In praise of Ịjọ folklore: *A Sailor's Son* by Christian Otobotekere

Imomotimi Armstrong

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The intersection of modern African poetry and folklore is a much-researched topic in African literary scholarship. However, literary scholars have not examined this relationship in the poetry of Christian Otobotekere, a king and poet whose cultural productions have been mostly studied from the perspective of ecocriticism. Therefore, in this article, I look at the place of Ịjọ (also spelt "Ijaw") folklore in Otobotekere's *A Sailor's Son 1: In the Wake of Games and Dances* (2015). I find that, in this collection, Otobotekere frequently employs the folklore of his people, including dirge, drum poetry, lullabies, moonlight stories, dance patterns, and musical styles, as well as elements of Ịjọ songs such as simplicity, repetition, allusion, dialogue, and direct address. I further discover that Otobotekere's incorporation of Ịjọ folklore makes his poetry performative and helps it to achieve the quality of what is usually referred to as "written orality". I argue that Otobotekere makes it his main aim to showcase these aspects of folklore to the non-Ịjọ reader and to document them for future generations in the Ịjọ community in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta region. This study appeals to scholars in the fields of literature and folklore as it contributes to the decades-long conversation on the interaction between the two disciplines. **Keywords:** Christian Otobotekere, folklore, the *Okun*, Ịjọ, traditional song, Isinabo.

Introduction

Folklore, sometimes also referred to as oral tradition, orality, orature, oral literature, and verbal art, has been a central focus of discussions amongst critics since the emergence of modern African literature in the middle of the 20th century. Indeed, in his book *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*, the Nigerian literary critic Abiola Irele argues that folklore or "oral literature represents the basic intertext of the African imagination" (11). Irele characterises the African imagination as "a conjunction of impulses that have been given a unified expression in a body of literary texts" (4). In any case, these debates on folklore have mostly centred on its relationship with modern African writers. For instance, Ezenwa-Ohaeto avers that modern African poetry "derives much strength and vitality from African folklore" (70). Olakunle George, too, has pointed out that folklore gives "effective authentication" to modern African cultural productions (16). For the Nigerian poet and scholar Tanure, folklore "feeds" modern African writers "stylistic models [...] to express their cultural identity" ("Orality in Recent West African Poetry" 303–4).

In this article, I investigate the oral-literacy intersection in the collection, *A Sailor's Son 1: In the Wake of Games and Dances* (subsequently, *A Sailor's Son*) by Christian Otobotekere (1925–2023), a king who was also a prominent published poet. Otobotekere's works are often studied from the perspective of ecocriticism (Egya; Okuyade; Ojaide, *Indegeneity, Globalization and African Literature: Personally Speaking*), but I will not be focusing on that aspect. Firstly, I recount a personal meeting with Otobotekere that provides significant background to the role of folklore in his poetry. Thereafter, I analyse several examples of folklore in his collection *A Sailor's Son* and indicate their function in the collection.

The importance of oral performance for Otobotekere

In the first quarter of 2018, I went to Otobotekere's home. As somebody who was already a published poet, being 93 years of age, the acting king of Ekpetiama *ibe* (clan), and *Okun* (paramount ruler) of Tombia town, I was convinced

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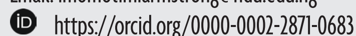
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he would have enviable knowledge of Ịjọ traditional expressive culture.[1] I was in Nigeria at the time to collect data on Ịjọ traditional literature for my PhD dissertation, that I completed at Rhodes University in Makhanda, South Africa in 2020. Some minutes into our discussion, I had cause to sing some songs that are no longer performed in Ịjọland and seized upon the opportunity—research into the oral literature of this ethnic group has enabled me to acquire knowledge in this regard. What surprised me was that, as I was singing, Otobotekere was actualising the songs I was singing in performance. He was dancing, using his hands to mimic the actual beating of a drum, and sometimes beating his chest. Why was I taken aback? I did not expect the acting king of an *ibe* or an *Okun* to perform a song a child—whether by age, achievements, social status, or knowledge of Ịjọ folklore—was singing. After the performance, Otobotekere went on to lament the non-performance of many genres of traditional literature in society today. When the discussion ended, he brought out one of his poetry collections, signed it, and handed it to me. But his choice of text, *A Sailor's Son*, is significant. In the acknowledgements section of the collection, Otobotekere pointed out:

