

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Niyi Osundare and the Materialist Vision: A Study of The Eye of the Earth

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7v66m06w>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 25(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Bodunde, Charles

Publication Date

1997

DOI

10.5070/F7252016650

Copyright Information

Copyright 1997 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

**Niyi Osundare and the Materialist Vision: A Study of
*The Eye of the Earth***

Charles Bodunde

Niyi Osundare, emerging as the most prominent poet of a new generation in Nigeria, has made an overwhelming contribution in a relatively short time. His most notable poetic works are *Songs of the Market Place*, *Village Voices*, *Waiting Laughter*, *Midlife*, *The Eye of the Earth* and *Moonsongs*. However, more than any of his texts, *The Eye of the Earth* encompasses all the material which lends itself to dialectical investigation. In this paper, *The Eye of the Earth* is used as the basis to explore the materialist vision in Osundare's poetry.

Biodun Jeyifo's critical introduction to *Songs of the Market Place* reveals the dialectical vision as the very kernel of Osundare's poetry. Jeyifo locates Osundare's position within the new poetic tradition as that which "constitutes a distinct revolution within the new poetic revolution."¹ He describes Osundare as "the most distinctive voice among our new poets" (p.xiv) because in his poetry, one encounters "both poetry of revolution and a revolution in poetry" (p.xiv). Jeyifo further argues that Osundare's poetry demonstrates the unique values of mature revolutionary poetry, for the social implication of his works is never obscured by mystifying artistic techniques. His poetry, as Jeyifo explains, possesses the capacity to "agitate that dialectical space between accommodation and resistance in a given social order" (p.xiii).

Emmanuel Ngara approaches Osundare's poetry by abstracting ideas from the preface to *The Eye of the Earth*. The preface is often used by artists to exhibit their literary intentions and, indeed, their authorial ideology and embodies the grains of the artist's vision, especially when it is written with the sort of energy exhibited by Osundare. Ngara proceeds to make a textual study aimed at extracting an ideological vision from *The Eye of the Earth*, a collection he

¹ See Biodun Jeyifo's introduction to Niyi Osundare, *Songs of the Market Place* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1987) vii. All subsequent page references are made to this edition and appear in the text in parenthesis.

acclaims best demonstrates Osundare's poetic vision.² The historical circumstances that determine much of the problems of Africa are spelled out in the preface. Ngara does not examine *The Eye of the Earth* with a rigorous materialist investigation that takes the triad of agrarian practice, capitalist formation and the dialectical resolution as the real focus. Ngara makes references to Osundare's defense of the peasants, his celebration of the earth and the need to preserve it. But the values of Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* emerge more significantly from a study which employs the historicist-materialist analysis in order to identify and assess the events which account for the shift to the capitalist mode of production.

Nature, Agrarian Practice and Aesthetics

A rewarding study of Osundare's portrait of social practices within a pre-capitalist structure should take account of the actual constituents of Nature, its material essence, the manner of relation with it and the dialectic character of this relation. The agrarian socioeconomic practice typifies this phase in the change of the mode of production. For this reason, *The Eye of the Earth* is undoubtedly the most relevant Nigerian poetry text that explores the various processes of transformation from pure agrarian practice to the capitalist mode of production.

A superficial reading of *The Eye of the Earth* suggests a near-Romantic idealization of the organic and the meditative value of the 'green world' with its forests, flowers and natural landscape. However, Osundare's depiction of Nature, symbolized in the metaphor of earth, departs from the Romantic interpretation. Embodied in the typical Romantic epiphanic naturism is Nature's capacity to communicate to human instinct and hence provoke meditation. Nature is useful to the Romanticist in so far as it yields itself for imaginative purposes. The idealism of Romanticism is clear in J.W. Goethe's description of the dominant spirit of Romanticism as "giving a lofty significance to that which is common and the dignity of the unknown to the familiar."³ Romanticism, in spite of being rooted in protest, is a non-materialist

² Emmanuel Ngara, *Ideology and Form in African Poetry* (London: James Curry Ltd., 1990) 176-187.

