

Context, Performance and Beliefs in *Duweì-ìgbela* (Ìjọ Funeral Poetry)

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Abstract

Scholars of African oral literature have been paying critical attention to funerary poetry in Africa ever since the publication of J. H. Nketia's *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*. Nketia's book generated awareness on the existence of this endangered form of traditional poetry and pointed out the need to investigate and document it in the various ethnic groups for posterity. However, a great deal of this attention is devoted to the dirges of the major ethnic groups on the continent. Therefore, this study examines the context, performance and beliefs expressed in *duweì-ìgbela*, a specialised type of dirge among the Ìjọ—referred also to as Ijaw or Iẓon of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The article, among other things, demonstrates how each song expresses a belief about the Ìjọ view of the dead. It concludes that these songs, which are no longer practised, preserve their ancient rituals, customs and beliefs.

Keywords: *duweì-ìgbela*; the Ìjọ; funeral dirges; beliefs; Barakubu

Introduction¹

Duweji-igbela refers to a special set of dirges that were performed as the deceased lay in state in some Ijọ *ibe mọ* (clans; *ibe* being the singular form of *ibe mọ*). The word *duweji-igbela* is made up of a noun, *duweji*, and a verb, *igbela*. Due to Westernisation, the dirges are no longer performed today. But they were performed up to the 20th century. The British linguist who became the leading authority on the Ijọ language, Kay Williamson, was the first scholar to study the *duweji-igbela* group of songs in 1975. However, her study was limited to an examination of metre in the songs: “As far as I am aware little attempt has yet been made to study metre in traditional West African poetry, and this attempt may therefore have some general interest” (Williamson 1975, 21). In line with that aim, Williamson gives no consideration to the concept of death and the worldview of the people that underpin their funeral songs, nor the beliefs expressed in them. Moreover, she gives attention to just one aspect of the performance of the songs: antiphony. Therefore, my aim in this study is to examine how the songs were performed and how each song chosen for analysis here expresses a belief of the people. Furthermore, I explore the concept of death and the worldview of the Ijọ, which undergird, as it were, the special songs.

The data for the research was collected through unstructured interviews and participant observation. The songs were recorded in 2016 in Igbedi community, Kolokuma *ibe*. Further clarifications concerning the songs were carried out with some of the earlier respondents in November 2020. The dirges in this article are transcribed in the Kolokuma dialect of the Ijọ language. The videotape of the data is deposited at Ibadan Cultural Studies Group, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

In the study by Williamson, she remarks:

The Kolokuma funeral dirges to be studied here are ancient and traditional, the words handed down from one generation to the next. They are sung only by circumcised women (*amata*) and only while the body is lying in state during the wake-keeping; it is dangerous to sing them at any other time. They are not sung for young people, for Christians, or for those who die of serious disease (such as ulcers, hernia, smallpox), by accidental death, or with a child in the womb, nor for those proved to be witches. (1975, 21)

Contrary to Williamson’s view, the dirges were not exclusive to Kolokuma *ibe*. They were also performed in other central Ijọ *ibe mọ* that surround Kolokuma *ibe*, such as Eketiama, Opokuma and Gbarain. It is probable that the dirges were also performed in

¹ This article is a substantially revised version of a section of my MA thesis done for the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. I have also discussed briefly the songs that form the basis of examination here in a chapter entitled “Traditional Ijọ Poetry” in the book *The Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta* (Armstrong 2021).

Olodiamia *ibe*. For instance, in 1979, Martha Anderson, who was fortunate to observe the burial of an Ijọ priest, Oweikoroghawei, in Korokorosei (Olodiamia *ibe*), points out that “people gathered outside Oweikoroghawei’s house that evening while a group of women sang *special songs* for the dead” (Anderson 1987, 54; italics added). The “special songs” that Anderson saw at the time she was conducting fieldwork in that community for her doctoral degree at Indiana University might be *dūweī-igbela*. Again, contrary to Williamson’s position that the songs were performed by “circumcised women,” they were actually performed by women who had passed their menopause, not all women. However, Williamson is right when she remarks that the songs “are ancient”² and were “handed down from one generation to the next” and that it was dangerous to perform or sing them outside the funeral context. As an instance, I was told by my respondents that no one dared sing the dirges in a setting other than the primary context. In fact, when the urge to sing them kept coming to someone, then someone would die soon or had even died in the community—unbeknown to the person who had the urge. As such, my mother and other respondents never liked the idea that I wanted to research “songs for the dead,” let alone singing for me. Fortunately, my persistence paid off.

