The Essentials of Niyi Osundare’s Poetry

Christopher Anyokwu

Literary historians in Nigeria are wont to credit Niyi Osundare with being the leading light or champion of a new kind of poetry, a poetry fundamentally different both in thematic concerns and style from that of the preceding generation of the so-called Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry. However, as some critics have argued, every age has a way of producing its own human medium through which it expresses its peculiar socio-cultural spiritus mundi. Accordingly, Osundare arrived on the literary scene at a time which shaped and prepared him for the task of freeing up poetry from the prison-house of obscurity in which the Soyinka generation was said to have put it. The socio-cultural and historical background or context of Osundare’s emergence – family, schooling, village setting, prevailing ideology, et cetera – went a long way in moulding and shaping him for the kind of poetry for which he has come to be known, namely: the poetry of performance. But before we go into details of his unique kind of poetry, it is proper for us to, first and foremost, pause to reflect on the shaping/gestative impact of these features of his development both as a man and, more to our purpose, a poet.

Niyi Osundare was born to Ariyoosu Osundare, poet, singer, drummer, and farmer, and Fasimia, ‘Indigo Fingers/Weaver of fabrics and fables’.1 Clearly, Osundare has inherited his parents’ artistic predilections and creative nous as it is very easy to make the connection between his own prodigious oeuvre and his parentage. Also, he was born and bred in an Ikere-Ekiti, famed for collectivism or a communitarian ethos,2 a primal communalism which fertilised his mind to receive the Afrocentric teaching he received at school, notably at the University of Ibadan under the late Professor Oyin Ogunba, who during the heyday of colonial (mis)education swam against the eddies of popular opinion by introducing his charges to the beauties and literary qualities of African oral literature.3 Thus, as part of the momentous wave of the decolonisation project, Osundare, alongside his fellow post-Civil War poets, embraced the Leninist-Marxist ideology which was sweeping large swathes of the so-called Third World and the rest of the developing world.4 His ideological affiliation was only deepened by his sojourn in Leeds, UK and York, Toronto (Canada) where he had travelled for further studies. This ideological intercourse between Africa and the West naturally bred in Osundare a good sense of nativism and cosmopolitanism, or, if you please, you may call it internationalism and neo-traditionalism. These aforementioned elements of the poet’s formative years seemed to have predisposed him to reject and revolt against certain aspects of ‘tradition’ as he decided to create his own unique brand of Afro-centric, orally-informed poetry.

What do we mean by ‘Tradition’ in this regard? Simply put, ‘Tradition’ here implies the sum of the pre-existing body of both written and non-written forms of poetry to which the living poet stands as heir or inheritor.5 Therefore, ‘Tradition’ approximates to both oral and written Yoruba poetry, African poetry in English expression and non-African poetry in English. As part of his

4Adagbonyin 84.
own development, Osundare, willy-nilly, must have read and studied these works in order to cut his own teeth, as he has on several occasions confessed. The scenario that is unfolding before us here is an interesting re-dramatisation of T.S. Eliot’s seminal essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. The poet stands on the shoulders of his predecessors the better to fashion out his own work, and what comes through as his claim to originality is a dexterous and deft personalisation of Tradition, i.e., ‘the masterpieces of the past’. It is fairly common that, in order for an emergent poet to acquire distinctiveness or originality, he or she must undergo a sublimated ritual of artistic parricide, an operation analogous to a kind of Oedipal Complex in which the ephebe or latecomer-poet seeks to ‘decapitate’ or squash the precursor-poet’s testicles. In the wake of the precursor’s (virtual) demise, the ephebe-poet has ample imaginative space to create his/her work. This Bloomian complex partly accounts for Osundare’s revolt against the ancien régime represented in this case by Soyinka, Clark, Echeruo and Okigbo. According to Biodun Jeyifo, the Ibadan-Nsukka generational cohort ‘deployed diction and a metaphoric, highly allusive universe calculated to exclude all but a small coterie of specialists.’ For his own part, Funso Aiyejina charges this school of Nigerian poetry with ‘an excessive preoccupation with the poet’s private grief and emotions over and above societal tragedies and triumphs.’ Aiyejina continues, ‘it was also a poetry distinguished by an undue eurocentrism, deviationism, obscurantism and private esotericism.’ Thus, Jeyifo posits that Osundare inaugurated ‘a revolution in poetry and poetry of revolution’. It is on this score that we may begin to tease out, in line with our topic, ‘the Essentials of Niyi Osundare’s poetry’.

