

## Minstrelsy and Sociopolitical Consciousness in Tanure Ojaide's *Songs of Myself*

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### Abstract

One dominant feature of Modern African poetry is its integrative quality. It incorporates the oral tradition carried by many African writers versed in their indigenous literatures into written form to enrich their poetic imagination. The resolve to deploy folkloric elements in aesthetic designs like myth, proverbial sayings, narratological strategies, riddles, chants, songs, drums and so on, produces sublimity prevalent in modern African poetry. Minstrelsy is an aspect of African oral aesthetics. It is an indigenous art form whereby the poet, Tanure Ojaide, assumes the role of a local singer. The paper examines the indices of minstrelsy in Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* (2015). This is with a view to seeing to what extent the warnings of the persona has impacted positively on the ruling class. The study adopts the Postcolonial Theory that privileges cultural plurality and hybridity to examine the interplay of orality and literacy in Ojaide's poetry. Significantly, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which conveys the relationship between the colonisers (the self) and the colonized (the other), is applied to show the duality of cultural realities in the selected poems. Selected poems in the sampled collection were subjected to qualitative, literary analyses. The analyses reveal that Ojaide assumed the image of a traditional griot through the use of oral cadences like songs, proverbs, invocations, incantations, riddles and other folkloric features in his poetry as a wakeup call to remind his people that the solution to their problem can be solved from within, and not outside.

### Introduction

Modern African poetry is integrative in nature as it incorporates the oral tradition carried by many African writers versed in their indigenous literature into written form to enrich their poetic imagination. This flavoring by folkloric elements in aesthetic forms like myths, legends, story-telling, proverbial sayings, riddles, chants, songs, music, dance, drum beat etc. produce the sublimity characteristically associated with Modern African Poetry. Perhaps, this is what Funso Aiyejina (1988), describes as the 'alter/native tradition' in the incorporation of oral traditional features into the written poetry. This also reinforces Abiola Irele's view that modern African literature is a 'written oral literature' (Ojaide, 1996, p.111)

In Africa, poetry is performative as witnessed in greetings, naming, burials, and festival ceremonies. The utilitarian nexus of poetry which is a communal activity, demands proper creativity and artistry from the poet to enlist the interest and attention of the audience hence the need to deploy traditional aesthetics to sustain the audience. According to Abubakar (2007, pp.189-206), multi-media aesthetics is a device used in describing the method of adopting different media to aesthetically communicate ideas, visions or offer criticism on vital socio-political and cultural issues by modern African writers. Finnegan (1977, p.272), in her reference to the African griots/bards/court poets, observes that their performance come in the form of reports and comments on current affairs, political pressure, propaganda and/or attempts to reflect and/or mold public opinion. Mphahlele (1959, p.196), describes African poets and story-

tellers as the ‘communities’ chroniclers, entertainers and collective conscience’. Solanke (2013, p.52) avers to generation of Nigerian poets after 1960 as chastisers, visionaries, inspirers and prophets of change. This study examines the manifestation of Minstrelsy and how they have effected Socio-political Consciousness with Tanure Ojaide’s *Songs of Myself*.

Minstrelsy is the practice of minstrels; that is, a troupe of folk singers. It is also a form of racist entertainment developed in the 19th century, known as a minstrel show (Wikipedia). However, in the context of this paper, minstrelsy is basically an aspect of African indigenous art form through which the local artiste communicates with his/her target audience. The minstrel, like the bard, the raconteur, the troubadour, the griot, the oral poet or the local singer, employs the medium of orality to ply his/her trade. Djibril Tamsir Niane calls them ‘carriers of tradition’ (Cited in Makward, 1990, p.23). In other words, the minstrel serves as a custodian of knowledge production, transmitter of cultural values and norms from one generation to another, and above all, is the conscience and sensitizer of the community. A true knowledge of the tradition and effective management of it is what Jane Guyer, cited in Ogbogbo (2018) espouses;

As scholarship reorients ... we need to examine the intellectual and social legacies of the past era ... and to apply experience and imagination to the deployment of the very asset they leave us with. These assets need to be reshaped, reconfigured and not intransigently defended or recklessly abandoned (p.5).