> I would like to acknowledge the heroes and heroines of our land whose activities I had witnessed from boyhood to manhood. As a boy I was thrilled and carried away in the joy of their performances, with no idea that I would one day come to report to others what I was witnessing. Of course, I was at that time far removed from any thought of putting pen to paper to let others share in my enjoyment. The prompting in me to communicate only grew gradually but became a pressing obligation later. Thank God, the pressure is now off my chest. (8)

These "performances", which Otobotekere said "constitute the essence of" *A Sailor's Son* (10), include wrestling, masquerade displays, festivals, dances, and various forms and elements of traditional literature. According to Otobotekere, aside from entertainment, the collection was written to create "awareness among younger generations, an awareness of the unique experiences of past days" (*A Sailor's Son* 11). Indeed, on the front cover of the collection are pictures of a traditional wrestler at a public square filled with spectators and two hands on a drum. In light of these facts, it is no wonder that Otobotekere selected *A Sailor's Son* out of all his published poetry to give to me.[2] In this article, I investigate some of the features and types of Ịjọ folklore Otobotekere incorporates in *A Sailor's Son*.

A Sailor's Son: Celebrating Ịjọ folklore

Until some years ago, traditional poetry in the Ịjọ community consisted of only songs and drum poetry. Indeed, the deceased British linguist and foremost authority on the languages spoken by the Ịjọ, Kay Williamson, pointed this out long ago: "All Ịzon poetry is apparently sung or drummed. I am aware of no chanted or spoken poetry" (21). As I have noted elsewhere, chanted poetry, a widespread practice in Africa, was imported into the Ịjọ community during the contemporary period from the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria (Imomotimi Armstrong, "The Emergence of Praise-Poetry Recitation in the Ịjọ Community"). Even today, it is likely that 98% of the Ịjọ are not familiar with this form of poetry. For one, its sole practitioner, Chief Adolphus Munamuna, lives in Yenagoa, the capital city of the Ịjọ state of Bayelsa. He performs the poetry in Yenagoa and sometimes in rural areas on invitation by the few who know him and appreciate the poetic form (see I. Armstrong, "Chief Adolphus Munamuna, *Ọụbẹbẹ Kẹnị Ịjọ Ibe* (the Chief Oral Poet of the Ịjọ Nation): The Ịjọ Praise Poet and the Niger Delta Issue" on the reception of this poetry by the Ịjọ). What I have been trying to point out, perhaps laboriously, is that it is traditional song, not some chanted poetic form, with which every Ịjọ in the Niger Delta is familiar. They have different sub-categories of song, and all of them have their local terminologies. The major sub-genres include children's songs, funeral songs, war songs, circumcision songs, moonlight songs, marriage songs, and religious songs. For the major category, song, the Kolokuma Ịjọ use the word "*duma*", while it is called "*numu*" in some other *ibe mọ*. It is likely that Otobotekere, too, was not familiar with the new poetic form in his community. Unsurprisingly, it is the traditional song that he incorporates into *A Sailor's Son*.

Otobotekere employs the traditional song in two distinct ways in the collection. In the first instance, he uses the features of the Ịjọ traditional song, including simplicity, repetition, direct address, figures of sound, dialogue, allusion, simile, and metaphor to make the written poems sound and look songlike. This is similar to what the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek did with Acoli traditional song in *Song of Lawino*, a classic in traditional and modern African literature (Okumu; Ofuani). In the second instance, Otobotekere reproduces, without any alteration, the traditional song the way it has always been sung in his society. By so doing, he has retrieved and documented a sub-genre of the traditional song for scholars and future generations. In his *Myth in Africa*, Insidore

Okpewho characterises this sort of relationship between tradition and the modern African writer as "tradition preserved" (161). Undoubtedly, it can be averred that Otobotekere was a collector of Ịjọ folklore and, therefore, is comparable to other collectors of African oral traditions, including J. P. Clark (his fellow Ịjọ poet and dramatist), Okpewho, Wande Abimbola, Adeboye Babalola, Ruth Finnegan, John William Johnson, Gordon Innes, Masizi Kunene, and Jeff Opland. Otobotekere reproduced twelve traditional songs in the collection, eleven of which, according to him, were "contributed" (*A Sailor's Son* 119) by Tarilayefa Kenikiou Tulagha, formerly an anchor of radio programmes in Bayelsa State, and Gambo Otobotekere (possibly his wife, but I could not be confirm this). In other words, the two women were Otobotekere's respondents in his fieldwork. He collected the other song himself, as it were. Otobotekere calls the traditional songs he collected "moonlight songs" and goes on to mourn their non-performance:

What of moonlight games
Of pretty fairy-like girls
Encircled by spectators in
Evening relaxation?
Games of thrilling songs, rhymes
And laughter!
Where are they gone?
Where? Here are some, only some. (*Sailor's Son* 115)

But not all 12 songs belong to the moonlight sub-genre. For example, most Ịjọ readers will immediately identify "Song 5" as a lullaby (I. Armstrong, "A Thematic Study of the Lullaby amongst the Ịjọ of Nigeria"):

Tuu tuu, tuu tuu
Kala bele two kpo
Ye ipiri figha
Opu bele two kpo
Ye ipiri figha
Tobou dei arau youyemoo,
Mama boo; mama boo.

