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## **WOUNDING WORDS, SATIRE AS NO OTHER: THE UDJE ORAL POETIC PERFORMANCE GENRE**

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### **Abstract**

One of the most developed and advanced poetic genres in Africa is the Udje oral poetic form of the Urhobo people of Nigeria. As an indigenous oral song-poetry tradition that is practised by many subgroups of the Urhobo polity, Udje has been termed by scholars as the premier song-poetry tradition of the people (Clark, 1965, 2008, Ojaide, 2003, 2009, Darah, 2005, 2009, 2010 and Okpako 2011). Udje is an elaborate song-poetry tradition in which songs are composed with the sole intent to hurt the prestige of the opponent. The songs are woven in biting images that not only lampoon individual(s) with antisocial traits but satirise people with physical disabilities from rival camps. In the cultural milieu in which udje thrived, people dreaded the poet. Many relocated from their communities after being sung with stinging metaphors during udje performances. This essay leans on the above thematics to examine how the satirical butts of udje have shaped considerably the ideological outlook of the poetics of the tradition in Urhobo land. In order to place the socio-cultural artistry that animates the performance aesthetics of Udje poetic tradition in its proper perspective, the paper highlights the historical and cultural experiences of the people and how they have impacted on the aesthetic thoughts of the oral poets, and how it has helped to check the individuals with deviant behaviour as well as maintain society's moral balance/order. The materials for this essay are sourced from the repertoire of notable udje maestros such as Oloya of Iwhrekan, Memerume of Edjophe, Omoko of Egbo-Ideh, and Kpeha of Owahwa. The study reveals that the spirit that animates satire in Urhobo oral poetic tradition is not only to wound the personality of the individual(s) but also to maintain the delicate social equilibrium of the society. Paul Richards expresses this view when he notes that "udje music hurts, but the stinging produces a glow" (2011,viii).

**Keywords:** Wounding Words, Satire, Udje, Urhobo, Oral Poetic Performance, Moral balance/order

## Introduction

In its very nature, Udje is an oral poetic tradition that is based on the deflation of the ego and prestige of individual(s) or groups. Its essential and governing features rest on the deployment of ‘wounding’ metaphors and fabricated images to ‘attack’ perceived targets of rival groups. It is this dialectical component of Udje that excites the audience/spectators who look forward to its performance at every annual festival. In traditional Urhobo societies where Udje held sway, every festival that would feature a performance was like an Olympic ceremony; for the people looked forward, not only to an artistic performance to satiate their aesthetic cravings but for latest song(s) with wounding images that commented on human foibles and exaggerated misfortunes of individuals in rival groups.

In trying to discuss the Udje oral poetic performance genre, it is important to examine the concept of satire since it is implicated in the title of the essay. This is because the mere mention of the term “satire” opens up a lot of meanings, many of which derive from its etymology. However, in the context of this study, we shall restrict ourselves to the definition by *Merriam-Webster* which describes satire as “a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn”. In other words, satire is the use of humour, ridicule or exaggeration to attack people’s follies or vices, especially with regards to anti-social behaviours. In the Urhobo society, satire is referred to as *ule ekan*, which means “song of abuse”. Its chief aim is to shame individuals or groups whose roles or actions run counter to the overall good of society. This is the sense in which satire is used in this paper. The idea of ‘wounding’ in the context goes beyond mere artistic deformation of the prestige of individuals or groups. It constitutes a degree of cultural indictment and deflation that pits individuals or groups against the communal ethos for which the victim(s) of attack may be deemed as deviants. This is why Tanure Ojaide argues that many of the Udje songs are “aimed at correction and determent from violating values, virtues, and ethos that ensure the cohesive nature of society” (17). R.N. Egudu also expresses this view in respect of Igbo poetic experience when he tells us that in an African society, “the good and accepted norms of behaviour – virtues in general – are loved and admired, while social disvalues and vices are hated and decried. And those individuals in the society who represent these groups of opposing traits are liked or disliked by the others as the case may be” (36). Thus in Udje song-poetry tradition, those whose public

image was wounded through the song sought vengeance either physically or through a more combatant song in an annual festival. By “song-poetry”, we mean a poetic composition that is based on sound, rhythm as well as word-manipulation. J. P. Clark refers to song-poetry as “...pieces dependent as much on melody as on word content” (107). Urhobo song-poetry describes compositions which exploit the elements of music and figurative idioms to achieve aesthetic effect.

