Introduction
It feels somewhat odd, if not a bit heretical, to presume to talk of tradition in the work of a self-confessed socialist-Marxist poet, since, as we all know, the Marxist ideology does not countenance any form of atavism which some might take tradition to mean. This feeling of oddity is partially assuaged by the knowledge that tradition is taken for most people as the take-off point or the entry-point in the discussion of literature and cultural production in general. However, for Niyi Osundare whose work is clearly rooted in and informed by his native Yoruba oral poetics, it will be myopic, in fact, insensitive of anyone not to investigate the place of tradition in his ever-burgeoning oeuvre. Moreover, besides his overwhelming reliance on his indigenous world view coupled with all the ramifying formal and contextual implications of this, his relation to the socialist-Marxist ideology invites us to also interrogate the extent to which the poet has been able to marry these nativist and foreign epistemologies. Does the epistemic wedding spawn good poetry or does it create disharmonious or discordant eclecticism? Does the poet’s neo-traditionalism, indeed, lead to a betrayal of his avowed espousal of Marxism? Seriously speaking does Osundare’s embeddedness in ‘tradition’, finally, result in regression and ahistoricism, or, to put it differently, does it make him a progressive traditionalist? What can we say is the theory of tradition in Niyi Osundare’s poetry?

Tradition
Before we go further in our discursive inquest into the theory of tradition in Osundare’s poetry, there is need for us to furnish an operational definition of tradition. In The Invention of Tradition, Eric Hobsbawm defines what he calls ‘invented tradition’ as ‘a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’. In an attempt to provide a basis for this phenomenon of the invention of tradition, Hobsbawm goes on to argue that:

It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the ‘invention of tradition’ so interesting for historians of the past two century.1

Hobsbawn rightly differentiates the two categories of tradition and custom, arguing further that custom gives ‘any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history’. While ‘custom’, according to

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Hosbawn, ‘cannot afford to be invariant’, ‘tradition’, by nature, is open to invention, or, to reconfiguration. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines tradition as ‘a belief, custom, or way of doing something that has existed for a long time’. All things considered, tradition may be said to designate a pattern of social behaviour whose warrant is usually rooted in the communal folk wisdom. While this pattern of social behaviour covers the entire gamut of social life, we are more interested in how the artist expropriates and utilises the constitutive elements of tradition in his work, both in terms of content and form. What, then, do we mean by tradition in Osundare’s poetry? What are the elements of tradition discernible in his verse? In so far as poetry is concerned, our reference to tradition will necessarily be limited to the artistic dimensions of the past; that which T. S. Eliot has called ‘the existing monuments’ and John Wain, on his part, clarifies as ‘the masterpieces of the past’.

‘Looking Back’: The Usable Past As Common Backcloth

For in the intricate dialectics of human living, looking back is looking forward; the visionary artist is not only a remembrer, he is also a reminder.

This excerpt exemplifies Niyi Osundare’s philosophy of poetry, if we may so term it insofar as in this brief statement we can flesh out the major ideo-epistemic planks of his literary engagement. The term ‘dialectics’, for instance, is vitally crucial in the overall hermeneutics of Osundare’s work, given his Marxist orientation. And as such, it behoves us to pause awhile to ponder the role of dialectics in his poetry. In A Dictionary of Marxist Thought ‘dialectics’ is defined in part as ‘the conflict of opposites driving reality onwards in an historical process of constant progressive change, both evolutionary and revolutionary, and in its revolutionary or discontinuous changes bringing forth genuine qualitative novelty’.

