WRITING TRANSGRESSION: PRESERVING THE LANDSCAPE OF TRADITION IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *GOD'S MEDICINE-MEN & OTHER STORIES*

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Abstract:
Tanure Ojaide, a celebrated Nigerian poet, is a writer who is constantly in search for an alternative social vision to the degenerating socio-political concerns in Nigeria. Social concerns mediated by *orature* provide the predominant framework within which his poetry collections have been analyzed. At the debut of his writing career now spanning three decades, Ojaide's entry into the Nigerian literary landscape in 1973 was heralded by the publication of *Children of Iroko. God's medicinemen and other stories* is his first attempt at writing short stories. This anthology of short stories expresses a deep moral indignation, in its denunciation of the shameful state in which the socio-cultural ethos has been compromised in contemporary Nigeria. This paper evaluates the manner in which Ojaide explores the broad theme of the break-down of social and cultural norms in Nigerian society as exemplified in *God's medicine-men and other stories.* It also examines how, in the anthology, the complexity of the intersections that obtain between tradition and modernity has significantly shaped individual lives, focusing mainly on the way in which cultural hybridity serves to underscore the effect of this breakdown in contemporary Nigerian society.

Key words:
Imagination, transgression, socio-cultural, ethos, landscape, tradition.

Introduction

Oral tradition provides a significant background for contemporary Nigerian writers. By oral tradition, this paper refers to traditional songs, song-poems, various forms of oral narratives, tales, legends, myths, historical narratives, and the creative arts in general, in which part of the concern is presenting events so as to give aesthetic satisfaction. Joel Adedeji, in his book *Oral Tradition and the contemporary Theatre in*

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Nigeria, evaluates the significance of oral tradition as the '*complex corpus of verbal or spoken art created as a means of recalling the past*', which is '*based on the ideas, beliefs, symbols, assumptions, attitude and sentiments of people*' that can be acquired '*through a process of learning or initiation and its purpose is to condition social action and foster social interaction*.' Charles Bodunde, in his article 'Oral Traditions & Modern Poetry: Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Okigbo's* Labyrinths', has provided a further categorization of oral tradition as literary and historical. In the literary category are included: poetic genres such as *oriki* or praise and totem chants, *Odu* or *Ifa*, divination poems and songs. The literary category also comprises formulae like proverbs, parables and incantations. The historical category is made up of forms such as narratives anchored in myths, legends and historical forms like the epic (p. 24). The vital influence of oral tradition in contemporary literary creativity has been recognized by critics like Ode Ogede, who provides an insight into why African writers usually appropriate matter from oral tradition:

'*The sense of having a mission to teach and to analyse issues of public concern is one of the features that, in general, the modern African writer has borrowed from the oral tradition*''. (p. 73)

Like the traditional oral artist, whose works must be grounded in the social reality of his society, in order for his message to have the reverberation and persuasion expected of someone who is the conscience of the nation, African contemporary writers, by employing the appurtenances of oral tradition, have been situated in a vantage position from which to discuss, in their poetry, fiction and drama, the socio-political problems besetting Africa. This view has also been acknowledged by Tanure Ojaide in his essay *Examining Canonisation in Modern African Literature*:

'*The cultural identity of modern African literature is a major consideration in establishing a canon for its texts. Culture involves a shared experience of belief systems, worldview, traditions, and aesthetic standards*' (p. 6).

Ojaide further observes the presence of certain aspects of cultural identity in the African novel, including: the utilitarian function of literature, social cohesion, the ethical/moral nature of African civilisation, defence of African culture, African mystical life, ideas of law and order, peculiar attitudes to time and space, and the special use of folklore and language,

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especially of proverbs. These aspects are sacrosanct to African novelists because they constitute variables for mediating culture and social reality in their works.