Udje is an indigenous oral song-poetry tradition that is practised by many subgroups of the Urhobo polity. The genre has been termed by scholars as the premier song-poetry tradition of the Urhobo. Clark describes udje as “the premier dance form, providing the peak of personal and collective display at seasons of festival” (107). Clark, in his study, also examines the social context in which Udje thrives in Urhobo society and unfolds the diverse spheres of metaphoric allusions contained in many of the Udje song-poems. He explains that the performance of udje is by “age groups, wards and towns, each using the other as subject for its songs” (107).

A significant aspect of udje is inter-group rivalry (*omesuo*). This refers to a situation where a community or ward competes against another community or ward in a song duel in which one group composed songs from often exaggerated materials to attack the other in an annual festival. That is, community “A” would compose her songs to attack community “B” this year; the other year, it would be community “B’s” turn to attack community “A”. It is this “attack-and-rejoinder” that Darah refers to as “battles of songs”. According to him, “the whole business of Udje was conducted as a kind of verbal warfare, battles of songs in which each participating group attempted to *sing its rival to a fall*” (vii). Ojaide, affirming the above assertion, defines udje as a “unique kind of battle, a competition of artistic performance of songs and dance institutionalized in adversary formations of two groups vying to ‘destroy’ the rival side with the ferocity of their poetic songs and dexterity of their dance performance” (7). In other words, udje is an elaborate song-poetry tradition in which songs are composed with the sole intent to hurt the prestige of the opponent. The images are vividly drawn from the environment and are laced with striking descriptive epithets. The composer (*ororile*) creates his songs in a deliberate manner as to damage the ego of the leader or prominent members of the rival group.

### **The Dialectics of Insult and Rejoinder in Udje Poetic Tradition**

Although Ojaide believes that because of its multigeneric nature udje should not be labelled rigidly as a satiric poetic genre, a critical evaluation of many of the extant texts shows that the overall goal of the art is to attack – sometimes in a subtle manner – attitudes and practices of individuals that are not in tandem with the society’s overall good. Many of the songs in which the sterling qualities of dead individuals are celebrated were done, not for the purpose of praise, but to spite the public image of the deceased family members who, it is believed, may have used diabolic means to kill one of their own. Instances abound in the tradition of occasions where such songs were performed and the family members of the ‘highly praised’ victims left the arena in tears. If for nothing else, the aim of Udje has been achieved.

Udje dance-song tradition has variously been described as a “battle of songs” because it affords anyone that is wronged to fall back to udje to compose a rejoinder song that will so “wound” his rival that the wrong on him may be assuaged. Among the Urhobo people, to insult a person with a song could hurt more than physical injury. This is because physical injury may be healed over time but the pain of an insult does not get healed easily. An Edjophe Udje song alludes this point thus: “Insults hurt more than illness does/An illness may be healed with time/But the effect of an insult remains forever” (qtd.in Darah,22).

Indeed, in the cultural milieu where udje held sway, the audience needed something – an image or metaphor that would lift them up psychically and emotionally; a poetic line that would stick in their memory for a long time, a memorable picture that should be the talk of the town, in the village square, and in the market place. In fact, in any gathering of people, it is the images and metaphors in the song that are remembered until the next year when the opposing group will try to outshine the earlier group with an aesthetically crafted song-poem. It is the careful construction of these images and metaphors that endears udje songs to the audience. The mental pictures created by the images are often remembered long after the songs are performed. It is against this backdrop that Ojaide explains that “people look out for the sheer beauty of the poetry. In fact, many go to

the performance to listen to the poetry of the songs. It is the words, the strength of the images, that people who attend a performance remember long after it is over” (51b). In this circumstance, the lead song that should be performed by a group, especially one that has a prominent composer/cantor should be rich in “wounding” metaphors. Darah underscores this point when he tells us that the “rival relationship was also expressed through the satirical temper of the songs. The desire of each performing group was to *sing its opponent to a fall*. For this reason, the words of every song were especially *minted* to ensure that they hurt the target as scathingly as possible” (13).