However, according to Holman and Harmon, ‘the most frequent system is that of Hegel, a modification of which Marx employed, in which the material at issue is analysed in terms of thesis, antithesis and synthesis’. Dialectics in Niyi Osundare’s poetry may be said to refer to the relational type, namely, the movement of history. ‘Oppositions’ and ‘resolutions’ abound in the historical process since nature – both in the phenomenal and human worlds – is intrinsically conflictual and contradictory. It is this contradiction – ridden human experience that Osundare in the excerpt above refers to as the ‘intricate dialectics of human living’. He goes on to stress the existential idea of ‘looking back’ as looking forward’. This is where we need to observe the greatest caution if we must pin down the theory, of tradition in Osundare’s work. What, then, does Osundare mean by ‘looking back’? And what does ‘back’ in this regard imply? A very convenient starting-point in our search for the essence of this

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2 Hobsawm, 3.
6 By the ‘Usable Past’, we assume that the past is not a perfect idyll or an elysium which the living poet must deploy wholesale in his appeal to Tradition. Thus, he is constrained to be selective in his expropriation of Tradition.
7 Niyi Osundare, The Eye of the Earth (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1986) xiv. In his paper entitled The Writer as Righter: The African Literature Artist and His Social Obligations, (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2007) 31, Niyi Osundare notes: ‘The past becomes not only a stepping stone, but a vision tower, for “looking back is to look ahead” ’ (Ayi Kwei Armah, The Healers (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1979) 172. This goes to show that the conceptual building-blocks of Osundare’s poetics of Tradition actually derived from Ayi Kwei Armah, who, himself was inspired by his Ghanaian oral culture.
8 Tom Bottomore et al., A Dictionary of Marxist Thought (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983) 120.

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'back' is to assume that it refers to the ‘past’. And what exactly is this ‘past’ and where do we draw the dividing line between past and present, given the overarching presence of the past? The past may be thought to cover or stretch from prehistory (including mythic time and folklore) through recorded history to colonial and post-colonial era, that is, the recent past. In this vast and varied stretch of time, human society has always been governed and regulated by certain norms of behaviour, belief-systems and cultural practices. And, expectedly, in traditional society, moral codes and ethical standards were clearly enunciated, with virtuous behaviour rewarded and encouraged and, conversely, vicious acts duly pilloried. It is this reward structure or system which undergirded the socialisation mechanism or process in ancient society.

Coming closer to home, in the Yoruba (African) society, virtuous behaviour was and is still highly regarded as such character traits as honesty, hard work, love or compassion, neighbourliness and hospitality, integrity and honour and communalism were seen as the moral building-blocks of society. Deviance or anti-social behaviour such as sexual immorality, dishonesty, laziness and selfishness were discouraged.

At this juncture let us emphasise that while those oral poets and storytellers were composing their songs without the aid of the technologies of writing or audio-visual, they nonetheless availed themselves of literary tropes and figures of thought, speech and sound such as simile, metaphor, personification, onomatopoeia, idiomphone, irony, satire, and litotes. The use of these poetic tropes by Yoruba oral raconteurs and poets demonstrates the universality of these rhetorical and stylistic elements as they are found in all oral cultures as well as in choreographic and typographic ones. Additionally, these oral poems, stories and songs relied for effect on such syntactic elements as repetition, parallelism and tonal counterpoint (see Olatunji10, Babalola11, Okpewho12, Ong13 and Osundare14). By the same token, Yoruba being a tonal language, oral practitioners tended to utilise and deploy sound symbols and images to compose and create their songs/poems. Small wonder, then, that we encounter a preponderance of the use of onomatopoeia, heteronyms, idiophones, refrains, folksongs, alliteration, assonances and consonances in the oral pieces of these traditional poets and singers of tales.

Cognate to the deployment of the socio-cultural and ethical values of the oral past and the literary syntactic features of Yoruba (African) oral poetry, in Niyi Osundare’s verse, we also find a lavish or liberal appropriation of such oral artistic categories as the proverb, the riddle, the curse, song, word games or punning, incantation, eulogy or panegyrics and satire. In highlighting the creativity of the orally biased people of Africa, Ruth Finnegan argues:

This has turned the spotlight on the detailed processes by which people create, entextualise, transmit, perform, or reflect about a multiplicity of forms of verbalized action: something to be considered not just in relation to texts and traditions from the past or to a canon recognized by elite scholars, but also as to how people are actually acting-performing and extextualising-in the present.15

