

Representing Death in Song-poems: The Example of Robert Ebizimor's Popular Music

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This paper examines how death is designated among the Izoṅ people in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, in their popular music. The motivation is that there have been no significant attempts by scholars to investigate the music from this consideration to bring fresh perspective to the discourse of death as a literary theme. The paper analyses moral and religious ideas build around death, to highlight their contribution to the thematic import of the music. The paper uses the qualitative method to analyse the lyrics/song poems extracted from two music tracks by Robert Ebizimor. This is enhanced by the sociological functionalist theory which seeks to interpret the roles of cultural practices and activities carried out by a society. The paper concentrates on death at ripe time, arguing that death is valued and celebrated, in terms of longevity and the usefulness of life lived. These aspects are thoughtfully linked with the moral and religious significance of an individual's death. Conclusively, the paper reiterates that death is a necessary end, which offers the living rare moments for moral and religious edification, to better the society; a reason death continues to feature as a powerful and relevant literary theme.

Keywords: Death, Izoṅ people, popular music, theme, song-poems, Robert Ebizimor, moral ideas, religious ideas.

Introduction

Literature is that art that is consistent with mirroring life as lived in the society. The mirroring of life comes in different ways. Through the multifaceted ways of representing life, literature reminds us of many important things or aspects of the human life. One of such aspects is death. Death is a common phenomenon to all human societies but has been subjected to different interpretations. In Western perspective, death is the “extinction of life” or the “end stage of life” (Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata, 2014, p. 236). But African societies find relevant beliefs and ideas in what brings about the cessation of the human life. Thus, death is a vital aspect of the African life, judging by the fact that African societies derive from the occurrence of death, beliefs, values, attitudes, patterns of behaviours which in their expression, often align with the collective aspirations of the society. This is the case with the Izoṅ people, an ethnic group

located in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Like Africa generally, their thinking about death show that there are two types of death; death at old age and premature death (Ifie, 1994). The former which this essay tends to prioritise, is more important to the Izoṅ people for social, moral and religious reasons.

Indeed, the occurrence of death at old age has the tendency to raise religious and moral questions to the point of providing an insight to the existence of a people. This is more so because it gives birth to the belief in ancestors and the idea of ancestor veneration in societies (Morgan and Beatrice, 2020). For the Izoṅ people, according to Simwa (2013), although majority have become Christian, elements linked to their traditional religion are still observed and it is critical to keep them alive in respect for the reminiscence of ancestors and the people's religious belief systems. This is a strong attestation to the importance of death on matters of life and

continuity of a people only when it comes at old age. The belief is that the deceased is moving from the world of the living to the spirit realm where they have spiritual powers to exert on the living. It is in recognition of the above that rituals are performed and celebrations done to herald the dead into the spirit world. While commenting on this, Ruddock observes that death inspires rituals in Africa to ensure that the deceased is fittingly buried with the effect that he can conveniently take his place among the ancestors to play a protective role (qtd. in Nwosu et al., 2017).

For the Izoṅ ancestors, Dime adds that they are not just spirit beings but “custodians and executors of public morality and a strong factor of social cohesion” (qtd. in Okaba and Appah, 1999). Also, (Torukro, 2001, pp. 51-52) says, with mystical powers at their disposal, Izoṅ ancestors are in a position “to harm, punish or protect and guide members” when the need arises. Accordingly, the recognition of this new position and role assumed by the dead is the reason for the popular tradition and practice of venerating ancestors by the living because of the spiritual benefits highlighted. This normally begins here on earth, indicated by elaborate ceremonies to mark the burial rites of the dead. What is important is that this happens only to those who die at old age, and are thought to have passed all the societal tests of morality while alive. This particular Izoṅ world view is similar to the Igbos as described by Ikechukwu (2017, p. 37) below:

The individual must live a morally upright life. He must also be successful as a person, and his success is shown in his possession of wife (or wives) and children especially male children,

and enough material possession. He must have died a good death ...not of mysterious illness or by accident (Onwuekwensu).

