

African Poetry and The Immediacy of the Humanizing Message: Niyi Osundare's Songs of the Season

Augustine Uche Emela, Ph.D

Department of Library and Information Science

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900192>

Received: 16 September 2026; Accepted: 21 September 2026; Published: 06 October 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines the humanizing imperative in African poetry with specific reference to Niyi Osundare's Songs of the Season. The paper argues that African poetry is distinguished by a sense of immediacy in its articulation of authentic socio-political independence, leadership accountability, and the rejection of corruption and nepotism. In Songs of the Season, Osundare foregrounds the plight of the poor, whom he represents as defenseless in the face of an oppressive elite that renders them as a worthless species of humanity. The collection functions as a voice for the weak; a moral guide for a leadership blinded by greed; a bulwark for indigenous culture against Western erosion, and a veritable avenue for national cohesion. Drawing on Yoruba oral aesthetics, particularly "oriki" (praise poetry) and "efe / ajagbo" (song of abuse), the study demonstrates how Osundare deploys satire as a humanizing tool to re-affirm the dignity of the marginalized.

Keywords: African poetry, Niyi Osundare, humanization, Yoruba oral tradition, satire, post-colonialism

INTRODUCTION

The Trajectory of African Poetry

Poetry in Africa constitutes an articulation of the African experience. It is a recreation of Africa's socio-cultural and political realities before, during, and after colonization. In the pre-colonial era, African poetry was rendered primarily in oral forms and functioned as a medium for transmitting belief systems, modes of worship, traditional mores, communal expectations, and cultural affinities through genres such as songs, dirges, and elegies.

During the colonial period, as Akeem Kolawole Bello notes, African poetry emerged as "an artistic imaginative creation of African people account of their social, cultural, political, religious, economic and historical perspectives at a given time and place presented in rhythmic way of written expression" (Bello 12). The dominant preoccupations of this era were frustration, protest against colonialism, and disillusionment, while the prevailing moods were those of sadness, uncertainty, and anxiety.

In the post-colonial era, African poetry became preoccupied with the critique of indigenous leadership, neocolonialism, and racial discrimination. It denounced corrupt practices by African leaders who perceived political office as an opportunity for self-enrichment and self-glorification. Notable poets of this era include Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, Lenrie Peters, Kwesi Brew, and Niyi Osundare.

African Poetry and Its Humanizing Message

A cursory examination of post-colonial African poets reveals a consensus that African poetry bears a

humanizing message that must be treated as urgent. To humanize is to render a subject humane, to make it relatable, and to reveal qualities, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities that elicit sympathy. It is an act of disclosing the latent humanity in persons otherwise categorized as evil or irredeemable.

In their unbiased representation of African reality, African poets capture the totality of the African experience — the good, the bad, and the ugly. While laying bare the various forms of exploitation perpetrated by the African elite against the electorate, they also acknowledge the possibility of redemption. More significantly, they seek to humanize the exploited class. The poor are seen as being dehumanized, battered, and brutalized politically, socially, and economically in their relationship with the rich and powerful who control the levers of power and wealth. The poets thus defend the poor in their helplessness and agitate for equity in the distribution of scarce socio-economic resources.

This, it can be argued, constitutes the central preoccupation of Niyi Osundare in *Songs of the Season*. Osundare positions himself as a defender of the poor and powerless and urges society to re-humanize them, precisely because their humanity has long been denied. They are attacked upon flimsy excuses and, because they command neither wealth nor power, they are rendered invisible.

Niyi Osundare's *Songs of the Season* as a Humanizing Tool

Songs of the Season occupies a unique space in Osundare's oeuvre. As Oyeniyi Okunoye observes, the collection "represents the best of his early poetry which also anticipates his later work. In this sense, it may be seen as a bridge between the two phases in the development of his poetry" (Okunoye 4). The collection is deeply indebted to Osundare's artistic philosophy, which is sustained by Yoruba traditions of popular poetry, particularly oriki and the song of abuse.

