

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR IN IGBO DIRGE SONGS

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Abstract

Dirge songs are oral rendition at burial or funereal ceremonies which address the dead, the family of the dead, the mourners, and death itself. Hence, beyond sorrow or grief, it nurtures hope and consolation. This research aims to examine how Igbo dirge songs conceptualize death and grief by ascertaining the use of metaphors in the speech communities, and to document the collected dirge songs. The data were sourced from Nawfija in Orumba South, Awka in Awka South and Awa in Orumba North communities, all in Anambra State- Nigeria. This was achieved through observation and interview methods. Subsequently, the data were analyzed using the Lakoff and Johnson (1980) conceptual metaphor theoretical framework. The research reveals some metaphoric elements used to conceptualize death such as; death is a visitor, a business entity/man, a door shutter, a fighter, rest, a thief, the interrupter of life's conversations, a terrible roommate/companion, an unannounced journey, a pepper, amongst others. In conclusion, it is observed that death can be perceived in various ways by the living.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, Igbo, dirge, songs

1. Introduction

Language is basically intertwined with culture, society, and the cognitive processing of human experience. Within the Igbo speech communities of southeastern Nigeria, language is not merely a vehicle for routine communication; it is a vital repository of metaphysical beliefs, cultural values, and ontological perspectives (Nwachukwu, 1995; Okoye, 2017). A particularly significant domain where language fulfills this role is during funeral rites, specifically through the performance of dirges. While death is a universal existential event that triggers profound psychological reactions across all human societies, the communicative mechanisms and linguistic strategies utilized to navigate grief are deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts (Finnegan, 2012). Consequently, the Igbo dirge provides an illuminating space to analyze how abstract, emotionally overwhelming experiences like mortality are linguistically structured and culturally internalized.

Dirges, alternately categorized as elegiac songs or ritual lamentations, are poetic oral renditions traditionally performed during mortuary rites to mourn the deceased, console the bereaved, and affirm communal solidarity (Nwoga, 1984; Okpewho, 1992). Rather than serving as passive expressions of sorrow, these songs function as dynamic cultural texts laden with symbolic meaning. They outline kinship obligations, negotiate social relationships, and bridge the emotional chasm between life and death (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 2016). Anthropologically, funeral rites within Igbo society are collectivist events (Mbiti, 1991). The performance of dirges, frequently led by women or specialized community members, reaffirms communal resilience, preserves collective memory, and situates the deceased within the broader continuum of ancestry.

From a cognitive and linguistic perspective, the emotional and metaphysical weight of a dirge cannot be sustained by literal language alone. Instead, these oral performances rely heavily on figurative expressions, primarily metaphors, to capture the otherwise inexpressible reality of death. As historical linguistic and anthropological shifts occur, these oral traditions face continuous pressure from Westernization, urbanization, and religious syncretism (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 2016). While traditional mourning practices are changing, dirges remain remarkably resilient, particularly within rural enclaves where indigenous verbal arts continue to thrive as a primary mechanism for psychological catharsis and social regulation.

To decode how these oral performances map meaning, cognitive linguistics offers a robust diagnostic framework. Rather than viewing metaphor as a superficial poetic ornament, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) establish in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) that metaphor is fundamentally a cognitive mechanism. It allows humans to use a familiar, concrete source domain (such as everyday physical experiences) to understand an abstract, complex target domain (such as death or grief). In African oral literature, according to Obiechina (1975), expressions like characterizing a deceased elder as a "fallen iroko tree" transcend simple aesthetic description; they reflect foundational cognitive schemas and cultural models regarding social status, legacy, and metaphysical continuity.

Despite the rich scholarship on Igbo oral literature, there remains a critical gap in localized, empirical data demonstrating how specific speech communities utilize cognitive metaphors during mortuary rituals. This study

addresses this gap by focusing on the oral traditions of three specific communities in Anambra State, Nigeria: Nawfija in the Orumba South Local Government Area (LGA), Awka in the Awka South, and Awa in the Orumba North LGA. While the broader Igbo socio-cultural enterprise is well-documented for its entrepreneurial and agricultural resourcefulness, its localized linguistic variations regarding existential crises merit deeper empirical scrutiny.

By utilizing field observation and direct interviews to source authentic oral performances from Nawfija, Awka, and Awa, this study aims to examine how Igbo dirge songs conceptualize death and grief. Specifically, it seeks to identify and analyze the structural use of conceptual metaphors within these speech communities and document these collected songs before they are further eroded by contemporary cultural shifts. Ultimately, this research contributes to the fields of cognitive linguistics and African oral literature by illustrating how specific metaphorical frameworks allow the living to perceive, rationalize, and survive the inevitability of death.

2. Literature Review

2.1.2 Language, Cognition, and the Metaphorical Nature of Dirges

Language plays a foundational role in the composition, performance, and conceptual interpretation of dirges. As a specialized genre of oral poetry, the dirge relies fundamentally on structured linguistic devices to encode cultural values, externalize psychological grief, and reorganize abstract existential concepts during crises of loss. In African societies, and within the Igbo speech community specifically, language transcends its utilitarian function as a tool for routine communication; it operates as an indispensable vehicle for processing complex cosmological beliefs and conceptual frameworks regarding mortality (Finnegan, 2012; Nwoga, 1984). Dirges embody this dynamic by synthesizing poetic syntax and cognitive mapping into a coherent linguistic script that allows the living to intellectually negotiate the boundary between life and death.

