

# Bardolatry and the Creative Space: The Example of Niyi Osundare and Akeem Lasisi

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## Abstract

*The question of "Influence" is one that dates back to ancient classical times and one which has engaged both creative and critical writers and scholars down the ages. In his influential study entitled *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Harold Bloom thoroughly investigates the concept, arguing the inescapability of "Influence" in the creative process as well as in the critical enterprise. Basing our argument on Bloom's theory, we examine the relationship between Osundare's verse and Akeem Lasisi's poetry and conclude that the one influenced the other in spite of the fact that both poets hail from Yorubaland.*

## Bardolatry: Theoria to Theory

The concept of bardolatry is perhaps not very popular or even common in the critical lexicon even though Harold Bloom uses it in the preface to his hugely important book entitled *The Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom merely drops the term once (xxviii) and does not even bother to shed some conceptual light on its theoretical ramifications. Yet we find the syntactic and morphological configuration of the term intriguing and fascinating enough for us to attempt to plumb the depths of its conceptual-cum-theoretic possibility, particularly in relation to the composition and/or production of contemporary Nigerian poetry. In fact, a simple morphological decoupling of the term "Bardolatry" reveals that it is a classic case of compounding in which we can derive the two terms, namely: "Bard" and "idolatry". The *coinage* "Bardolatry" is therefore facilitated through the stylistic mechanism of *blending* (as in, say, "brunch" which is composed of "breakfast" and "lunch"). By the same token, the term "bard", as we know, refers to such cognate categories as poet, singer, chanter, raconteur, griot, storyteller and vates; "-olatry", as noted above, recalls the concept of idolatry, defined simply as the act of worship of idols - for example, material things and even non-material objects and phenomena in place of the creator-God.

"Bardolatry", then, is the strong admiration or imitation by an ephebe (i.e. latecomer or belated poet) of a precursor-poet. According to M.H. Abrams: 'The "belated" poet's attitudes to his precursor, like those in Freud's analysis of the Oedipal relation of son to father are ambivalent; that is, they are compounded not only of admiration but also (since any strong poet feels a compelling need to be autonomous and original) of hate, envy, and fear of the precursor's preemption of the descendant's imaginative space (132). In theorising the dynamic and highly intriguing relationship between a younger

writer and an older, more established master, Bloom deploys the term "ephebe" (for the imitator writer) and "precursor" (for the master). Bloom was himself influenced by T.S. Eliot's theories of tradition. In reworking Eliot's theories and similar more ancient ones, Harold Bloom was able to masterfully produce his now classic work, *The Anxiety of Influence*, a work which brilliantly captures an experience common enough to the creative (as well as the critical) enterprise. Bloom remarks:

*What matters most (and it is the central part of the book) is that the anxiety of influence comes out of a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call "poetic misprision". What writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the consequence of poetic misprision, rather than the cause of it (xxiii)*

Anxiety of influence, therefore, implies the *influence* 'of one author or literary tradition upon a later author, who is thought to adopt and at the same time to *alter* aspects of the subject matter, form, or style of the earlier writer or writers' (Abrams 132). Since the resultant work of the ephebe (i.e. latecomer poet) is said to be the product of a "strong misreading" (or "creative misprision") of the master's work, the imitation piece suffers "a double illusion" as it tries to distance itself from its source (i.e. the precursor = poem) in its futile search for autonomy and originality. To be certain, as Bloom emphasises, 'a precursor of his views was Walter Jackson Bate's *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970), which described the struggles by poets, since 1660, to overcome the inhibitive effect of fear that their predecessors might have exhausted all the possibilities of writing great and original poems' (Abrams 133). In the context of contemporary Nigerian and, indeed, African imaginative writing, this "fear" of prior expropriation is pervasive, spawning a rash of third-rate, pseudo-imaginative effusions produced by a burgeoning breed of imitators of canonic titans like Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. In this connection, therefore, we discern in Soyinka epigones a strenuous striving after the Soyinka style characterised as it is by wide-ranging and far-flung disparates as the bases of his allusive *mélange*, elliptical and violently-yoked syntax, densely-packed imagery and hermetic diction, all of which result in rarified mythopoeia and correspondingly ideological befuddlement.

