WRITING NIGERIA: TIME AND NATURE IN THE POETRY OF NIYI OSUNDARE

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Johannesburg, 2020

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critical evaluation of the poetry of the Nigerian writer Niyi Osundare. It investigates varied ways in which time and nature are thematised in the poetry under study. The research is guided by an understanding of the interconnectivity of the two concepts it investigates. It is conceived as a deep and kaleidoscopic study of the output of one writer. As part of the design to make it a deep study, its scope covers only Nigeria, although it freely draws examples from diverse countries to advance its arguments. Time is by nature an abstract concept, and one of the benefits of studying it with nature is that the latter gives the former a grounding that renders it apprehensible. The study is theoretically framed by Bakhtinian theory complemented by various strands of ecocritical theory, especially apocalypse and animist theories. In respect of the theory of animism, I apply it on the Yoruba world which Osundare privileges, foregrounding its temporal and environmental ramifications. Its temporal ramifications brought to the surface include the spiritual forces in the Yoruba world and their roles in the lives of human subjects, the difference between time and eternity, how spiritual forces navigate time and space, and the role of animist consciousness in environmental preservation. The thesis also looks at Nigeria as a geographical space in this geologic age, alternatively studying the age as the Anthropocene and as the Capitalocene. By so doing, it throws into relief issues like inequality, strife and multifaceted forms and rapid pace of environmental decadence.

DEDICATION

The memory of the just is blessed.

The Holy Bible, Proverbs 10: 7

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my mama, Mrs Christiana Okenu Anolue, with love and gratitude.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of the genres I read and enjoyed in the course of writing this thesis was creation stories, and the archetype underlying them all is the transformation of chaos to cosmos. Completing the thesis gives me that feeling of creating order out of chaos and I thank all those who made it possible.

I thank my supervisor, Prof Dan Ojwang. I am grateful to him for the patience and thoroughness with which he has guided me through the process of writing this thesis, and for all else that he kindly did to see that the research became a success. Without his assistance, I could not have been offered admission for the programme in the first place. I remember those many months when I was applying for admission from Nigeria and the evaluation of my previous qualifications by the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) ran into several hitches. He went out of his way to ensure that the process was completed. Without that, I could not have embarked on the programme. I thank him for that act of kindness.

I also appreciate his colleagues in the Department of African Literature, Prof Isabel Hofmeyr and Dr Danai Mupotsa. I thank them for the various forms of assistance they extended to me in order to facilitate the research. Equally, I thank my proposal readers, Prof Eric Worby of the Department of Anthropology, and Dr Kirk Sides of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER). The thesis has benefitted richly from their insights and from the texts they recommended. Similarly, for the texts they recommended as well as other fruitful suggestions they proffered, I also thank my internal examiner, Prof Elsie Cloete of the School of Education, and my external examiners, Prof Russell West-Pavlov of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Global South Studies, University of Tubingen, Germany, and Dr Senayon Olaoluwa of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

I appreciate my employer, Bauchi State University, Gadau, Nigeria for granting me a study fellowship. From the University, I thank the following senior colleagues, past and present, for the various roles they played in facilitating my PhD studies: the Vice-Chancellor, Prof Auwalu Uba, his predecessor, Prof Ezzeldin Muktar Abdurahman; Prof Garba Kawu Daudu, Prof Saleh Abdu, Prof Asabe Sadiya Mohammed, Dr Auwal Amba and Dr Ahmed Tanimu Jibril. For kindly serving as my guarantor in respect of the study fellowship, I am also grateful to Malam Musa Jimra, former Principal, Government College Azare, Bauchi State.

I am grateful to the immediate past Registrar of the University of Jos, Mr Jilli Dandam for his intervention when a document I needed from the University when he was still in office was proving hard to secure. I also thank Mrs Kauna Dauda Suyibam of the University Registry for her assistance in the same matter. From the Department of English of the same university, many lecturers also offered me one form of help or another in the course of my application for admission, and when I had subsequently commenced studies. For that reason I am grateful to Prof John Adeiyongo, Prof Kanchana Ugbabe, Prof Amaka Azuike and Prof Uwemedimo Enobong Iwoketok. For a similar reason, I am grateful to Prof Chike Okoye of the Department of English, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

I appreciate the Harold and Doris Tothill Foundation for the study grant it awarded to me in 2018. I equally thank the University of the Witwatersrand for the Postgraduate Merit Award given to me for three consecutive years, with all the benefits attached to it. I am also grateful to the School of Literature, Language and Media and the Department of African Literature for the various grants they offered me which enabled me to register for my studies for several years. Thank you too to Mrs Kathleen Ripamonti of the School of Literature, Language and Media for all the time she spent doing the relevant paperwork in respect of the grants.

My thanks also go to you my sisters, Mrs Ngozi Abbey, Mrs Ego Okafor and Mrs Uche Dumaka, for your financial support and prayers. And to Uncle William Okafor, thank you for being a mentor. I also appreciate my fellow PhD students in the Department of African Literature, Rangarirayi Mapanzure, Femi Eromosele and Sakiru Adebayo for all the various forms of support I received from them.

I am grateful to my brother Nonso Afulukwe for financial support. Thank you too, Hope Uba, Nkeiru Nwoye, Habu Kakudi and Peter Ikebudu for the various supportive roles you played. To all the members of Rehoboth Ministries International, Simmonds Street, Johannesburg – the church where I have been privileged to be worshipping all these years of my studies – I am grateful for the family feeling.

Most importantly, I thank Almighty God Whose grace is the secret behind everything that has gone well with me in the course of writing this thesis.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

...in Maya, space also means time.

Anthony F. Aveni, *Empires of Time*

'No-one has yet observed a place except at a time, nor yet a time except at a place.'

Russell West-Pavlov, *Temporalities*

Nature and Progress

The nursery school I attended is in the premises of an Anglican church in my hometown, on the same land that used to be an evil forest belonging to the village before Christianity made its foray there. The village had offered the forest to the Church Missionary Society when they requested a place to site their place of worship. It was this forest of no return that those afflicted by abominable diseases were cast into and left to die, and also freaks such as twin babies. The small congregation of Anglicans cleared and built their church there, and ever since, twins have been joining other people in worship in the church. The church later built the nursery school and a primary school also.

For my cohort of pupils in the school, our break periods and other leisure hours were spent playing in the courtyard of the church, especially a lawn in the frontage that was the size of a football field. The lawn was home to grasshoppers, of varying ages and sizes and species. I remember the music of nature that the lawn produced; I remember the gentle chirping of grasshoppers as they basked in the sun, and their soft whirr as they flew around. I remember our excitement as we chased after big grasshoppers, as we caught them and removed their forewings before throwing them up in the air again, as we pursued them and caught them and removed their hindlegs before stretching our hands and throwing them into the air with all our power again, as we dived to catch them and they beat us and flew up and perched on another spot on the lawn. There was also the occasional fluttering of butterflies with their colourful wings. And catching grasshoppers was only one among the games we

played. One other thing I remember about the lawn – it never withered and never grew wild. Nature ensured the first, and the church the second – I don't know for how long.

We later graduated from nursery school and crossed over to join our elder brothers and sisters in the primary school. The primary school is situated opposite the church, separated from it by only a narrow road. It has its own sports field, and its green courtyard was enough for all the running about we wanted. But it was in the church premises, in the parsonage, that we went to drink water during break times and after school hours. So, crossing the road to drink water at the parsonage was often crossing over to play on the church lawn too. The church was our church too, and coming for evening activities presented us more oportunities to chase fun on the lawn. And it is perhaps because there was all this continuum of playing on the lawn that my memory of it remains very vivid.

When a boy leaves the place where he grew up and goes to live far away, the journey back home takes him backwards in space and in time. A return to the place of childhood is a return to the memories of childhood. The lawn was one of the places redolent with memories of my early life.

But when I returned about six years back and went to worship in the church, I saw the lawn no more. Now the grass is gone! The grasshoppers and butterflies gone! Their merry poetry totally silenced! Nature is gone from the church frontage and interlocking tiles now rule the place – cement and concrete everywhere! And my lush green memories withered to black as I saw a long season end. I think of this second clearing as markedly different from the first. The first gave twins for instance the freedom to live. But this second clearing gives the feeling of a fall. This substitution of tiles for grass and grasshoppers and butterflies, is that what development means? Is that what progress means?

Aim

The above reminiscence is on loss, of an idyllic environment of my childhood days and of the poetry of nature which it produced. While its introductory part echoes the early history of the church is South East Nigeria, its concluding questions are reminiscent of the workings of my mind when I come across a previously green landscape that has been destroyed in the name of development and progress. The story and the questions form my point of entry into this thesis in which I interrogate matters of time and nature in Niyi Osundare's poetry. The study is in two broad parts. The first part is centred on animism. That part brings together many

autobiographical poems of Niyi Osundare and uses them to conceptualise the Yoruba animist worldview on time and nature. In those poems in which the poet-persona is to varying degrees the hero, I foreground the fact that, as observed by Ato Quayson with regard to the heroes of some Nigerian mythopoeic novels, "The organic relationships between self and community make the hero a metonymic representation of that community in general" (161). In my own study, I read as communal archetypes the attitudes and attributes discernible from the poet-persona and fellow Yoruba characters alongside whom he features.

Osundare's verse also illustrates the inseparability of space and time. In so doing, it advances a concept known in physics as spacetime (West-Pavlov 41). Concretising the concept of spacetime, I discuss issues such as how the Yoruba perceive the differences between sacred and profane environments, and between sacred and profane times. As the Yoruba scholar of religion Jacob K. Olupona submits in his book *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space and the Imagination* (2011), although among Yoruba animists there is little difference between sacred and profane places, "they still sanctify an originary center as a place to experience the divine within the habitable world" (50). For analytical convenience, I take such centres sanctified and set apart for worship as sacred centres in comparison with which the places surrounding them may be called profane. I underscore the relationships between those differing spaces and times.

Also, in Osundare's poetry, elemental nature speaks, and arising from that fact, I interrogate the role that his ability to decode the communication of the non-human world has played in shaping his nature poetry. Further, reading poems in which the poet attributes to the intervention of Yoruba deities his escape from a raging flood in the United States in 2005, I use Benedict Anderson's concept of temporal simultaneity to conceptualise the timescape of the deities. I also argue that before those sacred forces, the world is smaller than a global village. Also, in the animist segment of the work, I study the Yoruba conception of the spoken word. The Yoruba believe that verbal incantations carry spiritual energy (Olupona 99). I examine the various ways in which Osundare uses the creation of the earth to validate that belief in the intrinsic spiritual energy of the spoken word.

The second segment of the thesis centres on geologic time and its effects on the ecosystem. The current geologic epoch is recognised as the Anthropocene (Menely and Taylor 3). But despite its popularity, that nomenclature is still a contested one. There are ecocritics and other environmentalists who argue that given its overwhelming hegemony in

the world, the capitalist economic system deserves recognition as the dominant force acting on the earth in this age, and arising from that, that the current geologic era ought to be christened the Capitalocene. One of the scholars in the frontline of advocating for the recognition of the term "Capitalocene" is the American ecofeminist Donna Haraway. She submits about the age that

> It would probably be better named the Capitalocene, if one wanted a single word. The mass extinction events are related to the resourcing of the earth for commodity production, the resourcing of everything on the earth, most certainly including people, and everything that lives and crawls and dies and everything that is in the rocks and under the rocks. (259)

I am interested in Haraway's invocation of the word "probably" in putting forward an alternative name for the Anthropocene. I read it to signify that while "the Anthropocene" has become a charismatic designation for the age, the age is too complex in its dynamism to be satisfactorily captured by any single term, and that each term has its relative merits. I have no interest in intervening in the debate about which term is more appropriate. Instead, my discussion of the age is attuned to the concept of relativity and demonstrates the validity of both nomenclatures. In essence, I demonstrate that "the Anthropocene" and "the Capitalocene" need not be viewed as oppositional terms, but can be made to complement each other in helping us come to terms with the complexity of ecological problems which the earth currently faces.

My argument in that regard is in tandem with Niyi Osundare's syncretic temporal philosophy. He has written in *Moonsongs* (1998), an anthology thematising time, that "The moon is a mask dancing" (5). The moon in the collection is a temporal icon. By the poet's confession, that image of time as a shifting and dynamic subject is a debt to Chinua Achebe (qtd in Arnold 439). In Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964), a character likens the world to a dancing mask that cannot yield a satisfactory viewing experience to a watcher standing on one spot (46). Achebe's idea (derived from Igbo oral wisdom) points to the infinitude of viewpoints that is seen as crucial for a wholesome understanding of any subject. In studying the effects of geologic time on the ecosystem, I demonstrate that arguments flowing from the Anthropocene conceptualisation of the age and its Capitalocene relation, insofar as they are both agreed that the current era is one of ecological peril, are but different sides of the same coin. In a way, I perform ecological mimesis, imitating the complexity of problems besetting

the earth in the age by showing in the same project two ways in which it can be conceptualised.

. The corpus of poetry forming the textual base for the study comprises *Songs of the Marketplace* (1983), *Village Voices* (1984), *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), *Waiting Laughters* (1990), *Songs of the Season* (1990), *Midlife* (1993), *Moonsongs* (1998), *The Word Is an Egg* (1999), *Days* (2007), and *City Without People*: *The Katrina Poems* (2011).

Given the fact that it is through the agency of craft that themes are executed, the study also pays attention to the formal strategies Osundare has made use of in depicting nature and time. These often involve recourse to the oral resource base of the Yoruba. His use of devices of oral rhetoric is very complex. Also, his technique is far too complex to be reduced to only his ethnic influences. Christian influence is another element of his manner of writing privileged in this study. Also, as a Marxist, he simulates the dialectical structure of Marxist discourse, juxtaposing characters that personify conflicting essences and putting them in a dialogue. From their clash of opinions, his ideological perspectives flash out. But beyond conscious technical influences, Osundare's poetry yields to diverse African and non-African interpretative paradigms, and insights gained from such paradigms help to advance this study.

Some questions that have been of help to me in thinking through the topic of time and nature in Niyi Osundare's poetry include: in what ways does Osundare's poetry promote the view that time actually exists? Does his poetry help us speculate about the provenance of the earth, and how? What are the implications of the theory of temporal relativity for understanding the poetry of Niyi Osundare? In what ways does Osundare's poetry demonstrate the inseparability of time and space? Given the extant debate about what constitutes nature, how does his poetry intervene in the debate? How broad is his conception of nature? How does his conception of time differ from eternity? What are the informing roles of Yoruba animism in Niyi Osundare's temporal and environmental poetics? How does his poetry help us to grasp the qualitative spiritual differences between different milieus in line with Yoruba animism? What new perspectives does his poetry bring to the global conversation on the Anthropocene? In what ways does his poetry demonstrate the value of Yoruba and other Nigerian oral literatures in conceptualising time and nature? In what ways does his Marxist ideology shape his thoughts on time and nature?

Also, given the gap that is believed to exist between Marxism and religion, the research is interested in the question, in what ways has Osundare's temporal and

environmental poetry reconciled Marxism and religion? More conceptual questions for the thesis include: what does the verse have to say about the resourcing of the earth and life? How does Osundare's poetry show the relations between time and social domination? How does temporal domination ramify into environmental domination according to Osundare's poetry? Does his poetry encode emancipatory futures for the earth, and how?

Rationale

Niyi Osundare is without doubt a dominant figure in third-generation Nigerian poetry. As such, his work has elicited a harvest of critical surveys. A book of critical essays, *The People's Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare* (2003), edited by Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah, attests to his eminence. The majority of critical reviews of his poetry have been Marxism-oriented. Yet, even in Marxist readings of his verse, there has been a tendency to dwell on the social sphere and use time and the environment only as a background for human action.

The nature of time in an African context has also been accorded scant scholarly attention by Africanists generally. The Kenyan theologian John Mbiti declared in 1968 and reiterated in 1989 that on the subject of African time "there is unfortunately no literature" and that his work represented a "pioneer attempt which calls for further research and discussion" (16). His claim of pioneering African temporal research is however scientifically erroneous. The British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard might be the pioneer in research on African time. His 1940 book, *The Nuer* includes a chapter titled "Time and Space" (94—138), on the temporal and ecological culture of the Nuer, a Nilotic ethnic group native mainly to South Sudan. Yet, there is still scanty extant research studying the temporal culture of Africans as a theme. What Evans-Pritchard has done in anthropology and Mbiti in the field of philosophy is related to Osundare's endeavour in creative writing. Osundare is a trailblazer in the field of African literature for the way he has consciously foregrounded the notion of time as a theme in his verse. But there is not as yet a sustained study of his poetic message on temporality. This thesis represents an effort to fill that void, and in so doing, to extend through literary criticism the important work on temporal discourse advanced by the likes of Evans-Pritchard and Mbiti.

This study is at once a study of time and nature. The two categories are, after all, closely related. Albert Einstein's physical theory of relativity is relevant enough to warrant its transposition to this context. As Russell West-Pavlov, commenting on Einstein, declares:

"Einstein's basic point was simple: time and space are not variables independent of one another, but reciprocally influence each other" (40). As such, the logic behind studying together the twin categories of time and nature becomes apparent. As has been hinted above, this was Evans-Pritchard's approach in his study of Nuer life. In this thesis, I study time and nature in Nigeria, especially among the Yoruba, making apparent the forms of reciprocal influence shared by the two. Bringing such influences to the surface constitutes part of the justification for the thesis.

Osundare is in the frontline of African poets who use their art to raise ethical questions about the human treatment of the earth within and outside Africa. While nature has attracted critical interest in his work, most of that interest has focused on his early poetry, with his Commonwealth Poetry Prize-winning collection, *The Eye of the Earth* as the prime text. There has been no sustained study to examine how that thematic point expressed with excellence in the collection is advanced in subsequent ones. The thesis analyses Osundare's work as a contribution towards reversing that situation.

There is yet another justification for this thesis. It is a measure of contribution towards striking a balance in African literary criticism. An overwhelming number of critics of African literature dwell on prose alone, to the detriment of the other genres. The critical neglect of poetry obscures not just its prominent standing among the genres but also the burgeoning creativity of third-generation African poets. To the extent that poetry is flowering on the continent, the critical neglect is fraught with irony. If we turn to the Nigerian situation as a specific instance, "poetry is the genre in which 21st century Nigerian writers have demonstrated their famed prolificacy and productivity the most. As was the case in the 20th century, Nigerians have written more poetry, and have published more poetry collections than they have written and published novels and plays in the 21st century (Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 137). The paucity of critical review of this poetry output illustrates that criticism has not kept faith with creativity. The Nigerian poet and critic Tanure Ojaide has observed this critical imbalance and cautioned against it in these words: "I believe that the criticism of African literature has to be integrative of all the genres. I fault the theorists who tend to ignore poetry and drama and write only about fiction" (qtd in Ezenwa-Ohateo, *Winging Words* 98). The trend of focusing almost exclusively on fiction is perhaps most prevalent in student research. It is rare for instance to find a doctoral student of African literature whose thesis is on poetry. The present work is also a contribution towards reversing that glaring neglect.

Admittedly, it is not enough to discuss poetry simply because other critics have largely ignored it. But poetry deserves study in its own right because it is capable of expressing the full range of experience. As this thesis demonstrates, although terse and abstract by nature, in terms of meaning, poetry is elastic and speaks to concrete and practical issues. As such, it is a fit material for the conceptualisation of any imaginable kind of topic, be it an abstract one such as time, or a more concrete one such as nature. And if aesthetics is taken as a yardstick to justify critical interest, there are talented poets just as there are talented writers of fiction.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

The study of temporality and nature in Osundare's poetry in this thesis focuses on aspects such as animism, Marxism, dream time and geologic time. The forms used to express the themes are interrogated also. The texts selected for this study are exclusively from Niyi Osundare's corpus. The twin issues of temporality and nature permeate his verse collections and his approaches towards the same issues are varied and complex.

Since the work is centred on verse alone, Osundare's plays do not form part of the study. Of the verse collections, *Early Birds: Poems for Junior Secondary* (Volumes 1 to 3), and *Seize the Day* are for junior readers. Resultantly, thematic issues are watered down in them. For that reason, they are not considered in the study. *Tender Moments: Love Poems* is also excluded since, as its title indicates, it is woven around a sole theme of love. Although romantic love is discussed at some point in the thesis, the poems in that particular collection are unsuitable for my analysis. *Horses of Memory,* and *Random Blues* are similarly excluded for not being relevant to the theme of the thesis. *A Nib in the Pond* is also excluded because it is out of print and I could not access it from any source during the period of the research.

Research Methodology

This research is an intertextual one. It entails free navigation across texts to cite and refer to poems and ideas to support the explication of points germane to the twin questions of temporality and nature. Most of the collections address miscellaneous issues, and most contain poems on both time and nature. The strength of this methodology is that it frees up poems, no matter where they lie, for use in creating a clear picture of the multifaceted concepts under discussion. The study is also interdisciplinary. Books and articles discussing temporality, and those on nature, which embody ideas that aptly validate or challenge the

poet's position, are drawn on. This enables the work to bring insights gained from other fields such as physics, geology, philosophy, history, ecology, anthropology, religion and economics into the task of literary analysis. While the primary texts are all Niyi Osundare's anthologies, works of other African writers which can help in advancing the review of his poetry in ways that include forming a background, establishing similarities and/or differences in perspectives and modes of presentation are also consulted.

Time, Nature and Theory

Temporality is one area of literary endeavour that is still awaiting a clear and elaborate literary theory. Unlike literary environmentalism in which ecocriticism is burgeoning, there exists a gap as far as theory is concerned when it comes to temporality in literature.

Although less developed than ecocriticism, the Bakhtinian theory of chronotope, and that of dialogue seem the closest that can be abstracted to ground the thesis, in conjunction with ecocriticism. The two temporal theories were devised by the Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin. He devised them to elucidate narrative temporality and the link between it and place. "Chronotope" is a term Bakhtin uses to mean 'time space' (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 85). Indeed, the term illustrates the influence on literary criticism of Albert Einstein's revolutionary theory of relativity which posits the inseparability of space and time. "Chronotope" is a composite term derived from time (chronos) and space/ place (topos) (Renfrew 112). In Bakhtin's definition, the term designates "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (qtd in McDowell 376). There is a corresponding temporal dimension to every spatial event and vice versa, for "in any meeting the temporal marker ("at one and the same time") is inseparable from the spatial marker ("in one and the same place")" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 97). "Time space" stands for the multidimensional nature of temporal and spatial relationships and their recreation in narratives. Bakhtin himself tries to qualify his use of the term, stating that what is of the essence in its application in criticism is its expression of "the inseparability of space and time" (qtd in McDowell 380). In the chronotope of the road for instance, he states that "the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect in one spatial and temporal point" ("Forms of Time" 15). Apart from pointing to the inseparability of time and space, this portrays that different temporalities can obtain in a

single situation. It also illustrates the sense of network or interconnection, not just within each of the two categories but between them.

On the other hand, "dialogue," a synonym for "interaction" connotes the multiple senses of time normally present in a narrative. But the theory lends itself to wider applicability, its appeal being an apprehension of time's complexity. It is a theory that "proposes ... creative ways to understand heterogeneous experiences of temporality and their recreation in narrative" (Burton 44). The mention of heterogeneity in respect of time shows that there is more than one type of time. Since time does not exist in a vacuum but is always enmeshed with place, the meaning of "dialogue" deserves to also be apprehended in terms of how it puts time and nature in conversation, and narrative needs to be understood in a broad sense as discourse. The basic sense in the theory of dialogue is that time is instinct with multiple dimensions, and that the dimensions interface, that some separate senses of time can be present in a single text, and that "it is the struggle or dialogue between them that animates the narrative" (Burton 46), while "discourse" replaces "narrative" in our context.

Bakhtin utilises the musical term "polyphony" as a metaphor for the unity in variety underlining the interaction of the voices of various characters in a novel. There are issues arising from that for an ecocritical reading of literature. We might for instance follow it and view the Anthropocene as "polyphony of ecological crises." In the same "narrative" of geologic time, the Anthropocene and the Capitlocene which are terms enabling theorists to come to terms with the age need to be seen as "polyphony of geologic time," neither of them being the "final word" on the age but each speaking "intertextually" to the other. It is Bakhtin's view that speech is "unfinalizable," given that every act of communication arises from a background of past dialogical encounters and ideological struggles. Every present speech act carries traces of past speeches and goes on to imprint its own traces on future speeches. Similarly, in time and nature, to understand any facet is to examine the network of relationships that have created it. Bakhtin's epistemology entails a historicised vision of reality. Each voice retains its individual essence, its distinct "idea" even when it blends with other voices in polyphony. A plurality of voices which appear simultaneously is crucial for polyphony. Bakhtin states that:

> at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom; it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different

> socio-ideological groups in the present ... All languages of heteroglossia ... are specific points of view on the world ... As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. As such they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people. (qtd in Burton 48)

That extract on language is also a fitting description of time. All discourses on time can be apprehended as a dialogue between absolute, relative and experiential times. While the study of time has been approached from a plethora of ways, its noted variety embraces among other things its historical and cyclical movements and its objective and subjective manifestations. In terms of movement, time is viewed as a binary of the cyclical and the linear models. The cyclical model, with an origin in traditional society, conceives time as moving cyclically. There is for instance the diurnal cycle, the lunar cycle, and the cycle of the seasons. At the heart of this viewpoint on temporality is the belief that everything in existence moves in a cycle, that the idea of progress is not grounded in reality, and that history repeats itself. Plato for instance is quoted to have said "But now the sight of day and night, and the months and the revolutions of the years... have given us a conception of time" (Munitz 1). Among Nigerians, there is evidence of this understanding of time that is dependent on the pattern of events which recur at regular intervals in nature. This view of time is brought to life memorably in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*. In that novel set in an agrarian Nigerian society, the cycle of the moon controls crop planting and harvesting, and therefore, the lives of the people.

On the other hand, there is the linear concept of time. This has a Jewish origin. Because of its Jewish roots it came to influence Christianity. In this connection, it is significant that Christianity teaches that time began from creation as recounted in the Biblical book of Genesis 1; and that it is moving towards its end on the Judgement Day. With the spread of Christianity to the West, this conception of time gained acceptance there. As Christianity spread farther from the West to other parts of the world, this model of time gained global dominance. This model categorises time into a triad of past, present and future. Time is conceived here as having a horizontal movement. This model postulates that everything happens in the present, the past is recalled through the agency of memory, and the future is visualised by anticipation. Time is believed to have an advancing historical movement. The modern mind is indebted to the linear sense of time for the notions of progress and change (Tobin 13—4).

Linear time is where Isaac Newton's absolute time belongs. According to Newton, "Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature, flows uniformly, without regard to anything external" (qtd in West-Pavlov 36). Absolute time is scientific time which is measured with the clock and the calendar. Time in this view is not regarded as subjective or private or related to experience, but is objective and public. It is the time used to synchronise our private experiences of time for social action and communication. Markers of this concept of time are "that it is independent of how we personally experience time, that it has inter-subjective validity, and most importantly, that it is believed to refer to an objective structure in nature rather than to a subjective background of human experience" (Meyerhoff 5). The key distinguishing factor of this notion of time, and on which its objectivity hinges is that it is measured in units which are coordinated with objects in nature. Time here is measurable because the objects with which it is coordinated have a measurable uniform standard of motion which can be determined. Such objects include the moon which coordinates with the earth to produce "lunar time;" sometimes it is the earth and the sun producing "solar time." At other times it is the earth and the system of fixed stars producing "sidereal time." Time here is conceived as an objective reality. It is an abstract sequence of fixed units which exists in its own right and which uses its pattern to control human activities. When physicists explain temporality, this is the paradigm they adopt. It is by this paradigm that chronometry is conveniently structured into discrete units such as second, minute, hour, etc.

Another salient distinction existing in the discourse on temporality is that between time in nature and time in experience. What is styled time in experience is the consciousness of time as forming part of the background of experience or human life. Time in this regard is psychologically perceived, personal and subjective. This concept refers to time as immediately and directly experienced. What is of the essence here is time as an immediate datum of consciousness. Put another way, only by what people do "in time" are they aware of its existence. A related paradigm to subjective time is Albert Einstein's relative time which posits that time and the environment are inseparable. Einstein posits that time varies from place to place (West-Pavlov 40). Relative time insists among other things on the localisation of time. In Bakhtin's work, he recognises this feature in ancient Greek literature: "The time of ancient Greek ... drama was profoundly localised, absolutely inseparable from the concrete features of a characteristically Greek natural environment" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 104).

For the ecocritical tradition, understanding it involves an understanding of a conflation of concepts with which it is associated. How ecocriticism overlaps with and is amplified by related concepts including environmentalism and environmental writing is among its key attributes. The intellectual streamlining that pervades ecocriticism has been noted by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley to involve the conflation of environmental texts with the critical methodology itself (15). The chain of events leading to the evolution of ecocriticism started with written descriptions of nature. Gilbert White, Englishman and author of *A Natural History of Selborne* (1789) is the acknowledged founder of the genre of nature writing (Abrams and Harpham 71, Glotfely xxiii). But even from classical times, writing of which nature is a central interest has been in existence. The Garden of Eden depicted in the Bible for instance is still ecocriticism's archetype of unspoilt nature.

British critic Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) is an important antecedent to what is now known as ecocriticism. And while ecocriticism was inaugurated in the 1990s, it is now customary to date the genealogy of modern environmentalism from 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, leading Greg Garrard to call the work "the founding text of modern environmentalism" (2). Carson, an American marine scientist, published the book to create awareness about the dangers of pesticide and insecticide use in the farm and home respectively. The book punctured many cornucopian claims of commercial agriculturalists on the application of DDT and other pesticides. It alerted Americans to the danger posed by such chemicals to human health and the survival of wildlife. They do not just kill insects and pests but also seep into the food chain and endanger human life. The book captured the attention of scientists and non-scientists alike by its remarkable combination of scientific authority and rhetorical force. Dissembling agricultural scientists with vested interests disparaged the book for among other reasons, a blending of rhetoric with scientific language. But through its rhetorical content the book elicited the attention of non-scientists.

But timing was also a crucial factor in the success of Carson's book. The 1960s was a decade of heightened interest in the global ecosystem. This accelerated interest was a result of both positive and negative causes. On the positive side, there were many voyages to space in that decade during which pictures of the earth were taken from outer space. These were spectacular technological feats which enthralled the world. In 1961, the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first cosmonaut to travel to outer space, completing an orbit of the earth on 12 April 1961. He was followed in 1962 by John Glenn, an American. Glenn also

circled the earth thrice. The Apollo 8 mission of 1968 brought home images of Earthrise, pictures of the earth rising above the moon. These images had two visual impacts: they revealed how beautiful and delicate planet earth is. By those appeals they became instant symbols for environmental advocacy groups.

On the negative side, the 1960s was a decade of widespread fears of nuclear Armageddon. The then two global superpowers, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were embroiled in a bitter nuclear arms race. The global public believed that the development of nuclear weapons meant that human beings had acquired the capacity to obliterate all life forms on earth and the fear of nuclear apocalypse pervaded political and intellectual discourses. The fear of nuclear apocalypse was for instance a major influence on the result of the 1964 United States presidential election. I cite this example because of a TV commercial that remarkably dramatised the world's fear then. The commercial from the campaign of President Lyndon Johnson, one of the candidates in the election, depicted a global apocalypse caused by the explosion of a nuclear bomb. It was targeted at his opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater, profiling him as a nuclear extremist, playing on the fear of the times:

> It showed a little girl in a sunny field of daisies. She begins plucking petals from a daisy. As she plucks the flower, a male voice in the background starts a countdown ... ten ... nine ... eight ... becoming constantly stronger. The screen suddenly explodes and the child disappears in a mushroom cloud. The voice concludes by urging voters to elect President Johnson, saying, 'These are the stakes: To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die. Vote for President Johnson on November third. The stakes are too high for you to stay home.' (Goldwater and Casserly 252)

This pervasive apprehension about a world blown into extinction was the existing environmental equation that Carson's book came to complicate.

These series of developments form the background to the emergence of ecocriticism. Ecological awareness in literature actually began to grow in the 1980s, with books, magazines and journals emerging with a focus on green literature. In 1991, a special session of MLA organised by Harold Fromm held with the title: "Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies." Prior to that period, ecologically informed criticism had been present in the

work of a scanty number of scholars, at individual levels only. Ecocriticism gained traction in the United States from where it has quickly spread to other countries of the world. Cheryll Burgess (Glotfelty) was the first individual to take up an academic appointment as lecturer in Literature and Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno, in 1990. In 1995, Lawrence Buell published his groundbreaking book, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. He sets out four indices that qualify a work as environmental: first, "*The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that suggests that human history is implicated in natural history."* Second, "*The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest*." Third, "*Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation,"* and fourth, "*Some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text"* (7—8, italics in the original).

The first visible ecocritical anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm contains twenty-five essays. The authors of all twenty-five essays are American. Rob Nixon has made a similar observation. He recalls among other instances an October 1995 cover story of the *New York Times* Sunday Magazine written by Jay Parini. Entitled "The Greening of the Humanities". The story closes by naming twenty-five writers and critics whose work was instrumental to catalysing environmentalism in literature departments, but "all twenty-five writers and critics were American" (234). Because of that overwhelming dominance, Nixon further argues that ecocriticism originated as a stream of American studies (235). As such, Harold Fromm, with whom Cheryll Glotfelty co-edited the first visible anthology of ecocritical essays, could in the same book refer to Glofelty's "influence in the ecological/nature-writing wing of American studies"(x).

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). But the central role of literature in ecocriticism has been questioned (Huggan and Tiffin 12). Two African examples suffice to lend credence to Huggan and Tiffin's view: Nigeria's Ken Saro-Wiwa and Kenya's Wangari Maathai. While Saro-Wiwa was a writer, his reputation in the ecocritical field rests on his activism as the leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and his non-fictional works, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (1992), and *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995). Conversely, the ecological interest in his imaginative writing is very limited. For Maathai, she owes her standing in the ecocritical discourse principally to her environmental activism with fellow members of Kenya's Green Belt Movement starting

from the 1970s, and to her non-fictional books, especially her memoir, *Unbowed* (2006). Ecocriticism interests itself in the state of the earth and in the activities of those who by fictional and non-fictional writing and other forms of activism bring the earth to the foreground. The inclusion of the phrase "non-fictional writing" is necessary to signal that ecocriticism does not focus only on literature in its narrow sense. Environmetalism in its broad sense, and not only the portrayal of nature in literature, is the sphere of ecocriticism.

Underlying ecocriticism is a belief that the physical, non-human world and human culture have a bearing on each other. Glotfelty adds that "nature per se is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation," and lists categories including rivers, mountains, deserts among "Other topics" of ecocritical studies (xxiii). But that raises the question, what is nature per se? That central concept which this work is dealing with, whether we denote it by either "nature" or "the environment" is a term fraught with overwhelming complexity as a result of which it is still considered indefinable (DeLoughrey and Handley 16).

A remarkable contribution of ecocriticism to literary studies is that it broadens the scope of the world. It stretches the world beyond its conception in most literary theory as being synonymous with society or the social sphere. The social sphere revolves around human beings of course. For the horizon of ecocriticism to transcend that sphere connotes that it incorporates the physical world which ordinarily acts only as a background in most of literary theory, and that it embraces the ecosphere as a whole. Taking the world as the entire ecosphere, ecocriticism applies terminology and ideas from ecology to the study of literature.

However, the tendency by ecocritics to appeal to ecology in their work is often ill-digested, resulting from their superficial grasp of ecology. (O'Brien qtd in Huggan and Tiffin 13). So, when ecological concepts such as "interdependence" and "stability" are invoked by ecocritics, they carry more rhetorical than scientific force. Other than the superficial and often romantic perspective of ecology from which much ecocritical discourse issues, other basic questions troubling the discourse relate to some common terms in its lexicon. I revisit the term, " the environment" for instance. The meaning of the concept, as DeLoughrey and Handley note, citing David Harvey, "varies radically between people and places" (16). What David Harvey's point suggests about "the environment" is its capaciousness. A school of thought criticises the term for its anthropocentrism and dualism. It connotes "that we humans are at the centre, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment" (Glotfelty xx). But still, it is also freely employed in terms that suggest a matrix of which humanity is part,

rather than what they are surrounded by. When in "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place and the Pathetic Fallacy," Neil Evernden advances a conception of the "individual as a component of, not something distinct from, the rest of the environment" (97), he obviously conceives of it in that sense. And it is pertinent to observe that the term features freely in the ecocritical discourse in both senses.

Related to the issue of the environment is the place of humankind in the natural order. There exists the aporia of employing the term "nature" simultaneously to refer to something distinct from, and affected by human culture on the one hand, and as inclusive of the human on the other. The ambiguity remains unresolved. Joseph Wood Crutch has expressed the ambiguity as "the paradox of Man, who is a part of nature, yet can become what he is only by being something also unique" (qtd in Love 232). And being unique implies transcending nature. Even the United Nations has sustained the ambiguity.

When the United Nations Conference on Human Ecology convened in Stockholm in 1972, it did not make a distinction between humanity and the natural world. It was guided instead by human ecology, a conception of ecology stressing the human in complex relations with the environment. The conference stressed that environmental protection is integral to economic and social development (Nixon 65, DeLoughrey and Handley 18). But when, after a series of related meetings and events, the effort culminated in the World Charter for Nature in 1982, the charter separated humans from nature and insisted "on the inherent value of nature regardless of its worth to man" (DeLoughrey and Handley 18). This is also the creed of deep ecology, the dominant Euro-American model of environmentalism. Given that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) already codifies the rights of human beings, the promulgation of a parallel document for nature is proof of the reading of the human as other than nature. An insight from Greg Garrard is crucial at this juncture. He has pointed out that "it seems likely that any given concerned individual will probably have eco- and anthropocentric attitudes at different times, under different conditions" (22). It is clear that conceptions of nature are inflected by ecocentrism and anthropocentrism respectively. Even in individual ecocritical texts, seminal ones included, this shifting conception persists.

The tension between the ecological tenets espoused in the Stockholm conference and the charter in a way speaks to a contrast between the environmentalism of the Global South and Euro-American environmentalism, between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. The dominant leaning of environmentalism in the Global South tends to be what Joan Martinez

Alier has categorised as *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (2002), but Western environmentalism is dominated by deep ecology.

Deep ecology is a Western movement founded on the philosophy of Arne Naess (1912—2009), a Norwegian philosopher. Ecocentrism is the hallmark of that movement. It teaches that humans are not superior to the non-human world. It envisages a world where humans accept themselves as equal to the other members of the biosphere rather than enthrone themselves as the sole subjects while consigning other organisms to the status of objects. Deep ecologists are remarkably invested in preserving biodiversity. In that regard, they often work for the preservation of wild places like forests and wildlife parks. But a serious baggage that troubles such advocacy for the preservation of nature untouched by culture is that the "last great places" these environmentalists seek to preserve have often served as loci of historical injustice. In South Africa for instance, it is implicated in the displacement of black South Africans from their native lands for the building of such nature's fortresses as wildlife parks. And that in effect means that the idea of ecological democracy implicit in such an ideology is a myth, since such displacement effectively means the elevation of wildlife above black South Africans. Environmental organisations in the Western world such as Earth First!, Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Club, Audubon Society, Council for the Protection of Rural England and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds are founded on the ethics of deep ecology.

The deep ecological slant of Western environmentalism was a major contributory factor to the suspicion with which black Africans have greeted it. Some cardinal planks of this philosophy include the assertion of the intrinsic worth of non-human nature, and following that, an insistence that environmentalists ought not to be promoting nature as a resource to serve anthropocentric ends (Garrard 21). Additionally, there is a Malthusian-like advocacy for a reduction of human population, based on the belief that human population as it currently stands constitutes a threat to nature. Gary Snyder for instance, a leading advocate of wilderness restoration advocates that for the success of that venture, the human population will need to reduce by ninety per cent (Nixon 239). The failing of deep ecology is thus its misanthropism, which is often coupled with chauvinism, because the likes of Snyder usually write with the implicit belief that it is others who ought to die, while they remain alive to carry on with their pastime of savouring nature.

In conjunction with conservation ethic, American land ethic also embraced ecolocalism. American land ethic is a distinct school within the deep ecology movement. Ecolocalism is the rhetoric of place within the environmental discourse. Its ecophilosophy is regional, not global, and not cosmopolitan. The rhetoric of place canvasses for "the intimate acquaintance with local nature and history that develops with sustained interest in one's immediate surroundings" (Heise 30). Place-based environmentalists deride cosmopolitanism as a restless movement of people from place to place in the manner of nomads. Such movement is held to be a disincentive to sustained inhabitation of a particular place which enables complex and deep knowledge of that particular ecosystem. Advocates of localism insist that the abuse of the environment is an inevitable fallout of lack of intimate knowledge of it. They fault, "globe-eye consciousness," a planetary sense of ecology, for being too vast and remote for an individual to grapple with. This conviction is reflected in Jay Parini's articulation of bioregionalism as hinged on a concentric focus on "One's local part of the earth whose boundaries are determined by a location's natural characteristics rather than arbitrary administrative boundaries" (qtd in Nixon 238).

In Africa, environmentalism and human rights have evolved hand in hand. Black Africans tend to regard the dominant ecocritcal template promulgated in the West as a dominating discourse, an attempt "to 'white out' black Africa by colouring it green" (Slaymaker 684). Literature whose major interest is the environment is not new in Africa. Negritude poetry and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel, *Weep Not, Child,* are few examples that attest to that. These texts contest colonial views of Africans and African landscapes. If we juxtapose Danish author Karen Blixen's memoir, *Out of Africa* (1937) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) for example, what becomes apparent is a situation where the dispossession of Gikuyu farmers of their ancestral land is romanticised in the former and problematised in the latter. The examination of such tropes as the land in African literature is no new phenomenon either. But such critical discourse was framed around the theory of postcolonialism. So, in Africa, postcolonialism is a forerunner to ecocriticism.

In "Ecoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses" (2001), William Slaymaker declares that black African response to the emergent trend of ecocriticism has been poor. But the loophole in Slaymaker's thesis as Byron Caminero-Santangelo has highlighted, is its assumption that what counts as ecocriticism is what conforms to the template of deep ecology as promulgated in the West (698). In his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon includes a chapter on

"Environmentalism, Postcolonialism, and American Studies" (233—262). He argues in that chapter that mutual indifference and suspicion have kept ecocriticism and postcolonialism developing in parallel, while urging a robust and symbiotic relationship between them. His call for a robust interdisciplinary study that consciously merges postcolonial and ecocritical methodologies and themes is in order. Although only incipient among Africanists, it has started, and Nixon himself is a pioneering figure in that endeavour since his book evinces clear and conscious postcolonial ecocriticism although without calling it by that name.

