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STYLE IN OKU BIRTH SONG

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ABSTRACT

Birth songs provide a medium for creative expression. The central theme of the songs is the importance of motherhood as well as the pride and respect that attend such status. In presenting the birth song, performers use poetic and literary devices to add beauty and variety to the songs and to effectively convey meaning. This paper examines the various stylistic devices employed by Oku n oral poets to effectively present the messages in the songs. Style is the way something is written or said as opposed to the subject matter. Style includes artistic props, literary devices, linguistic and structural devices that constitute the ingredients of intellectual pleasure Elements of style are used specifically and consciously to embellish literary expressions. Style in this context is the artistic designs, technical or methodological, which the artists use to enhance and enrich the process of their poetic creativity. We have examined the appropriateness of the language and imagery to the content of birth songs. In this study we have demonstrated that Oku birth songs have literary qualities and the singers use stylistic devices are used as ornaments to beautify the songs and to effectively pass across the desired message.

**Key words:** Style, Oku, Birth song

Introduction

An investigation into the style of a literary text is an inquiry into the usage of the writer in order to find out what is unique in his treatment of language. The style of a writer is encased in the linguistics features he has used in his text. The concept of style hangs on the notion of aesthetics or the beautiful. Chari says 'Aesthetics is the adoption of poetic means (words, sentences, figures and images) to poetic ends' (54). He points out that "The only criterion of poetic beauty is the criterion of appropriateness." Words, images, and all other elements of style derive their efficacy by being appropriate to specific ends".

Since the beauty of a work of art is largely dependent on the appropriateness of the stylistic devices inherent in the work, this paper examines the various techniques employed by oral poets to effectively present the birth song. The aim of this is to establish the fact that the birth song, besides combining the bipartite functions of entertainment and didacticism, is above all, an art form with full complement of artistic standards and so deserves the same attention scholars give to the poetry of other traditions. Pursuant to this objective we shall examine, with appropriate examples where necessary, thirty birth songs from Oku Sub Division of the North West Province of Cameroon. This will be done under two major analytical categories - the literary devices and the structure.

Oku people form the second largest clan in the Bui Division of the North-West province of the Republic of Cameroon. They according to Ngwa, occupy a stretch of land lying approximately between latitude

6°50 North and longitude 10° 40 and 10°50 East (6). Oku is made up of thirty three villages with a population of about a hundred thousand inhabitants. It is bounded on the north by Noni sub-division and on the west by Boyo division, on the south by Ngoketunjia division and on the east by Kumbo

Style is vital in all aspects of literary creativity. Galpherin, says 'the word style has been used in so many senses that it has become a breeding ground for ambiguity' (11). To Clark, "style is the way something is written or said as opposed to the subject matter" (44). Akwanya in *Verbal Structures* says style refers to an individual artist's personal direction of language (178). Robert and Jacobs in *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing* (262) add that style is 'the right words at the right time and at the right circumstances'

Oji in *Essay and Letter writing* (139) believes a writer's style is the index of his mind. He believes a writer with a crooked heart will produce a crooked and unorganized style but if he thinks straight he will express his sound mind with the maximum of precision, alertness and freshness.

Leech and Short in *Style in Fiction* contend that 'a fuller appreciation of style must be anchored on langue and parole' (10), linguistic terms enunciated by Ferdinand de Saussure. They explain that langue is the code or system of rules common to speakers or writers of language while parole refers to the particular uses of this system those speakers or writers of this system make on this or that occasion. Egudu in his discussion of style maintains that:

When talking about style it is necessary that we look at some artistic props, which though they are not in themselves, essential part of the structure play some role in the life of the poetry. These props are the literary devices...those linguistic and structural devices that constitute the ingredients of intellectual pleasure, thereby reinforcing the literary art. They are the designs used specifically and consciously to embellish literary expressions. These devices aside from serving as embellishing agents in poetry very importantly help to characterize the style of the poet (70).

Studying style involves studying diction. Diction in relation to style is not just the word that tell story but how successful and skillful the writer is in using the right words to convey his unique. Style in this context is the artistic designs, technical or methodological, which the artists use to enhance and enrich the process of their poetic creativity. We will therefore be concerned with the description of the language used in the birth song and with the examination of the literary style; that is, with the examination of the appropriateness of the language and imagery to the content of birth songs and with the form and structure of the birth songs.

Oku birth songs are verses of celebration which besides extolling womanhood and celebrating the fulfilled woman, a status achieved through childbirth, also make significant comments on events in the Oku society as a whole. . The songs are a medium for creative expressions which reflect both personal and social experiences. The central theme of the songs is the importance of motherhood as well as the pride and respect that attend such status. The subject matter in the birth song can be divided into songs of expression of joy for the gift of a child, Songs of praise and thanks, insulting and satirical songs, philosophical songs which are commentaries and reflections on life in general, didactic songs which help to uphold the values and decorum of the community and erotic and obscene songs. The content or themes of the birth song are not fixed but varied with the context, the frame of mind of the performer and participants and the prevailing circumstances.

The birth song is mainly performance-oriented and it is within the performance that its aesthetic qualities are fully appreciated. The performance is often held indoors and mostly by women. The main elements of the performance are song, dance, the performer and the audience. The women dance in a circular formation. The climax of the performance of each song is marked by ululations and simultaneous turning clockwise. In presenting the birth song, performers use poetic and literary devices to add beauty and variety to the songs and to convey meaning.