Tuu tuu, tuu tuu
When the small pot was used to cook
You didn't give me to eat
When the big pot was used to cook
You didn't give me to eat
Babysitter is crying
Mother, come; mother, come. (*Sailor's Son* 116)

It could be that the Ekpetiama Ịjọ, Otobotekere's clan, performed it alongside moonlight songs, even though I never saw lullabies performed together with those of the moonlight genre in my town in Kolokuma *ibe* when I was growing up. However, oral literary scholars have noted that the boundaries of oral literature genres are not fixed but fluid and loose (Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*; *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*; Barber; Ben-Amos; Olatunji; Abrahams). Differently said, the divisions of traditional literature genres are not definitive. In any case, it is noteworthy that the poet calls the moonlight songs "song-drama" (*A Sailor's Son* 119). These songs, as with oral literature genres anywhere, are actualised in performance. Nearly every song in the sub-category had its own distinct performance. While some would warrant performers to impersonate the behaviour or actions of certain animals and humans, others required them to dramatise certain myths of the ethnic group. But it is not my purpose here to revisit old debates and contend whether these performances should be considered full-fledged dramas, quasi-dramatic dramas, or pre-dramas (for these debates, see Echeruo; Enekwe).

In any case, Otobotekere should be commended for being able to reproduce these songs in *A Sailor's Son*. In my dissertation, I was at pains to leave out, on account of obscurity and issues of translation, these interesting and well-loved songs that elderly women recall with enjoyment many of the times that I collect Ịjọ folklore. Unfortunately, the poet neither translates the songs into English nor provides answers in this regard (the translation of the above

lullaby was done by me). Perhaps Otobotekere faced the same challenges I encountered. This clearly defeats, in some ways, the reason why he wrote the text—exposing the non-Ịjọ reader to Ịjọ traditional performances—because the songs are accessible to only those who speak the various dialects of the Ịzọn language. In the following paragraphs, I examine some of the resources of the traditional Ịjọ song that I noted Otobotekere employs in *A Sailor's Son* earlier. I begin with dirge.

Dirge—a form of traditional literature modern African poets, especially Anglophone West Africans, often exploit, sometimes to greater effects—is employed in the poem "Isinabo 11". The poem is an evocative dirge—not sung but spoken—in honour of a deceased wrestler in the poet's community. The evocative dirge is usually performed by elderly men when a relative or friend of some standing has passed on to what the Ịjọ call "*fịama bou*" (land of the dead). It is not usually performed by a woman or a young man who, in most cases, are considered to be unable to control their emotions. In the first stanza, the speaker says:

> Victor of 'D' day!
> Is it you, lying this low?
> Is it you, silent! (*Sailor's Son* 109)

This is the classic manner in which an elderly man begins a spoken dirge when he sees the corpse of a relative or friend. Like the speaker in the excerpt, the performer, with eyes fixed on the corpse, calls their name. In most cases, the deceased is addressed by their pet name or praise title, as in this poem. Next, the deceased is repeatedly asked whether they are the one who has died. The second line in the excerpt, in an actual performance, is rendered in various ways, including, "Is it you who lay dead here?" and "Is it you who have turned a corpse here?" Indeed, this phenomenon bears on the importance of variability as a foremost characteristic of oral literature in any society. Thereafter, the mourner goes on to address the deceased by their praise title and foregrounds the prowess and activity for which the diseased was known thus:

> Leopard of the Land,
> Fierce and free
>
> [...]
>
> Proof of muscle power
>
> [...]
>
> Who would dare your lifted
> Weighty right hand?
> Or withstand a sudden
> Leg manipulation? The fastest!
> Who would dare the racing terror
> Of double power?
> Or, withstand your parrying pushing hand?
>
> [...]
>
> Where are your bells—
> Where are your bells now barking
> For umpires to monitor— (*Sailor's Son* 109)

Clearly, the deceased was a renowned wrestler. The speaker tells us Isinabo was a "receiver of titles upon titles". As a champion wrestler, the deceased certainly had a large following who sang his praises at wrestling championships. Not surprisingly, the mourner asks Isinabo's lifeless body:

> Are the maids still singing,
> Tilting their necks and clapping,
> Praising, acclaiming
> In endless chorus?
>
> [...]
>
> Are the fans still crowding
> In ringing cheer,
> In joyous jamboree
> And as ever encircling you—
> Victor Ludorum, Victor Ludorum,
> In hearty bell-and-song dance? (*Sailor's Son* 110)

As a champion wrestler, certainly there were people who became great wrestlers under Isinabo's tutelage. As a mourning man would sometimes ask a corpse what will become of their acolytes in a particular activity by calling out their names, or a woman would of her deceased husband about their children, the speaker, too, asks in the eulogy:

> Where are your genetic offspring,
> [...] the Victors,
> The Jephtah's, the Ayaokpo's
> Trophy winners of later days
> Encircling you in heated chorus? (*Sailor's Son* 109–10)

But there is solace for these great wrestlers and other fans. The mourner notes that Isinabo:

> [...] Is also bound to win
> Accolades there.
> There, when we all later go,
> He would receive us into untold
> Kingdom of power. (*Sailor's Son* 111)

In this excerpt, Otobotekere highlights a fundamental belief of the Ịjọ: as with other African societies in sub-Saharan Africa, they believe that death does not end somebody's life. As I have pointed out elsewhere, it is claimed that a person transits to *fịama bou* (the land of the dead) at death (I. Armstrong, "Context, Performance and Beliefs in *Dụwẹị-igbela* (Ịjọ Funeral Poetry)"). It is further said that *fịama bou* parallels the world of the living. The only difference is the existence of complete happiness in the former. Thus, Isinabo shall continue with the sport that gave him fame when he was in the land of the living. But the poem lacks two aspects of the Ịjọ dirge. First, in the formal dirge, whether spoken or sung, a deceased becomes the means through which a mourner sends greetings and messages to friends, children, or relatives who are already in *fịama bou*. Second, a mourner usually details the names of those already in *fịama bou* who became famous in the activity in which the deceased also engaged. The speaker tries to remedy this second lacuna in "Isinabo III" but still falls short by not mentioning any notable deceased wrestler in the Ịjọ community who will keep Isinabo busy with wrestling contests:

> Did you receive a call
> From our ancestors, great wrestlers,
> Who left decades of decades ago? (*Sailor's Son* 112)

Otobotekere also reflects Ịjọ epic singing culture in *A Sailor's Son*. As an example, the speaker nostalgically comments in "Heroic Song":

[…] the drumming that gingered
The long forgotten tales
Which thrilled my forefathers
And my young eyes
Seven days long! (*Sailor's Son* 135)

The excerpt is a reference to a past tradition among the Ịjọ in which some tales were told over seven days. As Otobotekere points out in this excerpt, these tales were told to the accompaniment of drumming. In answering me when I questioned him about it, the Ịjọ linguist Odingowei Kwokwo said that, in the villages of the Gbarain Ịjọ, there were storytelling clubs that told tales lasting a week. He further notes that it was from one such club in his *ibe* that he first heard of the Ozidi epic before he saw its print version as an undergraduate student. The narration of tales over a period of seven days was exclusive to men, as Desmond Orumieyefa, a middle-aged man of the Kokokuma Ịjọ, was told by his ancestors (Orumieyefa and Armstrong). In the introduction to the Ozidi epic that he documented for scholars and posterity, Clark informs us that the tale is "told and acted in seven nights to dance, music, mime, and ritual" (ix). Even the version he recorded in Ibadan in south-western Nigeria from Okabou Ojobolo, an Ịjọ man, was narrated for one week.

Because these tales, apart from Ozidi, are no longer told, most Ịjọ are only aware of tales that last less than one hour. To an extent, I belonged to this category of Ịjọ. For a long time, I had thought that it was only the Ozidi epic that was told over seven days. However, my research on Otobotekere's poetry made me ask questions about the tradition. I was told that the Ozidi epic that formed the basis of much of Okpewho's scholarship on the African epic was only one of several such tales. My efforts to record some of these tales have not yielded any results because the tellers whom I have been directed to meet are either incapacitated due to old age or dead. Perhaps wide-ranging fieldwork by oral literary scholars, historians, or cultural anthropologists will someday reveal that the Ịjọ have other tales that can be classified as epics.

