



# “An Agidigbo that Everyone can Dance”: Drums, Flavours and Performance in The Poetics of Niyi Osundare

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## To cite this paper:

Yemi, O. (2019). “An Agidigbo that Everyone can Dance”: Drums, Flavours and Performance in the poetics of Niyi Osundare. *International Journal of Multilingualism and Languages for Specific Purposes*, 5(2), 67-81.

Received: 01/05/2023; Accepted: 02/07/2023 , Published: 31/12/2023

**Abstract:** *The Yoruba adage goes thus, “Bi owe, bi owe la n lulu agidigbo, ologbon nii joo, omoran ni sii moo”. Meaning, “Proverbial is the rhythm of the agidigbo drum, only the wise can dance ( to it ) and only the knowledgeable can understand ( it )”. The immediate trope of the paper is that like the agidigbo, a rather uncommon indigenous drum set, poetry is traditionally expected to be a difficult genre reserved only for the intellectual and elite class. At another level, drums in the various forms, compositions and classifications in the indigenous African settings have been identified as functioning both as symbols and as signs in the semiotic parlance in very significant manner in the poetry of Osundare. The theses of the paper are that in the first instance, drums contribute to the aesthetics and semantics of Osundare’s poetry to the extent that what ordinarily should have been difficult have been made easy and accessible. More importantly, drums have served as a means of Africanising the flavours of Osundare’s poetry, transforming the English language of rendition into something deeply rooted in African oral traditions. Our assumptions here are that the African audience is naturally attracted to the sound of their drums; they have a way of enjoying and understanding the language embedded within these rhythmic instruments. Furthermore, drums hold a universal means of constructing meaning for different audiences, making them a powerful literary and cultural tool. Osundare, through his poetics, has masterfully incorporated this element, ensuring that his work remains both culturally authentic and engaging. Ultimately, the intersection of drums, poetry, and language in Osundare’s works reinforces the depth, vibrancy, and accessibility of African literary traditions. All these essential artistic and cultural elements are seamlessly met in the poetics of Niyi Osundare who utilizes his Yoruba ingenuity.*

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**Keywords:** *Agidigbo, Drums, Favours, Performance, Poetics*

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## 1. Introduction

One may come to the safe conclusion that the art of poetry as a genre of literature may not need any serious form of introduction to any gathering of scholars except for the many differences that characterise the perceptions of scholars to the subject. From the many rather seamless but different definitions of the art, to the varying internal qualities, forms, functions and the practice of poetry; it becomes imperative for a discussion of the genre to define his approach from a particular operational perspective or the other. This brings us to the operational term known as poetics. Holman (1972, p. 403) define poetics as a system or body of theories that relate to the nature, principles, rules or manner of the composition of poetry. The term which originated on a referential note to everything that differentiates poetry from other genres has since grown to include all the analytical qualities inherent in poetry. In the context of the present engagement, poetics is seen more in term of the literary idiolect of a particular poet, Niyi Osundare, within a class of an emergent poetic tradition. And in line with Holman’s (1972, p. 403) assertion that “the term is often used today as equivalent of aesthetic principles”, we intend to examine Niyi Osundare’s peculiar handling of the art of poetry.

In this study, Niyi Osundare is a suitable contextual base for exploring an emergent poetic tradition operates within the larger framework of African literary tradition. Adeyemi and Johnson (2023) delves into Osundare’s unique contributions to African poetry. Their study examines Osundare’s social commitment to accessibility in poetry, as he advocates for an art form that is rooted in the lived experiences of ordinary people rather than being confined to elitist literary tradition. The article contends that Osundare’s poetic style is characterized by various forms of indigenous oral tradition that speaks to both historical and contemporary realities.

For a thorough understanding of the poetics of Niyi Osundare from the perspective of our present discourse, it becomes pertinent to pay some attention to the multi-cultural background that provides the bases for his philosophy, style and purpose in poetry. This position is in total agreement with that of Dasylyva and Jegede (2005, p. 133)

In modern Nigerian poetry, there is a symbolic relationship between the oral and the written. Both the vision and practice of poetry have combined for the purpose of producing a poetry that is oral although



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it is written. It is for this reason that critics refer to it as written orature... Besides, modern Nigerian poets have appropriated western techniques. They have often bent backwards with one leg in literary and the other in oracy to evolve a hybrid and unique poetic form which is exclusively African.

