TO OIL THE SONGS: TANURE OJAIDE'S *DISSEMINATION* AND *UDJE* AESTHETICS

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Abstract
Oil is at the root of the waves of conflict in Tanure Ojaide's Niger Delta region. The region is the belt of Nigeria's oil production. It is also the hottest site of resource-conflict in the Gulf of Guinea. This conflict has become a strong motif in the poetry of Ojaide. And Ojaide enunciates this situation by adopting the aesthetics of his oral tradition. There are two keystones in the aesthetics of Ojaide's DisseminNation. They are the bolsters of Udje and the construction of place. Both are, however, connected because the solvency of medium is tied to the poet's commitment to place. Ojaide's poems are deeply rooted in the habits of thought and aesthetics which underlie the Udje oral tradition of his nativity. This paper takes two trajectories: it locates Ojaide in the soil of Udje, and it goes further to show the bolsters of Udje in a selected number of Ojaide's poems on oil conflict.

I

Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah has observed Ojaide's debt to the *Udje* tradition. Na'Allah says that Ojaide has embraced the tradition of "Urhobo oral poets as he does his muse and the Urhobo god of memory, Aridon" (74). This observation is in sync with the position of Darah who says that the "lovers of Ojaide's poetry have recognized the place of *Udje* rhetoric" in the "overall aesthetic strategy" of the poet (80). Ojaide himself has acknowledged his admiration for the *Udje* masters, he pays tribute to the trio of "Okitiakpe, Oloya and Memerume" in *Poetry, Performance, and Art*. He notes that the trio has "bequeathed us a unique poetic legacy" (v). These oral poets are also acknowledged in *In the Kingdom of Songs* where Ojaide offers his poems as "tribute to this artistic tradition and the masters of the genre" (xii). They are the masters of a tradition which stands as the sub-text of Ojaide's poetry. In fact, in *Theorizing*, Ojaide avers that *Udje* is the sub-text to his art. Ojaide holds strongly to the formatives of the oral tradition which he says "is often ignored at the expense of the newer modern African literary forms of poetry…which though written, are informed by the older indigenous tradition of which *Udje* is a representative example" (1-2). Ojaide goes further to say that for any reader to really understand the works of the written tradition, especially those of African extraction, it is important for the reader to know the oral culture in which the writer has been raised (2). This statement is highly applicable to Ojaide's poetry.

Notwithstanding the waves of migration which have become a feature of postcolonial societies and postcolonial writers like Ojaide, the poet remains what he calls a homeboy minstrel. In "The Minstrel Lives a Homeboy", the persona avers that the minstrelsy of the "homeboy" is unfailing even "outside his nativity", and he is often "driven homeward" to bond with the "spirit" of his land in spite of the challenges of "civil strife" (1-4). This poem is but one example which corroborates the density of commitment to place in Ojaide's poetry. There are similar evocations in "Bonny", "The Minstrel's School", "Doors of the Forest", etc which evince either a strong sense of nostalgia, or a clarion for redress, or an outburst of anger at the degradation of his place. Ojaide declares: "I may have travelled extensively all over the world…but my native home is the Niger Delta. Friends and readers of my writing

say that I lighten up and become passionate when I write about the Niger Delta" (*Ordering* 24). Ojaide proves that the postcolonial act, which Bhabha describes as "gathering the past in the ritual of retrieval", is the sure way to the location of place and medium, and also the sure way to "gathering the present" (198). *DissemiNation*, as Bhabha states, is the propensity of postcolonial societies to generate cultural productions such as literature which embody the narratives of their experiences (201). The formal strategy of Ojaide's *DissemiNation* is therefore lodged in the poet's ability to locate his place in the Niger Delta, and in his capacity to find the medium which is embedded in the matrix of place, and in his application of the retrieved medium to a contemporary situation such as the resource-conflict in the Niger Delta. Thus the poet adopts the tropes of *Udje* for his poetry of protest and redress.

II

The search for the aesthetics of Ojaide's poetry is, to quote Deborah J. Haynes, a search for a "scheme of ideas which explains practice" (7). This involves a summation of the strategy which provides the hinges for Ojaide's *DissemiNation*. And a crucial index of this strategy is, undoubtedly, the application of the bolsters of *Udje*. *Udje* is a long standing tradition of oral poetry which, though enervated by time and modernity, has remained extant in the Urhobo nation of the Niger Delta for ages. Some of the elements of *Udje* which form the sub-text in Ojaide's poetry on oil are the enunciation of adversarial temper, the force of topicality and history, the trope of masking or indirection, the solvency of myths and symbols from folklore, the mystical glamour of deference to deities, and the evocation of community and participation.

