Preface

This book does not treat those debatable problems or issues regarding our oral traditions. Scholars of African literature have done this with great diligence and merely repeating them here would prove the more tedious and lacklustre. Rather this study of the African dirge tradition is an exploration of the consciousness of artistes and their art in their perception of death as a rite of passage. The communal African psyche has come to retain a deeply philosophical outlook in face of natural and man-made disasters. When expressed through the creative disciplines, this world view emerges in an elaborate fusion of artistry and individuality worthy of serious study.

We have seen such artistic progression especially in Chinua Achebe's works marking a creative enterprise that spans the colonial experience inscribing our decades of struggles with those committed voices that echo through our continent's successions of political and economic turbulence. Africa's songs, poetry, drama, dance, rhythm, sculpture and craft have all been expressions of her varied emotions in different epochs of her traumatic history.

The African ontology is one that is usually cognitive of a

spiritual world of ancestors from where, it is believed, the departed fathers preside over the affairs of the living. Nowhere, perhaps, in the corpus of traditional poetry have there been more works of heightened feelings than in the dirge. The gloomy circumstances of death give vent to poetry of unusual intensity and spontaneity. Here, the mourner becomes a poet in his own right; he is a conjurer of images and a weaver of emotions aimed toward not only the full realisation of the dirge sentiment but also the expurgation of overwhelming feelings. Other incidents akin to the death include the loss of a loved one, the atrophy of dreams, war, disaster, political betrayals and even some instances of human treachery.

These emotional responses elicit what may be called the communal consciousness which the bard evokes in his despair, frustration, loss, desolation and isolation at the instance of the death. What is almost always realised at dirge renditions and performances might be the sense of shared responsibility and the effect of general catharsis.

Adopting the methodical and investigative approach, I have set out to portray the role and function of African dirge songs in their communities. Moving from the general (African milieu) through the specific (Igbo) and contemporary local (Nigerian) situations, I have drawn some deductions and generalisations concerning the dirge in Africa. The major choice of dirge songs, both oral and written, and of poets has been, except with few

exceptions, restricted to the Ibo. Thus Igbo society has largely served my paradigm for Africa.

Furthermore, I have looked at both modes of 'written' and 'oral' poetic expressions. Exploring the written dirge works of Chinua Achebe, Emeka Chimezie and R.M Ekechukwu helps establish the link between oral and written traditions of African art riding on the crest of indigenous languages. It is significant that modern African writers, using the language of English, have advanced a literature of simultaneous oral and modern traditions. The poems of Pol Ndu, T.C Nwosu, and Ossie Enekwe are used to illustrate the oral nuances of speech, idioms, proverbs and imagery in the larger heritage of African dirge poetry.

A younger generation of African poets has been included in this study using some important voices in recent Nigerian poetry who employ the tone of lamentation in delineating the seasons of atrophy that plague their national progress. From their acute awareness of history emerges a threnodic voice that has now become part of modern African art and holds much relevance in contemporary national literatures.

A theory of the African dirge, with distinct features from its western counterpart has been provided by this research. This has been given graphic representation to achieve a sense of form and clarity. The intention is not towards the problematic ingenuity of a scholarly prescription, certainly not to advance a paradigm by which an artiste's creative impulse must flow. We can therefore

approach the issue of theory with as much caution as a true literary critic employs while eliciting the merits of a work of art. Perhaps, a better term would still remain *features* as against theor*y*. But in as much as any African dirge poem reveals some degree of adherence to the observed patterns of creative expression, I would be satisfied that my research effort would have yielded its true and original intentions.

GMT