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## Mythologizing Yoruba Orature in Poetry: Lobotomizing the Swivelled Pulses of Laughter in Niyi Osundare's *Waiting Laughters* and RemiRaji's *A Harvest of Laughters*

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### Introduction

African literary scholarship in the recent time has been embroiled in a dilemma, about whether the African literature should be written in the indigenous languages or not. The debate was kick-started by the Nigerian born Chinua Achebe, in his reaction to the African cultural misrepresentation by Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1951). Achebe's establishment of the platform for the promotion of African indigenous languages, is grounded in the Igbo proverbial laden, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). But at the forefront of this debate is the Kenyan writer, NgugiwaThiong'o, who although has written in English language for several years, begins in 1977 to write in his indigenous African language, Gikuyu. Ngugi explains in *Decolonising the Mind*, that he felt a nudge to do for Gikuyu "what Spencer, Milton, and Shakespeare did for English...which is to meet the challenge of creating a literature in them..."(29). Although, no Nigerian writer, playwright or poet of note has heeded this call in its entirety, but a mid-line response to this call is gradually evolving in the poetry of the younger generation Nigerian poets. This paper will be examining how NiyiOsundare and RemiRaji have essentially utilised the Yoruba orature as an alternative tradition, in crafting the poetics which reiterate the protection of the world ecosystem, an articulation of African tradition and the condemnation of military brutality in the *Waiting Laughters* (1990)and *A Harvest of Laughters*(1997).

### Oral Tradition and Literary Production in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry

Unlike the older generation of the Nigerian poets like Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark-Ambekederemo, Christopher Okigbo and Gabriel ImomotimeOkara who wrote in English, and borrowed excessively from the European poets like W.B Yeats, Ezra Pound and T.S Eliot. The younger generation Nigerian poets' uniqueness lies in their sustained appropriation of oral tradition and traditional linguistic elements grounded in their socio-cultural milieu. Evidence of this is significantly exemplified in the poetry of NiyiOsundare and RemiRaji, whose poetics are entrenched in the nexus of Yoruba orature and folk culture, to articulate the contemporary Nigerian socio-political issues. Contemporary Nigerian poets often situate the rhythm of their poetry in the discernible African oral tradition. This is remarkably captured in TanureOjaide's*New Trends in Modern African Poetry*, where he states that "poetry in Africa is...currently enjoying an unprecedented creative outburst and popularity" (4). This outburst is remarkably rooted in "some aesthetic strength hitherto unrealized in written African poetry which has successfully adapted oral poetry technique into the written form"(4). This phenomenon of orality and its influence in the works of contemporary Nigerian poets and writers has been examined in the AtoQuayson's seminal book, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, where he opines that African literature should be seen as "not as a mere precipitate of culture, but as a process of mediation upon it"(16-17). Quayson posits in the book, the link between the contemporary writing, history and the indigenous culture. He argues further, that orality constitutes the important segment of the indigenous resources from where the contemporary Nigerian poets, playwrights and novelists draw greater

inspiration and influence. This influence facilitates the predominant framework in both *Waiting Laughters* (1990) and *A Harvest of Laughters* (1997), where NiyiOsundare and RemiRaji have appropriated the inherent values of Yoruba oral tradition not only to comment on the various shades of social anomalies in contemporary Nigeria, but also employ it as a leitmotif in the reiteration of the soothing impact of laughter(s). Undoubtedly, RemiRaji has certain things in common with the Nigerian celebrated poet, NiyiOsundare in his ability to weave diverse images around happenings in the Nigeria's socio-political milieu. While *Waiting Laughters* largely contains poems that are untitled, *A Harvest of Laughters* has six movements of titled poems. It is important to note that Raji's *A Harvest of Laughters* conforms reasonably to the use of punctuation marks, but Osundare's *Waiting Laughters* like some of his other poetry texts do not subscribe to the rigid enforcement of the punctuation marks. This absence of punctuation marks in most of the poetry texts of Osundare has been explained in the words of Asomwan S. Adagbonyin, that "while punctuation is used with great regularity in some of Osundare's poetry collections(emphasis mine), it is used randomly and sparingly in some others. There are even texts where punctuation marks are not used at all. In most of these texts, the reader's predictive knowledge of English grammatical patterns aids his interpretation of the poetic texts as he can fill in, mentally, the punctuation marks, where they are expected to be..."(71). Adagbonyin further explains that, Osundare's reason for infrequent use of punctuation marks as exemplified in *Waiting Laughter*, "is that he seems to view the practice (especially the use of commas and semi-colons) as an unnecessary hindrance to the free-flow of his ideas. It destroys the tempo of reading, breaks up the text unduly..."(72-73). Suffice it to say that Adagbonyin's impassioned explication of Osundare's irregular use of punctuation marks is convincing to a greater extent. However, looking at his artistic-conscious Yoruba background, it will be important to realise that Osundare's infrequent use of the punctuation marks in his poetry, essentially portrays him as a communal raconteur whose art has to be delivered rhythmically without the encumbrances that are often orchestrated by the English language- nuanced phonological pauses. Nevertheless, the paper will articulate how laughter is rambunctiously dissected in the two anthologies, to delineate the various states of anomie in the contemporary Nigeria's socio-political milieu.

