

Memory and Homecoming in Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*

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Abstract

This article studies Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) as a homecoming journey that reveals the traveller's complex relationship with time and place. In this journey, the poet revisits distinguished symbolic places that stand for significantly nourishing and spiritual values for his people, and establishes a dialogue between the past and present of these places in order to question the recent economic and political changes that have led to the deterioration and degradation of the journey's destinations. At each destination, the poet holds a comparison between what has been and what lies before him, recalling the images that are stored in his memory of the past of these places. This act of recollection is not used as an escapist nostalgia that romanticizes the past in order to present a self-complacent image. Rather, it is used as a means of presenting a forward-looking vision that derives inspiration from a past that can be exploited in reminding the poet and his people of what has been inflicted upon earth and the country so that they can regenerate their land and their way of life. Throughout his journey, the poet has a high sense of the different images and effects of time on place and his own conceptualization of the land and its landmarks.

Keywords: animism, conceptions of place, homecoming, memory, Nigerian poetry, Niyi Osundare, nostalgia, time

1. Introduction

Niyi Osundare (1947-) belongs to the second generation of Nigerian poets whose poetry is "marked by stylistic accessibility" (Balogun, 2004, p. 187). These poets use oral Yoruba traditions to widen the scope of Nigerian poetry readership. They also try to "make important political statements and redirect people's thinking towards positive change" (Egya, 2007, p. 112). Osundare has written numerous poetry collections starting with *Songs of the Marketplace* (1983). His most recent poetry book is *City without People: The Katrina Poems* (2011). *The Eye of the Earth* (1986) is his third collection, and represents a journey into the poet's homeland where he encounters a landscape that creates tension between what he sees before him and what he recollects out of his memory. It has received many critical treatments from different perspectives such as materialism and Marxism (Bodunde, 1997), fertility and pluvial aesthetics (Ngumoha, 2011), environmental commodification (Nwagbara, 2012), and nature poetry (Jeff, 2009). No critical study has dealt with this collection as a homecoming journey that uses memory as a confluence that merges time and place in revisiting the poet's spatiotemporal past. The purpose of this study is to explore the connection of the poet's memory and historical landscape knowledge with his poetically ritualistic homecoming journey that is largely undertaken in the first programmatic movement of the collection and furthered throughout its other movements. I have chosen this approach because the collection employs a speaker who believes that disconnection from the earth and its connotations has deteriorating effects on his own life as a human being and on the life of his people. Osundare makes a journey "back to earth" with an eye on what supports life, enriches the speaker's character, energizes memory, and achieves a reconnection with a "soulful" earth that can provide him and his people with a forward-looking vision and worldview. This article is divided into three main parts and a conclusion. The first part studies how the poet's journey within the forest recalls his memories of this forest in the past and reflects upon the present conditions that mutilate green earth and paradoxically make the poet employ his journey back in time and space as a means of a forward-looking quest. The second part of this article covers another aspect of the poet's homecoming journey which is represented in revisiting the rocks of Ikere, the poet's hometown, in order to rethink and reassert his relationship with these spiritual guardians of the harvest spirit. The third part deals with the stage of Osundare's journey that

poetically highlights rain as a forward-looking vision that provides what is lacking in the earlier destinations, and throws a revealing light on the significance and purpose of the poet's homecoming.

2. Time, Memory, and the Forest

Memory and nostalgia play an important role in Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* (1986). Through them, the traveller or wayfarer revisits the times and places of his childhood and early adult life. This revisiting takes the form of a homecoming journey that establishes a seminal dialogue between the past and the present. The past for which the speaking voice longs is not romanticized because, as Osundare himself says in his preface to the collection, "looking back is looking forward; the visionary artist is not only a rememberer, he is also a reminder" (1986, xii). I use the phrase "speaking voice," not "speaking voices" because the collection is programmed by the poet into three movements and an "episodic diaphragm" (Osundare, 1986, p. xii) which are complementary to one another and create a unifying thread throughout this volume of poems, and because this poetry book is semi-autobiographical (e. g., Bamikunle, 1995, p. 133; Maiwada, 1993, p. 101; Oyedola, 2000, p. 380), with the autobiographical element pertaining to the collective dimension of the self, not just the individual one. The past that the poet revisits relates to the landscape of Nigeria, especially that of Ikere, the poet's hometown, and what it has been to be, which the poet enlivens through memory and comparison.