In the same vein, among the so-called sons (and daughters) of Achebe, there is equally a deplorable sense of aping of the 'Chief Masquerade' (Achebe) as the likes of John Munonye, Flora Nwapa, Chukwuemeka Ike, Elechi Amadi, and, more recently, Chimamanda Adichie, Akachi Adimora-Eseigbo, Ifeoma Okoye, Promise Okeke follow in the footsteps of Achebe as they all seek to reinscribe in their own works elements of the Achebe aesthetic such as the proverbialisation of experience, expressed through the meditative pose, fabular or didactic storytelling, the use of simple and straightforward narration, the drawing of realistic, true-to-life fictional characters and

situations, as well as the symbolic re-invention and imaginative refraction of politics, culture and society. While the females among Achebe's followers or imitators have sought to "write back" to the patriarchal centre said to have been created by Chinua Achebe, the male authors of Igbo extraction and others arguably have either tried to perpetuate the essential Achebe or, motivated by envy and fear, sedulously sought to stand Achebe on his head in order to create for themselves some imaginative space supposedly usurped by the precursor-author, Achebe himself. However, we need to stress at this juncture that even great writers of Soyinka and Achebe's stature had stood upon the shoulders of other precursor-writers, both indigenous and foreign since, as T.S. Eliot rightly observes, no one has his meaning alone. (See Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent").

Such is the dominant impact of "Influence" in creative writing that, writing under the sub-heading 'The Poet as Sage', Peter Lamarque in his book *The Philosophy of Literature*, observes thus:

*One of the targets of the New Criticism that developed in the 1930s and 1940s was the cult of the author, or what C.S. Lewis called "Poetolatry", idolatry toward the poet. The New Critics saw this as directing attention away from the work itself. There is no denying, though, how deep is the fascination with the personality of famous authors, a fascination that has a strong hold on the kinds of interests that readers have in literary works (86, emphasis in original. See also E.M.W. Tillyard and C.S. Lewis, *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy*, 1939, 104).*

It should be remarked that readers' fascination with authors is mainly borne out of the distinction and importance of the latter's literary works. Hence, established writers attain something of a cult following, notably by an emergent group of ephebe-writers, who seek to proliferate the precursors' distinctive style. Harold Bloom thus talks of tradition in his *The Anxiety of Influence*, arguing that nobody can escape its influence, particularly the precursors themselves.

Furthermore, as Bloom reminds us, the issue of the anxiety of influence is as old as Plato and the ancient classical Greek philosophers and writers. For instance, counseling the young ephebes on the art of creative writing, Horace remarks thus in 'The Art of Poetry': "Do you, my friends, study the Greek masterpieces: thumb them day and night" (see Dukore 73). Longinus, on his part, in his treatise 'On the Sublime,' calls young aspiring writers' attention to the secret of great writing: 'It is the imitation and emulation of previous great poets and writers' (Dukore 80). If Plato, Horace and Longinus captured the creative sensibility of the ancient classical times, William Shakespeare helps us understand the essence of the Elizabethan era. In his play *Timon of Athens*, Act 4, Scene III, lines 433-443, Shakespeare notes:

I'll example you with thievery:  
The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction

Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,  
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;  
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves  
The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief,  
That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n  
From gen'ral excrement – each thing's a thief.  
The laws, your curb and whip, in their rough power  
Has uncheck'd theft. Love not yourselves; away,  
Rob one another. (See *Complete Works of William Shakespeare* 1011)

Shakespeare implicitly expresses similar views on creative “poaching” in his sonnets 33, 40 and 99. The point is that, according to Shakespeare, no one creates *ex nihilo* and, by implication, there is no such thing as “originality” or conceptual purism. Shakespeare ingeniously mines the realms of Nature – the sun, the moon, oceans, the Earth – as the essential warrant of his argument and, thus, it is hard to see how Shakespeare goes wide of the mark.

In the traditional Yoruba experience, a would-be oral poet or chanter must undergo a period of pupilage spanning sometimes seven years or more, under a master performer who must painstakingly teach and guide his apprentice (See Olatunde 1984, Babalola 1966, and Barber 1991). Since this is not the case in the modern scribal dispensation, the “latecomer” or “belated” poet can only make do with the Horatian procedure, to wit: study the masterpieces and then *alter* them through what Bloom calls interpretive or creative misreading which, in effect, is the ephebe's own contribution to the canon, or, a counter-canon. Hence, Bloom argues that “the strong poem is the achieved anxiety” (xxiii). As we seek to elucidate and assess the relationship between Niyi Osundare's poetry and that of his younger compatriot, Akeem Lasisi, we must turn our attention to a common fountain-head from which they both drink, namely: the Yoruba oral tradition. And in so doing, we must ask whether both poets draw upon the same oral sources being native Yoruba. Or can we correctly assert that one poet influenced the other? Can we sufficiently establish a case of “influence” or “imitation” in relation to Osundare as precursor and Lasisi as belated-poet?