### **Chanting Oral tradition in *Waiting Laughters* and *A Harvest of Laughters***

The Yoruba proverbial serves as the vehicle of literary communication in Osundare's *Waiting Laughters* and Raji's *A Harvest of Laughters* because the duo perceive "proverbs, as a means of communication which oil the wheels of human interaction in day-to-day social contexts. By employing a proverb, a speaker may be able to express his or her view regarding a certain situation while protecting the interpersonal relationship between himself or herself and the hearer" (Tae-Sang,1999:86). The Proverbial affords the poets a convenient linguistic platform for making comments on the prevailing socio-political anomalies in contemporary Nigeria. By adopting the Yoruba proverbial as a frame work of their poetry, Osundare and Raji seem to be emphasising that due to its flexibility, oral literature provides them an alternative communication platform to foreground the depth of their poetry and fraternise with their audience. Osundare kick- starts his incursion into the Yoruba proverbial in untitled poem, in the *Waiting Laughters*:

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

Yoruba oral tradition is successfully harnessed in the Osundare's poem whose structure is more like a 'chant'. Its incantatory signification is rooted in the images of nature and vegetation: 'lips of the wind', 'laughter's parable', 'waking storms' and 'wizened seeds'. According to Ayo Fadahunsi, incantation in Yoruba orature, "may connote ritual recitation of verbal charms or spells to produce a

magical effect. It may also be interpreted to mean conventionalized words and slogans used and repeated in a manner likened to the utterance of spells, as by the traditional ‘juju’(medicine) men or herbalists. Thus incantation involves the summoning or invocation of magical power” (41). Since incantation remains an integral part of Yoruba oratory, Osundare has brilliantly deployed it in this poem by tapping into the natural characteristics of the wind and plant in the poem, to ‘pluck these words from the lips of the wind’ and sustaining ‘a covenant of wizened seeds’. The use of humour, vegetal and climatic images drawn from the flora and fauna in the poem, undoubtedly attests to Osundare’s communion with nature through the Yoruba oral performance. In a similar vein, RemiRaji sets out in ‘Introit’, by invoking the Yoruba orature in the articulation of his poetic wits which he intends, to render in form of songs. He promised to maintain the rhythm and vibrancy of Yoruba orature which could only be sustained by his avoidance of a slip into the borrowings from the English/European romanticism. He realised that such slip could obscure his choice of words and alienate him from his audience:

Introit’

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

The two poems demonstrate the influence which the Yoruba oral tradition exerts on the contemporary Nigerian poetry. Images expressed in the Yoruba proverbial and figurative expressions are significantly deployed in the poems. The action of the poet persona is mediated by the humourrealised from his determination to do away with borrowings from the European literary influence, couched in the poem as ‘the wilting metaphors’. For instance, the images in ‘Introit’: ‘spread my song’, ‘sunlight of web’, ‘seize upon the lemon-smell of laughter’ resonate a traditional setting of Yoruba oral performance.

#### Criticizing the Ecological Degradation in *Waiting Laughtersand A Harvest of Laughters*

The problematic of daily existence, essentially created by the global warming and its attendant effect in the forms of acid rain, famine, poor agricultural produce and hunger is devastatingly analysed in the poem. Global warming’s effect is felt world over, but its occurrence in Nigeria, has robbed it of the African communal conviviality. One might argue, indeed, that global warming has wilted out laughter and humour from the individuals and collective group of people in contemporary Nigeria. This disruption has been commented upon by Rajiin ‘I rise now’:

‘I rise now’:  
Everyday we hear  
In neighbouring lands  
The news of acid rain.  
Nobody  
No body seems to know  
How to smile again,  
Not even a grin colours the face;  
And I rise now  
With long drums of laughter  
To slaughter a thousand dragon-dreams of pain.  
Oh laughter, legacy of mask  
My wind of burning words  
Beyond the blues. (13-14)

The poem extempozes the dialectical juxtaposition between the old blissful communal Africa, when seasonal fruits and crops were planted and harvested in their due seasons against the modernist blighted climate where crops and plants are systemically wilted, thereby inducing hunger in instalments. This tragedy of global warming is also reiterated in the alteration associated with the global climate and seasons, ‘the early sun lies limbless/in the ambush of unkindly cloud’. The damaging effect of the global warming is exemplified in the Osundare’s untitled poem, in *Waiting Laughters*:

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

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

then tilt their ears  
to the purple horn of running wails,  
reaping strident guffaws  
from travails of martyred whimpers

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

This global climate change is attributed to the activities of the Western countries, who have continuously tampered with the nature through their nuclear programmes, which have caused a massive depletion of the ozone layer, that has now triggered global warming. This has in turn, given birth to ‘acid rain’ and ‘the blighted clouds of a locust train’. Osundare’s poem painstakingly itemise the ripple effect of the global warming, “an opening day meets waking moments/with a cavalry of iron groans/joy-killers reach for the neck of our laughter/dragging through sweat-soaked dusks/ the memory of our mirth/then throw our champion fish/into the wilderness of the sea”. Osundare is not enamoured of these negative actions of the global warming. Despite the damaging effect of the global warming, the poet persona in Raji’s ‘I rise now’ is resolute in his determination to move on with life and silence these global warming debilitations in laughter(s), whose immeasurable gains supersede the momentary pains inflicted by the biting effect of the global warming. The repetition of laughter in the last stanza of Raji’s ‘I rise now’ is employed to counterbalance the ‘muzzle-grip of Hell’ typified by the negative effect of the global warming. Laughter is allowed a voice of tradition, to give a free rein to the Yoruba proverbial ‘b’ekunpe di ale,ayombolowuro’, translated as ‘no matter how long a pain endures, laughter would surely prevail’. This Yoruba proverbial is aptly entrenched in the laughter’s capability to ‘slaughter a thousand dragon-dreams of pain’, restore hope and bring back ‘a grin colours of the face’ ,as thematically emphasised in the poem.

#### **Foregrounding Yoruba Orature in *Waiting Laughters*and *A Harvest of Laughters***

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

dexterity in their poetry. Osundare often use songs in his poetry either to praise or as a satire. This is demonstrated in Osundare's untitled poem in the *Waiting Laughters*:

My song is the even rib  
in the feather of the soaring bird  
the pungent salt and smell of earth  
where seeds rot for roots to rise  
My song is the root  
touching other roots  
in a covenant below the crust  
beyond the roving camera of the eye

My song is the embryo of day  
in the globule of the rising dew;  
a vow which earths the word  
in regions of answerable rain  
My song is *ogbigbotirigbo*  
waiting on the stairs of the moon  
garnering lights, garnering shadows,  
Waiting (26)

Osundare's untitled poem is influenced by the Yoruba traditional song praise, and song is seen among the Yoruba as a communal activity which has to be sung to herald the planting season, harvest season, dry season and rainy season. Song is used in the poem to celebrate nature in its ramifications, 'my song is the even rib/in the feather of the soaring bird/the pungent salt and smell of earth/where seeds rot for roots to rise/my song is the root/touching other roots/my song is the embryo of day/in the globule of the rising dew/my song is *ogbigbotirigbo*/waiting on the stairs of the moon'. Osundare in describing his song in the mould of '*ogbigbotirigbo*' a large bird in the Yoruba country, emphasizes the communal significance of his song. Rooted in the Osundare's poetry, is the understanding that the community plays a pre-eminent role in any artistic production in Africa, and the artist only serves as a conduit through which the communal consciousness is aroused. This notion has been corroborated by AderemiBamikunle who acknowledges that "in order to allow the voice of tradition full scope to do this Osundare adopts a poetic posture that modernists will call the posture of impersonality. His poetic voice is subsumed under the communal voice as he prefers to speak through various personae from the rural areas who adapt various forms of traditional art..."(53-54). The Osundare's untitled poem has a parallelism in Raji's 'Gift', where a chant is deployed to construct the Yoruba anthropomorphic proclivity:

'Gift'  
The chameleon has given me the gift  
of a thousand garbs;  
the spider dies  
and bequeaths me with the civil artistry  
of contraptions;  
the tortoise dies  
and all of me is her household wealth  
of gray wisdom...  
the songbird dies  
and my chest holds a treasure trove  
of beaded tales;  
in my clan the carver dies,  
I become the forest head  
of gladsome craft.  
I rise now

the promise of a brimming sun  
on my morning trail;  
I rise now  
hand in hand with Memory  
holding my frowns in fragments of laughter. (15)

Raji's 'Gift' is crafted in the mould of 'Ijala song' or hunter's song, an oral performance in the Yoruba country of Western Nigeria. Perhaps, the appropriation of 'Ijala' poetry pattern in the poem, is a reaction to AdefioyeOyesakin's lamentation over the dearth of Yoruba traditional poetry in contemporary Nigeria "after almost one and half centuries in the active study of Yoruba traditional poetry, the recurring problem for critics, artists, and consumers of this brand of literature is how to keep it culturally alive. Some of the genres like Orin Agbe, Orin Etiyeri and Aro are on the verge of total extinction while others like IwiEgungun, EseIfa and Ijala only peep into modern civilisation through the radio, television and written literature"( 241).The rhythmic structuring of Osundare's untitled poem and Raji's 'Gift' along the 'Ijala' poetry, only shows that Oyesakin's fear is misplaced because the Yoruba traditional poetry will always retain its aesthetics through its propagation in the poetics of the contemporary Nigerian poets like NiyiOsundare and RemiRaji. The poets personas' understanding of the inner workings of the worlds of 'song', 'roots', 'ogbigbotirigbo', 'chameleon', 'spider', 'tortoise', 'songbird' and the 'carver', endear them to the repository of rare wisdom, needed in African mythology, to whip the society into the path of order and development. The possession of these extra-ordinary networks of wisdom has invested in the poets personas 'the promise of a brimming sun' and 'memory', which now makes him a sage, who could proffer solution to all sorts of human problems. Hence he needs not entertain any emotional worries or troubles because he is atop of any situation that could beset individuals and human societies. Therefore, he could hold his 'frowns in fragments of laughter' and scorn the world.

### **Venerating the Rain in *Waiting Laughtersand A Harvest of Laughters***

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

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

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

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

Of lovers tending the night

like delicate tendrils without end.

I crave the serious rods of rain  
on the barren bosom of this land  
that the streets may run  
with naked children  
offering ballads to truant harvests...(25)

The rainy season in Africa typifies bliss, fecundity and harvest. Farmers always look forward to this season, because it affords them the laxity of taking a break from the active farm work. The season also brings forth a reassuring relief from the hot and humid weather condition needed to plant crops and seeds during the dry season, these positive attributes of the rain are underscored in the poem. The dominant theme of the poem is the verbal salute and praise offered by the poet persona to the rain, ‘there’s an eagerness in the loin of clouds/urgent and plural/I crave the laughing touch of rain/that the roots of rocks may sprout again/There’s a blue eagerness in the loin of clouds/the wind is pregnant/I crave the serous rods of rain/on the barren bosom of this land’. The rain is also venerated in Osundare’s *Waiting Laughters*:

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

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

Tonalities. Redolent tonalities  
And still fugitive like a fairy,  
The wind gallops like a thoroughbred  
Dives like a dolphin  
Soars into the waiting sky  
Like awodi with a beak of feathery oracles  
Tonalities. Redolent tonalities...(4)

The ‘ijala’ poetic style is employed in the Osundare’s poem, to eloquently praise the rain in the Yoruba esoteric expressions, ‘the rain is onibabantiba/the rain is onibabantiba/the rain which taunts the roof’s dusty laughter/In the comedy of february’ unsure showers/the wind is its wing, the lake/one liquid song in its fluent concert’. Although, ‘Onibabantiba’ connotes no specific semantic meaning, but is used in the poem as tonal counter-point to heighten the rain praise. Its adoption in the poem is characteristic of the ‘ijala’ poems where Yoruba words and phrases are used sporadically as puns to spice up oral performance. However, the coming of the rain in the poem is heralded by a furious wind whose speed tenacity is likened to that of ‘Awodi’ or kite. The exaltation of the rain in both poems is entrenched in the extra-ordinary actions of ‘taunting’, ‘springing laughter’, ‘galloping’, ‘eagerness’ and ‘pregnancy’, that are usually associated with human beings.

