

## **SONGS/ORAL POETRY**

In African societies almost all communal activities are accompanied by song and dance. In most societies there are songs for every stage and occasion of a person's life, from the cradle to the grave.

There are songs at birth, naming ceremonies, songs, and lullabies, singing games, songs in stories, initiation songs, marriage songs, work songs, war songs, praise songs, worship or divination songs, and lastly funeral songs.

As opposed to narratives, which are prose, song and recitation are verse. They demand that the composer should arrange his words in such a way that they should sound perfect especially in terms of rhythm and melody. These together with the meaning of the words enable the poet or the singer to express his feelings with the strongest impact possible. We distinguish between recitation and song mainly on the basis of musical complexity. Normally, musical features will be more pronounced in song than in recitation.

A song is a short poem or other set of words set to music or meant to be sung. A narrator may use songs to convey different aspects.

### **Songs are majorly used to;**

- a. Create suspense.
- b. Connect episodes/ plot development.
- c. Predict what is to happen/foreshadow events.
- d. Break tension within the audience.
- e. Express the feelings of the narrator/character.

### **Classification of Songs**

The classification used in this hand book is based on the functions served by songs in question.

#### **1. Religious Songs**

These are songs and poems performed during religious occasion or for spiritual purposes (prayer, incantations, and invocations.)

**Write one verse of a religious song you know.**

#### **2. Dirges/Elegiac Songs**

These are songs sung during funeral ceremonies. In most African communities death was a phenomenon taken very seriously based on its implications when it occurs, the loss of a beloved and the sorrow that goes with it.

Death was variously conceived in communities e.g. death does not just occur but is caused by some evil person or spirit; others believe that death is not a final thing. Life is a continuous process and when someone dies he is simply transformed into the world of spirits.

They are sung during the actual burial and during remembrances, a memorial rite of the dead or other post-burial ceremonies. These songs are sung round the corpse or round the house in which the corpse is lying while awaiting burial. Dirges reveal the community's attitude towards death.

They also serve to mourn and console the bereaved, sing praises to the deceased and as a lamentation towards death for taking away loved ones.

The expression of the bereavement or grief of the living took the form of song, wailing, weeping etc.

The elegies are commonly sung by women. This is more so because these songs often involve wailing, sobbing and weeping. This makes them suitable for women. In some societies there are professional mourners although it is a very rare thing.

The kind of songs sung often varies from one community to another. The dirges may be seen to reflect upon the age and importance of the deceased person. In most cases however the dirges are an expression of the pain of separation, the sorrow caused by death, resignation and acceptance of the inevitable.

Acholi funeral dirge:

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

I wait on the pathway in vain

### **Write one verse of a dirge you know**

#### **3. War Songs**

There are songs performed by warriors during a war event. This could be sung as a preparation to war, in order to boost the morale of the warriors. They could also be sung after a battle as the warriors come back home victorious.

War songs were not confined to the battlefield. War songs could also be sung in the absence of war in order to reinforce the military might of a particular community. The songs are sometimes accompanied by drumming brandishing of spears, and by bodily movements signifying courage and defiance, which stir up war like feelings.

Not all war songs glorify war. Some do exhibit the dangers and cost of war. There are always casualties. The warrior leaves in the knowledge that he may not return but that he goes to do his duty courageously.

War songs also express the general values relating to war.

Example:

Fight now! Come and fight now  
Slay them! We'll brandish spears!  
Straight forth doth speed your arrow  
Tremble! Yes! They tremble!  
When we draw near,  
And far they'll flee as we approach them!  
Sharpen keen yo yo arrows!  
Brave heads upraised and shouting  
Loudly your defiance  
All they oppose us.  
Quickly our spears  
Shall pierce their breasts. They will be scattered

#### **4. Work Songs**

There are songs that accompany rhythmic work universally in Africa societies. This would include chores or monotonous labour such as paddling, threshing, grinding corn or pounding, weeding, mowing, launching a boat, sawing, hauling in fish nets, floor beating, digging or hauling and hunting. Work songs depend on the rhythm of the work rather than audience. Therefore, their use vary with societies.