Postcolonial ecocriticism to a large extent contests the postulations of deep ecology. In contrast to wilderness preservation, which is reliant on the philosophy of deep ecology and is a popular pattern of Western environmentalism, postcolonial ecocriticism tends "to emphasise access to arable land and potable water, public health, the threats of militarism and national debt, and reflect social planning for cultural, economic and national sovereignty" (DeLoughrey and Handley 17). Black African critics, like others who write from a postcolonial perspective, articulate their environmentalism in ways that "firmly place the human in nature" (DeLoughrey and Handley 17). They are wary of the ecocentrism espoused by deep ecology. Nature for nature's sake is akin to art for art's sake – Black African cultural critics tend to repudiate both. Like intellectuals from other parts of the developing world, they view environmentalism that is not human-centred as another form of Western imperialism (Nixon 236). While deep ecology tends to gloss over human interest, postcolonial ecocriticism insists that humans are not just part of nature but are central to it. Postcolonial ecocriticism promotes instrumental ecocritical aesthetics.

In Africa, the powerhouses of environmentalism have been South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya. In South Africa, as I have already hinted, how the ugly history of apartheid is implicated in dispossessing the indigenous black population of their land has been the focal point. Black ecocritics usually strive to expose the injustice masked in the conservation ethic promulgated by Euro-American ecocritics and embraced by many white South Africans. The establishment of wildlife parks is integral to the white conservation ethos. It also advances the myth that Africa is a vast wilderness, in addition to featuring as a critical element of the tourism industry. But blacks draw attention to the erasure of their histories and cultures by the parks. They seek to foreground the injustice in forcing blacks out of their lands for the purpose of turning such lands into wildlife parks. In the case of Kruger Park for example, it is "roughly the size of Israel, (and) stretches 220 miles along South Africa's Eastern perimeter with Mozambique. (Nixon 188—9). Such land seizure for the purpose of parks and also white

commercial agriculture resulted in the creation of congested native reserves, denied blacks the opportunity of subsisting on the land and forced many into the mines.

South Africa has also been in the forefront of environmentalism in Africa in a different but equally crucial sense — through the interdisciplinary environmental humanities programmes run by some of its universities. The University of Cape Town runs Environmental Humanities South. Its website indicates that the programme includes interdisciplinary Master's degree and M/Phil, PhD in environmental humanities. At the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, there is Emancipatory Futures Studies in the Anthropocene. This is a research group comprising humanities lecturers and postgraduate students whose research interests centre on approaches to mapping out alternative futures to the Anthropocene. In both universities, scholarships are offered to African students for postgraduate studies in the field, making the research stream more accessible and popular to the African public. Ben Valentine conceptualises such programmes offered by some universities around the world as:

> research and practice programs that investigate the complicated intermingling between human activities and the environment. The typical products of the humanities — visual art, literature, poetry, audio and visual documentaries — are created and critiqued with an expanded lens where ecological discourse is placed on equal ground with philosophy, sociology, and even art theory. In doing so, these programs offer a vision of a future different from the one we are currently heading toward. As climate change becomes an increasingly deadly force, these new fields of study coupling scientific rigor and creative practice are necessary for thinking through how to live well on a damaged planet. (4)

In Kenya, the activities of the Green Belt Movement portray how the ecosystem can be salvaged by the heroic activities of people who take a long-term view of it and who in the pursuit of their objectives muster the courage to oppose those wielding state power. The movement was founded by Maathai and six other women in 1977. They planted seven trees on Earth Day of that year in commemoration of Kenyan women who had been environmental activists. From that modest beginning, the movement has expanded to the point where it has employed women to plant tens of millions of trees. The Green Belt Movement took a different view from the authoritarian regime of President Daniel arap Moi who seemed to regard the decimation of the forest cover of Kenya as proof of progress and development.

But the significance of the movement transcends tree planting and preservation of the soil. It also grafted the advancement of women's rights and civil rights into the core of its activism.

In Nigeria, the despoliation of the oil-producing region of the country, the Niger Delta has been the principal focal point of ecocriticism, which tends to call attention to the carnage being wrought on the Niger Delta ecosystem by multinational oil companies led by Shell Petroleum, and a complicit Nigerian government. The environmental activism of Ken Saro-Wiwa has played a key role in attracting ecocritical attention to this region of Nigeria, and early ecocritical essays by expatriate critics tend to use his writing as an entry point to the travails of this region. He declaimed the injustice in the situation whereby his Ogoni people had their environment ruined and their health endangered, while the petrodollars flowed to the oil companies and their military cohorts.

Saro-Wiwa's struggle for ecological justice from the oil companies and an equally predatory Nigerian state was titanic. His written accounts of that endeavour are remarkable examples of apocalyptic rhetoric, as indicated even in the title of one of his memoirs, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (1992). Apocalypse is a dystopian temporal imaginary in environmentalism. The most notable formulation of the belief that the world will come to an end, which came to influence environmentalist thought, is the Biblical book of Revelation otherwise called the Apocalypse, which foretells the end of the world and events heralding it. What counts for the environmental imagination is that a cataclysmic climax to global ecological problems is in sight. Saro-Wiwa portrays the operations of oil companies in his homeland as a pestilence, and temporally makes an impassioned argument that his people and their environment face imminent apocalypse unless urgent action is taken by the international community to compel the oil conglomerates Shell and Chevron to be guided by ecological justice in their operations. As he encapsulated that plea in a 1992 letter to the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, "Only the international community, acting with compassion and a sense of responsibility to the human race, can avert the catastrophe which is about to overtake the Ogoni" (*A Month and a Day* 98).

The catastrophe about to overtake the Ogoni is extinction. But since his campaign was for the ecological, political and cultural emancipation of his people, Saro-Wiwa's attacks are directed not only to the predatory oil companies and the Nigerian government but also the country's three major ethnic groups: the "Hausa-Fulani," Yoruba and Igbo. (I put "Hausa-Fulani" in inverted commas because it is not actually a single ethnic nationality. The Hausa

and the Fulani are different but relatively homogenous ethnic groups.) He complains that the major ethnic groups are stifling the Ogoni and other minorities politically, culturally and economically. But for an activist to who the question of minority ethnic identity was of primary importance and who worked tirelessly to project the identity of his Ogoni people, his work at times shows surprising lack of attention to the identities of Nigerian ethnic minorities who are not from the Niger Delta. An outstanding example is his constant reference to General Ibrahim Babangida, who he criticises, as Hausa-Fulani. Babangida ruled the country from 1985 to 1993, and Saro-Wiwa was repeatedly harassed and incarcerated by his regime. But like Saro-Wiwa, Babangida is from an ethnic minority. Babangida is neither Hausa nor Fulani. He is Nupe, a minority ethnic group in the country's North.

But the major attraction of Saro-Wiwa's eco-activism is his critique of the ills of expatriate oil corporations in Ogoniland. In that venture, his writing also shows how effective rhetorical language can be utilised in depicting environmental apocalypse, as in the following passage where he proclaims that the aftermath of the operations of Shell and Chevron in Ogoniland has been

> the total destruction of Ogoni life, human, social, cultural and economic ... What Shell and Chevron have done to Ogoni people, land, streams, creeks and the atmosphere amount to genocide. The soul of the Ogoni people are dying and I am witness to the fact.
>
> I hear the plaintive cry of the Ogoni plains mourning the birds that no longer sing at dawn; I hear the dirge for trees whose branches wither in the blaze of gas flares, whose roots lie in infertile graves. The brimming streams gurgle no more, their harvest floats on waters poisoned by oil spillages.
>
> Where are the antelopes, the squirrels, the sacred tortoises, the snails, the lions and tigers which roamed this land? Where are the crabs, periwinkles, mudskippers, cockles, shrimps and all which found sanctuary in mudbanks, under the protective roots of mangrove trees? (*Genocide* 83)

Temporally, Saro-Wiwa presents a picture of an ecological catastrophe whose timeline is not in the future but is already an unfolding reality. And his execution on 10 November 1995 along with eight of his Ogoni compatriots lent a dramatic force to his message that ecological apocalypse in the Niger Delta is a matter of now.

It is to him more than any other individual that credit is due for the prominent place that Nigeria occupies in the global environmental discourse. Within Nigeria, the Niger Delta is the centre around which environmental literature and ecocriticism revolve. Writers from different parts of Nigeria have risen to the challenge of using imaginative literature to expose the unconscionable ways of transnational oil companies in the region and call attention to the need for remedial action. Poetry collections inspired by the Niger Delta ecological crisis include Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* (1998), Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000), *Nnimmo Bassey's We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood* (2002), and Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (2005) to mention but a few. Novels that have been written on the crisis include Isidore Okpewho' *Tides* (1993), Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow* (2006), Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006), Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), Chimeka Garrick's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* (2010). The British author Christine Watson has also written a novel about the crisis, entitled *Tiny Sunbirds, Far Away* (2011).

Animism has also been a major influence on Nigerian environmental literature and its criticism. Some animist African religions promote deep respect for the non-human world, although not in the same way as deep ecology. As the present work shows, among the theories of ecocriticism, animism is arguably the strongest influence on Osundare's poetry. In his influential essay, "Explorations in Animist Materialism," Harry Garuba sheds light on the concept of animism thus:

> Perhaps the single, most important characteristic of animist thought — in contrast to the major monotheistic religions — is its almost total refusal to countenance unlocalised, unembodied, unphysicalized gods and spirits. Animism is often simply seen as belief in objects such as stones or trees or rivers for the simple reason that animist gods and spirits are *located* and *embodied* in objects: the objects are the physical manifestation of the gods and spirits. Instead of erecting graven images to symbolise the spiritual being, animist thought spiritualises the object world, thereby giving the spirit a local habitation. Within the material world, nature and its objects are endowed with a spiritual life both simultaneous and coterminous with their natural properties. The objects thus acquire a social and spiritual meaning within the culture far in excess of their natural properties and their use value. (267, italics in the original)

Apart from animism's tendency to embody spirits, another crucial characteristic is that it does not elevate human beings above the natural world. Unlike conventional modern worldview, animism does not uphold the nature/culture divide. Yoruba traditional religion of which Osundare is a devotee belongs firmly within the rubric of animism. The Israeli anthropologist Nurit Bird-David has drawn attention to the work of the British anthropologist M. Strathern (1988), comparing the Euro-American (modernist) and Melanesian (animist) concepts of "person." I consider Strathern's work relevant in showing the difference between animist and modernist conceptions of personhood. Strathern uses the term "dividual" to point to the Melanesian conception of "person". "Dividual" contrasts with the Euro-American "individual." Emphasis on individual autonomy and agency is the apex of Western Enlightenment humanism. Strathern's point is that not every culture considers a person as a whole and autonomous entity set apart from other persons and the environment. "Dividual" expresses the idea of a person as reducible to constitutive relationships, in contrast to the modernist conception of a person as an autonomous self-willed entity entirely responsible for his or her actions and life (qtd in Bird-David S72). More important for my purposes is that "dividual" does not recognise the separation of humans from nature. The concept nestles human beings within the community of nature rather than separating and positioning them as other. Bird-David applied the same concept of "dividual" in her 1978—79 ethnographic study of the Nayaka, a small hunter-gatherer community in South India. She reports that for them:

> Their composite personhood is constitutive of sharing relationships not only with fellow Nayaka but with members of other species in the vicinity. They *make* their personhood by producing and reproducing sharing relationships with surrounding beings, humans and others. They do not dichotomise other beings vis-a-vis themselves ... but regard them, while differentiated, as nested within each other. They recognize that other beings ... are of diverse sorts, which is indicated among other things by the different words by which they refer to them (hills, elephants, etc.) However, Nayaka also appreciate that they share the local environment with some of these beings, which overrides these differences and absorbs their sorts into one 'we-ness.' (Bird-David S73, italics in the original)

Such animist worldviews offer means of rethinking the human relationship with the non-human world.

Although writing in the specific context of the Anthropocene rather than animism, Dipesh Chakrabarty also makes a point that should help us understand how human beings and their environment are intertwined. That has to do with history. By pointing out that the gap between human history and natural history has been breached in the Anthropocene and that the two histories are now enmeshed, he uses geologic time to emphasise that humans are not only a social category (in the sense of people), but are also a biological category (a species) (220—22). Coming to terms with their status as Homo sapiens, a biologically determined species, will lead modern humans to the realisation that they are similar to other life forms, and thus part of nature. The key point in the animist conception of an ideal world is that in which humankind exists in brotherhood with the non-human world, with all the respect that the attitude implies. Also, by promoting reverence for all categories of nature, highlighting their interdependence and that they all have intrinsic spiritual vitality, it is believed that human beings will become humble and sensitive in their relations with the non-human world.

From the evidence of Osundare's work, he upholds animism. His reverence for non-human nature attains its climax in the many poetic pieces across his corpus which praise Olosunta and Oroole, two rocks/deities in his hometown of Ikere-Ekiti, and the goddess of River Osun, to whom his surname is related and to whom he has a sense of personal attachment. Osundare reveals in an interview that:

> Before people discovered my connection with this goddess, my father said that whenever I was ill, usually with a high fever — there was a time I was ill and nearly died — they went to all kinds of herbalists. Nothing worked. Even herbs produced by my father didn't take. Then they just tried water, ordinary water, cold water. They gave me some to drink, used some to bathe me, and poured the rest on what is called *awoje,* the very centre of the head, which is usually very soft when one is young, and within hours I was laughing, smiling and playing ... After, whenever I was ill, the medicine was water. (qtd in Arnold 444— 5)

The healing property of water reminds us of Harry Garuba's earlier-mentioned point that animism spiritualises the natural world.

In addition to animism, eco-socialism is another prominent streak in Osundare's work. Eco-socialists believe that ecological problems also arise from the capitalist system enabling one class of humans to dominate and exploit another (Garrard 31). They attribute the problem of scarcity to the capitalist mode of production for the way it manipulates the

mechanism of supply and demand. They believe that '"scarcity' is not simply an objective fact about the natural world, but a function of the will and means of capital: the purposes that guide production, and the technologies that facilitate it" (Garrard 31). As a result of the fact that they consider the exploitative structure of the capitalist mode of production to be the linchpin of oppression, they utilise political engagement to fight it and enthrone an egalitarian society. But if tested against a country like Nigeria, a flaw of eco-socialism becomes manifest. This school of thought is sceptical about discourses of overpopulation, taking the position that it is misleading to view a syndrome like hunger as evidence of overpopulation, and that it is the result of capitalist exploitation (Pepper 98). The reality is that capitalism and overpopulation are both major contributory factors to the situation. Since the population size of the country is inflicting a lot of damage on the ecosystem, it can be seen that the sole focus on the capitalist framework is capable of obscuring the role of a cultural factor such as preference for large families, which has to be rolled back if the country must ameliorate hunger and environmental degradation.

Rapid population growth also happens to be prominent among the causes that have secured for Nigeria a prominent place in environmental apocalyptic discourse in addition to the Niger Delta crisis. High poverty rate, hunger and deforestation for instance all tied to rapid population increase overstretching the country's ecological carrying capacity are all accelerating. Nigeria tends to exemplify the exponential rate of population growth predicted in 1798 by Thomas Malthus, although the country is benefitting from what has been termed 'demographic transition,' a situation "whereby scientific advances reduce death rates, populations soar and agricultural production struggles to keep up" (Garrard 106).

Tragic apocalypse and comic apocalypse are the two ways in which the apocalyptic discourse is framed, according to Stephen O'Leary (qtd in Garrard 95). Greg Garrard explains that "Human agency is real but flawed within the comic frame, and individual actors are typically morally conflicted and ambiguous. The tragic actor, on the other hand, has little to do but choose a side in a schematically drawn conflict of good versus evil, since action is likely to seem merely gestural" (95). In Nigeria, it would appear that issues of agency and time attaching to environmental apocalypse are fitted by the political class into the tragic category. My conclusion follows from the fact that while the astronomical population growth rate in the country is believed to be unhealthy and unsustainable, it is seen merely as an augury of a future catastrophe but not as a force to compel the adoption and implementation of decisive measures to avert the foreseen catastrophe. While the demographic growth speed

is clearly perceived to be dangerous for the ecosystem, in a religious country like Nigeria, citizens use the teachings of the major religions of Christianity and Islam to defend their preference for having numerous children while the government is unwilling to confront what is clearly understood to be an environmentally unsound trend.

Chapter Summary

The thesis is structured into six chapters, and their respective contents are summarised below:

Chapter 1: This introductory chapter functions as a preamble to the core chapters. It discusses preliminary issues that contextualise the thesis. Such issues include the justification for the thesis and its theoretical underpinning.

Chapter 2: This first core chapter delves into the analysis of primary texts from the worldview of Yoruba animist religion which Osundare practices. The organising principle in the chapter is the poet's life. Elements of Yoruba animism absorbed into the autobiographical aspects of his poetry which bear temporal and environmental import relevant to the thesis are critiqued in the chapter.

Chapter 3: Following up on the thread in Chapter 2, this chapter also applies animist epistemology to the reading of Osundare's poetry. It is concerned in the main with the poet's conviction that the spoken word is instinct with spiritual power. That belief is discussed in conjunction with the paradigms of how the earth was created, and his evocation of the animist notion of personhood.

Chapter 4: This chapter is concerned with foregrounding the fate of Nigeria in the present geologic epoch, the Anthropocene. It considers many ways in which the human impact has devastated the country's ecosystem.

Chapter 5: Closely related to its preceeding chapter, this chapter conceptualises the present geologic era as the Capitalocene. In the context of Nigeria, it considers primarily the implications of the commodification of time as it affects those forced to sell their time and those who buy it.

Chapter 6: This is the concluding chapter. It provides a brief additional reflection on the subjects discussed in the preceding chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE: TIME AND NATURE AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

> More philosophically, it may be supposed that the present as experience of a time is precisely that moment when different forms of absence become mixed together: absence of those presences that are no longer so and that one remembers (the past), and absence of those others that are yet to come and are anticipated (the future).
>
> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*

The inspiration for this chapter is Niyi Osundare's submission that "The autobiography of the African writer is like the biography of the continent" (qtd in Hogue and Easterlin 470). I restrict that submission from a continental to a Yoruba national scope. Given that the human is an ecological category and autobiography is a mode of temporal writing, I evaluate autobiographical aspects of Niyi Osundare's poetry against the Yoruba animist worldview on temporality and nature. In the first segment of the chapter, I use a festival celebrated by the poet and his fellow animists in honour of one of his village gods to study the conception of time and nature as either sacred or profane. In the second, I foreground the role of the supernatural in the formation of Osundare's environmental ethics, and in the third and final segment, I dissect a dream by the poet and account for how it embodies notable aspects of Yoruba ontology on time and nature.

Introduction

Religion, like time, is an ecological issue and Yoruba animism which forms a resource base for Osundare's poetry recognises divinity in nature. The present study of that poetry engages what Jacob K. Olupona christens 'indigenous hermeneutics,' which lays stress on the application of a distinctive culture's own framework in its evaluation (1). To conceptualise time and nature, it focalises the indigenous ontology and epistemology of the Yoruba. Hence, it demonstrates the ways in which the Yoruba worldview can enrich animist discourse especially as it pertains to the relationship of the human and the various forms of non-human beings in the ecological matrix.

Sacred and Profane Nature and Time

I am concerned in this section to study the form of temporality which obtains in a deity's shrine in the poet's village and how it stands in distinction to time outside the shrine. The section encodes ecological and temporal thought accordant with Albert Einstein's theory of relativity which punctured the postulations of Newtonian absolute time at the beginning of the twentieth century (West-Pavlov 38). Relative time posits multiple temporalities and opposes the idea of a single universal time detached from place (West-Pavlov 41). My contribution to the discourse is to use that deity and the sacred time emanating from him to show how sacred time differs from profane time.

When Osundare invokes deities from his village pantheon, he does not do so in the manner of a modernist bending backwards to acknowledge the gods of his ancestors in order to validate the authenticity of African culture. From the evidence of his writing and interviews many of which are referenced in this thesis, the gods of his ancestors are his own gods. When he depicts them, he does so not from the studied distance of a native observer cum sympathiser, but from the depth of feeling of a worshipper. His poems in praise of elements of material nature worshipped as gods have a ring of autobiography. In "A Song for Olosunta," he recreates the annual Olosunta Festival celebrated by Ikere-Ekiti animists of which he is one, in honour of the god Olosunta:

You have counted twelve moons

On the fingers of time

Oh rock with the winkless eye;

You have broken another year

Like a seasoned kola

Oh rock too heavy for the pupil

Of the looking eye;

You who master Ikere's ancient sky

As the elephant rules the rump

Of giant forests;

Mountain of mountains

Which tries the patience of the haughty leg. (*Season* 91)

This poem is just one from several pieces of Osundare's verse that are centred on Olosunta. He has taken recourse to the *oriki (*praise poetry) tradition of his Yoruba culture to coin praise epithets for the deity. We see the poem imbued with Olosunta's *oriki* in lines such as "Oh rock with the winkless eye/... Oh rock too heavy for the pupil/ Of the looking eye;/ You who master Ikere's ancient sky.../ Mountain of mountains" (*Season* 91). And it is by the combination of such praise names that the poem succeeds in evoking the magnitude, strength and antiquity of the lithic and mountainous god that give him an aura of grandeur.

"A Song for Olosunta" is remarkable on ecological as well as temporal fronts. Just as ecolocalists insist that members of a particular ecosystem are the ones well placed to determine the peculiar needs of their environment (Nixon 238) and consequently reject forms of one-size-fits-all solutions to global ecological crises, temporal relativity posits that time is immanent to nature. "Place encodes time" in the words of Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (4). However, to argue that Osundare is ecolocalist in relation to his poetics of sacred nature and time is not to imply a blanket rejection of globe-eye–consciousness in his nature poetry. The binary of ecolocalism/ecocosmopolitanism will lead to a dead end if applied as a strict theoretical frame on the sum of his nature poetry. In the anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism discourse in ecocriticism, Greg Garrard (2012) weighs in with an essential insight – that an environmentalist's fidelity to one does not preclude a similar fidelity to the other. Rather, both co-habit the sensibility of any environmentalist, leaving context to dictate which one to privilege (25). A transposition of that axiom to Osundare's attitude to sense-of-place and sense-of-planet poetics is pragmatic. But in respect of "A Song for Olosunta," he writes against ecocosmopolitanism and its temporal cognate, absolute time, and in favour of ecolocalism and temporal relativity. This much can be deduced from his celebration of Olosunta.

The gigantic rock being celebrated is an animist environmental and temporal icon. As an environmental symbol, it stands as an icon of sacred nature. And it is sacred because it is animate, is a divinity and has agency. By the way, sacredness is polysemous and as such, its sense in this thesis warrants specification. I will attempt such specification by definition. I use the term "sacred" in the sense indicated by Paula Gunn Allen in her treatise on the Native American perspective on time and nature, as "something that it (sic) is filled with an

intangible but very real power or force, for good or bad" (258). To her definition I add, something also of a spiritual essence.

It is true that among animists, there is a tendency to hold that all of nature is sacred. But as Graham Harvey points out in his study of paganism in Britain, "Although every day is sacred and all the Earth is holy, there are times and places that seem to be more special. Not all days are alike and not all times are the same" (*Listening People* 1). Olosunta's shrine in which the poem is set is such a special place for his worshippers. At least, in terms of how Ikere-Ekiti animists experience the environment, being a shrine, the place is so sacred that its surroundings may in comparison with it be considered as profane. What distinguishes Olosunta from profane rocks is that it is held to be inhabited by an active spiritual force. That gives it a special spiritual and religious value. As the influential Romanian scholar of religion Mircea Eliade explains, a material object acquires a spiritual significance because of its commemoration of a mythical act, or a belief that the souls of ancestors reside there, or because it has been consecrated by a sacrifice or an oath *(The Myth* 4). One or more of these reasons could be the source of Olosunta's sacredness. And, as can be deduced from Harry Garuba's essay, "Explorations in Animist Materialism," the Yoruba hold some of their deities to be mythical heroes who did not experience death but rather transmuted into gods. The place of deification of any such heroes in mythical times constitutes his or her shrine, a sacred space. But when Eliade reduces this belief to an attribute of the worldview of primitive peoples, he raises the question of which side of the primitive versus modern divide he would locate a figure like Niyi Osundare, currently a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of New Orleans.

Osundare by "A Song for Olosunta" acknowledges that some elements of nature are qualitatively different from others. It is the sacredness of Olosunta that has drawn the worshippers who are "Gathered here" (*Season* 92) in his shrine. That numinous quality which attaches to a locale for being associated with a deity and thus sets it apart from its surroundings proliferates in different ways in the Yoruba cosmos. For instance, Ile-Ife, the first city in the Yoruba cosmos and the place of descent of Oduduwa, the primal progenitor of the Yoruba, is for the latter reason sacred in Yoruba animist imagination in a way other Yoruba cities, towns and villages are not.

For his devotees, the temporal essence of Olosunta is that he is a figure of sacred time. And the Christian idea of sacred time as espoused by Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other*

(2002), which is a vector of Christian teleology differs from the type I am discussing here. In Christianity, sacred time implies that time is God's property and a medium for fulfilling His will until the end of the world. Christian sacred time is linear in character and is underpinned by "Faith in a covenant between Divinity and one people, trust in divine providence as it unfolds in a history of salvation centred on one Saviour" (Fabian 2). Among Yoruba animists and some other animist cultures, sacred time is the time of spiritual beings – mythical heroes, gods and spirits (Priestley 140). Although J.B Priestley's work strives to be objective and sensitive, it still manifests a European bias as evidenced by the ease with which he refers to cultures outside of the West as primitive. He explains that sacred time for "primitive man," is more meaningful than passing time (140). There is power in sacred time because it is the time of the powerful spiritual forces embedded in the local environment, myths and beliefs of the people.

Sacred time is qualitatively different from profane linear passage of time from one day to the next. Instead of being the same with the historical present, it is a present that is non-historical (Eliade, *The Sacred* 72). In other words, sacred time in this case is an eternal instant, a present that does not pass. Humans enter sacred time to connect with and draw strength from the spiritual forces in it. This quest for connection and power is evident in the setting of both the festival and the poem in Olosunta's shrine.

For Olosunta's worshippers, the "feet which have broken/ twelve earthworms on the road/ of another season" and have "Gathered here" (*Season* 93) in Olosunta's shrine, coming into the shrine is a breakthrough. It is a breakthrough from profane to sacred spacetime, from the spacetime of mortals to that of immortals, from natural to supernatural spacetime. And the fact that stepping into the shrine means stepping into sacred spacetime implies that Olosunta's shrine and his time are mutually constitutive. Part of the reason why the space is a shrine is that sacred time is inherent in it, and sacred time is inherent in it because it is a shrine.

For the worshippers, stepping into the shrine means exiting profane space and transient time which form the setting for their mundane personal and interpersonal activities, and stepping into a sacred place where time "floweth not" (Eliade, *The Sacred* 88). In entering sacred time, they enter the time of their ancestors, the mythical heroes of their culture and their gods. This mythical time is '*all-at-once instead of one-thing-after-another*,' past and present and future merging and becoming one" (Priestley 140, italics in the original).

That temporality is what underpins the god's "timeless bidding" (*Season* 93) which his worshippers are "Gathered bere (sic) again" to carry out (*Season* 93). And "timeless" is a word of profound significance in the poem. It is sacred time's most essential attribute. It denotes a quality of temporality which does not apply to historical time. Timelessness is the primary attribute which distinguishes the eternal instant of sacred time from the historical present. Instead of being the same with the historical present, it is a present that is non-historical (Eliade, *The Sacred* 72). It is because sacred time is a perennial instant that it is infinitely recoverable. For all generations preceding that of the poet, for the poet's generation as well as future generations of Olosunta's devotees, it is still the same mythical time of the origin of the god in which the festival is carried out. There is no change of time. That is the practical import of the eternal instant.

The time when the mythical heroes of the clan who are now worshipped existed is not only past but is also continually present. What this implies is a cultural conception of coevalness between the mythical and spiritual forces and their worshippers in Yoruba cosmology. Stepping into sacred time such as is inherent in the shrine makes these worshippers the contemporaries of the mythical forces of their culture such as Olosunta. The ontological belief in the presence and agency of the ancestors among the Yoruba rests on this idea of contemporaneousness; and its enabling temporal epistemology is the eternal instant. That seems to be the temporal framework enabling not just Yoruba animists, but animists from different African cultures to believe that their ancestors are co-present with them.

The Ewe (Ghanaian) poet Kofi Awoonor handles that belief remarkably in his widely anthologised poem, "Songs of Sorrow." In the last stanza of that poem, the persona sends a message through a newly deceased relative to his or her ancestors. It reads in part:

> Agosi if you go tell them,
>
> Tell Nyidevu, Kpeti, and Kove
>
> That they have done us evil;
>
> Tell them their house is falling
>
> And the trees in the fence
>
> Have been eaten by termites;

That the martels curse them. (42)

The eternal present which undergirds such communication also challenges the semantics of the obituary line about the dead passing away. Since the ancestors transit into a temporality that is always present, their death is not equivalent to passing away, for to pass away would signify transiting away in the tide of historical time. It would signify losing presence. Rather, when death occurs to mark the conclusion of their linear temporal lives, they transit to ahistorical time as ancestors. Osundare writes about such transition in another poem thus:

Those who passed have not parted

Those who passed have not parted

Their footprints settle the crest of every wave

Their mindprints thrive the leaves of fire

Which brighten the step of every word

Those who passed have not parted

They are the song in the hills

...

They are the roots whose hands confirm the tree,

the wind whose breath compels the leaves. (*Midlife* 56)

We glean from the extract that the dead remain present in sacred time, the time of powerful forces, where they rest not in peace but in power, able to exert influences on the living with whom they remain members of the same imagined community.

It is for the spiritual forces and their worshippers that agba, a long drum beaten during the festival (Osundare, *Season* 92) ministers as part of the musical accompaniment of the celebration. Thus, Osundare hails the drum as:

Wonder drum whose leather is

Hide of the gleaming sky,

Drum of distant depths which woos the choicest wood

In the forest beyond the eye

...

Let the sticks plunge their hoary heads

Into the leather's unfathomable belly,

Prompting ageless idioms

And proverbs with a thousand tongues (*Season* 92)

The beating of agba is accompanied with singing as suggested by even the title of Osundare's poem, "A Song for Olosunta" (*Season* 91). The poem's oral nuances, the praise of the god in it and its rapturous tone are all aimed at effectively recreating the atmosphere of the celebration, casting the piece as a probable simulation of the musical accompaniment of the festival. The poem might be an imaginative recreation and recording of an Olosunta Festival song. The music plays a major role in creating the atmosphere enabling the atemporal experience of the celebrants.

Phenomenologically, the suspension of passing time is evident in the poem's rapturous tone as encapsulated in lines in which the assembled worshippers declaim in Olosunta's praise, "Oh rock with the winkless eye;/...Oh rock too heavy for the pupil of the looking eye" (*Season* 91). It is complete with the beat of of agba, throbbing as a refrain in-between the stanzas: "KERERERE GIRODO/ KERE RE KE GIRODO" (*Season* 92). Caught up in the exhilarating atmosphere, the celebrants are transported out of time and are caught up in the magical experience of eternity. They sing and dance rapturously for Olosunta and to the throbbing of agba, the ground also "throbbing under/ The frenzy of (their) pounding feet" (*Season* 92).

However, integrating with sacred time and being at one with mythical figures only temporarily suspends but does not abolish the participation of the poet and other devotees of Olosunta in passing time. They still participate in linear time, and it forms an ordinary duration in which they carry out their profane activities, "acts without religious meaning" (Eliade, *The Sacred* 68). They navigate the two temporal modes. And what rites such as the

festival do for these worshippers is that by means of them they periodically exit passing time, the time of mortals, and enter sacred time, the time of immortals and power, from which they emerge with strength and courage to continue with profane life.

As for the unchanging present of sacred time inhabited by the powerful spiritual forces, it is infinitely greater than the infinitesimal present of linear, historical time. It is, as Helen Augur observes in the case of American Indians, "a present which contains all the time there is" (qtd in Priestley 162). By observing ritual behaviour such as the festival, animists remain connected to the spiritual beings and their time, thereby obtaining "courage and strength, but not if they 'desecrate or neglect the sites, break the succession of initiates, forget the myths and omit the rites.' Their commission of any of these infractions can cause them to lose 'an anchor in the past, a source of strength (in the present), and a sense of direction for the future' (Elkin qtd in Priestley 141). The poet is evidently one of such modernists who have not made a break with the past.

But the sequence, past, present and future applies to linear time and not to sacred time. In sacred time, past, present and future do not form a linear series. Instead, to use Achille Mbembe's terms, they are interlocked or entangled (16). To put it differently, the three linear categories of past, present and future are co-present in this conception of sacred time. Plato's articulation of time as "a moving image of eternity" (Turetzky 15) serves aptly to illustrate the similarity and contrast between the eternal instant in Olosunta's shrine and the passing time in its surroundings. Olosunta's shrine is a zone of eternity which profane time outside mirrors, yet from which it differs by moving and changing.

It is to this "timeless temporality" of powerful forces that Osundare and other worshippers return during the festival in order to draw strength and get relief from what Harry Garuba has called the 'unbearable lightness of being' ("Explorations" 279). This disquieting feeling of lightness, a condition that often haunts the modern human subject, is one of the by-products of the obsessive pursuit of progress with which profane life is synonymous. We notice in this belief a response to a deep psychological human need, the need for dependence on an external, more powerful and eternal force. To live solely in historical time, to be non-religious, denies one the satisfying mystery of sacred time marked by remarkable divine presence and power.

There is a reciprocal or symbiotic logic governing the allegiance of Olosunta's devotees to him. This speaks to the principle of interconnectivity that is at the heart of

ecology. Admittedly, interconnectivity has long become a cliché in ecocriticism, but Osundare's poem restates it not in a routine way that demonstrates a cliché for what it is, but in a manner that redeems it by imbuing it with a new and remarkable nuance of meaning. Osundare demonstrates the symbiosis between human and spiritual forces. The god has to discharge his duties towards his worshippers as a condition for continuing to attract their worship, and not fall victim of the desecration implied by the Yoruba adage which stipulates that "A deity who is continuously propitiated but fails to return the gesture is thrown into the bush" (Olupona 102). Many lines in the poem actually show Olosunta performing this role. In a stanza that depicts him as the spirit behind fertility and bountiful harvest, we have:

> Yours are fingers of grains, toes of tubers
>
> Your eyelashes are pumpkin leaves
>
> Begging the tasty fancy of the homing basket
>
> Waters of your roots are mellow wines
>
> In sagely skins
>
> Your teeth are the healthy beads
>
> On the corn's crispy cob. (*Season* 91—2)

Indeed, "A Song for Olosunta" expresses for Osundare that yearning for power and meaning to life that human beings seek outside of the self. Osundare has stated in an interview that he was born and raised in "a culture rich in all kinds of rites and rituals, festivals and ceremonies, complete with their theatrical possibilities. I soaked myself in as many of them as possible, and they gave meaning and purpose to my young life" (qtd in Hogue and Easterlin 463). It is one of such "rites and rituals, festivals and ceremonies" that "A Song for Olosunta" represents.

And just as Olosunta marks a break in the profane space around it, the performance of the ritual in its precincts marks a break in profane temporal passage – it "suspends duration, abolishes profane time, and participates in mythical time" (Eliade, *The Myth* 6). In addition to its traditional valence as a symbol of power, the god whose timeless bidding his devotees gather to uphold is also a particularly fitting symbol of timelessness. The passage of time

does not wear the "rock with the winkless eye" (*Season* 91). Rather, "It resists time; (and) its reality is coupled with perenniality" (Eliade, *The Myth* 4).

The rock also embodies another essence to Ikere-Ekiti animists as a symbol of the centre. According to the poet, the deity occupies the centre of the cosmic consciousness of his people (*The Eye* xiii). Mircea Eliade has thoroughly analysed the religious meaning of the symbolism of the centre, and many of his insights apply to Ikere-Ekiti animists and their deity. Symbols of the centre are ontological and phenomenological realities.

The centre, for a religious community, is always a sacred place, a place that marks a break from the profane (Eliade, *The Sacred* 45). Just as access to Olosunta's shrine is a breakthrough to his worshippers, the god himself symbolises cosmic breakthrough. At once a rock and a mountain, he is hailed by Osundare as "You who master Ikere's ancient sky/ As the elephant rules the rump/ Of giant forests;/ Mountain of mountains/ Which tries the patience of the haughty leg" (*Season* 91). Those lines suggest that the rock is very tall. The god/mountain connects the three cosmic regions – earth, sky and the underworld. He is "a cosmic pillar, *axis mundi,* which at once connects and supports heaven and earth and whose base is fixed in the world below (the infernal region) (Eliade, *The Sacred* 36, italics in the original). Although it does not touch heaven in a literal sense, the summit of the sacred mountain is imagined to be the world's highest point. It is around this centre that the cosmic consciousness of Ikere-Ekiti animists revolves. And since their village hosts the cosmic pillar, to them, their village is located at the centre of the world. As stated earlier, this is a cosmological reality, not a scientific one. By implication, "A Song for Olosunta" has a distinguished setting, a setting of cosmic significance. For Osundare, his poem is set in the centre of the cosmos.

Sacred Roots and Cultivation of Environmental Ethics

The role of the supernatural in the origin of Osundare's ecopoetics has been a neglected theme in Osundare criticism. Critics have tended towards an exclusive emphasis on his peasant and rural childhood experience as the factor that seeded his environmental consciousness and nature poetry. The exemplar poem for such reading is "Farmer-Born" (*The Eye* 43). Ezenwa-Ohaeto in one of such readings comments that Osundare's "caution against the tendency to devastate the environment and nature arises from the poet's altruistic love of the earth because he informs us autobiographically:

Farmer-born peasant-bred

I have lived on the aroma

of fresh-felled forests ." (32—3)

While such reading is accurate, it does not tell the whole story of the origin of the poet's environmental sensibility. It does not account for the animist subtext of his initial inspiration for writing nature poetry. The first stanza of the poem reads in full:

Farmer-born peasant-bred

I have frolicked from furrow to furrow

sounded kicking tubers in the womb

of quickening earth

and fondled the melon breasts

of succulent ridges. (*The Eye* 43)

What the poem reveals about the poet is that he developed a feeling for the natural environment through the imperative of livelihood. That situates him within the scope of Michael J. McDowell's remark that peasants and small farmers get to know nature through the need to earn a living (381). While this trope of rugged early days is essential, it should not occlude a factor as primary as communication with categories of non-human nature. Childhood emotions recollected in adulthood, as "Farmer-Born" exemplifies should be properly understood as complementary to the animist trope. In his review of one of Osundare's most remarkable animist poems, "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me," Sule Emmanuel Egya describes the conversation encoded in it, a conversation between the poet and the rocks as "imaginative" (267). I see that as a surface conclusion, and I believe that we need to go beyond the surface in order to tease out some salient nuances of meaning attaching to the poem which are necessarily mystical. We need to ask for instance what it might signify if the conversation is not (wholly) imaginative.

"The Rocks Rose to Meet Me" embodies an encounter of the sojourner poet with his village gods upon stepping on his village soil on return from one of his sojourns which had kept him far away for long. Three Ikere-Ekiti deities, Olosunta, Oroole and Esidale troop out

to welcome him. In “The Rocks Rose to Meet Me,” the “Me” is Osundare in his individual person, vesting autobiographical nuance to the piece as usual. He returns from his sojourn to distant lands and his meeting with the gods is dense with animist meaning. The poem opens thus:

> The rocks rose to meet me
>
> like passionate lovers on a long-awaited tryst.
>
> The rocks rose to meet me
>
> their peaks cradled in ageless mists.
>
> *Olosunta* spoke first
>
> the eloquent one
>
> whose mouth is the talking house of ivory
>
> *Olosunta* spoke first
>
> the lofty one whose eyes are
>
> balls of the winking sun
>
> Olosunta spoke first
>
> the riddling one whose belly is wrestling ground
>
> for god and gold (*The Eye* 13)

This nostalgia-suffused return-to-the-roots piece encapsulates many tropes salient to the human/nature dualism which is a site of contest in ecocriticism. Osundare’s return prompts a god-human conversation. The series of incidents chronicled in the excerpt, beginning from “The rocks rose to meet me” (*The Eye* 13) form what is commonly explained in literature as anthropomorphism. They go beyond personification. Here are rocks moving out of their precincts to go and meet a worshipper. And here is a worshipper recognising and acknowledging the attribute of movement — one of the cardinal attributes of living things — in the rocks rather than projecting it to them. But a rock in its physical essence is inert. The rocks in this poem are able to rise because they have life. They embody a spiritual aspect which their physical aspect both conceals and materialises. As rocks, they are inert but as

gods/spirits, they are alive and sentient, able to recognise a worshipper and move to meet and talk to him. Olosunta leads off with:

> "You have been long, very long, and far',
>
> ...
>
> "Unwearying wayfarer,
>
> your feet wear the mud of distant waters
>
> your hems gather the bur
>
> of fartherest forests;
>
> I can see the westmost sun
>
> in the mirror of your wandering eyes." (*The Eye* 13)

To make these claims of walking and talking about the rocks is equally to venture a significant speculation concerning Osundare, the human party in the meeting. To claim that the meeting described in the poem is imaginative implies a reduction of the physical activities of walking and talking in the poem to personification. That is a superficial reading that belies the poem's substance. A spiritual layman cannot see the gods even if they come out to meet him. As such, the lines strongly suggest a spiritual talent in the poet. It is a spiritually endowed man who can see and hear the gods welcoming him. And as the lines bear out, the poet savours their fraternity with nostalgia and familiarity rather than react with fright. We need to apprehend the poem in connection with what Osundare learnt from his herbalist grandfather while growing up. He confesses thus: 'I learnt to speak to trees and rivers, and get them to speak back to me' (qtd in Deandrea 514). This interpersonal communication with the non-human world seems to take different forms. Being an informal assistant can also imply being an informal apprentice, and Niyi Osundare, offspring of a priest paternal grandfather; offspring of a priest father, and in his younger days an informal assistant to each, is probably a runaway priest-designate like Christopher Okigbo.

