

The Signification of African Spirituality in Selected Short Stories of Tanure Ojaide

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Abstract:

African writers' cultural settings are often reflected in their artistic creations. In his writings, Tanure Ojaide constantly re-affirms his identification with, and indebtedness to, his Urhobo traditional heritage. The short story seems to afford him the opportunity to interrogate the visible (physical) and invisible (spiritual) in the lives of his people which he reflects through his fictional characters. This paper therefore, adopts a pragmatic approach as it examines Ojaide's preoccupation with the place, representation, and implications of spirituality through some stories selected from his four collections of short fiction. The writer projects ideas around African spirituality mainly through the relationship between the living and the dead, the importance of the final resting place for the dead, the existence and operations of supernatural forces capable of oppressive and sexual attacks, and the efficacy of bewitchment on the living. This study will assist in exploring the continued spirituality of Africans as expressed through Christian beliefs and traditional mysticism.

Keywords: African spirituality, Mysticism, Signification, Tanure Ojaide

Introduction

Modern African literature generally reflects the realities of the African condition and existence. That reality includes the norms, values, superstitions, philosophies, traditions and other belief systems peculiar to the African by virtue of lived experiences. For African writers, art is a mirror of reality; hence one can say that African literature incorporates and interrogates the historical and cultural worldviews of the people. Since literature is a cultural production, African writers consciously or unconsciously, in their literary representations, often reflect the lived experiences of their people. This is why some beliefs and practices that are not necessarily grounded on empirical evidence, but which are specific to some groups or make meaning to them as integral parts of their indigenous knowledge systems, form the backdrop of a writer's

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work. Hence, cultural theory explores the signification of material and non-material things such as belief systems as well as how they are represented physically through nature. These factors are important in discussing the works of a writer grounded in the culture, myths, legends, and belief systems of his or her people.

Much as Ojaide is best known as a poet, he is also a fiction writer and has through the decades published several novels and collections of short stories. His short stories collections include: *God's Medicine-Men and Other Stories* (2004), *The Debt-Collector and Other Stories* (2009), *The Old Man in a State House and Other Stories* (2012) and *God's Naked Children: Selected and New Stories* (2018). His stories are marked by cultural reflections that situate his characters, narration, and thematic preoccupations as he has himself admitted that the writer is not an “air-plant” but one rooted in a specific place which has its geography and culture.

Conceptualising Spirituality in African Literature and Society

African spirituality has to do with the understanding that beliefs and practices affect every facet of the life of an African. Njoki Nathani Wane describes spirituality as “not affiliated with a particular religion but was an everyday ritual. It was a way of being, of connecting with the land, the universe and creation” (Wane, 2002: 136). The renowned African scholar of religion and philosophy, John Mbiti avers the African life is filled with spirituality (1990). Specifically, an important aspect of the African belief system is the concept of the existence of two parallel worlds. Commenting on this, Wole Soyinka argues that the African reality can be best understood as a simultaneous inhabitation of the world of the living and the dead as well as the present and the past (1976). He says further that it is the tension between all these coordinates that forms the primary object of mimesis for African art and by extension its literature.

According to Ojaide people who share the same birthplace, culture, and society are connected in their group values and interests (Ojaide, 1999: 236). This assertion is underscored in literary studies by Abiola Irele's observation that the concern with historical and sociological realities makes African literature a more accurate and comprehensible account of contemporary African reality than sociological or political documents (Irele, 1981). It is for this reason that I intend to use African culture in general and Urhobo/Pan Edo culture in particular to study the signification of spirituality in selected short stories of Ojaide. Culture is used here in its broadest implication and this research strives to foster a better appreciation of a minority's belief systems as well as affirm its contribution to global cultures.

