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6. Elegiac Poetry

General and introductory. Akan funeral dirges: content and themes; structure, style, and delivery; occasions and functions; the dirge as literature.

I

Elegiac poetry is an exceedingly common form of expression in Africa. We hear of it from all areas and in many different forms. However it is usually less specialized and elaborate than panegyric poetry, and, perhaps for this reason, it has attracted less interest.¹ More private and normally lacking the political relevance of panegyric poetry—to which, nevertheless, it is closely related—it tends to be performed by non-professionals (often women) rather than state officials. It shades into ‘lyric’ poetry and in many cases cannot be treated as a distinctive genre. However, lamentation so frequently appears in a more or less stylized and literary form in Africa that it is worth treating on its own in this chapter. Furthermore, some account of Nketia’s detailed work on Akan funeral dirges—a study not known widely enough²—may serve as a stimulus to further similar work, and at the same time illustrate some of the complex artistic conventions that can be distinguished in one type of non-professional oral poetry in Africa.

The most obvious instances of elegiac poetry are those poems or songs performed at funeral or memorial rites. In this sense elegiac poetry ranges from the Islamic funeral song sung by Hausa mallams and reduced to writing in the nineteenth century (Robinson 1896: 2–13), or the short but

1 I know of only two analyses in any detail, (Nketia 1955 and Anyumba 1964) though there are many brief accounts and passing references.

2 It is not mentioned, for instance, in Bascom’s bibliographic survey of African oral literature, 1964.

complex Akan funeral dirges chanted by women soloists, to the simple laments with leader and chorus that are sung among the Limba and others, laments in which the musical and balletic elements are as important as the words.

The occasions for these laments differ from people to people. Often dirges are sung round the corpse (or round the house in which the corpse lies) while it is being prepared for burial. Sometimes, as among the Akan, this is followed by a period of public mourning, during which the corpse lies in state and dirges are sung. The actual burial may or may not be accompanied by elegies: among the Akan it is not (Nketia 1955: 15), while among the Limba all normal burials should be accompanied by singing. Deaths are also often celebrated by memorial ceremonies later and these too are usually accompanied by songs that sometimes include strictly funeral songs, and sometimes panegyric of the dead.

On these occasions women are the most frequent singers. Among the Yoruba women lament at funeral feasts (Ellis 1894: 157f.), Akan dirges are chanted by women soloists (Nketia 1955: 8 and *passim*) and the *zitengulo* songs of Zambia are sung by women mourners (Jones 1943: 15). The fact that these songs often involve wailing, sobbing, and weeping makes them particularly suitable for women—in Africa as elsewhere such activities are considered typically female. Also common are laments sung by a chorus of women, sometimes led by one soloist, and often accompanied by dancing or drumming. Occasionally men too are involved. Among the Limba, for instance, the initial mourning over the corpse is invariably by women, in either chorus or antiphonal form; but in the case of an adult male the burial itself is by the men's secret society and the accompanying songs are by men. Specialists too are sometimes conventionally mourned by their peers. Thus an expert hunter may have special songs sung at his funeral by fellow hunters (men) who come to attend the rites. Occasionally too one hears of professional or semi-professional singers. Thus the Yoruba sometimes invited professional mourners to their funerals to add an extra embellishment to the usual laments of the bereaved women (Ellis 1894: 157).



Figure 12. Funeral songs in the dark in Kamabai, 1961 (photo Ruth Finnegan).

Many of these songs are topical and ephemeral. That is, they are composed for use at the funeral of one individual and relate to him only, though they naturally use the accepted idioms and forms. Thus among the Ila and Tonga of Zambia, the *zitengulo* mourning songs are sung only once: they are very short and composed by a woman who mourns and thinks over the life's work of the deceased; she bases her song on this, starts to sing little by little, and adds words and melody until the song is complete (Jones 1943: 15). Other funeral songs, perhaps particularly the choral ones, seem to have a set form repeated more or less exactly at all funerals, or all funerals of a certain category—though on this point the evidence is often not very precise. There are also instances of songs or poems said to have been composed initially for some other occasion but taken over for regular use at funerals. The Chadwicks speak of elegies in Ethiopia said to have been preserved 'for several centuries' and instance the famous and much sung elegy for Saba Gadis (Chadwicks iii, 1940: 517). Another case is the Ibo song originally sung by warriors to their leader Ojea as he lay dying at the moment of victory, but now used as a generalized funeral dirge:

Ojea, noble Ojea, look round before you depart,
 Ojea, see, the fight is over;
 Fire has consumed the square and then the home,
 Ojea, see, the fight is over.

