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The African Roots of Michael Echeruo's Poetry: A Close-Reading of 'Sophia'^{*}

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I grew up feeling like I was in the village. I think I am at heart a village-boy—deep deep down my heart (Michael J. C. Echeruo, in an interview with Chukwuma Azuonye, 1987: 169).

1. INTRODUCTION

Although primarily a scholar, by his own confession,¹ Michael Joseph Chukwudaalụ Echeruo is considered by many leading critics of African literature as one of the most powerful voices among the first generation of post-independence African poets of the English expression. Now retiring as William Safire Professor of Modern Letters at Syracuse University, after fifty years of distinguished service to the academy, he was born on March 14, 1937, at Ụmụnumọ in the Mbaanọ local government area of present-day Imo State of Nigeria. Married since 1968 to a medical practitioner (Dr. Rose Echeruo), and the father of five adult children,² he is the first son of Igbo Catholic parents to whom he owes a great deal of his outlook on life. He acknowledges his mother, Martha N. Echeruo, as an “emotional and temperamental role model,” whose “tremendous influence” during the formative years of his life (between 1947 and 1953, when his father was away from home as a student in Britain) gave him a great deal of what he calls his “self-reliance.”³ He remembers his father, Chief Joseph Michael Echeruo—a Catholic knight, high school master and principal, and oil company executive, who later served as a Minister in the Government of Eastern Nigeria during the first republic—as an open-minded man who “didn't demand the fulfillment of any specific targets” but rather encouraged his children “to set [their] own standards and never to do anything [they would] later regret or feel ashamed to have done.”⁴ Remarkably, the early entry of his family into the upper middle class of postcolonial Nigeria did not alter Echeruo's sense of belonging to a “village”: “I wasn't even aware that I had an elitist education—I wasn't even aware of the fact that I had a middle-class background. I grew up feeling like I was in the village. I think I am at heart a village-boy—deep deep down my heart. But that doesn't mean, for one moment, that I am a common man's man.”⁵

The present paper will attempt a comprehensive close-reading of Echeruo's first published poem, “Sophia” (Moore and Beier, 1963).⁶ A much maligned and misunderstood poem, “Sophia” elicited, and seems to have set, a hostile tone of detractive criticism that has dogged the evaluation of all of Echeruo's poetry up till the present day. The perception of “Sophia” as a lyric clogged up with Euromodernist alienisms in theme and style and lacking in indigenous African roots has over the years been extended in a totalizing way by some vocal polemicists to all of Echeruo's poetry, preventing many a critic from consistently following the development of the art of this notable, transnational, postcolonial, African poet of our time. My reading of “Sophia” will be offered as a portal to Echeruo's poetry as a whole, from *Mortality* (1968) and *Distanced* (1975) to the yet unpublished collection, *Khaki No Be Leather: Poems After Chris Okigbo*, begun in 1999 and first read publicly by the poet in Boston, at the international conference on the poetry and life of Christopher Okigbo, on September 19, 2007. The organizing argument of the present reading is that, beneath the Euromodernist surface structure of “Sophia,” lie, at various levels of deep structure, patterns of traditional African thought and symbolism⁷ by which—in my

^{*} This paper was originally presented at the Michael Echeruo Valedictory Symposium (on “Fifty Years of African Literature and Scholarship in the Academy, 1960–2010”) organized by the Humanities Center, Syracuse University, to mark Echeruo's retirement as the William Safire Professor of Modern Letters in the Department of English, Syracuse University, New York, October 14-16, 2010.

contention—the meanings of the poems are actually shaped. Echeruo's assertion that he is "at heart a village-boy" is by no means fortuitous.

2. CONTEXTS AND EVOLUTION OF ECHERUO'S POETRY: 1960 TO THE PRESENT

Echeruo's years of childhood (1937-1950) were spent under the shadows of the evergreen tropical rain foliage and the cyclical rhythm of the seasons in his home village of Ụmụnumọ. He celebrates aspects of the richness of this native soil experience, albeit with keen awareness of the postcolonial "defections" that had occurred, in Part III ("Defections") of his first verse collection, *Mortality* (1968):

In harvest-time,
the mellowed earth beckons:
the ruptured earth yielding the seed
of another fertile year
the scent of unwashed tubers
earthy and sharp and dirty
the loveliness of maidens
in harvest excitement
and hair is all wet, distracting.

This is the month of earth and harvests.
This is the month for defections ("Harvest-time," *Mortality*, III, p. 31).

Despite the running climatic alienisms of spring, summer, and autumn in "Come, Come Spring" (*Mortality*, Part III: "Defections"), Echeruo succeeds in conveying an authentic sense of traditional African village life to the reader through the vivid local color realism of "Harvest-time":

Village maidens
are the bearers of my harvest.
They are rising from the stream
in the hush of this dusk.
They are breaking into laughter
at this pregnant encounter ("Harvest-time," *Mortality*, III, p. 32).

The social life of his family revolved around the traditional beliefs and customs of the village and the mesmeric rites of the village parish church that bears the same name ("St. Charles' Church") as the one in which his early poems to God and O'Brien (*Mortality*, Part IV) are set:

At Saint Charles's Church
confessions are heard
before the daily morning sacrifice.
Our ladies join the sin-flanked queues
to tell O'Brien they have sinned.
The candles squint while mass is said
in the unlit village church—
Where immaculate women kneel and hope
for the promise of the latin spells ("The Signature," *Mortality*, IV: p. 46).

Like other young men of his time, Echeruo grew up as the proverbial "child of two worlds," with one foot in the indigenous folkways of Ụmụnumọ and another foot in Catholicism. The unfortunate archaism "witching" notwithstanding, he never lost sight of the power and significance of the mysteries of the traditional Igbo religious ceremonies that flourished side by side with those of the village church, as we can glean from "The Signature," ii, l. 2-11):

The priest then palms their fears away
 under the witching *oji-tree*
 and waits for the second crow.
 Before his white-rimmed eyes there pass
 the hints of pasts and prophecies.
 Patient guests sit, cock in hand,
 and bide their solemn time
 when comes the frightened only son
 and spots the scorpion-haunted stone (*Mortality*, Part IV: p. 46).

In "Outsider" (p. 15), he describes his poetic persona as the "lonesome bird of the wild"—a visionary and romantic artist that "spat on the world" and "hooted at the moon," thus operating outside convention and drawn to the pleasantries of the natural environment. But he is also the "happy child of the new testament" ("Talk, Patter, and Song", p. 26) who, in spite of this identity, is paradoxically troubled by his own cultural alienation as manifested in his enchantment with the "wonders passing comprehension" of "the new testament." But the complexity of the dance of transition in which the village boy from Umunumọ is embroiled, with his exposure to postcolonial cosmopolitan culture, allowed him to seriously contemplate becoming a Catholic priest.⁸ This was well before his entry into the Stella Maris College, Port Harcourt, where his own father was an English master. There (between 1950 and 1955), his admiration for the priestly calling was reinforced by the moral influence of the school principal, Rev. Fr. Curtin, who he remembers as "a very very great priest—teacher, father, counselor."⁹ After Stella Maris, he gained admission, with a Federal Government scholarship, into the then University College, Ibadan (now University of Ibadan) from where he took a BA degree with high honors in English, in 1960. Thereafter, he worked briefly as a customs official in Lagos, enticed by the prospect of rapid advancement to the top of the senior ranks of the establishments then being vacated by European officers.¹⁰ But soon discovering his life-long calling in academia, he left the customs that same year. After an unsuccessful competition for the position of assistant librarian in the Nnamdi Azikiwe Library of the newly established University of Nigeria with Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967)—soon to emerge as Africa's leading postcolonial, transnational modernist poet—he joined the faculty of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Enugu, as an Assistant Lecturer in English.¹¹ From there, in 1961, he transferred to the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, as one of the founding members of the faculty of the Department of English.

Echeruo's career at Enugu and Nsukka were germinal to his emergence as a scholar and poet of distinction in the early 1960's. In 1960-61, at Enugu, he formed a lasting personal and literary friendship with Okigbo. It was also at Enugu that he began writing poetry seriously. There, he founded, edited and published the short-lived little magazine, *Freshbuds*, which carried one of Okigbo's early poems, "Moonmist," in its maiden edition (see Lindfors, 1974: 9). Okigbo transferred to the Nsukka campus at about the same time as Echeruo in 1961. Between 1961 and 1966, both flourished in the new university town as prominent members of the first generation of the extraordinarily fertile Nsukka School of Nigerian writers, along with Okigbo's next-door neighbor, the ebullient Welsh poet, Peter Thomas, and other members of the faculty of the English Department (Donatus Nwoga, Peter Ogbang and Obi Wali), as well as such prominent student writers in the department as the critic Sunday Anozie, and the poets: Okogbule Wonodi (then known as Glory Nwanodi), Romanus Egudu, Pol Ndu, Bona Onyejeli, Edward Okwu, Clem Abiaziem Okafor, Sam Nwaojigba, Ebenezer Ibe, and Nduka Eya, all of who made some contributions to the Great Mbari Renaissance of the early 1960's through their publications in *Black Orpheus*, *Transition*, *Nigeria Magazine*, and such overseas outlets as *Encounter* (in the United Kingdom).¹² Also, at Nsukka, Echeruo patronized and contributed some of the poems to be later published in his first collection, *Mortality*, to *The Muse: Literary Journal of the English Association at Nsukka*—the primary outlet for the creative output of the leading student writers. Later, in 1971, while serving as Chair of the Department of English, he founded the magazine, *Omabe* (named for the heroic chants of an Nsukka ancestral mask society of that name) as a "monthly" outlet for the extraordinary outburst of creativity among the second generation of Nsukka student writers immediately after the

Nigeria-Biafra war.¹³ Later, in 1977, he founded and became the President of the Nigerian Association for African and Comparative Literature.