In recent times work, songs have also been observed among road workers, miners and boulders for pulling trucks, road work, factory lands, miners etc.

These songs do lighten, coordinate and embellish agricultural labour and forms of work. Work songs stand out from others in their directly functional relationship with the activity they accompany. The joint singing co-ordinates the action and leads the workers to feel and work as part of a cooperating group, not as separate individuals. The rhyme of the song still encourages collaboration and control within the group, a pressure on all to take part equally within the given framework. The function of rhythmical music in encouraging people to work harder, faster and with more enjoyment.

Work songs can also comment on life in general on local events or on local characters and can express ideas of love, friendship or even obscenity.

The form and style of work songs typically accompany collective rhythmical movements of the leader and chorus. The soloist has more scope to develop or improvise his words, particularly when he is not expected to take part in the work directly but can concentrate on his singing.

The most striking aspects of work songs are the emphasis on rhythm and melody and not the words. The myth of the work provides the fixed framework within which the song must be developed.

#### **An Akamba work song**

Pounding song

At Kitilis there are herdsmen, both boys and girls,  
There are goats and lambs and cattle:  
Mwesya, do I not call you in my poverty?  
I have no family, I have no mother,  
I have no relatives to call upon.

Death, I will not give him food or water  
Seeing he has denied me my father and my family.  
E! Grinding!

Musyoka,  
I have no family, I have no mother,  
The mother of my sister Vika, Lonza and Linda;  
How forlorn I am! Did I call you?  
I do not share the sleeping mat with Lonza.  
How forlorn I am, I have nothing of my own!

(Source: Jack Mapanje and Landeg White. *Oral poetry from Africa*, Longman: New York, 1983.)

### **5. Lullabies**

These are songs sung principally to put the baby to sleep. They are sung in the soft tune that enhances their soporific effect. They employ simple language; one that children can easily identify with. Lullabies may also employ onomatopoeic words especially designed at ensuring rhythm. At times, nurses may sing lullabies expressing their attitude towards the mother of the children they have been left in charge of.

Example below;

Bunyoro lullaby

Ha! That mother who takes her food alone  
Ha! That mother before she has eaten  
Ha! That mother she says, "Lull the baby for me."  
Ha! That mother, when she has finished eating,  
Ha! That mother she says, "Give the child to me!"

### **6. Hunting Songs**

These are songs sung by hunters on their way to or from hunting after a successful kill. They could also be sung to express disappointment at having failed to catch any game. Praise and celebration is often reserved for the killing of game considered particularly to be dangerous. These may be animals such as elephant, lion, leopard or buffalo.

The hunter himself also sings boastfully of his exploits and retells his heroism in song designed for an audience. The dangers and hardships of hunting are also common subjects.

Hunting songs are also often sung at the funerals of skilled hunters. Hunting associations also sometimes have specialized festivals when, for example, they admit hunters to new ranks in the hierarchy.

Below is an example of a hunting song performed after a hippopotamus has been killed?

Chop it, chop it,  
Do take it and chop p it;  
Do take it and chop it yourself.  
Chipishya, bring the boat.  
Have you killed it hunter?  
Chishya bring the boat,  
Chipishya bring the boat,  
Have you killed it hunter?

### **7. Wedding/Marriage/Love Songs**

Though many wedding songs capture the joy associated with wedding ceremonies, many songs express sorrow at the thought of leaving the familiar home for an uncertain future. Other wedding songs sing praises to the bride, the groom and their parents.

Example

Wedding song (from *Isukha* of Western Kenya)

It is hard,  
Aloo,  
It's hard to leave your home  
To go to another.  
It's hard to call another  
Your mother.  
Father was educated, at Korotis  
And is a clerk  
I have seen the clerk.  
I have seen the clerk,  
Mama was educated at "Chipyesi" (GBS: Girls Boarding School)  
And is a nurse,

Mama wanted  
Nurse  
Weed the garden of fruits  
Weed mama's garden of fruits  
That they continue to yield.  
Aloo!  
Haa! Haa!

