

***FUNERAL SONGS AMONG THE WIMBUM:  
AN EXPERIENCE IN NON-NORMATIVE THEATRE***

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**Abstract:**

The essence of this article is to analyse funeral songs among the Wimbun people as a piece of non-normative theatre which is a pro-social non-conformist theatre that consists of actions that benefit the community. Operational in a community that is essentially oral, funeral songs among the Wimbun are performed as a kind of therapy as through them, the people are purged of the pains imposed on them by death. Using the sociological and performance-centred approaches, the article demonstrates that Wimbun funeral songs are theatrically satisfying as performers actualize their texts in ways particular to a people by way of their manner of performance. As a kind of theatre that does not conform to laid down norms due to its oral nature, performance becomes a leitmotif for its survival in the context of globalisation where orality is being threatened by the stronger forces of modern technology.

**Keywords:** *Funeral, song, Wimbun, theatre, Mbumland.*

**Résumé**

L'essence de cet article est d'analyser les chants funéraires chez les wimbun en tant qu'une pièce de théâtre non-normatif qui est un théâtre non-conformiste pro-social, compose des actions bénéfiques à la communauté. Opérationnels dans une communauté essentiellement orale, les chants funéraires chez les wimbun sont interprétés comme une sorte de thérapie car, à travers eux, les peuple est purgé des douleurs que lui impose la mort. En utilisant des approches sociologique et performance-centrée, l'article démontre que les chants funéraires chez les wimbun sont satisfaisants sur le plan théâtral car, les interprètes mettent en œuvre leurs textes de manière spécifique à un peuple par de biais de leur mode de performance. En tant que type de théâtre qui ne se conforme pas aux normes établies en raison de sa nature orale, la performance devient un leitmotiv pour sa survie dans le contexte de la mondialisation où l'oralité est menacée par les forces plus fortes de la technologie moderne.

**Mots – clés :** *funérailles, chant, wimbun, théâtre, Mbumland*

**1- Introduction**

In the Mbumland which is predominantly agrarian, semiliterate, and oral in outlook, song occupies and plays an important role in the people's daily interactions among themselves

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as well as with the supernatural forces that are a part of their existence. As a piece of orature, funeral songs among the Wimbum as Tala Kashim contends:

... is performed as part of ... obsequies. It laments the loss of the dead person, praises his memory, gives him messages to carry to the ancestors, and begs him to continue to preside over the affairs of the living from the spirit world. (Kashim, 1984 p.23)

To better analyse Wimbum funeral songs from a theatre perspective, it becomes imperative to use the performance-centred approach due to the fact that orature fundamentally requires direct contact between the performer who transmits the message by word of mouth, and the audience who is often actively involved in the communication process. This approach calls for an investigation of the existence of an oral piece in live performance so as to savour the artistic and aesthetic qualities of these funeral songs.

Hence, again confirming Tala Kashim's assertion:

Oral literature is not antiquarian but a living tradition. That is, it can only continue to exist in performance. Therefore, for any study of it to be completed it must take account of both the verbal and non-verbal elements. In short, efforts must be made to see the literature in its context, that is, in performance. (Kashim, 1984 p.7)

In performance, there exists a great relationship between performer and performance context in the realization of Wimbum funeral songs. This is in the sense that the context greatly influences the performer's performance. As opposed to the written text, tone, gestures, facial expressions, the dramatic use of pauses and rhythm, the interplay of passion and humour greatly contribute to the meaning and the aesthetics of Wimbum funeral songs in live performance. As a matter of fact, an oral performance cannot be captured in print since they are two basically distinct mediums.

To the Wimbum, funeral songs as the name suggests, are songs sung during funerals and "cry-dies"<sup>2</sup>. The songs are either sung or chanted with the accompaniment of instruments in the antiphonal style. Often, the songs contain words and messages of regret by the way that the performers while sending messages through the deceased to the ancestors, express regret at the death of the departed owing to the vacuum created by his/her transition.

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<sup>2</sup> "Cry-dies" among the wimbun refers to festivities that are organized after the death of an individual or in honour of departed individuals. "Cry-die" is meant for the living to formally say their final good-bye to the dead.

Equally, the songs pay homage and express praises to the departed for a life well spent depending on the age and/or status of the dead.

