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**Tanure Ojaide: The Poet-Priest of the Niger-Delta and the
Land Saga**

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Abstract

Oil detection in the Niger Delta has had multifarious effects on the Nigerian nation and its citizenry. Along with the enormous wealth accruing to Government coffers is the devaluation of the socio-economic life of the immediate community in the Niger-Delta. It has on record various devastating and unprintable indignities best expressed by its citizenry. The anomaly has distended into militant groups on local, regional and ethnic

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fronts to protest the activities of the foreign oil exploration companies. They have among others degraded the environment without putting anything in place to supplement the undervalued life of the people. Tanure Ojaide's lament for the land and people is unmistakable. It is not only the physical world of this depleted environment that Ojaide's poetry deals with, it goes further into the spiritual regeneration of his people's collective consciousness. This justifies the reference to the world of the gods and goddesses, who suddenly found their spiritual world desecrated by modern technology of oil exploration. Thus, the emerging features in Ojaide's poetry is the preoccupation with thematic issues of oppression, and struggles for liberation in techniques deeply buried in African folklore as well as the cultural beliefs and traditional religious practices of the of the Urhobo people.

Introduction

Place has an important role in our vision especially as writers in the Niger Delta. Ours is a land of suffering and neglected people while the Nigerian government and its corrupt leadership sits on the oil wealth and squander away.

- Okunoye (229)

Land has since been identified as central to Urhobo politics and culture. They believe that it is an important gift from a deity, "the eternal mother, and the water-goddess." It is a spiritual gift that should be protected with all sense of seriousness which reveals the spiritual perspective the conflict has attained in some Niger-Delta communities. They hold that due to the activities of the oil exploration companies, this goddess has moved back into the un-known, leaving this community spiritually vulnerable.

Associating artists with the landscape is becoming an important subject of study with attendant social questions. Ojaide's **Delta Blues and Home Songs** present the Niger Delta as a landscape in which observable physical degeneration and rot in social life unite. The preponderant aesthetic subterfuge they have is the seizure of the physical environment as an object in the visual rendering of the decline in his people's well-being:

This area of constant rains, where we children thought we saw fish fall from the sky in hurricanes, did not remain the same. By the 1960's the rivers had been dredged to take in pontoons and even



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snips to enter our backyard. ...streams and marsnes aried up rubber trees that were planted in a frenzy to make money and were soon tapped to death the 'owerre' fish that used to jump across the culverts and roads were gone.

It is in this light that Tanure Ojaide advances concern for the environment and the consequences of such unfortunate predicaments of his people. From his vantage position, he objects to absorbing "wholesale the culture of western technology" as well as "the multinational plunder" because it is observed to alienates the people from their environment and from their own spot that "sustains their economic production". The poet sombrely takes stock of what obtained in Edenic Delta in his poems in **Blood of Peace**. In the poem "No longer our own country" he categorically asserts thus:

We have lost it
The country we were born into
We can now sing dirges of
that common wealth of yesterday
we live in a country that is no
longer our own (9)

Ojaide broadens the perimeters of the problem by painting devastating pictures of the ugly situation in the following lines: Our sacred trees have been cut down/to make armchairs for the rich and titled; /Our totem eagle, that bird of great heights, / has been shot at by thoughtless guardians (9).The loss of his country\ land leads to one of Ojaide's popular themes of the exile. It is this wonky situation that has pushed the very incisive in society, especially the poet, into a situation of internal exile. The deprivation and poverty of the Niger Delta can be assessed in the light of a contradictory trade- relationship. Or what could be termed unequal exchange in international trade and export between the nation, and oil companies and the Delta people.

