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Creative dynamism and religious syncretism in Igbo oral funeral songs

Igbo oral funeral songs are dynamic and resilient oral forms. Applying the tenets of an infracultural model of ethno-poetics to study Igbo oral funeral songs collected during fieldwork, in this article, I examine the emerging trend in most Igbo communities of the co-existence, modification, and adaptation of Christian/western ideals into the mainstream repertoire of Igbo oral funeral songs. I therefore examine a situation where Igbo oral performers are drawing inspiration from western religious, linguistic, and cultural philosophies and applying them to the trajectory of Igbo oral funeral poetry. Observing that the reason for this is to accord the deceased a befitting funeral rite, I underscore the resilience of Igbo oral funeral poetry which acculturates western cultural elements into its oral funeral performances which are deployed to help reduce the pain of bereavement and assist the dead to successfully find their way as they journey to join their ancestors. **Keywords:** Igbo oral funeral songs, creative dynamism, religious syncretism, Christian influence on oral tradition, infracultural ethno-poetics.

Introduction

African oral traditions are facing many challenges posed by westernisation and globalisation. Added to this is the increased death of elders who constitute a large number of the performers of native creative lore. Mark Turin asserts that “oral traditions that are encoded in the speech forms become threatened when elders die or when livelihoods are disrupted. Such creative works of oral literature are increasingly endangered as globalization and rapid socio-economic changes exert even more complex pressure on smaller communities, often challenging traditional knowledge practices” (xvii). Oscar Jan is another scholar who is concerned about a “considerable decline in the transmission of culture from one generation to another” in Africa (2). He argues that African culture, especially the oral literary heritage “is seriously threatened by [the] rapid rate of urbanization, large scale migration, industrialization and environmental change [as] globalization and rapid socio-economic change exert complex pressure on our rich cultural heritage” (2).

Commenting specifically on oral literature, Elizabeth Gunner believes that “the pressure exerted on oral literature by written genres seem[s] to threaten their continued existence, yet oral genres continue to have significant power in contemporary culture and politics” (31). Oral literature, to her, is resilient and able to withstand the shock of western encroachment and urbanisation. With particular reference to the Igbo oral tradition, Udochukwu Emmanuel Ndukwe, Innocent Paschal Ihechu, and Onyinye Ralph-Nwachukwu are of the view that “there is hardly any aspect of the Igbo culture that education and Christianity has not influenced in one way or the other” (34). As regards burial rites and rituals, they observe that “in ancient periods, funeral rites in most African communities were colourful and engrossed in ritual practices, but with the arrival of Christian missionaries in 1843, the ritual practices associated with burial in Igbo land began to change” (30). To cap it all, they insist that “modernity has had its toll on the Igbo burial rituals” (37). Among these rituals is funeral rendition during burials.

My position in this article is that, in spite of the effects of western culture, composers and performers of Igbo oral funeral songs exhibit a high sense of creativity and dynamism as they produce songs that reflect the vibrant nature of Igbo oral poetry and adapt elements from western culture to produce, most times, a variant elegiac

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v6i2.15967>

DATES:

Submitted: 15 April 2023; Accepted: 9 February 2024; Published: 4 December 2024

performance or funeral song that is contextually robust. This is as a result of the kind of religious syncretism noticeable in Igbo culture. In this light, this article is organised into four segments. While the first part explores the notion of dynamism and syncretism in Igbo society, the second part explains the theoretical framework applied in the study. The third segment is an analysis of creative dynamism and religious syncretism of Igbo oral funeral songs with relevant illustrations, and the last part is the conclusion.

Creative dynamism and religious syncretism in Igboland

According to John Mbiti, death to an African is not annihilation but transition, for Africans believe that:

after the physical death, the individual continues to exist [...] at that point, such a person is usually remembered by relatives and friends who knew him in this life and those who have survived him. Those who survive him call him by name [...] they remember his entire personality, his character, his words and most often, the incidents of his lifetime. (qtd in Ndukwe, Ihechue, and Ralph-Nwachukwu 31)

Drawing from the above, Ndukwe, Ihechue, and Ralph-Nwachukwu remark that “death in Igbo land is therefore not seen as the end of Man; rather, it is seen as the transition from the physical realm to the spirit world” (31–2). Owing to this, the Igbo observe elaborate funeral practices in honour of the dead. According to John Odo Onu, “among the cultural practices which have become dominant in Igboland are the burial rites and the associated funeral dirges” (13). Explaining the rationale behind these elaborate burial rites, he observed that:

the Igbo mythology appreciated the fact that man was composed of body and soul, that these spirits by ways of decent burial receive a kind of worship by ways of undeniable and very necessary rites for the progressive journey of the soul to the spirit world. There are also mythological propositions, that without decent burial rites, the spirit of the dead roam about helplessly. (73)

Chief among these funeral rites is the observation of a funeral wake in honour of the dead. During this time, songs that recreate the activities, achievements, and memories of the deceased, as well as songs that help the funeral attendees meditate on the phenomenon of death in order to grapple with the pangs of bereavement, are rendered.

