

Christopher AMYok

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Niyi Osundare and the Interface Language Factor

Christopher Anyokwu

Abstract

Niyi Osundare is arguably the guiding light of the "post"- Soyinka-Okigbo – Clark generation of African poets, a fact borne out by not only his prolificity but the numerous local and international awards and decorations he has won. Osundare has steadily matured over time in his deft handling of language through his unique conflation of his native Yoruba (source language) and the English language (i.e. target language). This phenomenon, akin to the Achebean prescription, is what we have termed "the Interface language". Thus, this paper seeks to demonstrate using Osundare's oeuvre how "the people's poet" does this.

Introduction

Right from the outset of written African literature, the role of language in its scribal realisation has bulked large among the practitioners in the field. It is superfluous, if not plainly diversionary, to do a rehash of the opposing, entrenched positions of language critics on the question of whether writers of African descent should write in non-African communicative idioms instead of their own indigenous tongues. It is true that while some African writers like Chinua Achebe (1975:27), Ken Saro-Wiwa (Irele, 1992), Chidi Amuta (Irele, 71) et al hold that foreign languages deployed in the writing of African works should be sufficiently domesticated to "bear the burden of our peculiar experience" (Achebe's phrase following James Baldwin), others espousing what might be termed nativist agendum argue the adoption of indigenous African languages. Among this nativist school are such

culture heroes and canonical figures as Masizi Kunene, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi, Kofi Anyidoho and others.

Thus, following the epochal and groundbreaking thesis of the late Obi Wali in 1962 on the Language Question, African writers and critics have been divided over the issue. As in everything else, there is usually merit in the opposing arguments, the details of which we might not be able to go into here. The simple truth is that the advent of colonialism which equally brought with it the legacy of western civilisation on the African continent, no educated African can communicate with the international public in mind without using a foreign language. This is so because these alien tongues are the languages of formal instruction in our institutions of learning.

Apart from the Ngugi example (Ngugi, 1984) and few other half-hearted triers at nativism, the question of language choice in creative writing in Africa has remained largely an academic one since most have always written in the languages of their erstwhile colonial masters. On their own part, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, try to explore this vexed and contentious issue. According to them, "Language exists, therefore, neither before the fact nor after the fact but in the fact. Language constitutes reality in an obvious way: it provides some terms and not others with which to talk about the world" (44). In discussing how Third World or post-colonial writers deploy language, they provide two terms, namely, *abrogation and appropriation*, to explain the various linguistic behaviour of these writers. Abrogation is said to be "a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words" (38). On the other hand, appropriation is defined as "the process by which the language is taken and made to bear the burden of one's own cultural experience, or, as Raja Rao puts it, to "convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own". Therefore, the twin categories of abrogation and appropriation comprehend our project that is "the Interface Language" factor as it relates to Niyi Osundare's poetry. By the same token, the cross-cultural text which

is the main site of this phenomenon is constructed with such strategies of appropriation as glossing, untranslated lexical items, vernacular transcription, syntactic fusion and so on. Really, the cross-culturality or cultural syncretism of diglossic speech community such as Nigeria makes the interface language phenomenon a *fait accompli*. Indeed, what we intend to investigate in the verse of Niyi Osundare is not particularly too different from what Senghor's critics have termed *metissage*² in Leopold Sedar Senghor's poetry.

Senghor's poetry is fed root and branch by two main artistic sensibilities: the one represented by the Sine² and the other the Seine³. In other words, his verse is built around both his native serer (Senegalese) culture and the French surrealist tradition. Thus in his work, we encounter an intermesh of the autochthonous, the patently African on the one hand, and the foreign, on the other. Let it be stressed here that Senghor is not unique in this regard because most African artists and writers exhibit this *mélange* temperament in varying degrees.

However, we have decided to closely examine Osundare's poetry with a view to establishing this *metissage* or the intermeshing of both the native Yoruba (African) oral poetic forms and elements and western poetic strategies. Also, we shall try to investigate the problems of comprehension or communicability inherent in this marriage of disparate poetic sensibilities in his poetry. At the end we hope to be able to point the way(s) in which contemporary Nigerian, or, African, poetry is headed. Niyi Osundare is a Yoruba man. He is a locally rooted, yet cosmopolitan poet with global appeal. Also, he is a self-confessed socialist-Marxist poet who passionately deploys the poetic medium as platform to mount his pro-masses, populist campaigns. His socialist ideology seems to colour virtually everything he writes affecting his conception of such categories and tropes as language, heroism, myth, history, life, society, culture, man, and poetry itself. His poetic style or diction is strategically nuanced from a class perspective, bearing in mind the imperatives of his audience, coupled with the fact that his poetry is performance-oriented, and multi-media in nature. Osundare believes that closet poetry is elitist and alienating while platform or performance poetry

