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The poet as rainmaker: Fertility and pluvial aesthetics in Osundare's *The Eye of The Earth*

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In Niyi Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*, the poet functions as a primeval community's shaman or rainmaker whose main duty is to ensure adequate rainfall whenever "the rains have kept their time" and drought persists beyond the vernal equinox. "Farmer-born" and "peasant-bred" in an agrarian community, the poet in the collection consciously and unconsciously assumes the role of rainmaker in his poetry. This is not only for the material good of his local agrarian Ikere-Ekiti community in Nigeria but also for the salubrious enrichment of the citizens of the universe whose well being depends on the pluvial fertility of the earth. Osundare notes that *The Eye of the Earth* was partly inspired by the Green Peace movement, which accentuates the significance of the poet's evocation of the ancient tradition of rainmaking in the volume. This essay highlights the magico-religious tradition of rainmaking and examines the symbolism of the poet's assumption of the role of a traditional rainmaker in synthesizing human experience in his poetry. **Key words:** eco-criticism; fertility rites; mythology; Nigerian poetry.

1

The experience of the periodic return of the year over the face of the earth has greatly impressed the human mind in all ages and cultures, and it has moved them to meditate on the causes of such wondrous transformations on the earth plane. Their concern cannot be taken for granted for even savages perceive the relationship of intimacy which their lives have with the life of nature, for instance, the same forces which engender drought stripping the earth of vegetation also threaten them with hunger and extinction.

Of all the changes which the seasons bring, the most striking ones are those that affect vegetation. Thus, in *The Eye of the Earth*, Osundare celebrates rain, "the giver and sustainer of life. As agent of the difference between plenty and famine, life and death, the rain occupied a godlike place in the consciousness of Ikere's agrarian people" (xiii). Osundare's preface provides the reader with an outline of *The Eye of the Earth*, and by offering such he has cleared some of the paths to his poetic experience. "Farmer-born and peasant-bred" in the agrarian landscape of Ikere-Ekiti in Ekiti State of Nigeria, the poet stresses the crucial import of rainfall to a peasant populace famous for its large scale production of yams, corn and cotton. Such a community must, of

necessity, associate rain with fertility or as a fertilizing agent and Earth as the feminine principle, as the personification of all the reproductive energies of nature. She bristles with plants, seeds, crops, fields, trees and various forms of vegetable life. While the Earth personifies the regenerative power of female sexuality, rainfall represents the flow of celestial creative energy whose force is patriarchal, logical and conventional. In "Forest echoes" the poet states as follows:

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

The mythic embodiment of this type of association of rain with the fertility of the earth can be found in what Eliade (1975) calls "cosmic hierogamy", i.e. the marriage of Heaven and Earth, and the power of the periodic return of the year and all its revolutions.

2

The myth of Heaven that fertilises the Earth or the marriage between Heaven and Earth is a cosmogonic myth of wide cultural distribution. It is found above all in Asia, and America. In the Greek classic, *Theogony*, which has grand themes dealing with the creation of the world and the history of the gods, Hesiod tells us about a more or less similar myth. Ouranos (Heaven) unites with Gaia (The Earth) and the divine couple engender the gods, the Cyclopes and other monstrous beings. In Indian tradition, Indra personifies the supreme celestial patriarchal creative energy. Eliade (1975: 139) observed that Indra became the most popular of the Vedic gods, for he comprises all the forces and all fertilities. Indra embodies all the exuberance of life, of the cosmic and biological energies; he releases the waters and opens the clouds, quickens the circulation of the sap and the blood, governs all moistures and ensures all fecundities. He is the god "of a thousand testicles," the "master of the field," the "bull of the earth," fertiliser of the fields, of animals and of women. Whether we are reading of his thunderbolts that strike Vritra and release waters of the storm that precedes the rain, or of the absorption of fabulous quantities of soma, of his fertilisation of the fields or of his gigantic sexual potencies, we are being continually presented with an epiphany of the forces of life. From this, we can understand the creation of plants, trees and other forms of vegetation from the earth, for Earth, on her part, is the universal Genetrix and Nurse. She embodies the archetype of fecundity, of inexhaustible creativity and creates by cosmic marriage with Heaven. When, in rainfall, Heaven meets Earth, life bursts forth in innumerable forms at every level of existence.