And if indeed we can, what then does this situation say about the contentious matter of generation or/and periodisation in contemporary Nigerian (African) poetry of English expression?

### **Yoruba Oral Poetics and Osundare's Verse**

Among the Yoruba of the South-Western region of Nigeria, orality is quite dominant and the spoken word is central to their social life and experience. Such is the centrality of *oro*, meaning the “spoken word,” in Yoruba religion and metaphysics that several myths have been woven around its efficacy in making things happen. And when *ase*, i.e. the mystical powers of the spoken word are considered in communicative events, the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural blur or, better still, merge. The Yoruba language,

like most African languages, is a tonal, syllable-timed language which operates through a complex interplay of tones and glides (see Osundare 2002). Thus, in a Yoruba communicative event, sounds matter a good deal as the union of vowel and consonant sounds results in a meaningful utterance. Hence, Osundare notes that in a Yoruba oral speech event: "sounding is meaning, meaning [is] sounding" (12). In this phonological and lexico-semantic linguistic business, *sound* symbols and imagery such as onomatopoeia, ideophone and pun are deployed as meaning-signaling devices and systems to extend the polysemic range of the language. Hence, the normal act of speaking the Yoruba language sounds more like chanting than normal speech or speaking. Small wonder, then, that Ulli Beier remarks: "Nobody who attempts to translate Yoruba into English will doubt that poetry is what is left out in translation" (cited in Osundare 2002, 11).

In the prefatory note to his translated work *The Forest of A Thousand Daemons*, Wole Soyinka also hints at the polyrhythmic and, hence, polysemic richness of the Yoruba language when he bemoans the rich phonological loss incurred in the process of translating Yoruba into English (See Fagunwa/Soyinka 1968). For a language whose normal speech is like chanting, its poetry is even more so. According to Osundare: "In Yoruba, poetry is song and chant; a performed or performable *event* throbbing with human breath, with a robust sense of audience and participation" (12). However, traditional Yoruba poetry is quite diverse with genres and sub-genres reflecting the artistic temperament as well as religious consciousness of the Yoruba. Both Olatunji Olatunde and S.A. Babalola identify, among others, *oriki* (praise chant), *ofo* (incantation), *owe* (proverbs), *alo apamo* (riddles), *ijala* (hunters' chants), *ekun iyawo* (Bride's Song) and *Iremoje* (valedictory dirge) as Yoruba oral forms (Olatunji Olatunde 1984 and S.A. Babalola 1966). Central to all of the above poetic sub-types is the *oriki*, "the most basic, most widely practised of all Yoruba poetic types of the secular variety" (Osundare 2002: 14). Describing its stylistic features, Osundare writes that *oriki* is a breeding ground and storehouse of the tropes of attribute. Its seriated noun clause, relative clauses, and interminable appositional phrases thrive in the liberal syntactic structure of Yoruba (56).

There is no discernible difference, Babalola and Olatunji argue, between one oral poetic form and another in terms of wording, phraseology and allied verbal elements. What differentiates, say, *rara* from *ofo* is the *manner* of delivery, i.e. the tone of voice employed in recital. Some of the stylistic features of Yoruba oral poetry include repetition, parallelism and tonal counterpoint. Other rhetorical features of Yoruba orature include wordplay, non-casual language, tonal modification, unusual lexical formations, figurative language, allusion, personification, metaphor, hyperbole, irony and rhythm or lyricism (Olatunde 1984: VII). Yoruba is noted for its preponderance of heteronyms, a lexico-phonologico-semantic speech act in which a single lexical item, depending on its vocalisation or oral realisation, is capable of multiple meanings. Yoruba heteronyms work closely with sound

symbols like alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia and ideophones to produce melody which mellows into signification in the overall movement of meaning.

It should be stressed that, apart from the list of traditional Yoruba poetic sub-genres referred to above, every Yoruba village or township also has a plethora of variants of these major poetic forms. By the same token, while the Oyo-Yoruba, for instance, is known for *Ijala*, the Ekiti-Yoruba is known for *Alamo* and *Adan*, an episodic folksong or ballad and satirical songs, respectively (see Arnold 1992). Extensive fieldwork and exegetical explorations have been done by notable scholars on the various sub-types of Yoruba orality as Olatunji & Babalola and Barber demonstrate.