Located essentially within the public sphere, Yoruba popular poetry confers a considerable degree of immunity on its practitioners in the discharge of their social duties. While oriki celebrates on the basis of defined ethical principles, the song of abuse — variously known as efe, ajagbo, or oropelu in different Yoruba communities — indicts and ridicules misconduct to effect behavioral modification. The contradiction between the laudatory and censorious intents of both forms is resolved in their shared ethical motivation: the production of omoluabi (the well-bred person).

This immunity enables Yoruba traditional poets to satirize any member of the community, provided they remain objective and uphold communal values. However, this satirical license is traditionally restricted to specific communal festivals. Although Osundare cannot transfer the privilege and protection guaranteed within traditional Yoruba society to the larger multi-ethnic Nigerian nation, he assumes the traditional duties of the town crier, which include mobilizing, informing, and enlightening the public. This affirms the principles of agency and social responsibility that underlie much Nigerian poetry from the 1980s. The alienation of the indigenous ruling elite from the populace in the post-independence era engendered conflict between writers and the political class, leading to persecution in forms ranging from censorship and banishment to exile and incarceration.

Affirming the onerous responsibility of the contemporary African writer in his acceptance speech for the Noma Award in 1991, Osundare declares, "In our part of the world, we see the writer not only as a writer but as the voice of the people" (Osundare, "Noma" 3). He further clarifies his position in an interview with Cynthia Hogue and Nancy Easterlin: "Basically, I think the literature of the rich and powerful has to be different in certain important respects from that of the impoverished and unfree, so that the role of the writer in Africa, a developing part of the world, is different from what it is in the developed, industrial part of the world... What this boils to is that the African artist has always had a political role" (Osundare, Interview 211).

Structure and Discursive Strategy of the Collection

Published in 1990 as Osundare's seventh collection, *Songs of the Season* grew out of the poet's contributions to the Ibadan-based Sunday Tribune from 1985. It represents a deliberate effort to evolve a poetic idiom suitable for mass mobilization and to propagate his humanizing message. As the poet notes in the Preface:

From the very outset, *Songs of the Season* has been empowered by a definable style and purpose: to capture the significant happenings of our time in a tune that is simple, accessible, topical, relevant and artistically pleasing; to remind kings about the corpses which line their way to the throne, to praise virtue, denounce vice,

to mirror the triumphs and travails of the downtrodden who often the big books forget; to celebrate the green glory of the rainy season and the brown accent of the dry, to distil poetry from the dust and clay of our vast, prodigious land. (Osundare, Songs v)

The collection is structured into six sections — isihun (voice opener), songs, dialogue, tributes, parables, and sundry strivings — which read as one long poem. The rhetorical logic privileges thematic progression: the “songs” section follows the isihun; “dialogue” dramatizes the social reality inscribed in “songs”; “tributes” provides a necessary pause by drawing on the oriki tradition; and “parables” adopts an idiom conditioned by censorship and insecurity.

The isihun is not cast in the mode of *ijuba* (invocation) that solicits the consent of traditional authority. Rather, it empowers the discourse of the nation. In “a song for my land,” written to mark Nigeria’s twenty-fifth independence anniversary in 1985, Osundare invents an identity that erases negative inscriptions of the Nigerian union. By foregrounding natural abundance, the poet implies that the human factor accounts for the nation’s woes: “I have mounted Mandara tops / And seen one land, one people, one future / Sliced into countless pockets / By the glistening blade of political tongues” (Osundare, Songs 5).

The enabling form for the poems grouped as “songs” is the Yoruba song of abuse which, among the Ekiti, Osundare’s sub-group, is called “*Ajagbo*”. As Olusegun Adekoya notes, “songs of abuse constitute a distinct form of satirical poetry in the traditional Yoruba society, where they serve to correct social misdemeanors like adultery, drunkenness, and larceny at festival times” (Adekoya 81). Osundare extends this tradition beyond its Yoruba cultural location and beyond personalized assaults. He adopts a communal voice and directs his satire at the privileged minority dominating the political, social, and economic spheres, thereby empowering the margins.