There are cases in Urhobo communities where people who were attacked in udje songs resorted to physical means to seek redress. Ojaide alludes to this point when he informs us that there are “stories of women, especially newly married ones, who abandoned their marriages after being sung as ugly, dirty, or flirting...” He observes that “men hit with udje songs migrated to other parts of Nigeria to make money to redeem them from the shame of poverty” (23). Ojaide also cites the case of a poet in Okpare who composed a song about his cousin and was attacked with a machete and was almost killed. According to Ojaide, some “of the subjects of the satiric butt feel so hurt that they take the laws into their own hands and seek vengeance physically” (30). Chief Patrick Okitiakpe of Ekakpamre whose father was an *udje* maestro, in a personal interview with the writer (May 30, 2015), cited a similar incident that happened to his father after the father composed an *udje* song to satirise a man who was crippled. According to Chief Okitiakpe, after the song was performed publicly, the man was so pained that he sought diabolic means to attack his father, who, for fear of death, decided to relocate from the village to *urhie* with his family until the community intervened on his behalf. The above scenarios are not peculiar to the Urhobo society. Robert C. Elliot also cites similar examples where the Greek poet Archilochus composed satiric verses against his prospective father-in-law, Lycanbes, that Lycambes and his daughter committed suicide by hanging themselves (Elliot, C.R., 1960).

### **“Wounding” Metaphors in Selected Udje Song-texts**

This segment of the essay examines samples of udje song-texts whose thematic preoccupations and artistic goals foreground the notion of “wounding”. The Owahwa song “Noruayen” for instance, is built around Noruayen, whose untimely death is recreated as a disaster

not only to his immediate family but also to his community, Oginibo (Owahwa and Oginibo were rivals in udje). As is common with udje song-poetry, the poet introduces the tragedy resulting from Noruayen's death in a manner that his family is mocked for using witchcraft to kill their only successful child who would have brought progress to the community. The song, at the beginning, introduces the listeners to the news of Noruayen's death and how it was received by his people. Noruayen had promised his mother that on his return from *urhie* (work adventure outside his community), he would build her a mansion. However, instead of returning to do what he had promised, it was the news of his death that came to the community. The song presents the sterling qualities of the subject, Noruayen, how he was loved by his Hausa customers who reacted painfully to the news of his death. In the first section of the song, the artist moves from a known fact, the news of the death of Noruayen, the lamentations the news caused and juxtaposes it with the defence of the deceased's uncle, Tomre, who is required by tradition to supervise the sharing of the deceased's wives and properties. Tomre said, "let everyone note/Witches who kill people are in the family" (L.14-15). Here, spiritual matters such as witchcraft and other cultural issues are introduced into the song.

The composer goes further to compound the sorrows of the family of the deceased by presenting, in vivid details, the chief mourners of his death: his elder brother, Tomre, who stands to inherit his wives and properties; his mother, Akpotayobore, whose hope of her son having a mansion has been dashed; and his daughter, Ishaka, who would miss a successful rite of passage to womanhood (*emetejavwɔn*). All of these are recreated in detail as the family's tragedy is narrated with vigour, interposing various voice modulations between lead singer and group, thus intensifying the song's message.

Now he is dead  
 It is for a reason that it pains me  
 For the mother's sake that it pains me very much  
 Akpotayobore always cared for her son  
 As Noruayen was at *urhie*, she prepared to build a house  
 She instructed people to split iron wood  
 Then, she wrote a letter to her son  
 'Noruayen, do come home briefly  
 Bring roofing sheets home to complete a mansion'  
 When the answer to the letter came  
 It was written in red ink

The boy who opened the letter exclaimed  
 ‘This is a matter of danger, hold the mother  
 Chain the mother before we read the letter’  
 We have read the letter  
 It is a matter of death  
 Akpotayobore! How will you mourn this?  
 Our compound is reduced to half  
 Behold a song! (*Okpako, L. 32-50*)

Here the artist also creates an idea that there were already cracks in the deceased’s family. The uncle, Tomre was jealous of the fame of the deceased. This could have prompted him to use diabolic means to eliminate him. However, in his defence above, he informs the audience that ‘witches who kill people are in the compound’, suggesting that he may not be alone on the fate of the subject.