Research has perpetually demonstrated that the communicative and evocative efficacy of ritual lamentation is deeply rooted in its conceptual architecture. Okpewho (1992) observes that the artistry of African oral poetry relies on structural parallelism, repetition, and imagery to establish emotional intensity. Among the Igbo, dirge performers deploy a highly specialized lexicon and sophisticated figurative language including proverbs, localized idioms, and historical allusions to articulate the abstractions of loss in ways that literal discourse cannot achieve. The strategic deployment of stylized expressions and conventional lamentations illustrates how language within the funerary context shifts away from mere description toward a dense, figurative restructuring of reality, inducing profound reflection on the nature of existence (Nwachukwu, 2005).

From a cognitive perspective, the psychological and metaphysical weight of a dirge cannot be sustained by literal language alone. Because death is an abstract, intangible, and emotionally disruptive event, human speakers must rely on figurative frameworks to make it comprehensible. By invoking conventional linguistic expressions of journeying, departure, or sleep, Igbo dirges do not merely decorate a performance; they fundamentally restructure the harsh reality of physical termination into an organized, culturally intelligible narrative of transition (Okolo, 2013). Through these systematic linguistic choices, the raw, chaotic experience of grief is filtered through familiar cognitive schemas, transforming an existential crisis into a structured concept. This intersection of language and thought is best understood through cognitive linguistics, which posits that figurative language reveals underlying mental structures. Metaphors in oral literature are not superficial poetic ornaments used merely for aesthetic variation; they are primary cognitive tools used to make sense of the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). When a dirge characterizes a deceased individual or the act of dying through non-literal associations, it draws upon a vast repository of communal knowledge and collective memory. The language of lamentation ensures that abstract metaphysical ideas such as the afterlife, ancestral continuity, and human mortality are grounded in concrete, familiar realities that the human mind can readily process (Obiechina, 1975).

Ultimately, language serves as both the cognitive medium and the structural vehicle of the dirge. It supplies the lexical and conceptual frameworks required to navigate grief and preserve cultural continuity. For the Igbo, the dirge exemplifies the indivisible relationship between language and thought. Because these songs function as complex linguistic artifacts designed to map meaning onto the unknown, any rigorous analysis of their text must move beyond simple thematic indexing to systematically scrutinize the cognitive and linguistic resources through which their metaphorical realities are constructed and performed.

2.1.8 Dirges, Songs and Oral Literature

Within the study of oral literature, songs are recognized not merely as passive verbal art, but as effective tools for expressing and processing complex human experiences (Akpobaro, 2005). Because songs are uniquely structured to enter the mind and remain memorable (Kemma, 2020), they serve as ideal cognitive vessels for

transmitting collective knowledge and cultural schemas across generations. For the Igbo, singing accompanies nearly every vital landmark of existence, particularly the major rites of passage: birth, marriage, and death (Uzochukwu, 2012).

When confronting the final rite of passage, the oral tradition manifests specifically through the genre of the dirge. Scholars define the dirge as a specialized form of oral poetry and songs deliberately performed during mortuary or memorial rites to mourn the deceased and articulate the profound grief of the community (Ogene, 2010; Okorie, 2005). Because the emotional and existential reality of death is abstract and overwhelming, the structured, repetitive nature of oral song acts as a vital framework for cognitive stabilization (Nkamigbo & Agu, 2015).

Rather than serving as random expressions of private sorrow, these oral performances are highly structured, collective acts frequently led by women's groups, designed to alleviate the trauma of bereavement and meditate on the phenomena of mortality (Muti, 2003; Nwosu, 2019). Crucially, the formal properties of oral literature such as repetition, parallelism, and conventional tropes, do not simply decorate the performance. Instead, they provide the rigid linguistic and cognitive structures necessary to hold, organize, and systematically map the abstract, unsettling concept of death into familiar metaphorical realities (Finnegan, 2012). The solemn context of the funeral gives ultimate meaning to these oral performances, transforming the dirge into a primary cognitive space where the living can mentally restructure the finality of death into a culturally intelligible transition.

2.1.10 Concept of Death and Funeral Culture and Rites

In Igbo cosmology, death is not viewed as an absolute end, but rather a transition or continuity into the ancestral realm, reflecting a belief in communal existence that spans the living, the dead, and the unborn (Ebo, 2019). Additionally, death is seen as a passage into a realm where ancestors may still exert influence over the living community.

Igbo funeral practices are multilayered and highly ritualized. One key feature is the bifurcated burial system: an immediate first burial (interment), followed by an often elaborate second burial known as *Ikwa Ozu* "celebrating the dead". The second burial is culturally significant as it formally initiates the deceased into the ancestral realm (Ken-Anaukwu, 2024). Failure to conduct proper rites can result in the deceased becoming a restless spirit or *mmuo ojoo*, bringing misfortune to the living (Ken-Anaukwu, 2024).