Ojea, Brother Ojea, ponder and look,
 Ojea, see, the fight is over;
 If rain soaks the body, will the clothes be dry?
 Ojea, ah! The fight is over

(Osadebay 1949: 153)

The content of these elegies varies. At times—as in this Ibo example—there is no direct reference to the deceased. But often he is specifically addressed, and praise is one of the most frequent motifs. Among the Yoruba praise poetry is recited or played on drums at funerals as well as on other occasions (Gbadamosi and Beier 1959: 50), and in Akan dirges the singer calls on the deceased by his praise names and lauds his great deeds and ancestry. Occasionally the personal reference or address to the deceased is deepened by more general allusions. This is well illustrated by the Yoruba funeral song from Ede:

I say rise, and you will not rise.
 If Olu is told to rise, Olu will rise.
 If Awo is told to rise, he will rise.
 The newly wedded bride gets up at a bidding,
 Although she dares not call her husband by name.
 The elephant on waking gets up,
 The buffalo on waking gets up,
 The elephant lies down like a hill.
 Alas! The elephant has fallen,
 And can never get up again!
 You say you have neither wealth nor children,
 Not even forty cowries with which to buy salt.
 You muffled head, rise!

(Gbadamosi and Beier 1959: 51)

We also find resignation and acceptance of the inevitable. These are, for instance, mentioned as frequent characteristics of much Sudanese funeral poetry (Tescaroli 1961: 9). Other poems dwell on the personal feelings and experience of the mourner. Ellis quotes from a Yoruba example:

I go to the market; it is crowded. There are many people there, but
 he is not among them. I wait, but he comes not. Ah me! I am alone
 (Ellis 1894: 157).

The same note of personal grief is heard in the Acholi funeral dirge:

I wait on the pathway in vain
 He refuses to come again

Only one, beloved of my mother oh,
 My brother blows like the wind
 Fate has destroyed chief of youth completely
 I wait on the pathway in vain

(Okot 1963: 209)⁴

or again in an Ngoni lament:

I have stared at the setting (death) of my husband.
 They say, show me the pool that has a crocodile.
 Let me throw myself away.
 What can I do? Alas!

(Read 1937: 16)

We are not, unfortunately, told the details of the occasion on which the much quoted Bushman lament, 'The broken string', was composed or performed, but in this too we see that the main concentration is on the singer's feeling: he is mourning his friend, a magician and rain-maker:

People were those who
 Broke for me the string.
 Therefore,
 The place became like this to me,
 On account of it,
 Because the string was that which broke for me.
 Therefore,
 The place does not feel to me,
 As the place used to feel to me,
 On account of it.
 For,
 The place feels as if it stood open before me,
 Because the string has broken for me.
 Therefore
 The place does not feel pleasant to me,
 On account of it

(Bleek and Lloyd 1911: 237)

The elegies so far discussed have been those specifically connected with funeral rites of various kinds, or, at least, poems or songs mourning the death of some individual. There is also, however, a sense in which elegiac poetry also includes poems that take death or sorrow as their general themes without being connected with funerals or actual mourning. In this sense, elegiac poetry in Africa does not often seem to be a distinctly recognized genre. Although certain dirges (such as those of the Luo or the Akan) are sometimes performed in other contexts and with other purposes, funerals remain their primary and distinctive occasions, and death is merely one—and not apparently a very common one—of the

many subjects that occur in lyric poetry generally. In this sense, then, elegiac poetry does not seem a type that demands extensive discussion here.

The sort of way, however, that the theme of death is occasionally used outside a dirge is worth illustrating from the impressive Ngoni song recorded by Read. This is a very old poem, originally intended for performance at a marriage, but now sung on other occasions (including church meetings). The refrain, 'the earth does not get fat', is a reference to the way the earth is always receiving the dead, yet is never satisfied:

The earth does not get fat. It makes an end of those who wear the head
plumes [the older men]

We shall die on the earth.

The earth does not get fat. It makes an end of those who act swiftly as heroes.
Shall we die on the earth?

Listen O earth. We shall mourn because of you.

Listen O earth. Shall we all die on the earth?

The earth does not get fat. It makes an end of the chiefs.

Shall we all die on the earth?

The earth does not get fat. It makes an end of the women chiefs.
Shall we die on the earth?