Tanure Ojaide's reputation in Nigerian literary enterprise is given prominence in his poetry. Some of his poem collections include: *Labyrinths of the Delta (1986), Children of Iroko (1973), Endless Song (1989), The Eagles Vision (1987), The Fate of Vultures& other poems (*1991), *Blood of Peace (1991), Delta Blues and Home songs (1998), Daydream of ants (1997), In the kingdom of songs (2002)* and *I want to Dance and other poems (2003).* Ojaide has also written some short stories and novels: *God's medicine-men and other stories (2004), The Debt-collector and other stories (*2009), *Matters of the Moment (2009), The Activist (2006.* He has also written a memoir entitled *Great Boys*: *An African childhood (1998).* In these literary works, he has not only reworked folklore, but has also deployed folk items for the purpose of enhancing his writing and promoting his Urhobo culture in particular and the Niger-Delta cultural and linguistic background in general. This underscores Ojaide's sustained campaigning for the restoration of the dignity of the Niger-Delta, as succinctly captured by Tayo Olafioye in *The Poetry of Tanure Ojaide*: *a critical appraisal*:

„*Ojaide, like his art, makes every stage of his evolution a structural*

Ascendance of self-improvement. Each setting or stage therefore assumes a poetic. Experience, language and craftsmanship. His genesis from pastoral rurality, for example, reveals his botanical soul, an affinity with nature images, elegiac history, social dirges and satires, animated cleavages with cultural milieu and ambiences such as the satiric Udje song and dance" (pp. 74-75).

Ojaide's recourse to short-story writing is for the continuation of social criticism against different shades of social malaise in Nigeria, which affords him the use of techniques of oral expression meant to create a much convenient platform of discourse, because

'*… the short story has been regarded as a most effective vehicle for instruction because it dispenses with the extensive embroidery and ornamentation built into other forms like the novel and the literary drama, while managing to carry equal appeal with these other genres'*. (Ode, Ogede, p. 74)

This essay aims to evaluate how Ojaide, in his *God's medicine-men and other stories*, presents a vision of Nigeria descending into moral

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bankruptcy, in its struggle to address the clash of old and new social imperatives. The essay establishes a shift away from a concern with the impact of colonisation and the historical past and towards an examination of prevailing social, cultural and economic problems as grounded in the locale of the ten stories in the anthology. The essay further examines how Ojaide, in this anthology of short stories, mediates between the oral and the written elements of the novel as delineated by Ruth Finnegan: 'The basic point then, is the continuity of 'oral' and 'written' literature. There is no deep gulf between the two: they shade into each other (...) and there are innumerable cases of poetry which has both 'oral' and 'written' elements. The idea of pure, uncontaminated '*oral culture' (...) is a myth*.' (p. 24)

God's medicine-men and other stories is an anthology of short stories with diverse themes, written with poise and precision. Its structure demands that a reader's focus should be premised on the immediate level of perception, and should not search for parallel or inner meanings, which should come later. It is an anthology replete with a heavy portentous style, drugged with its own significance, which continually draws attention to its own profoundness. The thematic preoccupations of the ten stories in the anthology are stylistically derived from the modernist re-interpretation of social history, myth, legend and anecdote of Urhobo folkloric proclivity and Nigeria's social contradictions. These thematic concerns ostensibly foreground the signification of social and cultural transgressions, and how they have undermined value systems in Nigeria. In spite of the exploration of these folklore elements and social concerns in the narratives of the anthology, Ojaide, nonetheless, aesthetically improvised on the style of individual chapters in the anthology, so as to elevate them to the level of incisive social criticism.

In *God's medicine-men and other stories*, there is a skilful exploration of the social disconnection among individual characters, as well as of the individual's own evolving understanding of the dynamics of cultural hyphenation, revealing with grace, humour and a trace of sadness, the plight of those who occupy the interstices between modernity and tradition. Though Ojaide has not been prolific in fiction, his poetry collections have earned him several awards and recognition. The vivid details, the rambunctious humour and vibrant irony that characterize his depictions of primordial cultural practices in the Urhobo homesteads and

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communities of the Delta in Nigeria are underlined and amplified by his criticism of the inherent ambivalence embedded in such cultures. Aside from some of the engaging and esoteric aspects of his characters' lives, one of the necessarily curious elements of Ojaide's fiction is the presentation of Nigeria as a huge landscape of corruption and prebendal antisocial practices. Ojaide's Urhobo communities of Oghara, Eku, Warri, Oghareki and Okpe only serve as microcosms of socially corrupt Nigeria.

