

Formulaic Creativity and Oral Versification in Tiv Dirges

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Abstract

The oral formula is a creative or innovative possibility and prospect for oral versification in contemporary society. Using three dirges of Tiv traditional singers, the theory of oral formulaic composition is re-lived with the attempt to re-prove its applicability. This work explores the ontological possibilities of rethinking the oral-formulaic theory in the process of oral verse-making and exhumes diverse shades of inspiration for contemporary consideration to orature. The study reveals that Tiv dirges consist of metrical words and/or lines by means of formulas and formulaic thematic expressions. The aim is to verify the secret behind the nature and process of verbal composition and performance and to articulate the reason Tiv dirges possess the kind of characteristics they have. The dirges belong to a tradition of oral verse-making, created through a traditional style of learning, memorizing, composing, performing, and audience participation. The formula is not a strictly spontaneous approach which stifles the poet's poetic grammar into a static, almost impersonal, technical language. Rather, within the inherited formulaic, imagistic and ancestral traditions, the Tiv singer can develop a unique brand of poetic grammar with which to express their personality and aesthetic views, the same way a language speaker can have their own idiolect. The formulaic study is, therefore, an important tool for investigating Tiv vernacular poetry, both from the viewpoint of its aesthetic qualities and the degree of its yielded-ness to the oral traditional and/or formulaic style.

Keywords: Oral verse-making, Oral formula, Dirges, Tiv

1. Introduction

Formulaic creativity is a veritable infrastructure for the versification of Tiv oral poetics, particularly dirges. It is conceptualized as the traditional technology which is deployed to create Tiv dirges through a skillful, metrical, repetitive or contemplative design that enables for the learning, memorizing, composing, improvisation, performing and audience participation of songs without a written script; while the process of creating such traditional artistic products as outlined above is what this study refers to as oral versification.

Although studies abound on Tiv songs from various critical perspectives, the formulaic critique of Tiv dirges has not been extensively explored. In fact, no studies, to the researcher's knowledge, have investigated how the Tiv singer creates their verse in the formulaic approach that this paper adopts. In addition, this study is unique in its concentration on singers whose songs have never enjoyed the privilege of any form of scholarship. The study thus opens creative and analytical vents for orature as it makes up for such a gap by enabling understanding about verse-making in Tiv poetics and aiding pedagogical access into the nature and/or character of Tiv dirges.

In oral literary criticism, several theories have been adopted for the appraisal of the various manifestations of orature; however, none of these oral literary tools is all-sufficient. Each has its strengths and weaknesses in relation to the appreciation of verbal artistic products. Despite the unique import of the oral-formulaic theory to understanding the nature, composition and study of oral poetry, it has not been well utilized in the critical circle of oral literature.

In recent decades therefore, the number of scholarly publications on literary works that are centred on formulaic appraisals have sharply decreased. More so, the interest and passion with which the principles of oral-formulaic theory were discussed in the 1960s has given way to outright lethargy and a conservative conciliatory attitude. Nonetheless, the relevance of the oral-formulaic theory did not end in the comparative judgment of the classical epic and Yugoslavic poetic traditions; as such, its tenets can also be applied to the criticism of any form of orally composed poetry or verbalized art, anytime, anywhere (Ferioli, 2010).

Many people feel that this approach to orature is in crisis while others issue verdicts implicating formulaic analysis to have long ago reached a dead end (see Finkelberg, 2012, p. 244). However, the current study seeks to concentrate on the unique strengths of the theory of oral formulaic composition (Lord, 1968; Parry, 1971) so as to promote its role to the study of orally composed arts in general, and specifically, to examine the process which enables Tiv traditional singers to improvise poetry in a manner that stamps such unique oral literary characteristics to it.