In addressing the subject of oil exploration and the degradation of life, Delta people are savagely let down in the dubious oil deal. The national wealth is paraded and wasted before them by the obese conscience of the devastated land. The people are fed on the crumbs of foreign theories that have never been actualized to meet their needs. Nigeria is caricatured as a country of "petro-thieves" and legislators who are "legislooters". The magnitude of harm on life can be appreciated if we understand the quantity of harmful

substances released into the soil through the highly technical means of oil extraction. These substances in form of fluids and oils sink into the water to render it unfit for human consumption. Damaged pipelines also play their part in causing oil spills thus leading to heavy hydrocarbon release that destroys the natural endowments in form of seafood, animal, and plant resources.

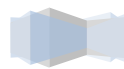
Tanure Ojaide laments the deplorable condition of the Niger- Delta, using local rudimentary psyched sights of anguish, discomposure, and trepidation that streak his time and land. He paints the stench of human waste into words for the purpose of rescuing and salvaging the helpless victims of the exacting system. His sensitivity to the situation makes the subject of the Delta a compact milestone in his ingenious mind as he uses it to uncover the deleterious social order in his society.

In Okome's word "Ojaide's poetry attacks, demolishes, demonises and castigates these people" (11). Further, he elucidates "Ojaide maps out the geography of his poetic profession. Poetry is the means of fighting the erosion of a cultural world that he had loved in his youth." (11). In a nostalgic reminiscent account, Ojaide records the beauty and bounty of the Delta before this ill willed development took place, but then as Okome asserts, the conquistadors 'came into the picture destroying the foetuses sprawling in wombs' and by "flashing gold at our faces broke our love." Okome: (169). The land is thus the symbol of perfection or beauty par excellence- the subject of Ojaide's metaphorical symbol of quest.

The Government- Niger Delta Impasse

The ugly cases of oil spillage have always resulted in the outbreak of epidemic especially between 1993 and 1994 which led to the loss of one thousand four hundred lives. The federal government has always assumed indifferent postures to the impasse between the oil companies and the Delta communities; it has been particularly accused of lack of cogent pollution control or environmental laws to check the excesses of the companies. Resulting in clashes with diverse tales of untold hardships on the lives of the residents..

Lately however, the Nigerian government has shown intolerance for oil companies that will not comply by its drilling rights insisting that such drilling rights will be "closely determined" for each environmental compliance /impact assessment for each drilling site. The government has



also intensified pressure on environmental laws from 2002 and ordered the Nigerian subsidiary of Shell to pay 1.9 billion dollars to the Ijaw for environmental violations in Bayelsa in 2003.

Other achievements recorded since federal government placed measures that are more stringent on oil companies include Chevron-Texaco's 400 million dollars spent on environment protection in 2003. Although the Federal government could not keep its promise of ending gas flaring by 2008, it has asked for extension and has put in place amnesty with a proposed full package of resettlement for all the militants. This is affirmed in the following lines:

Oil exploration and exploitation has over the last four decades impacted disastrously on the socio-physical environment of Niger-Delta oil bearing communities, massively threatening the subsistence peasant economy and the environment and hence the entire livelihood and basic survival of the people. Eteng 1997 (4-5).

Most of the environmental problems in the Delta thus revolve around deforestation, gas flaring, oil spillage, oil toxicity and contaminated marine life. Reports have it that there have been well over four thousand oil spills in the Delta since 1960 which have resulted in diverse environmental air pollution. The erosion of the natural habitat used for livelihood also deprived the people of their legitimate means of livelihood. These unfortunate developments also brought about the displacement of farmers, drop in farm produce, poverty and an increase in rural-urban drift in the Delta was also recorded.

For a people who have maintained a collective memory about society and the mythic, the uprooting of their gods and goddesses is a major cultural upheaval, signaling a painful break with the past. As Ojaide puts it, even their gods and goddesses, we realized, needed privacy" Okome (176). This privacy was shattered and the spiritual world of the Urhobo people became open to outsiders. The implications of such upheavals signal the decay and consequently the death of that culture.

