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## The place of Urhobo folklore in Tanure Ojaide's poetry

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While some notable studies have been done on Tanure Ojaide and his coevals on their "Alter/Native" tradition of modern African poetry that gained inspiration from indigenous African oral literature and folklore, there has been no focused study on the place of folklore in his writing, especially his poetry. Ojaide's writing is deeply steeped in Urhobo folklore, which his upbringing and later study and research in Udje have brought about. Though this is not an essentialist reading of his work, I intend to use his specific cultural background to do a reading of his poetry in order to show the depth, breadth, and complexity of his themes and the sophistication of his art, all of which are infused with his native Urhobo folklore. From legendary personages such as Ogiso, Arhuan, Aminogbe, Ayayughe, Ogidigbo through the fauna and flora of the *iroko*, *akpobrisi*, *uwara*, *eyareya*, to the incorporation of folk songs and modelling of poems on the *udje* genre, Ojaide uses orature to establish a cultural identity and a common humanity for his work. Through local folklore and a style borrowed from the oral tradition he deploys folkloric resources as style and form to advance his themes. My study thus illuminates the deep meaning of the writer's thoughts and the effective use of oral poetic performance style. This conscious effort of the writer appears to have yielded poetic dividends in the relevance of his work and the literary reputation he has gained through his consistency despite innovations now and then. **Keywords:** cultural identity, Tanure Ojaide, oral tradition, Urhobo folklore.

### Introduction

Tanure Ojaide is a renowned scholar-poet whose works have been subjected to a lot of scholarly interpretations. His over seventeen collections of poetry, seven works of prose fiction, two memoirs, and impressive number of scholarly books and critical essays on a wide range of subjects focusing on various issues in African literature are huge sources of academic references. Many of the academic researches carried out on his poetry tend to focus on his role as an environmental-cum-activist writer or one engaged in eco or Green Wave poetics. Speaking on his art, Enajite Ojaruega (93) observes:

He is one writer who through his art has been able to bring to public attention the level of environmental degradation going on in the Niger Delta region for several decades. By extension, he also reveals the plight of the people whose lives and livelihoods have been greatly compromised as a result of the negative consequences

of oil exploitation in that region. Much of Ojaide's poetry consistently dwells on the paradox of an oil wealth that is a blessing turned doom, a curse rather than a source of joy for his people and region. Strong strains of lamentation and nostalgic evocation for what was once an idyllic environment, but now greatly damaged, are also found in his poetry.

In this light, Uzoechi Nwagbara describes the poet as using "literature for environmentalist purposes" as "he places premium on the biotic community—its sustainability and preservation" (18). Some other notable studies have been done on him and his coevals on their "Alter/Native" tradition of modern African poetry that gained inspiration from indigenous African oral literature and folklore. This is probably what Tijan M. Sallah alludes to when he says that Ojaide's poetry is made more appealing because it possesses "cultural integrity" (20). Funso Ayejina comes close to the subject area of this article when he classifies this style of writing as an "Alter-Native tradition" which basically signifies "the return to roots" as Ojaide "uses traditional forms to achieve poetic vitality, intensity and relevance." He believes: "His philosophical musings look backward to tradition as well as inward to the present such that the poems exhibit a deeper interiorization which, while drawing primarily on the poet's personal experience, does not inhibit the general slant of his vision" (Ayejina 125). However, in spite of the views represented above, there has been no focused study on the place of folklore in his writings, especially his poetry. A closer look at Ojaide's writings shows it is deeply steeped in Urhobo folklore which his upbringing and later study and research in Udje poetic performance tradition have brought about. This essay therefore seeks to interpret the subtext of the Urhobo folkloric content embedded in his poetry which includes his use of folksongs, folktales, legends, myths, Udje tradition, proverbs, riddles, worldview, philosophy, and other folkloric tropes of Urhobo culture.

#### **Aspects of Urhobo cultural background and folklore**

Before I go on to discuss in detail the place of Urhobo folklore in Ojaide's poetry, it is only pertinent that I explain a little of the Urhobo cultural background which has greatly influenced this modern day poet. Ojaide now lives in and continues to write mostly from the United States of America, yet he maintains close connections with his traditional cultural heritage as shown in much of his poetry. The poet himself has in several oral interviews and critical essays focusing on his art made references to his indebtedness to the rich reservoir of his Urhobo traditional folklore and culture. In a particular instance, he explains the relationship between a creative writer and his birthplace by recommending that a writer should identify with a specific place or his nativity since he/she is not just an air plant (Ojaide, "The Niger Delta" 233–4):

Every writer's roots are very important in understanding his or her work. [...] Nativity has so much to do with creating literature, especially poetry. The writer tends to exploit memory to garner images to clarify his or her vision. This memory might be of the writer's birthplace or of the place he or she has lived in and associates with. I may have travelled extensively all over the world, I may have lived in different parts of my country, Nigeria; I may be currently living and working in the United States, but my native home is the Niger Delta [...] the constant backdrop to my inspiration [...] Nativity [...] means birthplace and/or the place where one grows up to imbibe its worldview. Generally, where one is born or lives the formative years of childhood defines one's nativity. Nativity is some specific place whose air, water, crops, folklore and other produce nourish the individual. (Ojaide, "The Niger Delta" 233-4)

Ojaide belongs to the Urhobo ethnic group that lives mainly in Delta State of Nigeria, West Africa. The Urhobo people, who currently number about five million, are the most predominant ethnic group in Nigeria's Delta State and the fifth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. They occupy about eight of the twenty five local government areas in Delta State. There are many versions of their migration story including ones related to the idea of having come from outside present-day Nigeria (Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, etc.) to finally settling in their current location. However, the most commonly accepted account traces their immediate origins to Aka or Udo, now called Edo, during the middle part of the Benin Empire. They were said to have left the eponymous Aka because of their gross mistreatment and oppression during the tyrannical Ogiso dynasty. They left in different groups and at different times in search of more peaceful territories to settle in.