In trying to explain the peculiarities of spirituality in the Urhobo culture, Ochuko Tonukari writes:

Traditional Urhobo basically view the universe as comprising basically of two realms: the visible and the invisible realms. They grasp the cosmos as a three-tiered structure, consisting of the heaven above, the physical world and the world underneath. Each of these is inhabited by different categories of beings. The Creator and a host of spirit beings, including arch-divinities, inhabit the heaven above; other divinities, ancestors, and myriads of unnamed spirits dwell in the world beneath; while human beings occupy the physical earth. Human beings may be less powerful, but their world is the centre and focus of attention. It belongs to human beings as sensible beings to maintain the delicate balance in the universe. This is what assures the happiness and prosperity of individuals and the community. http://www.waado.org/UrhoboCulture/Religion/tonukari/Urhobo_community_two_worlds.htm

To the African, spirituality involves beliefs and practices that relate to human life. Sickness, for example, is not only a state of being physically unhealthy but could also connote an imbalance in one's psychological and spiritual life. Although many Africans today have abandoned their various forms of traditional worship or veneration, and embraced non-indigenous religions, the average African is still highly spiritual and still believes in the existence and influence of forces beyond the ordinary in human life. These forces could be benevolent or malevolent. They could be responsible for turns in one's fortune for better or for worse. In cases where benevolent forces are perceived to be at work, humans experience a state of well-being in life's endeavors, while, malevolent forces cause sickness or bad fortune and so require a search for solution or methods of amelioration through supernatural interventions.

Ojaide's stories set in his Agbon and other places reflect the life lived around him. Agbon is a clan in Urhobo land in Delta Central Senatorial District of Delta State, Nigeria into which the writer was born. What happens in real life is replicated through fiction. It is only that fiction sometimes imagines and stretches the humanly possible into fantasy. That is why many aspects of the spiritual fall into the realm of fantasy and myth. The realism that the fiction writer thus aims at is to express the humanly possible even in the imaginary. As far as the invisible and spiritual are concerned in these stories, they are the indigenous beliefs and myths that permeate the characters and ideas of many Africans, including many educated Christianized and Islamized among them.

In Ojaide's short stories, he pries into beliefs of the characters and, often using the omnipresent narrator's viewpoint, shines a searchlight into the complexities of life as lived in the respective environments representing the settings in the stories. Hence, some of his short stories treat the theme of the metaphysical relationship between the living and the dead. What comes out of these stories is that there are alternative realities in the physical mundane life and the spiritual esoteric life. The visible and invisible, which though are contrastive, are expected to merge into one to define a human existence. In other words, the physical and visible must be in agreement with the spiritual and invisible for human life to have harmony and peace.

Elsewhere, Ojaide has written of the "Urhoro" of the Urhobo people which indicates a pre-human existence, which some describe as life in the womb, where people choose their respective destinies before being born to live them out (Ojaide, 1999: 235). This again shows that in his understanding of the Urhobo culture, the spiritual precedes the physical which it collaborates with in life before going back to a spiritual state upon death. In this conception, life is cyclical, moving from the spiritual to the physical and back to the spiritual in an unending cycle. This spiritual or rather supernatural state affects the Urhobo and other Africans who believe in them and many people spend their time and resources to protect themselves from malefactors in the forms of witches, wizards, and other evil forces.

Generally, Ojaide's works are suffused with substances and symbolisms that underscore his unapologetic identification with his Urhobo cultural heritage. Many scholars, including this writer, have written extensively on the influence of Urhobo orature to include folkloric elements in Ojaide's poetry. His novels, especially *The Activist*, have also received critical exegeses in the areas of environmental activism and female agency. But, not much scholarly attention has been accorded his short fiction collections even as I acknowledge here, Stephen Kekeghe's chapter contribution where he lauds Ojaide's use of "his short stories to express mental health situations and challenges, a relevant area of human endeavor not commonly expressed by Nigerian writers" (Kekeghe, 2020: 326) However, my study will not dwell on Ojaide's clinical representation of the theme of madness in literature as his did. Henry Oripeloye (2014) applies a postmodernist reading to Ojaide's *God's Medicine Men* through which he affirms a dismantling and fragmentation of traditional cultural values by post-colonial tendencies. Again, I choose to adopt a cultural examination of Ojaide's interest in the invisible and intangible forces – spirituality – at play in the lives of characters in his short stories.