Another important factor in his works is the adverse effect of modern European technology on traditional society. This influence works in two ways: the positive and the negative. Oil exploration is one of the prime examples of the negative aspects of European civilization on his people. He



maintains that the technology supporting this kind of engagement that puts a sharp knife to the cultural ties that binds his Urhobo people. Ojaide is bitter about the schism this has caused his people, but he is also aware that technology is in itself not solely responsible for the evil. The operators, who include the government of the day, have a share of the blame as represented in *Daydreams of Ants* and *The Blood of Peace*.

Urhobo History and Culture

Tanure Ojaide's distinct dissenting voice seeks to uproot the entrenched exploitative capitalist corruption that presents a startling debate on the political, social maladministration, deprivation, and oppression of the minorities symbolized by the Urhobo people among other oppressed tribes on the Delta. The poet presents the contradictions in the Nigerian social system as he honks at the plight of hundred million:

His eagle eyes peering downward
on the Ostrich minded cheats as their loot.
This is where a god led his worshippers to die
This is where I weep for my entire land...
...the Delta of my birth
reels from an immeasurable wound
Barrels of alchemical draught flow
...Masked in barrels of oil-

Delta Blues (21)

Labyrinths of the Delta convey the most enthusiastic picture of Urhobo history and culture. The collection is heavily laden with tales and allusions of uncertainties and of migration and accounts of the hopelessness/tyranny for the Urhobo people yoked under the servitude of the ancient Benin Kingdom. This experience, inhabitants believe, speaks directly to the minorities of the Delta region even today.

We took off without thought of
where we were going, and the
paths opened for our feet
it was not for fun men and women
split from bed, not for fun mothers ran with babies
on their backs,
we rushed into the vast night
living, not in our homes but caravanned in hope.



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Labyrinths (23)

Using the past to comment on the present, the poet assesses the political situation in the country and sums-up that time and civilization has not brought in any change. The vestiges of ethnicity and nepotism are still visible in the streets and in the work place. It was out of this kind of despair, as well as hope of a better life that drove the oppressed Urhobo people out of the land of the tyrannical kings:

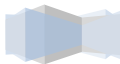
... Ogiso chokked flaming faggots
into men's throats,
castrated the manly among us, and
fell on anybody he loved or scorned
We wept at night
since we could not deny our blood in him
We wept awfulness of our lives
But could not wash the blood with tears
We knew we had not come to our own home.

Labyrinths (23)

The need for justice and freedom compelled the people further on in their migration legend and against all odds, as they found a suitable environment elsewhere. The account further asserts that the restored people turned to the river with drums, goats and cowries. They complained and solicited for the help of the water-god (dess) the mami-water of Ethiope. Once before the goddess of the large watery expanse, these worshippers became eager supplicants, praying the prayer of the needy and the desperate:

O water Bride
moving without a boat in deep waters,
you heeded the anguished cries for our souls,
ferried us across the midstream torrents,
you made us calabashes on the water
and delivered us on the bank, giving us
the virgin beauty of the Delta
who until now in a clear voice
told us we had a place (25).

The migration history is faithfully recorded here though Ojaide acknowledges the help given by the water-goddess. Rendering of the history of the Urhobo people in the turbulent “city of red dust” (Benin), the poet is

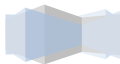


documenting the common account and property of all his people. The poet's re-interpretations, a critic observes, emphasises the pride of place and privileges of the water-goddess in the triumph of a people thoroughly oppressed and marginalized. He delineates the fact that it was the water-goddess that promptly came to their rescue. For this reason, the goddess receives infinite respect and reverence from the people, and to this day, a cult of worshippers has emerged around her in the Delta. The "Igbe cult", according to Okome, is one of the most vibrant manifestations of this reverence which is a common religious practice among the Urhobo people.