The Urhobos share similar linguistic and cultural features with the people of Edo hence they are regarded as being part of the Pan-Edo or Edoid group. Farming and fishing as well as small scale trading are the main traditional occupations of the Urhobo people. As part of the geographical entity referred to as the Niger Delta region, the people possess large expanses of land and water masses, rich in flora and fauna as well as aquatic life. Underneath their land and water spaces can be found rich deposits of petroleum which till today contributes over seventy-five percent of Nigeria's gross domestic earnings. As in other areas of the Niger Delta region where oil exploitation is carried out, the poet's homeland suffers from a gradual but steady despoliation and degradation of the ecosystem. This is as a result of the negative fallout of constantly drilling for crude oil on land and water and the consequences of the oil exploitation industry.

It is significant to note here that the Urhobo people traditionally have belief systems that are unique to them. For instance, they believe that every individual, before birth, makes a choice at *Urhoro* of what type of life he or she wants to live before being born.

*Urhoro* in Urhobo folklore designates a spiritual stage in a child's life before it is born or, as the Urhobo people would say, comes to the earth. To them, thus, there is predestination. However, it is believed that if one has a bad choice, the person can through sacrifices and good work on earth change the "choice" to a positive one. In this regard, one's head guides one's destiny and the hand is fated to either succeed or fail. A very spiritual people, the Urhobo people believe in reincarnation and the cyclical nature of life. They serve family ancestors and gods who are expected to guide and guard the living. A benevolent ancestor receives abundant sacrifice during festive occasions to show appreciation for the care towards the devotees.

The Urhobo also believe in the supernatural. For example, that witches operate in their coven world to cause mischief or harm to those they are envious of. However, they can be countered by acts of good living or traditional medicines prepared to fortify one mystically. There are traditional values such as kindness, honesty, truthfulness that the average person aspires to uphold. At the same time, the culture forbids certain things such as incest, stealing, lying, dubious lifestyle, adultery, and other acts that would adversely affect the corporate existence of the community. They also believe that the good will be rewarded in this world and also be better human beings in their next incarnation or the next world, while evil ones will suffer not only in their lifetimes but also in their next incarnation.

There is belief in the binary nature of phenomena. If there is evil, there is good. If there is poison, there is an antidote. This important aspect of Urhobo belief system even has symbolic representations in their vegetation specifically through two trees: the *akpobrisi* (a giant tree like the *iroko*) which is male and tyrannical and *uwara* (an elegant and seemingly fragile plant), which is female, tall, beautiful, and soothing. Another point that is significant for one who is familiar with the people's folklore is that art is close to religion. Sculptures/figures and songs/music are closely related to religion. For instance, the *udje* performance is closely related to the tutelary god for whom the songs are performed with dance to cleanse the land of spiritual impurities so that the people could be blessed with a good harvest in farming and fishing. The soothing female principle counters the harsh male principle. Thus, living in a typical traditional society as in the village where Ojaide was raised endows one with the values the Urhobo society promotes.

As will be expatiated upon later, it is quite noticeable that as part of the originality of his poetic oeuvre, Ojaide taps deeply into the cosmology, ontology, and epistemology embedded in the folklore of his people. The poet grew up in a rural environment and continues to consider himself privileged to have enjoyed a pristine environment then. As he reveals in his memoir, *Great Boys: An African Childhood* (1998) he was raised by his maternal grandmother, Amreghe, in the small village of Ibada. He followed his uncles to fish and farm until he was old enough to accompany his age-mates on such jaunts. Through his association with his grandfather and uncles, Ojaide

familiarized himself with the landscape of his nativity which will later be the source of reference for many of his poems and stories. He recalls the Edenic atmosphere with the lush green vegetation and rivers and creeks in the area. The landscape teemed with “bush” animals, anthills, butterflies, reptiles, and other non-human population that co-existed with the villagers. It was a life of abundance and fulfilment and nobody complained of hunger.

In his memoir, Ojaide recalls how the peaceful quiet rural environment was suddenly broken with the coming of prospectors out to seek oil, different from the palm oil that he knew. There were promises by the oil prospectors of a better life for the people whom they paid meagre compensations for the lands they prospected on. With time as Ojaide grew up, the boom expected turned to gloom with the pollution of the land and rivers as well as gas flaring that would pose health hazards to the people. As at the time the poet started writing, the fishing and farming of the rural population had been adversely affected by the oil exploitation. The damage to the people’s well-being affected other endeavours of life.

It is therefore often with a tone of nostalgia that he recalls this bygone era in most of his poems. Little wonder his poetry, nay work, constantly protests against those human agents that have continued to perpetrate the pillage of his beloved birthplace and are oblivious to the detrimental effect their activities have on the people and environment. The blame for the change he places squarely on the multinational oil corporations who came to the Niger Delta to explore and exploit petroleum. G.G. Darah (12) confirms this view of the nature of his poetry: “The poetry of Tanure Ojaide [...] fits into the tradition of outrage against political injustice, exploitation and environmental disasters.” The poet’s angst mostly stems from the paradox inherent in an oil wealth that has greatly impoverished rather than enriched the people who own the land. The people suffer untold hardships as a result of the multinational oil company’s greed and the government’s insensitivity to their plight. In one of Ojaide’s early poems titled “Ughelli” (74) in *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), he describes the irony of Ughelli, the foremost Urhobo city, having a power station that supplies light to the rest of the country but is left in perpetual darkness. The poet’s themes persistently focus on the issues of exploitation, tyranny, and official complicity even as he makes a strong case for the revitalization of this impoverished region and its people.

