



Urhobo Folklore and Udje Aesthetics in Tanure Ojaide's *In the House of Words and Songs of Myself*

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Mathias Orhero,
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Abstract: In his article "Urhobo Folklore and Udje Aesthetics in Ojaide's *In the House of Words and Songs of Myself*" Mathias Orhero argues that Ojaide's poetry incorporates Urhobo folkloric contents and Udje style. Using African New Criticism as its theoretical anchor, this paper reveals that Ojaide amply deploys Urhobo folkloric contents and Udje aesthetics in both the form and contents of his poetry and thus, he continues as a modern Urhobo Udje maestro of the hybrid tradition. This paper also brings Ojaide's recent collections to critical lenses, especially as masterpieces of his Urhobo folkloric and Udje adaptations. Orhero concludes by suggesting that further scholarship on the influence of Urhobo folklore and Udje aesthetics should be done on Ojaide's other poetry collections.

Mathias Iroro ORHERO

Urhobo Folklore and *Udje Aesthetics in Ojaide's In The House Of Words and Songs Of Myself*

This paper represents an attempt to examine the place of Urhobo folklore and Udje aesthetics in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide. Some critics have maintained that Ojaide's poetry is influenced by oral aesthetics. However, critical studies have yet to draw significant attention to the influence of Urhobo folklore and Udje aesthetics in his poetry, especially with regard to his recent collections – *In the House of Words and Songs of Myself*. Instead, Ojaide's works have mostly been examined from postcolonial, critical, and socialist realist perspectives. Consequently, his use of Urhobo folklore and the Udje tradition has been largely ignored, with critics paying more attention to his socio-political and ecocritical poems. In contrast to this scholarly trend, this paper treats Ojaide as a modern Urhobo folklorist and Udje maestro whose works belong alongside the other Urhobo Udje maestros of the oral literary tradition. In order to authenticate Ojaide's place in this tradition, this study examines contents and form in Ojaide's new poetry, with special attention given to the infusion of Urhobo folklore and Udje aesthetics in *In the House of Words and Songs of Myself*.

Born in 1948 to Urhobo parents from Okpara-Inland in Agbon Kingdom, Delta State of Nigeria, Ojaide is a poet whose works have been widely studied. He is primarily known as a socio-political poet, a satirist, and an ecocritical poet who is part of the generation Funso Aiyejina described as the "Alter/Native" tradition ("Recent Nigerian" 112). Ojaide's themes and techniques have changed over the years alongside the history and agitations of his people, but critics have recognized him as an important figure in African poetry since he began publishing in the 1970s. Bassey Bassey places Ojaide in "the generation of Nigerian writers after the Achebe – Clark – Okigbo – Soyinka era," and adds that Ojaide uses his poetry to "comment on the political reality of his day" ("Forms of Political Consciousness" 168). Tijan Sallah goes beyond the categorization of Ojaide's poetry to assert that Ojaide's work is appealing not only for its technical qualities but for its "cultural integrity" ("The Eagle's Vision" 20). Godini Darah further opines that "on the basis of sheer output, Ojaide is the most prolific in the Niger Delta region" ("Revolutionary Pressures" 2). Onookome Okome remarks of Ojaide's style that it "puts him apart from his literary peers. His poetry is simple, yet each line is loaded with meaning; each carries the weight of serious contemplation, creating a world in which meaning generates more meaning" ("About the Author" 2). On the strength of this evaluation, Okome concludes that Ojaide is one of the most important poets to emerge in Africa after Wole Soyinka.

Critics have noted that certain themes predominate in Ojaide's poetry. One of these themes is that of environmental pollution in the Niger Delta. In this regard, Nesther Alu and Vashti Suwa assert that Ojaide "advances concern for the environment and the consequences of such unfortunate predicaments [environmental pollution] of his people" ("Tanure Ojaide" 134). Furthering their argument, they write that "Tanure Ojaide laments the deplorable condition of the Niger-Delta, using local rudimentary psychéd sights of anguish, discomposure, and trepidation that streak his time and land. He paints the stench of human waste into words for the purpose of rescuing and salvaging the helpless victims of the exacting system. His sensitivity to the situation makes the subject of the Delta a compact milestone in his ingenious mind as he uses it to uncover the deleterious social order in his society ("Tanure Ojaide" 135).

In a similar thought, Enajite Ojaruega assesses the environmental activism of Tanure Ojaide's poetry and concludes that: "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" ("The Place" 138-139).

Apart from the environmental consciousness of his poetry, critics have also noted the political consciousness of Ojaide's poetry. In this regard, notable work has been done on his satirical tendencies and critical and social realism, as well as the pure political activism in his poetry. Jide Balogun believes that "Tanure Ojaide uses poetry as a vehicle for political mediation and social control" ("The Poet" 78). In this vein, he is often seen as a socio-political poet; for instance, Aiyejina refers to Ojaide as a Marxist poet ("Recent Nigerian" 112). The variety of critical readings of Ojaide's work yields credence to the idea that Ojaide is a poet of many colors. Ojaruega has also assessed Ojaide's use of orature in his poetry. She writes that: "...it is apparent that Ojaide uses orature to establish not only a cultural iden-

tity 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" ("The Place" 143).

