

Folklore, Cohesion and Meaning in Ojaide's *Agbogidi*

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Abstract. In linguistics, cohesion is traditionally conceived as a product of the lexical, grammatical and contextual ties within a text. Textual meaning is therefore the product of interplay between linguistic and nonlinguistic categories. Hierarchically, lexical and grammatical cohesive ties generally exert greater influence on textuality as they usually provide more of the meaning engendering properties of text. However, by examining the cohesive value of lexical and grammatical linkages, as well as the context of culture in *Agbogidi*, one of the folklore-inspired poems of Tanure Ojaide, this paper argues that: (i) lexical and grammatical cohesive linkages are almost insignificant in deciphering the communicative value of the poem under consideration arising from the apparent meaning discursiveness between the lexical items in the poems; (ii) cohesion in the investigated poem is underpinned primarily on socio-cultural semiotics. A fuller appreciation of meaning in the text is significantly dependent on the knowledge of the Urhobo cultural influences and belief system that permeate the text.

Keywords: Cohesion, Context, Cultural Text, Folklore, Meaning, Polysemy

1. Introduction

The primary concern of language (written, spoken, or signed) is the expression of meaning. Language enables social man to communicate a bewildering range of information: exchange of emotions, expressing ideas, and an infinite variety of ideational information about the world. The expression of meaning is a complex process that is carried out at a level above discrete linguistic components: sound, lexical unit, phrase, and the sentence. Competent users of a language primarily use a combination of these linguistic units to express different kinds of

meaning within the framework of sentence sequences linked by grammatical and lexical ties that produce linguistic patterns that are meaningful.

Halliday and Hassan (1976) explain these ties in terms of the theory of cohesion; a network of lexical and grammatical linkages. These linkages are fundamental to, and define, what constitutes a text. Text is the quality of having semantic unity based on the interplay between lexical and grammatical units and the meaning ties they provide irrespective of discourse genre.

In discourse (textual) analysis, context is also central. Here, context is defined to mean everything that surrounds an utterance and contributes to the derivation of meaning. Apart from grammatical and lexical cohesive devices, context provides the third leg of the tripod on which on textuality rests. The term (context) has attracted the sustained attention of researchers in philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics (Frege, 1880; Wittgenstein, 1922; Van Dijk, 1998). In linguistics, context is also categorised in a number of different, but related ways (Saeed, 2003). Several labels have been coined to describe a number of different context types. These include situational, social, physical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. These are sometimes broadly subdivided into the 'linguistic' and 'non-linguistic'. Linguistic context is underpinned on the use of lexical and grammatical cohesive ties to convey literal meaning devoid of the speaker's intent and assumptions (Cruse, 2004).

The non-linguistic component of context—social, situational, and cultural, on the other hand—provides other aspects of meaning arising from the social-cultural semiotics embedded in certain lexical choices. Originally coined by Malinowski in 1923,

the phrase ‘context of culture’ underscores the role that the knowledge of a people’s ‘way of life’ plays in meaning derivation. In recent times, linguists have coined other expressions that are equivalent to Malinowski’s ‘context of culture’. Saeed (2003, p. 192) refers to it as ‘background knowledge’ and defines it to mean ‘knowledge that a speaker might calculate others would have before, or independently of, a particular conversation, by virtue of membership in a community’. He defines ‘community’ among other things, to mean speakers of a ‘native language’.

It is a given that the context of culture constitutes an important component of the meaning potentials in every human language (Halliday, 1975). Depending on the nature of the text, discourse in present day English involves some element of intercultural exchange. Speakers who engage in intercultural communication typically do so by means of a common linguistic code. The interlocutors usually bring socio-cultural expectations of language to bear on such an encounter. Speakers’ expectations shape the interpretation of meaning in a variety of ways. These expectations, and the degree to which speakers from disparate linguistic backgrounds are able to reconcile them, largely determine the extent of cross-cultural understanding (Hiroshi, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2007). The status of English as the number one global language, partly because of its implantation in disparate cultures that are hitherto non-English, has resulted in a multiplicity of non-isomorphic context of cultures. Evidence of this is seen in designations like ‘World Englishes’, ‘New Englishes’, and non-native Englishes. A natural consequence of the foregoing is that English, as an international language, functions as an alternative means of expressing aspects of the culture for a variety of users: Mother-Tongue (MT), English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL), and English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) (Christopherson, 1960; Seidlhofer, 2003; Corbett, 2003).

