



## **Implicit Satire, Ironic Slices of Life and the Ambiguity of Shifting Values in Ojaide's Short Stories**

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### **Abstract**

Tanure Ojaide has recently shifted his attention from poetry - for which he's been known - to the prose of the novel, autobiography and the short story. With two collections of short stories - *God's Medicine-men and Other Stories* (2004) and *The Old Man in a State House and Other Stories* (2012) to his name - time is rife to discuss him as a short story writer. Most of his tales are set in his native Urhobo country of Nigeria, and where they are set elsewhere, they centre on characters who are Urhobo or have brought Urhobo experience into play. His figures, sometimes his narrators often evoke Urhobo culture, engage the impress of the empire - and or what local values have made of such an impress - interrogate human foibles and conflicts and the ambiguity of the time with a sense of satire and irony and the tools of sarcasm. The allegorical title story of the second volume of his tales is an indication that the Niger Delta, which is all too evident in his poetry, is never too far from his imagination. In these short stories, Ojaide rather than judge, calls for our judgment, rather than sound conclusive leaves the conclusion to us. His stories demand from their readers a systematic articulation of feeling before each story's splendid mosaic can be appreciated.

### **Preamble**

The critique of the short story is not as simple as its size and brevity appear to the eye. Its shortness does not in anyway suggest that its consideration will also be crisp and concise. A short story critic like Odun Balogun remarks that critiquing a short story is a tedious enterprise. "Take the novel, for instance, you find out that the same structural tools you use to examine one novel you have to use to examine every single story in a collection of several short stories. In other words, each short story is a whole study in itself"(249). The relationship between a novel and a short story is akin to that between a normal human being and a midget. All the attributes



of the regular person are also evident in the dwarf except that the latter's are usually pint-sized or in smaller denominations as it were. Much as one could not argue with certainty that a short story writer would also be a novelist, most writers began as short story scribblers and ended as remarkable novelists.<sup>1</sup> Some short story writers, particularly in Africa, started with the short story but could not grow taller.<sup>2</sup> In that case, one could just say that their muses were as diminutive as their short stories! Unlike most other African writers, Ojaide had become an established poet before he chose to go into the short fiction genre.<sup>3</sup> It is thus interesting to study his short tale experimentations because he seemed to have gone into this category of writing quite mature and with sufficient ideas.

Just as Helen Chukwuma observes that the short story “by its very form reflects the sense of urgency shown by its writers to record an event, a feeling, a phenomenon, a slice of life” (2), Ojaide's short stories are paced and urgent, filled with quips and satirical barbs thrown in for good measure but without missing any opportunity to cast ironies and sarcasm. Our author is not simply an avid story-writer, he occasionally enjoys twisting our emotion at the time we least expect him to do so. Thus, to read Ojaide is to be wary not to be fooled or emotionally toyed with at a point when one thinks some other situation would be the logical outcome. His twenty-four short stories so far can be classified into three broad thematic prongs, but for purposes of evoking his favorite concern it will be proper to have a fourth theme which although may be illustrated with one short story,<sup>4</sup> deserves a separate categorization because Ojaide's environment in nearly all his short stories is the Urhobo area of the Niger Delta. Here and there the female/feminist streak is evident but only effectively captured with only one story, “Come Back When You are Ready to Die” ( *Medicine-men* 1-17). Nevertheless, one does not intend to give the author's feminist thrust any concentrated treatment in this paper.

### **The Niger Delta Trope**

A majority of the twenty-four stories so far published by Ojaide are set in the Niger Delta. Yet he does not mention the ‘Niger Delta’ in any of them. Many people, particularly non-Nigerians may wonder what ‘Niger Delta’ is, and why it should constitute a trope in Ojaide's writing.<sup>5</sup> Ojaide has devoted much of his poetry to the Niger Delta without turning his poetic breath into a polemical or contentious verse afflation.<sup>6</sup> His Urhobo landscape, experience and culture which are all too noticeable in both volumes of his short stories belong to the Niger Delta area. As has been asserted in the abstract of this paper the somewhat allegorical short story bearing the title of his second volume is cast as a metaphor of how the Deltans were forcefully deprived of their resources, nature having been kind to them and put under their feet vast wealth in oil and gas products.



Ogbajiriemu, the old man, is painted before us as an epic hero. He is said to have been born big with “open eyes and eating voraciously from his very first day.” The way he is said to have sucked his mother’s breasts, gulped water or his physique described reminds one of the typical epic hero. And a hero he later turns out to be. Not only is he feared and later avoided, his acceptance of his abode as a lone resident to the end, shows that he is a mysterious human being. His larger-than-life existence compels all other Okpokpo people to abandon the land for him: “Singly and in groups of twos and threes at first but later in droves, they abandoned him to other villages and to Warri. Within three months, Ogbajiriemu became the sole inhabitant of a once teeming village” (*Old Man* 11). Thus Ogbajiriemu stood alone like an *Akpobrisi* “tree stood in the forest and always surrounded by weeds and no other trees” (12). The former residents of Okpokpo village regarded him as “a human *akpobrisi*” and felt that it was dangerous living in the same village with him, for “there was something diabolical in the *Akpobrisi* tree that burned other plants nearby and left only grass and low shrubs!” (15).