In Songs of the Marketplace, Osundare sets forth the essentials of his poetry, particularly in his manifesto-poem captioned ‘Poetry Is’:

Poetry is
not the esoteric whisper
of an excluding tongue
not a claptrap
for a wondering audience
not a learned quiz
entombed in Grecoroman lore

Poetry is
A lifespring
which gathers timbre
the more throats it plucks
harbinger of action
the more minds it stirs

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6 Adagbonyin 69-75.
12 Aiyejina p 112.
13 Jeyifo ix.
The Essentials of Niyi Osundare’s Poetry. Christopher Anyokwu.
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poetry is
the hawker’s ditty
the eloquence of the gong
the lyric of the marketplace
the luminous ray
on the grass’s morning dew

poetry is
what the soft wind
musics to the dancing leaf
what the sole tells the dusty path
what the bee hums to the alluring nectar
what rainfall croons to the lowering eaves

poetry is
no oracle’s kernel
for a sole philosopher’s stone

poetry
is
man
meaning
to man

A Wordsworthian reformulation of the definition of poetry, the phrase ‘man/meaning/to/man’ conceives of poetry as a common currency of discourse with ramified implications for language, class and social bonding, for profit and pleasure. This Osundaresque disembourgeoisement or/and demystification of the language of poetry is an oblique broadside against the poetic practice of the Soyinka-Clark-Okigbo coterie, and, more broadly, resurrects the age-old controversy over what really constitutes poetry qua poetry. Is it just a creative transgression of grammatical rules, what the Russian formalists refer to as ‘organised violence committed on language’? or is poetry a verbal or linguistic will-o-the-wisp, a jigsaw-puzzle? Does sound matter any longer in poetry, as Alexander Pope epigrammatically chimes, to wit: ‘sound must echo sense’? As we go along in this excursus we shall attempt to provide answers to these questions. In the meantime, let us draw attention to what I like to call the ‘Democracy of poetry’ which Osundare’s verse, of course, inimitably exemplifies. Very much in the Wordsworthian vein, Osundare also revolted against the cult of ‘poetic diction’ by deploying the colourful patois of city waifs and strays and hobos bereft of material assets but amazingly rich in street wisdom manifested always through what Osundare calls ‘the spontaneous wit of touts’. The people’s poet, as Osundare is fondly

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14 Osundare, Songs of the Marketplace 3-4.
called, uses everyday people and issues as fit and proper subjects of verse making. Topicality and public-mindedness are enhanced in his work through a strong element of ideological vision and clarity of purpose. To be sure, Osundare’s poetry is empowered and driven by the dual propulsive forces of literature, namely: *utile* (utility or social functionality) and *dulce* (aesthetic delight or the sensuous pleasure of art). In this regard, Osundare has been significantly influenced by the famous such as Longinus, Horace, Philip Sidney and Shelley, all of whom recognised the vital importance of art’s hortatory and remedial potentialities as well as its ludic or entertainment value.

Hence, Osundare has shunned ‘the spineless apologia of that superstition called “Pure Poetry”’ and its escapist post-modernist pretensions.16

Osundare is a socialist-Marxist poet who uses his art to galvanise the lumpen-proletarian productive forces of society to slough off the Blakean ‘mind-forged manacles’ and concrete systemic chains à la Jean Jacques Rousseau, and fight for collective self-empowerment. In short, Osundare deploys his poetry to champion and fight for the cause of society’s dispossessed. This class-conscious poetic fundamentally affects his attitude to and handling of such categories as myth, language, nature, society, culture, literature and power-relations. In the main, Osundare’s verse is energised by the revolutionary vision encoded in Karl Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* (11th Thesis), to wit: ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it’.17

What Osundare critics have come to describe as his poetry of social criticism and social commentary is principally anchored upon this poetics of change, both in thematic and stylistic terms.