## **2 - Geographical Location of Mbumland**

The name “Wimbum” is descriptive; “Wi” meaning ‘people’ and “Mbum” meaning ‘the land’. Thus, “Wimbum” means, the Mbum people or people of Mbumland. The Mbumland occupies the Nkambe plateau of Donga Mantung Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. The area occupies two of the five administrative units of the division namely; Nkambe Central and Ndu subdivisions. It is made up of three clans: the Tang, the Warr, and the Ya, and comprising of ten (10), thirteen (13), and ten (10) villages respectively. The Mbum tribal conglomerate lies between latitude 6°00° and 6°01.13° north of the Equator and longitudes 10°01.03° and 10°1.45° east of the Greenwich Meridian. It is bordered to the south by Nkum and to the south west by Noni Subdivisions in Bui Division, to the north by Ako Subdivision, to the west by Mesaje Subdivision, and to the east by Nwa Subdivision<sup>3</sup>. As one of the elite tribes in the area, Mbumland has over the years witnessed an influx of people from neighbouring ethnic groups and thus, becoming cosmopolitan. This cosmopolitan nature has an influence on the people’s orature as evident in the evolution of the themes, worldview and performance mannerisms of the funeral songs.

## **3 - Sociology of Mbum Funeral Songs**

To better understand the Wimbum funeral songs requires a close examination of certain aspects of Wimbum cultural values. As underscored by Bronislaw Malinowski (1926 pp.75-77), to understand the literature of a people, it is imperatively useful to have a socio-cultural knowledge of the society whose literature is under study so as to acquaint self with the culture of that people. To Malinowski and as quoted by Isidore Okpewho:

The text of course, is extremely important, but without the context, it remains lifeless. . . . the interest of the [song] is vastly enhanced and its proper character is the manner in which it is [delivered]. The whole nature of the performance, the mimicry, the stimulus and the response of the [chorus] mean as much as to the natives as the text: . . . the performance, again has to be placed in its proper time setting; the hour of the day and the season, with the background of the sprouting gardens awaiting future work, and slightly influenced by the magic of the [song]. We must also bear in mind the

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<sup>3</sup>cvuc-cm>Nkambe-communes et villes unies du cameroun.

sociological context of private ownership, the sociable function and the cultural role of the amusing [song]. All these elements are equally relevant; all must be studied as well as the text. The [songs] live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish, he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality. (Okpewho, 1990, p.1)

Generally, songs to the Wimbum refer to chants or poems which are sung either by an individual or a group of people with or without musical instruments. In the Mbumland, every event occasions a song and the event pre-conditions the type of song to be sung as observed by Finnegan (1970, p.247) when she says: *We sing when we fight, we sing when we work, we sing when a child is born, we sing when death takes its toll.* To Bole Butake, a song or a poem is the most:

. . . basic and profuse form of emotive expression in African societies. The [Mbum man] manifests his feelings through the outburst of song when he loves and when he hates, when he works and when he plays, when he is at peace and when he fights, when a child is born and when death takes its toll. The song then is the lifeline of a [Mbum man]; and he learns the art of [singing] because he is born and bred in a society which recognises that poetic form is, emotionally, most expressive of the human predicament. (Butake, 1978, p.138)

By inference, therefore, different types of songs among which is the funeral song exist in Mbumland based on occasion which further highlights the worldview of the Wimbum. The Wimbum hold that the dead become ancestors who return to the human world spiritually in order to continue to live with and influence the world of the living. In line with Mbiti's observation, the Wimbum believe that the ancestral world is in fact geographically here and separated from the human world only by virtue of being invisible to human beings. Like most of black Africa, the Wimbum strive to maintain this relationship *chiefly through libation, the offering of food and other items, prayers and observation of proper rites towards the departed or adherence to instructions from them* (Butake, 1978, p.49). To Wimbum, life is a continuous process from birth to death and beyond. Consequently, when a child is born, or when a man dies, there are celebrations. There is feasting at birth because a new soul has come to life while, there is drinking, eating and thanksgiving at death in order to celebrate the end of a cycle and to wish the departed a successful journey into the ancestral world. Among the Wimbum, birth and death are seen as gateways into life or into another level of existence respectively. To John Mbiti:

. . . birth is the first rhythm of a new generation and the rites of birth are performed in order to make the child a corporate and social being. Initiation rites continue that process, and make him a mature, responsible and active member of the society. Marriage makes him a creative and reproductive being, linking him with both the departed and the generations to come. Finally, comes death . . . the most disrupting phenomenon of all. (1982, p.149)

The Wimbun see death as a natural process that links the human and the ancestral worlds. This process has with it positive and negative implications. As explained by Doh, physical death to the Bamenda Grassfieldlanders:

. . . is primarily perceived as an unfortunate end to human life which brings about pain, disappointment, and suffering to those left behind by the deceased. But death is also looked at in a more positive light as a necessary end which cannot be avoided. (1990, p.17)

Death to the Wimbun is a bad thing because its visitation creates socio-cultural cataclysm, disrupts and violently disorders the social psyche of the entire community especially with the immediate relatives such as wives, husbands, children and parents.

The Bamenda Grassfieldlanders in general and the Wimbun in particular dread and hate death because of its mysterious and unsympathetic nature. Apart from disrupting the peace of the community, death renders the old and the young left behind by the deceased, helpless. Once more, Doh comments that death:

. . . like no other conqueror, reduces both the deceased and the bereaved to the level of total helplessness as the former lies in state, no better than a piece of furniture, while those bereaved robbed of pride, shame and all pretence, weep like infants. (1990, p.79)

At times, death is considered a blessing to the bereaved among the Wimbun especially when the deceased had attained full life. In this case, the visitation of death enables them to send messages to their ancestors in the spirit world. This is because a family to the Wimbun comprises of those who are dead, the living and countless who are still to be born. The departure of a member of the family especially when the individual had lived a full life is therefore seen not as his complete annihilation, but as a major change in his physical body. In fact, he remains a full member of the family. This explains why in an attempt to fill the vacuum created by the departure of a member of the society, the Wimbun name children after some of their departed family members. This is the case with deceased family members who were good and had achieved much for their families. The contrary applies to the dead who had lived as social deviants.

Death to the Wimbum must have a cause except for people who have lived beyond a certain number of years or have attained full life. When people die young, it is believed that they might have violated some of the societal norms and consequently have been punished by the deities of the ancestors. Death by car accident or by a stroke of lightning, despite the apparent 'natural' characteristics of the cases, is still looked upon with some suspicion because as according to Mbiti:

. . . although death is acknowledged as having come into the world and remained there ever since, it is unnatural and preventable at personal level because it is always caused by another agent. If that agent did not cause it, then the individual would not die. Such is the logic and such is the philosophy concerning the immediate functioning of death in [the Mbumland]. (1982, p.16)

Death is announced among the Wimbum variously depending on the status of the deceased. The death or "bvubvu" of a chief for examples, is announced through the use of gun firing in the palace in spite of the apparent awareness of the death by the villagers through gossip. With ordinary people, idiophones, sounds of laments and drums are used to signal the departure of a member of the society. With the coming of Christianity, church bells are used to announced the deaths of Christian faithful.

The time of announcing death is determined by the social status of the departed. With chiefs and titleholders, the announcement is made several days after their death and burial. This is usually meant to complete burial rites without interrupting the calm and solemnity that surround the exercise which are opened only to few title men and quarter heads. In circumstances of ordinary people, the announcement is made immediately they die. In this case, people abandon whatever they are doing and leave for the bereaved compound to participate in the mourning. Mourning therefore is a communal activity involving the entire community.

The duration of mourning depends on the status of the deceased. The mourning of men takes three days and that of the women takes four days. This is because it is believed that men cover the long distance within a shorter time to arrive the ancestral world than the women who are by nature considered to be weak and slow.

#### **4 - Theatricalising the Wimbum Funeral Songs.**

Theatre simply put, is a corroborative form of fine art that uses live performers representing an experience before a live audience in a specific place. The performers

communicate the experience through a combination of gesture, speech, song, music and dance. Thus, a Wimbun funeral song as a kind of musical theatre that combines songs, spoken dialogue, acting and dance with the dramatic goal of evoking genuine emotions. In the Wimbun funeral songs, elements of gun firing are used during specific ceremonies like the case of a community notable to enhance the physicality, presence and immediacy of the experience. With these funeral songs, performance is integral and plays an important part in its complete realization because Wimbun funeral songs as a piece of any orature will remain dead or lifeless if not performed.