In *Labyrinths of the Delta*, Ojaide addresses the "Water Bride" as a deliverer who he claims "heeded the cries of our souls" and by that hands were made calabashes on the water and delivered us on the bank, giving us the virgin beauty of the Delta who until now in a clear voice told us we had a place (14). The poet's loyalty and burden for the Delta is one thing he never toys with. Tracing the origin of his Delta ancestry, as he celebrates the God-given land of abundance and the ancestral bliss:

And now we had arrived at our God-built home
At the River with a thousand branches...
...
We brought along Aridon our memory god
And Uhaghwa, our voice for songs (15)

By recreating this history, Ojaide hopes to trace the length of time the Urobo as a people have been through multifarious political oppression as well as to celebrate the intervention of the divine by way of the water spirits. He also hopes to symbolically assert that this present struggle is not new to the Urobo nation. Continuity in warfare is congenial in Urobo worldview. Ojaide, is not contemplating only the idea of rescue from the tyranny of Ogiso, but a celebration of the love shown to the people by this goddess. It is an immortalization of the seemingly sacred act of deliverance which is widely believed to create a new world or as is hoped, a new cultural concept for the Urobo as a people accustomed to political strife and as overcomers. For the poet, a refuge or safe haven in times of tribulation and cataclysm, where "the visionary poet" must go to seek direction as quoted "searching beneath the labyrinths, inscribed in the goddesses..." It is for him and his people the true path to take, because the poet believes it was the water goddess who delivered us on the banks.



Poetry and Religious Syncretism:

In *Children of Iroko*, the poet's solicitation of the African traditional religious worship stems from the calls for change in the thematic and stylistic trends in African poetry. The abundance of cultural hypotheses in Ojaide's poetry is in response to the biddings for a return to the roots since the first decade after independence by the Soyinka, Clark and Okigbo group which Oda, Osundare and Ojaide executed to the later.

Perhaps as Okome explains "every first born male in Urhobo is traditionally a priest" just as every "every first-born Israelite belongs to God". The duality of his religious life is an important feature of the poet's life and work. This is certainly influenced by the tenets of the poetry of the alternate tradition of which he is a strong member. They all claim to have their inspirations from their cultural, linguistic and religious affiliations. It is in light that Okome's authoritative declaration upholds the "... need to renew this spiritually is an obvious theme that Ojaide pursues with vigour" (11)

In Ojaide's poetry the target is the reconstruction of his Urhobo world and culture. He castigates modern society's ill in "The Curse", the curse conveyed on the people's idiom with the recognitions of gods like "Sanggo" "Amadiora" and "Ogun". In satirizing the academic ills the language flows naturally after the oral songs of abuse common to many African languages:

...the scorpion's bitterest venom confuse the don's brains
Sango's strongest bolts smash the don's brains ...
The sturdiest cobra spit into his peering eyes
Sango and Amadiora burn his gowns
Oguns heaviest rod lash his flat buttocks...
The bees make thorough grimace of ...
Chukwu's smallpox uglify his elevated face
The liveliest bug enervates his hours of rest
Olokun weigh him down to the bottom waters (12).

Placing the Delta as memorial Eden of the people. Here too, there is the admission of God who had praise names. It is used here to place the relatively antiquated origin of the people in the region:

Before God's praise names were peddled
About in platter The Delta was one region



A tropical garden where you picked for free
Whatever appealed to your constitution?
The land carried people on his back
Proffering bounties... (16)

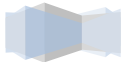
Here, as in the “The Verdict of Stone’ the poet acknowledges God almighty saying “except the soil God keeps his testament” (12). The record of beliefs, ritual worship and the attendant superstitious beliefs however juxtaposes his Christian beliefs. A salient feature of Ojaide’s poetry is the communal voice carefully crafted and maintained in the frequent use of the first person plural “we” indicative of pluralism, that togetherness or what others would say is “the brother’s keeper voice” as in the poem ‘We keep watch over them’:

From the scaffold of pain we keep watch over them
From the perilous precipice of misery we keep watch over them
From the exposed post of lowliness, cold and clammy
From the slums of existence we keep watch over them (30).