Between 1962 and 1965, Echeruo worked for both a master's degree and a doctorate in English at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. His doctorate dissertation, "Joyce Cary: Dimensions of Order," reflects the Africanist tilt of the Occidental focus of his early scholarship. It also laid the groundwork for his later engagement with the exocultural representation of Africa in classic English literature from Shakespeare to Conrad. The first African professor of English literature both at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (1972-74), and the University of Ibadan (1974-88), he served as the Dean of Ibadan's Faculty of Arts and of its School of Postgraduate Studies before moving back to the East in 1980 as the founding Vice-Chancellor of Imo State University, Okigwe (now Abia State University, Uturu), Nigeria. Between 1988 and 1990, he served as visiting professor of English at Indiana University and University of California Los Angeles before accepting the position of William Safire Professor of Modern letters at Syracuse University.

On the balance, Echeruo's accomplishments in such diverse scholarly fields as Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the English novel, 18th Century African Diaspora literature, the social and cultural history of Victorian Lagos, the literature and thought of pan-African nationalism, modern African literature, the Igbo folk festival and theories of the origins of drama, and Igbo language and literature—to which he has contributed dozens of scholarly publications¹⁴ and for which he has won several honorary awards¹⁵—have tended to overshadow his achievement as a poet. But he boasts one of the most promising and dramatic entries into the African literary scene.

In 1963, he won the first prize in the first all-African poetry competition organized by the Mbari Artists and Writers Club in which Dennis Brutus (1924-2009) and Arthur Norje (1942-1970), both of South Africa, took the second and third positions respectively.¹⁶ Okigbo—the then emergent crown prince of modern African letters—who also competed for the award, did not even receive an honorable mention.¹⁷ The winning sequence of poems, published earlier in *Black Orpheus* 12 (1962), under the title, "Debut: Or Love and the Hermitage," was as a matter of fact submitted for the award by the editors of the magazine without prior notice to the poet.¹⁸ The sequence eventually formed part of his first collection of poetry, *Mortality* (1968) which defined the first phase of his poetical works, a phase of intense experimentation in modernist poetics that lasted from 1960 (when he began writing seriously at Enugu) to 1975 (when his second verse collection, *Distanced: New Poems*, was published at Enugu).¹⁹ Composed mostly after the cessation of hostilities in the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1970, *Distanced* is informed by the experience of the war of independence and the traumatic fracture of national identities and allegiances which it occasioned. It also marked a remarkable shift in style, from the dense allusiveness of the *Mortality* poems to greater clarity and directness of phrasing. A third phase in the evolution of Echeruo's poetry began in May 1999 when he began composing the title poem of a new verse collection remarkably entitled *Khaki No Be Leather: Poems after Chris Okigbo* (2001). Publicly performed by the poet for the first time at 2007 Okigbo conference in Boston, this robustly confessional poem cast in the form of a dialogue with the dead poet and inchoate with phrases and words from Okigbo's poetry serves notice to his reading public of the new directions towards which the third phase of his poetry would now be expected to move.²⁰

By and large, the roots and evolution of Echeruo's poetry are comparable to those of other *avant-garde* postcolonial African poets of the second half of the twentieth-century. A movement from the ivory tower to the public square, the first phase was that of apparent isolation and distance during which the poet espoused what appears on the surface to be extreme forms of alien and alienating Euromodernism. Thus, as in Okigbo's poetry in its early phase, Echeruo's poetic persona of the *Mortality* poems, sang "tongue-tied/without name and audience" (*Limits*, III: lines 43-44). The second phase is one of 'deschooling'²¹ from the canons of Euromodernism, following an epiphany of the kind experienced by Okigbo in *Lament of the Drums* IV, wherein the earlier phase is rejected by the poet himself as obscurantist and uncommunicative: "like a dead letter unanswered"—a "rococo/ Choir of insects" and "null/ Cacophony/...void as a debt summons served/On a bankrupt" (lines 75-80). Finally, in the third phase, the poet finds his "own voice" and speaks directly to his reading public like a towncrier in a

language and tone deemed more accessible to the ordinary reader. As the poetic persona declares at the beginning of *Khaki No Be Leather* (a poem whose Pidgin English title reflects the vernacularism that punctuates its various parts):

I hear my own voice, not my masters.

I hear my own thoughts, not my teachers (*Khaki No Be Leather*, 1, iv).

Remarkably, the evolution of Echeruo's scholarship also follows more or less the same trajectory as his poetry—from Occidentalism classicism to an increasing concern with Igbo language, literature and thought. As summed up by him:

I have long ceased to be an Occidentalist. And let me also say that we all started with the West—with European languages and with the Roman alphabet, and all that. It has been a long road. The generations after us, since us, have moved more directly than we did to our indigenous literatures, thanks to us. My main concern now, as an academic, would be with Igbo language and Igbo thought. My concern, as an intellectual, is with Igbo religion, Igbo world-view. My concern as an academic administrator is with Igbo culture and Igbo resurgence (in Azuonye, 1987: 174).

One would have expected that this developmental trajectory would have led him logically to the doors of creative writing in his native Igbo. But not so for Echeruo, the maverick:

I am not a cultist. To try to write in Igbo would be just doing what I will be expected to do now, and, it would be an exercise, pure and simple. I can only encourage those who have the ability to do so (Echeruo, in Azuonye, 1987: 175).

To sum up, Echeruo's career as a scholar and a poet encompasses all of the first fifty years of postcolonial African literature in English as a discipline in the academy (the period covered by the present valedictory symposium). As a poet, he featured strongly in all the major (albeit few and far between) anthologies and studies of African literature, published between 1962 and the mid-1970's. Thus, in 1963, he was presented to the reading public of African poetry (with "Sophia") in *Modern Poetry from Africa* (ed. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, Penguin) and, in 1966, he was among the handful of "major" African poets of the day showcased in *The New Sum of Poetry from the Negro World*, published in Paris by *Presence Africaine*, Vol. 57. In 1968, his *Mortality* (published by Longman), was widely recognized as one of the earliest collections of postcolonial African poetry.

But since the mid-1970's, there has been a noticeable decline in notices of Echeruo's presence on the African literary scene. Not surprisingly, in 2008, Owomeleya Oyekan, in *The Columbia Guide to West African Literature in English Since 1945* (p. 102) even begrudges him a place among modern African creative writers, asserting that he "is primarily a respected and well-regarded academic," and only "qualifies for inclusion among creative writers on the strength of the poetry he published early in his career." By the same token, and despite strong representations in Nwoga (1967), Senanu and Vincent (1978) and Okpewho (1985), there seems to be a near total eclipse of Echeruo's name in the most recent anthologies and critical studies of African literature, and entries under his name in literary biographies (e.g. Gikandi, 2000) are begrudgingly brief and sketchy. In statistical surveys such as Bernth Lindfors' (1985, 1994, 1995, and 2006) "Famous Authors Reputation Test" (FART), he has remained consistently below the radar. But while there are some good grounds to blame this eclipse in his reputation as poet on his overwhelming excellence as a scholar,²² it would appear that the primary reason lies in the hostile reception promoted by ill-informed and reductionist criticism initiated by some early responses to "Sophia," the only poem by which he was introduced to a wider reading public of African literature, in 1963, through the influential anthology, *Modern Poetry from Africa*. In one such misreading, Okeke-Ezigo (1984: 9-10) asserts, with a totalizing reference to all of Echeruo's early poetry:

Trained [at] Ibadan University...in the 1960's [*sic*]²³ to value masculine strength and challenging complexity in poetry, he wrote abstract, deeply intellectual personal poetry, the most typical being the hard-boned philosophical disquisition called "Sophia." Echeruo's attitude then seems to be that poetry is not milk for infants and weak-chested people, but dry meat for strong men with distinguished dentition. It is as if the poet is bluffing the reader, challenging him to forge a mental pick-axe for uprooting a defiant.

The present close reading of "Sophia" is essentially a response to criticism of this kind, including those of the decolonization troika, Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike (1979, 1980) and Egudu (1986) to be discussed presently.

3. CLOSE-READING OF "SOPHIA"

But what exactly, in close reading, is the problem with "Sophia" as perceived by its critics? From a cursory glance, one can say that the poem challenges the reader's imagination by the intimidating Euromodernist bricolage (in particular the defamiliarization phraseology) of its surface structure:

Left hand is God's hand
Devil's hand across Chaos
When Eve began
Was hers in Eden farm
Through cat's tiger's fur
Through Adam's core.

'Increase and till the earth.'
Plough on virgin-land is temptation.

There was a fountain
Of rain and grain.
Force fountain down gorge
Into valley of shoots
(*Is not spilling*)
But will not bloom on Martha
Or *Vita Nuova*.

Eat apples by the left hand
Much sweeter.
Right hand is Right's hand
Bitter.