Among the Wimbun, every man or woman is bound to participate in funeral and “cry-die” activities which involve the singing as one of the major activities as these activities encourage group solidarity. The funeral songs are sung by non-professionals both men and women, although women dominate.

In fact, the composition and singing of funeral songs among the wimbun does not provide space for professionalism. Considering that these songs comprise wailing, sobbing and weeping which are common with women, Wimbun women are mostly associated with funeral songs. During funerals for example, while the men are occupied with transporting and laying-in-state of the corpse, digging of the grave and lowering of the casket, women regroup beside the house, the corpse or the grave and sing funeral songs. These women who spontaneously compose these songs draw on their own resources and originality to express and evoke the emotions they feel. Based on the spontaneity of their compositions and as Nol Alembong maintains, funeral songs:

. . . are topical and ephemeral. That is, they are composed at the spur of the moment, depending on the status of the dead person, and consequently are not likely to be used on another occasion exactly as used previously. The same [funeral song] may be used on different occasions but the words and motifs in it will change each time it is used. (2011, p.102)

The few women who attempt to withstand the grief caused by death in order to prepare food for mourners are heard, once in a while, singing funeral songs either consciously or unconsciously. Ruth Finnegan expressing the idea that singing of funeral songs is associated with women holds that:

. . . the fact that these songs often involve wailing, sobbing, and weeping makes them particularly suitable for women for in Africa as elsewhere, such activities are

considered typically female. Also common are laments sung by a chorus of women, sometimes led by one soloist . . . (1970, p.156)

Although men also sing funeral songs, they hardly compose funeral songs spontaneously as women do. Rather, they sing funeral songs that are accompanied by musical instruments and dancing, and which were composed by their great grandfathers with slight modifications made over the years. Like the Bajou women of Ghana, and as indicated by Arlo Nimmo, the Wimbum women break into singing funeral songs:

. . . as soon death is learned. [They] break into wailing funeral songs like chant, with other members . . . They crowd around and within the death boat while the deceased is wrapped in a shroud of white cloth. From the time of death to burial, the women wail their mournful refrain while men attend to other funeral business. (1976, p.53)

During funeral performances of older people and as far as costume is concerned, men usually take off their caps except title holders, chiefs and quarter heads. Women tie their head scarves round their waists and leave their hair unkempt as well as go about bare-footed. Performers related to the deceased move further to powder their heads and their faces with wood-ash or cornflour to identify with the departed. It is worth remarking that the grief of a Wimbum funeral song performer can be conveyed not only by what he sings, but also through his dresses and accompanying gestures. Emphasizing the importance of the attire of mourners during funerals, Ruth Finnegan posits that the grief of a:

. . . funeral song singer can be conveyed not only by a verbal evocation of mood but also by the dress, accoutrements or observed bearing of the performer. This visual aspect is sometimes taken even further than gestures and dramatic bodily movement and is expressed in the form of a dance, often joined by the members of the audience [chorus]. (1970, p.5)

From the above, we can establish that the attire of singers of Wimbum funeral songs is of prime importance in the transmission of the intended message. Generally, it is expected that the mourners-performers dress in a manner to carry home the message that they are bereaved.

While singing funeral songs and sitting on the floor, Wimbum funeral song performers stretch forward their legs once in a while, hit the earth with their legs and hands in a rhythmic manner. Others touch the corpse while at the same time placing their hands on the chest, cheeks or forehead of the deceased in order to express surprise in case of sudden death as well as to ascertain that the deceased is really dead. Other women place their hands on their heads or fall onto the ground and roll to different directions within the



yard. Other performers roll towards dug graves expressing the wish to be buried with the departed. Some performers, who cannot move close to the grave or corpse due either to lack of space or courage or, are pregnant women, demonstrate their grief through according to Kashim; *voice modulations, facial twists, dramatic body movement like jumping, body side twists, elbow edging, rhythmic leg flexing. . .*" (1989, p.95).

