Aesthetics of Resistance and Sustainability: Tanure Ojaide and the Niger Delta Question

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Abstract
The paper endeavours to establish the centrality of ecocriticism in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide. It will be argued in this paper that Ojaide’s poetry negates ecological imperialism, a capitalist practice that destroys the periphery’s natural world. In Ojaide’s poetics, there is an illustration of the nature and strategies he employs to actualise resistance literature – essentially premised on ecocritical literature. Ecocritical literature or ecocriticism is a form of literary criticism that considers the nature of the relationship existing between literature and the natural environment. Ojaide’s raison d’être for this artistic preoccupation is simple: the environmental and ecological predation in the Niger delta region of Nigeria, which is his native country. Therefore, since Ojaide’s poetics intersects with the realities of ecological imperialism, it is thus a dependable barometer to gauge Nigeria’s environmental/ecological dissonance for sustainable development.

Keywords: ecological imperialism; ecocriticism; Niger Delta; Tanure Ojaide; sustainable development.

The fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation.
--- Frantz Fanon.

Postcolonial writing does not begin only when the occupier withdraws: rather it is initiated at the moment when a native writer formulates a text committed to cultural resistance.
--- Declan Kiberd.

Introduction: The Niger Delta, Ecological Imperialism and Tanure Ojaide
Ecological imperialism is considered as the systematic and strategic re-shaping, exploitation, and destruction of the local ecosystems of the peripheral worlds for the
economic, political, cultural and ideological benefit of the centre. The centre-periphery paradigm amounts to spatial metaphor used to describe opposition between two basic types of places in world capitalist system: the one which is commanding and benefiting, the centre; and the one which is subjected to it, the peripheral world. It is used by development experts to designate one of the ugly faces of global capitalism, which supports the surplus gained by the centre to be used as investment fund in the periphery. In their provocative article, “Ecological Imperialism: the Curse of Capitalism”, Foster and Clarke see ecological imperialism as a grand design by the centre aimed at “robbing the periphery of its natural wealth and exploiting ecological resources” (Panitch & Leys 2004: 189) therein.

Under the rubric of core-periphery thesis, a “social pyramid system” is created that ensures wealth is gathered to the centre while the ecological consequences are distributed over a larger geographic areas by those with political, ideological and economic power (Wright 2004: 83-4). This process of exploiting developing or peripheral worlds is responsible for the environmental and ecological damage done to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, which has been made prostrate following oil exploration by the Multinationals in cahoots with Nigerian ruling class. The Niger delta environmental and ecological landscape is the artistic resource of Tanure Ojaide’s ecocritical poetics, which is predicated on resisting ecological imperialism.

Ojaide’s historical reflection on the vaporisation of the Niger delta’s environmental endowments and ecosystem, which have resulted to its present woes and lamentation through the activities of Nigerian political actors and imperialists, is pertinent here:

By the 1960’s the rivers had been dredged to allow pontoons or even ships to enter our backyard. Shell BP had started to pollute the rivers, streams and farmlands with oil and flaring gas. Forests had been cleared by poachers and others to feed the African Timber and Plywood Company in Sapele. Streams and marshes dried up. Rubber trees were planted in a frenzy to make money and were soon tapped to death. (Ojaide 1994: 15)

The impact of ecological imperialism in the Niger Delta as well as the effect it has on the
lives of its inhabitants is a common knowledge. Ecological imperialism has given rise to underdevelopment, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, loss of aquatic/marine life, environmental degradation and pauperisation of the locals – and Nigerians by extension. In this connection, casting a sombre light on the contradictions in the Niger delta, we can appreciate that

The story of the underdevelopment and neglect of the Niger Delta is well known in the world. The basic theme in all…has been that although almost all of Nigeria’s oil and gas resources come from or around the region, the social and infrastructural development there is abysmally inadequate. (Barrett 2009:46)

In relation to the above statement, a Nigerian journalist, Ray Ekpu, offers similar perspective about the Niger delta underdevelopment project and dissipation of her natural. For him,

The story of the Niger Delta is the story of a paradox, grinding poverty in the midst of vulgar opulence. It is the case of a man who lives on the banks of a river and washes his hands with spittle. It is the case of a people who live on the farm and die of hunger. (2004: 10)

Also, Nigeria is undeniably embroiled in environmental and ecological menace – largely necessitated by resource control issues, neglect of the oil producing regions or states as a result of ethnicity (Ojakorotu 2008: 95; Nnoli 1980:30; Osaghae 1994:9) and impropriety by the political class in managing affairs in the Niger delta, a region marooned in the geopolitics of Nigeria.

