

Myth and History in the Poetry of Osundare

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Christopher Anyokwu, "Myth and History in the Poetry of Osundare"
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Abstract: In his article "Myth and History in the Poetry of Osundare" Christopher Anyokwu examines the interrelation of myth and history from an African perspective. Anyokwu analyzes the poetry of one of Africa's most prolific and decorated contemporary poets, Niyi Osundare. Osundare is a third-generation Nigerian poet whose work is based on Yoruba oral tradition and informed by Marxist ideology. Osundare's poetry demonstrates the so-called "return-to-roots" neo-traditionalist ethos in modern African writing. Osundare's attitude to myth, ritual, and other African animist categories is intriguingly complex, ambivalent, and giving rise to charges of ideological irresolution and culturo-epistemic bifurcation. As a champion of poetry of social statement and revolutionary change, Osundare places history on a high pedestal in the overall message of his art. Anyokwu analyses the different points of interaction and divergence between myth and history in Osundare's poetry arguing its conjunctural significance in the growing world of African letters.

Christopher ANYOKWU

Myth and History in the Poetry of Osundare

I begin by reflecting briefly upon some comments made by Chinua Achebe, Nigeria's foremost novelist and doyen of modern African literature. He had once found himself in a similar situation of presenting a paper on the nature and fate of African literature, a task quite akin to what we are about to embark upon now. And quite interestingly, Achebe's opening shot was: "Art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorised dog-shit!" (19). He had gone ahead to shed some light on what he meant by that seemingly indelicate statement: "art is, and was always in the service of man. Our ancestors created their myth and legends and told their stories for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight); they made their sculptures in wood and terracotta, stone and bronze to serve the needs of their times. Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the good for that society" (*Morning Yet* 19). Pursuing the same line of thought is Isidore Okpewho, another Nigerian novelist and, more importantly, oral scholar, who, in his study entitled *The Epic in Africa* argues that art has always served a dual function, namely religious edification and aesthetic delight (2). In fact, most African scholars in the field of literature and allied disciplines hold a similar opinion about the essential nature and function of African imaginative writing. In order to avoid the charge of essentialism and/or cultural binarism, it is imperative and pertinent for us to remind ourselves of the universal character of literary arts: right from the earliest of times, to invoke Achebe again, literature has always a) served a human (social/historical) purpose and b) provided "pure delight" (*Morning Yet* 19) Horace in his *Art of Poetry* talked about poetry serving these dual roles; even Plato in *The Republic* expressed similar sentiments, although he would prefer poetry to play a more hortatory role in order to engender a morally sound society. During the sixteenth century, Philip Sydney in his *Defence of Poetry* echoed the classical view, that is, poetry should instruct and delight. And in the nineteenth century, Percy Bysshe Shelley felt called upon to articulate the general self-perception of the Romantic poets, a view he had captured in the oft-quoted phrase "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." The African writer is all of this and more. Being the "imaginative leader" and the "guiding sensibility" of his community, he must bear witness to the vagaries of time and history; his work must have the ability, "to create alternative realities, to push further the frontier of quotidian actuality through a relentless thrust of fresh imagination, its ability to create new answers for old questions and pose new questions for old answers, its concern for beauty, for the harmonious elevation of the human spirit, and therefore its capacity for 'seducing' us from ugliness, for healing rifts and stifling fragmentations" ("Stubborn Thread" 15).

Beyond the inherited patterns of response as well as the conventional and customary strategies of artistic mediation, Osundare comes across as the leading light of his age and time. The reason for this approbatory remark is because in Osundare's art we confront a poetry of revolution and a revolution in poetry (*Songs of the Marketplace* vii). Before I proceed with my discussion, let us sketch briefly the periodization of Nigerian poetry of the English expression. According to Tijan M. Sallah and Tanure Ojaide, African poetry may be sub-divided into three major groups of poets, namely 1) the nationalist politician poets who wrote "poetry" (or versified prose) as part of the momentous anti-colonial struggle, 2) Africans who started writing poetry during the independence era and postcolonial period, poets such as Lenrie Peters, David Diop, Okot P' Bitek, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Agostinho Neto, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark, among others, and 3) a younger generation of poets who came of age during the time when the African continent was caught in the throes of internal colonization and neo-colonialism unleashed by both erstwhile foreign colonial conquistadores (the Bretton Wood institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, the London Club of Creditors, the Paris Club, the G7 nations, etc.) and their local indigenous bonces of power, mass impoverishment, corruption, decay of social infrastructure, large-scale unemployment, poverty, ignorance, and mass illiteracy and other kindred pathologies (see Sallah and Ojaide 5).