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

and non-realist movement. For instance, Ernst Fisher contends that the typical Romantic mind negates social reality or at least extravagantly distorts it.⁴ Hauser contends that the characteristic feature of Romanticism is that it explores ideas through a fanciful and undialectical route.⁵ He emphasizes that the romanticist judges his own time unhistorically and undialectically.⁶

Osundare's social perception transcends the Romantic conception of Nature because his vision is rooted in a materialist-realist vision. His interpretation of Nature derives essentially from the Marxist view of Nature as that which is "identical with the whole of reality."⁷ A. Schmidt explains that Karl Marx himself constructs a number of terms synonymous with Nature in an apparent attempt to demystify it or seize it from an abstract metaphysical under-pinning.⁸ Schmidt mentions such terms as earth, material, "stuff of Nature," "natural thing," and "objective condition of labor."⁹ The last, "objective condition of labor," is the most suitable description of the material value of Nature. "Forest Echoes," one of the poems in *The Eye of the Earth*, illustrates Nature in its concrete, physical and material forms. Here, the interplay of cosmic and organic forces is expressed in a conjugal metaphor which alludes to the origin of organic life:

The rains have kept their time this year
(Earth has [finally] won the love of the
sky). Trees both with backward sap and
leaves grab a deepening green from the
scanty sun (p.3).

The forest, as a product of earth, is the symbol of active life: "Bouncing boughs interlock overhead" (p.3). The forest presents an intricate juxtaposition of growth and decay as evidence of Nature's complexity and of the dialectics of existence. The poet speaks of "a canvas of

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵ A. Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: New Left Books, 1971) 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977) 63.

⁹ Massimo Quaini, *Geography and Marxism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1982) 35.

leaves wounded/by the fists of time" (p.3) and "the compost carpet/of darkling jungles" (p.3) but this is to prepare a more positive opposite; that phase of the pulse of active life in the "budding herbs and ripening roots" (p.3). The poet seizes the cosmic elements (time, moon, sun) as forces which interact with organic materials to sustain the cycle of growth and decay:

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

The contrasting physical objects of Nature ("the compost carpet of darkling forest" and "the bud on the ripening tree") constitute the pattern of the contrasting state of the poet's experience. His imaginative use of pairs of oxymoronic, auditory and gustatory images underline this:

the haunting sound and silence
 of this sweet and sour forest
 dig deep channels to the sea of memory
 and the outcome:
 will it be flow or flood (p.4).

Earth is the base for flora and fauna. The poet portrays earth's flora in a hierarchical form. The Iroko tree which wears "the crown of

the forest" (p.5) becomes the symbol of the solidity of the material essence of Nature:

Iroko wears the crown of the forest,
 Town's rafter, roof of the forest
 ironwood against the termites of time
 Iroko wears the crown of the forest
 its baobab foot rooted against a thousand storms (p. 5).

One needs to re-affirm the uniqueness of Osundare's poetry and also distance it from Romantic meditative aesthetic. It should also be mentioned that it is Nature's materiality mediated by human activities that forms the basis of Osundare's treatment. Of course, this position is consistent with the Marxist view that a discussion of pre-social Nature (the kind of aesthetics reflected in the Romantic idea of unspoiled Nature) can only be an exercise in abstraction. Karl Marx himself contends that Nature which "preceded human history...is nature which today no longer exists anywhere."¹⁰ As Massimo Quaini explains in his evaluation of Marx's perception of Nature, one should not take Nature in the abstract or as an entity cut off from man since Nature has material value for man.¹¹ The most realistic interpretation of Nature is that which seeks to discover human mediation, in particular, human productive activities on Nature.

The Eye of the Earth introduces Nature as the basis of social and economic practices. Osundare posits that the manner of relation to earth determines forms of social practices. Where, for instance, labor approaches Nature in a communal medium, a practice which Fischer says is recognizable in the directness of relationships,¹² a more harmonic and more human social form is created. However, where Nature and labor are reified and appropriated with all strategies including the instrument of money, an impersonal and exploitative capitalism emerges. These extremes of social practices are portrayed in *The Eye of*

¹⁰ Ernst Fischer (trans. Anna Bostock), *The Necessity of Art* (London: James Curry Ltd., 1990) 49.

¹¹ See A. Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, 29.