Additionally, Williamson is correct when she notes that the dirges were not performed for the young. However, they were performed for witches, contrary to her view. As will be seen later in this study, the Ijọ ascertained whether a deceased was a witch or a wizard in the morning when the corpse would be buried, not immediately after someone died. The dirges were performed on the night of the day someone died. At that time, the people would not have known whether the deceased was a witch or a wizard or not.

Some of the mistakes in Williamson’s study are, perhaps, due to the fact that she recorded the dirges in Apapa, Lagos, southwestern Nigeria—outside the Niger Delta location of the people the dirges concern. However, Williamson is correct when she says that some of the words in the songs, like the Madinka epic, are “quite obscure”

² On the origins of the dirges: the majority of the Ijọ claim that the dirges were originated by *osowei*—a dwarfish 2.5 metres tall creature in the forests. The story goes that in ancient times, a certain man was always going to the forest in his community to complete work on the canoe he was carving. Each day he got to where he was carving the canoe, he would find that someone had carved it badly—with the intention of spoiling the canoe. Consequently, the canoe carver decided to hide himself and keep watch one night. In the night, *osowei* came out and was carrying out the dastardly act, whereupon the man came out of his hideout and accosted *osowei*. Since none of his people had seen such a smallish human creature, the canoe carver decided to take *osowei* home despite much pleading.

When they got home, the entire community came to the man’s house to see the strange creature. Thereafter, *osowei* asked them what they normally did before burying their dead. To his surprise, they buried their dead immediately after death without singing songs. *Osowei* started teaching them some songs. Later on, they formed a procession and sang the songs until they got to one end of the community. Right there, *osowei* asked them again whether they sang songs to honour their dead. Again, they answered in the negative. Consequently, *osowei* directed them to sing the songs he had taught them when someone died and was lain in state, and disappeared into the forest.

But the Ijọ are not unanimous on where the event occurred in their land. Some say it happened in Okorotomu, a small community in Kokokuma *ibe*; others say it occurred in Akaibiri in Ekpetiama *ibe*.

(1975, 21; Innes 1990, 107). In fact, I chose not to include some of the songs I collected in this study because of the issue of obscurantism. A related issue to obscurity in the songs is translation. As noted by Kofi Anyidoho, “we often encounter difficulty in finding precise non-African equivalents for the various terms that an African people uses in defining its art forms” (1991, 42). This problem occurs not only in the art forms but also in the words of traditional poetry. There are some Ijò words that do not have parallels or even close equivalents to them in English. Therefore, in the analysis that follows and in order to address the translation challenges, “paraphrasing” and “creativity” in translation studies were used to create equivalence, rather than direct translation. Horst Frenz (cited in Okpewho 1990, 114–15) correctly contends:

It is clear that a translator must bring sympathy and understanding to the work he is to translate. He must be the original author’s most intimate, most exact, in short, his best reader. But he must do more than read. He must attempt to see what the author saw, to hear what he heard, to dig into his own life to experience anew what the author experienced. ... The translator must be creative.

There are so many difficulties in translating traditional poetry from one language into another that the emotive force in the original is always lost. Little wonder most, if not all, of our English renditions are flat or what Isidore Okpewho calls “tastelessness” (1990, 113). In the next section, I shall examine the worldview and concept of death that underpin the funerary poetry of the Ijò.

Worldview and Concept of Death

The cosmology of the Ijò is categorised into two orders of existence: *kiri ọkpọ* and *tẹmẹ ọkpọ* (Okaba and Appah 2013, 149). *Kiri ọkpọ* is the visible world, the home of human beings, animals and plants. In other words, it is the world of flesh and blood. On the other hand, *tẹmẹ ọkpọ* is the immaterial world in which happenings are beyond the knowledge of the common human. It is the abode of *Woyengi* or *Oyin* or *Tamara* (God, the supreme creator), ancestors, spirits, deities (see, for example, J.P. Clark’s introduction to *The Ozidi Saga* [1977, xxxiii] and Horton [1962, 200]). It is claimed that knowledge of this order of existence is only accessible to infants, spirit mediums, witches and wizards. It is also believed that events in *tẹmẹ ọkpọ* have a direct bearing on *kiri ọkpọ*. Humans are made up of two parts: *mini* (flesh) and *tẹmẹ* (spirit). A human being is created when these two come together and dies when they separate. It is the belief in these two worlds of existence and their constant interaction that informs the worldview and the concept of death of the Ijò. This cosmos is brought out in their traditional poetry.

