

## Value of Dirge in the Musical Culture of Communities: A Study of Arondizuogu

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### Abstract

Music is one activity that has continued to represent so many things to different people in different societies of the world. It presents itself in different styles and is used for different purposes. The mournful and slow type is often used in burials, funerals and spirit-cultural functions to depict the degree of reverence, attachment and affection to the parties involved in the ceremony. This paper examined the use of dirge in Arondizuogu South East Nigeria. It explained the several connections of the music to religious organizations as well as heathens and Christians who must use the music in appropriate circumstances notwithstanding their faith. The paper relied on interviews and questionnaires as well as statistical techniques in analyzing the nature of the dance and the implication of participation thereof. It concludes that dirge is a unique song that could be danceable or otherwise but a required necessity in the passage of the soul to the great beyond. The paper recommends that people of all classes irrespective of race should pay attention to the lyrics, rhythm and voice of the music to appreciate the importance and participate actively as a means of respecting the dead and the God of the dead.

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### **Background to the Study**

Death is a phenomenon that has irked scholars over the centuries. Their perplexion is evident in the manner in which they express death and define the circumstances expected to surround the great beyond. Often the emotions are expressed through songs, chants, recitations and eulogies rendered to the dead, the bereaved and to God the creator of life who everyone recognizes as the giver and taker of life. When grief renders words inadequate, music can give a voice to overwhelming visceral emotion. Indeed, many have cried while singing in expression of bereavement. Thus, music has long been associated with emotional expression of one sort or another: joy, sadness, celebration and ritual. In grief however, the searing voice of music is clear. This fact is made manifest owing to the inescapable grief of bereavement and human mortality which seems to require musical accompaniment at all times and circumstances. Sometimes the music surrounding death tells us as much about the mourners and as it does about the dead. Songs have been written and rendered for dead loved ones and many times made tears to flow freely. It could be personal or even public as Bernie Taupin and Elton John's Goodbye England's Rose, written for the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, touched a public overcome with loss. Musical tributes for the dead are not just only for celebrities and public figures but for everyone who has lived on earth although with different degrees of gusto and entrapment. The death of a person and the accompanying loss is felt by someone even if not by everybody.

When an explosion at Westray coal mine in Nova Scotia (Canada) claimed 26 lives in 1992, personal grief was compounded by the suddenness and magnitude of the tragedy and the social and financial impact on families and the community. In the aftermath, local musicians have produced as many as 50 tribute songs. When a Nigerian Air Force Lockheed C-130H Hercules crashed killing all persons on board in 1992, there was national grief throughout. The same sense of loss pervades whenever someone dies.

In Western society at least, endless reiteration of grief in speech is not generally acceptable. Songs of this kind allow this to happen. There is no embargo on singing or playing them repeatedly. We may also cry when the song is sung; an emotional response is acceptable in response to an obvious, external trigger. For many, a dirge is the saddest song.

In religions such as traditional Christianity and Islam where the dead are presumed to have a hopefully better home in heaven, the dirge is a mix of pleasure and sadness. Sadness because the loved one will be sorely missed but pleasure because he is going to be with Christ who admonished his people in John 14: 2-3

*In my father's house are many mansions: If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself so that where I am, and there you may be also.*

For these classes of people therefore their task is to use a pleasure dirge in sending the soul of the deceased off to be with his maker. For some Christian mourners, however, the dead

have no place to go but to remain on earth to inherit it for at least a thousand years. Yet for another class of mourners the dead must remain on earth to haunt or protect the living. The people of Igbo people believe that the duty of the dead is to protect the living except in some bizarre circumstances related to the manner of death or to a sense that the rituals of mourning were not properly conducted. In all these case however the dirge is a necessity.

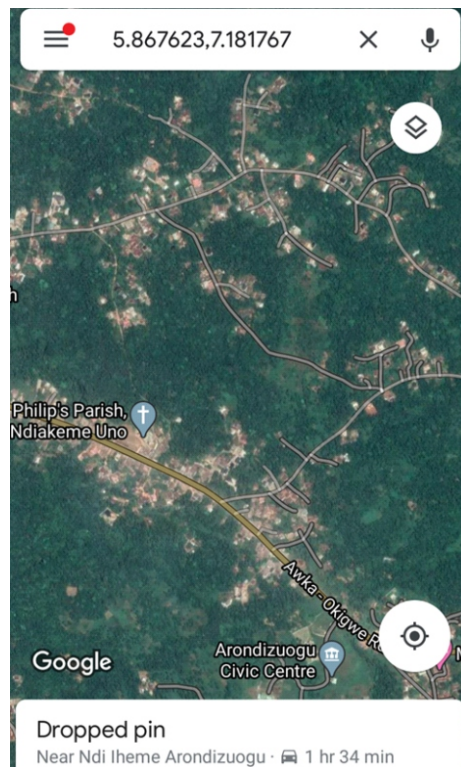
Death is a figure and factor that has remained an unsolved mystery to the extent that the matrix of life and death crystallizes into the pain of mourning and the reluctance of the living to let go of their dead. Death here seems to stand in for an indescribable and deeply ambiguous condition. Among the Igbo people of South East Nigeria who are Christians in the majority, funeral and mourning songs are not ordinary but sang with dignity befitting the occasion. In Arondizuogu and countless other communities and societies, death and music go hand in hand. According to Dell and Hickey (2019) music sometimes sings the dead to rest, offering comfort for grief-stricken individuals and communities; sometimes it confronts us with the anguish of mortality and loss. Sometimes it reflects something of the painful, complex and laborious task of mourning - at the end of which, the dead be may be finally laid to rest.