**Love songs** are sung and addressed to a beloved man or woman in the hope of marriage, frustrated love or in praise of a loved one. Besides expressions of feeling they also teach in morality and the expectations of the society in matter pertaining to marriage.

**Write down one verse of a love song you know**

### 8. Children's Play Songs

African children seem to have the familiar range of games and verse for their own play – nonsense songs, singing games, catch rhymes and so on. They also engage in riddle asking and in other games and dances.

#### a) Nonsense songs

They frequently take the form of a kind of follow-up or progressive rhyme, usually in dialogue. The sequences may be just for fun or may also include a definite competitive content making up of a kind of game. These songs pick on a particular petty thing or issue and sing about it and saying nothing in particular. They are used by children to bring out their childishness. In such songs children would sing about such things as frogs and cats.

The following song is sung by two groups of children (marked A and B respectively) in turns. The children join their hands to form the circle and swing their hands as they sing.

A: Watata WA tiriri our house is excellent

B: Watata WA tiriri it cannot be better than ours

A: Watata WA Tiriri what is yours made of?

B: Watata WA tiriri ours is made of stone

A Watata WA tiriri ours is made of timber

B: Watata WA tiriri give us one person

A: Watata WA tiriri who m do you like to have?

B: Watata WA tiriri we would like Kariuki

A: Watata WA tiriri Kariuki why don't you go?

At this point the boy named Kariuki moves from his group and joins the other group the other team begins the song again and by the end of the session the two groups would have exchanged many of their members.

#### b) Chain Songs - In chain songs every successive line is derived from the former.

#### c) A catch-rhymes/Tongue -twisting rhymes

They take the form of a game in which the point is to try to have one of the participants make an error. In this Yoruba catch rhyme, a participant may err by mentioning that an inanimate object has blood.

Lead	Chorus
Who has blood?	Blood, blood.
Has a goat blood?	Blood blood.
Has a sheep blood?	Blood blood.
Has a horse blood?	Blood blood.
Has a stone blood?	- -

A mistake results in laughter and sometimes-friendly beating.

Children also use a rhyme as parts of a hide-out-and seek game. The searcher faces the wall singing his nonsense song while the others hide. When he reaches the question part of the song the others must answer giving him a clue to their hiding-places.

#### d) Singing games

These are songs as part of the play activity. The singing is an integral part of the game. A common one is the song sung by small girls the jump around a rope.

#### e) Naughty songs

Each age has its secret naughty things that they want to do or say only in the context of their age-mates. For children they would taunt one another and occasional they may border on the absence. Sometimes nursery school children have naughty songs taunting their teacher though in a light note.

#### f) Trick – verse

This involves two groups engaged in a battle of wits using words in a song. Each group would represent an idea, object or specific group trying to prove to the other their supremacy. One group could represent cats while the other represents dogs and each would try to show the other how he is adored by men

g) Round songs

Several groups would be singing the same song but in a rotational form such that while the first is singing in the second line, the second starts the first line and so on. Its intention is to ensure that the members of each concentrate so that they are not outdone or overshadowed by the other.

h) Nursery chants

This is a modern category of songs sung in elementary schools to enhance the learning process.

### **9. Initiation/Circumcision Songs**

These are sung during circumcision or other rites of passage. These are sometimes narrowly perceived circumcision songs. They are sung when youngsters are being initiated into adults. Their function is to educate the initiate or such things are tribal history, immorality expectations in adulthood. Sometimes they can be used to encourage the initiates praise the fearless ones and ridicule cowardice.

Example

A Kipsigis initiation song

We tell you we are going,

We men don't mock us women.

We tell you circumcision is painful

But you can't die.

