GPH-International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research
(Online ISSN: 3050-9637)
Volume 9, Issue 10, October 2026
Publisher: Global Publication House
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24131633
Homepage: | https://gphjournal.org/index.php/ssh/index

Thanato-Poetics and the Aesthetics of Dirge in *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo* Musical Performances

Segun Omosule, Oluwakemi T. Olayemi and Owólọlá Àjúlékún
[123]Department of English, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria.
Corresponding Author: Owólọlá Àjúlékún Email: ajulekunowolola@gmail.com
Phone: 07067259199

Abstract

The persistent tendency to read dirge primarily as an affective outpouring of grief has constrained scholarly engagement with its semiotic, ideological and aesthetic significance within *Yorùbá* oral performance traditions. This study, therefore, examines thanato-poetics and the aesthetics of dirge in *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo* musical performances among the *Ìlàjẹ*, *Ìkálẹ̀*, and *Àpọ̀ì* of Ondo State, Nigeria. Anchored in a Gadamerian hermeneutic framework, it explores how dirge performances encode indigenous conceptions of death, transition and posthumous identity, and how these are aesthetically mediated through folk music. Through close textual analysis of selected dirge performances by Comfort Ọmọ́gẹ̀ (Àsíkò) and Ọnuréyẹ́ Arówójolú (Bírípo), the study demonstrates that stylistic devices and naming practices function as meaning-making strategies within a thanato-centric worldview. It further reveals that dirge performances articulate gendered experiences of loss, with particular emphasis on widowhood as a locus of intensified emotional and ideological expression. Moreover, the integration of lamentation with panegyrics reconfigures dirge as a performative space for negotiating grief and sustaining individual and communal identities in the face of mortality and modernity. By situating *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo* dirges within *Yorùbá* cosmology and the discourse of thanato-poetics, the study extends debates in African musicology and performance studies. It ultimately foregrounds death as an aesthetic and ideological principle of continuity.

Keywords:

Àsíkò, *Bírípo*, dirge, aesthetics, musical performance, thanato-poetics.

Introduction

Death remains one of the most enduring subjects of human reflection, evoking complex spiritual, emotional and philosophical responses across cultures. It is a culturally mediated experience that transcends boundaries of race, class, geography and historical moment. Across cultures, this condition finds expression in dirge, an oral poetic form through which communities articulate mourning, express catharsis and collective consciousness. In *Yorùbá* society, death occupies a distinctly philosophical space. It is conceived not as an end, but a moment of transition imbued with spiritual and cultural significance. Death, as Adeigbe (2022:104) observes, is a 'transcendental occurrence' that aggregates communal, social and philosophical meaning. In this worldview, death signifies a passage from one existential plane to another.

© 2026 Author(s). Published by Global Publication House (GPH).
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 License.

This conception is grounded in the tripartite worlds of existence—the world of the unborn, the world of the living and the ancestral world (Idowu, 1971). Such a cyclical ontology informs *Yorùbá* funerary traditions, especially for the aged, who are believed to have fulfilled their earthly duties and are, thus, celebrated as they journey into the ancestral world.

As Omosule (2009/2010) puts it, this celebration of the last cycle of life 'reduces death to a mere phase' (96). Funerary rites, therefore, serve not only as communal expressions of grief but also as aesthetic affirmations of continuity and reverence. To this end, Ogungbemi (1997) affirms that death 'provides the transitional process through which man completes his journey on earth' (70). These transitions are marked by elaborate rites which feature symbolic feasts, didactic songs, intricate drum beats and emotional dance steps, which encode the cultural meanings of death. These ritual logics are inscribed into *Yorùbá* folk music, where performance becomes the medium for expressing communal beliefs about mortality. In this regard, music functions as both an aesthetic expression of grief and a form of orature through which the living engage the departed and reaffirm communal values and memory. This dynamic is particularly evident in *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo*, which are performed in various contexts, including funerary rites and memorial services. In these musical traditions, death is aestheticised through controlled tempo, patterned drumming and poetic language that oscillates between lament and praise. Such performances do not merely express sorrow; they constitute a poetic system through which death is ritualised and rendered aesthetically.

Despite their cultural and aesthetic richness, *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo* musical traditions have received limited critical attention as aesthetic channels of dirge and poetic meanings. Existing studies on *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo* (Emoruwa, 2005; Ajimisan, 2016, 2023; Omosule 2019; Okunnuwa & Odulate, 2024; Babarinde & Igbi, 2024) have largely focused on ethnographic documentation, historical evolution, performance aesthetics, linguistic artistry, ethical dimensions and ecocritical orientations, leaving underexplored the extent to which these musical practices encode the thanato-poetic structures that shape emotional comportment, communal memory and metaphysical belief. This lacuna calls for a critical shift from descriptive ethnography to a poetics-oriented analysis that foregrounds the aesthetic organisation of meaning. This study, therefore, examines how the selected iconic performers, Comfort Ọmọ́gẹ̀ (*Àsíkò*) and Ọnuréyẹ́ Arówójolú (*Bírípo*), express thanato-poetics through their song-texts. It examines how imagery, symbolism and naming are deployed as aesthetic strategies for constructing relations between the living and the dead, while sustaining culturally grounded understanding of mortality.