2. Method of Data Collection

The three dirges under study were audio-recorded with an android phone, transcribed and translated by the researcher. Targule's song was first performed in 1994 and was also performed in November, 2017 for the researcher during a field trip in Tse-Agberagba, Mbakyondo in Gwer-West Local Government Area of Benue State. Aondoakaa's dirge was

first performed in 1996 and was sung for documentation in February, 2023, in Tse-Adura Adyagh, Gyaluwa in Gwer-West Local Government Area of Benue State. Mba-Anayoo's song is a dirge in the Ihyarev and/or Tyoshin division of Tivland and was performed for recording by Ukule Rhoda during a funeral wake in February, 2023, on Agbaana Street, North Bank in Makurdi, Benue State. All the documented songs are included in the Appendix, and form part of a collection which the researcher intends to make available online in the future.

3. The Oral-Formulaic Theory: Prospects, Strengths and Limitations

The theory of oral formulaic composition originated in the scholarly study of epic poetry developed in the second quarter of the twentieth century. The oral-formulaic theory, which does not refer to the oral composition of a given work, but rather to its employment of formulas that are the inheritance of an oral culture (Acker, 1998), was originally formed by Milman Parry and his student, Albert Lord in the 1920s to the 1960s. Thus, the theory is alternately referred to in this study as the Parry and Lord theory. It seeks to explain two related issues, namely: the process which enables oral poets to improvise poetry; and why orally improvised poetry possess the characteristics it does have.

The key idea of the theory is that poets have a store of formulas (a formula being “a word or group of words regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (Parry, 1971, p. 80) or as “the phrases and clauses and sentences” of the poet's specialized poetic grammar which he learns by “hearing them in other singers' songs”. The process of memorizing is thus unconscious, and “follows the same principles as the learning of language itself” (Lord, 1968, p. 36). In Parry's view, formulas were not individual and idiosyncratic devices of particular artists, but the shared inheritance of a tradition of singers. They were easily remembered, making it possible for the singer to execute an improvisational composition during a performance; and that, by linking these in conventionalized ways, they rapidly compose verse.

The hypothesis of oral formulaic composition created a paradigm shift to oral literary thinking and has opened up a new pathway for several possibilities such as dissolving the age-long debate over Homer's identity and the authorship of “Illiad” and “Odyssey”, including other traditional poetries all over the world, by highlighting their traditional backgrounds, thereby tracing their roots to traditional oral poetry (Ferioli, 2010).

In addition, through the formulaic theory, the concept of originality and authorship was to be fully redefined; that is, the reactionary criticisms of the Parry and Lord's theory brought about a newly established conclusion regarding the impossibility of originality in oral

literature without authorship as opposed to Barthes (1981), who views a narrative structure as reflective of just the linguistic structure, or Bello-Kano (2002) who also negates the place of the author in the composition and judgement of a literary work. More so, people's understanding of the ways in which pre-literate societies accumulated and transmitted knowledge was to be enhanced through the advent of this theory. The major development of the approach was carried out in Foley (1991).

Furthermore, formulaic study proves itself an important tool for investigating the traditional vernacular poetry in that it was what gave rise to inventions such as Lord's formula of density and Miletich's (1978) repetition theory. According to Lord (1968), formula density is a necessary criterion, a fundamental characteristic of orality, without which no testing would be complete or ultimately valid. Formula density thus, is the degree of formulas employed in a work which proves its orality as opposed to another with lesser or without formulas. Miletich (1978) also proposed the theory of repetition as a formulaic approach to the study of oral literature which is also based on the inspiration derived from the Parry and Lord's oral-formulaic studies. He categorizes repetitions into: elaborate and essential style and sub-categorizes them into six different types of repetitive sequences (see Miletich, 1978, p. 112). The contributions of formula density and repetition theory are, therefore, offshoots of the oral-formulaic theory.