The adversarial temper of *Udje* poetry is a key to Ojaide's poetic engagements, what he calls "a ready tool" for use (*Ordering* 31). It is this sub-text of orality that is depicted in the poem entitled "Durban", an address to the Zulu *imbongi*. The poem speaks of the kinship of art and the difference of artistic temperaments: "In the kingdom of songs we share one standard: /you praise as I abuse; both necessities of life" (33-34). "I abuse" is the mission statement of an *Udje* poet, the opposite of the Zulu *imbongi*. And it enunciates the abiding place of the *Udje* temper in Ojaide's poetry, especially in those poems which embody the vexed issue of oil and postcoloniality. The language of Ojaide's poetry takes a position in the conflict that is depicted. When the persona in Ojaide's "I No Go Siddon Look" says "I no go siddon look / make Shell dey piss and shit for our water" (3-4), he is drawing the line of engagement as in the tradition of the *Udje* masters. The engagements of the *Udje* tradition are motivated by *ofovwin* which is hinged on a sense of otherness and opposition. The *Udje* poet uses language to mark this sense of otherness on behalf of himself and his community. Ojaide's poetry adopts this tenor in his depiction of contemporary Niger Delta challenges. The persona in "I No Go Siddon Look" shows this vexation when he reveals the state of things: "I no go siddon look / make Shell dey piss and shit for our water", and "I no go siddon look / make Pentecostal noise cover *Udje* drums" (3-6). The poet-persona commits himself to confronting the subjection of his environment and his art. A key index of *Udje* aesthetics is premised on the ability of art as an instrument of confrontation and redress, and this is achieved through the sharp edge of criticism. Although in *Theorizing*, Ojaide, by seeking to situate *Udje* within the traditional frame of literature, argues that laughter and intellectual delight are the mainframes of *Udje*, Darah has stated that whereas the "long narrative of *Udje* songs combine a medley of tempers and themes" (74), the "primary purpose of *Udje* song poetry and performance" is "public censure or criticism vigorous enough to shame the target(s) of the songs" (72). Laughter and intellectual delight are of course possible effects given that the song-poems, as Darah says, are also "a treasure of knowledge" about the people and their environment (75); but "the dominant temper in *Udje* song-poetry tradition", in spite of its multigeneric capability, "is a censorious one" (73). This conforms to

the statement of the poet-persona in "Durban" who says "I abuse" (34), only that in this case it is the voice of a modern poet who is standing on the shoulders of his forebears, a modern poet who strongly stakes his claim to his patrimony. "I no go look / make Shell dey piss and shit for our water", and "I no go look / make Pentecostal noise cover *Udje* drums" (in "I No Go Siddon Look" 3-6). There is a provocation here, which calls for adversarial formation, what the *Udje* poets call *ofovwin*. The despoilers of the poet's place have provoked him to songs, and he stands as *obo-ile* (poet/composer) and *oro-rile* (cantor/performer), both in one mould, to sing the adversaries to a fall (*esuoshe*). Ojaide notes in *Poetry, Performance, and Art* that every *Udje* poet "wants to wound' the deviant(s) so that the song acts as a deterrent" (51). And he adopts this temper in his own poetry, as the speaker in "Durban" says. He even states this mission, in reference to *Delta Blues*, in his interview with Terhemba Shija: "I want to 'wound' with words the violator of humanity in such a way as to make him desist from doing so again. The subject, theme and mood compel the poet to use a certain style" (267). This is to say that the temper of his poetry is provoked by the compelling circumstances of his time and place. Granted that the statement is a direct reference to the strident tone of *Delta Blues*, it is nonetheless applicable to Ojaide's oeuvre on oil. His tone is strident and denunciatory because he has been provoked by the activities of the oil firms and the Nigerian state. *Delta Blues* is actually the bridgehead for the poems which he has come to write on the subject of oil since the death of Saro-Wiwa, and the tempo has spread to other poems in other collections such as *The Tale*, *Waiting*, *The Beauty*, etc. In "I Sing out of Sickness", one example from the recent poems in *The Beauty*, the persona says: "we must not leave it to lightning alone to strike down the monster" of hegemony and oppression (36). So the persona sings because he is "sick from the blindness of people from under whom lords tap /their wealth and insult them for the misery that breaks the heart" (7-8). The persona identifies with the "children possessed into demons and branded militants" (12). There is no doubt that the persona is angered by the abuses which his patrimony suffers; and he stands like his *Udje* forebears to sing the enemies to a fall. This is the reason for the topicality of the poems.