Osundare as well as his fellow poets and writers came to see themselves as seer, visionary, social crusader, human rights activist, political gadfly, singer, bard, and raconteur. And owing to the seemingly endless social and economic problems in Africa, the poet finds himself/herself almost always embroiled and implicated in the larger crises of his society. Theirs is not the impartial, dispassionate, and

standoffish "Situation Report" of an external observer (e.g., journalist, historian, ethnographer, or tourist); on the contrary, he/she is the bard writing from within the tribe, drawing inspiration from centuries, old traditions, and cultural heritage. Osundare dramatises the role of the poet in his volume of poems entitled *A Nib in the Pond* (1986). The poetry of Osundare, to all intents and purposes, is committed to social change. A number of factors account for the historicizing imperative in his formal verse. According to the poet, "in the intricate dialectics of human living, looking back is looking forward; the visionary artist is not only a rememberer, he is also a reminder" (*The Eye of the Earth* xii). For Osundare, "looking back" means drawing upon the collective artistic heritage of the tribe (that is, T.S. Eliot's concept of tradition) in order to bring to pulse "the dreamt feast of all humanity" (*Horses of Memory* 1). And a crucial and significant part of "tradition" is myth or the mythology of the tribe. In this article, I highlight selected definitions of myth offered by scholars and literary historians and then distil the salient features of myth necessary for a hermeneutic exploration of Osundare's poetry.

According to Philip Wheelwright, myth simply designates "our tribal habits of conceptualisation" (59). He goes ahead to aver that the primitive worldview embraces taboo, totem, magic, legend, initiation ceremonies, death chants, worship of gods and goddesses; and all of these constitute myth which in turn is used in literature as "expressive symbol" (59). Commenting on the interrelation of ritual and myth, Wheelwright states: "Ritual connotes a way of doing, and myth a way of envisaging; but the doing and the envisaging are of a special, not of an everyday sort, and imply in their turn a belief in a penumbral reality, something extending beyond yet interpenetrating with the affairs of mortal men" (60). He goes further to elucidate his argument thus: "the mythopoetic vision involves a certain idea of nature, for a myth, whatever its undertones of psychic extrapolation, tells a story whose locale is the world "out there" (61). To be certain, myth as a contested concept is protean in its signifi-catory possibilities: it is interpreted as "illusion," "legend," "false propaganda" (119). These are surrogate terms which suggest that the characters and the actions of literary works have qualities that make them representatives of types or classes or ideas. (119). Myth might also approximate "belief," "custom," or "convention," all of which tend to carry connotations of value. Myth is equally thought to be "racial memories," "unconsciously held values," "out-and-out rationalisation created by an individual," or "a sanctified and dogmatised expression, not necessarily in the form of literature, of basic social or class conventions and values, concepts which may be as inclusive as the "togetherness of the community mind" (Wheelwright 121). Wallace W. Douglas in his essay entitled "The Meanings of Myth in Modern Criticism" furnishes a fairly illuminating and insightful definition of the concept: "Myth or myths are opposed to facts, to 'cataloguable and manageable phenomena' to the logic of ordinary knowledge, to positivism, the empirical, the finite, to the logos, to the intelligence and will, and to the consciousness" (121). Douglas provides another useful perspective on myth when he argues quite convincingly that "myth ... originates in passionate, poetic, or institutional views of reality in the unconscious, the dream; in memories of the primordial, the mystery, the primordial mystery; in the world of spirit, of value, of an extra dimension; in the imagination; or in man's now suppressed or denied awareness of his sin" (122). We might add, just by way of corroborating Laurence Coupe's thesis that Osundare's use of Yoruba mythology extends his indigenous belief-systems and metaphysical postulations. Osundare's work is therefore mythopoeic insofar as it re-creates, re-interprets and, ironically undergirds myth which his Marxian materialist habit of mind should have exploded and debunked.

