



THE USE OF ORAL STRUCTURAL ICONS IN TANURE
OJAIDE'S INVOKING THE WARRIOR SPIRIT AS A POST-
MODERN VISION AND STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

Many critics merely discuss the contents of Tanure Ojaide's poems as fundamental elements, used as instruments for the portrayal of the Delta people's identity and valued environment. However, further critical insight into Ojaide's poems in particular, *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* reveals the fact that the aesthetic notions and values foregrounded by Ojaide more of are innovational experimentations of new criticism in relation to the context of his poems. What Ojaide presents is a picture of what a post-modern Niger-Delta should look like.

This article examines the artistic forms in Ojaide's *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* as revelations of the revolutionary commitment of the poet, to his land and his people, beyond this present modern age. The article exposes the traditional icons used by the poet as the envisaged re-establishing structures of the Niger-Delta modern philosophies and cultural ways. This article presents the effects of the poems as a reconciliatory and unifying spirit behind the in-coming complexities introduced by the intruders into the existing Niger-Delta beliefs, philosophies and vision from the traditional functional value. Ojaide develops new forms of consciousness and perfectly regularize and systematizes the forms on the whole. He proves in *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* that a distance from the social activities of the people will give the people a paradoxical doctrine and lead to their total confusion. His poetry as exhibited in this article to be the hallmark of a new Niger-Delta in the present and in future.

TOWARDS A POST MODERNIST VISION OF THE NIGER-DELTA AREA: THE USE OF
ORAL STRUCTURAL ICONS IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *INVOKING WARRIOR SPIRIT*
THE POWER OF RITUAL SONGS

The collection of poems in *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* opens with a traditional song titled *Mbira*. The poet emphasizes that this popular lyric song at leisure and during hardship by the people is a deliberate echo of tradition purposely meant to reinforce the poet's ancestor's perseverance and to also scare off the strangers of the land who are referred to as "ghostly clans" (2). Ojaide personifies this echo which he says multiplies his voice, a voice that has become a wizard. He compares the fear of the *Urhobo* man to a shaking and trembling tree; thereby delimiting him to nothing before his much value cultured. Ojaide eliminates fright with songs i.e. "fending off fear and keeping awake". (15) He heightens this auditory sensibility with another song titled *Oreghereghe*. This later song is ironically presented as a natural composition accommodating the new trends of event prophesized by an insane woman known as *Oreghereghe*.

Generally, in traditional African societies madness is usually attributed to attacks by evil spirits, which are believed to positively affect the thinking capacity of the mad victim. The assumption is that mad persons in turn communicate with these spirits, receive messages from them for onward transmission to the public. Hence, the utterances, of a mad person in the Niger Delta region is not taken with levity. Madness is distinguished from witchcraft theme earlier on referred to by the poet Ojaide himself becomes a wizard to be able to confront global challenges. And it is in this notion that

Ojaide talks of *Oghereghe* who was though a mad woman, became a legendary figure in the Delta community. *Oghereghe* communicates through inspiration for it is only a mad person that can tell the truth. The sane is full of lies, deceit, forgery and insincerity. The mad sees what others. Cannot see Ojaide's supposed medium is therefore more symbolic here than the message. The message becomes more effective based on the medium. Thus, Ojaide draws on the concept of madness from the resourceful riverine setting of his people to mainly connote openness against secrecy of the unknown friend. The iconic materials used by Ojaide are the weapons which the poet as a chanter uses to depict historical and social circumstances. He allows what is traditional to remain domineering and remarkably persistent in the rhythm that comes out of the poems in *Invoking the Warrior Spirit*.

If the song reads the palm, who will not listen to find the
way out of the dizzying dark hole?(17)

The palm is an undetachable and important part of the human body. The song is therefore presented as a unifying symbol of the Delta thrones. What Ojaide seems to be saying in these lines is that once the thrones remain strong, the natives cannot be deprived of their freedom to pay homage to the native powers. Homage is paid through poetic incantations, chants and invocations such as:

Buffalo that drives bushfarers from its dominion of
leaves, crocodile that policies the water from the river to
the sea, Eagle, mardnal of the sky, that supervises our
airspace, from your conglomerate of power, Great Iwri,
you who cannot be fully known, give me enough to be
firm and free (16).