Conceptual Clarification

Dirge is both a literary form and a cultural performance deeply rooted in the expression of grief and sorrow. It serves as an artistic outlet for mourning, capturing the emotional weight of loss through language, rhythm and ritual. As Ajuwon (1981) avers, dirge involves a 'spontaneous outburst of distress by the living on sustaining a loss' (272). This underscores its immediate emotional impulse. Akporobaro (2012) further highlights the artistic dimension of dirge by describing it as 'a highly stylistic form of expression that is governed by specific poetic recitative conventions used to express the feelings of the mourners in a determinate form and performance procedure' (66). In a similar vein, Ogene (2010) describes it as a funeral song characterised by direct emotional expression and ritual specificity. Beyond these descriptive formulations, African oral literature scholarship has consistently situated dirge within the broader aesthetics of performance (Nketia, 1955; Ajuwon, 1980; Ogede, 1995; Adeigbe, 2022;

Akrobettoe, 2025). From this perspective, performance remains the space where the thematic, aesthetic and ideological dimensions of dirge are realised. Accordingly, Okpewho (1992) argues that African oral genres derive their meaning from the dynamic interaction of performer, audience, context, gesture, music and other paralinguistic resources, making performance itself an indispensable component of textual meaning. Viewed from this performative standpoint, dirge transcends the status of an emotional lament; it serves as an ideological and semiotic practice through which grief is aestheticised and rendered culturally intelligible.

Thanato-poetics, as employed in this study, refers to the aesthetic encoding and performative articulation of death as a structuring principle of meaning. The concept originated in literary scholarship and was first introduced by the Austrian Slavist Aage A. Hansen-Love (1993), who employed the term to describe the centrality of death in Osip Mandelstam's poetic imagination and argued that death occupies such a dominant position in the poet's worldview that it constitutes a distinct poetics of mortality. Since then, the concept has gained wider currency in literary criticism as an analytical framework for examining the representation of death in literary texts. As Mirzagalievna (2024:61) notes, 'thanato-poetics is a branch of literary criticism that studies images of death and dying in literature', with its principal concern being 'the analysis of specific techniques and means of implementing the motive of death within the framework of a specific work and the creativity of a specific author' (61). Similarly, Blumenthal-Barby (2013) deploys the concept to interrogate the aesthetics and ethics of death in modern European literature. Consequently, the analytical application of thanato-poetics has remained largely confined to written literary texts and philosophical discourse.

This study extends the concept beyond its conventional literary domain by proposing *Yorùbá* thanato-poetics as an analytical framework for understanding how death is aesthetically configured and culturally negotiated in indigenous African oral performances. Rather than restricting thanato-poetics to textual representations of mortality, *Yorùbá* thanato-poetics conceptualises death as a performative, semiotic and cosmological phenomenon that is symbolically organised, ritually enacted and communally interpreted through music and other performative forms. While intersecting with broader discourses in thanatology and death studies, this formulation is grounded in indigenous *Yorùbá* cosmology, where death is conceived not as rupture but as transition, continuity and relational presence between the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. In this regard, artistic expression, particularly music, becomes a critical site for mediating the tensions between loss, memory, identity and metaphysical belonging.

It is within this thanato-poetic framework that the musical genres, *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo*, become especially significant. These genres are indigenous to the *Ìlàjẹ*, *Ìkálẹ̀* and *Àpọ̀ì* people who occupy Ondo South Senatorial District of Ondo State, Nigeria. These people are distinct for their 'thriving arts and culture, a rich, vigorous language and oratorical dexterity and a science of being' (Osundare, 2012:306). *Bírípo* carries profound meanings rooted in *Yorùbá* culture. It is a combination of two morphemes, '*Bírí'* and '*po'*. '*Bírí'* means 'turning' or 'twisting' while '*po'* indicates 'completeness'. *Bírípo*, therefore, involves 'complete, constant twist and turn in circle' as evident in the 'constant twist of dancers in the course of dancing during the music performance' (Omosule, 2019:3). From this point of view, *Bírípo* is a folk music whose meaning is rooted in the philosophy, 'life is a journey in a circle'.