The title of the first programmatic movement, "back to earth," brings to the fore a journey which the poet makes, actually or hypothetically. Although this title implies, at its surface, a traveller who has been away from the earth in a journey into space, for instance, reading the poems included within this movement reveals that this earth does not refer to the globe in opposition to the sky or other planets, for example, but to "the creative spirit of the earth" (Bamikunle, 1995, p. 124) where earth is regarded "as a human being" (Osundare, 2000, p. 293), "the home of man" (Jeff, 2009, p. 76), "a productive base" (Bodunde, 1997, p. 88), "the personification of all the reproductive energies of nature" (Ngumoha, 2011, p. 125), and "a source of increase and production" (Jeff, 2009, pp. 70-71) and "of our humanity and sustenance" (A. Okunowo, 2010, p. 401). In other words, the earth in the title of the collection as a whole and of the first poetic movement conveys a creative, regenerative, productive, sustaining and personified power which is not fully or positively substantiated in the starting point of the poet's journey. Hence, this journey "back to earth" has a temporal dimension, as "the poet journeys back in time to his childhood and remembers the beauty of the forests and the earth" (Duruoha, 2002, p. 59), and a spatial one which poetically resuscitates the poet's landscape of childhood and early adult life. Therefore, the homecoming nature of this journey lies in the poet's coming "back to earth." This return is to be understood as aesthetic and fictional, because Osundare's poetry collection which immediately precedes *The Eye of the Earth* is *Village Voices* (1984), is passionately engaged with rural life and those who tend and represent the land. That is why I have earlier referred to the autobiographical element in *The Eye of the Earth*: the poet returns to his, and his people's, early relationship with the earth or land in order to set its present deterioration and degradation in perspective and empower the land for future blooming and greening, or rather turn remembrance into a positive power that breathes new life into the present. In brief, it is a spatiotemporal journey which combines time and space in a unified whole which is set in a comparative perspective with reference to the present and which reincorporates "earth" into people's consideration and worldviews.

In his preface to *The Eye of the Earth*, Osundare emphasizes the journey-like nature of the poems of this collection. He also sheds light on the "passionate nostalgia" that is manifest in "rendering" or expressing the outcome of this journey in these poems. He justifies his resort to nostalgia as follows:

it is the legitimate flame of the inevitable fire often kindled when an embattled present makes a forward thrust difficult (surely not impossible!), and looking back becomes one of the weapons against a looming monster. But all this resides in the house of memory where doors open into the backyard of time, and windows bare their breasts for the knowing shafts of coming suns. (Osundare, 1986, p. xii)

He establishes a dialogue between the past on the one hand and the present and the future on the other. The meeting ground of these poles lies "in the house of memory" which provides the poet with a power that helps him fight the "looming monster" of the present and restore earth to its regenerative and productive status in the future.

The first poem in "back to earth," "Forest Echoes," establishes the mood of *The Eye of the Earth* as a collection that reverberates with the echoes of the forest that has been and no longer exists in its full bloom:

A green desire, perfumed memories,
a leafy longing lure my wanderer feet
to this forest of a thousand wonders.

A green desire for this petalled umbrella
 of simple stars and compound suns.
 Suddenly, so soberly suddenly,
 the sky is tree-high
 and the horizon dips into an inky grove
 like a masquerade scribbling loric fear
 in the lines of festival streets. (Osundare, 1986, p. 3)

The focal presence of “green desire,” “memories,” “leafy longing,” and “loric fear” create a semantic field that directs our reading of the poem to a green past and lively native traditions that are jeopardized by a present from which the speaker in the poem sets forth into the past as a “wanderer” who wants to bridge the temporal gap separating his feet from landing or treading on the land representing the destination of “reminding” nostalgia. Phrases such as “green desire” and “leafy longing” attest to the absence of the objects to which this longing and that desire are oriented. The sources of greenness and leafiness are delegated to the domain of memories, with the poet’s nostalgia serving as a requiem or an act of mourning remembrance. This mixture of “desire,” “memories,” and “longing” acts as a “lure” that seduces the poet to make this journey and catches the reader and the poet with the “bait” of the past so that they can be reminded of the spatiotemporal richness and diversity of this past, implicitly urging them to question the causes that have led to the deterioration and desertification of pristine, sustainable, and sustaining nature in the present. The use of the adverb “suddenly” indicates a sudden shift in the field of vision that captures the “tree-high” sky and the “inky grove,” a shift that disapproves of the degeneration of green and animal life before the eyes of the spectator. Also, the concomitant use of the adverb “soberly” moves fantasy and illusion away from this field of vision and indicates that the poet has already seen what he is going to re-experience in the poem or rather to bring out of his memory and stage before us on the page.

However, Osundare is aware of the elusiveness of the past and the illusiveness of nostalgia, for this past, whether temporal or spatial, cannot be brought into the present:

Here, under this awning, ageless,
 the clock, unhanded, falls
 in the deep belly of woods
 its memory ticking songfully
 in *elulu*’s sleepless throat
 Mauled the minutes, harried the hours;
 taunted is time whose needle’s eye
 gates our comings and goings
 time which wombed the moon
 to bear the sun,
 the hole in the ragged wardrobe
 the gap in the ageing teeth
 the bud on the ripening tree
 Oh time,
 coffin behind the cot. (Osundare, 1986, p. 4)

