

Osundare's Poetry and the Yoruba Worldview

Christopher Anyokwu  
*University of Lagos*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Anyokwu, Christopher. "Osundare's Poetry and the Yoruba Worldview." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.1 (2011): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1707>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1707)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 13 Issue 1 (March 2011) Article 3**  
**Christopher Anyokwu, "Osundare's Poetry and the Yoruba Worldview"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss1/3>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.1 (2011)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss1/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "Osundare's Poetry and the Yoruba Worldview" Christopher Anyokwu analyses the use of Indegenious Yoruba concepts found in Niyi Osundare's texts. Anyokwu postulates that Osundare appears to combine in his work concepts and traditions of Yoruba culture and Marxist ideology which, as Anyokwu argues, locates Osundare with other revolutionary-minded radical poets such as Pablo Neruda, Octovio Paz, Nicolas Guillén, Agostinho Neto, or Okot P'Biteke. Further, Anyokwu argues that a major aspect of the sources of Osundare's work, this perspective has either been under-theorized or examined only superficially in the critical corpus of Osundare's texts. Anyokwu both analyzes and assesses Osundare's immersion in and deployment of his native Yoruba oral poetics and mythological concepts which underline the poet's commitment to fight against social injustice as common human task.

## Christopher ANYOKWU

### Osundare's Poetry and the Yoruba Worldview

In discussing the socio-cultural and metaphysical building blocks of the Yoruba worldview, Derek Wright suggests that "If Yoruba religious beliefs and mythology appear to be riddled with contradictions, it is partly because Yorubaland in southwest Nigeria is not a cultural unity, with doctrinal uniformity or religious orthodoxy, but a region comprising a collection of cult practices, with many local variations, loosely organized around the *Ifa* oracle. The apparent confusion also owes something to a multipurpose pragmatism in Yoruba religious behaviour, underlaid by a belief in the indeterminate, many-faceted nature of truth and its expression as a variety of emanations from a single irreducible essence" (7). Overall, there seems to be a consensus on the socio-cultural context within which the traditional artist is located. According to S.A. Babalola, in his book *Content and Form of the Yoruba Ijala*, the *Ijala* chanter is usually a member of a professional guild, who must undergo rigorous training, sometimes spanning over a decade, in order for him/her to perform in public, particularly before royalty. During the apprenticeship period, the would-be chanter must engage in improvisation, memorization, and mnemonic devices (*isoye*), and voice training, among others. After having been certified by the master chanter, the trainee raconteur could then perform in public (see, e.g., Barber; Finnegan; Okpewho). The oral poet, during his/her apprenticeship, must study and internalize folk history, mythology, and the metaphysics of his/her people so as to be able to act as the mouthpiece of their culture (on myth and history in Osundare's poetry, see, e.g., Anyokwu). The poet is thus at once historian, seer, raconteur, dramatist, singer, and philosopher. But how does the modern and Westernized Yoruba poet function in an equally chirographic or scribal culture? In the following, I discuss African Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare's worldview we find in his poetry and other texts.

Osundare acknowledges to having been brought up in traditional Yoruba oral culture: "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. The concretizing power of these figures aids the transformation of the airy nothings of the imagination into sensuous, rememberable entities" ("My Poetry" 55). Osundare's poetry has also been influenced by Western poetry, notably by English Romantic poetry and Wordsworth's verse in particular. This convergence — rather than "influence" — can be explained by the similarity of African animist and Western naturalist understanding of the world. The animist temperament has been traced to peoples' earliest attempts to understand and deal with the wonders of nature: both the Greek pantheon and the Yoruba worldview can be understood as an effort to humanize, negotiate, and harness nature for the benefit of human kind. Thus, different gods and goddesses in the Yoruba pantheon represent symbolically different aspects of nature which people found inscrutable and mysterious. Accordingly, people did not only make gods of natural objects like mountains and hills, they deified and anthropomorphized flora and fauna, and rivers, lakes, and oceans became not just sources of nourishment but, more importantly, spiritual agents of protection and a holistic understanding of the world. In Osundare's poetry we encounter fulsome paeans intoned to mountains and rock-hills such as *Oroole* and *Olosunta*, rivers and seas like the *Osun* river, the Nile and the Niger, plants and trees such as the *Iroko* and *Oganwo*.