¹² Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977) 67.

the Earth. The crucial task in the exploration of forms of social relation with Nature in Osundare's text is to identify critical and literary evidences of the centrality of Nature in productive processes and then to examine the mediation of labor in social production.

We may strengthen the position that the earth is the material condition of all forms of production by referring again to Marx's position on the subject. Marx defines physical sensuous Nature as "the chief objective condition of labor" and the earth as "the objective condition of this reproduction."¹³ These views have parallels in Osundare's description of the earth. The poet's physical transfer of earth's praise name from oral traditions goes beyond the desire to enrich his poetry with traditional metaphysics. The ideophonic praise, 'Ogeere amokoyeri' is an appropriate ending for the poem "Earth." In its terse form, it alludes to one of the oldest forms of relation to earth, with the hoe as the familiar instrument of labor.

Human society must be in continuous contact with Nature, through labor, in order to sustain itself and to retain its humanity.¹⁴ Bertell Ollman's description of Marx's conception of man within the capitalist structure is quite relevant:

Man without any relations to Nature is a relationless void; without any specifically human relations to nature, he is an animal; and without his animal relations to Nature he is a dead human being.¹⁵

This idea is expanded in Leszek Kolakowski's restatement of the Hegelian conception of labor:

Man himself was seen to be the product of natural variations, and all his many sided faculties were the continuation of forces to which Nature herself had given birth. It was labor that distinguished man from the rest

¹³ Bertell Ollman, *Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971) 35.

¹⁴ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents in Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978) 383.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965) 173.

of the animal creation and was the source of all his proper pride.¹⁶

Human labor power is the most reliable instrument of mediating between Man and Nature; Marx's description of the relation between labor and Nature for the purpose of material production lends weight to this discourse.

labor is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material relations between himself and nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own want. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.¹⁷

Marx stresses that the process of labor is purely a human action geared towards social production. According to him, the products of Man's relation with Nature through labor are use-values. The imperative of the instrument of labor is captured in Marx's description of labor as "the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and nature, it is the everlasting nature imposed condition of human existence."¹⁸ Marx also emphasizes the complementary relation between Nature and labor and their interdependence. He notes that the worker has no material on which to base his production in the absence of physical Nature.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript*, 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The unity of labor and earth in social production is a motif in *The Eye of the Earth*. In "The Rocks Rose to Meet Me" Olosunta is the rock which embodies the material essence of earth. Within the communal mode of production, the rock's gold can be extracted to ensure meaningful development. Osundare distinguishes between harmonic non-alienating social production and the feudalist social order in which wealth is appropriated by "hollow" feudalists. The poet calls for a more egalitarian social formation that ensures social welfare:

The gold let us dig,
 not for the gilded craniums
 of hollow chieftains
 (time's undying sword awaits their necks
 who deem this earth their sprawling throne). With the
 gold let us turn hovels into haven paupers into people
 (not princes)
 so hamlets may hear
 the tidings of towns
 so the worlds may sprout a hand
 of equal fingers (p.14).

Osundare emphasizes the value of earth and its appropriation through labor: "earth is where we stand/earth is where we strive" (p.15). The rock is captured as a primal nature object giving life to organic forms:

Behold, cornfields flourish around your foot
 elephant grass follows the land
 for unborn harvests
 swell the grains
 with living water from your rocky arteries, fatten the
 tuber,
 so the hoe does not scoop a sterile clod
 so the dibble does not drill a deafened dross (p.15).

In "Harvest call" Osundare extends the theme of earth as a productive base. The yam that "wore the crown/in the reign of swollen roots/amid a retinue of vines and royal leaves" (p.18) and the corn cobs that

"rocked lustily/in the loin of swaying stalks" (p.19) are products of labor. Earth's products, realized through the process of social production, form the base of existence. For instance, the poet describes yams as valuable labor products that "provoked mouthful clamor/from the combat of hungry wood" (p.18) and then "a dough of contention smoothes down/the rugged anger of hunger" (p.18). These products also form the base of economic activities for their appearance on "the selling tray" (p.19) in its season turns the marketplace into "a mob of instant suitors" (p.19). Osundare celebrates Nature's regenerative energy by employing fertility and harvest metaphors. The images of "a riot of pollen grains" (p.19) in May, the corn cobs that "flashed their milky teeth" (p.19) in June and the cotton pods which part their lips by December's sun sum up the symbolic import of Nature as the fertile base for social production.