Clearly, Ojaide is a poet who has received much critical attention. His poetry has evolved over the years to cover a wide variety of themes and techniques. But for all of its diversity, this critical attention is also limited in scope. A crucial lacuna, which this paper will attempt to address, remains at the question of the influence of Urhobo folklore and Udje aesthetics in Ojaide's poetry.

The African New Criticism offers a useful set of critical tools for approaching such a question. Like mainstream New Criticism, African New Criticism reads a text closely. However, the context of a text is also taken into cognizance. It has some semblance with Neo-Aristotelianism in its recourse to context in explication. Gabriel Bamgbose describes the African New Criticism as "a sort of hybrid of the textual and the contextual as opposed to the Anglo-American New Criticism, which is extremely textual; it is a formalistic explication of text with focus on the intrinsic; however it strives to resist the temptation of ignoring the extrinsic since both are modes of signification of meaning" ("Reading" 1). Major African literary critics such as Abiola Irele, Chidi Maduka, and Charles Nnolim, among others have defended this approach as the best way to explicate African literature. Much like the attention given to literary language adopted by the Russian Formalists and American New Critics, the African New Criticism enables the reader of Ojaide to closely examine textual features such as imagery, symbolism, metaphor, structure, allusion, diction, style, satire, and other literary techniques. At the same time, however, an African New Critical reading of Ojaide would also examine the socio-political, historical, economic, and other contexts that the work is thrust into. For the purposes of this paper, this means an examination of how Ojaide's poetic language is employed to show Urhobo folklore and the Udje tradition.

Such a study must begin with an understanding of the Urhobo people and culture, and specifically of the Udje tradition. Tanure Ojaide identifies himself as an Urhobo man (*Poetic Imagination* 121), and he has argued that a proper knowledge of his background is important in understanding the dynamics of his poetry. The Urhobo people are indigenous to Delta State. They are about five million in population (Ojaruega, "The Place" 140) and are the largest ethnic group in Delta State as well as the fifth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. The Urhobo are also found in Bayelsa State (Sagbama Local Government Area) and Edo State (Ikpoba Okha Local Government Area). Their settlements can be found in Ondo and Lagos States. Urhobo major cities include Warri, Ughelli, Effurun and Sapele. There are various theories of the origin of Urhobo people. However, the most acceptable theory is that of the Benin origin. Atkins Salubi asserts that the Urhobo people migrated, at various waves, from Benin (*Aka*) at the time of the *Ogisos* to settle in their current places ("The Establishment of British" 184). The reign of the *Ogisos* frequently features in Urhobo folklore and Ojaide's poetry. There are currently about 22 clans in Urhoboland. They include: Agbarha-Ame, Agbarha-Otor, Agbarho, Agbon, Arhavwarien, Avwra (Abraka), Ephron, Ewreni, Eghwu, Idjerhe, Oghara, Ogor, Okere-Urhobo, Okparabe, Okpe, Olomu, Orogun, Udu, Ughelli, Ughievwen, Uvwie and Ughwerun (Emekpe, *The History of Ughelli* 9-10). Isoko is a closely related ethnic cousin to the Urhobo. Both the Urhobo and Isoko people speak an Edoid language owing to their Benin heritage. At the initial stages of the colonial period, Urhobo, together with Isoko, were referred to as the Sobo people.

Central to Urhobo culture are the concepts of predestination, which is manifest through the *Urhoro* concept where an incarnating soul predestines its life, karma, which dictates the station in life that an incarnating soul attains. The Urhobo also believes in divinities known as *Edjo*, malevolent and psychic beings known as *Orhan*, nature spirits/elementals such as *Akpobrisi* and *Uwara*, and mythical or legendary beings such as *Arhwaran* and the *Ogisos*. The Urhobo believe strongly in the supernatural, and often ascribe ailments, deaths and natural disasters to be the handworks of transcendental or malevolent beings. Urhobos believe in the concept of an all-knowing God, which is called *Oghene*. They also partake in some forms of ancestral worship through the concept of *Esemo* and *Iniemo*. It is believed that the ancestors are in constant watch over their progenies and are ready to welcome the dead who lead good lives. In the Urhobo ontology of life, there is a division between the world of the living (*akpo*) and the world of the dead/spirits (*erivwin*). These worlds frequently collide, and manifestations arise.

The Udje tradition of the Urhobo people is one of the forms of Oral Literature in Africa (Darah, *Udje Song Poetry* 3). It has been identified as one of the oldest surviving traditions of Urhobo secular song-poetry. The Urhobo Udje is practiced mainly in Ughelli South and Udu Local Government Areas of Delta State. Udje practice was organized as a form of verbal warfare among participating communities.

