

## THE ABANYOLE DIRGE: “ESCORTING” THE DEAD WITH SONG AND DANCE

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**Abstract:** Song and dance pervades the life and the world of the Abanyole. When they are sad, they sing; when they are happy, they sing; when a child is born, they sing and dance and when one dies, they also sing and dance. So strong is the singing and dancing tradition in this community that it can be described as lubricating oil that the Abanyole use on their wheel of life as they transact different facets of their being. In this article, I examine the role of song and dance in a funeral context among the Abanyole of the Western Province of Kenya. The discussion is focused on traditional Abanyole songs. I make this distinction because Christian songs are also sung at funerals in Bunyore. Specifically, performances by individual mourners and night performances at funerals will be discussed, guided by the following questions: Who performs? When do the performances take place? What is the structure of the performance? What is the meaning of the performances within the funeral context? I have utilized the Infracultural Model in Folklore Analysis as the conceptual-analytical framework for this article. This model emphasises the interpretation of words and actions within specific cultural contexts. This essentially means that the meanings of the words and actions can only be located within the perceptions of the studied community. Underlying this model is a key concern that researchers should participate in the life of the communities, being a sound basis for learning, experiencing and documenting the beliefs, expectations, fears and perceptions of the communities studied.

**Key words:** Abanyole, African folklore, dirge, Infracultural Model in Folklore Analysis, funerary rituals

### INTRODUCTION

The Abanyole, like many other African communities, believe that death is not the end of human life. They look at death as an opening to another life, which is generally referred to in literature as life after death (Roscoe 1923, Fortes & Dieterlen 1965, Goody 1962, Mbiti 1969, Adeyemo 1979, Uchendu 1965, Gehman 1999). Mbiti clearly brings out this view

*Death is conceived as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. He moves on to join the company of the departed, and the only*

*major change is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of Existence.* (Mbiti 1969)

The Abanyole believe that the spirit of the dead person advances to join the spirits of the other departed members of the community, which congregate in *emakombe*, the world of spirits (Alembi 2002: 143). This view of life and death leads to an approach to funerals and burial that stresses the idea of a journey to *emakombe*, which essentially means that death is a rite of passage. The funeral and burial are looked at as a process of seeing off the dead to their next abode in *emakombe*. This explains why in a funeral context the mourners, as they wail, sing, and dance, are heard saying *khekhukobanga omukhana wefwe* ('we are now escorting our sister') or *kobe papa nomulembe* ('escorting dad in peace'). Escorting the dead is obligatory and everybody must be involved. Those not involved in wailing or singing or dancing one way or the other are believed to kill the deceased by witchcraft. Therefore, escorting the dead is a very serious matter.

The Abanyole extensively use song and dance in escorting the dead to *emakombe*. A closer analysis of the singing and dancing reveals that the two are not just about death. They also reveal a lot about what the Abanyole think about life and death. This paper examines how the performance of oral funeral poetry contributes to fulfilling the role of escorting the dead among the Abanyole. The paper specifically analyses elements of context, sound, paraphernalia, costumes and make-up and how they help in our understanding of the concept of "escorting the dead".

## **RESEARCH METHODS AND THEORETICAL BASIS**

This paper is based on information derived from a synthesis of studies and data gathered from interviews and observations for my doctoral dissertation, which I defended at the University of Helsinki in October 2002. In-depth interviews were conducted with members of the sample community. In addition, I took part in funeral sessions and made observations and engaged members of the community in discussion on the theme of research. An initial draft of the research was shared and discussed with members of the sample community at an interactive forum in Ekwanda Primary School in December 2001. I found the interactive approach to be quite productive for gathering and interpreting data and strengthening the relationship between members of the community as well as between the researcher and the community.