These conditions must be accompanied by a befitting burial [with which] the dead are received in the land of the spirit (alammuo), by his ancestors.

The above is a complete interpretation of death as applied not only to the Igbos but the Izoṅ people and most African societies. The significance of death as an aspect of the cultural life, bearing the moral and philosophical fabrics of any society, is clearly articulated. It is in acceptance of this critical role death plays that literature in its reflective role is believed to have given attention to. Maina (2009, p. 188), speaking on the usefulness of literature in this regard, observes that literature reveals and places emphasis on the aspirations and desires of a people as it serves as “the meeting point where all manners of philosophies are presented and debated”. This is not limited to written literature as it is often said, too, of every oral artforms including popular music and songs. This paper rests on several studies on African popular music with the lyrics constituting oral poems or songs, which have provided useful information on the topic of death, demonstrating the significant role the phenomenon plays in the lives of the African people, in terms of social and cultural relevance (Omoko, 2014; Susan and Christopher, 2014). Hence, this paper focuses on looking at how literature treats useful ideas about death in a way particular to the Izoṅ people, by engaging the lyrics of Robert Ebizimor’s popular music from a literary

perspective. As a guide to achieve the purpose of the paper, the discussion is centred on finding out how death at ripe time is depicted; what moral and religious ideas and values does death evoke in the minds of members of the singer's society; and what is suggested about the relevance of such ideas pertaining to death with regards to contemporary Izon society.

Materials and Method

Since the paper is primarily concerned with looking at ideas built around death, the method adopted is the qualitative analytical procedure, focusing on analysing the framing of words by composer of the popular music to reveal how it denotes expressions of relevant ideas pertaining to how the Izon people imagine death. As such, lyrics from two songs: "Papa Amgbaduba", "Pa Obiri" are selected for their richness of the evidence required for in-depth discussion. Particular attention is paid to moral and religious thoughts that death is capable of inducing when it occurs. It gathers vital information by scholars from written materials and oral interviews from listeners of the music as well as informants knowledgeable in the Izon tradition to support the analysis. The moral and religious connotations of death in the music texts are identified and evaluated. It is pertinent to note that the music texts are composed in the Izon language and recorded in compact disc. Moreso, the Izon language has several dialects, they are transcribed and translated into English for the examination to be done effectively.

The theory used in this paper is the sociological functionalist theory. This theory explains the roles of cultural system and practices and how society survives with them over time. The theory was birthed in the twentieth century in response to previous studies that "arrogantly" labelled social behaviours outside Europe as "primitive culture" or "primitive society" (Okpewho, 1992, p. 173). Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe Brown, two of the founders of the theory opine that the emphasis in the consideration of the functionalist model is finding out how culture works to satisfy needs, whether at the level of the individual or the society (Koceva, 2016). It is in view of the above that the concept of death is giving priority. thus, the adoption of the theory in this paper is to unravel the purposes and significance of practices and beliefs in death as a cultural habit, in terms of its association with the moral and religious values of the Izon people as embedded in the song-poems.

The choice of Robert Ebizimor's songs is based on the singer's outstanding knowledge in the Izon Izon culture as demonstrated in the lyrics. He is mentioned by Green and Koroye (2009, p. 194) as one of the Ijaw musicians who have been influenced by "the utilization of records, audio and video tapes and compact discs, and being helped to reach a wider audience and the preservation of their works". His songs touch on every aspect of the Izon cultural and the human life. It is for this reason he is well known among his contemporaries across the various Izon communities for his long outstanding

commitment in promoting the Izon culture (Opomu, 2012). He has referred to this in an interview with Cornel-Best when he explains that in his poetry, “I also talk about respect for culture among other things”. Other notable Izon oral poets, dead or alive, whose music express the Izon culture, from which the choice for Ebizimor is made are Cardinal Jim Rex Lawson, Prince David Bull, King Sunny Brown, Pereama Freetown and Barrister S. Smooth to Alfred Ezonebi.