Thus, my point of departure is the different, albeit fiercely antagonistic and somewhat irreconcilable perspective on the nature, character, and function of myth. I am aware of the tentative nature of my attempt at pinning down the chimerical wraith known as myth. Richard Chase posits rather controversially that myth is not the "indispensable substructure" of poetry (69). Poetry is the indispensable substructure of myth. Myth is a less inclusive category than poetry. Poetry becomes myth when it performs a certain function, an idea [that] ... is abundantly affirmed by modern anthropology" (69). Couched in the rhetoric of paradox, Chase's argument ultimately holds true: the line, "poetry becomes myth when it performs a certain function" is at once putative and axiomatic. This is against the backcloth of the statement credited to Archibald Macleish: "A poem should not mean but be" (7) which Osundare counters with "A poem should not just *be*, it must *mean*" ("From Oral to Written" 8). In this connection, therefore, Osundare's art like all African literatures is a poetry of commitment — *littérature engagée* — imbued with social responsibility and socio-historical answerability, and like every

other aspect of social life traffic control, town-planning, agro-allied industry, manufacturing, sporting activities, oil-and-gas exploitation, and so forth, poetry serves a patently humanistic function in the African becoming. Curiously enough, all of these complementary aspects of national life are driven and empowered by a set of enabling myths to fulfil their specific roles in human society.

For anyone who has an acquaintance with Osundare's poetry, the reader will notice the poet's overwhelming deployment of nature and traditional Yoruba orature. Osundare's poetic canvas is framed in large measure by the mythic cosmos of the Yoruba whose religion and metaphysics are rooted in animism. While the poet's socialist-materialist ideology is largely derived from his Western education (although he tries to convince us that he encountered socialism in his Ikere-Ekiti town in his childhood), the animist consciousness at work in his poetry is eloquent testimony to "the return of the culturally repressed." According to Funso Aiyejina "The animistic energy with which *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" (Ogunbiyi 114). The resultant canvas is a large and intense land/people-scape presented through the eyes and mind of an involved, committed, and deeply philosophical ego with a lyrical and ebullient voice. This recounting ego celebrates the folk culture of his people and highlights their relevance for nature, presenting the myths with which they regulate their community while drawing attention to the continuing rupturing of their lives and the need to join them in resisting such ruptures (Ogunbiyi 114).

Apart from *The Eye of the Earth*, which marked the coming-of-age of Osundare as a poet, a close reading of his other volumes of poems reveals that the poet has always "poached" from the communal animist pool. From his very first work, *Songs of the Marketplace* through *Village Voices*, *A Nib in the Pond* to *Waiting Laughters*, *Moonsongs* and *The Word is an Egg*, Osundare has deployed consistently his native Yoruba metaphysical beliefs as well as traditional religious systems and this he has done in part to establish the local habitation of his verse, and, perhaps, more pertinently, to use them as a kind of aesthetic scaffolding or poetic conceits. Exploring what he has called "animist materialism" in Osundare's poetry, Harry Garuba remarks that "Rather than see a contradiction between the secular vision of Marxism and the metaphysical nature of the animist inheritance, Osundare's poetry provides an example of how both can be creatively deployed. In his poetry we encounter again and again, the lyrical evocation of nature and the poetic self dramatisation that we associate with the Romantic tradition: a nature suffused with mystical presences and healing essences" (70). On the face of it, Garuba's argument appears reasonable, a rough-and-ready arrangement similar to calling a truce between the lion and the antelope. If the truth must be told, Marxism does not brook any form of superstition, religious belief, or supernaturalism. It dismisses all of these as "false consciousness," and, religion as "the opium of the people." It is strange, to say the very least, for a self-confessed socialist-Marxist poet like Osundare to try to hold in precarious tension two mutually incompatible categories such as his native Yoruba animism and his materialist ideology. Put plainly, it is this attempt on the part of the poet to force a cohabitation between animism and Marxism in his formal verse that causes the internal ideological antinomy and tension in his writing. It is true that Osundare in his mythographic procedure tries to use the demythologizing imperative inherent in Marxism to explode or debunk his indigenous communal myths to suit his own class-oriented poetic, yet, these myths continue, ironically, to live and have their being in his poetry. Osundare's Marxism breathes fresh life into these myths, guaranteeing their longevity. This is the romance between myth and Marxism. Thus, Osundare's reworking of myth through Marxist epistemology ultimately leads to needless obfuscation.