The theoretical basis for this approach is people-centred. The theoretical foundation, developed by the author, is called the Infracultural Model in Folklore Analysis (Alembi 2002). The key elements of this model are:

- (a) The need for insider analysis and interpretation of works of art and a given reality of a community;
- (b) Interpretation of oral texts within their cultural contexts (I acknowledge the fact that oral texts are deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of the performer);
- (c) Examining narrative patterns beyond mere concern with stylistic features to elucidate the theme of study (Harvilahti 1998: 194);
- (d) Deep involvement in dialogue and interaction to understand the structural and underlying issues surrounding a phenomenon and a community;
- (e) Significance of the performance and given meaning. The assigning of meaning to oral texts is defined by the culture and traditions of the performer and audience;
- (f) Co-operative entry into the performance arena by the performer, audience and folklorist so that the focused way of speaking would become a focused way of meaning.

It is through the equal and cooperative entry into the arena that the text or performance becomes a fully experienced event (Foley 1995).

I strongly recommend this methodological and theoretical approach in studies of African folklore because they generate deeper insights into single phenomena.

## **ACQUISITION OF ORAL FUNERAL POETRY SKILLS**

Funerals are characterized by deep feelings that are partly expressed through poetry. Thus, poetry performances become useful avenues to let out pent emotions that could easily be harmful to health of the bereaved. Funerals are also characterized by feelings of joy that are expressed through poetry. Contrary to what Finnegan (1970) records in a general discussion on elegiac poetry in Africa, claiming that wailing and singing is solely a characteristic of feminine mourning, all members of an Abanyole community wail and sing at a funeral – these are the popular ways of “escorting” the dead to *emakombe*, the world of spirits.

The Abanyole perceive *emakombe* as the external home of rest and therefore it is generally accepted as a favourable abode. The place is so far away from the living and the person who has just died, yet so near that spirits from there can reach the world of the living in an instant. This explains why the dead has to be prepared for this long journey. The preparation is manifest in washing the dead before the burial and burying the dead with certain items that the person may need on the way to *emakombe*.

*Emakombe* is shrouded in mystery: several versions have been proposed attempting to locate it. Some people say the place is somewhere in the sky, others believe that it is located in the bowels of the earth; yet others claim that *emakombe* is in a space above the deceased's homestead. One thing is clear, though: *emakombe* exists and only for the benevolent spirits. The spirits of the dead who never go to *emakombe* are believed to remain in forests and valleys in torment, even crying because they are evil.

If everybody in Bunyore is involved in oral funeral poetry performances, how is this art learnt? As among the Yemen people (Caton 1990: 51), there is no formal instruction of this art among the Abanyole, which is quite different from the situation in medieval Ireland, where instructions in verse composition were highly formal (Williams 1971: 85–135). Since early childhood, the Abanyole observe and participate in oral funeral poetry performances. As a result, they naturally develop into effective mourners. One category of the performance, called *okhukoma*, calls for high individuality. This category is led by experts in the art. Thus, it is a more organized and specialized part of the larger body of oral funeral poetry performances. Nevertheless, the training of the artists, even in this sector, is still informal.

## PHASES IN THE MOURNING PROCESS

### **(a) Mourning on the day a person dies and on subsequent days before the burial**

Immediately upon the occurrence of death, men, women and children burst into wailing and singing. This serves as an announcement that death has occurred. As neighbours and passers-by hear the commotion, they turn up to see and join in until eventually the homestead is filled with people mourning and attending to funeral matters. Women wail as they sing and move in and out of the house where the deceased lies before being moved out into a tent, specially

made for this occasion. They also sing and move around the house. As they do this, they place their hands alternately on their heads, back and across their bellies as an expression of intense sorrow and loss.

When the body is lying in state in the tent, women wail and sing around it while their hands remain in the said position. Sometimes, as they mourn, they carry along items, such as clothes belonging to the deceased and his or her photograph. These items remind them of the good times they had with the deceased while he or she was still alive. The actions of the female mourners express their intense emotions. Similar emotions are reported in Nenola-Kallio's (1982: 22) study of Ingrian laments.