Through the use of humor and biting satire, competing groups, known as Omesuo, attack each other. The major composers, called Ororile, are assisted by several cantors, ebuole. The songs that are composed are stylistically peculiar, and they employ "images, metaphors, similes, proverbs and a whole gamut of figures of speech" (Clark, "Poetry" 286). Thematically, they deal with current and topical issues. Sometimes, allusions and thematic ties are made to Urhobo history and historical, mythical or legendary figures. The Udje song-poetry usually employs refrains and is structured systematically into three parts; umuoho (introduction), okparo (body) and ifuen (conclusion or epilogue). The Udje tradition began to decline after the 1960s, but has witnessed a contemporary resurgence in the songs of the Onorume Musical Ladies of Urhobo that was led by the now late Rose Okiriguo (Darah, *Udje Song Poetry* 73). The clans known for the best Udje aesthetics are Udu and Ughievwen, and these clans are often called the Kingdoms of Songs.

Although Ojaide does not hail from the part of Urhoboland where Udje practice is dominant, his research into Urhobo culture and the Udje tradition forms the background and architecture of his poetry. As much of the material from *In the House of Words* and *Songs of Myself* demonstrates, Ojaide uses the subtext of Urhobo folklore as a source of thematic and stylistic complexity. Consequently, these poems are infused with allusions from Urhobo folklore as well as thematic parallels of Urhobo history, culture, legends and myths.

A close reading of Ojaide's poetry reveals a number of symbols, metaphors and themes drawn from Urhobo mythology. One of the mythical character which can be found in the bulk of Ojaide's poetry is *Ogiso*. The *Ogiso* are a dynasty of kings in ancient Benin known as *Igodomigodo* (Otite, "A Peep" 13). Urhobo people are believed to have left Benin (*Aka*) during the reign of the tyrannical *Ogisos* and migrated, in various waves, to their current abodes. Urhobo folktales are replete with references to the *Ogiso* as evil, unjust and tyrannical leaders who had no respect for their subjects. Thus, for the Urhobo, *Ogiso* represents tyranny, evil and injustice. Ojaide adopts this metaphor of *Ogiso* to portray themes that border on political injustice, oppression, and imperialism. In his poem "For the sake of freedom," the *Ogiso* myth is called upon and used as a metaphor for oppression. The poet lashes out on salient societal issues using the subtext of *Ogiso* mythology. The poet says "they starve youths jobless in the streets/the occupation forced on the able-bodied/pilfering—Abuja is full of them/Lagos is full of them Area Boys" (*House of Words* 62). The poet likens the social malaise faced by the people to that which the Urhobo faced in the hands of the *Ogiso* when he says "it's no longer myth that *Ogiso*'s burning days are back" (62). This allusion to Urhobo mythology is an aspect of the infusion of Urhobo folklore in order to thematize corruption, bad leadership and injustice.

In the poem "On my birthday," Ojaide also alludes to the Urhobo myth of *Ogiso* as a metaphor for bad leadership. In this poem, he satirizes corrupt leaders and their praise singers. The praise singers are described as "those scholars arguing in defense of Aa Ba Cha,/the half-literate butcher of Abuja" (*Songs of Myself* 26). He further likens the praise singers to the griots in Urhobo folklore who sang praises to *Ogiso* even in the midst of tyranny by saying "those griots kissing *Ogiso*'s fungoid feet/and stoking fires of torture in Aso Rock" (26). This allusion is used to attack the negligence and blindness of those who have the ability to change things in the society but have been blinded by greed or avarice.

Another form of Urhobo folklore adopted by Ojaide is the reference to the Urhobo pantheon of gods. In Urhobo folklore, there are several gods that perform specific actions and are known for certain attributes. These gods are called upon by their adherents at moments of need. Some of the gods are community gods. Others are peculiar with certain ailments, art forms, and other attributes. Ochuko Tonukari notes that there are about 1,260 deities in Urhobo culture ("Aziza" 1). Ojaide calls upon these gods with reference to their attributes in his poems. One of the commonly known Urhobo gods that Ojaide calls upon in his poetry is *Aridon*. *Aridon* and *Uhaghwa* are regarded as gods of memory in Urhoboland that poets, singers, and those in similar vocations must call upon for inspiration (Ojaide, *Poetic Imagination*, 122). There is a ritual process that adherents of *Aridon* must go through to be initiates. Ojaide considers his art to be a product of *Aridon*'s inspiration. In this sense, he draws from Urhobo folklore and becomes the continuum of the Urhobo griots of old. Abdul-Rasheed N'Allah observes that Ojaide embraced the tradition of Urhobo oral poets "as he does his muse and the Urhobo god of memory, *Aridon*" (*African Discourse* 74). In the poem "A trip to a traditional library," *Aridon* is invoked for inspiration. The poem thematizes minstrelsy by an invocation of *Aridon* thus: "O *Aridon*, memory lives long" (*House of Words* 28). The poem is a nostalgic poem and a celebration of the days of minstrelsy and vibrant Urhobo oral poetry. The poet says, "Ogbariemu remembers days of his wrinkled/great-grandfather, carries photos of centuries/in a frame that mocks the fifty-year-old minstrel's" (28). The poet further expresses his angst at the uncelebrated Urhobo's "traditional library": "The minstrel arrives at the ancestral homecoming/without the ghostly livery

borne by meteors or/slipping through unguarded frontiers to spy on spirits" (28). This shows the value he places upon Urhobo poets who work under *Aridon's* influence. *Aridon*, thus, becomes the symbol of a muse, a divine afflatus for Ojaide.