Folklore-inspired poetry is especially a fertile source of the transposition of culturally bound meaning in African literature of English expression. Folklore, which encompasses the myths, legends and folktales

of a speech community, is a very significant ‘subtext’ in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide (Ojaruega, 2015:142; Maledo and Emama, 2020:1). The defining influence that the folklore perspective of literary analysis exerts on the poetry of Ojaide has engaged the scholarly attention of many scholars from the perspective of literary analysis (Alu, 2012). Investigative priorities have also been devoted to the study of folklore in several related fields of cultural studies, sociology (Thompson, 1980) and sociolinguistics (Mcdowell, 2018). These studies are useful in several ways. First, they establish the place of folklore as an integral part of the socio-cultural realities for a group of people and therefore an essential linguistic cog in the meaning-making potentials inherent in a particular language system. This is especially important in the context of the peculiar meaning dynamics that substrate languages introduce into English as a second language (Achebe, 1975; Alo, 2006). Second, folklores, apart from being carriers of cultural artifacts, also provide the inspiration for a significant number of works of literature. Arising from this, the unraveling of the cultural semiotics imbedded in any folklore-instigated poem is, therefore, indispensable to exploring its communicative value.

This paper is an attempt to establish, linguistically, the overarching communicative value of the context of culture by examining its cohesive role through the lenses of Tanure Ojaide’s folklore-inspired poem. This paper argues that, compared to lexical and grammatical cohesive devices, the textual glue provided by the context of culture provides, almost entirely, the linkages that make meaning derivation possible in the investigated poem.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This paper is underpinned on the theory of cohesion (Halliday and Hassan, 1976). The theory states that different genres of text are only meaningful because of the semantic linkages that all content, and some categories of function words, provide. These linkages are categorised into two broad types: lexical and grammatical cohesion (see Figure 1).

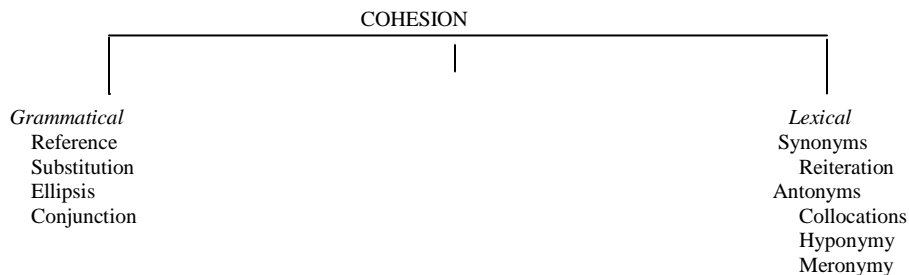


Figure 1

Lexical units (content words) provide a variety of cohesive meaning relations such as synonymy, lexical reiterations, collocations, meronymy, and hyponymy. These are paradigmatic sense connections of content words in the Saussurean mould. Some close system grammatical categories—a variety of conjunction types, personal/comparative pronouns, substitution, verbal and nominal ellipsis—constitute grammatical cohesive devices. The foregoing dual categorization is based on the interplay between full words and the close system grammatical items. Halliday and Hasan (1975, p. 303) refer to it as ‘lexicogrammer’, a dual component that provides the linguistic context in text. The meaning ties that these linguistic categories provide, in conjunction with some extra-linguistic context types, create text. Text is, therefore, a semantic relation where the interpretation of an element depends on another. A variety of extra-linguistic context types is also critical to texture.

3. Source of Data

The data consist of Tanure Ojaide’s folklore-inspired poem, *Agbogidi*, taken from one of his poetry collections: *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1997). Tanure Ojaide is a renowned scholar-poet whose works have been subjected to a lot of scholarly interpretations. His over seventeen collections of poetry, seven works of prose fiction, two memoirs, and an impressive number of scholarly books and critical essays on a wide range of subjects focusing on various issues in African literature are huge sources of academic references.