There are three types of time in this stanza: the eternity of the forest as it exists in an “ageless” state in human memory, time as a barrier or a gate that controls “our comings and goings,” and time as manifested in its effects upon human life. Forest’s eternity is associated with a sense of time that is measured by natural agents not related to the mechanical ways of counting time that are symbolized in the poem by the “unhanded” clock. The clock is replaced by the “sleepless throat” of “*elulu*,” a bird which Osundare describes in a footnote as “a kind of bird which hoots at regular hours of the day” (1986, p. 12). Moreover, “the cosmic elements” which mark time represented in the moon, the sun, and time itself “interact with organic materials to sustain the cycle of growth and decay” (Bodunde, 1997, p. 84). Also, the violence against the “hands” of the clock and the emphasis upon the Yoruba name “*elulu*” convey “a notion of time that discards the artificial or the mechanical in favour of the natural. Time is conveyed and preserved by Nature” (Dare, 2010, p. 396). The mechanical time is equivalent to the “crown of noisy gold, smashing old customs, assailing the very core of ancient humanistic ethos” (Osundare, 1986, p. xii). It represents an attack on this ethos and the living spirit of earth.

Osundare mourns this kind of natural or organic time through his successive usage of past participial adjectives: “mauled,” “harried,” and “taunted.” These adjectives highlight the aggressiveness of the attacks on the then union of time and space in the forest. These attacks result in the second concept of time as a gatekeeper who

“keeps” nostalgia in a state of an everlasting desire that cannot be quenched. Visiting the forest, which is now devoid of its natural time, cannot satisfy the speaker’s “green desire” because its mental image in the mind of this speaker does not have a reflection in reality. That is why Osundare presents the third concept of time: time as an erosive and ageing force that puts a gradual end to signs of life and places “the coffin behind the cot.” However, the image of this type of time is not completely gloomy because in face of “the hole in the ragged wardrobe” and “the gap in the ageing teeth,” the poet describes “the bud on the ripening tree,” which symbolizes rebirth and new life, furthering the “reminding” aspect of the poet’s nostalgia and homecoming.

These different temporalities merge with the forest as a landscape and create a sense of uncertainty:

And every toemark on the footpath
every fingerprint on every bark
the ropy climbers flung breathlessly
from tree to tree
the haunting sound and silence
of this sweet and sour forest
dig deep channels to the sea of memory.
And the outcome:
will it be flow or flood . . . (Osundare, 1986, p. 4)

Visual, aural, tactile, and gustatory images combine to bring past sensations into the present journey of the poet within the forest. Remembrance molds the forest in contrastive or oppositional perspectives where “haunting sound” coexists with “silence,” and the “sweet” with the “sour,” leading to the perplexity of the traveler, as he does not know “the outcome” of his journey: a “flow” can further memories and support life in the present, whereas a “flood” can inundate the present and leave the speaker totally drowning in “the sea of memories.” Uncertainty implies the risks involved in the poet’s journey. He does not know whether he can restore the spatiotemporal past or lose it forever. That is perhaps why Osundare creates two graphological or formatting levels in “Forest Echoes”: the first level is represented in the voice of the traveler in the present, while the second is that of choral or collective voices from the past. This attests to how Osundare “deploys graphological experimentation to make his poetry lucid” (Okuyade, 2010, p. 10). These collective voices are marked on the page by indentation. What they say can be seen as collected from the memory of the poet himself as he plunges deep into the forest. They recall a harmonious past when there were plenty of rains, sufficiency of food, abundance of green life, variety of trees representing national pride and native strength, and diversity of animal life: the “rains” that keep “their time” (Osundare, 1986, p. 3), “Oke Ubo Abusoro” forest (p. 5), the “chameleon” (p. 8), the “praying mantis” (p. 9), “iroko,” “hyena” and “elephant” (p. 10), for instance. This diversity of past life in the forest suggests a desire, on the part of Osundare, “for a return of a pristine environment that has been rendered comatose in the wake of capitalist activities” (Nwagbara, 2012, p. 67). However, this return is largely symbolic. It can be interpreted as a need for creating a comparable rich and diverse way of life in the present.

This act of recollection serves a comparative purpose and supports Osundare’s argument that has been cited above about “looking back” which acts as a call for “looking forward.” The poet “quotes” the richness of Nigerian green and animal life in the past and people’s mystic relationship with the land in order to shed light on the commercial exploitation, and consequently deterioration, of landscape:

A forest of a million trees, this,
a forest of milling trees
wounded, though, by time’s axe
and the greedy edges of *agbegilodo’s* matchet
A stump here, a stump there
like a finger missing from a crowded hand
swarmed by struggling shoots,
unapparent heir to fallen heights. (Osundare, 1986, p. 5)