Since our concern in this paper is to examine the stylistics devices employed by oral artists in presenting birth songs, we will examine the language used and the structure of the songs. This is done with the desire to prove birth songs, like other works of literature, are studded with figurative language. The poetic devices are used as ornaments to beautify the songs. They are also means through which the experiences in the birth songs are communicated. These literary devices are the essence of the style of a work of art, and though they are universal in their basic underlying concepts, when they are localized as to time and place, they

reveal the traits, which are unique to the people who provide them with a context. The language, structure and rhythm will be examined to show how oral artists expand and intensify their ideas.

### Language

Language is a vital tool for the verbal artist and the hallmark of style in oral literature is the beauty with which language is used. Chapman rightly observes that "Language materials in poetry are chosen and manipulated with greater care and complexity than average users of the language either can or wish to exercise" (4). The birth song, unlike other forms of Oku oral poetry like 'keyof' (lament) and masquerade poetry which are presented in an idiomatic language understood mostly by the elders, is presented in a simple and straightforward language that ordinary Oku people can understand. Though the diction is simple, the artists constantly expand and intensify their ideas from time to time by likening one thing to another through the use of imagery. They also use lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphonological deviation and other stylistic devices such as peasant bluntness, rhetorical questions and epithets.

### Imagery

Imagery is the backbone of poetry. Components of imagery are descriptive words and figures of speech. The success of the birth song, and even its classification as poetry, depend on its use of imagery. Preminger says "Imagery is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem" (363) and Miruka maintains that "imagery achieves vivid configuration of the subject matter in the audience's mind" (113). Some of the aspects of imagery used in the birth song include metaphor, simile, euphemism, hyperbole; metonymy, irony, sarcasm, personification, allusion, synecdoche and onomatopoeia just to name a few.

### Metaphor

Performers of the birth song often speak not literally about the world, but metaphorically so instances of metaphors abound in the birth song. A metaphor as The Encyclopedia Americana defines is 'an implied comparison between two dissimilar things, that imaginatively identifies one object with another and either ascribes to the first qualities of the second or invest the second with connotations inherent in the other (vol 9). Childbearing, for instance, is regarded as a heroic deed and is metaphorically referred to as "killing a lion" and "pulling down a baobab tree" and as "passing through fire as exemplified in

Solo: Ke jofe ge wan weh ebkoon  
nyam baa jang nowin

Chorus: Aan ke lote lu kejung ge wan weh  
ebkoon nyam baa jang nowin

Solo: Ke jofe ke wan weh gwele fekak  
sem jang nowin

Chorus: Aan ke lu kejunge ge wan jang nowin  
ebleeh web b gwelen fekak sem.

Solo: Ke jofe ge wan weh saine ebvus  
jang nowin

Chorus: Aan ke lote ljofe ge wan weh saine ebvus jang nowin

Solo: It is good that a child call her  
mother after killing a lion

Chorus: Yes it is really good that a child who  
has killed a lion informs her mother.

Solo: It is good that a child who has brought  
down a baobab tree informs her mothers

Chorus: Yes it is really good that a child who has  
brought down a baobab tree informs her mother

Solo: It is good that a child informs her mother  
after passing through fir.

Chorus: Yes it is really good that a child informs

her mother when she has passed through fire.

A woman who is delivered of a baby is honoured because she has successfully pulled down a baobab tree or passed through fire. To show how valuable a male child is, it is referred to as “an elephant, a cutlass and the sun” as in

Solo: E e e - e e e eh mbofeji - e e  
 Mbofejo - e e, me mboye e e  
 Chui lu iyzhio e e  
 Eh gha? E e e e  
 Eh tolon e e  
 Maih kil Fiake keghoos e e  
 Wil ah ne kebam ebkaa e e  
 Wil ah en beiy e e  
 Wil ah ne kebam fengwang  
 Wil ah ne ebvuse  
 Me mboye, mbofejo wan ebjunge e e  
 E e e - e e - e e eh mbofejo.

**Translation**

Solo: E e e - e e - e e eh  
 Freedom e e, I am free - e e  
 My son is up, I am free e e  
 Where, e e?  
 At Tolon e e  
 Maih has a cutlas in hand e e  
 If you have a bag of money, bring  
 If you have a bag of camwood, bring  
 If you have a bag of salt, bring  
 If you have a gun, bring  
 I am free e e, freedom e e  
 A child for ebjunge clan e e  
 E e e - e e - e e eh freedom

The Ebjunge’s family because of its ability to provide abundant refreshment to the performers in the time of scarcity is metaphorically referred to as “a river in the wilderness” as seen line

Solo: Mdukmen ne mbosei lu jio  
 Fene ebmne lo leise ghes  
 Chorus: Repeats.  
 Solo: Nyame ne mbosei lu iyrtui  
 Fene iy ne lo chokte esonge ghes  
 Ebjunge e e jio kelike ke yumen

Chorus: Repeats.

Translation .Solo: If wine were water, it would have drowned us.

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: If meat were a stone, it would have killed us.

Ebjunge e e e, a river in the wilderness

These metaphorical expressions are witty; they appeal to the faculty of intelligence and inventiveness and create freshness because they renew language. They are use for embellishment, to add beauty and concreteness to the descriptions in song. This is in line with Hudson observation that ‘of all the figures of speech, none comes near to painting as metaphor. Its peculiar effect is to give light and length to description, to make intellectual ideas in some sort visible to the eyes by giving them colour and substance and sensible qualities’ (32).The metaphors used in the birth song, enable the artists to clothe at will the most abstract ideas with life. Through metaphors, the artist is able to examine the various qualities of things or people from

several angles. This makes the themes vivid to the audience. For example, childbearing is presented as an occupation in song 28 and the audience is made to understand that, just as a serious farmer or hunter never lacks food or meat, those serious with the bearing of children can never lack children.