The stories in the anthology incorporate myths, legends and even supernatural occurrences. In *Come back when you are ready to die*, a story whose aesthetic bravura is grounded in Urhobo orature, a woman who got married four times and three of the husbands died mysteriously, Ojaide weaves a narrative around a spirit husband, which constitutes a vibrant myth in the trajectory of Urhobo orature. The dominant theme here is man's outright helplessness in the hands of the gods:

'*Man is caught in webs and mysteries he cannot understand, explain or disentangle himself from. Man must struggle to survive, indeed to live and prosper despite the threats to his survival; the doubts, the unanswerable questions, the fears that he must give faces to and delimit in some ways for his own sanity'* (Ebele Eko, p. 34).

This man's helplessness is what is underlined in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966).

Just as Amadi did not pursue an alternative belief system in *The Concubine*, portraying the life of Ihuoma, an incarnation of a sea goddess and the wife of a sea-king, whose two husbands died mysteriously at intervals, Ojaide, too, in *Come back when you are ready to die*, did not place the death of the two nameless husbands of the protagonist in an alternative belief system, but implied it in the story. Its significance is internalised and frequently *dramatized* rather than being presented as a subject of analysis in the story. Ojaide would want the readers to take the elements of African traditional belief system seriously within the context of magic realism, and not to trivialise them as myth, metaphor or image. This is in conformity with the view of William Bascom, who contends that

'*myths and legends contain detailed descriptions of sacred ritual, the codified belief or dogma of the religious system of the people*'. (p. 345)

The tragedy of the protagonist in the story may suggest other meanings to a modern reader, but at the level of narrative, Ojaide demands

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that we set aside our modern views of motive and cause, and surrender our imaginations to the nuances of a traditional world. The story, as it stands, acts to recuperate this alternative world. It shows how it offered those who lived in it coherent, meaningful ways to order and understand their lives. It also demonstrates the play-outs of the mysteries which sometimes characterised them.

Come back when you want to die begins at the death of an unnamed character simply referred to as 'my mother' by the narrator, who is her son. The protagonist's turbulent marriages constitute the thematic concern which has to be harnessed through a retrospective narrative device which provides Ojaide ample opportunity to deploy an insight into the pathetic experience of the protagonist. The protagonist recounts her life history from the time she married the first husband, a marriage which remaining childless for twelve years and had to be dissolved so that both parties could go their different ways. She then remarried, and had a baby, but lost the second husband mysteriously when her son was only six months. After eight years she remarried again, had three children and, in the fifth year, her third husband died mysteriously. After many more years in limbo, she remarried again and had a baby by her last husband, and the marriage lasted for fifteen years until the protagonist died. The story provokes pity and curiosity which reverberates with a haunting vision of human despair. Ojaide's appropriation of this Urhobo myth underscores Wole Ogundele's observation, that

'*Orature has come in handy for demonstrating fierce (but selective) loyalties to indigenous traditions. It has also been serving compensatory purposes: writers use it to assert artistic authenticity or continuity, and critics to claim cultural authority.*' (p. 132)

Ojaide deftly handles the complex, varied themes of the poignancy of traditional ethos through the employment of topical narratives in this anthology of short stories, inviting readers to peer into the experiences of characters who are victims of mystical manipulations, like Endurance in the story *God's medicine men*, who is constantly sexually violated by an unidentified person in her dreams. Her solicitation of divine assistance in warding off this violation through pastor Odele eventually reveals that he is the unmasked violator of Endurance, through supernatural manipulation:

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'*… pastor Odele had assured her that he would drive away the wicked spirits that tormented her with a repulsive body odour. He asked her to spend the night in his room in his mother's house, he would want to pray and also perform some sacrifices at midnight in a nearby crossroads. Before that night, Endurance had placed so much trust in Pastor Odele's power. That very night, she found herself in the experience which Pastor Odele was supposed to have cured her from, the only difference was that this time it was real! When it was over, it appeared Pastor Odele was the one who used to steal in to her because it happened in the same manner.*' (p. 87)