Sweet gorgeless Sophia

The title of the poem is from the Greek word for wisdom (*sophia*), chosen, as stated in the poet's notes (Echeruo, 1968: 52), in order to underscore its thematic focus on "two ideals—womanhood and knowledge—seen as domesticating, humanizing and dominating influences." But this title notwithstanding, and despite the prominence of the allusion to Dante Alighieri's early courtly love poem, *La Vita Nuova* (lit. "The New Life," 1295), the key to the argument of the poem seems to be contained in the "left hand" trope in its opening words. Simply stated, the argument seems to be that the creation of humankind, as depicted in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, is—from the perspective of traditional African thought—a "left-handed" (careless and ill-conceived) act, that gave rise to utter "chaos," a situation that allowed for a takeover by diabolical forces. Caught in the quagmire of the contradictory injunctions of the errant God, humankind is empowered to follow the bitter-sweet path of freedom and self-knowledge charted by our primordial and supreme mother, the heroine of the piece. This argument makes "Sophia" less a "puzzle"—as it has been misrepresented by the Decolonization troika (Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie, 1979: 30)—than an eloquent postcolonial interrogation of a domesticated alien mythology that is

as confused as it is confusing. This synopsis further belies the pet argument of some of Echeruo's critics that he "has shown little or no concern for the political problems of Nigerian society" (Egudu, in Gerard, 1986: 751), or for the larger ideological issues in postcolonial discourse in Africa.

Stanza 1 is one of numerous African reconfigurations of the story of Adam and Eve in the Judeo-Christian Book of Genesis. Line 1 has long been presumed to refer to Michelangelo's painting of the creation of Adam (reproduced in Fig 1 below):



Fig 1: Michelangelo's Painting of the Creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Italy

But nothing can be further from the truth. Even from a cursory glance at the reproduction, God's hand of creation in Michelangelo is the "right hand,"²⁴ not the "left hand" (as depicted in Echeruo). Echeruo's text is thus not an affirmative allusion to the Judeo-Christian myth depicted in Michelangelo's painting but a contradiction or counterfiguration of it. The key trope of the poem is thus neither the title "Sophia" nor the references to alien literature and mythology (*Vita Nuova* or the story of Mary, Martha and Jesus), but the antimony of "left hand" and "right hand" (in stanzas 1 and 4) as schematized below:

Stanza 1
Left hand is God's hand
 Devil's hand across Chaos

Stanza 5
 Eat apples by the **left hand**
 Much sweeter.
Right hand is Right's hand
 Bitter.

From deep structure analysis, we can see that, by dint of parallelism, God's "left hand" is not only profanely equated to "devil's hand," but that, in the consequences of their action "across chaos," both are indistinguishable from one another (as schematized below):

Left hand	is	God's hand Devil's hand	across chaos
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The answer seems to lie in the indigenous African left hand/right hand antimony, an antimony that perhaps go back to the earliest phases of human consciousness and the very origins of the analog call-

signals that evolved in Africa over the eons as part of the human language instinct. While there is still a moot association, in European languages, of the left hand with something wrong or untoward, as is indeed indicated by the idea of a "right hand" in English (suggesting a "correct" as opposed to a "wrong" hand), antimonies of this kind are no longer as explicit and unambiguous in post-industrial Europe as they currently are in indigenous African,²⁵ Asian,²⁶ Native American,²⁷ and Australasian languages, thought-patterns, rituals, and etiquette. In Echeruo's native Igbo culture,²⁸ the antimony is still very active and potent to the present day.

For the Igbo, the left hand is the wrong or abominable hand: *aka èkpè* (evil hand),²⁹ *aka ibìtè* (unclean hand),³⁰ or, more explicitly, *aka ojoṛ* (bad hand). The hand of forgetfulness, carelessness, insolence, rudeness, etc, it is traditionally regarded by the Igbo with the same negative connotations with which the left hand is associated in several other African languages and systems of thought. As Smith (1952: 22) notes with special reference to the BaSotho of South Africa and the Mandinka of West Africa,

Many Africans draw a distinction between the right and left sides of the body: the right is a symbol and seat of strength and virility, the left of weakness and femininity. A candidate for chieftainship may be rejected on the ground that he is left-handed.

To take but a few more examples, the Kaguru, a Bantu people of Tanzania, East Africa, "call the right hand or right side, *kulume*; the left, *kumoso*"; and they "consider the right hand to be clean and strong, and the left to be unclean and weak. Masculine qualities are thought to be of the right, feminine of the left" (Beidelman, 1961: 252). Furthermore, "The left hand is used to handle unclean material or to perform unpleasant tasks" (Beidelman, 1961: 253). Similarly, among the Nuer of Sudan (Evans-Pritchard, 1953: 5), "The left side symbolizes evil as well as femininity, and there is here a double association, for the female principle is also associated with evil directly, as it were, and not merely through the convergence of femininity and evil in the concept of the left side. Thus we have two opposites, the one comprising the left side, weakness, femininity, and evil, and the other comprising the right side, strength, masculinity, and goodness." In a study of the pre-Islamic customary folklore of the pastoral Fulani, Stenning (1959: 39-40, 104-5, 106-8) examines the paradigms (left = east, back, north, feminine, junior homestead, and genealogical junior; right = west, front, south, masculine, senior homestead and genealogical senior), suggesting the preeminence of the right.

Needless to say, there are variations, ambiguities and complexities in some of the particularities of the African right-left symbology (see Wieschhoff, 1938 and Wolfson, 1986). Thus, for example, the Banyoro are well-known for their occasional resort "to symbolic reversal." But, in their everyday customary folklore and etiquette, "they regard the right hand and (especially) the color white as auspicious in many contexts, the left hand and the colour black as inauspicious" (Beattle, 1968: 414). Thus, for them, in a wide range of folk gestural contexts "the right is pre-eminent and auspicious while the left is inferior and inauspicious" (Beattle, 1968: 415). Occasional symbolic reversals also occur among the Ovahimba, a Herero-speaking people of Angola and Namibia in south-western Africa; but more commonly, among them, "left and right...respectively denote: small or weak; and large or strong" (Crandall, 1996: 328). So strong are the negative connotations of the left hand in Igbo culture, as undoubtedly experienced by Echeruo (the village-boy) at Uṃunumọ in his years of childhood, that it is obligatory to render immediate apologies such as *bikō gbaghàra m aka èkpè m* (please, forgive me [the use of] my left hand) if for any excusable reason (e.g. congenital left-handedness, deformity, or the preoccupation of the right hand with something else), it becomes inevitable that an object must be delivered to another person (especially an elder) with the left hand; otherwise the gesture will be construed as disrespectful or insolent. A parent will quickly intervene if a child attempts to eat with the left hand. Furthermore, the left hand is in effect the hand of stealth and inconformity. It is also considered to be the hand of forgetfulness. In Igbo belief, an object put away with the left hand is apt to be forgotten. If a person misplaces an object, he is apt to say to himself, where on earth did I put this thing with my left hand? Needless to say, the ethics and world view of Echeruo the village-boy raised in the rural environs of Uṃunumọ must have been fashioned by the rules of conduct imposed by the left-hand/right-hand antimony before his exposure to other modes of

perceiving and processing reality. It can therefore be reasonably surmised that his perception and processing of the actions of the Judeo-Christian God in terms of the left and the right hand are rooted in his indigenous African habits of thought rather than in any alien system. In stanza 2 of Gabriel Okara's satiric lyric, "Once Upon a Time," the speaker's complaint outrage against postcolonial African subalterns, who in imitation of their European role models, "shake hands without hearts / while their left hands search / my empty pockets," is clearly informed by the same kind of indigenous African habit of thought.

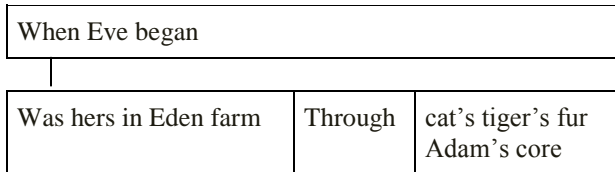
By contrast to the left hand, in Echeruo's traditional Igbo thought, the preeminence of the right hand as the correct or acceptable hand is asserted in the three most common names reserved for it—*aka nrī* (food hand), *aka ikengà* (masculine hand of personal achievement), and *aka oma* (good hand). It is the hand we stretch forward to shake another as an expression of amity or friendship. These Igbo conceptions of the right hand are comparable to those of several other African peoples. The Kaguru, for instance, like the Igbo, see the right hand as the food hand which they also use obligatorily "for greeting persons and for shaking hands" (Beildelman, 1961: 253). In its conception as *aka ikengà*, the right hand is linked by the Igbo with *ikengà*, by far the most complex ritual symbol of masculinity, purposive effort, and personal achievement in their myth and ritual.³¹ Described, with reference to Boston (1977) as "a cult object associated with a spiritual force, usually individually owned by males and generally associated with personal achievement," the Igbo *ikengà* "is characterized by a seated male figure with horns, sometimes highly naturalistic in appearance, at other times highly abstract" (Ottenberg, 1977: 8). Through its association with *ikengà*, the right hand exists in the Igbo cultural unconscious as a sacerdotal hand of sustenance, hard work, purposive effort, respectability, power, authority, achievement and fulfillment. This association probably goes back to the natural selections that helped define our humanness through the evolution of *Homo habilis*. Be that as it may, it seems to me that, in his reconfiguration of the Judeo-Christian story of Adam and Eve in "Sophia," Echeruo has summoned, from his creative unconscious, the totality of the right-hand/left-hand antimony in the traditional system of thought of his native Umunuṃo village. I therefore submit that, scrutinized in the light of this antimony, the poem yields its primary meaning, even without the poet's notes.