As soon as death is announced, all the men who were not present arrive on the scene, often carrying sticks or clubs, which they use to strike the ground as they wail and chant. This is a symbolic action of cursing death for its cruelty. By bearing arms, they also symbolically make a physical threat to death. Death is to them an enemy that must be fought with.

The major difference between the male and female performances is that women sing while men chant. Another difference lies in the details of performance. Men carry sticks and clubs as they chant while women sing as their hands are folded on their heads, backs or across their bellies. While among the Abanyole oral funeral poems are performed by everybody in the community, among the Ingrians they basically belong to women's tradition, women's culture (Nenola-Kallio 1982: 19).

This stage of mourning goes on for some days even after the burial, although its intensity will gradually diminish. As relatives and friends continue to arrive for the funeral, there are occasional sessions of intense mourning and wailing. The singing, wailing and chanting serve important psychological and social functions. Psychologically, they provide emotional support to the bereaved family, who must know that they are not alone in their grief. Socially, therefore, mourners express solidarity with the bereaved family. At the individual level, singing, wailing and chanting help in releasing tension and venting out emotions which, if suppressed, could be more insalubrious to the mourners. A mourner may develop complications, such as heart-attack or hypertension. Thus, the Abanyole do not put up these performances just for fun.

### **(b) Night performances**

Night performances are held mainly on the eve of the burial, although for prominent people, such as members of Parliament, wealthy business people,

chiefs and other leading figures in the area, such performances may take place for the entire period during which the body remains in state.

The performers arrive, singing and dancing in the compound where the deceased is lying in state. They trot straight into the tent in which the body is lying and perform there for a while. Normally, as soon as they get to the tent, the performers strike a slow tune that signifies their feeling of loss as they pay their last respects to the deceased. This tune is played for a few minutes without any dancing.

They then raise the tempo as they move out of the tent to dance around it with renewed energy. This symbolizes the idea that death does not mark the end of life. If anything, it is the beginning of a new life both for the deceased and for the living. The deceased will continue to live in the world of spirits while the living must produce more children to replace him or her who has now joined the ranks of the living dead (Mbiti 1969: 152). It must be added that through the young people who perform these rites, the Abanyole emphasize the fact that a death does not mean the end of the society. This inevitably brightens the mood as everybody, young and old, joins in the dancing. It is no longer a gloomy situation but rather a celebration.

After making a few circuits around the tent, they choose an appropriate space in the front yard and continue singing and dancing in an even greater frenzy, adapting the old songs to suit the new situation. They usually sing about the deceased: his or her virtues, relatives, friends and the village and rarely refer to his or her vices. It is important to bear in mind that once dead, the Abanyole acquire a higher status. They become spirits and the living dare not besmirch them for fear that it will bring the wrath of the spirits on their heads. Sometimes, the songs' lyrics reduce the family members to tears. Sometimes, the family and friends become so inspired that they reward the performers with food, money and alcohol. The performers and the audience stop dancing from time to time when they want to demonstrate their prowess. For example, one may stop dancing and start boasting

<i>Nise Ja Uganda</i>	I am a man from Uganda
<i>Mbullanga Orundu rundi</i>	I hear there are some useless people
<i>Ruli Hano</i>	here
<i>Orwelangaa elirailio</i>	Who use this name
<i>Nyenyanga rulole hano esaino</i>	I want to see them here now.