#### **Arondizuogu, South East Nigeria**

Arondizuogu occupies the area within longitudes  $7^{\circ} 075^1E$  and  $7^{\circ} 163^1E$ ; and latitudes  $5^{\circ} 475^1N$  and  $5^{\circ} 565^1N$ . It situates in the North Eastern part of Imo State of Nigeria. Politically, it used to be one of the three clans that made up former Ideato Local Government Area but presently spread Ideato North, Onuimo and Okigwe Local Government Areas of Imo State of Nigeria. Their neighbours include Umuakam, Umuoboma and Umuago in Ideato South Local Government area, Akokwa and Uzii, Umualoma in Ideato North Local Government Area, Okwe, Umuduru Egbeaguru and Umuna in Onuimo Local Government Area; Amuro, Ogene, Umulolo and Agbobu in Okigwe Local Governmnet Area, Ihitte and Umunze in Anambra state. Incidentally and very consciously, the people of Arondizugu live in all the nooks and crannies of Imo State to such an extent that their population was once reported to be significant in all their neighbours (Dike, 1885).

Arodizuogu lies within the tropical monsoon climatic zone and as a result is richly blessed with the water resources of rainfall. Temperatures do not vary much seasonally even from month to month ranging from 280C to 350C. Values of relative air humidity fluctuate between 80% and 85% or more during the rainy season. The mean wind speed in the area ranges between 7okm/day and 74km/day. The area is relatively upland averaging 150-400 meters above sea level. The highest points are areas around Ndi-Akeme and Ndi-Awa where heights of between 600 meters and 450 meters above sea level are noticeable. Areas around Ndi-Uche average 400 meters above sea level while parts of Ndianiche lie between 350 to 400 meters above sea level (Okoronkwo, 2006). A general description of the Arondizuogu is that of a wide circle of unbroken hills with Imo River running from North to South East. Very noticeable hills are Ugwu-ogidi, Ugwu ikpa, ugwu iyiobo and others; while the many tributaries of the Imo River include but not limited to Iyiobo, Nsuma, Iyiachara among others.

Politically, Arondizuogu is made up of 10 Autonomous communities recognized under the Imo State Traditional Rulers and Autonomous Communities Act 1981 as amended. Though the clan started with the first two autonomous communities under the names of the sons of Mazi Izuogu Obunukpo Akuma Nnachi -Uche Izuogu and Awa Izuogu, others later attained autonomous community status.