Ojaide seems to suggest here that there are mysteries in life that cannot be explained through modern belief systems and evaluations. Who could have believed that Pastor Odele, though mystically inclined, could manipulate such magic power to torment an innocent victim like Endurance. Ojaide's depiction of inherent African mysticism does not unobtrusively affect the structure of the narrative of *God's medicinemen*, thus contradicting Eustace Palmer's observation that

'*the use of supernatural agents in a novel always presents grave difficulties such as the problem of rendering them credible and realistic.*'(p. 56)

Tanure Ojaide's use of this element of oral tradition is designed to achieve two aims: situate the story within the locale of African cultural proclivity and satirize the inadequacy of Christianity in resolving deeply-seated mysteries such as the one Endurance experienced in the story.

Witchcraft as disruption of the transcendental ordering of society is touched upon in *The Major's appeal*. Major Efe Segine, who has attempted to disperse a village mob, is pushed from the back by a member of the rival family and inadvertently fires at the crowd killing a member of the rival family. In the story, the supernatural arouses curiosity, until it is eventually discovered that Major Segine's travails were caused by his sister, Titi, who confesses to being a witch and the cause of woes. Ojaide's characters are individuals who constitute an integral part of the community, who have to subscribe to a set of traditional norms and prescriptions. In Major Segine, Ojaide created a character with whose misfortune the reader empathises, whilst recognising that his travail was the product of a complex set of factors including ostensible overzealousness, protracted inter-family feuding, and the mysterious manipulation of the incident that led to his trial. The characters in this story are often torn between the values and cultural

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codes of the community and their personal desires. But any violation of these codes also attracts severe punishment, and that is why Titi falls ill, confesses her evil deed and dies for transgressing the cultural codes of her community. Ojaide's strength as a writer with an uncanny interest in the custom and tradition of his Urhobo ethnic group is never in doubt. He dextrously presents the inter-play of reality and the supernatural, which provides a first-hand assessment of cultural practices among the Urhobo group of the Niger Delta of Nigeria in particular and among other ethnic groups in Africa. Ojaide intends to articulate the significance of the supernatural ethos in his representation of his communal background, which is significant because by this strategy he indeed subverts the Eurocentric modernist fictional tradition, which tends to downplay the essence of witchcraft in the African milieu.

A get-rich quick syndrome through criminal tendencies among officers and men of the Nigerian police force is poignantly represented in Ojaide's *God's medicine men and other stories*. More conventionally shaped as a narrative of corruption in modern Nigeria, *The Roadblock* tells the story of how Private Oyibo and Corporal Shegbe commit an enormous criminal act, by mounting an illegal roadblock so as to extort illegal fees from commercial buses plying the Warri-Agbarho-Ughelli road, part of the busy PortHacourt-Lagos road. The story highlights the despicable level of corruption in Nigeria, as manifested within the police force, Prison service and other para-military units.

The increasing pessimism of the Nigerians as to the state and future of the country significantly constitutes the locale of *The Road block*. The story presents a bitterly disillusioning image of contemporary Nigeria, marred in corruption which seems irredeemable. Whilst the story stresses the impact of corruption on Nigerian society as debilitating, corruption is also presented in stereotypical terms, as an endemic scourge motivated by an insatiable appetite for material possession. Pursued aggressively, even if it undermines the values of society, as exemplified in the illegal acquisitions of houses and exotic cars by PS Debo Fakade, for whom no holds are barred as he thrives on administrative subversive practices, such as giving preferential treatment to prisoners and inmates awaiting court trials in exchange of monetary gratifications. In the story, primary moral impulses are seen to be hedged by specific qualifications arising from the actual

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conditions of life in Nigeria, which has circumstantially engendered such an ugly and despicable way of life. The characters' elemental sense of integrity is socially determined, as characters are free agents who have to be seen as metonymic of other Nigerians and of a debased Nigerian society. The graphic presentation of the chaotic administrative system in Nigeria, which thrives on ostentatious living, of the bizarre corrupt practice of illegal roadblocks dotting the highways in Nigeria, underscores how problematic the nature of corruption is in present-day Nigeria. Thus the social and economic corruption of modern Nigeria is portrayed as the legacy of years of moral compromise, of a history of duplicity foisted upon the nation by successive military regimes.