Funeral rites are informed by beliefs in reincarnation (*Inouwa*), where the dead may return to their lineage as newborns displaying similar traits or birthmarks (Wikipedia, 2024). Additionally, the deceased's status and gender often influence the complexity of funeral rites, with titled men frequently accorded more elaborate ceremonies, such as masquerades, sacrifices, and feasts (Ken-Anaukwu, 2024; Ezeme, 2024).

Funerals also function as rites of passage, marking the transformation of the deceased into a revered ancestor. As a Nigerian Catholic scholar notes, proper burial rituals are critical for the deceased's peaceful integration into the realm of ancestors; any lapse may result in their return as malevolent spirits (Landy, 2023).

These practices reflect the Igbo commitment to maintaining cosmic and communal harmony honoring the dead, preserving ancestral ties, and affirming cultural identity.

The Igbo worldview conceptualizes death not as an end but as a transition within the continuum of existence that unites the living, the dead, and the unborn (Ebo, 2019). In this cosmology, death signifies a passage into the ancestral realm (*ala mmuo*), where the deceased assumes a new ontological status as an ancestor capable of exerting influence, benevolent or malevolent on the living community (Ken-Anaukwu, 2024). Consequently, Igbo funeral practices embody a cultural logic that integrates cosmology, morality, and communal identity.

2.2 Empirical Studies

Onu (2015) studies an analysis of Igbo oral funeral poetry with particular reference to Edda. The author states that dirge is a form of oral poetry that makes use of language to communicate experience. In the same vein, funeral dirges, no matter where they are performed, have one thing in common, they all express the emotion of loss. The principal objective of the study is to analyze oral funeral poetry performance of the Edda people with emphasis on the form and structure of Edda dirges, belief of causes and effects of death, themes and significance of oral funeral poetry, funeral rituals and rites in Edda and the impact of Christianity and Western lifestyle on the performance of Edda dirges. An aspect of ethno poetic theory known as infracultural model in folklore analysis developed by Alembe is used in the analysis of data. The author's findings show that the funeral artists make use of linguistic and paralinguistic features at their disposal to realize the aims of their performance and various imageries are used in the dirges to showcase emotion such as loss, events such as death and hunting,

animate objects such as lion, kite and lizard, inanimate objects such as forest and mountain. The findings also reveal that the dirges poetically reiterate the theme of futility of life, social commentary, and reflection on life, spirituality and reference to the deceased. Dirges function as a repository of historical knowledge, a tool for social criticism, didacticism and as a medium of mourning and celebrating the life of the deceased. Ndiishina (spirits of the ancestors), witchcraft, charm, poisoning and suicide were identified as the major causes of death in Edda. For instance, the following lines of dirge illustrate:

(1)

<i>Nnachi Nkama apalile ije</i>	Nnachi Nkama is dead
<i>Ele ekika enwerezu ulo</i>	So termites will take control of the house

The artist is here indicating that death is a permanent separation of the soul from the body from the physical world to the spirit world. To the singer, when one dies leaving no children of his own, his house becomes desolate and invariably the termite takes over the house as the deceased has left no one behind to look after the house (Onu, 2015:7).

Nkamigbo and Agu (2015) document and analyze the traditional dirge songs of the Amokwe Orji community. Utilizing a descriptive approach to evaluate recorded oral performances, their findings reveal that while most of the dirges explicitly articulate grief over a loss, specific variations shift away from strict sorrow to offer comforting, reassuring expressions that celebrate a fulfilled life. Crucially, their linguistic analysis shows that performers rely heavily on deliberate literary and cognitive devices, including repetition, rhetorical questions, apostrophe, personification, and metaphor to restructure and emphasize their emotional realities. Finally, the authors note that the genre is severely endangered; due to the influence of Christianity and modernization, younger generations express little interest in these oral traditions, threatening the total loss of this localized linguistic heritage as the older generation of performers passes away. The instances of phonetically transcribed dirges as presented by Nkamigbo and Agu (2015) are thus:

(2)

Dirge Song

/ɔwɔ ee o meɪe oje/
 'oh death it has occurred to someone'
 /mɔ na oje ga eβi/
 'whom shall I live with?'
 /ɔwɔ gbulu ŋwa mmado/
 'death killed someone's child'
 /ɔwɔ mɔ na oje ga eβi/
 'whom shall I live with?'
 /ɔwɔ ee o meɪe oje/

(3)

Dirge Song

/na mbɔ ka ɔwɔ bidoɔlo/
 'death has been in existence from the beginning'
 /na mbɔ na mbɔ ko bidoɔlo/
 'in the beginning, in the beginning death has been in existence'