I will use some of his short stories to interrogate the nature and importance of spirituality which appear to reflect aspects of the author's

people's worldviews. The writer projects this mainly through their beliefs in, for example, the relationship between the living and the dead, the importance of the final resting place for the dead, the existence and operations of supernatural forces capable of oppressive and sexual attacks, as well as the efficacy of bewitchment on the living. Ojaide's preoccupation with these subjects are consistently expressed and reflected in the characters, setting, and thematic concerns in his short stories, yet has not received commensurate critical attention.

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In Ojaide's short stories, the reader encounters two worlds – the visible and the invisible, both real in man's physical and emotional/psychological life. The binaries of myth and reality are collapsed into the traditional belief system under which many of the fictional characters in the writer's stories operate. Though one is visible and the other invisible, there is no boundary between the spiritual and physical in the lives of the characters. This could also be described in the sense of reality and fantasy, a blend of which is an important aspect of the spirituality exercised by the characters. These two aspects of life, though one is perceptible and the other unseen, are realities or put in another way, alternative realities of life.

"The Benevolence of the Dead" from *The Old Man in a State House* is one of the short stories Ojaide uses to represent the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead, and their connectedness. The story also underscores Tonukari's assertion that "Ancestors are essentially benevolent spirits –they know and have their families' interest at heart" (Tonukari, n.p.). The narrator is a young girl who loses her father at an early age and has to live with an uncle who mistreats her. He starves her, engages her in arduous tasks, and refuses to cater for her educational needs. One particular night, after having prayed fervently to God for succor from her sufferings, her father visits her in her sleep. Apparently, he is able to see her pitiable plight from his abode of the dead in the invisible world. The little girl's earnest plea for help brings the dead father back to the land of the living as a spirit being. He interacts with her, reassures her that all will be well for her henceforth. Her fortunes soon change for the better as her dead father had promised her in her sleep. He is a benevolent spirit and a guardian who somehow manages from his spirit-world to give her emotional and psychological support as well as ensure that others still alive give his daughter the material and financial support that she needs to develop herself as a young girl.

The foregoing projection is in consonance with an Urhobo belief, replicated in the excerpt below, that the death of a relative does not end the affinity between the living and the dead:

The dead pass through the gates to the spiritual realm when all necessary rituals have been performed. As the departed are never regarded as being really dead in the grave, their offspring and other relations still refer to them as their fathers, mothers, brothers or sisters, which they were before their transition. They are believed to be capable of exercising their parental roles or so, though now in a more powerful and unrestricted way, over their survivors. (Ottuh 2017: 212)

Ojaide portrays a mystical relationship between the living and the dead in the aforementioned story. It is only the narrator who sees and interacts freely with her father whenever he appears to her. It is significant that the man wears the same clothes he was used to wearing when he was alive as another form of identification. However, the writer describes his eyes as if they were stars. So, in appearing to his daughter, the dead father carries both human and non-human qualities. After their encounter in the girl's sleep, the dead father leaves walking backwards. The Urhobo generally attribute to ghosts a weird behavior such as walking backwards.

In any case, on his part, the late father keeps a close watch over his daughter and is sensitive to her travails. He always appears to encourage and support her at crucial moments when she is facing some difficulties. These interventions provide her with the material and psychological stability she requires to thrive as a young woman. For her father, he is at peace in the spirit realm knowing that he is able to perform his parental responsibilities towards her even though he is not physically with her. All he asks of her is to "Always remain a good girl!" (*The Old Man in a State House...*: 6). However, towards the end of the story, he seems to abandon her after she sleeps with her boyfriend when she had not graduated from school. One possible interpretation for this is that as a spirit being, his duty was to guide and guard her through a period when she was relatively innocent, vulnerable, and helpless. That she now has another male companion, a lover, could mean the late father feels his assignment regarding her welfare has been completed and he can quietly retire back to his abode in the invisible world. The young woman will henceforth learn how to cope with life's challenges relying on her abilities and newfound partner.

