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# ON THE STRUCTURAL UNITY OF THE AKAN DIRGE

by E. O. Apronti

## Introduction

An important aspect of the *total* study of Oral Literature in Africa relates to the inner dynamics of the texts as texts. Such studies complement what can be stated about the religious, social or ritual contexts in which the texts are performed. They do this principally in increasing our awareness of the factors that have fostered the survival of these texts as texts, while at the same time making explicit those structural dynamics that reinforce the literary appeal of the texts.

Preservation and survival are crucial factors in the "lives" of unwritten texts. These texts vary in the extent to which it is felt that they should retain their integrity. The "prose" narrative of a folk tale for instance allows for more textual improvisation than does the Yoruba babalawo's IFA "verse" chant. Generally, indeed, the performance of verse texts tends to require a greater fidelity to the original than does the performance of prose texts.

How, then, does the integrity of an unwritten text get preserved? Content-wise, most texts evince a unity in their structure. Not only are they concerned with a particular topic, they also generally draw on vocabulary from a set field or scatter. They thus evince a coherence of theme or of subject.

Structurally, also, they evince various devices which unify the texts and thus enhance their memorability. The extant literature on oral literature high-lights this structural feature; a few examples are Babalola's *Content and Form of the Yoruba Ijala*, OUP, 1966; Abimbola's "Stylistic Repetition in Ifa Divination Poetry," *Lagos Notes and Records III*, 1, 1971, 38-53, and Nketia's *Funeral Dirges of the Akan*, Achimota, 1955, pp. 75-112.

Structural unity in both its syntactic and lexical aspects can, therefore, be shown to be a characteristic of many oral literature texts. As has been suggested above, such structural unity is a function of the memorability of texts—the tighter the structural dynamics, the greater the chances of a text remaining unchanged; conversely the looser its structural unity, the more liable the text is to emendation.

## The Akan Dirge

The most outstanding study of this literary form is Professor Nketia's book to which reference has been made above. In it is to be found a succinct discussion of the religious and social contexts in which dirges are performed, an analysis of their linguistic and literary properties, and examples of a variety of dirge texts.

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What is intended here is to supplement, without undue repetition, the statements that Nketia makes on the structural unity of the dirge. The theory which we shall apply to this material is a version of the concept of COUPLING proposed by Samuel R. Levin in his *Linguistic Structures in Poetry*, Mouton, The Hague, 1962. The theory is applicable in all its rigour to the dirge texts to be discussed. We desist from this, however, because such an exercise will interest only specialists; we are here concerned with the type of statements that readers who are not specialist linguists would find congenial.

### *Poetry versus Prose*

Before expounding the outline of Levin's theory and illustrating its applicability to the Akan dirge, it might be useful to dispose of the problem of distinguishing verse or poetry from prose. This, of course, has been a subject of age-long debate.

The distinction is usually, but by no means always, clear-cut. Indeed the dirge, being a song text, is poetry almost by definition. But the question raises wider stylistic issues of which we must dispose, if only to justify the relevance of Levin's theory to our discussion.

This distinction is made difficult by the fact that some "poems" are clearly prosaic in flavour (which generally makes them bad poetry. Examples abound in the daily and weekly press). Even more disconcerting is the tendency of some prose texts to evoke in all but their form the responses that readers generally associate with poetry. A recent example is afforded by the small-print chapters of Kofi Awoonor's first novel, *This Earth, My Brother*. . . . .

Attempts that scholars have made to distinguish poetry from prose have varied from appeals to memorability, to obviously regular rhythms, to structural symmetry and to the congruence of 'form' and 'content.' These criteria sound formal and rigorous enough, until it is remembered that many prose statements or passages exhibit them as well.

Several recurrent quotations undoubtedly have a prose form. For instance, an ultra-colonialist statement by Britain's war-time leader Sir Winston Churchill to the effect that he would not preside over the liquidation of the British Empire has found echoes in many parts of the English-speaking world. Besides, proverb texts which are quoted to such good effect in ordinary life can also be said to be prose. But they often evince structural symmetry.