Topicality and historicity are two formatives which Ojaide's poems share with the *Udje* tradition. Clark has described *Udje* as "topical poetry…turned into common currency for its immediate public as well as for the stranger…" (283). The same can be said of Ojaide's poems on oil. Oil is one of the most topical issues in the world today, especially when it is extracted from a region which has been marked by the tremors of resistance. It is the hottest issue in the Niger Delta. And as the *Udje* poet bases his song-poems on the topical issues of his place, so has Ojaide written poems on the hottest subject of his time. Topicality thrives on a clear sense of history. The reconstruction of the oral history of his people, which begins in "Labyrinths of the Delta", also finds strong anchors in "Welcoming the Dead", "Blues for a Virgin Beauty", "Oshue", etc., the whole stretch - from pre-colonial Niger Delta, through the Slave Trade, to colonialism and to postcolonialism - show the connections between epochs of disruption and dispossession in which human cargo, palm oil and crude oil are linked in the continuum of pain.

Topicality and historicity form the hallmark of the harvest of poetry on the postcolonial tremors in the Niger Delta: the entire poems on Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni saga, the depiction of the implosion and dystopia of the oil-city of Warri, the oil tragedies of Idjerhe and Odi, the environment of Bonny and the entire region, the rise of Egbesu Boys, among others are all captured in the poetry of Ojaide in a manner that has clearly brought the subject of oil up to date. Ojaide's poetry is a site of awareness. This is the influence of the *Udje* tradition. It should be recalled that Ojaide has said that "one can reconstruct Urhobo history, culture, and society" from *Udje* (*Poetry, Performance, and Art* 50). And Darah has

said that *Udje* offers "a treasure of knowledge" about the people and their environment (75). This is also true of Ojaide's poetry; it is a treasure of knowledge on the Niger Delta; and a storehouse of knowledge on the history of oil, even when the poet adopts the strategy of masking or indirection.

Of course, masking is what the *Udje* poet calls *iten*. It is the process of craft which tempers even the most topical or vituperative delivery with a veil of indirection. It also provides an artistic cover for the poet. Ojaide adopts this strategy in his poetry, in the balancing of indictment and indirect naming. The poems in *Delta Blues* offer many examples. General. Abacha is one personage who features in the collection. Gen. Abacha is depicted as "the uniformed lord" in "Immortal Grief" (8); as the "undertaker" who "presides over the land with a swaggerstick" in "Sleeping in a Makeshift Grave" (15); as "the hangman", an "old cockroach in the groin of Aso Rock" (4-5), as "the butcher of Abuja"(41) and as "*Ogiso*'s grandchild by incest" (43), all in "Elegy for Nine Warriors"; as "an incubus on top of the nation" in "Witchcraft" (8); as "the commander-in-thief, wealthiest thief-of-state" in "Solidarity Marches" (11); as "the usurper-chieftain" in "Army of Microbes"(1). In all these instances, and in spite of the apparent denunciation in the poems, Ojaide avoids direct naming. There are other examples in the poems in *Waiting* where Gen. Abacha is "ABC of torture" in "Victory Song" (58) and "ABC, alias death Squad" in "When We Hear Name of President" (9). General Obasanjo is also indicted in "When We Hear Name of President" as "Mr. Big Belle" who has sent "lightning" to "sweep Odi with fire" (11-12). In "Idjerhe", the persona indicts General. Abubakar for his attitude towards the victims of the Jesse fire disaster. Gen. Abubakar is called 'the salaaming man" (5) and "Bespectacled blindness' (10). These examples show that topicality is not the absence of metaphoricity. The strategy of masking helps to deepen meaning and codify images. It is the technique by which Ojaide is able to process experiences and render them in the highly metaphoric/symbolic codes his poetry.

Ojaide also draws from folklore like the poets of the *Udje* tradition. He deploys myths and traditional symbols in the enunciation of social issues. Personages and objects are drawn from folklore and they are cast in the poems as repositories of value and as timeless bearers of meaning. "Niger Delta myths are sources of allusions" for describing "the reality of the Nigerian nation", says the poet (*Ordering* 28). The poet holds that "the mythic corpus of the Niger Delta infuses poetry and other creative writings with a ready storehouse of allusions, which root the vision in a specific culture, locus, and reality. It gives energy and mystical glamour to the creative work" (*Ordering* 29). In *Poetic Imagination*, he avers: "I have to call on images and characters from folklore in order to depict the contemporary situation. I have often resorted to the images of Eseze of the Okpe people and [of] *Ogiso*, a legendary tyrant of ancient Benin" (126). Of the two, *Ogiso* features consistently in Ojaide's oeuvre on oil as the symbol of abusive power, repression and local suzerainty. There are examples of this enunciation in poems like "Four Pieces", "He Rode an Elephant", "The Ant Dances on the Elephant", etc. Those are poems which, through images sourced from Urhobo folklore, seek to capture the recurrent anguish of the Niger Delta in the grip of internal violators. Note that Gen. Abacha is called "*Ogiso*'s grandchild by incest" (43) in "Elegy for Nine Warriors" because he is held responsible for the suffering of the Ogoni and the death of the Ogoni Nine. *Ogiso* is Ojaide's trope for all holders of power who inflict pain on the weak or minority components of the polity; "*Ogiso*…has…metamorphosed into generals and presidents…especially in Nigeria" (*Waiting* vii). In the opposite, *Ogidigbo* is sourced from folklore as the symbol of resistance and self-determination. *Ogidigbo* is the ideal warrior, highly adored by *Udje* poets like Oloya in whose step Ojaide walks. *Ogidigbo* appears in many poems. In the second segment of "When We Hear Name of President", the uprising of