Listen O earth. We shall mourn because of you.

Listen O earth. Shall we all die on the earth?

The earth does not get fat. It makes an end of the nobles.

Shall we die on the earth?

The earth does not get fat. It makes an end of the royal women.
Shall we die on the earth?

Listen O earth. We shall mourn because of you.

Listen O earth. Shall we all die on the earth?

The earth does not get fat. It makes the end of the common people.

Shall we die on the earth?

The earth does not get fat. It makes an end of all the beasts.
Shall we die on the earth?

Listen you who are asleep, who are left tightly closed in the land.

Shall we all sink into the earth?

Listen O earth the sun is setting tightly.

We shall all enter into the earth

(Read 1937: 14–15)

Rather than generalizing further about elegiac poetry or reproducing further isolated examples, it seems best to concentrate on one example, the Akan funeral dirge. From this something of the social context of the form

and its complex conventions will emerge. It will also show how some of the familiar questions of literary criticism can be pursued with profit in the case of oral, as of written, poetry.³

II

The funeral dirges of the Akan have been intensively studied by Nketia who published his collection and analysis in 1955. Among the Akan-speaking peoples of southern Ghana dirges form just one among their many types of poetry. They are sung or intoned by women as part of the public mourning during funerals. In them 'speech [is] inlaid with music, sobs and tears and conjoined to bodily movement' (Nketia 1955: 118). Unlike some of the lyric poetry to be discussed later, however, the emphasis is on the words rather than the music, and the poems are performed by soloists without the accompaniment of either musical instruments or a chorus of supporting singers.⁴

Here in introduction are two examples from Nketia's collection. The first is sung by a woman for her dead son, Gyima (poetically referred to as her 'grandsire'):

Grandsire Gyima with a slim but generous arm,
 Fount of satisfaction,
 My friend Adu on whom I depend,
 I depend on you for everything, even for drinking water.
 If I am not dependent on you [i.e. if there is any doubt that I depend on you],
 see what has become of me.
 Although a man, you are a mother to children,
 A man who takes another's child for his own,
 Who builds mighty but empty houses,
 Who is restive until he has fought and won, Osibirikuo, Gyane the short one,
 Dwentiwaa's husband, and a man of valour. (Nketia 1955: 195)

In the second example the mourner is singing about her dead mother:

Grandchild of grandsire Kwaagyei of Hwedeemu that drinks the water of
 Abono,
 Daughter of a spokesman, who is herself a spokesman,
 Mother, it may appear that all is well with me, but I am struggling.

3 Further references to elegiac poetry include Anyumba 1964 (Luo); Beaton 1935–6 (Bari); Tescaroli 1961, part 2 (Sudan); Gutmann 1927; Stappers 1950; Hulstaert 1961; Littmann 1949. See also Moore 1968 (mainly but not exclusively on written forms).

4 In addition to the dirges described here the Akan also have choral laments sung by groups of women in solo and chorus form (not discussed here).

Nyaakowaa of Anteade and grandchild of Osafo Agyeman,
 O, mother, I am struggling; all is not as well as it appears.
 Mother, if you would send me something, I would like a parcel and a big
 cooking pot that entertains strangers.

The god *opem* has
 failed; the gourd of charms has won.
 O, mother, there is no branch above which I could grasp.
 Mother, if you would send me something, I would like parched corn
 So that I could eat it raw if there was no fire to cook it.

Mother, the parrot will catch a skin disease from the fowls and die!
 Grandchild of grandsire Kwaagyei of *Hwendeemu* that drinks Abono,
 Grandsire, the mighty pot, saviour of strangers,
 O, mother, I am struggling; all is not as well with me as it appears.
 Mother who sends gifts, send me something when someone is coming
 this way.

Mother, there is no fire in the deserted dwelling
 From which I could take a brand to light my fire.
 My helpful Wicker Basket that comes to my aid with lumps of salt,⁵
 O, mother, I would weep blood for you, if only Otire's child would be
 allowed to.

Grandsire, the crab that knows the hiding place of alluvial gold,
 What is the matter, child of the spokesman?
 Mother has allowed this death to take me by surprise.
 O, mother, I am struggling; all is not as well with me as it appears.