The change from “million trees” to “milling trees” concretizes the catastrophe that the mind of the poet experiences through his comparative view of the forest past and present. There are two causes for this catastrophe: “time’s axe” and “the greedy edges of *agbegilodo’s* matchet” or timber lorry. The former refers us back to Osundare’s third concept of time discussed earlier in this article, whereas the latter relates to the profit-driven impulses of capitalism. What is new about Osundare’s portrayal of this cause is the struggle he depicts as occurring between the timber lorry with its greedy “matchet” or machete on the one hand, and the apparently defenseless trees on the other. The outcome of this struggle is manifest in mutilation, disfiguration,

and dismemberment. This is a clear manifestation of “the organizing technique” that runs throughout *The Eye of the Earth*, a technique which Aderemi Bamikunle (1995) describes as placing “the picture of the community as the writer knows it in its edenic idyll with the picture of its devastation by contemporary culture” (p. 133). However, the “struggling shoots” which are the “unapparent heirs to fallen heights” ingrain hope within the texture of the poem and lead Osundare to celebrate his people’s mystic and commemorative view of trees’ hierarchies, resilience, and resistance. This celebration is corroborated by the poet’s intentional use of the Yoruba names for these trees, iroko, oganwo and ayunre, leading “the reader/audience to identify with the Yoruba popular culture” (Oyedola, 2000, p. 380). These “forest trees are given their praises according to their strength” (Alu, 2008, p. 78) and to their roles as fighters against the antagonistic forces represented in time and the lorry timber. For example, iroko is described as wearing “the crown of the forest” because it is “ironwood against the termites of time” (Osundare, 1986, p. 5) and the “scourge of the sweating sawyer” (p. 6). Its resilience makes it resist and overcome the effects of time, and its resistance and strength exhaust the efforts of the wood sawyer and force him to “retreat to the whetting stone” (p. 6).

The diversity of animals and plants celebrated in “Forest Echoes” is parallel to the diversity and mysticism of religion. In a stanza devoted to the “praying mantis” (Osundare, 1986, pp. 9-10), the poet celebrates the “eternal tabernacle,” “the compelling muezzin,” the “green *aladura*,” and “the cannibal calvary.” These four figures combine the three revealed religions and color them with a Nigerian touch through the “green *aladura*” that adds an animistic and mystic element to this element of spirituality, reflecting the union of all life forms recollected by the poet throughout the poem.

The last part of “Forest Echoes” is replete with echoes of parting and farewell. The poet repeats the phrase “my parting eyes” (Osundare, 1986, pp. 10-11) which represents the subject of some structural parallelisms, parallelism being one “of the rhetorical strategies of Yoruba oral poetry” (Anyokwu, 2011, p. 7). This parallelism gives “evocative markedness of thematic essence” (Y. Okunowo, 2012, p. 719) and “calls attention to the ideas that are juxtaposed in different patterned structures in which they can be construed” (p. 722). These syntactic parallelisms, which have semantic correspondences as well, serve to intensify the weight of loss and heighten the thematic effects of the poet’s journey through the forest as a whole. The first occurrence of these parallelistic structures relates to “the anthill”:

My parting eyes arrest the anthill,
pyramid of the forest,
.....
laying bricks and eggs
.....
and when these eggs are hatched
will they, too, adult into
a brick-laying brood,
unquestioning? (Osundare, 1986, pp. 10-11)

The “parting eyes” suggest that the poet cannot dwell in the spatiotemporal past for long otherwise he would be lost and would have an anachronous existence. All he can do is that he visually “arrests” this element of the landscape and holds it tightly so that it can have a secure and deeply rooted presence within his memory. It is noticeable that he ends this sequence of the poem which celebrates, and waves farewell to, the anthill with a question that implies, and supports his earlier sense of, uncertainty of the continuity of life diversity in the forest.

The next structure parallel with this one celebrating the anthill mourns the extinction of forest species represented in “expired snakes”:

My parting eyes sing silent requiems
to the vertebra of expired snakes
lying unstately on the roadside turf;
the same which only last season
eased off its hide
in the sumptuous wardrobe
of fallen foliage
like a striptease gleaming
before a colony of clapping ferns. (Osundare, 1986, p. 11)

The difference between this kind of parting and the previous one is that it relates to an absent element of nature

and to the faculty of speech while the previous one concerns a surviving natural element and the sense of sight. The absence, or extinction, of snakes greatens the poetic sense of the speaker, making him attribute the ability of singing to his “parting eyes” and characterize these songs as “silent.” While “the anthill” is present before his eyes, the “snakes” are present only within the domain of memory or remembrance. This extinction is aggravated by mentioning “only last season.” The poet’s reference to the rural and native calendar of seasons, not the mathematical one of years and months, serves three purposes: first, he sticks to his rural worldview which can be regarded here as an attribute of his identity; second, it retrospectively reflects on the images of time highlighted earlier in the poem, implying that the eternal time of the forest where the clock is “unhanded” was still active until the “last season;” third, the season is not only a season of vegetation, but of animal life renewal as well. Moreover, using words such as “sumptuous,” “striptease,” “gleaming,” and “clapping” suggests that this season represents a carnival where fauna and flora celebrate the renewal associated with the turn of seasons. The absence of this carnivalesque celebration during the present season, in comparison with the “last season,” condemns the causes that have effected negative rapid changes in the forest, making *The Eye of the Earth* “one of the fiercest indictments of modern economic culture of the people and alien destructive forces” (Alu, 2008, p. 70).