Austin Echema sees this view as one of the most important reasons why the Igbo accord the dead momentous funeral rites. He observes that “the burial rites are, therefore, the means through which the spirit of the dead reaches its final resting place and be at peace” (29). Giving another reason why the Igbo give the dead a decent burial, he asserts that “it is believed that unless these [funeral rites] are properly observed, the disembodied spirit is doomed to ceaseless wandering to and fro in no man’s land or spirit land” (29). He therefore refers to the interregnum between a person’s death and the observance of necessary funeral ceremonies as a period of torment for the dead. Echema adds that “it is believed that the longer the dead stay under this miserable condition, the more mischievous they become, especially if the deceased’s relatives have the means to perform the rites” (29). Owing to this, “the Igbo would do anything to secure a safe passage for the dying and eventually guarantee protection of the living” (30).

The Igbo, therefore, are a people known for celebration both in moments of joy and in sorrowful and hard times. This is due to their continued efforts to “make the best out of life, because they believe that although life may be full of uncertainties, such uncertainties are only temporary. So, the Igbo would celebrate whatever fortune brings in the knowledge that tomorrow will definitely be different” (Asad and Nawait 1). From the foregoing, Igbo “funerals are a time for the community to be in solidarity and to regain its identity” (Echema 30) after the loss of one of its members. According to John Onu, “a funeral ceremony in Igbo society involves sacrifices, singing and dancing” (74). However, this singing and dancing entail the rendition of oral funeral songs, which are said to be involved in some kind of creative dynamism and religious syncretism, which are the subjects of this study.

Dynamism, as a word, indicates a kind of force or ability to adapt to changing moments, needs, and expectations. It is the power to withstand the challenging vagaries of life and situations or the ability to successfully move along with changing situations. It is also the presence of the energy or force to inspire the production of new ideas that will help further achievements despite bottlenecks and challenges.

The Igbo inhabit a geographical area in south-eastern Nigeria. They are one of the most widely dispersed groups in Africa, a fact that Seun Onanuga *et al.* acknowledge when they say that “the Igbo are perhaps the ethnic group found abroad in larger numbers than any group in all Africa. There is perhaps no sphere where their influence is not felt, and no region where their fame has not been spread. There are no borders they have not crossed and

no nations, however distant, they are not found” (23). Because they migrate a lot, Igbo culture is highly dynamic as it is influenced by many cultures and social conditions such as Christianity and western culture/education. According to Aghaegbuna H. Uwazuoke and Greg O. Obiamalu, “Westernization and Christianity, no doubt, have been major contributory factors responsible for much inflicted change on the Igbo cultural heritage” (1). Through colonisation, European cultures have greatly impacted Igbo culture. This, according to Burabari Deezia, is like opening Pandora’s box because “it has adversely affected the traditional cultures of the indigenous African people to the extent that many traditional beliefs, customs and rituals were either totally bastardized, ignored or destroyed” (2). Some Igbo ways of life may be negatively impacted by western culture, but Mary Emeribe and Longinus Chinagorom are of the view that western culture has positive influences. This is what they termed creative dynamism. To them, “dynamism [...] suggests, projects and focuses on the varieties, and practical manner where the Igbo people could make their culture and language come into life in every aspect of life” (14). Despite the tautological ending of the above statement, the meaning is clear: Igbo dynamism suggests the Igbo people’s ability to transform their culture to incorporate all aspects of their life, including grappling with the ever-changing realities of life, as well as contending with other competing cultures. The focus of this work is on a particular aspect of Igbo life—the rendition of oral funeral songs to celebrate and mourn the dead—and the analysis will dwell on how the practice is carried out in the face of western influences.

Syncretism, on the other hand, connotes a system in which a person practises or observes the fundamental aspects of a religion or culture but also believes and practises some aspects of another culture or religion. It entails the co-existence of two or more religious practices or cultural observances at a place or in a given moment. According to Mushin Balogun, “syncretism in a broader sense will mean the process of borrowing elements by one religion and another in such a way as not to change the basic character of the receiving religion” (36). Similarly, while commenting on the current composition of people in Igbo land in a monograph entitled *An Outline of Igbo History*, notable Igbo scholar Adiele Afigbo quotes Sylvia Leith-Ross as having poignantly characterised the Igbo in the following terms:

[...] with no strain nor conflict “the modern Igbo” can attend communion and believe in “medicine”, keep, until he is found out, a “church” wife and several native marriage wives, tie up preciously in the same corner of a handkerchief his rosary and the shaped bit of “iron for juju” made for him by an Awka blacksmith, plant side by side in the garden round his new cement and pan-roofed house the hibiscus of “civilization” and the ogrisi tree of pagan family rites. (19)

The above description of the typical Igbo is reminiscent of a popular saying among the Igbo that “*amaghi ebe nzoputa si abia*” (it’s not easily discernible, where salvation will come from). The excerpt points to the fact that the practice of merging western and traditional ideals in Igbo land has led to a kind of religious syncretism. Ian Stevenson corroborates this when he says that Elizabeth Isichie only associated this phenomenon with the first generation of Igbo Christians who “tried to meld two religions” (14). However, the practice has persisted for some time now.