### Simile

A simile is an explicit comparison between essentially unlike things, actions or feelings, introduced by a connective (e.g. like, as, than) or a verb such as 'seems'. Similes in Oku song are marked by 'ka' as exemplified in "Wan fufe ka feniune mbong, liake ka lwoh" (A child white as feniune mbong<sup>1</sup>, bright as lightning) in "Solo: Wan weh biin, wan fufe ka feniunmbong liake ka iwuoh" translated as 'Solo: The child that is born, child as white as Feniune mbong, bright as lightning. Another example of a simile is Wiy Wan, bange ka beih leimen ka eblooh jofe ka FEN". (Daughter-in-law, red like camwood, sweet as honey, beautiful as FEN<sup>2</sup>) in Solo: Me yen men wan eh ngkante wan wan

Wiy wan, bange ka beih, leimen ku eblooh  
jofe ka fen weh lun ne weh neiy kenue ebchio ebyumen

Chorus: Repeats.

Translation

Solo: I have seen the child, a real grand child  
My daughter-in-law tanned like camwood, sweet  
like honey, beautiful as FEN  
you have done a wonderful thing

In the similes above, the beauty of the child and that of its mother is compared to objects and animals which Oku people associate with beauty – objects like cam wood, honey and feniun mbong and animals like FEN. Through these similes the performers achieve richness in style.

### Euphemism

Euphemism is also a figure of speech used in the birth song. In this figure of speech, indirectness replaces directness of statement usually in an effort to avoid offensive bluntness. Euphemisms are used in the birth song in order to veil special taboos or sexual references. The vagina is referred to as a bathroom – a sacred place so Wuchia is satirized for allowing every men into it 'solo: Wuchia dise kebaseroom ee, Yangchong ntonge ke ngley ken ke shwai (Wuchia opened her bathroom, Yangchong went in and sounded shwai) The vagina is also referred to as "bearded meat" as in 'bearded meat is tasteless" In the two cases cited, mild words like bathroom and bearded meat replace vagina, a word considered as offensively direct. Bluntness is avoided, especially in contexts where youths dominate the audience.

### Hyperbole

Hyperbole, blowing up an object or idea much more than its normal size or proportion is used in the birth song. In the song that follows, the stinginess of Ndi's family is exaggerated to ridicule them. Ndi's family is presented as worthless because it has not entertained the dancers enough for them to go to toilet. This is seen in this rhetorical question, Ndi's families! What caliber of people are they?

Solo: Ghele ghe Ndi beh lu ghele ghe?  
Chorus: Ghi sei cheme eh ndu se ikful ah  
Solo: Ghele ghe Ndi beh lu ghel ghe?  
Solo: Ngkante bottle mduk ghi baa jen  
Chorus: Ghi si cheme eh ndu se ikful ah  
Solo: Ghele ghe Ndi beh lu ghel ghe?  
Chorus: Ghi se cheme eh ndu se ikful  
Solo: Na keufe nyam ghi baa yen  
Chorus: Ghi se cheme eh ndu se ikful

<sup>1</sup> A white cap believed to have been gotten from Lake Oku; Oku rulers wear this cap during installation.

<sup>2</sup>FEN is the local name for the beautiful bird Bannerman Tauraco

**Translation**

Solo: Ndi's families! What caliber of people are they?

Chorus: When we dance we go to toilet.

Solo: Even a piece of kola we have not seen

Chorus: When we dance we go to toilet

Solo: Even a piece of cocoyam we have not seen

Chorus: When dance we go to toilet

Solo: Even a piece of bone we have not seen

Chorus: When we dance we go to toilet.

Hyperbole like repetition is an effective weapon of securing the audience attention to the subject and reminding them of their expected roles in the community. It makes the satirical song sarcastic, the victim is infuriated not because he is ridiculed but because his art is exaggerated. Hyperbole also creates a sense of wonder in the songs.

**Metonymy**

This is the use of the attributes of an object to represent it. Metonymy avoids the naming of the object directly but alludes to it through its attributes. A male child is referred to as "a cutlass". This is because cutlasses are used mostly by men in the Oku society.

**Synecdoche**

In a synecdoche the name of a part is substituted for that of a whole or the whole in place of one of its parts.

In this song,

Solo: Mnkong moteh dise men kebii kom

Ne ne bii egbo se idioh

Me kile men eghal se tang

None Nuse gwiye

Solo: Mnkong Moteh has opened my womb

I will bring forth a thousand hands

I now have wings to fly

Mama Nuse come and behold

Hands refer to the children the woman will bear because Mnkong Moteh has opened her womb and penis in the next text refers to men in general.

Solo: Eh sangle lee ne tekel sangle se teng ah

Ge ebleeh ne vin chi fo ndeh

Eh sangle lee ne tekel sangle se teng ah

Ghe ebleeh ne vin chi fo ndeh?

Solo: We rejoice, and penis rejoices too?

Who gave this pregnancy?

We rejoice, and penis rejoices too?

Who is responsible for this pregnancy?

The use of metonymy and synecdoche makes the songs humorous.