Nwosu (2019) examines the thematic and philosophical constructs of Igbo oral funeral songs, demonstrating that these performances transcend mere emotional outbursts to serve as vital instruments for mourning the dead and educating the living. Because these songs are strictly bound to the context of bereavement, their execution carries deep cosmological significance, prompting reflection on death as a natural yet mysterious phenomenon. Applying contextual analysis, Nwosu identifies that these elegiac songs are imbued with dynamic philosophical tropes designed to unpack the incomprehensible nature of mortality. Crucially, his findings reveal that the songs structurally project specific conceptualizations of death, mapping it as an inimitable, friendless, inevitable, and mysterious entity, as well as a "heartbreaker" and "havoc-wrecker." Ultimately, Nwosu underscores that these oral performances provide the essential cognitive and cultural frameworks through which the community rationalizes the existential crisis and *modus operandi* of death. Apart from expressing anger, sorrow and sadness, Nwosu (2019) states that most Igbo oral funeral songs explore the themes of loss, loneliness and frustration occasioned by the death of a beloved relation or friend. In the song below performed mostly by women, the major thrust is the unforgettable nature of the death of one's parent. Such death is seen not only as a heavy loss but an occurrence that is indeed definitely hard to forget and overcome:

(4)

S: *Onye nna ya nwurū?*

Ch: *Q na agba nchehu*

S: *Onye nne ya nwurū*

Ch: *Q na agba nchehu?*

All: *Q na agba nchehuo ooo*

Q na agba nchehu!

Metumaraibe!

Q na agba nchehu!

Chiawolamoke!

Q na agba nchehu! (A3)

S: One whose father dies

Ch: Does he forget it?

S: One who loses his mother

Ch: Does he forget it?

All: Does he forget it?

Is it easily forgotten?

S: (calls) Metumaraibe!

Ch: Is it easily forgotten?

S: Chiawolamoke!

Ch: Is it easily forgotten? (B3)

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The framework adopted for this paper is the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) by Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5). The authors define metaphor as 'understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another'. This definition is an extension of a conceptual metaphor as a systematic set of correspondences between two domains of experience. For example, in 'ARGUMENT IS WAR', the language in which we speak of some aspects of argument ('win or lose' an argument, 'attack' an opposing argument) reflects the metaphorical structure of the underlying concept, and as a consequence our actual experience of argument is structured in terms of war. We use war-like terms (attack, defend, defeat, and so on) to talk about arguments in which we experience a sense of personal threat. To talk about more civil, cooperative arguments, we use terms drawn from different metaphors, such as 'ARGUMENT IS A BUILDING' ('a solid foundation for his argument', 'the structure of her logic') or 'ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY' ('now we're making progress', 'where does this lead?') Sometimes metaphors are mixed, drawing from one to emphasize and express one aspect of our experience and another to emphasize and express another aspect; but this mixing of metaphors only works when the entailments are consistent, or at least complementary, and not contradictory. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim that our primary metaphorical systems are grounded first and foremost in our direct physical and social experience, moving the study of language beyond the traditional boundaries of conventional linguistics. It is noteworthy that all basic sensorimotor concepts are literal, in the sense that they are directly abstracted from physical interaction with the environment. The experiences of dimensionality, orientation, size, etc. form a system of literal concepts, which then form the basis for metaphoric concepts. Summarily, this theory posits that metaphors are fundamental to human thought and language, shaping how we understand abstract concepts through more concrete experiences. By applying CMT, this study situates Igbo dirge metaphors within broader African oral traditions, highlighting how linguistic expressions encode deep cultural cosmologies.

3. Research Methodology

The study employs qualitative research design. Qualitative research is particularly suited for investigations that require in-depth understanding of human experiences, cultural practices, and linguistic expressions as they occur in their natural environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Data for the study were derived from primary sources which include oral performances of dirge songs obtained directly from informants in the selected communities which are Nawfija in Orumba South, Awka in Awka South and Awa in Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State. Informants were carefully selected based on their cultural knowledge, age, and participation in funeral traditions. They comprised mostly elderly women and men in their communities. The researcher's native speaker competence in Igbo further enhanced accurate elicitation, transcription, and interpretation of the songs. Data collection was carried out using a combination of qualitative methods. Firstly, interviews, where unstructured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with informants in the selected communities. Secondly, in participant and non-participant observation, the researcher attended funerals and memorial ceremonies, observing and recording dirge performances. In adopting in-group discussions, small group

discussions were held with clusters of women and elders who collectively remembered, sang, and explained dirges. The collected data were carefully processed through the following stages: transcription, whereby the dirges were transcribed verbatim in the Igbo dialect of the dirge. Hence, the English translation of each dirge was done to aid accessibility for non-Igbo readers. Following the analysis, it was guided by conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), by identifying metaphors within the dirges.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of Igbo dirge songs collected and documented in Appendix I. Drawing from the goals of the study, the analysis focuses on conceptual metaphor.

In analyzing the dirges, a variety of conceptual metaphors emerge, which reflect both universal themes and culture-specific values. Below are key conceptual metaphors identified in the dirge corpus and their interpretations:

4.1.1 Death is a Journey

This is one of the most pervasive metaphors found in the data. It is grounded in the universal human experience of travel and movement from one location to another. In Igbo dirge songs, death is frequently conceptualized as a transition from the land of the living to the ancestral realm.

