

ARTS-

Nigerian poet seeks modern voice to change attitudes

By LISA WOOD

Poetry is a lifespung which gathers timbre the more throats it plucks harbinger of action the more minds it stirs (from "Poetry is", *Songs of The Marketplace*, 1983)

Stirring minds by the use of different media is the ultimate goal of Nigerian poet, teacher, and journalist Niyi Osundare, at York this summer as part of a lecture tour across Canada and the US. Born in rural Nigeria, educated in Africa, England and Canada (Ph.D. York, 1979), his experience has given him a bird's-eye view of the African situation.

The struggle in Nigeria today, according to Osundare, is one of reorientation. "Colonialism and imperialism have taken care of the African mind," and have created a cultural oppression which has only in recent years begun to be questioned, he said. Osundare and his fellow artists are faced with the double responsibility of reviving the nation's traditional art forms and restoring them to grace, while creating a modern voice which reflects the progressive energy presently at work in the country.

Osundare's response to this challenge has been to produce three

volumes of verse (*Songs of the Marketplace*, 1983, *Villages Voices*, 1984, *The Eye of the Earth*, 1985), all presenting topical issues with rich rural imagery and an underlying African rhythm. He is careful to avoid the tendency of many political writers to succumb to propaganda. "The writer is nothing without his environment," political and otherwise, he believes, but in order for art to be completely effective it must "transcend quotidian reality" — while maintaining a dialectical relationship with his immediate world, the artist must strive, as Osundare does, to relate his work to the general human condition.

Poetry has also filled another role in Nigeria, one generally not considered here in Canada. Because freedom of speech has not always been guaranteed, and social comment has been a punishable offence, those interested in social change have been forced to look outside the usual channels for a way of expressing themselves. Poetry, says Osundare, has allowed him, "through parable and allegory . . . to abuse those who were destroying our country," and to touch the public in a way that was impossible through the regular press.

In his quest to engender a human and political awareness in people, Osundare has expanded his talents to include areas other than creative writing. As a teacher at his *alma*

mater in Nigeria, he feels he occupies a unique position by being in direct contact with students, who will be the shapers of the Nigerian future. "The youth," he says "see things as they should be, or as they are capable of being." He sees the anger evident among the Nigerian Youth today as comparable to the feeling in Europe and North America during the late Sixties, a "constructive, regenerative anger" that can ultimately lead to social change.

Changes are already occurring, not only in Nigeria, but on a global scale. As a commentator on the African situation for the magazine *Newsweek*, Osundare has observed not only Nigerian politics, but those of Africa as a whole. "All of a sudden," he observes, "the continent has become smaller," and should violence occur anywhere in Africa the reverberations would be felt in Nigeria. He is quick to point out that although the black/white issue in South Africa is most visible, violence among blacks is also regularly occurring. The only way to overcome this conflict is to arouse the awareness of the world in general. Attitude, according to Osundare, is the most important factor, citing as an example the imposition of economic sanctions against South Africa. "Sanctions may not end apartheid," he says, "but our attitude towards sanctions may be able to do so."

Changing attitudes towards the earth and our fellow human beings is a theme which runs strongly through all of Osundare's work, and motivates him in his diverse occupations. Poetry is perhaps the most expressive of these, and it is in his poetry that we find the purest expression of his motivation:

I sing of the beauty of Athens without its slaves (from "I sing of Change", Songs of the Marketplace, 1983)

If, as Osundare believes, "the so-called African intellectual must be a man of many parts," then he is a success, affecting people's minds both intellectually and emotionally, and helping to create the groundwork for a new African identity.

Doing things "wrong" for artistic innovation

By PAULETTE PEIROL

"A professor once told me, 'You have to know anatomy perfectly before doing your own (figurative drawing) work.' And I thought, 'So I have to be able to do something perfectly before I can do it wrong?'" asks Gail Esau, one of five York students whose work is on display at the IDA Gallery.

Titled *Four Corners*, the collective exhibit also includes pieces by Kathy Garrett, Sue Meggs, Shelley Savoie, and poet Hazel O'Loughlin. Esau works primarily in sculpture while Meggs and Savoie favour etchings and lithographs, and Garrett works with acrylic paint and other mixed media (including 'found objects' such as old teeth).

Doing things "wrong," or at least spontaneously, is one of the prime motivations behind each artist's work. And in an effort to maintain personal uniqueness, the artists revert to "archetypal, primitive

time off between their secondary education and coming to York. Six years ago, O'Laughlin decided to come to Canada, after working as a customs officer in the West Indies, where she was born. Quiet-spoken, O'Laughlin laughs at herself, saying, "I came to university to try to meet with thinkers. I have a short attention span, and I'm very curious. So in first year, I tried English, French and Communications (courses). But I enjoyed the communication in Creative Writing courses most."

Garrett took theatre at Humber College, then went on the Katimavik youth program, and later attended the University of Victoria before coming to York. "There are too many (students) still out to please other for marks," she says of York students, adding, "It's not important anymore, how I'm influenced by peers and professors. I didn't get support in my painting class, but this turned out to be a catalyst."

The topic of discipline is one that



Displace Desires: Lithograph by Sue Meggs

values," according to O'Loughlin. Jungian dream motifs are also apparent in the work of Garrett and Meggs in particular.

"I don't start with a preplanned idea; the work is a process, using intuition," Garrett explains, "but a lot of people over-rationalize their work, as if it is invalidated without preconceived ideas." Garrett leans forward, laughing, "It's very embarrassing not to be able to tell people what it (the work) means!"

Esau takes this stance further, saying, "The product is irrelevant, that's why sculpture (which is changeable) is important to me."

Although Esau has "always done sculpture on (her) own," it took 13 years of working as a legal secretary and travelling through Europe, Canada, the US and Australia before she decided to attend York. "No one in my family went to university," she points out. "I spent a year in Australia still thinking about sculpture."

O'Laughlin and Garrett also took

concerns all three artists. O'Laughlin works in spurts, sometimes not writing for months, then suddenly producing a four-page poem. "I think in a fragmented way, rather than structured. Does that mean I'm undisciplined?" she asks.

"I'm totally disciplined," Esau counters. "Time is an obsession with me right now." Garrett considers herself "pretty obsessive about doing work."

"Isn't obsession perfectionism?" asks O'Laughlin.

"No, it's getting (the work) done," Esau replies.

"Perfection is getting the work to do what you want it to," Garrett revises.

"I have to paint," says Esau, gesturing with her hands.

"I have to think, but I don't have to write . . . I procrastinate," O'Laughlin concludes.

Four Corners will be on display until Friday, September 5.

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