As it has been expressed above, the major aim of udje is to wound and cause pain to the opponent by the fabrication of untrue and fictitious stories to shame the enemy. It is the mastery of such fabrications that endears each poet-musician to the audience/listeners. We notice in the “Noruayen” song, for instance, nine levels of hurting events to shame/wound the prestige of the victim’s family – the news of the death of victim, the accusation of witchcraft and the defence of Tomre, the causes of the victim’s untimely death, the distribution of his wives and properties among relatives, the lamentations of his wife, Lokoja, the pains of his mother, Akpotayobore, the wailing of his daughter, Ishaka, the various attempts made to deliver the victim from untimely death and the final curse placed on the European “...who poured oil/Into the river”. All these formal elements endear the song to the listeners by creating a realistic picture of the events in the song. They are constructed and woven into the song’s fabric to provide substantial evidence to damage the ego of the rival group.

We also find similar use of materials that are aimed at “wounding” the persona in the song “Tefue” from the udje corpus of Orhuwhorun community. In the song-poem, the poet uses metaphors of wretchedness and hardship to lampoon Tefue, the leader of a rival group, in a manner that the listeners feel pity and pain for the subject. At the beginning of the song, the artist introduces the hardship that befell the Nigerian people through the unpopular economic policies of the government in the 1970s. One such policy was the ill-advised wage increase otherwise known as the Chief Jerome Udoji awards; it was named after the chairman that headed the

commission. The arbitrary raise in the salaries of public servants adversely affected the economy as the resulting inflation escalated the prices of goods and services. Parents could hardly feed their children and those whose wives were pregnant became restless because of the cost of raising children. It is against this backdrop that the poet attempts a sarcastic portrait of Tefue's unsuccessful efforts to survive amidst these economic quagmires:

Before sunrise every day Tefue takes up a gun  
 He hangs fish traps on his bicycle  
 He also takes fish hooks and a fish net  
 And the man would set out  
 His work dress is never dry  
 Must one dive into water to catch fish because of child-bearing? (*Darah, L: 15-20*)

In the above lines, the artist uses alluring images of the wetland environment of the Niger Delta to ridicule Tefue's efforts to cater for his family in the face of hardship. The references to gun (hunting tool), fish traps, fish hooks and nets draw attention to the occupational engagement of the Urhobo people. By portraying Tefue as restless in his quest to fend for his large family, the poet has craftily besmeared his image in a manner that the listeners feel both pity and laughter. Whatever effort Tefue puts into his hunting engagement yields little relief. His frequent hunting escapades made the animals in the forest and the fishes in the rivers to hold a congress where Tefue's movements were closely watched by a paid security man. It is significant to note that as a sample of udje song-text, the "Tefue" song draws poignant materials from udje aesthetic resources that rely on attacks on individual foibles in order to elicit laughter and at the same time correct societal failings. Thus the artist continues his "wounding" attack on his subject when he compares the subject's poverty to a terminal disease that is beyond the handling of all medical experts.

The disease of poverty that attacked Tefue  
 Which doctor can cure this one?  
 Only Chiefs Ibru and Edewor can cure it  
 This is no illness for the hospital  
 Tefue, I am sorry for you (*Darah, L: 39-43*)

The effect of the references to Chiefs Ibru and Edewor foreground, significantly, the thematic goal of the song-poem. Chiefs Ibru and Edewor are renowned Urhobo businessmen whose successes in



the private sector have not only positively affected the lives of Nigerians but foreigners. In other words, Tefue's wretchedness can only be remedied by the philanthropy of the duo of Chiefs Ibru and Edewor.

As we have noted, many of the materials for udje song are often exaggerated. They are mere fabrications. For instance, during one of my field interviews at Orhuwhorun, I met one Mr Samuel Tefue whose father was the subject of the song under review. Samuel, himself an established poet, informed me that his father was not a poor man as their rival's (Ekrekrun ward) song indicates. He stressed that his father was a successful farmer by the standard of his time and that the story in the song was a mere fabrication which was part of the udje practice. Like other udje songs, this piece is composed with the aim to damage the prestige of the subject and to elicit laughter from the listeners rather than pity for the subject.