The transgression of societal norm is further reiterated in *The last-born.* In this chapter, deception and matrimonial manipulation constitute a thematic preoccupation. Titi's past, tainted by having had a baby as a teenager, is carefully concealed from her husband Ubi until it becomes the butt of jokes in the hospital complex where Ubi works as a medical doctor and Titi as a nurse. In spite of his expertise as an obstetrician, Ubi never knew Titi had had a baby, Tetebe, after a short but devastating love affair she had with George Kurusu when she was in the 4th form at St. Theresa's Grammar School Ughelli. However, the matter was amicably resolved through the ingenuity and maturity demonstrated by Ubi. That Titi has compassion and love for Ubi is not in doubt, but her inability to openly discuss her past with Ubi either before or in the early stage of their marriage reiterates the younger generation's eagerness to shake off the old system, perceived as synonymous with the traditional bondage which only affects women's social status in Africa but does not in any way diminish the social image of men who have children through sexual escapades before marriage. Titi is depicted here by Ojaide as a counter-example of a 'good wife', who is expected to confess her past to her husband before their marriage, as demanded by Urhobo culture and tradition.

A dimensional approach towards the articulation of cultural and social transgression in the anthology is skilfully reverberated in the devaluation of matrimonial bliss, as underlined in *I used to drive a Mercedes.* Ojaide created a world dominated primarily by women, where men function only as passing characters, effeminate husbands, lovers who are only preoccupied by sexual gratification. The bond between men and

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women is seen as a material exchange and marriage is overtly commodified. The narrative presents the undermining effects of adultery not simply on the cohesion of family life, but its attendant consequences on the individual lives of those going through divorce. The matrimonial bond between Alfred, a Major in the army education corps and Sarah is doomed to fail because of their inherent incompatibility. While Alfred is hardworking, compassionate and considerate, Sarah is wayward, contemptuous and very materialistic. The relationship between the two is played out in terms of power and domination: Sarah is depicted as heartless, withdrawn and selfish, while Alfred is weak, foolish and outright stupid. In an attempt to please his wife, Alfred indulges and pampers Sarah, who descends in sexual decadence and immorality in order to obtain the material benefits that her husband cannot give her:

„*Sarah's taste was now insatiable. She wanted to live with Major Tobrise as if she was still with Alhaji Isa Mohammed in a London hotel. She suddenly travelled out, according to her, to visit her girlfriends In Kano. She kept the tryst with Isa and returned after five days of Tumultuous love making*" (p. 60).

Although Sarah is an extraordinarily attractive woman, she allows her beauty to go to her head. She sinks out of her depth in cutting away from her role as a wife. But one also has to blame Alfred, who allows her to operate freely without any measure of restraint, to the extent of allowing her to stay in the hostel and travel at will wherever she wants, which allows her, for the first time in her marriage, to explore various techniques of sex which Alfred could not provide her while living with him as a housewife. She is for the first time enthralled, aroused, awakened and dazed by the monstrosity of sexual exploration she has with Isa Mohammed in a London hotel and its repeated performance in Kano, which she has not the strength of character to prevent.

Sarah's infidelity reached its crescendo when she starts making impossible demands that Alfred could not meet:

'*Major for nothing. See your mates with Mercedes for their wives while I am still on footroen and you driving a Beetle*'. (p. 60)

Alfred was pushed to the extreme when Sarah eventually leaves him. He decides to sell his poultry farm and buy a Mercedes, thinking that the acquisition of a Mercedes Benz would lure Sarah to come back to him.

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But the detour he makes to the female undergraduate hall at the University of Benin, to pick 'Miss Ekaite Okon' leads to a quarrel between him and the porters which unfortunately degenerates to a free-for all brawl, culminating in the burning down of the army jeep which contained the bundles of five hundred and fifty thousand naira notes, the proceeds from the sale of his Midway Poultry farm.