Such symmetry is also evident in the prose style called "Eupheistic writing" once popular among English prose writers and employed also by J. E. Casely-Hayford in his pseudo-novel, *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911).

It would seem that the most satisfactory clues in these days of "prose poems," "free verse" and "concrete poetry" consist of a combination of these various traits. We can thus make explicit our sensation of a structural unity in poetry principally on the basis of the syntax of the poems and secondly by reference to its meaning and the peculiar organisation of its (poetic) expression.

It will be found that the longer the piece, the more fruitful it is to analyse it on these structural lines. Indeed when prose—even fine poetic prose—parades as verse

the structural-syntactic test readily shows it up as not being as closely-knit as we would expect a piece verse to be. The kind of structural labels we shall provide for the dirges below are clearly inapplicable to prose texts.

### *Levin and "Coupling"*

The attraction of Levin's theory is that it helps to elaborate the structural basis of Nketia's stylistic analysis. It is hoped that this will enable us to show that the form and the content of a traditional oral poem can evince as much symmetry as an individual composition (compare the discussion offered below with Jean Ure's stylistic analysis of the present writer's poem "Funeral," in *Proceedings of the Eighth West African Languages Congress*, University of Abidjan, 1971, Volume 2, p. 589-597).

To summarize Levin's theory, he claims that the unity or symmetry that a poem evokes is a function of a particular type of composition or structure. He recognizes various units of structure, including the line. These units have places in them, which are occupied by smaller (linguistic) units. These latter units, naturally, have inter-relations both within the line and in successive lines.

The first line of a poem may consist of a structure of subject plus Verb (transitive) plus Object. The next line, let us say, may exhibit a similar structure. This is one kind of symmetry. The two subject positions are said to be equivalent (i.e. similar). But then, factors on other linguistic planes (apart from grammar) may reinforce this symmetry. For instance the respective lexical items (or items of vocabulary) that occupy Subject place in the two hypothetical lines may be semantically congruent (where for instance they are synonyms), or otherwise. Similarly, the lexical content of the two verbs may correspond or contrast and so on.

The possibilities are therefore quite considerable. One can pursue this type of analysis, on the one hand, by reference to such linguistic levels as phonology, morphology, syntax etc., and, on the other hand, in relation to combinations of varying numbers of lines.

Levin draws a distinction between positionally (i.e. syntactically) equivalent classes which he calls Type One, and semantically equivalent classes, Type Two. The ideal of structural unity and symmetry, then, occurs when Type Two equivalences coincide with (or are embedded in) Type One equivalences. Then you have 'coupling.' That is, we have coupling when linguistic items which are either semantically (or phonically) equivalent are found occurring in comparable structural positions.

The full rigour of this theory invokes the phonology or sound system of the language in which the poem occurs. As we shall be dealing here with the English translations of the Akan dirge, it would be fruitless to pursue the full implications of this aspect of the theory. Such an exercise would reveal, in the phonological sphere, only *fortuitous* phonic equivalences in the English text. This is not to say that the latter are entirely devoid of interest.

But the first stage of the theory which deals with syntactic and semantic factors, we contend, sheds a useful light on the structure of the Akan dirge, to which we now turn.

## *The Structure of the Dirge*

One aspect of linguistic analysis which will feature in the discussion that follows is the revelation of the skeletal structure of linguistic matter. To do this, we need symbols that can extrapolate that structure and abstract it, thus high-lighting structural features (namely correspondences and contrasts) to the exclusion of all other features.

We propose to use the following symbols:

- Z — addressive, similar to the Latin vocative, though not formally marked in all the texts. (One of the few marked is "Asumegya Gyebiri oo" p.211, line 6).
- S — Subject, defined by its regular syntactic relationship to a Verb or Predicator. It may in addition precede or follow forms of the copular, the verb "to be."
- P — Predicator or verb, evincing tense and mode forms, and in syntactic relationship to a nominal group in subject position.
- C — Complement or direct Object, a nominal group dominated by a transitive verbal group.
- Q — Indirect objects.
- R — locationals, separated from other adverbial phrases (A, below) on account of the dominance of the theme of the place of domicile in the dirge (see Nketia, *op cit*, pp. 38-43).
- A — adverbials other than locationals (R, above).