Death is called *fii*, a noun. *Fii* is also a verb, meaning “to die.” The Ijò believe that death is inevitable. To them, it is God that created it and equally has the power to stop it. Even gods and goddesses cannot stop it when God says it is enough for one. Death is feared and deeply felt. However, the dead are respected because, as noted by Robin Horton of the Kalabari Ijò, “they look after the welfare of their lineage descendants” (Horton 1962,

200). As such, Ulli Beier's contention that "in Africa, the idea of death is not associated with horror. The living and the dead are in continuous contact and a large part of the religious life of the African is devoted to establishing a harmonious contact with the dead" is also true of the Ijò (cited in Doh 1990, 78). Like the Abanyole of Kenya, they maintain that at death, "the spirit of the dead person advances to join the spirits of the other departed members of the community" (Alembi 2008, 8).

When a person dies, the Ijò say s/he has gone to *dùwẹjamabou* or *fịamabou*—the land of the dead. This *dùwẹjamabou*, as the claim goes, is structured like the living, with children, men and women who do everything the living do. Most of their folktales revolve around events in *dùwẹjamabou* (see, for example, Okaba and Appah 2013, 156). The difference is that the living (apart from children and some who have occult powers) do not see them unless one of the dead decides to be seen by the living. One other difference is the belief that a person who has died has been relieved of their problems here on earth because *dùwẹjamabou* is a place of total bliss. For example, someone who was physically challenged during his or her days as a being among the living becomes a perfect person after death.

The dead, to the Ijò, play important roles in their lives. In the words of J. Egbe Ifie (cited in Okaba and Appah 2013, 156):

There exists no strict distinction of influence between the living and the living dead; when on earth, the living dead were leaders of their family units. While in the spirit world, they do not cease to interest themselves in the general welfare of their descendants. They remain the custodians and executors of public morality and a strong factor of social cohesion.

For all this, the dead are celebrated. However, it is not every death that calls for a celebration. When a child or young person dies, there is no celebration; rather, it calls for great mourning. It is a celebration when an old person dies. The death of an old person is signalled by shooting canons: three for a man and four for a woman. Thereafter, especially in the past, the kind of death of the deceased determined the type of burial s/he would receive. There are two kinds of death: *agbara fịi* (violent death) and *Ijò fịi* (good or true death). Deaths caused by accidents, suicide, drowning, falling from palm trees and childbirth are regarded as violent deaths. Those who die violent deaths are buried on riverbanks like children unless the appropriate rituals were performed. These practices are still observed in some rural areas. On the other hand, when someone grows old and dies or dies of a minor sickness, it is considered a good or true death.

In the past, in the morning when the deceased would be laid to rest, the highly important *obobo bi* ritual (literally, "asking the ladder," where the corpse was asked who killed him or her, whether s/he was a witch or a wizard and how s/he should be buried, among others) must be carried out (for studies of *obobo bi*, see Anderson 1987; Leis 1964). It is claimed that if a person was a witch or a wizard but was buried like a "free" person—

someone who is not a witch or a wizard—then such a person would visit their children and relatives by killing them one after the other until the truth was ascertained (see Anderson 1987, 42). In which case, their corpse would be exhumed even after many years, booed and thrown into the river. In modern times, witchcraft is ascertained by dropping the corpse in water. If the corpse floats, then the deceased is said to be a witch or a wizard. On the other hand, if it sinks, the deceased was not a witch or a wizard. As expected, some families no longer perform this practice because of their Christian beliefs.

There was also the phenomenon of *apalipu*. Before the deceased was taken to the bush to be buried, the corpse was brought out and placed before the children and relatives. In fact, they stood opposite the corpse. Thereafter, a Siamese plantain was pulled apart and thrown to both sides. That is, one part of the plantain was thrown to the side of the children and relatives, while the other was thrown to the side of the corpse. The reason was that both the deceased and the living were once together on earth but were now separated. Hence, as s/he (the deceased) was now leaving for his or her new world, *dūwẹjamabou*, s/he should not come back to haunt them. All this brings to mind John S. Mbiti's (1969, 1) observation:

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious systems with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to violate it. ... Religion is the strongest element in traditional background and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned.

I now examine the major subject of this study: the performance of, and the beliefs expressed in, *dūwẹ-igbela*.

