

MYTHOLOGIZING YORUBA ORATURE: LOBOTOMIZING SWIVELLED PULSES OF LAUGHTER IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S *WAITING LAUGHTERS* AND REMI RAJI'S *A HARVEST OF LAUGHTERS*

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ABSTRACT

Every literary work emerges from the particular alternatives of its time. This is ostensibly reflected in the attempted innovative renderings of these alternatives in the poetry of contemporary Nigerian poets of Yoruba extraction. Discernible in the poetry of Niyi Osundare and Remi Raji is the shaping and ordering of the linguistic appurtenances of the Yoruba orature, which themselves are sublimely rooted in the proverbial, chants, anecdotes, songs and praises derived from the Yoruba oral poetry of Ijala, Orin Agbe, Ese Ifa, Rara, folklore as well as from other elements of oral performance. This engagement with the Yoruba oral tradition significantly permeates the poetics of Niyi Osundare's *Waiting laughters* and Remi Raji's *A Harvest of Laughters*. In these anthologies, both Osundare and Raji traverse the cliffs and valleys of the contemporary Nigerian milieu to distil the social changes rendered in the Yoruba proverbial, as well as its chants and verbal formulae, all of which mutate from momentary happiness into an enduring anomie grounded in seasonal variations in agricultural production, ruinous political turmoil, suspense and a harvest of unresolved, mysterious deaths. The article is primarily concerned with how the African oral tradition has been harnessed by Osundare and Raji to construct an avalanche of damning, peculiarly Nigerian, socio-political upheavals (which are essentially delineated by the signification of laughter/s) and display these in relation to the country's variegated ecology.

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1. INTRODUCTION

African literary scholarship in recent times has been embroiled in a seething controversy as to whether African literature should be written in the indigenous languages or not. The debate was inaugurated by the Nigerian born author Chinua Achebe in reaction to the African cultural misrepresentation in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1951) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Achebe's grouse and his basis for establishing a platform for the promotion of African indigenous languages is referenced in the thematic of *Things Fall Apart* (1958). But at the forefront of this more recent debate is the celebrated Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o who, although having written extensively in English for several years, began in 1977 to write in his indigenous African language, Gikuyu. Ngugi explains in *Decolonising the Mind* that he felt a nudge to do for Gikuyu 'what Spencer, Milton, and Shakespeare did for English ... which is to meet the challenge of creating a literature in them ...' (Ngugi 1986, 29). Exhilarating as this may sound, surprisingly, no contemporary Nigerian writer, playwright or poet of note has heeded this call in its entirety.

A mid-line response to this call is gradually evolving, however, in the poetry of the younger generation of Nigerian poets such as Niyi Osundare, Remi Raji, Femi Fatoba and Esiaba Irobi. Suffice it to say that Osundare holds a unique place in African poetry and it makes great sense to treat his poetry as a model of interaction between oral tradition and written tradition. Osundare's artistic contribution has had an indelibly marked impact on the poetics of contemporary Nigerian poetry. In the same vein, oral tradition continues to hold powerful sway on the artistic creation and radiates an infectious enthusiasm in the poetry of Remi Raji. However, Raji has certain things in common with the celebrated Nigerian poet, Niyi Osundare, in his ability to weave diverse images around happenings in Nigeria's socio-political milieu. Both poets, of course, have a confirmed trajectory of textual opposition to military dictatorship and poor governance.

Osundare is generally considered to be an avant-garde contemporary Nigerian poet who is at the forefront in charting a new course at the intersection of the indigenous traditional and Western traditional approaches to poetry. Although, Osundare and Raji are not contemporaries, their poetry follows very similar oral tradition patterns. The similarities in the poetry of the duo can be illustrated by their subscription to the alternative poetry tradition derived from the forms of Yoruba orature such as: proverbial; song; chants; anecdote and oral recitations which include Ijala; Agbe; Rara and Ofo or incantation. Essentially, the Yoruba is perhaps one of the largest homogenous groups in Africa and is culturally endowed. It stretches for a considerable distance on the Western Nigeria axis, from the area of Badagry to Warri, and then inland until it almost reaches the Niger around latitude 9° N. Indeed, certain parts of the Niger form the

boundary between it and the Nupe. The Yoruba country further cuts westwards across the whole of Dahomey (the present day Benin Republic) and reaches into the east of Togo. The Yoruba inhabit a continuous territory and speak the same language, but with dialectical variations (Akinjogbin and Ayandele 1980, 121). Remarkably, the Yoruba culture is imbued with verbal creativity and a great deal of oral performing arts which have elicited the curiosity of Osundare and Raji. In the poetry of the duo, one can see two complementary poetry traditions: a written literary tradition that appropriates linguistic appurtenances and the African oral tradition in which it is embedded, which facilitates a literary accessibility that endears the poets to their readers. This article will be examining how Osundare and Raji have essentially utilised the Yoruba orature as an alternative tradition in crafting the poetics which reiterate their veneration of the changes in the agricultural seasons, an articulation of African tradition and the condemnation of military brutality in the *Waiting laughters* (1990) and *A harvest of laughters* (1997).