Àsíkò, on the other hand, is composed of three morphemes: '*sí*' (to take off or to move from), '*kò*' (to meet or to agree), and '*à*' (first person plural pronoun "we"). When combined, *Àsíkò* translates to 'we take off or move from a point and meet at another agreeable point'. It symbolises the act of transitioning from one space to another domain. Broadly speaking, *Àsíkò* symbolises life as a journey—we take off at a point, travel far and wide, and ultimately return home to reflect on our experiences. In *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo* dirge songs, death is approached with solemn clarity and aesthetic gravity. Through patterned rhythms, dirge-like vocalisation and symbol-laden lyrics, these performances, especially in the slow segment, cultivate an atmosphere of controlled grief that aligns emotional expression with communal ethics and ideology. These folk music genres are, therefore, a music-poetic expression of the people's belief in 'the world they inhabit, the world around them and the hereafter' (Ajimisan, 2016:11). These semantic and performative logics ultimately configure *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo* as distinct thanato-poetic systems in which death is neither silence nor cessation, but an aesthetic principle through which continuity, memory and metaphysical presence are ritually composed and sustained.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing close reading and hermeneutic content analysis to examine the thanato-poetics and aesthetics of dirge in *Bírípo* (a predominantly male musical genre) and *Àsíkò* (a predominantly female musical genre). The primary data comprise two purposively selected dirge performances drawn from existing audio-visual recordings. The texts were selected based on their thematic relevance and representativeness of the stylistic and ideological concerns central to this study, namely, imagery, symbolism, naming, and the interplay of lament and panegyric. The selection was deliberately limited to two songs to permit a close reading of each text-in-performance. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the study privileges analytical depth over breadth, consistent with qualitative hermeneutic inquiry, which values interpretive richness over numerical representativeness. The choice of one male and one female performer was intended to facilitate a comparative exploration of gendered inflections in the deployment of thanato-poetic strategies across both traditions. The selected recordings were transcribed in the original *Yorùbá* (*Ìlàjẹ/Ìkálẹ̀/Àpọ̀ì* dialectal variants) and subsequently translated into English by the researcher, with attention to preserving idiomatic and culturally embedded meanings. These transcribed and translated texts were then subjected to close content analysis, guided by a hermeneutic framework that attends to imagery, symbolism, rhythm and naming as cultural signifiers of meaning. In addition to the primary data, secondary materials, including textbooks, theses, journal articles, and electronic sources on *Yorùbá* oral poetics, dirge traditions and death cosmology, were critically engaged to situate the analysis within existing scholarly discourse.

Theoretical Framework

Building on thanato-poetics as an aesthetic-performative logic through which death is structured, mediated and made meaningful, this study adopts hermeneutics as its theoretical framework. This choice is informed by the belief that dirge song-texts in *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo* serve as symbolic texts that encode stratified and culturally sedimented meanings of death, transition and posthumous identity. These songs are texts-in-performance whose meanings do not reside in linguistic form alone but emerge through a fusion of horizons between performers, audience and the cultural traditions that shape their interpretive frameworks (Gadamer, 1975). Within

the matrix of *Yorùbá* thanato-poetics, the meanings of death encoded in dirge are neither fixed nor ontologically stable; they are dynamically constituted through performance. The dirge performer draws upon inherited symbolic repertoires, while the audience interprets these within their own experiential and cultural horizons. Meaning is, therefore, continually renegotiated at the intersection of tradition, performance and lived experience. Omosule (2011) corroborates this view, defining hermeneutics as 'the significant quest for meaning in relation to the artistic endeavours of the folk' (66). Hermeneutics functions as a critical matrix for mediating the relationship between 'the intention and its comprehension' and 'the scripts and the imports' (67).

Hermeneutics is particularly appropriate because the concern of this study is not to establish universal laws of meaning but to interpret culturally situated understandings of death as they emerge through performance, language and communal memory. While hermeneutics traditionally concerns itself with the interpretation of linguistic utterances (Aina, 2011), its relevance in this study extends beyond linguistic exegesis to encompass the symbolic and affective dimensions through which death is aestheticised in musical expression. It enables an interpretive engagement that attends to what is sung, and how it is sung, performed and received in a specific socio-cultural context. Significantly, this approach privileges indigenous and culturally informed modes of interpretation, encouraging the reading of imagery, symbols and motifs within the semiotic system of Yoruba cosmology and philosophical worldview. In this study, hermeneutics is operationalised through a close reading of song-texts in performance, with particular attention to imagery, symbolism, rhythm and naming practices as culturally sedimented signifiers. By situating these elements within *Yorùbá* cosmology, the analysis foregrounds how thanato-poetics is encoded and activated in performance. In this sense, interpretation becomes an encounter, not simply with text, but with a living aesthetic system in which death is continuously reimagined as presence, transition and continuity.