This incident drives Major Alfred Tobrise out of his mind. He is declared mentally ill and is discharged from the army. In his madness, he takes to prowling the streets, howling: '*I used to drive a Mercedes. Give way and let me pass*'. (p. 53)

A cursory look at the development of the narrative and its imagery reveals the depth and subtlety of Ojaide's vision on how helpless an individual could become in a decadent society where social and matrimonial values have been grossly compromised.

Overzealousness at deploring cultural nuances in contemporary Nigerian society is obliquely criticised in *My master's son-in-law.* Here, Ojaide depicts the negative aspect of Urhobo culture. While Mr. Tadafe is an Urhobo man grounded in the ethos of his culture, he is not enslaved to its norms. He is pragmatic and considerate in his dealings with his house boy, Isaac Oghuvwu, who his kinsmen want to prevent from marrying his daughter Vera, because they counselled that Urhobo culture forbids the free-born from marrying the bonded. But Mr. Tadafe reacts differently and defends Isaac's innocence by chasing away the culturally irredentist kinsmen from his house:

„*Leave my house and don't ever come here again. This youngman is human being and if he and Vera love each Other, they will marry despite his background. You would not See him to insult if I did not ask him to come*" (p. 50).

Mr. Tadafe's reaction is symptomatic of a man who knows that although culture is fundamentally important to the well-being of everyman so long as it relates to them in their daily lives and arises out of the important aspects of their past and directly address their experiences in the present. A culture which only acts as the sophistry paraphernalia of superficial dressing, without the inherent, intrinsic internal regulatory mechanism of some flaws embedded within its ethos, cannot drive a society forward.

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In this story, Ojaide explores the dilemma of a boy whose identity is controversially steeped in cultural ambivalence reflecting the major concern with generic African identity formation, which is reminiscent of the story of a boy's search for his identity within the nation state of Somalia in Nurrudin Farah's *Maps*. While such identity search becomes somewhat transcendental and sustained in Farah's *Maps*, it is only sudden and spontaneous in *My master's son-in-law.* Ojaide's narrative broadens and deepens our understanding of the complexity of ethnic chauvinism in contemporary Nigeria, as a convenient weapon that could be wielded by any individual or group to demoralise and humiliate another person or group perceived as not conforming to its primordial values.

The low appreciation of hard work and productivity in contemporary Nigeria is ostensibly dramatized in the anthology. This is succinctly underscored in *The book case*. The story examines the plight of Mrs Fatumbi who diligently and meticulously toiled day and night to write a seminal Geography text: *The Human Geography of West Africa.* Mrs. Fatumbi's erroneous understanding of Nigeria's social dilemma is that the government celebrates academic excellence and encourages authors. Hence she assumes that her book:

„*Though a textbook, should do well. After all, the nation Emphasizes the education of its youths. Parents would go any lengths to educate their children. The Federal Government and the various State governments always talked of supporting Nigerian authors who could Write books that had a Nigerian flavour. Mrs. Fatumbi knew her book had A West African, albeit a Nigerian, flavour that would be difficult for any Geographer to mat*ch" (pp. 125-126).

The story attempts to link nation, culture and Nigerian national narrative, which focuses on the traumas of prolonged military rule, national collapse and misplaced priorities. How does Nigeria, with its ebbing values, write its contradictory positions among other, saner countries of the world? How does Nigeria re-think the conjunction of nation, culture and narrative amidst the chaos in its social milieu? In *The book case*, the conflicts between the Nigerian nation and its citizens are generated by opposing ideas about what should constitute national values. Mrs. Fatumbi represents the typical voice of the national ethos and the colonial era, in which academic excellence and contributions were honoured and acknowledged

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not only according to their individual merits, but also on the basis of their ability to uplift and positively project the image of the nation. By contrast, the Nigerian post-independence leaders, both civilians and military, are shown to be less sensitive towards these national values.

These contradictions in the value system underscores the bizarre turn-out at the book launch of Mrs. Fatumbi's text, marred by the absence of government patronage, which leads to the hospitalization and eventual death of Mrs. Fatumbi. The significance of the story lies in its portrayal of Nigeria as a nation which does not prioritise its values. As such, the story takes a new look at the vexed question of the social relevance of literature, the perception of the 'Nigeria project', and the nature of the aesthetic responses of individual Nigerian writers to the stifling socio-political realities in Nigeria. Invariably, the story locates literary production and reception within the context of the development of society.