There will be a moment of silence. If nobody steps forward, the performer on the floor may continue:

<i>Ilio silli elira litoro tawe</i>	That's not a simple name
<i>Ndanyakhana okhulinyola</i>	I've suffered for it
<i>Rakhaula imbwa yoyosi</i>	No "dog" whatsoever
<i>Niyelanganga elira ilio tawe</i>	Should call himself that
<i>Runanga munyembele</i>	I would like you to sing for me
<i>Olwembo ollayi</i>	A good song
<i>Nelutsie khu</i>	It is dedicated to:
<i>Eyasulwe nali Emakunda</i>	Star from Emakunda
<i>Gagi nali Ebuyalu</i>	Gagi from Ebuyalu
<i>Jebino nali Esitsimi</i>	Jebino from Esitsimi
<i>Olukanga nali Mukhalakhala</i>	Olukanga from Mukhalakhala
<i>Rasia nali Esitsimi</i>	Rasia from Esitismi

He will then drop five or ten shillings in the box guitar. Other performers are curious to know how much he is contributing, so he must announce it for all to hear. As soon as the announcement has been made, the guitarist who is doubling as the soloist starts singing the selected song. This may not, however, last long because soon, either a member of the crowd or another active performer will start boasting

<i>Nyakhanne mmakani mbu</i>	I am disturbed that
<i>Obukhana bunyala akhusinjisibwa</i>	This performance can be stopped
<i>Nende ebiingwa singa Ja Uganda</i>	By fools like Ja Uganda
<i>Khulwessilingi likhumi tsionyene</i>	For ten shillings only
<i>Khuinywe bosi abali hano</i>	For everybody who is present here
<i>Niwina oramanyile?</i>	Who does not know me?
<i>Umeme nilio elira liakhollanga</i>	Electricity is my performer's name
<i>Uyyie obulai amera kano:</i>	Listen carefully to these names:
<i>Kabala, Adijango, Msafiri,</i>	Kabala, Adijango, Msafiri,
<i>Khonje</i>	Khonje,
<i>Bebeto, Njuki, Stua nende Bidii</i>	Bebete, Njuki, and Stua
<i>Nyenyanga abandu yaba bose</i>	I want to see these people
<i>Hano bwangu</i>	Here immediately

The named persons move to the centre where space has been created for them. The performer then continues

<i>Omwami ompeni</i>	Mr. Bandleader
<i>Mbananga essilingi</i>	I am giving
<i>Likhumi nene tsirano</i>	Fifteen shillings
<i>Nyembele obusi</i>	Sing a song for me

<i>Abandu bali hano</i>	People who are here
<i>Bonyene nibo abetsa</i>	Are the only ones to
<i>Okhusina obukhana yibu</i>	Dance to this tune

He then drops fifteen shillings into the box guitar. The soloist strikes and sings the tune requested and a few people pick it up, dancing away with all their might. But this does not last long because somebody else will take up the challenge.

<i>Nise Ofiye</i>	I am the dead one
<i>Omukhana Wesitukho</i>	Daughter of Esitukho
<i>Ofiye siali omusino tawe</i>	The dead one is not a joke
<i>Buli mundu hano</i>	Everybody here
<i>Umanyile mbwo</i>	Knows that
<i>Ofiye niye ammondo</i>	The dead one is money
<i>Kata kenyakhanga</i>	In fact you should
<i>Munange Ofiye ammondo</i>	All call me Ofiye Money
<i>Omukhana Wesitukho</i>	Daughter of Esitukho
<i>Sikhunyala Okwikhala</i>	We cannot just sit in the cold
<i>mmbusindu</i>	
<i>Ne abandu batti babukula</i>	While few people dance
<i>obunkhana</i>	
<i>Suye akeno yako</i>	I say no to this
<i>Essilingi amakhumi kataru</i>	Here, thirty shillings
<i>Okhurula khu</i>	From
<i>Omukhana Ammondo</i>	Miss Money

At this point the crowd cheers wildly as she continues

<i>Bulimundu asine</i>	Everybody must dance
<i>Ompeni Khwenyanga khusine</i>	Mr. Bandleader, we want to dance
<i>Nikhubotokhana hango hano</i>	Round this home
<i>Nyenyanga Mbulle elira</i>	I want to hear the name
<i>Liomuchendi liullikhanga</i>	Of the deceased pronounced clearly
<i>Lekha etsikita</i>	Let the guitars
<i>Tsing'oma nende amanyanga</i>	Drums and shakers
<i>Biralanga elira ilio</i>	Clearly spell it
<i>Buli mundu okhwola aliulle</i>	Let everybody hear it
<i>Khutsie</i>	OK, let's go!

