

Dangme Traditional Work Songs

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a descriptive analysis of the literary devices in Dangme traditional work songs. The Dangme people are known for their traditional industries, agricultural and native economic activities. These activities create the occasion for some sort of songs to be used. Their traditional work songs are used in contexts in which wearisome labour is involved. The songs are considered 'special purpose poetry' because they have some direct connection with particular occasions and actions. This paper analyses these traditional work songs and brings to bear the literary devices deployed in them as they accompany specific work(s). Data for this paper was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The data analysis is descriptive with much emphasis on the literary devices in the songs. It has been revealed that literary devices such as repetition, idiophones, parallelism and the like provide aesthetic and beautiful values to the work songs. This aids to soothe the workers' psychological and physical bodies in order to increase their efficiency and work output.

KEYWORDS: Dangme; Literary devices; Work; Songs

Introduction: The Dangme People and Their Work Songs

Aside songs being treated as a form of speech utterances from stylistic considerations, they can also be very important avenue of verbal communication, a medium for creative verbal expression which can reflect both personal and social experiences. Hence, they contain themes that revolve around events and matters of common interest and concern to the members of a community or social groups within it (Nketia, 1974)

Dangme people's, like many other people's, cultures and variety of languages, are known for their main traditional economy, crafts and industries. Dangme is a Kwa language that belongs to the Niger Congo family of languages. It is spoken in two regions in Ghana (Eastern and Greater Accra) mainly in the South-Eastern Ghana. The Dangme people inhabit the coastal area of the Greater Region, East of Accra and part of the Eastern region of Ghana. Its closest linguistic neighbours are Ga, Akan and Ewe. Dangme has seven main dialects, which are Ada, Nugo, Kpone, Gbugbla (Prampram), Osudoku, Se and Krobo (Yilo and Manya). Caesar (2012) citing Ameka and Dakubu (2008: 12) posits that there are several small communities east of the Volta Region that trace their origins to the

Dangmeland; most of them have shifted to Ewe as language of their daily life, but others have not. Patches of speakers are also found in Togo-Nyetoe and Gatsi.

Traditionally, the people of Dangme in the inlands (Krobo, Sɛ and Osudoku) are known for their farming, hunting, live stocking, trading and other native crafts and industries which include extractions of palm oil, blacksmith, pot-making, basket work and the manufacture of primitive soup, cosmetics and beads (see Huber 1993). More also, the people of Dangme who inhabit the coastal line are typically known for their fishing, farming, salt winning, weaving of mats, baskets and bags. All these traditional industries, agricultural and native economic activities provide the occasion for work songs and these occasions include almost all contexts in which hard and monotonous labour are involved; though there are variations in how they are used in different communities among the people of Dangme.



Figure 1. Some Dangme folks winning salt in the Ada Lagoon. (Photographs from the Ada Sorngor salt archives.)

There are co-operative songs for hoeing during farming, launching a boat, hauling-in fish nets, preparation of palm oil and salt winning. There

are domestic and solitary songs for women grinding corn or pounding palm fruits to produce palm oil, 'kokonte' (dried cassava), selling; there are gang songs for pulling trucks and canoes, and for miners. It is very common that manual workers mostly sing such songs to accompany their hard physical labour. Finnegan (2012: 224) explains that the sort of work that these songs accompany usually consists of routine tasks such as paddling, pounding, forging or hauling which are not in themselves regarded as glorious or romantic. But the work thus provides the occasion rather than the subject-matter, and the song depends on the rhythm of the work rather than an audience for its point of departure. These songs are extreme examples of 'special purpose' poetry in that they have a direct connection with a specific occasion and with action (see Finnegan 2012).



Figure 2. Some Dangme folks hoeing amidst singing. (Photograph by Jonathan Tanihu.)

