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ORAL AESTHETICS AND SOCIOPOLITICAL TEMPERS IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *INVOKING THE WARRIOR SPIRIT*

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Abstract

The interface between orality and the written word constitutes the centre stage of modern Nigerian poetry, and it has earned impressive critical explorations. Existing studies on the poetry of Tanure Ojaide have examined his representation of environmental and folkloric experiences, but with little or no attention on the interplay of oral aesthetics and sociopolitical commitment in his poetry. This study, therefore, investigates Ojaide's appropriation of oral aesthetic features as vehicle for political mobilization in his poetry collection, *Invoking the Warrior Spirit.* The study adopted aspects of the Postcolonial Theory to account for cultural hybridity and plurality in the poems under study. The primary text, *Invoking the Warrior Spirit,* was purposively selected and subjected to qualitative literary analysis, showing how indigenous oral features serve as poetic strategies to convey sociopolitical consciousness and commitments. Besides the close reading of the selected poems in this anthology, secondary materials were gathered from books, journals and internet sources. The analyses of relevant poems in Tanure Ojaide's *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* reveal the appropriation of oral aesthetic features like proverbs, songs, dances, invocations, folkways, folkwords, repetitions and parallelisms, to convey messages that are of socio-political relevance. The interplay of oral aesthetics and sociopolitical commitment pervades the anthology. This is reflected in Tanure Ojaide's resentment against political oppression as evident in the sociopolitical depreciation and suppression of the Niger Delta peoples by the multi-national oil companies and their collaborators at the corridor of power.

Keywords: Orality, literacy, Modern Nigerian poetry, Tanure Ojaide, aesthetics

Introduction

The emergence of modern African literature witnessed a hybrid form that interlaced African oral aesthetics and folklore with Euromodern techniques of expression. For instance, in Nigeria, the earliest forms of literary expressions in English drew on the indigenous cultural environment. From Tutuola to Achebe and other contemporary writers in Nigeria, the oral traditions of different cultural spaces were closely revisited. Such creative writers exploit indigenous sensibilities like proverbial sayings, mythological ideas, songs and other oral aesthetic features, which are incorporated in English (Dasylva & Jegede, 1997; Kekeghe, 2014; Solanke, 2018). Contemporary study of oral literature acknowledges the appropriation of oral artistic features in written literature (Akporobaro, 2005, p.409). Okpewho (1982, p.160) discusses, in a classificatory form, the nature of modern African writers that are rooted to their traditional background as follows: tradition preserved, tradition observed, tradition refined and tradition revised.

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Some modern Nigerian writers either use their works to preserve the tradition, observe it or refine it. Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard,* which recounts different Yoruba oral narratives; J. P Clark's *Ozidi Saga* (1977) which explores the superstitious theatrics and mythical narratives of the Ijaw people and Chinua Achebe and John Iroaganachi's collections of folktales entitled *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (1972) are categorized under what Okpewho refers to as tradition preserved. The writers under this category exhibit an intense interest in preserving the oral narrative traditions of their societies in such a way that the original form is brilliantly retained (Okpewho, 1982, p.160). Many other Nigerian writers deploy experiences of cultural changes to form a hybrid culture. Such writers fall into the categories of what Okpewho refers to as observers and refiners of the tradition.

Orality simply means the unwritten indigenous resources and folklores that characterize a cultural space or community. Some scholars of oral literature use orality interchangeably with folklore. Folklore like orality involves what the people *say* traditionally like proverbs, folksongs, riddles, oral narratives, invocations; and what the people *do* traditionally such as dance, masquerading, festival processions, weaving, ritual, trading and farming (Dundes, 1965). The appropriation of oral elements in written Nigerian literature attests to the fact that modern Nigerian literature is a hybrid form that combines both indigenous and western techniques of expression. The modern outlook of such literature is the modern mechanics of writing used to convey it (Jegede, 1997, p.154). As beautifully illustrated by Solomon Iyasere (1975), modern African literature is rooted to its tradition as "a snail to its shell" (p.107). Chinua Achebe all along, has observed the hybrid nature of African literature both in his creative works and critical essays. In one of his essays, Achebe (1975) states: "the African writer… should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience" (p.61).