There is no better way to affirm the estrangement of the rich from the poor and the irreconcilability of their interests in the poems grouped as “songs” than placing “not for the poor” first in the section. The poem derives its aesthetic and ideological strength from its graphic representation of the impoverishment of Nigerians during the Second Republic (1979-1983). In this period, political power came to be perceived as the sole guarantor of economic mobility, a perception that engineered the total alienation of politicians from the populace and their material woes.

By underscoring the alienation of the powerful from the impoverished electorate, Osundare reveals what has become the central tragedy of self-governance in many parts of post-colonial Africa: the breeding of a self-seeking ruling elite whose legitimacy is divorced from the people. The immoral disdain of the political class for the poverty-stricken majority creates the ideological basis for rationalizing inequality. The poem itself is set to the tune of a Yoruba satirical song which registers the insensitivity of the rich to the plight of the poor. The rhetorical sarcasm that sustains the poem acquires reinforcement through the privileging of the active, collective voice of the rich. Their ventriloquized voice gives chilling expression to their damnable attitudes:

In the entire world this is the only country

Where air is free for every breath:

The beggar, the tramp, may gorge themselves

Without a kobo to the national purse

Hence our sleep, hence our sloth

Hence a nation perpetually broke

So tax the air, rate the breath (...)

The poor may die if they so desire

Who says we suffer a shortage of graves? (Osundare, Songs 10).

In asserting the inevitable demarcation between the rich and the poor, the speaking voice validates the link between political power and rapid socio-economic mobility. This becomes more significant in the context of IMF-inspired economic recovery programs: the austerity measures of the Shehu Shagari administration, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the Ibrahim Babangida junta, and the inflationary trends Nigerians have endured since the 1980s. As Jeyifo argues, Osundare's satire in this period moves beyond moral indictment to expose the structural violence of neo-liberal economic policies imposed on the African state (Jeyifo 116).

Incidentally, "not for the poor" is the only poem that tolerates the discursive presence of the alienated elite. Other poems in the section — "songs of the jobless graduate," "song of the street-sweeper," "retrenched," and "cometh the bulldozer" — represent the Nigerian crisis solely from the perspective of the victims. They project the shared agonies of the jobless, the exploited, and the violated majority, survivors of the trauma unleashed by the aggression of the rulers.

The functional transformation of the rhetorical refrain, from marking the collaborative interaction of performer and audience to serving as a booster of intent in "not for the poor," "the road to Abuja," "song of the tax-gatherer," and "shout of the people," reflects the constraint of the popular 'performance' within which the poems were originally experienced by the newspaper audience. As Bamikunle observes, Osundare's frequent manipulation of conventional rhyme patterns, hyperbole, and humour reinforces suggestions of failure, ignorance, and senselessness in relation to the leaders, and frustration, hopelessness, and utter neglect on the part of the ruled (Bamikunle 129).

The insecurity of the leadership emerges as a constant reminder of their isolation, creating the basis for scrutinizing their policies. Their economic policies retrenched workers; environmental sanitation programs made the demolition of so-called illegal structures inevitable; while efforts at ensuring security of lives and property produced incidents of extra-judicial killings. Osundare captures this with considerable passion in "song of the jobless," "cometh the bulldozer," "retrenched," and "song of the straying bullet."

Much as Osundare subscribes to the unity of Nigeria, he does not view the development of Abuja, the nation's new capital, as an attempt to forge a symbolic corporate identity. For him, the Abuja project is an elaborate excuse for the political class to loot the national treasury. This mistrust justifies his demonizing of the political class and his discrediting of the fraud-ridden project. It may be easy to dismiss many poems in "Songs" as merely topical because the urgency of responding to particular events necessitated their creation. However, "song of the tyrant" inscribes a profound reflection whose significance attests to the timeless value of the collection. Proceeding from graphically evoking the world of tyrants to effect a polyphonic mapping of their genealogy, psychology, and fate, the prognostic confidence which generates its judgement dramatizes the capacity of poems created in the atmosphere of popular performance for profound historical statements. Osundare's reading of the tyrant is a function of his creative outlook and consciousness of Nigeria's extended exposure to military misrule:

But our world is a book of yester-scenes

Scourge of tyrants and their wormy sins

Hitler hit the pall in a rayless tomb

Zia came to earth in a nameless bomb.