Wole Soyinka, a fellow Yoruba poet, who seems to favour liberal humanism, pays homage to the gods. He would thank the gods "for their self-sacrifice on the altar of literature, and in so doing press them into further service on behalf of human society, and its quest for the explication of being" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 1). Soyinka goes on to explore in his essay the nature of the gods' attributes, "their manipulable histories" and their universalising essence. He informs us that, "symbols of Yemaja (Yemoja), Oxosi (Ososi), Exu (Esu) and Xango (Sango) not only lead a promiscuous existence with Roman catholic saints but are fused with the twentieth-century technological and revolutionary expressionism of the mural arts of Cuba, Brazil and much of the Caribbean" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 1). Yet, the humanistic, scientizing cast of mind inherent in Soyinka's work also -- and this is critical- leads him to concede the fact that the gods are "a product of the conscious creativity of man, (and that) they enhance man's existence within the cyclic consciousness of time" (*Myth,*

Literature and the African World 2). In another discursive context, Soyinka illuminates the symbiotic relationship between man and the gods: "The Will of man is placed beyond surrender. Without the knowing of Divinity by man, can Deity survive? O Hesitant one, Man's conceiving is fathomless; his community will rise beyond the present reaches of the mind. Orisa reveals Destiny as-self-destination" (*The Cradle of Being and Nothingness* 35).

Against this animist universe of the Yoruba and the capitalistic set-up of the Nigerian society, Osundare furnishes a socialist projection of an egalitarian Nigeria of the future. Clearly, the poet's strategy here amounts to a myth in that contemporary Nigerian experience presents an unrelieved grim picture of life and living. History is a nightmare for Osundare, but one over which he ever so strenuously tries to throw a veneer of dream, a dream that, to all intents and purposes, those who hold the levers of power, by deliberate cynical choice, it would seem, have elected to defer: at present, it is generally believed that a democratic government is in place in Nigeria, yet all but only those in power will tell you that it is a "civilized" dictatorship that has been foisted on them. Under this tragic -- some might charitably say farcical -- arrangement, corruption, in the broadest possible sense of the term has been apotheosised into state policy and a national culture, and this malaise of corruption has equally bred abhorrent kindred pathologies such as nepotism in place of meritocracy; ineptitude instead of honest hard work; brigandage and arson, large-scale looting of public funds, murder, rape, unemployment, poverty, and mass misery and all of these have created and engendered a deeply disaffected citizenry for whom the word "patriotism" is anathema as what is, under normal, circumstances, supposed to be the commonwealth. It is against this situation that Osundare projects a counter myth or a countervailing, counterfactual, and, indeed, alternative "reality" encapsulated in Marxist ideals.

We confront an overarching use of the hero myth in Osundare's formal verse. The ubiquitous "common man" fits this description as the visionary and revolutionary poet everywhere in his work expects or rather encourages, coaxes, motivates, and propels him to take on the enemy, that is, the exploitative ruling elite. For instance, in *Songs of the Marketplace*, we are introduced to the victim-as-hero scenario in the poem entitled "Sule Chase" (*Songs of the Marketplace* 16-19); in his second volume, *Village Voices*, Osundare focuses on the rural poor *vis-à-vis* the dynamics of power relations. Poems such as "Eating with all the Fingers," "A Reunion," "Akintunde, Come Home," "The Land of Un-ease," "A Villager's Protest," or "A Grass in the Meadow" (see *A Nib in the Pond*) exemplify an iconographic depiction of the "common man" who is abused, robbed, oppressed, and dispossessed. He is a "scapegoat" figure who carries away the sterility which might otherwise blight the crops (Coupe 25). In *Waiting Laughters*, the "common man" is the long-suffering fixture, waiting forever in the visa queue, a *Wanderlust* urging him to relocate overseas in order to survive. In *Moonsongs* the "common man" breaks into multiple selves as we see him variously in the image of the poor villager living in a dilapidated house, the "aged" kids of Ajegunle rendered gaunt and sinewy by privations and malnutrition, and the multitudes of urban poor. In *Songs of the Season* Osundare sings the paean to the indomitable, redoubtable, and the self-fulfilling spirit of the "common man": bereft of the necessary, basic resources for self-improvement, the poor peasants, the *déclassé* or the *Lumpenproletariat* still manage to eke out a living from an exhausted earth, perennially plundered by the inordinately avaricious capitalist ruling/ruining class.