What I regard as syncretism in this article is what Echema calls the “ambivalent behaviour of the Igbo Christians” that “could be traced to the inability of Christian rituals to solve their problems” (69). To him, the Igbo regard religion as a “practical problem solver” (69), so any religion that fails in this regard is abandoned by the Igbo, be the religion traditional or western. Echema quotes Emile Durkheim to have said that, in such a situation, “the two faiths [Christian and traditional] seem to hang rather precariously in the convert’s single mind. [...] The proof is the rate at which old Christians, even intellectuals, fall back on the traditional religion in time of crisis” (69). The disposition to be committed to both traditional and Christian religions held sway in many Igbo communities up to the late 1980s when Christian Pentecostal churches began to spring up in various Igbo communities. Members of these new Christian Pentecostal churches like the Believers’ Gospel Mission, Assemblies of God, and Christian Pentecostal Mission, who were fewer in number then but are now rapidly growing in the present times, adhere strictly to Biblical injunctions and hardly participate in any form of traditional communal engagement. Before the emergence of these Pentecostal sects, there was a large number of adherents of early Christian churches in the community (who worship as Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, and Lutherans) whose practice of religious syncretism, or the attitude of religious ambivalence, was very strong. With the presence of more Orthodox Christians and a small number of Pentecostal Christians in the present Umuawuchi community, death and funeral observances in the community have taken two different dimensions. While the burial of a professed Pentecostal Christian takes a pure Christian outlook and the sympathisers and mourners are mostly very few, that of an Orthodox Christian is a blend of Christian and traditional observances.

The funeral songs that I analyse in this article were harvested from fieldwork I carried out in the course of my PhD programme (I defended my dissertation in 2017). The fieldwork concentrated on a particular Igbo community, the Umuawuchi, in the central Igbo region. During my fieldwork, my efforts were concentrated on the funeral ceremonies of some Orthodox Christians where I observed a kind of harmony and interplay between Christian obsequies (practices) and traditional funeral proceedings. I observed these two burial practices—the traditional and the western—to have existed side by side. I also observed that Orthodox Christian choruses/hymns and traditional funeral songs were rendered simultaneously (one after the other) during the burial ceremony of an Orthodox Christian in the Igbo community. Such phenomenon is neither new nor peculiar to Igbo communities; it is noticeable in other African communities as observed by Confidence Gbolo Sanka in his study of the dirge of Sisaala people of Ghana:

The reality is that the two religions [Christianity and Moslems] as well as Western education have come to meet the culture of the people. And though majority of local people have joined either of the two religions, they still find no problem in mourning the dead in the traditional way alongside Christian and Moslem practices. The new development is that it is the followers of the two religions who prepare, handle, and bury the corpse in the Christian or Moslem context. Dirge performance is, however, done the traditional way with the whole community participating in the rendering of such pieces. (195)

The same scenario is noticeable in most Igbo communities where the practice of rendering Christian hymns/choruses and oral funeral songs during wakes and funeral ceremonies is observed. Recognising this dynamism of oral poetry, Ruth Finnegan acknowledges that “oral poetry is not just something of far away and long ago. In a sense, it is all around us still” (4). This scenario is equally found in most Igbo communities where some Christian hymns and choruses, having been translated, learned, and internalised by the natives, are rendered in their native languages while some are entirely formulated and composed in these indigenous languages. This has made it possible that, during any moment of bereavement, both Christian requiem songs and traditional funeral songs are rendered intermittently, thus leading to the intermingling of Christian and traditional funeral ideals.

Conceptual and critical principles

As noted earlier, data for this article were collected from fieldwork trips I carried out to record Igbo oral performances during funeral ceremonies in Umuawuchi—an Igbo community in Ihitte-Uboma Local Government Area of Imo State in south-eastern Nigeria between May and November 2015. In addition, I conducted interviews with key stakeholders like elders, performers, opinion leaders, and titleholders.

I applied the theory of ethnopoetics in the study. According to Dennis Tedlock, it is:

[T]he study of the verbal art in a worldwide range of language and cultures. Primary attention is given to the vocal-auditory channel of communication in which speaking, chanting, or singing voices give shape to proverbs, riddles, curses, laments, praises, prayers, prophecies, public announcements, and narratives. The aim is not only to analyse and interpret oral performances but to make them directly accessible through transcriptions and translations that display their qualities as works of art. (8)

Here, Tedlock focuses not only on the aesthetics and cultural capital of the verbal art but talks of mechanisms through which they can be carefully collected, meaningfully transcribed, and translated in order to elucidate their artistic qualities. According to Catherine S. Quick, “proponents of ethnopoetics analyze texts in their original language and context to discover how individual elements function within a cultural performance of that text” (95). It is, therefore, obvious that studying the performance elements of the oral text would help “in understanding not only the role of poetry in society that created it, but also the aesthetic value of the poem” (Quick 95). Put in the context of this study, ethnopoetics would help us ascertain the roles of some dynamic funeral songs in most Igbo communities, especially as regards the purpose they serve for the people who mourn their dead. It will also help in examining the changes the funeral songs are undergoing as a result of western influence and their beauty as poetic oral expressions. That is why Ayman Elhallaq opines that ethnopoetics is “the study of the verbal art of the pre-literate cultures that aims at discovering the cultural and aesthetic aspects of their oral poetics [...] [that] focuses on texts, their rhetorical structure and presentational form” (1). This means that, apart from considering the artistic values of oral art, the ethnopoetist considers the figurative implications of oral texts as well as their manner of performance, which is the “presentational form”.

