Oral poetry is a popular genre in Africa, largely due to the poetic nature of the African environment. Almost every activity in African communities calls for one form of poetic expression or the other. Oral poems are usually brought into service in various ways because they are concerned with different human experiences. Elegiac poetry is one of the several poetic forms that exist in Tiv land. It is basically concerned with mourning the dead and consists of funeral songs, eulogies, chants and recitations that are integral to the funeral and memorial rites in the communities. This paper examines the Tiv perception of death, cosmology and the concept of ancestral potency as reflected in their funeral songs. It shows how oral literature acts as an instrument of self-control through the morals it teaches, thereby helping to bring order in the society. In addition to the theme of death, Tiv elegiac poetry is a repository of Tiv culture and tradition. In analysing the thematic concerns of the songs, the paper also highlights the literary and poetic devices employed by the performers in order to achieve the desired effect.

Key words: Elegiac poetry, oral, death, mourn, literature, songs.

INTRODUCTION

Oral poetry refers to all imaginative verbal realizations used in form of songs, chants, incantations and other verbal activities, sometimes accompanied by music. The oral art form is more popular in societies that do not emphasize literacy and written poetry. In such societies, therefore, values and wisdom are handed down from one generation to another through oral communication. Oral literature was thus quite popular in Africa, before the introduction of writing because of the low literacy level.

For a long time, African poetry was mainly oral and unwritten (Okpewho, 1985). In African communities, travelling bards sang songs and recited poetry to the accompaniment of musical instruments. These recitations and songs touched on different aspects of the Africa's way of life. Virtually every activity of Africa is associated with one form of poetic rendition or the other. Songs, recitations and music are also be used effectively to create the desired atmosphere and evoke the appropriate emotion on other solemn, happy or sorrowful occasions. Ulli Beier as quoted by Obafemi writes that in Africa, “nothing is done without poetry”. Before the written form of literature was introduced in Africa, the oral art forms had been flourishing for generations.

Usually, these oral poetic realizations are concerned with different human experiences. They are therefore used for praise, to mourn the dead, preserve historical facts, serve as social commentaries, to affirm and actualize religious beliefs, embody culture and also serve as inspirational purposes during war and game hunting.

Brief background on TIV and their elegiac poetry

Tivs are the most populous ethnic group in Benue State, Nigeria. The name Tiv denotes a culture-group of people and is also regarded as the name of the father of Tiv. Tiv is said to have had two sons, Ipusu and Ichongo. These two form the two main genealogies found in Tiv land.

Mostly black in complexion, the Tiv are a strong and very gregarious people whose main occupation is
farming. Religion is central in the life of a Tiv man and the main tenet of this religious belief revolves around akombo (divinities) and tsav (witchcraft).

Oral story-telling and oratory generally is an art that is highly valued in the society. Tiv oral artists have great humour and the ability to instantaneously improvise songs and dances for any occasion (Keil, 1979; Ker, 2002).

Elegiac poetry is a common form of oral expression in Africa. It comes in different forms from different areas. It is an art form that basically mourns the dead. It consists mainly of funeral dirges or laments sung by individuals or groups of persons. It also includes songs, eulogies composed by friends, chants and recitations that are so integral to the funeral and memorial rites in various African communities. Funeral songs probe the mystery of death, the helplessness of man and also provide some form of consolation for the living who feel the pangs of the inevitability of death.

Among the Tiv, death is perceived from what Abdul Rasheed Na’Allah calls “an eternal-living philosophy” (Na’Allah, 1994) especially, deaths of the aged. The old people who die are said to have only changed realms. They merely pass to the world beyond as ancestors who would then keep an eye over their descendants who are still alive. It is also believed that young people who ‘die’ resurface in other locations to live their lives to the ripe age, when they will then transit to the world beyond and join other ancestors. Instead of death therefore, the most suitable word for this “eternal-living philosophy” is transition. This whole philosophy is usually reflected in Tiv funeral poetry in which death itself becomes an object of song.