### **Subtexts of Urhobo folkloric content in Ojaide’s poetry**

The aim of the detailed background is to situate Ojaide as an eco-writer and also contextualize his artistic style for a better understanding of various aspects of his writings that include thematic preoccupations, poetic techniques, style, and form he adopts in his poetry. However, the focus of the essay is to discuss how the use of the folklore of his specific cultural background can be deployed to interrogate his poetry

in order to show the depth, breadth, and complexity of his themes and the sophistication of his art, all of which are infused with his native Urhobo folklore. Many of my poetic references would be taken from three of his collections: *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1997), and *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* (2008). The idea behind the selection is to show that the poet has been consistent with this art form under focus all through his writing career, from his earlier work in the first two collections through to his later work in the latter collection. It will be observed that there is a growing sophistication in the use of Urhobo folklore in the poetry collections. From a sampling of some poems in the aforementioned volumes of poetry, it is apparent that Ojaide uses orature to establish not only a cultural identity for his work but also organize style and form to effectively express his themes. In doing so, the poet also gives the present generation and readers an idea of their traditional heritage and how it can be used to express current and enduring thoughts and feelings.

Within Ojaide's poetry, contemporary issues are sometimes reconstructed through similar episodes and events found in past Urhobo traditional oral history and folkloric heritage. This art of imagining back provides the writer with the opportunity of using symbols, images, and techniques, as well as themes at a more public and post-colonial level. Ojaide infuses his poetic writings with references to his people's mythical and historical characters that have parallels with contemporary events. Mythical figures such as Ogiso, Ogidigbo, Aminogbe, Arhuan, and Uvo have their modern-day equivalents in many of Ojaide's poems. Hence, we notice that within his poetry, whenever he examines some of the nefarious activities of some modern African leaders, he invariably finds their parallels in the character of traditional rulers of the past. As recounted earlier, an aspect of Urhobo mythology has it that in times past, the Urhobo people, then dwelling among the Bini people, were subjected to untold cruelty by the ruling Ogiso dynasty. As a result of the abuse they suffered they fled southwards in search of a safe refuge to what is today Urhobo land. In the title poem of *Labyrinths of the Delta*, the poet replicates this migration story of his Urhobo people. He identifies some of the activities of the wicked Ogiso which were responsible for the people's hurried flight from their former place of abode which he refers to as "suffocating shrines" (23) to include:

Ogiso choked 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;  
But could not wash the blood with tears.  
We knew we had not come to our own home.

Through a poetic recall of oral history, the poet vividly re-creates the cruelties his people suffered at the hands of a tyrannical monarch. Their plight was further exacerbated by a sense of alienation which ultimately provided them with the impetus needed to free themselves from this stranglehold and discover “the virgin beauty of the Delta” where they later settled.

Similarly, in the course of decrying the different levels of socio-economic exploitation and political tyranny going on in his oil-rich Niger Delta region, the poet describes some of the activities of those behind these injustices in folkloric imagery. On several occasions within his poetry, he draws up a connection between the character and activities of the much despised legendary Ogiso in Urhobo folklore and the modern-day military leaders. Ojaide thus sees similarities between the reigns of these traditional rulers and those of some contemporary Nigerian military Heads of State. This notion is derived from both sets of leaders’ determined efforts to brutally crush dissident voices during their respective oppressive rules.

In fact, Ojaide strongly believes such tyrants share a common ancestry as seen in their style of leadership. “Elegy for Nine Warriors” (*Delta Blues*) is a dirge which mourns the brutal killing of the writer and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists on the orders of the then military Head of State, General Sani Abacha. Here, the poet observes that:

The butcher of Abuja  
dances with skulls  
Ogiso’s grandchild by incest  
digs his macabre steps  
in the womb of Aso rock.  
To get to his castle,  
you would stumble over skulls,  
stumble over jawbones (26).

Clearly he sees close parallels between the character traits of a despot Ogiso who locks up perceived enemies, revelling in their sufferings, and this particular Nigerian military leader (whom he refers to as Ogiso’s grandchild) who carries out secret executions and is so obsessed with remaining in power that he summarily incarcerates or executes those he regards as threats to his ambition. Related to the issue of tyranny is the impervious attitude of the rulers to the terror and carnage they unleash all in their bid to continue to rule over their subjects.

Ojaide’s “In the Castle of Faith” (*Waiting*) also condemns some unsavoury activities of the tyrannical Ogiso and other leaders of his type when he alludes to such men as presiding over “a cemetery of a capital city” since many of their subjects would “risk flights rather than wait for death” at their hands. However, the poet introduces an element of defiance when he observes that “Ogiso drove his victims to grow a third

eye; / Agokoli, his comrade, gave a seventh sense; / the Butcher of Abuja bent his people into steel" (19). Agokoli is the Ewe, Ghana equivalent of Ogiso, and there are myths of both groups coming from Ife. The above lines suggest some collective consciousness and will-power to act in order to change their condition. Thus there is the hint of a possible rebellion carried out by the people who muster the courage to plot to overthrow their cruel leaders. The people seek freedom from the despotic grip of such leaders and devise various means of getting rid of them.

One of such efforts at seeking their freedom from despotic rulers in Urhobo folklore as cited in the earlier mentioned poem was through the assistance of one of the wives of a despot who

[...] cast her lot with the victims  
and rid the world of a plaguing spouse;  
today praised, she as the first liberator.  
And so often womenfolk disarmed executives  
dancing naked over disappeared sons and men. (20)

The story here is that the people of Okpe kingdom were once ruled by a tyrannical king called Eseze. Several attempts at getting rid of him in order to end his brutish reign were unsuccessful until the people enlisted the assistance of his favourite wife. It was she who was able to lure him to fall into a mat-covered pit after which boiling palm oil was poured on him and he died, thus allowing the people respite from suffering. For those people who are forcefully incarcerated by military rulers under oppressive edicts, the poet tells us that they

[...] knew death only came once and so resisted it—  
they poured laundry and dishwater at the wall;  
at night scouted for the soft spot of the fence  
to perforate with water and prayers  
and in the dark broke through, once wave  
setting pigeons after corn to cover their trail.