Osundare's Criticism of Capitalist Ideology

The shift to capitalism introduces a completely different mode of relation to earth. The communal relation to earth under the dominantly agrarian social production disappears as capitalism violates earth's productive essence by commodifying it. Ernst Fischer characterizes capitalism in a way which suggests a self-centered and impersonal production mode. He describes capitalist wealth as that which demands "constant accumulation and concentration, incessant self-increase."²⁰ In an elaborate manner, Fischer states the hallmarks of the capitalist structure:

Capitalism turned everything into a commodity. With a hitherto unimaginable increase in production and productivity, extending the new order dynamically to all parts of the globe and all areas of human existence, capitalism dissolved the old world into a cloud of whirling molecules, destroyed all direct relationships between producer and consumer and flung all products onto an anonymous market to be bought or sold.²¹

²⁰ Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*, 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

An aggressive and destructive relationship with the earth defines the capitalist structure. The apparatus of technology and the instrument of money ensure the most ruthless exploitation of the earth under the capitalist mode of production. Osundare explores this in the early part of *The Eye of the Earth*. For instance, in "Forest Echoes," Iroko, a magnificent part of Nature, is the icon of physical Nature. The sawyer who exploits Nature in the most destructive manner is a product of capitalism's intense commodification of the earth. Here the poet uses the exploitative relation of the tree-felling sawyer as a metaphor for earth's despoilation; that non-harmonic relation to Nature under capitalism. The profit motive is the reason why capitalist labor is rapaciously exploitative. Even though the hard Iroko is the "scourge of the sweating sawyer" (p.6) he still assays a bite with "the champion machete" (p.6) while taking a momentary "retreat to the whetting stone" (p.6).

In "Eyeful Glances," Osundare expresses the predatory nature of capitalism in the metaphor of harmattan. Like the draft that divests the tree of its leaves with the sweep of "the whirling wind" (p.23) capitalist exploitation dries the earth. Capitalism, seen through the eye of the poet is "the desert caller" (p.23) which comes on a camel/of clouds" (p.23) undulating "through the dunes/of hazy shadows" (p.23). Indeed, Osundare signaled the effect of capitalist plunder of the earth in the preface. He warned of the advancing desert epidemic which "stalks a world where the rich and ruthless squander earth's wealth on the invention of increasingly accomplished weapons of death, while millions of people perish daily from avoidable hunger" (p.xii). He laments the present vicious capitalist relation to physical Nature, particularly the deforestation caused by exploiters:

Most of those trees so vivaciously native to this forest have met a rapid death in the hands of timber merchants whose exploitative improvidence is symbolized here by the ubiquitous agbegilodo (timber lorry). In a land where vision and humanistic sympathy have taken leave of the ruling class, hardly is there any policy aimed at stopping the parlous depletion of our natural being. Hardly is anyone aware that today's profit (for them) is

tomorrow's irreparable loss for universal humanity (p.xi).

The capitalist labor-Nature relation lacks the humanism engendered by the pre-capitalist system. Under capitalism, labor is reified and the person who offers it does not relate with Nature or any other object of labor with the directness of the agrarian social relation with the earth. The nature of labor under capitalism amounts to the exploitation of Nature. The contradiction in capitalism, especially with regards to labor-object relation, is sounded in Walter Benjamin's paraphrase of Marx's statement to the effect that "the man who possesses no other property than his labor power must of necessity become the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners."²² Furthermore, the expansion of production capacity through the improvement of instruments of labor leads to greater capitalist exploitation. Terry Eagleton captures this attitude in his succinct description of capitalist technology:

capitalist technology can be viewed as an immense desiring machine, an enormous circuit of messages and exchanges in which pluralistic idioms proliferate and random objects, bodies, surfaces came to glow with libidinal intensity.²³

The existing highly technological production also leads to the alienation of labor as the person who supplies capitalist labor is estranged from the products of his labor. Quaini expresses a similar view when he argues that the

paradoxical spill-over of nature into history and of history into nature takes place in capitalist society which whilst it enlarges the sphere of scientific and technological control over the forces of nature, creates a social nature or a natural society which sets itself against

²² Walter Benjamin (trans. Harry Zohn), *Illuminations* (London: Jonathon Cape Ltd. 1970) 261.