4. Method of Data Analysis

The method of data analysis is comparative. This is done by examining the communicative effectiveness of cohesive ties engendered by open-class lexical items vis-à-vis those provided by the context of culture. This paper argues that lexical textual connections in the data are seemingly discursive and that the derivation of meaning in the selected poem rests, almost exclusively, on the cohesion created by the context of culture. To establish the forgoing, the semantic load borne by open class lexical items in the data is determined using two strategies. The first is the identification of significant sense relations: synonyms, antonyms, meronyms, and hyponyms in the text; and determine the cohesive and communicative value they exert on meaning derivation. Secondly, context of culture-carrying lexical items and phrases are identified and analysed to establish the dominant influence they bring to bear in meaning derivation.

Lexical Cohesion in *Agbogidi*

1 I, Agbogidi, deflected lightning,
 2 from the umbrella tree I sat under;
 3 in the clash with thunder I doused it
 4 with a deluge-palm oil ablaze
 5 drew rain, not smoke, from the sky.
 6 When lost in the forest of night,
 7 I witness an antelope transform
 8 into a beauty – that’s how I married
 9 a sorceress, we owe each other
 10 what we can’t repay in a lifetime
 11 now my fan’s become a matchet
 12 & I clear ailments out of my way
 13 I was captive of the chief ogre
 14 and in the seven-day trial
 15 lived only on fingers of chalk
 16 instead of delicacies of bondage –
 17 my prayer flew directly to the sky
 18 and I landed at the outskirts of town,
 19 where journeys begin and end.
 20 This world isn’t home enough
 21 until the other world savages
 22 and gives you up from its depth.
 23 Where animals talk and you
 24 heed the multitude or mute wits,
 25 you’ll have enough counsel
 26 to bypass death’s many paths.
 27 I, Agbogidi, always returns home.
 28 This light specially held out for me
 29 to see ahead comes with a price
 30 I am glad to pay with a thousand denials –
 31 sacrifice will open its own way through
 tangles
 32 to the craft of putting the leopard to sleep

At the grammatical level, personal references provide apparent intra-textual cohesive ties that clearly connect the three unequal parts into which the poem is divided. For instance, the first person pronoun (*I*, *my* and *me*) are used seventeen times to establish the co-referential identity of the fictional character in the poem. The expression, ‘*I, Agbogidi*’ in Lines 1 and 27 provides firm basis for this conclusion. However, meaning relations at the lexical level appear discursive and disjointed in several ways. This is evident when we examine the peculiarities of lexical semantic relations within the stanzas and the poem as a whole. In the former, the relationships between lexical choices are seemingly opaque.

Meaning relations engendered by lexical ties in the poem are difficult to isolate due to a general lack of identifiable meaning-affinities based on synonymy, antonymy, meronymy, and hyponymy in the poem.

There are a few instances of lexical reiteration in the text. The first is *Agbogidi*, in Lines 1 and 27. Its cohesive value is only useful when linked with the cases of co-referential personal pronouns in the poem. Its primary function is to establish the sameness of indent across the seemingly semantically disconnected parts into which the text is divided. Though there are many collocations in the poem, they tend to obfuscate meaning, arising from the way the poet deploys them. There appears to be a lack of collocational meaning continuity between the lexical items in intra- and inter-stanzaic terms. The foregoing arises from several factors. First, at the intra-stanzaic level, the semantic force created by collocational meaning relations is heavily restricted to proximate lexical items; the textual force seems to become tenuous after a few lines of the text. Consequently, the semanticity created beyond the immediacy of proximate lexical items is missing; there is no meaning link arising from an obvious lexical field.

Second, the chaotic lexical choices create threads of seemingly parallel, disconnected narratives and actions, even at intra-stanzaic level. At the surface level, the text projects at least seven unrelated narratives. These roughly correspond to the proximate (strong) and tenuous collocational ties those contiguous lines in the text contract. In the first stanza, two unconnected narrative threads are identifiable. Lines 1 to 5 foreground *Agbogidi*'s super human exploits. He **deflects lightning** (Line 1), he **clashes** with, and **douses thunder** with a **deluge-palm oilblaze** (Lines 3 & 4), and **draws rain ... from the sky** (Line 5).