Hence, to the "enslaving ships, Ojaide mutters; "one single shot may not knock the leopard down but forays of barbed words will mortally wound the demon". (22).

Collectivity of the Niger-Delta people is further emphasized by the repeated use of the first person pronoun 'we'. And Ojaide uses this in conjunction with strong metaphors. He picks on the destructive diction of 'vulture', 'butcher', 'silver blade', 'hyena' 'victims of cloud' 'fallen warriors' to picturise the intruders of culture thus:

We have frozen the hyena's smile with a chant... *mbira*
o mbira o mbira o. The sandfly's song ruins the paradise
 of the palace, the abuse song stands the swaggering
 one upright, strip the robber of his swathe of network
 charity, break the staff of the torturer chief of flukes.
 Dig a bottomless hole beneath the leopards throne who
 says the elephant is not scared in the jungle.
 When it thunders and its head's shattered nerves,
 who says the lion is not confused in a burning bush?

This poetic piece titled *mbira* therefore consist of warriors diction chanted as an 'anthem of recovery' The "dance on the mass grave of vultures" presuppose a ritual, meant for seeking further protection from the ancestors otherwise symbolized as the warriors. No wonder Okome¹ observes Ojaide debates on "a communal need, the urge to recreate an environment that his generation could bequeath to posterity"².

This in essence is what can be seen as cultural renaissance. The melody of Niger-Delta songs, rhythm of the dance movement, accompanying the songs and used for ritual purposes, project not only the culture of the people, but also create room for natural unity and traditional cohesion.

Leo E.Otoide in "Tradition, Ethnic, Militia and Policy in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria" states that:

Group Cohesion nurtured by tradition possesses a cohesiveness that can be militant in expression. Traditional values are bonds which assist the capacity and veracity of a people to act in unison. Thus tradition is a ready arsenal from which a group can draw from in moments of crisis which requires confidence and solidarity (1)

Ojaide puts traditional values, beliefs, expressive and non expressive attributes in poetic language by so doing he encourages group support and self-reliance. To Otoide, such attributes serve as "communal rallying points". A rally strategy where "well" campaigns against "them"

THE FUNCTION OF THE ANCESTRAL CULT: *IVWRI*

Ivwri is presented as the biological source (mother earth) of the Niger-Delta people who must come together and seek for unity. Any deviation from the existing practices of the people cannot succeed unless approved by the people's ancestor. The ancestor intervenes in spirit. And this ancestral spirit is invoked by the people through songs and dance serving as elements of ritual.

Let us listen to this part of the poem:

Ivwri waits at the bottom of the precipice to custom us against a hard full, *Ivwri* fortifies the threatened with uteri that blunts the blades of machetes *Ivwri* keeps the gum from firing at his devotees, *Ivwri* snatches his favourites from peril and throws them into safety (17).

Symbolically, among the people, is the *ivwri* cult serving functionally as fortification means. From its practices, people gain courage. *Ivwri* therefore serves as the mediational essence between the old and the new tradition of the Niger-Delta people. The poet heightens this when he says:

Ivwri's clan of children conjure hurricanes to sweep open their blocked way, they raise bees to smite those who taunt them, they force hostile gods to flee the land. Afraid for myself at home and abroad, I have gone to the grove like others to imbibe *Ivwri's* draughts, ruled on the forehead with the sacred chalk (18).

Ojaide, faced with the problem of post modernism and showing his concern for his land, works out cultural strategies in poetic forms, for the only possible solution for the problem a head. He provides the spiritual need of the Niger-Delta people as a paramount factor that can make them come in terms with the new ways, some of which are yet unknown. He attempts to create for his people the situation which they can cope with despite the acclaimed advantages of the new dictates of western life. In poetic forms, he works out cultural strategies for the only possible solution and delimits man's insecurity and uncertainty created by the outside world into the Delta society.