Having been abandoned, Ogbajiriemu was left in possession of a very wide expanse of land. A fisherman who traversed three rivers - the Omoja, the Oruwe and the Uto, all of them flowing through Okpokpo village, he was also a trap setter. At a time people had learnt to kill fish and other animals with poisons, Ogbajiriemu’s meat and fish were very much trusted. He was not one who would poison his fish so as to catch them cheaply. His loneliness had turned him into a great thinker and philosopher: “His memory was now a huge house of many rooms, and he often moved from one to another. He enjoyed what each room offered in experience” (19). When he was through with capturing the past, Ogbajiriemu would close the door and sleep “outside of the mansion of a thousand memories” (21). He had only Umukor as his lover. Umukor, a divorced woman for over two decades, was both strong and firm about life. As her own village, Ogorivwo community, taunted her as Ogbajiriemu’s concubine, she would simply muse to herself, “They can’t understand” (22). Although she kept the terms of her relationship with the lone man of Okpokpo village - as Ogbajiriemu later came to be known - to herself, “Ogorivwo adults could not imagine a relationship between the two of them without sex” (22).

However, before long, intruders invaded Okpokpo village in search of something. From the way the strangers moved about and talked excitedly, it was clear to the old man that they had been “looking for something, which must be very precious to them” (22). It was oil! Though not palm oil or palm kernel oil which he was used to. In a short while, Okpokpo village became a beehive of activities: the place



immediately turned into a huge construction site. There was no dialogue, no agreement and no consideration: “With the oil struck there and the bright prospects of so much wealth, the Federal Government suddenly got interested in the bush in which Ogbajiriemu and his people had lived for centuries” (24). Here the short story writer delivers one of the messages of his poetry, namely that the Federal Government of Nigeria, whether during military rule or civilian era, has always been an accomplice in the desecration of the Niger Delta environment. Ojaide would later abandon his veil as an artist and don the garb of a journalist or social commentator when his narrator remarks:

And so in 1976 the mule of a head of state enacted the Land Use Decree, which took over all lands in the country as belonging to the state. The government that seized power from elected representatives now seized the entire lands in the whole country. Of course, they would talk of compensation even as they robbed the populace of the area. (24)

The above comment, lodged in a purely literary material, floats like a wooden cork thrown into a basin of water. Ojaide’s approach here reveals the depth of his involvement as a Niger Delta spokesman. Such is his commitment to the Niger Delta cause that he does not mind deploying his art to the service of agitation, even if for a brief moment.

The story in question serves as an allegory at two levels – one represents the metamorphosis of a village into an urban space: “a new township started to be built near where many oil wells had been struck. Government surveyors, contractors and engineers made money in the process of building an entire new town in the farmlands and bush of Ogbajiriemu’s people” (24). The second allegorical element reminds one of the Biblical rejected stone. As soon as oil was struck in Okpokpo village, those who ran away returned to claim consanguinity with the old man. They had abandoned him calling him names; now they were back and curried his favour as adjudication on the land disputes resulting from the new status of Okpokpo land commenced. “Ogbajiriemu is my grandfather’s cousin and friend and knew all our family lands’ one side would testify.” Another side would claim “Ogbajiri is our relative and knows this is our land” (24).

The short story writer’s loyalty to Urhobo land culture and landscape is not in doubt. Most of the characters names are Urhobo: Efe, Akoro, Ogaga, Orere, Efecha, Itofe, Ubi, Mukoro Osieke Toje, Tobrise, Fetebe, Eloho, Ode, Kurusu, Tadafe, Odova, Tabunor, Tejiri, Dede, Olotu, Segine, Okitikpi, Shegbe, Egbe, Bedebede, Urie, Amakashe, Orise, Osame, Atubi, Agogo, Ejiro, Umutor, Umukor, Ese, Ufuoma, Efetobore Edewor Omotedjo, Efeturi, Kevwe, Onome, Nomaso,



Metitiri, Otebele, Omare, Tobore, Ebi, Akpo Vughe, Akpome etc. Known Urhobo towns and villages are easily identifiable in the short stories: Ughelli, Agbarho, Kokori, Okpara, Ethiope, Aghalokpe, Eku, Okurekpo, Agbon, Utuyo, Uselu, Ore, Okere etc. References are made to some Urhobo god-heads: Obo, Eloho and Olokun. The Urhobo name for the Almighty is Osonobrughe while *mamiwata* is the spirit of the river who is also worshipped by some Urhobo as a goddess. Thus as Umutor arrives in North Carolina to take over the care of Ufuoma, her daughter, she prays, “Osobobrughe, take care of my daughter and grandchild” (*Old Man* 43).