**Fig. 1:** Map showing parts of Ndihome Arondizuogu

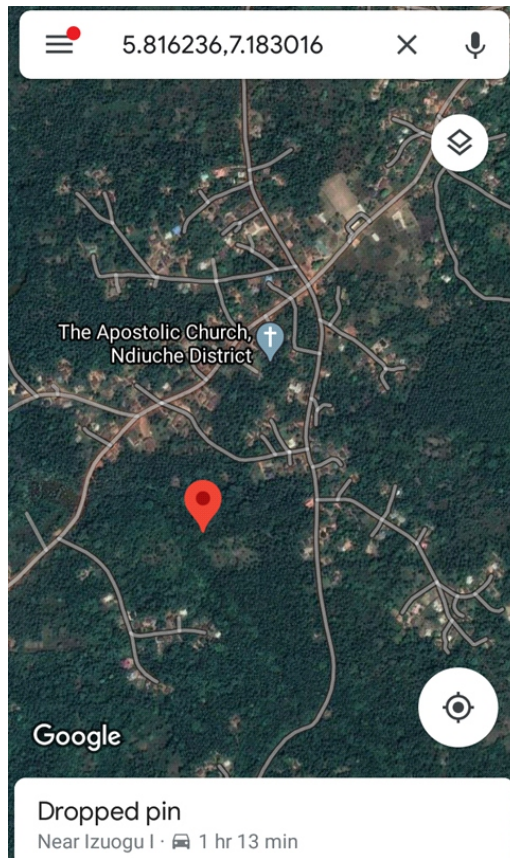
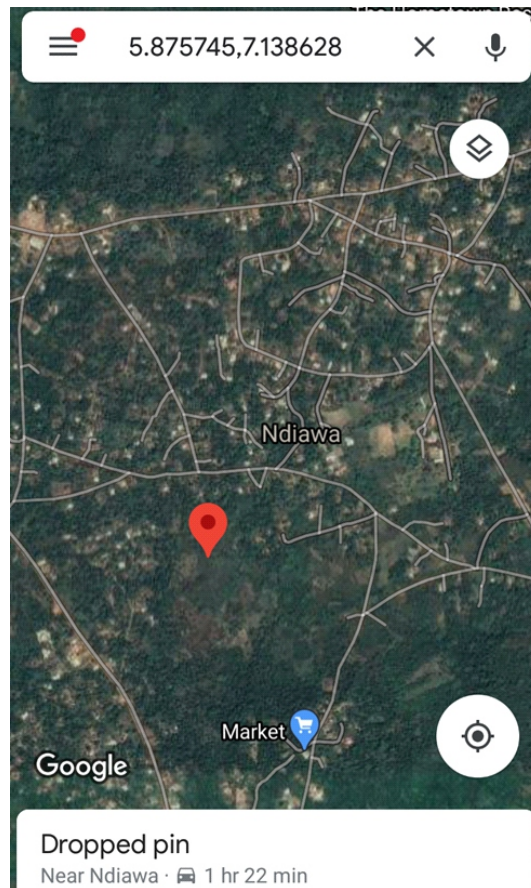


Fig. 2: Map showing parts of Ndiuche Arondizuogu





**Fig. 3:** Map showing parts of Ndiawa Arondizuogu

Figures 1, 2 and 3 are some of the areas where most of the population of Arondizuogu are thickly concentrated. There are eight autonomous communities that derived their names from the most populous towns/lineages. These are scattered all over the three local government areas earlier discussed – Ideato North, Okigwe and Onuimo. According to Okoronkwo (2006) these concentrations span across clans and lineages of other communities that are not Aro people.

The culture of the people of Arondizuogu derives primarily from that of the Arochukwu people of Abia State. Theirs are the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively as the ideas, customs and social behaviour of the people. The Aro people of Arondizuogu have vast reservoir of customs and cultural practices one of which is music (Okoronkwo and Okorafor, 2019). In this community, music is more than sound and strings but as well encompass light, love, behaviour, attitudes and most especially emotions. It is said that culture is the way of life of a people, their dreams and aspirations, their do's and don'ts. An amalgamation of diverse cultures from present day Anambra and Abia States fused into what is today charismatically known as the culture of Arondizuogu (Nwana, 2014). This flowed from

their progenitors of Arochukwu, Abia State and Nise, Anambra State. The people of Arondizuogu have conducted their lives and integrated their social and religious transactions that they have evolved as one indivisible and formidable entity no matter wherever they may be located. Their language, habitation style, occupation and vocation, marriage rites, music and dances, warfares as well as art expressions show a distinct class of spiritual maturity never witnessed in other parts of Igbo land. Of much concern and interest is their dancing of dirges in their burial rites and practices which this study examined.

#### **Death, Funerals and Dirges in Arondizuogu**

Death, transition, translation and other related terms are used by various human societies to communicate the ending of all formal functions and processes in the life of a living organism (Ikwuemesi and Onwuegbuna, 2017). According to Opata (1988) death is an inescapable fact of life...the logical end of birth which in itself is the beginning of life as we know it in this world. The Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria while mourning the dead also celebrate death, burial and funeral as a fundamental element of cultural heritage and a way of providing rite of passage to the great Almighty God. During this exercise heavy presence of sounds, words, images, gestures and imagery and dances turn what should ordinarily be a calamity into a theatrical expose where dirges are exhibited as dances and performances. The reasons behind this scenario seem to stem from the belief that people do not die but are transited to the great beyond where they will be with their maker for eternity. The Aro people just like other Igbo people believe that a burial depicts the reception the dead will receive at the other world and would indeed do everything imaginable to accord the dead a "befitting" burial (Achebe, 2008). Most conscientiously those who die are not sent forth carelessly and casually either by the bereaved or the community from which they exited (Jefferson and Skinner, 1974).