Like Walter Ong's (1982) ideas on the interface between orality and the written word, modern Nigerian literature gives eloquent testimony to the admixture of indigenous oral resources with Euro-modern techniques of expression. This tradition, as has been observed in this study, is used to recreate themes and sharpen subject matter. It is apparent that there is a clear interaction between the deeply rooted oral tradition and the developing literary traditions of the 20th and 21st centuries. This is because the wind of rediscovery of identity after several years of colonial influence began in the 20th century; and it is now developing fertile roots in the 21st century. There is therefore an increasing inclination on the part of the modern African writers to identify with the literary tradition of their people in terms of both contents and forms (Okpewho, 1992, p.293).

The emergence of written literature in the 20th Century witnessed early Nigerian writers in English like Amos Tutuola, D. O. Fagunwa and others, who invented narratives that are imitative of the African oral tradition. Later and more contemporary writers of the generation of Chinua Achebe and Tanure Ojaide have adapted oral artistic features in their works to communicate messages that are of universal relevance. This essay, therefore, investigates the exploration of oral aesthetic features in Tanure Ojaide's poetry collection, *Invoking the Warrior Spirit,* as an artistic strategy to expose the prevailing sociopolitical depreciation. The vision of the poet, through the appropriation of the oral form, is to enforce social correctness.

Statement of the Problem

Extant studies on the poetry of Tanure Ojaide focus mainly on wetland and ecological images and his representation of the Niger Delta question. Olafioye (2000) examines the Niger Delta condition and ecological despoliation in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide. Kekeghe (2016) discusses Ojaide's portrayal of the distresses engendered by the politics of dispossession and repression in the Niger Delta. Though some scholars have identified cultural canvasses in Ojaide's poetry, these have not been adequately linked to his sociopolitical commitment. This study, therefore, investigates Ojaide's appropriation of oral aesthetic features to convey messages that border on sociopolitical correctness in his poetry collection, *Invoking the Warrior Spirit*.

Aim and Objectives

The study examines the intersection between oral forms and Euro-modern techniques in Ojaide's *Invoking the Warrior Spirit*, showing how he utilizes that strategy to foreground his sociopolitical commitment. The specific objectives of this essay are to:

i. Identify oral aesthetics features in Tanure Ojaide's poetry collection, *Invoking the Warrior Spirit.*
ii. Investigate the use of the oral artistic features as a medium of conveying socio-political experiences.
iii. Show the hybrid nature of modern Nigerian poetry as reflected in selected poem in Ojaide's *Invoking the Warrior Spirit.*

Scope of the Study

The focus of this paper, is on a poetry collection of Tanure Ojaide, *Invoking the Warrior Spirit.* The analysis here is based on the infusion of oral aesthetic features in selected poems in the collection which conveys Ojaide's socialist commitment to sociopolitical development.

Methodology

The primary text, Tanure Ojaide's *Invoking the Warrior Spirit,* was purposively selected and subjected to literary or critical analysis. Secondary materials were gathered from books and internets sources.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted post-colonialism as its theoretical framework. The researcher utilized tenets of the postcolonial theory that accounted for cultural hybridity and plurality. Edward Said's idea of 'self' (the colonisers) and 'other' (the colonised) were appropriated in this study, to show the interplay of orality and modern techniques of expression in the poems understudy. The study argues that the admixture of Euromodern and oral techniques attests to the duality that is the after-effects of colonialism in Africa.

Analysis and Discussion

Tanure Ojaide's poetry is rooted in the folkloric experiences of the Urhobo people of the Western Delta. He infuses oral artistic features in his poems to convey a message that is of sociological relevance. In his poetry collection, *Invoking the Warrior Spirit,* one comes across Ojaide's deployment of indigenous images to express the political realities of the people. By implication, the oral resources employed in the poems featured in the collection are used to make a commentary that is of sociopolitical significance. The message that runs through the poems gives testimony to the sociopolitical depreciation in Nigeria, and it further stimulates a kind of revolutionary pressure. Some of the common oral artistic features in the poems under investigation are songs, invocations, incantations, proverbs and local words. Other oral elements like repetitions and parallelisms are featured in the poems.

Proverbial expressions pervade a good number of poems in Ojaide's *Invoking the Warrior Spirit.* Proverb is an indigenous art in most African communities which is deployed in communication. It has been categorized under oral poetry and oral narratives by scholars of oral literature; this is given the fact that proverbs are used for the narration of folktales, for songs and oratorical expressions (Finnegan, 1970; Okpewho, 1992 and Akporobaro, 2006). According to the Yoruba people, proverb is the vehicle through which words are communicated while the Igbo people perceive proverb as the palm oil with which words are eaten (Kekeghe, 2015: 290). Proverb is a functional art and it expresses the socio-cultural and economic realities of the people to whom it is attributed (Akporobaro, 2006; Kekeghe, 2014). As an artistic element, proverbs bring beauty and wit to communication, and they help to sharpen subject matter and theme. The proverbs are deliberately appropriated to recreate theme and sharpen the subject matter of the poems, which border on sociopolitical change. There is a revolutionary tenor that is discernible from the poems as shown in the witty language of proverb.