Accordingly, the mechanics of power relations between the Nigerian state and deltans has opened up a form of “environmental apocalypse” (Padilla 2009: 27) – what the martyred Nigerian eco-activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa calls “ecological war” that constitutes Tanure Ojaide’s poetic canvas, his personal helicon, is further explicated in this manner:

The specific, highly exploitative and grossly inequitable endowment/ownership-
exchange entitlements
relations between the Nigerian state and the oil-bearing
communities in particular, which explains why the enormous
oil wealth generated is scarcely reflected in the living standard
and life chances of the peasant inhabitants of the oil-bearing
enclave. (Eteng 1997:21)

It is well documented that the ‘‘the oil-bearing enclave’’ is the Niger delta, where oil and
other mineral resources have brought untold misery to the inhabitants of this region of
Nigeria.

It is therefore in resisting the above environmental and socio-economic slough that the
essence of Tanure Ojaide’s poetics is brought to the fore. Ojaide is one of the writers that
use art to engage with social and environmental experiences in their matrix. The hallmark
of Ojaide’s art is to use literature to interrogate the zeitgeist, and to advocate alternative
order couched in ecocriticism and environmental development. Therefore, Ojaide
considers literature as a reproduction of social experiences; it is a refraction of the totality
of human experience. Ojaide’s idea of art dovetails with Amuta’s statement regarding
literature:

As a refraction of social experience through the prism of
the human imagination, the ontological essence of literature
is to be located in terms of the extent to which it recycles
social experience and transforms it into an aesthetic
proposition. (1986: 38-39)

More significantly, Ojaide uses literature for environmentalist purposes. Ojaide places
premium on the biotic community - its sustainability and preservation. This literary
pattern is in congruence with ‘‘aesthetics of the earth’’ (Glissant 1999:149). It is a literary
preoccupation that is environmentally conscious and ecologically sensitive to the plights
of the people and their environment.

There is a sobering, graphic distillation of environmental and ecological dissonance
created by what Ojaide terms: ‘‘senseless destruction of our original neighbours, the trees
and animals’” (1994: 16) by the powers that be, in one of his poems, “Ughelli”, in *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986). In describing the nature of environmental devastation in the delta, Ojaide maintains that the imperialists want

To see her dry-skinned when her oil rejuvenates the hags
to leave her in darkness when her fuel lights the universe
to starve her despite all her produce
to let her dehydrate before the wells bored into the heart
to have her naked despite her innate industry
to keep her without roads when her sweat tars the outside world…
And for her to be sucked anaemic by an army of leeches,
it is a big shame. (74)

In exemplifying the magnitude and implications of the havoc wreaked in the Niger delta by the imperialists through the instrumentality of oil exploration and its concomitants, Ojaide uses enjambment and metaphor to achieve this in the above lines. In the excerpt, Ojaide excoriates the Multinationals, “army of leeches”, who make the deltans want in the midst of plenty. Metaphorically, leeches are sneaky, parasitic creatures that such blood from their hosts; this illustrates the ecological imperialists, who establish their satellites in their host communities to suck their blood – oil, the black gold. The gory atmosphere painted in “Ughelli” percolates the atmosphere of Ojaide’s poetic repertoire. Most of his poetry prefigures the vitiation of the flora and fauna of the Niger delta as well as the decimation of the economic wellbeing of the Niger delta people and their environment.

In this light, Ojaide reasons with Leopold Aldo, who said in his classic work, *A Sand County Almanac* that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (1966: 262). Moreover, Tanure Ojaide’s environmental poetics or ecocritical esthetics is a direct fall-out of his physical observation growing up in the Niger delta:

To me as a poet, childhood is vital, because it is the repository of memory… My delta years have become the touch-stone with which I measure the rest of my life. The streams, the
fauna, and the flora are symbols I continually tap... Home remains for me the Delta, where I continue to anchor myself. (Ojaide 1996: 122)

Thus, Ojaide’s ecocriticism is not predicated on universalism; it is based on what I call situated reportage. According to Ojaide, a creative writer is not an ‘‘airplant’’, who has no identifiable matrix; but someone, who is grounded in a definite place and time. This tradition is reminiscent of ‘‘sense of place’’ phenomenon. Ojaide’s ecopoetry is borne out of lived experience; he did experience the rich ecosystem and bioregion of the Niger delta growing up before its gradual disappearance through unscrupulous oil exploration. This is perceptibly articulated in his recollection:

I followed my grandparents to clear the thickly forested land for a farm and to plant yams. I followed my father and uncles to the pail-oil press, where palm seeds were prepared in a canoe-like wooden structure to produce palm oil. (Ojaide 1994: 15)

The environment, whose flora, fauna, streams and folklore animate Ojaide’s poetic enterprise, is under siege by the instrumentality of ecological imperialism. And to overturn the inanities and damage done to this environment, art should be a sin qua none.