The oral-formulaic theory of Parry and Lord is a theoretical system that has revolutionized the way to approach many different kinds of traditional literatures. Nonetheless, it has been widely criticized and came to be adopted as a source of methodological material, rather than the method itself. The Parry and Lord's oral-formulaic theory which seemed relevant in the early stages turned out to be ill-suited or improper later on. Parry and Lord's approach introduces the notion of formulaic system as a modification of the functionality of the formula; however, this also was criticized in its limited application.

The discourse in the above subsection is an attempt at carrying out briefly, a glossary exposition of the Parry and Lord's theory of oral formulaic composition, its major tenets, the direction it has led the study of oral literature, and the major criticisms it has attracted. The next section proves the applicability of the oral-formulaic theory, using three Tiv traditional oral dirges namely, Targule Julius Atyev's "Or ngu tsorun ze ooo", Mba-Anayoo's "That Place You Slept is Wide", and Aondoakaa Hyacinth Gbadi's "I've Come to See" as respective study references for appraisal.

4. The Oral-Formulaic Approach to Tiv Dirges

As a sub-category in the classification of Tiv songs, dirges are poetic verbal compositions crafted by initiated and talented composers and/or singers of tales. They are built up with metrical lines and half-lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions, and the use of rhythms and themes. Acker (1998, p. xiii) captures this perspective when he retorts that “a knowledge of formulas was what enabled the oral epic poet to improvise on traditional themes.” Tiv dirges are orally versified constructs because they are poems belonging to a tradition of oral verse-making. Dirges are stylistically fashioned creations that dwell on varying subjects of life and the after-life. It is with such understanding that an examination of the formulaic nature of three funeral songs is conducted below.

The formulaic style which originated from oral traditional singing of narrative verse (Benson, 1966, pp. 334-341) is a style of learning, memorizing, composing and performing traditional oral poems. It is as old as the traditional art of verbal creativity and performance itself; and it is not a skill belonging to any particular race or peoples but an inherited tradition of pre-literate societies. One vital way therefore, of detecting an oral traditional poem is in the degree to which it makes use of the formulaic style; that is, its formula density.

Generally speaking, all the dirges in the collection under study are littered with recurrent words and phrases; sometimes almost whole lines in a fashion that makes it transcend mere repetition. Such recurrent words and phrases are usually employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.

The three dirges under study to be specific, constitute a logical buildup of ideas from the beginning to the end of the poems through a regular metrical pattern of recurring words and phrases. Sun (2011, p. 93) rightly contends that “repetition is at the heart of all that defines the lyric as a unique art.” Under close scrutiny therefore, one will evidently notice that the building blocks for such poems are those repeated expressions; and those recurrent metrical expressions by extension are what is referred to as formulas. The formulas contained in Tiv dirges therefore, are the aiding or enabling process for the poets to improvise poetry.

In the first dirge under study, “Or ngu tsorun ze ooo”, for instance, the poet, Targule, uses the oral formula to fabricate a universal theme of the temporary nature of time-based life and projects death as the end to this other side of eternity. In a very simple but logical and chronological style, Targule is able to expose the theme of fleshly mortality; and he achieves this with the major aiding tools of the oral formula. Stanza one, which is made up of four lines, has five words on each line as seen below:

Transcription

Or ngu tsorun ze ooo

Mba-Kyeyenge ngom an ooo

Or ngu tsorun ze ooo

Mba-Tagbi ngom an ooo

Translation

No flesh shall immortally live

Oh! Mba-Kyeyenge my mother

No flesh shall immortally live

Oh! Mba-Tagbi my mother (Lines 1-4)

From the above sense group, it is obvious that the entire stanza is built around an essential idea; but this build up, as observed, is not just a repetition for aesthetic or emphasis purposes. The nature of the expression is formulaic because it goes beyond mere repetition. “No flesh shall immortally live” (Line 1) is thus repeated on line one and three of stanza one with the respective invocation of “Mba-Kyeyenge” and “Mba-Tagbi” (the first and second maternal ancestry of the poem persona) on lines two and four of the same stanza, not as arbitrary repetitions but as nuggets within the poets store house of formulas which is a veritable aid in composing, memorizing and performing his poem.