Every moment that presents itself to highlight Urhobo, and therefore Niger Delta culture, Ojaide never misses it. The female narrator in “Come Back When you are Ready to Die” (*Medicine-men* 2) informs us thus: “We live in a rain-forest area where hurricanes harass during much of the rainy season.” As if the author is bent on revealing who she is even as the author hides her name from us, she tells us: “my mother was among the first women in Urhobo to tap rubber” (4). It is in “The Rubber Tappers’ Fortune” (*Old Man* ) that so much space and time are given to this Urhobo tree. While rubber and its tapping yield wealth to Akpo Vughe in Okitipupa (a non-Urhobo town), it is Vughe’s Urhobo experience as a rubber tapper that encourages him to organize both men from Agbon and Aladja to harness the rubber resources. In a short while, both Akpo and the hired men become rich. However, the irony is that it is this easy source of wealth that is also their undoing: “As soon as money was plentiful in their hands, they started to see beautiful girls and women they had not seen when they had just arrived in town as penniless servants” (112). Their rascality soon attracted the attention of the inhabitants of Okitipupa people: “The town was soon up in arms against these invaders” (114). The Akpo boys, including Akpo himself, had got many of the girls pregnant without being ready to take responsibility. We are told that “a civil war broke out among the Okitipupa folks and another war between them and the migrant workers.” The hand of retribution is soon seen in the sudden withering of the rubbers: “All of a sudden, the rubber trees become afflicted with a strange disease.” Consequently, “what used to be a flood was degenerating into a trickle when the rubber trees were tapped” (115).

Witchery and wizardry seem to be a very popular cultural art in both Urhoboland and in the Niger Delta. It will be recalled that part of the reason why the Okpokpo natives abandoned their land for Ogbajiriemu was the accusation that the old man was a wizard. In “The Major’s Appeal”, the major’s younger sister admits having tried to hurt him through witchery. “I’ve been trying to kill Efe”, she admits before a gathering of the village. She announces her crime against Efe Segine, her elder



brother: “He’s already slaughtered, and we have shared him for a big party in the coven” (*Medicine-men* 118). Both “Sharing Love” and “The Cherry Tree Palaver” (*Old Man*) make sense because of the people’s belief in metaphysical events. It is believed among the Urhobo traditionalists just as it is with the other ethnic groups in Africa that the other-world influences what happens here. The sudden consensus in Unoh village that the cherry tree whose fruit had always been enjoyed should go is predicated on such a belief. Although Pastor Emmanuel of the Church of the New Dawn should ordinarily reflect modern, Christian thinking, he digs into the community by playing on the autochthonous belief system, namely that evil spirits could live in the hollow of trees.

As we shall observe when we come to Ojaide’s short tales centered on the theme of ‘two worlds’ all the elders of Unoh buy Emmanuel’s notion of the cherry tree being responsible for the new afflictions in the village. That is because that slant of thought is embedded in the sub-conscious of most of the villagers, Christianity or no Christianity. This is notwithstanding that this tree had been productive and protective of the environment for many years. However, Dr. Atubi with his deep knowledge of what is going on, including what lack of trees could cause to the environment, tries to resist Pastor Emmanuel’s condemnation of the cherry to its death. Not even his own father comes to his side. Dr. Efe Atubi’s preaching falls on deaf ears: “The tree brings health in so many ways to us. Like every other tree around, its existence makes us live better lives. More so the *Otie* fruit tree has been with us from time immemorial and our lives are linked to it” (*Old Man* 36). His father’s belief, on the contrary, is that “witches meet there and cause too many problems in the village. The *Otie* tree has become their assembly ground in plotting evil for people” (*Old Man* 36). The irony is that upon cutting the ‘demonic’ tree, their afflictions refuse to abate: “The problems of the people had not diminished but in fact redoubled; his father confessed to him (Dr. Atubi) before he died” (*Old Man* 40).

In “Sharing Love,” there is a mysterious struggle for Kena between Kena’s human lover and her spirit lover. Kena’s human lover, the narrator, had not known that even his lover’s other name, Omotedjo meant ‘daughter of Mami Wata’. While falling in love with Kena he had not reckoned with the fact that both of them were into a monumental struggle with extraterrestrial forces. Kena’s parents, very much aware of the fate of their daughter, had not welcomed her human lover. As Kena’s father put it, “her mother and I wanted to get close enough to her and know that you are flirting with another person’s woman. We don’t know the person but there is somebody already in her life and possessing her... you can only be mere friends” (*Old Man* 62). But Kena’s human lover insists on marrying her, whether



or not there is a spirit lover. However, both Kena and her human friend virtually elope in order to run away from the long arms of the spirits. He and Kena flee to the United States: “A severe headache that paralyzed Kena emotionally took over within a few days of our arrival abroad. She told me it was as if a hammer was hitting her skull persistently once darkness fell” (*Old Man* 64). Almost dying, Kena is sent home after only three months abroad so that she may rejoin her spirit husband: “At home she slept soundly but in constant dialogue with the spirit in bed at night” (66). Kena’s husband, still hopeful that his wife will return to him, is shocked when Kena’s mother laughs, cynically through the phone and utters the following instructive remark: “So you have not learned the lesson. We women here share one man but men don’t share one woman’ (*Old Man* 66).