These songs play a major role in the execution of these various works among the people of Dangme. They offer the workers with some sort of enlightenment, enjoyment and relaxation. They refill the workers or labourers with enthusiasm, vigor, mental and physical fitness to do more when they are strained from their daily routine or day to day activities. The rhythmic nature of the songs helps in encouraging the worker(s) to work harder, faster, and with much pleasure relieving them from weariness. Notwithstanding these importance, the Dangme work songs also comment on the way of life of the people in general, the character exhibition of the society, which are expressed on the subject-matters of drinking, love marriage, dancing, eating, family life, and others. This paper seeks to analyze these work songs by appreciating the various literary devices in them.

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Methodology

The data for this paper was collected from both primary and secondary sources. I collected the data from fisher folks, farmers, blacksmiths, traders and palm oil extractors through participant observations and unstructured interviews. I observe, and listen, before recording the songs. Others were also collected from books such as (Hugo, 1953). The data analysis is descriptive with much emphasis on the literary devices in the songs. The songs recorded are transcribed into Dangme before being translated into English.

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Literary Devices in Dangme Work Songs

Repetition

Repetition as seen by Okpewho (1992) and Saanchi (2002) is a strongly active device for verbal art form analysis. ‘It is a device that not only gives a touch of or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression but also serves certain practical purposes in overall organization of oral performance’ (Okpewho, 1992: 71). Agyekum (2013: 17) also posits that repetition is one of the most fundamental characteristic features of an oral literature that both carries an aesthetic and functional values to make an oral work (art) very beautiful for the people to enjoy. It actually provides certain practical purposes to the overall organization of the oral performance aside its touch of attractiveness. Repetition is somewhat a common perceivable structural device in Dangme work songs. The repetition comes in full or partial, i.e. sounds, syllables, lines and verses or full stanzas of the song may be repeated. Below is an extract that clearly indicates an instance of repetition in the Dangme work songs.

- | | | | |
|----|------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. | S: | <i>Nana lee-ee!</i> | Grandmother lee-e! |
| | C: | <i>Ma dʒe oo</i> | I will go |
| | S: | <i>Nana lee-ee!</i> | Grandmother lee-e! |
| | C: | <i>Ma dʒe oo</i> | I will go |
| | ALL: | <i>Ke i sa bɔsɔ</i> | If I extracted palm oil |
| | | <i>A hi mi ɣme</i> | I have not been given palm kernel |
| | C: | <i>Nana lee-ee!</i> | Grandmother lee-ee! |
| | S: | <i>Ma dʒe oo!</i> | I will go |

The song above is a palm oil extraction song. There is an alternation and repetition of two different phrases without variation. The first and second lines are repeated to show the intensity of the complaint by the

worker to his mother-in-law. *Nana lee-ee* ‘grandmother lee -ee’ and *Ma dze oo* ‘I will go’ are repeated thrice to express the lamentation of the singer’s dissatisfaction about the treatment she receives after her labour and toil to extract the oil. The repetition of these lines and words in the song does not only aid the singer in easy memorization but also gives a rhythmic movement of the pestle (in unison with the song) on the palm fruit is the circular stone (mortal). This gives a stylistic and beautiful atmosphere for the workers to work more. As Saanchi (2002) puts,

repetition is not only used because of lack of ideas or words but it gives unity to the song to make it easy to retain in the mind and also places an emphasis to the oral or verbal performance. It is indeed a significant feature of the lament in many cultures (2002: 418).

Parallelism

It is the recurrence or repetition of identically or similarly structured patterns between words, phrases clauses, and sentences. Agyekum (2013 citing Fabb 1979) states that parallelism is a literary device by which the oral artist brings together in a balanced relationship ideas and images that may seem independent of one another. Parallelism is a ‘sameness between two sections of a text and it can be basically categorized into (1) structured and (2) semantic. It is an organizing principle that divides the text into sections and requires the second half of each section to resemble the first (see Agyekum 2013: 85). According to Fox (2014) citing Jacobson (1966: 399) and Hopkins (1959: 267), in every level of language, the essence of poetic artifice consists of recurrent returns. It is also viewed as a spoken sound having a repeated figure. With these two definitions parallelism is seen to mean and include phonemic, syntactic and semantic levels of expression.