Ojaide is a functional, realist artist – not given to the Orwellian art for art’s sake thesis. He considers his literary trend as refractive of the conjunctures in his milieu:

Contemporary trends are enlarging the African literary canon. African writers have been responding to the impact of migration and globalisation on their people and continent. Ecological and environmental matters, sometimes arising from the actions of the multinational companies, are at the core of … Tanure Ojaide’s The Activist and The Tale of the Harmattan on the environmental degradation of the oil-rich Niger delta area of Nigeria. (Ojaide 2009: 15)

In sync with the above, one of the hues of global capitalism is ecological imperialism,

The sinew of Ojaide’s ecocritical writing is largely hinged on envisioning a new environmental order in the Niger delta as well as resisting the imperatives of ecological imperialism. This has earned him some accolades, which include the following: Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the African Region 1987; twice the All-Africa Okigbo Prize for Poetry 1988 and 1997; the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award 1988; and trice the Association of Nigerian Authors’ Poetry Prize 1988, 1994 and 2004, among other awards. Apart from Ojaide’s poetry, his fiction also deals with environmental and ecological issues in the Niger delta – and by extension Nigeria.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical approach adopted in this paper to explicate the reason why Tanure Ojaide’s poetry is an instrument for contesting the rationale behind the practice of ecological imperialism is ecocricism. Ecocricism or ecocritical literature is a burgeoning method of literary criticism that gained popularity about two decades ago following the seminal work of Cheryll Glotfelty. In her own wavelength, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996: xviii). Also, in his penetrating book, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Lawrence Buell considers ecocricism as a “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (1995: 430). The mainstay of ecocriticism – literature of the environment - is the primacy of nature and its bioregions...
in literature; it is the type of art which is environmentally oriented in approach.

It is within the spectrum of the above argument that the fictive works of some Nigerian authors are considered to be ecocritical. These writers include Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Ibiwari Ikiriko, Nnimmo bassey, John Pepper-Clark, Wole Soyinka and Ken Saro-Wiwa, among others. Thus, such works mediate between our natural environment and the damage done to it by (ecological) imperialists. In most literary works by the authors named above, there is a palpable rectilinear interface between their works and the exploitative socio-environmental milieu that forged them. To this end, in his “Examining Canonisation in Modern African Literature”, Tanure Ojaide argues that “in addition to reacting to European exploitation, after independence, African writers started to react to their separate African rule” (2009: 13). This is the case with Ojaide’s negation rhetoric, which is moored to ecocritical poetry.

The Cultural and Ideo-aesthetic Imperatives of Ojaide’s Poetics

The essence of Tanure Ojaide’s poetics inheres in environmentalist activism and what Sallah calls “a deep sense of rootedness in (the) Delta region and Urhobo culture” (1995: 28)” as well as the consciousness to resist or change the despicable landscape engendered by ecological imperialism. Since poetry in Ojaide’s perception is an instrument for change, therefore artistically attacking the ideological, aesthetic and cultural arrangements that have informed exploitation of the deltans as well as their environment could galvanise consciousness and efforts in the light of sustainable development. In his piece, “Revolutionary Pressures in Niger Delta Literatures”, G.G Darah harps on the urgency of Tanure Ojaide’s art of resistance:

The poetry of Tanure Ojaide … fits into the tradition of outrage against political injustice, exploitation and environmental disasters. On the basis of sheer output, Ojaide is the most prolific in the Niger delta region. From his titles, one can discern an abiding concern with the fate of the Niger delta people… Many of the poems in these collections are verbal missiles directed at political despots whose rule has brought misery and distress to the region. (2009: 12)
Declan Kiberd’s statement adds credence to this artistic preoccupation: “postcolonial writing does not begin only when the occupier withdraws: rather it is initiated at the moment when a native writer formulates a text committed to cultural resistance” (1995: 6). This is the trademark of Ojaide’s resistance aesthetics.