According to Wole Soyinka, societies which still live in a close relationship with nature are governed by a "metaphysics of the irreducible: knowledge of birth and death as the human cycle; the wind as a moving, felling, cleansing, destroying, winnowing force; the duality of the knife as blood-letter and creative implement" (*Myth, Literature* 148). However, Osundare's attitude to nature is ambivalent. This is owing in part to his socialist humanism, an ideology which *ipso facto* is noted for its a-spirituality. Thus, like most Marxist artists, Osundare is liable to plead blandly that he merely deploys nature as a master trope, a grand poetic conceit, or stylistic symbolization of his people-oriented message. Owing to the plethora of flak and short shrifts, Osundare has received from his critics, Harry Garuba has sought to rationalize Osundare's ideologic befuddlement: "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 deployed creatively. In his poetry we encounter again and again, the lyrical evocation of nature and the poetic self-dramatization that we associate with the Romanic tradition: a nature suffused with mystical presences and healing essences; a

Whitmanesque self so expansive that it encompasses the rocks and the rivers, the birds and stars of the galaxy, and every light and shadow that falls between. And these are all anchored, in the manner of Pablo Neruda, to a socialist commitment to change in an African post-colony" (54). What, then, is nature to Osundare? The pantheistic enthusiasm of Wordsworth? The physical embodiment of divine essence *à la* the ancient Greeks? Or, is it simply the flora and fauna of workaday experience? Or, better still, is his understanding and use of nature all of the above? In my view, Osundare's poetry suggests his choice to write about physical objects which act as metaphors and imagery. But if we are willing to take into account the place of nature in the animistic metaphysics of the Yoruba, as well as how the poet rhapsodizes even idealities such as *Ogun, Obatala, Sango, Osun*, and *Esu-Elegbara*, we are then forced to draw the conclusion that Osundare is no less a worshipper of nature than Wordsworth, and, more importantly, no less animist-minded than his elder compatriot Soyinka. Perhaps it is also important to ponder the significance of the poet's names and also consider how these factors into the aforesaid ideological project in his work. For example, the full names of the poet are Oluwaniyi Oluomi Osundare: the first name Oluwaniyi means "God-is-honourable" and the second first name Oluomi means "Lord of the sea" or "master of the waters" and the surname Osundare means "Osun-has-vindicated-me." As can be seen, all the three names underscore the traditional Yoruba belief in the supernatural and the existence of superior external forces which pilot and superintend in the affairs of people. Although, the poet tries to overlay this animist cast of mind of his people in some of his poems, on the occasion of his fortieth birthday anniversary, Osundare published a commemorative volume of poems entitled *Midlife*, a profoundly autobiographic work in which he tries to establish his deep-seated personal — as well as communal — convictions and beliefs as an imaginative self-writing framed within the rubrics of ritual and myth. Osundare dedicates several pages of laudatory panegyrics to Osun, goddess of the river Osun, a river which flows through the poet's birthplace and dominates his people's outlook on life. Osundare was Christened "Oluomi," referring to a symbiotic bonding between self and cosmos and the river and/or water is understood animistically to comprehend the omni-directional vastness or enormity of the natural being. In the Yoruba worldview — as well as in other people's traditions — the ocean or water symbolize human kind and thus if the poet is "Lord of the sea" or "Master of the waters," he is master of the human community.

The question, then, is how does Osundare reconcile himself to this apparent sub-textual apotheosis of class and position of leadership, given his own Marxist views? Will he repudiate the festoons of power and privilege thrust upon him by tradition? I postulate that there is a sense in which Osundare tends to take his quasi-patronymic name seriously in that he deploys the underlying metaphysical import of his name as an organizing principle in *Midlife* in particular and his poetry in general. From this follows that Osundare succumbs to the "false consciousness" of his animist autochthony: in an apparent intertextual dialogue with Soyinka's "Idanre" Osundare — in his own formal verse-making approximates — intimates and excavates the underlying epistemic, metaphysical, and socio-historical imperatives embodied in and typified by the Yoruba pantheon. For example, *Ogun* (the Yoruba god of iron and war) typifies the principle of duality, *Sango* (god of lightning) symbolizes the principle of retributive justice, *Ifa-Orunmila* symbolizes wisdom and knowledge, *Esu-Elegbara* (the Yoruba trickster god and the messenger of the gods) typifies the principle of chance, choice, and uncertainty. Thus, Osundare's implicit animistic rebuttal of a-spirituality in Marxist ideology seems to be coincidental with the traditional Yoruba belief in reincarnation, which itself derives from the tripartite order of existence and the realm of the living. Added to this three-tier schema are the so-called interstitial fissures dubbed "The Fourth Stage" by Soyinka (see *Myth, Literature*). According to Wright, "This dark middle area, alternatively termed the 'chthonic realm,' 'primordial marsh,' and 'transitional gulf' is an inchoate chaos, a 'storehouse for creative and destructive essences" (2) in which are found all the raw unfinished things that exist halfway between states (11).