As we know, oral art has its being in performance: it is therefore instantaneist, experiential and ephemeral, but while it lasts, it is characterised by multi-modalities of performance such

as music, words, singing, colour, somatic involvement, dance, material display. A cursory examination of the formal poetry of Osundare will reveal the poet’s overwhelming reliance on and the utilisation of the stylistic elements and the rhetorical features of Yoruba oral poetry (see Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Bamikunle). Niyi Osundare’s extensive use of proverbs is well-known, giving rise to criticism of his poetry, which in turn, elicited a poem entitled ‘Who’s Afraid of the Proverb?’ Osundare equally uses a lot of riddles in his poetry, so much so that most critics consider his verses as ‘riddling’ (see Anyokwu). Moreover, he regards his poetry following the pioneering examples of Okot p’ Bitek and Leopold Sedar Senghor, as ‘songs’, for example: Songs of the Marketplace, Songs of the Season, Waiting Laughters and The Word Is An Egg. In keeping with and following closely his native Yoruba oral poetic forms such as Oriki (praise poetry), ofo (incantatory poetry), ijala (hunter’s chants), ekun iyawo (bridal songs), ove (proverbs), alo apamo (riddles and jokes), and ese ifa (ifa divination poetry), Niyi Osundare expropriates the constitutive formal features of these oral modes and genres in his own poetry of English expression. Hence, he deploys various strategies of artistic mediation such as blending, compounding, clipping, neologism as well as other reiterative strategies like alliteration, assonance and cramping to effect word play, punning and word games which at once serve both satiric and humorous purposes. Even this conflation of satire and humour derives in the main from the Yoruba oral culture. The Yoruba, like the English neo-classical writers, abhor extremism, favouring instead the principle of the Golden Mean.

Among the Ekiti-Yoruba people, for instance, the practice of adan is meant to morally rehabilitate and socially redeem the deviant. Thus, in the adan satiric practice, humour is the energizing element, particularly in the lively context of real-time performance as the people seek to correct vice through ridicule. The belief-systems, the metaphysical assumptions and indigenous Yoruba world-view are embedded in the songs, poems, proverbs and the cultural productions of the people. The oral re-enactment of these cultural activities further reinforces and perpetuates the sanction of Tradition. Osundare admits:

My abiding source of inspiration remains that kind of literature that has no ‘authors’ in the conventional sense: the oral tradition. I was born and raised in a rich Yoruba culture in which poetry is music, the drum is a text, or, better still, panoply of texts; dance is both art and science, and the proverb is philosophy and wisdom without borders. I grew up in a community of chants and songs, ballads and incantations, plain songs and deep songs, panegyrics and flaying satires, and an interminable repertoire of oriki, that sub-genre which houses the poetry of praise and attribution, narration and colourful description.

16 Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Contemporary Nigerian Poetry and the Poetics of Orality (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1998) 162.
18 Osundare Niyi, Horses of Memory (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1998).
The Historical Sense: Voice and Memory in Poetic Imagination

‘The visionary artist is not only a rememberer, he is also a reminder.’

In the earlier part of this paper, we look at the first part of the above quote by Niyi Osundare, we examine his notion of dialectics in human society, emphasizing in the process Engels’ philosophy of nature which is said, or supposed to be, patently conflictual and fundamentally contradictory. However, the quote above calls attention to another important aspect of Osundare’s ideology of poetry, namely vision and conscious craftsmanship. The role of inspiration in the creative process is one which has always pitted one group of writers and scholars against another. While one school of thought holds that inspiration plays a decisive role in the creative output of a writer, thus relegating perspiration (cognition) to the background, another school of thought posits that creativity is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration. Although Osundare himself had once argued that, sometimes, a poet might be inspired by some external superior force the fact still remains that Osundare nevertheless believes that, in line with the demythologizing imperative of the Marxist epistemology, the human subject (the poet) is always fully in charge. This is why Osundare, the master stylist, deliberately elects to use the word artist in order to foreground the notion of a maker, a creator, a conscious craftsman who deploys everyday materials found lying about in the object world and presses them to poetic service. This act of creation/creativity confers on the artist some quasi-divine powers and prerogatives, such that we may begin to contemplate the artist-as-god. This portrait of the artist as man-god is analogous to the Nietzschean notion of man as Superman. And since Marxism discountenances religion, literary creativity becomes an aspect of a secular faith and the poet invariably assumes the role of a secular clergy.

