

**Yoruba Eco-Proverbs in English: An Eco-Critical Study of Niyi Osundare's
*Midlife and Horses of Memory***

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“A thousand books may not total one strand of the beard of a quiet proverb.”
- Niyi Osundare

ABSTRACT: In sustaining the cultural texture of African literature, contemporary writers have continued the tradition of using proverbs in African writings with the innovation of refreshing them to capture new realities in society while creatively modifying popular old ones. This paper examines eco-proverbs/nature proverbs and their importance as a literary resource tool through an exploration of extant Yoruba proverbs in selected poems of Niyi Osundare. It also undertakes an eco-critical inquiry into how Osundare deploys proverbs derived from Yoruba rhetoric and prosody, especially nature proverbs focused in their meanings, to enunciate contemporary social and aesthetic realities. It analyses how Osundare in *Midlife* and *Horses of Memory* reconstructs eco-proverbs on the fauna, flora, landscape and seascape derived from Yoruba eco-proverbs to create his poetic vision on socio-aesthetic imperatives. This is also an attempt to categorize nature proverbs into eco-pejoratives, eco-friendly and minatory groups.

1.1. Introduction

According to Frederick Akporobaro, proverbs have been and remain “a most powerful and effective instrument for transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another” (69). Proverb reveals the thought, wisdom and verbal techniques of the past and it is a model of compressed or forceful language for the speaker and the verbal artist. Not only is it a technique of verbal expression, it also gives a certain amount of freshness to speeches of accomplished speakers (70). A Proverb is a graphic statement that expresses a truth of experience. Further, he explains that “in terms of form, the proverb belongs to the wider category of figurative and aesthetically conceived forms of expressions like metaphor, simile, hyperbole, wit and other anecdotal forms” (71). In Nigeria, proverbs are largely shaped and determined by socio-cultural and geographical

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experiences enriched by the country's wide expanse of land and peoples with different belief systems and influences.

Yoruba proverbs and eco-proverbs particularly evolve and draw their aesthetic form and cultural relevance from the rich store-house of the Yoruba oral tradition. The Yoruba people are found in the South-West rain forest region of Nigeria, and are naturally agrarian by virtue of this geographical location. This geographical setting, found on a historical expression veiled in mytho-legendary experience of a common ancestry, gave rise to the unique socio-aesthetic cultural expression called 'Yoruba'. The eco-proverbial discourse in English is thus constructed to further impact the trajectory of the verbal arts in the Yoruba aesthetic-dialectics.

2.1. Tenets of Eco-criticism and Theoretical Framework

Eco-proverb is an aspect of eco-critical study which falls under the ambit of ecocriticism theory. Eco-critical theory attempts to find a meeting point between literature and the environment. The tenets of eco-criticism revolve around the rereading of major literary works from an ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world, and placing special canonical emphasis on writers who foreground nature their subject matter such as the American transcendentalists, the British Romantics like Jonathan Bate, the poetry of John Clare and the works of Thomas Hardy. They extend the range of literary-critical practice by placing new emphasis on relevant 'factual' topographical writings like essays, travel writing and regional literature. They emphasize "ecocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical responsibility and the claims of the world beyond ourselves" (Barry: 264). Jonathan Bate, a British Romantic, makes a distinction between 'Light Green' and 'Dark Green'. According to him, the former are environmentalists who value nature because it sustains humanity and contributes to our well-being. This school believes we can 'save' the planet by more responsible consumption and production while 'dark Green' or 'deep ecologists' take a more radical stance. They opine that technology is a problem and therefore cannot be the solution and so man has to 'get back to nature'. The 'Dark Green' dislikes the anthropocentric label 'environment' but prefer the term 'nature'. Nature, according to this school, is there for its own sake, not for man's sake.

Eco-critical literary theory developed from an ever-increasing enlightened consciousness and concern about the state of global environment. Post-colonial studies have been involved in environmental issues, particularly in terms of the relationship between humans and their environment on one hand and between land and language on the other. Recently, anthropologists, geographers and environmental managers, historians and literary critics shifted focus from these broad areas to

relationships between neo-colonial interests and eco-critical perspectives. “The ethical acceptability of the systematic, institutionalized killing of ‘non-human others’,” (Flashcroft 213) by the industrialized world is one of the reasons for degrading other people as animals and thus justifying the liberty to exploit colonies and their environment and the general eco-system for economic ends.