Dūwẹ-igbela: Performance and Beliefs

It was earlier pointed out that the *dūwẹ-igbela* corpus of songs was performed by elderly women who had passed their menopause. However, two other women also partook in the performance of two or three songs in the corpus even if they had not passed their menopause: the deceased's eldest daughter and one of his or her daughters-in-law (the first son's wife). As the corpse lay in state in the sitting room, the elderly women stood on both sides of the deceased for the performance of the dirges. These women performed these dirges amid a few other women mourners who sat in the room and others who frequently came to give them drinks and/or look at the corpse. Most of the mourners stayed outside the room during the wake. The women who sang the dirges did not wear any specially tailored clothes or make-up. However, they put on black clothes as funerals demand. What follows is an examination of the songs with close attention to the performance and the beliefs expressed in them. The very first dirge that was sung is "*Dūwẹ Warĩ*":

1. *Duweɪ Warɪ*

<i>Duweɪ-o uya!</i>	Sorry, dead one!
<i>Wo indeida mɛ</i>	Let's perform our tradition
<i>Duweɪ-o uya!</i>	Sorry, dead one!
<i>Duweɪ warɪ fɪnɪ ovingha, ovingha</i>	Fire never goes off, never goes off in the house of a corpse
<i>Duweɪ warɪ fɪnɪ vingha, ovingha</i>	Fire never goes off, never goes off in the house of a corpse
<i>Wo indeida mɛ</i>	Let's perform our tradition
<i>Duweɪ-o uya!</i>	Sorry, dead one!
<i>Wo indeida mɛ</i>	Let's perform our tradition
<i>Duweɪ-o uya!</i>	Sorry, dead one!
	(Armstrong 2016, 100)

When this song is being sung, the deceased's daughter-in-law and eldest daughter hold tiny pieces of bamboo. They use the lamp hung on the wall where the head of the deceased is to light them and use their hands to cover the flames to ensure that they do not go out. Then, the two women walk towards the legs of the corpse and put out the flames with their legs. As this is going on, the elderly women in the two lines rhythmically move their hands and knees frontwards, which is dictated by a complex pattern of hitting two hoe-like metals against each other. There is no handclap. This pattern of bodily movement is used for all but the last dirge. The walk from where the lamp is to the legs of the corpse is done three times for a man and four times for a woman. Moreover, this dirge is performed three times as the deceased lies in state: around eight in the evening, 12 in the night and early in the morning. What belief of the Ijo do the people claim “*duweɪ warɪ*” express? The belief that the deceased needs light to go home, as it were. It is believed that doing this provides light on the road that the deceased will take in the night as s/he goes to *fɪamabou*, the land of the dead. Nwakwe Peter Ebikibina—a middle-aged man who was a research fellow at the Institute of Niger Delta Studies, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Nigeria—who translated the songs with me told me that in his community, if the deceased were buried in the bush close to the community, as the performance of this song was going on, the townspeople would see from their houses fire moving on the road to the bush and provide light there until morning. This song is immediately followed by the performance of two dirges: “*Mama Ou Baɪ*” (2) and “*Tumu Dii Obiri*” (3):

2. *Tumu Dii Obiri*

<i>Tumu diigha obiri bo mu tumu diidoɔ-o ye</i>	The dog that's not been visiting the thoroughfare has now visited it
<i>Barakubu-o i yengi-o tumu diidoɔ-o ye</i>	Barakubu, ³ my mother, has now

³ My respondents chose to use the name of my deceased grandmother, Barakubu, in this song and the others. Due to the beliefs of the respondents, they refrained from using the name of a living person.

<i>Isele mọ kẹ yọu bo sọo-o</i>	visited the thoroughfare And has returned with camwood
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3. *Mama Ou Bai*

<i>Uu, uu, uu, uu</i>	<i>Uu uu uu uu</i>
<i>Uu, uu, uu, uu</i>	<i>Uu uu uu uu</i>

<i>Mama ou bai-e</i>	Mother is daughter of masquerade
<i>Ou bai-e</i>	Daughter of masquerade
<i>Ou bai-e</i>	Daughter of masquerade
<i>Ou bai</i>	Daughter of masquerade

<i>Mama ou bai-e</i>	Mother is daughter of masquerade
<i>Ou bai-e</i>	Daughter of masquerade

<i>Ou bai-e</i>	Daughter of masquerade
<i>Ou bai</i>	Daughter of masquerade
<i>Mama wo mu tumu dii tumu dii oi aka</i>	Mother, let's visit the thoroughfare, visit the thoroughfare, oi aka