Otobotekere also employs dialogue which scholars have pointed out is an important feature of African folklore (Ojaide, "Orality"). An example of this occurs in the poem "Not only for bygone days", in which the poet, as a child, praises the moon for beaming its light on earth for children to play, and the moon responds:

What a beauty you are,
Fair emblem of night sky,
My love for you cannot wane.
And still waxes most, when,
You are visibly overheard
The one and only lamp
Attended by slow-moving clouds

[…]

You are not only for bygone days.

Whether bygone days or not,
Enough is enough, dear kid,
Foster child, now go to bed
To refresh your body
And relax your nimble limbs
In sweet sleep.

Meanwhile, I shall continue to protect
Your surroundings and atmosphere
With sleep-inducing light

[…]

Sleep well, Bye, till next moonlit night. (*Sailor's Son* 133)

Direct address is another quality of Ịjọ verbal arts Otobotekere uses. In this society, it is common to see a priest directly addressing his god on behalf of someone seeking a solution to a problem, or a young woman, in tears and uncontrollable, addressing the corpse of her dead husband taken too soon from her, or a man asking his ancestors, as if they were present, why they allowed his son or daughter to die by accident. An instance of direct address occurs in the first poem of *A Sailor's Son* in which the speaker extends an invitation to the reader and tells them to leave their urban world behind and experience the beauty and magical charm of the fauna and flora of the Niger Delta region and cultural performances of his people:

> Have you received your card?
> Here it is.
> To a fairy-land fair
> Once-in-a-year.
>
> O leave the world behind
> And step into a new.
> Favoured with colourful
> *Cocta spectabilis*.
>
> O glide in, drive in, walk in,
> Into salutations free
> With open arms, both,
> *Atoo-Atoo*, heart to heart. (*Sailor's Son* 19)

In another instance, the speaker sees a white egret and, performing a popular Nigerian children's song, pleads with it to have some of the colour on his fingernails:

> Leke-leke give me
> One finger
> I go give you [I will give you]
> Two fingers
>
> Leke-leke give me
> Two fingers,
> I go give you [I will give you]
> Three fingers (*Sailor's Son* 63)

Earlier, I cited Williamson's observation that poetry is either "sung or drummed" in Ịjọ society. To elucidate the linguist's position, the drum that produces poetry in this society, the talking drum, is called *opu eze* (literarily, big drum) in some *ibe mọ* and regarded by them as the most important drum. As I have pointed out elsewhere, *opu eze* is used to welcome great men at assemblies, cultural performances, and royal courts by beating their praise titles and achievements (I. Armstrong, "Emergence"). For example, on sighting a retired great wrestler at a wrestling competition, the man behind the *opu eze*, in drum language, will let the audience know that so-and-so wrestler is at the arena too. Sometimes, the talking drum is also used to interview the two champion wrestlers in rival camps at an arena. Moreover, it is a key feature of warboats. Otobotekere celebrates this drum tradition in *A Sailor's Son*. In the text, *opu eze* is variously called "calling drum", "signature drum", "big drum", "giant drum",

and "praise drum". In "What is in these drums?" the poet begins on a note of innocence or lack of knowledge with respect to drum poetry:

What is that?
A voice, a human voice?
What is that pulsating
My titular name—
Both the name and a. k. a
That evokes immediate response.

But how did it come by my name
And my popular a. k. a
Who or what is in these drums?
What living tongue is there? (*Sailor's Son* 190)

What the speaker refers to as his "a. k. a" is his praise title.

As I pointed out in an earlier article, the use of praise titles is an important practice of men in this community, and every *ibe*, town, or village has a praise title (I. Armstrong, "Stylistic Elements in the Praise Poetry of Chief Adolphus Munamuna, Ọụbẹbẹ Kẹnị Ịjọ Ibe (the Chief Oral Poet of the Ịjọ Nation)" 396–7). In the past, this was also true of adult men, who introduced themselves by their praise titles at the beginning of a formal meeting. Today, some adult men in Ịjọ urban spaces do not have praise titles. Oftentimes, the praise title of an *ibe*, town, or village is the praise title of the man who founded it. Moreover, a man's male children are sometimes addressed by his praise titles. Some have more than three praise titles—perhaps having given themselves, in addition to their own, the titles of their late father and late grandfather. The crying out of praise names to cheer up and motivate the bearers at competitions is an enduring practice amongst this people. However, in this community, unlike the baSotho, praise titles are gained not only through heroic feats but also given to oneself based on your understanding of the world (see Kunene). It is also noteworthy that a man's praise titles have responses; when you shout out a man's praise title, his response will tell you what it means.