Okigbo's priestly poem, "The Passage" is a precursor to "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me" in what might be called the return to sacred roots tradition of Nigerian poetry. As Okigbo confessed, the relationship between him and the goddess of Idoto River in his village

transcended a goddess-worshipper relationship. He was a priest-designate of the goddess. He confessed to an interviewer in 1965:

> I am believed to be a reincarnation of my maternal grandfather, who used to be the priest of the shrine called Ajani, where Idoto, the river goddess, is worshipped ... My grandfather was the priest of this shrine, and when I was born I was believed to be his reincarnation, that is, I should carry on his duties. And although someone else had to perform his functions, this other person was only, as it were, a regent. And in 1958, when I started taking poetry very seriously, it was as though I felt a sudden call to begin performing my full functions as the chief priest of Idoto. (qtd in Whitelaw 36)

He then used his talent as a poet to serve his goddess. According to him, "Every time I write a poem, I am in fact offering a sacrifice" (qtd in Whitelaw 35—6). "The Passage" stands as the most remarkable of such sacrifices to nature; it is the most notable artefact of Okigbo's "poetry-medium priesthood." Osundare's poem casts him in the mould of Christopher Okigbo, as a writer whose animist verse is among other things a way of ministering to nature, in other words, a form of priesthood. The careers of both poets thus reveal one of literature's infinite uses, namely, a medium of priesthood to nature. But remarkably, Okigbo is the speaking party in "The Passage," declaring with submission to his goddess:

> BEFORE YOU, mother Idoto,
>
> naked I stand
>
> before your watery presence,
>
> a prodigal
>
> leaning on an oilbean,
>
> lost in your legend.
>
> Under your power wait I
>
> on barefoot,

watchman for the watchword

at *Heavensgate*;

out of the depths my cry:

give ear and hearken... (3)

In Osundare's poem, the situation is different. The sacred rocks of Ikere-Ekiti assume the role of speakers as we have seen. In the human-nature controversy in environmentalism, the separation of humans from nature rests on the acknowledgement of souls in humans and the denial of the same to their environment (Abrams 74). That elements of material nature possess no souls, are inert and therefore inferior to human subjects is what Osundare's verse challenges by parading rocks that are sentient, mobile and articulate. He is here showing that the non-human world does not comprise only passive objects while leaving human beings with the exclusive appellation of agents and therefore entrenching dualism rather than monism as the going ecological attitude, to the end that human subjects dominate the non-human world.

But as I have suggested, "ordinary" human eyes cannot perceive the rocks displaying these attributes, hence my speculation that if as Osundare's verse figures him, he is familiar with such esoteric acts, that can only be because he has a third eye. Although theorising an Asian situation, Mircea Eliade informs that the two main ways of becoming a shaman (or a herbalist, to use a more Yoruba context-oriented word) are through hereditary transmission and spontaneous vocation (call) (*Shamanism* 13). Niyi Osundare appears to be an only child – in his many interviews that I have read, he often makes reference to his childhood, but his only mention of his siblings that I have seen is to say that they died in infancy before his birth – see interview with Stephen Arnold (445). If we test Osundare against Eliade's first template, the fact that the priestly vocation runs in his lineage might have personal implications for him just as it did for Okigbo, and should also have implications for how we understand "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me."

Osundare is not only able to comprehend the speech of the deities; he is also able to decipher their written code:

I read the cipher tattoed

on the biceps of stone

open like a book of oracles. (*The Eye* 17)

What the poet-persona performs in the above lines is the deciphering of sign language, and as Mircea Eliade tells us, the ability to decipher symbols of nature is a key to understanding its language (*Myth and Reality* 141). Decoding these diverse forms of communication necessarily entails extrasensory perception. "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me" proves Osundare a master of the diverse languages of the environment and hence, of its secrets.

The ecosphere speaks in numerous ways and Christopher Manes avers in his essay on "Nature and Silence" that to ignore the howling, buzzing and gurgling of the biosphere and enthrone the human as the soliloquist of the earth has tragic consequences for the earth (15—26). Broadly speaking, the poem evinces that there exist other forms of speech in the ecosphere apart from human speech. The place of human speech in the ecosphere can be likened to absolute time. Human speech suppresses, effaces and homogenises myriad other voices of biodiversity. Yet, just as a minority of people are still attuned to alternative temporalities to absolute time, there are individuals who understand and are attentive to non-human voices in the biosphere. My argument is that Osundare is likely among that minority.

From an animist stance, the ability to speak places the rocks in the web of biodiversity. And human attention to biodiversity is partial when they discount the voices of other species. In his essay on the Anthropocene, Derek Woods sees as fallout of the epoch an exponential growth in the quantity of reading materials vying for the attention of intellectuals. Every intellectual has a plethora of texts that she or he would want to read but cannot find the time. A resultant effect of that is a shadow archive of unread materials which haunts intellectuals in this epoch with a feeling of desire mingled with loss. Woods christens that archive 'the Great Unread' (202). Since humans are part of the earth's biodiversity, we can extrapolate from his idea a single archive for biodiversity and include among 'the Great Unread' the speeches of non-human nature. These might include speeches of different animals, plants and even "inert" objects such as rocks as we have seen in Osundare's poem.

The communication going on between Osundare and the gods in "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me" has significance that goes beyond the single poem to embrace the sum of his nature poetry. It reveals a crucial source of his environmental ethics. His passion for promoting the health of the environment derives in a major way from the ability to

communicate with the non-human world as revealed in his confession about what he learnt from his grandfather, and which the poem demonstrates. His ethical eco-sensibility validates in a way that is at once literal and literary Hans Peter Duerr's assertion that 'people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them' (qtd in Manes 16). He literally hears from the non-human world and as such feels its heartbeat and is sensitive to its wellbeing. As such, a significant part of his literary output is "poetry-medium priesthood," being a servant to the earth through the medium of poetry, part of which is using his verse to canvass increased human sensitivity to the environment. A major factor responsible for the inception of his environmental sensibility is his spiritual intimacy with non-human nature as evidenced by his gift of communicating with the environment.

Dream Time, Sacred Forces and the Compression of Time and Space

Niyi Osundare's life and poetry furnish ample material for examining a surreal category of time, namely dream time. One of the notable properties of dream time which is key to comprehending this section is temporal compression by way of integrating the past, present and future. In terms of the future, I conceptualise it here from the frame of prophetic time. My sense of the term varies from its popular meaning in temporal discourse. Prophetic time is usually a synonym for the teleological vision of sacred time espoused by Christianity. Like Christian prophetic time, I am interested in examining a timescape marked by prefiguration and fulfilment. Also, like Christian sacred time, I mean a time marked by spiritual presence — but a different kind of spiritual presence. But Christian sacred time is universal in import whereas I am interested to examine only the individual life of the poet-persona Niyi Osundare as characterised by sacred influence, prophecy and fulfilment.

Whereas in Christianity, sacred time is God's property and unfolds His will for humanity, in the poet's case, his history is encoded in sacred time in that his life is a medium for fulfilling the events foretold by the gods before his birth. Much of this is revealed in a lengthy, trauma-inspired surreal post-Hurricane Katrina poem, "What Mother Said."

In this poem in *City Without People: The Katrina Poems*, set in the United States seven nights after the 2005 storm (*City* 95), Osundare is in a dream encounter with his aged mother who is in Nigeria. The poem is imbued with autobiographical nuance because it is an embeddedness of the poet's past, present and prophesied future.

His mother proclaims in the opening stanza, chanting the poet's praise song:

Pride of my Womb

Son of the Farmer

Whose yam dwarfs the mountain

Son of the strong one

Whose *ada* is larger than the loftiest machete

Offspring of the weaver

Who mistresses the loom and the shuttle's song

Offspring of the Indigo Woman

Whose hands are bluer than the bluest sea (*City* 95)

We see in this opening formula the function of memory even in a dream, and the use of nostalgia even in a traumatic condition. Dream time is synonymous with the conflation of past, present and future. And what we see above is the poet's lived past replaying in his dream. This dream image of his mother starts her commiseration by taking the poet to a happier past. The past on which the stanza and my mention of memory are based is the poet's childhood in the presence of his grandmother. The stanza is actually a variant of an oral text on which the poet's grandmother drew for his upbringing. Reminiscing about his childhood in an interview, Osundare recalls this practice of his grandmother's: "Whenever I did some good, my grandmother chanted my *oriki,* and if I did something bad she chanted it as well — and I regretted having done it" (qtd in Deandrea 514). In the stanza, he is reminded of his proud pedigree as the "Son of the Farmer/ Whose yam dwarfs the mountain" and "Offspring of the weaver/ Who mistresses the loom and the shuttle song" (*City* 95). Implicit in that reminder is the lofty heritage he has to uphold by honourable conduct which in this context of tragedy implies courage, cheerfulness and optimism. What is remarkable about this stanza which takes the poet back to the magical time of childhood is the nostalgia it succours him with in his time of loss and trauma.

Gaurav Desai has drawn attention to the forward-looking character of nostalgia. He notes that nostalgia is a "forgetting of trauma and a celebration of recuperable memories that are oriented towards a desirable future" (34—5). But nostalgia is only one of the two forms that memory takes, the other being melancholia. According to Desai, melancholia mourns the

irreparable loss of a dream (35). The melancholic experience of waking life is not forgotten in Osundare's dream. Rather, for him, dream time becomes a "site" for a struggle between nostalgia and melancholia, between happy times which lie in a somewhat remote past, and the immediate trauma of Katrina.

For the rest of the poem that follows, while it reflects the surreal formlessness of dreams in its non-chronological sequence, I have taken liberty to order chronologically my excerpts from its sixteen pages for the sake of analytical convenience. Despite trying to cheer up her son in this dream, his mother's voice quivers with the emotion of an old woman who nearly lost her only child. This tension which subsists in the background of the entire poem reflects the impact of waking life on dream life. It reveals the impact of the scary and traumatic experience of Katrina in the poet's dream life.

It is in the light of danger and trauma that we can apprehend the surreal dramatisation by his mother of the time of the poet's birth. A woman's time of labour is a "non-normative" time par excellence and a time of danger. Feminists argue that clock time is men's time, and that the concrete time of a woman's life is not amenable to its regime. One example of such female deviations is the time of labour and childbirth which in fact is a phenomenological eternity. The old woman is reliving the atemporal phenomenological sensation of labour time, and the pain of that moment is made more acute by the fact that she is confronting the fact of nearly losing the product of that labour who is her only child:

I touch my womb this day

So many seasons after

My body aches at the news of your losses

My knees wobble, my teeth clatter

At the hearing of your cry

Crimson waters of the beginning

Crimson waters of Breaking Moments

Pulsing dawns, breaking twilights

Cradling oceans, inchoate skies

New-laid eggs, warm and wary

Cosmic cracks of breaking shells

Thin-legged stagger of fledgling gaits

Frantic fancy of first feathers

The fright before the flight

The ultimate navigation

Of the waters of the wind

Mapless journeys, itinerant dreams

Sedentary pods, flying seeds

Way-wide rainbow across the sky (*City* 100)

This anxiety-packed confusion describes the atemporal experience of labour. The moment of labour is a moment when different times become mixed together, and a moment that is dense with pain. It is a moment when the concerned woman is filled with a sensation of chaos. And the mention of chaos in this context should recall Katrina. Hearing that she nearly lost her son, the poet's mother goes into a temporal seizure as the frightening news mingles with the recollection of the moment of his birth, the moment of "Cosmic cracks of breaking shells" (*City* 100). Dream enables Osundare not just to relive his own past but also that of his mother. As it were, he becomes a "witness" of his own birth as the event is dramatised. But since it is a dream scene, that the poet is "witnessing" his own birth also means that he is "re-enacting" the said birth. The ideas, emotions and action manifesting in a dream are not just projected to the dreamer, they are also projected by him or her, who is in effect both the actor and spectator of the dream proceedings (Jastrow 56). In this mimesis of his birth, the poet is both the distraught son and the anxious mother.

Like the time of Katrina like the time of birth, both are hair-raising moments of potential tragedy, each with the sensation of temporal suspension while it lasts. Meg Fox has rightly noted that 'The woman in labour, forced by the intensity of the contractions to turn all her attention to them, loses her ordinary, intimate contact with clock-time' (qtd in Martineau 151). Even hearing the sad news sends the poet's mother into a fit of convulsive trepidation

with the same effect on temporal phenomenology. On the atemporal experience of a woman's moment of labour, Meg Fox continues:

> For her, time stands still, moments flow together, the past and future do not lie still behind or before her. In place of sequence, and linear relation, there is an overwhelming richness of sensation, which pulls her attention from the outer world. She is immersed in the immediacy of her experience. (qtd in Martineau 151)

This summarises the sensation of the time of labour depicted in the above stanza. The stanza, with its compression of rich and contrasting references within the same moment is a remarkable simulation of dream time. Virtually all kinds of experience are possible in the dream, with no stricture as usually obtains in waking life. The performance of arrested time in the stanza is a dramatisation of what would have been the old woman's lot had the flood drowned her only child. It would practically have brought her life to a stop by emptying it of meaning and purpose and ushering in delirious pain instead.

She goes on to reiterate the place of the sacred forces in the Yoruba cosmos in the life of her son, even as he is in his abode in America, implicitly crediting them with saving her son from tragedy, thereby taking up the thread of hope in the poem once again:

> Fruit of my Womb
>
> The eyes watching you are many
>
> The eyes watching you are many
>
> Olosunta never sleeps in his majestic heights
>
> Oroole's rescue hands are long and strong
>
> Osun ripples on
>
> In the valley beneath their shadows
>
> Her vigilant waters astir in our veins
>
> The eyes watching you are many
>
> Pride of my prime

The eyes watching you are many

Your limbs are tributaries of a generous river

No alien flood will stem your flow (*City* 101)

This stanza says a lot about the embeddedness of the human subject in a community with sacred atemporal forces situated in his local environment of origin. It also challenges the myth of an inert non-human physical world, of the environment as a passive object and mere background for human exercise of agency. The speaking persona acknowledges and takes solace in the role of the spiritual subjects physically located in her local environment in navigating her son's life no matter how far he is from home. The rock deities Olosunta and Oroole, and Osun (the goddess of River Osun) are mentioned sacred forces watching him from his hometown: "The eyes watching you are many/ Olosunta never sleeps in his majestic heights/ Oroole's rescue hands are long and strong... / Your limbs are the tributaries of a generous river/ No alien floods will stem your flow" (*City* 101). This says something about the chronotope of sacred forces.

Perhaps the most important attribute of the above stanza in its reassuring tone is an expression of gratitude to sacred forces for Osundare's survival of the catastrophic flood. This shows that not only do spiritual forces exist in elemental nature but also that they are interested in human affairs. We are made to understand that his survival of the flood is not a coincidence. To understand the sense it gives about an aspect of the timescape and landscape of divine forces, we need to situate the stanza in disaster time. We need to imagine the eyes literally watching the poet at the exact moment of the flood. "Simultaneity" is the one word that precisely captures this temporal dynamic. What this says about the deities situated in Ikere-Ekiti in faraway Nigeria seeing live the flood threatening their worshipper in the United States is that they operate by a compressed timescape. By temporal compression, I mean simultaneity, as exemplified by their ability to see the flood in real time. As it is unfolding in the United States, it is simultaneously happening "before their eyes," being watched by them from Ikere-Ekiti because their eye sweep is planetary. They do not see events only prophetically but also instantaneously no matter where. For them, "simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguration and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence" (Fabian 24). Temporal coincidence points to the noticing of happenings instantaneously, at their exact clock time.

But the question arises as to what temporal mechanism allows the deities to operate that way. We need to remember that the poet is not the only worshipper of these deities. Their devotees probably count in thousands. And at the time of Hurricane Katrina, someone or another among them might be undergoing an equally remarkable experience needing the attention of the deities. The deities inhabit eternity and are able to simultaneously keep tab on all these temporal beings since, to use a spatial metaphor, time is located before (in front of) eternity. To understand this point we only need to refer to creation narratives that describe how time issued from eternity. When the Bible declares for example in Genesis 1: 1 that "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," there is something preceding that beginning which is not time but eternity and in which God lives. As Osundare's mother resident in Ikere-Ekiti reminds her son of the eyes watching him, we remember that being part of the community embracing these deities and their worshippers, she and her son who is in America are being simultaneously watched by them. Located in eternity, the deities are able to simultaneously see all their devotees because the devotees are all located in time before them. To see a slice of this picture, we need only to remember CCTV technology and imagine a chief executive sitting at his or her office desk, simultaneously monitoring what is going on at different strategic points in his or her establishment on a screen resting on a table placed before him or her. A scene relevant to my point here is in Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (*1954)*,* in the chapter entitled "Television-handed Ghostess." There, the narrator who is lost and has spent a long time wandering in the habitation of spirits, oblivious of how to make his way back to the human world and to his village encounters a female ghost who shows him his hometown on her palm. He recalls that "when she told me to look at her palm and opened it nearly to touch my face, it was exactly as a television, I saw my town, mother, brother and all my playmates" (*Bush of Ghosts* 163). The ability of spiritual forces to monitor what is going on in the human world at any time is what the scene suggests.

For the spatial situation, the world is compressed before the divinities. As such, in no time they are able to locate themselves in the same place with any of their worshippers. The poem shows for instance that to them, New Orleans is not far from Ikere-Ekiti. "Oroole's rescue hands are long and strong," Osundare's mother assures him (*City* 101). For Oroole, intervening in the scene of Katrina is as simple as stretching his hand. What this evinces is that in the sight of spiritual forces the world is much smaller than a global village.

Fragments of Osundare's dream are actually signposts to the Yoruba animist worldview as it relates to divinities and their role in the life of a human subject. Among such is the belief in an inner head, as articulated in the following stanza:

Son of the Elephant

Son of the Buffalo

Son of the one who shakes the forest

Like a mighty wind

You are no mean subject for the sniggering eye

Son of the Mountain which challenges the sky

Your journey is long

Your destiny distinct

You have ploughed the fertile fields

In countless seasons

You will not go the way of the mud

Before harvestide

Your head was molded from the firmest clay

It will never crack like a paper dome

Obatala is not asleep, my Son

He will never let the work of his hand

Dissolve in a strange and surging flood (*City* 96—7)

The *oriki* at the onset of the stanza does more than echo the poet's noble pedigree as set out in the images of the elephant and the buffalo. In referring to her son as the "Son of the one who shakes the forest/ Like a mighty wind," (*City* 96), the career of the poet's father as a herbalist is brought into focus. Using objects of nature as metaphors for characterising human beings shows how elemental nature is valued in Yoruba culture. The lines also point to one of

the instrumental uses of elemental nature, namely, the preparation of medicine; and in so doing, they suggest that the Yoruba traditionally attach an instrumental value to non-human nature rather than recognising its worth in and of itself. The Yoruba subscribe to traditional herbal medicine for various purposes: "if infused with the power of the *orisa* (gods), as antidotes against poison, pain and ill will (Olupona 14). The lines about Osundare's father refer to his expeditions into the forest to gather leaves, roots and herbs, an activity with which the poet became familiar from childhood and which has influenced his verse in obvious and not-so-obvious ways. In *The Eye of the Earth*, this venture of gathering herbs is the primary influence on these lines:

> Incapable of the hardy majesty of iroko,
>
> *Oganwo* wears the surrogate crown
>
> of heights and depths:
>
> wounded by wanton matchets (sic)
>
> bled by the curing cutlass of the *babalawo* (6)

Babalawo is Yoruba for a medicine man. The lines lead us to understand that *oganwo* tree is a raw material of the medicine trade and that it has innate magical power. It is among the spiritual resources of the rain forest.

As for the assertion by Osundare's mother that "You are no mean subject for the sniggering eye," its rationale seems enclosed in the preceding and succeeding lines. Both lines encode the sacred forces to which the poet is connected. The preceding lines make clear the poet's spiritually powerful ancestry, while the succeeding one, "Son of the Mountain which challenges the sky" (*The Eye* 6) is a reference to the rock/mountain gods of Ikere-Ekiti, a source of sacred power ensuring insulation from harm.

As for the figure of the "sniggering eye," it articulates the harmful intents of malevolent forces which, remarkably, are also usually projected spiritually. The structure of the stanza shows a connection of flood with "sniggering eye." This gestures to a belief that spiritual forces manipulate the elements. This could be through curses by malevolent human agents. The Yoruba believe in the efficacy of such oral pronouncements in the life of the target victim (Olupona 99). Such belief is demonstrated in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010) by a character who attributes the sudden death of her parents to

the pronouncement of a curse upon them by a fellow villager: "Somebody must have put a curse on them. People in our village didn't like to see others doing well. 'Why else would a log slip from a lorry and crush them on a road they travelled every day?' This was the question I asked the perplexed mourners who came to pay their respects" (121).

In Osundare's lines above, the belief in potent human ill will is connected with the most significant idea encoded in the stanza, namely the head, in the line, "Your head was molded from the firmest clay" (*City* 96). This refers to the ontological belief in predestination, which is symbolised by the *ori* (head). The line casts a significant light on the poet's sense of self. His apprehension of his place in the world derives from a belief in a grand destiny epitomised by his quality head.

The head symbolises individual destiny in Yoruba cosmology (Abimbola 113). Existential matters such as poverty and wealth, brevity and longevity of lifespan are all tied to an individual's head. To refer to *ori* at this time evinces a strong belief in that element which is so venerated by the Yoruba that it is worshipped as a god (Olupona 70, Abimbola 114). "Every man's Ori is regarded as his personal god who is expected to be more interested in his personal affairs than the other gods who are regarded as belonging to everybody"(Abimbola 114). Additionally, every child's head is symbolic of a prophecy of the child's future, a prophecy that can either be realised, suppressed or truncated. Considered against this worldview, Osundare's entire lifetime becomes a medium for unfolding the prophecy encapsulated in the destiny with which he was endowed at the time of his creation (before his conception) by Obatala, the creator god whose praise epithet is "the owner of the good clay" (Olupona 14—8). It should not be forgotten that a good head is only a sign of potential greatness. It is not a mark of finality. Whether the destiny will flower or be suppressed or truncated is determined by many factors including the possible interference of "sniggering eyes" (*City* 96), hence the need to court the favour of divinities including Olosunta, Oroole and Osun. The two previous sections of this chapter show some of the ways in which the poet has been courting the support of the deities. Destiny, or life, is not only created by divinities, it is also sustained by them.

That Niyi Osundare is realising his own destiny is evident in this stanza:

Pride of my Life

Was it not just one moon ago

That the world gathered

At the fireplace of your voice

Was it not just one moon ago

That I sat, head high,

In your hall of honour

My eyes bright, my heart glowing

My mind spinning as my *akeke* did

In my days at the loom (*City* 106)

This is a self-explanatory stanza in view of the towering status the poet has achieved on many fronts: Distinguished Professor, winner of the Noma Award (1991), joint winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (1986), winner of the Nigerian National Order of Merit (2014) (his country's highest award for intellectual achievement), and many other honours. The stanza could be taken for instance to be a recollection of the occasion of the conferment of one of such honours. If we view the world from the prism of this Yoruba ontological belief in destiny, what it implies is that the earth is populated by billions of distinct destinies. Each individual navigates his or her destiny amidst a complex of other similar, contrasting, complementary and conflicting destinies, including the "sniggering eyes."

The cheerful tone of the stanza is in marked contrast with much of the otherwise tension-charged poem. While one aspect of the poem shows the poet still haunted by the emotion of fear, the other asserts hope. Freudian psychology sheds light on this sort of scenario by explaining that both the cheerfulness and fear are the same: "If, in danger at sea, one man dreams of a rescue and another of a wreck, they both express the same hope and the same fear (Jastrow 57). This means that Osundare's dream is also a "site" of contest between fear and hope.

But even while the poet uses his mother as a mouthpiece to hold up his eventful life, it is clear that he regards his accomplishments with no sense of surprise. This follows from the fact that he is imbued with a strong sense of destiny, being conscious that his life is encoded in prophetic time. That a place for him is assured among the eminent is for the poet a matter of destiny. For a Yoruba animist, consciousness of destiny is tied to a belief in Ifa, the god of

divination. Yoruba sense of prophetic time is framed by this system of geomancy controlled by one of its national gods. Ifa (also known as Orunmila) (Olupona 113) is one of the national gods of the Yoruba. Ifa is known as the god of wisdom and controls the system of prophecy in Yoruba animist religion. In a stanza teeming with divinities, the poet's mother invokes this god among others:

> Oh you Rocks, you Rivers
>
> Esidale, Spirit of *Ori* and Origins
>
> Orunmila, Father of Sooth and Truth
>
> Iyami Iyami, you Wonder-birds that fly without wings (*City* 108)

In playing the role of divination, Orunmila mediates between individuals and other gods who influence human destiny and life, making known their will and divining the future of an individual, as 'the mouthpiece and public relations officer of all the other Yoruba gods' (Abimbola 9). Orthodox modernist worldview would cast soothsaying as superstitious. But here we have Osundare, with autobiographical authority, putting "sooth" and "truth" together, styling the patron god of Yoruba soothsayers "Father of Sooth and Truth" (City 108). To him, Ifa (Orunmila) divination is epistemological rather than merely ontological. Yoruba animists maintain a close relationship with this god in order to navigate the future with clarity in the short term and long term:

> In traditional Yoruba society, the Yoruba consult Ifa before they do anything important. At the birth of a new child, Ifa is usually consulted to find out what would be the fortunes and problems of the new child on earth ... In sickness, in contemplating a journey, in considering the choice of a life partner and at any other important turn in their lives, the Yoruba usually consult Ifa for guidance and advice. (Abimbola 10)

The above stanza also reveals the different levels in which deities operate in Yoruba animist religion: the individual, lineage, village and national levels. These are hierarchies of identity. The *Ori,* or inner head and destiny is the poet's personal deity, the Rivers in Osundare's poetic imaginary are a synecdoche for River Osun, the lineage deity of the Osundares ("Osundare" means "Osun has declared my innocence"), the Rocks are Olosunta and Oroole, Ikere-Ekiti village deities, and Orunmila is a Yoruba national deity. Like his

mother, the poet believes in a life embedded in different hierarchies of spiritual habitats epitomised by these divinities. But the last line stands out because it is not an address to any deity – "Iyami Iyami, you Wonder-birds that fly without wings" (*City* 108). Yet, the line pays homage to a potent spiritual presence in the Yoruba cosmos. The forces who are for the poet *iya mi iya mi*, (my mother my mother) are the witches in the Yoruba cosmos.

As a present and potent force, witches are being courted with their pet name. Knowing their capacity for harm, the Yoruba often humour them with the pet name *awon iya* (mothers). Like gods and spirits, they have an interest in the lives of people around them. Witches are not known for exercising their agency in a beneficial way. Yet they are known to be a formidable threat to the life prospects of whomever they choose to molest. And unlike deities, they cannot be appeased with sacrifice; hence, it becomes wisdom to curry their good disposition through flattery. The Yoruba scholar Rowland Abiodun makes a point about Yoruba women which is particularly pertinent to witches. According to him, they are 'openly loved, secretly feared' (qtd in Olupona 136). The element of fear with which Yoruba women are regarded is a subtle form of demonization of women in a patriarchal society. It is also related to suspicions of witchcraft practices which are seen to underlie their independence and success, especially in trading (Quayson 145). Witches are otherwise called *eleye (*birds) by the Yoruba, and that names the form they assume whenever they want to fly to unleash terror on a target victim. That use of open show of affection to mask secret fear is at work in Osundare's verse where he calls them his mothers and eulogises them as wonder birds.

He brings together in one line their pet name and derogatory name although he takes care to prettify the latter by calling them "Wonder-birds" (*City* 108) rather than just birds. Osundare by calling the witches *iya* (mother) indulges in pejorative synecdoche, using a title generally used to refer to women with children to denote witches specifically. Witches are at once human and supernatural, and from the latter aspect, spiritual laypersons are helpless objects of their molestation often taking the form of loss, death or disease. They are a known source of "sniggering eyes."

Osundare credits Yoruba witches with the ability to fly without wings (*City* 108). But do they indeed fly without wings? Jacob Olupona recalls a revealing meeting with a medicine man in Ile-Ife in 1989. He recalls seeing a woman in her sixties stepping out of the compound of the medicine man as he (Olupona) approached, and that she ignored his greeting. The following conversation shortly ensued between Olupona and his host, Baba Moru:

Baba Moru: *O mo on rin* — you have come at the right time! You had asked about *aje* (witches) yesterday?

Olupona: Yes, Baba.

Baba Moru: Did you meet a woman coming down the stairs?

Olupona: Yes.

Baba Moru: I am sure she did not greet you. She is one of them.

Olupona: But I thought witches are invisible, Baba?

Baba Moru: Yes, they are, but we {Baba Moru and the *aje*} maintain a very close relationship. This particular woman came to plead with me that I release her wings, which I took yesterday because she will not leave my clients alone. I informed her that unless she releases the soul of my client, whom she wanted to devour, I would not release her wings. (101)

Baba Moru's revelation suggests that the witches do indeed fly with wings. But more importantly, their ability to transmute into birds and fly is a testament to sacred power. In his book *Animism*: *Respecting the Living World* (2006), Graham Harvey has pointed out in this connection that in animist cultures, the ability to change into different forms is proof that a person is powerful (49). On the question of what their presence portends, Baba Moru's unfortunate client could be a case in point in terms of how formidable they can be as enemies. In relation to Osundare's near-death experience, belief in the existence of malevolent, yet potent force of witchcraft means a belief that the cause of that experience can be unorthodox. More precisely, it means that the role of witchcraft cannot be ruled out. Witches are capable of causing or manipulating environmental disaster. They can cause their target victim to be affected by one of such disasters for instance.

The Yoruba recognise a cosmos teeming with powerful spiritual forces and the *aje* are one of them. In the Yoruba world, witches are liminal individuals straddling the space between humans and animals. A bird is either an "ordinary" bird or a witch. This ability to assume different biological forms reveals that among the Yoruba, the boundary between humans and animals is flexible. The ability to transmute to a bird ramifies into knowledge of nature in ways outside the scope of human epistemologies, in the manner of the spirit child

Azaro in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), who can at times understand animal language. To be a bird ramifies into the suspension of human language and adoption of the language of birds. By implication, a witch can literally comprehend the languages of humans and of animals.

To return to "What Mother Said," that Osundare nearly got drowned is an ironic fact which does not get lost on his mother. This is because the poet has what might be called a special relationship with water. He traces his origin to water, and is named for the goddess of River Osun whose gift his parents believed him to be. His first given name is Oluomi (water goddess). His parents only "rechristened" him Oluwaniyi (God has honour) as a "school name" when he was about to start formal education. Fearing that the Christian missionaries who ran his would-be school might reject the name "Oluomi," they also named him Oluwaniyi as a gesture towards Christianity (Osundare qtd in Arnold 445), hence the name with which he is now popularly known. In the introductory chapter, I have pointed out one of the benefits of his special relationship with water, namely, his reliance on its therapeutic property, that as a child, whenever he was sick, he found cure only in water. His mother thus laments about Katrina: "I heard about the flood's savage havoc and asked: / How can Water do this to her own son?" (*City* 96). This initial capitalisation and accordant gendering of "Water" shows that she does not view water as an abiotic matter. She sees water as a living and sentient being with agency.

Conclusion

This chapter has been an attempt to conceptualise the Yoruba animist worldview on temporality and nature through the prism of a poet's life. Niyi Osundare's deep involvement in Yoruba animist religion makes him a veritable subject for this investigation, and he does not shy away from drawing on his life experience to articulate a vision of the world. This chapter has examined his relationship with the gods of his hometown and other gods in the Yoruba cosmos, highlighting through him the differing roles that the gods play in the lives of their worshippers. Concepts of sacred time and profane time and the differences between them have been examined, and the finding is that although the human subject in the Yoruba animist world lives in profane linear time, sacred time is a site to which he or she regularly returns in order to access power. The chapter has speculated that Osundare's deep interest in environmentalism is traceable not only to his being raised in a peasant and agrarian setting, but also his cultivating a deep and esoteric knowledge of the non-human world from his

father and paternal grandfather who were both herbalists. That knowledge is seen to manifest in his ability to speak with the non-human world. In the final section, the chapter has examined other temporal concepts such as dream time, prophetic time and the allied concept of destiny with which the Yoruba believe that every individual is endowed. Witches constitute a class of dreaded individuals who wield sacred power in the Yoruba universe and the mechanism for coping with them in that culture is to flatter them, otherwise they can manipulate time and nature against their target victim.

CHAPTER THREE

ANIMIST REALISM: THE SPOKEN WORD AND THE CREATION OF AN ENCHANTED AND LIVING EARTH

...voiceprints sculpted the Earth

Niyi Osundare, *The Word Is an Egg*

> 'It is said that it is so and therefore it is so'; that was the sentence in which an Eskimo of the Netsilik tribe expressed forcefully the magical truth, that is, the power to make real which the spoken word possesses.
>
> Raffaele Pettazzoni, "The Truth of Myth"

As deducible from the title of this chapter, its thematic concerns can be categorised into three: first, to study the mystical nature of the spoken word as conceived by Osundare; second, to review his portrayal of how the earth was created; third, to deconstruct his message that the earth is generally alive and enchanted. These three related messages are fused in one movement – the final movement of *The Word Is an Egg*. As such, I deconstruct them concurrently. Other sources I draw on are complementary to the message embedded in that movement. In reading the poetry, I keep in mind that Osundare consciously projects a Yoruba animist worldview. As such, I interrogate his deployment of animist formal strategies.

Introduction

Niyi Osundare attempts in his poetry of cosmic genesis to advance a conviction that the earth was indeed created by a supernatural being, which is a challenge to the big bang theory authorised by the scientific sensibility. But in attempting a depiction of the process of creation, he fuses varying, contrasting and at times conflicting creation paradigms. I want to read his "earth history," his representation of how the earth originated, from the purview of three creation archetypes outlined by the philosopher Milton K. Munitz in his book *Space, Time and Creation*. In doing so, I also focalise the point that his concern goes beyond the creation event in and of itself. He utilises creation as an organising principle to bring to the foreground some of his animist convictions. Such convictions which are highlighted in this chapter include the transcendental character of the spoken word, the belief that every object of nature is alive and sentient as shown in the way the objects exhibit characteristics of living things, and that the entire earth is at once physical and mystical. To think through these ideas,

I have adopted Harry Garuba's term, "animist realism" as against the more popular "magical realism." Garuba argues that "magical realism" is too narrow a term to cover the devices of representation allowed by an animist conception of the world ("Explorations" 272). Considered against the distinction made between the sacred and the profane in regard to nature in the previous chapter, this chapter shows an evolution in Osundare's animist poetics from acknowledging life in some objects of elemental nature to advancing the belief that all of the earth is imbued with life.

On the three archetypes underlying all stories of the earth's creation, Munitz writes:

> The interpretations of the manner of origination of the world consisted in the extended use given to ideas derived from certain familiar facts of experience. One was based upon the idea of making something by hand, or *craftsmanship;* another was based on the fact of *birth and growth* or the phenomenon of organisms developing from seeds or eggs; a third was based on the *evocative power of authoritative command*. (9, italics in the original)

Osundare's creation verse evinces an integration of all three archetypes: creation as craftsmanship, creation as procreation (the sexual activity of conceiving and bearing biological offspring), and creation through the verbalisation of a thought. Concomitantly, it is also a fusion of differing religious traditions and cosmologies.

However, Osundare's overriding thematic agenda in the whole of the collection, *The Word Is an Egg,* is a deliberation on the nature of the spoken word. Thus, even in the last movement on which this chapter is primarily based, the word remains a motif no matter what the message in any individual passage. Even in passages depicting other creation archetypes, the word still plays a major role. With analytical convenience in mind, I consider the word in both integrative and instrumental ways. In the first case, I study it as a trope; in the second, I privilege other tropes which the word also facilitates.

Creation and the Word

In this segment, I use the subheading "Creation and the Word" rather than "Creation by Word" in order to signal that its concern goes beyond the creation of the earth per se. It starts from how the word created the earth and moves on to also deconstruct other ways in which Osundare thematises the sacred nature of the spoken word. That pattern of development simulates Osundare's style in the movement.

Osundare casts the word as a subject that is alive and powerful. He thus figures creation as proof of the sacred power of the spoken word. Thus, the movement is as much about the word as it is about the creation of the earth and its nature. But how did the poet cultivate such animist sensibility? In the ten-and-half page movement opening with "In the Word was the beginning," (*The Word* 82) Osundare is influenced by Yoruba ontological belief. Something of that belief is contained in a monograph *Ayajo, Ohun Enu Ife* (The Oral Tradition of the Ife People) in which a local historian of Ife, Chief Fabunmi highlights the sacred power of oral poetic narratives and their capacity to convey meaning and exercise effect. According to him, "sacred incantations and curses affect actions and events" (qtd in Olupona 99). In another passage, writing about the town of Idanre, Olupona makes reference once again to the Yoruba belief in the esoteric power instinct in the spoken word. He characterises Idanre as a city whose "inhabitants are particularly famous for their control over and use of traditional medicine and the spoken word (ohun), the magical or sacred formulas to make things happen" (39). What is particularly of interest to me is the similarity between traditional medicine and the spoken word in Olupona's summation – both are imbued with sacred power that causes things to happen. For the poet, being from a lineage of herbalists, he "would accompany his diviner-physician paternal grandfather to 'gather roots and herbs ... incantations were needed to stir them to life' (Deandrea 495). Such experiences must be a matter of reflection for him.

In specific relation to creation, Osundare states:

> *The word was – let me say, is 'sacrosanct.' It carries a lot of meaning. My grandmother always said: 'The word is an egg. Be careful with it, because once it drops you can never put the pieces together again.' So every word has its reason for being, and the reason for being is its meaning. Not just passive meaning, but also transitive. The word, according to Yoruba belief, converts the world from 'it' to 'itness'* (qtd in Deandrea 495, italics in the original).

He provides an alternate phrasing of the idea of 'itness,' thus: 'the world couldn't have come into being except through the operations of the word' (qtd in Deandrea 514). He clearly means that the word, in its "transitive" force converted the world from an idea, a thought, to a physical reality. And calling the word "sacrosanct" is clearly meant to indicate that it is sacred. Thus, Osundare depicts creation through the power of authoritative command (as an act of verbalisation of a thought):

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

When beardless mists traversed the Sky,
Liquid as dreams, frail as foetal flowers;
Inchoate transfigurations drilled the eye
Like invisible mirrors. The Syllable whispered,
Plucking an eternity of Murmurs;
In this imagination of parting lips
Unborn tonalities grappled with Space

And silence. Grey dreams beckoned green robes
A fevered tongue broke the shell,
Spilling the innocent miracle of the yolk,
The Wind's fledgling temper, and the Seven Murmurs
Which rode seven storms, nomadic like winged clouds.
A metallic amplitude unmuted the Void;
Silence was solace, awaiting the Tongue's undoing (*The Word* 82)

The excerpt above opens with the poet's rumination on the spiritual aspect and agency of the word. For readers who are familiar with the Bible, one striking thing about the first line, "In the Word was the beginning" (*The Word* 82) is its Biblical origin. It is a reiteration of John 1: 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Appropriating Christian orthodoxy has two intended thematic implications for Osundare: one is to show that the word has power, two, to demonstrate that the spoken word is a spiritual presence on earth. But the lines do not only carry a ring of the Bible. By echoing

the first sentence in the introductory chapter of what is perhaps the most successful text in that tradition, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road,* they also align with the Nigerian tradition of animist realist literature. Okri's line goes "In the beginning there was a river" (3). The two succeeding sentences in that novel are also crucial for my argument and they read: "The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry" (3). Since despite being Urhobo himself, Okri steeps his novel in Yoruba cosmology, and since the second and third sentences in the first chapter of the same novel as cited above link the primal river to the Yoruba god of iron and guardian of the road, Ogun, Osundare's echo of the first sentence aims to make us understand that his text is similarly taking us to the enchanted world of Yoruba animism.

It is by the logic of animism that the essence of the road is not just that of a physical path but also a belly by which it is "always hungry" (Okri 3). In other words, the road also embodies the essence of Ogun who expects to be pacified with sacrifice by travellers in order for him not to use them to assuage his hunger (Garuba "Explorations" 269). This animist heritage of nature's dualistic signification as physical and supernatural is what Osundare's verse appropriates and foregrounds. In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri fleetingly presages Osundare's theme on the power of the spoken word in an exchange between the narrator, Azaro and a political chieftain in Madame Koto's restaurant:

> 'You will die!' I said to the man.
>
> The voices stopped. The man rose from the bench, his face quivering under the superstitious fear of a child's curse.
>
> 'Say I won't die!' he demanded.
>
> 'No!'
>
> He came towards me ...
>
> 'Take it back!'
>
> 'No'! (279)

For a man to be so frightened because of the curse of a boy to demand frantically that he retract the curse goes to show that he actually believes that unless the curse is retracted, his end is near. That is to say that Azaro has pronounced his death into being.

But to return directly to Osundare's first line and the idea of a beginning – "In the Word was the beginning" (*The Word* 82), — the line bids us ask in what sort of word was the beginning. The signal event of creation warrants a belief that it was the word as charged with sacred power. That is in consonance with the sense of the word in which my reading is premised, one supplied in the movement by Osundare's deliberate use of the Yoruba word *Oro*, explained by him in a footnote to mean "The Word, as repository of power and transformations" (*The Word* 92). "Power" as the context suggests, is used in the spiritual sense of "something akin to a (sic) mystical electricity" (Harvey, *Animism* 129). *Oro* is thus spiritual and, like electric power, transitive. That transitive nature is what enables it to convert a thought to the earth in the action of creation.

Creation as a product of an authoritative command is logically allied to what mythologists David Adams Leeming and Margaret Adams Leeming categorise as creation by thought, since the word and thought are inseparable. Like creation by thought, creation by authoritative command "suggests a mystical sense of the world as contained within the mind of God, the world as a thought that could be forgotten" (59). This also means that God was in existence before the creation. In the pre-creation instant, the eternity antedating the beginning, silence stood between the earth as a thought and its manifestation as a physical reality. Osundare captures this eternal moment in the line, "Unborn tonalities grappled with Space/ And Silence" (*The Word* 82). We need at this point to recall Osundare's assertion that the spoken word converted the world from 'it' to 'itness' (qtd in Deandrea 495).