The semantic import of this citation is that knowledge production from the oral resources of the community is very important, if we must face the present challenges of today. Delineating the cultural architecture on the paradigm of race to show its distinctiveness made, Pogoso (2021), raises a fundamental question, “Is African art conterminous with Western art in the sense that we know and perceive it?”(p.2). If the response is negative, then, it becomes exigent to understand the material culture from the communal pool that the literary artist draws the images and symbols that populate the worldview of his literary outpouring.

Modern African literature has become a brand. It has gained recognition worldwide with such classics as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not Child*, and Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. This recognition was reinforced by Soyinka’s winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 (Ojaide, 1997, p.1). It is heartwarming to state that the second Blackman after Soyinka and the fifth recipient of this prestigious award from Africa in 2021 is Abdulrazak Gurnah. He is a native of the island of Zanzibar in Tanzania. Why the growing interest in African literature? Perhaps, the postcoloniality and multiculturalism African literary writers are experiencing impinges on them the need to doggedly promote a psychic underlay of Africanity as exemplified in African oral traditions, values, norms and folklores. This brings out the distinctive nature of African cultural identity unique from others. Although a few of their works could be classified as protest literature, they bear semblance of a peoples’ worldview. Another dominant factor is the type of political structure bequeathed by the colonial masters as found in Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone literature etc.

## **Orality-Written Dichotomy**

On the issue of interface between oral and written literature, it is imperative to state emphatically that modern African literature is a product of a very vibrant and robust indigenous artistic tradition or folklores such as songs, festivals, proverbs, oral narratives, etc. These oral resources convey and underscore the indigenous social, cultural and political worldview of the African communities. This is given credence by Senanu and Vincent that “poetry in one form or another, is a cultural heritage of all peoples who all have rational conceptions of what it is” (2003, p.13). Hence, the Somalis showcase their cultural identity through the Swahili Utenzi, Ghanaian traditional society is evident in *Guardians of the Sacred Word* and the Ewe dirge form as seen in Kofi Awonor’s ‘Songs of Sorrow’. South Africa, through Izibongo, celebrates the exploits of Chaka the Zulu king. The Yoruba cosmology is demonstrated by valued traditions such as Ewi, Rara, Ekun Iyawo, Ijala, etc. as depicted in the poem, ‘Salute to the elephant’ and others. The inability of non-natives to decipher the cultural images and symbols imbedded in African oral aesthetics at first sight elicited negative compliments from earlier researchers for example, Wolff (1962), in a seminar article has called oriki ‘disjointed discourse’ while Barber (1991) posits that “to me it was nothing but a meaningless jumble of sound.’ ‘There was nothing in it that I could distinguish at all, despite my three years of studying Yoruba” (p.16). On the other hand, Lindfors (2002), ascribes such as a sociological document and an anthropological date whereas Finnegan (1977), espouses that Africans don’t have epics. Hence, the warning by Ojaide against the idea of critical absurdities as noticed in the works of Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier who used Western critical canons to approach African literature.

In same vein, the concept of the troubadour motif is a recurring trend as most African poets showcase their love and desire for a better society through the way they sensitize the government to do the needful in charting positive discourses of nation formation. The disenchantment that the masses experience as a result of the inability of the political elite to properly annex the human and material resources in the continent elicit what Remi Raji aptly tag aesthetics of rage with the need for political poetry. In the words of Egya;

Political poetry is a manifestation of committed writing that comes with the realization of the poet that his poetic vision must transcend the abstraction of artistic self-glorification. In transcending poetic subjectivity, the political poet objectifies his voice through what Remi Raji himself calls “the aesthetics of rage.” (2011, p.14)

This rage at the insensitivity of the political elite to the yearnings and aspirations of the masses, is exemplified in the poem ‘On behalf of silence’ from the collection of *A Harvest of Laughters* by Raji:

In the castration of men’s dreams  
in the seizure of children’s prattles  
in the abortion of female rites  
our emperor is fooled by remnant-smile  
of sycophants ... and silence (1997, p.55).

All categories of the followership from ‘men’, ‘children’, to ‘female’ reflect one form of deprivation or the other. The symbol of the political class is described as ‘emperor’ because of the largess and wanton display of affluence from (state fund) that ought to go into developing

social infrastructure to provide dividend of democracy but does not. Dasyuva (2019), in ‘Goloba’ from the collection *Songs of Odamolugbe* describes the political class thus: “a several cycles of identical chicks, Golobalized new-breed politricksters!”