In the poem "Visiting Mathias at Lapo village," Ojaide apostrophizes *Aridon* in a rhetorical question. He quizzes "O *Aridon*, what metaphor to capture the other's pain?" (*House of Words* 47). In this instance, *Aridon* is invoked as an opener, a muse for the lines to come. It is not uncommon among Urhobo poets and singers for *Aridon* to be invoked as an opener in a composition. Drawing from this, Ojaide invokes *Aridon* to inspire him to write about the pains of Mathias, a patient with Elephantiasis. *Aridon's* prowess as an inventor or creator is called upon when the poet asserts "O *Aridon*, reinvent another world hospitable to Mathias" (47). Ojaide draws upon the metaphor of *Aridon* from Urhobo folklore to thematize succor at this point. *Aridon*, thus, becomes a metaphor for ameliorating the plight of Mathias, who is in pains. *Aridon's* role as a muse to Ojaide is also shown in "No hunger." In this poem, the poet thematizes inspiration and creativity. Like the griots of the old, *Aridon* gives Ojaide ample inspiration so much that he says "*Aridon's* favourite suffers no hunger/in the famine of songs" (*Songs of Myself* 16). So saying, Ojaide authenticates the truism that *Aridon* is a metaphor for inspiration. This is a clinical example of the use of Urhobo folklore in poetic artistry.

Apart from *Aridon*, Ojaide also incorporates other gods from the Urhobo pantheon in his poetry. In the poem "Meeting," the poet invokes *Ivwri* (also spelt as *Iphri*), the Urhobo god of war, restitution and vengeance. *Ivwri* is usually associated with inter-tribal wars, hunting, masculinity, oratorical prowess and aggression. Ojaide's "Meeting" is written against the background of the *Ivwri* juju. The poem falls into the religious and invocatory tradition. It is a prayer and a salutation to the god. It opens with the lines: "Today fantasy lifts its cloak of mist/and I embrace the warrior in person" (*House of Words* 14). The poet describes *Ivwri* as a "warrior," the main attribute for which the Urhobo revere the god. Some of *Ivwri's* attributes are extolled. The poet praises *Ivwri* as "he who loses no contest/and overwhelms with heat." *Ivwri* is further beseeched by the poet to bring fire to "consume adversities" (15). He invokes *Ivwri* directly by saying "*Ivwri*, let malefactors fail-/destined hand, protect me" (15). This invocatory poem is written in the same tradition and language as Urhobo traditional invocations. *Ivwri* is used as a metaphor for strength that the poet needs to fight the ills of his society. The poet seeks to be like *Ivwri*, and thus extols *Ivwri's* attributes. Ojaide has not only incorporated contents from Urhobo folklore, but has created a continuum in the priestly praise and worship of this revered Urhobo god.

Ojaide's "Questing" is also a poem based on the worship of the Urhobo pantheon. In this poem, *Evwerhe Amre*, the god of seeking and finding, is invoked by Ojaide. This deity is housed in a shrine at Orhoakpor, in the Agbon Kingdom of Urhoboland. The poet, in the same tradition as the priests of old, calls on the god and extols its qualities. The poem opens in the pattern of a traditional prayer: "I come to you, *Evwerhe Amre*, far sighted deity,/you who lead the quester to find what he seeks" (*Songs of Myself* 20). The use of apostrophe in this poem is important in its categorization as an invocatory poem. The poem uses the language of supplication to heighten its religious effect. As a poet-priest, he beseeches *Evwerhe Amre* to help him attain the desires that he seeks. One of these is that he seeks "a land swept clean of kleptomaniac leaders" (20). The poet, thus, uses the *Evwerhe Amre* as a metaphor of change in contemporary society. By so doing, the poet merges the local folkloric materials with his poetic vision, making both converge at an inseparable layer of meaning explication.

Egba, the god of war, is also adopted by Ojaide in "Effurun market." This deity is housed in a shrine at the popular Effurun market. The poet's fascination and reverence for this god is clearly articulated in the lines: "By the dreaded *Egba* Shrine we dared not get close to,/by the space ceded to powers alive and dead and feared" (*Songs of Myself* 51). This deity is the guardian of the market and its presence adds solemnity to market days which cannot be "rescheduled for another day/no calamity postpones the market, the day of no burials." All market goers become devotees of *Egba* who is thrilled by crowds. The god "guards those doing transactions, bartering off/what's not dear to them but pricing it as if so invaluable" (51). The poet attempts to capture the psychic atmosphere of the Effurun market under the protection of *Egba*. This usage of Urhobo folkloric material thematizes the power of the gods. The poet believes that it is *Egba's* powers that protect the market just as the Urhobo folklore confirms.