The desire to modernize has induced developing countries into destructing their own environments and consequently, making the world’s ecosystem a gravely damaging aspect of Western Industrialization. This situation strengthens further the significance and need to adopt an eco-critical approach in assessing global crisis. Ecocriticism is an emergent movement and a critical approach which began in USA in the late 80s and in UK in the early 90s. Cheryll Glotfeltry is considered to be the founder of this academic movement. She co-edited with Harold Freeman a collection of essays on nature-related matters titled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1990) and also co-founded the Association of the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992. She also runs a house journal called *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE).

However, Michael Branch notes that ecocriticism as a concept first arose in the late 1970s at a meeting of The Western Literature Association (W.L.A.), a body interested in the literature of the American West. He traces the word back to William Ruckert’s essay: ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.’ The term ‘Ecological’ was made prominent by USA ecocritic, Karl Kroeben, in his article ‘Home At Grasmere: Ecological Holiness’. (*PMLA*. 89, 132-41). Branch observes further that the terms ‘ecocriticism’ and ‘ecological’ remained dormant in critical vocabulary until the 1989 W.I.A. Conference when Glotfeltry (then a graduate student at Cornell University and subsequently, Associate Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada), revived the term ‘ecocriticism’ and encouraged its use to accommodate the critical field previously known as Study of Nature Writing.

Three major 19th century American writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) whose works celebrate nature, the life force, and the wilderness in the American natural environment are credited with the current status of ecocriticism in the USA. Among their collections are: *Nature* (1836) *Summer on the Lakes* (1843), and *Walden* (1899). UK’s version of ecocriticism takes its bearing from British Romanticism of the 1790s. The founding literary figure was Jonathan Bate who authored *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991).

2.2. The Genealogy of Proverbs and its Ecocentric Relevance

The word ‘proverb’ is from the Latin word ‘proverbium’. The study of proverbs is called paremiology, from the Greek word “proverbs”, and it dates back to the time of Aristotle. Thus paremiology is the collection of proverbs.

Mieder Wolfgang, a prominent proverb scholar, defines the term “proverb” as “A short, generally known sentence of folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (International Proverb Scholarship, 119). Stylistic features of proverbs include the use of alliteration, parallelism, rhyme and ellipsis. In some languages, assonance, the repetition of vowel sounds is also exploited in forming artistic proverbs. A proverb is a short familiar sentence expressing a supposed truth or moral lesson. It is a saying that requires some explanation. It is a simple and concrete well-known expression often repeated in conversations. It expresses truths based on common sense or the practical experience of life. Its author is generally unknown else it will be a quotation. Proverbs are metaphorical, short sayings that often express some traditionally held truths and for the sake of remembrance, alliterative. Many English proverbs are said to have been absorbed into the language having existed earlier in other languages. Eco-proverbs that are in English Language or translated from other languages include: “A cat may look at a king”, “A leopard cannot change its spots”, “Big fish eat little fish”, “If you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas”, and “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.”

Mieder contends that proverbs are found in many parts of the world, but some areas seem to have richer stores than others (such as West Africa), while others have hardly any e.g. North and South America (Wise Words, 108,109). James Pritchard opined that proverbs are often borrowed across lines of language, religion, and even time. According to him, a proverb like, “No flies enter a mouth that is shut” is currently found in countries like Spain and Ethiopia. Though this proverb has gone through multiple languages and millennia, it can be traced back to an ancient Babylonian proverb (146). A proverb like this has gone through transformation with time and culture to result in a Nigerian proverb like: “The fly that has no one to advise it follows the corpse into the grave”.

According to S.B. Obeng, Proverbs remain invaluable for a variety of purposes. They are used for saying something gently, in a veiled way, to gain more weight in a discussion, to simply make a conversation and to make discussion livelier. In many parts of the world, he maintains, the use of proverbs is one of the marks of being a good orator (521). The study of proverbs has application in a number of fields. Those who study folklore and literature explore the proverb for its cultural themes. Scholars from a variety of fields like psychology, medicine, criminology and religion have profitably incorporated the study, using them to study abstract reasoning of children, acculturation of immigrants, intelligence, the differing mental processes in mental illness, etc. Proverbs have also been incorporated into the strategies of social workers, teachers, preachers, and even politicians.

Mieder contends that the Nazis deliberately used proverbs as a propaganda tool for years during the Second World War (Proverbs in Nazi Germany, 435-436). Eco-pejoratives that make flora its point of reference include this proverb from Abraham Lincoln: "If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I'll spend six sharpening my axe". Italian proverbs have these to say on consequences: "If you scatter thorns, don't go barefoot", "Never wrestle with a pig because you'll both get dirty and the pig will enjoy himself." (*The Word Today*, 8).