(Nketia 1955: 196)

Nketia describes in some detail the conventional language and themes of dirges—themes which throw light on features which might otherwise seem puzzling or banal. The deceased is the focal point. He may be addressed, his individual qualities described, or he may be identified with one or several ancestors. To refer to him the mourner often uses a series of different names that vary the language as well as honouring the dead. Besides proper names the Akan also have corresponding 'by-names' and these often occur in dirges for affective reasons. The same applies to praise appellations, terms which 'describe in a convenient short or gnomic form the qualities or expected qualities, accomplishment or status of a holder of the corresponding proper name' (Nketia 1955: 31). Thus in the first dirge quoted above, Gyima's praise names include *Anko-anna* ('one who is restive until he has fought and won') and *Dwentiwaa kunu barima*

5 Salt in the past was a very precious and scarce commodity.

Katakjje ('Dwentiwaa's husband and a man of valour'). Other instances of praise names can be translated as 'the beetle that eats away raffia' or 'Noble Apea Kusi, feller of Odum trees' (Nketia 1955: 32). They may in fact have been won by an earlier individual of the same name, but are used for contemporaries who are imaginatively pictured in the dirge as possessing the same qualities or status as their famous namesakes. The poetry is also further embellished by another type of reference to the deceased—the 'dirge names'. These are sometimes made up of a string of by-names, praise names, and other words, but also have less usual forms according to which a person of a given proper name can be addressed by any one of several dirge names. Many of these names cannot be translated—for example, one of the dirge names of a man called Apea: *Nyenenkye Asamanwoma Apeantummaa* (Nketia 1955: 33)—but used in a dirge they introduce an elevated and high-sounding effect.

Beside these specialized names, the deceased is also addressed by kinship terms and terms of endearment. In the second dirge quoted, the dead woman was addressed throughout as 'mother' and other such terms ('father', 'uncle', etc.) are frequent. The relationship to some third person is also used; the deceased may appear as, for instance, 'The Drummer's child', 'Father of Obempon and Ayirebiwaa', or 'Grandchild of Wealth'. Finally, a name of reference may be used to associate him with his clan or group—'Child of the Biretuo clan of Sekyere', 'Grandchild of the Buffalo' (i.e. of the *ekoona* clan), or 'The white fowl spotted by the roving hawk' (i.e. of the *Bosomtwe Ntoro* group) (Nketia 1955: 33–4).

Besides these ornamental names, qualities are often dwelt on. Benevolence in particular is frequently lauded in the dirges. It is referred to in such stock phrases as 'The slender arm full of benevolence', 'Grandmother, the big cooking pot that entertains strangers', 'You are a mighty tree with big branches laden with fruit. When children come to you, they find something to eat', or 'Fount of satisfaction' (Nketia 1955: 33–4). Sympathy and kindness are also picked out: 'He is a father to other people's children'; 'He was like the tree of the plantain planted behind the house, that gave shade and coolness'; and frequent references to the wisdom of the dead are expected, expressed by the singer lamenting that she no longer has anyone to give her advice. Fruitfulness is also commonly described, and one of the conventional comparisons is between a fruitful woman and the okro fruit with its many seeds: 'Mother the okro, full of the seeds of many issues and proven.' These stock ways of referring to the deceased both elevate his good points and bring home to the community the loss it has suffered.

While the person of the deceased is the focus of attention, there are other themes. One of the most frequent is that of the ancestor. Among the Akan, ancestry is important, both through the mother (significant for most social purposes) and through the father who represents the 'spiritual' side. In dirges both types of ancestry are commemorated, and the fact brought out that a member of two social groups (the father's *and* the mother's) has been lost. Thus the paternal ancestry of the deceased is often referred to in special name-clusters which indicate the *ntoro* (paternal group) of the person being mourned, names such as 'Nwanwanyane, offspring of the Leopard', or 'Gyebiri Siaw Anim, the nobleman'. References to ancestors in the female line are even more common, and the kinship of the deceased to a series of ancestors is emphasized. Some dirges concentrate almost completely on this theme. One opens

Kotoku man and grandchild of the Vanguard of Kotoku,
Grandchild of Ampoma: our lineage originates from Kotoku.
Grandchild of Baabu: our lineage hails from Kade . . . (Nketia 1955: 22)

and then continues through the various relationships of the deceased. Particularly in royal dirges one of the ancestors may be singled out for praise. An ancestor's bravery, skill, or leadership may be mentioned. His use of power, for example, is dwelt on in one dirge:

In the olden days, when you were
On your way to Akora Kusi's house,
You would stumble over skulls;
Vultures got up to greet you;
Blue bottle flies buzzed round you,
As if to say, Alas! (Nketia 1955: 23)