In the poem, "Message of Lust", Ojaide deploys proverbial resources to underscore the depravities and turbulence that manifest in the society that he is portraying. Some of these proverbs are as follow:

Grave problems drive sleep away
It is dawn and the virgins
Are not deflowered;
The goats are alive

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(*Invoking,* 2)

The expression, 'grave problems drive sleep away' is a common proverbial saying of the Urhobo people of the Western Delta which Ojaide infuses in this poem to communicate a message that borders on human and material insecurity. The poetic persona in the poem is bothered about the safety of virgins that are faced with the risk of being molested by marauding rapists as well as his material properties (goats) that may be stolen by communal thieves. The tension and fears in the society is engendered by the sociopolitical convulsion. The poet records this fear in the following excerpt:

Tigers own the homes
Where shall goats sleep
Where shall travelling virgins sleep
In a village of lust
(*Invoking,* 2)

In the excerpt above, the poet deploys parallelism, which is a form of semantic repetition, to show the unrest in the society depicted. The parallel ideas, 'goats' and 'travelling virgins', semantically suggest the same problem of turmoil and apprehension which are caused by leadership failure. Through the use of proverbial resources the poetic persona further laments the rapacious nature of the politicians who milk the nation dry at the expense of the common people, the tax payers:

The fowl is guzzling corn
It knows not for how much it is bought
The cook is frying eggs
He feels not the bruise of the hen's anus
(*Invoking,* 3)

The images of 'fowl' and the 'cook' are representative of the politicians that recklessly plunder the resources of the Nigerian nation. The message of the poem underscores the Nigerian sociopolitical realities. As depicted in the excerpt above, the exploited producers or the work force are suggestive of the masses that are perpetually exploited by the desperate and corrupt political class. This shows that Ojaide, conscious of the indigenous cultural root, has adapted some proverbial wit to convey a sociopolitical message that is of universal relevance.

In "What I Carry Along", Ojaide also infuses some proverbial ideas that foreground the repression and oppression in the Nigerian political space. It is evident that the proverbial images deployed in the poem are taken from the Urhobo cultural root, and are used to communicate a utilitarian message that is relevant to contemporary Nigerian society:

Sleeping on a leopard's skin
Or sharing a lion's den as room-mate
Tremble not for fear in the jungle.
…
The hunter comes home bagging a hawk
Enemies rejoice for the game
Their fowls are safe for the fowlherd:
Is the hawk the only living
That doesn't wish the fowls to cluck? (*Invoking,* 7)

From the excerpt above, images like "leopard's skin", "lion's den" and "hawk" are suggestive of political oppression. While the "fowls" suggest the cowardly oppressed masses, the hunter is used to represent the revolutionary members of the oppressed class that repudiate oppression, to emancipate themselves. These indigenous poetic canvasses are proverbs from the Urhobo cultural root.

Songs and dances are folkloric features that are infused in the poems under study. Songs and dance are common elements of African oral tradition (Finnegan, 1970; Okpewho, 1992 and Akporobaro, 2006). While songs are classified under the 'say' in folklore, 'dance' is categorized under the 'do' (Dundes, 1965). The

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utilization of elements of song and dance helps create an atmosphere of festivity in Ojaide's *Invoking the Warrior Spirit.* In "Labyrinths of the Delta", Ojaide uses the resources of song and dance thus:

Come and dance
It is here we dance
Come and dance
It is on this land we dance
Come and dance
It is on this soil we dance (*Invoking,* 16).

The excerpt above reads as a chorus in music throughout the poem, and it creates the lively atmosphere of oral performance in Africa. This dance technique foregrounds the African cleansing ritual; in this case, the cleansing of the pillaged land and creeks of the Delta that have been despoiled by the activities of the oil conglomerates in collaboration with the collaborators. There is a revolutionary and redemptive idea depicted by the song and dance motif deployed by the poetic persona. This is further reflected in the following lines:

The River swells with boats, a regatta for state-hood,
And throughout the land a warriors' dance at homecoming.
The task is done, and we mark the victory;
Our sweat is no more of hardship but mirror of joy (*Invoking,* 18).