On the converse side, Ojaide might be implying also that there are physical consequences for disobeying the injunctions or expectations of the dead or spiritual forces. In "The Benevolence of the Dead", we can infer that the spirit of the late father distances itself from the daughter the

moment she has sexual intercourse with her boyfriend. His only expectation of her as he helped her navigate through life's difficulties was that she should "always remains a good girl" which she promised to. When she violates this pact, he separates himself from her physically and spiritually. However, a factor worthy of note in all of all of the narrative is that Ojaide's inadvertently reveals the mutually beneficial relationship which exists between the living and the dead. In the above story, the father is roused from his resting place in the spirit world to come to his daughter's aid in her moments of great need in the human world. He is at peace knowing he is able to ameliorate his daughter's sufferings while the daughter, on her part, experiences a measure of progress and emotional balance from her father's spiritual presence in her life.

This concept of filial responsibility and obligation between the living and the dead is depicted via a reversed perspective in the title story of Ojaide's second short story collection. In "The Debt-Collector", it becomes the duty of the relatives to redeem the image and ensure the well-being of the dead. The body of a dead person is referred to as "*orinvwin*" in Urhobo. David Okpako further elucidates that:

the word *orinvwin* embodies complex emotions associated with the universal fear of the dead e.g. the imperative that the dead body must be treated with dignity, the need to satisfy the family honor in accordance with the status of the dead person and of his descendants; above all, the belief that the person though dead to the living, is alive in *erinvwin*, observing how the descendants deal with what is left of him/her (Okpako, 2014: 6).

Peter Ekeh also corroborates this important cultural rite of passage among the Urhobo when he states:

Living people inhabit Akpo and control its affairs; Erivwin is peopled by the spirits of the dead. Those among the departed who have been properly buried, and for whom prescribed rituals of passage have been performed by their living relations, will live in peace therein. Until the dead achieve such status, their spirits wander in strange places awaiting admission into their final resting places (Ekeh, 2004: 30).

In this story, the corpse of Ituru, a debtor who has been unable to pay back the money he owes his creditor, Shegbe, is forcibly seized by the rich man. This throws the family of the bereaved into double grief for a number of reasons that have deep-seated cultural implications. First, this act amounts to a violation of the spirit of the dead man as the Urhobo, and by extension African, concept of death recognizes the need to accord the body of the dead a final resting place within his family

stead into which he returns in his next life. The traditional thought is that if Ituru's corpse is not reclaimed from his creditor, then "their family would be depleted by one adult: dead or alive" (*The Debt Collector...*: 26) and his "spirit will continue to haunt us" (28). Michael Nabofa also suggests that the spirit in this condition would be restless and suffer serious agony (Nabofa, 2011: 367). In his article, Anthony Agbegbedia describes this relationship within the context of Urhobo culture thus:

... the Urhobo worldview embraces the belief that what we referred to as extended family (*orua*) in this mundane community of people has been pre-existent in the spiritual world (*erivwin*). For them therefore, beings are released from there to populate this earth and at death, one returns to it....Therefore among the Urhobo, there is a belief in what is called *erivwinr'uwevwin* (the spiritual abode of the household), *erivwinr'orua* (spiritual abode of the extended family)....This explains among other purposes, patri-linear family system inclusive, why the Urhobo like Biblical ancient Israelites bury their dead ones in the homestead of their fathers to make sure that when he or she would reincarnate, he or she would come back to life through the same family (Anthony Agbegbedia, 2015: 59).

Yet another reason why the family of the deceased is anxious is that the family's honor is at stake. They can become the butt of cruel jokes, negative references and social stigmatization for generations to come because of Ituru's "shame of indebtedness" (27). A third factor is the fear that the captor might tamper with some vital body parts of the dead for ritual purposes and if the dead reincarnates, these body parts will ostensibly be missing. The family thus resolves that "We cannot shelve our responsibilities. He was ours and still ours. Let us save our man from disgrace – he cannot be a worthy ancestor buried in the bush belonging to the chief" (28). By the evening of the same day, the family lives up to this collective charge and raise the remaining forty pounds which their dead member owed. They return the money to Shegbe who also releases the corpse to them for the final burial. The timely intervention by the living members of Ituru's family affords the dead man respect and a peaceful place of rest in the realm of the spirits and among the pantheon of ancestors.