galvanises the various social classes in society, turning them into a class-for-itself. Accordingly, Osundare's poetry relies heavily upon the various types and features of the Yoruba oral poetry. We find, among others, the *oriki*⁵, *ese ifa*⁶, *ofo*⁷, *owe*⁸, and *alo apamo*⁹ which are some of the most prominent native Yoruba oral poetic forms in Niyi Osundare's *oeuvre*. Briefly, we need to add that the *oriki* is Yoruba praise poetry which also happens to be, arguably, the most popular type of poetry among the Yoruba people.

In Yoruba orature, we find the general features such as repetition, parallelism and tonal counterpart (Olatunji, 1984). Besides these, we also have such stylistic elements as wordplay, allusion, hyperbole, rhythm, figurative language, unusual lexical formations, norminalization, recondite metaphors and so forth. We realise that Niyi Osundare's verse is overwhelmingly influenced by the Yoruba oral tradition. He does not only write his poems modelled, as they are, on *oriki*, *ofo*, *owe* and so on, he also borrows extensively the stylistic and rhetorical properties of Yoruba orature. In terms of form, structure, rhythm, tone and language, Osundare's poetry relies heavily on his indigenous literary heritage. According to Max Bilen in his essay titled 'The African poet as Bard of his people', "only poetry has the power of reviving in all their evocative power, the myths which are at the basis and origin of popular culture" (*Presence Africaine*, no. 54, 1965, 141). On their own part, John Reed and Clive Wake in *A Book of African Verse* (1964) opine that "Besides drawing on African vernacular poetry also draw on Africa for subject matter, re-telling stories from African history and legend, describing African folk-beliefs and customs, and putting into poetry the appearance of African landscape" (4).

Using a positive and progressive Marxist-socialist ideology, the poet succeeds in creating a new radicalism through his inimitably expert reformulation of the patois of the people-drivers, touts, farmers, market women, common folk generally and has evolved, significantly, a distinct original voice: the voice of vision, the vision of change. In his important book *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (1981), Abiola Irele makes a similar point about the importance of oral tradition to the contemporary poet: "There is no clearer road to the inner recesses

of our traditional culture, of our fundamental mental universe, than through our oral, traditional literature" (60). Other scholars like Cyprian Ekwensi, Joel Adediji, Aderemi Bamikunle, Adrian Roscoe, and even T. S. Eliot and others have averred the pivotal, and signal importance of orature to literature, to poetry in particular. Osundare, as forthcoming and forthright as ever, has recorded for scholars and the general reader interested in his work, his writing experience in the essay entitled "Yoruba Thought, English words: A Poet's Journey Through The Tunnel of Two Tongues" (Brown, 2000). In Yoruba oral poetry, according to Niyi Osundare, "Tone is the power-point, the enabling element in a Yoruba communicative event"(3). Thus, "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" (4). The point is that Yoruba is a syllable-stressed, tonal language while English is time-stressed. In Osundare's verse, rhythm is not derived from metre and rhyme-scheme as in the European poetic tradition. Rather, rhythm 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" (4). Given his penchant for lyrically vibrant and celebratory poetry, Niyi Osundare has always resorted to the use of phonological and prosodic approximations exemplified in the generous deployment of alliteration, assonance and consonance in his patently cross-cultural work.

It is important to note that the mainstay of Niyi Osundare's poetry is the deployment of the stylistic strategies of native Yoruba oral poetry. And, as we have noted before, repetition, parallelism and tonal counterpart are the benchmarks of Yoruba orature. What Osundare the poet does therefore is to transfer these tropes into his own poetry. He strives continually to transfer the Yoruba song in his heart into poetry in English, using a good deal of alliteration to sustain the musicality and rhythm of his verse. An "ear" rather than an "eye" poet, who thinks proverbially in his mother tongue (Yoruba), Niyi Osundare has seen it fit to use various strategies of mediation to allow his acquired language (English) bear the burden of his socio-historical experience. He has also depended largely on the use of repetition, parallelism, the Yoruba talking drum poetry,

and other various reiterative strategies which sometimes may look (but hardly sound) pleonastic in the eye of some readers long accustomed to western poetry (10). Some examples from his work will suffice:

Let it rain today
 That parched throats may sing
 Let it rain
 That earth may heal her silence
 (*The Eye of the Earth*, 28)

Time is the robe
 Time is the wardrobe
 Time is the needle's intricate pattern
 In the labyrinth of the garment
 (*Moonsongs*, vi)