In the excerpt below, the tone of nescience the speaker exhibits in the first two stanzas changes to that of someone who understands the traditions of his people in the latter stanzas:

The mandatory voice as we know it
Summons warriors and paddlers
At quarter-to-dawn to rise and muster
For battle.
It summons and rules crowds at will.
O it can move them against their will.
It manages all-night vigils and predicates
Societal and religious ceremonies.
It breathes mood into actors
It fans protests and riots!
It can also disperse them.

[...]

Drum speech evokes

[...]

Drum speech inflates the ego,
Energises fist muscle
And pushes dancer or wrestler
Into involuntary moves.

[...]

The umpire, the internet of
Village game-fields,
Dictates the tempo.
Drum speech rules all. (*Sailor's Son* 190–3)

Indeed, *opu eze* is so pervasive and important in Ịjọ society that the speaker avers that it has "usurp[ed] [...] human voice and kingly authority" (190). Otobotekere's poetry foregrounds the beliefs of the Ịjọ too. For example, in "Arrival", the speaker observes:

Before the sweeper
Launches her first steps,
Liquid fresh eggs
Fly North, South-South, East and West
Sweeten unseen spectators. (*Sailor's Son* 209)

The Ịjọ claim that the audience of a cultural performance comprises the living, the dead, gods, and goddesses. It is further said that some of these souls and deities are evil and ready to cause harm to performers. For example, loss of voice and consciousness while singing and dislocation of a wrestler's bone in a contest, amongst others, are attributed to these evil forces. As such, before a performance begins in some rural areas, prayers and food are offered to these malevolent, invisible spirits to quieten them. However, in some performances, prayers are rather offered to God to ensure that nothing evil happens. Moreover, it is said that certain birds are bearers of messages. It is very common to hear a woman say it was a bird that announced somebody's death to her on her farm. It is also claimed that birds can tell whether there are fish in the traps someone plans to inspect in the morning. Not surprisingly, some Ịjọ pay special attention to birds that perch and chirp close to their homes. While reflecting on the harmonious relationship that once existed between the Ịjọ and their natural environment, Otobotekere reflects the belief of birds being messengers in the poem "Floods of glee":

O bird, spirit-animated bird
Cheerful messenger,
Have you got a message
For me today
As was yesterday? (*Sailor's Son* 24)

Additionally, he relates some of the folk dances and musical styles of his people in *A Sailor's Son*. For instance, in "Dance of Seniors", the speaker recollects the *egene* or *agene* (depending on the *ibe*) dance style and *ekpete*, which he claims go together:

Now see dance steps reel:
Ekpete calling, Ekpete calling
And Egene, step by step
Simple and subtle, subtler than
You ever could imagine. (*Sailor's Son* 35)

However, those who have some knowledge of Ịjọ folk dance steps know that *ekpete* is not a dance (Otobotekere repeats in the footnote of this poem that *ekpete* is a dance style). Rather, it is a musical instrument that is often found in many dance ensembles. As a musical instrument, it can go with *egene*. But it cannot go with *egene* as a dance step because there is no such dance style. In Clark's introductory essay to the Ozidi epic that I referred to earlier, he notes of the *egene* dance:

> *Agene* or *keni-kene-koro* [...] literally translated means "one-one-you-may-drop." This directive as to the leg movement is not as simple as it sounds, it is in fact deceptive. But done by Ijo men and women, their bodies bent fully forward from the waist, their arms held out in front and bent at the elbows, *agene* is an intricate, floating dance in which the feet seem never to touch the ground at any one given moment. (xxxi)

As Sunday Abraye, too, has correctly noted, in the *agene* dance in which both men and women are performers and where a dancer "assumes a medium plane [...] the flow of energy is concentrated in the legs which punch on the

ground. So it is the waist downwards that burns up the energy. The energy is directed down the legs through the waist to the soles of the feet" (224). The speaker further claims in the same poem ("Dance of Seniors"):

Oh no.
Only a little bit
Is left with us:

[…]

Practised art.
O come back, come back. (*Sailor's Son* 36)

But this is far from the true situation in the Ịjọ community. *Ẹkpete* is still blown in many musical and dance performances, including *owigiri*, the premier neo-traditional music in this ethnic group. The same is true of *egene*. In many of these performances, as Clark notes, not only one dance step is used but rather a conglomeration of different dance steps, which is the beauty of a performance. In another poem, "Wriggle upon wriggle", Otobotekere showcases *egbelegbele*, a popular dance troupe of his people:

Have you heard?
Have you seen?
The latest of the latest?
Dance of the dances:
Little ones, extra sensational!
Step by step their feet, (*Sailor's Son* 37)