Reading Osundare's poetry, we realize that his poetic canvas is peopled by human, supernatural beings (gods and goddesses) and such personae of the social underclass as beggars, the diseased, and the desperately poor who are locked in epic fight-to-the-finish conflict with the more favored members of society. Thus, in line with the envisioned communist paradise the poet dreams of the eventual birth of a new race of free peoples who shall enjoy aplenty and abundance. We may, thus, imagine these future denizens of the earth as what Soyinka in his *Dance of the Forests* calls the "Half-child," the unborn. The Marxian secularization of the concept of god is invariably coterminous with the

desacralization and the virtual immolation of non-performing gods in traditional society (on this, see also Achebe's *Arrows of God* and *Hopes and Impediments*). This is in keeping with the pragmatic temper of the Yoruba for whom everything must serve a utilitarian purpose. Thus, it might be inaccurate to argue that it is the demythologizing imperative in Osundare's texts that is at work when the poet seems to use the Yoruba pantheon as metaphor. Even in oral society, gods rise and fall at the pleasure of men, their makers as in Soyinka's *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*. This seamless conflation of both indigenous practice and Western-derived Marxist epistemology can be seen at work also in the assimilative principle of the Yoruba culture: "The general concept of transition is central to Yoruba life. Like many West African societies, the Yoruba view excessive stability as undesirable because it induces stagnation and entropy ... The assimilation of changeful and even alien influences has always been a principle of social life and aesthetics ... Yoruba art and religion have long been famous for their capacity to accrete and absorb new forms and ideas without being subverted by them and for expanding identity beyond the point where most value systems would have lost theirs" (Wright 12-13). And commenting on the same issue of the assimilative temper of the Yoruba culture, Odia Ofeimun writes that "in reality, clearly, the antinomies, become self-defeatist. First, because the pride of the animism, something that Soyinka has consistently emphasized is that it is eclectic and liberal, admitting into its frameless frame, any new knowledge produced by the 'hot' gods. Once new knowledge is incorporated and domesticated within the *Ifa* system: it becomes part of the knowledge industry" ("Of Soyinka" 16). Basically, the compartmentalist mindset of the West runs counter to the Yoruba worldview in that in the latter culture maintains an expansive, dynamic fluidity even in its conception of tradition, which is not a body of stale, ossified, and inert beliefs and practices, or superannuated memorabilia of a bygone era but a burgeoning complex of dynamic cultural norms and beliefs revalorized. Thus, culture can expropriate and domesticate foreign, exogenous thought, folk ways, literary forms and techniques, and metaphysical systems. It is in the light of this that we can engage with Osundare's enormous expropriative stylistic strategies where he ranges freely across the world mining poetic tropes and figures from the works of established and well-known voices. For instance, in *Midlife* Osundare furnishes a roll call of some of the poets he echoes in his own work:

Sing to us about Soyinka, Guillen, Brathwaite,  
Neto, Walcott, AI Qing, Heaney, Mayakovsky,  
Okigbo, U Tamsi, Okot p'Bitek;  
about Neruda, bard of Chile, father of songs  
About Whitman who wrapped the world  
In leaves of eloquent grass.

Sing to us about Elytis' small world the great,  
Vallego's big-hatted verse,  
the laughing lemons of Darwish, victims of a map,  
who turned friend of the corn  
the day his poems were made of earth

.....

Sing to us about Huidobro,  
about the magic lyre of Octavio Paz,  
Zapata's arrow in the bow of flying ballads;  
about Czeslaw Milosz, "Child of Europe,"  
walking through the malignant wisdom  
of broken cities

.....