**Fig. 4:** Performing the Dirge for the Elderly  
**Source:** Okoronkwo & Okoronkwo 2019



**Fig. 5:** Dancing the Dirge for the Young  
**Source:** Okoronkwo & Okoronkwo 2019



**Fig. 6:** Dancing the Dirge by Christian Mothers of Aro Amuro Arondizuogu Okigwe  
**Source:** Okoronkwo & Okoronkwo 2020

Funerals in Arondizuogu are always accompanied with masquerades. These are fearful spirits in human form representing the ancestors of the people. Masquerades are replete in Igboland but in Arondizuogu, it has a slightly different connotation being regarded as the spirit of the gods, the ancestors and the yet unborn. When masquerade accentuate the funerals it is believed to drive the message home that the dead has actually and uninterruptedly rested in peace. Consequently, three forms of masquerades are used during funerals representing three classes of age/caliber of the people. Mgbadike is a representative of the father, the head of the family. That is why the masquerade is referred to as the father of masquerades (Nna Mmonwu). Mgbadike is one masquerade that muscuarly appears in all its spendour with axe and machetes adorned with garments of



nets, broken irons, nuts and raffia shafts. This masquerade usually appears during the burial of great men. Aburuja masquerade is the mother incarnate. They are special masquerades that are more clowns that bizarre. They are harmless, carry staff and bags like old women. It is usual to see such masquerade when women are being buried especially if the dead were noted philanthropists and peace makers. Oji-Onu masquerade is the youth and most popular. They attires are mostly cotton, very bright apparels and beautiful fabrics adorned with cowry. They sing the dirges in support of other singers.

**Table 2:** Masquerades in Arondizuogu Funerals

S/No.	Funeral	Masquerade
1	Youth	Oji-Onu
2	Mother	Aburuja
3	Father	Mgbadike

**Source:** Oruche 2019

There is the class of cult that usually only participates at the funeral of the initiated. This is the “Ekpe na Mboko”. It is not a masquerade but a dedicated elite group of sophisticated and highly revered individuals in the Aro society who are more or less regarded as the aristocrats of the people being leaders of opinion and rulers of the people. They are titled men and women who have attained all the necessary degrees and paraphernalia of offices and are mostly regarded as “ogaranya”. The funeral of such individuals are not ordinarily witnessed like others since most of the activities leading to the burial of the dead are shrouded in secrecy not because the dead are super human but that the Ekpe society which they belong conducts their affairs in secrecy. Their costume is the ukara cloth designed with insibidi writings. The group have their own type of dirges in celebration of their dead quite apart from the others.



**Fig. 7 and 8:** Ukara Cloth with Nsibidi writings; Omuaro cloth

**Source:** <https://twitter.com/ukpuru/status1201954744585138178>

Ukpon 2016 was explicit in his documentary of enculturation in Nigeria when he noted the social benefits of the “secret” societies especially in burials and funerals. It is also at the burials of the initiated that men of valour dressed strategically for greatness performs all sorts of songs dancing, singing and performing to the awe and admiration of people.



**Fig. 8:** Ikperikpi dance particularly performed for men of valour  
**Source:** Okoronkwo & Okoronkwo 2020

The death and funeral of great women elicits the emergence of Ojogo dance. This is an ancient scintillating dance where gracefulness anchors resilience. The beauty of the dance more or less is blossomed by Isi Ojo which depicts the importance of women in the society. The women are attired with the traditional Omu Aro cloth that is known all over the world as the insignia of strength, pride and resilience.

NorthCote (1914) recorded many dirges categorizing them then as oral folklore. These were archived for the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Folklore Society. Most dirges are common in Igbo land but some are presented here for particularity sake implying that they are popular in Arondizuogu.

<i>O nuru ekwe onwu</i>	<i>He who hears the bell toll</i>
<i>Buru ekete jewe Onitsha mgbere ahia</i>	<i>Decides to travel to Onitsha for business;</i>
<i>O zucha ya riewe ya</i>	<i>Will eat her transactions,</i>
<i>Onwu nokwa n'ulo ya</i>	<i>Death is also waiting for him.</i>

<i>Nwoke be ya gbara gharii</i>	<i>A man who is confused</i>
<i>Onye ujo oru</i>	<i>He is a lazy man</i>
<i>Nwoke kanyi jee oru</i>	<i>When asked to go to work</i>
<i>Anaghim eje na bem gbara gharii</i>	<i>He cannot go, because he is confused</i>
<i>Onye uju oru</i>	<i>He is a lazy man</i>

The musical culture of Arondizuogu will never be complete without discussing the contributions of Pericomo Okoye; a musician of repute who transformed the traditional music of Arondizuogu into a world class commodity. Dirges sang by this great musician connotes not only the spirit world but the life of the world to come. Pericomo Okoye was the doyen of Afro-culture where the base of the community always and in essence must conform. He was a specialist in dirges that wherever he attended a burial ceremony, the stories are told a million fold.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The value of dirges in the musical culture of communities is yet to be completely explored. What we have attempted to express in this piece is the relative relevance to the life we live and to be lived hereafter. In consequence therefore it is encouraged that people examine the critical nature of their music and its relationship with culture in respect of the living and the dead. Until this is achieved, the link between the past, present and the future will continue to be a mirage.

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