The rain, The rain
 The rain is onibanbantiba
 The rain is onibanbantiba
 The rain
 (*Waiting Laughters*, 4)

I asked the machete
 I asked the saw
 I asked the bulldozer which brutes the wilds
 In bovine fury
 I asked the timber-magnate waiting at the port
 A blue greed in his eyes
 (*Midlife*, 50)

The breath is rhythm of the wave
 The breath is murmur of the mountain
 The breath is sigh of the rain
 The breath is warble of the wind
 The breath is the drum the drum the drum the drum
 (*Horses of Memory*, 10)

The word, the word
is rocks and roots
sand and stone
rust and dust
love and lust

(The Word is An Egg, 11)

Explaining his intention to create musicality and rhythm in the above excerpts from *Waiting Laughters*, Osundare stresses that repetition is not monotony "On the written page, especially without tone marks, that would sound like nonsensical repetition. But when you give it voice, you discover that the difference is there. The first line ends *on* a high tone ["The rain is *Onibanbantiba*), the second ends on a low tone ("The rain is *onibanbantiba*) so there is kind of what we call tonal counterpart" (10).

Alliteration is a kind of repetition in Osundare's poetry and it happens to be his most used trope. Some instances will equally suffice here:

*Hairless heads impaled on pin necks
And ribs baring the benevolence
Of the body politic*

(Songs of the Marketplace, 17)

*Whose hippo hands slap the drum
Like a slab of flabby flesh
Flogging mere noise from
Its tuneful belly*

(Village Voices, 5)

*Mind my matter, mold my manner
For what is the song
Without the singing
The singing
Without the song*

(A Nib in the Pond, 11)

*A leafy longing line my wanderer feet
 To this forest of a thousand wonders
 A green desire for this petalled umbrella
 Of simple stars and compound suns
 Suddenly, so soberly suddenly ...*

(The Eye of the Earth, 3)

*The moon, the moon is the Lymph of the love,
 The tail of the tribe, the AMEN of absent
 Prayers.....*

(Moonsongs, 25).

*The Shrub's tangled tale
 Plaited tree tops
 And palms which drop their nuts*

(Waiting Laughters, 2)

*Child of the river, child of the rock
 Child of the rock which lends flying flakes
 To pagan winds
 The flakes fashion different legends
 In diverse lands*

(Midlife 9 - 10).

*A thousand seeds are sprouting, sprouting
 A thousand tendrils are wandering, wondering*

(Horses of Memory, 10)

*... the clown/in every crown/... which
 re-connect/the broken bricks of babel/...
 These words walk on water/and they do not sink.*

(The Word is An Egg, 34).

From these above-quoted excerpts, we can see that Niyi Osundare is very much within earshot of his Ikere-Ekiti homeland where the sing-sing cadence of his native tongue seeps through his creative imagination. Hence, the phonocentric bard uses alliteration generously in order to fully evoke the musicality of his native tongue.

To be sure, it is possible to do an analysis of the repetition of micro-prosodic features in Osundare's verse. That is, we can examine repetition at different levels: word level, phrase level, sentence level and even stanza level. An example of repetition at word level is: "The word, the word" (*The Word is An Egg*, 11): at phrase level: "silence now ...'silence now..." (*Horses of Memory*, 16); at sentence level: "The rain is *onibanbantiba*/The rain is *onibanbantiba*" (*Waiting Laughters*, 4) and at stanza level:

I am light
I am shadow
I am the luminous covenant
Of short and long spaces (*Midlife*, 3 and 8)

Apart from alliteration, Osundare uses a lot of assonance also. He has told us that consonant is male while vowel is female(5) and the union of both begets the syllable. Here is an example of the use of assonance: "The rain/ The rain/The rain is *onibanbantiba*/The rain is *onibanbantiba*" (*Waiting Laughters*, 4). In terms of isochronocity, the vowel sounds predominate here by virtue of their stress patterns.

Another example will be in order:

Some into *gba*
Some into *gba*
Some into *gbaagbuu*
Of Mehunmutapa
(*Midlife*, 10)

As the poet illustrates, "Yoruba owes a large portion of its lexicon to ideophones, those sound images and sound symbols which mediate the rhythm of speech into the movement of meaning" (5) By stretching onomatopoeia beyond its institutionalized matrix, Osundare is able to arrive at the above excerpt taken from *Midlife*. Apart from this, the poet sets most of his poems to musical instruments to accompany the declamation or public performance of the poems. Although, right from the earliest of times, traditional

The Bible specifically mentions the use of some music instruments in intoning the Psalms and other Hebrew airs. Also, traditional Yoruba (African) bards are wont to entertain and edify their audiences by charging and suffusing their eulogies with musical accompaniment like *kora*, *goje*, *sekeře*, drums, flutes, stomping of feet, hand clapping, *et cetera*. For instance, in the movement entitled "Human in Every Sense" in *Midlife*, we notice that the "I" there is not a monochromatically egocentric one, but a paradigmatic one representing a collective. The "I" is a decentred "I", a polyphonic kind of "I" that is at once Whitmanesque and traditional. (Arnold, 1992). The preponderant use of "I" contributes also to the repetitive resonance of Osundare's verse.