As compared to pre-burial performances, post-burial performances are done with lesser solemnity and lesser intensity of sorrow. Usually, these performances take place immediately after burial or after a considerable period of time to enable the family directly concerned to make provisions for entertainment or perform ritual rites as the case may be. During these post-burials or "cry-dies" or "rukwi" as they are usually called in Limbum, the mood of Wimbum funeral song performers usual change from one of bitterness to that of gentle smiles. When the deceased had attained full life, the occasion becomes elaborate with a variety of dances and performers. Funeral songs sung during this time as rightly pointed out by Nol Alembong, are full of praises to the deceased and the acceptance of death as an inevitable passage. Unlike during pre-burial performances when the performers sit on the floor and hit the ground with their legs and hands, in post-burial performances or "cry-dies", the performers dance to tones played by a group of energetic youths. At times, the performers who try to win over and maintain the interest of susceptible audience, pair up with performers of the opposite sex. However, in some performances, the opposite sex is not allowed to participate in the dancing process. This is the case with performances of the male cults. During the "cry-die" of an aged woman, the performers who are usually women dance in a circle while two women perform within the circle. These women improvise a tug-of-war as the performers dance round the grave of the departed with a locally woven basket called 'nkoh' carried up-side-down as a confirmation of the departure of the deceased. Moreover, the performers' manner of lamentation and mode as well as their accompanying gestures and attire and the theatrical elements of either dancing or rolling on the ground and the reaction of the audience culminate in bringing forth the originality of Wimbum funeral songs as a form of non-normative theatre that establishes its own unique norms in performance.

With respect to form, a Wimbum funeral song may be chanted by one mourner. In some cases, it may take the antiphonal form wherein, there is an interaction between the lead

mourner and the rest of the group. During the “cry-die” of an elderly male, many dance groups like the “Fuh”, “Samba” among others honour the occasion. With cult dances, performers dance while standing in order of hierarchy. While dancing, they make gestures like nodding of heads, shaking of the body especially the buttocks and stretching forward of legs and hands. The pace of the song and dance is determined by the rhythm of drums because drumming dictates the tempo of the performance. Hence the rhythms of the drums may either slow down, or quicken depending on the movement of the dance or, their patterns may indicate a change in the movement.

As a form of popular theatre, Wimbum funeral songs sung during post-burial performances or “cry-dies” are usually songs that are known to the entire community. They are mostly the choral ones and have a set form repeated more or less exactly in all “cry-dies” of certain categories of people. Unlike pre-burial songs, post-burial songs are subtle in tone because death is seen almost as a foregone process to the deceased during this time. In this instance, mourning becomes a heart-soothing ceremony.

The Wimbum funeral songs as earlier indicated take the antiphonal and the chant forms. On the one hand, the antiphonal style calls for the participation of more than one person and involves the soloist and the chorus:

**Soloist:** I came into this world empty handed, and would go away from it empty handed

**Chorus:** I came into this world empty handed, and would go away from it empty handed

**Soloist:** I came into this world empty handed, and would go away from it empty handed

**Chorus:** I came into this world empty handed, and would go away from it empty handed

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The soloist is in charge of intoning the songs while the chorus and sometimes the audience which in some cases parts of the chorus do respond to the soloist. In fact, the occasion is solemn and the tone emphasises the emptiness of human life and human endeavours.

It is worth noting that the manner of actualisation of funeral songs gives the performer time to reflect on the words, sounds, and ideas and hence enables him to adjust, add, repeat or embellish in the realisation process. This manner also gives the soloist the time to prepare his/her next line and hence, provides for stamina, pitch and good performance.

Generally, Wimbum funeral songs sung in the antiphonal style and accompanied by drums and rattles possess a relatively fast and strict rhythm so as to maintain the performance live and render it more theatrical and captivating. The rhythmic stamping of the feet or the throb of the drums are capable of weeping up folks into a frenzy and thereby, showing the communal nature of Wimbum funeral songs. Although the instruments may be many, the soloists of Wimbum funeral songs often identify with the principal drum in order to maintain coordination of the entire performance. Thus, highlighting the role of the drum and the dance as significant non-verbal elements in Wimbum rhythm that by themselves alone can produce stirring theatrical effects. This is because any alternation of either the singing or drumming rhythm may disrupt the overall effect and hence, results in the total breakdown of the whole performance. In fact, the drumming and the dancing are important elements in Wimbum funeral songs.