The infracultural model of ethnopoetics as propounded by Ezekiel Alembi is a *mélange* of the much older concepts developed by Dell Hymes and Tedlock. As Alembi puts it, the theory “emphasizes the interpretation of words and actions within a specific cultural context” (7). Explaining this, he says that it “means that the meaning of the words and the action [used during an oral performance] can only be located within the perceptions of the studied community” (7). Thus, “the assigning of meaning to oral texts is defined by the culture and traditions of the performer and the audience” (9). According to Mercy Onu, this model brings together the researcher and the community in a reflective process where information about the community’s beliefs, expectations, fears, and perceptions of death are gathered through observation and participation (3). As Mercy Onu further observes, instead of concentrating on Hymes’ view of ethnopoetics, which places emphasis on ‘written texts’, or Tedlock’s strand, which pays more attention to the ‘living discourse’, the infracultural model gives credence to ‘performance’. Thus, it requires the researcher’s dedication and resourceful involvement with the people in the process of data collection. This makes it a system of research that interprets an oral text in light of the understanding and traditions of the performers and the audience.

In view of the above, I am not only going to examine the expressional beauty of Igbo oral funeral songs with emphasis on their power of adaptation; I will also highlight their cultural signification and import and analyse their mode of performance and the effects of dynamism and syncretism on Igbo culture or the context that produces them. The aim is to establish not only their literary undercurrents but to also assess their ability to adapt to social change, incorporate traditional and Christian ideals with finesse, and as tools used in verbal mourning. By this, I argue that mourners of Igbo extraction deploy both Igbo traditional oral songs and Christian hymns and choruses to mourn their dead, and there is no friction, misunderstanding, or disruptions emanating from the application of this dual cultural or religious approach to achieve the goal of facilitating the peaceful repose of their dead.

Creative dynamism and religious syncretism in Igbo oral funeral songs

Man, by nature, is an ontologically expressive being whose life is permeated by singing and dancing (Avorgbedoe 208). In most Igbo traditional societies, performances that have poetic texture are mostly regarded as songs. While explaining this, Afam Ebeogu observes that “in the folk traditions, heroic recitations, chants, incantations, invocations can, because of their mode of utterance, be regarded as belonging to the sung art” (11). According to Isidore Okpewho, a song is characterized by the highest degree of musicality (both vocal and instrumental) and other aspects of performance (e.g. audience participation) (*African Oral Literature: Background, Character and Continuity* 133). Shedding light on this, he comments that: “in the song, however, we reach the highest level of vocal manipulation [...] the singer exploits the high and low tones of speech at several levels to achieve an even higher degree of affecting melody. [...] But it is in the areas of instrumental accompaniment and audience participation that the song demonstrates its superiority to the other modes of performance” (133–4).

A song can be performed by an individual or by a group but, most times, as Okpewho notes, people prefer a group singing in which they can participate in the singing, clapping, and dancing as opposed to listening to a solo performance by an individual artist. Significantly, there is hardly any occasion in African traditional society where singing and dancing do not feature. Such instances are enumerated by Okpewho to include:

when a child is born [...] when a child is crying or about to sleep. [...] During the ceremonies marking entry into adolescence [...] when the adult gets married ... [when carrying out] various honest occupations of men and women [...] [when relaxing after the day’s hard labour, when an individual is] rewarded by the community with a chieftaincy title [or at] the death of the individual. (*African Oral Literature* 138–9)

Igbo people sing on every occasion and one such occasion is a funeral ceremony associated with death, a phenomenon recognised as one of the major rites of passage: “Birth, marriage, and death constitute the rites of passage and as important landmarks in the life of an individual, they provoke great poetry” (Uzochukwu 27). Death is one such situation in Igbo land in which songs are rendered. As Sam Uzochukwu further reveals: “in any given situation in Igbo culture, be it marriage ceremony, the birth of a child or funeral celebration, songs feature prominently and the tunes and words of the songs on each occasion must be appropriate to the occasion” (27). Igbo funeral songs include sober and reflective singing and dancing carried out by members of an Igbo community during the funeral or memorial occasions slated to mourn a departed member, relation, or friend of the community. One remarkable feature of an Igbo funeral song is that it is performed by groups or in groups. Igbo

funeral songs carry messages that help in consoling the bereaved, highlighting the achievements of the deceased, and contemplating generally about life and death.

The Igbo oral funeral songs are to be analysed not as ordinary poetic texts (written forms) but as performance-based texts whose meanings and interpretations are dependent on the context of their production or the occasion that informs their enactment, which is death or bereavement. They are studied as verbal instruments of mourning that are performed and are thus accompanied by gestural features that add to their message, value, and functions. By this, I mean that, in order to effectively communicate their thoughts and feelings in the contemporary environment that includes Christians and traditionalists, Igbo oral performers reorganise, restructure, and incorporate contemporary items into their poetry.