2. ORAL TRADITION AND LITERARY PRODUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POETRY

It is important to note that Nigerian pioneer poets such as Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark-Ambekederemo, Christopher Okigbo and Gabriel Imomotime Okara wrote in English and borrowed excessively from the European poets such as W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Equally worrisome is the fact that, their poetry retains a hangover of Western tradition while showing minimal signs of borrowing from the oral African traditions. However, the contemporary Nigerian poets' uniqueness lies in a sustained appropriation of oral tradition, as indexed in their subscription to traditional linguistic elements grounded in Nigerian socio-cultural milieu. Perhaps, one might be curious to interrogate a reason for the differing attitudes exhibited in the poetry productions of the older and younger generations of the Nigerian poets. It would seem that, poetry has often been perceived by the older Nigerian poets as an esoteric sphere where the complexities of daily existence have to be resolved through an adaptation of European linguistic rhythm and form. Contemporary Nigerian poets, by contrast, believe in harnessing elements grounded in African oral tradition in conformity with the advocacy of the troika of literary critics: Chinweizu, O. Jemie, and I. Madubuike, in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. In this controversial but incisive book, the troika argues that:

African literature is an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures. It has its own traditions, models and norms. Its constituency is separate and radically different from that of the European and other literatures.

And its historical and cultural imperatives impose upon it concerns and constraints quite different, altogether antithetical to the European (Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike 1985, 4)

A wake-up call to the troika's advocacy seems to have been heeded in the poetry of contemporary Nigerian poets, especially, Niyi Osundare and Remi Raji, whose poetics

are entrenched in the nexus of Yoruba orature and folk culture. Nevertheless, whatever advantage we may agree has accrued to the contemporary Nigerian poets due to their embrace of oral tradition, English language still serves as a mode of communicating Nigeria's social, cultural and political experiences for both the older and younger generations of Nigerian poets.

In exploring alternative poetry craftsmanship that could project African culture, the contemporary Nigerian poets have situated the rhythm of their poetry in discernible African oral traditions. This assertion is eloquently captured in Tanure Ojaide's essay, *New Trends in Modern African Poetry*: '[P]oetry in Africa is ... currently enjoying an unprecedented creative outburst and popularity' (Ojaide 1995, 4). This outburst is remarkably rooted in 'some aesthetic strength hitherto unrealized in written African poetry which has successfully adapted oral poetry technique into the written form' (Ojaide 1995, 4). Furthermore, this phenomenon of orality and its influence in the works of contemporary Nigerian poets and writers has also been examined in Ato Quayson's seminal book, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, where he opines that African literature should be seen 'not as a mere precipitate of culture, but as a process of mediation upon it' (Quayson 1997, 16–17). Quayson exegetically pursues in his book a link between contemporary writing, history and the indigenous culture. He argues further that orality constitutes an important segment of the indigenous resources from where the contemporary Nigerian poets, playwrights and novelists draw greater inspiration and influence. Remarkably, this synergy of inspiration and influence facilitates a predominant artistic framework in both *Waiting laughter* (1990) and *A harvest of laughter* (1997). In these anthologies, Niyi Osundare and Remi Raji have appropriated inherent values of Yoruba oral tradition not only to comment on the various shades of social anomies in contemporary Nigeria, but also to employ it as a leitmotif in the reiteration of the soothing impact of laughter(s). As representatively exemplified in their works, it would seem that their careers have been marked by decades of increasing flirtation with the Yoruba oral performance art of Ijala tradition, verbal wit and constructive double vision.

While *Waiting laughter* largely contains poems that are untitled, *A harvest of laughter* has six movements of titled poems. It would appear from close observation that, Raji's *A harvest of laughter* conforms reasonably to the use of punctuation marks while Osundare's *Waiting laughter*, like some of his other poetry texts, does not subscribe to the rigid enforcement of punctuation marks. Examining the absence of punctuation marks in most of Osundare's poetry texts, Asomwan S. Adagbonyin has explained that:

...while punctuation is used with great regularity (in some of Osundare's poetry collections) (emphasis mine), it is used randomly and sparingly in some others. There are even texts where punctuation marks are not used at all. In most of these texts, the reader's predictive knowledge of English grammatical patterns aids his interpretation of the poetic texts as he can fill in, mentally, the punctuation marks, where they are expected to be ... (Adagbonyin 2005, 71)

If the absence of punctuation marks in Osundare's poetry suggests non-conformism, the basis for its use has been further explained by Adagbonyin who states that Osundare's reason for the infrequent use of punctuation marks could be '... that he seems to view the practice (especially the use of commas and semi-colons) as an unnecessary hindrance to the free-flow of his ideas. It destroys the tempo of reading, breaks up the text unduly ...' (Adagbonyin 2005, 72 – 73). Suffice it to say that Adagbonyin's impassioned explication of Osundare's irregular use of punctuation marks is, to a great extent, convincing. However, in looking at his artistic-conscious Yoruba background, it is important to realise that Osundare's infrequent use of punctuation in his poetry essentially portrays him a communal raconteur whose art has to be delivered rhythmically without the encumbrances that are often orchestrated by the English language – nuanced phonological pauses.

Nevertheless, it is exhilarating to note that poetics in both Osundare's *Waiting laughter* and Raji's *A harvest of laughter* is dominated by the exuberance of Yoruba oral tradition and marked by intermittent outbursts of laughter, for the dissection of essentially Nigerian socio-political situations and marked by intermittent outbursts of laughter, both intended to dissect essentially Nigerian socio-political situations. Perhaps surprisingly for younger-generation Nigerian poets who are grounded in the modernist conventional poetry craftsmanship, the underlying motive of Osundare and Raji's obsession with the African cultural heritage lies in the deification of the Yoruba orature. Suffice it to say that the lucidity that runs through their poetry incorporates the Yoruba linguistic elements for the rambunctious dissection of laughter in the two anthologies, to celebrate nature and delineate the various states of anomie in contemporary Nigeria's socio-political milieu.