Describing the operators of political system as ‘politricksters’ underscores their level of inconsistency and unreliability. He equally has words for the military elite as evinced in ‘Dancing Sigidi in the rain’

His bloated belly:  
treachery of our looted treasury!  
his stand as delicate in battering boots.  
as armoured tanks at campus gates—  
Blocking the road to reason,  
stifling our push to progress ... (Dasyuva, p.80).

The first stanza of the poem after the folksong reads ‘Usurper- General! Hiding behind a pair of Haitian sunglasses’ (p.79).

The image created is undoubtedly that of the late Head of State, General Sanni Abacha. Following is a quick reminder of all the misrule perpetuated during his tenure as the head of the military junta in Nigeria: ‘stifling our push to progress ...’ Niyi Osundare addresses the political class by waking them to their responsibility in the poem, ‘A song for Ajegunle’ where he exposes the threat of having a slum in an urban city like Lagos:

Morning here is a crow without a cock  
Taps without water, tables without bread  
Children without schools, schools without children  
And shoeless hoarders drifting  
Drifting dreamily to Ikoyi chores  
Or Victoria’s own Island where lawns  
Are green with sweat  
And Senior Service brats murder the peace  
Of tired nannies (p.312)

That social infrastructures are lacking is undoubtable. The juxtaposition of Ajegunle with Ikoyi and Victoria Island is to see the sharp contrast and the gulf that exists between them. Also and most importantly, while there is abject poverty and deprivation in Ajegunle; the ‘brats’ on the other side of the divide are pampered silly like inflated toads, all in the same state. What an irony!

Okot p’ Bitek, the celebrated Ugandan poet, in *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (2005), depicts his judgment of the political elite in his society aptly thus:

If only the parties  
Would fight poverty  
With the fury

With which they fight each  
    other,  
If diseases and ignorance  
Were assaulted  
With the deadly vengeance  
With which Ocol assaults his  
    mother's son  
The enemies would have been  
Greatly reduced by now (p.111).

This shows that in East Africa, just like in West Africa (Nigeria, especially) and elsewhere in Africa; the common man is disenchanted with the ineptitude and social malady of the political class with their empty boasts and promises before getting to office and little or no action afterwards. Hence, the song of the minstrel to remind them of what the common man expects from them. That is dividend of good and purposive governance to enhance development.

Most studies on Ojaide's poetry often focus on his critique of bad leadership, denunciation of exploitation, environmental issues, oral aesthetics, social mediation, and resource control, etc. None has explored the role of the minstrel as a sensitizer and carrier of the people's tradition. It is this lacuna in scholarship this work is out to fill. The scope of the study is limited to the artistic projection of the role of the minstrel in Tanure Ojaide's *Songs of Myself* (2015). The oral cadences deployed in the collection are highlighted and discussed, showing the role of the poet as a minstrel in the society. That the poetry collection is aptly tagged 'Songs' underscores the hallmark of the minstrel's vocation and advocate. Not every song in the collection will attract attention, but those that treat issues of socio-political consciousness, as Achebe once said that the commitment of an African writer is basically to show concern for his/her immediate society. Otherwise his/her case would be like the proverbial Igbo man whose house was on fire, and instead of looking for ways of stopping it, was busy chasing rats coming out of the flame.

The specific objectives are to identify indices of minstrelsy in Tanure Ojaide's *Songs of Myself*; to examine the minstrel's role as the carrier of the people's tradition for knowledge production as depicted in the collection under study; and to discuss means through which the minstrel sensitizes the society on political issues as demonstrated in selected poems from the collection under investigation. The study is relevant to the social and academic domains. Its findings will enhance further studies into the robust nature of oral literature and how new technology can be deployed to boost its effectiveness. While, for the academia, it could be used to reinvigorate new research into the area of cultural education that is today dwindling in the education curriculum of the youths especially in Nigeria and Africa generally as western culture is currently eroding indigenous culture.

### **Methodology**

This is qualitative research that involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data such as literary texts, analytical texts, etc. The methods adopted by the researchers were first-hand observation, and data collection through textbooks, journals, and internet sources.