Results and Discussion

1. Death and Moral Inference in the Song-poems

The incident of death, especially death in due time among the Izon people is more valued because it has grave implications on the society. While death relating to young members causes pains, grief and despair to the living, and raising questions over possible causes, death associated with the aged always delights the community because of the religious and moral attention it attracts. This is hinged on the belief that the deceased is privileged to become an ancestor. The atmosphere induced on occasions of this particular death, and the assurance of the aged joining the cult of the ancestors in Izon communities is similar to the Igbo society as described by Achebe (1958):

The land of the living is not far from the domain of the ancestors. There is the coming and going between them, especially at festival and also when an old man dies, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man’s life from birth to death was

a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his pancestor. (85)

The above accentuates the belief that becoming an ancestor after death is something desirable and therefore remains the dream of members of the community because incidents of death of this nature calls for festivity or celebration which gives the deceased a sense of fulfilment. As such, the occurrence of death of this scale is equated with moment of festivity as elucidated by Achebe above for purposes of ensuring continuity of the community. But then, the means to realizing the dream requires the individuals exhibiting moral tendencies approved by the community. This is paramount in the thinking of the Izon people and helps to guide their behaviour and conduct in the community.

The above elucidation on the cultural consciousness of the Izon people sets the drift for discussion on the philosophical inclination in Ebizimor’s song-poems. One song-poem which explores the topic of death is “Papa Amgbaduba”. Here, the focus is on the death of the aged and the underlining moral implications. The singer, in a sort of public announcement, recalls the death of a man that lived out his full life identified as Amgbaduba, a native of Ofonibegha community in Burutu local government area of Delta state. More important is the singer glamorizing the festivity that graced the burial rites of the deceased. He notes about the atmosphere that normally pervades and characterizes the death of the aged in not just a traditional Izon setting but African generally. The singer is particular about the celebration for two reasons that are requisite for the inculcation and promotion of

moral values in the community. First, the deceased is celebrated because his life ceased to exist not at a young age but at the rightful age where his death does not call for mourning; not even by his offspring, members of the extended family and the Izon community generally. In this case, the singer expresses a sense of elation, given that there is no interruption to life. This is because Amgbaduba lived up to the maximum age so that his death does not cause pains, suffering and despair to the living, rather, one that attracts a great deal of festivity. More important is the fact that at the time of his death, he was the oldest among the Izon people. Coupled with the long life lived is the reason he is privileged to attain such prominence and the enormity of the celebration that accompanies his burial rites.

Kẹmẹ tubọu yerin timi
Ama-okosuwei suwọu
Esená ebe sẹ bẹni emi ogbom
Izon okosu owei suwọu mẹ

kala egberi e
Ogẹ ba duba mẹ dẹin gha

A man lived for long
Made it to the status of the town's oldest man
Where the nine clans converged
To become the oldest Izon man
This is no less a matter
Which no celebration can exceed

(my translation)

It is pertinent to point out that the long life lived that makes him attain the status of the oldest man and the benefit of having the grand burial rites at the point of death does not come

effortlessly. According to Okore and Lanre-Abass (2016, p. 370), such a feat can only be attained by the individual by living a "meaningful life". This is something the singer is particular about, because of the moral lesson encapsulated in such a feat. It is shown that Pa Amgbaduba lived his life in accordance with the moral standards of the community. This is how he improved on his own moral growth both at the individual level and that of the community's. More so, the deceased, according to the singer, does not just live long but also have a creditable record of accomplishments that represent the results of hard work and thorough respect for the norms and values of his community. The singer is aware that the individual aspirations that is held as standard values in the community include procreating children that will continue to sustain the lineage of the forebear, and which will in turn contribute to the attainment of the collective dreams of the community. In obedience to the above, the deceased has many children. More importantly, the children do not only make him proud, but also the entire community, moment and after his death.