2.1. Chanting oral tradition in *Waiting laughter* and *A harvest of laughter*

Yoruba orature serves as the vehicle of literary communication in Osundare's *Waiting laughter* and Raji's *A harvest of laughter* because the duo perceive 'proverbs, as a means of communication which oil the wheels of human interaction in day-to-day social contexts. By employing a proverb, a speaker may be able to express his or her view regarding a certain situation while protecting the interpersonal relationship between himself or herself and the hearer' (Tae-Sang 1999, 86). The inherent proverbial in their poetry affords the poets a convenient linguistic platform for simulating the Yoruba language in written English dialogue and narration. The constitutive verbal power embedded in the interstice of written English and Yoruba orature has empowered them to make comments on the prevailing socio-political trajectory in contemporary Nigeria. By adopting the Yoruba orature as a framework in their poetry, Osundare and Raji seem to be emphasising that, due to its flexibility, oral literature provides them with an alternative communication platform to foreground the depth of their poetry and

fraternise with their audience. Osundare begins his incursion into the Yoruba orature in an untitled poem, in *Waiting laughter*:

I pluck these words from the lips of the wind
 Ripe like a pendulous pledge;
 Laughter's parable explodes in the groin
 Of waking storms
 Clamorous with a covenant
 Of wizened seeds
 Tonalities. Redolent tonalities ... (Osundare 1990, 2)

By inscribing itself in the set of images and myths carried by the orature, Yoruba oral tradition is successfully harnessed in the untitled poem whose structure is more like a 'chant.' Its incantatory signification is rooted in the images of nature and vegetation: 'lips of the wind', 'laughter's parable', 'waking storms' and 'wizened seeds.' In the words of Ayo Fadahunsi, incantation in Yoruba orature 'may connote ritual recitation of verbal charms or spells to produce a magical effect. It may also be interpreted to mean conventionalised words and slogans used and repeated in a manner likened to the utterance of spells, as by the traditional 'juju' (medicine) men or herbalists. Thus incantation involves the summoning or invocation of magical power' (Fadahunsi 1988, 41). Since incantation remains an integral part of Yoruba orature, Osundare has brilliantly deployed it in this poem by tapping into the natural characteristics of the wind and plants in the poem, to metaphysically 'pluck these words from the lips of the wind'. The poet further establishes his transcendental affinity with the supernatural forces by sustaining 'a covenant of wizened seeds' subsumed within a peal of boisterous laughter.

Louisa Wei provides a remarkable acknowledgement of Osundare's deification of nature in her essay entitled *Reconstructing the Forgotten Nature & History*: 'Osundare's delineation of Nature stands out not only through a unique vision that links sensitivity to sensibility, but also by adopting metaphors and proverbs from the oral literature (or orature) of Africa ... Osundare comes closer to the African tradition in his emphasis on the lyricism' (Wei 2003, 300). Beneath appropriation of the incantatory candour, laughter is given more direct expression in the lyrics of the poem through the use of verbal formulae as the basis for the action of the poet: 'I pluck these words from the lips of the wind/... Laughter's parable explodes in the groin/Of waking storms.' The supernatural cadence of the persona invokes a compelling visionary imagery that probes the level of myth which portrays man as God that could symbolically decree a thing to occur against its own volition. Hence, the deployment of language through incantatory chant draws attention to the domination over nature by the poet persona in the poem. Undoubtedly, the incantatory chant of the persona attests to the communion with nature in the Yoruba transcendental linguistic medium. The seeming tension between the real and imaginary worlds is offset by the laughter which dissects the interplay of eco-criticism and Yoruba oral performance.

In a similar vein, Remi Raji sets out in 'Introit', by turning poetry into an act of oral performance premised on the linguistic richness and rhetoric. This invokes Yoruba orature in the articulation of poetic wits, something he intends to render in a form of song. He promises to maintain the rhythm and vibrancy of Yoruba orature – which can be sustained only by his avoidance of a slip into the borrowings from English/European romanticism. He realises that such slip could obscure his choice of words and alienate him from his audience:

'Introit'
 I will spread my songs
 in a sunlight of webs
 I'll seize upon the lemon-smell of laughter;
 No, not for me the twilight tales
 of sick knights
 not for me, the wilting metaphors
 of pain-wrights (Raji 1997, 12)

The poem demonstrates the influence which oral tradition exerts on contemporary Nigerian poetry. Images expressed in the Yoruba proverbial and figurative expressions of 'I will spread my songs/in a sunlight of webs/I'll seize upon the lemon-smell of laughter' are, significantly, deployed in the poem to articulate the continuum of animist consciousness in the employment of verbal art, which tasks Raji to adopt what Kumkum Sangari has described as '[t]he talismanic notion of technology as a type of 'magic' art' (Raji 1997, 232). Far from sentimentalising the significance of the Yoruba linguistic ethos, Raji shows that Yoruba verbal construction rendered in English in the poem is intended to create a web of reorientation of verbal formulae that could further promote Yoruba cultural importance in African literature. This represents a notable, unobtrusive dexterity which was originally championed in the Soyinkaean literary production. The action of the poet persona in Introit is further mediated by the humour realised from his determination to do away with borrowings from the European literary influence delineated in the poem as 'the wilting metaphors' and settles to encode to its limits the mythopoeic substance grounded in the Yoruba oral tradition. This appropriation of an element of Yoruba orature to articulate mythical desire on the part of the poet, reiterates Soyinka's submission on the inherent possibility of language to verbalise the extraordinary intentions, as demonstrated in his essay *The Fourth Stage*:

Language therefore is not a barrier to the profound universality of music but a cohesive dimension and clarification of that wilfully independent art-form which we label music. Language reverts in religious rites to its pristine existence, eschewing the sterile limits of particularization...and words are taken back to their roots, to their original poetic sources when fusion was total and the movement of words was the very passage of music and the dance of images. Language is still the

embryo of thought and music where myth is daily companion ... there, language is constantly mythopoeic (Soyinka 1976, 147).