### Appraising the Nigeria's Season of Anomie in *Waiting Laughters and A Harvest of Laughters*

Nigeria's journey into nationhood was signalled by its independence in 1960, but Nigeria as a nation has traversed a tortuous political road full of bends and twists. Its apocalyptic period of political anomie was ushered in by the military who “ruled Nigeria from 1966-1979, and 1983-1999” (Alli 2001:208). During these periods, poetry was engaged as a literary communicative platform for the criticism of brutality and dehumanisation associated with the military rule. However, “Osundare stands out among the poets that engaged the military and he has also done more to theorise, popularise and defend this type of poetry than any other poet who became prominent in the 1980s. His newspaper poetry represents the first sustained effort at confronting military dictators...”(Okunoye, 2011:70). Osundare's criticism of the Military dictatorship is grounded in an untitled poem in *Waiting Laughters*:

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

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

The repetitive pattern of ‘waiting’ in Osundare’s untitled poem, resonates the employment of Yoruba oral narrative technique. Osundare as the narrator introduces his story of Nigeria’s deprivation by its Military rulers in the first stanza thus, ‘Waiting/always waiting/like the mouth for its tongue’. Characteristic of oral story telling in the African oral performance, the introduction is very important to stimulate the interest of the audience as to facilitate their collaboration in the oral performance, because “the story must be told in a manner that assists the narrator in retaining the physical attention of the audience as well as in gaining the emotive and cognitive attention of the audience” (Sekoni,1990:141). Osundare then continues with the narration of Nigeria’s despoliation by its successive Military rulers to the ridiculous extent, that its voice does not command any respect among African nations any longer, and it has also become a pariah among the nations of the world: ‘my land lies supine/like a giant in the sun/its mind a slab of petrified musing/its heart a deserted barn/of husky cravings’. This untitled poem has a striking correspondence in the condemnation of the Military incursion into the Nigeria’s political setting, in another Osundare’s untitled poem:

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

This is a satiric indictment of the Military, whose propensity for wanton disruption of political order is bitterly decried in the poem. Osundare manipulates the Yoruba proverbial dexterously to heighten the attendant chaos created by the sudden dislocation of the political order by the Military in the poem. Such disruption attracted a strident call for help from the poet persona who deployed it, in the form of an exclamation or ‘Ibosi o’. The Yoruba proverbial is successfully harnessed in the poem to portray the Military as a bunch of intruders who have displaced the democratically elected representatives of the people. This intrusion also graduated into wanton devastation roundly condemned in the poem. The dialogic of fear and trepidation associated with the Military, is succinctly captured by the use of oral narrative technique in Raji’s *A Harvest of Laughters*:

‘Silence II’:

Who sings when the Beast prowls  
when Night thickens

with dreams of blood  
when Sorrows's scent suffocates  
the remains of lean laughter  
who sings  
when slit drums stand spent  
and deaf in defiled groves  
who sings  
when rhyme's winds  
run amok  
like amputated tongues  
when boots barrels  
and the gift of grenades  
chase the choir into silence.

WHO SINGS WHEN THE BEAST PROWLS? (50)

In narrating the story of Military brutality in the poem, the poet persona starts and ends his story with a striking refrain, ‘who sings when the Beast prowls’. The use of refrain in the poem reflects the Yoruba oral narrative technique, and its attendant repetitive pattern, is essentially designed to articulate the excessive show of power by the Military in the poem. The ‘beast’ in the poetic narrative refers to the Nigerian armed forces: Army, Navy, Air force and the police, whose notoriety for gratuitous brutality, killing and maiming knows no limitations during the oppressive military rule in Nigeria between 1983 and 1999. During this period, many pro-democracy activists were detained indefinitely, deaths of scores of dissent voices were recorded and a lot of politicians also fled into exile. Literary productions were stultified by the inept and meddling Military during this era, hence questions are rhetorically asked by the poet persona to underscore this anomie, ‘who sings/when rhyme’s winds/run amok/like amputated tongues’. The destructive impact of the anomie created by the military is further pursued in Raji’s

‘Deadlines’:

Now that you slapped my land  
with a mascara of mourning  
Now that you fed your beast  
with the flesh of suckling birds