From the extract above, it is evident that the poet deploys the song and dance motif to underscore his socialist commitment, which borders on the need for a leadership that is responsive to the predicaments of the Niger Delta natives. Ojaide's infusion of such indigenous oral art forms of the Urhobo people is a deliberate effort to convey a message that is both aesthetically appealing and politically relevant. The poem suggests that if the repressed Niger Delta people are armed with some revolutionary spirit and take their battle to their ancestral spirits, they may win the battle against the oppressive manifestations of the oil multinationals.

Ojaide also employs different indigenous religious images in some of the poems, to show his socialist vision and cultural commitment. As portrayed in the poems, Ojaide deploys the indigenous images to exalt the African pre-colonial sensibilities, which is a decolonial effort. While Ojaide presents the theme of cultural nationalism, he stimulates a struggle against neocolonial manifestations in Africa. The following lines of "Children of Iroko" greatly attest to this message:

Now acolytes, you must dress new
In White calico with red bands
Like the virgin priestess
A feather hat from forest birds

Carry them on:
Newly basked serrated chalk
A white cock without a cow
Three-lobed kolanuts
Seven half pennies
Put them on the white plate, carry
Them towards happy shrine
And let the cow be led behind (*Invoking,* 4)

The cultural images appropriated in the poetic lines above paint a vivid picture of the indigenous society. Tanure Ojaide also deploys folk words and folkways to underscore his sociopolitical commitment in *Invoking the Warrior Spirit.* Through an exaltation of Osonobrughwe (Urhobo word for the Supreme God), Ojaide invokes the fighting instinct of the Delta. Ojaide's appropriation of indigenous Urhobo words, like Osonobrughwe, is aimed at conveying his socio-cultural commitment. Perhaps, the poet believes that the sociopolitical challenges is as a result of the imitation of the Euromodern political principles. He, therefore, craves the involvement of the indigenous ritual and cultural practices of the people in the quest to overcome neocolonial injustices.

Furthermore, in "From Labyrinths of the Delta", Ojaide creates a religious atmosphere where the people need to seek spiritual solution to their predicaments. Here, the reader experiments with the liveliness of Urhobo cultural and religious ambience. The use of English as the medium of expression does not reduce the prominence of cultural atmosphere portrayed by Tanure Ojaide. The atmosphere depicted is representative

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of the 'igbe' ubiesha religion which is a commonly practiced religious belief system of the Urhobo people. This is represented in the following lines:

Let us go to the River
With drums, goats and cowries
Let us go, draped in our favourite madras,
Powdered and perfumed;
Let us go to her.
She called us this way,
And we came, absorbing accents
Into our tongues
O Water Bride
Moving without a boat in deep waters,
You heeded the anguished cries of our souls
Ferried us fugitives across the mainstream torrents;
You made us calabashes on the water
And delivered us on the bank, giving us
The virgin beauty of the Delta (*Invoking,* 14).

In the poetic lines above, the deployment of repetition, 'let us go', a common feature of oral art, is aimed at emphasizing the message of the poem which borders on supplication to the goddess, to redeem natives of the Delta from the plundering of their lands and waters. The issue foregrounded in the poem is the politics of oil exploration, exploitation and dispossession in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Ojaide deploys this oral artistic strategy to negotiate for the political emancipation of the Delta natives, which requires the potency of spiritual supports (the goddess). The indigenous religious ambience portrayed by the poet is reflected in the extract below:

We brought Aridon, our memory
And Uhaghwa, our voice for songs.
The iguana ran to us like a god to his people
We offered it eggs to remain our friend
The ogbodu bird ran here and there on stilt
So much grace in the party that welcomes us (*Invoking,* 17)

Ojaide employs invocations to show the liveliness of the indigenous Urhobo society he is portraying. The invocation of revolutionary fighters and war gods is used to create an atmosphere of revolution in the poems. In this case, the 'warrior spirits' invoked are meant to facilitate the emancipation of the people who have been subjected to political and economic oppression. The poetic lines below further convey this idea:

Uvo! Ogidigbo! Your names will endure
Like the sky
After you were driven through half the world
You stood
Your ground and beat back your foes
Ama hirhe erherie (*Invoking,* 18)

As it is represented in the extract above, the reader comes across the magical deployment of invocation, an oral artistic feature categorized under poetry. For instance, in "The Curse", the poetic persona invokes curses on those who practice intellectual fraud. Here, the poet appeals to us as a moralist in search of social rejuvenation. The following poetic lines greatly attest:

Who pays examination questions for dowry
Who donates an undeserved 'A' to his mistress
The scorpion's bitterest venom confuse the don's brain
Sango's strongest bolt smash the don's brains

Who parades an intellectual but only a fraud
The sturdiest cobra spit into his peering eyes
Sango and Amadioha burn his gowns
Ogun's heaviest rod lash his flat buttocks (*Invoking,* 12)

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The poet's invocation of curses in the poem above creates a cultural atmosphere of an African community. The radical tenor of the poem attests to the poet's political commitment, which is anchored on African mores and folkloric realities. In "Future Gods", Ojaide invokes and idealises different Urhobo legendary heroes. The invocation and exaltation of these legends is meant to facilitate the emancipation of the dispossessed and oppressed. This does not only show the folkloric atmosphere of the Urhobo, it also shows their resilience as indicated below;

Ogidigbo, rise
And with your steel
Go on fresh exploits-
…
Let the hands that shook the mahogany tree
Break human shackles

Ogiso, rise
From the moat of slavers' sweat
And wipe out the dust breathing breast
…
Essi, rise
And leave your Itsekiri neighbours alone
We need each other's love in the world
Raise your army against witches weakening us. (*Invoking,* 41)

As shown in the poetic lines above, Ojaide's exaltation of gods and legendary warriors conveys his revolutionary bent, which also underscores his native intelligence. The poetic lines suggest that the revolutionary spirit of these legendary warriors should be imbibed by all those who seek emancipation from political oppression. Ojaide's infusion of such local words in his poems shows his adoration of his indigenous Urhobo language, which reflects his identity. In "The Battle", for instance, the reader comes across Ojaide's recreation of revolutionary tempers that border on sociopolitical and moral regeneration:

For fear of exposing its soft body
The *oghighe* plant covers itself with thorns
For fear of bad company
The *akpobrisi* keeps distant from other trees (*Invoking,* 39)

As shown on the excerpt above, the two images— 'Oghighe' and 'akpobrisi'— are deployed to make some political comments. For instance, 'Oghighe' is an Urhobo word for a kind of soft tree with thorns while 'akpobrisi' is a mythical tree in Urhobo that is commonly believed to have mystical powers. At a deep metaphorical level, the Urhobo people regard 'akpobrisi' as a tyrannical tree which surrounds itself with only weeds. Ojaide appropriates the image of the 'akpobrisi' and ridicule the despotic nature of the average Nigerian politician. Again, Ojaide's revolutionary temper against political oppression is evident in "We Keep Watch Over Them", through the use of local words as an oral aesthetic strategy:

When 'orodje' ordered us to hold back a falling palm tree
He drove us into our closet of metal;
When 'ogiso' wielded his sword against his own subjects
He fired the guns loaded in our guts; (*Invoking,* 30)

As shown above, Ojaide is not merely a cultural activist; he uses the cultural images to make commentary on the Nigerian political depreciation. Through the use of repetition, a common oral artistic feature, Ojaide conveys his rage against the oppressors:

From the scaffold of pain we keep watch over them,
From the perilous precipice of misery we keep watch over them
From the exposed post of lowliness, cold and clammy
From the slums of existence we keep watch over them (*Invoking,* 30)

The element of repetition in the poetic lines above underscores Tanure Ojaide's resentment against political oppression. The pathetic condition of the masses is reflected in the lines above. Ojaide deploys the device of

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repetition to emphasise the people's dismal socioeconomic realities. Ojaide's portrayal of Urhobo words and folkways is a deliberate oral artistic measure aimed at exposing sociopolitical failing.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion shows that Tanure Ojaide infuses oral artistic features in his poetry collection, *Invoking the Warrior Spirit,* as an aesthetic strategy to convey issues that border on sociopolitical depreciation. The use of folkloric resources in the poem suggests Ojaide's attachment to the downtrodden, found at the communal, agrarian societies. As characteristics of majority of the poets in Ojaide's generation like Osundare, Okinba Launko and others, they use poetry to speak the language that the dispossessed people at the base understand. Thus, the oral aesthetic elements that are represented in the poems featured in Ojaide's *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* are appropriated to expose the failings in the sociopolitical domains while also making suggestions for social improvement. Oral aesthetic features like proverbs, songs and dance, invocations, repetitions, parallelism, local words and local ways are used to recreate theme and sharpen the subject matter of the poems which border on sociopolitical upheavals and degeneration. The tenets of the postcolonial theory help to show the cultural hybridity and neocolonial ideas interrogated by Tanure Ojaide in the poems.

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