Modern African poetry as a term that connotes the birth of a distinct and separate tradition of poetry that is different from the concept and practice of the literary genre in the orthodox Western sense is what Mowah (2005, p. 99) refers to as “a product of conflict, political schisms, and experiences which have characterised the African world since the coming of the Europeans”.

Modern African poetry gained prominence around the close of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s when many Africans got their independence from their colonial masters. Protests against the oppressive tendencies of the ruling class in many African nations on one hand and the conflicts arising from the imbalances caused by the contradictory influences of their African tradition and Western values provided the background for a poetic tradition characterised by anger and confusion. (Nwoga, 1979).

Apart from the poems of Pan-Africanist politicians like Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Caseley Hayford, and Denis Osadebey who published propaganda elements against the colonial rule, the earliest publication of modern African poetry evolved a tradition that tended largely towards that of their Western models in terms of style, philosophy, and language. This tradition which Funso Ayejina refers to as “Ivory Towerism” replicated non-African poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in terms of difficulty, obscurism, and finesse. Notable Nigerian poets in this class include Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo. They were among the class of pioneer African poets. In what appears like the twist which produced a new generation of poets with a drastic change in poetic focus, Ogede (1996, p. 63) writes:

In large measure the writers dispense with the subdued ornamentation which were refined elements in the compositions of the earlier groups of poets like the late Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel okara, and M.J.C. Echeruo, Outrage became such a key Mood because the poets needed to speak with passionate, angry tones, defying all the previous conventions of restrained art.

The opening paragraph of Okunowo (2012, p. 715) is quite apt in



introducing this key member of the new generation of African poets. This essay would largely quite agree with the views that:

Niyi Osundare is about the most prolific poet in written modern African Poetry and his emergence is often tied to what is described as 'new Generation African poets' or 'new African poetry' (Ojaide et al 2002) in which a 're-evaluation of the folklore and oral tradition' are appropriated with an unmistakable degree of audience-consciousness (Osundare 2002, p. 6) informing poetic practice. (parentheses contained in original source).

## 2. The Agidigbo Trope

Agidigbo is a type of indigenous drum among the Yoruba of South-west Nigeria. The Agidigbo could come in a single piece. It could be two or three-piece. In the present day parlance, agidigbo could be likened to the bass conga, agidigbo features within the many forms of Yoruba drum ensemble like the bata, dundun, gangan and the likes. In the words of Raji (2016, p. 16), agidigbo is a supportive drum and not a particular distinct ensemble on its own. This drum has a concept among the Yoruba that has assumed a proverbial dimension that is of a stylist relevance to the poetics of Niyi Osundare within the new tradition of African poetry in English. The proverb goes thus.

Bi owe, bi owe laa lu ilu agidigbo  
Ologbon nii jo o  
Omoran nii mo o

### *Direct Translation*

Proverbially is the agidigbo drum beaten  
Only the wise can dance to it  
Only the knowledgeable can understand it.

The poem, "poetry is" (1983, p. 3) which can be conveniently described as Osundare's poetic mission statement brings this idea of changing the message of the agidigbo drum to the one which everyone (wise or otherwise) should dance.

Poetry is

Not the esoteric whisper



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Of an excluding tongue  
Nor a clap-trap  
For a wondering audience  
Not a learned quiz  
Entombed in Grecoroman lore.

The verse above, I would want to agree with Fasina (2005, p. 157), is a negation of the initial conception of poetry as a system of complex diction, complicated syntax, and restricted to the patronage of the noble and elite minds. Like poetry minds above, the agidigbo used to be played underground, beneath the normal run of the main rhythm of the major drums component. The agidigbo has its own rhythm which may easily be missed or ignored by the simple-minded dancer. Yet, it carries a serious message that determines the action, mood, and disposition of the dancer that actually understands its message. This mission is effectively captured by Ayejina (1988, p. 112) in what he refers to as the “alter-native tradition” because of the drastic change from what used to be an orthodox approach to poetry in the West. Ayejina (*ibid*, p. 122) comments further.

Osundare has emerged as the most prolific of the new Nigerian poets writing in English. In addition, he epitomizes the qualities which give distinctive character to the emergent Alter-native tradition in Nigerian poetry of English expression.

This position is further entrenched by Biodun Jeyifo (1988, p. 316):

Osundare’s central, looming position in the new poetry that derives, first of all from this issue of language... That differs from the ‘old’ pre-civil war poetic vintage of Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Michael Echeruo... As much as in the new subjects and themes of poetic expression as in the ‘demystification’ of the language of poetry.