**Personification**

In this figure of speech inanimate objects are not only animated but are often concretized by the "human" activities they are made to perform. In this way they "play off accepted cultural association of objects surprising the audience as well as communicating ideas. For example, it is said that the bed will "rest" until the child is weaned. For the Oku people, the proper place to make love is in bed. The bed therefore goes through the same struggle and tension as a couple in need of a child. It is thus regarded as a party in the process of procreation. By relating non-human agents to man personification presents a powerful figurative way of expressing ideas.

**Irony**

Irony is a language device either in spoken or written form, in which the real meaning is concealed or contradicted by the literal meaning of the words, or in a theatrical situation (dramatic irony) in which there is an incongruity between what is expected and what occurs. Irony is a form of indirection that avoids overt praise or censure. Irony is a common device in the birth song. Irony of situation is seen in songs where the co-wives instead of rejoicing with her mate over the birth of a child, shows resentment. In this song

Solo: Bange ghe ibu ka wan wan oh  
 Wil chi teihmei ne ndei wan  
 Bange ghe ibu kan wan wan oh  
 Wil ne teih mei ne ndei wan

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: Deye ghe ibu ka wan wan oh  
 Ngang koo wiy mei fane ah  
 Deye ghe ibu ka wan wan oh  
 Ngang koo wil mei fane ah

Chorus: Repeats.

**Translation**

Solo: What is red in the ibu like a grandchild?  
 I was abused because of my child  
 What is red in the ibu like a grandchild?  
 I was abused because of my child.

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: What is crying in the ibu like a grandchild?  
 A curse came to pass true and I am afraid  
 What is crying in the ibu like a grandchild?  
 A curse came to pass and I am afraid.

The grandmother instead of chanting the jubilant ululation at the birth of her first grandchild hides the child in her "Ibu<sup>2</sup>" (supposedly to be killed). Another instance of irony of situation is in

Solo: Wan ebvie e e eh  
 Wan eblumen ah  
 Wan ebvie e e eh  
 Wan eblumen ah  
 eh sei ne bii ka weh eh jion ndu maih ah  
 Fene weh ne loo gha ah?

Chorus:Repeats

Maih wan e e e? (4x)

Eh se ne bii ka weh jio maih  
 Fene weh a loo gha ah?

**Translation**

Solo: Girls  
 Boys  
 Girls  
 Boys  
 If we had been delivering and had been  
 Throwing into toilets as you do today  
 Would you have been?

Chorus: Repeats

Solo: Throw a child? (4x)

<sup>2</sup> The Ibu is a place in a woman's house where she keeps her private and personal belongings.



If we had been delivering and had been  
 Throwing into toilets as you do today  
 Would you have been?

Chorus: Repeats

Here children that are supposed to be loved are thrown into toilets by youths. Irony is used in *the birth song* to upset or mock. Irony in these situation is used to exposed and satirize the moral decay in contemporary Oku society.

### Sarcasm

This is a bitter remark ironically worded with the intension to wound. Under the guise of praise, a caustic and bitter expression of strong and personal disapproval is given. In this song,

Solo: Weh Febihlese se

Chorus: Weh Febihlese wan

ka bawan fo eh kase fil kfule

Solo: Weh fedum wan ee

Chorus: Weh fedumse wan eh

ka bawan fo eh kase fil kfule

Solo: Ah ah ah nghan laan weh ghen zhie

Chorus: Ah ah ah ah ah

Solo: Ghe zhie gese nue

Chorus: Ah ah ah ah ah

### Translation

Solo: Oh, a little kola

Chorus: Oh, a little kola for the birth celebration

That the child's father gave and again took and ate.

Solo: Oh! A little Rat mole!

Chorus: Oh! a little Rat mole for the birth celebration

That the father gave and again took and ate.

Solo: Ah ah, today, we will eat

Chorus: Ah ah ah ah

Solo: We will eat and drink

Chorus: Ah ah ah ah

The women want to emphasize the fact that they have not been provided enough food to appreciate their performance. Ironically, they say that they will eat and drink despite their impecuniosity.

### Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is the vocal production of sounds supposed to be similar to that being made by the action. According to Abrams, onomatopoeia is "applied to words or passages which seem to correspond to what they denote in anyway whatever - in size, movement or force as well as sound" (118). Onomatopoeia embodies ideophone that is, descriptive words which sharpen the audience's understanding of action by the usage of vocal reproduction of sound supposed to be similar to that being described by the action. "Kwaake" in "ngvuse kwaake beih ah! (Chickens cackled in the compound" on line 5 of the song below,

Solo: Kechii kel me nei gwiw ah!

Chorus: Ah eh e e e e kel wiy siy nai fufe

Solo: Kechii kel me nei gwiw ah!

Chorus: Ah eh e e e e kel wiy iy nai fufe

Solo: Ngvuse **kwaake** beih ya!

Chorus: Kel wiy iy na fufe

Solo: Mbiese tongnen beih yah!

Chorus: Kel wiy iy na fufe

Solo: Eh nyuke ndumse beih ya!



**Translation**

Solo: On the day I came  
 Chorus: Ah eh e e ele e didn't know it will fade  
 Solo: On the day I came  
 Chorus: Ah eh e e e e e didn't know it will fade  
 Solo: **Fowls cackled** in the compound  
 Chorus: Didn't know it will fade  
 Solo: Goats bleated in the compound  
 Chorus: Didn't know it will fade  
 Solo: Rat mole was roasted in the compound

is an onomatopoeia which describes the cry of a chicken. The ideophone "shwai ,in "Yangchong tong eke neiy ken **shwai**, (Yangchong went in and it sounded shwai) is an onomatopoeic words produced during intercourse. Onomatopoeic words sharpen the audience's understanding of the action, appeal to the audience's auditory, kinetic and visual sense, thus concretized the events described. They also enhance and produce musical effect in the songs.