5. *Laa n'udo* (Dirge 19, line 2) "Go in peace"
6. *Ada anyị alaala n'igwe* (Dirge 17, line 1) "Our daughter has gone to heaven"
7. *Ọ naa n'udo: ọ naa n'ebe o si bịa n'ụwa* (Dirge 18, line 2) "He/she is gone in peace, gone to where he/she came from"

The "death-as-journey" metaphor maps life and mortality onto the schema of travel, where the deceased leaves one location (the earthly realm) and moves to another (the spiritual or ancestral realm). This mapping provides psychological comfort: by framing death as relocation rather than annihilation, mourners can envision continuity beyond loss.

Data 5, and 6 contain expressions like "*Laa n'udo*" (Go in peace), and "*Ada anyị alaala n'igwe*" (Our daughter has gone to heaven) of which frame death as a journey, suggesting that life continues elsewhere, albeit in a different dimension. This metaphor offers comfort to the bereaved by portraying death not as an end, but as a passage to a peaceful afterlife. Also, the lexical choices in the dirges - *gaa* (go), *laa* (depart), *n'udo* (in peace), are all indicative of travel-related terminology.

4.1.2 Death is a Thief

A thief can be likened to a person who takes what belongs to another individual without the prior consent of the person, or forcefully snatching what belongs to another person. There are instances where death is seen as a thief from the dirge.

8. *Ọnwụ bụ onye ori* (Dirge 12, line 1) "Death is a thief"
9. *Ọnwụ ka anyị ike... ọnwụ ejila abalị bịa na bedi magburu nwokorobia* (Dirge 15, line 3) "Death is stronger than us... Death came over the night and carried a young man from his bed"
10. *Ọnwụ ị maara rie ego, rapurū anyị nwanne anyị* (Dirge 10, line 1) "Death, you would have taken money, spare our sibling"

The metaphor also emphasizes unpredictability and vulnerability (data 9), evoking embodied experiences of loss and surprise. Culturally, portraying death as a thief justifies moral, emotional, and ritual responses which are anger, lamentation, and even the protective rituals meant to guard life, while making grief socially communicable through a shared conceptual framework.

Also, in data 8, the line "*Ọnwụ bụ onye ori*" (Death is a thief) metaphorically equates death to a criminal figure who forcibly takes what is valuable without consent. This metaphor is rooted in the Igbo cultural understanding of personal loss as a form of violation. The idea that death "steals" lives implies injustice and violation of the social and spiritual order. The thief metaphor reinforces the suddenness and cruelty of death. Just like thieves strike at night or without warning, death arrives uninvited, stealing away lives prematurely.

4.1.3 Life is Temporary Possession

These expressions exemplify the metaphor life is temporary possession, reflecting temporal and moral mapping: life and its material or social acquisitions are conceptualized as borrowed or lent, emphasizing human limitation and impermanence.

11. *Agba m aka bịa n'ụwa... Agba m aka laa* (Dirge 20, line 1) "I came to the world empty-handed... I will leave empty-handed"
12. *Ka m merewe ụwa, amaghị m oge ọnwụ m* (Dirge 14, line 1) "Let me enjoy the world; I do not know my time of death"
13. *Ugogbe etiwarā... o tiwarā n'ike* (Dirge 5, line 1) "Mirror has broken... it broke untimely"

Data (11) (*Agba m aka...*) highlights the ephemerality of human existence, underscoring philosophical resignation and humility: humans enter and leave the world without material gain. Similarly, data (12) portrays the fleeting nature of opportunity to enjoy worldly possessions. Finally, data (13), through the metaphor of a broken mirror, emphasizes fragility and impermanence of worldly objects, linking materiality to human temporariness.

4.1.4 Grief is a Wound / Fire / Burning Sensation

There are instances of dirge that relate grief as a wound/fire/burning sensation.

14. *Q bu ɔnwu na-agba anyi ose n'anya* (Dirge 13, line 2) "Death is peppering our eyes"
15. *E tiwe moo, ebe we moo* (Dirge 6, line 1) "I am screaming oh, I am crying oh"
16. *O wutere anyi mgbe anyi nuru akuko onwu ya* (Dirge 3, line 2) "It grieves us when we heard the news of your death"

Data (14) equates anger and grief with sensations like burning (*ose n'anya*), creating tangible intensity. Data (15) show vocalized manifestations of grief (*E tiwe moo...*), making mourning performative and visceral. Data (16) emphasizes communal participation in grief, reinforcing shared embodied experience.

Here, CMT adds that psychological states are comprehended via concrete bodily experience, allowing mourners to experience empathy collectively. The dirges legitimize ritualized expressions like crying or wailing, making grief both physically and socially tangible.

4.1.5 Death is a Door Shutter / Closure

There are places where dirge paints death as a door shutter. It is likened unto a person who closes the door against people from having continuous access to a place. This entails a limited access has been given to an individual. Here, death is seen as the entity. For instance:

17. *Onwu mechiri uzọ* (Dirge 1, line 4) "Death has shut the door"
18. *Q nwuru n'ike n'ike, anyi ga-akwa ya n'ike n'ike* (Dirge 4, line 1) "He died prematurely, we will bury him fastly"
19. *Abali abuo ka mmadu nwere n'ua* (Dirge 21, line 1) "Two days is what every human has on earth"

Data 17 (*Onwu mechiri uzọ*) conceptualizes death as an endpoint restricting access. Data (18) illustrates abrupt closure, denying continuation of life. Data (19) emphasizes the limited temporal window of life, highlighting how death enforces finality.