The first mark of creative dynamism in Igbo oral funeral songs is code-switching. Charlotte Hoffmann, cited in Ngozi Emeka-Nwobia, said that code-switching is “the alternate use of two [or more] [...] languages within the same conversation” (2). Hloniphani Ndebele says that it is “the mixing of different codes by speakers in the same conversation and this switch may take place at any level of language differentiation” (v). This, in Igbo parlance, is called ‘Engligbo’, or the act of speaking English and Igbo together. A typical example is the song below, which is a funeral song rendered by a group of over thirty youths in Umuawuchi community during the funeral of a sturdy and athletic man on 20 October 2015:

S: *Iwe iwe ee*

Ch: *Iwe!*

S: *Iwe O na ewe unu e?*

Ch: *AEhee! Iwe na ewe anyi o*
Na anyi ahughi Papa anyi o
Somtini alala ukporo
Somtini!

S: *Anger! Anger!*

Ch: *Anger!*

S: *Are you people angry?*

Ch: *Yes, we are angry*
That we didn't see our father
Something is wasted!
Something!

Most Igbo oral funeral songs are antiphonal, meaning they follow a singer-response pattern. There is a lead singer, or “soloist”, who leads while the remaining people chant the response or the “chorus”. In the song above, as well as in other songs used as examples in the article, the letter “S” represents the lines taken by the lead singer while the letters “Ch” signify those taken by the other performers in unison.

To depict their anger, pain, and frustration at the loss of the deceased to whom the song is dedicated I noticed during the performance that the youths moved about in a disorderly, restive mood as they rendered the song. In order to effectively express the depth of their anger, the English word “something” is Igbolised to form the expression “*somtini alala ukporo*” (something is wasted). This code-mixing is used in the song for one particular reason. Because the song is performed by youths, it will be highly disrespectful of them to directly weave the name of the man whose death they are mourning into the song. Such an act will draw the ire of the elders. So, faced with such a dilemma, they opted for an English word which they Igbolised and employed as euphemism. Furthermore, at the denotative level, the youths also take some liberty by reengineering the words without losing the semantic import. As people who have attained some level of maturity and education, they are lamenting the loss of the man's sexual prowess in the song. As it is disrespectful for them to openly invoke the man's genitalia in such a sombre situation, they chose the Igbolised English word “*somtini*” (something) to whittle down the obscene and vulgarised import of the song. Apart from that, the word “*somtini*”, as used in the song, connotes many things. It could refer to *mmadu* (human being), *amu* (penis), *amamihe* (wisdom), *ike* (strength), or *obioma* (kindness). *Somtini* sums up many the deceased's physical and behavioural characteristics, which his death has ultimately wasted. Furthermore, an interaction with some of the youths immediately after the burial ceremony revealed more ideas to

buttress this point. The youths recited another song where “*somtini*” is used euphemistically to denote an amorous situation. The song goes thus:

Ayam s̄ori mgbe ahu I biara
Mgbe ahu I biara
An̄m n'elu s̄omtini.

I am sorry that time you came
That time you came
I was having fun [sex].

The expression “*Ayam s̄ori*” is an Igbolised version of the English expression “I am sorry”. In the song above, the performers are insinuating that when the addressee arrived, they were ‘on top of something’, meaning, meaning they were having sexual intercourse. But, to tone down the vulgar nature of the expression, they used the code-mixed expression “*somtini*”. When probed further, they said that they were ashamed or shy to use the lewd or licentious Igbo word for sex and preferred to use the Igbolised and euphemised English version.

At the same funeral, the song leader suddenly intoned a new song. The song which is in Pidgin English is completely Igbolised in tone and tune and it goes thus:

S: *Wan dee wan de na ya ooon*
Wan dee wan de na mai ooonuooo!

Ch: *Wan dee wan de na ya ooon*
Wan dee wan de na mai ooonuooo!

S: One day one day na your own
One day one day na my own o!

Ch: One day one day na your own
One day one day na your own o!

Surprisingly, even the predominantly non-literate, non-English speaking participants among the performers sang the song with gusto. Having paid equal attention to both poetic musicality and transmission of the message, their reactions evidently betrayed their understanding of the lyrics of the funeral song. Both the literate and non-literate, old and young, women and youth, as well as some men, sang and danced in tune with the song, indicating that they understood the meaning thereof—that one day, it would be their individual turn to answer the irresistible call of death, just as the deceased has done. After singing the Pidgin-English song for a while, the performers switched to an Igbo funeral song with a seamless shift. Their ease in understanding poetic language, especially the use of Pidgin-English as an inter-language, is an element of the funeral song performers’ creative dynamism. With it, they make their oral funeral rendition accessible to even non-natives in their midst, and their attitude and physical display show that, though the song is in Pidgin-English, it has become part of their oral funeral lore. Though it is not composed or rendered strictly in their language, it is their funeral song.

The contextualisation of Christianity in Africa has produced “African Christianity”, as Joel Mokhoathi notes: “So far, the contextualization of Christianity seems to have permitted syncretism. It has resulted in the emergence of ‘African Christianity’, which is the amalgamation of Christianity and African Traditional Religion” (1). Conversely, the in-roads made by Christianity in Igboland has resulted in a kind of Christianised Igbo who practices Christianity while also observing important aspects of their African culture and religion. As a result of this religious syncretism, some Christians in most Igbo communities still observe their traditional practices such that during occasions of bereavement, Christian choruses/hymns are rendered side by side with traditional funeral songs. In moments of bereavement, for instance, such Christian hymns and choruses are rendered next to traditional funeral songs. Sometimes, an entire church choir is invited to participate in the burial ceremony. This is also observable in other African countries. As Babila Mutia notes about the Bakweri people of Northern Cameroon: “Because of the influence of Christianity, particularly in the more urban towns, it is now fashionable for the deceased’s relative to invite church choirs (*velongi*) to sing and dance during [...] [the] wake” (388). The above scenario is also obtainable in Igboland as Uzochukwu notes: “There is now a growing awareness in some

areas of Igboland that the traditional mode of funeral celebration is not inherently fetish nor is it necessarily at variance with the Christian mode, for both aim at giving the deceased a befitting funeral which will guarantee for him some form of life after death” (117).