The above textual examples depict the mutually beneficial relationship that exists between characters in the visible and invisible worlds as portrayed in some of Ojaide's short stories. The dead is seen going out of its way to come back to life to guide and guard the interests and good fortunes of the living as in "The Benevolence of the Dead", while the living do not shirk their duty of restoring the honor of the dead and ensuring their smooth transition or passage to the world of the spirits as in "The Debt-Collector".

The theme of separation as a result of disregarding a spiritual pact is found in “Sharing Love” in Ojaide’s *The Old Man in a State House and Other Short Stories*. The narrator and beautiful Kena are very much in love but are eventually forced to part ways because Kena is a “Mami Wata pickin” (62). This last expression means, although human, Kena has some form of spirit possession and belongs to a female water spirit or deity popularly believed to bestow beauty and wealth to associates. Kena is also projected as being already married to a spirit husband who inhabits the marine world but comes only at night to possess her. Despite several warnings from Kena’s parents that they are not allowed to be together because Kena is already committed to a spirit spouse, both lovers decide to elope to the United States of America. After Kena and her boyfriend enjoy only three days of uninterrupted bliss, Kena falls sick and various medical tests in different hospitals are incapable of diagnosing the cause of the severe headaches she is experiencing. Unable to find a bio-medical solution to her condition abroad, Kena returns to her home country to look for a cure. Once back in Nigeria, she resumes her relationship with the spirit lover who heals her because she spiritually belongs to him and has returned to continue their affair.

Ojaide underscores the idea that the forces that inhabit and operate from the spirit realm are very powerful and disobeying them or going against their wishes will only cause more problems for the living especially those with whom they share a metaphysical relationship. Kena is a person of two worlds as she appears comfortable with each partner in both disparate love relationships. She has a consensual relationship with her spirit husband who does not mind sharing her love with the human lover in so far as all the parties respect boundaries and maintain a tacit understanding. The spirit lover “owns” her at night but the boyfriend can have her during the day. The spiritual husband only demonstrates his hold over her when Kena and her boyfriend try to outsmart him by relocating out of the country. Eloping to the United States of America from Nigeria does not stop Kena’s spiritual experience. By implication, the African belief is that nobody can hide or escape from spiritual forces that affect them by leaving one setting for a distant one.

While it is possible to have mutually satisfying contacts between human and spirit beings, Ojaide also presents a non-consensual association in “God’s Medicine-Men”, the title story of *God’s Medicine-Men and Other Stories*. Endurance, the protagonist, contends with some strange experiences. In school, she is often attacked by an invisible and oppressive weight called an incubus or succubus. She goes home to look for a solution to this problem and is confronted with another dilemma: she gets sexually violated by an invisible presence. In spite of her efforts she could “...not stop the intruder from entering into her at will. She wore rousers to

bed, and yet she woke with a feeling of sticky wetness between her legs” (69). Worse still is that she is the daughter of a pastor and has been brought up in the Christian way to believe that evil forces have no power over her. Yet her prayers do not have any effect on the source or subject responsible for these forceful invasions and body violations. This creates anxiety in her and causes her physical and emotional trauma. Her friend introduces her to Pastor Odele who combines his Christian worship with that of Olokun, the traditional river goddess. He recommends a spiritual bath in Sakpoba River to rid her of these oppressive forces at work in her life after which she gets some reprieve.

