

**TANURE OJAIDE AND THE UDJE PRAXIS:
THE SIMPLICITY OF ‘WOUNDING WORDS’**

Chike Okoye

NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA
DEPT OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES

Abstract

The charge that Tanure Ojaide’s poetry only occasionally manage(s) to rise above the level of prosaic banality is purely a personal opinion which is every individual’s entitlement. For the purposes of this paper though, a more polished and objective view that Ojaide keeps close to prose syntax (and) usually keeps the lines very poetic,... though his use of song rhythms and various forms of traditional images while a personal opinion too, is nevertheless more germane and structured to the crux of this paper; the operative phrase being “song rhythms and various forms of traditional images”.

Introduction and Background

According to Tijan Sallah in “The Eagle’s Vision: The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide”, Ojaide crafts his poetry “with a deep sense of rootedness in his Delta region and in Urhobo culture in particular” (28). The correlation between the “song rhythms” and “traditional images” and “rootedness in his Delta region” and “Urhobo culture”, become constructively illuminated and more meaningful. Ezenwa-Ohaeto makes a categorically statement in his “Transformations of Orality”:

The poetry of Tanure Ojaide is a poetry of evocation and even the expansion of oral resources. This poetic strategy clearly enables the poet to create a poetic tradition that incorporates the devices of traditional African poetry, especially its oral poetics. (135)

This quote helps concretize the notion that Ojaide derives most of his poetic resources from his own Urhobo ethnicity. Ojaide himself affirms this in his *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa: Essays on African Poetry*:

My images, symbols and references deriving from Urhobo folklore give a distinctive tone to my poetry. Thus, though I write in English, I try to infuse my verse with fresh nuances and rhythms that I carry from the Urhobo language. (130)

Ojaide is not alone in this dependence and recourse to oral elements in literature or poetry for African or/and Nigerian writers. Through traces of oral tradition could be found in the poetry of first generation versifiers such as Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, J P Clark-Bekederemo, Christopher Okigbo, MJC Echeruo, Kalu Uka, etc., a more conscious and active manifestation of what Ezenwa-Ohaeto calls in “Towards a Poetics of Orality”, “... a co-existence and mingling of both the oral and written phenomena in Nigerian poetry” (11), is easily identifiable and felt in the poetry of Ojaide’s contemporaries. Therefore, in poets such as ChimalumNwankwo, NiyiOsundare, OdiaOfeimun, ObioraUdechukwu, etc., one easily detects what Ezenwa-Ohaeto describes as the “oral flavor of the rich and variegated Nigerian cultures” (11).

Perhaps Chinweizu et al's charge in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* against the first generation poets of

Old-fashioned, craggy, unmusical language, obscure and inaccessible diction; a plethora of imported imagery, a divorce from African oral poetic tradition, tempered only by lifeless attempts at revivalism (165), played a more significant role in the contemporary poets' desire to return to tradition "...to create both acceptable and accessible poetry...(which) has made orality a major aspect of contemporary Nigerian poetry" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 14). Ezenwa-Ohaeto further captures the sentiments of Niyi

Osundare and Obiora Udechukwu who admit to a conscious recourse and use of elements and styles of oral composition(16). In fact, Tanure Ojaide in *Poetic Imagination* remarks pointedly that his research "into udje dance songs by notable Urhobo artistes", led to his discovery of the great poetry of his people. He declares that he will "continue to acknowledge (his) indebtedness to (the) great Urhobo artists, from whom (he) learned how to sing" (129-130).

The concept of "poetics of orality" postulated by Ezenwa-Ohaeto is central to this discourse. He describes it as "a critical approach based on the 'aesthetic principles' governing the nature of contemporary Nigerian poetry..." (18). It is an "African poetic that shows an awareness of oral performances in the vernacular" (18). Ezenwa-Ohaeto traces these aesthetic principles to Chinweizu et al in their *Toward the Decolonization* where they postulate that there is effective use of narrative poetry, parables, legends, paradoxes, proverbs, riddles, love songs, dirges, celebratory poems, lamentations, boasts, epics, satire, praise, etc., properly evidenced in oral tradition (18). Chinweizu et al also maintain that the introduction and improvement of traditional techniques of orature will enhance eloquence in our poetry; and this rejuvenation of sorts will create novel forms and techniques befitting of "new aspects of contemporary African reality" (*Toward the Decolonization*, 261).