The performers will sing and dance round the home till some other person comes forward thus changing the course of the performance.



Clearly these night performances, like the Yemeni *Bālah* (Caton 1990: 79), are like a game. If performed to culturally accepted specifications, they are supposed to loosen tension and make the night an enjoyable one thus relieving the minds of family and friends of the deceased from the pain of bereavement. These night performers thus serve a very important psychological and social function. On this point, Nandwa observes

*At night, the wake keeping continues a kind of organized group of singers dance to entertain the deceased and his relatives. They take up the dirges that have been sung during the day and add new words to them. Today, they use guitars and organize a kind of local nightclub during these funeral celebrations and sing songs to entertain the people of the deceased.* (Nandwa 1976: 224)

## **OKHUKOMA PERFORMANCES AND ACCOMPANIMENTS**

**Okhukoma** is a category of the lyrical genre of funeral poetry performances that are put up only for the morally upright male members of the community, who have at least a son, in the morning of the day when the deceased is buried. Of all the genres of oral funeral performances, this is perhaps the most elaborate. In this aspect I disagree with Finnegan (1970: 147) when she notes that funeral performances in Africa are not particularly elaborate. Contrary also to what Finnegan observes about performers being unprofessional, lead artists in *okhukoma* are highly specialized and skilful.

*Okhukoma* dance is like a one-act play that is divided into four scenes: *okhuchesia*, *esilemba*, *okhuhuliana* and *likopo*.

**Okhuchesia** is the first scene of *okhukoma*. It starts at about six o'clock in the morning on the day when the deceased is buried. The performers dance gently as they are singing. They walk around the village, visiting places frequented by the deceased. Death thus cuts a person off from physical life and *okhuchesia* ('to walk somebody/something around') is aimed at taking the spirit of the deceased to bid farewell to his favourite places for the last time; henceforth, it will join the world of the living dead. After the performers have visited the deceased's favourite places, they start walking, then trotting, and finally running at full speed as in a battle charge, towards the home of the deceased. This scene is known as **esilemba**. As they run, they blow horns, sing, drum wildly and utter war cries.

When they enter the home, the widow of the deceased welcomes them if she had been faithful. However if she had ever been guilty of *okhulia tsimbeba*

(‘committing adultery’), it is believed that she would die on the spot if she tried to welcome the dancers.

Upon entering the compound, all singing stops. Horn blowers move to the centre of the compound and completely take over instrumentation while the dancers go wild as they run around the compound spearing the air and “defending” themselves. This scene is called *okhuhuliana* (‘moving blindly’). Commenting on this part of the performance, Nandwa notes

*They then entered the home with great force and treading upon anything before them. All children had to be removed from their way, for they could be trodden underfoot. If there were any crops growing in the home, they cut them down and destroy them completely. (Nandwa 1976: 222–223)*

Also

*They visit his farm and grazing land, then move to his compound brandishing spears, clubs and twigs. Here, they go berserk, running to all corners and cutting down plants. Completely worn out, they regroup at the centre of the compound, ready for the last scene. (Alembi 1993: 17)*

Important points regarding death can be noted in this third scene. The “war” in *okhuhuliana* is a fight with malevolent spirits which are believed to have caused the death of the deceased. These spirits must therefore be defeated and expelled from the compound for the bereaved family to feel safe and secure.

I have supported this point in the following: ... *the ritual is performed to drive evil spirits away from home for these same spirits have been responsible for the man’s death* (Alembi 1993: 17).