The manner through which Endurance’s predicament is finally resolved calls to question the religious practice of some modern-day clergymen. The writer satirizes some of them who seek and employ powers beyond the scope of their Christian faith. Pastor Odele may claim to be a man of the Christian God by virtue of carrying a small Bible, but he has no physical church structure to take his followers. He appears a charlatan even as he combines Christianity with traditional religion (the worship of the water goddess known as Olokun or Mami Wata); hence he and others like Pastor Efe (whom he later empowers) are referred to as “God’s medicine-men”. “Medicine-men” is here used as a paradoxical referent of the known, but often disparaged, practitioners of African traditional medicine. Ironically too, the writer seems to suggest that there are some spiritual problems which require handling in the manner Pastor Odele did Endurance’s against the backdrop of some traditional African thought that power reinforces power. Unorthodox as they may be, the admixture of disparate therapies or alternatives are sometimes capable of restoring balance and harmony to troubled individuals within certain cultural and spiritual contexts.

Ojaide further explores the manifestation of African spirituality in his short fiction by interrogating the effects of superstitious beliefs on the psyche and lifestyle of a person or community. Enajite Ojaruega attests to the possibility of this line of reasoning when she affirms elsewhere that: “The Urhobo also believe in the supernatural. For example, that witches operate in their coven world to cause mischief or harm to those they are envious of” (Ojaruega, 2015: 141). In both “The Cherry Tree Palaver” and “Nobody Loves Me”, Ojaide presents characters whose minds are conditioned to ascribe their problems to the manipulations of spiritual forces. Once this situation arises, such persons are bound to act on this impulse as troubled and seek spiritual healing. This may be despite the fact that these people are only imagining that negative forces are against them. Among the Urhobo and other Africans, many people attribute their sicknesses and poverty to spiritual attacks. This leads many to worry and seek salvation or healing from other than

scientific sources. Hence, many go to traditional healers or to Pentecostal pastors for assistance.

In “The Cherry Tree Palaver”, the people of Unoh village have become disenchanted with the ageless cherry tree and seek “the destruction of the tree’s resident demon” (38) by cutting it down. The people experience short lifespan because of their unhealthy habits but put the blame on witches and evil spirits that they claim meet in coven on that tree. Clearly, the poor villagers lack scientific knowledge to relate their unhealthy lifestyles to the premature death of young villagers. They also lose sight of the tree’s functions in the ecosystem. Worse still, the exuberant pastor and his member exploit the villagers’ naivety. They amplify the people’s fears through religious conspiracy theories and even further propagate the superstition that the sap of the old tree as they cut it down is the blood of the victims of witchcraft. Subsequently, cutting down the old tree did not stop people from dying young in the village. It is noteworthy that at the end of the story, an educated son – a scientist and a professor of Botany – who was skeptical from the outset about the people’s views is able through logical reasoning to convince his superstitious father to change his unfounded beliefs. The sturdy cherry tree becomes a signification of ignorance that leads to superstitions. Ojaide seems to be saying here that many of the conditions attributed to spiritual attacks in Urhobo society (and other parts of Africa) are most likely as a result of ignorance that leads to senseless action as the cutting down of the ageless tree and the destruction of the ecosystem of the area.

Ngozi, in “Nobody Loves Me”, is a very beautiful woman at the prime of her womanhood. However, she is unable to attract the attention of men to seek for her love or fall in love with her despite her frantic efforts. She is troubled by all manners of thoughts and even remembers:

... that her elder sister was still living a spinster at forty-five in Aba. Is it true that the female children of her mother were jinxed not to have men? An old aunt had died after confessing that nothing could be done to remove the curse she had placed on her mother’s children (107).

At this stage, her condition becomes psychosomatic as although not sick physically, her mind is extremely troubled by her unappealing circumstances such that her appearance becomes lackluster. She seeks the assistance of a medicine man but her situation does not change for the better. She falls into depression and ends up committing suicide because she feels nobody loves her. Depression in many traditional African societies is often associated with being bewitched. Often, the fear of stigmatization deprives them from seeking medical help on time and from trained professionals. Because many who suffer from severe depression, as in bi-polar or schizophrenic cases, tend to “hear voices,”

they would prefer consulting traditional healers for solutions to their problems. Ngozi's case does not even degenerate to a severe case of mental disorder before she takes her own life. Her sense of low self-esteem might have just been responsible for her not having male admirers. Her problems appear to be psychological and may not have the spiritual dimension she relates it to.