The occasions for these laments may differ from people to people, but among the Tiv, the funeral songs and chants are rendered either as the corpse is being prepared for burial or as it lies in state during the wake-keep period. Such songs may consist of laments which demonstrate the people’s feeling of loss. In most cases, especially among the Tiv, as the deceased is being lamented his praises are also sung and his contributions to the lives of those around him or the community are recounted. He is mourned and honoured, and the general links between the past and the present, the living and the dead are brought out clearly in the songs. The sorrow felt by mourners at funerals can be heightened by a skilled performer who can evoke the pathos of the situation in his/her passionate utterances.

However, sometimes the dirges just serve as a means of expressing the feeling of loss, in which case the songs may lack coherence of thought but burst with feelings manifested in sobbing, wailing and ululations. These kinds of funeral songs are usually associated with the first stage of funeral rites when the feeling of loss is fresh and relatives of the deceased are overcome with grief. This study, as well as that of R.C. Abraham, in his The Tiv People (1940), has confirmed that in Tiv land, funeral dirges are often performed by women. The reason for this is because the songs often involve wailing and weeping, activities which in Africa, are considered typically feminine. Although it is mostly the women that perform these kinds of dirges, men too have been known to be involved in them especially when the deceased is their close relative.

As the funeral rites progress, the songs become a sober reflection on life and death, the cycle of existence, the goals of life, and the afterlife. This stage gradually eases tension by showing that the deceased contributed his share for the upliftment of man, that no one lives forever, and that the dead deserve repose. Sometimes, the theme of futility of life comes to the fore as a warning to the living against putting a high premium on what is transient. The dirges of the women are at this point reinforced and finally replaced by music and dancing.

The final stage in the funeral rite consists of a reconciliation of the first two stages, when the feeling of loss is still fresh and when the mourners begin to accept the reality of the situation. These two stages give way to prayers for the repose of the dead and for the living to be able to bear the loss. This third stage is accomplished through chants and songs which make a temporary parting of ways for those who believe in meeting with their loved ones after death. The songs also serve as a promotion to the realm of spirituality for the dead as conceived by those who consider their dead relations as joining the ancestors.

In some Tiv communities, the participation of women in dirges is sometimes restricted to certain stages in the funeral rites. Funerals of warriors, who belong to the girinya (warriors) cult for instance, are characterized by women’s laments only at the initial mourning over the corpse. At the burial rites however, the men who are initiates of the group take over from the women and sing songs expressing the valour and bravery of their departed companion. These songs are usually sung to the accompaniment of drumming. It is also important to note that some Tiv funeral songs are topical and short-lived because they are composed for use at funerals of particular individuals. There are, however, songs that are generalized and can thus be sung at many other funerals.

In Tiv land, actual interments may be accompanied by eulogies or elegies. Deaths are also often celebrated by memorial ceremonies long after actual interment. Funeral poetry can therefore be performed during actual burial rites and at ancestral remembrance ceremonies or just at anytime an individual feels like remembering his dead relation(s).

It is worthy of note too, that Christianity has influenced the Tiv perception of death to some extent. Consequently, apart from the traditional Tiv songs of lament, other kinds of mourning songs in recent times feature prominently at Tiv funerals. These are basically Christian mourning songs that are performed at funerals of members of Christian groups. The songs are largely an affirmation of faith and also to commend the deceased’s soul to God.
Classification of Tiv funeral songs

Among the Tiv, there are two basic classifications of dirges. The first category is the highly dignified and elaborate dirges. They are performed at funerals of prominent elders or very important personalities of the community. The dirges combine mourning and praise singing. Most often, these songs are composed and performed at such funeral occasions by professional singers. The order of presentation of material is dependent on the performer’s dexterity and skill. This category of dirges is usually tied to the particular person whose death is being mourned.

The second category of Tiv dirges is the less elaborate women’s dirges which lack coherence of thought and are often sung by non-professional singers. They also include dirges sung at funerals of ‘ordinary’ people as well as children. Apart from being devoid of praises, the songs are considered as less dignifying.

From the foregoing classification, it is evident that Tivs show differentiation in funerals of the elderly, the young, the prominent or wealthy and the poor or ‘ordinary’ persons. As a matter of fact, the more prominent or wealthy the deceased or his family members are, the more elaborate and comprehensive is the funeral. Funerals of the poor or ‘ordinary’ people are, on the other hand, carried out in a hurry.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the result of a fieldwork. The songs used here were recorded on audio-tapes at different funeral occasions. The songs were then transcribed and translated into English before embarking on the analysis.