Going further, the poet declares that:

As long as the fence kept folks for execution, so  
would they contrive to break out of the prison-house-  
clay or stone erected by one could be undone by other

Ojaide thus uses Urhobo historical, legendary, and mythological figures to reflect on the contemporary situation in Nigeria and Africa in general and his society in particular. Since he subscribes to redemptive or activist poetry, a deeper implication of the above depiction translates into the fact that the flight from Ogiso indicates that there is refuge from tyranny. In other words, people, whether in traditional or modern



times, do not just submit themselves to oppression or other forms of cruelty but resist it by any means possible to attain peace and freedom. This is why part of the Urhobo migration myth as poetically reconstructed in his works also strategically presents the people's various attempts at overcoming their underdog position.

However, while Ogiso is an example of cruelty, there are other legendary figures that the poet also mentions to inspire his people and readers. In *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* he mentions the courage of Ogidigbo, who sometimes exhibits Ogunian traits by falling on his people whom he sometimes protects. Nevertheless, Urhobo mythology depicts him as more of a source of positive inspiration to the people. Specifically, the poem, "The Ant Dances on the Elephant" (*Waiting* 47) makes an allusion to the colonial history of the Urhobos during a period of exploitation. Ogidigbo, as one of the leaders of the Urhobos, boldly tells his people and emissaries of the colonial authorities that "It was senseless to pay a tax, head, poll or in whatever guise" and for this he was arrested and "wouldn't recant under the threat of death." At the end, he commits suicide rather than allow himself to be humiliated by his captors and "be delivered as a prisoner / to ensure the officer's sadistic success". This and other acts of bravery shown by this legendary figure in defence of his people are regarded as worthy of emulation. Ogidigbo has since remained the symbol of heroism amongst his people and occupies the position of sainthood in Urhobo traditional folklore.

Likewise we find from Ojaide's *In the Kingdom of Songs* (2002) an eponymous poem full of praises for one of the foremost leaders of the Urhobo people called Mukoro Mowoe. Within this poem, the poet cites this historical character as an example of a selfless community leader. He was known for uniting the Urhobo people into a cohesive group. An indefatigable figure, he was courageous in helping to fight for his people's rights. The patriotism of this historical figure served as a rallying point for his people. That is why the poet graphically presents the people's palpable grief at the news of his sudden death thus:

"Mowoe's gone, who'll stand for us?" they queried  
their dumbfounded fate. Yours the only grief  
that ever befuddled the entire people, even fishes  
in water caught cold, in August the earliest  
harmattan to rob the harvest of forest crops.  
You were the *Olotu*, in constant pain and still  
wielding a steadfast smile for everybody to follow (80).

Again, as a parallel observation, such reactions on the death of a favoured leader can be contrasted with what happens when a tyrant ruler meets his end. The death of Ogiso was met with internal joy at being relieved of an oppressor and murderer.

Arhuan is another mythical hero from traditional Urhobo history who defended his people against the whiplash of oppressive rulers like Ogiso in the olden days. He

is sometimes called Uvo or even Ogidigbo. Arhuanran is presented as a liberator, who led his people from the stranglehold of Ogiso. He is often portrayed as a giant figure in Urhobo folklore. The poem "He Rode an Elephant" (*Waiting* 36) celebrates a man whose name we are told became synonymous with 'arms against victimization' and some of whose valiant activities include covering "the entire population with his body", "whose body enemy weapons / bounced back to destroy their throwers; one who "threw a rag at Ogiso's severe face" and dug a wall of protection (a moat) around the city to prevent the invasion of enemies. Thus, Ogidigbo (also called Uvo or Arhuanran) and Ogiso are antithetical figures from Urhobo folklore whose different roles in the lives of the people have been recalled by Ojaide in some of his poems.

Close to these historical and legendary Urhobo figures are other groups the poet depicts as worthy of acknowledgement because of their laudable contributions towards the progress of their society. Hence, Ojaide's poetry also calls to mind the role of women in Urhobo folklore. The Urhobo culture places much premium on the contributions of women, especially in traditional societies where they are regarded as nurturers of different generations. Little wonder then that Ojaide's poetry is replete with images of the industrious, long-suffering, devoted, virtuous and brave Urhobo woman. The folkloric woman of iconic stature is referred to as "Ayayughe". In Urhobo culture and as expressed by the poet, Ayayughe is the mother figure who makes great sacrifices for the sake of her children and by extension her society. The poet devotes an eponymous poem to this female figure in the second section of *Delta Blues* where he sings her praises in superlative terms for her devotion to the survival and progress of her family. The poem ends with the declaration: "And for you, Ayayughe, / let motherhood be daily blessed" (58). Other instances of the woman's admirable selfless role abound in some lines of "In the Castle of Faith" (*Waiting*) where she is presented as the people's last hope in gaining freedom from oppressive leaders. Ojaide tells us:

Eseze's wife cast her lot with victims  
 And rid the world of a plaguing spouse;  
 today praised, she is the first liberator.

And so often womenfolk disarmed executives  
 dancing naked over disappeared sons and men.  
 There is no limit to where victims go for power.

She is often portrayed as selfless to remind modern and contemporary career-oriented women that they could play their roles effectively both as professional workers and great mothers.