Also, in Robert Lowth’s quest to study and observe the principles of composition of the Old Testament, and Hebrew poetry, he came out in the year 1713 and 1778 that, Parallelism means the correspondence of one verse or line with another. He puts,

The correspondence of one verse or line with another, I called parallelism. When a proposition is delivered, and a second is subjoined to it, or drawn under its equivalent, or contrasted with it in sense, or similar to it in the form of grammatical construction, these I call parallel lines; and the words or phrases, answering one to another in the corresponding lines, parallel terms (Lowth 1778: ix) cited in Fox (*ibid.*).

With this it can be deduced that parallelism according to Lowth, can be categorized into synonymous, antithetic and synthetic or constructive

parallelism. Saanchi (2002) citing Jacobson (1966: 400) explains synonymous parallelism as songs, lines words or phrases that express the same sense in different but equivalent terms; i.e. a proposition delivered should be repeated either wholly or partially, the expression being varied but the sense entirely or nearly the same. However, the correspondence of lines by means of an opposition... sometimes in expression and sometimes in sense only, is referred to as Antithetic parallelism. The synthetic or constructive parallelism consists only in the similar form of construction. These categories of parallelism find themselves in Dangme work songs. The song text below shows such instances of parallelism.

2. S: *K'i na le ma se!* If I have got a canoe I will enter
 C: *Kloono hee he kloono!*
 S: *K'i na ja fɔ!* If I have got a net to cast
 C: *Kloono hee he Kloono!*
 S: *K'i na lo ma gbe!* If I have got a fish I will catch
 C: *Kloono hee he kloono!*
 S: *K'i na lo ma kpe!* If I have got a fish I will chew
 C: *Kloono hee he kloono!*



Figure 3. Some Dangme fishermen fishing in Lake Volta. (Photographs by Jonathan Tanihu.)

The parallelism in (2) can be said to be synthetic or constructive parallelism because the lines 2, 4, 6 and 8 which are the choruses, are similarly or identically constructed. And lines 1, 3, 5 and 7 are also parallel in the constructive form though there is neither contrast nor similarity among them. These lines have embedded constructions. The base sentence should read *ke i na* 'if I see' the 'e' of the conditional 'ke' has gone through a phonological process which is elision or deletion to produce *k' i* 'if I'. This *k' i* and other lexical items such as *na* 'got', *ma*, 'I will' are correspondence morphologically and syntactically throughout the lines.

Another typical example of parallel structure in Dangme work song text can be seen in the extract below.

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>2b. <i>Sa a Ladoku a wo nu ηε.</i></p> <p><i>A wo nu ηε Nugo</i> <i>A wo nu ηε Tema</i> <i>Sa a Ladoku</i></p> | <p>In the olden days it was at Ladoku where they traded with palm oil They traded with palm oil at Nugo They traded with palm oil at Tema In the olden days at Ladoku. (Huber, 1993)</p> |
|---|---|

In the text (2b), there is an instance of synonymous parallelism, synthetic parallelism and cross parallelism. The synonymous parallelism is indicated at lines 1, 2 and 3 *Ladoku*, *Nugo* and *Tema* are names of towns. These nouns represent the same entity in sense, i.e. towns (*Ladoku*, *Nugo* and *Tema*) which are said to be the places that the palm oil traders or extractors trade their palm oil. Also, there is a constructive or synthetic parallelism. Lines 1 and 4 and lines 2 and 3 are identically or similarly constructed. The verb *wo* 'trade' is preceded by the pronoun 'a' 'they' and then *nu ηε* 'oil at', the noun *nu* preceded by the postposition *ηε* 'at' in lines 2 and 3 are both parallel. Line 1 is partially parallel to line 4. The syntactic and morphological construction *Sa a Ladoku*, 'In the olden days it was *Ladoku*' are synthetically parallel.