The demystification of agidigbo seems to continue in Osundare’s poetry is (1983, p. 3)

Poetry is

A life spring  
Which gathers timber



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The more throats it plucks  
Harbinger of action  
The more minds it stirs

The implication of the above lines is that for the agidigbo, our metaphorical correlate, to be more functional, more dancers must dance to it while concerted efforts should be made to make its rhythm and message accessible to more dancers. The process, problems, prospects and challenges of doing this form part of the thrust of Osundare's (1995) essay *Caliban's Gamble: The stylistic Repercussions of writing African literature in English*. A reading of this essay would definitely give one an insight into the fact that Osundare has a burden of dancing round the problems of multi-culturalism and the effective expression of African poetry through the medium of English language. His poetics has not left one with any doubt that he has ample stylistic solutions to the envisaged problems.

Our choice of agidigbo in this essay perhaps further illustrates Jeifo's (1987, p. XIV) view that Osundare relies heavily on traditional (Yoruba) oral poetry and folk tradition. Though this observation is a reaction to the caution by Ayejina (1986) that the style would render Osundare redundant, we would like to agree totally with Jeifo's (*ibid*) that rather than render Osundare poetically redundant, it has actually given him "a distinct personal poetic style". This brings us to another core issue in this essay as hinted at by Olu Obafemi (1989).

All these elements make Osundare's poetry exude life and vitality. The context is popular and so is the medium... the procimal relationship to oral performance made, the familiarity of the images, simplicity and lucidity of the language combine to make his works distinctive from those of early Nigerian poets and in fact in advance of his contemporaries.

The notion of performance seems to have taken away poetry from its known domain to the exclusive domain of festivals or at the best, ritual/drama.

### *2.1 Drum motifs in the Poetics of Osundare*

Sotunsa (2005, p. 67ff) explores the concept of rhythm as a component of drum language in what he refers to as drum poetry. Among other issues, he discusses the inter-relatedness of music, drum, poetry and rhythm as constituting a nexus of communicative systems among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. We have also observed in this study that drums have a prominent place in the style of



Osundare’s poetry. The poet himself hints at this in virtually all the prefaces to his anthologies. In the dedication of *Horses of Memory* (1986, p. vii) Osundare recounts.

In true commemoration of this man of song and memory, these poems are composed for orchestration and incantatory spectacle: part choric: part threnodic, designed as they are, to achieve full celebrative energy and with the accompaniment of singing and drumming

Also, in the preface to *Songs of the Season* (1990, p. v) Osundare remarks inter alia:

Written poetry has remained, for many years, an alienated and alienating enterprise in Nigeria- a painful irony in a country where every significant event is celebrated in song, drum and dance, where living still has a fluid rhythm and the proverb is one huge tome of unforgettable wisdom. *Songs of the Season* is aimed at “wooing and winning” an audience for written poetry.

In his preface to *The Eye of the Earth* (1985, p. xii), Osundare introduces the reader to a section with the caption “The Rocks Rose to meet me” which he describes as

A homecoming of a kind, a journey back (and forth) into a receding past which still has a right to live. The rocks celebrated in this section, Olosunta, Oroole (both wonder siblings of Esidale), occupy a central place in the cosmic consciousness of Ikere people they are worshipped and frequently appeased with rare gifts; thunderous drumming and dancing.

From the instances above, which are but a few of the many others, Osundare provides a background that gives the audience an impression that drums in their different forms and compositions have a very significant place in his poetry. The place of drums in his poetics is carved out of his vision of poetry as a performance that involves the performer and the audience with one no less important than the other in the scheme of activities. Sekoni (1990, p. 139) describes oral narrative performance.



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like all other speech arts, is a communication system in which a social discourse takes place principally between a narrator/performer and the audience.

To this, Okpewho (1990, p. 160ff) adds the different dimensions of the active participation of the audience in an oral performance comes to the conclusion that the audience “are an integral part of the creative art in an oral performance” (ibid, p. 180). Okafor and Mensah (2022, p. 44) opine that Osundare’s poetry as a connection between the traditional Africal oral aesthetic and the demands of modern literary expression. To us, within the thematic of this essay, drums serve as an essential part of the poetics of Osundare what the different flavours of the several condiments of the African spices serve to ensure that different groups of people get enchanted and perpetually attracted to the local cuisines. Let us attempt an analysis of the use of drums in the Eye of the Earth (1986). Yemi Olugbamigbe (2006) has discussed this collection and some others by Osundare as manifesting as a major motif of the early works of Osundare as deriving from the regenerative characteristic of the earth (ile) as a substance or phenomenon that has the ability to regenerate itself. Hence the saying:

Ile ki i ku

Ile ki i run  
Kaka ki ile ku  
Ile a sa

*Translation*

Earth does not die  
Earth does not ail  
Instead of the earth dying  
The earth may fade.