**Allusion**

Allusion is another poetic device used in the birth song. It is according to Baldick, "an indirect or passing reference to some event, person, place or artistic work, the nature and relevance of which is not explained by the writer but relies on the reader's familiarity with what is thus mentioned" (6). Oku birth song is woven out of the substance of the experience of the Oku people so allusions are usually made to these experiences. There are numerous allusions to Mnkong Moteh who is believed to be the founder and protector of Oku. This is exemplified in

Solo: Lu ken kangte wil elem  
 Chorus:Lu ken kangte wil elem weh eb  
           sei kil esang mbkwank ebleh iyfii sang  
 Solo: Ghen ghe kiyen ghen fo jii se ghes  
           bek ghes Kfunye ebkwak.  
 Chorus: E e embofejo e e me mboiye  
 Solo: **Mnkong Moteh** ndin jii se ghes  
 Chorus:Repeats  
 Solo: Ge ghi lu ebkuileen lu ebleeh  
 Chorus:repeats  
 Solo: Lu keng kangte wil elem  
 Chorus:Lu ken kangte wil elem weh eb  
           sei kil esang eblesh eh fii sange.

**Translation**

Solo: It is only the best farmer  
 Chorus: Only the best farmer that has corn in his barn during the planting season.  
 Solo: Side-lookers give way to us for we are coming from the farm  
 Chorus: Mboy fe jo e e me mboye e e  
 Solo: Mnkong Moteh show us the way  
 Chorus:Repeats  
 Solo: It is only a good farmer  
 Chorus: It is only a good farmer that has corn in his barn during the planting season.

Through this allusion the Oku people are able to link their present with the past. This gives them a sense of spiritual continuity and enables them to identify their aspirations with those of their ancestors for example every Oku person aspires to be as patriotic, hardworking and honest as Mnkong Moteh. In some of the songs references are made to a stone that spoke in Nso. This stone was taken from Oku to Nso division by a road contractor and because the stone did not want to stay in Nso, it started asking to be taken back to Oku. The

allusion brings to mind the long standing enmity between the Nso and Oku people and shows that even a stone from Oku will be uncomfortable to sojourn in Nso.

### Rhetorical Questions

A rhetorical question is a question asked for the sake of persuasive effect rather than as a genuine request for information, the speaker implying that the answer is too obvious to require reply. Rhetorical questions are meant to convey information to the addressee and do not elicit new information. Some examples of rhetorical questions in Oku birth song are 'What is red in the ibu like a grandchild?', 'Ndi's family, what caliber of people are they?' and 'If we had been delivering and throwing into toilets as you do today would you have been?'. These questions heighten the dramatic qualities of the songs. They activate and rekindle the audience's interest, and help to sustain the level of excitement in the performance. They create suspense which allows the audience time to ponder over the questions and the themes in general. Through the questions the women protest against social ills.

### Peasant bluntness

Peasant bluntness is characterized by a preoccupation with obscenity. It is obvious from the songs collected that nothing is considered indecent in the birth song. Though euphemisms are used, there are instances in which such things as the human genital are called by their proper names without being couched in euphemistic terms as in normal everyday usage. In real life, the women are modest, but in the performance the birth song, they become erotic and blunt both in the use of words and in the dance. Although the audience is shocked by this bluntness, it enjoys them because they provide it (the audience) freedom from the established social norms. Examples of songs in which there is the liberal mentioning of sexual organs are

Solo: Bawan eh jange mei  
 Chorus: O o bawan eh jange mei jelele njelele  
 Solo: Jange mei ne item ntuke  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Jange mei se fo ghe?  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Jange mei se fu iykel  
 Chorus: jelele njelele  
 Solo: Babey eh jange mei  
 Chorus: O o babey jange mei, jelele njelele  
 Solo: Jange mei se fo ghe?  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Jange me se fo wan  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Jange me se ghe ah?  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Jange me se fii iyfun  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele

### Translation

Solo: The baby's father calls me  
 Chorus: Oooh the baby's father calls me, jelele njelele  
 Solo: Calls me to give what?  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Calls me to give penis  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Our husband calls me  
 Chorus: Oh oh our husband calls me, jelele njelele  
 Solo: Calls me to give what?  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Calls me to give a child

Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Call me for what?  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele  
 Solo: Calls me to take vagina  
 Chorus: Jelele njelele

Here, sexual organ like the penis and vagina are liberally mentioned and references are freely made to the sexual act as in "open the thighs open the thighs for the penis to enter" in one of the songs. In the songs above the genitals are mentioned without any resort to euphemism. The birth song therefore, provides an occasion for the performers to escape, temporarily from social restrictions; hence protecting the Oku culture from destruction which would have been the case if there was no way or outlet for these prohibited desires to be expressed.