An important experience of African spirituality surrounds a people's apprehension of their indigenous medical practices and the forces behind it. Ojaide's weaves the story of "The Healer's Favorite Son Dies" from his latest collection, *God's Naked Children: Selected and New Stories* around this cultural trope. Aderha, whose name means "born at a crossroads", is the protagonist and regarded as an enigma for several reasons. His mother, hard pressed by labor pangs on her way to the market gave birth to him at a place where three roads meet. Within the Urhobo and other African traditional cosmology, a crossroads is regarded as the meeting or gathering place of spirits. It is where humans make sacrifices and petitions to the spirits for malevolent or benevolent purposes. The signification of this is that anyone unwittingly caught in this location would either suffer some form of catastrophe or be the recipient of good fortunes from these resident spirits.

In Aderha's case, the spirits were benevolent towards him, thus he grows up as a superhuman imbued with extraordinary powers. He also puts these qualities to good use as he takes up the profession of a traditional healer of mad persons. For the medicines he uses for treatment, he relies on the efficacy of roots and herbs from plants and trees coupled with arcane incantations. The narrator tells us that Aderha spoke and understood the language of the plants as it is believed that the spirits lived in the plants (153). As a result, he was quite famous and celebrated as a great medicine man capable of taming "the spirit of insanity" (144). This affirms the belief among Africans that madness is a form of spirit possession rather than purely a medical condition.

However, Aderha's professional fame and good fortune are put to test when his favorite son and acolyte, Edewor suddenly becomes mad. Always in his father's company during his several forays into the forest to collect herbs for treating patients, Edewor on a particular occasion ventured far into the forest on his own. His father's frantic search for him leads him to the bottom of the *akpobrisi* tree, where he recovers Edewor, already besieged by the spirit of madness. Against the background of Urhobo folklore, the *akpobrisi* tree is said to be the most feared tree in the forest and demands certain rites for fortification before a medicine man can take leaves and barks from it. Aderha had always been the one to do so when the need arises and always kept his son away from this task. It thus appeared as if on this particular occasion, Edewor ignorantly violated this practice when he went out to the forest on his own. He was therefore

assailed by the spirit of the *akpobrisi* tree which is assumed afflicted him with the non-violent but incurable type of psychopathy.

The ultimate irony here is the inability of an acclaimed traditional healer of persons with extreme forms of mental disorders to cure his favorite son of even a supposedly mild form of insanity. Aderha's life story which started on a good note ends in pitiable tragedy as he not only loses his favorite son to a sickness which he is famous for curing in others, but also might himself soon succumb to. This is because an attack from the spirit of the *akpobrisi* tree is imminent as in his hurry to retrieve his son, he forgot to perform the rites required for protection. Aderha's fate reminds one of the tragedy of Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu upon the death of his favorite son, Obika in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Both are remembered as male characters who were abandoned by their spiritual sources of powers in their moments of greatest needs. Maybe, the lesson to take home from these representations is that the spirits do not have favorites!

Conclusion

From the focal stories interrogated, Ojaide presents characters whose physical lives and psychological conditions are associated with, and controlled by spiritual dimensions against the cultural backdrop of an African epistemology. The writer's characters live the spiritual world in the physical world. Both worlds coalesce to determine the reality of the living. Even though there are visible and invisible aspects to the lives of the characters, their portrayal is realistic in the sense that these configurations are interwoven in reality. Some aspects of the unfathomable and spiritual may look like fantasy (such as the dead counseling the living, a lover or husband in the spirit world having a wife in the living world, and witches meeting at night in coven on top of a cherry tree), but these are beliefs that many Africans harbor in their minds and perceive as affecting their lived lives. They also have to be reconciled in the destinies of humans in order to be able to survive backlashes from evil humans and spirits. Clearly, for many Africans, the physical and the spiritual have to be in sync with each other for emotional and psychological peace and harmony.

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