Sing to us about bards, troubadours, griots, towncriers  
Who joined the earth but left their voices behind. (44-45)

Osundare's poetry reveals an immense debt which he owes to the poets he refers to. This intriguingly complex element of eclecticism, both in terms of style and ideas, is part of the poet's habitual recourse to his native Yoruba sense of unabashedly forthright "poaching" of other writers' insights and rhetorical properties. Perhaps one of the reasons why Osundare does not seem to worry about using the ideas, concepts, forms, and styles borrowed from other cultures in his work is because he believes like his people do in the essential oneness of all humankind. While the world is divided into different

continents comprising peoples of varied races, these branches of the human tree draw nutrients from the same soil. While the world has been polarized between the Northern and Southern hemispheres ("the West and the Rest"), a racial and economic binarism which has valorized the divisive politics of difference with its tragic corollaries of hate and xenophobic ideologies (i.e., the prime cause of terrorism), Osundare considers all of this as artificial, the futile shenanigans of historiographers, ethnographers, and politicians: "The deep structures of our cultures and the literatures they produce unite us. It is the politics of the surface structure which divides and alienates" (Osundare qtd. in Ohaeto 95). Accordingly, in his poetic manifesto "Poetry Is" Osundare defines poetry in a reformulation of Wordsworth's concept as "man meaning to man" (*Songs of the Marketplace* 3). Part of this strategy of universalization of all human experience is enacted poetically through the tropal deployment of the seas, oceans, and rivers as figural approximations of this proto-un-animist outlook. Consider, for example, this excerpt: "My body harbours a river in every vein: / The Euphrates, the Ganges, the Mississippi, / the Volga, the Rio, the Niger all seek a share / in the confluence of my heart" (*Midlife* 36). And Osundare goes on to argue that in spite of all the divisive politics of race, gender, and class, the earth's poor are united by the strongest force in the world: hunger. Osundare notes that: "at the social level poverty is poverty, injustice is injustice, whether it is here in Nigeria or somewhere there in Mongola, and there is a way the battle against injustice is always a universal battle, in which the struggle for human rights is a global struggle. We are in the world and the world is very much in us" (Osundare qtd. in Ohaeto 97). While virtually all of his poetry reads like one song of protest against all forms of injustice and inequity and the universal theme of social deprivation, his poem entitled "Sule Chase" (*Songs of the Marketplace* 16) is perhaps the most significant. This focus is of course an expression of the Yoruba worldview of the original oneness of Orisa-nla ("Godhead") that on a fateful day on his hillside farm shattered into four hundred and three shards by Atunda (or Atowoda), his slave, with the aid of a boulder (see Aiyejina; Osundare, "Wole Soyinka"; Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*).

With regard to the Yoruba worldview, Funso Aiyejina suggests that "The myth of Atunda explains why today the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Benin Republic, Cuba, Haiti, Peru, Grenada, Venezuela, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States of America, and so on, have four hundred and one gods and goddesses, by some accounts. Without any doubt, therefore, Atunda was the first guerrilla, the first liberation fighter, the first revolutionary, and the first post(-) colonial subject. Atunda is the mythic ancestor of the Guevara, Fidel Castro, Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Amil [Amilcar] Cabral, Nelson Mandela, Hugo Chavez, Wole Soyinka, Adaka Boro, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Gani Fawehinmi, Femi Falana, Fela Anikulapo, etc." (6-7). We may add to this list Osundare because of his championing, through his performance-oriented poetry, the cause of the disenfranchised in society with an agenda of mass mobilization through political action in his artistic production (on this, see also Brown). His volumes of poetry is powered and energized by creative anger or impassioned *Angst* aimed at the corrupt, inept, and reprobate ruling class, government functionaries, and grotesque social types. In 1987, shortly after winning a literary award, Osundare was attacked on the University of Ibadan campus on his way home from work. In hindsight, this near-tragic experience proved a baptismal ordeal for the people's poet, who, thereafter, has taken to constructing verses through the technique of quasi-mythic poetic fabulation. He has achieved this through a deft and adroit symbolization of the rich bio-diversity and eco-system of his Yoruba environment, thereby using common everyday objects as fit and proper subjects of poeticization.