Analysis and Discussion

In indigenous *Yorùbá* music, dirge is not merely an emotive performance but a cultural mechanism rooted in a thanato-centric worldview that is deeply attuned to the inevitability and philosophical significance of death. Within the framework of thanato-poetics, dirge functions as an aesthetic-performative system through which death is symbolically structured and culturally intelligible. Known as *Ìgbálá* in *Ègbá*, *Ògbérè* in *Ọ̀yọ́*, *Orin arò òkú* in *Onàdó*, *Eré ògàgó* in *Ìkàrẹ́*, and *Alámọ̀* in *Èkìtì*, *Yorùbá* dirges do more than express grief; they interpret death, encode lineage, invoke ancestral presence and affirm the cyclical nature of existence. From a hermeneutic standpoint, these functions are not inherent properties of the text but emergent meanings, produced through interpretive engagement as members of the audience negotiate shared cultural codes of mortality within performance.

Among the *Ìlàjẹ*, *Ìkálẹ* and *Àpọ̀ì* people of Ondo State, dirge songs are known as *Ìjègbé*. *Ìjègbé* is the slow, sonorous and often mournful chant-like performance incorporated into *Bírípo* and *Àsíkò* performances to intensify their emotional and ritual significance (Ajimisan, 2023). It is, according to Enikuemehin (2013), a mournful song customarily performed during the funerary rites of departed loved ones. Like other indigenous ethno-poetic genres, *Bírípo* and *Àsíkò* performances are 'amenable to any ceremonial occasion be it naming, burial, installation, anniversaries, thanksgiving and, or even rites of passage etc.' (Emoruwa, 2005:53). In this regard, these musicians may also be regarded as professional dirge singers. Through dirge

performances, they articulate and preserve the philosophical worldviews and cosmological beliefs of their communities.

Historically, this expressive domain was largely occupied by women, particularly in pre-colonial African societies. Women were culturally constructed as emotionally expressive, a perception that patriarchal ideology translated into assumptions of vulnerability. In contrast, men were constructed as embodiments of stoic strength, and public weeping by men was often frowned upon, if not classified as an outright taboo. Finnegan (2012) aptly captures this gendered dynamic, noting that dirge performers are typically female because the 'songs often involve wailing, sobbing, and weeping', qualities that 'make them particularly suitable for women' (148). Consequently, dirge not only reflects the universality of mourning but also mirrors the gendered expectations and emotional politics of indigenous African societies. Hermeneutically, the female performer occupies a mediatory position, translating private grief into culturally legible signs that the community can interpret and internalise.

The following dirge, '*Gèlè Gun Orí Gele*' by Ọmọ́gẹ̀, exemplifies how thanato-poetics operates at the intersection of gender, symbolism and performance, while also illustrating how meaning is hermeneutically constituted through layered imagery and cultural codes:

Gèlè gun orí Gele	Headgears set on *Gele*
Òsùpá gun orí àlùmóyìn lọ	The moon mounts the orange trees
Pẹ̀rẹ̀kùtú yẹ̀yẹ̀ mo jíjó ẹlẹ́dìyẹ àbà	Reluctantly, I dance like hens in a coop
Àwéré-werè ṣe bí àdàbà, ó lọ	*Àwéré-werè* steps like a dove and exits
Já tó r'érin, ó dugbó	We'll reach the forest before spotting an elephant
Já tó r'éfàn, ó dugbére	We'll reach eternity before encountering a buffalo
Ẹyẹ bí ọ̀kẹ́n sọ̀ghán	There are no birds like peacocks
Jọ̀ọ́ o ọkọ mi lóro ò	Please my darling husband
Má sàì wá ò	Do not but come back

The dirge thematises widowhood by dramatising the emotional and existential consequences of marital bereavement. As a funeral lament, the song draws on visual, kinetic and spiritual imagery to embody grief, longing and the metaphysical distance between the living and the dead. The headgear is symbolic of feminine elegance in *Yorùbá* culture. In *Yorùbá* dress culture, a headgear serves as an emblem of feminine dignity and ceremonial identity. In this song, the *gèlè* is placed upon the persona, *Gele*. The pun, alliteration and metaphor in the line suggest a piling of burdens, layers of grief or a world shattered by mourning. The image evokes the overwhelming ceremonial burdens imposed upon widowhood. The symbolic headgear usually worn by the widow is metaphorically likened to the moon mounting the orange trees. In this imagery, the moon, conceived as a divine presence, encroaches upon the space of the orange trees, traditionally associated with nourishment and continuity of life. This juxtaposition foregrounds the vulnerability and transience of human existence when confronted with mortality. From a hermeneutic perspective, this action foregrounds evening or night as the temporary setting of the dirge, marking a liminal transition from one plane of being to another. The moon's sudden appearance, particularly when the sun has not yet withdrawn, activates a motif of loss and reinforces the thanato-centric ideology.