The role of the soloist in choral funeral songs cannot be over emphasized as he brings more life into the performance by invoking sorrow or sympathy through his ability to manipulate his pitch, dancing style, facial expressions and gestures to suit the occasion.

Commenting on the antiphonal forms of songs in Africa, Finnegan points out that:

. . . songs in Africa are very frequently in antiphonal form. That is, there is response from some kind of soloist and chorus, and the song depends on alternation between the two parts. The soloist is crucial. It is he who decides on the song and when it should start and more important, he can introduce variations on basic theme of the song. In other cases, the soloist has complete scope to improvise his part of the verse as he chooses a part perhaps from the very first line. (1970, p.111)

As a stylistic device, the soloist uses aposiopesis which consists of leaving utterances and utterances unfinished thereby, creating suspense and obliging the chorus/audience to form or provide conclusions as the case may be. The use of aposiopesis engages the audience

to actively participate in the performance by way of providing multitude of conclusions thereby highlighting the community-based nature of funeral songs among the Wimbum. As a community-based exercise, the soloist uses repetition of words, phrases of whole lines sandwiched with hyperboles in a relatively free rhythm and in a language that is down to earth and drawn from the community but without being simplistic.

Oh my giver, my god, my god  
 Oh my mother, you deceived me oo  
 Ndimbe my father oo, you deceived me oo  
 Oh death, you have overcome the world oo  
 You have abandoned me in the middle of the sea oo? To go where eeh?  
 Oh my god, oh my shelter, oh my giver  
 Oh you called me because you were traveling?  
 Oh my god, without permitting me to stay with you all  
 Ndimbe, where will I go to?  
 Oh death confuses, where do I go from here?  
 My people, does any person end here on earth?  
 My people, does any anyone end here on earth?  
 Father went to the land of our ancestors  
 When you reach there, greet everyone on our behalf  
 Tell them to cater for us.

The dominant device used in the song is repetition. Repetition does not only reiterate the theme or the main idea which runs through the song but more importantly, it is used to draw the attention of mourners-audience which sometimes results in sudden outbursts of more dirges. The repetition of phrases highlights the perception of death as a destroyer while at the same time death is seen as an agent of transformation to a higher level of existence in the company of the interceding ancestors. The repetition of the idea of traveling emphasises the idea that death is a channel through which a person can attain beatification to be able to intercede for the living. Furthermore, repetition helps the individuals to understand the intended message and enables them to retain the repeated even lines after the ceremony. To Olatunji, repetition:

. . . is used to emphasise and intensify the theme of the repeated sentences. Through reiteration, the audience is made to pay attention to the content of the sentences repeated, or the target of the sentence is made more forcefully aware of the desires of the speaker. (1984, p.19)

Still, praise appellations, kinship and kingship terms, and terms of endearment are usually used in Wimbum funeral songs. This is meant to highlight the deceased's personal qualities so as to show the concern for the departed and the high sense of loss. The deceased is referred to as a god, father, provider, shelter etc. as a way to show the

communal grief caused by dead. The emotional touch in the funerals is further attained through the use of ideophones, juxtapositions, comparisons and exaggerations and as Nol Alembong asserts:

Dirges may be direct reference to the deceased. He or she is specifically addressed and praised. In this respect, the qualities of the deceased are often dealt on. This is often in conjunction with a sense of affliction on those who are still mourning. (2011, p.103)

As opposed to the antiphonal form, the chant form of Wimbum funeral songs involves a single person who determines the pace, rhythm, rhyme scheme, length and the theme of the song. The performers of chant form of Wimbum funeral songs usually draw the attention of the audience through their ability to vary their pitch and the accompanying gestures. In this case, attention is focused on the individual artist who exhibits his skills and artistry on his own and occupies the centre stage as he is the prime mover of the occasion. Among the Wimbum, performers of chant form of funeral songs are usually aged people who are believed to be verse with the Wimbum concept of death and its spiritual, philosophical and cultural implications. This group of performers are always treated with a lot of reverence because they are considered to represent the tribe's archive. In the following chant, the performer uses rhetorical questions as a literary technique to draw the community attention to ponder on death as a phenomenal occurrence in the society:

Oh what is it? O o o people here what is it? O o o people here o, what is it?