There is a parallel in the literature that valorised colonialism. The creators (writers) of such literature engaged in evangelical crusade (in fiction) to propagate the superiority and hegemony of occidental values, culture and mores to the detriment of the colonised. Such anthropocentric thought schema and literary representation, in the main, also served the cultural project of control for the colonialists; it equally fuels their development. Lumped together, colonial literature and ecological imperialism unleashed an intricate interplay of what Nicholas Dirks calls “coercion and hegemony” (1994:4), and this arguably made the imposed Otherness of the Niger delta (African) natural environment appear likely. In advancing this position, we can appreciate that

> The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. (Bhabha 1994:101)

In this fashion, colonial fiction valorised and legitimated the tendency to exploit the natural environment and its resources. This is perhaps best articulated in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Technically, colonial fiction underwrites the process of commercialisation of the African (Niger delta) ecosystem and landscape (Myers 2001:100). The warped rhetoric of anthropocentric messianism was behind other colonial fiction that propagates the colonisers’ supremacy. This form of fiction includes D. Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1789), R. Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), E.M Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924) and G. Orwell’s *Burmese Days* (1934) among others.

Consequently, as indicated earlier, the meat of Ojaide’s resistance poetics resonates with cultural resistance aesthetics. Ojaide is on a cultural and environmental redemption mission. In this sense, Aderemi Bamikunle asserts that

> His poetry takes off from the present in desperate search for
values to redeem its malaise. The search takes him to the immediate past in the history of colonialism, and beyond that into the pre-colonial ancestral history and culture… (1991:81)

In illustrating Ojaide’s poetics of resistance, Dike Okoro’s review of his recent poetry collection, *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007), adds credence to this:

*The Tale of the Harmattan* is Ojaide’s 15th poetry publication. Part one of the book, much like Ojaide’s previous poetry collections, narrates and reflects on local issues with global implications. We are introduced to the disturbing tale of the oil saga that continues to plague Nigeria’s conscience. Ojaide references an array of struggles for a clean environment, multinational sensitivity to local people in their business dealings, minority rights, rights of the people to be treated as humans, and the legacy of grandmothers. (2007:1)

There is an extension of the logic of “the legacy of grandmothers” in Ojaide’s BBC prize-winning poetry, *The Fate of Vulture & Other Poems* (1990). In the title poem, “The Fate of Vultures”, Ojaide remonstrates with the fugitive politician, Aridon in protecting the bequest of nature and gifts of the natural world that his forefathers left behind: “O Aridon, bring back my wealth from rogue vaults…” (11).

Through intertextuality, we notice a corroboration of this premise in another poem, “Wails”, in *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1997), where Ojaide makes reference to the same “Aridon” for props to tear the stronghold of imperialism and elite culture:

Aridon, give me the voice

to raise this wail

beyond high walls.

In one year I have seen

my forest of friends cut down,

now dust taunts my memory…
I must raise the loud wail
so that each will reflect his fate…
The boa thoughtlessly devours
its own offspring, Nigeria’s
a boa constrictor in the world map. (18)

The “‘voice’” that “‘Aridon’” offers, is part of the ensemble needed to wage “‘ecological war’” heralded by Ken Saro-Wiwa.. In Ojaide’s artistic vision, poetic vocation that is sensitive to the plights of the Niger delta people – and Nigerians by extension as their environment and biodiversity disappear before their very eyes is crucial.

**Rhetoric of Environmentalism and Development: Ecocriticism and Ojaide**

Among recent poetry in Nigeria, perhaps, none is more charged with environmentalist alertness, and none more self-consciously steeped in anti-imperialist terms than Tanure Ojaide’s poetry. His poetry highlights the system of exploitative environmental policy that places the multinationals – represented by Shell, AGIP, Texaco, Chevron, and Mobil, etc as well as the political elite above the people (the subaltern), thereby destroying their environment. In this light, “‘the destruction of the environment as in most of Ojaide’s poems dealing with nature is symbolic of the destruction of African (Nigerian) culture and values’” (Shija 2008:2) as well as natural resources.

Following Nigeria’s mired politics and environmental crisis, Ojaide has re-engineered the possibilities of his poetics so as to ensure that the leadership problem of the nation does not subsist. In his view, poetry is a functional, aesthetic and ideological tool for environmental agitation. One defence against the “‘meddlesomeness’” of poetry in the politics of the day is the urgency of the situation that it addresses. Thus, the idea of poets in Nigeria as duty-bound to confront the political matters of the day harks back to the notion of poet in oral tradition as the spokesmen for the common people in the court of the powerful.

In taking back the traditional responsibility to speak for the people, the contemporary Nigerian poets have often seemed more concerned with the public role of an artist. This oracular responsibility finds resonance in the technique, craft and style of these writers; their technique mirrors societal disequilibrium: the content is a function of the container.
Niyi Osundare, a Nigerian eco-poet contends that

[…] art has a purpose. I believe in the social status of art…
It must be used to advance the cause of humanity… I believe that if art has any sake at all, it is human. I am a humanist.
The content is as important as the work. A work of art is not a technical jargon. Cleanth Brooks refers to a poem as ‘well-wrought urn’. But that talks about appearance per se.
A container without content is empty. As concerned, committed artists, the basis of all art is justice. (Ogoanah 2003:5)

In advancing the cause of (environmental) ‘justice’ as noted by Osundare ‘‘against the environmental degradation of the Niger delta and the unjust system which makes the people to be chief mourners and paupers in the midst of their oil wealth’’ (see the blurb of Delta Blues & Home Songs), Tanure Ojaide has used poetry to accomplish this.