The time adverbial 'when' (Line 6) signals the beginning of the second strand of the narrative. Its main function is to spatially separate the events in the preceding lines from those in Lines 6 to 10. Although **sorceress** (Line 9) who **transforms** from an **antelope** into a **beauty** (human female) (Lines 7 & 8) sustain the ambience of the supernatural, there is no doubt that the events related here are different and unconnected to the preceding events. Lines 11 and 12 emphasise the disjointedness of the narrative style of the first stanza. While the word '**marry**' (Line 8) and the pronouns **we** and **each other** (Line 9) have cohesive value underpinned on reciprocity of action, one is hard put to fathom the semantic ties that '**fan's become a matchet**' (Line 11) and '**I clear ailments out of my way**' (Line 12) provide in the context of the preceding narratives. The last two lines in this stanza constitute the third narrative thread.

There are two distinct narrative preoccupations in the second stanza. The first details *Agbogidi*'s capture by the **Chief Ogre** (Line 13), his escape through culinary self-denial (**fingers of chalk/ delicacies of bondage**, Lines 15 & 16) and **prayer** (Line 17). These actions facilitate his escape to the **outskirt of town** (Line 18) where **journeys begin and end** (Line 19). The second is an apparent comparison of the metaphysical and the physical world: the latter exert an overarching influence; it is a crucible (**savages**, Line 21) and endows mortal man with the spiritual and physical wherewithal to navigate existential threats (**bypass death's many paths**, Line 26) on the mundane plane of human realities. He attributes his ability to survive (**I, Agbogidi, always return home**, Line 27) to the fact that he **heeds the counsel** (Line 25) of the other, non-physical world).

The poet's lexical choices in the second stanza also present similar communicative challenges despite having comparatively higher instances of lexical sense linkages. Unlike the first stanza, the second has more clearly defined cases of lexical meaning affinities: reiteration (**home/world**, Lines 20/27 and 20/21), synonyms (**captive/bondage**, Lines 13/16), antonym (**begin/end**, Line 19), and a wider range of collocational connections (**town/home/journey/paths/heed/counsel**). However, these are of limited value communicatively. For instance, cases of lexical reiteration do not have the same referent. The poet's use of **world** (Lines 20 & 21) refers to different planes of existence: one is metaphysical, fantastical (**animals talk**, Line 23), savage, full of vicissitudes; and the other, mundane. The same lack of sameness of reference also applies to his use of **home** in Lines 20 and 27. The qualifying adjective (**enough**) changes the expression (**home enough**) to a phrasal adjective. Consequently, **home** in line 20 is only lexically reiterative in form; not in meaning, with that in line 27.

Again, the textual connection of the second stanza to the first is lacking due to the discursiveness in the narrative style. The impression is that the poem is a product of the fusion of a mosaic of Urhobo folktales and epic narrative. Arising from this, the reader is tempted to believe that the only constant feature, the leitmotif, is the centrality of *Agbogidi* in the narratives. This is reinforced by the general lack of lexical sense connections within and between the stanzas. Furthermore, the cohesive value of lexical meaning connections identified in the first and second stanzas are dependent on several context-of-culture words and expressions. The overarching

cohesive force that these provide will be examined shortly.

The final stanza dwells on the uniqueness of some gift (This **light specially held out for me**, Line 28) which could either be interpreted as clairvoyance, improved physical vision, or the mere act perceiving objects ahead him (**see ahead**, Line 29). The gift comes at a price. A price he is willing to pay with (**a thousand denials**, Line 30). Again, the meaning import of ‘denial’ is ambiguous. It is either understood to mean ‘a refusal to satisfy a desire’ or the antonym of ‘acknowledgement’. The alternative—an acknowledgement—will result in the loss of foresight. It is a **sacrifice** (Line 31) he is prepared to pay to guarantee clairvoyance (**open its own way through tangles**, line 31). Again, the subject matter is digressional with no discernible narratological link to the preceding threads. In the last stanza, the pervasive sense of meaning disconnect is further accentuated by the seemingly unrelated expression in the last line. The reader is mentally challenged to decipher the communicative value of (**craft of putting the leopard to sleep**, line 32) in relation to the preceding lines.