Without abandoning his primary focus, that is, denouncing all forms of injustice, oppression, and corruption, Osundare's Atundaesque revolutionary activism ties up neatly with his socialist-Marxist ideology. Marx declared on his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach that philosophers have interpreted the world, the point is to change it. What is relevant here is that the same human impulse to make sense of the world and to transform it for better human habitation is also in place in the Yoruba worldview: "A peep at the historical narratives suggests how Obatala, as leader of the autochthons emerges as the back of which Orunmila, the master of divination and prophecy, the keeper of the old gnosis, is the front. Even before deification, Obatala, the autochthon, is quite a world from Ogun and Sango, the 'hot' gods of the pantheon. The latter create dynasties, build states, live by performing outstanding feats ... making a living by breaking frontiers ... if need be, and daring to push nature to its limits ... Obatala is the philosopher who interprets the world where the Ogun-Sango complex is determined to change it" (Ofeimun, "Ogun as Cross-cultural" 25). Thus, Osundare may be thought to have inherited



the radical spirit of dissent or revolution from his autochthonous oral culture, imbibed into his political unconscious during his formative years as a "peasant-born, village-bred" bard. It is a fascinating case of ideological affinity that both his Yoruba metaphysic and his Marxist convictions conjoin to predispose him towards championing popular causes. And it is this mandate of change that we see in his poetry. He tells us, for instance in his prefatory note to *Midlife* that "The world I see is bent. I am mode and medium for its straightening" (x).

It might appear heretical for a world-renowned poet noted for his espousal of Marxist ideology to foreground the first-person singular "I" in his formal poetry, knowing full-well that this assertive pronoun negates the Marxist principle of collective ethos and plural heroism. This literalist reading of the item "I" may only hold water insofar as we are unaware of and/or are unwilling to acknowledge the semantic and semiotic implications of the lexical item "I," a scenario which runs counter to the Western idea of "I." To begin with, the first-person "I" captures the individualist ethos, the everyone-for-himself-God-for-us-all worldview of the West that is dramatized by the spatial demarcation of the individual from the larger community. In contrast, in the Yoruba worldview the individual's dwelling place is part and parcel and an extension of the entire neighbourhood. This sense of collectivism is not negated by the first-person singular "I" (*emi*), because the Yoruba hold a different view of "I." For them, "I" stands for the multitude, the communal crowd: "this 'I' should be interpretable as 'we.' But it will be an 'I' that will contain the existential inclusiveness of the 'we' without necessarily erasing the uniqueness and specificities of the 'I'" (Arnold 157). Therefore, behind that "I" is both self and other, or, the poet and his/her audience of which he/she is a paradigmatic representative. It has to be admitted, however, that this collectivism or the democratization of the heroic stature derives partly from Marxist ideology in Osundare's poetry. Part of the reason why there appears to be a difference between the Western and Yoruba worldviews expressed in language is because both languages come fully made with patently irreconcilable ideational differences. These deeply ingrained differences play out themselves whenever the Yoruba poet tries to translate ideas found in his indigenous culture to English as second language.

English is a stress-timed language whereas Yoruba, like most African languages, is a syllable-timed one, "operating through a complex system of tones and glides. In this language, prosody mells into melody. Sounding is meaning, meaning is sounding. The music which emanates from the soul of words is an inalienable part of the beauty of the tongue. Tone is the power-point, the enabling element in a Yoruba communicative event" (Osundare, *Thread on the Loom* 8). By the same token, when the Yoruba poet says "I," this verbal expression provokes universal sympathies framed within the vitalist world of a people bound together by kin sensibilities and a common fate. Thus, in Osundare's verse we encounter different strategies of mediation deployed by the poet in blending, reconciling and, at times, yoking "Yoruba thought" to "English words." This ideational ecumenism or cultural syncretism is not monochromatically idiosyncratic because it is a common experience of all postcolonial writers trying to write back to the centre. Still, on strategies of mediation Osundare writes that "Through phonological and prosodic approximations exemplified in the generous use of alliteration, assonance, and consonance in the English text. Through the use of repetition and various reiterative strategies which may sometimes look (but hardly *sound*) pleonastic in the eye of some readers" (*Thread on the Loom* 15) and "very frequently I am confronted by the problem of transposing Yoruba metaphors, idioms concepts and allusions which have no equivalence in English. In this regard, the highly agglutinative and meaning-laden Yoruba names are particularly interactable. And yet, like *Mosafejo in Waiting Laughters* (p. 75), *Ésímúdá* in *Village Voices* (pp. 40 and 57) ... these names are necessary for a full interpretation and comprehension of the poems in which they occur. One of my coping strategies is to transfer such problematic items into English, most times with footnotes and glossary" ("Yoruba Thought" 18).