Another case of parallelism in the text is cross parallelism. Cross parallelism is the parallelism that comes in an order but the order is reversed. Agyekum (2013) states that cross parallelism is a lexical parallelism which simply consists of the transposition or criss-crossing between adjacent lines of identical units of speech (identical words). In the text (2b), lines 1 and 2 are cross parallel, there is a change of word and phrase order. The singer craftily and carefully criss-crossed the clause ...*Ladoku a wo nu ηε* and *A wo nu ηε Tema/ Nigo* '...Ladoku where they traded' and 'they traded at Tema/ Nigo' are transpositioned. It should be noted that parallelism is not just a mere repetition of words, phrases, clauses and lines (whether in sense or structurally) due to scarcity of such

repertoire but rather, it gives unity and cohesion to the structures of the song texts for easy memorization and singing (See Saanchi 2002: 422).

The Sound System of Dangme Work Songs

Sounds play an essential and vital role in music like poems; the Dangme work song texts create patterns of sounds in themselves. These sound patterns help in the smooth flow of the songs when sang by the workers. Some of these sound areas include, idiophone (onomatopoeia), alliteration and assonance and rhyme.

Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of initial consonant sounds used (especially in poetry) to lay emphasis and link words as well as to create pleasing musical sounds. Dangme work song texts are full of this sound pattern. Below is an extract that shows repetition of initial consonant sounds.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| 3. <i>I dɔ mɛ nɛ a bɛ oo!</i> | Whether they failed to turn-up for my request to help me |
| <i>I dɔ mɛ nɛ a ba oo!</i> | Whether they turned-up for my request to help me |
| <i>Nɔ nɛ ma na,</i> | Whatever is my goodwill |
| <i>I na momo!</i> | I've already received |
| <i>Nɔ nɛ ma na,</i> | Whatever is my goodwill |
| <i>I na momo!</i> | I have already received. |

In the text above, the consonant sounds /d/, /b/, /m/ and /n/ are repeated. These repetitions help in unifying and emphasizing the song for easy learning.

Assonance

It is the repetition of similar vowel sounds in words or syllables. The extract below shows a case of assonance in Dangme work songs (Song text 2 is repeated here for easy reference). The vowel sounds /a/, /i/, /ɛ/ and /e/ are repeated. /O/ is also repeated throughout lines 2, 4, 6 and 8.

- | | | |
|-------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 2. S: | <i>K'i na le ma se!</i> | If I have got a canoe I will enter |
| C: | <i>Kloono hɛɛ hɛ kloono!</i> | |
| S: | <i>K'i na ja fɔ!</i> | If I have got a net to cast |
| C: | <i>Kloono hɛɛ hɛ Kloono!</i> | |
| S: | <i>K'i na lo ma gbe!</i> | If I have got a fish I will catch |

C: *Kloono hee he kloono!*
 S: *K'i na lo ma kpe!* If I have got a fish I will chew
 C: *Kloono hee he kloono!*



Figure 4. Some fisherfolks hauling their boat up from the beach with accompaniment of singing at Akplabanya-Ada. (Photograph by Matthew Sewor Agee.)

Rhyme

Agyekum (2013: 163-164) gives two major types of basic rhyming schemes which are based on the position of the rhymed syllables in the lines and the number of syllables in which the sounds are similar or same. Considering the topic under study, I would prefer to go for the former in the analysis of the data. I would look for some end scheme in Dangme work song texts. The end rhymes (scheme) are rhymes that occur at the end of poetic lines or verses. Letter of the alphabets are assigned to sounds, starting from 'a'

Below is an extract that shows the rhyme scheme of a Dangme work song text.

| | | | |
|----|----------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| 4. | <i>Moo hoo ni waa je</i> | a | Cook and let's eat |
| | <i>Amele ja dzu numeli</i> | b | Amele went to steal palm oil |
| | <i>Mo ffi ku waa je</i> | a | Cook and let's eat |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| <i>Amele ja dzu numeli</i> | b | Amele went to steal palm oil |
| <i>Amele mo ffi ku waa je</i> | a | Amele cook and let's eat |
| <i>Amele ja dzu numeli</i> | b | Amele went to steal palm oil |
| <i>Amele sue, sue, sue!</i> | c | <i>Amele sue, sue, sue!</i> |