Consequently, this metaphor reinforces mourning rituals, social awareness, and existential reflection, providing a tangible way to reconcile with the irrevocable nature of death.

4.1.6 Death is an Interrupter of Life's Conversations

In these examples, death is conceptualized as an interrupter of life's conversations. CMT frames abstract death as intrusion into concrete experiences of dialogue, social engagement, and daily activity.

20. *E tiwe moo...akala mu na nwanne m boru abo emesia onwu bia* (Dirge 6, lines 1-4) "I am screaming oh; the discussion I had with my sibling, but death came later"
21. *Ewoo, anyi na-achọ nwanne anyi... Ana bu ana, anyi na-achọ nwanne n'ike n'ike* (Dirge 7, lines 1-4) "Oh, we are searching for our sibling hastily; death has interrupted our plans to meet"

Data (20) portrays interrupted sibling discussions or plans (*akalu...ana bu ana*), highlighting life's abrupt disruption. Also, data (21) shows that death interferes with certainty and access.

This metaphor underscores existential, social, and relational consequences of death in Igbo cosmology: death is not merely an end but an intrusive force disrupting ongoing life, relationships, and communal interactions.

4.1.7 Death is Disappearance / Loss

These examples illustrate the metaphor death is disappearance/loss, mapping the abstract concept of death onto the concrete experience of losing people or objects.

22. *Anyi na-achọ nwanne, umu nwaanyi achoro nwanne ha gaa n'ahia* (Dirge 8, lines 1-4) "We are seeking our sibling; women searched for their sibling in the market"
23. *Choo choo choo... anyi na-achọ ya anyi ahughu ya* (Dirge 9, lines 1-8) "Search search search; we searched in market and family but did not see him/her"
24. *Anyi aga eje na mmiri... Ugogbe awanari anyi* (Dirge 2, lines 1-4) "Should we go to the river in search of a dead person; futile attempt to recover the lost"

Data (22-23) show individuals grieving in various places such as markets, family areas, and work environments, highlighting the feelings of confusion and shared powerlessness that often come with experiencing loss. Data (24) continues this metaphor: efforts to retrieve the dead or shattered mirrors are pointless, representing a loss that cannot be regained. The image of shattered mirrors shows how death creates a lasting break in the flow of life.

4.1.8 Death is a Mysterious Visitor

These dirges employ the metaphor death is a mysterious visitor, where mortality is conceptualized as an unannounced guest.

25. Amaghị m oo oge ọnwụ ga-abia... onye ọbuna na-ekpe ekpere (Dirge 11, lines 1-3) "I do not know when death will come; everyone should pray"
26. Ka m merewe uwa, amaghị m oge ọnwụ m ooh (Dirge 14, lines 1-2) "Let me enjoy the world; I do not know the time of my death"
27. Ọnwụ ejila abali bia na bedi magburu nwokorobia (Dirge 15, lines 3-5) "Death came over the night and carried a young man from his bed"

Data (25) emphasize unpredictability (*Amaghị m oge ọnwụ ga-abia*), prompting communal preparation and prayer. Data (26) frames death as an interrogable visitor (*who will live with you?*), reflecting a human desire to negotiate or conceptualize the unknown. Data (27) portrays sudden nighttime death, highlighting fear of unanticipated intrusion.

According to CMT, abstract mortality is understood via familiar experiences, i.e. unexpected arrivals. The metaphor also shapes social practice and moral consciousness, encouraging vigilance, prayer, and ethical living in anticipation of death.

4.1.9 Death is Rest / Peace / Relief

These dirges exemplify the metaphor death is rest/peace/relief, mapping mortality onto experiences of cessation of struggle and emotional relief.

28. N'elu uwa bu onye nwuo o zuru ike... Onye nwuo o zuru ike, nwanna m ooo (Dirge 16, lines 1-5) "On earth, when one dies, he rests; my sibling rests"
29. Ada anyi alaala n'igwe... ezigbo nne anyi alaala n'udo (Dirge 17, lines 1-4) "Our daughter has gone to heaven; departed in peace"
30. Laa n'udo, ezi nwanne m huru n'anya... laa n'udo (Dirge 19, lines 1-3) "Go in peace, my beloved sibling; go in peace"

Data (28) emphasizes bodily and spiritual rest (*o zuru ike*), conveying liberation from earthly suffering. Data (29-30) incorporate religious imagery (heaven) to reinforce spiritual continuity and eternal peace.

CMT frames this as an embodied-cognitive strategy, linking the abstract experience of death to familiar sensations of relief and cessation. The repetition of peaceful states reassures mourners, integrating cultural and Christianized understandings of death as comforting, socially mediated, and spiritually meaningful.