Part of the new spirit and the new agenda of ‘change’ include the following:

1. The *conscious* and *deliberate* effort to write poetry of social mobilisation, social conscientisation, a revolutionary aesthetics as against the preceding practice in which poetry was a ‘cultic’ and alienatingly elitist affair;

2. As a result of the stated functionality of poetry, the language of poetry is *deliberately* and *consciously* demystified: it is rendered in largely simple, lucid and accessible terms;

3. The victim-as-hero replaces the old idolatry of mythical personages (Ogun, Sango, Obatala, Idoto et al) because of the thematics of economic survival that supersedes cultural reclamation. Therefore, the ‘common man’ and his struggles against poverty, oppression, dispossession, and social inequities are celebrated as against the lionisation of the heroic feats and the grandiose exploits of legendary figures and mythological idealities;

4. The ‘alter/native’ tradition (or change) creates a poetry of performance that prioritises participation and relevance as against the former ‘Ibadan-Nsukka’ poetry school, forbidden in its complexities. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Osundare returns to his oral culture to borrow their musical instruments such as drums, flutes, native string-and-wind instruments to enhance the popular appreciation of the original and essential place of poetry as tool for *utile* (instruction) and *dulce* (delight or entertainment). Although the practice of the instrumental orchestration of poetry goes back to Biblical times, and has been in use throughout history, the point is that it had never been put to class-conscious,

16 Osundare, *Songs of the Season* vi.

revolutionary use in the way Osundare and his ilk do. In this light, therefore, change-as-continuum is highlighted;

v. The change in strategies of verse-making aimed at, according to Osundare, ‘wooing and winning’ an audience for poetry is mainly and strategically geared towards the realisation and the fulfilment of Karl Marx’s prediction, namely, that, while philosophers have interpreted the world, the point is to change it. According to Osundare, ‘the world I see is bent. I am mode and medium for its straightening.’ By the same token, therefore, Osundare is championing a new kind of class-conscious, ideologically motivated, revolutionary poetry aimed at bringing about fundamental social change and a clear improvement in the quality of life and the economic emancipation of the lumpen-proletarian elements in society;

vi. The institutionalisation of what Osundare calls the ‘poetry of profit and pleasure’ is a significant aspect of change in the production of poetry in Nigeria and beyond. Prior to Osundare’s emergence on the literary scene in Nigeria, the average student’s fear of poetry was real. The appreciation of poetry proved a living nightmare for students as they laboured to puzzle out the ‘knotty theorem’, ‘the esoteric whisper’ or ‘the learned quiz/entombed in Greco-Roman lore’. Osundare, thus, felt the need to re-humanise poetry by using the oral material – proverbs (owe), riddles (aloapamo), folksongs (orin), folktales (itan), panegyrics (oriki), incantations (ofo), etc. – with which the masses are familiar;

vii. To be certain, the strong sense of audience in Osundare’s art is an important dimension to the ‘change’ paradigm. Osundare ostensibly writes for the common people – the poor and barely literate peasants and the wage-earning working class (the déclassé). His desire, it would seem, to write for the common man (‘poetry/is/man/meaning/to/man’) arose partly against the backcloth of the highmindedness of his predecessors;

viii. As part of the ‘return-to-orality’ paradigm, Osundare refurbishes and reformulates native Yoruba poetic modes such as the curse (epe), the lament/dirge, the ode, satire, the ballad, the pastoral and the pastoral elegy (for instance, ‘For The One Who Departed’), the epic (as deployed in ‘Omoleti’), the gossip, and even the erotic modes (see Moonsongs, Waiting Laughters and Tender Moments). However, the proverb, described by Osundare as ‘one huge tome of uncountable wisdom’ deserves special attention because it occupies a central place in his oeuvre. Evidently, this deliberate and conscious quarrying of the people’s artistic patrimony is a practice Osundare has popularised and given intellectual respectability. His deep respect for his people’s orature was, as earlier hinted, instilled in him by Oyin Ogunba, a professor of oral literature at University of Ibadan;

ix. As a consequence, Osundare, thus, considers ‘Tabloid poetry’ as well as poetry for secondary school students as part of his ‘alter/native’ tradition. Hence, he has championed the publication of mass-oriented verse in widely-read newspapers and magazines in Nigeria and beyond;