### **Irony and the Burden of the Past**

Because of the central role of irony in this paper, this regiment is created to show the importance the author has placed on it. The short story writer presents to us characters in about six tales in which their past seems to run into their present, and so determine their future. In “The Last-Born”, a man and a woman come to live together with hidden pasts. Although it is ordinarily a responsible couple, each tucked away his/her past thinking it would not matter or be discovered. However, the short story seems to be saying that some one’s dirty past has a way of occasionally resurrecting even when it is thought that it has been dead and buried. That is what happens in the case of Dr. Mukoro Ubi and his nurse-wife, Titi Toje. Such is Dr. Ubi’s uprightness that she shuns private practice, and when appointed Chief Medical Director of the Warri General Hospital “inspired other doctors to behave with propriety” (*Medicine-men* 28). Even his wife to-be calls him “a good man” insisting that “not every man is as loving and kind as you are” (22). On the part of Titi she is initially portrayed as a quiet, determined woman who “remained invisible to her own people around her. She knew how to keep to herself, how in the crowd to be faceless” (21).

However, each of them hides something from the other. Titi’s past is the first to give way when Tetebe, though thought to be her youngest sister, the last-born, turns out to be her child. This is not revealed until Tetebe is about to be married by David Ode. Although Dr. Ubi refers the suitor to Utuyo village where his in-laws live, his in-laws turn round to refer the seeker of Tetebe’s hand in marriage to Sapele “to see her junior father” (33), a Mr. Kurusu, once introduced to Dr. Ubi as Titi’s cousin. With respect to Dr. Ubi, he had earlier married Tilly, a rich white lady while he was abroad. The marriage had broken down, but without the marriage being officially dissolved, he had flown back to Nigeria where he had given the impression that he was never married before. Such is Titi’s tension when



Makoro Ubi gets to know about her past that she prepares herself for the worst: “Titi’s heart beat fast and her breathing was loud. She did not know what to expect”(37). It is at the couple meeting to discuss the new knowledge that Titi gets to know of her husband’s own hidden past, narrated by the husband himself. We are told that, “she expected an assault but met a retreat” (37). Being a balanced act on both sides, the story ends on a comic note when the couple decides to have sex “with lights still on” (38), something they had never done before.

Many of the short stories laced with irony are to be found in *The Old Man in a State House and Other Stories*. They include, “Blacked Out Nights of Love,” “Nobody Loves Me,” “Any Problem?” “Married at Last” and “Morning Walk.” In “Blacked out Nights of Love”, the past raises its ugly head again. It is also the scenario of a man about to marry a woman. Each comes to the marriage with a burden which threatens their happiness. The association begins with intense passion because “neither had felt before now that he or she would ever be in love again” (*Old Man* 69). Mukoro Nomaso had caused the death of his first wife, a troublesome woman known for her garrulousness. What was given to the public was that the first wife “had slipped in the bathtub and broken her neck and died” while hiding the fact that he had pushed her after “one of their usual late evening quarrels” (70). Ufuoma Metitiri on her part, had come to the new association from Jos with the sore past of having been accused of killing her earlier husband, the man who had died on top of her from heart attack. Mukoro has been a widower for fifteen years while Ufuoma is in her late forties, a widow for twenty years. Both meet in Warri with their past securely tucked behind them. We are told that “she wanted to marry Mukoro and did not want anything embarrassing or secret to break out to stop the planned marriage. She would cover her back until both Mukoro and she had respectively pronounced ‘I do’” (74). For her, she would not allow the incident of her past to be revealed: “She made up her mind that she would not tell any man who wanted her about Otebele. It was an experience that was better forgotten than revived through candor. She wanted it buried and totally sealed off her new life” (76). In a while the news, hitherto thought to be sealed, leaks out. Umukoro hears it but cannot stop the wedding from taking place for more than one reason. First, he is “committed already after the engagement and bride price paying ceremony”. Second, he is afraid that his own past may have also leaked out to Ufuoma. The wedding eventually takes place after the author had build up a lot of tension on both sides. It is like a storm in a tea-cup; a resolution had to be worked out in order not to rock the boat, as it were. The ending is contrived since the reason given for allowing Ufuoma to go on with the wedding does not seem cogent enough.



In “Married at Last,” Margaret who is said to have “remained a virgin to this late age of forty-two,” she being a ‘born-again’ Christian, has had to romanticize her wedding night anytime it would be. She had spent much of her youthful life learning. She is a woman of virtue who “hated abortion and did not want to have a child outside of marriage” (*Old Man* 120). The first irony the author scores in the story is an implicit satire on what people do in the churches as different from the image of holiness which their actions portray: “Margaret had noticed that Victor always looked at her during service. He had formed the habit of sitting close to her or sitting where he could have a good view of her”(120). Earlier married to Rachel, now late, Victor has no impediments not to re-marry. The very day he joined the church membership in Warri, Victor was introduced as a widower. On the part of Margaret, she had never married before, even as she was ageing. Because marriage is a woman’s most momentous event, Margaret dreams constantly about the allure of her wedding night. The irony is that the dream is dashed as after their wedding, Victor, advanced in age and probably impotent, is unable to perform his conjugal responsibility. “In the past weeks they had been close together, there was no time his manhood swelled” whereas “she had observed how men had behaved before her. She could feel the heat of the penis almost tearing through their pants when they were close to her.” Thus Margaret’s dream is a non-event: “She had hoped for a sex feast after holding back for so long, but she soon discovered that she would not taste that luscious dish at all. She was already married to Victor and could not leave him, according to her religion” (125).