The closure of “Forest Echoes” intensifies the thematic effects of the poem as a whole:

And now
Memory,
loud whisper of yester-voices
confluence of unbroken rivers,
lower your horse of remembrance

Let me dismount. (Osundare, 1986, p. 12)

It is apparent that the “echoes” spotlighted in the title of the poem are those of the time and space of the forest as they reverberate in the memory of the poet. This closure combines “memory,” time represented in the “yester-” of “yester-voices,” and the mind of the poet as the junction that merges the rivers of the past and those of the present. It is noteworthy that memory is both spatialized and temporalized in order to convey the outcomes of the poet’s spatiotemporal journey into the past of his native forest. Also, the vehicle used to make such a journey is the “horse of remembrance.” The metaphorical use of a traditional means of transport instead of a modern one goes hand in hand with the poet’s celebration (and mourning of the loss) of the native traditional way of symbiotic and enriching life.

The final line of the poem, “Let me dismount,” implies that it is memory which takes hold of the poet: his journey drives him into memory through involuntary comparison between what he loses before his eyes and what is tumultuously stirring in his memorizing mind. The request present in this final line also suggests that his memories outweigh him to the extent that he cannot tolerate the loss, destruction, and manifestations of life extinction facing him in the forest. It also asserts that all that is positively described in the poem is set in a time far away from the present. This highlights the relationship between “looking back” and “looking forward,” leading us, through this poetic journey, “to enhance our understanding of the present” (Jeff, 2009, p. 69). In addition, this closure refers us back to a question that the poet has earlier asked about the outcome of his journey deep into the forest: “will it be flow or flood?” (Osundare, 1986, p. 4). It appears that the unbalanced comparison between the rich past and the poor present weighs down upon the poet and is about to make him sink under the “flood” of the past. As a result, he asks to be dismounted so that he can “flow” safely back to the present, strengthened by the life-supporting memories of this enlivened past.

3. Revisiting the Spiritual Rocks of Ikere

The poet’s journey takes a turn in “The Rocks Rose to Meet Me,” with the rocks and their wisdom taking the place of the forest and its echoes. Having been on the verge of being flooded by memories of a past that have no substantial traces in the present, the poet turns now to landmarks which are still present. He portrays and dramatizes his relationship with the rocks in a way that merges the present and the past and expresses, or rather concretizes, the spiritual value of these rocks and the economic struggle ensuing over their economic benefits.

The poem is divided into four numbered movements. The first movement conveys the poet’s encounter with the rock Olosunta which he describes in a footnote as “a huge, imposing rock in Ikere, worshipped yearly during the popular Olosunta festival, reputed to be a repository of gold” (Osundare, 1986, p. 17). The two aspects of this rock, being a deity and being “a repository of gold,” are emphasized in the first movement. Through animistic personification, Osundare gives voice to Olosunta in order to strengthen the unifying thread that runs through the poems of *The Eye of the Earth*:

Olosunta spoke first
the riddling one whose belly is wrestling ground
for god and gold.

"You have been long, very long, and far',
said he, his tongue one flaming flash
of unburnable gnomes
"Unwearying wayfarer,
your feet wear the mud of distant waters
your hems gather the bur
of farthest forests;
I can see the westmost sun
in the mirror of your wandering eyes". (Osundare, 1986, p. 13)

Although the speaker animates *Olosunta*, the use of the adjective "riddling" with reference to it is itself puzzling. Describing the rock as speaking in riddles or as puzzling can be interpreted in different ways. First, the speaker no longer shares his people's belief in *Olosunta*'s sacredness and animistic attributes. Second, the rock initiates a dialogue with the speaker that is not understandable, at least in its immediate context. Third, the riddling aspect of this rock can be related to the coexistence, in its belly, of "god and gold," of spirit and matter. The rock, in turn, uses an adjective which is no less puzzling: a wayfarer can be described as "unwearied," not "unwearying," at least in customary usage. It appears that the rock refers to Osundare's quest in the collection as a whole and in his other volumes as well, as it alludes to the "farthest forests" of the previous poem and as the poet himself retackles, later on in "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me," issues that have been dealt with in his earlier poetry collection *Songs from the Marketplace* (1983) where the poems are "socially committed on the side of the underprivileged" (Bamikunle, 1995, p. 135) and call for "social revolution or social action that will lead to social change" (Aboh, 2012, p. 3).