How is it? Ha ha ha what is it?

Oh what is it? O o o people of Ndimbe household what is it? O o o people of this world o o o, what is it? How is it ha ha ha what is it?

And n n n n the mother o. is dead oo

O o o my father is gone – oh my mother

I'm an orphan, a complete orphan now o o o o o o

My children, our children will soon become orphans as well o o o

Oh what is it? Orphans we're all o o o.

Among the Wimbum, aspects of folklore are expected to be known by almost everybody of the community. The use of rhetorical questions in the above example only goes to remind the people of the realities they know. The concluding statement “orphans we're all o o o”, tells of the Wimbum's philosophy of life on earth as being transient.

In terms of structure, there is no standard form in Wimbum funeral songs. This is because the length or number of lines of a song is determined by the soloist, number of performers, the subject matter or the form (antiphonal or chant) of the performance. Funeral songs in the antiphonal style which are accompanied by drums and rattles will have many lines with a lengthy size. This is because individual performers attempt to march the pace of the music with the words or the other musical instruments which sum up to make for the whole performance process. In this light, Zurmi Idi observes that the song . . . *may form lines in one syllable or fifty syllables depending on his virtuosity in rapid speech and his subtlety in weaving the rhythm of his language around those of the instruments* (1981, p.91).

The audience of Wimbum funeral songs is non-exclusive and constitutes an integral part of the whole performance because this audience usually encourages or discourages the performers during performances. The audience may react through hand-clapping, shedding of tears in silence, singing of new funeral songs, or wiping-off tears from performers' cheeks. When the audience responds spontaneously to a song intoned by the soloist, the soloist or lead performer becomes inspired and modifies as well as improves on his intoning prowess. The Wimbum audience therefore according to *Tala Kashim*:

Maintains a controlling interest in the action as watch-dogs, critics and learners and in this capacity participates on a profoundly psychological level. In effect, therefore, the audience demands and is given the opportunity to share in the [sorrows] of the occasion while ensuring that creative standards are maintained and avenues for promoting continuity opened. In such a situation it will be difficult not to call the audience participants in the sense of being emotionally involved, particularly in their conscious concern for fundamental artistic values that regulate performance. (1989, p.14)

In fact, the audience acts as a critical school by way of their reactions towards the performance thus, helping to make the performance a complete experience. Consequently, the consciousness of the performers of the presence of a critical audience plays a great role in shaping and determining their performance. Indeed, when the performers know that they are being assessed, they will engage certain devices that will ensure a steady flow of their presentation thereby, saving them the embarrassment of awkward breaks in their performances. Funeral songs among the Wimbum are a communal property but it is the individual's range of imagination, creativity and improvisation that gives it its theatricality.

### **5- Perspectives of Wimbun Funeral Songs.**

In a world that is undergoing rapid mutations with opposing attitudes towards individuals and groups and, giving a new impetus and vigour albeit negatively where Christianity and self-interest is on the ascendancy vis-à-vis traditional religion, funeral songs among the Wimbun have been able to bridge the gaps between these opposing forces by way of integrating Christian songs in its corpus thereby, making coexistence in a multicultural context a realisable experience. This feature contrasts very much with the modern individualistic spirit that has gripped contemporary Cameroonian-African society. If other aspects of our lives were approached with the same zeal and communal understanding as funeral songs in the Mbumland, most if not all extremist and intolerant tendencies that have plagued our society today will be eroded and, in their place, virtues of tolerance which are vital ingredients in the construction of a solid social fabric will gradually enhance genuine development and happiness for the greater majority.

### **6- Conclusion.**

From the foregone, it could be concluded that even though Wimbun funeral songs do not particularly align to any critical school, they are theatrically satisfying by way of their performances and the overall worldview that are contained therein. In the heat of the performances of funeral songs among the Wimbun, we see vestiges of Wimbun-African communal spirit still in force where one man's burden is collectively borne by all and sundry as the whole community will stand up as one when death strikes or as in the case of a "cry-die".

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