The *egbelegbele* performance consists of young women dancers younger than 18 years of age and adult male instrumentalists. An *egbelegbele* performance starts when an instrumentalist, in trumpet language, calls the lead dancer of the ensemble onto the stage. After some time, the other dancers dance onto the stage and immediately form two lines, each led by the lead dancer and a dancer called the Queen of the House, while still dancing. As Undutimi Armstrong (25) points out:

> It is the music of the instrumentation that determines their body movements as they are dancing. The music provided by the percussions tells them when to stand, raise hand, shake head and when to bend towards the left or right. Sometimes they turn their backs to the audience; at other times all the girls would stand in different directions, giving privilege to a particular girl to perform. In most cases, this single-dancer performance is done by the lead dancer. She has the license or freedom to stand in the front, middle or back of the two lines, depending on where, as the claim goes, the spirit leads her.

The climax of the performance is when the lead dancer, while dancing, climbs up an artistically designed ladder positioned on the stage, dances for some minutes on the ladder's flat top, and dances down to the shouts of the audience. The performance of *egbelegbele* highlights issues of love, identity, and gender.

The dance performance originated in Amassoma, the host town of Niger Delta University, and spread to other places in Ịjọland. It is not that the dance performance is a recent development or "the latest of the latest" in this community, as Otobotekere claims. In an interview with Undutimi Armstrong, Macduff Ben Makpah, the present director of the troupe, notes that *egbelegbele* is an ancient cultural performance (Undutimi Armstrong 1). What is true is that it was confined to the town from which it originated and a few others in Ogboin *ibe*. It became popular in the 1990s, especially at the beginning of the 21st century when Chief D. S. P. Alamieyeseigha, an indigene of Amassoma, became the first executive governor of Bayelsa State. With the financial backing of Alamieyeseigha, the troupe could travel to anywhere in Ịjọland for a performance. It further became the unofficial traditional performance for the entertainment of official visitors to the state and was funded by the state government to compete at both national and international cultural competitions. As a result of *ekpelegbele*'s mass appeal, it was copied by several towns in the ethnic group. However, it is claimed by some that the troupe from Amassoma,

to date, remains the premier one. In any case, the origins of *egbelegbe*, like many traditional performances in Ịjọ society, is traced to a performance by otherworldly creatures. Undutimi Armstrong (1) notes:

> There exists a strong mythology which narrates the story of an old woman called "Egbele" who was believed to have mysteriously disappeared in the forest for defying the traditional law of the people: staying at home on market days. Egbele, who was in the forest for seven days, witnessed this form of performance while trying to trace her way back home to the community. It is claimed that she was given the directive by the people of the forest to tutor young girls within the age range of five to twelve to perform the dancing steps she saw in the forest; failure to do so would lead to her death.

Otobotekere also writes about festivals in his society. For example, in "Okolode Calling", the poet celebrates the premier annual festival in his *ibe*: Okolode. In fact, the title of this poem immediately reminds some of Gabriel Okara's often anthologized "The Call of the River Nun". Okara, from the town of Bomoundi, shared the same *ibe* with Otobotekere. The poets were friends, and it is very likely that Otobotekere had read the poem composed by his clansman. However, if Okara's poem is simultaneously a perpetual call from the Nun River to the poet who was then in south-eastern Nigeria to come back to his roots and a reminder of death because of aging, then Otobotekere's is a call to those who live outside Ekpetiama to come back to the *ibe* in large numbers during Okolode, something common with other festivals in his society:

> Is it the gala day?
> (5th of June or nearest) when
> The total of humanity,
> Male and female,
> Rulers and their subjects
> Crowd this rural haven
> With pump and pageantry?
> For a societal jamboree.
> Yes, with gaiety and flowery dressing. (*Sailor's Son* 97)

Okolode, the "festival of festivals" (*A Sailor's Son* 97), is *aya bury fị uge* (literally, a new-yam eating festival). Even though the festival, as the speaker notes, falls on 5 June every year, a celebratory atmosphere surrounds the *ibe* from the first day of June. As Dennis Ebipa Okpotolomo informed me (Dennis Ebipa Okpotolomo and I. Armstrong), in the past, the Ekpetiama axis of the Nun River was closed from 26 December to 31 May. During this period, no fishing was done in the river. When the river was opened on 1 June, fishing began in preparation for the festival, which came up after four days. It was the fish caught during this period that was used to cook the new yam, as it were. Usually, new yams were harvested from May. However, married men were not permitted to eat them until the day the festival began. Even then, the chiefs, paramount rulers, and the king of the *ibe* did not eat the new yams until the last day of the festival. Today, some of these traditions are no longer observed, including not fishing on the Nun River and not eating yams until a specific day. In any case, from 5 June, different cultural competitions, including wrestling, drumming, dances, masquerade performances, and recently, football matches, are held. Each town in the *ibe* takes a day to hold these performances:

> Feelings and sentiments explode
> In song and dance
>
> [...]
>
> turn by turn
> Community by community
> Club by club in
> Distinctive attire
>
> [...]
>
> hearty drumming, trumpeting,
> Waving flags and colourful banners
>
> [...]

dance of the year,
Dance of every soul
For the first fruits—
Turn by turn,
Community after community,
Till another year. (*Sailor's Son* 97–8)

The climax of the festival occurs on the final day when the men, including chiefs, heads of towns, invited important personalities, and the king travel to the host town to eat the new yams. The host town is the one which presents its performances on the final day of the festival. Prior to that day, all women in the *ibe* had contributed yams to the head of the women of the host town. Okolode is famed for providing an opportunity for attendees to meet their future spouses. The poet reflects this by commenting:

Honey moons [sic] also get fixed
To the pleasure of waiting parents. (*Sailor's Son* 98)

Finally, masquerade performances are also referenced in *A Sailor's Son*. Scholars note that these performances are a common sight in the Ịjọ community (Titus-Green; Agoro; Hlavácová). In Ịjọ society, masquerade performances are performed both on their own and as part of annual festivals. Among the *ibe mọ* in Eastern Ịjọ, masquerades are performed by the well-organised and structured famous *Sekiapu/Ekine* and *Owu-Ogbo* societies (Anderson; Horton). These societies have "authority to exercise discipline over citizens in certain matters" in their towns or villages, as the Ịjọ historian Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa observes of those in Eastern Ịjọ (qtd in Titus-Green 74). However, it is not so in Central Ịjọ where the tradition of masquerade is not as developed as in Eastern Ịjọ. In fact, in most places today, there are no longer masquerade performances, unlike Eastern Ịjọ. For instance, in my village in Kolokuma *ibe*, there has been no performance for at least 20 years now. Saviour Nathan A. Agoro also speaks of the "demise of the masquerade phenomenon" in Epie *ibe* (18). Not surprisingly, in the poem "What of those games? Where?", Otobotekere asks whether the tradition is "gone forever". For the poet, as with Agoro, the problem lies with Christianity:

You're far beyond

[...]

The puerile curses rained on you by
Certain New-born-agains or
Extra-born-agains? who,

[...]

now look
More foreign than your good self

[...]

Why must they try to block your way,
To deny you passage
From generation to generation? (*Sailor's Son* 88–9)

From the analysis above, it emerges that folklore nourishes Otobotekere's poetry and gives it vitality. The Okun's use of folklore, especially the incorporation of different Ịjọ percussions, further gives his poetry high musicality. Moreover, I would aver that the use of folklore ensures that the poetry can be read aloud for enjoyment or easily be realised in performances like oral literature genres. Folklore also provides insights into the geographical setting of Otobotekere's poetry. A foremost impact of folklore on the poems, though, is their simplicity. Folklore is created for public consumption, a public that comprises even children. As such, it is generally expressed in simple language. Otobotekere follows this tradition by writing in a language that is easily accessible.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed several poems from the collection *A Sailor's Son 1: In the Wake of Games and Dances* to demonstrate ways in which Otobotekere integrates Ịjọ folklore. In the text, he intentionally "reports" the vanishing folklore of his people, including dance styles, festivals, music forms, and beliefs, to outsiders and those Ịjọ who do not know this oral tradition. The poet further employs forms of traditional Ịjọ literature and some of its elements, such as dirge, drum poetry, dialogue, and direct address. In this same collection, the poet becomes a collector of Ịjọ folklore as he reproduces some songs in their originals. In the article, I interpreted Otobotekere's utilisation of folklore in *A Sailor's Son* as significant in various respects.

Notes

1. An *ibe* in the Ịjọ community, usually rendered in English as a clan, comprises a few villages or towns that are founded by a man's male child in which the people speak the same dialect of the languages spoken by the ethnic group. There are over forty of these *ibe mo* (the plural form) in Ịjọland (Alagoa, *et al*.).
2. At the time I met Otobotekere, his list of poetic works included *Playful Notes and Keys* (1987), *Around and About 1* (2005), *Around and About 2* (2005), *Lives to Live* (2009), *Beyond Sound and Voice* (2010), *Next to Reality* (2011), *Light* (2014), and *My River: Poems on Riverine Ecology* (2014).

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