The best of Ojaide’s stories, in this present writer’s judgment, is “Any Problem?” It is brisk, humorous and economical. There is no wasted word in the story. The plot is natural and familiar, at least in Nigeria. Although the mockery in the tale is shared by Tejiri, the son of Mama and Papa Tejiri, he seems to have known in advance that his hastily-assembled empire will sooner or later collapse. However, the future is hidden from both parents who had for a while lived from hand to-mouth, particularly since Papa Tejiri lost his job in African Timber and Plywood Company in Sapele without compensation. The couple leaves Sapele for Lagos where “it was very difficult to have one good meal a day” (*Old Man* 136). After living in this way for ten years, Tejiri suddenly becomes rich: “his wealth came unexpectedly as a Niger Delta flash flood from a thunderstorm in the dry season” (136). In due course he invites his parents to return to Warri, and when they do, he makes a duplex available to them. They live a life of luxury, parents who had found it difficult to eat full daily meals in the past. But this comfortable life will end in the near future without their knowledge just yet. Meanwhile, they look down on neighbours and relations who sometimes would merely come to felicitate with them by constantly asking them, “Any Problem?” The old couple is so



satiated with the things of life that in their thinking anybody who comes around must have a ‘problem’. Before long, the hastily-acquired wealth is threatened when the bank which gave Tejiri the loans on which he contrived his affluence comes for the recovery of its loans. Before now Mama and Papa Tejiri “did not want to be bothered by poor people. They had left the low class and would not like to be reminded of it” (*Old Man* 142). The most humorous moment in the short story is the way and manner husband and wife take a majestic walk down the staircase in order to read what is pasted on the wall by Atlantic Bank officials: “Mama Tejiri held his hand, and he followed her down stairs. They stepped down with the dignity of first-class chiefs, one slow but steady step after another, their heads erect and not looking down” (143). This is a symbolic movement, from their *ad hoc* life of ease back to the gutters, where they thought they had left. Once the duplex is seized by the bank and their son no where around, only the Catholic Church comes to their rescue “by renting a one-bedroom flat for them in an area of Warri that Mama and Papa Tejiri would not like to mention as where they lived” (144).

### **Tragic Undertones**

Some of Ojaide’s stories leave us with a sense of tragedy, though not in the Aristotlian sense. Most of this category of tales end in regret and a sense of flatness occasioned by what the Nigerian society has turned out to be in recent times or the bliss of ignorance which people are not ready to abandon half way. In “I Used to Drive a Mercedes,” Alfred Tobrise, an ex-soldier, gradually suffers mental disintegration owing largely to his faults. He is a bit on the careless side, tolerating Sarah’s love for materials and her squandering of riches. Thus by the time she implements her belief in using an adulterous life to make up for her lack, he had lost her. Sarah, his wife, tells herself, “I’m glad my eyes are now open” (*Medicine-men* 57). Secondly, Tobrise’s hands are not clean as it is said in popular parlance. We are told that his poultry farm at Oghara had been started “with money meant for an unexecuted project but which he had claimed with the state governor’s approval” (56). Thirdly, he is crazy about other girls. In fact it is in his search for Miss Ekaite Okon in the university hostel that he loses all. Fourthly, he is ill-tempered. Stopped from going into the female hall to look for Ekaite Okon by the porters, he becomes violent. Meanwhile, inside his car is the sum of five hundred and fifty thousand naira, the amount he had sold his Midway Poultry Farm. In generating violence by his stance with the porters, he attracts the attention of male students of the university who would usually challenge a violent act, especially if it came from an outsider. Both he and the President of the Students’ Union, Paul Ighodaro, stand shoulder to shoulder, a shove now and then, and each ready to show off his belligerency. Soon it becomes an angry student mob versus the



militant but unarmed Alfred Tobrise. His ventures and losses, added to the failure of serving soldiers coming to his rescue as he was attacked, crack him.

“The Book Case” is also a tragic one in a country that has no true regard for learning. The story is about the military era when learning and education scored little or nothing. Again at this time anyone who opposed military highhandedness is avoided, virtually ostracized in the civic arena. This is the mode of the times when Mrs. Fatumbi decides to publish her geography textbook and seeks to launch it. A determined woman, it takes her five years to get the book ready. This effort is different from Uli Kalu’s who wrote *Soldier Diplomat and a Time to Serve* for the then incumbent military president. This is a satire on the hack writers that flourished during the military era in Nigeria. Kalu compares the then President, who later made himself a General to some notable Western generals namely Eisenhower, Westmoreland, de Gaule, and Nelson. Not only is Kalu satirized for “titillating the President’s ego for pay,” his reward is not hidden: “A house in the new capital, a Mercedes, and a million naira,” (123). The satirical butt seems to have been aimed at a well-known former ex-military president of Nigeria and his wife, the First Lady when the author informs us that the then president’s wife also wrote *Home Frontline* at whose public presentation, the military president was the Chief Launcher. Satirized too is a type of the academic in professor Udo who described Kalu’s book on the Head of State as “a masterpiece” (123).