The cosmic union is an act of creation. It is at once cosmogony and biogenes, both the creation of the universe and the creation of life. Of special significance, in this regard, is the image of a divinely personified anthropomorphic being (the Sky) a great cosmic male and also of the Earth as Woman, as the Mother. As pointed out, the situation draws our attention to the tremendous telluric profundities, which generate various forms of life. She that nurtures all is invariably the mother of all. Mother Earth gives birth to and nurtures all things in creation. The cosmic marriage of Heaven and Earth in pluvial terms signifies the union of the creative powers of fertility.

In "Forest echoes", Osundare dropped completely into the wells and seas of folk tradition rendering visions of the mystery of life. The main issue is that people, over space and time, have always attached much importance to the fertility of the earth that is the source of their sustenance, vegetable and animal. One can therefore imagine their reaction when the fertility of the source of their lives is threatened by droughts. Their survival instincts led them to perform certain magical fertility rites which they believed could aid the earth, which is the principle of life, against the opposing principle of death (or drought). These rites are more widely and solemnly celebrated in lands which are prone to desert encroachment and drought such as Egypt, Asia and the land bordering the Eastern Mediterranean. In this regard, Frazer (1964: 341) observes "under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis and Attis, the people of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially of vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead." In the tropics also, many agrarian communities engage in this practice, but with a variation; they do not only celebrate the revival of life at the time of the spring equinox, but also resort to the magical rite of rainmaking whenever "the rains have kept their time" and drought persists beyond the vernal equinox.

3

One of the main functions of a primitive community's shaman or magician is to ensure an adequate fall of rain; this he does for the general well-being of the people. In traditional society, the rainmaker is an august personality who belongs to a special class of magicians whose main function is to regulate the heavenly water supply. Osundare, in *The Eye of the Earth*, assumes the role of shamanic rainmaker not only for the material good of his seed-planting and food-growing Ikere community but also for the symbolic salubrious enrichment of the citizens of the universe whose ultimate well-being depends on the fertility of the earth. The poet's concern is predicated on the fact that "Waters are dying, forests are falling. A desert epidemic 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" (xiv). The poet seems to imply that only rainwater can purify the earth, only

the pluvial showers of heaven can restore and enrich an impoverished earth. Prior to fulfilling his self-imposed duties as a rainmaker, the poet, in “eyeful glances”, concentrates on images of desolate aridity and coldness presented as active forces that threaten existence.

The desert caller
comes on a camel
of clouds
undulates through the dunes
of hazy shadows
&
gliding through the open welcome
of January’s door
whispers urgent tidings
in the ears of my skin
[...]
a tree leaflets the sprawling lawn
a grass reads between the veins
and up they rise
against trampling feet
borrowing anthems from the whistling wind
[...]
a timid rain peeps behind the clouds
then recoils abandoning the world
to the gruelling heat
of a hungry season. (23–24).

The time of the year, in this poem, is the “tinder season” of drought with
a few teasing drops
on earth’s gaping lips
vanishing like droplets
on a sheet plate
hot with the forge’s red rage. (23).

The “desert caller” stands for the northeast trade winds that blow from the Sahara and usher in the harmattan season, a season characterized devastating chilly winds. The northeast trade winds allude, mythologically, to Boreas, that fiery north wind that “stirs up the seas, crashes towering trees, freezes the snow and lashes the earth with hail.” In its various manifestations (whether as harmattan winds, cyclones, tornadoes or hurricanes) Boreas is the proverbial ill wind that blows no one any good. The dust-laden harmattan winds bring, in their wake, excessive aridity and

parchedness of the soil. This is how the poet reacts to this unattractive landscape of desolation:

dust
dust in brewing kitchens
dust in eating halls
dust in busy bedrooms
dust in scheming boardrooms
dust in retrenching factories
dust in power brothels. (27–28).

Although the lines above do express some elements of pessimism, the images do not detract from the poet's songs for rain, for the world, at this time, fervently longs for the "waters of March" when "earth's pain would be soothed".