The slashing of the plants as the performers go through the motions of the dance is symbolic. It means life has temporarily come to an end but will resume as the plants regenerate. This shows that the Abanyole do not believe that death is the final end of human beings. They will live again in *emakombe*, the world of the living dead (Alembi 2002).

At another level, it means that society does not end with the death of an individual. Society, through procreation of its members, will continue to thrive.

The last scene of *okhukoma* is known as *likopo*. This is a very relaxed performance as the dancers are already exhausted after the energy-draining *okhuhuliana*. Traditionally, the dancers used to walk along the main road and footpaths near the deceased’s home as they were singing, paying their last respect before the burial. Today, the dancing is mainly done in the dead man’s compound.

In terms of musical accompaniments, the main instrument in an *okhukoma* performance is a horn. Two types of horns are used: the short horn called *essilipa* and the long one known as *olwika*. *Essilipa* is mainly used to spice the performance while the long horn is used for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is generally used to inform members of the community of the death of an adult member – male or female. In *okhukoma*, however, it is used to control the performers. In all the scenes of the performance, the long horn is used to regulate the movement of the dancers. For example, in *okhuchesia*, it is only used occasionally, while in *esilemba* it is frequently blown as people jog towards the home where the deceased is lying in state. In *okhuhuliana*, the blowing of the horn reaches its peak as the people run around the homestead. In *likopo* it subsides to an occasional blowing as the dancers move out of the homestead and walk calmly around the village, and now compound, singing. There are other instruments used in this performance. They include *omutindi* (small drum), big drums, jingles, sticks and fiddle. These instruments are not used on any other occasion. Therefore, whenever one is seen carrying any of them, people console the person and ask questions such as *kalaha, khemutsitsanga okhukoba wina?* ('Condolences! Who are you going to escort?'). And, depending on the quantity of the instruments, they may observe, *Lelo owamutsitsanga okhukoba netalanyi* ('Whoever you are going to escort today must be a lion'). The quantity of the instruments and even the number of the performers depends on the status of the deceased. Lion in this context is a symbol of authority or power. It means that whoever is going to be escorted must have been a powerful person.

### **COSTUME, MAKE-UP AND PARAPHERNALIA**

*Okhukoma* is an elaborate performance. Costumes, make-up and props are used for colour/spectacle and to attach importance to the ritual. The principal participants in this performance, the musicians and lead singer, dress differently from the other dancers. They wear shorts beneath sisal skirts, which are supposed to facilitate dancing. They also wear light tops, like vests and T-shirts, a band adorned with feathers around their heads and make-up of coloured soil or chalk. This assists in portraying their characters as *okhukoma* dancers. Some wear masks of leopard faces, which signify that the deceased was a warrior. They wear jingles around ankles, while the wearing of shoes is discouraged as it hampers footwork. Those who must wear shoes are encouraged to use sandals. The bulls, besides being adorned with twigs, wear around their necks bells, which jingle as they run.