Though the lexical choices exhibit a fair degree of sense interconnectedness, they are referentially opaque. Like in other stanzas, the key lexical choices are highly polysemic and therefore lack the general specificity of meaning that context provides. Context is indispensable in disambiguation of polysemous words. For example, the adjective ‘weak’, if used out of context, would either be meaningless or have a plethora of meanings. It is only in combination with other words that the sense of a polysemous word is revealed. Proximate lexical items usually provide the minimum context necessary for disambiguation. In the example given above, the meaning significance of the word ‘weak’ is disambiguated by other lexical collocates: ‘weak argument’, ‘weak structure’, ‘weak defence’, ‘weak muscles’, and a host of other paradigmatically relevant choices. This is lacking in some of the polysemous and semantically loaded linguistic units (word and phrases) in the third stanza. Examples include: **light** (Line 28), **see ahead** (Line 29), **open/own way/tangles** (Line 31). In the last line, another layer of interpretive conundrum is introduced by the ambiguity of **leopard**. It begs the question of the collocational significance of the words **craft** and **sleep** (Line 32) in the delimitation of the ontological status of ‘leopard’: as a feline (*Panthera Pardus*) or a precept in Urhobo cultural lore.

5. Context of Culture in *Agbogidi*

The poet’s discursive narratological strategy presents the first challenge of interpretation. This is because the poem is inspired by two source materials: the mythical folk hero, Agbogidi, and at least two folktales from the repertoire of the Urhobo people. This explains the two distinct features of his lexical choices. First is the general lack of lexical sense convergence within and between the stanzas. Second is the dominant role that certain culture-dependent words and phrases exert on meaning evaluation.

In our opinion, the eclecticism of the source materials, the imposition *Agbogidi* and the tribal lore he exemplifies, perform vital cohesive functions that derive from religious their ethno-cultural significance. These will be unraveled by examining how the poet employs certain culturally bound words and phrases (context of culture) to re-emphasise the primal connections between man, the supernatural, and nature and, in the process, reveal the all-embracing cohesive glue they exert on the text.