Several patterns of modernist ambiguity follow in Stanza 1 from the "chaos" arising from the Judeo-Christian God's left-handed act of creation, beginning with the entry of Eve ("Sophia") as the archetypal feminine revolutionary. Her entry is heralded by the elliptical line ("When Even began"). In its silence, this line is paradoxically loaded with significations, among them: "when Even began her search for knowledge", "when Eve began to seek an answer to the mystery of the forbidden fruit", "when Even began to question her state of being as a female afterthought and help meet for the man in the Garden of Eden"; "when Eve began to understand her place in the order of things"; "when Eve began her liaison with the Devil come to her in the guise of the serpent", "when Eve began the first women's liberation or feminist movement in the world"; when Even began to search for the essence of her womanhood", "when Eve began to seek a proper understanding of the relationship between God and humankind," etc. But whatever it is that Eve began, the phrasing is one that clearly identifies her as beginning or initiating something revolutionary, as an agent of change, a culture heroine, or a founding mother.

Besides the left-hand/right-hand antimony, another dominant trope in "Sophia" that is decidedly drawn from the African tradition is the feline symbolism of "cat's tiger's fur" (the alien word "tiger" notwithstanding). Simply stated, "cat's tiger's fur" is the natural fur on the body of a cat that resembles that on the body of a "tiger." Echeruo is perhaps not different from several other African postcolonial writers who use the word "tiger" in their writings when "leopard" (*agu*, in his native Igbo) is intended,³² tiger not being (strictly-speaking) part of the fauna of the tropical African rain forests. But in close reading, it is easy to see why the choice of tiger in the present modernist translocalism may be deemed deliberate on the part of the poet. In reading, the Western educated African audience can easily make the connection with the local feline equivalent, leopard. But, with "tiger" as the actual word on the page, Echeruo is able (at the same time) to tap into a wide range of other significations which emerge from a careful deconstruction of the mytho-syntactical environment in which the word is placed:

Was hers in Eden farm
 Through cat's tiger's fur
 Through Adam's core

As schematized below, several types of ambiguity are packed into this case of postcolonial hybridity, allowing us to read the statement severally and collectively as affirmative and interrogative, thus empowering us to accept both a mythic certainty and epistemological skepticism:



In an interrogative deconstruction, the overarching question in these lines seems to say: "Was any action of "hers" (or whatever it is that she began) in "Eden farm"³³ purely of her own making or "through" the instrumentality of other agencies? In the two parallel lines that impute the influence of a coercive "other" via the prepositional signifier ("through"), an affirmative deconstruction leads us inexorably to sexuality: her fate in Eden was indeed sealed by both her own femininity and sexual liberation and Adam's masculinity and masculine prowess, as indeed suggested by Echeruo in his note on line 7, quoted above: "Eden has been lost through both sexuality and the search for knowledge."

At issue here, as observed above, are several patterns of postcolonial hybridity. The first parallel phrase "cat's tiger's fur," subsumes the many significations of the word "cat," both indigenous African and alien, e.g. *nwaanawiri*,³⁴ in some Igbo dialects, hybridized with *tiger cat*, or a wild feline that resembles a tiger in appearance or behavior; *tiger*, in the metaphorical sense of a person that is regarded as possessing feline aggressiveness, audaciousness or fierceness; and, in English slang, *cat* as a verbal ("To look for sexual partners" or "have an affair or affairs") or as a nominal ("A woman regarded as spiteful").³⁵ Some of these cross-cultural significations also apply to the leopard as represented in Igbo and other traditional African verbal arts. Here again, the significations are infinite, and Echeruo's careful manipulation of his phraseology empowers us, in deconstructive reading, to tap simultaneously into the entire semantic range of "cat's tiger's fur," both positive and negative. Among the positive potentialities of the phrase is the Igbo proverb, *ebube agu na-eche agu* (the splendor of the leopard protects the leopard). The serpent of the original Abrahamic myth has been eliminated but Eve stands protected by her own feline resplendence. By the same token, the splendor of the tiger cat's fur can also, in a sexual encounter, carry the ultramodern connotation of a "sophisticreamy" lady (to borrow the image from Okigbo's Waterwaid sequence in *Heavensgate III*)—clothed in a feline fur, alluring and intimidating. Indeed, Echeruo's Eve comes with extraordinary modernity and female power, like a sexy diva in fur coat, yet bristling with the sexuality of a "tiger cat" (leopardess or lioness) in the wild. The first sexually and intellectually liberated woman in human, albeit mythic memory, she may be viewed in some readings as carrying the venom of the archetypal *femme fatale* or evil woman.

On the surface, the meaning of the poem turns on Eve's discovery—through her defiance of divine power and authority as a result of her empowerment through her acquisition of knowledge—of sexual fulfillment and freedom. But at deep structure, it is also about the archetype of revolutionary change in all its ramifications. Overwhelmed by Eve's emergence, Adam responds with equal modernity. The second parallel phrase "Adam's core," subsumes the many significations of the word "core," among them "The hard or fibrous central part of certain fruits, containing the seeds," or (in oil and gas technology) "A cylindrical mass drilled vertically into the earth."³⁶ The mannered reference through Adam's core," to the first man's genitals and sexuality seems fairly obvious, especially when we conflate this reading with the idea of "hard core" (extremely graphic or explicit representation of sexual prowess) in contemporary popular sexlore.

These deconstructions lead us back to "God's double injunction," as reformulated by Echeruo in stanza 2 of "Sophia":

'Increase and till the earth.'
Plough on virgin-land is temptation.

The spotlight here is on two sexually compatible persons alone in paradise, unreasonably restricted from attaining natural self-fulfillment by a Fascist God's left handed order forbidding sex ("the forbidden fruit") despite the injunction to "till on virgin land" which invites the discovery of sexuality. In actual fact, "Increase and till the earth," is Echeruo's telescoping of two separate statements attributed to God in the Book of Genesis. On the fourth day of creation, God is reported as saying to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply. Let the fish fill the seas, and let birds multiply on earth" (Gen. 1: 22). It is not until much later that the idea of tilling the earth comes up (Gen. 2: 4-14). Later (Gen. 4: 2), we are told that Cain is "a tiller of the ground," but no concordance or index examined has unveiled any specific injunction to the first human to "till the earth" or "to plough on virgin-land." These phrases therefore seem to be Echeruo's own extrapolations, by dint of poetic license, from God's curse on the man after he had been deceived by Eve into participating in eating the fruit of the forbidden tree (Gen. 2: 17-19). The underlying problem here is the problem of theodicy (lit. "argument in defense of God's goodness despite the existence of evil")³⁷—"the great accopt" of Milton in his *Paradise Lost*, to "justify the ways of God to man" (Book 1, line 26). But, as Echeruo's poetry suggests, there is in fact no way of justifying the ways of the Judeo-Christian God to humanity. Throughout *Mortality*, especially Part IV ("Poems to God and O'Brien"), Echeruo grapples with the problem of theodicy. "Man and God Distinguished" (p. 42), for example, is a reflection on human mortality and fear of death in the face of the wonders of creation. The final image is a veritable enigma ("And the cold angel caresses the God!") which, in close reading, seems to point to an existentialist dimension to Echeruo's poetry. The collocation of the two irreverent phrases ("cold angel" and "the God") evokes an image of callous divine left-handedness (or indifference) to what comes through as the existential anguish of humanity, for "the God," whom "the cold angel" (decidedly the angel of death) "caresses," is not only above the spray of human mortality but can be seen as continuing business as usual in the face of human suffering and death. Okpewho's (1985) excellent analysis of the meaninglessness of colorful Catholic rites in "Easter Penitence" and the gap between human faithfulness and the providence of the left-handed God of Christendom further underscores Echeruo's disavowal of formal theodicy in his verse.

Now to Stanza 4, which I have earlier described as essentially a counterpoint to the contradictory double-injunctions at Eden. The stanza is in the form of a miniature hymn to the life-sustaining forces of natural and healthy sex, sexuality, reproduction and fecundity of which earth deities like the Igbo *Ala* (or *Ani*) are a personification:

There was a fountain
Of rain and grain.
Force fountain down gorge
Into valley of shoots
(*Is not spilling*)
But will not bloom on Martha
Or *Vita Nuova*.

An elaborate metaphysical conceit, the stanza paints a composite picture of both the male and female human genitalia as well as of the forms of healthy sexuality guaranteed to promote fecundity. But this is not in terms of the injunctions of the left-handed God in Eden. It is rather in terms of "the realities of life" which these injunctions contravene. The portal to this interpretation lies in an understanding of the semantic range of each of the key words—"fountain", "rain and grain"; "force"; "gorge"; "valley of shoots"; "*not spilling*"; "bloom"; "Martha"; and "*Vita Nuova*."

"Fountain" refers to a jet of water or as spring that is the source of a stream. In line 1 of the stanza before us, we have a vivid visual image of a germinal jet of "rain and grain," rain being an agency of fertilization while grain is the seed of new life. The jet is thus, clearly (in the established context), a decorous metaphor for the stream of spermatozoa (the seeds of life) ordained by nature to be forced down the portal of human procreation, the vagina, here denoted as the "gorge." Through this emphasis on vital nature imagery, the Biblical creation myth is expropriated into a thoroughly pagan (or, shall we say, traditional religious) context, a postcolonial rhetorical ploy that further undermines the alien Judeo-Christian myth through the subtle suggestion that any claim it may have to consistency and value pertains to patterns already present in the poet's indigenous cult of the earth mother.