#### Form and Structure of the birth song

Holman defines form as 'the organisation of the elements of a work of art in relation to its total effect...the pattern of structure employed to give expression to the content'(2). Maduakor says 'the term form is often used interchangeably with structure but they are not quite the same thing'. He maintains that:

There are two basic concepts to form. Form as kind or mode and form as shape'. In the first category, form relates to the mode or genre to which a work of art belongs. This mode is distinguishable within a given genre. There are, in poetry for example, clear distinctions between the sonnets form, the lyric form and the epic form (35). In this light, Oku birth song exists in the form of song. The songs are spontaneous creations which stem from spontaneous reactions to an event (birth). They are lyrical in form and, therefore, are open-ended. They suggest rather than state. They hint rather than explain. They are inseparably wedded to a particular tune and exist only exist as song in the composers mind. They are short narratives with repeated lines, ceremonial in nature and accompanied by dance.

In the second concept, form means shape. It is in this sense that form approximates structure. Structure is the plan or the way something is put together. In contemporary criticism too structure is used not only to define verse form and formal arrangement but also the sequence of images and ideas which writers use to convey meaning in poetry.

Oku birth song has an antiphonal structure. The vocal techniques are based on the antiphonal exchange between the soloist(s) and the chorus. These vocal techniques involve the following forms: Solo performance, call and Response, Call and refrain, Solo and chorused Refrain and the Mixed structural form.

The solo performance involves only one performer. This is either during work or when a child is lulled to sleep. In the call and response form, the soloist intones the song and sings a phrase referred to as the call, while the chorus responds with another short phrase which differs in text and melody from the call. In the call and refrain form, the chorus sings a refrain which is continually repeated at the end of each call. Examples are in

Solo: Ghele ghe Ndi beh lu ghele ghe?  
 Chorus: Ghi sei cheme eh ndu se ikful ah  
 Solo: Ghele ghe Ndi beh lu ghel ghe?  
 Chorus: Ghi sei cheme eh ndue se ikful ah  
 Solo: Ngkante bange ibih ghi baa jen  
 Chorus: Ghi si cheme eh ndu se ikful ah

#### Translation

Solo: Ndi's family! What calibre of people are they?  
 Chorus: When we dance we go to toilet.  
 Solo: Ndi's family! What kind of people are they?  
 Chorus: When we dance we go to toilet.  
 Solo: Even a piece of kola we have not seen  
 Chorus: When we dance we go to toilet

In the solo and chorused refrain the soloist sings the entire verse of the song and the chorus repeats verbatim. This is exemplified in.

Solo: Eh bine lee nowan weh bine se teng ah  
 Ge wan ne vin chi maih ndeh?  
 Eh bine lee nowan weh bine se teng ah  
 Ge wan ne vin chi maih ndeh?

Chorus: Repeat.

**Translation**

Solo: We dance, mother; you dances too?  
 Who threw away this child?  
 We dance, mother you dances too?  
 Who threw away this child?

The mixed structural form is a combination of other forms. As Agu observes 'The structures of African songs are not limited to solos, call and Response, call and Refrain and solo/chorused Refrain patterns alone. Rather, African composers create much larger forms which are referred to as mixed structural forms' (26). This structural form is the combination of the other forms and it is used profusely in the birth song. We have a combination in the song below:

Solo: Kebaa bu wan ah me lie gha nyam - ah  
 Kebaa bu wan ah

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: Kebaa bu wan ah me lie gha moto  
 Kebaa bu wan - ah

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: Kebaa bu wan ah me lie gha mduk - ah  
 Kebaa bu wan - ah

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: Kebaa bu wan ah me lie gha mduk - ah

Chorus: Repeats.

Three wrappers me kole - e e

Solo: Three wrappers the kole e e  
 lie se leh se mak eghom  
 Three wrappers me kole - e e

Chorus: Repeats

Solo: Salamader eh me eunge eh  
 Salamader eh, me tunger eh  
 lie se leh se ghal eghol  
 Salamader eh me tunge eh

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: Ebsiy nyam me kfule - ee  
 Ebsiy nyam me kfule -ee  
 lie eh leh se for se buoh  
 Ebsiy byam me kfule -e e

Chorus: Repeats

Solo: Mtem me mduk ah me nue - e e  
 Mtem mduk ah me nue -ee  
 Lie em le se suse ntie  
 Mtem mduk ah me nue -ee

Chorus: Repeats

Yune moto me lii me ghakmen

Solo: Yune moto me lii me ghakmen  
 ne ebkwange wiyse jele ntie  
 Yune moto me lii me ghakmen

Chorus: Repeats.

**Translation**

Solo: But for a child

Where would I have gotten salamader?

But for a child

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: But for a child,

Where would I have gotten meat?

But for a child

Chorus: Repeats

Solo: But for a child,

Where would I have gotten a car?

But for a child.

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: But for a child,

Where would I have gotten wine?

But for a child

Chorus: Repeats.

Three wrappers I will tie.

Solo: Three wrappers, I will tie

and carry some on my shoulder

Three wrappers I will tie.

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: Salamader, I will wear

Salamader i will wear

and carry some in my hands

Salamader I will wear

Chorus: Repeats

Solo: Meat, I will eat.

Meat, I will eat and give some to dogs

Meat I will eat.

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: Wine I will drink

Wine I will drink and

pour some on the ground

Wine I will drink.

Chorus: Repeats.

Solo: Buy a car for me, I am rich.

Buy a car for me, I am rich,

I will no longer trek

Buy a car for me, I am rich.

Wine I will drink.

Chorus: Repeats.