To turn now to some of the longer dirge texts which, as we have already indicated, yield the most fruitful results through this type of analysis. The first Aduana dirge on page 139 begins:

1. Atwea Yaa, the flint arrived too late.

Here "Atwea Yaa" is an addressive or appellation, and is therefore "Z". The next two words constitute a nominal group "S" in subject position to the Predicator "P" "arrived." The last two words being adverbial (but not locational) may be labelled "A."

Line One therefore yields the structure:

1. Z, S P A

Line Two reads:

2. Sakrabutu, he is neither an upturner, nor one who moves about.

We open again with an addressive "Z," followed by two clauses which, for our purposes, ought to be rewritten (because the following are their underlying strings or structures) as

2a he is not an up turner

2b he does not move about.

It is interesting here that the Akan version (page 209, line 2) evinces a structural symmetry which is obscured by the English translation:

2c Sakrabortu, anye butufoa, anye nantefoa.

which is clearly Z, SPS, SPS, where P is the copular "to be" to which the category of transitivity does not apply, hence 'S' after 'P.'

To turn back to the English version, then, the structures are:

2a S P S

2b S P R

We may note here in passing the uniform negative mode of the two verbs, as well as their uniform tense. Line 2 as whole thus yields the structure:

2. Z, S P S, S P R

The next line reads:

3. You will find him crouching by the wayside  
which we may expound as

3a. You will find him

3b. He is crouching by the wayside.

These two yield the following structures

3a. S P C

Where "you" is "S," "will find" is "P," and "him" is "C."

3b. S P R

With "he" as "S," "is crouching" as "P," and "by the wayside" as "R" a locational. Thus the whole line is:

3. S P C, S P R

The next two lines embody a conditional clause

4. If you ask him for anything, he gives it to you.

5. And says: Vanquish the thousand and the mighty with it, which is balanced by lines 6 and 7. Line 4 yields the structure

4. S P C Q, S P C Q

an example of perfect symmetry within the line, a fact that is not readily evident in the verbalized version. Line 5 may be said to be prefaced by "if you asked him for anything" (SPCQ) of line 4;

"He says" can therefore precede the colon as SP, thus:

5. (S P C Q, S) P: P C<sup>1</sup> + C<sup>2</sup> A

We have here a concatenation of two direct objects dominated by the verb "vanquish," namely "the thousand" and "the mighty." Since we cannot assume that those two have identical referents, we use superscript numbers to distinguish them.

Now come the two lines that counterpoise the previous two;

6. Then you reply: I will not use it for that purpose.

7. But will use it for something greater.

Line 7 in its turn is expounded by lines 8 and 9, as we shall see below later.

Line 6 yields the structure

6. S P: S P C A

Line 7 begins with a suppressed "Then you reply, (But) I" . . . which we supply, yielding

7. (S P: S) P C A

The symmetry evinced between lines 6 and 7 is thus made explicit. We note in addition the contrasting modes or poles of the two verbs, a negative "will not use" in line 6, but an affirmative "will use" in line 7.