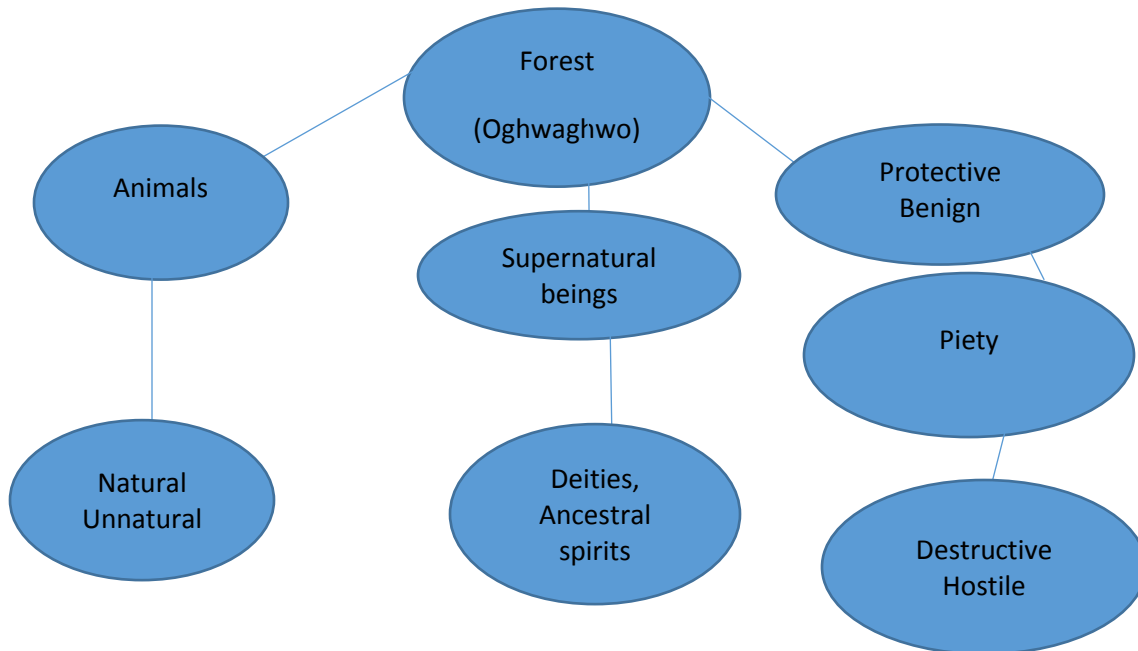
The portrayal of the folk hero, Agbogidi, exemplifies vital components of the belief system of the Urhobo people. Chief among these is the conviction that mystic traditional medicine (*Ekpofia*) fortifies the warrior and renders him invincible to malignant supernatural forces. Spirit beings, antithetical to evil, bestow such protection on the worthy adherents who must, as a matter of necessity, be individuals of good character: morally and spiritually. Agbogidi exemplifies this: He is daring, adventurous, and fearless. The spiritual fortifications furnished by traditional medicine confer on him the powers to perform super-human feats. He becomes invincible; he **deflects lightning**, he clashes with thunder and neutralises its destructive power; dousing it the way one puts out embers with water. The words **lightning**, **thunder**, and **palm oil** are culturally significant in the belief system of the Urhobo People. The extra-linguistic meanings that underpin them provide further insight on their communicative value in the text. Depending on the circumstances in which they occur, lightning and thunder are considered favourite tools of destruction. In this regard, they are associated with dark mystical powers, especially witchcraft (*orhan*). The Urhobos also believe that palm oil is imbued with mystical properties; an effective counter-measure against, among other things, witchcraft-generated lightning and thunder. Agbogidi effectively deploys this arcane knowledge to peremptorily neutralise lightning and thunder sent to kill him. In this sense, palm oil is functionally analogous to, and has the same context of culture

significance *Eitr* and *Excalibur* in Norse and Celtic folklore. Although these cultural artifacts and their use as mystical counter-measures are universal, an awareness of the cultural underpinnings is crucial in appreciating their textual properties.

Folktales centred on hunting are an important constituent of the lore repertoire of the Urhobo people. The narrative in Lines 7 to 12 is one of such. The hunter must be especially formidable. He must be versed in certain arcane arts that render him, spiritually and physically, impervious to harm, especially those that emanate from witchcraft. In most cases, he has dual identity: a hunter and a medicine man. The hunter is especially admired for many reasons. First, the primeval forest—a choice location for hunting—contains animals that are timid

and those that are hostile (**leopard**, Line 32). Second, the forest also abounds with potentially hostile sorcerers and sorceresses capable of transforming into all manners of animals (**antelope transform into a beauty**, Lines 7 & 8). Third, supernatural forces, more powerful than the hunter-medicine man, also inhabit the forest. The primordial forests also serve as transit points for the spirits of ancestors (*Erivwin*) in the course of their cyclic sojourn to the human plane. The transposition of the heroic personage of Agbogidi into a folktale narrative of this mien is therefore appropriate.

In Urhobo lore, the primordial forest (*Oghwaghwo*) has multiple extra linguistic, cultural meaning collocations. The diagram below represents some of these.



The primeval forest has a dual personality: it protects and bestows psychic powers upon the pious folk hero. It increases the efficacy of his *Ekpofia* but punishes the wicked. To be worthy, the depth of the individual's piety is measured based on his conscientiousness and the extent to which he observes the guiding tenets of the ancestors and deities. To him, nature reveals aspects of its power and positive personality (**witness an antelope transform into a beauty**). He develops better synergy with the metaphysics of the forest by contracting a spousal relationship with an aspect of her manifestation (**married a sorceress**, line 9). He matures: in addition to invincibility, he is gifted with the knowledge of curative traditional medicine (**I**

clear ailments out of the way). In this regard, the lexical item **fan** (*adjudju*) is an important aspect of the context of culture. The hand – held fan (usually made of the hides of animals) is important object in Urhoboland and other cultures in the Edoid group. It is believed that the patron deity imbues it with curative powers and gifts it to the chief priest or any other worthy adherent. It is therefore functionally analogous to a literal **matchet** (line 11) which cures ailments similar to the manner it is used to grasses.