Thus, rather than using Biblical metaphor or terminology, Osundare describes the artist as an agent of progressive change, a prophet-seer, a social crusader, rights activist and moral gadfly. In the bleakest of social anomy, the poet shines the light of hope; he is a veritable beacon of revolutionary optimism, enthusing in man’s undoubted capacity to triumph over life’s vicissitudes. The artist’s vision presupposes forward-looking, a prescient mind-frame which enables the poet to dream alternative possibilities for his society as he contributes his own quota to the Marxist grand agenda of changing the world.

Yet, the visionary poet is a ‘rememberer’, according to Osundare. That is to say, the poet does not discard or discount the past in his attempt to bring about a brave new world of possibility. Even if he wishes to discountenance the past, he cannot. Such is the nature of things that the poet as the imaginative leader of his community and society is also a product of the socio-cultural milieu. His vision is ineluctably bound up with his life-world; and his experience is the incremental accretions of the historical process. The past, therefore, constitutes, for him, as we earlier noted, the common backcloth, the fount of his own creative essence. It is this omnipresent past that he must always ‘remember’ – both to avoid its negative aspects and to reinforce and celebrate its positive aspects. Accordingly, Osundare in Midlife writes:

But what if we forget the past
And the past never fails to remember us…?

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26 Osundare, The Eye of the Earth xiv.
This centrality of memory dominates Osundare’s verse. A random sampling will suffice: In his foreline to *Midlife*, Osundare remarks: ‘This volume, therefore, is informed by an inescapably panoramic vision…’. This ‘panoramic vision’ is empowered by memory as the poems in the volume exemplify. The volume entitled *Horses of Memory* is almost entirely dedicated to the exploration of the memorial temper and the monumentalizing penchant of the Yoruba people. Indeed, Osundare, in the Dedication, tells us that: ‘In true commemoration of this man of song and memory [his late father], these poems are composed for orchestration and incantatory spectacle’. The poetry volume *The Eye of the Earth* equally turns upon the poetic evocation of the ‘shades and shadows of a remembered landscape, echoes of an Eden long departed…’ (emphasis added). Further, in the poem ‘Shadows of Time’ (Anniversary of a Future Remembered), the poet chants:

Memory’s minions all:
trees reckoning rings on the ripening finger
of mating forests;
the insolent grey in the jungle of the singer’s beard
the okro which, counting days, springs steel fibres…

In the poem entitled ‘In praise of little things’, Niyi Osundare intones:

In praise of the scarlet sigh of dawn
Silence of sleeping sea
Infinitesimal grains on the shores of Memory
Mirage on the asphalt face of Beauty’s road…

In ‘Queen of the Night’, the poet-lover croons: ‘Give me Memory/ Give me a Name’. As Chinua Achebe inimitably glossed, the Igbo (African) philosophy of *Nkolika* (Retelling is Greatest) in *Anthills of the Savannah* is closely linked with the act of recalling or remembering (see Introduction by Homi Bhabha in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*). The African sense of recalling (Memory) is encrypted and encoded in the numerous names people bear as well as in proverbs and wise sayings. This African sense of memory is also borne out by festivals and cultural ritual observances and rites of passage. The visionary artist is thus considered a memory-man or/and a muse of memory who stands sentinel at the bridgehead of a long line of African griots, minstrels, troubadours and oral bards who rely on memory to recount and re-enact past events and sagas. Osundare who sees himself as ‘a Caller at Noon’; as a town crier, deploys his formal poetry to denounce bad leadership, political corruption, social injustice and oppression in Nigeria; and, indeed, to tell the tyrant (i.e. Nigeria’s political leadership) that: ‘The people always outlast the place.’