Another important aspect of traditional Yoruba poetry is its performance, which involves poetic minstrelsy or bardism. Oral bards are wont to traverse the length and breadth of the Yoruba country, performing to musical accompaniments before live audiences comprising royalty and their subjects. Even in trying to eke out a living by singing the praise of the powers-that-be, these itinerant singers of tales equally berate or verbally abuse deviants and social misfits for violating social codes of conduct. Thus, in carrying out their bounden duty of social commentary, bards tend to be more Horatian than Juvenalian due largely to the Yoruba (African) abhorrence of extremism or absolutism. Consequent upon this, indirectness, suggestiveness, circumlocution, parables, riddles, fables, euphemism and innuendoes are favoured over frontal and trenchant traducing. Thematically, Yoruba poetry is used to address sundry sociocultural issues ranging from social morality, religious valuesystems, family life, myths and legends as well as historical happenings. In Yoruba orality, therefore, vice is roundly pilloried while virtue is celebrated and encouraged. In spite of the noted satiric edge of some Yoruba oral poetic sub-genres, the people's sense of *joie de vivre* still shows. This is because of the general Yoruba sense of incurable optimism which makes them always take a hopeful view of things, regardless of how dire and desperate the present situation might be.

Osundare has repeatedly confessed his indebtedness to Yoruba oral poetics (Osundare 2005, 55). Accordingly, we find in his verse what we might term a "return-to-sources/roots" aesthetic ideology. The neo-traditionalism, anti-progressivist and doctrinaire as it might seem, teems with emancipatory potential and, quite crucially, manifests itself through various elements of oral performance which Niyi Osundare adroitly incorporates into his poetry.

Some of these oral elements include (i) instrumental orchestration of poetry (ii) the public stance of the cantor-bard (populism) (iii) the preponderance of rhetorical flourish (iv) clear, simple and accessible diction resulting in the demystification of poetry, e.g. "Poetry Is" (*Songs of the Marketplace* 3) (v) deployment of oral forms such as the proverb, the curse (*epe*), the direct address, the confession, the complaint, folksong, refrain, riddle and eulogy

for "positive Archetypes" (Osundare's *A Nib. in the Pond*), (iv) social comment and criticism (the *Adan* effect) (viii) Nature, i.e. the flora and fauna of the sylvan universe used principally to poetise social experience. Additionally, in Osundare's poetry, we realise that he bases his work on the tripod of performance, participation and relevance. Relying as he does on the antiphonal style of Yoruba social poetry, Niyi Osundare blends Yoruba folksongs used as poetic intermission or interludes or, better yet, refrains and poetic sequences rendered in English even as the poet-raconteur engages his audience in perfervid "battles of song" against a musical background produced by largely indigenous string-and-wind instruments whose symbolic design and significance reach beyond the cold impersonality of the open page. This audience consciousness is intricately tied to the Marxist poetics and praxis of mass mobilisation of the *déclassé*, the lumpen-proletariat who, in fact, are the productive forces of society and the veritable makers of history.

For Osundare, the performance of poetry is anchored on the twin planks of *dulce* and *utile*- *delight* and *utility* respectively. Poetry should not just *be*; it must *mean*, contrary to the infamous dictum of McLeish in *Ars Poetica*. Poetry, for Osundare, should not lull the masses into a false state of security and quietude. Rather it should be *functional*: a veritable tool for social conscientisation for rallying mass action; thus poetry is seen not as an inert art but a revolutionary instrument of mass empowerment. In this regard, the people are no longer seen as a class-in-itself but a class-for-itself; and society is not ossified as "being" but conceived as a dynamic force of "becoming".

The participatory imperative of Osundare's verse makes its *performance* a form of social leveler as bard and audience coalesce into one, thereby foreshadowing the dreamt-of socialist vision of classlessness and social egalitarianism. Osundare has also told us that, for him, poetry is utterance (see "Yoruba Thought, English Words"). Poetry, thus, is *speakerly* in nature unlike that of the so-called Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry which is said to be infested with the stylistic flaws of Euromodernist poets like T.S. Eliot, G.M. Hopkins, Dylan Thomas and Ezra Pound. Thus, for Osundare, the performance poetry which he has championed (i) harks back to the ancient practice of bardic itinerancy (ii) fulfils the Socialist-Marxist insistence on communalism, collectivism, and empowerment of the common man and (iii) provides entertainment and therapy, sorely needed in the depressed Nigerian (African) social climate.