In *Edon* "the forbidden secrets" one of the poems in *Invoking the Warrior Spirit*, Ojaide presents the traditional institution of *Edon* in *Ughelli*. *Edon* is a student ruler, the protagonist of the poem, confined under three months to a secluded house where former rulers were buried. Here, he learns about the taboos and tradition of his people.

The effectiveness of spiritual exclusion is explored in this poem. Only through this can man reach union with tradition:

I must withdraw to *Edon* I, initiate, to prepare for the task ahead... in my parrot's tongue to avoid pitfalls, I will open my ears to wind-counters to forestall hurricanes ... I look forward to being lost to the world for three months to choose right from countless gifts the deal is struck who's chosen to ascend the high stool of governance must bear the land's offering ... (23).

The notion here is that the training which the new tradition claims to bring is one of the traditional elements that have been in existence from time immemorial among the Niger-Delta people. What the poet does therefore is to allow the natives to critically deduce subtle fusion of their own elements with the contradictory elements of those he refer to as strangers. Only through this, can a progressive Niger-Delta community be ensured.

In *Urhoro*, Ojaide emphasizes the traditional death cycle belief of reincarnation. The belief that man dies and come back to life to live again. The concept of death is so personified in the poem that the reader feels its importance. This notion of transcendence is likened to the metaphorical traditional pounding in mortar. The poem says "Hearts pound away in anticipation of communion".

CONCLUSION

Ojaide's collection of poems in *Invoking the Warrior Spirit*, contain potential and suggestively effective images of what a post-modern Niger-Delta should look like to achieve peace (spiritual and political) and also to enhance cultural cohesion and advancement. In this selection, the poet deliberately foregrounds the socio-cultural political and economic institutions of the people. He heightens this with mythical beliefs, governance and practices of the Delta people. He agitates for the fusion of a new Niger-Delta where all that is native are not left out but carefully fused with new methods of livelihood. Only this he believes can give the individual spiritual peace and communion with his god. Ojaide uses mythical figures such as *Iwri* and *Edon* to

accentuate his mission for collective progress, despite all odds. For instance, his post-modern vision can be deduced from the following lines in "Rivers" and "the forest" (9), where he stresses the importance of the people's cultural sensibility in contemporary existence thus:

Divine courier Sent into Olokun's Underwear mansion,
Let your course fill new acolytes with cheerful tales...
Offerings at river beaches mirrored coins
and icons of cults and devotees. Red/white-robed
priestess and her press of women from land of the Iroko
went to the Ethiope for their yearly bath
Bout driver that made the Delta a family of creeks
fish provider that filled every month..
You were the greatest of many friends ... (11)

References to *Edon* and *Ivwri*; the riverside ancestors is to allow for a recognition of two world, both of which are temporary. With this, Ojaide presents tradition and ritual patterns of rebirth, in Niger Delta area Man is presented as a short-lined being. The issue is man society and transition. He asserts the fact that the luxuriance of the culture is over shadowed by incoming turbulence and desolation. Hence, there is urgency in emergent proclamations such as in the poet's collection of poem *Invoking the Warrior Spirit*. Collectivity is further expresses in the words "Cults" "devotees" and family. Yearly bath is the annual ritual performed by the riverine people for the cleansing of their polluted land as a result of new technology that has destroyed the "Evergreen magnate", "Parent Earth". Stronger communion with the land, ancestors and genuine cultural practices are what can lead to a crisis-free post-modern Niger-Delta.

To uphold the communal wholeness, aspirations and sensibilities therefore, Ojaide's collection of poems in *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* is functional media forum for the multi-expressional dimensions of the Niger Delta values that could be reshaped for future certainty of the community. Orderliness in a timeless vision is the main advocacy.

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