the nations of the region, against the incongruities of postcolonial Nigeria, is depicted as the rise of *Ogidigbo* (117-118).

Besides the opposing images of *Ogiso* and *Ogidigbo, Ojaide* also appropriates other images from folklore. The tortoise is used in "Labyrinths of the Delta" as a figuration for the onslaught of imperialism on the people. The eleven lines, from 98 to 108, are strongly influenced by a folksong. The Urhobo "characterization" of the tortoise/turtle is "the symbol of exploitation and oppression for which the speaker [in the poem] seeks revenge and restitution" (*Ordering* 31). Only that in the context of this poem, it is applied to the groundwork of imperialism on which today's postcolonial travails stand. There is a similar tenor in "Welcoming the Dead" where the poet builds a powerful testimony against subterfuge and complicity on a belief system. Ancestor worship runs foul when the local people commit the error of receiving the pale men of Europe as kith and kin from the dead. This error of judgment helps to inaugurate the treachery of Europe in the region, from slavery to colonialism, and now to postcolonialism. Oil has been crucial in the last two phases of Western subterfuge in the region, and the nations of the region are still not free from errors of judgment.

Another crucial feature of the poet's debt to folklore is that, like his *Udje* forebears, he defers to divinities. He accords the deities a place of authority in the universe of his poetry and in the war which he wages by art. He courts the support and camaraderie of the deities, especially *Aridon* and *Uhaghwa*. In *Ordering*, he notes that "*Uhaghwa* and *Aridon* are sometimes used interchangeably by Urhobo people and [he] had made *Aridon* assume the role of *Uhaghwa* and vice versa" (28). He defers to these deities because he appears to believe that "Gods have their homes but the efficacy of their influence, blessing and power goes beyond their places of origin. In other words, there are no barriers to their power over their devotees" (28). This belief stems from the interface between art and religion in the cosmology of the poet's people. He states, in *Theorizing*, that "the rites before and after *Udje* performance, as well as the constant invocation of *Uhaghwa* for inspiration, performance, zeal, and protection indicate the role of the arts in the morality of the community" (16-17). Thus, the office of the poet is considered to be existing at the instance of the gods, as in "The Muse Won't Let Me Quit" (in *The Beauty*). A poet is believed to be one who performs a serious function in the society, and he depends on patron deities for his success and protection. The task is thought to be fraught with danger, and it is even more so in the dire politics of oil. So the poet-persona in "I Carry No Weapons" acknowledges the risks involved in the high decibel of protestation in *Delta Blues*, and he leaves his safety in the hands of Uhaghwa in those uneasy days that followed Saro-Wiwa's death. In "Wails", a dirge for Saro-Wiwa and his compatriots, the persona calls Saro-Wiwa the "favourite son" of "the god of songs" (46), and he also calls on *Aridon* and *Uhaghwa* to support the songs of protest and sorrow have been provoked by acts of state-terror targeted at Ogoni and the entire Niger Delta. "*Aridon*, give me the voice / to raise this wail", he says in lines 15-16. And in lines 75-76, he says *"Uhaghwa*, give me the insuppressible voice / to raise this wail to the world's end". In many respect, "Wails" is a typology for Ojaide's poetry on oil and the agony of the Niger Delta. The poet's oeuvre is a wailing poetry. And the deities are constant elements in the oeuvre. For instance, they are invoked in "Labyrinths of Delta" at the concourse and stock-taking of the people. There are several "citations" on the gods in the poems in *The Tale*, in *Waiting*, among others. The craving for amity is extended to *Ivwri*, the Urhobo god of restitution and revenge, whose support is always needed at moments of resistance. This also involves *Egbesu* and *Ifri*, the Ijo deities in the programme of resistance in the region. The gods are always called in the struggles of the people, from *Ogidigbo* to *Egbesu* Boys. And