We tell you step on the grass

While it falls down.

So we tell you children

Those go for circumcision like Europeans

Who go to their wedding calmly prepared?

We tell you

Stay firm like a stone

We shall be happy after your circumcision

Even those who, are passing, even

Brothers.

We tell you

I say thanks until we meet.

See you father, see you mother and

Relative

Till we meet.

### **10. Panegyric/Praise Songs**

These are also referred to as mass praise songs. They are sung to praise on royal or aristocratic power, and an admiration for military achievement, a person, clan or a community. They lay stress on the significance of personal achievement.

Praise songs can therefore be seen as compositions and recitations which praised leaders and great men in society whose abilities, personal achievements and rare qualities are well known. Praises did not however go to men alone, even inanimate things like bicycles and the supernatural; the spirits and gods were praised.

These songs were important in the rites of passage, when an individual moves from one age group to another in society, the transition is celebrated. Self-praise by boys at initiation are an important aspect of their claim to adulthood. Weddings are also an obligatory occasion for praises for the bride and groom by friends and relations or by professional bands. Taking charge of office is another occasion for praise.

The significance of praise can be said to be the validation of status by the content of the praise and the number and quality of performers and by the public nature of the recitation. The validation is often acknowledged by gifts. They stress accepted social values or can act as a medium of public opinion. For instance, praisers can withhold praise or include implicit or explicit offensive allusions as a kind of negative conduct of the ruler's acts.

They also publicize new status or achievements, flattering their power or drawing attention to one's own achievements, preserving accepted versions of history serving as an encouragement to emulate or achievement and also providing an economically profitable activity for many of those who engage in it.

Most praise songs make use of imagery such as similes, metaphors, symbolism and hyperbole often employed with references to historical events. There is elaborate use of alliteration and assonance, parallelism, repetition, ideophones and interjections to convey emotions or add to the descriptive quality with vivid conciseness.

People may be compared to animals or a series of animals. His strength may be encouraged by referring to him as a lion, rhino, elephant etc. The actions and qualities of a hero may be conveyed in metaphorical terms. However may be compared to natural phenomena e.g. a storm, a rock etc.

**Write two stanzas of a praise song.**

### **11. Political Songs**

Oral literature plays a significant role in raising political awareness of people. Political songs are in widespread occurrence in Africa. Their occurrence is, however, not limited to recent or present times. They date back to the time immemorial.

Political songs can be divided into:

- (a) Songs of social protest.
- (b) Songs for creating political awareness
- (c) Songs for creating political conformity.

We are familiar with songs sung in praise of our leaders, whenever there is a gathering – meeting. These songs, panegyric songs, are perhaps the most commonly sung.

Political songs have various functions: generally these songs report, comment on current affairs can be used to exert political pressure, political education, propaganda and to reflect and mold public opinion. Songs of insult, challenge and satirical comment are common.

Songs form a means of communication with someone in power with the hope of influencing avoiding the danger of speaking directly. The conventionality of song makes it possible to indicate publicly what could not be said privately or directly to a man's face.

It is common, for instance, for singers to place their requests through song to a leader, to express public opinion through a song. This would not be possible otherwise as it is not always easy to have access to these leaders like the president for instance.

During the 'Traitor' issue in Kenya in 1982 a number of songs were sung to reflect and mold public opinion, to praise and strengthen the position of the leaders.

In Kenya, songs for secret propaganda were widely used by the Mau Mau movement popularly known as Mau Mau hymns.

Example

Serikali ya Nyayo  
Ni ya maendeleo  
Fuata Nyayo mwenzangu,  
Hatutaki matata  
Kama wewe wataka  
Kuleta matata Kenya,  
Tafuta Kenya yako  
Hatutaki porojo  
Rais amesema  
Atawalinda watoto,  
Jiunge nasii wenzangu  
Hatutaki porojo!

**Make notes of following songs**

- **Beer songs**
- **Child-naming songs**