In the udje song "Logbo" by Omoko Orhoro of Egbo-Ideh, the composer creatively uses the issue of barrenness to attack his perceived rival. The artist begins the song with various sociological and ethical musings that are not only meant to expose the song's thematic focus but also to satirise Logbo's inability to satisfy the tenets of polygamy.

Sati went for marriage in Logbo's household  
It is Hwofadon's children Sati nurses there  
Oh Sati, the world is a tricky place  
Hwofadon has had children for Logbo  
It is you who are the unlucky one  
What a great pity

*(Darah, L.10-15)*

The use of images that are directly compared with the subject's predicament makes the import of the song's narrative to be vivid. Also, the use of indirectness gives the listeners the leverage to think and draw their own conclusions about Logbo's problem, including casting doubts on the paternity of Hwofadon's children. The poet cites examples of a barren (Shaghware) in the community and contrasts her case with that of Logbo in a manner that the listeners will cast aspersions on Logbo's situation. "Shaghware is barren, there is no doubting it/Consider the case of Logbo who married two wives/But had sperm enough to fertilize only one of them" (lines, 25-27). The comparison of Logbo's infertility with that of Shaghware paints a concrete picture of the seriousness of Logbo's problem. The artist emphasized it thus: "But had sperm enough to fertilize only one of them/Had procreative energy for only one of them" (lines, 27-28). The repetition is to

emphasize the composer's affirmation of Logbo's infertility. In the song, Logbo only recognizes his inability to impregnate his wife through his quest to solve Sati's problem of childlessness. He puts up a poor defence that the experts he invites to examine Sati waste his money as it is only her "alimentary canal they repair instead" (line, 74). It is a satiric remark like this that satisfies the aesthetic yearnings of the listeners.

There is use of idiophones and invectives in the poem. The poet says Sati moves about in the house "gbrogbrogbro" indicating the sense of anger shown by Sati with a strong physique. It should be stressed here that in the performance of this song, the dancers would, at appropriate sections, support their words with facial expression as well as synchronised body movement dramatise the degree of humiliation contained in the song. This is because the spectators are not only enthralled by the lyrics of the song-poem but are excited by the dancers' imitation of the satirised subject of the song.

One of the fiercest rivalries in the udje 'song-battle' tradition was the one between the twin communities of Edjophe and Iwhrekan whose lead singers, Memerume and Oloya, were rated as the best in the art. Both poet-musicians took the competition among their communities as a form of superiority contest. The song "Oloya the Fugitive" from the corpus of Edjophe community proclaims the superiority of the Edjophe community over its arch rival, Iwhrekan. In the poem, each of the stanzas carries the element of boast about the superiority of the Edjophe over Iwhrekan. This idea is highlighted through the deployment of sharp images drawn from the forest and riverine ecology of the people. At the beginning of the poem, the poet compares his community to the agama lizard who still retains its territory despite the advent of local government council in the area. The image of the agama lizard explicates the fact that there may be other competitors in the forest but the agama lizard must stand out with its regal red-cap which crowns it as a king. In others words, the artist imagines himself as the king in poetic craft.

The agama lizard polices the bush  
It dominates its haunt  
Though councils have come,  
The agama lizard still wears its red cap  
Who can take the cap from it? (*Darah, L. 2-6*)

Further in the poem, the poet compares his community's songs to a snake that needs no rope before coiling itself into a pad in a bid to strike. The metaphor of snake, a predatory animal that

hunts alone and preys even on its own kind, provides the sense of poetic hostility between the two rival communities. To the poet, the rivalry is an eternal one and its conviviality can only be sustained by an acceptance of superiority and subordination and not friendship. The poet wants his song to hurt his rivals hence the deadly venom of the snake that needs no rope before constricting its preys to death.