In this way the deceased can be praised indirectly through his ancestors' great deeds. At funerals the Akan remind themselves both that their ancestors too were once human beings and that they themselves, as well as the deceased, are not without an ancestry and a historic tradition of which they can be proud. As a mourner sings:

We are from Creation.
It was my people who first came here,
And were joined later by the Fante Hosts.
It was my grandfather that founded Komenda.
I am the grandchild of the Parrot that eats palm nuts.
It was my grandfather that weighed gold
And the scales broke into pieces under its weight.
Grandchild of Apea Korankye hails from Abooso. (Nketia 1955: 26)

Rather similar to the theme of ancestors is that of places. The identity of the deceased (or his ancestors) is clarified by adding the name of his home or place of origin (the link between the dead and their mourners is often brought out by the fact that they share a common home). This convention often introduces historic evocations into a dirge. It also adds colour to the words, for it is common for a descriptive phrase to be added to the name itself: 'Asumegya Santemanso, where the leopard roars and comes to town for its prey' or 'Hwerebe Akwasiase, where the Creator first erected a fireplace and placed a beating stick by it' (Nketia 1955: 41). References to places can either be interspersed throughout the poem or, in combination with the theme of the ancestor, form the main framework on which the whole dirge is built up.

While the main focus of the dirge is on the deceased—his nature and qualities, his ancestors, his historic home—the mourner also makes certain reflections. There are certain stock ways in which these are expressed. The dead man is often pictured as setting out on a journey, so that part of what the mourner is doing is bidding him farewell—'Farewell, thou priest' or 'Receive condolences and proceed on' (Nketia 1955: 44). The sorrow of parting is brought out in stock phrases like 'I call him, but in vain', 'I would weep blood' (if only that would bring you back), or, with more passionate emphasis on the mourner's sense of loss, 'I am in flooded waters. Who will rescue me?' and 'There is no branch above which I could grasp'. The mourner wishes for a continued friendship with the dead man even when he reaches the world of spirits, and speaks of wishing to go with him, or to exchange gifts or messages; this is why the singer so often asks the dead to 'send me something when someone is coming'—an imaginative rather than a literal request. The mourner expresses her sorrow and loss through particular concrete images rather than through general statements about death. Instead of speaking of death taking away her support, she sings 'The tree that gives shade and coolness has been hewn down'; and, when she alludes to the shortness of life, she uses the conventional metaphor in which the duration of life is compared to the time a market woman takes to sell her goods—'What were your wares that they are sold out so quickly?'

Among all these various motifs and conventions of content and expression the individual mourner can select her own. The use of many of the stock forms of expression does not necessarily mean a lack of sincerity on her part or that she creates little artistic impact. As Nketia puts it, the 'traditional forms of expression [are] still pregnant with emotion to the Akan, expressions which are not considered outworn in spite of frequent use' (Nketia 1955: 49).

III

Four main types of dirge can be distinguished. All are built up on the conventional themes and forms of expression already described, but they vary both in the arrangement of the material and in the scope given for the spontaneity of the mourner.

The first, type 'A', is the most stereotyped and dignified. This kind of dirge is short and marked by unity of subject. Besides mention of the deceased, reference is normally made to just one ancestor, one of his qualities, and one single place. Many different dirges of this type can be built up about the same person; the same ancestor can be brought in but with a different quality described; or all the references could be changed, with a different ancestor introduced and a different place of domicile, forming the framework for another set of dirges round that theme. In spite of the stereotyped structure, then, the possibility of variation according to the singer's choice in a particular situation is manifold.

Such dirges open with a name, usually of an ancestor, and this theme is then taken up in the next portion of the poem, referred to as the subject, in which the ancestor's qualities are mentioned. He may be associated with some historical event, or with some message or observation. This portion of the dirge can be short or long according to the theme chosen. This is followed by a break, a point at which the dirge name of the deceased is inserted. In other words, until this point the dirge can be used for any member of the group associated with the ancestor, but the insertion of the dirge name ties the poem to a particular individual. After the dirge name, the formal part of the poem can be ended, often with the theme of the place of origin and domicile. By linking them both to the same place, the ancestor mentioned in the opening and the deceased just referred to by his dirge name are brought together. The dirge may stop at this point, but if the mourner wishes she can extend it by adding her own reflections in rather less conventional style.