Ojaide's use of Urhobo folkloric women in his poetry is extensive and done in a positive or redemptive light. Hence we see that a woman is responsible for perfecting the plot that helped get rid of a wicked Ogiso-like traditional ruler. This is what the

poet refers to when he makes allusion to the fate of one of the earliest Orodjes of Okpe. As revealed in an earlier section of this essay, Eseze I was a tyrant whose wife participated in the successful plot to get rid of him. She was helpful in luring the king to fall into a mat-covered pit before boiled oil was poured over him to end his tyrannical rule. This brave action by women is replicated in modern times and expressed in Ojaide's novel *The Activist* (2006) and the poem "In the Castle of Faith" through the Niger Delta women's recourse to the nude protest march. This exercise is a last resort meant to force oil multinationals operating in the area to yield to the people's basic demands for improved welfare and the release of their incarcerated male folk.

Women therefore do not only nurture life through caring for children and their husbands but also contribute to the ending of tyranny. The poet through this manner of characterization emphasizes that women are powerful and should not remain passive but be active when faced with different conditions of tyranny and oppression. Later in this discussion, we will see where women openly express their displeasure with their male folk over some domestic conflicts. It is worth noting that in his memoir, *Great Boys*, Ojaide mentioned being raised by his maternal grandmother, Amreghe, and his positive experience in being raised by a woman whom he calls "Mother Hen" must have influenced his portrayal of female characters. The consistent image of the female characters we find in Ojaide's writings depicts them as protectors, nurturers, and harbingers of good luck in life.

On the whole, it is significant to observe that Ojaide's concept of history, as reflected in the historical and legendary figures in Urhobo folklore, is cyclical. In a way, history tends to repeat itself at different times in the rules of oppression and exploitation that the people have to confront. However, people learn lessons from the past to confront contemporary problems. As a result, some historical and legendary figures also have their modern-day equivalents. Ojaide wants people to learn from the past and use such lessons gained to their advantage in freeing themselves from unwholesome tutelage, exploitation, and oppression at any point in time. History may repeat itself, the poet seems to be saying, but there is a gradual improvement in lives as there are newer ways to fight recurring problems. At the same time, the poet presents legendary figures to instil confidence in the contemporary generation to emulate the heroic qualities and actions of their forebears.

Ojaide's use of folklore in his poetry does not end with the use of past figures alone. He also incorporates into his poetry aspects of the oral literature in the forms of songs, folktales, and proverbs, verbal rhetoric to enrich the bases of his poetic style, form, and thematic expression. Some examples of these will be examined next. Certain elements of Urhobo traditional folktales are sometimes fused into the poet's work in order to underscore particular themes. The poem "When Green was the Lingua Franca" (*Delta Blues* 12) is one of his eco-wave poems. In it, he bemoans the negative effects of oil exploration activities on the lush vegetation and pristine waters of the

Niger Delta of his childhood. In one of the stanzas of the poem, the poet persona emphasizes the culpability of those he regards as culprits in this matter through the use of a folkloric device—a particular folktale. Artfully, he enjoins people to hold Shell, one of the major multinationals, drilling oil in the region, and not women, as responsible for the fabled distance between God and man. An Urhobo folktale has it that once, long ago, God and the sky were quite close and God was in very close communion with man until the ruckus and smoke from women’s cooking activities caused God and the sky to relocate to where they are now so far away from humans. That withdrawal of God and the sky therefore created a rift between God and man. Through a folkloric medium, the poet exonerates women while indicting Shell thus:

Then Shell broke the bond  
with quakes and a hell  
of flares. Stoking a hearth  
under God’s very behind!  
Stop perjuring women for  
their industry, none of them  
drove God to the sky’s height;  
it wasn’t the pestle’s thrust,  
that mock love game,  
that caused the eternal rift.

There are also other instances of Ojaide’s subtle blending of elements of Urhobo folktales to underscore some of his poetic themes. These include the myth of an antelope that transforms into a beautiful woman and sorceress mentioned in the poem “Agbogidi” which chronicles the feats of a great warrior (*Delta Blue* 81); the irony of a king who claims he wears invisible robes and was ridiculed rather than sympathized with because of his arrogance in “Wanted: Disrespect”. This depicts the poet’s impression of the ultimate fate of tyrannical rulers (*Labyrinths* 12). Here he calls for bad rulers to be challenged and wants the practice of praise-singing of rulers to be stopped. Praise-singing gives the rulers the false impression that they are doing well when in fact they are disastrously destroying their nation and people.

The poet’s use of folkloric materials is extensive. He highlights the consequences of the greed inherent in man’s nature by sharing an anecdote from the fable of the greedy tortoise and a pot of flavoured beans in “The League of Heroes” (*Waiting* 76). Ojaide also incorporates the use of the opening formula found in traditional tales. In Urhobo culture, storytellers are known to begin their narration with the opening phrase, “*Iku yegbe!*” to which the audience responds/chorus “*Yegbe!*” Roughly translated, “*iku yegbe*” means “a weighty or interesting story”. This chorus is meant to capture the attention of the listener and ensure active participation in the narrative that would follow. It also signifies the speaker’s (here the poet’s) desire to communicate

to his listeners an important subject which he wants them to treat seriously. Thus we find this folkloric device in the form of a recurring refrain in the poem "Poachers" (*Delta Blues* 70) where the poet bemoans the erosion of traditional values and practices due to negative incursions in the guise of modernity. "Ita ye-e! / Ye-e!" is another version of this folktale opening formula he uses in the poem "Good or Bad" where he philosophically dwells on the duality inherent in nature (*Waiting* 11–2).

Similarly, songs from folktales are sometimes embedded in some of these poems. He skilfully incorporates this folkloric art form when he presents an existential philosophy. This is embedded in what the poet refers to as the endless possibilities of hope. This matrix allows for the oppressed or victim, no matter how small or weak, to exercise the human and basic right to life and existence by overthrowing the oppressor or predator and marching on to victory. This theme is expressed in the poem "Victory Song" (*Waiting* 91–4) where the poet charges his people to:

Overturn the history of pain  
with an era of well-being.  
It so seldom happens, but it happens—  
the swordfish gores the crocodile.  
Blow loud the ivory trumpet,  
Dance to the exceptional victory:  
Onwa whe edjere:  
pupu puu, pupu puu.  
Onwa whe edjere:  
pupu puu, pupu puu  
Onwa whe edjere:  
pupu puu, pupu puu.  
(The swordfish gores the crocodile:  
let's celebrate the rare victory.  
The swordfish gores the crocodile:  
let's celebrate the rare victory  
The swordfish gores the crocodile:  
let's celebrate the rare victory.)