The tyrant's will and the wheel of the world

Are different lots, a different mould

The doors once locked by the tyrant's whims

Are thrown ajar by History's fumes (Osundare, Songs 29).

The representation of the Nigerian social landscape in "Songs of the Season" creates the impression that the crisis generated by the twin factors of power and powerlessness permeates virtually every sphere of life. R.N. Egudu suggests that this phenomenon is a common feature of Nigerian poetry in general, but that while the older poets "are contented with depicting and satirizing them in deeds and actions that offend social justice, the younger poets [published between 1970 and the present] not only deal with similar issues with like satirical attitudes, but also overtly try to inspire and mobilize the oppressed to fight injustice and change their piteous plight for the better" (Egudu 79).

In "At the Senior Staff Club," this takes the form of a humorous celebration of the impoverishment of the middle class, a major threat to its existence. In "retiring into farming," it emerges as a biting exposé of the corruption of retired Nigerian military officers, while "buka banter" hints at the dehumanization of the masses to suggest that they are incapable of meeting basic needs. In almost every case, the poverty of the average Nigerian is read as both illogical and incredible because it contrasts sharply with the wealth of the nation. The emasculation of the people is not only material; its worst form is the deliberate deployment of the apparatus of the Nigerian state to repress, censor, and eliminate legitimate opposition. Thus, the success of "only four" as a humorous indictment of the Babangida dictatorship derives from its ability to articulate its devaluation of human life. The killing of four helpless students by the police in 1986 occasioned this reflection:

The students assailed my comfort

For just a few hours

And I called the police to quell the row

My guests fired their guns

(After all, the mob too fired

Their volleys of noisy chants)

And a few students decided to die (...)

The Press then screamed

As if it was all a senseless massacre; But when I counted the corpses

They numbered a meagre FOUR

Four, yes only four!

From a crowd of a dozen thousand

How can FOUR dead be such a crime? (Osundare, Songs 51).

"Songs of the Season" as a Humanizing Voice of Change

In the face of terror, insecurity, and insanity promoted by an irredeemable ruling elite, the inevitable response of the town-crier poet is to collaborate with the forces of change. Thus, "maydaysong," which passionately expresses solidarity with Nigerian workers in commemoration of the annual Labour Day, is a fitting conclusion to the section:

I salute the hands

Which make and mould

the hands

which think and set

I salute the hands

which vow

that those who sow

must also reap (Osundare, Songs 59).

Osundare intervenes to restore national heroes, a subversive act consistent with the project of redefining national values. In constructing a new roll of honour, “Songs of the Season” discredits norms that license the celebration of personages who should otherwise be declared enemies of the state. The heroes celebrated in “tributes” are recovered from the margins, having been demonized or subjected to neglect in official quarters. The inscription of these figures on the collective conscience is an act of restitution. By pressing oriki into service, Osundare downplays personal aggrandizement to eliminate the vain, ego-boosting adulation that often characterizes Yoruba praise songs. The significance of those celebrated is not a function of ancestry, wealth, or self-centred quests. Oriki proves amenable in Osundare’s handling for recognizing individuals who have facilitated positive social engineering. In negating the official denigration of teachers, the first and longest poem in this section, “for Chief Fal Adeniran,” estimates the poet-persona’s debt to a teacher. The unity of vision that runs through “for Femi Falana,” “letter to Fawehinmi,” “for Dele Giwa,” “for Ayodele Awojobi,” “for Chief Obafemi Awolowo,” “for Fela Anikulapo-Kuti,” and “for Tai Solarin” testifies to their emergence from the same radical consciousness.