The employment of adjectives such as "far," "distant," "farthest," and "westmost" on the tongue of *Olosunta* implies that *Olosunta*'s speech is another sort of homecoming songs or chants in the fashion of African oral traditions which Osundare re-enacts in the poem in order to emphasize the temporal gap that has necessitated his homecoming quest for a reunion with this past. Having been "a renegade," he "is now trying to establish vital links with the past" (Jeff, 2009, p. 68). It is *Olosunta* who/which enacts the homecoming chant in his/its speech in order to celebrate the return of the prodigal son. However, a phrase such as "the bur/ of farthest forests" indicates that this "son" was not so much "prodigal," as he has been pursuing a union with other aspects/landmarks of nature and the land. That the poet places this homecoming chant on the mouth of *Olosunta* and that the latter recognizes the homecoming poet and emphasizes the spatiotemporal distance that he has "wandered" or walked in order to meet it again – both facts suggest that *Olosunta* has been waiting for him and has not forgotten their mutual past relationship. At the same time, the poet feels some kind of guilt towards the rock:

Olosunta spoke
his belly still battle ground of god and gold.
The god I have killed
since wisdom's straightening sun
licked clean the infant dew of fancy
The gold let us dig,
not for the gilded craniums
of hollow chieftains
(time's undying sword awaits their necks
who deem this earth their sprawling throne).
With the gold let us turn hovels into havens
paupers into people (not princes)
so hamlets may hear
the tidings of towns
so the world may sprout a hand
of equal fingers.
Yield your gold, lofty one.
But how dig the gold
without breaking the rock? (Osundare, 1986, p. 14)

The change that has taken place since the poet's departure is represented in two things. First Olosunta has turned from a "wrestling ground" to a "battle ground," a change which shows the widening of the scope of the struggle over the economic or material value of this rock. The second thing is that the poet's education has had a negative effect upon his view of his people's beliefs, as it has "killed" his belief in the spirituality of this rock and eradicated "the infant dew of fancy." Education, symbolized by "wisdom," is "straightening," a participial adjective which can be understood as "making straight," "corrupting," and even "straitening" in the senses of "narrowing," "confining," "restricting," and "depriving" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Thus, the poet's re-encounter with the rocks can be seen as coming back to what has been repressed by his education and by a culture which regards myth as the opposite of reason and enlightenment. In this sense, the issue that has been raised, earlier in this article, about the poet's use of the adjective "riddling" with reference to Olosunta can be seen in the light of this perspective which places the "god" in the belly of the rock in opposition to its "gold," a perspective pertaining to the educated "renegade" or "prodigal son." The poet's confession that he has "killed" the godly aspect of Olosunta conveys a sense of repentance and of a re-engagement with the "fancy" and imagination of his people.

As for the second aspect of Olosunta as a "repository of gold," Osundare uses it to link the poem and the collection as a whole with his first collection *Songs from the Marketplace*, as referred to earlier in this article. He manipulates this aspect in expounding his socialist and egalitarian views on the distribution of wealth and natural resources. Having criticized the greed of materialist drives represented in the machetes and the timber lorry in "Forest Echoes," he now attacks the covetousness of the feudalists and military chieftains or rulers who want to loot the natural resources of the country. He sees gold as the property of all people and should be used for improving the conditions of both "hamlets" and "towns" and for supporting equality and egalitarianism. However, the poet is aware of the privacy of Olosunta, since digging its gold means that it will be destroyed: getting the gold equals sacrificing its spiritual value and destroying the landmarks of landscape. In other words, preserving the integrity of Olosunta necessitates disregarding its economic and material value; otherwise it will be lost forever.

Osundare sheds light, in his preface to *The Eye of the Earth*, on the mystic and religious value, and the "creative, material essence" of the rocks celebrated in this poem. He also conveys Ikere People's view of these rocks "as guardians of the harvest spirit" and as "wonder siblings of Esidale" (Osundare, 1986, p. xiii). Hence, their economic value is nothing in comparison with their spiritual, mystic, religious, and creative dimensions. The poet's recognition of the privacy and integrity of Olosunta leads him, in the final movement of "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me," to re-inscribe the spiritual within his vision, and enrich his education and "wisdom" with what this wisdom has driven away:

I saw the invisible toe-marks
of Esidale
indelible on the spine-less column
of rocks
unrubable like a birthmark
older than God
hieroglyphed when earth was molten pap
sculpted into stone by the busy hands
of wind and water. (Osundare, 1986, p. 16)

Esidale is "Earth god or the god 'Pan' of the white man" (Thompson, 1995, p. 55), or "Founder of Earth and sky," as Osundare himself describes him in a poem cited by Arthur Pfister (2012) in his review of Osundare's *City without People: The Katrina Poems*. The poet re-routes his "wisdom" to reincorporate the spiritual within the material and the religious within the socialist, especially when it relates to the earth and its deity. Christopher Anyokwu argues that the "cohabitation between animism and Marxism in his [Osundare's] formal verse ... causes the internal ideological antinomy and tension in his writing" (2009, p. 4). This argument cannot be held as generally true because tension can ensue when the poet has a tightly and narrowly held belief in them away from each other. Since Osundare is aware, as we have seen earlier in this article with reference to "The God I have killed" (Osundare, 1986, p. 14), of the negative effect of his education and "wisdom" on his view of the beliefs of his people, this awareness enables him to review his own perspective on both animism and Marxism in order to widen the scope of the latter in a way that does not oppose or negate the former.