According to Ezenwa-Ohaeto,

These new forms and techniques decipherable in contemporary Nigeria poetry are part of the poetics of orality which is hinged on the acceptance of the view that there is the employment of the principles of traditional aesthetics and rhetorical devices of the oral mode in written poetry. A poetics of orality, therefore, critically delineates these aesthetic principles derived from the oral traditions and presents them as a coherent set of critical features that would help to cast insight on the technique and subject matter of contemporary Nigerian poetry. (18)

This description and establishment of the poetics of orality approach, though lengthy, is necessary for clarification and proper delineation. We shall more or less apply the described principles in due course; but an understanding of the udje is needed presently.

The Udje Dance Song

Stephen Kekeghe describes the phenomenon as thus: "The udje dance-song is an inter-group rivalry tradition traceable to ancient songs of derision with which feuding parties attacked each other" (54). Tanure Ojaide in "Poetry, Performance, and Art: Udje Dance Songs of the Urhobo People", comments further on udje as

a unique type of Urhobo dance in which rival quarters or towns perform songs composed from often exaggerated materials about the other side on an

appointed day. Udje songs are thus dance songs sung when udje is being performed. Since there were no prisons in traditional Urhobo, major crimes were punished either by selling the offender into servitude or by execution. Minor crimes were, however, punished by satire. Udje dance songs fall into the corpus of satire. (Ojaide).

Ojaide's view above explicates the tradition as an entertaining spectacle of satiric bent designed to correct certain ills and misdemeanors in the society. Incidentally, G. G. Darah's description gives us the right impression that the tradition is in decline. He posits:

Udje as an artistic tradition had three aspects, namely, dance, poetry, and music...the intention and wordings of the songs, and public performances at dance song festivals ...the whole business of Udje was conducted as a kind of verbal warfare, battles of song in which each participating group attempted to *sing its rival to a fall*. (vii)

Like most African oral forms, udje's decline is not jolting. We already know the combined effects of corrosive civilization, economic uncertainties, the digital world, scramble for urbanity, etc., and what it has done to the survival and sustenance of oral traditions.

The original structure and performance matrix of the udje phenomenon is elaborate and expensive. Its preparation, development, practices and eventual presentation involves quite a large number of participants, extensive man-hours, espionage, ritual fortifications, and rites and so on. However, for the present purposes, what is of interest is the verse aspect of the performance mix; that is the poetic songs and its structure as it affects the written poetry of Ojaide. He has in line with the position of critics reviewed here earlier, acceded to and underscored the importance and influence of the oral form on his poetry. In "Performance, the New African Poetry, and my Poetry", he says: "there are oral voices in the written poetry to underscore the influence of the oral tradition in our written modern poetries" (111). He goes further to reveal that his exposure to "traditional poetry and later researching into it" gives his poetry "elements of an oral voice in its written form" (112). He becomes more specific with this proclamation: "Udje is my model of not only the oral poetic tradition but also of poetry as a whole" (111); thereby leaving no doubt as to the base model of his poetry. He explains further while extolling and justifying his diction and style as they derive from the revered oral form:

...the poem is meant to be performative in form and simple in the sense of a syntax that is not much different from that of prose. One should not denigrate the simple nature of this poetry which validates itself in its use of fresh metaphors and other tropes to express feelings and thought. What makes good poetry is not its difficulty or obscurity but its expressive mode anchored in figurative language. (111)