The next two lines read:

8. Deception and the worst stratagem

9. The portion of the exterior of the pot that Skin does not cover.

Line 8 is structurally dominated by "I will use it for" in line 7 and is thus an elaboration of the "A" element of that line. It therefore has the structure

8. A<sup>1</sup> + A<sup>2</sup>                      A<sup>2</sup> + A<sup>2</sup>

Line 9 might be rewritten:

9a. The portion of the exterior of the pot

9b. Skin does not cover it

where 9 is structurally similar to 8, hence

9a. A<sup>2</sup>

and 9b yields

9b. S P C

The complete line is thus

9a. A<sup>2</sup>, S P C

The final line is

10. Grandchild of Atwea Yaa that hails from the town of Atwea Gyampon.

which we may re-write as

10a. Grandchild of Atwea Yaa

10b. You hail from the town of Atwea Gyampon,

yielding

10a. Z

10b. S P C

The transitivity of the Predicator "hail from" (equivalent to the Akan "firi") is verifiable by replacing "the town of Atwea Gyampon" with the pronoun *object* "him." "From. . . . Gyampon" is thus not a locational unit, despite all appearances to the contrary.

Line 10 as a whole thus yields:

10. Z, S P C

The skeletal framework of the first Aduana dirge on Nketia's page 139 may thus be displayed as:

1. Z, S P A

2. Z, S P S, S P R

3. S P C, S P R

4. S P C Q, S P C Q

5. (S P C Q, S) P: PC<sup>1</sup> + C<sup>2</sup>A

6. S P: S P C A

7. (S P: S) P C A

8. A<sup>1</sup> + A<sup>2</sup>

9. A<sup>3</sup>, S P C

10. Z, S P C



Recurrent syntactic structures are thus seen to be a significant feature of the dirge. Add to this the consistency of the vocabulary, drawn here from the activity of hunting and combat: *flint, moves about, crouching, vanquish, deception, stratagem, skin*. We thus get an inkling of the basis of the reader's sensation of unified or coherent experience in the dirge as a form of poetry.

We conclude the paper by citing another dirge and extrapolating its structure to illustrate the method employed here. It is of course possible to specify in greater detail than we have done in this paper the structural elements that underline the unity of the dirge, but we have indicated above reasons why that amount of delicacy (i.e. detail in analysis) would be inappropriate here. In the following dirge, therefore, many locational references will be adumbrated by a "Z" addressive specification. This is done without prejudice to further statements that are possible and are, indeed, of interest, but which we shall not accommodate here. (Note again that "hail from" is treated as a transitive verb).

The dirge in question is number 90 on Nketia's page 182. It is an Agona dirge

1. Kotoku person and grandchild of the Vanguard of Kotoku.

Z , Z

2. Grandchild of Ampoma: our lineage hails from Kotoku

Z , S P C

3. Grandchild of Baabu: our lineage hails from Kade

Z , S P C

4. Grandchild of Ofori Amanfo: you are a Tia person

Z , S P S

5. Grandchild of Ampona: our lineage hails from Dankyira Mmorebemmu.

Z , S P C

6. Grandchild of Sasu Dam hails from Sankubanase (when rewritten as "Grandchild of Sasu Dam, you hail from Sankubanase).

Z , S P C

7. It is grandsire that hails from Kontonkyi, where the stone is wearing down the axe

S P S, S P C, R S P C

8. Tia person, grandchild of Akwasi Afrɛ

Z , Z

9. Okyeręgya's grandchild that drinks at Tafo Abooso

Z , S P R\*

10. Abeam Dansoaa offspring of the Biretuo clan of Sekyere,

Z , Z

11. Akwasi Afrę is the offspring of Agona and Biretuo clans

S P S

12. A Dompri person and grandchild of Aboagye Awua of Akyem

Z Z

13. Grandchild of Abora Kani, Kani pure and true

Z , Z

\* or, following Akan syntax, Z, S P C.

Apart, again, from the closely-knit structure of syntactical elements, we notice even from a casual glance the elaborate repetitions of kinship vocabulary—*grandchild, offspring, hail, lineage*. This dirge is therefore a unified poetical experience.

The case for regarding the dirge as a coherent whole is thus seen to be based on structural, lexical and semantic considerations. We have been concerned here with drawing the outline of the application of a method of stylistic analysis which lends validity to our intuitive awareness of the appeal or "punch" of a dirge as a unified poetic expression, and we find here at least a partial explanation as to why, even without the benefit of writing, this piece of oral literature has hung together for so long.