In *The Eye of the Earth*, "Let earth's pain be soothed" is the opening invocation of "rain songs" – the third movement in that volume. This poem is "for the one who brought rainy news from under-the-Rock" and it is "to the accompaniment of a flute and / or the rain drum" (27). This implicit statement by the poet serves to link the poem to the folk belief of the people of Ikere-Ekiti; it is an evocation of the primordial experiences of their ancestors. The Ikere-Ekitians revere the Olosunta Rock, which is regarded as a physical manifestation of the spirit of Olosun who, it is believed, dwells in the rock. It is to this enigmatic legendary hero of the town, "the owner of the rocky place" that this poem is dedicated. Olosun is he who "brought rainy news from under-the-Rock," he who when he was angry with the people of Ikere caused drought, famine and barrenness to come to the town and the people suffered; he who when he was propitiated (with a sacrifice of cocks, hens, yams, goats and kola nuts) made the rain begin to fall, the springs begin to flow. The crops grew again so that Ikere-Ekiti did not die but lived on (Courlander 1973: 157–61). To the people of Ikere Ekiti, Olosunta, giver of life and vitality, is the embodiment of fertility. The poem, dedicated to that deity, opens with tremendous verve and on a telegraphic urgent tone, its mood is that of desperate longing for the procurement of a vital need. We are invited to the following lines in which the poet bursts forth in mellisonant rhythm "to the accompaniment of a flute and / or the rain drum."

The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst

Our earth has never lingered so dry
in the season of falling showers
clouds journey over trees and over hills
miserly with their liquid treasure

The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst

Prostrate like famished horses
brown hills cast vacant looks
at balded plains where playing kids
provoke dust in what once was
the cradle of green

The sky carries a boil of anguish
Let it burst. (27).

This ceremonial invocation is born of the realisation that one short period of little rain at the critical moment would result in loss of the labour of a whole year and in famine. The special inscription of the poem's unique accompaniment with "a flute and / or the rain drum" draws the poem into the sphere of homeopathic or imitative magic. This recalls the law of similarity whose fundamental principle rests on the fact that like produces like, and effects resemble their causes. From this principle, the magician is firmly rooted in his art and concrete belief that he is capable of producing any effect he desires merely by imitating it *ab initio*. Frazer (1964: 70) rightly points out that this is one of the methods by which rainmakers attempt to discharge the duties of their office. "If they wish to make rain, they simulate it by sprinkling water or mimicking clouds." The flute in Osundare's song would simulate the sound of the rain-bearing winds and the thunderous drumming would mimic the patter of pluviosity. The musical instruments serve to enhance, as it were, the status of the poet as rainmaker, a strategic poetic ally of the pluvial powers. Herein lies the symbolic posturing of the flute and the rain drum in the rain song.

The impact of the poem is further enhanced by an imaginative visual representation of its rendering as a traditional ritual sing-song based on the melodic structure of its versification. Inherent in the poem is the musical concept of harmonic rhythm, which admits of the rapidity of harmonic change with respect to rhythmic flow. To the lead chanter (poet, priest or shamanic rain-maker) could be assigned the invocatory petition imploring the sky to let go of its "boil of anguish" while the procession or congregation would echo the refrains which decry the misery of an arid landscape, and in the background would be heard the flutist and rain drummer at their best. It expresses the general values relating to rainmaking rather than an immediate part of an actual rainmaking process.

Some lines in Osundare's poetry also portray him as functioning within a tradition of rainmaking that is widely recognizable in some parts of the world. Frazer (1964: 74), for instance, wrote that among the Greeks of Thessaly and Macedonia, when a drought

has lasted a long time, it is customary to send a procession of children round to all the wells and springs of the neighbourhood. At the head of the procession walks a girl adorned with flowers, whom her companions drench with water at every halting-place, while they sing an invocation, of which the following is part:

Perperia, all fresh bedewed
Freshen all the neighbourhood; by
the woods, on the highway. As thou
goest, to God now, pray: O my God,
upon the plain send thou us a still, small rain
that the fields may fruitful be, and vines in
blossom we may see that the grain be full and sound, and
wealthy grow the folks around.