As earlier highlighted, Osundare deploys nature or the object/phenomenal universe in his poetry as an organizing principle, a leitmotif of his change-facilitating poetic. It behoves us at this junction to pause awhile in order to consider the theoretic depths of the mythic dimension of Osundare's use of nature as a founding trope in his poetry. Wheelwright opines that the Melanesian word *mana* is coterminous with what I refer to here as animism and he argues that *mana* is a borderland idea, whose mode of existence lies between the personal and impersonal, between the natural and supernatural, and between the subjective and objective" (62). Thus, *mana*, which Wheelwright comments deprecatingly upon as "the childlike perspective" (63) is the vital force in nature; it is "at once the urgency and the expression ... of man's participation in living nature" (63). In Osundare's verse, we find the poet aligning his vision with the rhythmic time-character of the natural universe.

Osundare's class dialectic is rooted principally in the cycle of the seasons: "In the tribal calendar of ceremonies, appropriate to planting, reaping, feasting, war, the hunt, adolescent initiation, marriage, sacrifice, and the like. Nature, in mythopoetic perspective, is cyclical; it exhibits vitally periodic, as

apposed to mechanistically regulated, becoming" (Wheelwright 64). His poetics of revolution and radical change is predicated upon the primal logic of unchanging and predictable nature: "The poet's pre-occupation, the central theme of all literature, is the vegetation myth which dovetails with the myth of eternal return" (Adekoya 70). The question, then, is, how does one achieve in real life, the idealistic picture of life furnished by and exemplified in the phenomenal universe? It is this all-important, crucial hiatus between myth (nature as motif) and history (workaday experience) that foregrounds the ideological dilemma in Osundare's verse: the missing link between *praxis* and *theoria*. Wheelwright also talks of "natural sympathy" and "the law of participation" (67) with regard to humanity's relationship with nature. Significantly, Osundare peoples the landscape of his poetry with objects of nature, the flora and fauna of the Sylvan universe, and a host of nature's denizens. Even his definition of poetry is based on nature imagery and symbolism (see *Songs of the Marketplace* 3). *The Eye of the Earth* is a threnodic evocation of the tragic depredations of our natural being by urbanizing, and/or modernizing and who, rather than plough the earth, plunders it. *Midlife*, the volume of poems with which the poet celebrates his fortieth birthday anniversary turns on such natural elements as the overhead sun, the rock and the river.

In virtually all of Niyi Osundare's volumes of poems, we encounter lexical items like oceans, rain, light/shadow, forest, roots, twigs, trees, crust, core, leaves, among others. In *Horses of Memory*, for example, the poet mourns his late father who was a "poet, singer, drummer and farmer" (vii). In commemorating this man of song and memory, the poet seizes upon the poetic mode of pastoral elegy to celebrate him. Osundare takes his audience literally by the hand and leads them into the rainforests of Africa so as to re-enact the seasonal rituals of farming, for which his father was known. Thus, just as *The Eye of the Earth* takes the whole of terrestrial nature as its locale, *Moonsongs* relies for effect on the use of the sky and its features such as the moon, stars, winds, and rain. Osundare also deploys the metaphors and symbolism of the four seasons, winter, spring, summer, and autumn, on the one hand and the tropical opposition of rain and drought on the other hand (see *The Eye of the Earth* and *Songs of the Season*). In *The Word is an Egg*, for example, Osundare writes: "The Word is rain / The Word is dust / The Word is a rainanddust ... The Word is life / The Word is death / The Word is lifeanddeath" (12).