THEMATIC AND LITERARY ANALYSIS

The Tivs dread death and view it as a very serious phenomenon that terminates man’s physical existence on earth. In spite of the devastation that death causes, the Tivs feel that since it is inevitable, man must learn to accept it as an inescapable mystery. Despite the trauma and pain that death brings in its wake, man is expected to accept his fate passively. This Tiv perception of death is thus discernible in their funeral poetry as can be seen in the poem below:

TIV

Ee aho ayooo!
Orhembe ku ngu hana?
Aondo hemba inya i chir ooo!
Ee aho ayooo!
Or hemba ku ngu hana!
Aondo hemba inya i chir ooo.
Nam azenga a kuu,
Aondo sen kende
Se ijinga i kuu ve,
Ayoo-o ku yo u hemba,
Aondo hemba sha won ve,
Ek u wua
Mbavela wam kela ngu ze oo!
Aondo hemba inya i chir oo!

ENGLISH

Ee aho ayooo!
Who is greater than death?
God is greatest, earth is next
Ee aho ayooo!
Who is greater than death!
God is the greatest; earth is next.
Give me batons of death,
God has dropped us
A baton of death,
Ayoool Death is great
God is greatest in the world;
Death has killed
My ‘Mbavela’, she is no more
God is the greatest, earth is next ooo.
(Amase, 2010)

The first stanza of this dirge opens with a shout of despair, “Ee aho ayoo”, and goes on to inquire who is greater than ku (death). The answer to this question comes in lines three and six that God is the greatest and earth is next. Earth here is a metaphor for death because it is the earth or grave that keeps the dead permanently. There is yet another metaphor, azenga a kuu (batons of death) in line seven. Death is seen as a relay race, where one runner hands the baton to the other. Once the baton is dropped at your feet, you must pick it up. Consequently, in the penultimate line, the mourner’s relation, ‘Mbavela’ has picked the baton and is therefore “no more”. This song demonstrates the Tivs’ concept of death as an inevitable phenomenon which though painful, man must learn to accept with stoicism.

The belief that ancestors still make contact with their descendants living on earth is also evident in Tiv’s dirges. The people believe that the dead only transit from the physical to the spiritual realm and that the aged, who die, sometimes do so out of annoyance over certain unpleasant happenings on earth. The dirge below attests to this:
This dirge was performed to mourn a dead mother. The singer starts by saying that people are wailing because mother is no more. The singer then rhetorically asks the deceased why she left without warning. The effect of this expression is to show the suddenness of death. Again, in lines nine and twelve the mourner expresses his despair and anguish when he asks, who would feed and save him. The last two lines sum up the whole idea of going to meet others in the spirit world, as the singer concludes by calling on his late father, “Shabu” and tells him that his wife has joined him.

Jenkwe is right when he posits in his Yanmoel Yashi: A Study of Tiv Oral Poetry (1998) that the Tiv see death as a compulsory levy placed on man by God. This debt, man must pay at the appointed time. Life in this world is thus transitory. The idea of life being transitory is a sure sign of hope and comfort for the bereaved as demonstrated by the following poem:

The singer opens the above poem with an announcement of the disappearance of his relative. In line three the poet wonders if the missing brother was caught by a tiger, but again in lines five and six he uses parallelism to answer the question:

“He is silent in the casket. He is sitting silently…….”

The image of death painted here is that of a tiger, that comes stealthily and attacks its prey without the least suspicion. Life is likened to the short period, between supper and bed time, when the Tiv people sit in the ‘ate’ (reception hut) to rest for a while before going to bed. During this period, whoever feels sleepy leaves the others and goes to bed. Just as it is impossible to stop the sleep, so it is with death when it comes for you. The poet therefore concludes: 

“No matter your resistance Your day has come”

The next song hints on the superstitious aspect of Tiv perception of death. The Tiv believe in the supernatural powers. They believe that deaths do not just occur; people who die are usually killed for certain reasons by the mbatsav (a highly spiritual group of witches and wizards). It is believed that even though death is inevitable, this group always has a hand in the deaths that occur in the community. Commenting on the activities of this spiritual group, Keil states:

The mbatsav are alleged to leave their sleeping bodies for night time cabals, during which they exhume corpses,
revive them and then slaughter, divide them and consume them in a never ending round of acquiring and paying flesh debts to each other (1979).