The next images deployed to underscore the rivalry theme in the poem are those of the kingfisher and crocodile. Here, the poet displays his craftsmanship by comparing the rivalry between the two communities to a duel of superiority between the kingfisher and the crocodile. The poet uses these images to stretch his boast further by insisting that it is foolhardy for the kingfisher to think of killing the crocodile. In this dramatic and anecdotal reference between the two communities, the poet uses the kingfisher to represent his rival and the crocodile to symbolise himself. The poet creates a picture of the contest when he tells us that the moment the crocodile emerges from the river, the kingfisher who had boasted of killing it frantically scampers for its life and hopelessly pecks at tiny crayfish by the river bank – illustrative of fright and surrender. In other words, the arrival of the poet's community on the dance arena will certainly send fear into the rival's camp. The comparison of the rivalry between the two communities with animal images makes the poetic message to be vivid and rich. It is for this reason that Darah thinks that the "poetic devices of invective, parody, caricature, and lampoon excite aesthetic pleasure. [...] The songs are a rich treasure of knowledge about Urhobo and their environment" (38c).

The listeners who are conversant with these maritime animals are not only enthralled by the sonority of the song's lyricism but also see, feel and even witness the "poetic battle" as it unfolds. These anecdotal references to the rivalry between the two communities are characteristic of the combat nature of the udje song-poetry tradition. It gives the listeners the opportunity to follow the poetic thoughts and the aestheticism the song contains. Darah explains this position further when he notes that the artist in this song "is playing on the analogy of unequal combatants to affirm that he is a greater and more invincible artist than his rival, Oloya" (40c).

The rejoinder by udje artists of Iwhrekan in the song, "Nana" is also laced with wounding metaphors meant to shame their opponents. In this short song, the narrative revolves around the wretched life of the subject, Inana whose poverty made him to be absent from an udje song contest in which he is a lead singer.

Edjophe featured an Udje dance but Nana was absent  
 The visitors were inquisitive:  
*Where is the famous lead singer?*  
 The loss of a low quality cloth caused his absence  
 What a scandal!

The artist builds up the subject's portrait in a dramatic manner that the listeners feel the urge for both pity and laughter. Nana, the subject of the song has only one cloth which he wears to every occasion. He washes it in the morning and stays indoors until it gets dry and puts it on for outing. It is this cloth that a kite carries away. He pleads with the kite to return his cloth but it refuses.

The same-dress-for-work, the same-dress-for-outing  
 Washed and spread out to dry was taken away by a kite  
 Ululation rent the air: *When Nana wakes up*  
*Who is it can console him?*  
*The only child of a barren has died*  
 When Nana woke from sleep he raced out nude  
 In search of a lost dress; he was in distress  
 Nana in tears pleaded with the kite:  
*Oh kite I prostrate, please have mercy on me*

The vivid narrative develops to the last line and explains the reason why the lead singer of Edjophe community could not attend an important song contest involving his community. The poet chooses his "wounding" images and metaphors appropriately from the wetland environment of the area. The portrait of Nana running out of his house naked to plead the return of his only cloth taken by the kite only intensifies his lowly background that makes him inferior to his opponent. The metaphor of the death of the only child of a barren implicated in line (10) of the song is meant to highlight the tragedy of the subject. His only dress (already taken by the kite) is synonymous with the death of the only child of a barren. The metaphor readily comes to mind when one imagines the existential distress that constitutes the lot of a barren woman who loses her only child. All these anecdotes help to intensify the sarcasm and ridicule in the song. This is a suggestion that the poet's opponent is always afraid to confront him in the "battle of songs". This is a good example of a poem composed with the literary dexterity and "wounding" metaphors associated with udje poetic tradition.

## Conclusion

The udje oral poetic performance genre of the Urhobo is a unique art form that thrives on the attack of human foibles through songs composed essentially to “wound” the prestige and pride of its victims. During its golden age, the artistic practice helped in maintaining the delicate social structure of the Urhobo people by exposing anti-social conduct. The udje oral poets aimed to protect the society against individuals with deviant behaviour. The listeners in an udje performance event get their aesthetic delight from the images and metaphors – often exaggerated to hurt the ego of the opponent. The scandals associated with the “wounding” portraits caused ill-feeling and anger on the part of the victims; yet it was the poetic rigour of the damaging images and insults that endeared the songs to the public. This is what Okpewho would call the essence of true poetry which, according to him, “lies in its power to appeal strongly to our appreciation and, in a sense, lift us up” (3).

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