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

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

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

Raji adopts the Yoruba’s ‘rara’ or oral lament poem’s stylistic, to vilify the Military in the ‘Deadlines’. The poem is originally dedicated to the memory of Dele Giwa, a colourful Nigerian

journalist, who was killed through a parcel bomb during General Ibrahim Babangida's Military administration and Ken Saro-Wiwa, a writer and minority activist, who was sentenced to death by hanging during General Sanni Abacha's repressive Military regime. The poem has a unity of tone and focus which mournfully takes a roll call of the other casualties of the Military repressive regime in Nigeria's recent political history. Characteristic of 'rara' poetry, the poem starts with a subdued tone, 'now that you slapped my land with a mascara of mourning/now that you fed your beast with the flesh of suckling birds/now that you filled your tongue with darts of denials and lies/now that you killed laughter like a cruel coward...'. The poem is crowded with the interlocking imagery of grief: 'Mourning', 'killed', 'funeral' and 'thorns'. The poet persona humorously mocks the pretentious concern of the Military, who after orchestrating the death of its victims will simultaneously despatch a high-profiled delegation to attend and give oratory at the funeral ceremony, 'gleeful orator at funeral rites/sucking lice in your throats/thorns in the very palm of your handshake.../why do you console me now/septic balm on festering sore'.

### **Maximizing the Laughter Therapy in *Waiting Laughters* and *A Harvest of Laughters***

While most developed and developing countries of the world are breaking new grounds in the areas of technology, healthcare and poverty alleviation, a greater proportion of African countries are still trapped in the throes of poverty, unemployment, AIDS pandemic, and majority of them are still engaged in the internecine wars. Africa in the twentieth century has become a euphemism for a continent under siege. These chaotic deprivations are emblematic in almost all African nations. Nevertheless, Osundare and Raji have adopted the '*agbe*' poetry stylistic in the format of their poems, to distillaughter, which serves as an enduring elixir in the midst of chaos, to heal the various emotional scars harvested as casualties of socio-political deprivations in the Nigeria milieu. The *Agbe* art has been described by Olugboyega Alaba as a "genre of Yoruba traditional oral poetry which is still being practiced as a unique social entertaining and instructive poetic activity in some parts of Yorubaland. In a formal stage performance it is accompanied with agbe(stringed gourds),instrumental music and dancing. The verbal compositions central to this social activity consist mainly of praises, salutations and character sketches of individuals, current chronicles and random themes of the moment"(57). *Agbe*'s tonality is strikingly identified in the rhythm of Raji's 'Harvest III':

'Harvest III':  
if only  
if only we know  
if only we know the crescent magic of laughter  
we will ride the flood of predicted pains  
we'll toast to a tomorrow full of love  
without stitches or stains  
without brimstones of plagues  
without milestones of snakes;

grime-faced brother, laughter can heal  
if only you know...(80)

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

The exhilarating effect of laughter also underlies Osundare's untitled poem in *Waiting Laughters*:

Laughters, waiting laughters  
peals of silence  
thunder of rocking teeth  
bolts of syncopated seas  
shifting continent of the cheek  
musing estuary of the jaws  
incandescent contour of the brows  
batting array of retreating eye  
spreading escapade of seeing lips  
echoing, echoing cascade of scarlet caves. (27)

The poem celebrates the attributes of laughter(s) which includes, ‘thunder of rocking teeth’, ‘shifting continent of the cheek’, ‘musing estuary of the jaws’, ‘incandescent contour of the brows’. Laughter is also invested with the following dividends in the poem, ‘batting array of retreating eyes’, and its capability to ‘spreading escapade of seeing lips’, guarantees laughter’s indispensable tonic in African communal settings. Laughter’s ability to sustain the ‘echoing, echoing cascade of scarlet caves’, indubitably endorses it as an enduring enterprise among Africans.

### Conclusion

The paper has evaluated the significance of Yoruba orature in the NiyiOsundare’s *Waiting Laughters* and RemiRaji’s *A Harvest of Laughters*, to emphasise that despite many years of neglect, the Yoruba oral tradition has not gone into extinction, but has been re-structured linguistically as a platform of literary communication by the younger generation Nigerian writers. The aesthetic signification of the Yoruba oral tradition resourcefully underlines the poetry of NiyiOsundare and RemiRaji. The paper has also identified the appropriation of Yoruba oral poetic forms like, ‘Ijala’, ‘satire’, ‘lament’ ‘song’ and ‘Agbe’ in the poetry of both Osundare and Raji. These traditional poetic forms have hitherto been entrenched in the Yoruba oral performances, but have now been employed as literary motifs by Osundare and Raji in their strive for an alternative literary tradition. The paper concludes that the adoption of these traditional poetic forms has created a flexibility in the artistic craftsmanship of the poets, thereby making their poetry accessible to their teeming audience both within Africa and other parts of the world.

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