At some funerals therefore, the unwholesome activities of the Mbatsav are addressed from different perspectives as shown in the song below:

**TIV**
Ormbatsav-oo!
Ormbatsav ngunu-ooo,
Kenger inyam yough.
Ormbatsav tema zulugh
Ormbatsav wa ityough inya
Ormbatsav mough ityough sha
Kenger inyam yough

**ENGLISH**
Wizard/witch!
Here is the wizard/witch
Look at your meat.
The wizard is sitting worried
The wizard has bowed his head
Wizard, raise up your head,
Look at your meat.
(Amase, 2010)

An imaginary member of mbatsav, whom the singer believes is present at the funeral is being addressed directly. This poetic device is called apostrophe. Sometimes too, after the real wizard/witch responsible for the death has been identified, the women singers address this song to him/her publicly. The singers allege that the wizard/witch seems overwhelmed with guilt and is thus sitting dejectedly, which amounts to regretting his act. The ormbatsav is thus told to stop pretending, but rather raise his head up and look at his meat (corpse). This public indictment and disgrace is a punitive measure employed by Tiv mourners to deter others from indulging in this wicked act.

Sometimes, dirges are woven in complex metaphors in order to paint a picture of helplessness and grief which are the lot of the bereaved, whose main support in life is the dead person.

**TIV**
Me ityô yam-ooo!
Ityô yam-ooo,
Ityor kin mase tsuan se ve
Me ityô yam-ooo!
Ityô yam-ooo
Ityor kin mase tsuan se ve,
Indyer iyase imenger cii,
Ikyurav ger dighin kpa ilu tso

**ENGLISH**
My clan
This pillar has finally fallen
My clan
This pillar has finally fallen
Our slit-log drum has overturned,
Ikyurav people have screamed, but only time will tell.
(Amase, 2010)

*Ityô in Tiv refers to one’s matrilineal clan. The first two lines of the song are a call on the singer’s clan, to whom he reports that “the pillar has finally fallen”. Line seven introduces an important object, *indyer* (slit-log drum) which is a sacred musical instrument made from a huge log of wood. *Indyer*, according to Tiv tradition is capable of bringing prosperity to its custodians. As used in the poem therefore, the *indyer* and *Ityôr* are metaphors for strength and prosperity. With the collapse of the pillar and the overturning of the slit-log drum, symbolizing the deceased’s death therefore, the strength of the mourner and his survival are in jeopardy. Death therefore leaves an indelible mark of sorrow on the minds of the mourners.

The Tiv also, persistently portray death in their mourning songs as a blind reaper, often picking on the seemingly wrong fruits. This perception forms the subject of the next poem which demonstrates the ironies of life:

**TIV**
Ka or a fa kwagh,
Nan kpe ku fele;
Ka or a lan kwagh
Nan lu sha won zan zan
Nan eren ior ican gbern

**ENGLISH**
When a man is kind,
He dies quickly.
When a man is wicked,
He lives for a long period
And causes people to suffer.
Zege Bundu sha Ukan-oo
Za kar nyôr,
Aza Ugba, mue u tor-oo
Za kar nyôr.

Zege Bundu from Ukan,
Has passed and entered.
Aza Ugba, acting Chief
Has passed and entered.
(Amase, 2010)
The above song shows that death is truly heartless and often very unfair to mankind generally. Those that the majority of people feel deserve death, hardly die as expected. However,

“When a man is kind, 
He dies quickly”.

It is therefore ironical that those, whose activities positively touch the lives of those around them, hardly live long enough to continue with the good work. However, the selfish and wicked are often spared by death and they continue to make the lives of other people miserable.

The first stanza comprises antithetical statements that show the unfairness of death to mankind. The poet makes effective use of euphemism in lines two and four of the second stanza, where he mentions the names of two victims of death, who were very kind men and simply says, each “Has passed and entered”.