<i>Ou bai-o wo wẹrẹ baa-e</i>	Daughter of masquerade won't leave us to die
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<i>Wo mu tumu dii tumu dii oi aka</i>	Let's visit the thoroughfare, visit the thoroughfare, oi aka (Armstrong 2016, 101–2)
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The main road or thoroughfare in Ijọ communities is *tumubọlọ*—the centre of activities. In the performance of these two dirges, the women, in a procession, leave the house of the deceased, walk to the thoroughfare and return to the house. Two lines are formed that are led by the daughter-in-law and the first daughter on both sides. “*Mama Ou Bai*” is sung as they leave the sitting room, while “*Tumu Dii Obiri*” is performed when they are returning from *tumubọlọ*. The songs tell the audience that the deceased has become the guardian angel of the family. As such, just as a masquerade (a water or river god or goddess) will not see their worshippers killed, s/he must also protect her children from her abode in *fiamabou*. These two dirges are performed three times: around eight in the evening, 12 in the night and very early the following morning. After the first performance and when the women have returned to where the corpse lies in state, the other dirges are sung at random.

The belief of the Ijọ that when one dies, one has been relieved of one's suffering on earth is expressed in “*Ou Bai*”:

4. *Ou Bai*

<i>Ou bai-o ogbọnomọ</i>	Take the mat and lay the daughter of masquerade
<i>Ou wẹrẹ bau-o ogbọnomọ</i>	Take the mat and lay the daughter of

<i>Pẹrẹ fị ọgbọnọmọ kọrị bọmọ teri-oo</i>	masquerade Take the mat of riches and wrap her
<i>Ị daụ warị yegha ee</i>	Does it belong to your father's family?
<i>Pẹrẹ fị ọgbọnọmọ kọrị bọmọ teri-oo</i>	Take the mat of riches and wrap her
<i>Ị yengi warị yegha ee</i>	Does it belong to your mother's family?
<i>Pẹrẹ fị ọgbọnọmọ kọrị bọmọ teri-oo</i>	Take the mat of riches and wrap her (Armstrong 2016, 103)

The English phrase, “mat of riches,” does not really capture the sense of the Ijọ phrase, *pẹrẹ fị ọgbọnọmọ*. The word, *pẹrẹ*, in Ijọ, means a “king,” “riches” or “wealth.” In the componential analysis of this word, *pere* means “minus,” as in a lack of hardship, poverty, suffering and pain. Hence, when it precedes *ọgbọnọmọ*, it means a mat full of riches or wealth. The only time this collocation is used is when somebody dies. In traditional Ijọ society, when someone died, the deceased was wrapped with a mat. Moreover, the deceased was lain on a mat when the body had been washed by elderly women. As such, covering the deceased with such a mat demonstrates the belief that all the problems of the deceased have been solved by their death. They are going to experience the joys of what is known as Elysium in Greek mythology.

As pointed out earlier, death, to the Ijọ, is inevitable. This makes life ephemeral. Consequently, when a person dies, all the pursuits of the person come to an end. Hence, it is best for one to live a good life while on earth and always contribute to the well-being of the society. For the day one falls “asleep in death,” one is no longer capable of raising one’s legs or hands. The natural consequence of this is that one, as the Ijọ would claim, will be full of regrets even though one’s spirit constantly interacts with the living. It is this reflection on death that runs through the lines in “*Laa Dii*”:

5. *Laa Dii*

<i>Laa dii-o, laa dii-o</i>	Gazing at the sky, gazing at the sky
<i>Laa dii-o, laa dii-o</i>	Gazing at the sky, gazing at the sky
<i>Wo yengi ma laa dii-o, laa dii-o</i>	Our mother is gazing at the sky, gazing at the sky
<i>Laa dii zẹ zẹ zẹ</i>	Gazing at the sky helplessly
<i>La dii buọ kọ kọngha, laa dii-o</i>	Gazing at the sky without moving the leg, gazing at the sky
<i>Laa dii zẹ zẹ zẹ</i>	Gazing at the sky helplessly
<i>Laa dii bara kọ serigha laa dii-o</i>	Gazing at the sky without moving the hand, gazing at the sky hand
<i>Laa dii zẹ zẹ zẹ</i>	Gazing at the sky helplessly (Armstrong 2016, 102–3)

It is also part of the belief of the people that whenever a death occurs, the people of *fīamabou* prepare a party to welcome the deceased the way the living welcome their reincarnated ancestors. This party, it is believed, occurs simultaneously with the wake that is going on in real life and takes place in the bush where the deceased is to be buried. There are stories of people seeing items related to festivities at the place the corpse will be buried in the morning. Some traditionalists even maintain that they sometimes saw the soft light of the party when the place of burial could be seen from the community. This is the whole point of “*Uge Fie ma-e*”:

6. *Uge Fie ma-e*

<i>Uge fie ma-e</i>	A party is resonating
<i>Uge fie mo</i>	A party is resonating
<i>Orubiri boutebi bọ ye koroemi-o</i>	Something big is happening in the forest of Orubiri
<i>Aya uge</i>	It’s a new party
<i>Aya uge</i>	It’s a new party
<i>Uge warara-warara</i>	Party warara-warara
<i>Aya uge</i>	It’s a new party
<i>Uge wiriri-wiriri</i>	Party wiriri-wiriri
<i>Aya uge</i>	It’s a new party

(Armstrong 2016, 104–5)

When the deceased eventually gets to the other side of the world, the dead come to welcome them the way the living welcome a traveller. This is expressed in the dirge “*Kule Yengi*”:

7. *Kule Yengi*

<i>Kule yengi-o ma bo</i>	Let’s go welcome mother and come
<i>Kule yengi-o ma bo</i>	Let’s go welcome mother and come
<i>Ama Barakubu ọwọyọ mọ zi arau ma</i>	Barakubu, the one who gave birth to children
<i>Wo mu kule yengi-o ma boo</i>	Let’s go welcome her and come
<i>Kule mọ ẹgbẹigha kpọ</i>	Even if it’s not right to welcome her
<i>Wo mu kule yengi-o ma boo</i>	Let’s go welcome her and come
<i>Kule kule bara-o</i>	Welcome her as we always do
<i>Wo mu kule yengi-o ma bo</i>	Let’s go welcome mother

(Armstrong 2016, 106–7)

The belief in witchcraft also comes into play in some of the *duweji-igbela*. The powers of witches and wizards and how the Ijọ see them have already been noted. Apart from using the *obobo* to identify such persons, as mentioned earlier, in traditional times, it is claimed that the people would know if the deceased was a witch or a wizard as s/he lay in state in the night. They believed the head of the corpse would bend towards the left for a witch or a wizard no matter how the relatives tried to bring it to a normal position.

I was told it was a secret known by a few elderly people. In contrast, for a pure person, the head would bend towards the right. This is the hidden meaning of the dirge “*Ile Bein*”:

8. *Ile Bein*

<i>Ile bein-o bein-o</i>	<i>Ile</i> tree bears fruits, bears fruits
<i>Il’ama bein-a</i>	When <i>Ile</i> trees bear fruits
<i>Kenị anga beingha-o</i>	One part does not bear fruit
<i>Ile bein-o bein-o</i>	<i>Ile</i> tree bears fruits, bears fruits
<i>Il’ama bein bein</i>	When <i>Ile</i> trees bear fruits
<i>Kenị anga beingha-oo</i>	One part does not bear fruits
<i>Ile mọ sẹ beinsin-a</i>	When all <i>Ile</i> bear fruits
<i>Koromu-koromu-koromu</i>	<i>Koromu-koromu-koromu</i>
<i>Il’ama bein bein</i>	When <i>Ile</i> trees bears fruits
<i>Kenị anga beingha-a</i>	One part does not bear fruits

(Armstrong 2016, 103–4)

It is the practice in Ijoland for elderly women to dig canals close to the rivers and lakes when the flood season is about to come. Traps for crayfish are set in these canals when the flood season eventually comes and the water from the rivers and lakes flows into them. There are reports claiming that sometimes, when the owner of a canal goes to inspect her traps, she will see a dead relative or mother doing what she went there to do. This is the implied meaning of “*Kana Beingha*”:

9. *Kana Beingha*

<i>Ee yarịn-o</i>	Yes, shake it
<i>Opuru yarịn kị sụọ mo</i>	Crayfish enters well when the basket is shaken
<i>Yarịn-o</i>	Oh, shake it
<i>Ee yarịn-o</i>	Yes, shake it
<i>Opuru mọ kana beingha nị yarịn-o</i>	The crayfish has not filled the basket, so shake it
<i>Ee yarịn-o</i>	Yes, shake it
<i>Ee yarịn kụromọ</i>	Yes, shake it well

(Armstrong 2016, 105)

In the morning, the final song in the *dụweị-igbela* corpus, “*Odobaị*”, is performed:

10. *Odobaị*

<i>Odobaị-o odobaị dọu bo</i>	O snail! search for snail and bring it
<i>Beriba tu odobaị-o</i>	The snail under the plantain tree
<i>Pịrigha kịmị kpọ wẹnịteigha</i>	Not leaving anyone who refuses to give something
<i>Beriba tu odobaị-o</i>	The snail under the plantain tree