Niyi Osundare’s poetry of social criticism and social commentary eschews the hagiographic tendencies of the Yoruba *oriki*, as he eulogises those he refers to as ‘positive archetypes’ – distinguished public-spirited individuals like the late lawyer and human rights activist, Gani Fawehinmi, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Femi Falana and Balarabe Musa (see *Songs*

30 Osundare, *Midlife* x.
31 Osundare, *Horses of Memory* vii.
of the Season). Additionally, the role of memory in poetic imagination is also intimately bound up with what T. S. Eliot has called ‘the historical sense’. In his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Eliot avers that the living poet must obtain ‘tradition’ ‘by great labour’. And, he also notes that tradition ‘involves, in the first place, the historical sense’. 38 He expounds his meaning further.

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. The historical sense which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timelessness and of the temporal together is what makes a writer traditional. 39

We have argued elsewhere 40 that Osundare’s poetic vision is very similar to that of T.S. Eliot’s in the way that both artists stress the crucial role of history and memory as well as the peasant origins of poetry. As the foregoing discourse discloses, Osundare’s poetry is deeply informed by a keen sense of social awareness, a high degree of topicality and contemporaneity even as the poet takes upon himself the task of a peopled persona, holding brief for the déclassé, the disinherited masses of his country, Nigeria and the world at large. When the poet, thus, speaks, even when he uses the first-person singular pronoun ‘I’, he is simply a paradigmatic representative of a collectivity 41. In a Whitmanesque sense, therefore, Osundare contains multitudes, just as he tells us in “Peopled Imagination 1”.

Mine is a peopled imagination…
My masks are many; un-
Countable sunlights name every line
of my figured face. 42

In fact, Osundare’s poetry devolves upon memory and desire, notably in line with his back-to-roots, orally informed poetics.

**Ancien Regime: Millstone or Stepping-Stone?**

Literary history furnishes a panoply of different literary conventions, movements, epochs or ages, a rather complex and sometimes controversial differentiation exercise purportedly warranted by writers’ changes of tack and/or deviations from conventional practices in the pursuit of novelty. Even T. S. Eliot argues that social change sometimes results in a sea-change in literary-critical tastes, tendencies and pre-occupations. The demarcation of Western literary tradition into, for instance, the Classical and the Middle Ages, Renaissance and the Neo-classical periods, the Romantic Movement and the Modern Age, is believed to be informed by the change in the thematic and the formal features of literature in particular and cultural production in general. Truthfully, there is a sense in which social mobility, class reconfiguration and major political upheavals tend to impinge upon the collective psyche of writers, who, in turn, as arbiters of taste, endeavour to mirror these social currents in their works. And, in seeking to reflect the spirit of the age they end up, at times, jettisoning old or

38 Eliot, Tradition 14.
42 Niyi Osundare, Horses of Memory (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1998) 112.
prevailing literary ethos for new-fangled ones. Even so, nowhere does literary history appear to furnish a clear-cut record of clean breaks, or abrupt discontinuities between a preceding movement and a subsequent one. What exists is rather a gradual de-emphasizing of the old and a corresponding emphasis of the (seemingly) new. The so-called new hardly subsists without expropriating the resources of the old. Nothing exemplifies this truism more dramatically than the English Romantic Movement. In spite of the hue and cry about neo-classical theories of poetic diction, the heroic couplet as well as the citified artificialities of Augustan poetry, some critics contend, even till the present time, that it was still business as usual during the Romantic period. These critics argue that the so-called revolution in poetry inaugurated by Wordsworth and Coleridge with their joint-publication of Biographia Literaria was all but a huge and elaborate hoax. In fact, it is argued that William Wordsworth did not actually use language spoken by rural folk as he claimed; and that his poetry is everything but spontaneous and simple. The point is that it is difficult to really discern a clear distinction between one literary movement and its immediate predecessor. What really exist are continuities between the old and the new, with the new as the old reconfigured or refurbished through the incorporation of truly new data emanating from a changed social environment. As Eliot observes, ‘art never improves but that the material of art is never quite the same’ and, also that, ‘the conception of poetry [is] as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written’. Thus, the ‘existing monuments’, or the ancien regime, warts and all, can be said to be more of a stepping-stone than a millstone for the living poet. We can demonstrate this nature of tradition by examining the relationship between Osundare and his immediate predecessors.