The Tiv have other dirges that are usually sung by a soloist and chorus. Such dirges may have the same refrain for the chorus, but the soloist can prolong the performance through skilful improvisation and expansion during performances. It is therefore usually quite unlikely for such songs to be exactly the same, when performed at different occasions. Even if it is performed by the same artist, the text cannot be the same. The next poem is a suitable example:

**TIV**

Soloist: M mar wan u nomso
Kwagh doom member-oo
Chorus: Aondo gema na inya
Soloist: M mar wan u nomso
Kwagh doom member-oo
Chorus: Aondo gema na inya
Soloist: An a zere mo ikyondo?
Chorus: Aondo gema na inya
Soloist: An a yamen an baa?
Chorus: Aondo gema na inya
Soloist: An a yamen wan inyama?
Chorus: Aondo gema na inya

**ENGLISH**

I got a male child
So, I rejoiced;
God has given him to the earth.
Who will clothe me?
Who will buy salt for me?
Who will buy meat for me?
God has given him to the earth

(Amase, 2010)

This song was performed at the funeral of a young man who happened to be his parent’s only male child. The Tiv believe that a man without a male child is as good as having no child at all, since he has no heir-apparent. Losing a male child is thus a loss of unimaginable degree. Even the sympathizers are easily drawn to tears as they listen to this sorrow-laden song. The singer rejoiced when a male child was born, but now God has committed the child to mother earth. Earth here is the metaphor for death, since it holds those buried in it securely. The rhetorical questions in lines seven, nine and eleven heighten the already tense atmosphere, as the mourner counts his losses.

Earlier, in the introductory part of this write-up, it was pointed out that Tiv funeral songs fall largely into two categories. There are the very common and less elaborate dirges whose authors are often not even known by the performers, and also the more elaborate songs, often tied to particular prominent personalities:

**TIV**

Or wasen Aondo ter mhenga,
Ter Aondo ahenen kwagh a or,
Ma ilu hen iyange ne ga,
Joseph Doctor Tarka
Man akpe ga
Se mba vaan ku ne
Kpa ka ke hemen,
Kera ka ku tseghee ga.
Guda se tim yunivaseti
Se yilan iti na er
Tarka yunivaseti of tekenoloji
Se kera hungur iti na ga-ee
Ataver se u zuan a or veren
Hen ian i senator, Nachi

**ENGLISH**

Man does not assist God in taking decision
If God were to confide in man,
It wouldn’t have been this time
That Joseph Tarka
Would have died.
We are mourning this death,
But it is for the future.
It is not just his death
It is better to site a university,
We shall call it
Tarka University of Technology
We shall never forget his name.
It will be difficult for us to get someone
To occupy the position which
Amase

Yan tile la, Sena nor Nachi occupied.
Se mba vaan ku ne We are mourning this death,
Kpa ka ke hemen But it is for the future
Kera ka ku tseghee ga. It is not just his death.
Guda se tim yunivaseti It is better we site a university
Se yilan iti na er, We shall call it:
Tarka yuniversaati of tekenoloi Tarka University of Technology
Se kera hungur iti na ga-ee We shall never forget his name,
Ka ngura kpa ior a hemban nyöröö-oo Many people will attend it.

II

Kwagh er vihi joo, Something terribly bad has happened.
Mnenge President u Nigeria, I saw the President of Nigeria,
Shagari har mliam, Shagari, shedding tears.
Paul Unongo Kwaghngise Paul Unongo Kwaghngise too,
Yan nongo u wuan iyol Almost killed himself
Shie u yan Ioryina Shaahu When Ioryina Shaahu
Kua shi Ayua Num Abua And Ayua Num Abua
Za nyör a ikoyom na ve Arrived with the corpse
Peter Atsuku man ör And Peter Atsuku then called
Akor Ikòör ve kor akwati Akor Ikoyör and they held the casket
Ihungwa amin inya tee-regh, And brought it down slowly.
Shima vihi, Alahaji Gwalgwada: Alhaji Gwalgwada was heart- broken;
Gwalgwada tile mliam-aa Gwalgwada stop wailing,
Gwalgwada tile mliam-aa Gwalgwada stop wailing,
Gwalgwada kune vihi u kpa, Gwalgwada, this death has saddened you,
Kuma sha gomna, But not as much as
Aper Aku ga; It does Governor Aper Aku.
Ku ne vihi u kpa This death has saddened you,
Kuma sha Tor u Tiv But not as much as it does the Tor Tiv
Kur Baka Shima Yawe Kur Baka Shima Yawe,
Ter u Tiv ga; The father of Tiv.
U nyör-u shin Mbaikor If you get to Mbaikor
Hen pe Tyoor Where the clan head,
Alagh Lienev Adi Alagh Lienev Adi
Kpa shi a tem, Is seated,
Tsò u mase kaven Then you will realize
We ku ne vihi, How bad this death is,
Or lamen ken Mbaikor No one talks loudly
Ka taver ga. In Mbaikor clan.