From the first poem in this anthology “Earth (i) through the next collection” back to Earth (2ff). Osundare celebrates the earth in a style that is heavy with the nuances of the Yoruba panegyric poetic subgenre, the earth is celebrated with the accompaniment of flute and heavy drums. In the Yoruba drums style, heavy drums are the usual flavor of festivals. The assemblage of heavy drums does not specify any kind of Yoruba drum set- dundun, gangan, sekere, pepe or gelede, but a combination of various drum types and sets to create an aura of festivities. The presence of flutes in this celebration brings in the dimension of heroism within the



context of the celebration of earth is occasioned by the Yoruba’s belief in the animistic presence in the components of the earth-rivers like Osun and Ogbese; trees like Iroko, ayunre and the rope climbers and the rocks like Olosunta and Oroole. Flutes are also used to flavour incantatory poems in Yoruba. The persona for instance commands:

A bevy of birds, a barracks of beasts, a school

of truant antelopes obey my head masterly steps

(p.7)

This portion is like an incantatory chant by the hunter to whom the Yoruba normally attaches the flute. Our contention here is that though the non-Yoruba audience does not understand the details of this set up, he still catches a glimpse of the message that is sufficient to put him in the mood created by the poet. Somehow, he begins to dance to the unfamiliar rhythm of the “universalized Agidigbo”. In the next move, *The Rocks Rose to meet me* (p.12ff), the celebration has mutated towards a ritual festival and so have the drums changed to the ritualistic Agba drum which only throbs. While the Yoruba audience understands the context of the Agba drum, the non Yoruba audience understands the idea of throbbing. Agba is referred to as the drum of the elders and it comes into the poetic world of the Eye of the Earth with its ritualistic flavour. The elders in Yoruba land are either the departed or the departing or the spiritual and all these have the habit and the ability to reside in the surrealistic locales within the context 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

...

Oroole came next

his ancient voice tremulous

...

I saw the invincible toe-marks

(p.12)



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## of Esidale

Here, Osundare re-enacts the poetic celebration of the twin-rock formation, Olosunta and Oroole whose imposing feature dominates the geographical landscape of the entire Ikere land-municipality and environs. The celebration is not without the performance of the ritual presence of Esidale, the creator of the universe and his/her invincible "toe-marks" on the rocks. Just as the cults of the gods is restrictive, so also is the patronage of the Agba drum. Osundare's selection of words in this section gives the non-yoruba audience an incling of the nature of the Agba drum with the choice of words like "hieroglyphed", "cipher", "book of oracles", "ankle-bells", "a million beads" etc. The "Harvest call", (Pp.17ff), like any festival of harvest in Yoruba land is accompanied with "lively bata music". The flavour here exudes the cheerful mood that accentuates the happy event of harvest. Bata is a drum-set used for festivals that in corporates men, women, children, initiates and non-initiate members of the society such as the egungun festival, naming ceremonies, chieftaincy, naming and others. And when the poets' persona suddenly realizes the disappearance of some species of plants like aroso, peregede, ohili and pakala (p.19) the music lowers and becomes solemn to reflect the solemnity of the mood of celebration.

While the entire section of "eyeful glances" (pp 20-47a) is without musical accompaniment, the audience wonders but with some understanding he comes to a fuller understanding with the poem, "Our Earth Will Not Die" (p.48) where the music returns to (a solemn, almost elegiac tune) in what looks like an invitation-another sub-type of the incantatory poetry. "But our Earth will not die (p.49). And suddenly afterward the (music turns festive louder) and the performance of the restorative powers of the earth comes to the fore again.

The dual concepts of popularization and celebration which dominate the poetics of Osundare have a meeting point in the choice of "songs" as the preferred synonym for poetry or poems in many of his works- Songs of the Season, Songs of the Market place and Moonsongs. It should also be noted that "voices" as used in village voices is also an extension of the word "songs" as it is commonly used by some singers. The presence of drums is also implied in the circumstances where the songs are present. In the Yoruba (African) context, it is almost impracticable for songs to be separated from the drums. The idea of popularization of poetry comes from the fact that people do not, or should we even say, cannot ignore the drums. A Yoruba saying goes that: Bi dundun ba wolu, Teru t'omo nii joo. That is, when the dundun drums enter the town, slaves and children alike dance along.