This is a primary text-driven study and the text for the research is Ojaide's *Songs of Myself*. In African Oral literature otherwise known as Orature, first-hand observation involves the researchers' physical presence at the venue of the occasion. This becomes imperative because orature is performative in nature. Apart from the spoken word culture, there are other non-verbal elements like the choice of costumes, colour, peculiarity of the set of drums and pattern of drum beat, dance steps etc. that are connotative and denotative in nature. The distinctive nature of the performance could sometimes be gender sensitive e.g. certain cultural festivals in the South West Nigeria like "Oloolu" masquerade in Ibadan (Oyo State), "Oro" festival in Iseyin and Oyo towns (Oyo State), Sagamu, Ijebu Remo, Ijebu Igbo and Ijebu Ode (Ogun State), Ikorodu and Epe (Lagos State) do not allow female participants either as initiates or as observers. Whereas, the "Eyo Adamo Orisa" masquerade cultural festival of Lagos State and Udje traditional dance songs of the Urhobo people (Delta State) are an inclusive ceremony that incorporates the entire community. Olaleru (2018) acknowledging the success of D.O. Fagunwa as one of the flagships of the spoken word cultures contends that there must be (i) the performer, poet in our case the minstrel, (ii) the public / audience (iii) poetry, text, song. This is corroborated by Opoola and Kadiri (2019) that affirms "the centrality of the performer in an African performance... put the artist at the centre (p.145). Therefore, the event by convention requires observers who will eventually double as active spectators because of the call-aud-response nature of African oral performance.

Closely related to the above is the intimacy ambience, a technique deployed by performance poets whose works have been categorised by Hoffman (2011) as written oral poetry. Perhaps, this explains part of the success of the minstrel, Tanure Ojaide in this context as he has consistently maintained that the success of his prowess as one of the most outstanding 'voices' of his generation is his heavy reliance on the Udje traditional dance songs of the Urhobo people in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In this society, the local singer, a typical Udje exponent picks on an opponent from a different camp. The performer / poet / minstrel begins his artistic performance by first abusing himself e.g. citing his own deficiency before satirising his opponent. This is usually carried out at a village arena / market, an open space to allow for spectators. This shows the healthiness and livelihood of performative poetry in African setting. Needless to say it is this spirit of harmless combative vituperation that particularizes the poetic outpouring of the minstrel, Tanure Ojaide in the text, *Songs of Myself*.

The idea of going back to the archives to get the recorded video performances of celebrated names of Udje exponents like Okitiakpe, Oloya and Memerume as they perform to a jubilant crowd of enthusiastic spectators to have a feel of what the original concept is. This is before reading a reenactment of it as exemplified in the text under study, *Songs of Myself* and all other related materials. The essence of this approach is to underscore the consistency and commitment of the minstrel as a representative of the common man in his socio-cultural milieu. Hence, the populist approach to linguistic choice as witnessed in 'Wayo Man' (p.87), 'We dey chop akara dey go' (p.133). These are titles of poems written in Pidgin English an acceptable lingua franca in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The opponents are the enemies of common man that have chosen to plunder the commonwealth i.e. the natural resources of the community to foreigners and agents of the government.

The text in this situation is the effective deployment of the tradition, custom, values, folklore, folktale, folksong etc. artistically presented to show case the richness, beauty and robust natural endowment of our socio-cultural milieu. All of these the minstrel exhibit to bring relish and splendor to his artistic production as a celebrated performer.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for the analysis of data in this research is Postcolonial Theory as enunciated by Edward Said (1978) in his book, *Orientalism*. Part of the tenets of the theory are: juxtaposition of the Orient and the Occident; the civilized West and the primitive “other”; the consequences of colonialism e.g. chaos, coups, corruption, civil wars, and bloodshed which permeate many ex-colonies; linguistic, economic and cultural imperialism; and opposition to unitary ontology / globalization etc.

The theory is germane to the study because it has relevance to the situation in the worldview of the primary text and other issues tangentially related to the study since they are written in English language, a by-product of colonialism. Other consequences of colonialism are common features in most African countries today. A typical example was and is still the incessant military coups taking place in the Sahel region recently.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Tanure Ojaide as a poet, writer, theorist and literary priest enjoys interdisciplinary global attention from researchers. However, the concern of this work shall be as it relates to his poetry. For example, Reuben (2014) examines oral aesthetics and social mediation in selected poetry of Ojaide with a view to seeing how oral traditional arts are adapted into the written medium. Onwuka, Uba and Fortress (2021), interrogate Ojaide’s poetry from the perspective of versifying history and national trauma to show the symbiotic relationship between literature and history. Also, to show his poetry as history in verse form, Edem (2016), looks at Ojaide’s poetry as language and ideological tool for environmental agitation. According to him, Ojaide uses his poetry as a weapon to unfold the socio-political decadence of time. Orhero and Udo (2019), studies the concept of disillusionment and absurdity in the poetry of Ojaide. The aim was to have a deep philosophical insight on the human condition as well as the poet’s vision and activism.