The third line in the stanza goes: "When the Wind, tremulous around the Void" (*The Word* 82). The line conveys a feeling of suspense heralding an epochal event and positions the wind as one of the elements that antedate creation. It also appeals to the traditional symbolism of the wind as synonymous with transformation, as in the cliché, the wind of change. But that is only to enhance the magical aura of the word which will finally do what the "tremulous" or hesitant "Wind" is unable to do. The "Void" speaks of the uncreated state, the primal vacuum that creation was meant to fill. Osundare imagines that surreal pre-creation state as "Liquid as dreams, frail as foetal flowers." (*The Word* 82)

The philosopher Czeslaw Lejewski speculates on the way the concept of pre-creation void was imagined among Pythagorean philosophers, as something "opposite to concrete or 'full' things, yet at the same time it was thought to be real" (30). In other words, the void is a somewhat paradoxical concept that is at once abstract and material. It thus parallels

Osundare's conception of the spoken word. Speaking in the context of drama, Osundare makes a point which is relevant to understanding his creation verse: "To me, the word is not just an abstract phenomenon. It is giving (sic) life by the human voice" (qtd in Deandrea 497). This statement of belief which he tries to concretise in the movement is now dramatised as the word takes the place of silence, abolishing the gap between the world as a thought in the mind of God and as a material reality. In the same atemporal moment of suspense and silence, when "Silence was solace, awaiting the Tongue's undoing"(*The Word* 82), the word, charged with power, somewhat "steps forward" to undo the silence and perform what the wind cannot do, thus "A fevered tongue broke the shell,/ Spilling the innocent miracle of the yolk" (*The Word* 82). This yolk then becomes the earth. This is a restatement of the message encoded in the first line, "In the Word was the beginning" (*The Word* 82). But as stated earlier, the trope of creation by word is more about the nature of the word than the details of creation.

The word has a double valence in the scheme of Osundare's poetry. His appropriation of the image of Jesus Christ in "In the Word was the beginning" humanises and spiritualises the spoken word. In the Christian tradition, divinity and humanity are one in the person of Jesus Christ, and He is called The Word of God. But for Osundare to employ a Christian creation frame which crucially attributes personhood to the Word is only a way of using a popular conceptual structure to depict his own animist conviction.

Unlike the traditional interpretation of the Christian creation story that he is appropriating, Osundare is not concerned about using creation to evidence the power of God; rather, God is only for him a dim background used to demonstrate the mystical power of the word. He effaces the role of God in such a way that the word seems to be a person.

We can see this formulation of the word as a powerful person in Osundare's lines "The Syllable whispered,/ Plucking an eternity of murmurs;/ In this imagination of parting lips" (*The Word* 82). The Syllable which whispers elicits the response of language, an eternity of murmurs. In other words, the role of the word in creating the world transcends the physical transformation of chaos to an orderly form and also embraces imposing another type of order by making the world intelligible. The initial capitalisation of "Syllable" is not gratuitous. Indeed, it is not unique in the architecture of the movement. Rather, such initial capitalisation is one of the movement's pervasive characteristics. It is a major device in the animist formal strategy deployed by Osundare in the section and is in accord with his attempt

to foreground the word. Its aim can be found in the idea of animist materialism which will shortly be discussed, and also the animist notion of personhood which will be explained later.

Creation by word such as in the Christian tradition makes us understand that the work of creation, the work of transformation of chaos into order is incomplete until the word has given distinctive names to objects in the world, therefore instilling subjectivity in them.

As part of creation:

A talking tribe took form

In the belly of the deep,

The first waves announced the advent of Speech

...

And the Word named the Sea

And the Sea named the Sky

And the Sky named the Sole

And the Sole named the Palm

And the Palm named the Womb

And the Womb named the Tomb (*The Word* 86)

This naming, in all its complexity, which captures the sea and the sky and everything in between them is for Osundare the perfection of creation, and is inconceivable in isolation of the word. It is part of the process of creating order out of chaos. The climax of it, which is reiterated as a refrain in a part of the movement is that "The Word named God" (*The Word* 87).

But as I alluded earlier, Osundare in writing about creation aims to project his animist vision. In doing so, he deploys the technique that Harry Garuba has christened "*animist materialism,*" a term which he explains to be "grounded in a religious consciousness of the material world" ("Explorations" 268, italics in the original). Garuba is referring to the animist ideology which locates divinity in material nature. Tracking this phenomenon in the works of some African, African American and Latin American writers, he concludes that "The major

strategy adopted by these writers is to ascribe a material aspect or existence to what are perhaps only really ideas or states of mind in the manner in which animism imputes a spiritual dimension to material objects" ("Explorations" 272). In essence, these writers materialise or embody incorporeal concepts in a way analogous to animism's creed of spiritualising the physical world. This concept perhaps best describes Osundare's treatment of the word in the last movement of *The Word Is an Egg*.

The movement under discussion is rich in the devices of animist materialism. One of them is the device of reification. In accordance with his aim of demonstrating the potency of *Oro* (the word as imbued with transformative power) and portraying that it is a means of enchanting the world, Osundare gives it materiality. Thus, we meet *Oro* endowed with flesh and bones in these lines evoking the pre-creation instant:

When Earth was Water and brittle Wind

And the Sky was a brief breath

Above the clouds

The Word roamed the Void

Fleshed in the Vowel, boned by the Consonant (*The Word* 86)

That is the word in an embodied form about to commence creation. Giving the word physical embodiment is in consonance with animism's "almost total refusal to countenance unlocalized, unembodied, unphysicalized gods and spirits" (Garuba, "Explorations" 267). Such device is at work in "Fleshed in the Vowel, boned by the Consonant" (*The Word* 86). The word is hereby given a physical make-up with vowels and consonants. Thus embodied and humanised, the word may now proceed to its task of transforming chaotic matter to an orderly world. *Oro*, imbued with power, finally acts to create the earth: "And voiceprints sculpted the Earth/ From coastlines to craggy heights" (*The Word* 86). These lines are clearly repetitive since instead of supplying details of the process of the earth's creation, they essentially restate that the word created the earth. But writing creation poetry without much detail is in a sense a mimesis of the world's creation stories since they are not known for being detailed. As such, while the reader looks for details in Osundare's creation poetry, what keep surfacing are diverse forms of repetition.

But in connection with the concept of materialism, perhaps the most profound interpretation that can be adduced to the lines, "And voiceprints sculpted the Earth/ From coastlines to craggy heights" (*The Word* 86) – is that they signify that the earth is materialised word in the way that commodity is materialised time in Marxist labour discourse. In a comment relevant to this trope, Karin Barber suggests that speaking is practically the same as taking action, noting that "Speech act theory has enabled us to ask what a speaker is *doing* in uttering certain words" (3, italics in the original). In essence, to speak is to do. The work of *Oro* in relation to creation concretises that conception of utterance as action.

As surreal as the idea of the word embodied with flesh and bones is, it is not far-fetched in an animist universe. As such, Osundare's lines above vaguely recall a scene where voices materialise in *The Famished Road.* In the scene, the words are spirits on a visit to Madame Koto's bar, and the spirit-child hero present in the bar recounts:

> Soon he (a customer) was asleep and began to snore. I had been looking at him intently for a while when I became aware that the bar was filling up. I looked round and saw no one except the man. But the bar was full of drunken and argumentative voices, laughter, vitriolic abuses, and the unrestrained merriment of hard-drinking men. I went and told Madame Koto about it.
>
> 'Rubbish!' she said, following me.
>
> When we got into the bar the voices had materialised and the place was quite full.
>
> 'Plenty of people,' she said, eyeing me. (125)

That it takes a liminal individual like Azaro to notice this materialism goes to show how esoteric the idea both authors are advancing is.

Temporally, what Osundare has done by superimposing the Christian creation story on a creation motif drawn from Yoruba cultural resource base (the belief that the world could not have come about except by the operations of the word, as he alludes to in a previously cited interview) is superimposition of the linear, progressive time of Christianity on animist time. Wole Soyinka describes traditional Yoruba thought as predicated on "not a linear conception of time but a cyclical reality" (*Myth* 10). He categorically points out that this cyclical temporality in which are intertwined the world of the living, the dead and the unborn

is hardly reconcilable with "the Judeo-Christian theology of 'In the beginning, God was'' (10). Thus, Osundare performs a remarkable act by marrying the same linear Christian temporality with his Yoruba animist temporal heritage. His poetry thus figures as a crucible for forging a unity between cyclicality and linearity, between the traditional and the modern.

By being tagged to linear Christian time, the Yoruba creation ontology lays claim to ideas of progress attaching to that temporal paradigm. Osundare's use of a Christian timeframe operates within the dialectic of accommodation which is a means through which the Yoruba religion has been negotiating its encounter with exogenous religions, and through which animists such as Osundare have been doing the same thing at individual levels. It is a striking variant of the "animist unconscious," Harry Garuba's term for "a form of collective subjectivity that structures being and consciousness in predominantly animist societies and cultures" ("Explorations" 269). I describe it as striking because of its inherent paradox – it involves poaching from religions with which Yoruba animist religion would normally be viewed as opposed. This tendency for accommodation which often operates in the form of appropriating symbols and metaphors from the exogenous religions of Christianity and Islam by Yoruba animists has been remarked upon severally by Jacob Olupona. In one example which I have selected because it can shed more light on the juxtaposition of Christian and animist beliefs about the word in the foregoing analysis, Olupona writes:

> Ile-Ife traditionalists freely borrow Christian and Muslim metaphors to convey meanings in their own tradition. Having accepted the reality of Muslim and Christian influences in their own tradition and worldview, they use the new traditions as regular points of reference for making comparative and ontological observations. Many diviners were educated in Christian elementary schools or Muslim Arabic and Islamic Schools, and their knowledge of these traditions helps them convey the truth of their own tradition. (186)

This attitude of receptivity falls within the phenomenon that Wole Soyinka has described as "the continuing evolution of tribal wisdom through an acceptance of the elastic nature of knowledge as its one reality, as signifying no more than reflections of the original coming-into-being of a manifestly complex reality" (*Myth* 53). In the case of creation, Osundare, beneficiary of missionary education, product of Christ's School Ado-Ekiti, in seeking to elaborate a hazy Yoruba belief with Christian material both exploits and lends credence to the elasticity of his people's worldview.

But by appropriating elements of a rival religion, the practice of accommodation puts to question that element of tension seen to be existing between the two and the varying worldviews which they represent. I do not mean that Christianity and animism are similar in their teachings. I mean instead, with specific reference to temporality, that the cyclical paradigm and linear paradigm with which animism and Christianity are respectively associated are not irreconciliable. Harry Garuba has articulated the general cultural import of this phenomenon in a way that is relevant to Osundare's poetry and the Yoruba worldview which forms its superstructure:

> A recurrent theme in accounts of the meeting between traditional ways of life and modernity is the clash of cultures and the agony of the man or woman caught in the throes of opposing conceptions of the world and of social life. In these narratives a binary structure is usually erected, and within this world the agonistic struggle of the protagonist is drawn. The animistic trajectory of accommodation ... appears to belie the rigid binarisms of this narrative and to undermine the agonistic relationship often drawn by an elite in search of sites of agency and identity. What may be much closer to the reality is that animist logic subverts this binarism ... by reabsorbing historical time into the matrices of myth and magic. For the mass of ordinary people, animism cushions the movement into modernity by providing cultural certainties, which create the "illusion" of a continuum rather than a chasm, thus giving an imposed subjective order to the chaos of history ... Animist culture thus opens up a whole new world of poaching possibilities, *prepossessing the future*, as it were, by laying claim to what in the present is yet to be invented. It is on account of this ability to prepossess the future that continual re-enchantment becomes possible. (270–1, italics in the original)

Christianity discountenances the magical view of the earth in which it is believed to be generally enchanted. Yet, Osundare has appropriated its theological and temporal mechanism to advance an enchanted vision of the world. Tagging a Yoruba animist belief to linear time and using Christian imagery performs for Osundare a symbiotic duty with his use of the English medium. They bring his people's enchanted vision of the world to a global audience in terms that are familiar to that audience, hence ensuring the survival and global reach of that vision – prepossessing the future, to echo Harry Garuba. In this connection, they

elicit attention to the Yoruba cultural base which has to be penetrated for the indigenous material to yield its meaning to the global readership.

To return to the poet's thoughts on the nature of the word, if there is still at this point any doubt left about his overriding concern with the word, he dispels such with a story. The aim of this folktale-like story is clearly to show that he does not embody the word as an end in itself but as an ancillary device to concretise and demonstrate the personhood of the word. But before proceeding to a hermeneutic analysis of the story, I ought to now comment on my use of the word "personhood." To understand Osundare's musing on creation, the term ought to be apprehended from an animist rather than a Western epistemic perspective. In his extensive discussion of the animist concept of personhood, Graham Harvey makes clear that animists recognise a far wider diversity of persons than the modernist worldview. Rather than reserving the term "person" for only humans, deities and angels, animists recognise a much wider diversity of persons. Harvey points out that central to animist ideas of personhood is the "opposition between 'persons' and 'objects.' Persons are those with whom other persons interact with varying degrees of reciprocity. Persons may be spoken *with*. Objects, by contrast, are usually spoken *about*" (*Animism* xvii, italics in the original).

The extract can be summarised thus: objects are inert, and whatever is alive and volitional rather than inert is a person, not an object. In his exposition on the notion of personhood among the Ojibwe, one of Canada's indigenous (and animist) peoples, Harvey identifies not just birds, fish and some rocks but, remarkably, also seasonal stories among their categories of persons. While to my mind there is nothing that the Yoruba call seasonal stories, there is something in their culture roughly corresponding to the way the Ojibwe regard seasonal stories. It is called *odu Ifa* (Ifa divination texts) and will be explained later. Osundare's handling of the word perfectly tallies with the Ojibwe ontology. The Ojibwe treat seasonal stories the way all other ecological categories they recognise as persons are treated. Among them, "seasonal stories are bounded by respectful etiquette that shows they are living persons" (Harvey, *Animism* 41). The characters in the seasonal stories are also regarded as living. It is crucial to note that the Ojibwe do not merely indulge metaphor when they call such stories persons.

The seasonal stories and their characters exhibit the human traits of volition, agency and relative freedom. The discussion of personhood is one that I will further flesh out in subsequent segments of this chapter. For now, what I have highlighted from Harvey's work

are the aspects immediately germane to the story shortly to be discussed. As further background to that story, I also draw attention to one of the categories of other-than-human persons discussed in Harvey's study, namely, seasonal stories. In terms of Osundare's narrative strategy not just in the story but in the whole creation movement, virtually every phenomenon exhibits such human traits. As such, it is crucial to point out at this juncture, following Harry Garuba, that it is inaccurate to regard such technique merely as manifestations of extended metaphor. When the architecture of the entire work is built on representational devices derived from animist cultures, and in which the writer embodies or materialises what might appear to a modernist sensibility as merely ideas, then it should be recognised as animist materialism in operation ("Explorations" 274—5). What I would add in relation to further insights gained from the Ojibwe worldview is that Osundare's ideological motive for embodying the spoken word is to project it as a person.

Now to Osundare's story which is a folktale-like "story within the story" and a sort of relevant digression in his creation poetry – in the tale, the word manifests as a human being and marries an obstinate village damsel. The story goes thus:

> Once upon a silence
>
> In a town beyond Memory
>
> A girl there was whose name was Omoleti
>
> Supple, fresh, luminous like a polished bronze,
>
> Her black face pronounced the whiteness
>
> Of her teeth set right and rhymed
>
> Like *asede'*s accomplished wonder
>
> Her beauty spoke without words
>
> And everyone knew she was moulded
>
> When Obatala's clay was dawn
>
> And his hand had an eye on every finger.

Like bees to nectar,

Men swarmed her way from lands far and near

Some donned up in choicest gold

Some in gorgeous *alaari* straight from the royal loom;

A suitor even came in a garment made of lionskin

Another was so prepossessing that

Honey dripped from his very looks;

A prince journeyed in from a distant kingdom,

His slippers of diamond and rarest stones,

Omoleti surveyed each suitor

And her answer was a mortifying NO!

The town talked

The village talked

Birds exchanged notes

In their little nests

It was clear beyond dispute

Omoleti would die,

A stubborn and haughty maid

Then ... from the far land

Of Something and Nothing

From the Darkness of Noon

And the dazzling Light of Night

Half-man half-matter

Half-clad half-nude

Dwarf and Giant

Maker and Breaker,

Haloed by Seven Rainbows

Over Seven Crossroads,

Oro walked into town one evening

And Omoleti swooned into helpless love ...

The day Omoleti wed her groom

The world was eloquent with untellable joy (*The Word* 88– 9)

In the scheme of Osundare's animist poetics, this story is less about Omoleti than her husband *Oro*. *Oro* is the ultimate hero who wins the "star prize" that has eluded all other eligible bachelors. The story is a contextual anecdote, and in that sense, it is part of the influences of Yoruba orality in Osundare's verse. Deirde La Pin in her study of storytelling among the Yoruba notes that a speaker "launches into anecdotes to clarify a point and to help bring his/her audience to a value judgement on the reported experiences related by the speaker" (qtd in Quayson 25). That oral strategy is what Osundare has utilised by introducing the Omoleti story and seeking to use it to drive home to his readers that the creation movement has been about demonstrating the living status of the word, its personhood, and that as he has said, "the word is not just an abstract phenomenon" (qtd in Deandrea 497). This is of course an esoteric idea, but the "story within the story" is one of his means of concretising it. Ato Quayson has suggested that oral narratives employ anecdotes in order to embody "things" and ideas that are by nature abstract (25).

The story of Omoleti is one that will strike with familiarity anyone who has read Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952). To echo *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in the same movement that opens with a resonance of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* is to dispel any residual doubt that the movement should be read as animist realist poetry. Tutuola was the first writer to make use of a variant of the story in imaginative literature, with the probable exception of D. O Fagunwa, his compatriot who wrote in Yoruba. In Tutuola's text, it is a sub-plot and features as the story of the complete gentleman. But it is a common story in the folklore of some Nigerian ethnic groups. Its subject is usually an obdurate girl who turns down suitors and eventually marries a fairy being disguised as a handsome suitor, which is to say that it is a trickster tale.

About Omoleti, we are told in Osundare's poem that "Her beauty spoke without words/ And everyone knew she was moulded/ When Obatala's clay was dawn/ And his hand had an eye on every finger" (*The Word* 88). The temporal word "dawn" suggesting the time Omoleti was created is significant in understanding her looks. Obatala, the Yoruba god of creation, is noted for drunkenness which sometimes results in creating ugly or deformed human beings (Olupona 148). To be created at dawn rather than after dawn is to be created in his period of soberness when he can pay the kind of rapt attention to his work that is shown in the lines above. In other words, for Omoleti to be created at dawn by him is to be fortunate to avoid physical deformity and ugliness. For *Oro*, what better way to demonstrate his personhood than to make him emerge from the metaphysical glory of fairyland – "the far land/ Of Something and Nothing" (*The Word* 88) to the human world and marry such a village damsel created as a paragon of beauty?

The two properties attaching to *Oro* in the light of this story are indicative of Osundare's message, that the word is at once a metaphysical and living reality. The story genders the word as male, and his metaphysical aura proves a more potent asset than the physical attractiveness, wealth and ornaments possessed by the human suitors. While some of them wore rare gold, there were "Some in gorgeous *alaari* straight from the royal loom;/ A suitor even came in a garment made of lionskin/ Another was so prepossessing that/ Honey dripped from his very looks;/ A prince journeyed in from a distant kingdom,/ His slippers of diamond and rarest stones" (*The Word* 88). *Alaari* is "A gorgeous, expensive woven Yoruba textile material" (*The Word* 92). But looks, royalty and wealth fail to sway the beautiful Omoleti.

The failure of all these men, each a man of grandeur in his own right, is only detailed as a backdrop to the success of *Oro* in order to accentuate the import of that success. Omoleti with her glory of physical beauty is only dazzled by the magical glory of *Oro*. Osundare attaches such premium to that metaphysical glory that he sketches it in considerable detail as a backdrop to the emergence of *Oro:* "From the Darkness of Noon/ And the Dazzling Light of Night/ Half-man half-matter/ Half-clad half-nude/ Dwarf and Giant" and "Maker and Breaker,/ Haloed by Seven Rainbows/ Over Seven Crossroads,/ *Oro* walked into town one evening" (*The Word* 89) .

As can be seen from the above excerpt, one of the devices heightening the aura of *Oro* is the number seven. Seven is a recurrent number in Nigerian folktales and usually carries mystical connotations. That mystery is robustly woven into the structure of the movement. Most of it is deliberately structured in seven-line stanzas. The Omoleti story above for example, apart from one instance of a one-line stanza, is arranged in seven lines from beginning to end. The mystical number is one of the devices of folktale that have been absorbed into animist realist writing by Nigerians. In *The Famished Road* for instance, Okri frequently deploys the number for the same mystical effect, as in the scene where after a ferocious boxing bout with a mystical character named Yellow Jaguar, Black Tyger lapses into delirium but on the seventh day his condition suddenly normalises (405–14). Osundare strategically deploys that number at many points in the entire movement.

What we see demonstrated in this part of the movement is a subtle exercise of power by *Oro*, a spiritual person, in order to subdue a human person, a person whose Yoruba name, Omoleti, connotes a stubborn child. The moment *Oro* walks into town, "Omoleti swooned into helpless love" (*The Word* 89). The subtlety with which the power of the word is exercised in this instance stands in marked contrast with the direct use of the force of the word to create the earth. But both are complementary in displaying divergent ways in which the power of *Oro* works. In the interstices between Christian theology and Yoruba folklore, Osundare inserts animist epistemic ideas about the power of the word.

Since focalising that power is Osundare's aim, and since the word is an everyday phenomenon among human beings, he defamiliarises it in order to bring to the foreground its metaphysical aspect. In one line in a poem suggestively titled "Invocations of the Word," he calls the word "The cat's eye which pierces the garment of night" (*The Word* 10). This praise epithet is significant in that connection for its esoteric connotation. The ability to see through

the darkness of the night suggests something mystical about the cat. As Ato Quayson has noted, in esoteric lore, cats figure as liminal subjects with knowledge of the spirit world (127). And in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road,* their frequent appearance is one of the sources of the aura of mystery pervading the text. Their appearance usually suggests mystical presence, and the hero, Azaro, speaking of the king of the spirit world to which he belongs, states thus: "Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat." (3) Thus, being equated with a cat positions the word as sentient and liminal, as something that is concurrently part of the natural world and the spiritual world.

But to state the point that way is not meant to imply that the spiritual world and the physical one are separate in Osundare's conception. In reality, Osundare advances the view that both worlds are intertwined. If we refer back to the Omoleti story again, one of the noticeable differences between it and Tutuola's version is that in Tutuola's text, supernatural scenes are located in a separate spiritual world. The complete gentleman returns to the spirit world with his human wife and the Drinkard has to embark on a quest to the spirit world in order to rescue the young woman. But in Osundare's version, they simply get wedded in the material world and the story ends there.

The ending of the story is also significant in another sense. As Ato Quayson points out, several variants of the story end with a didactic bite, teaching the girl not to confuse appearance with reality (48). For Omoleti, the poet betrays no intention to teach her any such lesson as it would erode *Oro*'s grandeur. *Oro* is not the grotesque figure that rents or borrows body parts from fellow goblins before visiting the human world. In Tutuola's version, using the Drinkard to rescue the complete gentleman's victim turns the gentleman into a villain. Osundare preserves *Oro*'s heroism by ending the tale on the euphoria of their wedding day: "The day Omoleti wed her groom/ The world was eloquent with untellable joy" (*The Word* 89).

The most crucial import of this story is that it enables Osundare to imbue the word with life using a folktale form that preserves mystical cultural nuances without having to trouble about the conventions of realism. Spirits are normal denizens of the world of folktale just as the dream world. Also, in the world of folklore as in the world of dream, the category restrictions often taken as axiomatic in the material world do not apply. Species categories are fluid and their boundaries are very flexible. For a spoken word to turn into a human being is not far-fetched in folklore. In that connection, the poet's motivation for incorporating that

motif in writing about the physical world appears to be to liken it to the folktale world in terms both of transformation and of spiritual presence.

In African storytelling traditions, elders narrate folktales to children. Such stories usually entail fantastic characters and incidents. While the adult narrators view such incidents and characters as purely mythical, the children tend to believe in their reality. Osundare would apparently want a revision of such sceptical attitude from adults, enabling them to view the world with a child's eye. He believes that it would afford a picture closer to reality than the adult point of view.

In relation to *Oro* as a figure of power, to claim that he walked into town is to claim that he materialised. And that ability to change form lends folklorist credence to the innate mystical power which Osundare is advancing as a property of the word. *Oro*'s ability to transmute from one form to another is proof of possession of spiritual power. As Graham Harvey notes, "Physicality is, to some degree, fluid especially for powerful persons" (*Animism* 49).

*Oro'*s transformation to a human being in order to marry Omoleti entails for Osundare transmutation to a human person from an other-than-human person. "Other-than-human persons" is anthropologist Irving Hallowell's term for categories of animist persons who are not human (qtd in Harvey, *Animism* 17). In other words, in animism, humans are not definitive of personhood but are rather only one out of myriad categories of persons. *Oro*'s assumption of human form is not just a demonstration of power but also a demonstration of life.

And with regard to the markers of a person in animism, *Oro* displays some of them. Graham Harvey notes that animist "Persons are those with whom other persons interact with varying degrees of reciprocity. Persons are volitional, relational, cultural and social beings" (*Animism* xvii). It is pertinent to note that by marrying Omoleti, *Oro* demonstrates most of the attributes of persons listed by Harvey, viz. volition, relationality and sociality. All those attributes facilitate Osundare's attempt to situate him within the community of persons in the material world and distinguish him from abstract concepts which are "objects" defined by inertia.

Oro's possession of volition, being an intentional actor, is encapsulated in his conscious decision to try his luck with Omoleti, or perhaps more appropriately as can be

deduced from the analysis so far, to try his power on her; and taking practical steps in pursuit of that dream, eventually succeeding in marrying her. As for reciprocity or sociality, marriage is nothing if not a reciprocal union. In their case, it is a marriage between a human person and *Oro* who by transforming into a human being becomes something of a paradox, a paradox that points to his liminality. He becomes a word person in human form in the manner that a witch who transmutes into a bird may be regarded as a human person in bird form.

The respect Osundare accords *Oro* is in keeping with the animist ideal in relating with all categories of persons and his own idea of how humans should treat the word. The fact that *Oro* is able to transform aligns him with Harvey's remark that "While this means that appearances can be deceptive, it also means that everything can be treated respectfully" (*Animism* 49). Osundare is urging caution and respect in the way human persons treat or relate with the word. His perspective in this regard is encapsulated in his grandmother's earlier-cited aphorism: "*The word is an egg. Be careful with it, because once it drops you can never put the pieces together again*" (qtd in Deandrea 495, italics in the original). That aphorism reincarnates in the poet's collection in several ways, as exemplified by the eponymous poem "The Word Is an Egg":

> The Word, the Word
>
> Is an egg:
>
> If it falls on the outcrop
>
> Of a stumbling tongue
>
> It breaks
>
> Ungatherably (*The Word* 14)

Whether as the Word that created the world or as a character in a folktale-like anecdote, Osundare makes the word venerable. As such, his call for respect for the word can be read as a parallel to the philosophy of the Ojibwe among whom seasonal stories are

ontologically regarded as living persons, inviting a consideration of the way the Ojibwe treat such stories:

> Among the Ojibwe, seasonal stories are grandfathers ... Like other grandfathers they teach (in various culturally recognisable ways) ... They do not expect to be approached casually. They require careful attention and must not be interrupted frivolously. Certainly human grandfathers joke and amuse others, just as they might insult or tease them ... The 'characters' about which grandfather stories speak (thoughtfully and intentionally) are also alive. Naming them and speaking of their deeds also entail responsible adherence to appropriate etiquette. (Harvey, *Animism* 41)

The mention of 'characters' in the above extract should remind us of *Oro* in the story under analysis.

While the Yoruba do not have such grandfather stories, the *odu Ifa*, the oral divinatory narratives of Ifa, the god of divination, might be the closest Yoruba approximation of the idea of the word as living, and an ontological influence on Osundare's treatment of the word in his animist realist poetry. Jacob Olupona explains the nature of *odu Ifa* thus:

> These myths, proverbs and legends express the mythical worldview of the Yoruba people. The *odu* in Yoruba imaginations are also personified as supernatural beings transformed into the spoken words of Ifa. They are verbal manifestations of divine power ... Just as the shaman, to procure a cure for a client, must disclose manifest forces by embodying them and acting them out ... so the diviner recites the appropriate verses that embody the primordial power and events. (181)

In essence, the embodiment of words in Ifa divination practice is part of the oral culture of the Yoruba and parallels Ojibwe treatment of seasonal stories.

Thus far, this analysis has proceeded mainly on the metaphysical. But in terms of why humans ought to treat the word with care, Osundare demonstrates it in a less metaphysical way in the same collection. In "Invocations of the Word," he cautions that the word is delicate like an egg, and yet powerful. The manner it is said or not said can for instance make all the difference between peace and strife on earth:

The Word, the Word, is an egg

From the nest of hawk and dove

Its shell the sheath of anger's sword

Its yolk compostbed of bile and boon (*The Word* 10)

The Yoruba believe that every human being carries innate spiritual power (Quayson 105), and Osundare sees that power at work even in civil communicative contexts. In *The Word Is an Egg*, he is struggling to give voice to that conviction. In so doing, his poetry is also helping to clarify and entrench this as an ethno-philosophy. Karin Barber's articulation of this idea is pertinent to the poetry of Osundare: "The text ... does not just represent an already-constituted ideological viewpoint; it is in the text that a viewpoint is constructed, in the process revealing more about the ideology implicit in daily discourse than could otherwise be discovered"(3).

The power in the word can cause strife in the manner of a hawk if released carelessly, since it is "From the nest of hawk and dove (*The Word* 10)." We should note that the hawk and the dove share one nest. That is what is reiterated in the last line of the above excerpt which figures the word as a crucible of contention and peace, of destabilising and stabilising the world, a "compostbed of bile and boon" (*The Word* 10). Together, both lines restate what has been forcefully stated in the Biblical verse that goes thus: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18: 21).

Gerald Gaylard in his work on magical (animist) realism avers, following the innate ability of words to influence reality, that "it might be argued that all writers are magicians to some extent" (44). If we relate his line of thought to Osundare's declaration that words are given life by the human voice (qtd in Deandrea 497), we reach the logical conclusion that Osundare is advancing the belief that all speakers are magicians to some extent. To formulate the idea less strangely and in line with Yoruba ontology, the spiritual power in every human being is discharged to some extent in his or her speech acts. That is perhaps the most notable argument Osundare sets out to advance in *The Word Is an Egg*. A remarkable demonstration of this belief can be found among the indigenes of Ile-Ife. Before colonial authorities stopped the practice, it used to happen that they often offered human sacrifice to their gods. Sacrificial victims were gagged before being killed in order to prevent them from pronouncing a curse

on their killer. This is because the people of Ile-Ife believed in the efficacy of such a curse if pronounced (Willet 49). Recalling one of the memories that informed the collection, a childhood memory of an instance of using the spoken word to influence reality by pronouncing social sanction into being, the poet says:

> in our area there was once a king who was very tyrannical. People didn't want to visit violence on him because they had built the palace he lived in, and they wouldn't set it on fire. Political action took an artistic form. A song was composed; I still remember my father singing it. It was sung around the palace of the king just for him to hear. It was a parable of course. He heard it and still refused to leave. People started singing it every day. Somehow the District Officer heard about it, and he knew there was going to be some kind of revolution. So the District Officer stepped in and the tyrannical Oba was banished. He was taken to Orodogo – a mythical place of dishonour ... Another Oba was put in his place. (qtd in Arnold 446)

In the above scenario, it is the power of the word that acts on the District Officer who in turn acts to remove the tyrant. For Osundare, the fact that words can have such a drastic effect imposes an ethical obligation on humans to use them with discretion. In line with the imperative of propriety, human beings should know when to express their thoughts by words, and when to refrain from speaking and perhaps employ other modes of expression including silence, "itself playing the role of powerfully performative communication at times" (Harvey, *Animism* 41). Indeed, Osundare presents varying performative substitutes for the word, all encoded in silence. They include facial expressions, nodding and other physical gestures; they are all meant as alternatives to verbal speech and ways of restraining its magical energy:

> In the Beginning was the Word...
>
> In the face – beyond masks,
>
> Beyond the desperate make-believe
>
> Of plastic profiles
>
> The Word is in the face:
>
> In the shifty twitch of mocking lips

In the precarious precipice

Of eyebrows hanging like sulking clouds

Over the commerce of mean stares

The Word lives

In the indifferent countenance of shrugging shoulders

The complacent geometry of folded arms

The head tilting leftward like a rebellious rock

...

The Word is in the face

In the oval mystery of the living eye:

Stand here in the daylight of my presence:

There is a harvest of words

In the library of the nod. (*The Word* 83)

Creation as Procreation

In this segment, I read Osundare's creation poetry from the lens of procreation in its broad sense which signifies the process by which an organism produces biological offspring, a process that goes from conception to delivery. But it needs to be underscored that despite having been read as an autonomous archetype of creation, the spoken word remains the dominant motif even in passages that portray creation as procreation. Perhaps in order to signal that fact, in every sub-section of the movement there is a reiteration of the refrain "In the Word was the Beginning" (*The Word* 84). In such instances, the word often acts in consonance with some other force to bring about the earth. Also, as usual, my discussion goes beyond the creation event. I use creation as a springboard to draw attention to some animist messages encoded in Osundare's poetry. In this segment, such messages include that

sexuality is a pervasive characteristic of natural phenomena, and that all natural phenomena are alive. In Milton K. Munitz's taxonomy, the archetype of creation as procreation bifurcates into creation as the hatching of an egg and as a sexual activity (23). Osundare's poetry aligns more with the latter.

When the movement flicks to creation as procreation, we have:

In the Word was the Beginning

...

And the Vowel went into labour

And the Sea was born

And the Consonant stretched its loins

And the Mountain erupted into view (*The Word* 86)

The above lines which extend the trope of the power of the word locate the male and female creation principle in the spoken word. But as stated early on in this chapter, Osundare in this movement does not only aim to write about creation in and of itself. He also uses creation as an organising principle to advance some animist beliefs. In the case of the sexualisation of the word and the earth as portrayed in the above excerpt, he is furthering one of the main motifs of his poetry oeuvre, namely, sexuality. Even in the same movement, that sub-theme features prominently and is a substratum of the poet's message that life inheres in all elements of nature. Consider the following lines in connection with the ones cited above:

And the Word flipped the Sun

and the Moon was born

And the Word parted the legs of the hills

thereafter, a valley of fluffy bliss (*The Word* 89)

For him to extend the theme of sexuality to this movement suggests a conception of sexuality as a phenomenon that does not just involve human beings and animals but also embraces other ecological categories including some that orthodox modernist epistemology classifies as inanimate, which is also to say that sexuality is as spiritual as it is physical. Even

before he composed a whole collection – *Tender Moments: Love Poems* (2006) – orchestrated around the theme of amorous love, sexuality had made remarkable appearances in some of his earlier anthologies. This ribald confessional poem from *Midlife*, a collection published in 1993 to mark his fortieth anniversary is typical:

I am human in every sense

lover of life without regret

ample hips, the bouncing bosom

handsome lips alive with joy

tongues that twist and tangle like exultant vines

a tickle in the armpit, a tickle in the groin

the cool-hot hearth in the valley of the legs

the pestle finds its mortar

the mortar finds its pestle

legs touching legs in a dance beyond the drum

a gentle sigh, a sticky moan

hard and soft is the legend of the flame. (37)

The point I seek to make is that apart from depicting such amorous scenes among human beings, Osundare's interest in sexual love also delves into the spiritual. It is in that connection that the restatement of the same trope in his creation verse needs to be read. Before portraying the earth in *The World Is an Egg* as having been created by sexuality, he had written to advance the belief that sex also happens in the supernatural realm, between what are scientifically regarded as inanimate objects. That is what we can deduce from this poem where an amorous visit between a rock/god and a river/goddess in his hometown is dramatised in *Midlife*:

The rock comes to the river

The rock comes to the river

With a limestone smile

And shafts of lofty frowns

The rock comes to the river

...

The rock takes off its cap of clouds,

Steps out of its dusty slippers

Then bends its hard, hard knees

On the soft mercy of the river bank

The rock dissolves into the river

The river hardens into the rock

Then, the water-buffalo's unseasonal grunt,

The hawing of frogs peeping

Through the grey window of fragile waters

...

And a boulder touches the river

In its warm, abiding core;

And the river quakes into land

Quakes into sea

Quakes into fire which shapes the fury

Of forging breaths,

Quakes into wind which gives a womb

To wandering seeds...

The rock dances

The river dances

Rockprints on riverloins. (15)

In this poem, a lithic god leaves his shrine to pay an amorous visit to a river. What follows as the rock arrives at the river is passionate sexual intercourse. This elaborate depiction of "sexual embrace" between one of the lithic gods of Ikere-Ekiti and the river/goddess Osun strongly suggests a belief in the idea of sacred sexuality, in terms of sex between deities. It is an attempt to materialise a Yoruba ontological belief. When we juxtapose it with the preceding scenario demonstrating Osundare's humanity by his sexuality, what they illustrate is a Yoruba belief that "Ordinary human experience mirrors what we might call the world of the supernatural or the sacred" (Olupona 7). In other words, sexual relations among human beings mirror what obtains among spiritual forces. As Olupona also reports, "Yoruba gods and deities display human traits – the ability to eat, speak, quarrel and *love*" (115, my italics). That belief is what is ecstatically demonstrated by the rock and the river, complete with frogs in the river furtively watching, thus: "The hawing of frogs peeping/ Through the grey window of fragile waters" (*Midlife* 15).

For the poet whose praise chant includes the line "Child of the river, child of the rock" (*Midlife* 9), the lines inscribe sexual intercourse between his spiritual progenitors. In the last line, "Rockprints on riverloins" (*Midlife* 15), the prints belong to his spiritual father who is the rock/god while the loins are of his spiritual mother, River Osun. That the poem is part of his fortieth anniversary collection, a collection with many private poems, and his only collection with him as the cover picture lends credence to the fact that the rock and river are not random ones but are those of his ancestry. Talking of his ancestry, his mother tells him in another poem that "Osun gave you to me" (*City* 97). It should also be noted in line with a point made earlier in this chapter that the spiritual world in which the rock and river engage in their sexual activity is not different from the physical world.

This trope of spiritual sexuality is extended in Osundare's creation poetry to include the spoken word. From writing about sexual intercourse between a rock and a river, he depicts as part of the creation process sex between different phenomena which are usually viewed as inert or abstract. What this suggests, apart from the belief that sexuality is an

everyday part of the life of the spirit world, is that the community of life is far wider than plants and animals which are the only categories of nature in which life inheres according to the modernist worldview. In the lines below, the word is continuing the activity of creating the world through sexual relations with different categories of natural phenomena. I quote the following lines again in order to now analyse them:

And the Word flipped the Sun

and the Moon was born

And the Word parted the legs of the hills

thereafter, a valley of fluffy bliss (*The Word* 89)

The word, as noted earlier, is gendered as male. Here, sexual intercourse is depicted between him and the sun, resulting in the birth or creation of the moon, and between the word and the hills, giving rise to the valley. We also have to consider further the implications of Osundare's sexualisation of the cosmos and its affinity with Yoruba cosmology. The Yoruba do not only believe that deities marry and copulate, they also hold the same view about the sky and the earth (Osundare qtd in Arnold 443). Thus in a panegyric for the earth, Osundare calls the earth the "spouse of the roving sky" (*The Eye* 1). And in another poem, "Forest Echoes," he celebrates the rejuvenation of the earth by rain in terms that depict rainfall as coitus between the earth and her husband, the sky:

The rains have kept their time this year

(Earth has (finally) won the love of the sky)

Trees bob with barkward sap

and leaves grab a deepening green

from the scanty sun. (*The Eye* 3)

The logic of the last excerpt above entails that drops of rain also have sexual significance, that they are the seed with which the sky impregnates the earth. This is a remarkable angle of the poet's general animist vision. Taken together, these sexual episodes express a general conception of sexuality as pervading cosmic reality. They portray sexuality as one of the characteristics of living things which most categories of nature share. That

belief should help us to better understand the pervasive "sexualisation" of the last movement of *The Word Is an Egg* by Osundare. And in the evolution of his animist poetry, this marks a leap from demonstrating that deities are endowed with sexuality to portraying the belief that other categories of what the scientific sensibility regards as inanimate share the same characteristic. And we should remember that sexuality is a sign of life.

As usual, the word still facilitates creation even in this archetype as we have seen. Osundare's lines give a sense that there is latent life in every object, and portray the spoken word as the force that awakens that life, a conception that seems to derive its warrant from Yoruba culture. Consider for instance the role of the word in this context during the Diviners' Festival in Ile-Ife. After the sacred Ifa leaves have been plucked, "As the leaves are squeezed in water, the diviner recites the appropriate invocation and ritual formula (*isoko*) that make the leaves efficacious ... The diviners remark that the verses invoke the beings in the medicinal leaves ... Each leaf is unique and has its own personality and individuality" (Olupona 199). What all this means is that each leaf has latent animate life or spirit which the diviner activates by ritual recitation. The word similarly stimulates the living vitality of things in Osundare's poetry, as we see in these lines:

> And the Word gave Fire its flame
>
> And the Word gave Water its mercy
>
> And the Word gave the Wind its wings
>
> And the Word gave the Cat its claws
>
> And the Word gave the Dove its peace (*The Word* 87)

That all elements of nature have innate life, it should be noted, implies to some extent that they are all equal. This follows from the fact that they are all subjects, there are no inert objects to be regarded as less important. Paula Gunn Allen's essay on the animist American Indian worldview foregrounds its dissonance with the conventional Western outlook in a way that is worth citing here because of its remarkable congruence with Osundare's animist realist view:

> Another difference between these two ways of perceiving reality lies in the tendency of the American Indian to view space as spherical and time as cyclical, whereas the non-Indian tends to view space as linear and time as sequential. The

> circular concept requires all "points" that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function, while the linear model assumes that some "points" are more significant than others. In the one, significance is a necessary factor of being in itself, whereas in the other, significance is a function of placement on an absolute scale that is fixed in time and space. (246)

There is no strict dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural in the Native American worldview. This parallels the world created in Osundare's canvas which also speaks to the Yoruba conception of nature: "The Yoruba experience a world in which the sacred and the profane are symmetrical counterparts" (Olupona 7). And rather than being inert, nature is an active participant in its own creation in Osundare's poetry. This is how to read the active participation of not just the spoken word in the creation canvas of Osundare but also other natural phenomena most of which are usually taken to be inert. These include wind, fire, mountain, plains, sea, thunder, sun, hills. According to Jacob K. Olupona, "No natural phenomena lack signifiers of the sacred in the Yoruba imagination: rain, rainbow, thunder, storm, and wind are interpreted as heavenly forces" (34). Again, Paula Gunn Allen articulates the idea nicely:

> American Indian thought makes no such dualistic division (between the natural and supernatural), nor does it draw a hard and fast line between what is material and what is spiritual, for it regards the two as different expressions of the same reality, as though life has twin manifestations that are mutually interchangeable and, in many instances, virtually identical aspects of a reality that is essentially more spirit than matter or, more correctly, that manifests its spirit in a tangible way (246).