Apart from Ojaide's reference to the Urhobo pantheon, his poems reflect the Urhobo worldview, especially as it pertains to the supernatural. One of the aspects of Urhobo worldview is the belief in witchcraft. In Urhobo philosophy, witches (called *Orhan*) have the ability to cause harm and even kill humans. This belief is so strong that if anyone dies young or at the peak of life, it is believed that witches and wizards are the cause of such death. In the traditional Urhobo society, people collect *Ebo* (charms) to render the powers of witches impotent. Religious sects such as *Igbe* evolved in order to

checkmate the activities of witches. John Agberia asserts that the belief in witchcraft is a part of Urhobo people's heritage ("Cosmology" 134). The Urhobo believe that witches fly at night using groundnut shells to their coven, which is called *Egben* and that they feast on blood, especially of those in their prime (Clement Onakpoberuo n.pag.). In Ojaide's "Night, in Charlotte," the reference to the Urhobo conception of witchcraft is strong. The poet is nostalgic of his homeland in the poem, and he relishes in the memory of nights in Urhoboland. One of the common fears the Urhobo have about night is expressed in the opening lines of the poem: "There are no masquerades patrolling the night/no witches flying spacecraft of groundnut shells/no spirits assembled at crossroads to feast on sacrifice/and with guttural tirades chill hearts of women and children" (*House of Words* 3).

The portrayal of witches flying in groundnut shells is referenced by the poet as part of his people's experience which he is nostalgic about. This belief is central to Urhobo worldview. Similarly, in the poem "In the shadow of the iroko," the poet creates the imagery of witchcraft and their coven (*Egben*) which, in Urhobo worldview, is usually situated in an iroko tree. In this poem, this image is conjured where the poet says:

In the shadow of the *iroko* at night
fear pokes fingers into intruding eyes
at the feet of the *iroko*
footpaths of men and spirits meet
they appear in shadows
they parley without words
witches and spirits cohabit
the shadow of the *iroko* at night.
(*House of Words* 11)

These lines show Ojaide's rendition of the superstitions of Urhobo people. The poet explores the symbol of the iroko as an *Egben* to portray the psychic atmosphere of his people through the use of magical realism.

Before the advent of colonialism in Urhoboland, it was a common practice for accused witches to be sold off to Ijaw men as a means of exile. This practice became a norm and was fully ingrained into the Urhobo people's folklore. Old, ugly-looking and stubborn women were dubbed witches and quickly sold off. It was a great injustice done to women by the pre-colonial Urhobo society. Ojaide discusses this issue in his poem "Exile Island." In the poem, we are introduced to the Urhobo people that are now indigenous to Amassoma, Bayelsa State, because of the trade in accused witches. The Urhobo believed that witches must be exiled lest they constitute more nuisances to the society and this belief is captured in the poem:

And so from the young ladies were purged witches,
from the voiceless gender the pretty ones who would
not be sluts to chiefly or cash-robed men pronounced
witches; the not-so-pretty but mannered not giving in
got labelled witches and freighted overnight into exile
as inglorious men lived free to perjure with more lies."
(*Songs of Myself* 28)

The elites mainly exploited the Urhobo people's fear of witchcraft to unleash injustice on the victims. The poet further presents the banishment of the ladies and their "exile after secret marriage contracts" (28). The practice was so rampant that the poet asserts, "A diaspora of my kinsfolk has grown in Amassoma" (28). Ojaide's resourcefulness in tapping Urhobo's folklore and history is evident in this poem.

Witchcraft in Urhobo folklore is not without its remedy. Many people who have suffered at the hands of witches and wizards run to certain shrines and traditional doctors that specialize in counteracting the powers of witchcraft. Many of these shrines and witchcraft detectors abound in Urhoboland. Famous among them is the *Eni* Lake at Uzere. Ojaide describes one of the rituals in which the Urhobo use to counteract the powers of witches and wizards in the poem "A trip to a traditional library." In describing the nature of a potent anti-witchcraft medicine called *orhakpo*, the poet-persona says: "One of his recent wives confesses collecting sand from/the compound for medicine to ruin him. He survives, thanks to/the *orhakpo* medicine that hurls back at malefactors their evil.//After a goat was slaughtered for purification rites, the evil/wife driven away, I can understand his attitude to women/he can't do without. Witches he mistrusts and combats" (*House of Words* 29). The ritual undertaken above will eventually return all malevolent thoughts and projections to the witch who crafted them.

The poet has displayed his mastery of Urhobo folklore in this poem. In Urhoboland, nothing ever happens without a reason and when the thing happening is of an evil dimension, witches are always believed to be involved. The Urhobo must then arm themselves if they are to survive the inquests of witchcraft. This, Ojaide has portrayed in this poem.