This interplay of Christian ideas and Igbo traditional philosophy has resulted in the permeation of traditional lore into some Christian funeral choruses, and certain traditional songs have benefited from their composition and rendition.

The first example is the lyrical reconstruction or the re-composition of some strictly Christian songs into traditional lyrical funeral songs. The following song illustrates this:

Ikpe ikpe ikpe mara ya
Ikpe ikpe ikpe mara ya
Ikpe ikpe ikpe mara ya
Onye na enweghi umunna ikpe mara ya!

Guilty, guilty, the person is guilty
Guilty, guilty, the person is guilty
Guilty, guilty, the person is guilty
One without kinsmen is already doomed.

This is a slight restructuring of a powerful Igbo Christian chorus:

Ikpe ikpe ikpe mara ya
Ikpe ikpe ikpe mara ya
Ikpe ikpe ikpe mara ya
Onye na enweghi Jizos ikpe mara ya!

Guilty, guilty, the person is guilty
Guilty, guilty, the person is guilty
Guilty, guilty, the person is guilty
One without Jesus is already doomed.

The song equates the love for Jesus and belonging to a Christian fold—“having Jesus”—to that of communal brotherhood—“belonging to the fold of one’s kinsmen”. During the rendition of the song, I observed that none of the Christians who were in the congregation experienced this song as blasphemous. There was no religious antagonism; instead, in the spirit of religious syncretism, they all sang and danced until the song leader switched over to another song.

In another funeral song, death is said to have given a terrible blow to a person and so, the people are there to sympathise with the deceased’s family and relatives. The song has a double interpretation, depending on one’s religion. To the traditionalists, it laments the havoc death has caused by killing a very simple-minded human being, leaving the deceased’s remains for them to bury. The expression ‘son of man’ as used here by the traditionalists is generic as the song was recorded on 29 March 2015 during the burial of an old woman who could be referred to as a ‘daughter of man’. To the Christians among them, it was an allusion to the Bible verse in which Jesus said that “the son of man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). The song goes thus:

S: *Nwa nke mmadu o*
Ch: *Onwu e mee ya aru o*
S: *Nwa nke mmadu o*
Ch: *Onwu e mee ya aru o!*

S: Oh son of Man
Ch: Death dealt with him
S: Son of Man
Ch: Death dealt with him!

The functionality of this song lies in the fact that it bemoans the fate of the deceased, who, as a woman, is not a ‘son of man’ but a ‘daughter of man’ whose life has been snatched away by wicked death. The singing and dancing that accompany the song had an electrifying effect on the mourners once intoned. They displayed various forms

of choreographic display by rhythmically stamping their feet on the ground while snapping their fingers loudly and shaking their heads abjectly, followed by displays of skilful dancing steps. This can be juxtaposed with the song below, in which a western artifact, a wristwatch, is appropriated as a key element of comparison in a song composed and rendered primarily by rural women.

Gbara ogwugwu oge
Di ka elekere
Ka o ghara I di ka
O mere gi na amaghi ama!
Gbara ogwugwu oge di ka elekere!

Wear end-time like a watch
So that it won't be like
It took you by surprise
Wear end-time like a watch

The above song is an illustration of the main thesis of this article as it indicates the resilience of the Igbo oral tradition, which survives by incorporating western, Christian, and contemporary aspects or elements. The clock is an important western invention and wearing a watch makes the wearer time conscious. Thus, the above song advises that advises people to wear the end-time around the wrist like a watch encourages them to be mindful of their acts, utterances, and movements at every point in time. The funeral song talks about the Christian epoch of rapture or end-of-time. However, the significant thing about the song is that it was not rendered by a particular church choir but by a traditional women's group, *umunwanyị amara ulo* (a kinswomen group that came to mourn their departed member). As members of different Orthodox churches in the community, they were able to appropriate a western memento—a watch—to compose a traditional funeral song with a Christian message. In this sense, the use of the watch as a simile in the song portrays the dynamism and adaptability of the Igbo language to the current realities of life. It indicates that the ideas and thoughts associated with the language are in-tune with the trend of technological innovations—and that, in Igbo land, time is no longer measured with natural phenomena like the position of the sun, as in the days gone by, but rather with a watch.

Similarly, the biblical precept by Job, who professed that he came to the world empty-handed and will leave same way, is observed in another Igbo traditional funeral song that was rendered by elderly men on 11 September 2015 as they moved around the village in a symbolic search for the deceased. The lyrics of the song go thus:

Agbara m aka bia n' uwa
Agba m aka ala
Ihe n' ile m nwere n' uwa
Onweghi nke m ji ala!