Literally, a gorge refers to "a deep narrow passage with steep rocky sides," in short, "a ravine."³⁸ Seen simply as a "deep narrow passage," Echeruo's "gorge" in line 3 may be read as coterminous with "the passage" in Okigbo's *Heavensgate* I, where it is deployed as a metaphor for the vestibule connecting the vagina and the "dark waters of the beginning" (the amniotic fluid buoy of a new babe in the womb). Taken together with its "steep rocky sides," we have an evocation of the idea of the *vagina dentata* (toothed vagina) of cross-cultural folklore (Stith Thompson Motif Index Nos. A933, A1313, D1610, F547, K1222, and K1315)³⁹ which has traditionally been associated with Eve or her alter ego, Lilith (A933), as the archetypal *femme fatale* that has brought suffering to the world through her unbridled sexuality that goes against the grain of God's Fascist decrees.

But Echeruo's civility and unsentimental postcolonial counter-figuration strategy does not seem to admit of the idea of the *vagina dentata*. His Africanization of the subject of sexuality in Eden focuses rather on the female genitalia as a "valley of shoots" in the state of nature—of young growth arising from germinating seed and womanhood as an embodiment procreative powers imaging the world of self-generating nature. In this respect, he would agree with aspects of the myth as recounted in the Book of Genesis: "springs came up from the ground and watered all the land" and "all sorts of trees grew up from the ground—trees that were beautiful and that produced delicious fruit" (Gen 2: 4-14). The continued self-generation of nature calls for natural sexuality, a cross-cultural more that informs Benjamin Franklin's homely wise-saw, "Rarely use venery but for health or offspring."⁴⁰ Sure enough, this is the idea of womanhood which is venerated in traditional religions and myths across the world as the great Earth Goddess, a myth that is particularly strong in Echeruo's own Igbo culture in the person of *Ala* (or *Ani*), the undisputable supreme deity of everyday life of the Igbo.⁴¹ As represented in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (chapter 5, paragraph 1),

Ani, the earth goddess [was] the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth.

In a restatement of this image of the Igbo earth goddess in his the maiden Ahiajoku Lecture, Echeruo (1979:19) states quite categorically: "if ever there was a supreme god among the Igbo, it was *Ala*. A crisis in our institutions has obscured this fact." Describing himself as a poet perceived by some parties as "a neo-Christian and some say neo-pagan," Echeruo (in Azuonye, 1987: 166) appears to see sexuality in "Sophia" with what is tantamount to a Christian humanist sensibility in which there is an amalgam of Christian and traditional morality wherein healthy sexuality must be an extension of the power of generating new "shoots" embodied in the great mother Earth. In this sense, *Ala* or *Mbari* (an artistic ritual celebrating the great mother's embodiment of all facets of creativity and knowledge, would seem to be a good title for the present hymn and a fair alternative title for the poem as whole.

The earth-ordained morality necessarily excludes "not spilling"—a parenthetical allusion to Onanism (or *coitus interruptus*), a type of sexual perversity forbidden by the pagan retentions of the Levitical Code of the Old Testament and named after Onan, son of Judah, who had taken over his dead brother's wife, in accordance with a custom which exists in Echeruo's own traditional Igbo culture as *nkuchi*:

Onan was not willing to have a child who would not be his own heir. So, whenever he had intercourse with his brother's wife, he *spilled* the semen on the ground. This prevented him from having a child who would belong to his brother. But the Lord considered it evil for Onan to deny a child to his dead brother. So the Lord took Onan's life too (Gen. 38: 9-11).

Surprisingly, in the closing couplet of the stanza at hand, the blessing of creativity ordained by God is excluded from blooming on Martha and *Vita Nuova* (Beatrice, the glorious lady of Dante's *Divine Comedy*). But why not "on Martha"—a homely woman devoted to domesticating values but is distracted by her sister, Mary, during a visit to their home by Jesus. As recounted in the Gospel According to St Luke (10: 28-42),

As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed them into her home. Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he taught. But Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me." But the Lord said to her, "My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her."

Within the framework of the "two ideals" of "womanhood and knowledge—seen as domesticating, humanizing and dominating influences," which Echeruo explores in "Sophia," Christ is seen here sounding like a latter-day radical feminist. His response to Martha seems to encourage female pursuit of intellectual (humanizing and dominating) influences (represented by Mary) at the expense of the traditional domesticating influences (represented by her more homely sister, Martha).

In the penultimate stanza (4), the core of the author's argument that "Eden was lost through sexuality and the pursuit of knowledge" is briskly wrapped up with reference to the new postcolonial the left-hand/right-hand antimony introduced by imperium:

Eat apples by the left hand
Much sweeter.
Right hand is Right's hand
Bitter.

Here God's "right hand" is associated with the "bitterness" that inheres from restrictive exercise of coercive power and authority and Eve's "left hand" is associated with the "sweetness" that inheres from a rebellion that guarantees self-knowledge through sexual freedom and fulfillment. At issue here, in one of numerous possible deconstructions of the stanza, is the Right-Left antimony in power politics in which the Right (conservative) tends to be seen as authoritarian and coercive conformity while the Left (Liberal) tends to be seen as revolutionary and unbridled non-conformity. In the present context, the right hand emerges as the hand of conformity and of acquiescence while Eve's non-conformity with divine injunction can be seen, as Echeruo does, as a "left handed" action, which, as rebellion, is often "much sweeter" than simply towing the line. In the end, the Judeo-Christian God emerges as the archetypal extreme right-wing Fascist (in terms of the dictatorial and centralized control of human enterprise and repression of all opposition) while the great mother of humanity, Eve, the sweetness of whose rebellion is clearly endorsed by the poet, emerges as the archetypal extreme left-wing revolutionary of the postcolonial world order. Needless to say, all these have clear implications for postcolonial discourse in Africa. A postcolonial poet does not have to write what Okigbo calls "platform poetry" in order to be recognized as committed to the issues of the day in the postcolonial politics of his people. Poetry, at its best, is after all a fabric of metaphors rather than of wow-wow-wow!

In Stanza 4, the narrative returns to Adam and Eve with a focus on the meaning of Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit, here arbitrarily described as "apples" (a demystifying and unhelpful reductionism). Echeruo's note, however, offers the useful insight that "Eden has been lost through both sexuality and the search for knowledge. The hand of God is no longer his alone." Furthermore, the revolutionary moment is

adroitly tied by dint of Echeruo's lyricism to the left-hand/right-hand antimony in this stanza in a way that helps to establish this antimony as the central trope of the poem.

The fourth and final stanza is a single-line ("Sweet, gorgeless Sophia") which, like the superpository image in Ezra Pound's poetry (as discussed, for instance, in Egudu, 1971), sums up and clarifies the image sets in the earlier sections.

The final stanza (5), offers a one-line summary image in which the problem of the poem is resolved in favor of womanhood as a humanizing force of the intellect:

Sweet gorgeless Sophia

I posit that this image celebrates the triumph of Eve's sexual and intellectual revolution. Because "gorgeless" (without "gorge") can be interpreted as sexless or asexual in the light of the above deconstruction of "gorge," this closing line can be read as the ultimate tribute to the mother of mankind as a culture heroine that opened the way to human cultural freedom and enlightened discourse unencumbered by illogical restrictions imposed on humanity in the name of an overbearing divine providence. But whatever else it means, from a host of other possible close readings, it is essentially an African interrogation of an exocultural mythic image that inheres—in more ways than hitherto recognized—from our postcolonial yearning for freedom from a mindless fascist, colonial authority.

It is my hope that the present close-reading will help to put paid to malevolent misreadings such as the following from the decolonization troika, Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike (1979: 29-30):

Partly as a result of this addiction to archaisms, the poetry of the Ibadan/Nsukka poets tends to be craggy, lumpy, full of obstructions, unnecessarily and artificially difficult. Simple ideas are often deliberately clothed in esoteric idiom. For instance, what exactly does Echeruo's "Sophia" mean? What is he trying to communicate?...A poem cannot just be, it must also mean—regardless what anyone says to the contrary. Is "Sophia" a simple erotic experience? Or some archetypal ritual? And it is not enough to say that we miss the whole point. That we miss the whole point is the point! The poem doesn't make sense, not even if we know that Sophia means Wisdom. If he is talking about a simple erotic experience with some woman by the name of Sophia (or Martha) on whom the copulation will not bring conception and new life ("will not bloom on Martha/ Or Vita Nuova"), why the unnecessary associative indirection? If this is not what he is talking about, then what on earth is he talking about? Poetry is not a puzzle.

It is hoped that the present close reading has shown that "Sophia" is by no means "craggy, lumpy, full of obstructions, unnecessarily and artificially difficult" and that it cannot be written off as "a puzzle." It is rather a poem with a coherent and persuasive argument that is relevant to some of the most dominant issues in postcolonial discourse in postcolonial and post-Christian Africa. It is also my hope that the left-hand/right-hand dichotomy employed in the exposition of the primacy and strength of African thought-patterns in the shaping of the poem can be recognized as an essential key for the exorcism of obscurity in the reading of Echeruo's poetical works as a whole.