Omẹnẹ kẹmẹ kẹzj wẹrẹ fẹ mẹ
ke gba kpọ
Kọu yaj bo ne ba timi o dibi yaj kpọ
Bra nana wẹrẹ o dibi yaj kpọ pa do nẹ
Omẹnẹ a mẹnẹ buru kirj ke pele fẹ mẹ

Though he lost some children
To the hands of cruel death,
Among those that survive
Were persons of great wealth
That gave him a befitting burial rites
Accordingly, he reaps of the harvest

Of yam and plantain that he sowed
(my translation).

The singer uses to above to portray Amgbaduba as a dutiful father. He is shown as one whose life underscores the virtue of sacrifice expected of every father as the head of the family. He ensured that his children are successful and renowned in all respect as he had been. There is the message that this is possible because that while alive, he valued the moral ideals of the community and assiduously worked hard to attain them. That the children are able to give him a proper burial rites points to the conviction of members of the community that the deceased is not a failure but a great achiever, admired and celebrated by the community. This is vividly evoked in the metaphor of “yam and plantain”. The children and their ability to give him the needed burial rite is equated with bountiful harvest. Therefore, the deceased is likened to a successful and prosperous farmer. Hence, the singer urges him to have the sense of elation and fulfillment as he transits to the spirit world.

As poets are known advocates of the people’s culture and practices, the song-poet is so enthused to counsel his audience to be guided by the community’s values if they dream of becoming as successful as Pa Amgbaduba. He warns that it is useless for one to aspire to attain long life when there is not even a single child to attract the support of friends and well-wishers that would be dragged into competitions of who provide the casket. He stresses that the only condition for an old man to transit smoothly to the spirit world is to have a child or children that will

give him a proper and memorable burial rite. This instruction is shown in:

Emeṅe owa meṅe owa me
Tubou kpọ zị gha
Ware kpọ keṅe gha
Ere kpọ nana gha owake emo owa meṅe aba
A ne owa me akpọ a fa owa
Emeṅe tubou zi de aba
Eṅe tubou kpọ ondo timi dau dibị
Ekpede femo otu kpọ zuwo ka koro de
Bra pa de aba
Eṅe kara meṅe owa me
Kere gbololo mu suwo de

The long life you crave for
Whereas you have no child
You have not built a house
You have long life but without a wife
Such long life is useless
When you give birth to a child
Your child should stay alive to bury you
Let there be competition among whom
To provide the casket
Then, your prayer for long live
Will be rendered meaningful
(my translation).

To put the above succinctly, dying at the rightful time has no value and can never be complete without having children with the capacity to bury the dead as a matter of honour.

Similarly, in “Pa Obiri”, the singer uses the occasion of the death of another old man from Bolou-Orua community to press home the fundamentals and significance of death to the people. Coincidentally, like Agbaduba, Pa Obiri was the Ama-okosuwei, the oldest man of the community. Consequent upon his death, given the status of an old man and the oldest of the community, he is giving a burial rite that is copiously marked by

elaborate celebration to usher him into the spirit world. The singer expresses no doubt about his moral life while on earth. He is departing as a fulfilled member of the community with evidence of his conformity to the moral codes and values. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for him to live up to such a desirable age in the first place, let alone, becoming the oldest man of the community. The attainment of this feat is glaringly projected and this is in recognition of its significance to the well-being of the community. As a matter of honour, his death and the rites of passage is graced with the grandeur it deserves. The honour accorded him by his children and the community on this occasion has the subtle effect of teaching members the importance of emulating the life of the deceased.