I came into the world empty-handed
I will leave empty-handed
All that I have in the world
There is none I will take along!

Though the song is steeped in the Christian ideology of the futility of life as expressed by Job, it is rendered as a pure, traditional funeral song. In the song, the people associate the fate of all humans with that of Job, especially when it is necessary to draw their attention to the issue of the futility of human riches, to discourage people against get-rich-quick syndrome, or to warn those who are miserly in their attitude towards others and themselves. I observed this particular funeral song was during the burial of an old man in the community on 19 September 2015. It was rendered by the few remaining members of his age after his body had been interred, and they had been presented with refreshments. The old, grey-haired men invited the man's first daughter to carry his enlarged photograph while they moved about the village, symbolically searching for him. Age grade group is a traditional social institution in most Igbo communities, and not a religious one, though most of the members are Christians. As such, it was easy for them to fall back on the community's funeral lore in mourning one of their own. There is a dramatic tilt to the song, as I observed during the fieldwork, that touches on the performance essence of the song. This is one of the central concerns of infracultural ethnopoetics. As the performers rendered the last two

lines of the song, they turned their arms and showed their empty palms to the audience, dramatizing the idea of leaving the world as empty-handed as you arrived at birth. With that, they emphasised with their gestures that all efforts to amass property and wealth are meaningless, as you are unable to leave this earth with any of the things acquired here.

As they were coming back from their symbolic search, the same group of men also sang the song below, which has embedded in it the biblical myth of creation that suggests that being descendants of Adam who was said to have been created with sand, humans' physical make-up is also sand:

Aja ka anyi bu
Aja ka anyi ga alaghachi
Chukwu kere uwa
Omwu siri na mmehie bia

Sand we are
Sand we shall return back to
Oh God creator of the world
Death came through sin.

As the above funeral song points to the Adamic nature of humans by recollecting how sin entered the world—through the disobedience of Adam and Eve—it is rendered as a traditional funeral song, not a Christian hymn. It is not rendered by a band or Christian choir but by a group of elderly men in the Igbo community made up of Christians and African traditional worshippers. Their interest, per se, is not in the religious import of the song but in the existentialist message it carries and the fact that people should desist from committing sin. There is also a dramatic angle to the song as the performers, in a bid to dramatize the song, bent down and picked some particles of sand which they threw into the air. Incidentally, one of them digressed a little by chanting, “*I ma onye m bu? Unu makwa onye m bu?*” (Do you know me? Do you people know who I am?). Then, picking up particles of sand and throwing them into the air, he further chants, “*Lee ihe m bu! Aja ka m bu?*” (This is what I am! I am sand). The dramatization attracted the attention of many sympathisers who shook their heads abjectly, humbled by the fact that, no matter how powerful or weak anyone is, he or she will die someday. The burial of their kinsmen and the funeral song as rendered by the deceased's age mates offered them the opportunity to ruminate on the real essence of life.

Furthermore, in the spirit of intertextuality, the main ideas in an Igbo Anglican hymn are recast and restructured, thus giving it a traditional flavour, especially when the hymn is too long. Consider this song, which is an abridged form of a popular Anglican hymn:

Ihe eji echeta mmadu
Bu ọlu, ọ luru n'ụwa
Ihe eji echeta mmadu
Bu ọlu!

What we remember someone with
Is by the work he has done in the world
What we remember someone with
Is by just the work!

The above Igbo oral funeral song makes vigorous allusion to a popular Anglican hymn, “Only Remembered”, composed by Horatius Bonar and set to music by Ira D. Sankey in England in 1891. It was first rendered at the funeral of Charles H. Spurgeon, the great English philosophical preacher and writer of the highly moralistic book

John Ploughman's Talk. Compare the wording of the above Igbo oral funeral song with an excerpt from the English and Igbo versions of the Anglican funeral hymn, "Only Remembered":

Nani n'olu-ayi, nani n'olu-ayi
Nani n'olu-ayi k'ageji cheta'ayi
Otu a k'ayi gesi si n'oluwa nka la;
Nani n'olu-ayi k'ageji cheta ayi. (Ekpere na Abu 196)

Only remembered, only remembered
Only remembered by what we have done;
Thus would we pass from the earth and its toiling.

It is apparent that the themes of both the traditional funeral song and the Christian hymn emphasise the fact that the major thing one is remembered for after death is the works they have done. There seems to be a kind of cross-fertilisation between the Christian hymn and the Igbo funeral song. It is uncertain which one influenced the other, but they express the same thought. The songs are rendered side-by-side specifically during the funeral of someone whose life has touched the lives of many people in numerous positive ways. It indicates a level of cross-religious permeation of Christian and traditional religious ideals in most Igbo communities. While the songs are composed in the Igbo language, the texts or lyrics are all stored in people's memory as songs to mourn or celebrate the dead. So, once someone dies, whether a Christian or a traditionalist, the songs are recalled and rendered in groups, to help give a befitting burial to the deceased.

Similarly, in the course of my fieldwork, I discovered that just as some Christian tenets have been incorporated into traditional funeral songs, some traditional tenets have also been woven into Christian choruses. In the following song, Igbo's two most important rites of passage, birth and death, are woven into an Igbo Christian chorus which depicts the importance attached to each:

S: *Abali abụọ!*
Ch: *Abali abụọ ka mmadu nwere n'uwa*
Ụbọchi ọmụmu, n'ụbọchi ọnwụ ya!