As the people’s poet, Ojaide allows the social facts in the lived world to find expression in his art. This trademark is evocative of artistic commitment aimed at pointing a flambeau at evils of ecological imperialism as well as inept governance in the Niger delta (Nigeria). Thus,

Literature has to draw attention to [the] increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights… It is understandable why the African artist is utilitarian. (Ojaide 1996:42)

The act of portraying the true state of affairs in Nigeria through literary creation is a form of environmentalism against the warped ideas that ecological imperialism spreads in order to gain foothold through capitalist globalisation and information technology, which have the possibility to homogenise the world. From this point of view, Harry Garuba has asserted that ‘‘the post-Saussaurean separation of signs from their signifiers and referents has led to the valorisation of language over reality, the privileging of culture over and above the material practices which create these cultures’’ (Okome 2000:27).
Ojaide’s commitment to the literature that points to this ‘‘signifier’’ as well as the one that addresses the imbalance in Nigeria is well documented in his poetry. The unbridled capitalist onslaught on the bioregion of the Niger delta and the aftermath of this uncanny state-sanctioned assault are given effulgence in ‘‘Delta Blues’’, one of the poems in the collection, *Delta Blues & Home Songs*:

This share of paradise, the delta of my birth,  
reels from an immeasurable wound.  
Barrels of alchemical draughts flow  
from this hurt to the unquestioning world  
that lights up its life in a blind trust.  
The inheritance I sat on for centuries  
now crushes my body and soul…

My nativity gives immortal pain  
masked in barrels of oil –  
I stew in the womb of fortune.  
I live in the deathbed  
prepared by a cabal of brokers  
breaking the peace of centuries  
& tainting not only a thousand rivers,  
my lifeblood from the beginning,  
but scorching their sacred soil was debauched  
by prospectors, money-mongers?  

My birds take flight to the sea,  
the animals grope in the burning bush… (21)

The snippet above is quoted at length to distil the footprints and horrors of multinationals’ presence and activities in the Niger delta. Their activities crush the biodiversity of the delta as well as make its inhabitants impoverished. Ojaide’s eco-poetic intensions are captured in bold relief by the use of imagery, contrast, irony, hyperbole and other devices to depict the ‘‘immeasurable pain’’ that his environment is subjected.
Ojaide’s poetry collections are dialectical; they flow into each other in a manner that distils one major concern: the dangers posed by man’s activities on the environment. In another collection of poetry, *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*, Ojaide continues the same message: environmentalist poetics. In one of the poems, “The AT & P, Sapele”, there is a reconstruction of the damage done to the flora in one of the Niger delta areas, Sapele, which is home to the famous sawmill in Nigeria – that provided timber for export:

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When I first entered the AT & P
on excursion from St. George’s,
it was next to the largest sawmill
on earth…

The planks smelt fresh,
sardine-packed for export;
they came in raft by water…

When decades later I went home
to the delta of hardwood,
a big clearing welcomed me… (30)
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Evidence of this “clearing” and loss of flora is captured poignantly in another poetry collection: *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live*. In the title poem, “When It No Longer Matters Where You Live”, Ojaide paints a gory picture of the flora and fauna on the heels of the oil exploration going on in his world.

Thus, for Ojaide oil exploration and prebendal politics have left a balance sheet of ecological imperialism and socio-physical disaster, as seen from this versification:

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Choking from the season’s flagellation,
droves of wailers comb the breath of the land…

Wild fires consumed barks and herbs
what are the chances of catching the lion alive…? (77)
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The image of a nation on fire is portrayed with density and piquancy in the above poem. In its foray into imagery, we could see words like “choking”, “flagellation”, “wailers” and others crystallise the intensity of worsening living conditions of the masses and the environmental predation that have visited this social, geographic space – Nigeria.