What Allen argues on behalf of Native Americans in the above lines is that among them, physical nature is a materialisation or embodiment of the spiritual. That is what Osundare has also demonstrated in the movement under review by the way virtually every element of nature is made to appear not just natural but also supernatural. See for instance the phantasmagorical presentation of this mountain and plains as they play their respective roles in the creation:

> And the River sprang down between the teeth
>
> Of the Mountain;

And in the armpit of the Plains

The liquid journey of a Lake began. (*The Word* 86)

Presenting nature in this manner, apart from spiritualising nature, defamiliarises it. Such lines give the impression of fantasy, of romance rather than reality. Imagining a mountain with teeth for instance yields a picture which in its fantastic strangeness is meant to force us to ponder if our orthodox scientific way of seeing reality does not present a picture of nature that is narrow rather than realistic.

But again, such presentation seems to be emphasising a conception of the earth congruent with what Paula Gunn Allen has discussed in the case of American Indians: "all of life is living – that is – dynamic and aware" (243). Even her use of "life" as a synonym for "earth" is remarkable in itself and encapsulates the belief that the entire earth is alive. Among the Yoruba, life is also synonymous with the earth. The Yoruba word "aye" means both "life" and "earth." Allen's quote can be rephrased thus: "all of the earth is living – that is – dynamic and aware." That is the conceptual matrix that sheds light on the pervasive initial capitalisation and related anthropomorphism of virtually all phenomena in this movement, such as Earth, Water, Wind, Sky, Word, Void, Vowel, Consonant, Mountain, River, Plains, Sound, Silence, Waves, Sea, Sole, Palm, Womb, Tomb, and so forth (*TheWord* 86—92). These are some of the diverse categories constituting cosmic totality. They are all cast in the mode of members of the community of life. The device of initial capitalisation appears to be one of the means of representing life and personhood in writing animism. Consider for instance this line from Irving Hallowell's 1960 report on his research among the Ojibwe: "as we shall see, *Flint* is represented as a living personage in their mythology" (qtd in Harvey, *Animism* 36, my italics). Capitalising "F" in "Flint" becomes pertinent in order to distinguish the mineral from inert objects.

In this connection, it is noteworthy that while writing about the deities of his hometown in his early collections, Osundare does not distinguish them with initial capitalisation. In this line for instance: "The rocks rose to meet me" (*The Eye* 13), "rocks" signify Olosunta and Oroole, but in his later collections, he has in the manner of someone correcting an error moved to writing the same word as "Rocks" while referring to the same gods, as in this line: "Oh you Rocks, you Rivers" (*City* 108). As such, the significance of initial capitalisation of phenomena in the last movement of *The Word Is an Egg* is that it highlights his belief that life inheres in them all, just as he deems to be the case with the gods.

It is not for nothing that each of them is written like a proper noun and is made to act like a fairy. Collectively, they give Osundare's canvas in the movement the appearance of an enchanted world where everything is alive and active. In this connection, quoting Paula Gunn Allen verbatim will shed light on this idea which Osundare seems to affirm:

> The more abstractionist and less intellectually vain Indian sees human intelligence as rising out of the very nature of being, which is of necessity intelligent in and of itself, as an attribute of being ... It follows that attributes possessed by human beings are natural attributes of *all* being. The Indian does not regard awareness of being as an abnormality peculiar to one species, but, because of a sense of relatedness to ... what exists, the Indian assumes that this awareness is a natural by-product of existence itself. (246, italics in original)

Gunn Allen's words, "being" and "existence," are remarkable because from their context, they are clear synonyms for cosmic totality. And following that, we surmise the point of her argument thus: to exist is to be alive and sentient. That belief which we have seen in Osundare's verse is perhaps the most radical tenet of some varieties of animism, what philosophers call panpsychism.

The philosopher Christian de Quincey defines panpsychism as

> a cosmological and ontological theory that proposes all objective bodies (objects) in the universe, including those we usually classify as 'inanimate' possess an interior, subjective reality (they are also subjects). In other words, there is something it feels like from within to be a body (of any kind). (qtd in Harvey, *Animism* 17)

In projecting panpsychism, Osundare is extending an existing trend in modern African poetry. The Senegalese writer Birago Diop for instance has advanced the same belief before him. But Osundare's poetry differs from Diop's in one important particular. As I have pointed out, Osundare positions the word as the animator of all things. But for Diop, it is the dead that paradoxically animate all things:

> Breath
>
> Listen more to things
>
> Than to words that are said.

The water's voice sings

And the flame cries

And the wind that brings

The woods to sighs

Is the breathing of the dead.

Those who are dead have never gone away.

They are in the shadows darkening around,

They are in the shadows fading into day,

The dead are not under the ground.

They are in the trees that quiver,

They are in the woods that weep,

They are in the waters of the rivers,

They are in the waters that sleep.

They are in the crowds, they are in the homestead.

The dead are never dead. (qtd in Soyinka 131–2)

Diop portrays death not as the end of life but as a life-giving transition, as the fulcrum of life. Death displays its power not by ending life but by transforming it to ancestral life, making it part of the engine of all life.

Creation as Craftsmanship

Craftsmanship is the third template incorporated in Osundare's verse on the earth's provenance. Specifically, he depicts creation through the evocation of the craft of blacksmithing, making blacksmithing an allegory for the creation of the earth. In that connection, he writes:

In the Word was the Beginning

Primal energy of Wind and Fire

...

And Fire burning high, burning low

At the urging of the Wind,

The bellow's glib-cheeked breaths

And proverbs, talkative ingots,

In the crucible of the forge;

Blue-red accents of shaping coal

And syllable splitting and spreading

In the maternity of the anvil

The ashes' last laugh

The ashes' last laugh

Grey tonalities of ex-pyred idioms

And the smith's black mastery

Of the whiteness of the page

The ashes' last laugh (*The Word* 84)

The line "Primal energy of Wind and Fire" (*The Word* 84) harks back to philosophy in which all objects are supposed to have originated from basic elements called matter. Two of the elements – wind and fire – are here helping to fabricate the earth. The above lines seek to draw attention to the aliveness of matter by portraying blacksmithing as a magical operation. They give the impression that while the fire rages that smelts metals in the course

of creation which blacksmithing is, there is more to the fire than meets the profane eye. They portray the spirits of fire and air working in concert with the blacksmith to bring about a successful execution of creation.

The spirits, Wind and Fire, are working in concert to ensure the success of the process, the Wind directing and modulating the Fire, thus: "And Fire burning high, burning low/ At the urging of the Wind" (*The Word* 84). In essence, Osundare is using creation to direct attention to his belief that the elements are imbued with spirits. The role of the word is prominent as it is embodied as the ingot of the earth, the metal with which Fire and Wind are working in concert with the blacksmith to fashion the earth to the desired state and shape: "And proverbs, talkative ingots,/ In the crucible of the forge" (*The Word* 84). That the ingots are alive and articulate is to underscore the active role of the word in the process. As such, rather than sparks of ordinary metal issuing from the fire, we have "verbal sparks" thus: "And syllables splitting and spreading/ In the maternity of the anvil" (*The Word* 84).

In using the allegory of blacksmithing to illustrate that air and fire are animate subjects, Osundare is reaffirming a belief that the Guinean novelist Camara Laye has demonstrated in *The Dark Child (*1955). Laye also presaged him in utilising the craft of the smith to advance that message, and in the overarching role of the spoken word in the process. The significance of Osundare's intervention is to depict the craft on a universal scale, as an allegory for how the earth originated.

In Camara Laye's book, the narrator whose father is an outstanding goldsmith whose success derives from his reliance on magical forces ponders an aspect of the process of smelting gold by his father in a passage that is dense with animist meaning. One interesting fact for me about the excerpt below from Laye's book is the way it encapsulates some major tropes of this chapter. It opens by foregrounding the magical power of the spoken word, portrays the elements as endowed with spirits, shows nature playing an active role in the process of creation and suggests that invisible spirits inhabit the visible world:

> What were the words my father's lips were forming? I do not know; I do not know for certain: I was never told what they were. But what else could they have been, if not magical incantations? Were they not the spirits of fire and gold, of fire and air, air breathed through the earthen pipes, of fire born of air, of gold married with fire – were not these the spirits he was invoking? Was it not their help and their friendship he was calling upon in this marriage of elemental

things ... The operation that was going on before my eyes was simply the smelting of gold; but it was something more than that: a magical operation that the guiding spirits could look upon with favour or disfavour. (29 – 30)

But animist realist texts generally tax the imagination of the reader. Determining what some passages signify can be a futile struggle. Many lines in Osundare's creation verse are complex to the point of extreme abstraction. They direct attention to the word but beyond that, their meaning remains a riddle. Consider the concluding stanza of the movement for example:

Oh those palms scattering riddles in the Wind

And squirrels scattering the nut of obstinate proverbs

And the Word breaking, Egg with a luminous shell

And new Dawns hatching, fortified with new wings,

Nous over noise, Mind over matter,

Tyrannies crashing: an eloquence of Wills

Armed with Seven syllables and Seven Silences (*The Word* 92)

The complexity evidenced by the above stanza is however not only an attribute of animist realist writing. At a personal level, it also marks Niyi Osundare's later poetry idiom. In the sphere of African literature, Osundare is perhaps most widely associated with "Poetry Is," (*Marketplace* 3—4), the first poem in his first collection (1983), which many have come to see as a sort of manifesto prescribing lucidity as a necessity for poetry. Interestingly, the first couplet of "Poetry Is" declares that poetry is "not the esoteric whisper/ of an excluding tongue" (*Marketplace* 3). The last stanza reads:

Poetry

is

man

meaning

to

man (*Marketplace* 4)

How do we square the esoteric verse that is the last movement of *The Word Is an Egg* with the above prescriptive lines? What is responsible for the glaring difference between the two, where one is obscure and the other lucid? This is part of the answer: in a 1990 interview, Osundare declared that "I ... changed style from a conscious perspective. The kind of simple poetry people had asked for was degenerating into a simplistic doggerel in the hands of many people, and it was rather embarrassing being cited as a weapon of defense by a number of people who were really not writing poetry" (qtd in Arnold 439). The last movement of *The Word Is an Egg* marks the climax of that change of style; it marks the climax of the evolution of Osundare's poetry from simplicity to complexity. I offer further comment on this formal shift in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has evaluated the creation poetry of Niyi Osundare through the purview of three creation archetypes. It has also shown that the motif of creation is a launching pad from which the poet goes on to advance animist ideas on the nature of the earth. Further, the chapter has shown how the animist concept of personhood can enhance our understanding of interpersonal relations. It has also tracked the use of indigenous resources of the Yoruba culture by Osundare, most notably the folktale, in putting across his message. The syncretic style entailing a fusion of Christian and animist materials, the chapter argues, proves that the temporal paradigms associated with them are not oppositional to each other.

CHAPTER FOUR

NIGERIA AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

This earth is ours to plough, not to plunder.

Niyi Osundare, *The Eye of the Earth*

Are they of this earth
who live that the earth may die
Are they?

Niyi Osundare, *The Eye of the Earth*

As the above epigraphs suggest, I ruminate in this chapter on the plundering of the earth by humans. Specifically, the chapter is about the Nigerian experience in the Anthropocene. Anthropogenic impact on the ecosystem being the defining attribute of the Anthropocene, I review Osundare's poetic reflections on the era. I interrogate complex interconnected tropes including among others widespread deforestation, contamination and rapid decline of water bodies, drought, crop failure, gas flaring, flooding and loss of biodiversity. Ascendant forms of ecological degradation in Nigeria can be apprehended as both causes and consequences of the Anthropocene. Osundare ruminates on many of such manifestations in his verse.

Introduction

Perhaps the right way to start this chapter on the Anthropocene is to reflect on the age preceding it. The history of the earth in the three billion or so years preceding the domination of the earth by the human species is usually called geologic history and that vast amount of time, deep time. A distinction is usually made between deep history and recorded history, the history of the world "since the ten thousand years that have passed since the invention of agriculture but more usually to the last four thousand years or so for which written records exist" (Chakrabarty 212). Modern history revolves around the last four hundred years (Chakrabarty 212). Osundare in *The Eye of the Earth* casts a backward glance at the Nigerian forest before the modern era:

Iroko wears the crown of the forest,

Town's rafter, roof of the forest

Ironwood against the termites of time

Iroko wears the crown of the forest

its baobab foot rooted against

a thousand storms. (5)

I view as an emblem of geologic time the *iroko* (*Milicia excelsa*), which the stanza eulogises. Since change rather than stasis is the true ecological order, the *iroko* here can be read as a living paleontological symbol and as an element of enduring form in the midst of change. Reading it as a paleontological symbol, as "Ironwood against the termites of time" (*The Eye* 5) casts it as a survivor of the vastness of deep time. As the sovereign who "wears the crown of the forest" and whose feet resist a thousand storms (*The Eye* 5), the *iroko* is being used by Osundare to stare backwards into deep time. This staring is speculative rather than empirical. It engages the agency of wonder, defined by Dana Luciano as "a mode of invested inquiry that exceeds and redirects the empirical" (98). This mode of enquiry is apt for a retrospective account of an epoch antedating the poet's species. If we remember that deep time predated the modern era, then the *iroko* which survived it emblematises the memory of a vast but past epoch. Passing before history entails that deep time is the repository of many flora and fauna that might have gone extinct, buried in its overwhelming vastness and depth, and about which we can only speculate rather than account with considerable certainty.

By surviving deep time, the *iroko* becomes a species that "by refusing to vanish into the abyss of time, prevent(s) time from becoming merely abyssal" in Dana Luciano's words again (100). The *iroko* refuses to allow the present to negate the past, to permit social history to obliterate deep time. The termites of time which the stanza mentions approximate stratigraphic records — geologic records buried in layers of rocks – which subsist on the body of the *iroko* in the Derridean sense of a trace as an absent presence (qtd in West-Pavlov 94). In its sturdiness and longevity, the ironwood approximates a rock on which lithic inscriptions are sediments of times past. Walter Benjamin suggests that we imagine the transformation of epic forms as 'occurring in rhythms comparable to those of the change that has come over the earth's surface in the course of thousands of centuries' (qtd in Menely and Taylor 1).

The similarity between epic forms and deep time is temporal and geographical vastness with a slow pace of change. I transpose Benjamin's proposition to the *iroko* tree, enabling us to see that before the Anthropocene, the transformation was very slow and benign as the vast years preceding the current era merely registered their impact on the tree as "termites of time" with no harm to the "Ironwood" (*The Eye* 5). The *iroko,* by far the largest plant in Nigeria, is a notable cognate of epic forms by its vast physical size and vast lifespan, just as the epic conveys "the vastness of the Earth, (and) the amplitude of time" (Menely and Taylor 1). In that connection, *iroko* stands as an imaginary specimen of dendrochronology, "the science of dating based on counting growth rings on trees" (Streitmatter-Tran and Le 98). By the numerous rings it has naturally developed while growing to the "roof of the forest" (*The Eye* 5), the forest's geologic history can be gleaned.

The Forest and the Anthropocene

Against the background of how the *iroko* has been depicted so far, Osundare casts the tragedy of the Anthropocene as one in which the *iroko* species which survived billions of years of prehistory has been consumed close to extinction within hundreds of years of human history in the geographical area now known as Nigeria. He reflects on this in a way that is strikingly resonant with "A Fable for Tomorrow," the now-famous fable with which the American marine biologist Rachel Carson prefaces *Silent Spring*, her 1962 book which roused the global environmental movement into being. Carson's story is set in an American town teeming with biodiversity, where human life is merry and children literally play with assorted species of birds whose chirping provides a pleasant background to human life, where fishes fill the waters and anglers visit the community from diverse distances. Then, blight creeps into the town, brought on by the well-intentioned human use of insecticide, and spawning an epidemic that renders the town desolate as it literally wipes away animal life from its ecosystem, and reduces its human inhabitants to sickly living and mysterious death (21—2). Carson's tale is evocative and wistful. A similar air of desolation and wistful tone pervade Osundare's condensed poetic fable which similarly casts the onset of the Anthropocene as a blight on the Nigerian forest:

> This morning I saw a tree weeping
>
> At the edge of a smouldering forest
>
> Its branches bruised, its roots sad like carrots

withering on the market tray,

I asked the matchet (sic)

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

I saw the proud *iroko*, once tree, now log,

lying without a name. (*Midlife* 50)

Unlike the previous excerpt, the current stanza teems not just with human presence but also with human action. In the present stanza, human history and natural history have become one. From the poet-persona who is the ubiquitous "I" in the stanza to the divergent groups represented by technologies including machete, saw and bulldozer, there is heavy human presence; and with the exception of the poet-persona, all the human agents thrive on decimating the forest. The stanza is a notable encapsulation of the crisis of the Anthropocene, it represents the ecological menace that the human species has become by its sheer number and technological culture. As Naomi Oreskes frames the crisis, "There are now so many of us cutting down so many trees and burning so many billions of tons of fossil fuels that we have indeed become geological agents" (qtd in Chakrabarty 206).

The majesty of the tree whose outstanding size and hardihood have been depicted with generous encomiums in the previous poem is in touching contrast with the regicide and lost glory implicit in the image of "the proud *iroko*, once tree, now log/ lying without a name" (*Midlife* 50). The contrast between the two also illustrates what Osundare postulates as the difference between the Nigerian forest's glorious past and its fallen present. In the first *iroko,* we have seen the benign inscription of deep time. But the above stanza, especially the last two lines where the *iroko* tree has been felled show the fatal inscription of the Anthropocene. For a forest that hardly changed during the preceding geologic era to the one now all but depleted, the tempo of deep time and modern time stand in sharp contrast.

If the human impact will be read on the same *iroko* tree representing the forest, it is clear that if it survived deep time as a living symbol, it cannot similarly survive the Anthropocene; rather, it can only remain as a fossil, a dead symbol of the age of the Anthropos. Humans are inscribing on the forest a signature of extinction. This is because of the intensity which characterises the Anthropocene. Previously, the impact of the passage of time on the ecosystem was mild, but not any longer. The tempo of modern time is dictated by capitalism in which "To be efficient is to produce something or to perform a task in the shortest possible time." And "To be competitive is to be faster than your rival" (Barbara Adam qtd in Martineau 161). I mean that the tempo of modern time is furious. The forest in Nigeria is cut down at such vicious speed that it is rapidly being depleted. The image of animal fury, specifically of cattle fury in the lines: "I asked the bulldozer which brutes the wilds/ in bovine fury," (*Midlife* 50) fittingly evokes the speed of depletion of the forest. In "A History According to Cattle," Terike Haapoja and Laura Gustafsson depict the current age as one "moving forward like a bull." They call cattle a species with a verb-based vocabulary (296–7). That sense of thrusting forward into the forest and that of action orientation describe the tempo of assault on the Nigerian forest.

But the "I" figure in the poem deserves further analysis. It is remarkable that the "I", standing for the persona, is the only one whose presence poses no danger to the forest. The persona is rather raising awareness about the depletion of the forest by other people. According to Osundare, the "I" in *Midlife* "represents "we" (qtd in Hogue and Easterlin 470). Although he means the people who turned forty around the time he did, "I" can also be read in this context as standing in for another type of "we," another collective group to which the poet belongs. As a collective pronoun "we" symbolises not just the poet-persona ruminating on the anthropogenic impact on the Nigerian forest but a host of people — geologists, nature writers, green activists, ecocritics and other human categories usually bracketed with the capacious label, "environmentalists." The poet-persona stands for environmentalists, a diverse group of people that are involved in raising awareness about the unhealthy impact of the human species on the environment. In this connection, there is a notable difference between this extract and the preceding one. Whereas in the previous one, taking stock of the state of the forest is a retrospective reckoning, an imaginative backward glance at a bygone era, the present poem involves a persona ruminating about a current era, an era of which he is part. That is because "The Anthropocene is ... not only an epoch in Earth's geohistory defined by the shaping influence of human activity. It is also the epoch in which our singular species

reads its transformative presence in the Earth's strata, reads *itself* in the rocks, and in doing so establishes new stories about its identity and this planet" (Menely and Taylor 3, italics in the original). As a literary environmentalist, the anthropogenic transformation of the earth is a concern animating Osundare's nature poetry. He writes with a conscious aim to awaken humanity to read its impact on the ecosystem, and in the specific case of this poem, the forest.

Bearing in mind the meaning of deforestation, which is a process involving the conversion of forest land to another use, or the removal of forest cover, thus altering the original ecological make-up of the area (Aigbe and Oluku 3), it is imperative to interrogate how the poem's image of a smouldering forest has materiality in the Nigerian context. In the above poem, Osundare inscribes a panorama of the means by which the insidious trend of deforestation has been progressing. One of the uses of the line, "I asked the matchet" (sic), is that it evokes traditional farming, normally preceded by slashing and burning the bush. ("Machete" is consistently spelt as "matchet" in Osundare's poetry and I comment on that in the concluding chapter.)

Such farming is based mostly on shifting cultivation. In this wise, forest retreat in Nigeria conforms to the hypothesis of Andre Aubreville, an authority on forest retreat in Francophone West Africa. Aubreville sees savannah and grassland as anthropogenic formations resulting from short fallows, overgrazing and fire which reduce the forest to expanses of grass and desert punctuated by pockets of fire-resistant trees (qtd in Michael Williams 324). It is one of such devastating forest fires that the introductory lines of the above stanza lament. The tree in the first line —"This morning I saw a tree weeping" (*Midlife* 50) – is one of such fire-resistant species. Pauline von Hellermann's description of the practice of sparing large trees by peasant farmers in Edo State in Southern Nigeria resonates with the situation in the whole country. According to her, in the dry season, while clearing prospective farmlands:

> They cut down most small trees but left those that were too large to cut, such as the silk cotton tree (*ceiba pentandra*) and those that were useful to preserve. The most important of this was the oil palm, of which every part was used in different ways – for cooking oil, kernels, palm wine, brushes, leaves for roofing, and other purposes. Another tree left was the iroko (*Milicia excelsa*), the royal tree. (35 italics in the original)

The introductory lines of the stanza where a tree is crying at the edge of a burning forest allude to such preparation of prospective farmland. The mega flora, though left standing, are retarded by the impact of such roasting fires as the poem portrays with regard to the roots and branches of the distraught tree which is bewailing the devastation not just on plant life around it but on its branches and roots.

But the image of fire in the forest also invites metaphorical reading. A close look at the stanza shows a forest in the throes of what might be called ecological warfare. If we think in line with the Anthropocene as the age of the confluence of human and natural histories, the stanza portrays that fusion as sparking a sustained assault on the forest. If we read the lines, they portray for the Nigerian forest a picture of a place under bombardment and overwhelmed by both friendly fire and enemy fire. The smouldering forest invites us to think of fire as a metaphor for attack. The stanza from beginning to end figures the Anthropocene in Nigeria as a period of human bombardment upon the forest, a bombardment so intense and multidimensional that it threatens to turn the ecosystem into chaos.

Friendly fire and enemy fire are both martial categories. One of the ways the Anthropocene is conceptualised is as a side effect of anthropogenic inventiveness (Meneley and Taylor 3). Jennifer Wenzel draws attention to this strain of thought in Dipesh Chakrabarty's choice of words in his influential essay, "The Climate of History." For Wenzel, the expressions "fallen into," "stumbled," "slid into," that Chakrabarty uses speaks of the age as a sort of global mishap into which the planet has fallen (173). What is crucial for my purposes is the conception of the crisis as unintended, as an accident. Similarly, in a war, a friendly fire is always an accident. That is an appropriate metaphor to describe the devastation of the Nigerian forest by the peasantry armed with machetes. That element of accident speaks of the innocence of those who are carrying out what is essentially culturally sanctioned livelihood by farming and gathering fuel wood. Those are the category represented by the machete in the line "I asked the matchet" (sic) (*Midlife* 50). They log fuel wood as a way of life, oblivious of the harm to which they are exposing their environment. In 1990, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation estimated that 52 percent of arable land in Africa was cultivated (qtd in Aigbe and Oloku 3– 4). But while cultivated land is increasing, yield per hectare is decreasing because soil fertility is diminishing (Onyekwelu, Monsandli and Stimm 224, Aigbe and Oloku 4). Slash-and-burn practice which the introductory lines of the stanza evoke is a major contributor to this diminishing return on cultivated land. But it is quite an old practice in the country. For instance, in Ibadan, between

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when there was a growing demand by the natives of the town for land to expand their cocoa cultivation, it led to forest destruction through slash-and-burn. The British Resident in Ibadan reported in 1904 that 'During the next twelve years the forest south of the Alagutan stream was cleared by cutting and burning until a large portion of it became farmland' (qtd in Berry 59).

But when population still permitted, such lands were allowed sufficient fallow time to regenerate into secondary forests. However, the surge in population and the attendant pressure on land has made it difficult to allow farmlands sufficient time to regenerate into forests. The practice of slash-and-burn is a widespread method of environmental degradation in Nigeria; it has overtime reduced many forests to mere grasslands. Michael Williams locates the acceleration of deforestation in Africa as the period after the wave of independence that blew across most of the continent between 1954 and 1965, and the principal cause as a surge in population in such newly independent countries (397). He continues: "Consequently, strains on the forest increased as it became one of the last sources of new land for food and for fuelwood for heating, cooking and even industry" (397). With regard to conflict between forest conservation and clearing for farming purposes, the going attitude in Nigeria has been that agriculture takes priority. As early as the colonial period, in the 1940s, this stance was somewhat codified by Forestry Department's policy. The first Ten Year Plan for Forestry Development prepared by Chief Conservator F.S Collier made clear that 'agriculture must take priority over forestry' (qtd in von Hellermann 63).

Indeed, since the Neolithic age is one of the periods proposed for recognition as the inception of the Anthropocene, the progress of humankind from hunting to agriculture might be seen as starting a friendly fire on the environment. Among the possible causes of friendly fire, I am particularly drawn to one: misidentification of the target. This simply follows the dualist conception of the ecosystem that prevails in Nigeria. The conceptual gap between human beings and nature, which still has a strong hold on the public imagination fosters the prevailing definition of nature as other, as an externality. This attitude enables emotional detachment of the human subject from the presumed object and obscures the self-destructive reality that human degradation of the environment is.

In a country where the masses might be part of the complaint about changing climate patterns, and yet do not perceive the link between it and forest decimation, they cannot adopt environmental conservation as an immediate priority. They will continue their age-old

farming practices for example. What count for them are their nonce interests. Nature seen as an externality might have a valid claim to preservation but that is at worst unnoticed or at best an abstract idea which the people cannot immediately begin to respect since they do not understand it. It is not seen as concrete and urgent as having sufficient land to cultivate in the next farming season, or firewood for cooking and often for sale. As such, the masses carry on innocently damaging the forest. But the line where the forest is weeping impresses on us that the danger inherent in forest decimation is no longer something of an abstraction that can be ignored.

On the other hand, there is the enemy fire of racialised capital. The exogenous nature of this agent is inscribed in the lines: "I asked the timber-magnate waiting at the port/ a blue greed in his eyes" (*Midlife* 50). The mention of the saw in "I asked the saw" (*Midlife* 50) is also a reference to the entrance of capitalism and its allied market forces into the forest equation in Nigeria. That started in the late 1940s and marked what Pauline von Hellerman has called "a new age in Nigerian forestry" (103). The causative factors of the "new age" were the introduction of the chainsaw and timber lorry, both enabling technologies for timber merchandise. The technical innovations were allied to the huge demand for timber for the project of rebuilding post-Second World War Europe (von Hellermann 103). Before the introduction of these technical innovations, it took a large number of men armed with axes to fell a large tree for timber. Also, timber merchants considered proximity to a river in selecting trees to cut, as labourers would afterwards roll them manually to the nearest river from which logs were floated towards their points of sale (von Hellermann 91). This tedious process ended with the introduction of chainsaws and lorries into the business, which helped to stoke the metaphorical enemy fire of racialised capital.

To understand the import of this enemy fire of international capital, we need to link it to the worldview of traditional societies who vaguely conceive of the space outside of their known territory as chaos. This is in contrast to their inhabited — and hence organised — ecosystem. Racialised global capital typifies the conception of such forces from outside the closed world of the community for its equivalence with its external place of origin. The space outside the familiar territory, the place analogous to chaos, Mircea Eliade notes, is seen by traditional societies as the zone of the dead, demons, ghosts and foreigners; thus, as synonymous with danger (*Images and Symbols* 38). This danger is what foreign capitalist interests incarnate. As such, they are overtly reckoned with as grasping and destructive, as

necessarily dangerous. The obvious reference to the hegemonic Global North casts it in opposition to Nigeria and casts its exploration interests as plunder.

The conception of the forces of international capital as intentional enemies in Osundare's poetry replicates a fact of forest history in Nigeria. When the Benin Division which had the richest expanse of forest in the entire Protectorate of Southern Nigeria was conquered in 1897, foreign firms that applied to the colonial authorities for logging licences were clearly viewed in that light by colonial authorities. The Acting Commissioner's letter to the Foreign Office clearly saw their mission as predatory:

> What they (would-be concessionaires) would probably do would be to work their concessions with great energy so as to get as much out of it {sic} in the shortest possible time and having drained these resources, to seek concession elsewhere ... the Natives of the Protectorate ... would be left with their country very much the poorer in certain products. (Anene qtd in von Hellermann 88)

Among the foreign interests were Messrs Alexander Miller Brothers, the African Association, and a Mr Bleasby (von Hellermann 88). Those merchants of timber – Alexander Miller Brothers, the African Association, and Mr Bleasby – can be rightly viewed as pioneering figures in the capitalist class who Osundare holds responsible for a major role in pillaging the Nigerian forest. The image evoked of a "timber magnate waiting at the port" (*Midlife* 50) is a metaphor for them and their ilk. And the metaphor still enjoys currency. In Edo State where, following the withdrawal of expatriate firms, the biggest "timber magnate" is a local businessman, Efionayi Iyayi, his Iyayi Group owns a large sawmill and purchases timber from many suppliers in addition to its own logging operations. Managed by Italians, it mainly produces parquet flooring for the European market (von Hellermann 114). In other words, international capitalism is still exerting pressure on the Nigerian forest.

These diverse pressures – wood for fuel, clearing for agriculture, and timber to satisfy the international market — are held up by the poet as among the multidimensional ways of unmaking the Nigerian forest, in other words, a vortex in which the Nigerian forest is caught. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen defines a vortex as a "dynamic form that spins into being at the meeting of heterogeneous pressures and trajectories" (26). That meeting is evident in the stanza that I have been discussing.

In interrogating the contrast between the Nigerian forest's past and present, the title of the first movement of *The Eye of the Earth* in which a wholesome tropical rainforest of the poet's childhood is inscribed, "Forest Echoes," is noteworthy. The poet looks backward in time to recollect the rich forest teeming with flora and fauna which formed the background of his childhood life in his hometown of Ikere-Ekiti. "Forest Echoes" presents the persona wandering within the forest landscape and observing the diversity of plant and animal life which populate it. The persona is in awe as he forages through this "forest of a million trees," (*The Eye* 5). Osundare is on a project of "restoration" in this poetic movement. He is recollecting with a view to preserving a sense of the lushness of the landscape of the Ikere-Ekiti of his childhood. The parade of rodents and mega fauna in this forest canvas, swarming with a "bevy of birds" and "a barrack of beasts" (7) includes antelopes, the weaverbird, partridge, squirrel, chameleon, snake and elephant among others. Ever the poet of the oral school, he praises each in the style of Yoruba oral praise poetry, as in this stanza devoted to the palm tree, a tree whose every part is treasured in his society for some instrumental uses:

> Let iroko wear the crown of the roof
>
> Let ayunre play the clown of the fireplace,
>
> But let no tree challenge the palm,
>
> Evergreen conqueror of rainless seasons.
>
> Let no tree challenge the palm
>
> Mother of nuts and kernels
>
> tree proud and precious like the sculptor's wood
>
> bearer of wine and life (*The Eye* 6)

And this forest of a past era is at its most magnificent when its mega flora and fauna are paraded side by side, as in:

> the *iroko* which swallows the shrub,
>
> the hyena which harries the hare,
>
> the elephant which tramples the grass

its legs nerveless with the gangrene

of senseless power. (*The Eye* 10)

The landscape is a terrifying one, which is fitting for a poet trying to recall the awe with which he regarded the thick old-growth forests of his home village in the days of his childhood. But even in the midst of these lines which sublimate the experience of growing up surrounded by rainforests, the dangers of such an ecosystem are manifest. The "hyena which harries the hare" and "the elephant which tramples the grass/ its legs nerveless with the gangrene/ of senseless power" (*The Eye* 10) are symptomatic of the danger inherent in the rainforest of the poet's childhood, in the same manner that the Biblical Eden harboured a snake. But the poet has evoked such danger in a manner that it heightens rather than detract from the grandeur of the forest.

But while an ecocritic might be expected to charge Osundare with presenting a romantic image of the forest by sublimating its inherent danger, I consider it more productive to see his forest image as culturally nuanced. His not viewing the danger that the forest epitomises as a minus to its magnificence might derive from a sensibility shaped by the Yoruba worldview. Andrew Apter's observation on the portrait of the bush in novels by Yoruba writers is pertinent here: "the bush is the place of ghosts, demons, monsters, even inverted societies which only the most powerful hunters and heroes can survive. It is also the habitat of dangerous animals and special plants used by herbalists to make *juju* medicines." (175). We should note not only the catalogue of dangerous presences in the forest but also the mention of hunters. The forest is of central importance in the formation of the Yoruba ideal of manhood. This has to do with the qualities that cluster around the hunter in the Yoruba imagination. It is for his ability to subdue as it were the manifold dangers inherent in the forest that the hunter figures as the Yoruba cultural model of the manly virtues of "self-reliance, courage, heroism, mastery of medicines and knowledge of forest lore" (Quayson 75). The forest has to retain its appeal of physical and spiritual danger if the hunter's manly traits must continue to be validated. From this worldview, we deduce that a Nigerian ecosystem with no forest is akin to a Nigerian society with no solid men and that to the Yoruba, a forest without danger is an absurd place.

As the survey of the magical landscape in "Forest Echoes" is building up to a climax, suddenly, the persona brings it to an end with this temporal signal:

And now

Memory

loud whisper of yester-voices

confluence of unbroken rivers

lower your horse of remembrance

Let me dismount. (*The Eye* 12)

The sudden introduction of memory vests an elegiac tone on the poem, ending such kaleidoscopic glance at the rainforest. Memory functions as a vehicle for enacting what Leo Marx calls 'the episode of the interrupted idyll,' that is "a genuine moment in which the pastoral enjoyment of nature is invaded ... by a disconcerting awareness of its inevitable disappearance" (Branch 295). The poet-persona's love for nature is troubled by an awareness of its ongoing devastation. With those lines, the reader is notified that the journey through the forest landscape has been a tour down memory lane. The lines in a sense restate the title of that movement, "Forest Echoes," a title loaded with nostalgia for a lost landscape. Greg Garrard reminds us that there are three temporal orientations of pastoral: the elegy which looks back to a vanished past with nostalgia, the idyll which celebrates a bountiful present, and the utopia which anticipates a redeemed future (42). Among the three, what Osundare has written in "Forest Echoes" is an elegy for the rainforest of his childhood, which is perhaps also an elegy for his irrecoverable childhood. As such, there is a vague resemblance between the poem and the anecdote in the introductory chapter of this thesis.

The Desert Condition

Niyi Osundare's poetry also lends itself to an evaluation of the climatic condition of the Sahel ecological zone into which part of Northern Nigeria falls. The Sahara Desert has been spreading in the Sahel region. The desert witnesses whole years with absolutely no rain (Taylor 42). The desert is rapidly encroaching in Northern Nigeria. But a related phenomenon to the spread of the desert as a geographical fact is what might be called the spread of the desert condition, by which I mean the spread of aridity associated with the desert. The desert condition is spreading more rapidly than the desert itself. I evaluate Osundare's poetry from

that purview. We can see that condition indexed in one of the cultural occupations for which that zone is known, which is the herding of livestock. The travails of herdsmen and their livestock in this ecosystem resulting from increasing drought are portrayed in "Cloudwatch." The poem tells of a shepherd herding his sheep to graze but finding no pasture for his purposes. Its opening stanza shows the deteriorating situation of the shepherd:

> The shepherd is out in the field
>
> Weathered like his staff
>
> And sparse kaftan
>
> Alone, holding a dry dialogue
>
> With the sky. (*Marketplace* 75)

His slim, "Weathered" frame, evidencing worry over the fate of his animal stock, can be noticed in his habit. A desolate atmosphere surrounds him as he broods over the daunting task of finding fodder for his equally emaciated herd. His dialogue with the sky is unproductive as the rain he seems to be supplicating for is not forthcoming. The effect of such aridity is telling on his herd as:

> the sheep are all angles now
>
> sapped on grassless miles
>
> each cracked oasis belying
>
> the seeming greenness of date palms
>
> the market will pass them over
>
> those skeletons in hairless membrane (*Marketplace* 73).

Everything in the poem is embraced by the aridity of the desert: the weather, the field, the shepherd, the oases, and the herd. As a result of the desert condition, the Anthropocene implies ecological scarcity in this region. The experience of a diminishing ecosystem is the sign of the age. Deducible from the lines is the fact that the Sahara Desert is rapidly establishing itself as the master metaphor for this ecosystem. The pun on "weather" and

"wither" in "the shepherd is out in the field/ weathered like his staff" (*Marketplace* 73) puts this pervasive desert condition down to the climate.

The Sahel is an ecosystem of a "withered weather," which is a fitting metaphor for climate change. The desert condition becomes an inescapable condition for every component of this ecosystem: humans, vegetation, animals and the market, as we see in "the market will pass them over/ these skeletons in hairless membranes" (74). In Nigeria, the market relies solely on these herdsmen for the supply of all beef sold in the nation. Climate change is figured as portending different immediate dilemmas for different species in this ecosystem, all of which suffer similar fates in the end. For vegetation, it spells death; for lakes, dryness; for cattle, famine; for herders, worry. And these dilemmas are but different permutations of the desert condition. The savannah vegetation has transformed to an arid condition since it cannot be regenerated without adequate rainfall. The situation threatens millions of cattle and sheep with famine.

But there is also an irony underlying the travails of the shepherd and his sheep. The desert condition now buffeting them is considerably of their own making. An influential theory by Chancy et al attributes drought in the Sahel to anthropogenic activities. As postulated by that model, loss of vegetation cover in that belt is traceable to overgrazing and deforestation which in turn exacerbate drought (qtd in Ekpoh and Nsa 52). The shepherd's quest for fodder and water for his livestock takes him through dry and grassless miles. But it says much about his instrumental environmental sensibility that he places no value on the lakes and vegetation in their own right. His worry about the destabilisation of the ecosystem is only because it has stopped furnishing food and water to his herd. The danger in that attitude is that if we fail to value the natural environment for its own sake we are likely to misuse it. The ideal would have been to strike a balance between grazing his livestock and preserving the ecosystem. Rather, by not caring for the preservation of the vegetation as long as his herd flourishes, the shepherd has contributed in devastating and turning the Sahel ecosystem from a pastoral to an "anti-pastoral" one.

To appreciate that the ecosystem has lost its pastoral appeal, we only have to take cognisance that the beauty of the pastoral is absent in the poem. A pastoral place tends to have a particular kind of aesthetic appeal, as Raymond Williams shows: "the fields, the woods, the growing crops, the animals – are attractive to the observer" (61). Such pastoral beauty is missing in the poem, hence my claim that it depicts the opposite of a pastoral

ecosystem. Rather than robust livestock feeding on abundant grass, we have, "the sheep are all angles now/ sapped on grassless miles" (*Marketplace* 74). It is an arid place that saps sheep rather than feed and invigorate them.

The shrinking of water bodies in this ecosystem, most spectacularly epitomised by Lake Chad is of an epic scale. This is a description of the state of the same ecological zone in the fifteenth century: "The Hausa states extended eastwards from the Niger, towards Lake Chad, and the country was fertile and well watered" (Shinnie 62). The imprecision of the phrase "well watered" is in order as it enables the writer to in one gesture refer to adequate rainfall and terrestrial waters such as Lake Chad. If we keep in mind that vastness of setting characterises the epic, we can locate that defining element in the three cosmic levels – land, sky and sea — that are the traditional setting of an epic tale. The desert condition is of an epic proportion as the three regions of the ecosphere are embraced by it, as "A merciless drought descends/ upon our earth" and "sucks our streams" (*Season* 108). The sky is dry and as such can only release "drought" rather than rain. Drought in turn dries up the land and waters rather than respectively wetting and replenishing them. E.W Bovill, who wrote in 1921 on "The Encroachment of the Sahara on the Sudan," declared in respect of Sokoto Province which falls within the Sahel that since records were begun there in 1903, there had been a continuous dwindling of rainfall; and that water was also shrinking in wells and lakes there (qtd in Prothero 43). In the same place in the current season, "sand storms come and go/ but the sky declines to spit" (*Marketplace* 74).

When Osundare, in meditating on Earth Day in "Aprili 22" (sic) writes that "Lynched lakes congeal like rancid potions," (*Days* 96), Lake Chad springs to mind. It is a critical water source for millions of people in the Lake Chad Basin in the Sahel region. This is the drought-devastated area which straddles some territories of Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Lake Chad was once the world's sixth largest lake (Gore 117). Over a period of not more than fifty years however, the lake which used to cater for about thirty million people has shrunk to about ten per cent of its original size, from 25, 000 square kilometres to 2, 500 square kilometres (Lai Mohammed qtd in Soniyi, Ajimotokan and Okoh). In the Sahel region, Lake Chad used to be the landmark, when it was well watered. But now it has effectively been "lynched" by the desert. Ordinarily, the lake and the desert have different and oppositional significations. The lake normally symbolises humidity in contrast to the aridity symbolised by the desert. What its present state buttresses is that the desert condition has drained the "moisture condition." Like the shepherd's flock, Lake Chad is "all angles now"

(*Marketplace* 74). One consequence of that "lynching," as Al Gore reports, is that "N'guigmi, a city in Niger Republic once surrounded on three sides by Lake Chad, is now more than 60 miles from the water. Fishing boats and water taxis there are permanently stranded" (117). The boats and taxis are now fossils of the pre-Anthropocene era, the era when the ecosystem was in a good pluvial condition:

> last year the rain didn't go
>
> on a journey
>
> the sky had its due
>
> and courier shafts drenched
>
> earthbed in green
>
> water furrowed through
>
> myriad shoots of lush. (*Marketplace* 74–5)

The Anthropocene present is arid in contrast to the past which was bountiful and beautiful. The Anthropocene shows a negative order of history. It shows a trend whereby the forward thrust of linear time makes the ecosystem progressively less healthy.