To effect his determination of crafting poetry that will embed the interaction of African culture and the English language, Raji employs the proverbial as a range of rhetorical devices sandwiched in Yoruba orature. Ostensibly, the proverbial emphasises the social relationship between man and vegetation, which legitimises the interaction between nature and the poet. To underscore this social engagement, laughter is employed to articulate the symbolic actions embedded in the poem: 'spread my song', 'sunlight of web', 'seize upon the lemon-smell of laughter' to resonate the symbolism of collective cultural myths of the Yoruba oral performance.

2.2. Criticising the ecological degradation in *Waiting laughter* and *A harvest of laughter*

Although, Nigeria secured independence from Britain in 1960, by the mid-1960s the discovery of oil, a recognition of self-rule and the buoyant economy fuelled by the expansion of agro-allied industry had produced boom conditions. However, the euphoria of the boom was abruptly shattered in 1966 by a military coup d'état and all viable economic policies designed to guide the boom were callously suspended by the ruling military junta on 15 January 1966. Consequently, the problematic of daily existence – essentially created by the poor handling of the economy by the successive military regimes, in tandem with arbitrary changes to the agricultural seasons, resulted in debilitating famine, poor agricultural production and hunger, as so devastatingly captured in the poem. The effects of the attendant fluctuations in the agricultural seasons effect were felt gruesomely in some rural areas of Nigeria, which robbing these of their African communal conviviality. Based on this hindsight, one might indeed argue that consistently poor agricultural yields and incongruous agricultural seasons have wilted the laughter and humour of individuals and collective groups of people in contemporary Nigeria. Raji comments on this disruption of communal flow in *I rise now*:

Everyday we hear
In neighbouring lands
The news of acid rain.

Nobody
No body seems to know
How to smile again,
Not even a grin colours the face;

And I rise now
With long drums of laughter

To slaughter a thousand dragon-dreams of pain.
 Oh laughter, legacy of mask
 My wind of burning words
 Beyond the blues. (Raji 1997, 13-14)

The poem juxtaposes the blissful, communal Africa of the past, in which seasonal fruits and crops were planted and harvested in their due seasons, against the blighted contemporary climate in which crops and plants are systematically wilted, thus bringing hunger to the people. Hunger and malnutrition in contemporary Nigeria... Hunger and malnutrition in contemporary Nigeria are symbolised by the debilitating drought and famines ushered in by the inclement agricultural seasons. Recourse to the blissful past filled with an abundance of food and succour, however, is a somewhat tendentious mockery of the present which is marked by 'a thousand dragon-dreams of pain.' The tragedy of the upheaval in the Nigerian agricultural seasons is reflected in the climatic alteration associated with global warming which manifests in 'the early sun lies limbless/ in the ambush of unkindly cloud.' The damaging effect of global warming is further indexed in Osundare's untitled poem, in *Waiting* laughs:

Sometimes
 the early sun lies limbless
 in the ambush of unkindly cloud;
 an opening day meets waking moments
 with a cavalry of iron groans

Sometimes
 joy-killers reach for the neck
 of our laughter,
 dragging through sweat-soaked dusks
 the memory of our mirth...

Yes, they strip our distance runners
 of the beauty of their legs,
 then throw our champion fish
 into the wilderness of the sea,
 dispossessed of its sturdy fins (Osundare 1990, 86)

Change in global climate has often been ostensibly attributed to the greenhouse gases arising from industry and the burning of fossil fuels that has caused a massive depletion of the ozone layer that has now triggered global warming. The African continent unfortunately, seem to bear the brunt of acid rain. The African continent, unfortunately, seems to bear the brunt of 'acid rain'; 'the blighted clouds of a locust train' and flooded

rivers which ‘throw our champion fish into the wilderness of the sea.’ This untitled poem in *Waiting laughs* further painstakingly itemises the ripple effect of global warming, “an opening day meets waking moments/with a cavalry of iron groans/joy-killers reach for the neck of our laughter/dragging through sweat-soaked dusks/ the memory of our mirth.’ These lines clearly present an ecological manifesto that, even though the global ecology is self-regenerating, the onus for its preservation rests on the people who inhabit the earth. Osundare is not enamoured of these negative effects of global warming which dampen hope and stifle laughter, as strikingly encapsulated in lines of the poem. Hence, his concern in the poem betrays a passionate obsession with nature, thus linking existentialism to preservation in his dogged pursuit of the ecology thematic. However, the persona in the poem is very optimistic that normalcy will be restored to the global ecology someday.