Osundare’s immediate predecessors, that is, the second-generation of Nigerian (African) poets such as Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Christopher Okigbo, and M.C.J. Echerue were criticised rather harshly for their alleged euro-modernist tendencies exemplified through what Chinweizu, and others, calls the Decolonization of African Literature. With their perceived over-valorisation of form and dependence upon private and far-flung symbolism and hard-going poetic style, the Soyinka-Okigbo coterie all but alienated the public, thus turning poetry into a rarefied ‘esoteric whisper’ to be deciphered by a small coterie of specialists’. Jeyifo, thus, argues that the poetry of Osundare’s predecessors was characterised by ‘arcane latinates and [the] learned, allusive pedantry’. It is this unsavoury state of affairs that Niyi Osundare reacted against when he started his career as a poet after the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War in the 1970s.

As though holding brief for his coterie of fellow poets, Soyinka reacted to the strident criticism of his poetry and his fellow poets’ work in his article entitled ‘Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition’. Soyinka argues in his article that even traditional oral poetry is characterised by the use of complex tropes and figures which resist easy comprehension. He notes that traditional poetry may appear simple but never simplistic as the work’s semantic and metaphoric range remain profound. Truth be told, while the Soyinka-Okigbo school might have produced difficult, and, in fact, obscure poetry, the fact remains that theirs was an admixture of both orality and Western-derived poetic method. In the article entitled ‘John Dryden’, T.S. Eliot remarks that Dryden ‘is a successor of Johnson, and therefore the

43 Eliot, Tradition 16.
44 Eliot, Tradition 17
46 Osundare, Village Voices 3.
47 Osundare, Songs of the Marketplace ix.
descendant of Marlow; he is the ancestor of nearly all that is best in the poetry of the eighteenth century [...] His inspiration is prolonged in Crabbe and Byron, it even extends, as Mr. Van Doren clearly points out, to Poe'. What this argument demonstrates is that the living poet is an embodiment of the ‘existing monuments’ or ‘the masterpieces of the past’. A close and careful study of Osundare’s poetry reveals his immense indebtedness not only to the poetry produced mainly in the Western English-speaking world but, more decisively, to Yoruba oral tradition. Our understanding of tradition in this context must therefore be nuanced and broadened to accommodate, not just indigenous Yoruba poetics but all written poetries with which Osundare has come in contact and have had a shaping influence on his poetic career.

The Alter/Native Tradition
Niyi Osundare is generally said to have rejected the poetic style of his immediate predecessors, regarding their poetry as ‘cryptic’ and ‘labyrinthine’. In his first-ever published poetry volume, Songs of the Marketplace, Osundare sets forth what most critics and scholars regard as the poetic credo or manifesto of the new, post-civil war Nigerian poetry. The opening poem entitled ‘Poetry Is’ is at once a pungent tirade against the Soyinka-Okigbo cohort and an adroit reformulation of Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as ‘man meaning to man’. Since his predecessors were believed to be ‘closet’ poets, writing mostly from an ivory tower, Niyi Osundare decided to compose poetry inspired by ‘the hawker’s ditty’, ‘the eloquence of the gong’, ‘the lyric of the marketplace’ and the quotidian commonplaces of nature. In an attempt to bring poetry closer to common, everyday people, Osundare started publishing poetry in newspapers in simple and accessible language aimed at ‘wooing and winning’ in audience for written poetry. Part of what Biodun Jeyifo identifies as poetry of revolution and revolution in poetry with regard to Osundare includes (a) a deliberate demystification of the language of poetry through the adoption of lucid language and metaphoric vibrancy (b) the instrumental orchestration of poetry through the adoption of lucid language and metaphoric vibrancy (b) the instrumental orchestration of poetry through the incorporation of musical instruments (c) audience consciousness based on a concentric paradigm, namely: (i) Yoruba native speakers (ii) non-Yoruba Nigerians and (iii) the international audience, mostly Euro-American readers (d) the appropriation of traditional Yoruba oral poetic forms such as oriki, ofo and owe (e) the use of Yoruba folksongs, refrains and lexical items glossed as footnotes, etc. (f) public themes and topicality (g) a high degree of lyricism and musicality to create ‘performance poetry’ and (h) class consciousness with Osundare aligning with the masses. This makes Niyi Osundare’s poetry highly ideological, and, some will argue, revolutionary.