The sense of relevance in Osundare's poetry derives mainly from fulfillment of its social corrective imperative (*utile*) and its aesthetic architectonics driven by metaphoric display and lyricism. In *The People's Poet: Emerging Perspectives on Niyi Osundare*, many of the Osundare critics and scholars remark on the theoretic as well as thematic and stylistic features of Osundare's verse which set his work apart from the Soyinka generation of poets. It is this ground-breaking change in poetry production which made

Biodun Jeyifo to remark that in Osundare's poetry we encounter a revolution of poetry and poetry of revolution (see Preface, *Songs of the Marketplace*). Funso Aiyejina, following Femi Osofisan, also characterises Osundare's verse as belonging to an "Alter/native Tradition" (See Aiyejina 1988). Part of the revolutionary change inaugurated by Osundare is what Isidore Okpewho has called "tricks of print" which Niyi Osundare has incorporated into his work. Such formal features include blending, neologism, compounding, inversion, cramping, alliteration, assonance, sound symbolism and imagery (see Adagbonyin 1996) Commenting on his reliance on traditional Yoruba poetics, Osundare reveals that:

*In keeping with the oral poetic tradition whose inexhaustible  
lifespring I am forever indebted to, poetry here is confession,  
declaration, reflection, play, struggle, vision... It is exchange, an  
unwavering engagement with the world, a dynamic treasury of  
neotic probings and rooted voyagings mediated through epic  
syntax and experimentation in the choric blend of rhetoric and  
song. (Midlife x)*

### **Orature, Osundare and Akeem Lasisi's Poetry**

Akeem Lasisi is a Lagos-based journalist and poet of Yoruba extraction, like Niyi Osundare. According to a short biographical profile of him in his compact disk album entitled *Wonderland: Eleleture*, Lasisi is said to have "performed poetry within and outside Nigeria in the past 15 years. Famous for his ability to spontaneously deliver poems on various subjects, his craft-mark is the ease with which he switches from Yoruba to English forms and vice versa". Lasisi's Wordsworthian spontaneity of poetic virtuosity and imaginative inventiveness has spawned a number of award-winning poetry collections including *Iremoje: Ritual Poetry for Ken Saro-Wiwa* which won him the 2000 edition of the Association of Nigerian Authors/Cadbury Poetry prize, *Wonderland* (2001) and *Ekun Iyawo (The Bride's Chant* [2001]. And as a poet-musician, Akeem Lasisi has also to his credit three poetry-music albums entitled *Post-mortem*, *Ori Agbo* and *Wonderland: Eleleture*. In the "Introduction" to the collection *Iremoje*, Lasisi sheds some light on the actual significance of the traditional Yoruba oral poetic sub-genre.

Being a functional art, the Yoruba traditional poetry is largely events-based. Hence, such sub-genres as *Ekun Iyawo*, *Ijala* and *Oku Pipe* are identified with such ceremonies as marriage, naming and funeral respectively. One other strictly specialised form is IREMOJE, a valedictory ritual poetry in honour of a dead hunter. ("Introduction")

Appropriately, Lasisi uses his indigenous oral poetry to chant a paean to Kenule Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni-born environmentalist-cum-creative writer who was executed on 10th November 1995 on the orders of the late General Sani Abacha, the then military Head of State of Nigeria, based on trumped-up charges of treasonable felony against the Nigerian state. Saro-Wiwa was a very outspoken critic of the Nigerian military government, particularly over



issues of oil exploration and the concomitant environmental degradation and the loss of sources of livelihood for indigenes of the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. Standing toe-to-toe with the then military tyrant Abacha and his goons, Saro-Wiwa, alongside his fellow Ogoni native sons, had fought the Nigerian state to a standstill, thus demonstrating the truism that "the pen is mightier than the sword". However, Abacha had summarily hanged Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni-born rights activists, thus sparking international furore and global consternation over the heinous extra-judicial killings. Akeem Lasisi, thus, intones:

Kenule Saro-Wiwa

You cannot die the death of the dinosaur,  
Who erased its history from the map of time,  
From the memorial scheme of sesame street.  
With the cup of wine in the glutton's womb,  
Once my voice pierces the silence of the earth,  
Dust your spirit, clothe your soul  
Turn the ribs you rest on mat of sand  
As a nursing mother is instantly gripped by her  
baby's screech (Blurb).