The soloist sings the introductory solo while the chorus joins the soloist in a unison continuation of the stanza that has been initiated and sings it to completion and there are portions where the chorus just repeats. There is really no specific way a song in the mixed form is required to be arranged. The existence of different rhythmic structures is not unusual in this case

**Rhyme/Rhythm**

The birth song is composed in verse but the songs are not governed by a regular line pattern. A line may contain just two word as in "Solo: Wan ebvie e e eh (Girls)," or seven words as in "Solo: Ghele ghe Ndi beh

lu ghele ghe? (Solo: Ndi's family, what caliber of people is they). The length of a stanza may vary from a single line of three words as in to three or more lines.

Rhyme is the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables to form a rhythmic pattern. Though a poem need not rhyme to be a good poem, rhyme is the most effective way of bringing a poem into a unit and rhyme gives pleasure in itself. Oku birth song is not governed by a regular line pattern, that is, the ends of the lines do not necessarily rhyme and do not have regular length. In Oku birth song like in Igbo poetry as Uzochukwu, maintains, "The succession of recurrent movement is achieved by the ordered arrangement of strong and weak elements which correspond to the raising of the foot from the ground and its being put down" (39). The essential musical requirement is that the singers keep in rhythm with the musical accompaniment which in the case of Oku birth song is the dancing step. She could, therefore, form lines of five or nine syllables depending on her virtuosity in rapid speech and her subtlety in weaving the rhythm of her song around the dance step.

There is heavy reliance on the time-line which makes the songs to conform to Nketia's assertion that "the use of time-line recurring rhythmic patterns of fixed duration or time span which clarifies the regulative beat is a common feature of rhythmic organisation in some African traditions" (132) It does not, therefore, matter whether a song contains two or eight lines; what is important is that the duration in time of all the lines in the stanza is the same. If a line has only a few words, the words are lengthened through the use of significant ululating vowel sounds so as to make the lines have the same length as when many words are used in the same breath-group.

For instance, in the song below, the vowel sounds 'e eh' and 'ah' are used to lengthen the first two lines and the fourth line to enable them have the same length the third line.

Solo:Wan ebie e e eh  
 Wan eblumen ah  
 Wan ebie e e eh  
 Wan eblumen ah  
 eh sei ne bii ka weh eh jion ndu maih ah  
 Fene weh ne loo gha ah?

Chorus: Repeats

#### Translation

Solo: Girls  
 Boys  
 Girls  
 Boys  
 If we had been delivering and had been  
 Throwing into toilets as you do today  
 Would you have been?  
 Chorus: Repeats

The performers also use meaningless syllables to complete the rhythm .For example 'njelele jelele' 'ehma ehma'in and 'Ah eh e e e e'. Sometimes, the rhythm is achieved through elision. Elision is the shortening of words by the omission of the initial, medial and final letters of words. In the birth song, words can be omitted to achieve the rhythm. For example, the use of "kechii ke me neiy gwiw ah" instead of "Ne lu kechii ke me neiy gwiwen" and "loole se me tie me tom wiy wan" instead of loole se me ke tie eh me tom wiy wan. Elision enhances the beauty of the songs. This is done by removing the clumsiness inherent in the presence of the unremoved elements.

#### Repetition

Repetition is also a technique for achieving rhythm. Repetition is one of the basic structural features of the birth song. Repetition could be of sounds, words, lines or ideas. It could be at regular or random intervals. Repetition pervades all the songs. The duration of the performance of each song depends on the repetition employed. This repetition could be of the whole song or a section of the song. Repetition of the whole song is common in songs with one stanza. It gives the soloist the opportunity to sing through the song

before the chorus repeats. Repetition of a section of the song involves the repetition of lines, phrases, statements or sentences within the body of the song. The repetition of lines is exemplified in:

Solo: Loole se me tie me tom wiy wan e e e  
 Loole se me tie me tom wiy wan  
 Loole se me tie me tom wiy wan e e e  
 Ka me neiy kwuo eb lie nkok yon  
 Loole se me tie me tom wiy wan e e

Chorus: Repeats.

Translation:

Solo: Get up from my chair for my daughter in-law to sit  
 Get up from my chair for my daughter in-law to sit  
 Get up from my chair for my daughter in-law to sit  
 For when I die she will take my basket  
 Get up from chair for my daughter in-law to sit

Repetition could also be of lexical items or a song could be repeated as many times as desired. Other forms of repetition in the birth song are: parallelism, alliteration and anaphora.

### Parallelism

Parallelism is the use of parallel sentences to create some sound effect. It involves the repetition of lexical, phonological, syntactic and semantic patterns. It has two or more parallel components which are structurally related. Parallelism in *The birth song* is used as a means of repeating structures to enforce the repetition of thoughts for emphasis and for creating rhythmic effect. As Azuonye has explained, 'parallelism falls into four categories, synonymous or semantic parallelism, complementary parallelism, antithetical parallelism and synthetic parallelism' (247).

#### Synonymous or semantic Parallelism

This category of parallelism involves the pairing of lines on the basis of their meaning. Here the idea of the first part is repeated in the second part with slightly different words. An example is in

kejing ebkaa bef                      lack of money is bad  
 Kejing ghone lu lorn                lack of children is a curse

#### Complementary Parallelism

In complementary parallelism the first line presents the character of an object or an action while the second. Stanza 4 of song 24 is an example of complementary parallelism. It goes thus:

Ghone mbaksin gwiw ne ebfua                      Twins bring property  
 Ghone mbaksin sei lu ken mbiy                      Twins usually excel

The first lines present the qualities of twins and the second line completes these qualities.