Most importantly, the poet demonstrates his expertise knowledge of his people’s culture far and above what the modern age would ordinarily permit. The Urhoro/African praise names, animal imagery, animal names, traditional appellations, sea animals and bird names and value placements form the oral sources fill his poetry portraying how versatile he could be in cultural matters. The wealth of Urhobo culture thus litters the poems as in ‘The Battle’

For fear of exposing the its soft body
The Oghighe plant covers itself with torns
For fear of bad company
The akpobrisi keeps distant from other trees,
For fear of falling into the grip of age
The python yearly casts off his skin.
For fear of its head
The tortoise moves inside a fortress
For fear of our lives
We arm in diverse ways (39)

The essential message Ojaide preaches by his insistence on the addressing culture in all his works is summed up in what Okome describes in *Labyrinths of the Delta*, as the prodigal becoming awake to a cultural world that has been submerged by the advent of technological development and modernity.



Ojaide's poetry tries to unearth meaning from this world, foregrounding the deep spirituality of his people; he argues that change must come from within this culture.

In an attempt to invoke the traditional and cultural spirits of many African communities who had outstanding victories, Ojaide mobilizes heroes for action. In "future Gods" he lists them as "Ogidigbo; Ogiso; Essi and Shaka" (40) saying:

You were all warriors and never did you
Come back from wars without spoil
Now fight your way back
To help us in these desperate days
Shame on gods who look on bemused
As lightningstrikes their devotees
In their own groves. (41)

Conclusion

Ojaide's emphasis on a return to traditional worship could most likely be traced to the influence of Christopher Okigbo's syncretism on him. Ojaide's "Children of Iroko" like Okigbo's 'Mother Idoto' both convey a similar message of the prodigal's return from his brief romance with Catholicism. His acolyte comes back from his assumed estrangement, all dressed up for ritual worship. The reader is thus confronted with an impasse where a one-man- squad fights tooth and nail to redeem a land; where the people are almost brought to total ruin by a few privileged members of the nation.

The poet though an avowed Catholic, would either puzzle or dazzle the reader by a double-faced appearance as a traditional-priest and poet. He has always exhibited this observed proclivity to traditional religious worship even when he nods to Catholicism. The poet's espousal to the two faiths bears witness to the syncretic content of his faith and poetry. In response to which questions, he avers that he was baptized into the faith; "I went to catholic school and was baptized and later confirmed in the Roman Catholic Church, but returned to serve as a priest or acolyte in the native shrine":

Now acolyte you must dress new
In white calico with red bands
Like the virgin priestess
A feather hat from forest birds



And lead the procession on.
A colyte, the priestess by your right
Place the weighty carriage on the floor
And touch your forehead on the ground
Pour the wine

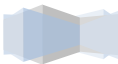
In drops;
Let it stream
Over the ground
To sink beneath
And let Osonobrugwe take his fill
We thank you.

Children of Iroko (13)

Okome affirms though that “Every first born male in Urhobo is traditionally a priest”. This could be perfectly true but it brings the reader to another point of conflict since the Christian faith, which he earlier embraced also gives its converts equal privileges in the order of priestly ministerial services. If the poet-born-priest goes to embrace another faith without actually renouncing his faith in the former, religious syncretism is established beyond reasonable doubt. “No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matthew 6:24)

This contradiction is most apparent when placed side by side scriptural laws of the Christian faith: “Thou shalt not have other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water underneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” (Exodus 20:3-4)

Undoubtedly, the call to the reconstruction of African culture in art is infesting the serenity of the one-time cosmic harmony Christianity hoped to instil. Though not an offence peculiar to the poet, it is best seen as the corporate heritage of all poets and sympathisers of the Alter-Native tradition of African poetry. This could also be traced to earlier poets like Okigbo and to a certain extent Soyinka who shed influence on many of the second generation of Nigerian poets.



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