Type 'A' dirges, then, can be seen to fall into four sections—(a) opening, (b) subject, (c) insertion, (d) close, followed by an optional addition, (e) the extension. The structure can be illustrated in the following example:

- (a) Karikari Poti of Asumegya.
- (b) When I am on the way, do not let me meet
Gye-me-di, the terror.
It is Karikari Poti, Gye-me-di, the terror
That spells death to those who meet him.
- (c) Pampam Yiadom Boakye Akum-ntem.

- (d) Grandchild of Karikari Poti hails from Asumegya Santemanso
Where the leopard roars and comes to town for its prey.
- (e) O, mother,
(What of) Your children and I.
O, mother,
Your children and I will feed on the spider,
The mouse is too big a game. (Nketia 1955: 57–8)

Though dirges of the other three types are somewhat less stereotyped, similar detailed analyses could be made of their conventional structure. Type 'B' is made up of a series of short stanzas which can follow each other in any order and are themselves structured according to certain conventional patterns. An example of this type is the three-stanza dirge:

Grandchild of Boampon of Asokore clan
That walked in majesty amid flying bullets:
Child of a leading Spokesman.

He was an elephant tusk which I was going to use
for carving out a trumpet,
Ofori, child of Konkonti.

Father Apau that overpowers bullets:
Offspring of Nkwamfo Abredwom.
Alas! Death gave me no warning
so that I might get ready.
Mother will go: she has not come back yet.
I shall follow her. (Nketia 1955: 200)

Type 'C' dirges are constructed on cumulative linear stanzas, sometimes marked off by a reflection or statement—a simple style often used for ordinary people. Such a dirge might open

Grandchild of Minta that hails from Dunkesease.
Grandchild of Obeeko Asamoa that hails from Bonkaben.
Grandchild of Obiyaa that hails from Aborodesu. (Nketia 1955: 65)

and so on through a dozen lines or so. Even in these very simple dirges emotion is aroused through the connotations of the names introduced. Some women, however, do not consider this type to possess much appeal or depth and instead prefer type 'D' dirges. This type, while not possessing the dignity of the first two, has the attraction of giving more scope to the mourner's individual emotions and reflections. The conventional themes are included but may be woven into the dirge as the individual singer wishes. 'Grandchild of grandsire Kwaagyei' quoted earlier is one example of this type. Another is part of a dirge sung by a Cape Coast woman for her

mother, a poem which begins lightly and gains depth as the sorrow of the mourner grows in intensity:

Mother! Mother!

Aba Yaa!

You know our plight!

Mother! you know our plight.

You know that no one has your wisdom.

Mother, you have been away long.

What of the little ones left behind?

Alas!

Who would come and restore our breath,

Unless my father Adorn himself comes?

Alas! Alas! Alas!

Quite often it is a struggle for us!

It is a long time since our people left.

Amba, descendant of the Parrot that eats palm nuts, hails from the Ancestral chamber.

I cannot find refuge anywhere.

I, Amba Adoma,

It was my grandfather that weighed gold

And the scales broke under its weight.

I am a member of Grandsire Ksse's household:

We are at a loss where to go:

Let our people come, for we are in deep distress.

When someone is coming, let them send us something.

Yes, I am the grandchild of the Parrot that eats palm nuts (Nketia 1955: 65)

A final example of this type illustrates how the conventional themes and stock terms of address can be woven together into an original piece by the mourner in which she can dwell at length on the deceased and her own state. It was sung for a Mass Education Officer who died in 1952, and is in the form of a continuous poem with two slight breaks after 'father on whom I wholly depend':

Valiant Owusu,

The stranger on whom the citizen of the town depends,

Father, allow my children and me to depend on you

So that we may all of us get something to eat,

Father on whom I wholly depend.

When father sees me, he will hardly recognize me.

He will meet me carrying an old torn mat and a horde of flies.

Father with whom I confer,

My children and I will look to you.
 Father on whom I wholly depend.

Killer-of-hunger,
 My saviour,
 Father the slender arm full of kindness,
 Father the Rover whose footprints are on all paths. (Nketia 1955: 71)

Certain types of dirges are considered suitable for particular occasions—types 'A' and 'B', for instance, are held to be more dignified and thus appropriate for royal funerals—but at any funeral the mourner is free to sing whichever kind she prefers.