22Osundare, Songs of the Season vi.
x. Also, as part of the natural fallout of the humanisation of poetry, it has won for itself an ever-growing following, particularly on tertiary institution campuses as poetry clubs have become a frequent aspect of popular culture. It is obvious that Niyi Osundare endeavours in his poetry to re-interpret and synthesise existing traditions to suit his contemporary audience and to respond to the exigencies of changing times. Osundare is not just a product of the intellectual milieu of his era but a creative artist whose work embodied the very time-spirit with the masterly interpenetration of reality and text.

One of the essential qualities of Osundare’s verse is the especial emphasis on sound. It would appear as though some of Osundare’s predecessors seem to have forgotten the original conception of poetry as verbal (oral-aural) art, speakerly in realisation such that melody mellows into meaning. In interview after interview, poem after poem, Osundare never tires of calling attention to this crucial and vital element of poetry. Little wonder, then, whether in the brisk, clear and refreshing language of the poems collected in Songs of the Marketplace, Village Voices, A Nib in the Pond and Random Blues or the increasingly prismatic idiom of Waiting Laughters and Moonsongs, Osundare carefully sculpts his language and allows its sounds to semiotise the movement of meaning. It is not hard to see that the lyrical and tuneful deployment of sound symbols and images in Osundare’s verse is part of the overall instrumental orchestration of poetry. The resultant vernacularisation of poetry inheres therefore in the use of musical instruments, Yoruba folksongs and refrains as well as the blended use of Yoruba oralities, for example ofo, owe, and oriki. It is also germane to stress, as Olatunde notes, the alliterative tradition popularised by Osundare even as he deploys the Yoruba oral resources of repetition, parallelism and tonal counterpoint, in bolstering the rhythmic power of his poetry. Hence, in his work, Osundare freely uses alliteration, assonance and consonance in order to achieve a high degree of polyrhythmic affectivity. Says the poet: ‘Rhythm for me is systemic and pervasive, it is secreted in every consonant and every vowel even as both engage in the musical union that begets the syllable’. To demonstrate the meaning – potential of sounds in his poetry, Osundare offers the following excerpt:

Some into gba
Some into gbu
Some into the gbaagbuu
Of Mehunmutapa.  

The poet illustrates thus:

The interpretation of gba and gbu must start in the mouth before proceeding to the brain! The heaviness of the labio-velar plosive /gb/, the contrasting realisation of the open vowel /a/ and the close /u/, the coming together of both syllables and lengthening (through doubling) of both vowels in gbaagbuu is all intended to produce an oral-aural bang with a resonance which reaches back to primordial times.

In Osundare’s poetry, sounds matter, contrary to McLeish’s dictum, namely, that a poem need not ‘mean’ but ‘be’. Osundare’s verse thus rejects this academicist aestheticism and valorises,