#### Antithetical parallelism

In this case the artist employs nouns and verbs which are antonymously related. Here an idea is given in the first and a reverse or opposite is given in the following. The second line contrasts or denies the first. In this category as Okwueze maintains that:

The second part relates the idea of the first in a paradoxical manner. Here the second part intensifies the thought of the first, eg "righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people. Here righteousness and sin are contrasted and the implication of sin intensifies the necessity to be righteous (231). The whole of song 11 is structured on antithetical parallelism; stanza one is used here to exemplify.

Me bii wan                                      I am delivered of a child  
 Me baa bongue njio                          I have not committed an abomination.

Another example is in

Solo: Gha se luu me ebvie weh mbui ee (2x)  
 Me lam wiy ndon ne weh  
 Gha se luu me ebvie weh mbui  
 Chorus: Repeats



**Translation**

Solo: Don't abuse me senior wife (2x)  
I don't cook in your pot  
Don't abuse me senior wife

Chorus: Repeats.

**Synthetic parallelism:**

In this type of parallelism emphasis is sought through rephrasing which leads to an increase in the thematic patterns. Here something is said in the first part and in the second a new idea is added or an explanation is given for example:

Ghes chakte ghe tem o  
Ghes chakte ghen ghe ngvumken o  
Ghes chakte ghen diom  
Ghes bele ghen ka gwiyse bine wan

**Translation**

We greet you who are standing  
We greet those squatting  
We greet you who are sitting  
We thank you for coming to celebrate with us.

**Stair-like parallelism**

In this kind of parallelism only a part of the line is repeated in the subsequent lines. An example of this type of parallelism is found in the song below:

Didn't know it will depreciate  
Didn't know it will ever fade  
Didn't know it will be out dated  
Didn't know it will ever be bitter  
Didn't know it will depreciate (song 6)

Besides clarifying themes and representing them in a variety of forms, parallelism is used as a device for line distinction.

**Alliteration**

Alliteration is one of the structural devices used in the birth song. Alliteration is the repetition of sound in poetry. This repetition may come at the beginning, middle or end of words. There are two types of alliteration: consonance, which designates the repetition of consonant sounds, and assonance, which refers to the repetition of vowel sounds. Alliteration in Oku birth song is exemplified in "Ghes chakte ghen ghe tem." 'We greet you who are standing' "ghe" is the alliterated sound. Another example is found in

Wan wan wom, me lu se yase se yen  
Ka me jaa ngoole eh bin kebine keghooh

In this case 'w' and 'k' are the alliterated letters. Alliteration is very important in Oku birth song because through it euphony, an important aspect in music is produced.

**Anaphora**

Anaphora is the deliberate repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences; like alliteration anaphora enhances the melody of the songs for it is used to achieve rhythmic effect in the songs. Examples of anaphora in the birth song are:

Chakse me Nini yaya me ee  
Chakse me Nini yaya me  
Chakse me Nini yaya me  
Me lu leen ka ngkante wil  
Translation  
Carry me Nini shoulder high

**Translation**

Carry me Nini shoulder high

Carry me Nini shoulder high  
 Carry me Nini shoulder high  
 I am now a human being

### The significance of Repetition

Repetition in the birth song is an aesthetic principle which fulfils a number of functions. One of such functions is to create emphasis. For example, in

Solo: Loole se me tie me tom wiy wan e e e  
 Loole se me tie me tom wiy wan  
 Loole se me tie me tom wiy wan e e e  
 Ka me neiy kwuo eb lie nkok yon  
 Loole se me tie me tom wiy wan e e

#### Translation:

Solo: (Get up from my chair for my daughter in-law to sit) 3x  
 For when I die she will take my basket  
 (Get up from chair for my daughter in-law to sit)

Chorus: Repeats.

the lady emphasized her desire that her property be relinquished for her daughter-in-law to inherits by continuously repeating 'Loole se me tie me tom wiy wan, Get up from my chair for my daughter-in-law to sit'. Repetition also helps to evoke sentiments and emotion in Oku birth songs.

Repetition is also used for clarification. Repetition in a song makes the theme to register properly in the minds of the listeners. Repetition aids the performers in production. This is because it offers them sufficient time to improvise and extemporize. This leads to variation which is necessary to arouse the interest of the audience. Repetition is also used as a device to maintain the rhythm of the songs. Repetition is furthermore, used as a means of instilling a rhythmic sense and love of music in the new baby. Besides increasing the tempo and movement of the songs and sharpening the memory of the soloists, repetition helps to lengthen the songs, thereby avoiding very brief performances. This offers enough time for the dancers to express their feelings through dancing. In discussing the significance of repetition, Leech maintains that: Man needs to express himself superabundantly on matters which affect him deeply. The affinity here is to those sub-terrestrial rivers of corporate belief and sentiment which find their expression in the iterative procedures of ritual (79). He sees repetition as "an escape from suppressed intensity of feeling –an imprisoned feeling as it were for which there is no outlet but a repeated hammering at the confining walls of language"(79). It is evident from the discussion above that Leech's observation of the significance of repetition holds as far as repetition in the birth song is concerned.

### Conclusion

In this paper we have demonstrated that Oku birth songs have literary qualities and stylistic devices. This has been done by examining the use of language and the structure of the songs. The poetic devices as has been discussed are used as ornaments to beautify the songs and to effectively pass across the desired message. They are means through which the experiences in the birth song are communicated. These literary devices are a portion of the essence of the aesthetics of a work of art, and though they are universal in their basic underlying concepts, when they are localized as to time and place, they reveal the actual traits which are unique to the people who provide them with a context.

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