Stanza 3 is essentially a miniature hymn to the life-sustaining forces of natural and healthy sexuality, fecundity and reproductivity, of which traditional earth deities like the Igbo *Ala* (or *Ani*) are a personification. A counter-point to the left-handed injunction (against the eating of the forbidden fruit) that contradicts the command to "Increase and till the earth," it is a celebration of the quantum leap in perception and thinking represented by the first revolutionary moment in the global mythic unconscious and the association of this moment with female leadership. Against this background, the concluding allusions to the Bible story of Christ, Martha and Mary, as well as to Dante's picture of the 'glorious lady' of his mind and his predicament in the *Vita Nuova* seems rather superfluous and, can be easily be expunged from the poem without much loss in meaning. At this point, it seems worth remarking that Echeruo's academic annotations to his poetry tend to obfuscate rather than clarify. Often, the notes throw up clouds of spherical aberration between readerly competence and his highly evocative lyricism. In a deconstructive enterprise, such as the present close reading, the autonomy and supremacy of the text is infringed upon and authorial statement of intention reveals itself as not necessarily compatible with the

meaning of the text. In deconstructive reading, every text has a life of its own, often independent of authorial intention. No poet, no writer, has his meaning alone. Readerly competence, which evolved in deconstructive discourse from Noam Chomsky's theory competence and performance, means that every member of the reading public of a poem has an inborn capacitance to bring his or her own personal experience of life and letters to the meaningful interpretation of the text before him or her, irrespective of the original intention of the author. The problem with magisterial authorial statement of intentionality, therefore, is that it often bids fair to foreclose semiotic plasticity, disabling readerly competence from apprehending several aspects of the infinite meanings of the signifiers laid out on the page by an inspired artist, and Echeruo is undoubtedly such an inspired artist.

4. 'SOPHIA' AS A PORTAL TO ECHERUO'S POETRY

I began the present close reading by posing the question: What exactly is the problem with "Sophia"? It seems clear from the foregoing that the answer goes beyond the poem's intimidating modernist bricolage and defamiliarization phraseology. The overarching problem is one of cultural ambiguity and the unresolved contradictions that inhere from this ambiguity. The emperor's new dress is here not stark nudity but an aesthetic overdressing in an alien accoutrement that is so loud that it drowns the poetic persona's underlying ancestral voice, raising doubts about the poet's allegiances and identity. This is, in some respects, the problematic of young Nigerian woman novelist, Chimamanda Adichie's keynote address ("Negotiating Identity") at the Echeruo valedictory symposium on October 14, 2010. In that address, Adichie dwells at some length on what she calls "a singularly peculiar question" ("Are you an African writer?"),⁴² posed by a fellow Nigerian at one of her public speaking engagements on her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), set in the Biafra-Nigeria war of 1967-70. Says she:

I was born and raised in Nigeria. I wrote a novel about a central moment in Nigerian history. I speak Igbo, one of the indigenous languages of Nigeria. I have only one passport, which is Nigerian; and, by all accounts, Nigeria is in Africa. Yet I was being asked if I was an African writer. This, by the way, is a question I am often asked and nearly always by an African. So it is a peculiar question, and considering how often I have been asked that, it is also an increasingly tiresome question.

Over the past forty-three years, since the publication of Echeruo's *Mortality* (1968), he has been waylaid, from time to time, by many critics, with the same question. Some of these critics have blatantly dismissed him as an Anglophile with no African roots at all. In some of these critical onslaughts, his fidelity to the poetic manifesto as stated in "Daedalus," the final lyric in *Mortality*, is called into question, often leading to the conclusion that he is temperamentally and aesthetically ill-equipped "to forge in the smithy of his soul, the uncreated conscience of [his] race." In one such criticism, Roscoe (1971; 64-67)—in an adverse comparison with Soyinka and Okara—accuses him of either indisposition or inability "to fashion his art from traditional African material." But by far most extensive and devastating criticism in this vein (the fallacy of most of its key arguments already exposed by the Africanisms discussed in the present paper) will be found in fellow Nsukka poet-scholar, Romanus Egudu's essay on "Christopher Okigbo and the Growth of Poetry," in Gérard (1986: 751):

Of the poets who were represented in Moore and Beier's *Anthology* and/or who had had collections of their own printed before the civil war, Michael Echeruo (b. 1937) is the least "Nigerian" in terms of national consciousness and especially poetic style. In his only volume of poetry, *Mortality* (1968), which appeared rather late, though not quite as late as Okara's, his curious interest in biblical episodes which he does not believe it and his satirical attitude to Christianity are revealed in sections I and IV. Furthermore with his abstruse record of his own love experiences, Echeruo has shown little or no concern for the political problems of Nigerian society. Like James Joyce's Daedalus, after whom the last poem in *Mortality* is named, his mind is the sole stage upon which his poetry is acted out. But whereas Daedalus as he goes into exile sets himself the noble task of forging in the smithy of his souk "the uncreated conscience of his race," Echeruo appears to belong to no particular race and to be conscious of none.

It does not follow from this, however, that Echeruo's poetry has no significance or artistic merits. It may have these but not as Nigerian poetry; rather, perhaps, simply as poetry without a local habitation. For instance, the writer's erudition is exhibited in the Latin-clogged lines and biblical allusions. Whatever success this kind of poetry achieves will certainly be determined by criteria other than those relevant to the Nigerian situation.

Fraser, who fails to mention Echeruo's work in his *West African Poetry: A Critical History* (1986), maintains more or less the same attitude in his ambiguous praise of Echeruo's achievement as a poet in his contribution to the online *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* (n.d.): "Echeruo is a poet of moods: declining seasons, the crisis and promise of death. Throughout *Mortality* the controlling images are of autumn and harvest, the melancholy and fruitfulness of which are explored in their private, mythic, and political dimensions."

But by far the most blistering denunciation of Echeruo's alleged scorn for, or aesthetic alienation from, his African roots will be found in the loquacious polemic, *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, in which the well-known troika, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Madubuike (1979, 1980), spare no odium in advancing their contention that Echeruo, like other Nsukka-Ibadan poets of his generation, is so obsessed with imitating his Euromodernist masters—Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Hopkins, etc.—that he has failed to heed the true voices of tradition writ large in the oral poetry that must have formed part of his African village upbringing. Ignoring all possibilities of vraisemblance in poems informed by the Latin Mass of the Roman Catholic Church in the poet's home village, the troika has taken much liberty in accusing him and Okigbo of "littering" their poetry with the so-called "*corpus christi* formulas: *ne nos inducas; ure igne; nobis quoque peccatoribus; qui tollis peccata mundi; misere; non sum dignus*—"according to the order of Melchisedech" (Chinweizu, *et al*, 1980:165). As summed up by the troika:

Companion to that is the vast array of Catholic impedimenta which clutter their poetry. Just about every other line we stumble against a chalice, crucifix, marble sarcophagus, halo, incense, rose, passion flower. In their presentation of the accompanying rites, if their intention is to mock, it rarely comes through; and when it does, it sounds like the pusillanimous mockery of an initiate on the verge of disenchantment" (Chinweizu, *et al*, 1980:165).

There can be no denying the fact that, in both the actual lyrics and in the notes accompanying them in *Mortality* (1968), Echeruo may have contributed to several of the above lines of attack. He does so in three main ways.

The first is his sporadic use of Latinisms of the kind identified by the decolonization troika. Some of the examples cited by them are clearly pedantic and irrelevant to the logic of the poems in which they occur. But the troika is clearly in error for lambasting him over his use of other so-called "*corpus Christi* formulae" or "Catholic impedimenta." As a matter of fact, I see no Catholic impedimenta in Echeruo's poetry. No one who knows anything about the firm roots of Roman Catholic Latin spells in Africa, especially in Igboland, can reasonably describe such formulae as impedimenta, for they impede nothing. They may have the mesmeric power of magical abracadabra, but they are as familiar to the ear of even the most illiterate Igbo villager as the songs of birds and other natural sounds of the environment. The so-called "*corpus christi*" formulae and "Catholic impedimenta" are in fact an intrinsic part of the Catholic consciousness in even the most remote villages, including the poet's home village, Umuñumo, where,

At Sunday Mass,
choristers intone (little angels)
Kyrie eleison, Christie eleison
then drown the *Holy Holy Holy*, yelling,
confounding young O'Brien's *Te igitur*
kissing the altar, *Most Merciful Father*;

as soul still searches for covenant

remembering *Ezra*.

Nnenna from the choirstand
soul-sings for young O'Brien naming apostles,
Petri et Pauli, while sacred fingers
consecrated and friendly
carry the chalice with devotion,
pleading *non sum dingus*
for her and those other
(*nobis quoque peccatotibus*)
while praying for the Fire ("*Ure Igne*," pp 43-45)

So deeply set in the souls of African Catholic folk, even in the most remote postcolonial villages, that we can hear resonances of the Latin phrases of the Catholic mass (*Kyrie, kyrie eleison/ Kyrie, kyrie eleison*) from a place as unlikely as the cave of *The Hell's Angels* in which denizens of Kenya's kleptocracy, in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1978: p. 13), are engaged in a competition of thieves and robbers,. It is often forgotten that Christianity has been part of the African experience since the first century AD and that the Latin mantra has been part of the quotidian folk speech of the Catholic faithful in Igbo land since the second half of the 19th Century (see Omenka 1986, and Ugochukwu, 2000).