The Rainmaker and the Rainy Season

In "Dry Seasons," Osundare writes about the activities of one class of mystical individuals who Nigerians know to have the ability to manipulate the weather during the rainy season. Such individuals are known as rainmakers. Given the fact that Nigeria has only two broad seasons – rainy and dry seasons, "Dry Seasons" encapsulates a temporal aberration as it speaks of the incidence of dryness in rainy seasons. It portrays as disruptive the intertwinement of two normally distinct seasons. A stanza proclaims:

> The sun stands smothered
>
> Heavy clouds exchange
>
> Groans of parturition

It's a long time now

Since we heard the

Pattering cry ora (sic) new born:

Earth awaits in

pain of the embrace of

shafts of birth. (*Marketplace* 73)

The lines depict the meeting of human and ecological times to be a problematic rather than a smooth alliance. Nature's time is cyclical and predictable. In practical terms, this implies that in the natural order of things, farmers can predict the onset of the rainy season and the dry season respectively. Within this natural order, they are to fit in the cultivation of their crops. But for the two seasons to get welded in this manner shows the suspension of cyclicality. It shows the interference of human forces. The anthropogenic impact on time is disruptive as we witness here. The putatively past season refuses to give way and the present one is unable to find full expression. Rainy season and dry season are literally vying for space as the first three lines juxtapose sun and cloud in virtual combat leading to climatic violence: "The sun stands smothered/ Heavy clouds exchange/ Groans of parturition" (*Marketplace* 73). Here, the disruption that human time has wrought on ecological time is evident in the elongation of the dry season at the expense of the rainy season.

But what is most remarkable is that this entanglement of distinct seasons is a result of the deliberate activities of a rainmaker as the concluding couplet shows: "But the village knows the man/ who fans the clouds away" (*Marketplace* 73). The poem shows that the rainmaker's operation is confined to only the rainy season. He can cause drought in the rainy season but is unable to conjure rain to moisten the earth in the dry season. In his article on the activities of rainmakers among the Verre, a small ethnic group in Northern Nigeria, Adrian C. Edwards reports that "In 1987, the rains came later than usual, and this was ascribed to the *sa'az* (rainmaker) being angry that while the people paid the government development levy, they had paid nothing to him" (320). The withholding of such gratification by members of the community is what leads to such intentional wickedness by the rainmaker.

The lines, with their reference to "shafts of birth" (*Marketplace* 73) are informed by the common notion of the earth as mother. Steeped in anthropomorphism, they depict the sky

as a woman in complicated labour, as a result of "complicated time." Inability to bring forth what has been conceived is a threat to the continuity of the cycle of life. And so, as the climate labours in groans, her tension mirrors that of the people as they await in suspense the resolution of her labour, since its failure is a threat to the continuity of life. In this poem, Osundare's recourse to the Yoruba myth of marriage between the sky and the earth is underpinned not by a factual use but by its alteration. In the lines, the sky takes on the role of a pregnant woman in complicated labour, entangled in "groans of parturition" while her husband, the "Earth awaits in/ pain of (sic) the embrace of/ shafts of birth" (*Marketplace* 73). The awaited baby is rain which will renew the hydrological cycle, and its pattering sound the customary cry by which a new-born baby announces its arrival in the world and the continuity of the cycle of human life. Osundare thus likens the effect of the manipulative practices of rainmakers on the earth to the breaching of a woman's labour. The rainmaker becomes the antithesis of a midwife in the sky's time of labour.

The man who fans the clouds away and stops them from delivering rain is a member of a group with the ability to control nature. For the rainmaker to control the elements in an agrarian community means that he has the fate of farmers in his hands. How this struggle for dominance between the two seasons affects crops is that it ramifies into their futile struggle against death and decay:

> For some time
>
> It's been dry suffering
>
> maize leaves toughening
>
> into sisal, the tendril
>
> collapsing on stakes,
>
> heads turning dust-brown
>
> and the earth hot like
>
> molten steel. (*Marketplace* 73)

The situation that the lines encapsulate, occurring during a supposedly rainy season, and clearly presaging a poor harvest, is fraught with dangerous consequences for food security. The sweltering untimely sun is scorching maize and other crops. This sensation of

arrested time embracing an entire ecosystem is fraught with violence and pain. The farmers, the "heads" are caught in this temporal vortex, like Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.* A passage from Achebe's novel that speaks to Osundare's poem reads:

> The first rains were late, and, when they came, lasted only a brief moment. The blazing sun returned, more fierce than it had ever been known, and scorched all the green that had appeared with the rains. The earth burned like hot coals and roasted all the yams that had been sown. Like all good farmers, Okonkwo had begun to sow with the first rains. He had sown four hundred seeds when the rains dried up and the heat returned. He watched the sky all day for signs of rain-clouds and lay awake all night. In the morning he went back to his farm and saw the withering tendrils. (18)

The significance of Osundare's poem is that it shows that such disasters can be, and often are, deliberately induced by human beings with spiritual power. He shows that the hydrological cycle in an ecosystem, and with it the fate of crops, can be subject to the deliberate whims of certain people. A certain class of human beings can hold communities to ransom by inducing this sort of temporal confusion akin to what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has described in a different context as "a temporality that does not easily sediment into discrete layers" (26). For the human members of the ecosystem, it ramifies into a communal trauma in the meantime. As for the future, the poem anticipates a dystopian future as "the cob this year/ will rust grey-tassled/ the tuber undersized" (*Marketplace* 73). It anticipates famine.

Natural Disasters and Ecological Memory

One further proof of the erratic current of the Nigerian climate is the incidence of flooding in some parts of the country, which is concomitant with drought in some other parts. In Lagos for example, flooding in many parts of the city during the rainy season is a routine mishap to which residents are accustomed. In other parts of the country too, flood frequently ravages the ecosystem. But by far the most catastrophic flood the country has witnessed in its history was in 2012.

I transpose Osundare's poetry written in respect of Hurricane Katrina to the Nigerian situation, using it to think through the 2012 flood. In the case of Hurricane Katrina which struck the United States in 2005, it originated from near the Bahamas, and from there coursed through Mexico where it was strengthened by other waters. From Mexico, it hit the Southern

part of the United States. Arriving New Orleans (where Osundare lives), the flood broke the levee of London Avenue Canal which served the purpose of pumping rainwater into Lake Pontchartrain. This led to an overflow that saw the lake surge into New Orleans. The impact of the flood was devastating, and Osundare and his wife narrowly escaped death in it. They lost myriad valuables including his library. The traumatic event of Katrina birthed *City Without People: The Katrina Poems*. But although the informing context of the collection was American, it is amenable to a fruitful reading in relation to the 2012 floods in Nigeria.

Torrential downpour in Cameroon and Nigeria in July 2012 compelled the release of water from Lagdo Dam in Cameroon, and Kainji and Jebba Dams in Nigeria. The flood from the dams ran into River Benue and River Niger. As a result of excess water surging from the dams into Rivers Niger and Benue, the country's two largest rivers overflowed their banks and ran with a furious speed. When they hit the streets, chaos and carnage ensued as "roads lost their names,/ Streets their memories" (*City* 13).

One of the lessons we can learn from the disastrous flood is how time tends to uncouple human sensibilities from the effects of human actions on the ecosphere. Following time's mediation of human actions and their consequences, the disastrous effects of such actions come to be viewed as natural disasters rather than anthropogenic-induced disasters. To illustrate, an armoury went off in Lagos on 27 January 2002. The explosion and its aftermath killed up to one thousand people. But because the tragedy involved mishandling of military hardware, it was viewed from the prism of human-made disaster, an accident. But conversely, an outlook that still separates nature from culture and is not attentive to the workings of time on the ecosystem led to the reading of the flood as a natural disaster, effectively permitting human beings to ignore their role in bringing it about.

Osundare in "Water Never Forgets" carries out a reflection that has broad pertinence to the generality of human-environmental relations, a truth that Nigerians are habituated to ignoring even with the complex of environmental turbulence that has come to underline the Anthropocene. "Water Never Forgets" teaches that human beings are responsible for natural disasters, which are reckonings for their disruption of ecological order. It points out that natural disasters are human-made disasters which time decouples from the moments of human commission of offences against the earth, to use an Igbo metaphor. Such offences are accretional and therefore, when they build up to a climax, the earth fights back. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence should help us understand my point in this connection. He defines

slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Although the time of disaster might be remote from the moments of such myriad offences, nature is a careful record keeper and the Anthropos eventually reap what they have sown. The poem cautions that:

Water has its own memory,

its drip-drop, drop-dead

hints, its mindscape of echoes

So when we steal its swamps

un-fin its fishes

and trample its shells

When we scoop its heart

steel its span

and cement its stomach

It never fails

to roar back and reclaim

its trespassed honour

Water has memory

its mouth sizzles

with vengeful teeth. (*City* 19)

The introductory stanza warns that pluvial dynamics are a product of the imprint of the human species on water. In an age when the frequency, volume and even purity of rain are getting erratic, this stanza calls human attention to the fact that such volatility, rather than being misunderstood as a mystery, is reminiscent of how human culture has mediated the hydrosphere. The mention of memory signifies that any human modification of the natural hydrological pattern is an ecological record which can be read in the frequency, volume and also purity of drops of rain that fall on the earth. By declaring that "Water has its own memory,/ its drip-drop, drop-dead/ hints, its mindscape of echoes," (*City* 91) human beings are alerted that like rocks whose sediments can be studied by stratigraphers in order to decipher records of past geologic eras, the hydrosphere keeps records too. Accordingly, abnormal rainfall trends become a cipher from which human beings can read the inscription of their species on the hydrosphere.

Osundare's animist style in the lines vests a remarkable mystical meaning on rainfall and its time. Rainfall becomes a mode of communication, a gesture through which a sentient earth conveys the result of the human imprint on the hydrosphere. By implication, rain time acts as a teaching moment, a time for humans to learn a lesson about how well or badly they have used water, or more broadly, the environment. If we schematise it this way, then the 2012 floods showed that such a lesson can be bitter. Floods as a bitter lesson become reminiscent of how awful the human record on the hydrosphere has been. Rainfall thus goes beyond a physical, hydrological reality to also signify a medium through which the result of human domination of the hydrosphere is communicated. In "Water Never Forgets," drops of rain are like syllables. They are "drip-drop, drop-dead/ hints" (*City* 19) in reading hydrological memory.

In stating that water does not forget, Osundare seems to also mean that it does not forgive. "Water Never Forgets" is didactic in its thematic thrust and in part, it teaches that technological modification of water is not value-free when it comes to accounting for human-water relations, thus:

> When we scoop its heart
>
> steel its span
>
> and cement its stomach

It never fails

to roar back and reclaim

its trespassed honour (*City* 19)

The above stanzas clearly draw a link between dams and flooding. For Third World countries like Nigeria and Cameroon, the construction of dams is a technological feat. When they cage water, when they "steel its span/ and cement its stomach" (*City* 19), such countries demonstrate their presumed mastery over water. But incidents like flood forcefully upset that assumption and return them to the fear of water.

Osundare would have us know that factors that engender flood include technological imposition of strictures on the natural flow of water through the construction of dams and that whatever problem solved by the damming of waters tends to lay the foundation for a future problem. Roaring back is an especially fitting way of articulating the catastrophe that was the 2012 flood. To gauge the effect of the flood from human death and displacement alone, the National Emergency Management Agency stated that three hundred and sixty-three human lives were lost (qtd in Amangabara and Obenade 76). The dislocations also included the survivors who were displaced from their homes. Such people were estimated by NEMA at 2.3 million (Amangabara and Obenade 76).

But reading water as a synecdoche for the non-human physical world in "Water Never Forgets" is even more productive because it offers a prism from which to consider the human species in this age as a collective All-of-you. A considerable correspondence exists between the Anthropocene and the Igbo folktale about a feast in the sky featuring the ever-cunning Tortoise whose alias is All-of-you. The self-centredness of the human species parallels that of the greedy Tortoise in that story popularised in the realm of African literature by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. The pillaging of the resources of nature by a self-centred human species arising from their perception of the wellbeing of their species as the sole raison d'être of the earth casts them as possessed of the All-of-you complex. The exploitation of birds implied in the eating and drinking of most of the food and wine prepared by the sky hosts mirrors the exploitation of the environment by the human All-of-you. The gluttonous eating and drinking by Tortoise demonstrates as in the human case the conspicuous consumption that goes before a fall. A passage from Achebe's rendering of the folktale goes thus:

> After kola nuts had been presented and eaten, the people of the sky set before their guests the most delectable dishes Tortoise had ever seen or dreamt of. The soup was brought out hot from the fire and in the very pot in which it had been cooked. It was full of meat and fish. Tortoise began to sniff aloud. There was pounded yam and also yam pottage cooked with palm-oil and fresh fish. There were also pots of palm-wine. When everything had been set before the guests, one of the people of the sky came forward and tasted a little from each pot. He then invited the birds to eat. But Tortoise jumped to his feet and asked: "For whom have you prepared this feast?'
>
> 'For all of you,' replied the man.
>
> Tortoise turned to the birds and said: 'You remember that my name is *All of you*. The custom here is to serve the spokesman first and the others later. They will serve you when I have eaten.' (78, italics in the original)

Just as Osundare's poem states that "Nature Never Forgets," the cheated birds eventually demonstrate to Tortoise that they have a memory and are capable of vengeance. In anger, they seize the feathers they gave to him, leaving him stranded in the sky. From the distant sky, he falls to the earth to his hurt, breaking his shell. His fragmented shell is his reward for his selfishness, and, similarly, droughts, floods, famines and other natural disasters which proliferate in the Anthropocene may be seen as the comeuppances from an angry non-human world to humans for their greed.

Eco-419: Ecolocalism as Ecoparochialism

This section reviews a paradox, namely, the adoption of ecolocalism as an article of faith by multinational oil corporations operating in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Ecolocalism being a term for ethic-of–place environmentalism is a current of environmentalism that is opposed to a sense of the planet as a whole. Ecocosmopolitanism or sense of planet on the other hand is a stream of the academic discourse on cosmopolitanism which stands as a counter to rootedness. It is a school of ecological thought that promotes thinking beyond the region and the nation. It is, in Ursula K. Heise's words, "an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and non-human kinds" (61).

But it is ecocosmopolitanism's opposite, ecolocalism, that I am interested in applying as a frame to examine the operations of the multinational oil corporations. To Arne Naess, the

Norwegian eco-philosopher and founder of deep ecology belongs the ecological maxim serving to conceptualise the operations of the oil corporations with an aim to raising ethical questions around the way that maxim has been employed by them. In Naess' formulation, 'the nearer has priority over the more remote — in space, time, culture, species' (qtd in Heise 34). This is a fine articulation of the underlying tenet of ecolocalism. Ecolocalism has its merits. It can stimulate our interest in our immediate environment and prompt us to be responsible members of our local habitat. However, it is also susceptible to abuse and can foster what Rob Nixon has termed ecoparochialism (242).

Nixon cautions in the context of American bioregionalism that ecolocalism has a "tendency to naturalize rootedness and stigmatize as alien people who are perceived to look or talk differently" (242). His line alerts to the limitation of Naess' maxim. Those who are classified as Other are denied equal treatment with those defined as belonging and for that reason deserving of being accorded priority. The drawing by the conglomerates of boundaries in which ecological and ethical geography are one, in which that geography is the developed West, preserving those boundaries and discriminating against Nigerians who they define as outsiders also evinces the element of fraud integral to their operations. That submission follows partly from the fact that while the corporations are ecolocal in outlook, they are ecocosmopolitan or global in the reach of their operations. Because of their fraudulent exhibition of ecolocalism, I posit a parallel between the operations of the expatriate oil companies in Nigeria and the transnational Internet racket which Nigerians call 419, hence my use of the neologism "eco-419." The 419 racket is ironically named after the section of the Nigerian constitution stipulating penalties for such crimes. Because of the role of the Internet in it, it is also called Yahoo business.

Ecolocalism becomes fraudulent ecoparochialism when its proponents exceed their boundaries and extend their operations to the environment of those same people they define as outsiders. They oil conglomerates expropriate wealth from the Niger Delta and repatriate the same to the West, developing their countries of origin while leaving the Niger Delta in environmental ruin. As Osundare's lines encapsulate it, "They rob the clouds/ to pay the sun" (*Days* 54). That is the nature of 419. Osundare uses diurnal imagery to capture further some manifestations of such ecoparochialism:

> Some days

lock you up

in the prison

of your skin

lynch you

for your looks

stab your voice

for its strange accent

dim-sighted

they cannot see

beyond the surface

mud-eared

they are for ever deaf to

the summons of the deep

Some days live for ever

In the carapace of colour (*Days* 70)

The above lines bear temporal and spatial ramifications. Ecolocalism's temporal correlative is relative time which identifies time with space. Johannes Fabian, in *Time and the Other*, has noted how dispersal in space reflects sequence in time (11—2). It is a conception of time as coextensive with place that underpins the adoption of starkly different operational standards and policies by the oil conglomerates for their Western and Niger Delta operations. This placement of different geographical spaces on different points of the arrow of time underwrites the oppositional classification of societies as advanced or civilised and backward or primitive. Place is therefore seen as encoding time and, in a less obvious way, race.

It is the racial subtext of Othering that the lines above convey. The last two lines: "Some days live for ever/ In the carapace of colour," (*Days* 70) show the function of the colour line in circumscribing and dividing the environments of the operation of such oil companies. We also need to recall once again Rob Nixon's warning about the limitations of ecolocalism because of the remarkable way in which it explains some of the above lines. He warns that it carries the tendency to stigmatise and alienate "people who are perceived to look or talk differently" (242). In Osundare's lines, ecolocalists "lynch you for your looks" and "stab your voice/ for its strange accent" (*Days* 70). Race thus becomes a template for discrimination. The point I have been driving at in that connection is that the fact of Nigerians being black and different is a factor why the ecological wholeness of their country is not a priority to Shell and other such Western conglomerates. In essence, the conglomerates' ecolocalism and eco-419 carry an undertow of eco-racism.

To give a further parsing to the place of race in determining proximity and distance, I turn to Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2009), an imaginative expose of the world of 419. We need to juxtapose the sensibility expressed by Osundare above with a poignant passage in Nwaubani's novel, where a conversation takes place between a 419 kingpin, Cash Daddy, and his protégé, Kingsley. I cite the passage at length because of the remarkable way it spells out the import of distance in human terms. Mirabelle, an American victim has from her country sent tens of thousands of dollars to Kingsley in Nigeria. He has swindled her to the point that his emotional side gets awakened and he begins to develop sympathy for her and imagine the devastation awaiting her when she gets to realise that she has been conned of the funds she and her partner saved to buy a house with.

Kingsley is inclined to back out from defrauding her further, but he has to obtain the permission of his boss, Cash Daddy. Kingsley (Kings) narrates:

> 'Kings,' he said when I had finished explaining. I waited.
>
> 'Kings,' he called again.
>
> 'Yes, Cash Daddy?'
>
> 'This woman ... what's her name?'
>
> 'Her name is Mirabelle.'
>
> 'No, no, no ... what's her full name? Her surname?'
>
> 'Winfrey. Mirabelle Winfrey.'
>
> He sighed deeply and shook his head remorsefully,
>
> 'Kings.'
>
> 'Yes, Cash Daddy?'
>
> 'Is she your sister' I did not reply.
>
> 'Go on ... answer me. Is she your sister?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'Is she your cousin?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'Is she your brother's wife?'
>
> 'No'
>
> 'Is she your mother's sister?' I got the point.
>
> 'Go on ... answer me.'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'Is she your father's sister?'

'No.'

He shrugged. Then as an afterthought: 'Is she from your village?'

'No'

'So why are you swallowing Panadol for another person's headache?' (153–4)

As if the racial undertone is still not apparent, Cash Daddy goes on to make clear the "folly" of Kingsley "worrying about one *oyibo* woman in America" (154). We should note that the two keywords that mark Mirabelle as a perfect target/victim are *oyibo* and "America"— a race and a place different and remote. *Oyibo* is Pidgin for "white." Similar spatiotemporal confinement of ethical commitment drives the two sets of actors I am comparing here. Hamish Dalley has in his review of *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* highlighted the clear definition of ethical commitment by 419 scammers as diminishing "as physical and social distance increases, reaching a terminal point at the nation's boundary" (21). The freedom from scruples that animates the transnational operations of the two groups of actors is alike, likewise their restriction of affect and moral attachment to their respective races. While the oil conglomerates see Nigerians as black, non-Western and poor, and therefore deserving to be cheated, the 419 scammers conversely see First World citizens as white, Western and wealthy and for these same reasons deserving to be duped. To both sets of actors, the nearer claims priority over the more remote. To posit that is to also liken the policy makers of the oil corporations to the 419 kingpin, Cash Daddy. We can thus understand Ken Saro-Wiwa's revelation in relation to his fight for ecological justice in Ogoniland in the Niger Delta, that some top Nigerian employees of Shell "have told me privately that they agree with most of the points I have made and that they have raised the same points only to find that they cannot influence company policy, which is invariably dictated from The Hague or London" (*A Month and a Day* 167). To the Cash Daddy types dictating such policies from the remote West, the grave ecological decay of the Niger Delta is other people's headache.

The transnational corporations define their locality as the developed world. So, when Rob Nixon makes the valid point that "bioregionalism can help instil in us an awareness of our impact on our immediate environment, help ground our sense of environmental responsibility" (238), he raises a question pertinent to this study's line of inquiry, namely, what is the immediate environment of a transnational oil corporation? What for instance is

the immediate environment of Shell, which has an active presence in about a hundred countries? We can follow common sense and declare that it is a complex question, embracing the multiple and variegated regions of operation of such corporations around the world. In other words, they have multiple immediate environments. What that dictates is that they ought to adapt currents of ecocosmopolitanism as guiding principles of their environmental praxis. This would imply having a fairly uniform standard of environmental policy adapted to suit the specific realities of each particular operating territory. But instead, they are bound to ecolocalism which opposes the homogenisation of global culture, "they are for ever deaf to/ the summons of the deep" (*Days* 70).

The line "the summons of the deep" encapsulates psychology, archaeology and geology. Archaeology can be aligned with psychology in deciphering the mind of ecological predators. Jennifer Wenzel has drawn attention to Sigmund Freud's fascination with archaeology whose stratigraphic aspects he viewed as analogous to the unconscious, stating that for him, "the psychoanalyst is an archaeologist, digging down through sedimented layers of the mind and memory to seek the origins of psychopathology, guided by stratigraphy's law of superposition: deepest is oldest" (175). To correlate depth with horizontal distance reveals by a logic akin to superposition, that the more alive a transnational company is to "the summons of the deep," the more ecocosmopolitan it becomes. Conversely, the nearer or shallower it is, the more ecolocal.

In defence of ecolocalism, Kirkpatrick Sale, an American ecocritic has stated that:

> The only way people will apply 'right behaviour' and behave in a responsible way is if they have been persuaded to see the problem concretely and to understand their own connections to it directly and this can be done only on a limited scale ... People will do the environmentally 'correct' thing not because it is taught to be the moral, but rather the practical, thing to do. That cannot be done on a global scale, or a continental, or even a national one, because the human animal, being small and limited, has only a small view of the world and a limited comprehension of how to act within it. (qtd in Heise 53)

This view does not significantly differ from Cash Daddy's own, except that it is meant to guide those who stay in their home habitat, not those who launch out into distant places in advancing their interests. My argument is that ecolocalism has its merits, but when its "small

view of the world" such as enunciated by Sale is adopted to guide the operations of a global colossus such as Shell, the tension between a localist ideology and a global scale of operation debases it and negates its validity, rendering it fraudulent.

Shell is a dominant player in the Nigerian oil industry whose operation is consciously underpinned by this policy of spatial, temporal and cultural discrimination founded on a centre versus periphery model in which the Global North and its race and culture are viewed as "we" and "ours." That is attested to in one instance by the care the company takes to conduct thorough Environmental Impact Assessments and other environment-preserving measures in its European operations. Consider the report published by Shell in 1992, on the seventeen Environmental Impact Assessments it conducted before it commenced work on a pipeline project in Scotland:

> A painstakingly detailed environmental impact assessment covered every meter of the route and each hedge, wall, and fence was catalogued and ultimately replaced or rebuilt exactly as it had been before Shell arrived. Elaborate measures were taken to avoid lasting disfiguration, and the route was diverted in several places to accommodate environmental concerns.' (*Shell and the Environment* qtd in Okonta and Douglas 65)

We notice that Shell, somewhat presciently named, is consciously bound to "the carapace of colour" (*Days* 70) if we juxtapose the above excerpt with the poetic lines below which expose the Niger Delta situation. Apart from the striking contrast, we notice that there is an inverse correlation between the two in that they reflect the two extreme poles of Shell's environmental responsibility performance:

> Everywhere
>
> a lake is killed by the arsenic urine
>
> from the bladder of profit factories
>
> a poisoned stream staggers down the hills
>
> coughing chaos in the sickly sea
>
> the wailing whale, belly up like a frying fish,
>
> crests the chilling swansong of parting waters. (*The Eye* 50)

Responsible for the devastation inscribed in the above lines is the primitive mode of operation of the oil companies which is in accord with the supposed status of the Niger Delta as a primitive territory. This follows the gulf of real and imagined differences — temporal, spatial, cultural and racial — separating Scotland from Nigeria. The picture in the above extract is that of a pirate operation.

Hamish Dalley designates 419 as "pirate capitalism" (24). Although he does not define the suggestive term, it resonates with the activities of the oil conglomerates. The connotation of voyage and plunder intrinsic in "pirate" serve well to describe the adventure of the oil conglomerates from the West to the Niger Delta and more importantly their vicious mode of operation. It calls to mind the lines below from Osundare's verse, in which, to the pirates, racial difference is the basis for plundering the treasures of the Niger:

> The innocence of the Niger
>
> waiting, waiting
>
> ...
>
> for the proof of the prow
>
> waiting
>
> for the irreverent probing of pale paddles
>
> waiting
>
> for the dispossessing twang of alien accents (*Waiting Laughters* 37)

The first line above suggests the tranquil state of the Niger Delta before the arrival of Shell, the first pirate capitalist oil company which discovered oil in Oloibiri village there in 1956. If we consider the lines with specific reference to Ogoniland, William Boyd's introduction to Ken Saro-Wiwa's *A Month and a Day* shows the difference between the state of the area before and after the arrival of oil companies there: "What was once a placid rural community of prosperous farmers and fishermen is now an ecological waste land reeking of sulphur, its creeks and water holes poisoned by indiscriminate oil spillage and ghoulishly lit at night by the orange flames of gas flares" (x). On how this vicious form of capitalism operates in the Niger Delta, one of the activities involved in the process of site preparation for exploration is dredging, the construction of canals. Usually, the dredged material, high in organic content

and turning acidic with time, is dumped on either side of the canal. Apart from destroying the surrounding areas, such dangerous waste material so dumped is later washed back into the canal or its adjoining swamps when it rains, or it seeps into groundwater, polluting it with its harmful chemical content (Okonta and Douglas 70—1). That is just one form the "arsenic urine/ from the bladder of profit factories" (*The Eye* 50) takes. And those two lines remarkably summarise the Anthropocene by the way they put the human and capital together, humanising capitalism. The "arsenic urine" equally takes the form of oil spills and toxic waste dumps which are frequent occurrences. Oil spills which result from leaking pipelines and blowouts pump crude or refined oil into nearby creeks, swamps and streams; and waste dumps inside waste pits which dot the landscape of the delta also sip into the surrounding areas during rainfall (Okonta and Douglas 70). We can further apprehend the pervasiveness of the plunder and its attendant ecological degradation implied in "everywhere" (*The Eye* 50) if we consider this information from Matthew I. Eboreme's and Douglaston G. Omotor's article in *Anatomy of the Niger Delta Crisis* (2010):

> The Niger Delta region has 606 oil fields for both offshore and onshore exploration ... Each oil field is made up of several oil rigs and flow stations that terminate at a particular oil field. In all of these, most of the oil communities have pipelines for crude and refined products crisscrossing their landscape. The process of exploring for both crude oil and gas, and the distribution of the products themselves come with a lot of attendant problems which are of both immediate and longer term consequences. (86)

As a result of the activities of these pirate capitalist corporations there is desolation in the delta as we see in this apocalyptic image:

> Fishes have died in the waters. Fishes.
>
> Birds have died in the trees. Birds.
>
> Rabbits have died in their burrows. Rabbits. (*The Eye* 51)

Apocalypse has become something of a common denominator in accounts of the activities of the oil companies and their effects, likening the pirate capitalists, the oil companies, to the archetypal Biblical idea of a thief: "The thief comes only to kill and to steal and to destroy" (John 10: 10). We can gain a clearer understanding of Osundare's lines above if we consider

them in connection with an interview published in *BBC Focus on Africa Magazine*'s January —March, 1995 issue. In the interview, Princess Irene Amangala, a native of Oloibiri, the Ijaw village in which oil was first discovered in the Niger Delta recalls a particular instance of oil spillage in the course of Shell's exploration. According to her, "*The oil just came out of the ground and it was more than they could cope with. It circulated in the rivers and many fish died, and where it touched the land, food crops died and the land became infertile*" (qtd in Okonta and Douglas 61, italics in the original).

And talking about fish, the Niger Delta is not just famous for oil production. Its creeks and streams are the breeding sites for three-quarters of the freshwater fish caught in the West African sub-region (Okonta and Douglas 63). In terms of the immediate effect of this oil spill on the local economy, we see from the above lines that they are usually poisoned to death by particulates. What that speaks of is the effect of one type of economy upon another. Multinational oil pirates are destroying the traditional fishing economy of the delta. But to the extent that the scenario portrayed is rampant rather than rare, one would wonder at the reluctance of the oil companies to put an end to this brutal form of economic oppression. But the answer lies in geographical, temporal and cultural distance. The survival of the delta's fishing economy is not a priority since the oil conglomerates have no affiliation to it.

As a relevant digression, we can see from the Niger Delta situation that the claim made by the British physicist James Lovelock in his book, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1995) that "Pollution is not, as we are so often told, a product of moral turpitude. It is an inevitable consequence of life at work" (25) is an essentialist argument at best. There is nothing inevitable about the frequency and scale of harm being unleashed on the ecosystem of the Niger Delta by the oil conglomerates. Such environmental damage is clearly tied to moral turpitude which enables 419.

One striking thing about Amangala's recollection and the last excerpt from Osundare's poetry is that in their apocalyptic nature they recall the nuclear accident that occurred in Chernobyl, Ukraine on April 26, 1986. A reactor in the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl exploded, pumping radioactive plume into the air. Thirty-one people died (Heise 179). However, while that of Ukraine was an unforeseen accident whose possibility Soviet scientists had estimated at once in ten thousand years (Heise 178), that of the Niger Delta can be called a foreseen, in fact an induced "accident" expected to happen at any time. It is routine. In Rivers and Delta States alone, three hundred major accidents are estimated by the

World Bank to happen annually (Okonta and Douglas 66). But, unlike the case of Chernobyl in which the Western governments took a sustained interest because of the proximity factor, there is no such interest by powerful governments to compel remedial action by the oil companies.

In the same poem, Osundare writes further:

> And the rain
>
> The rain falls, acid, on balding forests
>
> Their branches amputated by the septic daggers
>
> Of tainted clouds
>
> Weeping willows drip mercury tears
>
> In the eye of sobbing terrains (*The Eye* 51)

The above excerpt shows that in addition to the terrestrial and aquatic habitats, the sky over the Niger Delta is also grievously contaminated. It encapsulates pollution of the atmosphere as implying also what one might call pollution of time. The rainy season is treasured in Nigeria as a season of regeneration. It is heralded with joy for that reason. It is the season of renewal of the fertility of the earth. But in dangerously polluted Niger Delta, rather than nature, what the sky sends down is *natureculture* (Donna Haraway's term), in the form of acid rain. The people and their environment inhabit a polluted time during the rainy season. The rainy season demonstrates that the ecosystem of the Niger Delta is framed by a polluted earth and an equally polluted sky. The fate of the forest evinces the fate of the whole ecosystem. For many communities whose streams have been polluted, but for who the oil companies have not troubled to provide an alternative source of potable water, who would ordinarily have welcomed rain as a healthy substitute, the pertinent question in this sort of situation is: to drink or not to drink? The rainy season thus becomes a time of death and desolation rather than of the renewal of life. The trees portrayed as virtually naked illustrate the exposure of the whole ecosystem.

The primary cause responsible for the atmospheric pollution depicted in the above extract is gas flaring. As a result of gas flaring, the Niger Delta atmosphere is seriously polluted. Oil companies in Nigeria flare gas at a rate that is unequalled anywhere in the world. Western multinational oil corporations operating in Nigeria deliberately opt for the cost-saving measure of flaring nonassociated gas in situ rather than incuring the expenses of installing facilities to inject it back into the wells or collect it for commercial use (Okonta and Douglas 73). In 1991 for instance, 76 per cent of the gas produced in the Niger Delta was flared. The rate of flaring in some other countries in the same year was 0.6 percent for the United States, 5.0 percent for Mexico, 21.0 for Libya, 20.0 for Saudi Arabia and 19.0 for Algeria; for Holland, Shell's home country, the amount of gas flared was 0.0 per cent (Omotola 102). Clearly, if we consider the dialectic of proximity and distance, Nigeria is farthest from Holland.

Osundare collates the tropes of ecological degradation in the Niger Delta and their global aftermath in one remarkable stanza. The stanza encapsulates tropes that have been largely treated above, yet it bears citing in full if only as a summary of what eco-419 has done to the Niger Delta:

> I took off my clothes by the long-accustomed lake,
>
> and a dying fish showed me the silent fire
>
> in its limpid water.
>
> The sea now tomb for lethal salts,
>
> Where will the salmon spawn eternal summers?
>
> Unnatural gales rip off the roof of the sky,
>
> the moon staggers into night, a dark tear
>
> in each eye.
>
> Where is he, where is he?
>
> Where is the vandal who punched a hole
>
> in the garment of our sky?

Now every rain is a storm

The sun is ready fire above our broiling heads (*Midlife* 50)

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have used this chapter to think through the manifestations of the Anthropocene in the Nigerian ecosphere. I have ruminated over the contrasts between deep time and modern time as indexed in the Nigerian ecosystem. I have also argued that local people and foreign interests are complicit in the ecological degradation Nigeria is witnessing. Capitalism usually attracts a prominent mention in the discourse of the Anthropocene, and in this chapter, its manifestations in the Nigerian ecosystem have been interrogated through its effect on the country's mega flora and the chronic endangerment of the Niger Delta ecosystem. Early in the course of this research, one observation that struck me about theorising ecological degradation in Nigeria was the remarkable amount of interest interest invested by expatriate ecocritics in the country. But once that observation registered in my mind, a related observation followed, namely, their reading of the Niger Delta as Nigeria. This chapter transcends that critical limitation. It has highlighted the Niger Delta crisis but has also endeavoured to draw attention to other equally ominous ecological hazards bedevilling the country, within the room allowed by Osundare's opus.

CHAPTER FIVE

LIVING IN THE CAPITALOCENE: A NIGERIAN EXAMPLE

> Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent.
>
> E. P Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism"

> For we are now at a point where sociologists are discussing the "problem" of leisure. And a part of the problem is: how did it come to be a problem?
>
> E. P Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism"

In this chapter, I evaluate Niyi Osundare's Marxist temporal and ecological poetics vis-a-vis a capitalist Nigeria. The chapter is a multifaceted reading of the Nigerian condition in its current economic era, focusing principally on the domination of producers' time by the capitalist class. The argument that the geologic present ought to be called the Capitalocene is predicated on the overwhelming grip of the exploitative capitalist economic model on the earth and the damaging results of that grip on the majority of planetary citizens and their environment. Thus, this chapter attempts a nuanced examination of the implications of the hegemony of the capitalist mechanism of production in Nigeria, highlighting its enabling factors and the role especially of the wealthy capitalist elite, but also of the poor, in exacerbating the country's ecological problems.

Introduction

This chapter is principally a reading of "Olowo Debates Talaka," a dramatic poem in *Songs of the Season.* Other poems aid in fleshing out the argument proceeding from this primary text which is framed on class dialogue. *Olowo* (singular for *awon olowo*) is Yoruba for a wealthy man while *talaka (*singular for *awon talaka* is Yoruba for a peasant. For Osundare who earned a reputation by deploying his verse to the function of pro-peasant advocacy, the poem sees the two classes into which his ideological universe is polarised, the wealthy and the poor, personified. Talaka is concomitantly a worker and an indigent citizen while Olowo doubles as a wealthy citizen and his employer. My reading is attentive to this capaciousness of signification. The poem's dialectical structure encodes a struggle between bourgeoisie time and proletariat time. In their manifestation as employer and employee, they are pitted in a debate. Osundare is a poet of the people and simultaneously a poet of socialism. In

consequence, the bourgeoisie and the capitalist economy are cognate evils in the world of his poetry.

Man of Money Debates Man of Work

It bears being stated that the significance of Olowo and Talaka, the dramatis personae in the temporal struggle, goes beyond their individual persons. Their larger essence resides in their function as mouthpieces for unlike and conflicting ideologies and social classes. Osundare's resolve to simulate the dialectical nature of Karl Marx's philosophy could be one reason for the poem's dramatic structure which distinguishes it from most of his output. Below is Talaka's cynical response to Olowo's taunt that the poor deserve their fate because of their indolence:

Talaka: Man of money,

A thousand truths of yours
Are a little lighter than a pigeon's feather.
We know we are lazy; who says we are not?
Waking each morning before the first cock,
Grabbing our matchets (sic) and brooms
And hammers and rugged axes...
Sowing; sowing but hardly reaping,
We put the hum in your factories,
We are the blast in the furnace
Of your minting forge.
We know we are lazy; who says we are not?
The laziness of sweating brows
And broken backs,
Of restless biceps
And hands rough and rude
Like the hide of ageing crocodiles;
We know we are lazy; who says we are not?
Lazy in our twilight noons

And green graves

Lazy, we who never know the softness

Of easeful nights. (37)

The excerpt presents us with a jeremiad suffused with lamentations on the alienation of the time of the Nigerian producer by the capitalist class. It should be borne in mind that time, in Marxist labour discourse, is "The measure of the expenditure of human labour that is not a quality and nature of its product" (Postone 189). What Postone's intervention evinces is that commodities, the products of labour time, tend to exist like atomised entities with no relationship to the time of labour. Commodity conceals the temporal component of its production. Yet commodity is reified time. It represents "congealed" time, the materialised form of the time spent in its production which by its character it is alienated from. Therein lies one of the grudges of Marxists against capitalism which fetishises commodity. Commodity does not reflect the minutes, hours and days invested in its production. By implication, since man-hour implies manpower, it assumes distinction from the labour which brings it into being. Capitalism summarises value in monetary terms. Therefore, the dominant value of commodity is its monetary value. Indirectly, what this implies is that capitalism places a monetary value on labour time spent in the making of commodities. Talaka contests the vilification of the poor implicit in the category of the lazy, whereas they are the direct creators of wealth which is appropriated and personified by the bourgeoisie.

Deconstructing "laziness" reveals that what is at stake is a temporal struggle. Encapsulated in that word is an accusation that Talaka is a time waster. That is reminiscent of a charge levelled against Lawino by her Westernised husband, Ocol, in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966). Consistent with her Acoli culture, Lawino manifests an attitude to time that is relaxed and in which people are not conscious of clock metric. But her husband who is attuned to the ticking of the clock sees such attitude as abhorrent. Thus, Lawino laments:

My husband says

I am useless

Because I waste time,

He quarrels

Because, he says,

I am never punctual.

He has no time to waste.

He tells me

Time is money. (67)

For Talaka, the time of the Nigerian producer who he spars for is in conflict with the time of the capitalist typified by Olowo. Traditional versus modern time is another latent struggle in the dialogue. How Olowo perceives that Talaka is lazy is that he is not satisfied with his own level of wealth. He is accusing Talaka of underutilising and therefore depreciating the value of his work time. But as it has been argued, time is not a framing device for phenomena. It is rather the happening of phenomena that is time (West-Pavlov 3, Mbiti 17). In the Olowo-Talaka context, time is not a medium for the production of commodities but it is the activity of production itself which constitutes time. Seen in that light, the logic of the Marxist contention that commodity is reified time becomes apparent. But Olowo views time as a medium for the production of goods and consequently accuses his employee of laziness for "underutilising" it.

Relating the charge of laziness to scholarship on African temporal ontology is pertinent here, to the extent that it connotes many things including slowness and waste of time. Olowo is in an important sense perpetuating a colonial stereotype. It is remarkable that the colonialists who instituted capitalism in various countries in the developing world also stereotyped the natives as lazy. This was according to their timescape with which capitalism is also synonymous, and which Olowo typifies: "The settler never stopped complaining that the native is slow. Today, in certain countries which have become independent, we hear the ruling classes taking up the same cry. The fact is that the settler wanted the native to be enthusiastic" (Fanon 156). That is exactly the cry we hear from Olowo who has taken the place of the colonialist in the labour set-up in post-independence Nigeria.

But the idea of producing time mentioned above has been used to challenge the profiling of Africans as lazy – the sort of attitude that Olowo embodies. John Mbiti has argued that the conception of time as a commodity that can be wasted is alien to traditional African thought and is a colonial legacy in the continent. Instead, Africans produce time in their activities. As such, they produce just as much of it as they want (19). While the deduction he makes from that observation, that Africans do not believe that time can be

wasted, is essentialist, I find merit in his idea of producing time. The cultural practice of producing as much time as needed by the producer, applied in the occupational sphere might account for the subsistence nature of traditional occupations such as farming. Talaka seems to be still influenced by this timescape. But both Olowo and capitalism repudiate subsistence and harp on surplus, conceiving the market not as an opportunity but as a necessity. Capitalist time is dependent on the clock which ticks away irrespective of whether the producer is resting or working; irrespective of the tempo of work.