Beyond the grief, the dirge-text reflects gender politics in indigenous *Yorùbá* society, especially in the pre-modern era. The line, *'pẹ̀rẹ̀kùtú yẹ̀yẹ̀ mo jíjó ẹlẹ́dìyẹ àbà'* (Reluctantly, I dance like hens in a coop), is a metaphorical and kinetic depiction of grief performed under cultural

expectations. This symbolises the awkward, hesitant gestures of the mourner whose performance of grief is both deeply personal and culturally scripted. Hermeneutically, the hen's restricted movement in a coop signifies emotional constraint and societal expectation. It evokes a sense of restriction and helplessness, bringing to light the emotional and social entrapment of the bereaved, particularly widows, who are often expected to mourn in demeaning ways.

In the precolonial *Yorùbá* society, widowhood was often accompanied by intense socio-psychological and physical suffering, influenced by patriarchal customs and phallocentric order. Widows were typically subjected to degrading mourning rites that reinforced their perceived impurity and social inferiority. These rituals included forced confinement, shaving of the head, wearing of mourning clothes, and prolonged periods of isolation. Ikpeme (2020), in this regard, argues that, although duration and tasks involved vary between communities, 'the dehumanizing condition, suspicion and negative labels given to the widow are the same in almost all practicing communities' (275). In some communities, widows were made to sleep beside the corpse or drink the water used to wash it. Denied inheritance rights and often dispossessed of their husbands' property, many widows were left destitute and vulnerable, sometimes coerced into levirate marriages with their deceased husbands' relatives as a means of retaining access to land and children. These practices reveal a society in which a woman's identity and security were tethered almost entirely to her husband, and his death marked not only the loss of a partner but a brutal descent into marginalisation. The pain of widowhood, which involves estrangement, is evident in the persona's emotional, paradoxical plea that dramatises the existential ache of separation. This longing motif is an invocation that underlines the *Yorùbá* belief in the invisible presence of the dead around the living.

The aesthetic value of the dirge lies in the use of animal and bird imagery. The performer likens the deceased, who is *Àwéré-werè,* to a dove. The striking image demonstrates the ethereal departure of the deceased. A dove is known for its peaceful and divine nature as seen in the maxim, *dídẹ̀ ni í dẹ̀ àdàbà lọ́rùn* (things are always soft for a dove). In *Yorùbá* worldview, a dove (*àdàbà*) is a signifier of spiritual transition and the soul's unburdened flight into the metaphysical realm. Although the bereaved, especially the beloved of the departed, are left in deep pains and agonies, the deceased is believed to have successfully traversed the ancestral realm. This perceived ingenuity is stylistically encoded through the technique of naming. The persona is designated *Àwéré-werè*, an onomatopoeic identity that evokes agility, swift turns and evasive movement. By implication, this symbolises the metaphysical cleverness of the deceased and his successful passage to the world beyond.

The following metaphoric couplet, *Já tó r'érin, ó dugbó/Já tó r'éfàn, ó dugbére (*We'll reach the forest before spotting an elephant/We'll reach eternity before encountering a buffalo*),* employs proverbial hyperbole to express the enormity of the loss. In *Yorùbá* folktales*, th*e elephant and buffalo are not ordinary animals; they embody grandeur, dignity and ancestral might. Their elusiveness here emphasises the irretrievable loss of the beloved. To see an elephant (*èrin*) or buffalo (*éfàn*) in their habitat requires venturing into their respective territories, which are *ugbó* (thick forest) and *igbére* (eternal space). This metaphor magnifies the uniqueness of the deceased, whose equal cannot easily be found. The line, *Ẹyẹ bí ọ̀kẹ́n sọ̀ghán*, heightens the elegiac tone through visual opulence and rarity. This is invoked through the image of the peacock (*ọ̀kẹ́n*), a paragon of splendour and iridescent beauty. This peacock imagery is an aesthetic embellishment. It is a subtle panegyric that reaffirms the inability to

replace the deceased. The speaker implicitly asserts that, among all creatures, none rivals the brilliance or elegance of the departed.