Various researches have been carried out which relate to Ojaide’s *Songs of Myself*. For example, *The Sun Newspaper* in 2019 carried an exclusive interview of the poet where he talked about the uniqueness of the text, *Songs of Myself*, ‘based on the oral tradition in which the singer or minstrel sings about himself or criticizes himself before criticizing the rest of the society’. The Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG (2017), Literature prize interview sees the text as a travelogue that takes the reader through the life of the persona from childhood to adulthood “it deals with self-examination and the minstrel’s alter-ego”. Also there is the use of self-mockery that justifies mocking others. Lami (2017), in assuming the Minstrel’s mantle in Ojaide’s *Songs of Myself* avers that “it seamlessly blends the personal with political in this volume of verse to paint a compelling portrait of a Nigeria always in transition.” Ojaruega (2015) posits that, “Ojaide taps deeply into the cosmology, ontology and epistemology embedded in the folklore of his people and forges a distinctiveness in his galvanization of oral

aesthetics to excoriate the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta region” (p.11). The present study, contrary to any of the aforementioned, deals with the issue of minstrelsy and socio-political consciousness in Ojaide’s *Songs of Myself*.

### Textual Analysis

Tanure Ojaide, one of the most committed modern African poets, is an Urhobo from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. He is undoubtedly one of the most eloquent voices craving the eradication of ecological hazards in the Delta region. His array of awards both locally and internationally is an acknowledgement of his acceptability as an accomplished poet. Ojaide’s 2015 publication, *Songs of Myself* is a symbolic representation of his creative intellect and artistic ingenuity in projecting the utilitarian nexus of art to wake the socio-political consciousness of his community. The researchers intend to establish the assertion that, Ojaide, like most African poets, is a minstrel. This can be justified through his use of oral/aural cadences. For example, all his poems are couched in the form of songs –*The Endless Song* (1989), *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1997), *In the Kingdom of Songs* (2002), *Songs of Myself* (2015), *etc.* The use of parallelism, repetition, alliteration, consonance, rhyme and other song devices are common feature of this poetry. Also, Ojaide makes his poetry accessible through the deployment of local images and symbols, colloquial language, sometimes Pidgin English which is a lingua franca with the people around the Delta region. Most importantly is his boldness in confronting those in authority. This constitute his socio-political engagement as will be noticed in the data below-

To properly situate this discourse, certain issues are paramount. The interface between the oral and the written is indisputable. Most poets under the category of Modern African poetry borrow extensively from the abundant and very robust oral resources at their disposal. For instance at an interview, Remi Raji claims he derives inspiration from Fuji music (a local genre of folk song). He even asserts that he started as a Fuji musician before turning to writing. Perhaps this explains the musicality in his poetic rendition. Also, Ojaide was unequivocal in affirming that Udje dance songs of his Urhobo speech community has very strong influence on his mode and style of poetic rendering. Ojaide explains in an interview with *The Sun* that the concept of *Songs of Myself* was derived from Udje Dance song of the Urhobo people where singers will first abuse themselves before abusing others.

Minstrelsy as a vocation advocates deploying one of the most important aspects of African oral aesthetics: Songs. The type of songs in question relates to folkloric songs- songs routed in oral traditions, myths and other oral resources. Scholars have expressed how songs permeate the lifestyle of Africans e.g. Barber exemplifies how songs are used to wake the Oba (King) from sleep in the morning and how ewi – panegyric poetry- is lavished on prominent individuals at ceremonies by the local bards. Tanure Ojaide, following the footsteps of local singers, employs the song motif to communicate his message to his target audience. One of such example is the poem ‘Gently’ from *Songs of Myself*:

Dede-e dede-e  
Gently and steadily the old man pulls the thread of the loom.  
Dede-e dede-e



He limps his way through the rugged terrain that stretches before him  
but outpaces strides of those without age or other kinds of challenges.  
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 (p.14).