In the text above, we have 'abc' The first, third and fifth lines rhyme, the second fourth and sixth also rhyme leaving the seventh line which is designated with the letter 'c'. The rhyme as a sound device in Dangme work songs not only helps in learning and memorization of the song but it gives pleasure to both the singer and the listener due to its musical component. It gives a rhythmic pattern in connection with the movements made in the work. Its echoing sounds in the ears of the singer and the listener crave his attention more to it which in turn boosts his/her enthusiasm to work more without tiring (see Agyekum 2013: 166)

Idiophones

An idiophone is a vivid representation of an idea in sound. Idiophones are linguistic expressions whose forms and sounds often correlate with their semantic meanings and therefore debunk the arbitrariness of language (Agyekum 2013). The Dangme work songs contain some idiophones. Below is an extract:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 5. <i>Medoku Aye e le sɔmi,</i> | <i>Medoku Aye</i> is a master blacksmith |
| <i>Ne e ɲɔ sɔ ɔ ɲɔ to blɔ he</i> | He has set up his forge on the roadside |
| <i>Imi sɔlɔ</i> | I am the blacksmith |
| <i>I sɔ ɲmlɛ ɲɔ wo</i> | I make ankle bells and wear them |
| <i>Tfiki-ɸai! Woyo-woyo</i> | <i>Tfiki-ɸai! Woyo-woyo</i> |
| <i>Medoku Aye, e ba sɔ kue mi</i> | <i>Medoku Aye</i> has come to his workshop |
| <i>Kɪɲai- Kɪɲai! Sɔ kue mi</i> | <i>Kɪɲai kɪɲai!</i> To his workshop. (Huber, 1993) |

Tfiki-ɸai and *woyo-woyo* are ideophones that depicts the sound of the ankle bells on the forger's ankle. Another idiophone is *kɪɲai- kɪɲai* which denotes the sound of the hammer hitting the heated metal/iron under forging. It also signifies the strength the blacksmith is exerting on the heated iron or metal. The main significance of these idiophones in this particular native craft (blacksmith) is that they show how expert and masterful the blacksmith is, who forges a very loud ankle bells. It also shows the intensity of his strength when it comes to hitting the hot irons (forging).

Symbolism

Agyekum (2013:260) sees symbolism as the use of an object to represent or suggest another or mean a different thing. It is also explained by (Nypson 2001 and Nsoh et.al 2010) as cited in Sanortey (2013) as a concrete familiar object that is used in reference to or as an explanation of an abstract idea or less familiar object or event. This means that the portrayal of human values can be carried out through concrete familiar objects. The Dangme work songs depict such cases of symbolism. Below is an example (Song text (1) is repeated for easy reference).

- | | | | |
|----|------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. | S: | <i>Nana lee-ee!</i> | Grandmother lee-e! |
| | C: | <i>Ma dʒe oo</i> | I will go |
| | S: | <i>Nana lee-ee!</i> | Grandmother lee-e! |
| | C: | <i>Ma dʒe oo</i> | I will go |
| | ALL: | <i>Ke i sa bɔsɔ</i> | If I extracted palm oil |
| | | <i>I hi mi ηme</i> | I have not been given palm kernel |
| | C: | <i>Nana lee-ee!</i> | Grandmother lee-ee! |
| | S: | <i>Ma dʒe oo!</i> | I will go |

The song text above is a Palm oil extracting song which signifies a lamentation of a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law for not receiving her reward from the husband after her labour to extract the oil. It also symbolizes her complaint about her childlessness to her mother-in-law. The ...*lee-ee* in lines 1, 3, and 7 signify a loud bemoaning of the daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. The *bɔsɔ* in line 5 also symbolizes the work, toil and labour of the daughter-in-law in the house stead. *ηme* in line 6 symbolizes the reward or recompense, it also stands for child that the husband refuses to let her have.

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Conclusion

It is clear that the repertoire of the songs sung (or performed) by a worker or group of workers at any point in time may be for invigorating of strength, announcing of their presence and to soothe both their psychological and physical being for the work to attain high efficiency and pleasure. And these are naturally reflected in the texts (words) of the songs through the employment of aesthetic literary devices such as repetition, parallelism, idiophones, alliterations, rhymes, etc. which have been discussed above.

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