Another example of the integration of a folksong within a poem is seen in "Climbing the Family Tree" (*Delta Blues* 56). Here, the poet adopts the expression "Otie mre oovwata ko she," a phrase from a popular Urhobo folksong to express the concept of luck as bestowed on a favourite by benevolent forces.

By way of a summary, these two folksongs illustrate the use the poet makes of the Urhobo worldview in his poetic mission. The Urhobo believe in destiny and it is held that every human makes a selection of his or her fate at Urhoro (the passageway to life and at death) and once this has been done, one lives out one's choice. By "otie mre

ovwata ko she" (the cherry fruit sees its favourite and it falls), the poet is speaking of one's destiny. To the poet, therefore, life is luck but a preordained luck that follows one. An Urhobo saying that what is really one's cannot be taken away relates to the concept of the ripe cherry fruit (*otie*) falling when the favourite is close enough to snatch it.

On the other hand, "omwa whe edjere" (the swordfish kills the crocodile) exemplifies how the small or the innocent overcomes great odds. Of course, the swordfish is very small but it is armed with spikes and when swallowed by the big crocodile, it gets stuck to its throat and kills the powerful crocodile. There is also the underlying meaning that every creature, including humans, is naturally endowed to defend itself against powerful ones. Ojaide recalls this Urhobo trope to show justice or to make the point that evil ones are ultimately consumed in their acts of wickedness; and that is to say that the oppressed will be given the opportunity to fight back with their naturally endowed powers. So, the small swordfish killing the powerful crocodile whose "dominion" is also waters implies succeeding against all odds and it is an epic victory that the gods assist the weak, innocent, and seemingly powerless to win.

Women's interests are also not left out in this particular poetic inventiveness. A short folksong in the form of a lullaby in "Noble Inheritance" (*Waiting* 87) succinctly sums up the extent and depth of a mother's unflagging commitment towards the well-being of her children. In an attempt to soothe her crying child, the mother sings:

*Mi kpe eki-i, mi rovwo,  
mi kpe aghwa-a mi rovwo;  
omo me na je vwe no.*

*(I mind not missing the market,  
I mind not missing farm work,  
to take care of my lovely baby.)*

The above resonates with the spirit of total devotion to the well-being of her family and by extension, society which the Urhobo woman, popularly referred to as Ayayughe is known for. It also replicates the contemporary image of a sweet mother who places above everything else the love for her child.

On the other hand, the fact that women are accommodating and tolerant in filial relationships does not mean they do not have their own personal aspirations or outlooks which they expect others to be sensitive to. Section IV of the poem "When a War Song is a Love Song" (*Waiting* 67–8) contains two folksongs through which women vent out their pent-up frustrations at being short-changed by their male partners. The first song describes a women's call for assistance from her spouse in domesticity with the charge being:

If you prepare the starch  
as I grind the pepper,  
in no time will food be served.  
You've just returned from tapping rubber,  
I've just returned from weeding the farm;  
I am as worn out and hungry as you are.  
If you prepare the starch  
as I grind the pepper,  
in no time will food be served.

The appeal here is for sensitivity to each other's feelings as well as complementarity between man and woman in order to promote gender harmony at home and in the society at large. The second song is a woman's lament at the injustice of being further oppressed by a spouse after a rival wife steals from her. The woman sings:

My rival stole my cassava  
yet my husband doesn't want the world to know  
After I expose her, he wants me  
to beg for forgiveness for embarrassing her.

Therefore, rather than succumb to this double standards, she threatens "to go back to Okpara, / go back to my parents' home". The poet thus deploys Urhobo folksongs wherever necessary to express some aspects of Urhobo philosophical worldviews and to reinforce his call for justice the world over.

While the poet makes use of different types of folklore found in the Urhobo orature, he has also consciously studied a poetic tradition of his people which he adopts in many of his poems. This is closely tied to Urhobo cultural perception of the place of honour and shame in evaluating human living and relationships. *Udje* is a unique type of Urhobo oral poetic songs composed by a community from often exaggerated and sometimes fictional materials about a rival community. In other words, it is a verbal form of satire rendered in song. Its performance involves music and dance and is held on an appointed day during a festival, usually in front of large audiences. The rival groups perform in alternate years. In one year, one side sings about the other using materials it gathered to compose songs that exaggerate the other side's foibles and frailties; and the following year, the side that sang the previous year listens to and watches the response of the opposing side. Foremost a form of entertainment, this tradition uses the poetic composition as ammunition in a type of battle, aimed at "wounding" and even destroying its rival. Expatriating further on this, Darah writes, "Indeed, the whole business of *Udje* was conducted as a kind of verbal warfare, battles of songs" (vii). Elsewhere, he also points out that: "The spirit that animates satire (*Udje*, in this case) is that of criticism, a criticism so vigorous enough to make

culpable actions and injustices appear reprehensible and repulsive. It is this attitude of censure that informs all satirical song-poetry in Urhobo." (Darah 21)