The udje verses are structured into three songs for a performance. According to Darah, "These are: a. prelude song or *ubroule*, b. short narrative (*uleukrekre*), and c. the long narrative (*uleeshan*)" (65). The udje is basically satiric, therefore its content rarely deviates from ridicule intended for the opponent or opposing side. The prelude song (*ubroule*) is made up of brief, terse, challenging, and scintillating statements that though not developed, are mostly about a telling aspect or aspects of the target being attacked. It sets the scene for the next type, the short narrative song (*uleukrekre*). This is more prosaic, drawn-out and

entertaining. According to Darah, its main objective is to “draw a vivid, usually grotesque, character portrait... through descriptive, epithets, expressions, and remarks stated in quick transition” (66). The last type, *uleeshan* (long narrative) though very much like the previous type, is nevertheless more elaborate and lengthy. It even has within itself a three-part structure of *umuoho* (introduction), *okparo* (main body), and *ifuen* (conclusion). Darah describes it thus:

While the short narrative is concerned with drawing a sharp portrait, the burden of the *uleeshan* is to tell an elaborate story about the life of an individual or that of several persons whose experiences are typified by a central image. The story in the song is related in such a way that every essential aspect of the victim’s life is brought into sharp focus. (67)

In content, Ojaide’s explication in “Poetry, Performance, and Art”, complements Darah’s exposé. It presents themes such as sexual misbehavior (in terms of adultery, incest, improper trysts, etc), oversexed persons, prostitution, poverty, idleness, indebtedness, folly and stupid behavior, etc., for open ridicule and satire which are basically juvenalian since names are mentioned; hence their harshness. For Ojaide, “the subjects and themes of udje dance songs are those ideas, practices, and habits that threaten the corporate harmony of the Urhobo people” (Ojaide). He goes further:

For the community to have...healthy environment, everyone and group had to be held in line. The udje song attempts to deter individuals or groups from deviating, and the poet wants to so “wound” the deviant(s) that the song acts as a deterrent. (Ojaide).

Aesthetically, according to Ojaide, the udje does not lack in figures of speech and poetic elements. He affirms that they “are full of figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, sarcasm” (Ojaide). Udje is also replete with rhetorical piling up of comparisons, evocative and topical allusions, proverbs, repetitions, etc (Ojaide, “Poetry, Performance, and Art”).

The Udje Backdrop and Ojaide’s Art

One can safely align with Ojaide’s position quoted earlier that the form, structure, and diction of most of his poetry derive from the oral form of his Urhobo people, the udje. However, there are some specific poems that are more faithful than others in mimicry of the art. Here, lines from selected poems in the collection *Delta Blues and Home Songs*(1998), and *Songs of Myself: Quartet* (2015) will be analyzed with the aim of identifying in them the simplicity and the satirical style characteristic of the udje. A few, original, translated udje songs from Darah’s *Battle of Songs* are reproduced here; varyingly dealing with their targets’ negative social traits and misfortunes requiring satirical attack. The following lines deal with adultery, parental worries at their children’s irresponsibility, crime, poverty, hardship, and vicissitudes generally:

When a mother gives birth to children
They grow up and cater for the mother
Kpaenban had nine issues
They grew up to specialize in crime
Developed notoriety for adultery with neighbours’ wives
Why wouldn’t a mother grieve?
If a child commits adultery once
The father settles the damage costs
When the instances increase to two, three
The father becomes worried

Even sudden affluence causes alarm
How much more crime-mongering
Life is an enigma, oh Kpaenban
Lament is a companion to living
Life is a mystery, oh Kpaenban
Regret is a close companion to living in this world
Ever since Loya and Gbariemu became men
For that long has hardship been their lot....(76)

The same simplistic directness with which the target family's negative peculiarities are vividly narrated above is seen replayed below as the theme here changes to the impoverished and pitiful state of a neglected wife of a pauper:

Here is a spectacle!
Edevieron was once married
Was once married at Urele
To the Ashekpe family
She never used one dress twice
She wore whichever took her fancy
Here is a spectacle!
Edevieron who was light-skinned
Light-skinned with polished body to match
That complexion is now stained
Wretchedness has creased it
Her body like ringworm discharges scales
Discharges profusely
Like the coarse skin of Figo, Kpaenban's daughter
Figo is a silk-cotton tree that disperses cotton wool
Edevieron returned from war camp
The mother got ready to go and welcome her
On getting there
A lunatic's attire was better than her daughter's
On arrival there
A lunatic's dress was preferable to her daughter's
Animal skins of *uturu* dye
There she wore a loin cloth... (81-82)