These conceptual metaphors illustrate how the Igbo linguistic worldview encodes death not as a monolithic concept but as a multidimensional experience, an event that intersects with the spiritual, social, moral, and emotional domains of life. Through metaphor, dirge singers transform abstract grief into tangible symbols, enabling communal healing, memory preservation, and the reinforcement of cultural identity. Conceptual metaphors, thus, provide an epistemological bridge between emotion and expression, individual loss and collective memory. In Igbo dirges, they are both cognitive lenses and cultural templates through which reality is interpreted, narrated, and ritualized.

5. Summary of the Findings, and Conclusion

In conceptualization of death and grief, the dirges portray death as a journey, a thief, a debt, or a powerful force that no one escapes. They reflect communal acceptance and individual questioning of mortality. Metaphors such as *Ọnwụ bu onye ori* "Death is a thief" personifies death and emphasize its inevitability.

Furthermore, in metaphors, the research's rich metaphoric structures highlight the Igbo worldview. Death is metaphorized as a mirror breaking, pepper in the eyes, or the shutting of a door - images that evoke loss, finality, and pain. It is observed that some dirge songs are addressed to death as a wicked and heartless entity. For instance, "*ọnwụ bu onye ori*" (dirge 12).

Igbo dirge songs are invaluable cultural artifacts that encapsulate the Igbo people's relationship with death, spirituality, and social responsibility. This study has shown that these songs are not only emotional expressions but also structured linguistic and cultural performances that convey deep-seated values and beliefs.

Through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, we find that Igbo dirges use death to negotiate moral accountability, spiritual hope, and communal solidarity.

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Appendix

Dirge 1

Ọnwụ ngaa ogu

ọnwụ ngaa ogu, kwamgbom,
 Iro nūwa ọnwụ, mụ aṅuwa ọnwụ,
 ọnwụ ngaa ogu, kwamgbom,
 ọnwụ bụ omechiri ụzọ, kwamgbom

Translation:

Death, take insult

Death, take insult, *kwamgbom*
 When enemies speak against death, I will criticize death,
 Death, take insult, *kwamgbom*
 Death is a door shutter, *kwamgbom*

Dirge 2

Anyị aga eje na mmiri?

Anyị aga eje na mmiri chọba onye nwurụ anwụ?
 Onye ji amara weta ụgbọ ka anyị chọbanu ya na mmiri:
 Ugogbe awanari anyị,
 Ugogbe awaala, ugogbe awaala.

Translation:

Should we go to the river?

Should we go to the river in search of a dead person?
 One who has boat should bring it, let us search for him/her in the river,
 A mirror has broken against us,
 A mirror has broken, a mirror has broken

Dirge 3

O wutere ayi

O wutere ayi, wutere ayi, wutere ayi,
O wutere ayi mgbe ayi nuru akuko onwu ya,
O wutere ayi, wutere ayi, wutere ayi,
O wutere ayi mgbe anyi nuru ya,

Translation:

It grieves us

It grieves us, grieves us, grieves us;
It grieves us when we heard the news of your death,
It grieves us, grieves us, grieves us
It grieves us when we heard it.

Dirge 4

O nwuru n'ike n'ike

O nwuru n'ike n'ike, anyi ga-akwa ya n'ike n'ike
O nwuru n'ike n'ike, anyi ga-akwa ya n'ike n'ike
Translation:

He died prematurely

He died prematurely, we will bury him fastly,
He died prematurely, we will bury him fastly,

Dirge 5

Ugogbe etiwara

Ugogbe etiwara o tiwara, ezigbo ugogbe etiwara otiwara,
o tiwara n'ike

Translation:

Mirror has broken

Mirror has broken, it has broken, a good mirror has broken,
It broke untimely

Dirge 6

E tiwe moo

E tiwe moo, ebe we moo,
akala mu na nwanne m boru abo emesia onwu bia,
e tiwe moooo, ebe we moooo,
akala mu na nwanne m boru abo e mesia onwu bia

Translation:

I am screaming oh

I am screaming oh, I am crying oh,
The discussion I had with my sibling, but death came later,
I am screaming oh, I am crying oh,
The discussion I had with my sibling, but death came later

Dirge 7

Ewoo, anyi na-achọ nwanne anyi

Ewoo, anyi na-achọ nwanne anyi,
Ugbọ enu nata, nwanne anyi esoghị ya (x2)
Ana bụ ana, anyi na-achọ nwanne n'ike n'ike

Translation:

Oh, we are searching for our sibling

Oh, we are searching for our sibling,
The plane landed, our sibling did not come follow it (x2)
The land, we are searching for our sibling hastily.

Dirge 8

Anyi na-achọ nwanne

Anyi na-achọ nwanne, nwanne o lee ebe i nọ nwanne,
o di onye ahụ si na o hụrụ ya?
umụ nwaanyị achọrọ nwanne ha gaa n'ahia.

Translation:

We are seeking our sibling

We are seeking our sibling, sibling where are you sibling,
Is there anyone who saw him?
Women have sought their sibling to the market place.

Dirge 9

Chọọ chọọ chọọ

Chọọ chọọ chọọ anyị na-achọ ya anyị ahụghị ya,
anyị na-achọ nwanne anyị, anyị na-achọ ya anyị ahụghị ya,
chọọ ya gaa n'ahia, anyị na-achọ ya anyị ahụghị ya.