Biodun Jeyifo and Funso Aiyejina are of the view that Osundare inaugurated the so-called ‘alter/native tradition’ in Nigerian (African) poetry in the light of the inaccessibility and hermeticism of the poetry of the Soyinka-Okigbo school. According to Aiyejina, ‘Osundare is the fulfilment of the public poet – the town crier – briefly glimpsed in the Okigbo of ‘Path of Thunder’. This ‘alter/native tradition’ in Nigerian poetry á la Osundare derives in the main from the poet’s relentless quarrying of ‘existing monuments’ for the development of an authentically unique individual voice. Hence, a reading of Osundare’s poetry reveals line echoes and similarities, borrowings, reformulations and reworking. Osundare himself has confessed his immense indebtedness to many older poets, African and

50 This is an oblique reference to Soyinka’s A Shuttle in the Crypt (London: Methuen, 1971) 15, and Christopher Okigbo’s Labyrinths, (London: Heinemann, 1971) 25.
non-African, alike. (Adagboyin\(^{52}\), Soyinka\(^{53}\)) Still on the poet’s deployment of material taken from other poets, T. S. Eliot stresses:

> A large part of any poet’s ‘inspiration’ must come from reading and from his knowledge of history. I mean history widely taken; any cultivation of the historical sense, of perception of our position relative to the past, and in particular of the poet’s relation to poets of the past.\(^{54}\)

In Osundare’s *Midlife*, the poet gives a roll call of some of the older poets and writers who have inspired and influenced his own work.\(^{55}\) What seems to give a critical and revolutionary edge to Osundare’s verse is his socialist-Marxist ideology, an ideology whose pervasive influence on Osundare’s verse results in a kind of vernacularisation of socialism even as Osundare, using the Hegelian dialectic, as reflected in the conflictual interaction between the ruling class and the poor masses, elevates conflict to a metaphysical principle that infuses everyday experience. Objects in the natural and the human world are imbued with an ideological significance way beyond their ordinary essence. Thus, these objects become charged with meaning and significance which, ultimately leads to what might be interpreted as the utopianisation of revolution. Osundare’s idealist and theoretical commitment to Marxism, to be certain, finally results, not in praxis but in stasis. This is because his Marxism cannot be said to be a patently secular but a religious utopianism, owing in large part to his animist-cum-organicist orientation.

**Osundare and the Animist Quagmire**

Although Osundare’s poetry has been termed poetry of social engagement or commitment by most left-leaning critics of his work, they nevertheless usually fail to highlight ‘the accustomed animist ritualism of older poets like Okigbo and Soyinka\(^{56}\) present also in Niyi Osundare’s poetry. It is refreshing to read what Funso Aiyejina has to say about this issue. Commenting on *The Eye of the Earth*, Aiyejina writes:

> The presiding autobiographical intelligence in *The Eye* is one which owes its existence and survival to a community of others and consequently, its perspective is communal rather than personal, constructive rather than destructive and giving rather than taking. The animistic energy with which the volume is charged does not originate from the poet as an individual but rather as the sensitive heir to, and interpreter of, a complex tradition and a collective philosophy.\(^{57}\)

Harry Garuba in his paper entitled ‘Explorations in Animist Materialism and a Reading of The Poetry of Niyi Osundare’ discloses that:

\(^{52}\) Sunny A. Adagboyin, *Niyi Osundare* (Ibadan: Humanities Research Centre, 1996) 75.


\(^{54}\) Eliot, *Tradition* 12.

\(^{55}\) Osundare, *Midlife* 44-45.

\(^{56}\) Jeyifo, xv.