Pīrīgha kīmī kpō wēnīteigha

Not leaving anyone who refuses to give something

Beriba tu odobaī-o

The snail under the plantain tree

Ingele-o ingele kaīn-o

O greedy person, greedy person

Siyai mīē ingele

A person who is mean

(Armstrong 2016, 106)

“*Odobaī*” is sung as the women take basins and move around the quarter of the deceased, stopping at every house. As custom demands, each household puts raw food in the basins. The second stanza of the song is sung at persons who did not put anything in the basins. The food is cooked after they get home. Thereafter, it is eaten by the women and others amidst incantations and invocations. The performance of this song is anchored on the belief that the deceased must eat before s/he is buried and goes to *fiamabou*. The people see it as the highest demonstration of wickedness for someone not to contribute food towards the preparation of the last meal of the deceased among the living because they can put in whatever they have. “Who does not have such little things as salt, cubes of magi, pepper or onions in his or her house?”, as my respondents would ask.

As we have seen, the performance of the *duwēi-igbela* corpus of songs differs in some ways from dirge performances in other ethnic groups in Africa. For one thing, traditional African dirges that do not eulogise a deceased may be hard to hear. Dirges usually detail the positive deeds of the ancestors of the deceased and link them with his or her own achievements. However, the *duwēi-igbela* songs do not do any of that. In his study of the funeral songs of the Bamenda of Cameroon, Emmanuel Fru Doh points out that it has “always been the habit with Grassfielders to send off the spirits of their deceased ones with songs: songs lamenting their death, songs praising their achievements in life, songs consoling the bereaved relatives” (1990, 129). In Ijoland, it is the laments—discussed in the final part of this paper—that fit into Doh’s description of the traditional funeral corpus of songs, but not *duwēi-igbela*. For one thing, as pointed out earlier, they were sung by women who had long ceased giving birth. Moreover, the singing of the *duwēi-igbela* songs did not involve men, unlike the funeral songs of the Bamenda. In addition, they were not sung post-burial. Post-burial among the Bamenda, Doh tells us, is known as “cry-die,” when relatives of a deceased invite different well-costumed troupes who take turns to sing their songs. Dirge performance in pre-burial Bamenda may be likened to Igede funeral homes where every mourner sings or chants his or her personal lamentations from when a death is announced, through a wake, to the time of the burial (Ogede 1995, 80–81).

The performance of the *duwēi-igbela* songs also differs from dirge performance among the Sisaala in the Upper Volta region of Ghana. Confidence Gbolo Sanka (2010), in his study of Sisaala dirge performance, remarks that there are professional funeral bards among the Sisaala who go to perform dirges at funerals. This takes the form of a competition as the bards take turns to sing before the corpse. Sometimes these bards are

invited by the deceased's relatives. The audience, we are told, is the chorus and critic because it is familiar with the songs. In addition, a young boy who wants to compete with the best bards must attach himself to an experienced singer of dirges. The women who used to perform *dùwẹ̀i-igbela* did not undergo any formal training, nor did they enjoy a unique or privileged position in the community like bards among the Sisaala.

In a paper entitled "The Preservation of Yoruba Traditions through Hunters' Funeral Dirges," the Yoruba folklorist Bade Ajuwon points out that *iremoje*—known by its more popular name, *ijala*—preserves important aspects of Yoruba culture. *Ijala* is a specialist poetic form chanted by Yoruba hunters to mourn and at the same time celebrate their fellow dead hunter. Ajuwon notes that "chanters of *iremoje* poetry regularly refer to past Yoruba rituals, customs, and ancestral skills in their performances. By making these references, they provide their audience with oral information bringing their cultural heritage once more into the limelight" (1980, 68). According to Ajuwon, some of the dirges help the Yoruba to have knowledge of their ancient forms of music, which are no longer in vogue. For example, there is the performance of the *Ogun* ritual dance that is semi-acrobatic and requires formal training. This performance, to Ajuwon, is a "rememory" of a dance that is ancient and no longer practised. Gestures are used to act out ideas in the performance of these dirges. The ritual drama recalls the names of its past practitioners. This suggests, Ajuwon argues, that folk dramatists existed among the Yoruba in ancient times. It means, Ajuwon further contends, that Yoruba contemporary dramatic groups and acrobatic dances were inspired by the dramatic elements of *ijala*.