Urhobo history, especially of recent colonial times, forms a part of Urhobo folklore. The earliest Urhobo nationalists, intellectuals and elites acted as mentors and helpers to their people and kingdoms. These nationalists featured greatly in the colonial history of Urhobo people, and their inputs led to innumerable reforms in Urhoboland. The fame garnered by some even transcended their kingdoms to the whole of Urhoboland. Some of the great historical figures include Mukoro Mowoe who is the most celebrated as the father of Urhobo nationalism, Jabin Obahor, M.G. Ejaife, T.E.A. Salubi, Frederick Esiri, W.E. Mowarin, Thomas Essi, among others. Folksongs have been composed in Urhobo for these historical figures to memorialise them for their greatness. A folksong exists in almost every Urhobo Kingdom for the great Chief Mukoro Mowoe of Ewreni and Warri. Ojaide explores folk history in the poem, "An old yearning grips me," where he shows aspects of Urhobo's collective history. The poet is nostalgic of the days of old and proclaims: "I want Mukoro Mowoe and Mowarin alive in Warri/to place their palms on my forehead as I chant peace./I want Essi to wield his arms against robber politicians/to invigorate the warrior spirit we need for our well-being" (*House of Words* 9). The allusion to these great Urhobo figures projects the poem as a nationalist poem, one of revival and revolution. The poet also adopts a bit of the Niger Delta struggles in its earliest days in Urhoboland when he says, "I want to be an Area Boy in Okurekpo of long ago/to chase out Shell-BP from dispossessing villagers" (9). The poet attempts to revive the nationalist spirit that the Urhobo of yore possessed, and allusions to historical figures help in doing this.

Urhobo folksongs serve as ready materials in Ojaide's poetry. He has adopted parts or all of some Urhobo folksongs in his poems. In some cases, he adopts the refrains of the folk songs. At other times, he employs their opening calls-and-responses. He is also known to translate some of the folksongs, in addition to modelling his poems after these songs. In his poem "The homeboy suite," Ojaide embeds the popular folksong "*Otie mr'ovwata ko she*" (*House of Words* 16-18). This Urhobo folksong is highly philosophical and closely tied to the *Urhoro* predestination concept (Ojaruega, "The Place" 150-151). Loosely translated, it means "if the cherry fruit sees its favourite, it falls." This statement expresses the theme of good luck, which is understood in *Urhoro* philosophy as a faculty of good karma that is predestined for the soul before its incarnation into the earthly plane. Its usage in the poem maintains the traditional call-and-response pattern where the lead singer chants philosophical statements and the cantors repeat "*Otie mr'ovwata ko she*." This call-and-response pattern of Urhobo folksongs and folktales can be found in other poems in these collections as well. In the poem "American wonder," Ojaide anglicizes the form through the cantors' repetition of "*Come and see American wonder*" (*House of Words* 83) after the lead singer makes witty statements. This pattern, which Ojaide draws from Urhobo folk materials, can also be seen in poems such as "Gently" and "For youths." The first poem has "*Dede-e dede-e*" (*Songs of Myself* 14), which means "gently," as the responsorial by the cantors. In the other poem, the response is "*Omo Okogbe/Okogbe*" (*Songs of Myself* 60), which roughly translates as "child of the village." In the poem "Don't follow the palm wine tapper's course," Ojaide translates an Urhobo folksong and foregrounds the translation by italicising it thus: "*Odjoboro is strong but foolish-/he built his canoe with soft wood//when there's abundance of hardwood in the forest/for a sturdy canoe to ply the creeks and rivers*" (*Songs of Myself* 116). The translated folksong shows the theme of wisdom and prudence and calls upon the visual imagery of canoe, hardwood, softwood, forest, creeks, and rivers to juxtapose the destruction of the natural environment in contemporary times. So doing, he merges folklore with ecological activism.

Ojaide also imbues other forms of Urhobo philosophy and worldview into his poetry. One of these is the Urhobo belief that oil (called *ofigbo* in Urhobo) can cure any ailment. Palm oil is usually drunk to counteract the effect of poison, stomachache, injury, and pains. The poet alludes to the potency of palm oil in Urhobo folklore in "Everybody has turned hunter," where he says: "oil is the cure for chronic diseases/oil the fuel that revives the dead" (*House of Words* 117). This shows the poet's knowledge of Urhobo traditional medicine.

The *Ekanigbogbo* is another aspect of Urhobo folklore that Ojaide adopts. *Ekanigbogbo* refers to one who is a serial failure, usually an imaginary opponent at every game. This character is found in many Urhobo folktales and songs. In the poem "Ekanigbogbo," this character is adopted by Ojaide and the typical indicators of its failure are conjured. This poem employs the dramatic monologue as its technique, and it is written in a boastful tone much like a relic of the days of *Olotu* and *Ogba* (soldiers) where praise singers conjure *Ekanigbogbo* to demonstrate their incontestability. Like an Urhobo soldier, the poet-persona says, "I tell the imaginary opponent I am no longer a child/but he says it

doesn't matter the years I have grown/since last we competed in a series of games/and I won all despite trips that disadvantaged me" (*Songs of Myself* 102). These lines show the boastfulness that marks the Urhobo soldiers of times past. It is believed that the soldier must first confront himself and the psychic forces before confronting his enemy. The soldier, thus, calls upon *Ekanigbogbo* to boost his morale, confront himself and the psychic forces and then becomes ready for war. This is what the poet tries to show in this poem.