26Osundare, ‘Yoruba Thought’ 15.
recuperates and celebrates ‘instantaneist’ perfervid, antiphonal performance. Having surveyed the state of Nigerian poetry, Osundare has come up with a typology of poetry, namely: (1) poetry as courtesan, (2) poetry as coquette, and (3) poetry as nun. As for poetry as a courtesan, he has in mind doggerels and what D.I. Nwoga calls ‘versified intelligibilities’. This kind of poetry is not different from normal prose arranged in stanza form in order to acquire the appearance of poetry or verse. This is often the work of poetasters and would-be poets. This kind of ‘poetry’ lacks depth or the mysteries and the painful pleasures of cerebral exertion. The second type is the poetry as a coquette: unlike the courtesan who is ‘cash-and-carry’ or ‘pay-as-you-go’ soul provider, the coquette enjoys the mysteries, the intriguing anticipation of the chase and the longed-for the happy ending. Accordingly, poetry as coquetry parallels the sweet agony of delayed gratification, postponing the longed-for moment of consummation as long as possible but finally yielding to the lover’s insistent entreaties at long last. Poetry in this regard is the type which does not yield all of its meaning at the first time of asking. It demands patient study, reflection and close reading before the reader can prise open its semantic implications. Even so, the teasing-out of its meaning is a continual process, like one going to a river with a receptacle for collecting water, one never exhausts the river. The third type of poetry is ‘poetry as nun’: try as hard as you may, you can never get the nun, sworn as she is to a life of celibacy, to get into bed with you. It is the same with a hermetically-abstruse poetry which simply resists penetration of the enquiring intelligence. Osundare would have nothing to do with the first and the third forms of poetry, being as they are two polar extremes of the aesthetic/stylistic spectrum. A middle-of-the-road poet, Osundare favours poetry which is neither too difficult (i.e., ‘poetry as nun’) nor too lax or loose (i.e., ‘poetry as courtesan’). Although, as we noted earlier, being a socialist-Marxist writer and writing along class lines, Osundare is expected to be an out-and-out and thorough-going progressive. But it is important, however, to stress at this juncture that, for all his apparent progressivism, Osundare, at bottom, is a conservative who relentlessly yearns for the grounded securities, the time-honoured stabilities and the accustomed pieties of the past. There is, in fact, a sense in which his relentless deployment of native Yoruba oralities, ancient homespun wisdom couched in proverbial lore and folkways, his abiding and remorseless conservatism as well as his sceptical attitude to modernity combine to portray him as atavistic and a starry-eyed nativist. The seemingly perennially insoluble nature of Nigeria’s, nay, Africa’s problems forces Osundare to produce poetry of social criticism aimed at ‘criminalising’ the complacencies of unconscionable power, on the one hand, and mobilising the lumpen-proletariat for political action, on the other. And, this stance gives his work the imprimatur of revolutionary Marxism. It is this apparent Marxian militancy on the surface of his verse and the undercurrents of traditionalist conservatism that tend to problematise Osundare’s politics.

Osundare’s environmentalism turns largely on the overarching centrality of nature to the mechanics and logistics of his verse-making. Nature is deployed as a leitmotif or an organising principle in his poetry. For a start, Osundare uses it as metaphor for the myth of eternal return. He also deploys nature as metaphor for power relations (or class struggle, a strategy further enhanced by his recourse to the use of folklore). For instance:

Behold, too, these preyers
in the cannibal calvary
of the forest:
the iroko which swallows the shrub

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the hyena which harries the hare,
the elephant which tramples the grass
its legs nerveless with the gangrene
of senseless power.28

Symbolically, the forest represents the human society, and predatory beasts such as ‘hyena’ and ‘the elephant’ symbolise the oppressor class in society while ‘the shrub’ ‘the hare’ and ‘the grass’ typify the hapless déclassé, the poor masses, eternal victims of ‘senseless power’. By the same token, Eco-Osundare or what we have termed his environmentalism, may also be located in his well-known concern with conservation and ecological justice (see The Eye of the Earth and City Without People).

In the same connection, the environmentalist-poet (or naturalist a la Seamus Heaney) believes that so long as man shows respect for ‘the earth, our home’,29 social wellbeing can be guaranteed. Additionally, the environmentally-conscious poet uses nature-flora and fauna-to establish a sense of local habitation to the so-called ‘airy nothings’ that constitute part of the flesh-and-blood of his poetry. In Wordsworthian vein as well, Osundare uses nature as a veritable stimulus to philosophising. In the poem entitled ‘For the One Who Departed’,30 the poet threnodies the death of his father, using the flora and the sylvan denizens of tropical Africa as tropes of transience, mortality and memory. This poem, which is a classic instance of pastoral elegy recalls John Milton’s Lycidas’ and it is instructive that both works are used by their authors to meditate on larger existential or cosmic issues such as love, death, ageing, change, transition. In a sense, in much the same manner as Wole Soyinka, Osundare also explores in his poetry the paradoxical world view embodied by nature and dramatised through the plenty-drought continuum in nature. Painful as death is, it is a seed for new life, a fresh beginning and birth itself intimates the waiting sea. Indeed, Osundare’s memorialising temper or his preoccupation with memory is conveyed mainly through an adroit metaphorisation of Nature as in the poem ‘Forest Echoes’ in The Eye of the Earth and Horses of Memory.