This is significantly formulaic because the poet exploits traditional, universal, ancestral and personal resources which are familiar to him and weaves them around some related essential ideas of death and its inevitability as well as the passage of time to create an artistic edifice. The skill displayed above reveals a unique tradition of spontaneity as a fabricating mesh for song composition. It looks as though the entire poem is a journey that is realized through a block-by-block, logical build up; or a step-by-step advancement into the world of the poem’s ideals. And this “climactic” ladder of spontaneity exploited in the composition and performance of the poem is laid upon a bedrock of formulas.

This characteristic of fluidity as noticed in the poem under study goes ahead to confirm the fact that, the song, in the nature of oral art forms is only actualized through the life-wire called performance. It is pertinent to note therefore that some of the elements of performance such as, emotional tone, pitch changes, dramatic gestures, facial expression, vocal expressiveness, rhythm, melody, pause-effect, to mention just eight, are incorporated with the formulaic creativity to give the song life and to keep it fresh.

Since the mind is the engine room for composition and the memory is the warehouse of poetic materials, it can be proposed that these formulas of recurrent words or phrases are skilful vents of memory aid in order to grease memorization and delivery of poetry during performance.

The second stanza of the poem, “Or ngu tsorun ze ooo”, yields to the same formulaic tendency. The first and third lines are made up of eight words each, while the second and fourth lines are made up of six words sequentially as seen below:

Transcription

Ku yo ka ikyuren i tar je la

Ka we kpe u mem ooo

Ku yo ka ikyuren i tar je la

Ka we yem u mem ooo

Translation

For death is the end of the world

O! When you die you rest

For death is the end of the world

O! When you die you rest (Lines 5-7)

As revealed above, Lines 1 and 3 as well as Lines 2 and 4 of stanza two are not just mere sentence repetitions. The nature of the above expressions qualifies them to be easily identified as formulas because such recurrent metrical usages take place at cardinal stems of the poem from which other subsequent ideas bud. And such recurrent group of words are contemplative junctures that help the poet to navigate his map of verse-making. They are pause effects and breathing vents for creativity and not in the strict sense of emphatic or anaphoric beautification as in the case of written poetry. O'Neill (2006, p. 159) affirms this when she states that, "Lord also stresses the importance of establishing a clearer differentiation between what constitutes a formula and what constitutes repetition."

It is worthy of mention that although repetitions occur on lines 5-7 above, such rhythmic alternating pulses are not necessarily to create a repetitive effect; but are formulaic contemplations skillfully advancing the thematic thrust of the song to a logical crescendo. This is what gives such outlook to the poem and makes subsequent lines to be rendered as in the two stanzas below:

Transcription

Tso or kaan a a ku er

De sar kper ze ooo

Or orun a a ku er

De sar tugh ze ooo

Translation

Thus, no one says to death

Wait till tomorrow

For no one tells death

To wait till nightfall (Lines 8-11)

The second traditional oral poem under study, titled, "Ape u yav la iyan la gbangegh", is a dirge by the Anayoo women in Tyoshin, West of the Gwer River in Benue State. The Anayoo, mostly consisting of elderly women, are group of professional mourners who perform lament songs at funerals. The poem "Ape u yav la iyan la gbangegh" is a dramatic monologue which is addressed to the dead – Mba-Hiato, admonishing him that, although place he slept (that is, the grave) is spacious, it is a place belonging to the dead and not to the living. As such, it is an eternal space where abundance dwells, as opposed to the scarcity characterized by this other side of time-based reality. Death therefore, should not be dreaded but the dead and relations of the deceased should be consoled with the awareness that the place of sleep in death is not a place of scarcity. The grave is an abode where perpetual rest

and eternal resources abound; therefore, Mba-Hiato's new destination is not a pitiable but an enviable place.