Relying on the call-response antiphony of his native Yoruba orature, Akeem Lasisi in *Iremoje* skillfully composes poem-sequences ostensibly sung/intoned/chanted/recited performed among three chanter-poets called Lasisi, Lasun and Alagbe; and this is because, as the poet informs us in the "Introduction", "Iremoje's artistry transcends its rituality, with chanters even embracing poetry competition in the show". Also, in keeping with Yoruba orature, Lasisi subdivides the entire collection into four major parts, namely: Invocation, the Rites, Festival of Life, and Departures. In a normal traditional Yoruba poetry performance or even theatrical presentation like the *Alarinjo* (i.e. Yoruba traveling theatre) the performers start off by first and foremost paying homage to the resident artists, both living and dead, as well as intoning the *awure*, a short ritual chant designed to rally goodwill and good fortune in order to have a successful outing. This opening glee called *Iba* is usually followed by the performance proper and thereafter we have the closing glee in which the singers do the honours, thanking all and sundry for their co-operation and goodwill. Modelling his own written poetry of English expression on the Yoruba oral format, Lasisi seizes upon the Yoruba collectivist strategy in oral performance by adopting a dramatic interchange between himself as chief chanter and two guest-chanters with whom he swaps poem-sequences interspersed with Yoruba folksongs coming in as refrains and for audience participation.

Complete with stage directions, *Iremoje* unfurls with multiple stanzas of varying lengths, built on the rhetorical armature of nature symbolism and imagery such as an adroit deployment of flora and fauna, the rich biodiversity of equatorial rainforests of the sub-Saharan African world. Approximately,

forest giants like the Iroko (known as *Oluwere*) and animals like the elephant and other denizens of the forest populate the textual landscape of Lasisi's verse. Adopting this poetic strategy of indirection and fabulation, the poet-chanter canters through town, intoning the praise of friends and colleagues and, in equal measure, flaying foes in riddling satire. With a deft interfusion of nature symbolisation and Yoruba folklore, Lasisi chants *Oriki* (i.e. panegyric songs) and the *ijala* (i.e. hunters' chant) of various personages and even inanimate objects, anthropomorphised in the truly Yoruba animist sense. Innuendoes clash with euphemisms as the poet relentlessly rifles through his autochthonous Yoruba proverbial lore to ponder the antinomic stresses and crises of his post-colonial Nigerian maelstrom. In this connection, the reader follows the poet as he pays homage to the likes of Odia Ofeimun (elder Nigerian poet and Africa's foremost essayist), J.P. Clark and Abubakar Gimba. As the main subject/object of laudatory apostrophising, Ken Saro-Wiwa takes centre stage in *Iremoje* as Lasisi scours the rhetorical and stylistic cornucopia of his Yoruba orality to intone paeans (*Ijala*-style) to the immortal memory of the fallen "hunter" in the Nigerian forest of a million Demons.

Reading through Lasisi's *Iremoje*, the reader discovers that he is an apt pupil of his elder Yoruba-born poet, Niyi Osundare, who is generally regarded as the guiding light of the much-discussed "Alter/Native Tradition" of Nigerian Poetry. All the stylistic devices and rhetorical tropes identified so far in Lasisi's poetry are traceable to the masterwork of Osundare. In *Moonsongs*, for instance, Osundare opens the volume with an invocation entitled 'I Wake Up This Morning' (1). This introductory style taken from Yoruba orature is common in Osundare's verse as a whole. Moreover, the artistic device of using nature as leitmotif or framing device even when politics is the thematic concern of the poem is a noted stylistic benchmark of the Osundare style. Accordingly, animal imagery and plant symbolism are deployed as poetic strategies of circumlocution and oblique referencing. Lasisi does not make any bones about referring pointedly to Niyi Osundare's titles in his own work, titles such as *The Eye of the Earth*, *Waiting Laughter*, *Village Voices*, *Songs of the Season* and *Songs of the Marketplace* (see Lasisi's *Wonderland* 13-15):

*Songs of the marketplace, village voices*  
*Eye of the Earth, Waiting Laughters*  
*Songs of the Season...* (14)

This thorough ingestion and internalisation of Osundare by Akeem Lasisi manifests in form of the return of the delightfully repressed even as he closely and carefully imitates what Osundare critics and scholars have termed "the alliterative tradition" in Osundare's poetry. Osundare notes: "Meaning is sounding, sounding meaning. But how have I been meaning in Yoruba and sounding in English? Through phonological and prosodic approximations exemplified in the generous use of alliteration [...] in the English text" (Osundare; 2002, 17).