Despite the damaging effects of global warming, the poet persona in Raji’s *I rise now* is resolute in his whimsical determination to move on with life and silence these global warming debilitations in laughter(s). It is an oblique laughter whose immeasurable gains supersede the momentary pains inflicted by the biting effect of global warming. The repetition of laughter in the last stanza of *I rise now* is employed to counterbalance the ‘muzzle-grip of Hell’ typified by the negative effects of global warming. Laughter is allowed a voice of tradition, to give free rein to the Yoruba proverb ‘*b’ekun pe di ale, ayo mbo lowuro*’, which translates as ‘no matter how long a pain endures, laughter would surely prevail.’ Here, the Yoruba proverb is aptly entrenched in the capability of the laughter to ‘slaughter a thousand dragon-dreams of pain’, restore hope and bring back ‘a grin (that) colours the face’, as thematically emphasised in the poem. Raji, however, not only emphasises the significance of laughter in ameliorating the debilitating impact of ecology – but also the fact that the impact of daily existence in Nigeria (which has been remarkably overshadowed by economic and social worries) can be circumvented only by way of a good dose of laughter. However, while both poems deal with eco-critical themes, their stylistics, differ remarkably. Raji’s *I rise now*, through humour, employs the imagery of climate change to interrogate the perceived pervading disunity among the differing Nigerian ethnic groupings: ‘Here in the muzzle-grip of Hell/where mushrooms of hate grow/under water/in the wind/in the rash of times/in the bellies of lovers and children/we hear the news of acid rain/’. Osundare’s untitled poem, in turn, reeks of a poetic anger directed at Western, technologically-oriented nations, as it symbolically wields backlash against those who orchestrate the ecological degradation of the world in their disastrous actions: ‘... strip our distance runners/of the beauty of their legs ...’.

2.3. Foregrounding Yoruba Orature in *Waiting laughs* and *A harvest of laughs*

Both Osundare and Raji appropriate Yoruba oral tradition in varied poetic forms ranging from proverbial, satire, song and other elements of oral performance to foreground the

poetic dexterity of Yoruba poetry. Osundare often use songs in his poetry either to praise or as a satire. This is demonstrated in his untitled poem in *Waiting laughs*:

My song is the even rib
in the feather of the soaring bird
the pungent salt and smell of
earth
where seeds rot for roots to rise

My song is the root
touching other roots
in a covenant below the crust
beyond the roving camera of the eye

My song is the embryo of day
in the globule of the rising dew;
a vow which earths the word
in regions of answerable rains

My song is ogbigbotirigbo
waiting on the stairs of the moon
garnering lights, garnering shadows,
Waiting (Osundare 1999, 26)

Osundare's untitled poem is influenced by the Yoruba traditional praise song. Song is seen among the diverse African ethnic groupings, and among the Yoruba in particular, as a communal activity which has to be performed to herald the planting season, harvest season, dry season and rainy season. Song is used in the poem to celebrate nature in its ramifications: '[M]y song is the even rib/in the feather of the soaring bird/the pungent salt and smell of earth/where seeds rot for roots to rise/my song is the root/touching other roots/my song is the embryo of day/in the globule of the rising dew/my song is ogbigbotirigbo/waiting on the stairs of the moon' (Osundare 1999, 26). The repetitive, concatenated structure of the refrain 'my song', enunciates the weight of information contained in the witty and epigrammatic message that the persona wishes to share with his listeners. This weight is offset by the communal appeal of the song, premised on oral narrative pattern, which elicits an emotional response from the audience.

Osundare describes his song in the mould of *ogbigbotirigbo* a large, mythical bird in the Yoruba mythology, imbued with giant features, super-avian strength and endowed with great wits, to emphasise the communal significance of his song. Rooted in the Osundare's poetry, is the understanding that the community plays a pre-eminent

role in any artistic production in Africa, and the artist serves only as a conduit through which the communal consciousness is aroused. This notion has been corroborated by Aderemi Bamikunle who acknowledges that, ‘in order to allow the voice of tradition full scope to do this Osundare adopts a poetic posture that modernists will call the posture of impersonality. His poetic voice is subsumed under the communal voice as he prefers to speak through various personae from the rural areas who adapt various forms of traditional art ...’ (Bamikunle 1992, 53 – 54). The essential aura of Osundare’s communal narrative (song), is built on suspense and often utilises surprise to shore up its thematic. Osundare’s untitled poem has a parallelism in Raji’s *Gift*, where a chant is deployed to construct the Yoruba anthropomorphic essence:

‘Gift’

The chameleon has given me the gift
of a thousand garbs;
the spider dies
and bequeaths me with the civil artistry
of contraptions;
the tortoise dies
and all of me is her household wealth
of gray wisdom...
the songbird dies
and my chest holds a treasure trove
of beaded tales ... (15)

Correspondingly, Raji’s *Gift* is crafted in the mould of Ijala song (or hunter’s song), a traditional oral performance in the Yoruba country of Western Nigeria. Perhaps, the appropriation of the Ijala poetry pattern in the poem is a reaction to Adefoye Oyesakin’s hasty lamentation over the dearth of Yoruba traditional poetry in contemporary Nigeria:

[A]fter almost one-and-a-half centuries in the active study of Yoruba traditional poetry, the recurring problem for critics, artists, and consumers of this brand of literature is how to keep it culturally alive. Some of the genres like Orin Agbe, Orin Etiyeri and Aro are on the verge of total extinction while others like Iwi Egungun, Ese Ifa and Ijala only peep into modern civilisation through the radio, television and written literature (Oyesakin 1990: 241-248), 241).