According to Joseph Raymond, Russian proverbs between the 1700s and 1800s reflect tension between the Russian and the Czar. In order to openly avoid criticizing a given authority or cultural practice folks took recourse to proverbial expressions which voiced personal tensions in a tone of general consent. Thus personal involvement was linked to public opinion.

Proverbs abounds in Africa because African languages are spiced with expressions deliberately structured to articulate the peculiar life experiences of its people in order not only to retain lessons derived from such experiences, but also to serve as guiding light to future generations.

Some proverbs can be very blunt and may sound extreme. An example is this proverb from Oromo, in Ethiopia: "kan mana baala, a'laa gala" ("A leaf at home, but a camel elsewhere": 'somebody who has a high reputation among those who do not know him well.')

2.3. Yoruba Eco-Proverbs in English

The Yoruba proverbs that we have in English today are translations from Yoruba Language to English. Yoruba proverbs themselves are as old as the users of the language itself. Its foundation is embedded in the moral wisdom of the Yoruba culture and world view. In fact, proverbs are the vehicle for understanding the depth of the language for according to a Yoruba proverb, 'owe lesin oro, oro lesin owe' which, metaphorically, in translation means, 'proverb is the horse of the word; the word is the horse of a proverb'. Literarily, when a speaker is short of words, proverbs come to the rescue: 'ti oro basonu, owe lafinwa'. The significance of 'oro' (word) and 'ohun' (voice) is clearly spelt out in Yoruba cosmology in David Shooks' interview with Niyi Osundare:

The Yoruba also have a deep fascination, no fascination is a weak word,
An abiding respect for and interest in the word (ohun/oro). Words are not
Just the building blocks of language; they are its core, essence, and enabler.
Without words, no language; without language no society. This is why the
Yoruba consider words as delicate/fragile/sacred (Osundare).

Nothing defines a culture as distinctly as its language, and the element of language that best encapsulates a society's values and beliefs is its proverbs. Proverbs have remained relevant in Yoruba traditional rhetoric and prosody through the ages and have survived the trials of extinction. Significantly, they have remained a potent

literary force not only in oral tradition, oral narration and poetry, but also have continued to remain relevant in African writings today thus, giving African writing its uniqueness and legitimacy. Chinua Achebe declares in a much quoted in a much quoted view that “proverbs is the palmoil with which words are eaten.” (*Things Fall Apart*, 6). Many of such proverbs have nature elements in them.

Proverbs in Yoruba tradition fall under Yoruba oral poetry and narration. Yoruba eco-proverbs can also be classified under two main categories: eco-pejoratives and eco-friendly. While eco-pejoratives proverbs constructs the natural environment as object of exploitation designed for human exploitation and sustenance, eco-friendly proverbs on the other hand, are minatory and protective of the eco-system: a subject preserver and an object to be preserved. Yoruba eco-pejorative proverbs on the fauna are “Its poverty that kills the child of ‘aparo (bird)”, “All shades and shapes of knives make their appearance on the death of an elephant”, and “The domesticated goat does not appreciate the worth of the hunter”. Yoruba eco-friendly proverb on fauna and flora are “The person who throws stones on the alagemo (chameleon) will neither die nor stink, his cloths will turn grey”, “If the ant was created a horse, it will trample man to death” and “A child in ignorance mistakes herbal-medicine for vegetable”.

The beauty and relevance of using eco-proverb in expressing African experiences are directed at attaining visions of a more life-conscious and earth-sustaining human race in contradistinction to present trends that focus on engaging the earth purely for exploitative (and by extension destructive) purposes. In this respect, the Yoruba comparatively excels in the emphasis the Yoruba language gives to nature in structuring its proverbs. Niyi Osundare, perhaps rivaled only by Okot’P Bitek and the later Christopher Okigbo, has explored the richness of African eco-proverbs in his poetry more than any other poet of his generation. *Midlife* for instance is an exploration of the proverbial texture of the Yoruba language, which he enhances by successfully transferring and sustaining the profound character and rhythm in the original Yoruba language to its English translation. Here are a few excerpts from *Midlife*.

3.1. Eco-proverbs in *Midlife*

The author in this collection focuses on two areas of eco-proverb: proverbs derived from known Yoruba eco-proverbs and creatively reconstructed for poetic purposes and personally constructed eco-proverbs or derivative-proverbs that are rooted in Yoruba world view.