Akeem Lasisi also borrows Osundare's poetic style of punning and symbolic wordplay, the use of Yoruba folksongs as refrains and skillfully reworked and reformulated Yoruba wise sayings and proverbs. A few examples will suffice:

Let the words crack  
In the terrain of the ears.  
"Latubosun, Latubosun",  
Bosun, *sun sun sun* (*Iremoje* 35)

The excerpted passage clearly exemplifies the use of wordplay to achieve aesthetic effects of humour and entertainment, just as the poet on pages 22-23 furnishes liberal doses of Yoruba proverbs, among other cognate gnomic structures. As noted earlier, Lasisi's signature style of using dramatic conceits under which we can bring the antiphonal style, the use of musical accompaniments and background singing, constitutes the fulcrum of Yoruba performance poetry as popularised by Osundare both in his home country Nigeria and abroad. By the same token, the poem-sequence on page 19 (*Iremoje*) is arguably a clever reformulation and deft imitation of Osundare's *Moonsongs*, what with the stylistic deployment of repetition, parallelism and the percussive rhythm of the Yoruba talking drum used as the substratum of the piece. *Iremoje* on page 47 equally exemplifies the poet-persona's indulgence in self-portraiture, a self-projecteering which turns on a vivid borrowing of Osundare's *Waiting Laughters* as Lasisi's reference to "Imeldan heroines" (33) recalls Osundare's own poetisation of Imelda's obsessive love of shoes (see *Waiting Laughters* 52).

Furthermore, the lines:

My poetry is Oruku tindi-tindi  
My poetry is Oruku tindi-tindi (45)

echo Osundare's:

The rain is *onibanbantiba*  
The rain is *onibanbantiba* (*Waiting Laughters* 4, 26)

Apart from these borrowings, Akeem Lasisi also helps himself to other lexico-stylistic devices like lexical cramping and neologism, also popularised by Osundare. The term "These sea wonder why" (*Iremoje* 33), for instance, is a classic use of lexical cramping like Osundare's "from swamp to savannah" which contains four lexical items (see Adagbonyin 7). Also, the term "warsome" (*Iremoje* 48) is an imitation of Niyi Osundare's "greensome" (*Midlife* 30), "Bladesome" (*A Nib in the Pond* 11), and "holesome" (*Songs of the Season* 5). Even Osundare's use of the curse form (*epe* in Yoruba) is borrowed by Lasisi (see *Iremoje* 34). Additionally, apart from modeling the volume, *Iremoje*, on Osundare's *Village Voices* in terms of structure and format, Lasisi, in the truly Bloomian fashion, takes 'The Bride's Song' (Osundare's *Village Voices* 41) and turns it into a book-length work complete

with both the Yoruba original and the English translation. Indeed, like Osundare, Lasisi's call-response style is reminiscent of the ancient Yoruba bardic style on the one hand, and western poets like John Donne and Robert Browning, on the other. He has taken the Osundare style to greater heights as he is said to be more an oral bard than a literate poet (see "Introduction" to *Wonderland*).

It is, however, instructive to emphasise here that, while Osundare is influenced by his Ikere-Ekiti *Adan* satirical song-tradition, Lasisi who hails from a family of *Ijala*-chanters in Oyo-Yoruba, is expectedly influenced by the *Ijala* chants of his agrarian people.

All told, Lasisi's work could do without the grammatical infelicities and "semantic irresponsibility" being taken as "poetic license". It could also do without the gratuitous arcaneness and obscurantism forged to give his work false depth and breadth of vision, inconsistency in imagery due mainly to brisk and sudden change of metaphor, register or even voice/personae. His work is equally weakened by verbosity and wooliness or prolixity. This pleonasm stems in part from the inordinate mimicry of Osundare's style. Besides, Lasisi's frontal assaults on fellow poets and would-be critics of his work as well as his chest-thumping self-gratulation, all in one breath, are in bad taste. "Frantic as a prentice poet" (*Moonsongs* 11), Akeem Lasisi's work betrays many "errors of rendering", but, beyond this, his work remains an important part of the ever-bourgeoning *oeuvre* of contemporary Nigerian poetry of English expression.

#### **Closing Statements: Tradition, Change and Continuity**

Harold Bloom, commenting on Shakespeare's work, notes that: "Ovid, Chaucer, and Marlowe fused into Shakespeare's composite precursor, as his contemporaries evidently understood" (xxix). And there is a sense in which this "composite precursor" might be interpreted as "tradition" in the Eliotesque sense, and the ephebe or belated poet or even any living poet looking to tradition as point of entry or departure in his own artistic career may proceed to subvert tradition through the theory of creative misprision in order to achieve autonomy and originality. According to Bloom:

With more ambivalent modern poets, even poets as strong as Blake, Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Rilke, Yeats, Stevens, every *Kenosis* voids a precursor's powers, as though a magical, undoing-isolating sought to save the egotistical sublime at a father's expense. (91).