Major features of this traditional song poetry include its derisive nature, use of invectives, the desire to shame through ridicule or to disparage, and witty comments. It is noteworthy that Ojaide received the National Endowment for the Humanities grant in 1999/2000 to collect, translate, and discuss *udje* dance songs in the Urhobo area of Nigeria. This research has resulted in two books and a series of articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Thus, having lived with Udje and researched into the oral poetic performance tradition, Ojaide uses the tradition as a formal and technical model to express his views on the Nigerian society which he satirizes as he makes his own recommendations as to how the socio-political problems of the nation can be solved. The poet believes, as expounded in the *udje* tradition that laughter helps to regulate behaviour in society. By embarrassing leaders or other violators of socio-political values, the poet is using his poetry to laugh at such folks towards deterring them from such negative practices. This objective of the poet is one reason why T. C. Maduka is of the view that for: "Most African writers [...] there is a direct relationship between literature and social institutions. The principal function of literature is to criticise these institutions and eventually bring about desirable changes in the society". (11)

In the "Home Songs" section of *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, Ojaide specifically modelled several poems on the *udje* oral poetic form. The poems "Professor Kuta" (76), "Odebala," (78) and "My Townsman in the Army" (74) contain several elements in them that call to question the social image or honour of the subject under attack. For example, through a derisive description of the character of Professor Kuta, the speaker attacks the scandalous relationship of university teachers and their students, the corruption in promotion procedures, the sales of learning materials which the lecturers force the students to pay exorbitantly for, sexual harassment of female students, as well as other ills within the university system. As a member of the academia and familiar with its internal workings, the poet highlights some of the ills perpetrated by some members in order to shame them and also with the hope that some moral and ethical rectitude would take place. Thus, of the university don who falls into the category described in the poem, the poet has this to say:

He professes poverty, professes robbery of young ones;  
professes nothing scholarly—no book to his credit;  
of the articles he cites in his CV, three appeared  
in the *Nigerian Observer* and *The Daily Times*;  
the other two paid for and printed in street tabloids.  
Students have discovered his handouts are lifted  
from his undergraduate notebooks wholesale.  
If one's mouth conferred authority, Kuta would be a professor.



I heard from his colleagues that he has no Ph.D.  
but an ABD, he thrice flunked his Ed.D defence.  
Who doesn't know some doctors are imposters?  
Tell Professor Kuta to bring his transcripts for all to see.  
The sort of Professor Kuta would be better off trading  
Than robbing students in the mantle of a don.

Similarly, in satirizing a major-general in the Nigerian army of the 1980s, the poet exposes the murky dealings in the armed forces. The poet's opening statement prepares the reader for the disagreeable character traits to expect from a top officer in the army whose ways are crooked. Everything about Udi, the major-general calls to question the positive ethics and values such a public figure ought to uphold and represent. As is the practice of the *udje* tradition of the Urhobo people, the speakers of these poems want to embarrass the subjects of the songs, university professor or army major-general, towards good professional behaviour.

In addition to the specific *udje* form that Ojaide models his poems on, he adopts *udje* techniques such as the use of strong epithets, repetition, refrains, performance features, and formulas associated with the oral poetic tradition. These features occur in the works of the poet. The *udje* song/poem relies on the use of descriptive epithets, caricature, repetition, refrain, and other devices that satire needs to be pungent. There is barely any collection of Ojaide's poems without copious use of repetition or/and refrain that is a major feature of *udje* to both emphasize a point and also bring about musicality. Descriptive epithets are used in poems condemning tyrants like Ogiso or military dictators and sometimes in a positive manner to describe the poet's love for other subjects he admires. The *udje* character of some of Ojaide's poetry reinforces their satirical edges. At the same time, it establishes the poet as a satirist out to expose the ills of the society towards their replacement with positive moral and ethical values for a harmonious society.

Ojaide goes on to acquaint his readers with the order of the pantheon of Urhobo gods. In his essay "The Niger Delta, Nativity and My Writing" Ojaide writes at length about his nativity and writings. He alludes to the inter-connectedness between man and gods with the latter seen as being in control of and overseeing human affairs. This religious worldview stretches to accommodate the likelihood of a communion between the human and the spirit worlds. The implication, as gleaned from the place of some deities featured in Ojaide's poetry, is that gods are apotheosizing people's beliefs, values and desires. It is quite commendable that the poet sheds the use of Greco-Roman or European classical gods and in order to be true to his nativity, adopts gods whose festivals and presence were common occurrences in the land in which he was raised. For instance, a reader familiar with Ojaide's poetry collections notices that some of these works have an opening poem that reads like the poet's invocation

to a muse. The muse here is usually a god or deity of sorts. Specifically, the poet ascribes a very important position to a deity like Aridon, the Urhobo god of memory and remembrance, whom he depends on for inspiration and the extra edge needed to perfect his art. Thus, an invocatory poem becomes one of the hallmarks of Ojaide's poetry through which he situates and pays tribute to his main source of poetic inspiration.

Uhaghwa serves as the poet's god of effortless performance since poetry is not complete traditionally until it is performed. Sometimes, Aridon and Uhaghwa are used interchangeably to denote the god of memory or flawless performance. The poet also assumes different personas in his works, chief of which is that of a minstrel who practises and hones his art as he travels from one place to another. In traditional Urhobo folklore, such a character is called Aminogbe. Ojaide's minstrel figure serves as his protagonist who under the divine mentorship of his muse, Aridon, ranges on the side of good as he makes pertinent comments on human existence especially as it concerns the fate of his people. Many of the experiences he recounts in *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* are told through the voice of the itinerant Aminogbe. While Aridon and Uhaghwa appear to be foremost on the poet's mind as he needs their respective inspiration and craft for his poetic mission, he acknowledges other members of the Urhobo pantheon in his poetry. There are prayers to Osonobrugwe, the Supreme God, in collections ranging from *Labyrinths of the Delta* through *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel*.

Irrespective of his current religious affiliation, the poet no doubt still believes in the Supreme God of his people to whom he addresses his prayers for the good of society, the nation, and self. It appears from Ojaide's poetry that he identifies with the series of rituals and festivals performed for different Urhobo deities. He highlights the idea that despite the multiplicity of deities, Osonobrugwe is the Almighty and is also addressed as Oromowho, the Great Creator in most of his poems.