It is also arguable that it is possible for a section of the people to miss the solitude voice of a poet, the introduction of songs and drums actually give the poem the required timbre required to spread the message. The implication of the presence of drums to the emotional context of poetry introduces the flavour of celebration. Even when the poet is lamenting the sub-human existence of the common people as seen in Song of the Market Place, Osundare is not doing so from the perspective of a tragedy. But in line with the vision of social realists (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1996, pp. 73-76), it is rather a call to the folk to rally round in celebrating the imminent passing away of the unpleasant phase. In many cases though, Osundare celebrates not only the wretchedness of the folk, but also their helplessness, and of course their ignorance (Nwachukwu Agbada, *ibid*, p. 76). A good example of this is the poem "at the senior service club" (Songs of the season. p.48)

Oh let me have my chicken

wing, breast and drumstick  
yes, the drumstick  
which beats the "gbedu" of pleasure  
in a palace of dancing teeth

The above lines are a reflection of the reality of some ignorant senior civil servants who waste their salaries are paid only to return to the cycle of poverty and lack for the most part of the working month. The drumstick in the poem refers to the angular feature of the chicken's arm that resembles the feature of the Yoruba drumstick. The introduction of the "gbedu" a deep sounding royal drum here is metaphorical and at the same time cynical and satirical.

"Gbedu" is used by the royal family to celebrate and it is beaten in an aura of affluence and plenty. The civil servant who just received his paltry salary is suddenly translated into a delusion of ending pleasure. The last line "in a place of dancing teeth could be view literally as the mouth of the worker that has a lot to munch at the moment. But a deeper look at the "dancing teeth" would also imply that soon after the moment, the mouth becomes empty and the dancing teeth become "gnashing teeth" a metaphor for regret at being wasteful of planless. Another possible interpretation for dancing teeth in this context could also mean "shaking teeth" which would translate to painful teeth. Here also, the gbedu drum has added a flavour to Osundare's lively use of Yoruba images in his poetics. In 'not for the poor' (Songs of the Season p.8), the apala drum is used to introduce the thematic of the poem.

to the tune of:



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Bamubamu la yo  
Bamubamu la yo  
Awa o mo pebi npomo eni Kankan  
Bamubamu la yo  
Translation  
We are absolutely contented  
We are absolutely contented  
What business of ours if anyone is starving?  
We are absolutely contented

The apala is another type of drum ensemble among the Yoruba. It usually comes with components- talking drums, sekere, aaro, akuba, bembe. The rhythm could be very solemn like we have in the context of this poem, and it can also be very fast and high. The apala can be used to pass series of meaning and to convey messages and its messages can be instructive, indicative, declarative and abusive as the case may be (Olaosun, 2016). The drum is used on “not for the poor” here to play dual functions. The first function is that it is suggestive of the insensitive and parochial tendencies of the ruling class, the rich and the powerful as they dominate and exploit the impoverished and weakened common man while yet explaining the injustice away in orchestrated propagandas.

Apart from the thematic function of the tune in the poem, it also functions to determine the rhythm of the poem. Over the years, I had presented this particular poem to a class of undergraduates in a predominant Yoruba speaking town by merely introducing the students to the tune and its correct rhythm. The result had always been magical. One, the students did not receive the poem with the usual negative attitude with which they faced the teaching and learning of poetry. Rather, they performed the lines like the folktales and rendered the tune like the accompanying refrain following the rhythm perfectly. In a similar vein, the tune of woro, another type of folk music dictates the tune of the opening poem in *Moonsongs* (1988). Here also, we see another performance of poetic re-enactment of the “moonlight” tales of the Yoruba people. Despite the seriousness embedded in the differences and the squalor of the people of Maroko in the appearance of the moon becomes the façade that gives the audience the needed spice to bear the message.

### 3. Conclusion

Among the many issues considered in concluding this essay, I am tempted to conclude regarding a “Dialogue of the Drums” in *Village Voices* (Pp 5-8) .



Listen first to the leather of my mouth

I was born with a song in my throat  
And my hands on the face of the drum

If much attention has been paid to the prominence given to songs in the style, thematic, and philosophy of Osundare’s poetics, then some significant attention should be given to the function of his drum poetics. There is more to be revealed in the language of Osundare’s drums than has been shown in this study.

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## Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the support of my research assistant, Mr. Hillary Anfofun for his contributions towards making this article published.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article.

## Ethical approval

This research did not require any ethical approval.

## Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