The subject matter of the poem hovers around the riches or wealth of the grave. Despite the insatiable appetite of the grave and the painful nature of the death of a loved one, the poem cushions these with a consolation of the sufficiency that death opens its victims to. Apart from the desert land, the barren womb, and the fire that are always never satisfied, the grave is one among those entities that never says it is enough. Virtually every minute of the day, people of varying capacities and immense potentials die in the world; yet, the grave has never declared that it is enough or complained that there is no more space to swallow additional people. The grave is therefore, the most robust warehouse in custody of the greatest destinies, minds and people of all classes, statuses as well as backgrounds. To this end, the poem uses dramatic monologue to announce to Mba-Hiato – the dead man – that, the place where he sleeps is very spacious. It is a place of abundance that is void of discomfort, sufferings and/or pains, therefore, Mba-Hiato should rest in peace and the relatives of the deceased should be comforted with the understanding that their loved one is in a better place.

Furthermore, the poem under study, in the nature of traditional poetry, is built upon rhythmic repetitive chords of formulas. The entire poem for instance, is made up of only two actual lines that are modified and repeated all through the poem (See Appendix). For instance, it is the following lines: "Nothing is scarce there" and "That place you slept, the space is wide" (Lines 1 and 5) that constitute the main stringing chords with which the entire poem, comprising both chant and response is constructed. The above two lines thus become the formulaic code and/or the mnemonic device with which the entire poem is improvised and performed by the performers and audience. For example:

Transcription

Kwagh ban her ga eee

Kwagh kpa ban her ga eee

Kwagh ben her ga aaa

Translation

Nothing is scarce there

Nothing at all is scarce there

Nothing is scarce there (Lines 1-3)

The repeated lines in the sense group above exhibit the exploitation of mnemonic techniques of cueing and scanning by the poets to aid them in the composition process – like attaching a cue to every line for ease of memory. The formulaic sense group highlighted above serves as the poets' master code, a mnemonic code for learning, memorizing, composing and performing the poem. The nature of the above expressions qualifies them to be easily identified as formulas due to their recurrent metrical usages. And such recurrent groups of words are primal building blocks for the poets – Mba-Anayoo – the in their verse-making.

This repetitive technique, as it is known, is not arbitrary; it is the ingredient with which the poets concoct or improvise their songs. Repetition thus is a salient stamp on traditional poetry – and this repetition is not just mere repetition; it is a formulaic device – like a cueing and scanning technique for composition, memory, improvisation, performance and audience participation. Formulas are of course, recurring words and groups of words but for purposes entirely different from the recurrent phrases in repetitions. Formulas therefore, unlike repetitions are not just phrases repeated to call attention to a previous occurrence for an aesthetic, semantic or contextual reference or even for emphasis. In fact, formulas do not point to other uses of themselves; they do not recall other occurrences. According to Lord (1968), in respect to repetition, oral poetics is different from written poetics precisely because in it, one is dealing with formula, not ‘repetitions’.

It is safe to opine, therefore, that formulas are extended or advanced repetitions. The nature of the repeated expressions in formulaic compositions are distinctly recognizable, not just in the repetition, but much more, in its merit as resource materials for the poet in verse-making as evident in the stanza below:

Transcription	Translation
Or Mba-Hiato an ooo	Oh, man of Mba-Hiato stock
Ape u yav la iyan la gbangegh	That place you slept, the space is wide
Kwagh ban her ga	Nothing is scarce there
Wan Mba-Hiato	Oh son of Mba-Hiato
Ape u yav la iyan la gbangegh	That place you slept, the space is wide
Kwagh ban her ga	Nothing is scarce there
A nyor le eee	Oh, he has descended (Lines 4-9)

The next dirge, “M va me nenge”, is an elegiac song by Aondoakaa, which is also knitted and knotted with loads of formulas. From the first to the fourth stanza, the carefully built poem logically develops a pathetic atmosphere which matures into an emotional climax through the resource of formulas.