Another stylistic trope which Niyi Osundare has borrowed from oral tradition is the proverb (Yoruba *owe*). In point of fact, a whole dissertation can be done on Osundare's deployment of traditional proverbial lore of the Yoruba. It is not an exaggeration to say that a major part of his contribution to world poetry derives from his deft use of Yoruba proverbs and folklore. The modern poet or any practitioner in creative writing looks to the fecund and limitless reservoir of rhetorical aesthetic tropes contained in traditional African proverbial lore as the very fulcrum of his work. The point bears belabouring that the singular major contribution that the contemporary African writer makes to world literature is the deployment of the uniquely African oral lore which constitutes, in large measure, the *substance* of his creative fare. The resulting product of this expropriative strategy is merely a distillate of creative refurbishing, or artistic/imaginative recreation. In brief, the *what* and *how* of modern poetry (like Modern African literature) is a derivative of the communal artistic traditions. To be certain, almost the entire volume of Osundare's *Village Voices* is a collection of translated or mediated Yoruba proverbs and wise sayings. His other volumes depend extensively on the use of proverbs as well. In response to the growing derisive criticisms by his critics about his tireless rehashing of Yoruba proverbs and popular sayings, Niyi Osundare wrote a poem in defence of his style, entitled "Who's Afraid of the Proverb?" (*Horses of Memory*, 95).

According to the poet, "the proverb is one huge tome of uncountable wisdom" (*Songs of the Season*, vi). In a sense, we can say Osundare's poetic vision derives in part from the proverbialization of the human condition. This inclination towards proverbialising dovetails into his proclivity for neologism and wordplay. Noted for his love for epigrammatic structures, Niyi Osundare suffuses his poetry with verbal innovations like "Bumham-dom" (*A Nib in the Pond*, 42). "streetful" (*A Nib*, ...47); "headmasterly" (*The Eye of the Earth*, 7). "earlessly" (*Midlife*, 95), "unveils" (*Songs of the Marketplace*, 62): "sighlens" (*The Words is An Egg*, 54), "hoofmat" (*Horses of Memory*, 25). Here, the poet uses open classes and close systems in English, through rankshifting, to convey meaning. As a stylistician, he is able to pull this off without much effort. Need we add that the incantatory cadence of Osundare's poetry is a direct influence of the Yoruba *ọfọ*. According to Wole Ogundele, Osundare's poetry "has tended to become less and less about something, but more and more about that something". So, as in songs and incantations, it is the experience of reading (more properly, *chanting*) the poems that really constitutes meaning (Brown, 6) Osundare has been able to use the conditions of orality to strengthen the aural imagination in his work. He has also been able to transform the idioms, tropes and techniques of his Yoruba oral poetic heritage, and successfully adapt its mythology and metaphysics as the informing vision of his own poetry (Ogundele, 2000). Part of this incantatoriness in his poetry derives from the use of the "spontaneous wit of touts", "the hawker's ditty/the eloquence of the gong/the lyric of the marketplace" (*Songs of the Marketplace*, 3). In other words, by writing lines which have been well-rehearsed in the mind, lines which on the page read like spoken words, impart a lively aural/oral resonance to Osundare's poetry. Interestingly, Osundare's art also relies heavily on the *oriki* sub-genre, a genre which also exploits the proverb for its substance. The *oriki* exploits most mellifluously the intricate interplay of sound patterning and syntactic patterning (Brown, 7).

Oriki is a storehouse of the tropes of attribute. Its serrated noun clauses, relative clauses, and interminable oppositional phrases thrive in the liberal syntactic structure of Yoruba. To

transpose them into English Osundare has found it necessary to syncopate here, reduce the number of 'oppositional' clauses there, then adjust for sounding and rhetorical appropriateness. (7)

The resultant product looks like the following excerpts:

Iroko wears (the crown of the forest, town's rafter, roof of the forest

Iron wood against the termites of time

Iroko wears the crown of the forest

Its baobab foot rooted against a thousand storms

Another classic example of a piece of *oriki* in translation is:

Give me wine- palm wine

Sap of the honey) tree

(Give me wine, palm wine

Niyi Osundare and the Interface

The unmatchable maiden

Who turns valiant suitors

Into tapping lizards

Give me wine, palm wine,

The hasty god in the patient keg.