Eco-proverbs derived from Yoruba proverbs in the poems in *Midlife* are flora, fauna or landscape. In “Rocksong”, Osundare describes the agrarian, rocky landscape of Ikere-Ekiti environment. he juxtaposed these two nature elements as “The elephant rock” and compares, proverbially the awesomeness of the rocks with that of an elephant:

Ah! The elephant is feast;
 Whoever takes the jungle's giant
 For a passing glance
 Craves trampling mortars in his tender farm,
 The elephant is feast for any sight. (v.21-25).

The above lines are derived from an elegiac-eco-proverb to the elephant: 'Ajanaku kojaa mori nkon firi': 'The sight of an elephant goes beyond saying; 'I saw something like a strand of hair'' and 'atari ajanaku kise eru omode': 'the head of the elephant is not a play thing for a child'. These eco-proverbs allude to the size of the elephant. The lines in question are thus, a crafty representation of an elegiac-proverb to the elephant.

In "Human in Every Sense" Osundare employs a chain of eco-proverbs to conjure images of animals like millipedes and snakes and how they are limited or endowed by nature's selective grace:

For if speed were a function of legs
 The millipede would have no rival
 In the race of the forest;
 If wisdom were a direct offspring of the magnitude
 Of the head,
 No beast would challenge the buffalo
 In the discourse of the grassland;
 If cunning could bestow a towering height
 The snake would be the hissing Kilimanjaro
 Of the shrub. (205-214).

While lines 208-211 is eco-proverb that relates to physical size of the head of the buffalo against wisdom. Lines 212-214 are an eco-proverb in reference to the limitations of the snake when height and length are contrasted in nature. The snake's cunning ways are limited to its length and horizontal-slithering, it has no business with Kilimanjaro's towering height".

Osundare reconstructs Yoruba eco-fauna-proverbs on 'the hen and the hawk' on one hand and the large aquatic animal called 'arogidigba' (a large, greedy fish), on the other.

I was there when the hawk swooped at dusk
 And the hen's joys disappeared between its claws (246-247).

These lines are poetic reconstruction of eco-proverb derived from the proverb: 'angba omo edie lowo iku, oni wonje ki oon losi atitun loje'. In translation: 'In an attempt to protect the chick from the jaws of the hawk, it complains of being prevented from searching for food in the open field'. Lines 248-249 are similar to the previous two lines:

I was there when arogidigba heaved open its funeral jaws
And a tribe of minnows became a tale (248-249).

Thought, arogidigba is a threat to smaller fish; it is not an easy prey for man in its deep sea domain. These lines are coined out of the original eco-proverb: 'enikan ki mu arogidigba lale odo'. In translation, 'No one catches arogidigba with a hook-trap'.

The flora-proverb, "For When cutting a tree, it is only the wise/ Who watch out for the destination of the leaves" (525-526) is a poem that reconstructs the Yoruba proverb: 'Ti omode ban gegi nigbo, agbalagba lomo bi toma wosi'. (In literary translation: 'When a child cuts a tree in the forest, it is the elder that knows the direction of its fall'). The proverb which expresses the significance of knowing your place of calling and staying there in order to sustain relevance is aptly represented in the fauna-proverb:

The star finds its name in the galaxy of night
the fish spells its face in the book of fugitive shoals.
The snake which roams the wild in the company
Of its skin
Soon finds its head under the hunter's club. (655-659).

Abstract images, phrases and comments on wisdom, unity, collaboration and mutual respect for one another among human species are symbolically and metaphorically represented in concrete nature images like 'pebbles', 'rocks', 'trees' and 'forest':
Snap shots of the wisdom in unity, collaboration and mutual respect for one another is again expressed in:

"Pebbles which join heads will form a rock,
trees which share branches will form a forest.
What name do we call it, that hand
Whose tribe is memory of a sole finger?
Omi l'enia (660-664).

A proverb that is derived from the Yoruba metaphoric wise saying: 'omi l'enia (man is river) is re-constructed into an eco-proverb that includes landscape items like 'pebbles', 'rock' and flora items like 'trees', 'forest'. In the section of the collection labeled "midlife", Osundare, making a political statement and asking a pertinent question about Africa continent's pathetic socio-political state, says that "My continent is a sky ripped apart by clever crows,/awaiting the suturing temper of a new, unflinching Thunder" (136-137). He laments that:

The lion has lost its claws
To cheetahs of other forests;

What use, the magnificent mane
Of emasculated tantrums (130-133).