The preservation of the fauna and agitation for the rights and wellbeing of humans are part of Ojaide’s humanist ideals. Through the creation of asphyxiating landscape in the third stanza of the poem “On the World Summit for Children at the UN, 1990” in *Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*, Ojaide calls forth the same mantra - the deplorable condition of man and fauna in the delta:

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Dogs will never shed enough tears
to tell their sorrow,
goats will never sweat enough in a rack
to show the world their desperation.
Babies suffocate from the game
of loveless elders of state… (70)
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The above poem calibrates the smothering condition under which the political elite, who are represented in the poem as “elders of state”, operate; they are in league with imperialists to further underdevelopment in Nigeria. This is corroborated by imageries of misery, sorrow and general asphyxiation that the people as well as animals face following gas flaring, blowouts, spillages and inept governance.

Therefore, the imperative of Ojaide’s ecocritical poetry is anchored in artistic and political method of narrative, which could

deconstruct the social, economic, and political institutions which reflect the values of ‘modern civilisation’ as conceptualised through the prevailing ideologies in order to pave the way for the recuperation of ‘primordial culture’ as conceptualised through the ‘cosmologies’ of endogenous societies. (Walunywa 1997: 21)
The process of deconstructing institutions and concepts that impede Nigeria’s (Niger delta’s) (environmental) development above crystallises in resisting the mandate of ecological imperialism – a practice that crushes the natural world of the Niger delta.

Ojaide likens the loss of feeling for nature to decline of poetry as a genre, since he reckons that the basic function of poetry is to galvanise, even to educate, the emotions. As Ojaide sprinkles his poetry with environmental, cultural, political and economic flavour, he draws our attention to the polluted atmosphere through the choking in the air. And through the gnarled barks of the trees, he alerts us about the peril of deforestation; and through the faces of the people and the animals, he points a torch to the evils of imperialism and corporatism wrought via blowouts, gas flaring and oil leaks in the Niger delta – and Nigeria by extension. This poetic consciousness negates the impacts of ecological imperialism and environmental crisis.

**Negating the “Delta Blues” Contradictions**

Ojaide’s poetry seeks answers to social and environmental problems in its own negation of contradictions. In “I, Oniniwherhe, the ant”, one of the poems in the collection, *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (1998), Ojaide launches the logic of negation in the midst of the pain and albatross of privation wreaked by the activities of the multinationals:

> And this, my coveted pain…
> In days of record famine,
> I am the envy of those too disabed by nothing to venture out…
> I, Oniniwherhe, a mere ant
> have become the day’s hero! (90)

In the above lines, there is a palpable song of grit in times of despair, pain and misery. The imagery of “ant”, a little creature, portrays the power of the powerless to change their world for better no matter what stands before them. This versification throws up the core-periphery dialectic – which sees the peripheral world as “powerless” and defenceless. But in contradiction to this perspective, “Oniniwherhe” – a metaphor for the defenceless Niger delta, has risen to challenge the contradictions engendered by oil
exploration – which has resulted to famine - hence, the arable land has been made barren through grisly oil exploration.

In another poem, “Dance of Defiance”, Ojaide continues the rhetoric of resistance with passion and trenchancy that is characteristic of Fanonist “fighting phase” (third phase), when “the native turns himself into an awakener of the people…” (Fanon 1965:179), and begins to resist unjust order. The titular choice of the poet here is sheer demonstration of pure negation of the institutions of tyranny as well as defiance. Take note of this song of defiance:

I will sing and dance at wakes…
I will still climb towards
the thin neck of the magic palm
to get my wine fresh from the top…

Let me be the eyareya grass
shaken relentlessly by winds
but will not fall in the frenzy.
Let me be that perennial river
that will be swallowed by the sea
but will continue to swagger… (68)

Through Ojaide’s stylistic use of metaphor and orature densely encapsulated in “river” and “eyareya”, an unyielding, taut grass, he calls forth the energies of the marooned people of the delta to resist unjust order. The “sea” above is a metaphor for imperialist albatross that requires resistance.

In The Endless Song (1989), there is a call for cultural renaissance anchored in getting back the natural largess of the deltans – this amounts to rejuvenating the Niger delta cultural heritage, endowments and folklore, which have been under siege through imperialist practice. One of the poems in this volume, “Future Gods”, calibrates this commitment to the past as a bridge that will lead the delta from her present environmental woes to glory:
Now fight your way back
to help us in these desperate days.
Shame on gods who look on bemused
as lightning strikes their devotees
in their own groves. (52)

In *Waiting for the Hatching of the Cockerel* (2008) – his last poetry collection, Ojaide incarnates the wisdom of “Aminogbe”, a traditional minstrel whom he projects as a protagonist fighting on the side of good against evil in the “wars which are no longer physical but multi-faceted in nature” (2008: vii). In the poem, “Fatalities”, Ojaide assays his trademark environmentalist motif as his minstrel bald-facedly warns about the multinationals’ scourge:

Planted in the soil, these heads,
Won’t grow – unlike pieces of yam.
Don’t blame the overbearing sun
or faint stars, nor the voracious earth;
the cemetery devours adjoining streets
and the living have only a short time
to wait for their inevitable turn. (98)

The urgency of resisting (ecological) imperialism is the sinew of the above excerpt; hence, we have a short time to remake the Niger delta natural world before its natural endowments evaporate.