Urhobo's natural environment features greatly in Ojaide's poetry. In describing the flora and fauna of Urhoboland, Ojaide makes good use of loanwords to write the exact Urhobo words for animals and plants in his poems. Audio-visual imagery is also employed by the poet in portraying Urhobo natural habitat. In the collections of poems under study, loanwords such as "oko" (type of bird), "uwara" (type of plant), "erierie" (tender grass), "omoja" (a river in Okpara, Delta State), "omwe" (a stale river in Okpara, Delta State) and "eyareya" (grass), among others, feature as part of the poet's descriptive and representative prowess of the Urhobo locale.

A brief overview of the Urhobo Udje has been done as part of the background to this study. Udje forms a part of Urhobo folklore. However, its stylistic significance in Ojaide's poetry invites the critic to single it out for separate analysis. The Udje influence in Ojaide's poetry manifests particularly in his stylistic choices. Ojaide himself lists some of the stylistic devices that are copiously employed in the Urhobo Udje song-poetry, and they include invectives, irony, sarcasm, innuendo, proverbs, hyperbole, humor, deflation, wit, idiophones, onomatopoeia, analogy, allusion, allegory, parallelism, and personification (*Poetry, Performance, and Art* 36). In poems such as "The community development officer," Ojaide employs these stylistic elements to create a biting satire. Urhobo Udje is a highly satirical art form, and the object of attack is usually directed at persons whom the *ororile* (lead singer) deems to be scandalous and deserving of satirical attention. In this poem, the object of attack is the Community Development Officer. He employs humor, hyperbole and metaphor, which are major features of the Udje art form when he says "I met one community development officer/transformed from a stick into a fat neck" (*House of Words* 26). In lashing out invectives, the poet-persona says: "there was a gas explosion/it didn't matter to him/his people died the death of grasshoppers/it didn't matter since death was their portion/for as long as he sat in a big chair of/the air-conditioned office with a fat salary" (26). The pattern of this satire conforms to that which the Udje poets of old employed. By employing this form, Ojaide continues the Udje tradition of social consciousness.

The poem "For youths" also employs Udje aesthetics. This type of poem is identifiable in Udje typology (Darah, *Udje Song Poetry* 25) as *ubro-ile*, or prelude poem. The poem makes use of the refrain, which is found in most Udje poems. In this poem, the refrain is "*Omo Okogbe/Okogbe*" (*Songs of Myself* 60). The refrain is meant to be delivered by the *ebuole*, or cantors. This poem, as with most Udje poems, paints the picture of the object of attack, which, in this case, is an overzealous fighter who meets his Waterloo. In deploying imagery, which is one of the main aesthetics of Udje, the poet-persona says: "He entered with the gait of one spoiling for a fight./He came in wearing charms on his arms and feet./...He shouted down everyone he came to meet at the gathering./He had no patience for anybody wearing charms as he did" (60).

One can see the use of audio-visual imagery, repetition and simple diction to paint the portrait of the object of the Udje attack. Proceeding to the peak of the poem, the poet-persona further says, "He did not bring the pride of whoever sent him to this place.../ So he hastily took on the fight he had never trained for./It took no time to settle his status on the arena- he lost his life" (60). One can see the beauty of the poet's language and his narrative progression in this poem as known in the Udje poetic tradition. This poem is didactic, and it uses the narrative function, polished with fine imagery, to create a work in the Udje tradition.

Darah (35) identifies the rejoinder-reply as one of the forms of the Urhobo Udje. The person(s) and clan(s) at the receiving end of any Udje attack can respond to issues raised and address them squarely. This type of Udje employs irony and sarcasm. In "Self-defense," Ojaide employs the Udje rejoinder form where an Udje poet, who is the poet-persona, responds to accusations leveled against him. The poet persona says "They say I am the loafer, the stay-at-home one/and everybody smacks me with terrible insults!" (*Songs of Myself* 91). The argument that he is lazy and idle, which must have been made by a rival community's poet in the traditional Udje setting, is countered by the poet persona through the use of irony, sarcasm, humor, imagery, simile and metaphor. An extract of his argument is presented below:

They call me the town's lazybones whose hands soft
like ripe bananas peel when I do the least hard work;

they call me the weak-kneed one so listless and feeble
I cannot jump across the creeks; what it takes to fish....

but I am sent on errands, the town-crier of every season.
I composed the chant that makes leopards of warrior;

in the days of Biafra I spotted camouflaged saboteurs
before military intelligence recovered from rape orgies.