The detailed linguistic style and delivery of dirges are also discussed by Nketia (1955: Chs. 5, 7). The diction is marked by the great frequency of keywords throughout the poems, terms closely associated with the main themes already mentioned. Thus there is constant use of personal names, names of places and sources of drinking water, kinship terms and terms of address, and, finally, terms referring to an individual's clan or paternal group. Certain verbs of identification are also particularly common, for example, *ne* (to be) and *firi* (to come from),⁶ which occur in conjunction with the theme of the ancestor and of the place of domicile. Besides these keywords, all part of the mourner's stock-in-trade from which she constructs her dirge, there are also conventional expressions used to describe someone's attributes or express farewell or condolence. The deceased or his ancestor may be described and praised by such set phrases as 'fount of satisfaction', 'the big cooking pot', 'large breast', or 'friend Adu: one on whom someone depends'. The mourner may also refer to her despair and sense of loss by using verbs which mean 'to get dark', 'to be flooded', 'to be homesick or hungry for a person', or nouns like 'coolness', 'darkness', or 'empty house'.

Many conventional arrangements form part of the artistic style. These include name clusters, repetitions of key-words, and such combinations as, for instance, 'Asim Abenaa's grandchild-and-my-mother comes from Ahensan', which follows the common pattern by which the term *nana* (grandchild) is combined with personal names, kinship terms, and the verb *firi* (come from). Similar conventions can be observed in the structure of sentences. Of the varying patterns, the most common is a construction with a front-placed nominal, that is, sentences opening with a name or name cluster—as in 'Ano Yaa Kani whose kola tree bears fruit out of season'

6 Many other examples of such conventional collocations are given in Nketia as part of his detailed picture of linguistic conventions in dirges (Nketia 1955: 86–93).

or 'Asim Abenaa of Ahensan, the Queen of old in whose vessels we grind millet'. This placing of names at the start of sentences is a characteristic feature of the language of Akan dirges and forms a conventional basis on which chains of reference can be built up.

Apart from these specialized syntactical forms and certain obscure names and figurative expressions, the language of dirges is relatively straightforward. Indeed the style as a whole is often simple and the main units within the dirge (the stanzas) tend to be short, in keeping with the circumstances of the performance. The compressed and allusive expression can also be connected with this; names and historical events, for example, are referred to briefly rather than described or narrated in full. By these means, in spite of the ordinary language and short span of the poem, a whole range of highly charged impressions can be conveyed.

When the prosody of Akan dirges is considered, it is clear that there is no even beat in a piece as a whole, though there is a scattered use of prosodic patterns of various kinds throughout the poem. Stress is not significant and there is no systematic use of tones or syllables. There is, however, a diffused occurrence of tonal and phonological patterns. These depend on the nature of the lines or linear units in dirges. These units are relatively easily identified through a number of phonological and grammatical forms which mark them off, such as a concluding particle (*ee, oo*), pause, or sob; parallel formation within a line; break in sequence marked by repetition or pronoun referring back; and occasional end-patterning (frequently tonal). Within linear units there is often repetition of single phonological terms (as, for instance, the *s* in the line *Oso ro se meresen asase*), of syllables and groups of syllables in words (e.g. *Sakrabutu onye butufoo*), or of words or segments (e.g. *Yese yenni nton, yenni abusua*). Repetitions of tone patterns also occur within lines; for example, in the line *odehye damfoo boo dam*, the high tone *dam* is in each case preceded by a low tone, and the repetition of the low-high sequence is noticeable. Within groups of lines similar repetitions can be observed: whole lines may be repeated, the first or second halves of succeeding lines may be identical, or there may be cross repetitions with the word or words in the end position appearing again at the beginning of the following line. This 'prosody of repetition', which is copiously illustrated by Nketia, fulfils some of the functions of rhythm and brings out the poetic style conventionally associated with Akan dirges.

This poetic flavour is further marked by the musical features of the dirge. It is true that, for the Akan, the *verbal* content of the dirge is paramount; Nketia quotes the remark that 'it is not so much the beauty

of the voice as the depth of the verbal forms, in particular the range of the praise appellations that counts'.² However, musical aspects of form and performance also play some part in the artistry of the dirge as actually heard (Nketia 1955, esp. Ch. 7).