Observing the honour accorded him to be meaningful, the singer makes it clear that attainment of such life does not come with ease. He dismisses the notion that it can be attained through prayers, not even by the children. This unlikelihood is expressed sarcastically:

Kẹmẹ kẹmẹ mẹnẹ ondo ketẹi mẹnẹ mo be
Kẹmẹ kẹmẹ dau ondo ketẹi mẹnẹ ke gba
Church wari ondo tei gha kẹmẹ kpọ fa
Kẹmẹ kẹmẹ mẹnẹ ondo ketẹi mẹnẹ mo be
Kẹmẹ kẹmẹ dau ondo ketẹi mẹnẹ ke gba

Everyone prays for long life
Everyone prays that their fathers live long
Everyone prays for long life in churches
Everyone prays for long life
Everyone prays that their fathers live long
(my translation)

The reference to church and prayer above indicates that the behaviours and thoughts of the people have been affected by the new religion represented by Christianity and its doctrines and values. Nevertheless, the singer strongly expresses the view that it does not change the fact that long life can only be granted to those who merit it by showing behaviours that respect the traditions and moral principles of the community.

2. Death and Spiritual Inference in the Song-poems

Death in Africa gives rise to the belief in the reality of the spirit world of the ancestors. And it is opined that the world of the living is incomplete without the world of the ancestors. The acceptance of the existence of this world by the living foregrounds the belief in the interaction between them and the (living)-dead ancestors (Dasyuva, 2005). The interaction places the ancestors in a superior position where they exercise spiritual influence over the living-descendants. So, death becomes important, as according to Kilonzo and Christopher (2014, p. 76), it gives birth to the strong belief that it does not indeed result in the end of human life, but “a process and an avenue through which the oldest generation of the community enters the ancestral world”. The Izon people strongly believe in this reality as part of the body of their religion. This is evidently expressed in Ebizimor’s song-poems. In “Amgbaduba”, the song-poet shows that the people are so enthusiastic with the transition of Amgbaduba from the physical world to the spirit because his age qualifies him for the status of an

ancestor. Therefore, he conveys the community's sense of religious attachment to the dead for spiritual edification and protection, a belief that is like the Christian's belief in God. This is not to say that the Izon people do not believe in God, just as their world view shows that they believe in the existence of God as the creator of the universe (Okaba and Appah, 1999).

Informed by the aspirations of the people, Ebizimor does the work of a priest, and as instructed by the community, seeks the intervention or mediation of the newly admitted ancestor on matters affecting his immediate descendants and the community generally. From the children and wives of the deceased to the entire community, they ultimately desire long life and prosperity. The attainment of such aspiration by every member is therefore entrusted in the hands of the deceased for an accelerated action. The feeling of members of the community that shows this spiritual attachment to the dead spirit that has become of Agbaduba is relayed, thus:

Agbaduba enẹ awọu bo enẹ ondo
bra ke ondo
Peipi de nana ere mo kpọ enẹ ondo
bra ke ondo
Izọn sẹ kpọ enẹ ondo bra ke ondo
Anẹke pa gha pa gha eyi
Izọn ma padẹ nẹ
Kẹmẹ Kẹmẹ pọwẹ dẹ yo, papa.
Agbaduba let your children

Have the grace to live long as you lived
Let it be that your wives
Have the grace to live long like you lived
Agbaduba let the whole Izon people

Have the grace to live a long life like you lived
This would be a rare occurrence
Where everyone in Izon-land would be
delighted, Papa
(my translation).

This form of supplication to the death is suggested to be valuable to the people in the poem. Hence, in similar vein, the singer continues to pray:

Papa Agbaduba o Ofonibeingha
Fe mu angon dei dẹ bo
Pepi dẹ ena awou kpọ enẹ ondo
Bra ke ondo
Agbaduba of Ofonibeingha

Go and return in new form
Grant your children long life
Like the way you have lived
(my translation).