The second way in which Echeruo, in *Mortality*, appears to have contributed to the unease among some critics about his African roots is through his repeated evocation of the seasons in terms of alien European names and imagery. Fraser's notes, quoted above, that "throughout *Mortality* the controlling images are of autumn" is by no means an isolated example. We encounter other alien seasons (spring, summer and winter) throughout Part III of *Mortality* ("Defections") and elsewhere in the collection (e.g. "the autumn of desire," Line 2 in the very first poem, "Debut," p. 1). To accuse Echeruo of colonial mentality would be to stretch cynicism to its elastic limits. There is nothing in his seasons of anomy that can be compared—for instance—to the mindset of the young high school student in Lagos in Mrs. Achebe class, who, out of the fear of being considered a bushman by other boys in his class, chooses to describe "harmattan" as "winter."⁴³ It therefore seems reasonable to assume that these evocations of temperate seasons are strictly-speaking defined either by this mentally liberated poet's American experience or his acute sense of cultural alienation. He is thus either literally writing about his experience of spring, summer, autumn and winter in an alien temperate environment or honestly confronting the demons of his own mental and spiritual disconnection, as a postcolonial cultural exile, from his ancestral roots. In the latter sense, the title of Part III can be better understood both literally and symbolically in terms of one of the semantic constituents of "defection," namely "abandonment of one's native country or country of habitation, usually for political or moral reasons" or "abandonment of allegiance to a cause or party, especially when this also involves supporting something previously opposed." Such a reading will eliminate the impression of inartistic error⁴⁴ involving a dislocation of geographical reality. In the psycho-autobiographical lyric, "Come, Come Spring" (p. 34), therefore, we can empathize with the postcolonial cultural dislocation of Echeruo as "one born in March/ who wed his soul to spring hope/ and summer blossoms":

spring is made for hopes
summer will realize.
summer understands
spring's not meant for certainties.

I know of one born in March
who wed his soul to spring hope
and summer blossoms.

but early shoots that trust to spring
lose their souls

in the sprinkling sparkling rain
of early spring.

There are clear landscapes of identity between this lyric and the culturally unambiguous evocation of the so-called tropical "spring" of May (after the dry season) in Heavensgate V (ii) with such a vivid combination of naturalistic verisimilitude, pathetic fallacy and allusions to cross-cultural mythology by Okigbo (who Echeruo admires so much). But Echeruo's lyric appears to be a song of exile wherein the poet honestly confronts his own cultural alienation whereas Okigbo's ode to his newborn niece is a song of regeneration imaging the perennial cycle of rebirth in nature, culture and the life of the artist. But some readers would disagree, detecting incongruous seasons of anomy in other poems such as "Threnody" ("The spring dove sang/Of Earth's rebirth," lines 4-5 and "The sky went cold/When I caught my dove/In the heart of spring./And I was dead!" line 10-13) and a further disquieting encryption of the poet's state of his emotion in terms of alien climatic conditions ("the autumn of desire," Line 2 of Debut," p. 3), that recall the poet's wedding of his soul to spring in "Come, Come Spring" (p. 34). There can be no denying the presence of ambiguities in the logistics of Echeruo's deployment of his images; and it can only be hoped that greater clarity will be sought in any revision of the poems towards the final versions that will be preserved for posterity,

But the good news is that Echeruo's climatic alienisms, even if taken seriously at face value, are in general so superficial that they can be expunged without too much loss in meaning. Far more important in his poetry is evidence of local color realism referencing the flora (e.g. oilbean, palms, demon tree, *udara*, tubers, and *oji* tree), fauna (wild birds, dove, cock, sheep, dogs, kids, fireflies, frog, lion, river-crocodile) and seasons (e.g. harmattan) of the tropical rain forest environment of his native West African, which seem to occupy the heartland of his poetic geography. This fact is lost to critics like Egudu (1986) who insist that he is, among his contemporaries, "the least 'Nigerian' in terms of national consciousness and especially poetic style." Thus despite "the autumn of desire" in its line 1, the defining tropes of "Debut" (p. 3) are the "palms of earth" and, more so, the "palm nuts" which the poet celebrates as a "thing of beauty." In "Wedding" (p. 9), the image of "Erect, root and trunk" akin to "the high-arched roots/ of the demon-tree" in typical Igbo villages⁴⁵ in "Lullaby" (p. 21) is unmistakably a metaphor for the exilic poet's search for the sap of his native soil. Towards the end of the poem, the poet conjures it "bloom" and "besiege the world" and "stretch/to the core of this earth"—to reach the "Sultry maid of evening time" (essentially the muse of postcolonial African poetry), "sultry" (also used by Okigbo) suggesting the underlying passion and sensuality amounting to hierogamy, in the poet's relation to the muse, as in Okigbo⁴⁶). In "Melting-pot" (p. 10), the core image in the poet's own inner soul-searching is that of a "blind man of this city" who "Stumbled on an *udara* underfoot/And lost it in the search for more?" In "Lullaby" (p. 21), we have a vivid evocation of a typical Igbo evening at sundown, beginning with an image of "the valley" that recalls "the valley of shoots in "Sophia":

now the sun goes down
into the valley
beyond the palms;
the broods will be returning.

soon the last cock will crow,
the last clay-pot bestowed,
and the fifth finger licked.

sheep and dogs and kids
beside the hearth
sleep beyond all reproach.

In "The Singers" (p. 22), the first choral intervention of the earthy "Mothers" bring us home from the alien shores of spring, summer and autumn to the dry dusty and chilly harmattan wind that blows from the Sahara toward the western coast of Africa, especially between November and March:

For we, too, have fought
the dry north-wind;
Survived the mad fires
of late December.

In "Talk, Patter, and Song" (pp 27-30), "the dry north-wind" is specifically identified by name (as "the harmattan"):

*By the foot of the oil-bean
riding the first winds
of the harmattan!*

The storm is on the wing,
my love,
whirling
the seeds of the New Year
in the bosom of Woman...

Set at "the foot of the oil-bean," these lines seem to be reminiscent of the homecoming prodigal in Okigbo's *Heavensgate* I (i), "leaning on an oilbean" before "Mother Idoto" in a hierogamous posture that is part of the running metaphor associating sexuality, reproduction and creativity in both Okigbo and Echeruo as in several other postcolonial African poets. Who else then can the capital letter "Woman" (to whom the poet's love and creative offerings at "at harvest-time" are associated) be but the supreme mother or muse of postcolonial African poetry, the earth goddess, *Ala* (*Ali, Ani, Ana*), the higher of "the deities of harvest" invoked in "Harvest-time" (p. 31-32), the other being *Njoku* (otherwise known as *Ahiajoku, Ahanjoku, Ifejoku, Ifejoku, Ivejoku*), the deity of yam, agriculture, and harvest, represented in Igbo iconography, in some cases as the husband, and at other cases as the son, of *Ala*. As I have recently stated elsewhere (Azuonye, in Onyerionwu, forthcoming, 2011),

The idea of the *muse* is often invoked in the scholarship on modern Nigerian literature; but it is often shrouded with a mystique that tends to reduce it to something abstract or far-fetched, or, at best, a kind of African imitation of the classical muses of Graeco-Roman antiquity. But our reascent muse was not only concrete and manifest in our postcolonial practical engagement with our indigenous cultures; she was also an embodiment of the highest cultural ideals of our ancestral traditions as we perceived them. She appeared to each and every one of us in multifarious guises. But whatever her emanation was, she was unmistakably a personification of the earth of our ancestors—the earth goddess, *Ala*, the supreme light (*chi*) that nurtures all creation, an embodiment of the eternal bond that unites the living and the dead.

With the appearances of the muse in Echeruo, his poetry blossoms into a verbal icon, coterminous with the magico-religious *Mbari* mud sculptures created by the Owerri Igbo at the behest of *Ala* as "a celebration through art of the world and of the life lived in it".⁴⁷ This reading is, as a matter of fact, specifically encouraged by the poet's own identification of his artistic persona as a "clayman" or mud sculptor in "In Memoriam" (p. 35):

I, sculptor, have figured it,
clayman, I have worked at it
till the scales came down me
with the soot, and the fragments
through the very sieve of me

like a shot of the needle

At this point, the vicarious images of "woman" (lover, milkmaid, village maiden, mother, etc) in Echeruo coalesce into something more profound that goes beyond personal love affairs, libidinal overflows, and traditional African reverence for mothers and the ideal of "mother is supreme" which in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Chapter 14) is linked to the overwhelming presence of the earth mother, Ala, in Igbo communal affairs. Not surprisingly, in "Ecstasy" (p. 8), even "Time" is personified as "village maiden" who we watch "wriggle away" only to transfigured, as she "wabbles through/like the days do," into a divine figure of such surpassing beauty that, in an ultimate tribute, by dint of meiosis, "the sun shines nearly as she does"!

A third and by far the most serious contributing factor to the unease among some critics about the African roots of Echeruo's poetry is his tendency to give undue prominence to characters, actions, situations and locations in remote corners of European history and myth in his notes and titles. Two examples from one poem, "Cross-Roads" (p. 6) will suffice to illustrate this error. First, in his general note (pp. 52-53), Echeruo tells us that

The imagery of the poem is derived, (a) from early sailing voyage, during which the throwing overboard, of the only compass was a sure way to avert a mutiny; and (b) from the spiritual journey of the Christian mystic—a journey usually represented as that of a loved one (the soul) seeking re-union with the lover (God). Secondly, on line 17 (O *dichosa ventura*), translated by the poet as 'O happy arrival' we are told in the following note that this is "the ecstatic cry of fulfillment by the Spanish Catholic mystic and poet, St. John of the Cross, who is here also used as the patron for these journeys in search of a spiritual love. He is the pilot of Toledo.