While Ọmọ́gẹ̀'s dirge foregrounds death through the intimate emotional landscape of widowhood, domestic loss and affective longing, it simultaneously demonstrates that thanato-poetics is deeply inflected by gendered experience. Death is mediated through feminine subjectivity, where mourning is embodied in restrained movement, emotional vulnerability and the social burdens imposed upon widows. Arówójolú's dirge, by contrast, shifts the hermeneutic focus from private bereavement to the public philosophy of mortality. Rather than dwelling on the emotional consequences of death for the bereaved, it contemplates death as an indiscriminate existential force that transcends social status, spiritual authority and masculine prestige. Read together, the two performances reveal that thanato-poetics in indigenous *Yorùbá* music is neither monolithic nor gender-neutral; it accommodates multiple interpretive horizons through which death is aesthetically configured, whether as intimate personal loss or as a communal meditation on the inevitability of human existence.

Ìjègbé, like other indigenous *Yorùbá* dirge traditions, 'portrays both the attitude of the people to death as well as their worldviews, especially about existence and transition' (Omosule, 2009/2010:90). This function aligns with thanato-poetics, through which dirge operates as a cultural site for articulating collective philosophical thoughts about mortality. This thematic thrust is seen in Arowojolu's '*Ikú Á Pa Oníf*á':

*Ikú á pa oníf*á *bí ọnẹ gbọ́fá*	Death will kill *Ifá* priests like a novice
Ikú á pa oníṣègùn bí ọnẹ né egbògi	Death will kill physicians like one without charms
Igi yóó hù yọ́yọ́ nòwúrọ̀ kùtù	The tree that sprouts jute leaves early in the morning
Án mà ge lulẹ̀ nọ̀họ́n gangan	Has been felled at noontide
Àsá fò pìrì	An eagle soars ferociously
Ó gbé ọma ẹdìyẹ nọ̀họ́n gangan	It carries away a pullet at noontide
Òròmadìyẹ mẹ̀ í kígbe: iye…	The pullet wails: mother…
Onúlé ẹdìyẹ lè fò bá àsá jà	The poulterers cannot soar to wrestle the eagle
Rọ̀bọ́tì ọma Ọmamùlé	Robot, the son of *Ọmamùlé*
Ọnẹ oyè yẹ	The one to whom titles befit
Òkìkí ọ̀bọ̀n Òyìngbò	The famous man at *Òyìngbò* market
Ọma Jàṣẹ́ẹ́ ùjí	The son of *Jàṣẹ́ẹ́*, the storm
Ọma olóko lílá nẹ́yìn ọ̀hà	The son of the owner of a sprawling farm behind a lagoon
Àsá ti gbé òròmadìyẹ lọ	The eagle has carried away a pullet

The song foregrounds death as a central motif in cultural consciousness. It presents death as philosophically inevitable. In other words, the song offers a poetic meditation on death as an equaliser that renders status, wisdom and power ultimately meaningless. The opening lines establish the epistemological paradox of death. In *Yorùbá* cosmology, *onífá* (*Ifá* priest) and *oníṣègùn* (herbalist or physician) are believed to be endowed with spiritual and medicinal powers. This positions them as custodians of indigenous and metaphysical knowledge. Yet, death 'kills them like novices', which reveals a core existential irony. Those believed to possess the secrets of life and healing are no less vulnerable than the uninformed. This subversion deconstructs the illusion of human omnipotence. It affirms the belief that 'death has neither regard nor respect for political or economic status of anyone' (Adeigbe, 112). It is an ultimate leveller whose operations defy and render meaningless all forms of class and gender stratification.

The death motif is also apparent in the allegorical configuration that speaks of a tree which 'sprouts jute leaves early in the morning', only to be 'felled at noontide'. In *Yorùbá* society, *yọ́yọ́* (jute leaf) is not only a significant edible plant but also a symbol of nourishment and social usefulness. The tree that bears such leaves metaphorically represents tender-hearted, selfless individuals whose presence enriches the community. One would expect such a tree to be cherished and preserved; yet, the allegory laments a tragic reversal. These virtuous lives are often cut short. This underscores the indiscriminate and insensitive nature of death. This worldview is further illustrated, for instance, in *Ìlàjẹ* and *Ìkálẹ̀* onomastics, where names such as '*Ikúémònẹ́hàn'* (Death does not recognise good people) and '*Ikúéènómiye*' (Death has no relatives) depict the absoluteness and inescapability of death in indigenous thought.