Since Esidale is associated with indelibility and with "wind and water," Osundare conveys a message of hope that alleviates, and even eradicates, the negative effects of progression in time that are manifest in the forest and in the materialist attitudes of the "hollow chieftains" towards the rocks. In addition, the parallelisms that the poet

makes between “of Esidale,” “of rocks,” and “of wind and water” indicate that the poet highlights (and equates) the importance of all that come after “of,” a parallelistic effect which makes us re-read all that has been described in “Forest Echoes” and “The Rocks Rose to Meet Me” in a new light that makes the poet’s “looking back” a vision of future rootedness and green consummation, not just “a green desire.” Thus, he manages “to adapt successfully its [Yoruba’s] mythology and metaphysics as the informing vision of his own poetry” (Ogundele, 2001, p. 28).

4. Osundare’s Forward-Looking Vision

In the poems that follow “The Rocks Rose to Meet Me,” Osundare adopts a forward-looking vision that tries to enact what can resuscitate the forest and the rocks. This prophetic vision is highlighted in “Harvest Call” where the poet, after celebrating “yam,” “cobs” and “cotton pods,” foresees an abundance of vegetation:

Uncountable seeds lie sleeping
in the womb of earth
uncountable seeds
awaiting the quickening tap
of our waking finger. (Osundare, 1986, p. 20)

The participial adjectives “quickenings” and “waking” imply that the wake up of the “uncountable seeds” is only a matter of time. These seeds will grow into green abundance sooner or later. They only need some sort of collaboration, as the collective pronominal adjective “our” shows. This prophecy is preceded by a journey back into time and space to cover the abundance of food in Iyanfoworogi:

where yams, ripe and randy,
waged a noisy war against the knife;
here where, subdued by fire,
efuru provoked mouthful clamour
from the combat of hungry wood:
the pestle fights the mortar
the mortar fights the pestle
a dough of contention smooths down
the rugged anger of hunger. (Osundare, 1986, p. 18)

This journey to a time that precedes the colonization of Osundare’s homeland, or “before the virulent advent of Europe’s merchants who turned native farmers into cocoa-coffee-cashew croppers” (Osundare, 1986, p. xi), is not used to give a contented image of the collective self. Rather, it “presents Africa’s beautiful past in order to create a defence against today’s alienation” (Jeff, 2009, p. 71). This alienation is an alienation from the productivity of the earth. In other words, Osundare revisits the green abundance and plenty of food in the past in order to urge the inhabitants of the present to awaken their restorative powers and restore the “sleeping seeds” back to consciousness and growth. Thus, the kind of “waking” referred to in “Harvest Call” incorporates some kind of consciousness and awareness as well, for the poet concludes the poem with an emphatic contrastive view of the warm earth and the cold hearth:

With our earth so warm
How can our hearth be so cold? (Osundare, 1986, p. 21)

This question interpellates the people to whom the speaker belongs and questions their “slow” or “sleepy” action at a time that requires quickening and acceleration. As the word “quickenings” has other meanings which indicate “making alive,” “reviving,” “animating,” “stimulating,” “stirring up,” and “rousing” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), Osundare emphasizes the role of the people in reviving the earth. Since the number of these people exceeds that of the “sawyers,” “chieftains,” timber lorry drivers, and abusers of nature referred to in “Forest Echoes” and “The Rocks Rose to Meet Me,” the action of the people included within the inclusive “our” which is repeated three successive times in the three last lines of “Harvest Call” can outdo and outweigh all the negative actions of these destroyers of nature and its resources.

Homecoming is not limited to one’s symbolic or physical return to his/her homeland. It is used by Osundare to expose the forces that have led to the aridity of the land and the misery of its inhabitants. In “Eyeful Glances” which links “Back to Earth” with “Rainsongs,” he sheds light on those who create “the tinder season” (Osundare, 1986, p. 30) through burning the land:

a careless match, a harmattan rage
our farms are tinder

for a dispossessing flame;
a criminal torch, an incendiary plot
a blaze conceals the trails
of looters of the state. (Osundare, 1986, p. 25)

The parching and dusty harmattan which has been described earlier in the collection as having “tiger claws” (Osundare, 1986, p. 20) is here adapted to symbolically refer to those who contribute to the dryness of the land and the blazing of the farms. Their “careless match” can set fire in the remaining green life. These “looters of the state,” who remind us of the “hollow chieftains... who deem this earth their sprawling throne” (Osundare, 1986, p. 14), dismember the land in order to conceal their “trails.” In turn, this reminds us of “the greedy edges of *agbegilodo's* matchet” (Osundare, 1986, p. 5) which mutilate the forest and its green diverse life. Hence, aridity and droughts are largely caused by human agents represented in the politicians who have “tinder” desires and circulate an “incendiary plot” that conspires against quenching the “green desire” that has driven the poet on the path of his spatiotemporal journey. Therefore, we can regard this journey as a way of uncovering the causes that have led to the degradation of landscape, flora, and fauna in the present.