Dede-e dede-e, an onomatopoeic expression of 'gently' in the Urhobo language, is intermittently used amidst proverbial sayings to give the song a rhythmic pattern that is sonorous to the ears. The persona, in the worldview of the song cautions that there is need for patience, carefulness and diligence when carrying out one's duties. The flavoring of this song with proverbial sayings indigenously Urhobo in content and other local images and symbols like cotton tree, Iroko tree, palm tree, crocodile etc. portray the minstrel as a carrier of the people's tradition and norms.

From another poem, 'Let them die for Arsenal', the poet- musician through the instrumentality of song motif raises the political consciousness of his people thus—

#### **Let them die for Arsenal**

Let them die for Arsenal  
and millions more for Chelsea, Manchu, and Real Madrid  
those who hide as neighbors die from armed robbery  
those who do nothing seeing their property carted away  
those who watch their mothers, wives, and daughters raped  
those who pay phantom light bills for blackout months  
those whose reps steal their share of the national wealth  
those who abandon their children in war to save themselves  
those who flee rather than club to death the cobra at the doorstep. (p.165)

In this poem, Ojaide moves from the global to the local by tactically identifying some of those social ills plaguing the society like: armed robbery, social insecurity, rape, property vandalism, incessant power supply, corruption in public places, etc. The poet- griot juxtaposes these as pertinent issues worth dying for as against a European club Arsenal. A club that does not know the individual even exists in the first place.

Ojaide is often described as a poet laureate of the Niger Delta as a result of his commitment and consistency at pursuing the yearning and aspiration of his people especially as it relates to resources control and environmental hazards caused by oil exploration and exploitation continuously perpetuated by the multi-national oil companies and their federal government collaborators. To this, Ojaide cited in Olafioye explains:

“My roots thus run deep into the Delta area. Its traditions, folklore, fauna and flora no doubt enriched my *Children of Iroko* and *Labyrinth of the Delta*. This area of

constant rains, where we children thought we saw fish falling from the sky in hurricanes, did not remain the same... My Delta years have become the touchstone with which I measure the rest of my life. The streams. The fauna and the flora are the symbols I continually tap. Even when I wander outside to the many places I have experienced, that land of streams, the Iroko trees, antelopes, anthills and so much life remains indelible in my memories and imprinted in my thoughts. Home remains for me the Delta, where I continue to anchor myself. (p.3)

It is for this reason that the poet sees himself as an embodiment of the community, therefore his agitation for a better society. Commenting on the issue of political consciousness in the poetry of Ojaide, Olafioye posits: the poet must plead the cause of the voiceless and call insanity to reason. His metaphor must trumpet the basic manifesto for action and reason... (p.50)

Unmindful of speaking the truth to those in power irrespective of the looming danger, Ojaide deploys idyllic images and symbols that drive home the message he wants to convey. This can be exemplified in the poem— 'Questing' from the collection *Songs of Myself*;

I seek the Iroko king of tree to proliferate  
but the entire species barely survives poachers;  
I seek a land swept clean of kleptomaniac leaders  
but the population has become a thieving army.(p.20)

The Iroko is very significant in the poetry of Ojaide as well as in the society he, like the mimetic theories, reflect. The Iroko tree is a towering image of stability and strength as the monarch of the flora he dominates; its economic impact is that it generates a ready source of timber-logging. Aside commercial purpose, the Iroko addresses the spiritual needs of the people as a deity that must be worshipped hence the desire of the persona to see it proliferate. However, powerful forces as represented by 'poachers' make it impossible because of their personal selfish interest. It is the same ruling class that are described as 'kleptomaniac leaders' and 'thieving army'.

In another poem titled 'On my Birthday', one notices the mixed feelings of the persona especially when in retrospect he recalls and reflects on how colleagues who would have been part of the celebration had gone all in the course of the struggle. Christopher Okigbo died at the war front during the civil war, Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders were hanged by the military junta under Gen Sanni Abacha for making a rightful demand and sundry cases. The political elites were represented as:

Vultures that hover over every corridor of power  
nobody sees them without spitting in revulsion. (p.26)

Unlike such birds like the dove, peacock, and the weaver bird that connote positivity, the vulture has a metaphor of all the negativity attached to it. It is a symbol of bad omen, destruction, decay and death. Therefore, for the persona to describe those in 'corridor of power', whether under the military or civilian, as 'vultures' underscores the degree with which the persona is anti-pathetic to their style of administration. The second line of the stanza, 'nobody

sees them without spitting in revulsion’, emphasizes the way the masses view, with distaste, those in government. Another stanza in the poem reads:

they won’t ever be ancestors of anybody  
but forever remain outcasts of humanity (p.26).