This was the social climate surrounding book launches in the country which may have encouraged Mrs. Fatumbi to want to publicly present her own book, *The Human Geography of West Africa*. However, she failed to realize that the circumstances were not the same. In the case of the military president and his wife, wealthy people who had benefited from the president’s government or still hope to benefit had tramped in to donate fat sums just to please the General and his wife. The donations were indirect gifts to the president and his wife, not because books have been written or published. Mrs. Fatunbi’s indiscretion in having the name of Dede Daro boldly inscribed on the invitation card is a costly mistake. Mrs. Toyin’s advice to the author to drop Dede Daro’s name goes unheeded. She tells the Geography teacher, “You know this is our country. Government is the provider for all and nobody wants to annoy Government...Dede Daro and Government don’t agree”(127). The Art teacher’s advice is turned down. While Mrs. Fatumbi wants Dede because he is “a brilliant journalist”, Toyin thinks that a book launch is a business. In essence, the book outing fails as no persons of worth appear just because Dede’s name is on the invitation card. In the end, and as a consequence, both the author and the publisher incur a very huge debt. There is frustration all round, leading to the sudden death of Mrs. Eunice Fatumbi and the mental



breakdown of the Mr. Akin, the publisher. Mrs. Fatumbi's husband announces in court that he had, on his way to court that morning, seen Mr. Akin "picking pieces of paper from the street. I think he is really insane" (142).

What the author achieves in those short stories with some tragic undertones is to bring society face to face with its own contradictions. Almost, always a palpable sense of tragedy is the outcome. This is true of "The Wake-keeping" (*Medicine-men*), "The Servant's Slave" and "The Cherry Tree Palaver" (*Old Man*) which we had earlier examined. In "The Wake-keeping," the death of Odova, poor and wretched, and the manner his body is treated may on the surface be regarded as his personal tragedy and that of his close relations, but the society in which his case has been handled is in itself tragic. As soon as Odova dies, would-be mourners are not enthused; we are told that they "did not expect much from this one" (*Medicine-men* 151). In advance, they know that his wake will not yield much to them: "Most Okpara people measured Odova's wake-keeping with their eyes and saw nothing to leave home for" (152). On the day of his burial only a small crowd of mourners appears even if the corpse does not arrive in the end because none of his numerous children can pay his hospital charges and the mortuary fees.

"The Servant's Slave" (*Old Man* 127-34) refers to the corrupt academic who belittles himself by accepting to be the chairman of the Sam Temile Campaign in Ethiope East Local Government. Professor Orere does not only chair a prospective L.G.A chairman's campaign team, he illegally "stuffed full with voting cards" the voting boxes of his preferred candidate. Tadafe's father's accusation against the don is that "he accepted to chair an enemy's campaign" while Tadafe's own grouse against him is that "he bowed to the gubernatorial candidate, much younger and far less educated than him at an election rally last month" (129). Although the Prof. is later rewarded, it is the reward of the servant's slave. Orere is such a bad example of an educated man that Efeturi tells his son, Tadafe: "If I knew education changed people to lose respect for themselves like this our townsman, I would have stopped educating you after elementary school" (129). Orere later fails as an intellectual, an ideologist, and as Vice-Chancellor of an exulted institution, a position he uses to enrich himself. He earns his satirical barb when Osame, the chairman of the Road Transport Workers' Union in Delta State is sworn in as the new Governor of the State and he fails to appoint him to any position. We are told that "Professor Tabunor Orere had to live with his people, a retiree, a pariah among them, and no longer acknowledged in public places" (134). This is the author's mockery of the members of the intelligentsia who, because of wealth or position, abandon the age-old values of decency which they had cultivated all along. Rather than the local



upstarts and never-do-wells emulate his ways, Orere belittles himself and embraces the low value system for which the uneducated and unrefined are known.

### **Shifting Values and the Two Worlds of the ‘Modern’ Nigerian**

The so-called modern Nigerian is essentially a traditionalist at heart but lays claim to being modern by his having gone to school and chalking up some certificates, belonging to one of the foreign religions, putting on a Western dress code and speaking English. Even when some Nigerians choose to be Christians, they are also practitioners of traditional religion at night or at some hidden corners. Endurance who is mesmerized by an unknown male spirit at night cannot be helped either by her own prayers or those of her parents who run their own church in Warri. Again, her parents live in two worlds of two images - the First Couple of the church in the day but at night they have their quarrels: “...they fired abuses at each other in low tones and their voices were never raised to reach the street” (*Medicine-men* 72). Endurance too, being a pastor’s daughter lives a lie: “she had to hide to have her fill in this respect” (73). At 21, “he has made love several times before” (73). So confused is she that she does not know what is happening to her or who her noiseless secret lover is. Not even her chants such as “In the name of Christ, I stop you. With the blood of Jesus, I overrule you” (75) could stop the strange visitor from coming into her from time to time, much against her will. It is not Endurance alone who lives ‘doubly’; her father, Pastor Jeremiah Efe also lives a lie. He is the son of traditional healer; father of a not-too happy family; and one who spends more than he earns. These are contradictory values but he lives with them. He is both an Anglican Church priest and a secret admirer of the Roman Catholic Church “that is a state of its own and has gold reserves” (80).