This oedipal complex manifests or operates sometimes at a subconscious and often at a conscious, deliberate level whereby the latecomer poet seeking to stake out an imaginative space for himself tries to figuratively commit patricide by radically reformulating the elements of his master's poetic and redirecting his praxis, just as Akeem Lasisi has done by adding poet-musicianship to his resumé, thereby going beyond his master, Osundare. Thus, Bloom writes: "Every poet is a being caught up in a dialectical

relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets" (91). Lasisi is caught up, therefore, in a dialectical relationship with Osundare with whom he shares the same *tradition*, to wit: Yoruba orature and poetries of the English-speaking world, particularly the poetry of Western Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, the United States and, coming closer to home, Anglophone African poetry. Harold Bloom further remarks that:

I shall take these examples by pairs – Wordsworth and Keats, Browning and Yeats, Whitman and Stevens, for in each case the earlier figure is both a precursor and a sharer in a common precursor: respectively Milton, Shelley, and Emerson (123).

The same applies to Osundare and Lasisi as Osundare is Lasisi's precursor and both of them *share* in a common "composite precursor", namely: Yoruba orature and the English-language poetic tradition. Writing on the characteristic features of the politically-conscious, engaged modern Nigerian (African) poet, Obakanse Lakanse brilliantly posits:

[T]he poet's assumption of the town crier's role in this age – or anointed spokesman of his people, his preoccupation with politics, his strident and self-righteous sermonisation at the populace and its leaders, his continued ornamentation of his poetry with the gew-gaws of a bygone age and other poetic baubles, his extravagant use of metaphors and orchidaceous symphonisation of workaday themes. (44)

Lakanse goes on to explain that it is commonplace and conventional for a poet of an emergent generation to be inspired or influenced by his immediate predecessors, but for a *distinct* generation to emerge, as Eliot also argues, there must be clear-cut thematic and formal idiosyncrasies that must set a preceding generation apart from a succeeding one. But this does not seem to be the case with the so-called Lasisi generation, hence Tanure Ojaide's strictures against up-and-coming Nigerian poets and writers, a slew of authors whom Ojaide dismisses as "copycats" (cited in Lakanse 44). According to Lakanse:

The apparent immobility of thought and perception in our contemporary poetry is, I think, due to the fact that our economic and socio-political conditions have remained largely unchanged from those of our forebears in the early 1970s and 80s. If anything, they have become worse. But should our poetry be tied rigidly and monocratically [sic] to only a certain part of our contemporary experience? (44-45)

Niyi Osundare agrees with Obakanse Lakanse that "there are no groundbreaking ruptures yet, the kind of groundbreaking ruptures you need to have before you can simply differentiate one generation and another" (Osundare, 2007: 47). In spite of this position, Osundare still wrote an article

entitled "Singers of a New Dawn..." in which he specifies about four generational cohorts, namely: (1) the politician-poets of the pre-Independence era (2) the Wasted Generation aka the Ibadan-Nsukka school (3) the Angry Generation, aka the post-Civil War Generation including Ojaide, Ofeimun, Osofisan, Ohaeto, Udechukwu, Aiyejina, Garuba, Fatoba, Osundare himself and (4) the Anxious Generation comprising such young poets as Ogaga Ifowodo, Akeem Lasisi, Chiedu Eseani, Obi Nwakanma, Joe Ushie, Nike Adesuyi, Remi Raji and Toyin Adewale-Gabriel. Going further to characterise the dynamic nature of *appropriating* tradition, Osundare stresses that: 'There are things in Wole Soyinka's new works that you see in the works of new writers aged 20, 22 and 23. There are also things in those works by him that you see in the works he did when he was 26. Human life is not as chronologically arranged as a series of lamp-posts neatly standing in one invariate line. Generations flow into one another' (Osundare 2007: 47).

Likening the Nigerian literary landscape to a river which "flows back and forth" Osundare refuses to concede that his poetry has influenced Akeem Lasisi. He argues: "Remember we all operate within the same pond. Take Wole Soyinka, Osofisan, Sowande, Akeem Lasisi, Wunmi Raji and so on: we all operate from the same Yoruba culture" (47). As has been argued elsewhere (Anyokwu 2006 and 2011), *Tradition* is not an inert handing-on of ancient monuments and artistic practices of the past, but a dynamic reconfiguration of these practices in the light of new experiences, new data, concepts, information and so forth. *Change*, therefore, is the vehicle of tradition, helping the past to define the present and the future. It requires the concerted efforts of the Osundares and the Lasisis of Nigerian poetry to help perpetuate Yoruba orature which, in fact, remains a distinguishing feature of contemporary Nigerian poetry of English expression.

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