The persona, in this citation, warns that those in position of authority who collude with foreigners to deplete the common wealth and impoverish the masses will ‘forever remain outcasts of humanity’. And contrary to the norms in African Cosmology and the Worldview which Soyinka describes as a cyclical process among the living, dead and unborn to show the fluidity of human existence, the likes of the people will not be able to graduate from the level of the dead to the enviable position of ancestors that watch over their children— the living. Because through their nefarious acts, they have broken the chain that link them to their roots.

Ojaide, like the common practice of local griots/singers/bards as conscience of the society, draws attention of the ruling clan to the predicament of the common man. The poet unambiguously beams his search light on the legislative arm of government. In the poem, ‘The new lotus eaters’ (after a three week stay in Abuja) the poet documents his impression thus:

They forget what they were sent for, to fight battles,  
that will give dignity to their people as human beings;  
the representatives forget they are messengers of hope  
to bring succor to desperate folks languishing in despair’ (p.105).

Perhaps, the long nightmarish experience of military rule in the country, or ignorance on the part of the electorate when picking leaders, or abject poverty that gives room to the highest bidder has resulted in producing ‘lotus eaters’ as leaders. From the observation of the persona, the leaders/representatives are not prepared for the role they are given. Hence, ‘they forget what they are sent there for’. The only ‘battle’ they fight is for personal gains and selfish interest. The issue of bringing dignity to their people does not interest these legislators. The image of forgetfulness resonates even in the second stanza to show how absolute power has corrupted them absolutely. And as if that is not enough, in another stanza the poem reads:

They hide in their paunches the billions meant for roads  
and bridges that will take desperate people out of misery’ (p.105).

In this poem, just as in the previous one, the concept of kleptomaniac leadership vibrates otherwise why ‘hide’ if it is legitimate. And a cursory look at the poem depicts a juxtaposition between affluence displayed by those who should be ‘messengers’ and the electorate (masses) refracted as ‘desperate people out of misery,’ ‘languishing in despair’. These are absolute reflection of lack of dividend of democracy which could snowball into civil unrest.

Another aspect of the paraphernalia of the minstrel is the use of repetition and parallelism to enhance the musicality of the songs as exemplified in the poem ‘For youths’

### **For youths**

Omo Okogbe

Okogbe

Omo Okogbe

Okogbe

He entered with the gait of one spoiling for fight.

He came in wearing charms on his arms and feet.

Omo Okogbe

Okogbe

He shouted down everyone he came to meet at the gathering.

He had no patience for anybody wearing charms as he did.

Omo Okogbe

Okogbe (p.60).

The expression “Omo Okogbe Okogbe follows a syllabic pattern that gives the song its rhythmic pattern. Also, there is the use of repetition for emphasis which is peculiar to song mode in the African folklore. Similarly, the poet/performer uses the song to draw the attention of the youths to the need to have respect and regard for elders. Repetition and parallelism are reflected in the poem ‘No hunger’;

### **No hunger**

The minstrel suffers no hunger

in the famine of songs

since his muse always provides

from the divine abundance.

Aridon’s favorite suffers no hunger

in the famine of songs;

his eyes rest on every beauty

he discovers and sings about

and even the aches he suffers

resonate in a rhythmic cry.

The muse’s favorite suffers no hunger

in the famine of songs— (p.16)

The poem has fifteen stanzas, each stanza has two lines. There is consistency in the repetitive use of certain words and expressions like ‘suffers no hunger’, “in the famine of songs’. The use of these and other sound effects like consonance and assonance enhance the musicality of the song motif in the text.