The negation sensibility above finds counterpart in *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007). In the glossary segment of the poetry collection, Ojaide explains that the poem: “‘The Goat Songs’ ‘represents a song of anguish and complaint’ – symptomatic of the people’s lethargy following oil politics and its correlates in the Niger delta. Ojaide remonstrates: ‘‘I sing the community’s goat song/ Folks wear gold over tumours of hope’’. He continues his jeremiad of negation:

And who care if foreigners found deep
under their bare feet divine gifts of pools
and started to tap the earth’s underbelly
for fuel to blaze brushes of progress? (9)

The negation aesthetics is captured eloquently and forcefully in ‘‘Reclamation’’ a versification in Daydream of Ants and Other Poems (1997), which shall be quoted at length here:

And what errand can I run
...

If I must make a career
of the endless song, what hurricane can I invoke
to treat my people?
And if they have to leave their chores
and come into the open spectacle,
what field can I light without a match
for harmattan bonfires?
...

I must grow back the forest
cleared to build the schools
for children of born singers;
I must dig back Delta creeks
From the football fields –
let every dugout be afloat again.
I must keep off shell BP
to decontaminate soil and water.
How will Ethiope’ blocked heart
be freed of water hyacinths
for fishers to garner their fill
from Olokun’s generous breast?
...
I am still groping for the direction
of the song, and going to bed
when will I wake with a fresh birdsong?
My heart burns for a desire
that must be filled. (67-8)

Resistance Discourse: Power, Poetry and (Environmental) Development
Ojaide’s resistance poetics is predicated upon acquiring power as the basis for challenging the foundation of ecological imperialism, which is rather rooted in power project by the imperialists to continually undermine development in the Niger delta – and to further environmental pillage of this region of Nigeria. This standpoint is underwritten in this Foucauldian language:

Power is dispersed across complicated and heterogeneous social networks marked by ongoing struggle. Power is not something present at specific locations within those networks, but is instead always at issue in ongoing attempts to (re) produce effective social alignments, and conversely to avoid or erode their effects, often by producing various counter-alignments. (Outa1994: 109-110)

Taking a cue from the above, we can understand that power is fluid and not fixated at a particular place. Thus, Ojaide’s poetic enterprise is a power project – aimed at challenging the jaundiced, ideological and inept basis of ecological imperialism.

The dream that Ojaide has in Daydream of Ants & Other Poems culminates in some kind of counter-discourse or social vision that resists ecological imperialism and elite-salving paradigm. Thus, the aesthetics of this poetry collection is encapsulated in dialectics of struggle to re-create African (Nigerian) heritage, culture and environmental ethos devoid of the shenanigans of the imperialists and their compradors. To this end,

That struggle can never be successful if we adopt imperialism’s methodology, ideology and intellectual heritage. That struggle could only be won by finding an alternative pedagogy of mass affirmation through a critical re-examination of our literary heritage. (Udenta 1994: xvi)
In the struggle to resist oppression in the delta, Ojaide has tailor-made his literary aesthetics to suit this literary pattern, however indirect it appears. He therefore envisions hope and liberation through literary mediation, which, although, seems indirect, will galvanise opposition – what Udenta has referred to as ‘‘alternative pedagogy’’.

Not to act means hopelessness. I have hope. We are hopeful. However indirect we may have to be in our struggle, we are contributing to a dismantling of oppression and corruption. I have used the image of the struggle which collectively will destroy the oppressor. (Ojaide 1994: 17)

The ideological-cum-artistic discourse of resistance and struggle is brutally surmised by Ojaide’s narrator in the title poem, ‘‘The Daydream of Ants’’:

We are in league with powers
to wreck one vision
with lust for more visions
to refashion a proud world –
with the same hands… (15)

For Ojaide, the capacity to create a new world devoid of environmental predation and political tyranny is lodged in resistance rhetoric that is in conflict with the zeitgeist. The ‘‘proud world’’ in the above versification foreshadows a Niger delta that is free from imperial plunder.