In addition to the above referred to strategies, Osundare also uses sound symbols and sound images in his work. This is because Yoruba is a tone language and as such sounds matter in the movement of meaning in a normal communicative event. Hence, Osundare tells us that "meaning is sounding and sounding is meaning" ("My Poetry" 25) and he notes that "in a language given to euphony, the *ideophone* mediates the territory between the idea and the sounding which enables its meaning" ("My Poetry" 55). The reliance on and use of the rhetorical strategies of Yoruba oral poetry such as repetition, parallelism, wordplay, alliteration, and assonance, as well as tonal counterpoint have far-

reaching implications for rhythm and, ultimately, the form of Osundare's poetry. Writing on the nature of rhythm in his work, Osundare writes that "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. The Yoruba syllable is a unit of music" ("Yoruba Thought" 15). This unique understanding of the pervasive, text-wide distribution of rhythm on the part of the bard has been examined elsewhere by this scholar (see also Anyokwu on "the alliterative tradition" in Osundare's poetry, a practice partly traceable of English Medieval poetry, and, more importantly, in the Yoruba experience). According to Ulli Beier, "Nobody who attempts to translate Yoruba into English will doubt that 'poetry is what is left out in translation'" (Beier qtd. in Osundare, *Thread on the Loom* i). The point is that the Yoruba language is the missing link between music and speech. It is a language which is more chanted than spoken and this "sing-song" language has equally spawned several types of oral poetry such as *oríkí* (chants of praise), *íjálá* (hunters' chants), *ówé* (proverbs), *áló apámo* (riddles), *ófó* (incantatory poetry), *ifá* divinatory poetry, *ékún iyáwó* (bride's song), and *írámójé* (valedictory chant) (see Olatunji; Babalola; Barber; Finnegan). Interestingly, Niyi Osundare seems to draw at once upon almost all of these poetic sub-genres when composing his poems. Consider, for instance, this excerpt: "*írókó* wears the crown of the forest, / town's rafter, roof of the forest / ironwood against the termites of time / *írókó* wears the crown of the forest / its baobab foot rooted against / a thousand storms. // *Iroko* wears the crown of the forest / Scourge of the sweating sawyer / The champion machete assays a bite / Beating a blunted retreat to the whetting stone. / The iron wood wears the crown of the forest" (*The Eye of the Earth* 5-6). This excerpt is at once a piece of *íjálá* because it rhapsodizes the *írókó*, it is also an *oríkí* because of its elements of laudatory apostrophizing an *ofo* piece because of its intensely incantatory nature, and there is also in it a hint of proverbial love with the reference to the "forest," a powerful trope emblematic of the cosmos. Additionally, the poet tries to "simulate" or intimate the rhythm of the Yoruba talking drum in the poem sequence. As surrogate speech, the drum communicates repressed as well as deep experiences latent in the tribe's collective unconscious. Not unlike every form of orature across the world, Yoruba oral poetry teems with densely packed tropes and figures which remain an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the modern poet. As the above excerpt shows, the poet relies on the deployment of such stylistic elements as parallelism, repetition, tonal counterpoint, personification, and metaphor.

Some critics have criticized African poets of Euro-modernism for what they consider their betrayal of Afrocentric aesthetics (see, e.g., Chinweizu and Madubuike). However, other critics have come to the defence of African poets accused of imitation and Odiá Ofeimun, for example — a well-known poet himself and one of Nigeria's finest essayists — argues that the credit given to Western sources as inspiration for African literary arts and discourse is misplaced: "One does not have to be a Yoruba speaker, to intuit the rapid word-play, and sometimes the deliberate infelicities and thus the 'Hopkinsian' dimensions that the *Ewi* poet on Nigerian radio carts along with the most sing-song performance" ("Of Soyinka" 16). Further, Soyinka, in his "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition" makes similar points in his defence of the richness and variety of Yoruba poetics. Of all the criticisms levelled against Osundare, the most consistent and interesting is criticism of his use of the Yoruba worldview, in my view a curious critique of a poet's reference to his/her Indigenous culture, this in a postcolonial world. In a gesture of critical advocacy Ofeimun rallies to Osundare's defence for his use of the Yoruba worldview and its pantheon of animistic elements: "Assumedly, where myths thrive, and gods subsist who are viewed as archetypal beings, as archetypes of behaviour and as patterns and habits of mind that human beings project in their everyday lives, a sensitive grasp of their forms could help in apprehending, if not altering, what Soyinka has called the vicious circle of human stupidities. The essential motivation is the need to learn about the gods, not so much to valorise them as objects of worship, but to appreciate how human activities conform to or might move away from the modes of their archetypal rituals ... it is not so much an issue of whether you are or you are not a devotee of this or that god but whether the patterns in nature that myths represent can be tested in everyday life as some kind of hypothesis to help people grapple with social life" ("Ogun as Cross-cultural" 25).