The Urgency of the Humanizing Message

Overtly, Osundare appears to make one central argument: not only about the humanization of the poor and marginalized, but about the urgency of doing so. This humanization is imperative because the worldview of Nigerians is dominated by the rich, who have branded the poor as thieves, prostitutes, kidnappers, and ritualists. Consequently, the perspectives of the poor are delegitimized, marginalized, and dehumanized.

Through Songs of the Season, Osundare acts as the mouthpiece of the poor — the modern town-crier. He insists that the poor are not what they are branded to be. If they steal, perhaps it is because they have been impoverished to the point of being unable to feed their children. If they turn to prostitution, perhaps it is because they have been pushed to the wall and see it as the only means of survival. If they kidnap, it is because they seek a share of the national cake from which the rich have excluded them. This aligns with Tanure Ojaide’s observation that contemporary Nigerian poetry “humanizes the deprived by providing a sociological explanation for their so-called deviance” (Ojaide 65). The collection thus carries a tone of urgency — of immediacy. Osundare insists that it is high time we understood that the poor are authentically human: if you tickle them, they will laugh; if you pinch them, they will cry. One cannot beat a child and deny him the opportunity to cry.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Osundare deploys Songs of the Season as a vehicle for spreading the urgent message of humanization. It is his sane, patriotic, and visionary method of educating a society where the majority operate from the fringes, enduring exclusion, impoverishment, censorship, and political victimization. Through the collection, Osundare executes a serious indictment familiar to students of post-independence African writing, while simultaneously restoring humanity and true identity to the poor, the marginalized, and the deprived. The work therefore stands, in Irele’s terms, as an example of how the Yoruba literary tradition perpetuates itself by “affirming and interrogating shared practices” to make tradition relevant to contemporary realities (Irele 186).

REFERENCES

1. Adekoya, Olusegun. "Folklore and the Primacy of National Liberation in Village Voices." IFE: Journal of the Institute of Cultural Studies, 1999, pp. 79-88.
2. Adekoya, Olusegun. "The Social Context of Yoruba Satirical Poetry". University of Ibadan Press, 1998.
3. Bamikunle, Aderemi. "The Development of Niyi Osundare's Poetry: A Survey of Themes and Technique." Research in African Literatures, vol. 26, no. 4, Winter 1995, pp. 121-37.
4. Bello, Akeem Kolawole. Perspectives on African Literature. Malthouse Press, 2010.
5. Egudu, R. N. "Power and Poverty in Nigerian Poetry in English." _Okike_, no. 38, Feb. 1998, pp. 79-92.
6. Irele, Abiola. "Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka." _The African Experience in Literature and Ideology_, Indiana UP, 1990, pp. 174-97.
7. Jeyifo, Biodun. "Niyi Osundare." Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present, Volume Two, edited by Yemi Ogunbiyi, Guardian Books, 1988, pp. 114-20.
8. Ojaide, Tanure. "The Changing Voice of History: Contemporary African Poetry." _Poetic Imagination in Black Africa_, Carolina Academic Press, 1996, pp. 58-72.
9. Okunoye, Oyeniyi. "Niyi Osundare and the Marginalised Majority in _Songs of the Season._" Commonwealth Essays and Studies, vol. 29, no. 2, 2007, pp. 45-60.
10. Okunoye, Oyeniyi. "The Poet as Town Crier: Niyi Osundare and the Politics of Form." _African Literature Today_, vol. 24, 2004, pp. 1-18.
11. Osundare, Niyi. "Bard of the Tabloid." _West Africa_, 18 May 1987, p. 18.
12. ---. Interview by Cynthia Hogue and Nancy Easterlin. The Iowa Review, vol. 23, no. 2, 1993, pp. 205-221.
13. ---. "Noma Award Acceptance Speech." 1991.
14. ---. _Songs of the Season_. Heinemann Educational Books, 1990.