In carrying out his duty as a social crusader and becoming a voice for the voiceless, the poet takes sides with the youths of the Niger Delta. This category of the citizenry of the nation are mostly misunderstood, which culminates into the various names they are tagged. For instance, during the military era they were called “Saboteurs.” Today, they are referred to as

militants who are anti-governments. But in the poem ‘If those called militants’ Ojaide takes sides with this oppressed segment of the society as he writes—

If those called militants  
had The New York Times or The Times of London  
they would call their detractors unprintable names (p.112).

The youths of the Niger Delta, like any bona fide member of the society, have legitimate right to demand that the government should provide social amenities for them. For example, why should exploration and drilling of oil destroy the ecology of the area? Why are there no schools, hospitals, drinkable water, road network, power supply, jobs to engage the teeming youths of the area? Another stanza from the same poem reads:

If the homeland warriors called militants  
had their own CNN and Aljazeera  
they would call their robbers monsters (p.112).

The homeland warriors are the dynamic youths suffering marginalization and deprivation from their oppressors. A once blissful land, rich in flora and fauna, has become devastated as a result of mindless despoliation by the multi-national oil companies and their government collaborators. Hence, they are described as ‘robbers’ and ‘monsters’, who cart away enormous natural resources of the land while natives languish in abject poverty, hunger and perpetual want. Yet, when they make very honest demand to be given a share of their God given gift, their oppressors label them ‘militants’. Is this not ironical?

The last data is a poem titled ‘We dey chop akara dey go’ (p.133). This particular poem is couched in Pidgin English, the lingual franca of those around the coastal area. Typical of African oral aesthetics is the deployment of satire to lampoon, make jest, fun and generally to deflate tension often generated by government’s ineptitude and lack of will to provide the much needed social infrastructure to uplift the living condition of the common man. These are similar to what one finds in the typical Udje exponents, also available in the Oro and Oke Ibadan masquerade festivals in Yoruba lands where ribald jokes as Poetic license are freely used as exemplified in this poem:

We dey chop akara dey go  
If moin-moin no dey  
  
We ask for resource control,  
Government give us NDDC

Both akara and moin-moin are made of beans cake. But moin-moin is richer in content and may take much time to prepare. So, sarcastically the persona, in the worldview of this poem, is saying if the government is incapable (not as a result of unavailability but lack of will to annex

human and material resources in the land for better living) we are content with the best they could offer. Hence, the repetitive use of the expressions—

We dey chop akara dey go  
If moin-moin no dey

The demand is in respect of ‘resource control’ but instead ‘NDDC’ was provided. Are they the same? Another stanza reads-

in place of clean rivers,  
Shell dey build boreholes

The demand for “clean rivers” is to probably see if that might bring back the lost aquatic culture of the natives. What has that to do with boreholes? This shows the insensitivity of government and the private oil companies to the genuine demands of the people they claim to have their mandate to lead.

From the data collected, Tanure Ojaide, like Ezenwa-Ohaeto in *The Chants of a Minstrel* (2003), has deployed the indices of the song motif as found in repetition, assonance, consonance, rhythm, etc. to create a platform through which to champion the yearnings and aspirations of their peoples.

### **Conclusion**

It could be deduced so far that literary artistes, especially poets, in Africa draw their source of inspiration extensively from oral traditions, folklores, images and symbols from their socio-cultural and political milieu to fuel their creative writings. It was also noticed that what the oral artist does is not significantly different from the written works of modern poets like Niyi Osundare, Stephen E. Kekeghe, Remi Raji, Ademola Dasylva, Stephen O. Solanke, and Tanure Ojaide. Also, there is the observation that whether in the South West (Yoruba), South-South of Nigeria (Urhobo) and even in faraway East Africa Uganda (Acoli), there is relative similarity in artistic performance and rendition pattern of Modern African Poetry. They all have heavy reliance on oral poetic traditions.

As far as this study is concerned, indices of minstrelsy in Ojaide’s *Songs of Myself* are evident in the song motif also are the uses of repetition, assonance, consonance, chants, and parallelism, etc. The research has shown that the minstrel has proved beyond any reasonable doubt that he is a carrier of the people’s tradition and custom for knowledge production through his deployment of Urhobo proverbs, idioms, and folklores etc. for posterity.

Finally, it is apparent that the minstrel, like other local singers / bards, has deployed his talent at sensitizing the political elite on the socio-political predicament of the common man to no avail. The indifference of the leadership is similar to that of a dog this is destined to get lost, as it fails to listen to the whistle of its owner.

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