Other deities that pre-occupy the poet include Eni, the god of truth; Ivwri (also spelled Iphri) is the god of restitution; and Mami Wata, used interchangeably with Olokun (bestows good fortune, wealth and beauty to devotees). The poet persona refers to Eni when one is in a position of double bind or in a cliché expression being between the devil and the deep sea. In ancient times, this tutelary god of truth named after a lake in Urhere or Uzeri in Isoko area of Delta State was where the complicity or purity of people was settled. The accused person was thrown into the lake and if he or she swam to safety the person would be declared innocent. However, if the accused drowned, then he or she would be taken as guilty. Eni and actions around it affords the poet with issues of truth, dilemma, and of course the subtle criticism of a kind of trial by ordeal.

Ivwri is the god of restitution that was created during the slave-raiding days. The poet often invokes the god for what he, his people, or the exploited are denied. Mami

Wata (Mammy Water) and Olokun are used interchangeably even though Mami Wata is postcolonial in her presence in Urhobo folklore while Olokun appears to precede her. Mami Wata is used to connote beauty among women but also (like Olokun) is a benevolent goddess that blesses her devotees. Ojaide uses these gods or deities from the folklore of his people to better represent the reality of the people whose contemporary experience he expresses. In *The Tale of the Harmattan*, the poem, "At the Kaiama Bridge" (33) expresses the poet's deep reflections on the irreparable loss caused by the encroachment and activities of oil prospectors on the aquatic environment of the Niger Delta region. Amongst others, the poet bemoans the retreat of "flotillas of river spirits", "the oil-blackened current suffocating / Mami Wata and her retinue of water maids", the absence for over three decades now of a regatta and "the island's boat of songs" with its ritual paddle raised "in salute to high gods" as well as the preponderance of water hyacinths caused by oil spillage which has made "Refugee gods [...] taking the last route / before the entire waterway is clogged." Underscored within the above lamentation is the fact that both physical and non-physical aspects of the people's living have been adversely affected by oil exploration. Hence, even the spiritual elements whose abode is the water and that were before now within the people's easy reach seem to have all been forced to relocate by the series of pollution engendered by oil excavation. This portends a rupture in the hitherto closely-knit relationship between the people and their gods whom they depend upon for sundry favours to help make their lives more comfortable.

Urhobo flora and fauna, animal life and cosmic nature (sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, etc.) all play prominent roles in Ojaide's poetry. Basically, he uses them to express some natural phenomena and to help the reader through his poetic mind see life as natural. Known for his deep concern for the on-going devastation of the bio-diversity in his oil-rich Niger Delta, the poet in "When Green was the Lingua Franca" nostalgically takes the reader on a poetic excursion of the ecology of his birthplace as he knew it while growing up, contrasting it with what it is today as a result of oil exploitation activities. He recalls the abundance of fishes like "*erhuvvudjayorho* [...] a glamorous fish / but denied growing big". Elsewhere he mentions forays into the dense forests of his youth to scour for snails and *koto*, the prevalence of froglets called "*ikere*," the *uwara* and *akpobrisi* plants, the latter oppressive and symbolic of tyranny yet succumbs to the charm of the former, indulging in a diet of wild fruits like *urhurhu* grapes, *owe* apple, cherries and breadfruits. He mentions the *iroko* and *uloho*, gigantic trees that have spiritual, albeit mystical, connotations.

Such was the total harmony existing between different elements of nature that there was what he tagged "the delta alliance of big and small, / markets of needs, arena / of compensation for all". In some of his other poems, we find metaphorical use of animals like the sunbird, boa constrictor, swordfish, and crocodile to underscore some themes related to environmental issues that his poems deal with.

## Conclusion

It has been established that Tanure Ojaide has deployed the folklore of his people in his poetry as a strategy to achieve poetic success. Whether consciously as through the *udje* tradition or unconsciously as imbibed through nativity, Urhobo folklore is integrated into the entire fabric of his poetic creation in the diction, images, techniques, references, allusions, form, and meaning of the poems. The folklore brings in layers of meaning that make the poetry more profound because of the comparison and the parallelization of the past and the present towards a future. There seems to be a cyclic movement of progression with the present learning from the past and getting wiser. The thematic meaning is reinforced by parallels of figures or other tropes to deepen and strengthen the poetic viewpoint.

Furthermore, as has already been said, the folklore gives a cultural identity to Ojaide's poetry. He has deployed Urhobo tropes to express himself in English and thus indigenized the English language at least in a modest way. Urhobo folklore and experience become the subtext that gives a vital force to his poetic expression. His use of folklore affects the outcome of his poetry in a multi-dimensional manner. The language is simple but poignant in the poetic expression with images carrying folkloric meaning that balance and stress out the regular conventional English. He gives variety to the poetic form in the use of *udje* satirical form as well as other modes of orature. The poetic vision is borne out by the subtle use of Urhobo ontology and worldview. As a postcolonial poet, Ojaide deploys Urhobo folklore as one of his weapons to wrest English out of its conventional comfort into an angst that reflects the contemporary African and human conditions that the poet expresses. Finally, no research into a prolific writer's use of his or her people's folklore can be finite but this effort and the exposition of the intricately woven aspects of Urhobo folklore will undoubtedly make his poetry to receive the serious study it surely deserves.

Finally, the local folklore is deployed to tackle global issues such as that of climate change and environmental pollution and degradation. The same is done of universal and human issues and problems. In his use of Urhobo folklore, Ojaide as a poet seems to be saying that the small groups of the world have their own knowledge to contribute in the cultural discourse of poetry to make life better than it is. He has succeeded in his own way to make the local global and the global expressible in the local.

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