Then comes Pastor Odele into Endurance’s life. He is thought to be real, but again while he claims to be a Pastor, he “looked every way like a medicine-man as he ministered to us and other visitors who trickled into his mother’s home” (82). He prays in the names of both Olokun, the sea goddess, and Jesus; to everyone he gives a happy prophesy. With time Pastor Efe accepts to go looking for Pastor Odele in Benin because “sometimes, the medicine-man cannot heal himself” (84). In Benin, father, mother and daughter meet Pastor Odele, and together “they prayed noisily and, as was common with Pastor Odele, he invoked Olokun and Jesus Christ to inspire Pastor Efe to preach to move people’s hearts” (84). Moving the hearts of his congregation would ensure more offerings and “gifts with open hands” (85). Pastor Odele in all practicality is a medicine-man because he gives “Pastor Efe two wrapped things to rub and lick before going to bed and before going to preach” (84). Meanwhile, Endurance, now a spiritual patient of Pastor Odele develops a bad odour. Only Pastor Odele does not avoid her; the certain



odour “made people to avoid coming close to her” (86). All effort she makes to purge herself of the foul smell fails. An earlier strange occurrence took place when Pastor Odele visited the Efes in Warri. Three of the silver goblets with which the Efes had served Pastor Odele wine got missing. But these goblets were later to be found in Pastor Odele’s house in Benin. Endurance with her bad odour marries Pastor Odele while her father later becomes the Anglican Bishop of Benin-Delta Provinces and lives in Benin where his daughter lives with her husband. Much of Pastor Odele’s prophesying works in the Efes but his ‘power’ is derived, not from Christian spirituality, but from his mother’s juju shrine.

“The Road Block” is borne out of the ambiguity of shifting values. Such ambiguity often yields corruption. Everybody nowadays is bent on making money one way or the other. Every workplace is turned into a ‘goldmine’, to use the words of Alhaji Lawal, a retired superintendent of police as he is about to hand over to Debo Fakade. By the time he leaves the prison service he is so rich that he starts a motor transportation company whose “buses crisscrossed the country” (*Medicine-men* 94). Fakade too takes this route to wealth. Although we do not know what specifically Alhaji Lawal had done to enrich himself, Fakade, his successor is already on the way to making his millions by all the strange things he does in prison because of money. In prison he is a provider of comfort to rich convicts or detainees, at a fee of course. Fakade creates two ‘cells’ which are exclusively meant for such rich convicts who can easily “buy privileges in superintendent Fakade’s kingdom” (91). He not only owns and runs a guest house; his wife is the food contractor for Warri Central Prison where her husband holds sway. We are told that “superintendent Fakade acted as a public relations officer for his fee paying prisoners” (92), occasionally telling lies on their behalf as when he had told the press that the two junior policemen in custody who had killed their boss, Mr. Joseph Egbe, a superintendent of police, at a roadblock were on hunger strike “for being falsely accused of a murder they did not and could not have committed” (92-93). Rather than be on hunger strike, the two men are in fact feasting under Fakade’s protection. They are Private Oyibo and Corporal Shegbe.

The short story in question does not leave the issue of corruption at the door of the police alone. Money and materials win cases in court: “A retired topmost government official gave a Mercedes Benz to a judge’s wife and the judge dutifully squashed the case. That was the end of the matter with the embattled retired official”(96). With the quantity of the money the two junior policemen had made at their illegal roadblock, they make Fakade’s “mouth full” like a dog which cannot bark when its mouth is filled. After Fakade, they hope to reach the trial judge, Mr. Justice Isiah Okitikpi “with big envelopes of money” (96). SP Joseph



Egbe had caught these two junior officers twice on their illegal roadblocks and warned them not to do so again. Rather than withdraw from their illicit activity, they relocate to another road where they had thought their boss would not meet them again. But the SP chooses that route this fateful day. Joseph Egbe is not necessarily without his own moral burdens. That route would have taken him to his concubine, Omare. Upon accosting Oyibo and Shegbe again, the two men shoot their boss asking his corpse “poor man no go chop?” However, prior to the commencement of their case, the two suspects with the connivance of Fakade’s gate-man and gardener - a Raymond Olotu - turn fugitives from justice. This planned escape appears arranged without Fakade’s knowledge. Notwithstanding, it shows that it is not only him who wants to make money by all means. Others are also keen to enjoy what he enjoys. Fakade’s faith briefly dangles when warders grumble for being sidelined: “They had been bypassed and were never allowed to be anywhere near those people they were supposed to keep watch over in prison (105).