The dirge derives much of its aesthetic force from a rich network of visual symbolism and metaphorical imagery. The line, *Igi yóó hù yọ́yọ́ nòwúrọ̀ kùtù*/*Án mà ge lulẹ̀ nọ̀họ́n gangan* (The tree that sprouts jute leaves early in the morning/Is cut down at noontide), employs arboreal metaphor, a recurring aesthetic motif in *Yorùbá* dirges. The tree is symbolic of human life and growth; it is cut down just when it begins to flourish. This represents untimely death, which is classified as 'bad' death. The juxtaposition of 'morning' and 'noontide' shows life's fragility and brevity. Morning suggests youthfulness while noon represents an abrupt interruption. The use of avian imagery further deepens this abrupt interruption. The imagery of an 'eagle' and a 'pullet' deepens the symbolic density of this dirge. The eagle is known for its power and swiftness. It is used here as a symbol of death. Its sudden swoop to carry away a 'pullet' evokes the abruptness of mortality. The pullet's helpless cry invokes the image of innocence and dislocation. It underlines the helplessness of the deceased in the face of death. Both the deceased, 'the wailing pullet', and the bereaved, 'the poulterers' who 'cannot soar to wrestle the eagle', are helpless before death represented by the 'eagle'. The song, therefore, reflects the people's belief in death as a supra-human force, majestic and untouchable.

One unique feature of dirge in indigenous *Yorùbá* music is the use of panegyrics. The blend of lament and *oríkì* is central to *Yorùbá* thanato-poetics, as it reconfigures death from loss into a site of identity reconstruction. *Oríkì* (praise poetry) helps dirge performers to historicise and add emotion to the songs. In expressing their emotional attachment to the deceased, Akande (2017) argues that 'people can chant the praise of the deceased and that of his lineage as well as sing in honour of the departed soul' (192). This is evident in the song above. The song transitions from symbolic lament to heroic eulogy: *Rọ̀bọ́tì ọmọ Ọmamùlé/Ọnẹ oyè yẹ*/*Òkìkí ọ̀bọ̀n Òyìngbò* (Robot, the son of *Ọmamùlé/*The one to whom every title fits/The famous man at *Òyìngbò* market). This exemplifies an invocation that deploys naming as an aesthetic tool of identity configuration. Through this strategy, the deceased is situated within a reputable lineage and this affirms that death does not efface personal or communal identity. This aesthetic logic is further reinforced through the use of simile and urban imagery in which the popularity and social status of the deceased are likened to *Òyìngbò* market, a major commercial centre in Lagos State, Nigeria.

The storm motif further foregrounds the paradox of human existence as both powerful and transient. The deceased is portrayed as a formidable figure, a warrior whose strength mirrors the force of a storm. Nevertheless, he ultimately yields to the call of death. The image of a farm conveys the ideas of productivity, heritage and sustenance, while the lagoon suggests a liminal space between terrestrial and metaphysical realms. Collectively, these images encode death not as a terminal event but as a transition across a metaphysical threshold, a symbolic return to the

primordial source represented through the convergence of water and land. The closing line employs a euphemistic representation of death, depicted as an eagle carrying away the pullet. This is a metaphor for vulnerability and the preciousness of life.

The contrast between Ọmọ́gẹ̀ and Arówójolú ultimately demonstrates that thanato-poetics in Yorùbá musical performance is shaped by both shared cosmological assumptions and gendered aesthetic priorities. Whereas Ọmọ́gẹ̀ privileges the emotional and relational consequences of death through domestic and avian imagery, Arówójolú foregrounds its philosophical inevitability through proverbial discourse, heroic panegyric and public identity. Yet both performers converge in representing death not as annihilation but as transition into another mode of existence. Their differing aesthetic strategies therefore disclose complementary rather than competing dimensions of Yorùbá thanato-poetics, confirming that mourning in indigenous performance simultaneously preserves personal memory, communal identity and metaphysical continuity.

This stylistic blend of panegyrics and dirges helps in sustaining posthumous identity and cultural belongingness. It also helps in situating the deceased within a genealogy and reaffirming virtues such as courage, hard work, fame and authority. Death, though tragic, does not erase one's essence and legacy; instead, it demands a reassertion of the deceased's worth. Through several archetypes such as the storm, the market, the lagoon and the eagle, the deceased is mythicised. In this way, *oríkì,* as used in dirges, serves as a verbal epitaph aimed at immortalising the dead.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the deployment of dirge within indigenous *Yorùbá* music traditions is not incidental but carefully structured to articulate specific ideological and aesthetic logics of death. By mobilising the concept of thanato-poetics within a hermeneutic framework, the study has shown that dirge serves as an aesthetic system through which death is made culturally legible. In *Àsíkò* and *Bírípo* performances, dirge functions as a complex semiotic system through which mortality, transition and ancestral continuity are interpreted, aestheticised and rendered socially intelligible. Through the strategic use of metaphor, imagery and symbolic naming, death is configured not necessarily as an abrupt termination but as an inevitable passage within a cyclical ontology, thereby reinforcing a distinctly thanato-centric worldview. Crucially, these meanings emerge through text-in-performance, where, in Gadamerian terms, a fusion of horizons enables performers and audiences to co-constitute the significance of death.