Ojaide's poetry shows how the resistant-movements use the symbolism of the deities to foreground their efforts. The cultural import of this attitude is understandable but the efficacy of the gods to the business of the poet or the well-being of the nations will always be highly debatable. There are also poems in Ojaide's oeuvre which indict the gods for dereliction and even complicity. The career of the gods is suspect. "In the Castle of Faith" is an example. It is, therefore, safer to consider this act of deference to the gods, in Ojaide's poetry, as artistic fidelity to culture, which "gives energy and mystical glamour to the creative work[s]" (*Ordering* 29), but not as a programme of faith. The poet and the warrior may be steeped in culture, they may employ the tropes of culture, they may celebrate and venerate the gods, but they cannot afford the complacency of leaving their business to them. Even the "favourite son" of "the god of songs" can become a victim of abusive power ("Wails" 46). That balance is enunciated in Ojaide's oeuvre on oil. The lightning of the gods is more of a trope of culture which has run from the *Udje* poets to Ojaide. The speaker in "I Sing Out of Sickness" says the people "must not leave it to lightning alone to strike down the monster" of hegemony and oppression (36). The office of the poet testifies in itself to the fact that it is the duty of every man to sing his adversary to fall. While they venerate their deities, it is the duty of the nations to confront the destroyers of their patrimony. And because, by the *Udje* tradition, poetry is the instrument for this duty of confrontation, the poet cannot fail to court the participation of his people in the processes of art.

Ojaide has noted that *Udje* is a "participatory artistic tradition' (*Ordering* 57), and he carries this trope of participation into his poetry on oil. *Delta Blues* is his first collection to commit a great number of poems to oil and conflict; it is also one of the first by a Nigerian poet to come on the heels of Saro-Wiwa's death. The collection begins with a strong sense of minstrelsy, addressed to the community or audience which is called *inughe* in the *Udje* tradition. The opening poem, "My Drum Beats Itself", rings a clarion: "Sing with me" (33). This is a call for participation in a communal wailing and/or protest against the spoilers of the communal heritage. This opener sets the mood and tone for that section of twenty-eight poems. And it is replicated in the eighteen poems of *The Tale*, in the sections entitled "Oil Remedies" and "At the Kaiama Bridge". The persona in the opening poem says "I sing the community's goat song", the community's song of anguish ("The Goat Song" 1). The trope of minstrelsy continues in *Waiting*, in *The Beauty* and others.

Conclusion

The problems of oil have always been communal from the colonial era. Tanure Ojaide, who sings about them, cannot be a closet poet. His address is both to the community and about the community. He wages the war of songs on behalf of his people. He calls the people into this war. One sees this kind of poetry as a concourse for the voices of the "small ones who [reel] in cruel pain" ("Cemetery of Heart" 30). The personae shed light on the issues across strata, across epochs, across myths and history, across the nations of the region. The poetry sheds light on the home of *Ogidigbo, Ozidi* and *Egbesu* Boys, as well as the herbal healer who laments that his environment and office have been ruined by the "fires of capital" (55) and by the "tankers [which] take oil to inland ports" (in "The Lamentation of a Herbalist" 21). The poetry gives voice to the plight of Bonny (in "Bonny") which is "swathed in inevitable water and fire" (50). The speaker in "Bonny" notes that the "roaring flames are no sacrificial bonfires, /not the annual congress of devotees and their pantheon" (27-28). They are "incessant gas flares and oil blowout" (32) which create a "cornucopia of woeful tears" (36). But as "the fires…consume the evergreens / and cascades of grease…clog prided wetlands" (37-8), the island proves to be resilient in the face of its challenges; it strings "tender words' (43); it nurtures its endangered "birds, fish [and] flowers in the face of "flares" (43-44); it dares to be "happy" with its "muffled wails" (47). This same image of

dystopia is shown in the charged conundrum of the oil city of Warri in "Wafi, My Incontestable Love", among others. It appears too in "The Ethiope at Abraka, 2008" in spite of the elation in the persona's voice. As the persona celebrates the unsoiled strip of Ethiope which has barely escaped "the poaching" done in the region by "oil lords" and other greedy heads, he still remembers that that strip is only free because there are "no oil wells" there (2). There is a strong concern for and commitment to place in Ojaide poetry; people and medium are tied by the ferment of reality. This process of *DissemiNation* locates the solvency of the poetic medium at the centre of communal experience. The poet uses language to mark the borderlines of experience between his place and the disrupter of his place. The language of the poet shows the contest that is waged over oil between the owner and the accumulator.

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