Continuing the debate, Olowo reels out a charge of sloth against Talaka thus:

> You slink like slothful swine
> Seeking ripening roots and dropping fruit;
> You sit, hands folded, at the bottom
> Of a towering palm, praying gourdfuls
> Of wine to roll down your lying throats,
> Tell me, do you think it flows for free?
> I work for every kobo in my brimming banks
> ...
> We all know laziness is
> Poverty's legitimate father (36—7)

The above lines actually inscribe an image of the capitalist economy and Olowo's perception of the place of the poor in it. Their use of biological metaphors is not gratuitous. Just as a subliminal symbolic connotation of the saplings held by members of Kenya's Green Belt Movement while resisting the deforestation of their country's landscape for development purposes in the late twentieth century was returning "the blighted trope of growth to its vital, biological roots" (Nixon 134), we find in the above lines a similar return to the biological roots of the economic metaphor of growth encapsulated in the impressive image of a towering and healthy palm tree. Growth is a principal means by which a healthy capitalist economy gives account of time. Immediately we take cognisance of that homage to "growth," a word in the top rank of capitalism's venerated terms, the relation of the poor to that economy becomes apparent.

The poor are situated on the deficit side of the capitalist economy. The growth "around them makes them doubly poor," in George Crabbe's turn of phrase (qtd in Williams

115). In the lines, "You sit, hands folded, at the bottom/ Of a towering palm, praying gourdfuls/ Of wine to roll down your lying throats," (*Season* 37), Olowo taunts Talaka with one of the cliché of the capitalist age – no free lunch. Osundare in the same lines returns to the image of the palm-wine imbiber as a metaphor for laziness that is common in Nigerian literature. That is a representational device whose archetype is the hero of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard.* Tutuola's hero states in the first two sentences of the novel: "I was a palm-wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life" (3). I cite Tutuola's text in order to show the legendary dimension of laziness Olowo is charging Talaka with. He is also insinuating that, similar to the Drinkard in Tutuola's novel whose father has to employ a tapper for the exclusive job of tapping for his son, the Nigerian peasantry are indolent to the point of handicap, to the point that they cannot tap the palm-wine they need to drink.

The excerpt also reads like a Biblical parable. Discernable in it is the echo of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Just as the wealthy man turned down Lazarus' plea to feed on the crumbs from his table, Olowo emphatically denies Talaka free wine from capitalism's palm tree. He proceeds to attempt to justify the denial by playing up the nexus between time and poverty. In his estimation, the poor, by wasting their time, are the architects of their own poverty. Such is the meaning encoded in the arrogant taunt: "We all know laziness is/ Poverty's legitimate father" (*Season* 36—7). Thus, the poet's disdain for capitalism stands in relief as the lines draw to themselves the moral lessons of the Biblical story. One of them is that the wealthy that show no compassion to the poor will go to hell to spend eternity just as the wealthy man in the story eventually did.

As has been remarked, Olowo is heir to the legacy of colonial temporal values. He is carrying forward on Nigerian soil the capitalist economic system complete with its time-as-a-commodity principle, and the perception of producers as a lazy lot, in the manner Western colonialists often described their subjects as lazy. The element of domination underpinning colonialism is also evident in the Olowo—Talaka relationship. Colonial masters saw their subjects as displaying a different and inferior temporal attitude. The metric time perception of work is what has conditioned Olowo to believe that Nigerian workers are lazy and shiftless. Laziness is seen to find expression in producers' wasting of time and improvidence. Physical and mental inertia are implied in Olowo's charge. His worldview betrays Eurocentric metric-time perception of work as unremitting toil which led for instance W. Tench, a white settler in Australia to proclaim with regard to the Aborigine that "All savages hate toil and place

happiness in inaction" (qtd in Donaldson 197). Aborigine laziness in the estimation of the white settlers whom Tench typifies is indexed through roaming around the country in seasonal cycles, a socialist inclination expressed by the sharing of resources and their casual attitude to work aimed at winning provisions to satisfy immediate needs (Donaldson 148).

Similar to the Aborigine case, what is pertinent to note about the meaning of the supposed laziness of the Nigerian worker is that it is an aggregate of many of the elements comprising indigenous ways of relating with time. It is pertinent to note that as can be deduced from the poem, Talaka is not just a poor man, he is a poor labourer. As such, the accusation that he is folding his hands and waiting for some free wine does not sit well with him.

But in his response, Talaka shows himself a consummate fighter by seizing his boss' term and fighting back with it. His subversive retort, "I know we are lazy; who says we are not?"(*Season* 37) warrants unpacking. It encapsulates more than a response to an ungrateful employer. In the time of capital, laziness has come to signify ways of passing time rather than spending it. Whichever way time is consumed other than in economically productive work is categorised as laziness. Talaka's mode of defence is a direct attack on a capitalist temporal dogma. The *awon olowo* have appropriated the creative value of time and privileged it to elide and malign other temporal values. The function of time as a medium of creation is not a capitalist invention. In the Christian tradition, God created heaven and earth in time, demonstrating thereby the supreme value of time as a medium of creation. Christianity holds time to be God's property for which the faithful will eventually give account on the Judgement Day. Accordingly, it lays stress on "redeeming the time" by utilising as much of it as possible in worthy activities such as prayer and work, not trifling it away in sloth.

But capitalism appropriated and corrupted the Christian norm by idolising work as the only activity that constitutes serious and proper use of time. The capitalist understanding of the value of time as a medium of creation is shown in this stanza from *Moonsongs*:

Beyond the wilderness of stone

Beyond valleys of suffocating veils

Beyond Wednesdays of unpenitent ash

A Monday flings open the door of the week,

A pliant clay in its waking hand:

Supple moments, oh supple moments!

And brittle breaths unchain the dance

And ample hands unhush the drum (19)

Notice the dismissal of Ash Wednesday, a holy day and the beginning of the Lenten season to Christians. The emphasis is on Monday which is a day of work. What we see in the above excerpt is that time is synonymous with work. Monday dawns with supple clay in its hand ready to be used for creation. The extract in its musical orientation holds up work as the rhythm of time and life.

Capitalism also discarded redemption as the essence of work and installed money in its place. As time is reduced to money, those who have utilised their time wisely have money to show for it. The poor conversely exist as personifications of their own laziness as, in the estimation of Olowo, "laziness is/ Poverty's legitimate father" (*Season* 37).

There are in those lines strong echoes of an attitude to time which originated in England, the birthplace of capitalism, an attitude codified by the Rev. J. Claython's Friendly Advice to the Poor, written at the behest of the officers of Manchester Town in 1755 warning that the sluggard can only reap poverty: 'If the Sluggard hides his hands in his bosom, rather than applies them to work; if he spends his Time in Sauntring, impairs his Constitution by Laziness, and dulls his Spirit by Indolence' (Thompson 83). Under capitalism, it is an a priori "truth" that the reward for work is money while that of laziness is poverty. But Talaka's life provides a posteriori case that punctures that received wisdom.

By equating time with money, capitalism effaces other temporal values such as leisure and social relationships, reducing them to a status analogous to relative time. They only subsist in the shadow of work. Advanced capitalism considers them inferior to work, with their essence often questioned as they are consigned to the category of laziness. Take social relationships such as marriage ceremonies that are central to Nigeria's communal culture, it was the same conception of time that prompted Muhammadu Sanusi II, economist, former Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, and former Emir (traditional ruler) of Kano to publicly rebuke the federal government in 2017 for taking loans from China for construction of rails. He queried:

> China will lend you $ 1.8 bn (sic) to build rail. This light rail will be done by the rail workers from China. The trains will come from China. The engines will come from China. The labour comes from China. The driver is Chinese.
>
> At the end of the day, what do you benefit from it? Your citizen (sic) will ride on a train and when you ride on a train, in northern Nigeria, in a state like Kano or Katsina, where are you going to (sic)? You are not going to an industrial estate to work. You are not going to school? You are not going to the farm. You borrow money from China to invest in trains so that your citizens can ride on them and go for weddings and naming ceremonies. (qtd in Odeboye, Eniola and Isenyo)

By highlighting proof that the poor are industrious, Talaka attempts a rebuttal of such attitude which Olowo speaks for. Talaka declares that "We know we are lazy; who says we are not?/ The laziness of sweating brows/ And broken backs,/ Of restless biceps/ And hands rough and rude/ Like the hide of aging crocodiles" (*Season* 37). His rebuttal is successful. Yet, just as Einstein's relative time only succeeds in relativising Newton's absolute time rather than damaging it (West-Pavlov 41), Talaka's attack on Olowo's hypothesis that the proof of industry is money – "I work for every kobo in my brimming banks" (*Season* 37) – does not negate Olowo's argument. It only relativises it. Relative time figures as a temporal paradigm in opposition to absolute time. Yet, its acceptance remains relative as only a minority of elites have come to terms with its logic, while absolute time maintains its grip on the public imagination of what counts as time. Similarly, Talaka's contention that such things as calloused hands and broken backs are markers of work time and dedication to work by the peasantry is only relatively valid in the capitalist era. In the Capitalocene, "the 'good' man is the active man, the successful man, the man who has put his time to good purpose" (Meyerhoff 69). And the absolute proof of time purposively spent is money, not calloused hands.

To be perceived as lazy implies that Talaka is a negation of the "good" man. And in the charge of laziness levelled against him, we see also another element of capitalist time, which is the separation of work from leisure, or work from life. To a capitalist, to be lazy also carries the suggestion of entangling labour time and leisure time, or combining work with leisure. This is an aberration, a waste of time and a vice according to the capitalist worldview. In essence, capitalism criminalises rest at work. But Talaka's view of the practice envisions it as freedom in work rather than freedom from work. According to the capitalist episteme, it is

the lazy who play while at work. That is part of what E. P Thompson has sardonically dubbed "the 'problem' of leisure" (95). But that means that capitalist work ethic is antithetical to nature. It is natural, and is still manifest among many self-employed workers, as E. P Thompson observes, that work time alternates between periods of animated labour and of idleness (73). This is the order of the agrarian economy which remains a major presence in capitalist Nigeria.

In the Capitalocene, the foil to "laziness" is the production of more and more goods in every unit of time. Olowo's vilification of prayer as an index of laziness, as one of the ways in which the *awon talaka* fold their hands and waste their time, waiting for free wine, deserves parsing because of what it says about the character of Nigerian capitalism. It signifies the system's break with spiritual mooring. Yet, whether as Christians, Muslims or animists, Nigerians take prayer and religion seriously. Olowo's attitude reveals impatience with "sentimental" values. It is deducible from his stance that there has settled in Nigeria one of the conventional attitudes governing modern capitalism, namely, "The belief that values, emotions, intuitions, spirituality are all secondary to 'hard' economic 'facts of life'' (Pepper 69). This encapsulates the belief that religious and humanitarian values count less than profit. The implication of this for the Nigerian worker is that his or her value is measured by the amount of goods he or she can produce within a timeframe, not by any other parameter such as the rewards he or she can reap from his or her labour within the same timeframe, or his or her wellbeing. The good employee is the hardworking one, which means the one who is able to produce to the satisfaction of the employer.

One further effect of capitalist time in Nigeria is eliding the indigenous temporalities of the different communities within the Nigerian state. To the extent that capitalism entered Nigeria with the slave trade and got accelerated in the colonial era, it can be seen that one subtext of the legacy of the imperial encounter by the Nigerian nation is the suppression, destruction and synchronisation of the different timescapes of the country's distinct constituent communities. These processes – destruction, suppression and synchronisation – remain incomplete, resulting in tension within the homogenising capitalist temporal regime. For a country with above two hundred ethnic communities with divergent cultural relations to labour time before the capitalist era, it can be seen that the Nigerian working class for which Talaka functions as a mouthpiece is extremely wide and heterogeneous.

The group is an extremely diverse cluster of workers with differing and conflicting cultural, religious and individual attitudes to labour time. Nigeria's capitalist present is an apt example of what Harry Garuba has described in a different context as a "complex embeddedness of different temporalities ... and different epistemological perspectives within the same historical moment" ("On Animism" 49). In the poem, the pronoun "we" standing in for the working class becomes itself a correlative and an ally of capitalist objective time in the effacement and suppression of concrete individual and cultural times and subordinating them all to one overriding temporal regime. "We" is clock time's ecological cognate in that it is a collective, and therefore, public, pronoun just as absolute time is public time which stands in contrast to individual experiences of time. In other words, it is capitalism that has provided the conditions enabling the existence of "weness" among the workers. At the same time, the workers develop that sense of oneness in order to contest their exploitation by the same capitalist system. As Talaka squares up to Olowo, the sheer number of the exploited workers seems to be his strength. Like a labour leader, he is wont to defend his position with the force of the collective "we."

Seen in that light, the temporal conflict in the verse is not limited to the obvious one between the working class and the capitalists. Within Talaka's group, the diverse group of individuals homogenised by the collective pronoun "we," there exists also a latent but serious temporal conflict. Some of the working class are more amenable to capitalist labour time than others. Some are more hardworking in the capitalist sense than others. Some may even regard their fellow workers as lazy. But "we" perfectly occludes these subjectivities in the same manner that the clock elides subjective time. The name Talaka is another correlative of objective time. It implicitly homogenises reality. The lengthy dialogue unfolds on the assumption that all Nigerian private-sector workers are indigent. The persona's name allied with the collaring of all workers into the sweep of his argument comes to perform clock time in the sense of effacing nuances and differences among workers and working conditions and fitting all to the category of the poor. The justification that can be found for that is that since the majority of the workers feel underpaid and dissatisfied, there is adequate ground for generalisation since their situation is the norm.

The sustained interrogation in the stanza of the profiling of the Nigerian worker as lazy also reveals some of the ways in which it is the alienation of the workers' time that is tagged laziness. For instance, the producers are only known as workers while their employers claim responsibility for producing the products of the workers' labour. Hear Talaka: "We put

the hum in your factories,/ We are the blast in the furnace/ Of your minting forge" (*Season* 37). It is the man of money who claims credit for the result of these processes in the form of the finished product, the materialised time translatable into some other values denoting social success. As Hans Meyerhoff points out in his critique of capitalism, 'making' is an equivocal word (115). The semantic designation of roles sees the various workers who play different roles in the manufacturing process merely as labourers or workers while the man or woman of money, the industrialist, for being their employer, claims the title, "manufacturer." While as Talaka has quipped, the proletariat are the group making the product or commodity, Olowo is the one making it in the eyes of the wider society, both in terms of being recognised as a manufacturer and in terms of the social success connotation of the phrase "making it." The phrase encapsulates wealth and such other related values as prestige and power. Those whose time is alienated by others hardly make it.

As such, Talaka's taunt that Olowo's words are immaterial – "A thousand truths of yours/ Are a little lighter than a pigeon's feather" (*Season* 370) – while it makes moral sense, lacks practical force within the wider capitalist order governing the country. It is something of an irony given that in the Capitalocene, it is the words of the poor that are treated as inconsequential, not those of the wealthy. The poor, being financial featherweights may have valid opinions on issues but such opinions are easily disregarded, alongside those of other lowly classes such as the insane, for the lowly economic status of their owners which also brings about lack of prestige. A moral defect of capitalism exposed in this connection is that an individual has to have money for his or her opinion to be respected. If we take the example of Europe, according to Michel Foucault in his book *Madness and Civilization* (1965), "The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw social unrest and economic depression, which they tried to solve by imprisoning the indigents with the criminals and forcing them to work. The demented fitted quite naturally between those two extremes of social maladjustment and iniquity (vii). It is those "maladjusted" classes whose words are immaterial in a capitalist order, not the wealthy.

Part of the temporal alienation Talaka rues also stems from the time of his class being appropriated by private individuals rather than being used in communal ventures. For instance, in traditional Igbo society, those taking part in *mbari*, the ritual process of building a sacred house in honour of the gods, a process that demanded isolation from society and could take up to two years to complete, had the psychological satisfaction of working for their gods

and communities. Such satisfaction is impossible in the Olowo-Talaka set-up. What obtains instead is Olowo's provocative fulminations.

Olowo's attitude emanates from a belief that time thrift is a virtue that can only be imposed on the Nigerian industrial worker from an external source. E. P Thompson gestures to this belief in a general reference to the developing world, averring that "Without time-discipline we could not have the insistent energies of industrial man; and whether this discipline comes in the form of Methodism, or of Stalinism, or of nationalism, it will come to the developing world" (93). I have earlier drawn a parallel between Olowo and colonialists who wanted natives to work with enthusiasm. But it is worth pointing out that the imperative of time discipline in the workplace is not a European legacy in Nigeria. We only need to look at the Igbo experience in *Things Fall Apart* for that point to crystallise. From the same text also, we gather that even scolding industrial workers "into line" such as Olowo is attempting is a carryover from the country's pre-capitalist era. From Okonkwo to Olowo, there is a continuum of the practice of controlling workers via verbal violence.

But the point of difference is the vital issue of motive. In the case of Okonkwo in his relation with his son Nwoye for instance, it is motivated by a long-term vision of the world in which he envisions Nwoye as the ultimate beneficiary. Rude admonition is part of Okonkwo's methods of making his son to habituate hard work in order to eventually become a successful farmer himself. This farm scene in *Things Fall Apart* bears that out:

> 'Do you think you are cutting up yams for cooking?' he asked Nwoye. 'If you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw. You think you are still a child. I began to own a farm at your age. And you,' he said to Ikemefuna, 'do you not grow yams where you come from?'
>
> Inwardly Okonkwo knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed-yams. But he thought that one could not begin too early. Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him. (26)

Olowo differs from Okonkwo in that his verbal coercion is self-centred and motivated by short-term greed. Another point of difference between them and the two differing

economies they represent is that while Okonkwo leads from the front, actively participating in the production process and teaching by example, Olowo teaches from the sideline as it were, and by precept.

Talaka taunts Olowo saying:

> We know we are lazy; who says we are not?
> The laziness of sweating brows
> And broken backs,
> Of restless biceps
> And hands rough and rude
> Like the hide of ageing crocodiles;
> We know we are lazy; who says we are not?
> Lazy in our twilight noons
> And green graves (*Season* 37).

The temporal struggle assumes the form of fighting negative stereotyping with positive stereotyping. The lines in their own way standardise concrete individual times of labour by foregrounding the best and effacing the rest. They constitute a case of using the best to represent the whole. With the selfless and animated dedication to duty that the lines inscribe, they represent a case of projecting the most dedicated and productive Nigerian proletariat as the average run of the workforce.

What Talaka has done by using the most productive worker to represent the whole is notably a kind of inversion of scientific management, a process which among other things includes division of labour and the control of the labour process by the employer. It is one of the hegemonic means of controlling workers' time by breaking down the process of production in order to time its various stages (Martineau 136). The use to which this model is employed by management in order to maximally control workers' time goes beyond timing them to embrace determining average time of performing each production task. One of the ways this model can be manipulated by management is by selecting and positing the most rapid workers as the average workers with whom all others must catch up. Such processes are usually met with opposition by workers who are at the receiving end of the pressure it entails, as in this example related by Jonathan Martineau in a presumably Canadian context:

> The workers being observed for timing tried not to rush their movements, they emphasised to the employer the importance of periods of rest between periods of intense physical effort, they struggled to have time allocated for toilet breaks, to take a drink of water, and they challenged the result of the study on the basis of the risks that such timeframes and work techniques posed to their health and security. (138)

Here, workers' time is natural human time while the employer's time is machine time. In Osundare's poem, Talaka inverts the scenario by positing the most exemplary workers as typical or average, not for the purpose of compelling their colleagues to catch up with them but for bargaining for benefits from management. The struggle for the control of labour also implies a struggle for the control of labour time, and this is one of the dimensions it takes. And Talaka endeavours to suggest an alternative parameter by which the value of labour time can be reckoned. That is by balancing the amount of goods produced with the standard of welfare accorded the worker. In other words, it will not do for the value of labour time to be determined by the amount of product it translates to but also by how rich it makes the worker's leisure time through welfare packages. This is expressed in Talaka's sarcastic quip that his class is "Sowing; sowing, but hardly reaping" (*Season* 37). The agricultural metaphor is pertinent for reasons including its Biblical authority, for workers' welfare has scriptural sanction. Time is mapped out for it in the book of Ecclesiastes 3: 2 which makes clear that there is a time to sow and a time to reap.

In Talaka's accusation on the undervaluing of the time of the Nigerian peasantry by the appropriating capitalist elite – "We know we are lazy; who says we are not?/ Waking each morning before the first cock, /Grabbing our matchets (sic) and brooms /And hammers and rugged axes.../ Sowing; sowing but hardly reaping,/ We put the hum in your factories/ We are the blast in the furnace/ Of your minting forge" (*Season* 37) – is another result of the transition to capitalist time manifest. For the workers, temporal alienation also implies cultural alienation. Capitalism has altered the relationship between them and the product of their labour, with negative implications for emotional connection and satisfaction. Whereas their forebears worked for themselves, for instance as farmers and artisans, and owned the products of their labour, obtaining from their labour time and its products emotional satisfaction, the transformative impact of the Capitalocene is that workers' time has been monetised. Having sold their time, workers are no longer in control of it. They have lost the prerogative of determining when and even how to work, but must abide by the compulsive

capitalist creed of work and more work – "Sowing; sowing" (*Season* 37) – in order not just to maintain production levels and stay afloat but to keep increasing them and increasing Olowo's excess capital. This ethos is integral to capitalism because "*increasing*, rather than steady profits are needed in order to increase capital accumulation, to reinvest in the hope of creating yet more capital" (Pepper 92, italics in the original). And since profit translates to the amount of workers' time not paid for, the meaning of the drive to increase profit is an increase in alienated time.

The commodification of time also speaks to the transformation of the essence of work. In the agrarian economy predating the capitalist order for instance, the direct goal of the farmer was to feed his or her family. There might be other considerations such as social prestige, as in the Igbo world of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Yet, even the hardworking hero of that novel, with several barns of yam to show for it, is not wealthy, the accumulation of money not being a goal of work. The land was owned by the cultivator or the community, not by an alien autonomous being, and working it was a way of life, a cultural continuity, not an effort to earn a wage. By being alienated from their time through selling it, and doing so cheaply, the peasants feel enslaved.

Those who sowed in the previous era in their own fields reaped the fruits of their labour, but for the Nigerian proletariat, the situation is different. A result of this is the emotional disconnect between them and their labour. Their time is spent producing for a market from which they are alienated, because they are ignorant of the diffuse identities of the potential consumers of their products. Additionally, the immediate appropriators of their time, the manufacturers, plus the management class, mediate between them and the market.

But the disaffection evinced from the complaints of Talaka speaks partly to the failure of Olowo's attempt at instilling false consciousness in him. False consciousness among the exploited class is a necessary aid to capitalist exploitation of workers' time. It takes the form of the fetishism of commodities, which is a situation "where the products of human labour are turned into commodities: seemingly impersonal things which do not derive their importance from craftsmanship or social usefulness, but primarily from exchange value" (Pepper 89). The effacement of labour time invested in the production of such commodities tends to give them an autonomous existence once they have left the hands of the workers. With that autonomy, it now appears as if the amount of profit realised from them is not the business of workers. It now appears that workers ought not to care that it is their time which the appropriators have bought cheap that they are selling dear. It seems that workers who take an

interest in how much the commodities generate are going beyond their bounds; that they are unduly inquisitive and are invading the turf of commodities which have the right to be sold with any profit margin without being accountable to their producers. And as a result of that alienation, the lot of the workers is to accept their wage as it is. It does not matter that despite being employed, the proletariat live in harsh realities as shown below:

Talaka: ...

Our barns are lean,
Our granaries, ringing shells
Of noisy hunger;
A lingering death knocks
The door of our hearts,
Our cooling hearts ever so hot
With thunders of howling stomachs. (35)

Osundare pays homage here to the country's agrarian economy. Both as a theme and as a metaphor, he privileges farming more than any other vocation in his poetry. What counts in temporal terms about Talaka's lamentation above is that it is the resultant effect of being forced to disengage from nature's time to enter capitalist time. Famine results when multitudes of workers exit ecological time to enter clock time as industrial workers. Central to the time of traditional farming is time as event rather than as abstract units calibrated with clocks and calendars. That is unlike capitalist time. The cultivation of yams and grains follows a cyclical ecological order in which time is indexed by the major events constituting it. In this sense, the year is composed of lunar rather than calendar months; and in Nigeria, the months fall into two broad seasons: rainy and dry seasons, named after the ecological phenomena with which those seasons are synonymous. Within this two-season order are smaller time segments such as planting season, weeding season and harvest season. Into this seasonal order fitted the production of various crops. Making a break with this concrete temporal paradigm and investing their labour in abstract capitalist time fosters the hegemony of the latter, eliding the former with the kind of productivity it supports. The result for the *talakawa* is empty barns and granaries – in short, hunger.

Capitalism's by-product is the many that spend their time toiling, yet remain poor. Whereas before its advent in the country, poverty or success was mainly a function of how

hardworking an individual was, capitalism has ushered in the regime of a paradox whereby many citizens work hard but are unable to break away from want, because their time of labour is alienated. Their empty barns and hunger symbolise many things, one of which is the debilitating effect of the moneyed order in which they labour at a disadvantage. Capitalism commodifies work time, workers and employers, summarising them all with the single currency of money. Hunger despite working long hours shows how little peasant time is worth by the capitalist maxim which states that time is money. As such, it becomes evident that another implication of equating time with money is that the time of the peasant is small money. The peasantry are hungry since capitalism, with its fetishism of commodities, does not distribute them according to hard work or needs of the individual but according to the individual's ability to pay. Exchange value is central to the monetary ethos of capitalism, its synchronising dialectic. An individual's worth in the economic system equates with the individual's market or exchange value. Talaka is hungry because his likes cannot afford enough of life's necessities, being themselves "commodities" with little monetary value.

Capitalism necessarily depends on class exploitation. The excess value of the worker's product, which is unpaid for, called profit or capital, is indispensable to its survival. The wage of the labourer represents a portion of the monetary value of his or her labour time which is given back to him or her in order that he or she can afford a living. According to David Pepper, "it is the value of labour which needs to be expended to reproduce the workforce" (80). But fair wage is dependent on a society's notions of decent standards of living; it goes beyond the imperative of reproducing the workforce. As such, Talaka's complaints reveal that those whose time is alienated experience time as a waste. Their lived time is comparable to that of another class of Nigerians produced by capitalist modernity – the unemployed. They are similar to the unemployed whose time, not being spent in productive ventures, has no (monetary) value and is therefore a waste. Talaka, though employed, still experiences time as a waste since its (monetary) value does not translate to a meaningful standard of living. The capitalist workforce experience time as a waste since its price cannot purchase the essentials of happiness.

One of the implications of this phenomenological angst is that, try as he might, Olowo can never inculcate his idea of time discipline in Talaka. At best, he can bully him into time obedience. A good measure of satisfaction and willingness on the part of workers is indispensable to time discipline, but coercion can obtain time obedience. The latter is what workers can exhibit concomitantly with grumbling. For the *awon talaka,* time is experienced

as a waste in the sense of being useless because the workforce does not derive a sense of satisfaction or meaning from their work, and that dissatisfaction stems mainly from the meaningless reward for their labour. Talaka's supreme essence is the paradox he epitomises by being a worker whose name denotes poverty.

Impoverishing the worker through farm alienation takes many forms in the lines. The effects of capitalism on the farm include scarcity of yams and grains and other traditional food crops. The deleterious implication of that for food security and nutrition for the peasantry is what the lines demonstrate. The transformative impact of capitalism goes beyond alienating time from the land and vesting the same in industries and includes alienating both land and labour from the production of food crops and vesting them in the cultivation of cash crops. The trope is evident in another poem, "A Prisoner's Song":

> We know you, son of Tanimola,
> We know every branch of your family tree
> Your father's yam was huge like a rock
> In the loamy soil
> Where *iroko* boughs challenge the sky
> Till he lost his land to
> A man of money from the city
> Who wanted a private cocoa plantation;
> His greed uprooted your father's yams (*Village Voices* 24-5)

The above lines inscribe memory in a time of loss. The time of capital and the time of loss enmesh in the excerpt, producing polyphony, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's term for the embeddedness of many ideas in a composition (Renfrew 76). The acquisition of Tanimola's land by a moneybag figures the commodification of land in Nigeria, a temporal rupture ending the era in which land was a communally owned factor of production, and ushering in the Capitalocene in which land has become a commodity. Osundare apparently views that bygone era as a golden past, and attends it with nostalgia while protesting against what he perceives as the decadent moneyed economy of the present. The transformation by capitalism of the land tenure system has come to give another dimension to peasant poverty.

The ecological deprivation manifest in their lack of land is consistent with their monetary poverty. Commodifying land serves as an inducement for the peasantry to sell their

land. For the moneybag from the city, the incentive for farming is the accumulation of more money. He typifies those whose entry into farming is motivated by pecuniary interest. But for the fact that farming yields money, he would not show any interest in it. The consequence of the ascendancy of capitalism is the alienation of land which also figures concomitantly with the alienation of time. This portrays that in the Nigerian situation, the agricultural sector is among those responsible for cultural disruption and alienation of peasant time. The Nigerian peasantry have not only faced alienation from the land in the literal sense of abandoning farming for wage work in industries, but alienation has also taken the form of abandoning native food crops and devoting land, time and energy to the cultivation of cash crops. Seen in this light, the excerpt speaks crucially to the previous one on the question of empty barns and granaries. The original owner of the land who might have sold or had it confiscated by the agricultural industrialist might still be working on it, yet he or she has lost connection with the product of his or her hands. The farm setting can in fact be the setting of the dialogue between the time of Olowo and the time of Talaka. Yet, it is no longer the type of farm it used to be. Power relations in it have changed. From being the master of the farm and of his own work time in it, Talaka has become no more than a farm hand cultivating cocoa.

Cocoa is the chief imperial crop in West Africa, not only in Nigeria. In his book, *Ecological Imperialism* (1986), Alfred Crosby details how the introduction of European plants and animals into other regions of the earth aided the colonial enterprise and altered the ecological configuration of those regions. Cocoa is synonymous with the inception of agrarian capitalism in Nigeria and the awakening of money consciousness and market imperative among farmers in the country. It is also responsible for the advent of hunger as well as for exacerbating inequality. It has engendered bitter disputes over land and other resources, as suggested in the above line where Tanimola's farmland is acquired by a wealthy man. Tanimola's relationship to the land is informal yet longstanding. There may be no document to prove his ownership of the land though it might have passed down to him through his forebears. On the other side is the agricultural capitalist from the city who will now assume formal ownership of the land, with a title deed to prove it, pitting him in an unequal contest with the displaced Tanimola, a contest between a pre-modern era insistent on surviving and a capitalist modernity bent on supplanting it. One crucial implication of the displacement portrayed in the lines, which is not obvious, is the origin of unemployment in the country. Such displacements have also scrambled the demographic configuration of the country, spawning migration from the countryside to the city in search of salaried jobs.

Furthermore, the import of the advent of cocoa with its attendant awakening of the market imperative is that leisure time has become an expensive commodity which the native farmers can afford very little of, as they are forced to sacrifice much of it in the race to produce more export crops and increase capital. In Orla Ryan's book, *Chocolate Nations: Living and Dying for Cocoa in West Africa* (2011), in which she reports that most of the world's supply of this crop emanates from West Africa, that "Nearly 2 million small producers in West Africa ... produced 2.3 million tonnes in 2008—2009, accounting for roughly two-thirds of the total world crop of 3.5 million tonnes," she adds instructively that in the region "cocoa and chocolate do not feature in local recipes or ceremonies" (3—4). Cocoa products have very marginal use in Nigeria. Since Tanimola's case is a particular example of a widespread phenomenon, especially in the country's South West where Osundare comes from, the cumulative effect of such alienation of land from food crops and converting it into cocoa production turns the geographical space from a food-producing area to a food- importing area (Berry 10).

Wangari Maathai captures the scale and result of this form of alienation for Africa as having brought about

> the virtual disappearance of the cultivation of many indigenous foods like millet, sorghum, arrow roots, yams, and green vegetables, as well as the decimation of wildlife, all in favour of a small variety of cash crops ... The loss of indigenous crops and the methods to grow them has contributed not only to food insecurity but also to malnutrition, hunger, and a reduction of local biological diversity. (175)

What is at issue here is a problem of communal proportions: the alienation of land not just from an individual as represented by Tanimola, but its alienation from the society in which it is situated, to the extent that a farm is now used for cultivation aimed solely for export. Labour time on that farm is not socially necessary labour time, that is, time spent in producing commodities necessary to meet the needs of society. Rather, it is spent in catering for the nutritional interests of remote folks in different foreign countries, people with whom the labourer has no form of emotional connection, people about whom the producer is really indifferent save for an interest in their money.

To return once more to the alienation of workers' time by Nigerian capitalists, there is a correlation between the amount of time produced by workers and the time consumed by

their employers. If Marx's articulation of commodity as congealed time which is translatable into money is kept in mind, then we can see that there is a correlation between time produced by the masses and the time consumed by the appropriating capitalist elite, as the following exchange illustrates:

Olowo: Call me hyena, call me leopard
Call me the bloodiest in a tribe
Of monster beasts;
But this I know;
A leopard labours hard for his daily prey;
I work hard for every kobo in my bank.

Talaka: Hard work! Hard work!
The lazy hobby-horse of the rawly rich!
Hard work! Hard work!
The insufferable drudgery of chilling Benzes
Hard work! Hard work!
The suffocating sweat of loafing barons
Hard work! Hard work!
Those toilsome junkets in London and Yokohama
Hard work! Hard work!
In busy beds and rivers of champagne
Hard work! Hard work!
Of absentee barons and surrogate fortunes
Hard work! Hard work!
Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop! (38 --39)

Talaka, earlier accused of indolence, is turning the table against Olowo. But beyond that, the above lines lend themselves to the disentanglement of capitalist time by considering the concept of division of time, an idea analogous to division of labour. One of the forms this takes is division of time between the producers and their employers; and in this temporal order, the time of sowing belongs to Talaka while harvest time is for Olowo. This follows from capitalism's dynamic. Since producers spend their time making money for their

employer, another of the implications of the maxim, time is money, is that workers' time is their employer's money. That is part of the realities against which Talaka pits himself. In the above exchange, Osundare projects his revulsion for capitalism through the mouth of Olowo. Olowo brazenly owns up to the predatory monikers that Talaka has given him and even adds some more: "Call me hyena, call me leopard/ Call me the bloodiest in a tribe/ Of monster beasts" (*Season* 38—9). The poet is here advancing his disdain for capitalism as a predatory economic order. He has characterised capitalism, following Ngugi wa' Thiong'o, as economic cannibalism, a system 'where you are either eating people or being eaten' (qtd in Arnold 441). To a large extent, "Olowo Debates Talaka" is about that eat or be eaten ethic of the system, presented in temporal terms.

The Pidgin adage ending the excerpt finely captures that predatory ethic – the production of time by one class and its consumption by another: *Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop* (the monkey does the work; and the baboon the eating). The monkey produces what the baboon eats. The busy production schedules of the vast multitude of overworked peasants yield a profusion of time for the tiny minority of capitalist employers to consume. Peasant work time is related to bourgeoisie leisure time because the latter is a product of the former. While the *talakawa* always feel the pressure of insufficient time for the production they are ever engrossed in, the capitalist elite have far more than enough time than they can ever consume. Work time is for the poor and leisure time is for the wealthy. And the *awon olowo* can be seen with gusto gorging on their leisure time. There is such an excess of leisure time that consuming it all is impossible no matter how voracious the wealthy elite.

The lines further show that workers' time varies from the time of its appropriators not just quantitatively but also qualitatively. The quantitative difference has to do with temporal scarcity for the *talakawa* and superfluous time for the *awon olowo*. The two causes of temporal scarcity for the proletariat whose time is alienated is that they have sold their time in the market to capitalist appropriators, and therefore, their time no longer belongs to them but the purchasers of it. Also, in translating that sold or alienated work time into commodities, the nature of their production is such that they are constantly under pressure to utilise it more effectively by producing more and more goods – company research unit, where it exists, contributes to the pressure by creating new wants for society and taxing producers' time. Production time is never enough to meet the insatiable avarice-driven targets set by the appropriators. Producers therefore experience time as scarce. Resultantly, their experience of production time is filled with pressure, tension and trauma.

On their part, as has been pointed out, the appropriators have superfluous time, and excess bourgeoisie time is a product of scarce proletariat time. Peasant temporal scarcity is inversely proportional to bourgeoisie temporal superfluity. Bourgeoisie time is not only abundant in contrast to producers' temporal shortage but both times are also qualitatively different. The time that the proletariat produce for the appropriators to consume is a time full of pleasure, not just because it is abundant and also devoid of work, but also because it is full of money. All the time appropriated from numerous producers and converted into money is there at the disposal of the capitalist. Work belongs to producers while life or leisure is for their employers. The latter are engrossed in the consumption of leisure time. The ingredients enriching employers' leisure time, whether men, women, or champagne, are all commodities purchasable with money. Each has a price, and the *awon olowo* can afford their various prices. As such, they can live life to the full unlike the *talakawa* who cannot afford basic necessities of life.

Abundant bourgeois time is not like that of the unemployed, which is abundant time with lack of money. Bourgeoisie time is simultaneously abundant time and abundant money. It is evidently cosy time. The temporal tension in "Olowo Debates Talaka" reflects Nigeria's internal divide between excessive production and excessive consumption personified by Talaka and Olowo respectively. Olowo is of the tiny minority of wealthy elites who are can afford medical tourism to "London clinics" (42) or wherever else they choose, and Talaka is among the vast majority who must make do with the drugless clinics in the country.

This also reveals one more notable difference between the capitalist class and the poor labourers. That difference lies in their relationship to the planet. This divergence has earlier been hinted at in the poem. The wealthy that profit from capitalist absolute time tend to also take the entire planet as one, while the poor tend to be place-bound. The bourgeoisie are all over the map, enjoying the full benefits of the compression of both time and space made possible by technology. Not only are the *awon olowo* able to afford medical tourism, they take full advantage of the compression of the earth implied in the idea of the global village. Their wealth enables them to enjoy the diversity of places and experiences afforded by a wide and diverse earth.

Technology has compressed the earth, and "What happens now here, happens now everywhere; while we are at one place, we are potentially (with the negligible difference of a few hours) anywhere in the world" (Meyerhoff 110). The earth is now technologically small.

Their relationship to this potential to be anywhere in the earth is one factor that differentiates the employer from the employee. To employers, it is a fulfilled potential because they are worth the cost. They have what it takes to embark on "junkets in London and Yokohama" (*Season* 39). As has been observed, the ones who make the goods in capitalism are different from those making it. To the employees, those making the goods, it is an unfulfilled potential since they are not worth the cost. They are bound to place as their experience of the earth is limited to their locality, especially their production site. In other words, sense of planet and sense of place or ecocosmopolitanism and ecolocalism are among the factors that separate Olowo from Talaka. In the world of Osundare's poetry, the separation of times between the social classes in a capitalist order in different ways reflects also the separation of places. While workers' time is located in production sites, bourgeoisie time resides mostly outside of such sites, and instead inside "chilling benzes," in "junkets in London and Yokohama," and in "busy beds" (*Season* 39). This separation is of course relative rather than absolute. Producers' time often crosses with their employers' own during the time of inspection.

To the working peasantry, the definition of absolute time as homogenous empty time takes on a new meaning: it is the time of monotonous work empty of emotional satisfaction. This is another way of advancing the theme of alienation by figuring workers' time as monotonous work time and juxtaposing it with their employers' time which is made up of different concrete social times, and suggesting that the capitalists are still able to enjoy their social times because of production by proxy which capitalism enables, since they have a horde of workers handling production on their behalf.

The alienation of various concrete social times by abstract capitalist clock time and their absorption by labour time is another element of temporal inequality evident in Osundare's poetry as we see below:

Olowo: Though short on wealth
You are long on woes
Those labours you so assiduously proclaim
A beast, any beast, can do.
An ox hardly thinks beyond its yoke;
You are men of brawn, we of brain,
The tongue of money only speaks

The language of brains. (*Season* 38)

Olowo in the above lines falls back on the image of a beast of burden to depict what he believes to be the contrasting attitudes to time between the poor and the wealthy in Nigeria. To him, the poor, like an ox which does not think beyond its present yoke, live with a very short temporal horizon. Though their lives are charged with pain and frustration which arise mainly from their supposedly merited lot of being beasts of burden to the rich, they live imprisoned in the present by the sensation of pain and frustration. They live perpetually in the now while the temporal horizon of the rich anticipates the future.

Olowo's argument can be understood in the light of Jane Guyer's terms, "presentism" and "futurism" (410), employed in her study of the correspondences between macroeconomic and evangelical Christian time. He is suggesting that the temporal imaginary of the capitalist class is futuristic while the *talakawa* inhabit presentism. The ability to anticipate and plan for the future is a function of the brain. In his smug imagination, as far as economics is concerned, the *talakawa* live in pre-modern times. They have not made the mental transition away from the pre-modern agrarian economy when a man's worth was a function of his brawn to the modern era that is a knowledge economy. In his estimation, the *talakawa* therefore justifiably remain like oxen carrying the Olowo class to the projected future of the latter. By insinuating that Talaka inhabits presentism while he inhabits futurism, Olowo denies coevalness to Talaka.

Inhabiting presentism implies that the timescape of the poor is not teleological and is therefore discordant with the Capitalocene. Capitalist time is teleological; economists divide it into short term, medium term and long term. Among these three temporal horizons, according to Olowo, the *talakawa* occupy only the first, short term. He is insinuating that their concept of the future embraces only the near future which is hardly distinguishable from the present.

While Talaka grapples with immediate survival, Olowo demonstrates himself a master of modern times. His reference to the language of the brain which the tongue of money speaks is an apt way of framing the future because the future is a temporal category which is not yet, and therefore is only graspable by means of mental effort. Grasping the future is not a passive act but an active mental effort entailing planning activities and projecting outcomes. To master the temporal framing of modern economics is to master "The tongue of money (which) only speaks/ The language of brains" (*Season* 38). Those whose

time is a 'reduction to the present' (Fredrick Jameson qtd in Guyer 410) operate at a disadvantage in terms of power relations in a capitalist economy. They are merely "men of brawn" (*Season* 38) in a knowledge-based economy that, having no plan for their own advancement must spend their time and brawn executing the economic plans of others. No wonder Olowo's taunt: "Those labours you so assiduously proclaim/ A beast, any beast, can do" (*Season* 38). But Olowo's pontification only stereotypes the poor.