Further manifest in *ijala* are traditional beliefs and rituals associated with birth. In Yorubaland, a baby's transition from *orun* (heaven) to *aye* (earth) is done through performances of traditional rites. In addition, on the seventh or ninth day after a baby is born, naming rituals are performed. The elderly woman who officiates in these rituals is someone who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of Yoruba traditional customs, according to Ajuwon. Regrettably, the observance of this traditional custom is "becoming less common in contemporary times and, even where it is observed, both the form and the ritual items have largely lost their meaning" (Ajuwon 1980, 70). Fortunately, the observance of this aspect of Yoruba culture is chanted in the performance of *ijala*.

The same can be said of the *dùwẹ̀i-igbela* songs as preserving the traditional beliefs, rituals and customs of the Ijọ, as this article has shown. Furthermore, as with Igede funeral dirges, the Ijọ special dirges champion social values such as hard work, humility, kindness and solidarity. There may never be a time when the dirges will be performed in their primary context for posterity to know all this. However, researchers, collectors and students of folklore will always see from this research and future studies of dirge performance in Ijoland that the *dùwẹ̀i-igbela* songs embody all these ideals.

As remarked earlier, the songs that make up the *dùwẹ̀i-igbela* corpus were not the only songs the Ijọ sang when someone died. For example, when someone died and the canon

had been shot, the women—both young and old—living close to the house of the deceased would gather and sing two songs round the community. Other women joined the procession as it moved. This means a procession that started with five or six women would have grown to include more than 50 women by the time it came back to the house of the deceased. The singing served as an announcement that someone had died in the community; as such, no one should go to farm again. The two songs were:

1. *Ama Yanrìn*

<i>Barakubu ama yanrìndòu-o</i>	Barakubu has woken the community
<i>Ama yanrìn</i>	Woken the community
<i>Barakubu ama yanrìndòu-o</i>	Barakubu has woken the community
<i>Ama yanrìn</i>	Woken the community

2. *Naagha bọ fa*

<i>Naagha bọ fa-o</i>	Nobody has not heard
<i>Kìmì ma bou sigħa</i>	Nobody will go to farm again
<i>Barakubu fììbì</i>	The death of Barakubu
<i>Naagha bọ fa-o</i>	Nobody has not heard
<i>Kìmì ma bou sigħa</i>	Nobody will go to farm again
	(Armstrong 2016, 100)

Unlike the *dùwẹ̀-ìgbela* songs, these two songs were performed by clapping the hands, dancing and beating a drum and spoons against smaller bottles. The pace at which the women walked was quicker than normal. The women in the procession further sang, and in some rural communities still sing, some songs round the community on a day called *tìbìsẹ̀n báy* (literally, the day the hair is shaved). On that day, the children and some close relatives (both old and young) of the deceased, shave off all their wisps of hair. The ritual is performed three days after the death of a man and four days after a woman has died. It is noteworthy that all these songs—the ones constituting the *dùwẹ̀-ìgbela* corpus, those sung to inform the community about someone's demise and the ones sung on *tìbìsẹ̀n báy*—are different from the lamentations that still occur at funeral homes. The laments come in two modes: spoken and sung. They are the most elegant of any dirge I have heard at Ijọ funerals. Despite their gracefulness, I have never thought it wise to record someone's pain, as it were, in the primary context. Oftentimes, it is a mother who is highlighting the virtues of her departed son or daughter and talking about the vacuum s/he has created in her (the mother's) life, or a wife who, pointing fingers at her husband's corpse or coffin, sorrowfully tells him to look at her condition and that of the children and promise her that he will come back and kill the person responsible for his death. As J. H. Nketia notes about Akan dirges, "the presence of the body of the deceased lying in state urges mourners on to self-expression, to wail, cry and sing and express their thoughts and sentiments in a series of dirge pieces" (1955, 10). The laments of both men and women among the Ijọ are similar in content to Akan dirges.

Conclusion

This article has examined the beliefs that are expressed in a specialised form of Ijo funeral poetry called *dụwẹi-igbela*. The paper does not explore the songs in isolation. Rather, it situates the songs in the context of their performance. This has helped the reader to see that it is the cosmology and the life-view of the Ijo that inform *dụwẹi-igbela*. Death, as shown in this article, is not the end of one's life. The deceased, to the Ijo, has only transited to another world that is in constant interaction with the living. As such, for someone who died at an old age there should only be a celebration and no weeping. Today, due to Westernisation of the Ijo society, *dụwẹi-igbela* is no longer performed. Moreover, there is the fear that performing it outside its only appropriate context will bring some harm to the performers and/or the collector. Even though the performance of the *dụwẹi-igbela* corpus of songs is no longer in vogue, the songs preserve traditional Ijo beliefs, rituals and customs.

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