The poem which is centred on the pains and vacuum created by maternal demise formulaically and systematically carries out this aim through a metrically recurrent three-line-stanza. The first two stanzas revolve around some repeated phrases using formulas to lay an emotional foundation and/or atmosphere for the poem:

Transcription	Translation
M va me nenge	I’ve come to see

Ikyom i wan Ioryer	The corpse of loryer's daughter	} X2
Kwagh kpiligh mo iyol juu	I'm so astonished	
Mva me nenge	I've come to see	
Ikyom i mama wan	The corpse of mama, daughter	
Ioryer u Tishar	Of Ioryer, Tishar's wife (Lines 1-6)	

As identified from the first lines of stanzas one and two, the same groups of words recur on both lines. Note that, these opening lines to the first and second stanzas serve as the framework upon which the ideas in the respective and even subsequent stanzas are built.

“M va me nenge” as used in Stanza 1, and repeated in Stanza 2, is thus a reference point for the poet's memory. Since traditional oral poetry is creatively composed and performed on the strength of the poet's memory through traditional themes, these formulas help to usher the performer into the world of the poem's themes and also serve as a map to guide and/or keep it on track. The formula therefore does not only help the poet in learning, memorizing and composing his poem; it also aids him during the performance as well, by enabling him manipulate his theme to suit his unique audience.

Furthermore, the formulas employed in the poem help subsequent talented singers of tales in the singing and re-singing of the traditional songs. The flexibility of traditional oral literary product as opposed to the written one comes about in the exploration of formulas. When formulas are used therefore, it is not only easy for the creator to play around words; it makes it easier for subsequent singers to add or drop words to suit their aim or the occasion of the performance.

The line “I've come to see” (Line 1) therefore, instead of the original rendition, can be followed with other groups of words or lines as follows: “I've come to see//The corpse of Yeke's daughter” or on another occasion, either the poet or other singers, performing the same song for another person's funeral may render it thus: “I've come to see//The body of Ter-Nagi”. And the second stanza in this case will go thus: “I've come to see//The corpse of mama, daughter//Of Yeke Terkaa's wife”. If the dead is a man, the rendition may go as follows: “I've come to see//The corpse of baba, son//Of Agber Terkaa's child”.

The formula in oral-formulaic discourse therefore, serves as the skeleton upon which the traditional oral composition is fleshed. The major task of the singer(s) during performance is to employ the formula and upon that framework, a basis for improvisation is created; that is, formula is a foundation stone upon which the song and theme can be built, modified or manipulated rhythmically during a performance.

In addition, formulas are not only to aid the poet's memory and to help him/her manipulate themes; they are also not only meant to enhance ease in the singing and re-singing of a poem by other performers in subsequent occasions: formulas are in addition, veritable tools for enhancing performer-audience relationship.

Unlike the close-ended nature of the written text in its disconnection between the reader and the author during the reading process, traditional oral poetry is usually produced and consumed in a participatory nature, from oral to auditory sources (mouth to ear). As such, during the performance of traditional songs, the audience, with rapt attention, quickly learns the song during the first few rounds of recitation – after which it becomes a call and response relationship between the performer and his audience. It is noteworthy that what makes the audience quickly learn the song and join in its performance is due to the presence of formulas. More so, the audience, after familiarizing themselves with the formulas of the song, have the right to manipulate, modify and/or modulate it by spicing up aspects of it with several other words or phrases that revolve around the poem's theme as demonstrated above.