**Figure 1.** *Evening in the marketplace.* Photo by Andres Kuperjanov (2001).

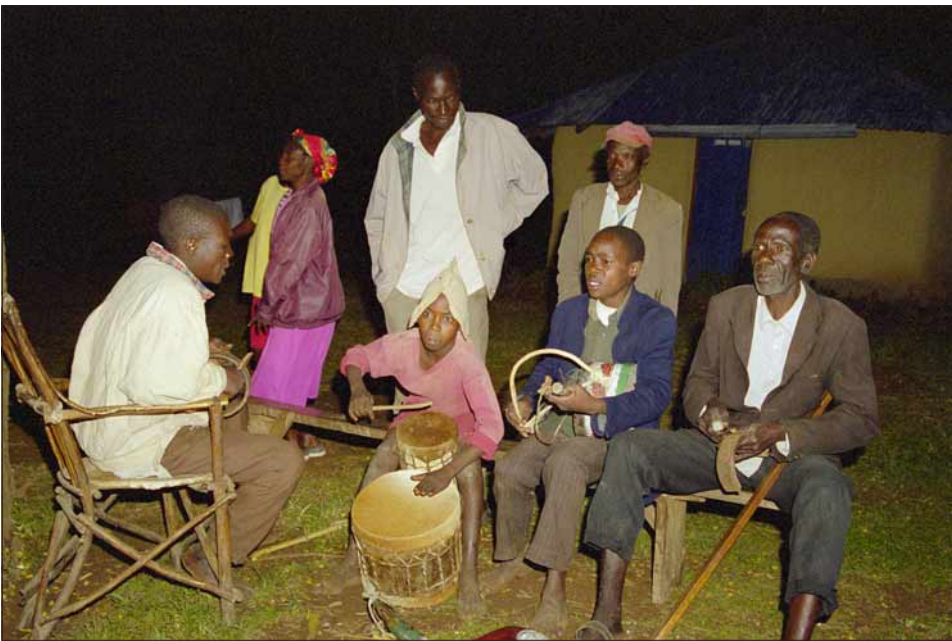


**Figure 2.** *Magnolia.* Photo by Andres Kuperjanov (2001).





*Figure 3. Lamenter and death wake. Photo by Andres Kuperjanov (2001).*



*Figure 4. Night Drummers at work. Photo by Andres Kuperjanov (2001).*

The dancers carry spears and shields and wield them as if in real battle. Costume, make-up and props are highly symbolic in this performance. If the dead person was a warrior, prominent farmer, landowner or businessman, the presentation is more elaborate with bright colours, more dancers, more bulls and more make-up. On the whole, a performance for a prominent person was richer, as if the community was aspiring to affluence. Writing on the importance of costumes and make-up, I have summarized the discussion as follows

*Costumes and make-up are worn for this performance. If the deceased was a warrior, most of the participants will wear war dress, comprising of a leopard skin to show the deceased was a fearless fighter who could even face a leopard, one of the fiercest animals of the jungle. Some might wear leopard face masks. They would also carry appropriate spears and shields. On the other hand, if the deceased was a rich landowner with many wives, children and cattle, they would dress accordingly for his okhukoma. (Alembi 1993: 17–18)*

The manner of dress of the performers therefore isolates *Abakomi*, the dancers, from any other villagers. Once one is seen in the costumes described above, other members of the community know that he is going to escort a dead person and they may observe, *Nelelo mweboele. Mutsitsanga akhukoba wina?* ('You are dressed up! Who are you escorting today?') If a dancer has elaborate costumes, which means that he is going to "escort" the spirit of a person of means, the members of the community may observe, *Nelelo mweboele! Owa-mutsitsanga okhukoba okhwola abe omundu wa bandu.* ('You are so dressed up today! Whoever you are escorting today must be a person of persons'.) 'Person of persons' means that this is not an ordinary member of the community, as the phrase is meant to create the image of power or affluence. They may also comment, *Nelelo mwefwalle mbwena? Mufwana abakobanga akhahunwa!* ('How are you dressed today? Looks like you are going to escort a young heifer!'). It is demeaning for a man to be referred to as a heifer. By calling a dead man *akhahunwa*, or heifer, members of the community are declaring him a failure and this must be reflected in the costumes that the *Abakomi* wear.

## CONCLUSION

In view of the foregoing, song and dance are important in the funeral context in Bunyore. Through them, this community not only bids farewell and escorts the spirits of the departed members but also communicates important messages about death and life.

Firstly, death is a rite of passage. Through the ritual, the community's members are reborn as spirits which must journey into *emakombe*, the space or world where the spirits of the dead members of this community congregate. Song and dance are therefore important in 'escorting' these spirits to their new abode.

Secondly, through death the life that one has lived is revealed. People who were rich are accorded respectable burial, while those who were poor are given less dignified burial. Subtly, members of the Abanyole society are encouraged to shun poverty and aspire to be affluent. These performances are therefore not just about death but also about life.

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