An evaluation of the worthlessness of life without money and means of livelihood in contemporary Nigeria is clinically examined in *As in such things*. The story explores the life of Nick Mara, who lives on the fringes of social life. His business has failed, his son is gravely ill and he needs to refund a debt he owes his friend, who needs urgent medical attention abroad for a terminal disease.

Grounded in the personal story of the economic misfortunes of Nick Mara, *As in such things* encompasses the story of other Nigerians, helpless, depraved, rudderless, and economically jaundiced, in a nation that provides no meaningful forms of social welfare for their present and future. Nick Mara's decrepit home constitutes a general metaphor for the pervading squalor and utter poverty among the poor in contemporary Nigeria:

"*The building had not been repainted, and the peeling original paint gave the house a dull brownish ochre-like appearance. The inside was mouldy, the cushion-chairs cumbersome and smeared with sweat. Some were torn and I could tell that their springs were either broken or loose. I knew that Nick Mara was not yet doing well, at least financially from the look of his home. Anyone who had such a fine woman as Mrs. Mara would use his means to make her shine, but she looked like a star covered by clouds*" (p. 149).

The story portrays a nation that is ethnically divided, trapped in social disequilibrium, with no succour for the socially displaced. The image of Nigeria is grievously sullied by the scandalous social neglect of its

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citizens, given the usual rapidity with which the economic policies of successive Nigerian governments change, in contrast with the variations in the economic well-being of the rulers and the ruled. Ojaide argues that literary writing in present-day Nigeria should strive towards the responsibility to detail and preserve the interplay of the social and economic circumstances which affect the well-being of the citizens. The story's plot exposes a landscape grounded in misery, bedevilled by a perennial fuel crisis, harangued by a neglected health sector, typified by a General Hospital, '*where the consulting doctor would need a bribe before checking a patient whom he would advise to seek help at his private clinic*.' (p. 146)

As in such things is a pathetic story in which almost every aspect of Nigeria in the depth of socio-economic deprivation is touched upon: lack, want, poor infrastructure, ethnic chauvinism, vanity and poverty induced deaths. At no point does any hopeless situation change for the better in the story. The story's pessimism is highlighted by the string of misfortunes that marks the life of Nick Mara:

'*His son had died. While there, I learnt his friend who could not be flown abroad for treatment had also died. His car was parked, dry of fuel. His wife and relations were more afraid of what would happen to him in his distraught state than they were concerned about their mourning for the dead son and friend'* (p. 150).

In the face of the evidently dysfunctional governance, where social services are grossly insufficient and poorly delivered because the capacity for service delivery is manifestly lacking, the least Nick Mara and other hapless Nigerians could do is to give up in utter despondency.

The theme of poverty and deprivation is further accentuated in *The wake keeping*. The corpse of Odova was kept in the morgue at Ufuoma clinic in Warri, but the body could not be retrieved by his children because the corpse, having been kept in the morgue, has contracted a huge demurrage which has to be offset before it can be released. Though Odova has many children, none of them is well-off enough to pay for the morgue charges and give Odova a befitting burial. His extended family is so affected by abject poverty that his corpse is abandoned in the morgue, which constitutes a desecration of Urhobo tradition.

Ojaide expresses anxiety and concern for the uncertainty surrounding Odova's burial. The anxiety arises from the unclear fate of

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Odova, whose burial should have been accompanied by some traditional rites usually reserved for old men in African social setting, but the delay in burying the corpse is now attracting controversy and generating communal resentment against his family and kinsmen from the villagers, who perceive such delay as a transgression of Urhobo traditional values. The characters in *The wake-keeping* are trapped in a world where the balance between persons and objects has been upset. In a typical African cultural milieu, there has always been a considerable veneration for certain kinds of objects, often identified as sacred, like the corpse of an aged man or woman, usually perceived as a symbol of communal bond. Yet this veneration is never directed towards the more physical substance of the object, but rather to certain cultural significations attached to it. It is not sufficient to put the blame for the delay in Odova's burial on the inability of his children to provide the money for his burial, the community should have tasked itself to undertake this process so as to maintain cultural continuity as dictated by African cultural norms.