In the following lines, Ojaide reminds us that our world would be lost to the imperialists unless we resist their ruse:

We have lost it,
the country we were born into.
We can now sing dirges
of the common wealth of yesterday
we live in a country
that is no longer our own. (*The Blood of Peace* 1991: 8)

In contradiction to the threnody above, Ojaide envisions an alternative order sublimated by environmentalist agitation. Therefore, in reclaiming the ‘‘lost’’ world, Ojaide opts for resistance rhetoric enshrined in ‘‘resistance army’’ as seen here:

We have organised a resistance army, 
declared sovereignty over our resources; 
but have not pushed back the poachers. 
Outside forces pillage the inheritance. (*The Tale of the Harmattan* 33)

In the poem ‘‘For the Egbesu Boys’’, in *The Tale of the Harmattan*, Ojaide’s solidarity with the oppressed and dispossessed as well as the marginalised to fight for the sustenance of their environment is picturesquely annealed:

For the same reason I sang praises of the Ogoni youths, 
I praise you Egbesu Boys in songs – you cannot be 
shackled from enjoying your own land’s blessing; 
you do the honourable duty of brave sons – fight on. (41)

By doing ‘‘the honourable duty’’ – that is wrecking the white man’s vision of conquest, literature will be denouncing the Rudyard Kipling’s ‘‘the white man’s burden’’ theory that attributes harbinger of civilisation to imperialism (colonialism) as well as repudiating the ‘‘privileging of one form of history’’ and the ‘‘suppression of the other’’ (Ogude 1999: 88).

In ‘‘The Power of Victims’’, the ‘‘resistance army’’ is more trenchant – thereby emphasising Ojaide’s literary commitment to resist foreign and home-made domination and deadweight:

And these are the tolls of dominion: 
victims reeling with vengeance. 
Cutting through stones to pathways, 
arching wide rivers with rainbows,
launching dreams to people the moon
and clearing space for inevitable confrontation,

We strew our way with the victims. (*Daydream of Ants* 34)

The ‘‘victims’’ as seen in the title of the above verse are the Niger delta people, who are victims of Richard Auty’s ‘‘resource curse’’ – ‘‘the curse of oil’’.

In transforming his people from victims to victors, Agbogidi, Ojaide’s (military) generalissimo and chanter in his verse ‘‘Agbogidi’’, one of the poems in *Delta Blues & Home Songs*, charts and embodies this victorious course.

I, Agbogidi, deflected lightening
from the umbrella tree I sat under;
in the clash with thunder I doused it
with a deluge – palmoil ablaze
drew rain, not smoke, from the sky…

How can one be invisible…
how can you be the war-god’s hand
without being carrier and sacrifice?
I Ogidigbo, have chosen this course –
I break through perils and arrive home. (82)

The commitment in ‘‘Lordship of the Leopard’’, another poem, to ‘‘… keep off the leopard/ from devouring the Delta/ and his flock of songs’’ (80) finds counterpart in the above lines, where Agbogidi, the war-god, fights to resist the ‘‘perils’’ in the delta. There is no vitiation of purpose in Ojaide’s environmental resistance poetics since he portrays every conceivable means of advancing man’s condition as well as bettering his bioregion as the fulcrum of his poetics. The verse inheres in its ability to wage ‘‘ecological war’’ with the imperialists for power to control the oil wealth in the Niger delta. The people have to do this by taking their destiny in their own hands, as demonstrated in the poem.

The entire oeuvre of Ojaide’s poetics not only pays attention to language as an apparatus of domination and as a means of reconstructing reality for power, it also demonstrates
coherence and maturity in Ojaide’s efforts regarding resistance art, society and life in general. Here, Ojaide is not only preoccupied with the social function of poetry; he is also concerned with the creative process, as well as the ideo-aesthetic faculty of art to resist domination for sustainable development.

Conclusion
The key concern of this study can now be reformulated. It has been argued that Tanure Ojaide’s ecocritical poetics serves as a framework for a discursive understanding and analysis of the Niger delta as well as a reconstruction of its politico-historical and environmental woes. For Ojaide, art (poetry) is crucial in order to winnow out the contradictions of ecological imperialism in the Niger Delta. In the poetry analysed in this paper, attempts are made to demonstrate that art is a veritable instrument that could be used to contest power thereby resisting any form of subjugation, particularly ecological imperialism. One of the main thrusts of Ojaide’s achievements in this context is the masterly manner he weaves his craft to crystallise the poetics of environmental resistance, which is moored to environmental aesthetics, sustainability and development. Therefore, Ojaide’s overriding attempt in his poetry is to use ecocriticism to interrogate “environmental apocalypse” that is threatening humans and their environment, for sustainable (environmental) development in the Niger delta region of Nigeria. This will help to reclaim the history of the region’s people from the rubbles of imperial pillage.

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