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Marriage of the Spoken And Written Word

By Mercy Ette*, Huddersfield, England
Monday, June 18, 2007

For Osundare, champion of poetry of performance, there is no wall between the spoken and the written word

It is a fair bet that only one person in the studio knew what to expect. The invitation gave very little away. It promised an evening of performance by celebrated Nigerian writer and activist, Niyi Osundare, followed by conversation about his life and work with Mercy Ette. To some of the guests, he was just an African writer with an unpronounceable name, which made imagining what lay ahead almost impossible and being publicised as one of Nigeria's greatest living poets added an extra burden of expectations.

Osundare did not disappoint. "It was a fantastic event, of which the school should be very proud. The positive feedback is richly deserved," Cath Ellis, head of Humanities at the University of Huddersfield, enthused a few days after the event. "Incredible beyond words," "It's nice to be introduced to such a writer, who I've not even heard of! But I will investigate his work further," "I really relished the chance to see a performer from another culture (Nigerian) that I was unfamiliar with," some guests wrote on feedback forms.

They spoke for many who were at the Panasonic Studio at the University of Huddersfield to watch Osundare as he performed a selection of poems from many of his collections. In less than two hours, he did more to burnish the image of Nigeria than the diplomatic mission in London can ever hope to achieve.

Niyi Osundare's visit to the university was almost accidental. He was billed to run a poetry workshop in Leeds, a bustling city in the northern part of England and home to his alma



Rommi Smith, Niyi Osundare and Dr Mercy Ette

mater, the University of Leeds. But when Rommi Smith, creative writing projects coordinator at the University of Huddersfield heard about his programme, she bombarded him with emails and talked him into spending a few hours in Huddersfield, a town he first visited in September 1973 when he was a student at Leeds. Returning to it more than 30 years later, he said, was a 'homecoming of a kind.' He opened his performance with a song, the agbamurere song which tells the story of a mythical figure that easily and whimsically transforms itself into different forms and shapes to escape attention. Although the song is meant to be sung to the accompaniment of lively drumming,

"Incredible beyond words"

Osundare had to settle for a call and response chant by coaxing his guests to sing along. They willingly obliged. He ended the performance with another song, 'A-men, A-men.' Between the two, he sandwiched ten poems that celebrated his love affair with 'the word.'

For Osundare, champion of poetry of performance, it was an opportunity to demonstrate his infectious passion for the word, the spoken word. To him there is no wall between the spoken and the written word. His poetry, he says, is influenced by the coming together of the two. Without the spoken word, he says, the written word would not have come into being. At the University of Huddersfield, he celebrated the marriage of the spoken and the written word.

In Osundare's world, in the beginning was not the word, but in the word was the beginning. The power of the word is contrasted by its fragility. To utter, he says, is to alter because the word is like an egg, once it is broken, it cannot be put



Niyi Osundare (right) talking to a guest

together again. His writing underpins his respect for the word. He does not just throw words together, he plucks them carefully from his rich cultural heritage and the many influences that shape his poetry and interlaces them with nuance and hue that resonate.

Osundare's poetry is a child of his background. He grew up watching and listening to the theatre of the street. The sounds, rhythms, movements, colours and scents he absorbed as a child in Ikere Ekiti permeate his poetry. He told his audience that without his orality background he would not be the kind of poet he is. His father, he said, was his first Shakespeare before he met the man from Stratford upon Avon, through his writings.

He punctuated his reading with commentaries that provided a backdrop for the poems and information about his life and experiences. A recent memory that has cast a long shadow over his life is his close shave with death in 2005, when he almost lost his life in New Orleans to Hurricane Katrina. He performed *People Are My Clothes*, a poem that sums up public response to his personal tragedy.

Written in 1984 after a reading at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), the poem is the first in his latest collection, *Pages from the Book of the Sun*. It speaks of the importance of community and of communal network of support. The outpouring of concern from all over the world following the nightmare of Katrina has etched his memory and to remind himself of his blessings, he now performs the poem whenever he gets the opportunity to share his work in public. The uplifting tone of *People Are My Clothes* was, however, dampened by the *The Weeping Book*, a poem he wrote after his first visit to what used to be his house before Katrina's unwelcome visit. The poem evoked a picture of books in his library submerged in Katrina's woe.

Although he is best known for his political poems, Osundare also writes love poems. His manuscripts of tender verses and other collections, however, were washed away by the hurricane before he could put them together for publication. Weeks after the flood, he said he used to lie awake at night

A recent memory that has cast a long shadow over his life is his close shave with death in 2005, when he almost lost his life..

trying to remember lines from his unpublished works. The ones that came to the forefront of his mind were from his love poems. A few weeks ago, *Tender Moment* was finally published and has proved to be the most controversial of his collections. People, he said, are curious to know the subjects of his affection. He did not tell. Why the



Niyi Osundare and Dr Mercy Ette

curiosity? He asked. No one offered an answer.

The reading was followed by a question and answer session which provided the audience with an opportunity to interact with Osundare. One guest wanted to know if poetry could be a tool for teaching. As would be expected of a teacher, his answer was an unequivocal 'yes.' He said that even though poetry is more condensed and come with certain generic expectations, it could be used to teach not only literature but other subjects including mathematics. The challenge was how to demystify the perception of poetry as a subject not meant to be understood, a view which, he said, has alienated people from poetry. He pointed out that before poetry was reduced to writing, it lived on the lips of human beings. Poetry, he said, can be stretched to cover other areas of learning.

He has already shown that through the publication of three collections of poetry for young readers. The books, he said, are being used to teach civics as well as literature in Nigerian schools. And in the UK, *Not my Business*, a poem he wrote during the dark days of military dictatorship in Nigeria, is on the reading list in schools and is providing a platform for interaction with students from different backgrounds. This summer, *I Sing of Change* will adorn underground trains in London as one of the poems selected to promote African poetry by the Poems on the Underground, a charity that promotes the study, use and enjoyment of poetry.

After his performance at Huddersfield, he is no longer just a name but a face, a voice for Nigerian literature. Rommi Smith who organised the event has big dreams. She sees his visit as a first step into the thick, rich forest of African literature. Osundare's performance, she said, has opened doors for other African writers at the University. In just a matter of hours, he gave his guests a glimpse of what African literature has to offer.

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