The construction of the stories in the anthology is satirical and allows Ojaide to include detailed description and exposition of the socio-cultural worldview of the Urhobo of the Niger Delta, Nigeria. The geographic range in the anthology is significantly smaller, in that most actions and events in the stories predominantly take place in Urhobo villages and some towns in mid-western Nigeria. Only *The book case* and *As in such things* are set in Lagos. This offers Ojaide the opportunity of commenting on the impact of the social and cultural breakdown in Nigeria generally, and its effects in the Urhobo enclave.

The stories in *God's medicine-men and other stories* convey a forceful, cohesive, acerbic and satiric pronouncement on Nigeria topical problems: corruption, bribery, ethnic division and social irresponsibility on the part of Nigerian political leaders. The pronouncement is substantially steeped in the dramatic treatment, enhanced and supported by an abundance of imagery and metaphors exemplified in the various dialogues in the stories of the anthology. The daunting, amazing incidents portrayed in *Come back when you are ready to die*, *The last-born*, *The Major's appeal*, *As in such things* and *The wake-keeping* are so organised and skilfully strung together and knotted so as culminate in a hilarious climax.

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Proverbs are extensively used in both *Come back when you are ready to die* and *The wake-keeping* as '*a traditional speech trope, to validate what the writer aims at conveying ... These proverbs give a distinctive cultural identity to modern African literature*' (Ojaide, p. 9). These proverbs are used in the stories to reiterate the importance of culture to Urhobo society and show how often some aspects of this culture conflict with the social and emotional demands of the characters involved.

It is interesting to note that Ojaide's major literary forte is Poetry, and *God's medicine-men* and *other stories* is his first attempt at writing short-stories. While the narratives in the anthology evoke a sense of place and events which stimulate the reader's imagination with the scenes and actions in the Nigerian social and cultural landscape, the limited use of dialogue in the narrative structures of most stories constitutes a major weakness. However, Ojaide's spirited sense of humour, deft use of satire and fluidity in the language deployed in the description of actions and events make the anthology a success.

In conclusion, without being exhaustive, this paper has argued that Ojaide, in this anthology, has poignantly appropriated the devices of oral tradition and voiced the tragedy of the transcendental transgression of social and cultural norms in contemporary Nigeria. Some of the social and cultural ills treated in the stories, like the mystery of the supernatural, corruption, matrimonial upheaval, poverty, the misplaced priorities of government and the loss of cultural values, point to the perils which get in the way of Nigeria's steady march to nationhood.

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Rezumat:

Transgresiuni: Prezervarea peisajului tradiţional în "God's medicine-men & other stories", de Tanure Ojaide

Tanure Ojaide, un celebru poet nigerian, este un scriitor aflat constant în căutarea unei viziuni alternative asupra societății chemate să răspundă preocupărilor privind deteriorarea climatului social-politic din Nigeria. Problematica socială intermediată de *orature* furnizează cadrul predominant în care au fost analizate volumele sale de poezie. La debutul carierei literare, întinsă acum pe trei decenii, intrarea lui Ojaide, în 1973, în peisajul literaturii nigeriene era consfinţită de publicarea volumului *Children of Iroko. God's medicinemen and other stories* este primul său volum de nuvele. Această antologie de proză scurtă exprimă o adâncă indignare morală prin denunţarea stării de decădere a etosului socio-cultural din Nigeria contemporană. Lucrarea noastră evaluează maniera în care Ojaide explorează tematica amplă a prăbuşirii normelor sociale şi culturale în societatea nigeriană, exemplificată în volumul amintit. Sunt examinate pe rând complexitatea intersectărilor dintre tradiţie şi modernitate ce au afectat semnificativ viaţa oamenilor și modul în care hibriditatea culturală accentuează efectul crizei societății nigeriene contemporane.

Cuvinte cheie:

Imaginație, transgresare, socio-cultural, ethos, peisaj, tradiţie.

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