III

Mza shin ön mba ngôm me, I went to my mother’s children
Me za lam a Tseke, So that I would talk to Tseke,
Ngu heregh ga, He was not present,
Kpa mza lam a kwase na But I talked to his wife,
Ka angbianwam shin Mbaityav; She is my sister from Mbaityav.
Eliza u Tseke
Eliza Tseke,
We ngu vaan yum, You are wailing this much,
Kaan aza kumbur ngò na Who will console his mother
Er a tile mliam tee-regh? To stop crying?
Aza Saawuan yö As for Aza Saawuan,
Mnenge Orduen sen, I can see Orduen Nöngu
Ngu heregh ngee-regh; Is standing by:
Aza wen awua iyol ga. So Aza will not kill herself.
The above song was composed and performed by a professional singer called Tarker Golozo, at the funeral of the late senator J.S. Tarka (1932-1980), a prominent Tiv political leader. The singer does not just settle on the theme of death and sorrow, but also includes praises. As the deceased is mourned, he is also praised and his positive attributes are recounted. The singer says Tarka has been the pillar of Tiv politics and with his demise, it would be extremely difficult to fill the vacuum created.

The second part of the song deals with the steps which the people hope to take in order to immortalize the deceased’s name. A university is to be built and named after him. The singer further says the effect of Tarka’s death is so great that even President Shagari, Governor Aper Aku and Paul Unôngo are openly weeping. This assertion is a good hyperbole, intended to paint a gory picture of the havoc this death has caused. In Mbakor, the deceased’s home town, the singer says people hardly speak in the tones above a whisper.

In the last stanza, the poet paints a picture of hopelessness and dashed hopes when he says “Our sun/has finally set”. The sun which is the source of life has been used here metaphorically to refer to the deceased whose presence had illuminated the lives of his people. Just as sun set heralds the arrival of darkness, so has Tarka’s death brought darkness to all those who had looked up to him for leadership and sustenance. The song then ends with a demonstration of the Tiv belief that, “No one lives forever” and that death is a must for everybody.

In addition to the traditional Tiv dirges, Christians’ laments are also feature at some Tiv funerals in recent times. The main source of these songs is the Holy Bible. Apart from heightening the solemn atmosphere at funerals, these songs are an affirmation of faith and belief in God and the here-after. This is illustrated in the next lament:
This song demonstrates an acceptance of the fact that death is inevitable for all human beings. The deceased is thus said to have simply led the way that all must trod eventually. The concluding part of the stanza sums it all when the singer states that man is made of dust, and to dust he must return. It is thus necessary for man to prepare his mind for this frightening yoke that must be borne.

**Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis demonstrates the Tiv concept and perception of death. The Tiv see death as a compulsory levy placed upon man. The songs therefore urge man to see life as transitory and should thus prepare for death. The belief in the philosophy of life after death and that the dead only change realms is equally manifested in Tiv funeral songs. The paper shows that Tiv oral literature is didactic; it aims at sustaining a disciplined and upright society, ensuring peace, stability and development. The Tiv see death as a serious phenomenon that terminates man's physical existence on earth and therefore, death becomes an object of songs.

Generally, in Tiv funeral poetry, death is characterized in its stealthiness, horror, greed, unfairness and unpredictability. These concepts are carefully embedded in the appropriate figurative expressions and imagery to effectively express the Tiv impression of death.

**REFERENCES**