In conclusion, Osundare may be thought in the light of the above explanation to be both a mythopoeist and a mythoclast, at once rooting for and universalizing his autochthonous Yoruba animistic metaphysics and using Western-derived socialist humanism as an alter/native mythico-historical tem-



plate to construct an inclusive, pan-human, at times essentialist and ahistorical perspective, but ultimately providing us with a grandly utopian and emancipatory vision.

### Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Arrow of God*. Essex: Heinemann Educational Books, 1964.
- Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987*. London: Heinemann International, 1988.
- Aiyejina, Funso. *Esu Elegbara: A Source of an Alter/Native Theory of African Literature and Criticism*. Lagos: CBAAC Occasional Monographs, 2010.
- Anyokwu, Christopher. "Myth and History in the Poetry of Osundare." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.4 (2009): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss4/1>>.
- Arnold, Stephen H. "A Peopled Persona: Autobiography, Post-modernism and the Poetry of Niyi Osundare." *Genres autobiographiques en Afrique/Autobiographical Genres in Africa*. Ed. János Riesz and Ulla Schild. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1996. 143-65.
- Babalola, S.A. *The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966.
- Barber, Karin. *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1991.
- Brown, Stewart. "African Literature Past, Present and Future." *The Quest for Democracy: Writings on Nigerian Literature in English*. Ed. Francesca Rosati. Roma: ARACNE, 2004. 35-64.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970.
- Garuba, Harry. "Explorations in Animist Materialism and a Reading of the Poetry of Niyi Osundare." *The People's Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare*. Ed. Abdul-Rasheed na'Allah. Trenton: Africa World P, 2004. 54-70.
- Chinweizu, Onyiah, and Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Toward the Decolonization of Africa Literature*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1984.
- Ofeimun, Odi. "Of Soyinka, Chinweizu and Polemics on Afrocentricism." *Sunday Sun* (22 February 2004): 16.
- Ofeimun, Odi. "Ogun as Cross-cultural Heritage in the West Coast." *Sunday Sun* (21 March 2004): 25.
- Ohaeto, Ezenwa. *Winging Words: Interviews with Nigerian Writers and Critics*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 2004.
- Okpewho, Isidore. *The Epic in Africa*. New York: Columbia UP, 1979.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Songs of the Marketplace*. Ibadan: New Horn P, 1983.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Village Voices*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 1984.
- Osundare, Niyi. *A Nib in the Pond*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 2002.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Songs of the Season*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1990.
- Osundare, Niyi. *The Eye of the Earth*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1986.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Moonsongs*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1988.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Waiting Laughters*. Lagos: Malthous P, 1990.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Midlife*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1993.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Horses of Memory*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1998.
- Osundare, Niyi. *The Word Is An Egg*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2000.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Tender Moments (Love Poems)*. Ibadan: U of Ibadan P, 2006.
- Osundare, Niyi. *Thread in the Loom: Essays on African Literature and Culture*. Trenton: Africa World P, 2002.
- Osundare, Niyi. "My Poetry is Influenced by Yoruba Poetics." *Guardian* (10 July 2005): 55.
- Osundare, Niyi. "Wole Soyinka and the Atunda Ideal: A Reading of Soyinka's Poetry." *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*. Ed. Biodun Jeyifo. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001. 187-200.
- Soyinka Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976.
- Soyinka, Wole. *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1991.
- Soyinka, Wole. "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition." *Transition* 48 (1975): 38-44.
- Wright, Derek. *Wole Soyinka Revisited*. New York: Twayne, 1993.

Author's Profile: Christopher Anyokwu teaches African literature at the University of Lagos. His areas of interest include African literature, the English Romantics, and literary theory. Anyokwu's recent publications include "Fifty Years On: Problematizing the Heroic Ideal in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," *California Linguistic Notes* (2008), "May We Always Remember": Memory and Nationhood in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*," *Journal of Language and Literature* (2008), "Inheritance of Loss: Narrative and History in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*," *California Linguistic Notes* (2009), and "Myth and History in the Poetry of Osundare," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (2009). He has also published creative works including the plays *Stolen Future*, *A Parade of Madmen*, *Ufuoma*, and *Homecoming*. E-mail: <[canyokwu@unilag.edu.ng](mailto:canyokwu@unilag.edu.ng)>