Aondoakaa's song under consideration, "M va me nenge", therefore, possesses several ventilating spaces of formulas to ignite the fire of participation in the forge of the performance process. For instance:

Transcription	Translation
Wan mbayev yem di vaan ooo	Oh, children have gone crying
M va me nenge	I've come to see
Ikyom i wan	The corpse of daughter
Ioryer u Tishar	Of Ioryer, Tishar's wife (Lines 7-10)

In the above sense group, the first line, "Oh, children have gone crying" (Line 7) is a formulaic, rhythmic, if you like, pun-like code, employed in that aesthetic construction. More so, the word "children" holds the master code of formulaic creativity and a passage that helps in the transition to other stanzas. Through pausative, contemplative, rhythmic progression, the word "children" is not only used to encode the ideal of lamentation but to also create an atmosphere of mourning. This is exemplified in the following lines:

Transcription	Translation
A yem a undu	She has gone and left
Se vea ambayev ve	Us with the children
Anbayev yem di vaan ooo	Children have gone crying
Ambayev mama ngom ooo	Children, Oh! mama my mother (Lines 11-14)

The above formulaic repetitions in Aondoakaa's song are bridges that resonate rhythm, synergy, life, vigour, energy and passion into the performance. This formulaic code, "children", is employed to create the requisite atmosphere as dictated by the thematic thrust of the song and to link the audience to its next aspects as will be facilitated by the performer, who at that point, basks in the euphoria of the intoxicating muse of improvisation as it flows into the next stanza:

Transcription

Sagh nyagba uya sha

Aondo Ter hembra fan ooo

Kumbur di mbayev

Translation

Lose your mourning loincloth

God knows best

Console the children (Lines 15-17)

It is imperative to note that the formulaic line, "I've Come to See" and the code, "children", as used at different points in the poem, serve as safe landings and 'knots' on the 'rope' of ideas in the reservoir of the performance. Formulas are peg-like depressions cut onto the 'stick' of the traditional songs at various junctures of memory. They are like twigs or stepping stones on the bundle of idea (the oral poem), in the warehouse of the poets' memory. It will not be out of place therefore, to judge that the entire poem, "I've Come to See", by Aondoakaa, is formulaic. This is because the formulaic lines and/or codes that the poem is replete with, are breathing spaces and stepping stones in the furnace of composition and the ladder of memory. They enable the poet to ascend unto the realm of inspiration through language and performance, to draw out an aesthetic edifice for the entertainment, appreciation, and sublimation of their audience.

Although all the poems appraised in this study are short in their original compositions as captured in the appendix, however, during performances, the performers and audiences could sing and re-sing such traditional songs all night. This is because, through poetic grammar and mnemonic techniques of learning and performing, the singers/poets could always shape a song while singing through an extensive use of formulas, rhythm and themes.

Themes refer to the group of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song (Lord, 1968, p. 63). This feature is evidently incorporated in the formulaic creation of Tiv dirges. As seen in the three dirges under study, there is a recurring invocation of traditional materials and universal ideas in a formulaic pattern that aids the composition of the songs. All the three dirges under study thus, hover around the universal idea of fleshly mortality, the inevitability of death, sorrow/emotional deflation over the loss of a loved one, the passage of time and/or the temporary nature or brevity of earthly life as well as the riches and wealth of the grave. The three traditional mourning songs under

criticism also feature a consistent conjuration of local materials and/or powerful imagery in the formulaic system of traditional singing and re-singing.

To this end, one can surmise that Tiv dirges are ornamented by rhythm (all the above songs under study for instance, could be performed with the melodious accompaniment of instruments and they follow an organized or systematic metrical pattern of versification). Tiv traditional poetry also makes use of formulas and themes as explored copiously in the appraisal of the three dirges under study. Chiefly, the paper has proved that formulas aid the poet in composing, memorizing, performing and even in audience participation of traditional songs; and it also enables subsequent talented singers of tales to learn and re-sing the songs.

5. Conclusion

In all, the oral-formulaic theory as a tool for investigating the study of orally composed materials is effective in achieving this aim in its own right, especially in verifying the secret behind the nature and process of verbal composition and performance; and of understanding the reason why verbal arts possess the kind of characteristics they have. It is also a commendable approach for differentiating between orally composed and written literature through the use of formula density; however, when the theory is taken out of context or over generalized, it becomes a misfit.