Niyi Osundare’s poetry presents an interesting textual resource for the consolidation of these explorations of animist materialism. Locating his poetry within the continuum of animist signification presents an interesting challenge for several reasons, not least of all because Niyi Osundare is a Marxist-socialist poet and animism is often regarded a reactionary, metaphysical mystification opposed to the spirit of historical materialism and scientific socialism.\(^{58}\)

While Aiyejina tries to defend his friend and compatriot as well as a fellow poet, Garuba literally answers his own questions. What is left for us to add is that, like water and oil, animism and Marxism do not mix. The term ‘animist materialism’ betrays an oxymoronic and, hence, epistemic violence, which, ironically yet correctly emblematises the state of ideoreligious anomie in which contemporary Nigeria is mired.

Religious promiscuity, a social habit of hunting with the animist hounds and running with the hares of scientific socialism, is standard practice in Nigeria. Perhaps what we have here is a case of Jamesonian Political unconsciousness in which the poet-peopled persona that he is typifies the Nigerian condition. But, seriously speaking, encountering several instances of the Marxist-socialist artist’s deep immersion in his native Yoruba animist world view leaves much to be desired. It is not as though the poet’s neo-traditionalism or his return-to-sources poetics does not make good poetry or great art for that matter. The main problem is ideological. A committed Marxist ideologue ought to forswear and renounce all categories of false consciousnesses, animism being a cardinal feature of idol worship or the fetishisation of matter. Nothing, indeed, can be more retrograde, atavistic, and essentialising than animist thought. Like Femi Osofisan, his compatriot and fellow Marxist writer, Osundare has always responded in his defence of this strange and worrying practice by arguing that the Yoruba pantheon of deities is deployed merely as poetic symbols and metaphors.

Granted, the use of endogenous Yoruba demiurgic emanations and idealities serves to reinforce the work’s local habitation and cultural matrix. Yet, a sustained dispassionate mythoclastic procedure, on the poet’s part, might have been in order. But what we find in Osundare’s work is a pervasive celebration of animism, making the poet come across as a lapsed Marxist caught mid-stride between his reactionary animist nativism and an idealistic socialism. This ideological double-mindedness will continue to be a major aporetic moment in Osundare’s poetic career, since his theory of tradition derives mainly from both the Yoruba worldview and Marxist-socialist ideology.

**Conclusion: The Past is Present**

It is reasonable to conclude from the textual evidence furnished by Osundare’s poetry that the past bulks large in his poetry, as nothing proves the veracity of T. S. Eliot’s theory of *Tradition* more than Osundare’s verse. We have shown how the past that is both traditional Yoruba oral poetics, and written poetries of the English-speaking world principally shapes and fundamentally informs Osundare’s poetry. An attitude of faith in the ineluctability of the past coupled with its inescapable influence on the present can give rise to essentialism or/and undialectical ahistoricism. The presupposition is that it is a natural given or an eternal verity like, say, the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. Is it, therefore, inconceivable or impracticable for it to be otherwise? That is, can tradition (past) not be de-emphasised for the individual talent (present) to take centre stage? Does regression therefore imply progress? What, indeed, is it about human nature and the nature of things generally that makes the past so inescapable, so pivotal to human life and experience? It seems we may never be able to

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provide satisfactory answers to these questions as they seem to be as complex and confounding as life itself. Tradition seems to be in the DNA of the living poet and any attempt to deny this fact is an exercise in self-delusion or willed ignorance. Like the myth of eternal return, tradition will always re-assert itself in the present as whatever is created, composed or, even conceived is basically a re-enactment, a re-dramatisation, and, hence, a perpetuation of tradition. Indeed, as Eliot declaims:

    Time present and time past
    Are both perhaps present in time future,
    And time future contained in time past. 59

Since art does not improve but only its materials do, the living poet can only hope and endeavour to ever so slightly alter tradition by using new data, new ideas and new experiences to reconfigure and revamp tradition to suit the changed social situation. What comes through as change, then, is simply tradition methodised/modified. Indeed, it is tradition that things change and do change.

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