As a locally-rooted native son, Osundare finds it convenient and useful to explore his native Yoruba myths, notably Yoruba pantheon of gods and goddesses in his poetry, although as a self-confessed socialist-Marxist writer, Osundare might be expected to see anything that has to do with superstition or religion as ‘false consciousness’. In The Eye of the Earth, for instance, Osundare dramatises the role of rocks and mountains found in his village of Ikere-Ekiti.

In the Preface to the volume, he remarks thus:

The rocks celebrated in this section, Olosunta, Oroole (both wonder siblings of Esidale), occupy a central place in the cosmos consciousness of Ikere people, they are worshipped and frequently appeased with rare gifts, thunderous drumming and dancing.31

Also, in Midlife, the poet lyricises and poeticises Osun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility, a deity who occupies an important place in the poet’s family history as evidenced by the poet’s surname: Osun-dare. The River Osun flows past the backyard and the farm path of the Osundares. The locals venerate and worship the goddess and in return expect her to bless them with fruitfulness and fecundity. Symbolised by the pigeon, Osun’s favourite bird, Osun is celebrated as the essence of purity, blessing and plenty by the poet. In the same vein, the poet

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29Osundare, The Eye of the Earth, xvi.
30Osundare, Horses of Memory 5-17.
31Osundare, The Eye of the Earth, xvi.
also celebrates *Olokun* (Yoruba god of the oceans), Oya (goddess of the River Niger), Ogun (god of iron and war and the deadly hunt) and Sango (god of thunder). These instances of the poet’s veneration of Yoruba mythical beings simply serve to point up a pervasive tendency on Osundare’s part, although, he would have us believe that both the rock-formations and the gods are “dramatized ... as a creative, material essence, as lasting monuments of time and space”. Coming to the defense of Osundare’s valorisation of the Yoruba animist metaphysics. Funso Aiyejina notes:

> The animistic energy with which the volume (*The Eye of the Earth*) 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.

Harry Garuba also goes to great lengths to rationalise Osundare’s dabbling in ‘false consciousness’. In a paper entitled ‘Explorations in Animist-Materialism and a Reading of the poetry of Niyi Osundare’, Garuba endorses his former teacher’s method as ‘animist materialism’. It is indeed, strange to see a critic seek to yoke together two irreconcilable categories: materialism suggests what is concrete or corporeal while ‘animism’ is an attitude, a religious mindset. Osundare yields further to this religious philosophy, particularly the Judeo-Christian creed which records in the Book of Genesis that God created the world. Osundare, however, stands this Biblical myth on its head by reversing the order thus: ‘In the Word was the Beginning’, thereby giving primacy, agency and precedence to man over God. Accordingly, in the epic poem-sequence ‘Omoleti’, the poet enthuses:

> In the Word was the beginning  
> In the spoken Clay before the First Fire  
> When the Wind, tremulous around the Void,  
> Bided the lettered lore of the primal Tree  
> Footless echoes spelt the blank  
> The Universe loomed in myth and matter,  
> Waiting for a Name.

The poet, then, goes on to narrate and recount how ‘Silence’ and ‘Darkness’ were routed by the Word, and with the cooperation of the Four Elements: Wind, Fire, Earth and Water – the World as we know it was birthed into existence. Hence, the poet tells us that: ‘The Word named God’. As Wole Ogundele correctly observes, ‘Omoleti’ is Osundare’s anti-creationist rebuttal and/or evolutionist attempt at re-imagining Genesis. Thus, while, on the one hand, Osundare engages in mythoclastic criticism of the Christian myth, he indulges in mythopoeia, on the other. But it is salutary to note that the nature-poet or the environmentally-conscious bard deploys nature, notably the sylvan universe, to reinforce and re-emphasise the popular myth of Eternal Return, a patently sanguine myth which periscopes the socialist myth or dream of a future El-Dorado, the communist paradise. Thus, the myth of Eternal Return which focuses on the birth-death-rebirth

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33 Osundare, *The Eye of the Earth* xv.  
34 Aiyejina 112.  