(Songs of the Seasons, 55)

At work in these two excerpts is the use by the poet of the various strategies of appropriation and poetic mediation, to wit, glossing, interlanguage (i.e. the fusion of linguistic structures of two languages) and vernacular transcription. This style of syntactic fusion has become his stylistic *metier*. Indeed, a closer look at and an indepth analysis of some of his poems will reveal Osundare's appropriation of the Yoruba talking drum rhythm and the lyrical strategies of popular Yoruba folk musicians like Chief Ebenezer Obey, King Sunny Ade, *et al.* For instance, the above excerpt: "Iroko wears the crown of the forest...." is deftly modelled on the percussive poetry of the Yoruba drum. What we find on the page is usually an eclectic fare made up of the stylistic properties of native

Yoruba (African) oral poetry and, of course, English poetic tradition. From these excerpts, we can see the generous use of repetition and parallelism which, as we have already noted, is at the very heart of Yoruba oral poetry. And, since sounds matter so much in Osundare's verse, we see how the chants mellow into the movement of meaning. A common practice by Osundare is his use of native Yoruba words and expressions in his work. The untranslatability and the rhythmic energy of these native lexical items force the poet to use them. However, he always explains their meanings in footnotes and glossaries. In *Waiting Laughters*, for instance, he uses *awodi* (kite, p. 4), *sokoyokoto* (make-the-husband-robust: a favourite Nigeria vegetable, p. 14), *Arogidigba* (a mythical fish in D.O. Fagunwa's novel, notorious for its terror and greed), *Olobounboun* (scarab beetle, 1/118) and so on. The poet Niyi Osundare has gone to great lengths to incorporate linguistic features and various supra-linguistic elements of his mother tongue into his poetry, thus creating a patently performative poetry. To him, therefore, the orchestration of his poetry is very important: "I want to listen to my poems throb on the lips of the drum" (Adagbonyin, 1997) he once said. The English Language is a "meaning" language while the Yoruba language is a "sounding" one. Trying to accommodate the effects of the indigenous idiom in a European communicative code presents some problems:

How does one conceive, think out, a poem in Yoruba, then give it expression in English? If language is truly the dress of thought, how would deeply Yoruba ideas look and feel in English coat and tie?

What adjustments must be made in size and style to prevent the tie from turning into a noose?"

(Brown, 8)

Osundare thinks in Yoruba, his native language and writes in English, his acquired language. He has told us that when he is "confronted by the problem of transposing Yoruba metaphors, idioms, concepts and allusions which have

English", (8) he deploys the poetic strategies of mediation, some of which we have already looked at. Therefore, in Niyi Osundare's verse, we see a fine and masterful equipoise maintained between "the vital primacy of Yoruba" and "the pragmatic necessity of English".

The interface language phenomenon is part of the fallout of the colonial experience in Africa. And, part of the colonial heritage is that the educated class will always have to grapple with what in sociolinguistics is called the "Interference phenomenon" which operates at more levels than one. Thus, in a diglossic society such as Nigeria, Nigerian bilinguals will always face the challenge of being able to speak an English language which approximates the RP form and still speak their indigenous tongues. But it is in reality becoming increasingly clear that most educated speakers of English in Nigeria (and, by extension, Africa) speak what has tentatively been termed "Nigerian English", a form of English (Ashcroft, et al. 1997) coterminous with the interface phenomenon which we have been investigating in Niyi Osundare's poetry.

What we find here is the triumph of the Achebean paradigm, that is, a sufficiently domesticated English in whose veins run the speech habits and patterns of the indigenous idiom.

Notes

¹ The term "métissage" is a French word denoting mixture, a pot-pourri of sorts. Here it refers to the mixture of both African and foreign artistic elements in Senghor's poetry.

² The Sine River is in Senegal, and it is used to symbolise African sensibilities in Senghor's verse.

³ The Seine is a river in French, used in Senghor's work to connote his poetic absorption in French poetic tradition.

⁴ Osundare's poetry is complete with musical accompaniment as well as vocal orchestration, etc.

⁵ *Oriki* is Yoruba praise poetry.

⁶ *Ese Ifa* is the Yoruba divinatory poetry.

⁷ *Ofo* is Yoruba incantatory poetry.

⁸ *Owe* is Yoruba proverbial lore and wise sayings

⁹ *Alọ apamọ* is Yoruba riddles.

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