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Niyi Osundare and other African writers in Japan

**E**DITOR'S NOTE I spoke with the poet, Niyi Osundare the other week. It was shortly after a return from Japan where he participated in an African Writer's Forum. The Forum was initiated and sponsored jointly by the Japanese Foreign Ministry, the Kodansha Limited of Japan and Africa Society of Japan. The purpose, we gathered, was 'for the purpose of deepening mutual understanding between the peoples of Japan and African countries, in view of the necessity of increased co-operation in the international community, for its peace and prosperity.'

Also in attendance were other African writers like Micere Mugo of Kenya, Ndebele Njabulo (now Vice Chancellor, University of the North, South Africa), Kole Omotoso of Nigeria and Paul Zelesa of Malawi. The forum had the theme, 'What are the problems the African Countries face in terms of its social and economic development, when those are seen through the African writers' eyes?'

I then asked, What did you see, what did you feel, what did you touch and smell? Which was a conscious departure from what should have been the more predictable question,

'What did you say?' at the forum. Each prospect - of an interview resulting from the encounters, or an outright travelogue - looked rather attractive for our own purpose. But then, we bent towards the travelogue and agreed on a deadline, which departmental and other literary commitments prevented him from keeping. Then came a wild idea and I asked: 'Did you scribble any lines of poetry, I mean which record images or capture your impressions of that world?' And of course he had. Poetry lines ordered in stanzas of four lines each (he told me they were deliberately patterned after a haiku, which is a traditional Japanese poetry genre, one of its oldest; Osundare however regrets that these poems (which are published below) have little of the sublime virtues of a haiku - its carefully measured rhymes, etc.) His own recapitulative lines were scrawled on narrow strips of paper, dug out of a pit of files and documents. As he read them to me, he got lost in-between, unable to decipher his own handwriting in parts obscured by cancellations of words, superimpositions, etc. etc. Even so did he draw a chair and proceed to 'copy out' the poems that in the end became complete rewrites and for some, instantaneous compositions.

What did he feel? One of the poems tell of his wondrous encounter with Japan's *asahi* (Japanese for dawn and sunrise). And touched...? There was the hot sake, the popular brew made from rice, as ubiquitous as it was delectable.

And then there were the happy chaps, who in common reckoning would have been thought as unimportant; one such was Miho Mizutani, the escort who spoke a flavourous dialect of English. It was Miho who stopped the procession on request at a fruits and vegetables market and apologised for not knowing the 'nationality' of a particular species of grapes.

All of those were taking place at a time and close to the place where Hasahara's mob was gassing Tokyo's underground train passengers to death with the Sarin And as would be evident from Osundare's tribute to Kenzaburo Oe, winner of the Nobel literature prize in 1994 (an article which we present here in full), one of the lessons of Japan is, as Osundare says, the startling sameness of a common humanity - for good or for ill - across all the continents of the world.

# IMAGES OF JAPAN

NIYI OSUNDARE