Commenting upon Africans' intimate closeness to nature, Isidore Okpewho, quoting Leopold Sedar Senghor, writes: "Black voices, being undomesticated by the Schools, reveal all the nuances of ideas steeped in feeling; drawing freely from the unlimited dictionary of nature, they borrow her sonorous expressions, from the lucid songs of doves to the dark bursts of thunder" (243). Cyclic in design, Osundare images nature as the archetypal metaphor of humanity's existential fate. And, in keeping with the principle of natural dialectic, differing from the English Romantics, characterizes nature as Janus-faced: it is both "Temporary basement/and lasting roof ... breadbasket/and compost bed" (*The Eye of the Earth* 1); nature is benevolent, as well as malevolent. Nature, like Time, especially as it is dramatized in English Renaissance poetry, gives and takes. In fact, beyond the life-affirming potential of nature, it can also be red in tooth and claw. Wheelwright notes that "The typically primitive attitude toward nature is largely a tension between familiarity and watchfulness. The former gives stability and confidence, a feeling of membership, of at-homeness, of being comfortably rooted in Mother Earth. The security of the cave, of the family, and, subconsciously perhaps of the womb, supplies the primordial ground-plan of human living" (63). Here, it is important to emphasize that, apart from the *ofo*, Osundare uses other Yoruba oral forms such as *oríkí*, (chants of praise); *íjálá* (hunters' chants), *ówé* (proverbs), *áló apámo* (riddles), and folksongs, among others. And myths are tied to these poetic forms which are re-enacted on occasion as celebrative, sacramental and, at times, magical rituals. Humanity's empathetic imagination enables people to identify with all of nature in trying to negotiate the contingencies and vicissitudes of the cosmic order. Also, anthropomorphic deities like Ogun, Sango, Obatala, Osun, Olokun, and Esu are allowed full scope in the mythic ambience of the Yoruba universe to operate: "Cascades of pigeons / Corn-rows an *Olokun's* majestic head; / Ogbese straddles every land, / A wiltless flower between her legs, / Oya hastens through sand, through loam / To meet her waiting suitors: / *Ogun* lays claim to one breast. / *Sango* hangs hot on the other; *Eyekaire* sways through iron, through fire" (*Midlife* 24).

From the above excerpt one can discern an astonishingly sympathetic imagination at work in Osundare's verse, a fecund imagination which combines an animistic mental universe with a Romantic

predilection, all of this powered by an interfusion of *ofo*, *oriki*, and other allied folk poetic sub-genres. To be sure, in the excerpted passage as well as in most of Osundare's formal verse, we confront the Coleridgean perspective on the organic principle in nature while the poet remains Wordsworthian in his adoration of nature and his self-appointed role as poet-seer, priest, visionary, and moral crusader he is akin to the Shelleyan "unacknowledged legislator of the world" and his self-identification with and self-absorption in nature approximate to the Keatsean "negative capability." His passionate denunciatory stance against social inequality, oppression, and vice recalls William Blake's quasi-socialist penchant for championing popular causes: "The Romantic Marxist ideal is a secular variant on the Christian myth, itself a 'circuitous quest'" (Coupe 71). Christianity and Marxism are myths of deliverance as both of them derive their moral force and sanction from natural justice and seasonal legitimacy: ideas of rebirth, renewal, and spring are embedded in the Marxist worldview. Like Christianity, the pattern traced by Marx's myth is meant to be essentially progressive. It treats history as an advance, proceeding stage by stage to the goal of a classless society. Where the Christian story begins with Eden and ends with Jerusalem, the Marxist begins with the primitive communism of tribal society and ends with the advanced communism of past capitalist society (Coupe 70). Therefore, in line with the Romantic style for which the ideal of poetry is illumination (or imagination) rather than the "poetry of reflection" (György Lukács), Osundare, "the farmer-born, peasant-bred" bard operates mainly as visionary rather than scribe: "I look through the sand, I see a fountain, / I look through the fountain, I see the river, / I look through the river, I see the sea, / I look through the sea, I see the sky / I am the bard who sings of water / in shrivelled seasons" (*Midlife* 35). What is evident in this excerpt is a synthesis of reality and imagination, a poetic technique devised to construct a provisional human myth to undercut dead doctrines and rigid hierarchies. Osundare's corpus is an anthem of possibility rather than a catalogue of actuality. This is the Marxist vision of revolutionary optimism.