There are two different ways of singing dirges. The first is to adopt a type of wailing voice in which the words of the dirge are 'spoken' and the contours of the melody reflect the speech contours of the performer, sometimes accompanied by a few tuneful fragments. There are special musical conventions for the treatment of interjections, and this type of delivery also gives scope for the use of the sob, which is often uttered on the syllable *hi* and rapidly repeated perhaps five or six times. The other form is more purely musical. A fairly normal singing voice is used, with melodic contours resembling those of songs. However, there is a general tendency for dirge melodies to begin high and move down to a low resting point at the close. There are some traditional tunes associated with fragments of dirges, but in the main, whichever musical mode she employs, the singer makes up her own tunes as she goes along. Unlike many other types of songs, the rhythm of Akan dirges is free in the sense that there is no handclapping or percussion accompaniment to the singing, nor is it intended for dancing. This, in conjunction with the fact that the mourner herself acts as both soloist and chorus, gives the individual mourner greater scope to treat the subject in her own manner, without reference to others present, and to express her own feelings in the words and melodies she chooses.

IV

The occasions of the Akan dirge are easily described. It is a literary form expressly composed and performed for the occasion of a funeral and it takes its place alongside such other social expressions as drumming, the firing of guns, singing, wailing, and speaking. Indeed, some of Nketia's informants were unwilling or unable to reproduce their dirges apart from the stimulation of an actual funeral; as they frequently explained, 'they could not utter the words of the dirge without shedding tears or fasting' (Nketia 1855: 2).

Funerals are important and memorable events among the Akan. They usually open with the preparation of the corpse, a stage at which no dirges are sung. In the second phase of public mourning, however, dirge singing is a central part of the proceedings. As Nketia describes it:

From among the confused noises will be heard the voice of many a woman mourner singing a dirge in pulsating tones in honour of the dead or his ancestors or some other person whose loss she is reminded by the present death, for 'One mourns one's relation during the funeral of another person' The dirge is made the culminating point of the preparation for the funeral as well as the beginning of public mourning. Grief and sorrow may be personal and private, nevertheless Akan society expects that on the occasion of a funeral they should be expressed publicly through the singing of the dirge (Nketia 1955: 8).

During this stage the women who sing the dirges pace about among those attending the funeral, pausing before the corpse or the chief mourners. Though there is no dancing to dirges, the singer makes gestures and gracefully rocks her head to add to the pathos of what she sings, and, like the chief mourners, she too is expected to fast as a sign of the sincerity of her anguish. There is great freedom as to how and what any performer sings, for dirges are not normally an organized performance, so that the individual can draw on her own resources and originality to express and evoke the emotion she is expected to feel. As the funeral ceremonies go on, the dirges tend to become fewer and fewer, partly because the singers become worn out by the physical and emotional strain of fasting, anguished lament, and pacing about the public gathering. Nevertheless, occasional dirges are heard from time to time until the end of the funeral:

The funeral dirge is heard with diminishing frequency and from fewer and fewer mourners, though it rarely ceases until the funeral is over. A sudden outburst is heard from time to time from a relation while all others may be resting. And so the funeral goes on until after the third day of the event of death when fasting and mourning cease (Nketia 1955: 15).

The funeral is sometimes followed by remembrance ceremonies some weeks after the death; some dirges are sung on these occasions, but they play a relatively minor part.

Very occasionally dirges are heard outside the context of a funeral. But funerals remain the conventional setting, and at them dirges are obligatory. In this context the dirge is, above all, a means of praising the dead person. He is honoured and mourned, and, as well, the general links between the past and present, the living and the dead, are brought out in stock themes. The sorrow felt by the mourners at the funeral is not only expressed in this conventional form, but can actually be heightened by a skilled singer who evokes the pathos of the situation through her passionate utterances. These dirges, in fact, form the mainstay of any funeral particularly at the outset; it

is only towards the later stages that the dirges of the women are reinforced and finally replaced by music and dancing.

The Akan funeral dirge is a conventional medium of expression, with its own canons of form, theme, and delivery as well as its own traditional occasion when it is performed. There are certain stock forms of phraseology which are regarded as obligatory, and errors in these are quickly corrected. Nevertheless, within these limits both variations and scope for individual creativeness are possible. Traditionally all Akan girls were expected to learn how to sing and compose dirges. They had to master the traditional themes and language, but when performing they were free to exercise their individual tastes and express their own sentiments. The dirges are thus both fixed *and* flexible. For the Akan the funeral dirge is a form recognized not only for its clear social importance but also for its aesthetic merit. Far from being random or wholly spontaneous, the Akan dirge has its own complex and sophisticated conventions, a literary tradition at the service of the individual composer.