The narrative from line 13 to 27 is also based on a popular folktale. On the surface, it is a simple narrative centred on the capture of the main character by an evil deity (**Chief Ogre**). It underscores the

value of abstinence and self-control as instruments of escape from the Ogre's captivity. Again, apart from the transposition of Agbogidi's heroic personage into the narrative (I, **Agbogidi always returns home**, line 27), there are culturally bound lexical items and phrases that enrich the communicative value of the narrative. They provide the needed extra linguistic linkages to the first stanza where surface lexical meaning fail.

The duality of good and evil is a universal precept in the lore of every culture. Here, the Chief Ogre is the antithesis of good. Periodic tribulations are general characteristic features in folk hero narratives. Tribulations and vicissitudes are necessary crucibles (**seven-day trial**). They refine and validate the folk hero's worthiness: his mental and physical temper. The process is continual and prepares him for a greater quest. Previously, Agbogidi's credentials have been twice certified: by the medicine man (*Obo*) who fortified him to neutralise lightning and second, by the supernatural forces of good. The expressions **fingers of chalk** (line 15) and **delicacies of bondage** (line 16) are the primary carriers of the context of culture and indispensable to meaning derivation. The latter has religious significance while the former is intertwined with the cultural values placed on self-denial. It contrasts with a rejection of a gluttonous, self-indulgent life style.

Fingers of chalk (*orhe*) is an important item in religious rituals, in ancestor worship and in ceremonial purification. Its colour – white – symbolises purity. It is believed that only those who are conscientious; who harbor no ill will, use it. It denotes righteousness. The cultural import is that the protective value of righteousness is transcendental. The chief ogre's successful capture of Agbogidi, despite his formidable protective shield, underscores two critical religious doctrines of the Urhobo people. The first is that personal good will and conscientiousness are key ingredients in warding off evil. The second, which emanates from the first, is the belief that these attributes gives access to the supreme God (*Oghene*). Oghene controls all other deities. It was Agbogidi's supplication to Oghene (my **prayer flew directly to the sky**) that secured his escape from the clutches evil. His piety, symbolised his ability to *orhe* (fingers of chalk) ritually qualifies him to approach the supreme God. Oghene's is the ultimate source of protection and enables Agbogidi to avoid premature death and other injurious encounters (**bypass death's many paths**, line 26). His invincibility is enhanced (I, **Agbogidi, always returns home**).

The last five lines chronicle the final piece in Agbogidi's spiritual evolution. He has now reached the zenith of spiritual consciousness that a mortal can attain. He is now psychic; prescient (**see ahead**, line 29). His encounter with *Oghene* has provided greater spiritual illumination (this **light specially held** out for me). The post-qualifying adverb "specially" personalises the gift. It is the reward for a track record of piety. The gift of foresight enables him to deploy spiritual counter measures with greater finesse and minimal effort (the **craft of putting the leopard to sleep**, line 32). He no longer relies on brute spiritual force (**clash with thunder /deflect lightning**). The sustenance of his clairvoyance is dependent his unwavering obedience to a set rules. The expression "a **thousand denials-sacrifice**" has cultural meaning significance. It refers, not Agbogidi's denial of his psychic abilities, but to certain taboo items that he must avoid. These items may include certain objects, culinary items, animals, corpses, and some locations.

6. Conclusion

Culture is a vital component of the meaning making property of language. The extent to which textual meaning is influenced by linguistic and non-linguistic context largely depends on the nature of the text. In *Agbogidi*, textual meanings created by lexical sense connections are of minimal communicative value. Firstly, key meaning-laden lexical items lack contextual clues necessary for disambiguation. Second, the poem is suffused with the religious and cultural symbolism of the Urhobo people. Understanding the context of culture that underpins these usages is there vital for intelligibility.

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