The rhythmic structuring of Osundare’s untitled poem and Raji’s *Gift* along the lines of Ijala poetry shows only that Oyesakin’s fear is misguided because Yoruba traditional poetry will always retain its form and aesthetics through its propagation in the poetics of the contemporary Nigerian poets such as Niyi Osundare and Remi Raji. The poets’ understanding of the inner workings of the worlds of ‘song’, ‘roots’, ‘*ogbigbotirigbo*’, ‘chameleon’, ‘spider’, ‘tortoise’, ‘songbird’ and the ‘carver’ endear them to the repository of rare wisdom needed in African mythology, to whip the society

into the path of order and development. The possession of these extraordinary networks of wisdom has invested in the poets' personas 'the promise of a brimming sun' and 'memory', which now makes them sages who can proffer solutions to all sorts of human problems. Hence they need not entertain emotional worries or troubles because they are on top of any situation that could beset individuals and human societies in contemporary Nigeria. Therefore, they can hold their 'frowns in fragments of laughter' in 'a vow which earths the Word' to scorn the world.

2.4. Venerating the rain in *Waiting laughs* and *A harvest of laughs*

The 'Ijala', originally hunting poems in the Yoruba tradition, are songs that are often chanted at the funerals of brave and distinguished hunters in the Yoruba country. In the recent times, however, hunting poems have been re-integrated into the repertoire of Yoruba cultural recitations, primarily for entertainment during social functions. Although 'Ijala' is a genre of speech, its utterance, accompanied by unique rudimentary musical characteristics, is often rendered as a recitation, but not as a song. Regarding its thematic, Finnegan contends that, 'often there is no very clear central theme, but the poem rambles from one topic to another in a way which distinguishes these poems from direct involvement in action. One dominant theme is verbal salute and praise ...' (Finnegan 1984, 224). The influence and phonological appurtenances of 'Ijala' are appropriated to sing praise to the rain in Raji's *Rain Song* and Osundare's untitled poem in *Waiting laughs*:

'Rain Song'

There's an eagerness in the loin of clouds
urgent and plural
as the wet rhyme of an ancient stammerer.

I crave the laughing touch of rain
that the roots of rocks may sprout again
and the beaks of flowers suck my pain.

There's a blue eagerness in the loin of clouds
the wind is pregnant
with seductive memories
of burning flesh, of pollen laughs

Of lovers tending the night
like delicate tendrils without end.
I crave the serious rods of rain

on the barren bosom of this land
 that the streets may run
 with naked children
 offering ballads to truant harvests ... (Osundare 1999, 25)

The rainy season in Africa typifies bliss, fecundity and harvest. Farmers always look forward to this season because it affords them the luxury of taking a break from active farm work. The season also brings forth a reassuring relief from the hot and humid weather conditions needed to plant crops and seeds during the dry season and these positive attributes of the rain are underscored in the poem. The dominant theme of the *Rain Song* is the verbal salute and praise offered by the poet persona to the rain: '[T] here's an eagerness in the loin of clouds/urgent and plural/I crave the laughing touch of rain/that the roots of rocks may sprout again/There's a blue eagerness in the loin of clouds/the wind is pregnant/I crave the serous rods of rain/on the barren bosom of this land'. The praise evokes a reality that is both physical and literary and that follows a broad trail of images and symbols of fecundity which form a synthesis of suggestive meanings. The rain is also venerated in the untitled poem in Osundare's *Waiting laughter*:

The rain. The rain
 The rain is onibanbantiba
 The rain is onibanbantiba
 The rain which taunts the roof's dusty laughter
 In the comedy of February's unsure showers;
 The wind is its wing, the lake
 One liquid song in its fluent concert

Tonalities. Redolent tonalities

The wind has left springing laughter
 In the loins of bristling deserts;
 Sands giggle in grass,
 Fallowing pebbles reach for sacks of scrotal pasture

Tonalities. Redolent tonalities

And still fugitive like a fairy,
 The wind gallops like a thoroughbred
 Dives like a dolphin
 Soars into the waiting sky

Like awodi with a beak of feathery oracles
 Tonalities. Redolent tonalities ... (Osundare 1999, 4)

The 'Ijala' poetic style is further employed in Osundare's untitled poem to eloquently praise the rain using Yoruba esoteric expressions, 'the rain is onibanbantiba/the rain is onibanbantiba/the rain which taunts the roof's dusty laughter/In the comedy of February's unsure showers/the wind is its wing, the lake/one liquid song in its fluent concert'. Although, 'onibanbantiba' connotes no specific semantic meaning, it is used in the poem as tonal counterpoint to heighten the rain praises. Its adoption in the poem is characteristic of the Ijala poetry where Yoruba words and phrases are used sporadically as puns to spice up oral performances. However, the coming of the rain in the poem is heralded by a furious wind whose speed and tenacity are likened to that of an 'Awodi' or kite. The exaltation of the rain in both poems is entrenched in the extraordinary actions of 'taunting', 'springing laughter' and 'galloping' that are associated with the human beings 'eagerness' and 'pregnancy' –(delete), things that are usually associated with human beings.

2.5. Appraising Nigeria's season of anomie in *Waiting laughs* and *A harvest of laughs*

Nigeria's journey into nationhood was signalled by its independence in 1960, but Nigeria as a nation has traversed a tortuous political road full of bends and twists. Its apocalyptic period of political anomie was ushered in by the malevolent military regime that, 'ruled Nigeria from 1966–1979, and 1983–1999' (Alli 2001, 208). During these periods, poetry was engaged as a literary communicative platform for the criticism of brutality and dehumanisation associated with the military rule and Osundare was in the vanguard of such criticism. Not surprisingly, 'Osundare stands out among the poets that engaged the military and he has also done more to theorise, popularise and defend this type of poetry than any other poet who became prominent in the 1980s. His newspaper poetry represents the first sustained effort at confronting military dictators ...' (Okunoye 2011: 70). Osundare's dissension against military dictatorship is further examined in an untitled poem in *Waiting laughs*:

Waiting,
 all ways waiting,
 like the mouth for its tongue

My land lies supine
 like a giant in the sun
 its mind a slab of petrified musing
 its heart a deserted barn
 of husky cravings ... (45)

The repetitive pattern of ‘waiting’ in Osundare’s untitled poem reverberates through the employment of Yoruba oral narrative technique to reduce the boundary between the reader and the text. Osundare as the narrator introduces his story of Nigeria’s deprivation by its military rulers in the first stanza thus, ‘Waiting/always waiting/like the mouth for its tongue’. Characteristic of oral storytelling in the African oral performance, the introduction is very important as it stimulates the interest of the audience so as to facilitate their collaboration in the oral performance, because ‘the story must be told in a manner that assists the narrator in retaining the physical attention of the audience as well as in gaining the emotive and cognitive attention of the audience’ (Sekoni 1990, 141). Frighteningly, Osundare weaves into the untitled poem a narration of Nigeria’s despoliation by its successive military rulers, a process which spanned decades. The despoliation narrative oscillates from the sublime to the ridiculous and Nigeria is portrayed as pariah among nations of the world: ‘my land lies supine/like a giant in the sun/its mind a slab of petrified musing/its heart a deserted barn/of husky cravings’. This untitled poem has a striking correspondence – in the condemnation of military incursion into Nigeria’s politics – in another of Osundare’s untitled poems:

Ibosi o!
 Hands which go mouthwards
 in seasons of ripening corn
 have lost their homeward trip
 to the waiting bowl (46)

This is a satiric indictment of the military, whose propensity for wanton disruption of political order is bitterly decried in the poem. Osundare manipulates the Yoruba lament poetry, otherwise called ‘rara’ signified by ‘ibosi, o!’ A cryptic lament embedded in the poem’s title dexterously amplifies the attendant chaos created by the sudden dislocation of political order by the military. Such disruption attracts a strident call for help by the poet persona who deploys it in the form of a declamatory phrase ‘Ibosi o!’ The Yoruba lament further bemoans the magnitude of loss in the polity: ‘Hands which go mouthwards/in seasons of ripening corn/have lost their homeward trip/to the waiting bowl/’. This is successfully harnessed in the poem to portray the military as a bunch of intruders who have often displaced democratically elected governments in contemporary Nigeria. This intrusion also graduated into wanton devastation of the country and is roundly condemned in the poem through humour. The dialogic of fear and trepidation associated with the military is succinctly captured by the use of oral narrative technique in Raji’s *Who sings when the beast prowls*:

‘Silence II’:
 Who sings when the Beast prowls
 when Night thickens
 with dreams of blood
 when Sorrows’s scent suffocates

the remains of lean laughter
 who sings
 when slit drums stand spent
 and deaf in defiled groves
 who sings
 when rhyme's winds
 run amok
 like amputated tongues
 when boots barrels
 and the gift of grenades
 chase the choir into silence.
 (Raji 1997, 50)

In narrating the story of military brutality in the poem, the *poet persona* starts and ends his anecdote with a striking refrain, 'who sings when the Beast prowls.' The use of refrain in the poem reflects the Yoruba oral narrative technique etched in anecdote, and its attendant repetitive pattern is essentially designed to articulate the excessive show of power by the military in the poem. The 'beast' in the poetic narrative refers to the Nigerian armed forces: Army, Navy and Air Force, as well as the police, whose notoriety for gratuitous brutality, killing and maiming knew no limits during the period of oppressive military rule in Nigeria between 1993 and 1999. During this period, many pro-democracy activists were detained indefinitely, the deaths of scores of dissenting voices were recorded and many politicians also fled into exile. Literary productions were stultified by the inept and meddling military during this era, hence, rhetorical questions are asked by the poet persona to underscore this anomie, 'who sings/when rhyme's winds/run amok/like amputated tongues'. The dazzling sequence of intimidation and subjugation generated in the poem's narrative is designed to provoke laughter, mocking the military brutality as the collective willpower of the masses triumphs over it. Eventually, in 1999, this led to the restoration of democratic governance in Nigeria. The destructive impact of anomie created by the military is further pursued in Raji's Deadlines:

Now that you slapped my land
 with a mascara of mourning

Now that you fed your beast
 with the flesh of suckling birds

Now that you filled your tongue
 with darts of denials and lies

Now that you killed laughter
like a cruel coward...

How do you console me now
gleeful orator at funeral rites
sucking lice in your throats
thorns in the very palm
of your handshake...
why do you console me now
septic balm on festering sore
how do you console a mother
bereaved by the talons of a tiger? (Raji 1997, 75)

Raji adopts the Yoruba's 'rara' or oral lament to vilify the military in *Deadlines*. The poem is dedicated to the memory of Dele Giwa, a colourful Nigerian journalist who was killed by a parcel bomb during General Ibrahim Babangida's reckless military administration. The poem also eulogises Ken Saro-Wiwa, a writer and minority activist who was sentenced to death by hanging during General Sanni Abacha's repressive military regime. The poem has a unity of tone and focus which mournfully takes a roll call of the other casualties of the repressive military regime in Nigeria's recent political history. Subsumed within the characteristics of 'rara' poetry, the poem starts with a subdued tone, 'now that you slapped my land with a mascara of mourning/now that you fed your beast with the flesh of suckling birds/now that you filled your tongue with darts of denials and lies/now that you killed laughter like a cruel coward ...'. The poem is crowded with the interlocking imagery of grief: 'Mourning', 'killed', 'funeral' and 'thorns'. Placing emphasis on the tenuous power relation between the military and the hapless Nigerian masses, the poet persona humorously mocks the pretentious paradoxical concern of the Nigerian military which, after orchestrating the death of its victims, will simultaneously despatch a high-profiled delegation to attend and give oratory at the funeral ceremony: 'gleeful orator at funeral rites/sucking lice in your throats/thorns in the very palm of your handshake ... /why do you console me now/septic balm on festering sore'.