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cyclic progression and continuity constitutes a crucial lodestone of Osundare’s poetic vision. Be that as it may, the interaction between animism and materialism in Osundare’s verse comes across as aporetic ambivalence of vision, a sticking point which some Osundare critics find difficult to rationalise.

In terms of voice, the poet who loves to pride himself as a peopled-persona almost always presents a public ‘I’ which metamorphoses into ‘we’. This Whitmanesque sense of peopled-persona runs through Osundare’s poetry, right from Songs of The Marketplace, through A Nib in the Pond to Days and City without People. The character, Sule in ‘Sule, Chase’ for instance, might be interpreted as Everyman or, more directly, the ‘common man’ who indulges his anti-social instincts for self-preservation in the face of irresponsible and unresponsive power. To be sure, the archetypal image of man that comes through in Osundare’s poetry is that of a homo viator, the acting man unfazed by insuperable odds. As a stylistician, the poet does not always make clear the characters who animate the lines of his verses, and, as he himself confesses, he relies upon the use of multiple masks, profiles, voices embedded within the nuanced armature of song-poems made discernible through syntactic change of gears.

Osundare’s poetry is empowered by revolutionary optimism derived from the socialist-Marxist idea of plurimental heroism. Besides, this sense of optimism in the face of life’s vicissitudes in part derives from the traditional Yoruba optimistic cast of mind. Furthermore, Osundare’s craftsmanship is aided and enhanced in no small measure by his professional training as a stylistician, and this manifests in the ‘tricks of print’ which he uses to transfer otherwise performable/oral features of poetry onto the ‘cold impersonality of the page’ (to borrow Isidore Okpewho’s phrase).

As Sunnie Adagbonyin inimitably demonstrates, Osundare liberally makes use of neologism, experimenting with verse forms in the manner of e.e. cummings, Ezra Pound and Liyong. Additionally, he uses structuro-morphological strategies of lexical cramping pictographs and other cognate forms of lexical innovation such as affixation, compounding, functional conversation, puns, blends and sound symbols-idiophones, onomatopoeia and heteronyms. Osundare’s method seems to consists in the interfusion of oriki, ijala, ofo, owe, aloapamo and adan-inspired satire rendered in English in what the poet himself calls ‘interface language’, that is, a variety of Nigerian English suffused with the rhetorical properties of ethnic Yoruba. A poem is mostly a blend of two or more of the native Yoruba oral poetic sub-genres built around the deployment of tropical flora and fauna as the abiding metaphorisation of quotidian experience. Disclosing the most important source of his poetic afflatus, Osundare submits:

My poetry is strongly influenced by Yoruba poetics. Mine is the figured fancy. Metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy and other figures of speech populate the lines as fishes do a fertile river.

38Osundare, Songs of the Marketplace 16-19.
39Adagbonyin 101.
40Adagbonyin 101.
42Osundare, ‘Yoruba Thought, English Words’ 28.
To conclude, as Biodun Jeyifo remarks, ‘The dispossession of the majority of our people, and more specifically of the rural producers, may in fact be said to be the grand theme of Osundare’s poetry’.44 We might as well simply add that, apart from this theme, the ultimate theme of his poetry is class struggle of the poor masses in order to, in the distant future, establish the hoped-for classless communist society. And, finally, what are the features which characterize Osundare’s poetry? They are the following: limpidity of diction, multivalence of form, the intermingling of man and nature, animist materialism, adroit deployment of stylistic ‘tricks of print’, neologism, wordplay, lexico-morphological innovation, sound semiotics, sprung rhythm, riddling vision, the memorial temper, innuendo, joie de vivre, cultivation of collectivism, an unbending commitment to revolutionary ideals and the passionate pursuit of freedom.

**Works by Niyi Osundare**


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