I compose lethal songs that at every *udje* festival
destroy boastful rivals and make us invincible warriors.
(*Songs of Myself* 91)

The stylistic resourcefulness of *Udje* is consciously employed by Ojaide in crafting the above poem. Ojaide obviates his *Udje* source by a direct reference to the art form in the poem. He also employs the rejoinder form in the poem "I am so predictable" which is an apparent reply to a previous *Udje* altercation in which the poet persona was described as being predictable. In countering that view, he uses irony, humor and hyperbole to make his argument. The poet persona, in a good use of irony, says "I am so predictable/I am married with one wife/but exercising polygamous instincts/that the village DNA tagged me with" (*Songs of Myself* 93). He goes further to employ humor and hyperbole when he says "I am so predictable/I was born a girl/it took five years for my father's/family to discover I am male" (94). The poet's ultimate irony lies in the divide between the first line and the last. In the first line, the poet writes "I have been too predictable" (93) which is a response, as earlier stated, to the argument that he is predictable. The stream of ironic statements continues until the crux at the final line where the poet persona says "nobody really knows me!" (94). The last line apparently answers the argument that was made against the poet persona. This is the beauty of the Urhobo *Udje* art form.

Ojaide also employs *Udje* aesthetics copiously in "The emigrant," "The new lotus eaters," "They say my child is ugly like a goat" and "Learning." Specifically, these poems make use of the *Udje* mode of satire. In "The emigrant," the poet uses *Udje* satirical techniques to attack corrupt persons in the society. The poet persona appears to be a politician when he says "because I did not want the National Assembly to be/the pinnacle of my career I flew out for another life" (*Songs of Myself* 98). This self-portraiture is not uncommon in the *Udje* poetic repertoire. The poet persona condemns his society, which harbors corrupt persons, by saying "It befuddles me because robbers and murderers are conferred/with chieftaincy titles; no song against theft from the commonwealth." He alludes to *Udje* when he attacks his hypocritical society by saying "You will always have dirty songs to compose against me./Now I pity you and make you the laughingstock of my song!" (99). In "The new lotus eaters," the poet unleashes invectives at corrupt politicians and uses animals as metaphors for politician's gluttony. The poet persona says "Once there they transform without effort into goats, pigs,/pythons, and other beasts scrambling in the oil-glutted soil [...]they are practically animals without human minds and souls" (105). In "They say my child is ugly like a goat," the poet employs humor and simile. The poet persona says "They mock me because of my child/whom they say is ugly like a goat./Don't mind them who see nothing good./My pickin fine pass any goat" (107). The comparison to a goat is reminiscent of the *Udje* form of invectives in which animal imagery is frequently called upon. Likewise, in "Learning," the poet persona is the object of various *Udje* attacks and thus, he has composed his poem to assert his imperfection and express life as a learning experience. The use of the epigram (a short, witty statement) as a stylistic device drawn from the Urhobo *Udje* tradition is obvious in this poem. The epigram in this poem is foregrounded in italics thus: "*The miserly one eats only beetle-ravaged yams! Not harvesting his yams, beetles helped him out!*" (109). From these examples, one can see that Ojaide's literary style is influenced by *Udje* aesthetics. The poet has not only used contents from the *Udje* poetic repertoire but has also infused its stylistic peculiarities in his poetry. The poems can be said to be modern *Udje* poems of English expression.

This paper has attempted to establish the influence of Urhobo folklore and *Udje* aesthetics in Tanager Ojaide's *In the House of Words and Songs of Myself*. It has been shown that Ojaide infuses elements of Urhobo folklore into his poems, and the *Udje* tradition informs his style of writing. Some of the folkloric elements deployed by Ojaide include allusions to mythological characters and historical figures, as well as incorporation of Urhobo philosophy, superstitions, folksongs, folktales, the Urhobo pantheon of gods, and the Urhobo locale. In his adaptation of the *Udje* tradition, Ojaide makes use of the satirical form and other techniques that are frequently employed in the traditional *Udje* songs. Some of his poems are also modelled after specific *Udje* types. In applying these folkloric materials and the Urhobo *Udje* in his poetry, contemporary issues are also addressed. Ojaide can, thus, be said

to be a modern Udje maestro in the written tradition. This is part of what Darah (71) calls "Hybrid Udje." This study ultimately posits that Urhobo folklore and Udje aesthetics inform Ojaide's themes and techniques. Ojaide's Urhobo roots form the key with which his poetry can be accessed. This study also examines Ojaide's collections, *In the House of Words* and *Songs of Myself*, as masterpieces of Ojaide's craft due to the copious influences of Urhobo folklore and Udje in the poems. The scope of this paper has been limited to only two collections of Ojaide's poems. But its purpose has been to lay a foundation for further studies on the influence of Urhobo folklore and Udje aesthetics in Ojaide's other collections of poetry. Richer poetry is created when a writer incorporates aspects of his culture and ethnic lore in his writings. This saying, without a doubt, is true with respect to Ojaide's *In the House of Words and Songs of Myself*.

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