Similar lines recur in Osundare's "Let earth's pain be soothed" and it is here presented, open for analysis and comparison with Fraser's quoted reference above. The poet's lines read as follows:

Let it rain today
that parched throats may sing
Let it rain
that earth may heal her silence
Let it rain today
that corn leaves may clothe the hills
Let it rain
that roots may swell the womb of lying plains
Let it rain today
that stomachs may shun the rumble of thunder
Let it rain
that children may bath, and bawl and brawl. (28).

Perhaps, in this poem, one important contribution that has been made by Osundare to the understanding of the emotional symbolism of poetic themes is that concerned with the cosmic marriage between Heaven and Earth, which assures a fruitful harvest. In those poetic lines the action of the drama appears concentrated. Caught in their ecstatic urgency, we are made direct participants in the faith that this song for rainfall, which aims at relieving the pains of suffering humanity, has consequences beyond itself. It would bring new life not only to him who sings, but also to those for whom he sings with responsive feeling. Osundare, here beautifully re-enacts a traditional fertility rite of rainmaking, and in this, he symbolically functions as a shamanic rainmaker, a sort of human thunderstorm whose main concern is the good of the populace. His success in his self-imposed role finds expression in "First rain," the

logical sequence of “Let earth’s pain be soothed.” It is here that the mystic relation between the suffering of the people (drought) and the victorious love of the poet (rain) and the fertility of the earth find expression in a celebration of auspicious rainfall:

A tingling tang awakes the nose
when the first rain has just clipped
the wing of the haughty dust.
as a cooling warmth embraces
our searching soles
as the land vapour rises
like a bootless infantry
and
through her liberated pores
our earth breathes again. (29).

How do we explain these flashes of brilliancy in poetic achievement? The eventual coming of the rain opens the planting season, and farmers always begin to sow with the first rains. The cosmic marriage has taken place; fertility and a harvest have been assured. The poet demonstrates this in “Rain-coming”:

the early rains ring the bell
and the earth springs green
from the sleep of brown
[...]
the rain unties the farmer’s tongue
bursting famine yawns
into barns of liling yams
plums and pumpkins
dense with drink and daring
roll juicily from furrow to furrow. (30).

4

From this look at the poetry of Niyi Osundare, a discernible pattern (involving “cosmic hierogamy” fertility and increase) has thus been identified and established. We shall now re-examine our findings. It has to be noted that, in more concrete terms, what we know as reality has at its centre human beings and their actions; it has to do with people’s relationship to nature, with other people as well as their interaction with those means and objects with which they conduct the ritual of daily living, and the advancement of their material circumstances and consciousness. It is the totality of these variables that gives a sense of environment to a work of art. It is thus in this light

that we have to view, for instance, Osundare's assumption of his role as the community's rainmaker. He seems to have felt through the experience of traditional rainmakers and wrought it into expressiveness in his realistic picture of human beings' relationship to nature and the means that they employ to enhance their livelihood and well-being on the material plane. In his rainmaking role, the poet demonstrates that any intentional act far transcends the specific nature of the act. If you view rainfall as a process of spiritual regeneration and intentionally ritualise the practice, the benefits will be greater than if you see rainfall merely as a phenomenon of the weather, especially during the planting season. A shower of rain seen in its creative form in terms of the cosmic union between Heaven and Earth is tremendously beneficial; its fertilising power restores the earth to its natural responsiveness. Without the rains, we can live but for a brief time. As one of the most essential elements of our well-being rainwater plays a great role as a sustaining and enriching element in our lives. Thus, it is worthy of honour for its symbolic and physical qualities. This accounts for why, in Osundare's poetry, "rain songs" is "a celebration of the giver and sustainer of life" the "agent of the difference between plenty and famine, life and death," which "occupied a god-like place in the consciousness of Ikere's agrarian people."

Writing on the poet (as rainmaker), Robert Graves (1959: 124) observed that "his characteristics and history can be deduced from a mass of legends, folk-customs and megalithic monuments. He is the rain-maker of his people and a sort of human thunderstorm." In the light of the present study and Graves's observation, is it any longer considered inappropriate to surmise that Osundare, in *The Eye of the Earth*, functions consciously or unconsciously within the magico-religious universe of his community as shamanic rainmaker?

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