To demonstrate that such supercilious taunt amounts merely to stereotyping the *awon talaka,* I transpose to the Nigerian situation a true-life story in *The Surplus People*, a book documenting the implementation of the black resettlement policy of the South African government during the apartheid era. The story is of a black labourer in white-owned commercial farms. I consider transposing that story apposite because there is a similarity between the mechanism of white-owned commercial farms in apartheid South Africa and the set-up in which Talaka works. Both circumscribe the ability of the poor labourer to translate his or her dreams for a better future into concrete plans. In the case of Jamangile Tsotsoebe (not real name) who was born in the Eastern Cape, South Africa in 1911, his father was a farm worker in the employment of a white man. He grew up to be a labourer on the same farm. But he earnestly desired a better future for his children and wanted them to go to school. That cost him his job as his employer insisted that his children must work in the field. After decades of relocation and frustration in which his plans for his offspring had been crushed by the strictures of apartheid, he looked back on his life trajectory at old age and groaned

> that now there is no hope. When he was young, he wanted to give his children and his grandchildren a different kind of life. Now he sees that there is no hope for his children. There is no hope for him or for his wife, and he doesn't understand why he has to live at all. He is now over seventy and he cannot say: This is my life. I have given my sons an education and they are now wealthy men, and my daughters are married to good men, and my grandchildren are healthy. (qtd in Platzky and Walker 6)

Tsotsoebe's experience should help us understand that the poor also plan for the future. They are capable of long-term planning. But then, the balance of power in the capitalist order is tilted against them. And that is what often makes the difference between them and the *awon olowo.* The *awon olowo* can inhabit a progressive linear temporality since

they control the levers of power and their problems are of a different order. Rather than Talaka who complains "Of wages unpaid" (*Season* 40), Olowo's problem is that of "whimsical foreign exchange" (*Season* 40). Conversely, the poor inhabit cyclical temporality because they are hidebound by the constrictions imposed by the economic interests of the rich and powerful. They plan for instance to raise healthy children who go to school. Yet, the *awon talaka* often end up in old age with this Tsotsoebe-like cry: "*Muwamuwa* our school-less children/ And their letterless parents" (*Season* 42). By implication, rather than escape the cycle of the present predicament of their parents, the children can only perpetuate it. Their temporality is out of sync with Guyer's idealistic hypothesis entailing choice in the short run and growth in the long run. Ideally, it is in growth that the result of choice is manifested. But in reality, both choice and growth require power, including economic power. The children of those lacking power may dream all they want about a generational change of fortune but might be buffeted by the interests of the rich and powerful, and end up like Tsotsoebe's children, not like the hero of *Things Fall Apart*. I juxtapose the two in order to foreground the contrasting dynamics of the different economic orders they represent.

Continuing, Olowo mocks Talaka thus: "*Muwamuwa* your numberless wives/ And teeming tribes" (*Season* 42). In a September 4, 2017 newspaper article on Nigeria's demographic situation, entitled "Aint We Too Many," (?), Alex Otti, Nigerian economist, former Managing Director of a commercial bank, and newspaper columnist recalls someone quipping that the best strategy for population control is to control copulation, by which he means restricting sexuality. Although the correlation between a man's sexual activity and his family size is not absolute, yet a large harem of wives and teeming children suggest sexual hyperactivity on the part of Talaka. As such, Olowo is putting it to him that he is poor as a result of leading a mere sensual existence rather than an active life.

Further, Olowo's accusation needs to be read in the context of Nigeria's demographic dynamics. More specifically, it is to be understood within the context of the country's discourse on overpopulation since Olowo is basically accusing the poor of accumulating overpopulated families. I select another newspaper article to buttress the existence of such a discourse: "Population Issues in a Season of High Wire Politics," the September 24, 2015 article in *Vanguard Newspaper* by Is'haq Modibbo Kawu, now a former Director General of the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission. A paragraph in the article reads in part:

> as I write, Nigeria's population is displayed (on the 'worldometers') as being 184, 728, 559! These are very frightening statistics as we will discover. They show that Nigeria now ranks as the country with the seventh highest population on earth. The population density is 193 per km2 (sic); the fertility rate is 6.01 and we witness the addition of about 4.7 million newly born annually.

And so, it happens that when the elite in Nigeria begin to ask the Malthusian question, "Aint We Too Many (?)," to revisit the title of Alex Otti's article, they do so with an underlying assumption that it is the poor who are the culprits, for their presumably insatiable craving for marriage and procreation. That is the trope Olowo is reiterating by castigating Talaka for having a figuratively endless number of wives and children. Poverty, the opposite of wealth, is arguably the greatest recognised existential problem in capitalism. In a country like Nigeria, the altruistic aspect of the conversation on high poverty rate is primary. But shorn of abstraction and reduced to its human manifestation, the argument is that the poor are too many. Remedial suggestions are geared towards reducing their numbers and increasing the *awon olowo*. If we relate that fact to the country's unwieldy population, one thing it brings to the fore is an elite consensus that while Nigeria it factually overpopulated, it is the poor who constitute *The Surplus People*, to evoke Platzky's and Walker's text again. As such, monetary worth becomes a yardstick to determine the relative "right" of a human subject to live in the Capitalocene. What is often remarked (and rightly so), in the Capitalocene is the ecological problem that overpopulation constitutes. But Olowo has inadvertently exposed the term's ambivalence. He has shown that it also carries a pejorative aspect, being, as the Indian economist Amartya Sen has highlighted, a euphemism used to reprimand the poor for being present in the world (qtd in DeLoughrey and Handley 19).

But it is necessary to decipher the differences in temporal horizon that account for the difference in family size between Olowo and Talaka. Olowo believes in immediate gratification while Talaka defers his own. Olowo believes in giving himself a high standard of living from his youth. As such, his family size is small so that it does not impede his ability to realise that priority. The rationale for Talaka having a large family is that he has chosen to sacrifice his comfort in the short and medium terms, until old age. His large family size is expressive of the fact that he is counting on support from his children when he grows old. So, the two are similar in their belief in the imperative of a high standard of living, but unlike in the timeline to which they tag such beliefs. In his study of household size in Nigeria, John C. Anyanwu avers that economic security "is one of the rationales for parents

to increase the number of children so that they will have high probability of getting support when they are old" (10). On the other hand, another study by Uche C. Isiguzo-Abanihe reports that "*monogamy ... and intention not to rely on children for old-age support are significantly related to smaller actual family size and preferences* (sic) *for smaller families* (149, italics in the original).

Yet the implications of Talaka's employment in the industrial sector need to be deciphered as they pertain to the wellbeing of his family in the near future. As the debate continues thus:

Olowo: *Muwamuwa* your numberless wives
And teeming tribes
Talaka: *Muwamuwa* your London clinics
And our drugless wards
...
Talaka: *Muwamuwa* our school-less children
And their letterless parents (*Season* 41-2)

The dramatis personae are accusing each other of being excessively demanding, as suggested by the Yoruba expression, *muwamuwa* (bring-bring). From Olowo's quip: *Muwamuwa* your numberless wives/ And teeming tribes (*Season* 42), the residues of pre-modern agrarian Nigeria still prevalent in the Capitalocene are once again inscribed. There are different times in the same time, as Bakhtin's chronotope reminds us. Regardless, it must be remembered that even within the capitalist era, the agrarian age still subsists, and there is in fact such a thing as agrarian capitalism which marked the inception of capitalism in Nigeria. But with regard to the debate unfolding in the poem, Talaka is dislocated from the agrarian era from which his family size originated and to which it is suited. The size of his family is of temporal and economic significance. His family size spells waste of time.

Going by clock time, every individual has twenty-four hours in a day. Therefore, the man-hour available to Talaka's family per day is twenty-four hours multiplied by the number of his entire family: himself and his many wives and children. In effect, here is a family that is temporally rich but economically poor – a family that symbolises waste of time. By amassing many wives and children yet having them depend on his wage rather than working the land with him, Talaka has amassed a profusion of redundant time. Since it is his own time

only that is employed at work, the tension between the potential work time and the actual work time of his family is partly responsible for their collective hard time. His family's suffering is proportional to the amount of time it "wastes." Capitalism deals his family a deficit because his priorities are out of sync with capitalism which stipulates that the only thing to do with time is to spend it in a productive venture.

Of the two dramatis personae in the poem by the way, Talaka is the one who fits the general economic and developmental image and status of the country, not the affluent Olowo. Nigeria inhabits several temporalities, but that of the *talakawa* dominates. Their discomfort and difficulty coping in the Capitalocene is a fitting general metaphor for Nigeria and its troubled capitalist modernity. Crucially, Talaka being a generalised persona encapsulates the lifestyle of the poor in Nigeria. He is Olowo's employee, yet, of the two, it is his family that is large enough to warrant mention – a negative mention. The paradox of the poor clinging to polygyny and a general tendency for them to have families larger than those of the affluent is crucial to examining the country's placement within the world's economic divide of North and South.

The concepts of Global North and Global South used as discursive terms to theorise macroeconomics can do with deterritorialisation. The binary sees the globe polarised into a wealthy North and a poorer South. But in reality, with regard to the defining attributes of the North and the South, every country embodies within its boundaries elements of the "Global North" and "Global South." An Australian for instance belongs to the North if a white settler and to the South if an Aborigine. The contribution of the Global South to the endangerment of the earth is demographic explosion aggravating poverty and environmental degradation, while that of the North is excessive consumption which results in dangerous levels of waste. North and South of course are synonyms for developed and developing countries respectively:

> The lethal combination is that of rapid population growth in developing countries, which exacerbates environmental problems associated with poverty such as land pressure and deforestation, accompanied by rapid economic growth in developed countries, which exacerbates problems associated with wealth, such as domestic waste disposal and greenhouse gas emissions. (Garrard 24)

Olowo is a member of the tiny minority of the wealthy who consume the country's resources and "push bellies bloated by excess" (*Village Voices* 46). His size is emblematic

not just of conspicuous consumption but of inequality which is among capitalism's chief disincentives. "Olowo Debates Talaka" is thus a poem on a debate between Nigeria's internal "Global North" and "Global South." As the debate unfolds further, Olowo mocks Talaka by telling him that any animal can take over his job: Those labours you so assiduously proclaim/ A beast, any beast, can do. (*Season* 38)

Beyond the banality of equating the producer with beasts, one of the tenets of capitalist labour time is encapsulated in those two lines. It is not just a beast but any beast that can perform Talaka's production task. This implies that capitalist work time, absolute clock time, homogenises and renders impersonal the production task, thereby basically denying room for the exercise of the personal initiative and individuality of the producer. In so doing, capitalism strips producers of their individuality. The Nigerian *awon talaka* are a mass of undifferentiated producers. This homogenisation of the workforce is achieved through what Jonathan Martineau describes as the separation of brain from hand (135). This is the function of management. It tries to abstract knowledge of the task from "the factory floor" *(Season* 40) and vest it in the management, while reducing the actual production to a mechanical process, a *zombification* (Achille Mbembe's term) of the producer. The knowledge historically embedded in the performance of the task itself is transferred to the manager: 'the managers assume ... the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed (sic) by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating and reducing the knowledge to rules, laws and formulae" (Taylor qtd in Martineau 135). This separation of work from expertise is a hoary attribute of capitalism and one of Europe's gifts to Nigeria. Previously, as in the case of Europe before the Industrial Revolution:

> the craft or skilled trade was the basic unit, the elementary cell of the labour process. In each craft the worker was presumed to be the master of a body of traditional knowledge, and methods and procedures were left to his or her discretion. In each such worker reposed the accumulated knowledge of materials and processes by which production was accomplished in the craft. (Harry Braverman qtd in Martineau 135)

Dissociating labour from mental capacity implies the dissociation of labour time from the exercise of the producer's discretion and initiative, rendering it a mechanical process, making every producer an absolute equivalent of another, and therefore easily dispensable and

substitutable. A worker cannot distinguish himself or herself by showcasing individual talent since there is no room for such. This means that producers are mere tools whose work time is spent in the implementation of processes designed by management. This temporal alienation is coupled with the fact that management does time by itself every stage of the production process, meaning that the pace, sequence and time frames of the production tasks are alienated from the producer. But uniformity in product standard is the appeal of this transformation.

When Talaka satirises Olowo's greed in these words:

One kobo today

Tomorrow a million naira:

Meal-on, Mealy-on, milling on.

The glutton swallows our only morsel,

Pleading magic and eerie spirits;

With such gaping jaws and itching talons

Who still craves miracles

For vanishing feasts? (*Season* 41),

he introduces an animist dimension to the argument. The excerpt, with its reference to magic and spirits, reveals something significant in terms of Niyi Osundare's ideology. It breaches the gap supposedly existing between Marxism and a religious vision of the world. The poet himself personifies that breach. A collection of essays on his writing is entitled *The Peoples' Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare* (2003), but his poetry often reveals a fusion between animism and Marxism, as the above lines exemplify, showing that the tension between Marxism and a religious view of reality is at best provisional.

The lines link capitalist avarice to magic. In so doing, they equate with malevolent magic the mechanism of capitalism which enables "The glutton (who) swallows our only morsel." (*Season* 41). The "morsel" belongs to the community but has been appropriated by a single glutton through "magic and eerie spirits" (*Season* 41). This likens the mechanism of capitalism to magic by which a person can prosper by spiritually appropriating the prosperity

potentials of others while leaving them in poverty, a situation akin to shining brightly by harnessing the light of others and leaving them in darkness. In Ben *Okri's The Famished Road*, there are speculations of this sort of mystery trailing the wealth of the character Madame Koto. She is surrounded by poor and suffering people while her business concerns flourish and expand. She is into magic and is haunted by allegations of belonging to a secret society, or being a witch or using medicine, enabling her to prosper at the expense of her neighbours; that she "stole the people's energies" (568). Azaro, who is one of her neighbours, narrates that "In spite of what people said, however, she prospered, while the rest of us suffered. She opened another bar in another section of the city. She divided her time between both. She opened a mighty stall in the big market where she sold garri, lace materials, and jewellery. She had many servants" (429). To liken capitalism to the malevolent use of spiritual power in this manner means that Osundare is equating the relationship between Olowo and Talaka with that between a wizard and his victim.

When Olowo further bludgeons Talaka with: "I deserve the profits: I run the risks" (*Season* 40), the debate takes a new dimension, underscoring the differing forms of risks to which each group could be exposed, thus:

> **Talaka**: Of wages unpaid?
>
> **Olowo**: Of recessions and depressions!
>
> **Talaka**: Of summary sacks and retrenchment?
>
> **Olowo**: Of stocks and shares
>
> **Talaka**: Yes, of stocks and shears (*Season* 40)

To maximally grasp the meaning of the above excerpt, it has to be situated in its immediate historical context. It recreates a time that may be taken to signify the acceleration of neo-liberal capitalism in Nigeria. The period of the International Monetary Fund-imposed Structural Adjustment Programme which the country implemented from 1986. Terms of the programme included among others devaluing the country's currency and downsizing the industrial workforce in pursuance of increased profit. A close look at the above repartee reveals that while the industrialist articulates the aftermath of the policy in terms that are general and abstract, in the language of economic "depressions and recessions," indexed in part in the stock market with volatile "stocks and shares" (*Season* 40), its effects on the

worker are far more immediate and personal. While the country adopted the measure in the purported interest of the distant future, of long-term economic growth, its effects on the workforce are immediate rather than remote or futuristic; and concrete rather than abstract. Workers are forced to sacrifice their present in concrete ways – of "wages unpaid" and "summary sacks and retrenchment," (*Season* 40) – in order for the system to pursue an abstract long-term growth horizon. Talaka's whimper about summary retrenchment (*Season* 40) supplies more concrete nuances of meaning when read intertextually with another poem of the same orientation. The poem, "Retrenched," may be taken as fleshing out the earlier line, showing what life was to an average Nigerian industrial worker who was sacked in the wake of the Structural Adjustment Programme:

I worked and worked, then the dizzying news:

The nation is broke and factories fail

The boss is licensed to suck and sack

And that is how I lost my job

The boss has said it's the nation's good

To lower our coffin and hike his profits

Sacrifice! Sacrifice! For motherland

Time to starve for fatherland

...

And so it was I lost my job

In a plant I've served with youth and strength

I know no trade besides the one

That's sapped my life for twenty years

My wife is wan, my kids are cold

The times are hard, but so my heart

I will never die on the rubbish heap

I've sown my sweat, I deserve to reap. (18– 9)

I am drawn to this poem because of the way it demonstrates the interface between life and literature. It saved from suicidal intentions a factory worker sacked in line with the terms of the IMF economic package. Niyi Osundare was then a lecturer at the University of Ibadan and was writing a topical weekly poetry column in *The Tribune*, a national daily. His recollection of that experience is worth quoting at length for the way it comprehensively elucidates the poem. It is like Talaka leaping into life from the pages of his poetry:

> *One experience I will never forget is this: I was teaching down here one afternoon, when somebody knocked on the door. I asked him: "Could you please wait until I've finished teaching, or go and come back?" He said, "No, I can't come back, I've come from a long distance." I looked at him and I saw he was very scruffy, so I said, "Please, just wait a minute, I'll be with you." When I finished my lecture I joined him in the corridor, but he wanted us to speak in my office. There he said: "I've just come to thank you for saving my life." I replied: "I'm not a Messiah, a prophet on a beach, an Imam, a politician, or a soldier. What do you mean?"*
>
> *He put his hand in his pocket and brought out a copy of my* Tribune *poem of the Sunday before: "This saved my life,"he said. I still didn't understand what he was saying, and he told me: "I have come all the way from Cross River State," about eight hours by bus, "to thank you for this." I then looked at the poem: it was "Retrenched." It was as if I knew what had happened to him. He thought I wrote the poem for him, but how would I have known?*
>
> *What happened to him was that he had worked in a company for twenty years, and the Structural Adjustment Policy came recommending that factories should slim down so as to increase their profits. In other words, to destroy human beings and make money. This man, with a clean record, just went to work one day only*

> *to be told "Go back." He had a wife and seven children, and said he was actually going to commit suicide. And then somebody brought a copy of The* Tribune*, used for wrapping groundnuts. He told me that he used to love literature when he was at school; he didn't have much education. The last stanza of the poem goes: "The times are hard, but so my heart/ I will never die on the rubbish heap/ I've sowed my sweat, I deserve to reap." So he had changed his mind and came to let me know all that*. (qtd in Deandrea 505– 6, italics in the original)

The worker's subjective lived present, cast against the background of macroeconomic rhetoric of growth that fetishises the distant future stands in stark contrast with that rhetoric. His experience decouples "macro" from the abstractions of vastness of scale by showing in personal, "micro" terms the gap between what Jane Guyer in her commentary on that policy tags "fantasy futurism and enforced presentism" (410). The future is vast and fantastic – fantastic in both senses of imaginary and beautiful. But in contrast, the lived present for the worker is subjective, real and ugly. In essence, the impact of the policy was to destroy workers in the short term in order to hopefully increase capital for their employers in the long run.

On the dialogic structure of "Olowo Debates Talaka," apart from the Marxist dimension of that technique which this chapter has already mentioned, there are other influences. Osundare's interest in drama is an influence on the poem. He is also a dramatist with four published plays to his credit. Yoruba oral literature is another influence. In oral literature, a good raconteur is more of a "story dramatist" than a mere storyteller. Storytelling involves not just verbal narration but also the use of facial and other physical gestures to enhance effect. And to mention the use of physical gestures is to draw attention to dramatic devices which will enhance the poem if performed on stage. "Olowo Debates Talaka" is a poem intended for performance, and has been acted at least once, at the University of Ibadan (Osundare qtd in Deandrea 509). By orienting the poem towards performance, the poet makes it fit and ready to benefit from additional nuances and effects attaching to a context of oral poetry recital, which is "basically a communal event, something performed before an audience, aimed at persuading and entertaining, enlightening the people who are there before the poet and reacting to his words and to his general performance" (Nwoga 33).

Ikoyi and Ajegunle: Two Faces of One City

Since I have developed this chapter largely on a dialogic structure, I want to evaluate one more pertinent dialogic poem as the chapter moves towards conclusion. The poem, XXII in *Moonsongs*, refigures the alienation of the time of the poor by the wealthy through locating them in neighbourhoods that are in sharp distinction with one another. Its geographical setting is Lagos. Two neighbourhoods in the megacity, Ikoyi and Ajegunle, are juxtaposed, revealing their interconnection and dissimilarities. Ikoyi is a posh neighbourhood, Ajegunle, an iconic slum. The two environments are placed side by side in order to show how each is connected to the situation of the other. The poem reads:

Ikoyi

The moon here

is a laundered lawn

its grass the softness of infant fluff;

silence grazes like a joyous lamb,

doors romp on lazy hinges

the ceiling is a sky

weighed down by chandeliers

of pampered stars

Ajegunle

here the moon

is a jungle,

sad like a forgotten beard

with tensioned climbers

and undergrowths of cancerous fury:

cobras of anger spit in every brook

and nights are one long prowl

of swindled leopard (42)

The logic behind structuring the poem in this manner is to bring to the foreground the fact that the wretchedness of Ajegunle is a product of the affluence of Ikoyi. Ajegunle makes do with the worst of life because Ikoyi has claimed the best: in natural scenery, in physical infrastructure and in standard of living. Take the image of the city as a symbol of civilisation, of organised culture – Ikoyi fits that image. Its landscape evidences planning and order. Its lawns are carefully laid out and "laundered," not neglected. It is a place of arresting skyscrapers, where "the ceiling is a sky/ weighed down by chandeliers/ of pampered stars" (*Moonsongs* 42). Ikoyi easily elicits the feeling which Raymond Williams has expressed, that the city is a symbol of human ingenuity: "This is what men have built, so often magnificently, and is not everything then possible?" (15) And if we frame Williams' rhetorical question in the Nigerian vein, we have, "This is what Nigerians have built, is not everything then possible?" Not only physical infrastructure but also the ability to maintain order and serenity is implied in "what Nigerians have built." Ikoyi thus figures as the country's symbol of progress and light. The universal association of wealth and luxury with the city, and in the Nigerian instance with the city of Lagos especially, to which Nigerians are drawn, is realised in the "Ikoyi" segment of the poem, with its reference to beautiful skyscrapers and chandeliers. But the structure of the poem is meant to point out that the beauty of Ikoyi is not all there is to Lagos, that the whole of Lagos is not like Ikoyi.

In its binary structure, the poem simulates one of the most outstanding universal attributes of the city, namely, geographical hierarchisation. This is in tandem with the capitalist creed of ordering the world according to economic hierarchy, according to levels of wealth. In this order, Ikoyi is a neighbourhood for the upper class, Ajegunle for the lower class. And that encapsulates the authorial intention of the poem, to use the environment to lay bare the sharp inequality that is the Capitalocene's "gift" to Nigeria. In the city, economic class and social class are one, and the different classes do not live together. Money maps the city into classes in a linear order: Ikoyi for the most progressive, Ajegunle for the most backward. In other words, the hierarchisation of the environment is a cognate of the teleological arrow of capitalist time which sequences time into the short-term, medium-term

and long-term. While the short-term corresponds to lower-class neighbourhoods which are located at the tail of the arrow of time, middle-class neighbourhoods occupy the middle of the arrow, and upper-class neighbourhoods the tip of the same arrow.

The ideas of backwardness and progress will help us in focusing more sharply how the capitalist class consume the resources of the country. That is to say that I am now reading the city as a microcosm of the country (nation). Raymond Williams encapsulates the attributes attaching to the city and the country (countryside) thus:

> On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. (9)

If we test the poem on Williams' insight, one thing that becomes glaring is that the best of life is in Ikoyi while the worst is in Ajegunle. The noble associations of the city – a centre of learning, communication, light – have already been made explicit in our reading of the poem thus far. But one other interesting fact about Ikoyi is that in addition to those fine attributes of the city, it also encapsulates the fine attributes of the countryside – and the fine attributes only. These include, to quote Williams verbatim again, "the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue" (9). These pastoral-like lines show that Ikoyi also claims for itself those endearing associations the countryside has to offer, with its moon "a laundered lawn/ its grass the softness of infant fluff" in which "silence grazes like a joyous lamb" (*Moonsongs* 42).

Thus, Ikoyi is a harmonious compound of the pastoral beauty, tranquillity and innocence of the country and the learning, light and progress of the city. And collectively, the above lines further reveal that lived time in Ikoyi is soft. Words like "joyous," "softness" and "pampered" index lived time in Ikoyi. Life there is as soft as "infant fluff" (*Moonsongs* 42).

But what problematises that impressive picture is the fact that the progress of Ikoyi feeds off the backwardness of Ajegunle. Ikoyi is linked to Ajegunle by the predatory logic of capitalism. None of the positive characteristics of the city and the country attaches to Ajegunle. Clustered around it instead are the negations of the lofty attributes of the city and the country. I examine Ajegunle from the prism of such negative attributes: "the city as a

place of noise, worldliness and ambition ... the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation" (Williams 9). The second segment of the poem is worth citing in full again in order to show clearly how it places Ajegunle squarely in the centre of those unflattering characteristics:

Ajegunle

here the moon

is a jungle,

sad like a forgotten beard

with tensioned climbers

and undergrowths of cancerous fury:

cobras of anger spit in every brook

and nights are one long prowl

of swindled leopards (*Moonsongs* 42)

Although urban, this neighbourhood is not urbane at all. The keyword in the entire excerpt, and which is definitive of Ajegunle, is "jungle." Other words are essentially an elaboration of it. In its association with the countryside, the jungle is crude and unattractive. In that sense, Ajegunle fits this definition of "jungle" by *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*: "a wild land overgrown with dense vegetation, often nearly impenetrable, esp. tropical vegetation or a tropical rain forest." And that calls to mind "tensioned climbers, "undergrowths of cancerous fury," "cobras of anger," and a "long prowl/ of swindled leopards" with which Ajegunle is associated (*Moonsongs* 42). In other words, in its rural image, Ajegunle is wild and dangerous. It refutes Ikoyi's image of Lagos. Whereas Ikoyi projects the image of a beautiful pastoral setting, Ajegunle presents the sort of rural image usually construed in opposition to civilisation: the countryside as a wild place charged with danger and therefore needing to be cleared. For Ikoyi's image of a carefully maintained lawn, Ajegunle substitutes an unkempt, "forgotten beard," (*Moonsongs* 42), a figurative forest containing dangerous flora and fauna.

As for the association of the rural area with ignorance, we should note that Ajegunle is portrayed as lacking both the stars and the chandelier that give a brilliant light to the ambience of Ikoyi. Its nights fully retain their primal association with darkness. Also from *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* I take a definition of "jungle" that accords with the city image of Ajegunle: "a scene of violence and struggle for survival." Ajegunle is a place fraught with danger, — of armed robbery for instance – where "nights are one long prowl/ of swindled leopards" (*Moonsongs* 42).

From the length of the night in Ajegunle we can deduce the sensation of lived time there. And in that connection, it is worth remembering that time is experienced as slow when it is charged with trauma. Whereas life in Ikoyi is "pampered" and "soft," in Ajegunle, words like "sad," "fury," and "anger" converge to show that lived time is very hard and trying. In a related poem, "A Song for Ajegunle," the capitalist exploiter-exploited relationship between Ikoyi and Ajegunle which accounts for the dissimilarities we have seen is laid bare:

> You stretched out your calloused hands
>
> Switched on your weed-infested smile
>
> And spread your battled history
>
> Like a tattered mat for my calling feet
>
> I, who like a curious bird,
>
> Have seen you sprawled out
>
> Like an empty bag on the threshold
>
> Of Ikoyi's bursting barns. (*Season* 124)

Ikoyi is the dominant partner in its relationship with Ajegunle. And in respect of that relationship, the above lines also highlight the fact that although close to the capitalist economic growth and wellbeing symbolised by Ikoyi, Ajegunle is placed at the liminal point of that order, and is not integrated into it.

Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter has tried to deconstruct the practical meaning of the Capitalocene in Nigeria, especially as it obtains in the industrial sector and where people live. Through archetypal characters, the chapter has carried out a fine-grained study of the ways in which the Capitalocene spells the exploitation of workers by those who control the power of capital. It is my submission that Osundare shows how the capitalist class values commodities above the workers who produce them. I have also highlighted that time discipline works as an excuse for employers to maximise the temporal exploitation of their employees. Rapid population growth evidences one way in which the poor are perpetuating the tendencies of the agrarian era and contributing to the endangerment of the ecological health of the nation. The influence of capitalism on the city as deducible from Osundare's poetry includes segmenting its neighbourhoods and inhabitants into a hierarchy.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Our earth will not die

Niyi Osundare, *The Eye of the Earth*

> The Greeks often thought of an age that might follow that of Zeus: a time when men would be born from their graves and grow younger, when all the strife inflicted on the world would shrivel and disappear, when time would literally reverse itself and flow backward.
>
> Anthony F. Aveni, *Empires of Time*

An optimistic vision of the future is one obvious commonality running through the two epigraphs above. Each envisages an earth that is redeemed from its present undesirable course. Niyi Osundare's hope that the earth will be eventually salvaged from the multifarious abuses being visited on it by humankind is symptomatic of his attitude as a Marxist who also has faith in the liberation of the peasantry from the yoke of domination in an unequal capitalist labour set-up. This implies essentially, that while in his poetry he inscribes an apocalyptic vision of the world, his apocalyptic vision is comic rather than tragic.

In the introductory chapter, I have pointed out the resignation of the Nigerian government to the burgeoning population of the country, noting that the government, while realising that the country is on a trajectory to an apocalyptic climax, does not envision an emancipatory future since it takes no concrete step to stem the trend. A meaningful political response to Nigeria's complex environmental challenges is lacking. In respect of the attitude with which he attends the future, Osundare's attitude varies from that of the political class. To him, current environmental problems are not just signs of worse impending dangers but a warning that they should be averted. As such, his environmental apocalyptic orientation is comic. The comic frame hinges on a belief in human agency (Garrard 95). The calls that his poetry is devoted to making for humankind to rise to the duty of salvaging the earth is based on the understanding that they have the requisite agency. "Our Earth will Not Die" is the title of the concluding poem in his outstanding collection of nature poetry, *The Eye of the Earth.* And while the poem is a chronicle of environmental ills plaguing not just Nigeria but the earth, including the threat of nuclear annihilation: "a nuclear sun rises like a funeral ball/

reducing man and meadow to dust and dirt (51), the insistent optimism of the poet acts as a moderating presence in the gloomy atmosphere suffusing the poem, reiterating as a refrain that "our earth will not die" (50—1).

My reading of Osundare's poetry has been Nigeria-centred. Therefore, my mention of the lines which are concerned with the danger that nuclear weapons pose to the earth serves also to register that his verse is equally attentive to the problems of the global ecosystem which are not playing out on a Nigerian locus. But I am not suggesting that the country is immune to the effects or possible effects of such problems.

One of the remarkable ways in which African environmental literature differs from that of the hegemonic West is by the prominence it accords to animism. Niyi Osundare's Yoruba nation has one of the most widespread animist religions in Nigeria and Africa if not in the world at large. Their animist religion is practiced not just in Nigeria and the Republic of Benin but is also manifest in the religious practices of some communities in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, Grenada, Babardos, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and the United States of America (Apter 1—2). And from a Yoruba worldview, animism holds the key to the understanding of the contested concept, "nature." An attempt to understand what time and nature mean to those who believe in Yoruba animism has led me to pay attention to their religious practices in this thesis. As we have seen, for Yoruba animists, nature means not just the physical world but also the largely invisible spiritual one. This conception of the ecosphere is thus much more encompassing than the version constructed by Western modernity. To Yoruba animists, the spiritual world is one with the physical. And in paying attention to their religious beliefs and practices which are robustly recreated in Osundare's poetry, I have also made apparent some temporal ramifications of animism in a Yoruba context.

From the prevalence of animism in African environmental literature follows its presence as a prominent attribute of African ecocriticism. In Canadian critic Greg Garrard's influential theoretical book, *Ecocriticism* (2012), based on the principles of Western ecocriticism, many theories are outlined, but animism is one critical school that is virtually missing. The book shows animism to be very marginal in Western ecocriticism. It is treated as a sub-topic under another sub-topic. It is only cursorily mentioned in the general context of Native American ecological outlook which is further subsumed under a broader mode of inhabiting the earth called dwelling (116—45). Conversely, one of the ways in which Africanists are domesticating ecocriticism is by imbuing their praxis with animist insights.

This is manifest for instance in *Natures of Africa: Ecocriticism and Animal Studies in Contemporary Cultural Forms* (2016) edited by F. Fiona Moolla. Many of the fourteen essays by Africanist ecocritics in the book are, to varying degrees consciously framed by animism. This thesis has extended that thread.

One thread in animist literature which interestingly speaks to an incipient but revolutionary hypothesis in science is the belief that the entire earth is alive. Osundare is an ontological counterpart to scientists propounding such ideas. One remarkable example is James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis in which he canvasses the view that the entire earth is one sentient planet, a living super-organism. This idea of a super-organism embraces not only what are traditionally known as living organisms but also what are conventionally known as abiotic or inert matter. Lovelock defines Gaia as "a complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet" (10). He argues that even some non-living phenomena in the cosmos, such as the ability to light a fire, result from the fact that life inheres in Gaia (35). That life inheres in the earth is one major distinction between it and other planets such as Jupiter and Mars, according to Lovelock.

In a related vein, the American physicist Gerald L. Schroeder has also highlighted that even in terms of the orthodox scientific division of matter into the living and the inert, the processes of the two overlap: "The individual chemical and physical reactions involved in the maintenance of life are quite similar to those found in reactions among nonliving substances. Clearly the processes of the living and the inert overlap. The distinction between the two is one of quality, not of type" (106). At times, " inert" matter grows for example: "A massive lump of salt in the Dead Sea starts as a single crystal that gradually adds more salt to its surface" (Schroeder 105). So, ecologists might someday seriously begin to rethink the boundary between living and non-living things just as they have commenced with respect to the boundary between humans and nature. And just as creation stories exerted an influence on scientific cosmologists by stimulating their interest in formulating a comprehensive theory of cosmic evolution, such extant although vague ontological beliefs in the general aliveness of the earth figure as an influence on the work of Lovelock and the attendant interest in the subject by the science community.

One of the trends in ecocriticism that I have applied as an analytical principle is ecological monism, the belief that human beings are part of nature rather than distinct from it. One of the reasons why this principle is gaining ascendancy is because the devastation of the earth by human beings has been posited by environmentalists to have arisen largely from their emotional detachment from their environment. But I want to now draw attention to one limitation of this strain of thought since I have yet to see environmentalists engaging with it.

A radical implication of insisting that human beings are one with nature is the abolition of the category "synthetic" or "unnatural." Whatever is produced by a category of nature is usually seen as natural, be it the dropping of birds or honey from bees for instance; and in general, tends to be held up as more healthy for the earth than human-made products. One of the provinces of environmentalist censure is the harm that synthetic human products inflict on the earth. Since whatever is produced by nature is natural, insisting that the human is a category of nature implies that whatever humans produce is equally natural. Industrialisation, capitalism and whatever else humans contrivance have to now be seen as natural, otherwise the admission of human beings into the category of nature can rightly be seen as partial and in fact superficial. And if we begin to view whatever originates from humans as natural, we generate a problem that is not less dangerous than emotional detachment from nature. For example, we create grounds for the acceptance and defence of harmful human-made products such as toxic chemicals, nuclear waste and even nuclear bombs as organic. So, I would submit that neither ecological dualism nor monism as an ideology exclusively holds the key to the reversal of the degradation of the earth which the epigraphs in this chapter urge.

This thesis is about temporality and ecology but also about poetry. As such, I revisit at this juncture a point raised in an earlier chapter about the evolution of Osundare's poetry from simplicity to complexity. For a poet who prefaced his first collection with the words of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda: "I made an unbreakable pledge to myself/ That the people would find their voices in my song" (*Marketplace* xvi), the question arises whether the people's poet has by that step broken his pledge and abandoned the people. Neruda's quote embodies two key aspects: one, that the concerns of the masses of the people will animate his poetry; two, that his poetry will be accessible to the same downtrodden people. In respect of the second aspect, the question arises, is there value in Osundare's progression from a demotic style to a complex one? To answer from my impression garnered across his collections, the leap is salutary for his poetry.

The urge on the part of writers to connect with the masses has also been cited as the reason for the emergence of Pidgin poetry in Nigeria. The drive, as a subtext of commitment, to simplify poetry in the interest of the masses rests on the assumption that they are poetry lovers/readers. Thus, Tanure Ojaide writes that "The vogue of pidgin English poetry is to bring poetry to the African masses by de-emphasizing its intellectualism. Poems in pidgin English express serious and profound ideas in a rather light-hearted language" (15). However, this assumption that the masses are ready to patronise accessible modern poetry is only an ideological fiction. In reality, modern poetry in Nigeria is an elite preserve. The Nigerian masses have yet to begin relying on it for entertainment. Although ostensibly aimed at the common people, it is still composed by the elite and enjoyed by them. Since Ojaide's point is in respect of Pidgin poetry, let me illustrate my point with the Pidgin poetry of Ezenwa-Ohaeto. His introductory comment to his *I Wan Bi President* (I Want to Be President) (1998) bears out the point that Pidgin poetry is consumed by the elite:

> I tried some of these Pidgin poems at the College of Education auditorium, Awka, during the annual English Night of the School of Arts. The reception was absolutely encouraging ... I read the poems at Abuja to a group of fellow writers, who were wonderfully impressed. I read some of the poems in Lagos during a conference of the Association of Nigerian Authors, and the large audience erupted into a thunderous clapping of hands … I read the poems to an audience at Calabar during an International Conference on "African Literature and the English Language," the reception was stupendous. Soon after I was invited to the Anthill Poetry Night at Nsukka as guest poet by the artist/poet Obiora Udechukwu, and Usman Shehu. (11–2)

It is instructive to note that all the classes of audiences from Awka to Abuja to Lagos to Calabar to Nsukka comprise intellectuals. Thus, the Association of Nigerian Authors features rather than such an association as the National Union of Road Transport Workers.

A point made by the Nigerian critic Donatus Nwoga in 1976 in relation to the Ghanaian context equally applies to the Nigerian scene, including in the age of Osundare. Nwoga's point is in relation to *No Time to Die*, a collection of poems by Kojo Gyinaye Kjei and Hannah Scrieckenbach. The work is the result of a tour undertaken by the authors through Ghana, to collect the "down-to-earth philosophical statements" of the folk as presented in

slogans of mammy lorries. The work also involved interviewing lorry owners, drivers and their mates.

The book, written in a blend of formal English, the local language and Pidgin, is dedicated to all mammy lorry drivers. In 1976, it was launched at the Accra Arts Centre. However, "although the book is dedicated to all mammy lorry drivers, not one of them was at the Accra Arts Centre on the day this humour-packed collection about them was launched" (48). Nwoga further adds that:

> it might be ideologically appropriate to talk of "the average African reader or comprehension by anybody who can read" but it is unrealistic to assume that there is such an audience waiting for the poets to write for them. I would imagine that if one went to the places where the drivers and their mates drink beer and palm-wine after work, one would find that they engage in their poetic activities which are perhaps more rigorous than written poetry by the educated. (48)

Nwoga's words above neatly sum up the reality about my argument in this section. There is no proof that the masses in Nigeria have cultivated a fascination for modern poetry, including its demotic variety. When indeed they need poetry, they go for the oral variety which belongs to the community as a whole and does not involve the encumbrance of the printed page. It is in the light of that fact that Osundare's creation poetry reviewed in Chapter 3 has to be understood as matching theme with appropriate expression rather than as abandoning social commitment. His creation verse thus fits into the argument which Abiola Irele has made in respect of *Waiting Laughters* (1990), an anthology of complex poetry. Irele writes that "Osundare has taken a major step towards resolving the difficulty that, despite its undoubted appeal from volume to volume, his poetry has so acutely raised, that is, of communicating a ... vision that is not compromised either by the simplifications of a naive commitment, or by a misguided refusal to engage the complexities of poetic language. (xx) Ideological commitment to the Nigerian masses needs not be demonstrated by writing watered-down verse, since they hardly read poetry at all. My point is however not to dismiss the value of simple poetry but to say that its justification should rest on aesthetic grounds rather than presumed audience.

African poetry in English is remarkable for its diverse forms. Poets have created, and continue to create utilising a variety of modes as dictated by their individual stylistic tastes. Success depends on the individual poet's talent. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and

Ihechukwu Madubuike have delineated three major stylistic directions in Anglophone African poetry, viz. the Euromodernists, the traditionalists and "a miscellany of individual voices of the middle ground" (65). They categorise the traditionalists as "those who have sought to model their English language poetry on elements from traditional African poetry. These include Mazisi Kunene, Kofi Awoonor, Okot p'Bitek and the later Okigbo" (63). This thesis has shown Osundare to be another notable poet of the traditionalist school.

At this point, I draw attention to one technical issue in the poetry under study. One word that has appeared a number of times in my quotations from Osundare's collections but has been consistently "misspelt" is "machete." Wherever it has appeared, it has been spelt as "matchet." That reflects the influence of Nigerian English in his poetry. Although the existence of Nigerian English is still a contested topic among linguistic scholars in the country, some features of the variety of English widely used in Nigeria are unique to it, and this popular way of spelling "machete" is one of them. One fact related to this observation is that despite his international exposure and renown, Osundare has published most of his collections in Nigeria. I see that as a deliberate patriotic gesture on his part. Out of the ten anthologies studied in this thesis, nine were published in Nigeria, the only exception being *City Without People: The Katrina Poems* (2011) which was published in the United States most likely because of its history. The financial implication of this might be unfavourable to him, but he does not seem to mind, being a socialist by inclination. As part of his protest against capitalism, he has declared that "There is something inhuman about capitalism. The profit motive, the fact that you ... put out a book not for cultural and spiritual enrichment but to add to your bank account (qtd in Arnold 449). He seems to be abiding by that conviction in his choice of publishers.

In the final analysis, the thesis represents a single researcher's view of the poetry under study. Its interpretation and evaluation of the poetry of Niyi Osundare is not exhaustive. As has been noted, the concepts it privileges are animism and geologic time. They are not exhaustive of the principles of ecocriticism or of temporal studies. Thus, there is still need for further research on Osundare's nature poetry that will test it against other ecocritical and temporal paradigms.

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