S: Two days!
Ch: Only two remarkable days does one have in this world
The day of his birth and that of his death!

Due to the importance attached to these two events (birth and death) in the life of any Igbo person, the Christian chorus hyperbolically sums up all the days a human being has in his or her lifetime on earth to be equal to only two days—"the day of his birth and that of his death". In traditional Igbo society, the birth of a child attracts much fanfare and merrymaking, as Igbo people place many premiums on procreation. The same thing applies to death, when people come from far and near to pay their last respects to the deceased. This makes these two moments the most significant in the life of any Igbo person. In the course of my fieldwork, this song was part of the Christian elegiacs intoned by a Christian youth group during the funeral wake of an old woman on 29 March 2015 in Umuawuchi community. They fused these core elements of Igbo cosmology into a Christian song that had been included in the Christian lore for the mourning of one of their own.

Compare the above song with the one rendered by the same group of people which carries a sterling Igbo worldview into a Christian funeral chorus:

S: *Anyi na ala ala e?*

Ch: *Na ofe mmiri oma*

S: *Anyi na ala ala?*

Ch: *Na ofe mmiri oma*

S: *Nwanne I gakwa ala ala e?*

Ch: *Na ofe mmiri oma*

Na ofe mmiri oma.

S: We are going [sailing]

Ch: Across the good river!

S: We are going?

Ch: To the place where the water is clean!

S: My brother will you go?

Ch: Across the good river!

S: My sister will you go?

Ch: To the place where the water is clean!

Sailing across a good, mild, or non-turbulent river (water), as sung here, means going to a place where one can have peace of mind. It also means going to a place that is calm; where one would have access to 'clean water', which signifies the good things in life that have been dearly missed in this mundane world. This second meaning is quite apt. As the Igbo would say, "*anu pu ụzọ na ańu mmiri oma*" (the first animal to get to the stream drinks the cleanest water). Metaphorically, it means that the first to arrive at any event or place enjoys the juiciest of things. However, the song projects a double meaning to the audience. For Christians, 'sailing across the beautiful river' or going to a place where there is 'good water' connotes going to heaven: a place of infinite serenity, joy, and happiness; a place that is devoid of the hardship and mayhem that characterise life in this mundane world. For the traditionalists, the song has an entirely different meaning. According to Igbo cosmology, anyone coming into the world or the 'land of the living' at birth passes through a river called *Oshimiri*. When that person completes the tasks assigned to him by his *Chi* on earth, he takes the same route back. In explaining this aspect of Igbo philosophy of creation, Chinwe Achebe avers:

Man journeys from the land of the spirits to the land of the living where he takes the physical form [...] The journey to the earth is negotiated across a river. Each set of creatures are ferried into the world of the living in the same boat. Each individual is ferried back when he has finished shopping; for life is like going on a huge shopping spree with some people shopping successfully and others not so successfully. (16-7)

In the funeral song, quick allusion is made to going across a "good river", which is drawn from a typical Igbo worldview. The performers comprised Christians and non-Christians, and there was no rancour during the wake as efforts were made to accord the deceased a befitting farewell based on both Christian and traditional lore.

In the course of this research, I observed that there was no segregation among the people of Umuawuchi community while mourning the dead. While rendering Christian funeral choruses, the Christian choir in the community could intone a core traditional oral funeral song, and everybody (both the Christians and traditionalists) would sing and dance along to the end. In the same vein, a group of native women who assembled as co-wives to a deceased could lace their performances with Christian-based oral songs. I also noticed that the interest of most oral funeral performers in the community was to deploy whichever funeral song came to their mind in mourning a departed member of their society without minding whether it was traditional or Christian. In the same vein, there is a kind of decorum that exists in the Igbo community which has given rise to the parallel existence of traditional funeral songs and Christian hymns and choruses and their deployment by oral funeral performers to accord their dead a respectable funeral rite. With this, it is evident that the performance of Igbo oral funeral songs is undergoing a moment of transition and transformation with attendant colourations and dislocations. It is expanding its boundaries by adopting western and Christian principles while also infusing a basic Igbo philosophical worldview into the Christian consciousness.

Conclusion

In this article, I established that there are elements of creative dynamism and religious syncretism in the performance of Igbo oral funeral songs in the performances that I observed in 2015. In these performances, code-switching involving the alternate use of Igbo and English structures in the composition and rendition of most Igbo oral funeral songs was an important marker of syncretism. Furthermore, some western-cum-Christian concepts were incorporated into the repertoire of Igbo oral funeral rendition, thus leading to a kind of cross-fertilisation. I observed a harmonious co-existence of Igbo thoughts and ideals with those of the west in some areas, thereby indicating the dynamism and adaptive capabilities of Igbo verbal lore.

Acknowledgments

This article is based on my PhD dissertation, "Art and context in Igbo oral funeral poetry: A study of the oral funeral songs of Umuawuchi community in Imo State Nigeria". It was completed under the supervision of Prof. Sophia Obiajulu Ogwude at the University of Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria. The degree was awarded on 9 November 2017.

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