Translation:

Search search search

Search search search, we are searching for him/her, we did not see him/her,
We are searching for our sibling, we are searching for him/her, we did not see him/her,
Searched for him/her in the market, we are searching for him/her, we did not see him/her.

Dirge 10

Ọnwụ ị maara rie ego

Ọnwụ ị maara rie ego, rapurū anyị nwanne anyị ooo
Ọnwụ ị maara rie ego, rapurū anyị nwanne anyị ooo

Translation:

Death you would have taken money

Death you would have taken money, and spare our sibling oh
Death you would have taken money, and spare our sibling oh

Dirge 11

Amaghị m oo

Amaghị m oo oge ọnwụ ga-abia,
Amaghị m oo oge ọ ga-abia ee,
Amaghị m oo, onye ọbuna na-ekpe ekpere

Translation:

I do not know

I do not know when death will come,
I do not know when it will come
I do not know, everyone should be praying

Dirge 12

Ọnwụ bụ onye ori

Ọnwụ bụ onye ori ooo,
ọnwụ ike bụ onye ori ooo,
o zuru ọ gbalaga

Translation:

Death is a thief

Death is a thief,
sudden death is a thief oh,
It steals and flees

Dirge 13

Ose abaa anyị anya

Ose abaa anyị anya, ose abaa anyị anya,
ịma na ọ bughị ose na ọ bụ ọnwụ na-agba anyị ose n'anya

Translation:

Pepper has entered our eyes

Pepper has entered our eyes, pepper has entered our eyes,
It is not pepper but death is peppering our eyes

Dirge 14

Ka m merewe uwa

Ka m merewe uwa, amaghị m oge ọnwụ m ooh,

Ka m merewe uwa, amaghị m oge ọnwụ m ooh

Translation:

Let me enjoy the world

Let me enjoy the world, I do not know the time of my death oh,

Let me enjoy the world, I do not know the time of my death oh

Dirge 15

Ọnwụ ka anyị ike

Ọnwụ eeh, ọnwụ eeh, ọnwụ ka anyị ike,

ọnwụ eeh ọnwụ eeh ọnwụ ka anyị ike,

ọnwụ ejila abalị bịa na bedi magburu nwokorobia,

ọnwụ na ajọ mmadụ ole nke ka, ha naabụ ha kwa

Translation:

Death is stronger than us

Death oh, death oh, death is stronger than us,

Death oh, death oh, death is stronger than us,

Death has come over the night and carried a young man from his bed,

Death and an evil person, which is worse, both of them are equal

Dirge 16

Onye nwụọ o zuru ike

N'elu uwa bụ onye nwụọ o zuru ike,

Onye nwụọ o zuru ike, nwanne m ooo

Onye nwụọ o zuru ike, ị na-anụ ya?

Onye nwụọ o zuru ike, nwanna m ooo

Onye nwụọ o zuru ike

Translation:

When one dies, he rests

On earth, when one dies, he rests

When one dies, he rests my sibling,

When one dies, he rests, can you hear it?

When one dies, he rests, my brother

When one dies, he rests

Dirge 17

Ada anyị alaala n'igwe

Ada anyị alaala n'igwe, ezigbo nne anyị alaala n'udo,

Ada anyị alaala n'igwe, ezigbo nne anyị alaala n'udo

Translation:

Our daughter has gone to heaven

Our daughter has gone to heaven, our good mother has departed in peace,

Our daughter has gone to heaven, our good mother has departed in peace.

Dirge 18

Ọ naa

Ọ naa, ọ naa, ọ naa, n'udo:

ọ naa n'ebe o si bịa n'ụwa Chukwu gozie ya.

Translation:

He/she is gone

He/she is gone, he/she is gone, he/she is gone,

He/she is gone from where he/she came to the world, God bless him

Dirge 19

Laa n'udo

Mama anyị alụsigo, ọ labago

Laa n'udo laa n'udo

Ezigbo mama anyị alụsigo, ọ labago

Laa n'udo laa n'udo
Ezigbo nwanne m hụrụ n'anya ọ lee mgbe m ga-ahụ gị ọzọ?,
laa n'udo

Translation:

Go in peace

Our mother has finished work, she's gone
Go in peace, go in peace
Our mother has finished work, she's gone
Go in peace, go in peace
My beloved sibling, when will I see you again?
Go in peace

Dirge 20

Agba m aka bịa n'ụwa

agba m aka bịa n'ụwa,
agba m aka laa,
akụ niine m kpara n'ụwa;
e nweghị nke m ji ana
Ego niine m nwere n'ụwa;
e nweghị nke m ji ana,

Translation:

I came to the world empty-handed

I came to the world empty-handed,
I will go empty-handed,
All the wealth I made on earth,
I am not going with anyone,

Dirge 21

Abali abụọ

Abali abụọ ka mmadu nwere n'ụwa ụbọchị omumụ ya na ụbọchị onwụ ya,
Abali abụọ ka mmadu nwere n'ụwa ụbọchị omumụ ya na ụbọchị onwụ ya.

Translation:

Two days

Two days is what every human has on earth, his birth day and his death day,
Two days is what every human has on earth, his birth day and his death day.