²³ Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1988) 142.

people and rules them more than natural nature would have dominated pre-capitalist societies.²⁴

Quaini argues further that this alienation provides the basis for Marx's apt description of the bourgeois system as a "state of society in which the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him."²⁵

In "They too are the earth," Osundare provides an example of exploitation of Nature and labor. We have already established the processes by which capitalism wrecks the earth and, by this, truncates the agrarian formation turning dislocated people into beggars and slaves. In this poem, Osundare weaves the earth metaphor into a weapon of social criticism. The beggars, "sprawled out in brimming gutters" (p. 45) gaping at the "snakeskin shoes and Mercedes tyres" (p. 45) of the rich, the old ones "dying distant deaths in narrow abandoned hamlets" (p.45) and those "buried alive in hard, unfathomable mines" (p. 45) are the negative outcome of the plundering of the earth. They incarnate the earthy essence and the humanistic virtues which capitalism has attempted to destroy. In contrast, however, the exploiter class "who fritter the forest and harry the hills" (p.45) have lost the humanistic touch that a unity with Nature through labor can provide. They are only parasites "who live that earth may die" (p.45).

In "Forest Echoes" Osundare picks the anthill as the symbol of the alienation of labor from its products. He sees

the anthill,
 pyramid of the forest,
 with a queenly pharaoh swollen
 with stony orders,
 block-headed termites building
 moatless castles, brittle turrets
 ceaselessly wounded by the arrows
 of the rain;
 laying bricks and eggs
 their milling chambers tenanted

²⁴ Massimo Quaini, *Geography and Marxism*, 39.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

by lashes of unquestioning labour...
 their winged tribe akimbo
 standing in some safe and sweatless shade;
 and when hounding hoofs assail the castle,
 they seek ready sanctuary
 in the castle of their wings (pp.10-11).

The images of queenly Pharaoh swollen/with stony orders" and the "block-headed termites" that build "moatless castles" provides the symbolic parallel of exploitative relations within the feudalist and the capitalist systems.

Restoration

One of the major points highlighted in Jeyifo's introduction to *Songs of the Market Place* is the revolutionary thrust of Osundare's poetry. He argues that the core of Osundare's poetry and his ideological bent derives largely from "a vigorous sustained solicitude for one of the world's oldest producers: the peasants, those who till the soil, and their quasi-mystical ties to the earth" (p.xii). Osundare is clearly conscious of the dynamism of dialectic forces. He uses his poetry, forcefully and persuasively, to bear the vision of the restoration of lost unity with earth. The contradictions of capitalism, the marks of an overextended mode of production that we pointed out earlier, are the very reasons for negating and dismantling it. The dialectic triad which Fischer identifies as thesis, antithesis and synthesis²⁶ provides the model of dialectic intervention and reminds the ideologue-artist of the inevitability of conflict and struggle in resolving social contradictions.

Conflict and struggle are the prevailing actions in the resolution of social contradictions. Cornforth contends that these are fundamental processes of dialectics:

Dialectics refuses to think of things each by itself, as having a fixed nature and fixed properties...but it recognizes that things come into being, exist and cease to be in a process of unending change and development,

²⁶ Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*, 54.

in a process of complicated and ever-changing inter-relationship, in which each thing exists only in its connection with other things and goes through a series of transformations and in which is always manifested the unity, inseparable interconnection and struggle of the opposite properties, aspects, tendencies, characteristic of every phenomenon of nature and society.²⁷

Nature itself provides for society, the exemplar of dialectic essence. Cornforth's reference to Stalin's position on the distinction between metaphysics and dialectics sheds more light on Nature dialectics. He states that

dialectics does not regard nature as just an agglomeration of things, each existing independently of the others, but it considers things as connected with, dependent on and determined by each other. Hence, it considers that nothing can be understood taken by itself, in isolation, but must always be understood in its inseparable connection with other things, and as conditioned by them.²⁸