The invocation is to press further the possibility that the deceased can come back to live in the physical world again through the process of reincarnation. This gives credence to the general African world view that life is the totality of a transition from and to, of the corporal and spirit world. The belief is that after death, an individual continues to live life in a spirit world, where he or she receives a new body identical to the one of the physical world in order to function as an ancestor (Okore and Lanre-Abass, 2016), The singer's prayer is in line with the belief of his people that the deceased had lived a life that is of great significance to his family and the community. The singer sends a message about the reality that his demise has created a vacuum that is irreplaceable. In consequence, he requests that the deceased returns to the corporal world which he has left with immediate effect. Okaba and Appah (1999) in support of this view

declare that when a family member dies, he or she joins the members of the same kindred who had proceeded before him and would later return to earth through the medium of rebirth by his offspring or other affine. The singer's supplication is influenced by the philosophical outlook of his people. This does not only corroborate but also succeeds in strengthening the observations on the Izon world view. It is interesting to note that the singer shows admiration for this belief system and gives an unparalleled prominence in the song-poem despite a world obsessed with cultural hegemony. It presupposes that his people still strongly hold on to the belief not minding the times they are.

The above religious essentiality of death is also vividly captured in "Pa Obiri". Pa Obiri as reported earlier passed on at his rightful time and the oldest of his community. Going by the standard of the Izon cosmology, the singer reports of his transition to the spirit world where he has the privilege of joining the ancestral cult. Consequently, he is celebrated, not just by his children, but the whole community. Like Amgbaduba, the implication of his death at a rare age and the continuation of his life in the spirit world will certainly raise the hope of the living about a harmonious and prosperous existence. This is because, he is now in a place and occupying a position where he would have to watch over his descendants and the whole of the Bolou Orua community. Slightly different from what is recorded in "Pa Agbaduba", the singer discloses the spirit world as "Heaven", the dwelling place of God.

Pa Obiri

Boulou-orua ma oko suowei

Heaven nu ka mụ emi

Kẹmẹ tubou ondo timi amaokosu bidẹ bẹ

Heaven ka mụmo

Pa Obiri

Boulou-Orua's oldest man

Has journeyed to heaven

One who made it to the status of the oldest man

Would make it to heaven

(translation mine).

This is an upgrade that excites everyone in the community, but most especially, the children of the deceased. Thus, the singer encourages them not to be worried but be proud of the destination of their father. His duty is to let them know that their father is more or less a saint now, seated with God in heaven to direct the affairs of his offspring and the community. The awareness of this new reality obviously influenced by the Christian faith makes it more enduring and appealing to the people. What this means is that the Izon culture and belief in the matter of death has been impacted following the preponderance of Christianity in Izon communities.

Conclusion

This paper was designed to examine what death is to the Izon people, basing on perceivable evidence dispatched in the oral poetic art of Robert Ebizimor. It concentrated on death that comes at ripe time, and made new and fascinating findings that are necessary to broadening the notions of death in Africa generally. The findings indicated that this type of death is highly valued and celebrated for

two reasons. The first is about the longevity of life lived before death, which was revealed to be graced by festivity. This is because of the strong belief that the attainment of this level of death comes with the conferment of the status of an ancestor on the deceased upon transition to the spirit world, entrusted with spiritual power to exert on the people. This resonates with the popular practice of ancestor worshiping in African societies that have ensured a creation of spiritual bonding between the dead-ancestors and the living. Secondly, such death is also celebrated judging by the usefulness or impact of the deceased's life to the community even after departing. This was explained as a feat measured by the deceased's level of conformity to the moral codes and values prescribed by the community. It includes most importantly, procreation of children and the training given to them, so that they become useful in several ways to the community. These are all exemplified in the subjects of the song texts.

As it is characteristic of panegyric, it was discovered, therefore, that the songs are artistically imbued with the atmosphere of celebration intended to pass a strong message, that this type of death is desirable in the community because of the obvious moral and religious purpose that the occurrence of death is made to serve the people. The submission was made, thus, that death to the people is a necessary end as it offers members rare moments, and the room for moral and religious edification that will largely be impactful, in terms of the community's survival. This draws attention to the account of how the singer

shows to be a cultural nationalist, signposting a commitment to promoting and upholding the cultural beliefs and practices of his people, especially in times the Izon culture is faced with modern influence. This is in agreement with Okwechime and Legemah (2017) where they conclude that practices of this kind promoted by a people is an effort to spur the young to keep to the values of the society to guarantee its continuity and peaceful coexistence.

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