The study further reveals that dirge operates as a critical discursive space in which gendered experiences of loss are negotiated, particularly through the heightened socio-emotional and ritual burdens placed on widows in pre-modern *Yorùbá* society. In this context, mourning emerges as both a personal articulation of grief and a culturally regulated performance shaped by patriarchal norms. This underscores the ideological imports of thanato-poetics deeply imbricated in structures of power and social expectations. Moreover, the integration of *oríkì* within dirge performance implies that death does not erase identity; rather, it demands its re-inscription within genealogy, collective memory and mythic consciousness. *Yorùbá* dirge affirms music as a mediatory channel through which the living sustain dialogic relations with the dead, preserving cultural continuity and reconfiguring existence as relational, cyclical and

enduring rather than terminal. In this regard, dirge emerges as a philosophical mode of cultural reflection. It entails a poetic reconfiguration of death from an endpoint into an ongoing process of meaning-making. By foregrounding death as an aesthetic and ideological principle, this study contributes to African musicology and performance studies by advancing thanato-poetics as a critical framework for understanding the place of death in *Yorùbá* belief systems.

References

Adeigbe, A. I. (2022). Meaning-making in lamentation: A cultural appreciation of death in *Ìgbálá*, an *Ẹ̀gbá* funeral lore. *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies*, 13(1), 104-117.

Aina, A. A. (2011). An integrative notion of punishment in traditional *Yorùbá* culture (Doctoral thesis, University of Ibadan).

Ajimisan, S. O. (2016). Features and functions of *Bírípo* among the *Ìlàjẹ* of Ondo State, Nigeria (MA dissertation). University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

_____. (2023). Minstrelsy, apprenticeship, origin and features of *Bírípo*, the *Ìlàjẹ* folk-poetry. *Randwick International of Social Sciences (RISS) Journal*, 4(2), 268-279.

Ajuwon, B. (1980). The preservation of *Yorùbá* tradition through hunters' funeral dirges. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 50(1), 66-72.

_____. (1981). Lament for the dead as a universal folk tradition. *Fabula: Journal of Folktale Studies*, 22(3), 272-280.

Akande, D. I. (2017). On the content and form of *Ìwúde* songs in *Òkè-Igbó*. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 7(1), 192-199.

Akporobaro, F. B. O. (2012). *Introduction to African oral literature*. Princeton Publishing Company.

Akrobettoe, R. T. (2025). The aesthetics of the Dangme dirge. *Contemporary Journal of African Studies, 12*(1), 60-102.

Blumenthal-Barby, M. (2013). *Inconceivable effects: Ethics through twentieth-century German literature, thought, and film*. Cornell University Press.

Emoruwa, F. D. (2005). *Form and meaning in Bírípo dance of the Ìlàjẹ in Ondo State*. University of Ilorin Press.

Enikuemehin, J.O. (2013). Folksongs and social consciousness among the *Ìlàjẹ* people of coastal *Yorùbá* land. Unpublished Long Essay, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State.

Finnegan, R. (2012). *Oral poetry: Its nature, significance and social context (2nd ed.)*. Indiana University Press.

Gadamer, H. (1975). *Truth and method.* Sheed and Ward.

Idowu, E. B. (1971). *African traditional religion: A definition*. SCM Press.

Ikpeme, N. J. (2020). Widowhood rites and social stigma: Examining the process of re-integration and attitude of community members. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews*, 10(3), 274-296.

Mirzagalievna, A. S. (2024). *Thanatopoetics in D. Tartt's novel The Goldfinch*. Journal NX: A Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal, 10(3), 61-64.

Nketia, J. H. K. (1955). *Funeral dirges of the Akan people*. Achimota.

Ogede, O. S. (1995). Context, form and poetic expression in *Igede* funeral dirges. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 65(1), 79-96.

Ogene, M. S. (2010). *Literary appreciation: Theory and practice with creative writing and textual criticism*. Ndix Educational Publications.

Ogungbemi, S. (1997). A *critique of African cultural beliefs*. Pumark Nigeria Ltd.

Okpewho, I. (1992). *African oral literature.* Indiana University Press.

Omosule, S. (2009/2010). *Ijegen*: The ritual drama of transition at *Ode-Irele*. *Ibadan Journal of English Studies*, 6, 86-107.

_____. (2011). African cultural performances as indigenous hermeneutics. *MAJAC: Makurdi Journal of Arts and Culture*, 9(1), 65-78.

_____. (2019). Aesthetics in *Bírípo* indigenous musical performance. *Scene*, 7(1), 55-67.

Osundare, N. (2012). Getting the falcon to hear the falconer: The eternal value of *Things Fall Apart*. In C. Anyadike & K. Ayoola (Eds.), *Blazing the path: Fifty years of Things Fall Apart* (pp. 298–310). HEBN.