Nature as trope in Osundare's poetry is a symbolization of the myth of the dying god or the fertility myth which in turn dovetails into the myth of the quest for the Holy Grail. The so-called quest for the Holy Grail is usually rationalized as a congenital yearning for a state of perfection wherein all needs and desires are met to the heart's content. This attitude of mind is usually propelled and engendered by some kind of willed imperviousness to the starkly dispiriting or unsettling state of affairs with which humanity is confronted everywhere; this self-actualising urge is also motivated by the innate sense of final domination of the existential space within which one conducts the accustomed routines of experiential life. However, the reality "out there" enervates, depresses; it tends to frustrate the entelechial drive for self-plenum and lays to ruin every effort to reconstitute a human-social community into the lost primal Eden, a self-sufficient, secure idyll. Yet, marked as one is and hobbled by natural fallibility, the social lifeworld presents the sleazy and unsightly obverse of the dreamt-of state of grace and all-round wellbeing: humanity is at every turn besieged by sickness, dogged by ignorance, and bogged down with the "excess baggage" of largely self-inflicted disabilities and vulnerabilities.

Also, as part of the change-facilitating poetic strategy of his verse, Osundare takes to greater heights the instrumental orchestration of poetry inherited from the Bible (Psalms), Yoruba orature, and other poets across the world such as Senghor, Okigbo, among others. Little wonder, then, that Osundare's verse is patently performative and with a very strong audience-consciousness. This antiphonal style is further enhanced by the poet's deliberate use of familiar, commonplace, and everyday ideational and physical elements, images, metaphors, proverbs, and so forth. Hence, Funso Aiyejina tells us that "the banter of the marketplace, the garrulous and living voices of street fighters, the spontaneous wit of touts, and the poetic work-tunes of farmers are encapsulated in Osundare's poetry" (Aiyejina 123). All of this enables the poor people to know and appreciate the fact that someone is fighting their cause and they can take solace in the fact that part of his instrument of war is their own rhetorical heritage, although the people tend to be lost when the language of conflict becomes necessarily recondite and rarefied. Yet the situation is partly salvaged by the poet's *Kerygma*, Osundare's redemptive mantra of socialist El Dorado.

As for the myth of the relation between "chaos" and "cosmos," which is immanent in all literature, Femi Osofisan posits that the fable of art is a fable of paradox, and that literature is a product of psychotic experience. Thus, "the muse of Art is, invariably, the Muse of anomy" (Osofisan 3). Often, it is pain indeed, and rarely pleasure, that provoke the artist into creative motion. The Yoruba are familiar

with the passage rites of the gods -- Sango, Ogun, Obatala, Oya, Osun, and so on, and it is suffering and not satiety, anguish and not euphoria, frenzy not sobriety that animates and powers the catalytic impulse to creation (Osofisan 3). We may simply add that it is crisis in society and/or unpleasantness that provokes creative anger in the artist. Osundare in particular has taken to writing poetry as his own way of helping to arrest Nigeria's drift into chaos and collective self-destruction. Nature is Osundare's leitmotif and he hinges his idea of radical social change on the myth of eternal return or the vegetation myth, an important myth exemplified by the wisdom of the *ourobos*, the symbolic snake that continually renews its life by eating its own tail. It is a myth of hope suggestive as it is of rebirth, renewal, and of spring. Again, since the seasonal cycle is the basis of change, it means that History is not linear, but cyclical in Osundare's poetic universe. Osundare's poetic vision of change may be represented diagrammatically thus, as we establish once more mythic similarities between Christianity (a redemptive myth) and Marxism: Eden/primitive communism; the fall/the development of private property; the wilderness/class society; the crucifixion / the oppression of the proletariat; the resurrection / the rise of class consciousness; the day of judgement / the revolution; Jerusalem / classless society (see Coupe 70).

In conclusion, Osundare's rejection of the Nigerian (i.e., African) poetic *ancien regime* has resulted in a poetry of revolution and a revolution in poetry through the instrumental orchestration of poetry, as well as fashioning a social poetry rooted in the principles of participation, performance, and social answerability or relevance.

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