As a theory of oral composition, therefore, the oral-formulaic approach has tremendously revolutionized the study of traditional oral products and has opened new vistas for several other experiments and inventions, though, not without limitations and constructive criticisms. An aspect of the limitation of this approach therefore, is its tendency of bottling the analysis of verbal arts into a straight-jacketed formulaic bent; and its overtly structural outlook to oral literary discourse.

In the formulaic study of Tiv poetic tradition as conducted above, the formula is not engaged as a blanket approach which defines the poet's poetic grammar as an almost totally impersonal and static technical language. The art of traditional singing in Tiv land is by initiation, after which the initiate, even while operating within the tradition he or she inherited, can have their own brand of poetic grammar, just as ordinary speakers of the same language also have the right to their own peculiar speech habits. The study, therefore, promotes the Tiv oral poet as an independent individual who has the liberty to express their personality and aesthetic views through their art.

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Appendix: Three Tiv Dirges

1. “Or Ngu Tsorun Ga” (Imo i Targule J. Atyev)

Or ngu tsorun ze ooo

Mba-Kyeyenge ngom an ooo

Or ngu tsorun ze ooo

Mba-Tagbi ngom an ooo

Ku yo ka ikyuren i tar je la

Ka we kpe u mem ooo

Ku yo ka ikyuren i tar je la

Ka we yem u mem ooo

Tso or kaan a a ku er

De sar kper ze ooo

Or orun a a ku er

De sar tugh ze ooo

Translation of “Or Ngu Tsorun Ga” (By Targule J. Atyev)

“No Flesh Shall Immortally Live”

No flesh shall immortally live

Oh, Mba-Kyeyenge my mother

No flesh shall immortally live

Oh, Mba-Tagbi my mother

For death is the end of the world

Oh, when you die you rest

For death is the end of the world

Oh, when you die you rest

Thus, no one says to death

Wait till tomorrow

For no one tells death

To wait till nightfall

2. “Ape U Yav La Gbangegh” (Imo i Mba-Anayoo)

Kwagh ban her ga eee

Kwagh kpa ban her ga eee

Kwagh ban her ga aaa

Or Mba-Hiato an ooo
Ape u yav la iyan la gbangegh
Kwagh ban her ga
Wan Mba-Hiato
Ape u yav la iyan la gbangegh
Kwagh ban her ga
A nyor le eee

**Translation of “Ape U Yav La Gbangegh” By Mba-Anayoo
“That Place You Slept in is Wide”**

Nothing is scarce there
Nothing at all is scarce there
Nothing is scarce there

Oh, man of Mba-Hiato stock
That place you slept in, the space is wide
Nothing is scarce there
Oh, son of Mba-Hiato
That place you slept in, the space is wide
Nothing is scarce there
Oh, he has descended

3. “M Va me Nenge” (Imo i Aondoakaa H. Gbadi)

M va me nenge
Ikyom i wan Ioryer } X2
Kwagh kpiligh mo iyol juu

M va me nenge
Ikyom i mama wan
Ioryer u Tishar

Wan mbayev yem di vaan ooo
M va me nenge
Ikyom i wan
Ioryer u Tishar
A yem a undu
Se vea ambayev

Ambayev yem di vaan ooo
Ambayev mama ngom ooo

Sagh nyagba uya sha
Aondo Ter hemba fan ooo
Kumbur di mbayev

Translation of “M Va me Nenge” By Aondakaa H. Gbadi

“I’ve Come to See”

I’ve come to see
The corpse of Ioryer’s daughter } X2
I’m so astonished

I’ve come to see
The corpse of mama, daughter
Of Ioryer Tishar’s wife

Oh, children have gone crying
I’ve come to see
The corpse of daughter
Of Ioryer, Tishar’s wife
She has gone and left
Us with the children

Children have gone crying
Children, Oh, mama my mother

Lose your mourning loincloth
God knows best
Console the children