Osundare revisits this issue in “Rain-Coming” where he optimistically celebrates the coming regeneration in spite of the scheming of the “barn-burners”:

Slowly
but
surely
the early rains ring the bell
but, oh my land!
deep and dry still
in the unnatural desert
of bam-burners. (Osundare, 1986, p. 31)

Graphologically formatting the first three lines of this stanza in the form of downward stair steps, which is repeated three other times earlier in the poem, visually paves the way for rains to descend through this staircase to satisfy the thirst of the earth. This visual parallelism, which conveys a natural, pluvial phenomenon that has been awaited for long, counterbalances, and even overweighs, “the unnatural desert” that “barn-burners” have artificially created, thus furthering Osundare’s “vision of the restoration of lost unity with earth” (Bodunde, 1997, p. 93) or “the restoration of an active equilibrium between man and his environment” (Maiwada, 1993, p. 97), emphasizing rain’s “fertilising power” that “restores the earth to its natural responsiveness” (Ngumoha, 2011, p. 132).

In “Raindrum,” Osundare links aridity, rain, memories, and regeneration in order to convey his optimistic message of renewal:

A stray drop saunters down the thatch
of my remembrance
waking memories long dormant
under the dry leaves of time:

 of caked riverbeds
 and browned pastures
 of baking noons
 and grilling nights
 of earless cornfields
 and tired tubers

Then
Lightning strikes its match of rain
Barefoot, we tread the throbbing earth,
Renewed (Osundare, 1986, p. 32)

The title of the poem evokes the power of drumming as a “surrogate speech” and conveyor of “deep experiences latent in the tribe's collective unconscious” (Anyokwu, 2011, p. 7), mimicking “the patter of pluviosity” (Ngumoha, 2011, p. 129). This “raindrum” indicates the animistic and mystic belief in the responsiveness of the rain to the ritualistic calls of the people. It also refers to the magical powers of the people who invoke the rains as a resisting reaction to the desertifying actions of the “hollow chieftains” and “barn-burners” who represent

“tropes of power abuse, economic mismanagement and poverty among other legacies of military regimes” (Gbemisola, 2003, p. 6). In his preface to *The Eye of the Earth*, Osundare condemns the lack of “vision and humanistic sympathy” in “the ruling class” who do not take any measures to stop “the parlous depletion of our natural being” (1986, p. xiii). The people use their traditional spiritual energies to resist the materialist greed of their rulers and to stop this depletion, resuscitating life in “our natural being.”

In this extract, Osundare recalls the “waking fingers” from “Harvest Call.” But instead of the “sleeping seeds” that await the touch of the people, the strolling drop of rain “wakes” the “memories” of parchedness, droughts, and tinder times. This “remembrance” is not used to revisit a green past that makes the poet angry with, or regretful for, the deterioration of the present. Rather, it is employed to emphasize that aridity and land starvation are now matters that belong to the past. This parchedness covers water resources (“caked riverbeds”), green life (“browened pastures”), natural markers of time (“baking noons / and grilling nights”), and consequently crops (“earless cornfields / and tired tubers”). Their “memories” are only waked in order to be driven away from the mind of the speaker. Also, Osundare recalls the “careless match” (Osundare, 1986, p. 25) of those who create “the unnatural desert” (p. 31), but he reverses its effects, as the “match” is associated with “rain,” not with those desertifying human agents. The result is that “earth” is now “throbbing” or pulsating with a new life that restores the pronoun “we” that has been absent from the poems of *The Eye of the Earth* since its occurrence in “The Rocks Rose to Meet Me.” It is noteworthy that the word “renewed” occupies a complete stanza that closes or concludes the poem. It refers both to “the throbbing earth” and to the inclusive “we” which incorporates the poet and his people. Thus, the act of homecoming is not limited to that of the poet who undertakes a journey into the time and space of his homeland, but it widens to include the homecoming of rains and the season of wetness.

5. Conclusion

Niyi Osundare’s homecoming journey in *The Eye of the Earth* is passionately charged with the memories that the returning wayfarer has of the places he revisits. Through a comparative perspective, he visualizes the past of the forest so that we can see what he describes of the present conditions of this forest in the light of what it has been, indirectly condemning the causes of forest deterioration and degradation. But Osundare does not romanticize the past, as he is aware of its elusiveness, and he is conscious that the sea of memories may turn out to be a flood that may drown the present and the future altogether. He only enlivens these memories as a bridge that moves him to a better future. While he celebrates many native trees of the forest, he reminds his readers that this celebration should be taken as a sign of the earth’s soul which should be enabled to resume its life in the future; otherwise the past would turn into a bait that lures people and imprisons them there.

The same attitude is adopted by Osundare when he shifts to another station on the way of his homecoming journey, which is represented in the rocks of Ikere. He enacts his relationship with these rocks through dialogue, reflection, and social activism. This station turns out to be a personal quest for the spiritual in the poet’s life, and a collective quest for earth’s god so that life can be re-breathed into the earth in order to restore the integrity of these rocks which represent the harvest spirit. Therefore, he moves from rocks to rains in order to incorporate the “sleeping seeds” in his journey so that people and rains can be woken up and can satisfy both godly rocks and the earth itself.

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