He uses the fauna-image of ‘crows’ and ‘lion’ to represent exploiters of the continent and Africa respectively. He concludes by using a Yoruba proverb which infers the sense of value: “enilori onifila, enini filaolori”. He deploys fauna-images of ‘cheetahs’, (still playing on the sound word ‘cheaters’) and ‘lion’ (king of the forest) to represent exploiters of the continent and Africa respectively. He continues in this line of thought by playing on the Yoruba proverb: ‘enilori onifila, enini filaolori’ literally meaning: ‘He that has a cap has no head and he that has head has no cap’. Emphasizing on the question of value and the inequality that beset human existence, Osundare contents that:

They who have heads have no caps
Those who have caps are in need of heads. (134-135).

Eco-proverbs in *Midlife* are proverbs derived directly from Yoruba nature-proverbs. These proverbs are creatively manipulated by Osundare to bring fresh poetic insight into the nature of eco-poetry and to make profound literary and socio-cultural comments. Collection in *Horses of Memory* equally abounds in eco-proverb and its focus quite distinct from those deplored in *Midlife*. In *Horses of memory*, Osundare takes a different approach to the question of eco-proverbs. He uses rhetorical question “Who is afraid of proverb” to comment on those who appreciate the use of proverb in literary dialectics and find its aesthetic and social functions valuable and enriching on one hand, and those who see nothing worthwhile in proverbs on the other.

3.2. Eco-Proverb in *Horses of Memory*

In the ‘Memory Tracks’ section of this collection, Osundare takes a different approach to the question of proverbs. He starts every stanza of the poem with a rhetorical question: “Who’s afraid of the proverb”, and follows this with nature related answers to the question. “Who is Afraid of Proverb” can be subdivided into two. The first part makes a poetic enumeration of the quality of the fearless persons who are not afraid of the truth and power imbedded in proverbs. This persons in question appreciates, get inspiration, strength and innate succor from proverbs.

Part two of the poem examines the nature of the fearful, those who are afraid of the power in a proverb will not go, literally beyond the surface – being cautious in the light of Oscar Wilde’s position on arts which states that, “Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril, those who read the symbol do so at their peril” (6). In the section “Memory Chips”, Osundare contends that, “When two proverbs fight/it is memory that suffers” (82-84). “Who is Afraid of Proverbs” is derived from a Yoruba eco-proverb which states that, ‘When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers’. When we relate this to another proverb, “The wise person is angry/And slowly thinks

about tomorrow/The not-so-wise is angry/And instantly calls for an arrow (79-82), we can adduce by implication that when we compare those who appreciate value of proverbs and those who despise proverbs express contempt for one another in the forest battle of words, it's the gullible that suffer. The first part of the poem in question tells us of the position of those who appreciate the immense benefits of proverbs, its social and aesthetic values. According to the persona of "For the One Who Departed" in the section "Settled Dust", "they men for all seasons"(179-180) 'okunrin lada', literally meaning "The matchet is the man". Metaphorically, this could refer to 'men of steel'. These are fearless literary men like seasons of "mellow mouths dropping wisdom like juicy gnomes" (184-185).

In "Who's Afraid of the Proverb?" in the section "Memory Tracks", Osundare shows that Owe (proverb) in essence is the concretizing of 'oro' (abstract 'word') and thus the prover "owe lesin oro/oro lesin owe/T'oro ba sonu/Owe la fi 'n wa", that is, "The proverb is the horse of the word/The word is the horse of the proverb/When the word is lost/It is the proverb we use for finding it" (II.22-25). This is introducing what proverb is in relation to the 'word', what the Yoruba also call 'ohun'(voice). This is followed by the rhetorical question: "Who is afraid of the proverb?", followed by a subtle answer: "Of the eloquent kernel in the pod/of silent moons". In other words, a proverb is a paradox, like wisdom of the tree hidden in its seed. The second stanza answers the same question through a Yoruba proverb which says: 'enu arugbo lobi tin gbo' which in translation means: 'Kola nut ripens in the mouth of the elder'. The poet transforms this proverb metaphorically into an eco-proverb consisting of 'mountain', 'cow' and 'sky':

Who's afraid of the proverb
of the kola in the mouth of the mountain
giant udder of the cow of the sky. (I.4-6)

The third stanza talks of the eternal value of the proverb which cuts across space and time. The quality of its echo is timeless and its immortal value can be compared to what John Keats refers to in his "Ode to a Nightingale": "No hungry generations tread thee down;/The voice I hear this passing night was heard/In ancient days by emperor and clown"(62-65) and in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "When old age shall this generation waste/Thou shall remain, in midst of other woe/Than ours, a friend to man"(46-48). There Osundare demands:

Who's afraid of the proverb
Of the drum which left its echoes
In the auricles of leaping streets. (I.7-9).