2.6. Maximising the Laughter Therapy in *Waiting laughs* and *A harvest of laughs*

While most developed and developing countries of the world are breaking new ground in the areas of technology, healthcare and poverty alleviation, a greater proportion of African countries are still trapped in the throes of poverty, unemployment, the AIDS pandemic and the Ebola virus pandemic – and a few of them are still engaged in internecine wars.

Africa in the twenty-first century has become a euphemism for a continent under siege. These chaotic deprivations are emblematic in almost all African nations. Nevertheless, Osundare and Raji have adopted the Agbe poetry stylistic in the format of their poems, to distil laughter which serves as an enduring elixir in the midst of chaos and to heal the various emotional scars harvested as casualties of socio-political deprivations in the Nigerian milieu. The *Agbe* art has been described by Olugboyega Alaba (1988:57) as a ‘genre of Yoruba traditional oral poetry which is still being practiced as a unique social entertaining and instructive poetic activity in some parts of Yorubaland, in Nigeria. *Agbe* poetry in a formal stage performance is accompanied with *Agbe* (stringed gourds), instrumental music and dancing. The verbal compositions central to this social activity consist mainly of panegyric praises, salutations and character sketches of individuals, current chronicles and random themes of the moment’. *Agbe* tonality is strikingly identified in the rhythm of Raji’s ‘*Harvest III*’:

“Harvest III”:
 if only
 if only we know
 if only we know the crescent magic of laughter

we will ride the flood of predicted pains
 we’ll toast to a tomorrow full of love...
 grime-faced brother, laughter can heal
 if only you know... (Raji 1997, 80)

The repetitive pattern, the use of balancing of sense, and the line length in the building of the rhythm unit (all often seen in the structure of *Agbe*) can be identified in *Harvest III*. For instance, there is a discernible *Agbe* tone patterning in the first stanza of the poem: ‘if only/if only we know/if only we know the crescent magic of laughter. This is reinforced by the instructive tone on the need to internalise and savour the inherent benefit of laughter. Characteristic of the *Agbe* poetic form, *Harvest III* enjoins everyone to embrace laughter as a weapon of overcoming the ‘flood of predicted pains’, toasting to a ‘tomorrow full of love’ and for the dismantling of all seemingly insurmountable barriers of daily existence.

The exhilarating effect of laughter in the *Agbe* tone also underlies Osundare’s untitled poem in *Waiting laughters*:

Laughters, waiting laughters
 peals of silence
 thunder of rocking teeth
 bolts of syncopated seas
 shifting continent of the cheek
 musing estuary of the jaws

incandescent contour of the brows
 batting array of retreating eyes
 spreading escapade of seeing lips
 echoing, echoing cascade of scarlet caves. (27)

The poem celebrates the enduring attributes of laughter(s), which include, ‘thunder of rocking teeth’, ‘shifting continent of the cheek’, ‘musing estuary of the jaws’ and ‘incandescent contour of the brows’. Laughter is also invested with the following dividends in the poem, ‘batting array of retreating eyes’, and ‘spreading escapade of seeing lips’, guarantees the indispensable tonic of laughter in African communal settings. Laughter’s ability to sustain the ‘echoing cascade of scarlet caves’, indubitably endorses it as an enduring and soothing balm against all social assaults that have engendered happiness and tranquillity in postcolonial Africa.

3. CONCLUSION

This article has evaluated the significance of Yoruba orature in Niyi Osundare’s *Waiting laughters* and Remi Raji’s *A harvest of laughters* in order to emphasise that, despite many years of neglect, the Yoruba oral tradition has not gone into extinction, but has been re-structured linguistically as a platform of literary communication by the younger generation of Nigerian poets. By mythologising the Yoruba orature in these anthologies, Osundare and Raji have proven that contemporary Nigerian poetry is a veritable literary site where oral narrative, oral chant and performance intersect with modernity, and regenerate each other.

Interestingly, the influence of the Yoruba oral tradition in the poetry of Niyi Osundare and Remi Raji is resourcefully underlined in the parodying, turning into dialogue and appropriation of the acts of linguistic interference subsumed in the Yoruba oral poetic forms such as, ‘proverbial’, ‘anecdote’, ‘Ijala’, ‘rara’, ‘incantation’ ‘lament’ ‘song’ and ‘*Agbe*’, which have been harnessed to dissect peals of laughter at the semantic and stylistic levels of selected poems in the paper. The article has further proven that Osundare’s *Waiting laughters* and Raji’s *A harvest of laughters* attempted a revisionary reading of the effervescent aura of laughter as symbolic and as having an enduring capability to lessen emotional stress in the chaotic and shambolic African countries as they reel in a miasma of hunger, famines and needless wars.

Although, the traditional poetic forms illustrated in the anthologies are the constitutive elements of Yoruba oral performance arts, they have now been used by Osundare and Raji as literary motifs to foreground their striving for alternative literary tradition. The article concludes that the adoption of these traditional poetic forms has created flexibility in the artistic craftsmanship of Osundare and Raji, thereby making their poetry accessible to their teeming audience within Africa and other parts of the world.

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