In the end, everything is worked out in such a way that “the prosecution did not show up” and “within ten minutes the assassination case was over” (106). This was at the behest of Judge Isiah Okitikpi. Fakade arranges and promotes the grumbling warders and is grateful to God that “the judge had kept his side of the bargain to take care of the prosecution” (106). He later retires with his loot and arranges a ‘thanksgiving service’ at St. James Church to mark it. One could wonder why Ojaide tells such a story in which serious cases of corruption against Fakade, his gardener, Justice Okitikpi and the two junior police officers go the way they have gone without any of these irresponsible people facing any punishment. The author may have done that to show that Nigeria is irretrievably neck-deep in corruption or that with the judiciary ensconced in corruption there is little or no hope left for society’s escape from the bog of sleaze. Be that as it may. It is not the business of the artist to be pessimistic or get to the apogee of pessimism or to think and propagate the feeling that society is irremediable or to sound neutral where good conscience has been decidedly bruised.

## **CONCLUSION**

David Morley remarks that “the short story is a place of order, resonance and closure” (157). Certainly, Tanure Ojaide satisfies this expectation in his short stories. The same is true of what Richard Ford means when he says that “there’s a rage for order in certain of us, a fury which nothing but a nice, compact little short-course bundle like a story can satisfy” (xvii). Apart from the love for order and resonance, one suspects that our author may have lately chosen to ventilate his mind with such an artistic mode of expression because most of his concerns and



the ambience he takes in considering them may not have been catered for in poetry, which is his primary forte. It is observable also that he withholds his judgment in matters of obvious guilt of some of his characters and allows the readers to note all the clues and cues and develop their own attitude. Some of the short stories like “The Benevolence of the Dead”, “Morning Walk” and “Birthing Generations” (*Old Man*), and “The Roadblock” and “As in Such Things” (*Medicine-man*) have neither surprises nor are we meant to be in suspense as we read them. The result is that his stories are oftentimes natural expressions of a heedless and bizarre world. After all, the daily occurrences in the world do not always come to us as a surprise not do we read *every* human event with a sense of suspended animation. Ojaide’s recommended staple, if one were to be asked, include, “Come Back When You are Ready to Die” “The Last-Born”, “The Major’s Appeal” and “ God’s Medicine-man” (*Medicine-men*); and “Any Problem?”, “The Cherry Tree Palaver,” “Sharing Love”, “Married at Last” and “The Old Man in a State House” (*Old Man*).

The author’s strength lies in his regularly satirizing one human foible or the other. He does this by his constant deployment of ironic twists here and there as the story progresses. Yet an informed reader and a critical eye would not fail to notice a rich insertion of both mockery and ironic swings nor a revelation from time to time that our society has abandoned the grand old ways of action and behaviour for which it had been known. Thus, Ojaide often compels us to observe with him the harm which imported cultural norms have done on society’s original values. Whereas there are good points for the Western way of life, when it occasionally acts on our autochthonous heritage or it is borrowed to resolve an impending problem, there could result a desecration of the African humanity. For instance, in the pristine past, Odova, in spite of his acute poverty as painted to us by the author, would have deserved a decent burial whether or not his children were rich. But today’s hospital system with its capitalistic modeling, our current love for entertainment at funerals and our new assessment of people on the basis of private wealth begrudged Odova a final resting place in his compound. So frustrated about Odova’s family impecuniosities were the few mourners that had managed to come out that they supported the speaker when he shouted, “Let the clinic burn the corpse!” Yet corpse-burning had never been part of an Urhobo or Nigerian culture, and could thus not be appropriate.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henry James, Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway tried their hands at some short story writing before they turned into full-blown writers. David Morley’s “many new writers choose to begin writing them (short stories), almost as a rite



passage...later these abilities find release across a novel's vast fields" (p 157) shows that we are not far from being correct in our assertion here. Same will be said of Cyprian Ekwensi, T.M. Aluko, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, I.N.C Aniebo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Alex La Guma, Richard Rive, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Ayi Kwei Armah. For the early careers of Ekwensi, Achebe and Soyinka as short story writers, see Berth Lindfors, *Early Nigerian Literature* (1982). Ayi Kwei Armah's early writing career may be glimpsed from Berth Lindfors, *Loaded Vehicles* (1996).

<sup>2</sup>Charles Nnolim, Daniel Kunene, Chinweizu, William Saidi etc, each of them an accomplished short writer, are yet to turn into novelists.

<sup>3</sup>As I write, I'm still to run into facts which contradict the position held in this essay, namely that most African novelists published short stories first before they went into longer narrations and thereafter became established writers. However, part of the blurb comment on *God's Medicine-men and Other stories*, Ojaide's first volume, states that this collection his "first attempt *ever* at short-story writing [which] turns out delightfully surprising and entertaining results" (Italics mine).

<sup>4</sup>See his 2<sup>nd</sup> short story collection for "The Old Man in a State House", equally the second volume's title.

<sup>5</sup>The Niger Delta is the part of Nigeria that makes her an oil producing country. In the 1990s, the people of the area began to agitate for more monetary accruals from the country's oil wealth, particularly because for more than thirty years previously their environment had been devastated by oil prospecting and production without their having much to show for it. This agitation has given rise to an ample amount of literary writings, out of which are some of Ojaide's volumes of poetry.

<sup>6</sup>See J.O.J Nwachukwu-Agbada, "Milking the Breast of the Earth" (pp1-15).

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