The first poem in *The Eye of the Earth* reflects Nature's dialectics. In "Earth", physical Nature is a complex fusion of the opposites. Showing the fundamental dialectical principle of Nature, Osundare reveals earth's components in their contradictory yet connected essence. We have the contrasting images of fruition and organic decay, solid and liquid matter, rocks and rivers, the "silence of the twilight sea," (p.1) and the, "echoes of the noonsome tide" (p.1). Part of the complexity of Nature is also that the unity of opposites; of the contrasting materials of Nature necessarily generates reactions which lead to the creation of what Cornforth describes as "the quantitatively new."²⁹ The unity of the

²⁷ Maurice Cornforth, *Dialectical Materialism: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1974) 68-69.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

opposites as we have already seen in "Earth" results into "a thousand offsprings" (p.1). Also in "Rain Song," earth is transformed from the drought color of brown to the green landscape that gives signs of the beginning of active agrarian life:

like liquid fingers
 on the aluminum drum of echoing roofs
 the rain unties the farmer's tongue
 bursting famine yawns
 into barns of lilted yams
 plums and pumpkins
 dense with drink and daring
 roll juicily from furrow to furrow (p.30).

In "Who says that drought was here?" Osundare reflects on Nature's transition from the season of drought to that of rain. He deploys images that recount the passage from lifelessness to active life to express Nature's dialectic transition:

The rain has robbed the earth
 in vests of verdure
 the rain has robbed an earth
 licked clean by the fiery tongue
 of drought (p.34).

The swarm of winged termites, the butterflies that "court the fragrant company/of fledgling flowers," (p.35) and the mushrooms that are soon to "break/the fast of venturing soles"(p.35) are symbols of the active force of resuscitated earth.

Dialectic change in physical Nature is an epiphany for the social world where the dialectic process is relatively more valid. The transience of an historically organized social form is evident in its eventual decay. Marx stresses the imperative of dialectic change in society while defining dialectics itself as a method which

includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same

time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.³⁰

Seeing the society as subject to dialectic motion, Osundare gives the vision of restoration, the redeeming essence of a positive social form. "What the Earth said" contains such a vision. In remarkably revealing planting metaphors the author recommends a revolutionary force to destroy the hegemonic structure of a destructive system.

And the earth,
 the earth receives these green fruits
 with dusty tears,
 the earth receives them saying:
 behold these seeds planted so soon
 in the season before the rains
 let them sprout in the month
 of daring struggle;
 let them bloom
 and kill the killer pests (p.47).

The artist shows his understanding of the dialectic processes in social forms by concretizing it in the articulation of a viable transformative social vision. Fischer's analysis of the social function of the artist in pre-capitalist societies is valuable here. He concludes that the artist is the servant of the collective and to act as the spokesman of the society is a current and correct social role of the artist. Osundare's use of poetry in the service of the people fits into what Fischer discovers about the responsibility of the artist.

The artist's task was to expound the profound meaning of events to his fellow-men to make plain to them the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

process, the necessity the riddle of the essential relationships between man and nature and men and society. His duty was to enhance the self-awareness and life-awareness of the people of his city, his class, and his nation; to liberate men, as they emerged from the security of the primitive collective into a world of division of labor and class conflict, from the anxieties of an ambiguous fragmented individuality... to guide individual life back into collective life, the personal into the universal; to restore the lost unity of man.³¹

Osundare's alternative to the prevailing alienation and social contradictions is a return to earth's productive essence. The return, however, is to be defined within a collective appropriation of earth, a practice that is analogous to the communal labor/earth relation in the agrarian structure. The value of the communal practice and its objective parallel with collective mode of production emerge from Marx's discussion of pre-capitalist social production and Quaini's amplification of the same subject. Marx argues that

this relation to land, and soil, to the earth, as the property of the laboring individual is instantly mediated by the more or less historically developed and modified presence of the individual as member of a commune.³²

He goes further to locate the individual within a communal ownership mode:

As a natural member of the community he participates in the communal property, and has a particular part of it as his possession. His property, i.e. the relation to the natural presuppositions of his production as belonging to him as his is mediated by his being himself the natural member of a community.³³

³¹ Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*, 42.

³² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 485.

³³ *Ibid.*, 490.

Quaini expounds this view when he offers that one does not enter into a labor relationship with the earth as an isolated individual but "as a member of a community," whose appropriation or ownership of land "is mediated through a community."³⁴ This communality is, of course, a preferred alternative to the reification of land and the consequent privatization of this crucial factor of agrarian production by monied elite.

In content and language, Osundare shows a commitment to a collective labor relation to earth. The poet-personae who calls for a return to earth speaks in a collective voice. It is no longer the voice of the individualistic capitalist speaking in Napoleonic "I" but the voice of one who represents the communal ideals speaking in "ours" to articulate the value of collective possession. These views are clearly detailed in Osundare's "Ours to plough, not to plunder." In this poem, the standard relation to the earth is used. It is that which tends the earth for its productiveness. Earth, the poet maintains, "is ours to plough and plant" (p.48). The hoe is celebrated as the instrument of labor that ensures a communal contact with the earth. Earth's productive essence is expressed in ripening images:

Let the sweat which swells earthroof
relieve heavy heaps of their tuberous burdens
let wheatfields raise their broadsome
hands
to the ripening sun
let legumes clothe the naked bosom
of shivering mounds
let the pawpaw swell and swing
its headward breasts (p.48)

Osundare designs two antithetical metaphors to describe opposing forms of relation to earth. The metaphor of ploughing suggests a reactivation of the earth through agrarian labor while the culture of waste in the capitalist earth-relation is suggested in the metaphor of plunder. The earth metaphor in this poem reveals two

³⁴ Massimo Quaini, *Geography and Marxism*, 60.

connected formations: the agrarian social form sustained by productive earth or a nation that needs collective action to dislodge plunderers. The two experiences are implied in the concluding stanza:

This earth is
 Ours to work not to waste
 Ours to man not to maim (p. 48)

In "Our Earth will not Die," the last poem in *The Eye of the Earth*, Osundare summarizes the evils of profit-driven capitalism. He gives a final concrete material character to the destruction of the earth and the consequent distortion of the rhythms of existence under this system:

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

Every life-giving element, organic or cosmic, shows the macabre picture of death:

And rain
 the rainfalls, acid, on balding forests
 their branches amputated by the
 septic daggers
 of tainted clouds (p.51)

However, Nature's regenerative capacity, its constant reflection of the dialectical change from stasis to dynamic motion, from passive death state to active life, gives the poet the optimistic vision of a new earth emerging from the existing chaos. Osundare captures this in images revealing the birth of a new social form whose climate is figured in a new rain:

Our earth will see again

eyes washed by a new rain
the westering sun will rise again
resplendent like a new coin.
The wind, unwound, will play its tune
trees twittering, grasses dancing;
hillsides will rock with blooming harvests
the plains batting their eyes
of grass and grace (p.51).

So far, we have examined Osundare's treatment of forms of relation to the earth. From the evidence of *The Eye of the Earth*, we have also raised the issue of the destruction of the agrarian culture by an implanted capitalist structure. We must stress that Osundare's criticism of the capitalist formation and his pursuit of alternative social practice which should differ significantly from the existing decadent structure is consistent with the ideological position he shares with progressive ideologue-artists. For instance, Funso Aiyejina applauds *The Eye of the Earth* for instituting forces through the literary medium to resist the rupture at the communal and constructive agrarian society which supercedes capitalist individualism and destructiveness.³⁵ Biodun Jeyifo also praises the artistic force and vision that produce *The Eye of the Earth*. He argues that the text is a criticism of the social form which initiates "the predatory capitalist plunder and despoilation of the earth,"³⁶ that submerge the agrarian production mode.

³⁵ Funso Aiyejina, "Recent Nigerian poetry in English: An Alter-Native Tradition" in Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature*, Volume 1 (Lagos: Guardian Books Ltd., 1988) 123.

³⁶ Biodun Jeyifo, "Niyi Osundare," in Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature*, Volume 2 (Lagos: Guardian Books Ltd., 1988) 320.