These examples of *udje* belong to the elaborate and detailed narrative type called *uleeshan*; this incidentally is the backdrop format Ojaide's examples here imitate. From *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, the poems "Odebala", "Professor Kuta", and "My townsman in the army" satirize fake lies of wealth, intellectual charlatanism, and adultery respectively. Selected lines from "Odebala" say it all:

Odebala boasts he is rich...
Odebala swaggers, puffs out his shoulders
because he daydreams he's rich.
We know he inherited debts from his father
and his hands are neither strong nor fortunate
Odebala boasts he's the town's millionaire,
but watch him. Who knows what he eats...
He thinks nobody knows, but they say
he can barely coped with his one wife,
falls asleep before he realizes what he's

doing with her; the woman cries out!...
A rich man should provide for an only wife
but Umukor looks like one without a provider----...
When Odebala claims he's rich again,
ask him which rich man lives in a mud house... (78)

The simplicity of the pointed satiric attacks in the direct and merciless juvenilia fashion is clear. The fake wealth Odebala boasts of is exposed as lies and references are made to indices that say as much – his house, properties, wife, etc. The udje that features the suffering Edevieron character bears many similarities in structure, language, satiric mode of wounding simplicity, and so on, with the Odebala saga. In the next example, “Professor Kuta”, a plethora of vices spewing forth from a supposedly highly placed individual – a professor – in the society is ridiculed mercilessly just as the earlier cited Kpaenban udje chronicles myriad of vices found amongst the Kpaenbans. Some lines from “Professor Kuta”:

I would have kept my peace
If Professor Kuta doesn't parade himself
in a field where he doesn't belong.
If you know Professor Kuta, you would pity him.
He is a robber masked in an academic gown –
If you don't pay five hundred naira for his three-page handout,
he will fail you even if your head is a computer.
He professes poverty, professes robbery of young ones;
professes nothing scholarly – no book to his credit;
of the articles he cites in his c.v, three appeared
in *The Nigerian Observer* and *The Daily Times*;...
Kuta is not a professor he calls himself.
I would have shut my mouth to his masking,
if he doesn't parade himself as a university don. (76)

The poem “My townsman in the army” focuses on adultery, sexual promiscuity, and sex-for-promotion syndrome (where a wife offers her body to senior officers in order to facilitate the husband's rapid promotions in the army). Ojaide satirizes the ignominy by employing the direct and wounding words of the udje tradition in seeking through ridicule, a correction of this anomaly. A few lines will demonstrate the poem's affinity to the oral udje's style of attack:

He's risen fast but I do not envy him.
Every year before promotion interviews,
Madam moves from office to hotel,
hotel to office;...
... He believes
When she says she's shopping for contracts.
We know what she contracts out!...
The woman enjoys herself, the man
celebrates his accelerated promotion.
Most senior officers above her husband
Know the detailed contours of her body,...
I prefer to remain a captain all my career
than sell my wife for two stars on my uniform.
I pity the husband whose wife is an article
For sale in every *Mammy Market*....
The major-general who has not fought any war

Sends his wife to battle in bed with others.... (74)

The direct impingement of simple satiric diction is felt all through Ojaide's lines; as they are laced with similes, metaphors, and vivid descriptions. Other typically oral form devices and elements found in the udje such as proverbs, idioms, choruses, refrains, repetitions, invocations, allusions, etc. are also found in most of Ojaide's verses. The terseness, wry tenor, allusiveness, proverbial, and suspenseful nature of the prelude song (*ubroule*) is clear in this udje example:

One caught in a sudden war kills without sanction from the gods
Behold a duel!
Ours is a tale of victory
Our feats deserve a triumphant chant
When two gluttons share a meal, someone else serves them water
If you hit me once, I will reply with deadlier punches...
How dare the dwarf anthill contest stature with the termites mound?
Let all gathered remark this truth:
A herb associated with militancy is a favourite for a war charm
(Darah, *Battle of Songs*, 69)