The fourth stanza examines the universality of proverbs, their value and applicable truth in human society and art. Like a river, the meaning and the impact of truth flows with ease to all listeners and gives intellectual wisdom to all races and culture:

Who's afraid of the proverb
Of the river which traverses the earth
In limbless intensity. (I.10-12).

The fifth stanza explores the intrinsic literary quality of the proverb, the metaphors, imagery, etc. that runs in its veins: "Of the sonic feathers of metaphor in flight/the lift and thrust of impossible fancies" (I.14-15). The sixth and the seventh stanzas look at the poetic musicality in the proverb. A proverb is like an instrument that plays melodic truth and exactitude in its message: "The wind's truthful lyre/melodic thrum of Desire's fingers.../of the shortest distance/between many truths" (I.17-21). Part two of this poem dwells on man's failure to see the value and relevance of proverbs in human society and its intrinsic aesthetics. In stanza one, the poet examines their nature and disposition as those who feed on modernity and 'Lactogen' that has no root in the truth of past wisdom. They stand on the bank of the river today forgetting that their primal fountain is the milk that flows down the breast of yesterday:

Who's afraid of the proverb
Who so fat on the Lactogen of the moment
Has lost all hint of the primal milk. (II.1-3).

Stanza two of part two portrays a vivid picture of those drunk with pessimistic ideas of foreigners on African and its 'primitive' world views. These "cant parrots" continue to mimic the cry against their own personalities symbolized by "the dialect of the drum":

Who's afraid of the proverb
Who so drunk on the cant of imported parrots
Has no ear for the dialect of the drum. (II.4-6).

Stanza three continues in the flow of the former lines on 'deep' and 'shallow' waters, of "stalking minnows in brackish waters/scared of the shoals which surprise the deep" (II.8-9). These lines conjure images of nameless birds in realm of limitless sky and the infinite treasures in the deep sea: "anonymous spaces/in the abyss of the sky" (II.11-12). Stanza five also continues the idea of who's afraid of the proverb? He sees the fearful among the pioneers, the "first clay in the furnace" that kills the fire. They are the crooked fire wood that is a misfit in the furnace: 'igi woroko tin dana ru'. They live and trust only in their own kind of fire that dampens the common fire into chilling discord: "first clay in the furnace/of chilling fires" (II.14-15). The salt that sweetens the soup and preserves decay is absent in them. According to the poet, those who are afraid of the proverb are "silent salt in the feast of delicious words" (II.17-18).

Those who are afraid of the proverb do not see proverb as the horse of the word nor do they believe the word is the horse of the proverb, so when a word is lost in the labyrinth of the forest of discourse, they are “afraid of memory”(II.20-21) and would rather sweep the meaningful opulence of their yesterday under the carpet of decay of today and ‘let the sleeping dog to lie’ in the uncertain, surreal dream of tomorrow.

Through the rhetorical question, “Who is afraid of the proverb?”, Osundare, was able made a clear distinction between those who see proverb as an art-form that is anachronistic, of no artistic nor social value in current literary dialectics and is better left in yesterdays’ ‘primitive’ world views, on one hand, and those who are able to appreciate the universality that runs in the veins of proverbs, their value and applicable truth and exactitude in their messages and the meaning flowing with ease to all listeners and giving intellectual wisdom to all, in art, human society, races and cultures, on the other.

Conclusion

Our objective in this study is to explore the richness and aesthetic appeal of Yoruba eco-proverbs as deployed in Niyi Osundare’s *Midlife* and *Horses of Memory*. We also highlighted the relevance of proverbs in the quest to sustain the natural environment by showing that eco-criticism is a critical mode and theory that is beneficial to mankind by its focus on sustenance rather than exploitation and destruction of the natural environment. In *Midlife* and *Horses of Memory*, we identified vital eco-proverbs that Osundare engaged effectively to communicate not only the richness and beauty of the Yoruba culture and expression, but we also showed how he deployed them artistically in a refreshing style to enhance his artistic vision. Osundare’s poetry therefore succeeds in encapsulating the Yoruba worldview and lores efficiently through his reliance on eco-proverbs that have existed in the language for ages. Osundare’s success at harnessing the life-sustaining proverbs therefore has not only greatly enhanced his readers’ consciousness of the natural environment but has marked him out as one of the greatest poets who celebrate nature to come out of Africa.

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