Such qualities (and more: eg – refrains/repetitions, formulaic choruses, etc) are also seen in these lines from Ojaide's collection *Songs of Myself: Quartet* which are also written in the mode of *ubroule*. Of special note is the onomatopoeic chorus that suggests gentleness:

Dede-e dede-e
Gently and steadily the old man pulls the thread of the loom.
Dede-e dede-e
The cotton tree stands unnoticed amidst iroko and palm trees
but its soft sheets of fabric cover the entire world's nakedness.
Dede-e dede-e
It's not only years that confer wisdom, says the young crocodile
that has dug its hole with tools of its mouth and satiated with fish.
Dede-e dede-e
It's not the hulk that gives one power, boasts the black ant after stabbing the
elephant's butt and downing the giant of the jungle.
(from "Gently", 14)

The next excerpt from the same collection *Songs of Myself*, is also unique in the general terms that have been espoused and discussed so far and specifically because of the vernacular chorused refrains/repetitions as are in "Gently" above. They still retain the unique qualities that are present and characteristically distinctive in the udje examples that have been featured. Interestingly, it contains the formulaic shout-and-answer patterns common to oral forms.

OmoOkogbe
Okogbe
He entered with the gait of one spoiling for a fight.
He came in wearing charms on his arms and feet.
OmoOkogbe
Okogbe
He shouted down everyone he came to meet at the gathering-
He had no patience for anybody wearing charms as he did.
OmoOkogbe
Okogbe
Nobody knew where he came from, not to talk of his name.

Nobody remembered his grandfather had been a warrior chief.

OmoOkogbe

Okogbe

Who cared whether he was a messenger from a commander?

He did not bring the pride of whoever sent him to this place.

...

So he hastily took on the kind of fight he had never trained for.

It took no time to settle his status on the arena – he lost his life.

...

Now a song mocks the youth rushing in to challenge

those already out in the field or coming in with tight lips:

...

OmoOkogbe

Okogbe

(from “For Youths”, 60)

The call “Omo Okogbe” and the reply “Okogbe” is the the chorus refrain repeated in between the couplets. This functions as a didactic emphasis designed to focus the mind of the audience on the central message – that of wisdom and caution. It achieves this generally by satirizing the character Okogbe, making him the poster-child errant youth whom all must avoid imitating his uninformed rashness.

Discoursal Conclusion

This treatise is basically hinged on the intertextuality device of the textual approach method to comparative critical literary analysis. The oral form, udje, has been placed comparatively as a relatable form for the establishment of proof that the tenor, diction, and style of Ojaide’s poetry has a veritable, revered, time-tested, and contextual model worthy of emulation – the udje of the Urhobo of Nigeria. Inasmuch as he has already affirmed the fact vocally and verbally, this paper goes ahead to practically prove his bent. He places ancient orality above modern music and rhythmical aurality: “...the oral voice in a written poem is more specialized than the aural in written poetry which is always there” (“Performance, the New African Poetry”, 113). He believes, as we have seen, in the utilitarian and ornamental values of the unique elements found in the oral form:

...the presence of repetition, refrains, formulas, parallelism, and piling up detail in traditional poetry or songs also obtains in the written poetry of the African poet. While the traditional poem is a song or chant and is directly musical, the written poem with these features borrowed from the oral tradition also attempts to be musical in a unique African manner. (114)

Through the udje sample featured in this paper and other described qualities of the dance-song, the reasons for Ojaide’s unique practice are laid bare as clear duplications of form, style, and diction are seen in his written poetry. The art of applying wounding words in its original udje form for satirical purposes is put to topical use in our contemporary society as human foibles and misdemeanors remain constant. Interestingly, it is still in the mode of the borrowed art of udje dance songs that the word “song” is retained in the titles of the two texts used here as the importance of the term resonates among other African versifiers who leaned back to borrow and adapt – Kofi Awoonor’s “Songs of Sorrow” of the Ghanaian Ewe tradition and Okotp’ Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* of the Ugandan Acoli tradition. Traditionally rooted, Tanure Ojaide’s praxis is apt, original, germane, and effective as an extension of the Urhobo consciousness in grappling a modern world.

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