Needless to say, very few readers outside the Western intellectual tradition and the narrow confines of Medieval European Scholasticism will find trivia of this kind a hospitable invitation from a poet to read his or her poem. Arcane details of this kind are better located in scholarly editions by academics for academics. When they come from the hand of the poet himself, they tend to subvert readerly competence, foreclosing alternative readings and inviting criticism such as that noted earlier from Egudu (in Gerard (1986: 751), which though largely is true, is undermined by its untenable generalizations about the total absence of African roots in the poet's profile that are not founded on a critical scrutiny of all the available evidence of the kind provided, I hope, in the present paper. But the lack of cohesion between Echeruo's mythos and some of his arcane Europhilic allusions is an incontestable verity. Herein lies the major difference between him and his transnational, modernist contemporary, Okigbo. An adept in the art of bricolage or collage, Okigbo, who Echeruo (2003) describes as a "poet of echoes," often derives his imagery from sources as arcane as those cited by the poet for "Cross-Roads," but he assimilates his sources so thoroughly into the organically-related fabric of his own distinctively Okigboesque text that readerly competence is thereby empowered to make of the words on the page what it will. His method exemplifies Eliot's distinction between "mature" and "immature" poets in his essay on Philip Massinger (1920):

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, good poets make it into something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from which it is torn; the bad poet turns it into something which has no cohesion.

The Echeruo we see in most parts of *Mortality* and in the whole of *Distanced* (1975) and *Khaki No Be Leather* (1999-2007) is by no means an "immature" poet. But some of his early imitative poems (which ought to be deleted from his canon when he produces the final versions to be preserved for posterity) display the absence of the kind of cohesion noted by Eliot as a characteristic of "immature poets." This weakness is exacerbated by another contributing factor to the unease among some critics about his African roots, namely his tendency to insert academic and magisterial statements of authorial intention

that—as observed earlier—serve no other purpose than to foreclose the reader's freedom to follow the plasticity of his signifiers to their optimum ends.

I have devoted so much space in unveiling the Europhilic weaknesses of Echeruo's early poetry in *Mortality* (1968), because, as revealed by our close reading of "Sophia," alienisms of this kind are essentially disposable exterior accoutrements that distract the reader from the deep-structure Africanisms that actually inform the meanings of the poems. Take away this alien and alienating garb and we are beholden to a pattern of deep structure Africanisms that lead us back to the essence of the poet's "poetic manifesto" in "Daedalus" (*Mortality*, p. 51), "adapting the conclusion of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'to forge in the smithy of my soul, the uncreated conscience of my race'" (Echeruo, 1968: 55). Further to the Africanisms already cited and discussed, interested readers will hopefully, in future studies, notice the many mini-narratives and anecdotes in the poems which help to locate their provenance in the Igbo oral tradition and folklore. Examples include:

'Come into my parlour,' said the spider/ to the fly" ("*Ne nos inducas*," p. 7);
The days are warm like handsome men" ("The Singers," p. 22);
Comes the Frog in the day/Croaks a song to the babe!/Should we then run into the house/ of the stranger/forgetting the poison of his/ heart? ("Defections," pp 25- 38);
A lion of the wilds of the west./Asked her father for her hand!" ("Defections," pp 25- 38);
Patient guests sit, cock in hand,/and bide their solemn time/when comes the frightened only son/and spots the scorpion-haunted stone/that keeps the doctor's mysteries" ("The Signature," pp. 46-47), etc.

The later poems—*Distanced* (1975) and *Khaki No Be Leather* (1999-2007)—are even more densely loaded with similar Africanisms. Echeruo himself can contribute to the discoveries that lie ahead by carefully pruning the poems and deleting as many purely ornamental and distracting alienisms as possible. Despite strictures by critics not persuaded by this manifesto, beneath the Euromodernist surface structure of "Sophia," lie, at various levels of deep structure, patterns of traditional African thought and symbolism by which the meanings of the poems, especially *Mortality* (Parts III and IV) and more succinctly in *Distanced* (1975) and *Khaki No Be Leather* (1999-2007), are actually shaped.

5. CONCLUSION

Echeruo's poetry is by no means marginal to the central concerns of modern African letters. His poetry is rather representative of some aspects of the spirit of its age—the period covered by the present valedictory symposium, 1960 to the present day. On the strengths of his poetry, some of the most insightful critics of our time, focusing on African elements in their theme and style, have been unequivocal in their assessment. In *West African Verse* (1967: 208-209), Donatus Nwoga spotlights his technique of "describing states of the mind, or persons and incidents through the imagery of natural phenomena presented in fantastic forms which conform to the violence of the poet's feelings." In *The Chosen Tongue* (1969), Gerald Moore calls attention to "his jealous husbandry of words." With reference to the lyrical beauty of his poetry, Kofi Senanu and Theo Vincent, in *A Selection of African Poetry* (1976: 235), pay tribute to his "careful attention to detail and sense of irony." In appreciation of the subtlety of his earthy style, Angus Calder remarks that "Echeruo writes with a cold, crisp, controlled sensuality which is utterly convincing." Focusing on the postcolonial cultural hybridity of his poetry, Joseph Bruchac (2003) comments, in *Contemporary Poets*, that "Michael J. C. Echeruo, like his late countryman Christopher Okigbo, has forged, from the crossroads experience of an African heritage and a 'European' education, poetry which is wide-ranging, deceptively simple, and highly individual." On his thematic preoccupations, Isidore Okpewho, in *The Heritage of African Poetry* (1985: 262), asserts that "Michael Echeruo has written some of the most demanding but brilliant poetry of ideas in Africa today."

His poetry deserves to be better known than it is currently. It deserves to be re-centered in postcolonial and transnational modernist discourse. A good critical and annotated edition of his collected poems is now overdue and should be produced as soon as possible. There is need for anthologists to look again, as heretofore, to his poetry as worthy of presentation to the reading public of modern African

letters. Conference panels and roundtables and—where possible—whole conferences or colloquia on his poetry should be held, especially under the auspices of one of the numerous institutions associated with his professional and creative career. Despite mixed critical evaluations, the poems presented in anthologies by Moore and Beier (1963, 1984, 1998), Nwoga (1967), Senanu and Vincent (1976, 1988), and Okpewho (1985), have been well-received at high school and general public education levels. They are even better suited (because of their sophistication and subtlety) for both undergraduate and graduate classes at college/university level. It is to be hoped that the proceedings of the present symposium will move us closer to the portal of the much needed reevaluation and better understanding of the works of this incontestably important, transnational, postcolonial African poet of the second half of the twentieth century and the beyond, despite the poet's own modest protestations to the contrary. It is also hoped that the present proceedings will help to redirect the interest of students of modern African letters as well as of general readers to the challenging world of Echeruo's poetry.

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NOTES

¹ In his interview with Bernth Lindfors (1974: 5-15) he presents himself as "a teacher, critic, and a poet in that order." Asked by Onyerionwu (Forthcoming, 2011), if he was in a position to reconsider this self-assessment in 2010, he answers in the affirmative: "Yes, I am satisfied with that order of priorities. Teaching is what I do for a living and I am especially pleased to think I have been doing a reasonable job of it, to judge by the response of my students. Being in the classroom has been an exceptionally gratifying experience for me. 'Critic' is a word I might not use of myself today. I think of myself as a scholar: one who makes judgments about particular works of literature and culture, but is primarily concerned with making a contribution to knowledge in the field. The latter term is, obviously, more embracing than the former. As to being a poet, that clearly is only an extension to my life's work, not a principal one, and has never been. I have had no special expectation of being a major poet. I know my own limitations. That doesn't mean I don't think some of my poems are great poems. I actually treasure them and believe people will in future return to them with much appreciation of the passion and technical felicity that went into them."

² Ikechukwu, Okechukwu, Ijeoma, Chinedu, and Ugonna.

³ Quoted from my "Interview with Michael J. C. Echeruo" (Azuonye, 1987: 162).

⁴ Azuonye, 1987: 161.

⁵ Azuonye, 1987: 169.

⁶ "Sophia" is omitted in Moore and Beier, 1984, 1998 and subsequent reprints and replaced with "Melting Pot" (p. 268) and "God and Man Distinguished" (p. 269).

⁷ I hesitate to use such terms as indigenism, nativism, vernacularism, and localism, because these terms carry some implications of sentimentality often transcended by the tenor of Echeruo's verse.

⁸ According to Echeruo (in Azuonye, 1987: 166), "most young Catholics at that age would want to be priests. There was something sacred and almost absolute about being one. You had the privilege of holding the Eucharist. In the imagination of the young it was something you could never never match. There was no ambition greater than that. The priest walks up to the altar at the beginning of Mass and washes his hands — "*lavabo manus meas ...*" He says "I am a sinner," and he washes those two fingers and goes on to say mass, holding those two fingers together that way until the end of Mass. At the end of it, after communion, he washes his hands again, this time of the crumbs and dust of the Eucharist. And not just washes to throwaway, but to drink the water of ablution. The priesthood was the supreme calling any young man could dream of. There was no greater life one could aspire to than that. So, at various stages, I might well have gone into a seminary. I didn't. But it wouldn't have surprised me if I did. And even now, I still think, and retain some of that idealism, some of that desire to have a calling or to be initiated into an order as great as that. I suspect a university professorship is the nearest I have come to joining such an order."

⁹ Azuonye, 1987: 165.

¹⁰ Closing Remarks, Michael Echeruo Valedictory Symposium (on "Fifty Years of African Literature and Scholarship in the Academy, 1960–2010") organized by the Humanities Center, Syracuse University, to mark Echeruo's retirement as the William Safire Professor of Modern Letters in the Department of English, Syracuse University, New York, October 16, 2010.

¹¹ Echeruo, Michael J. C., Keynote Address, "Five Poems for Okigbo and Some Reminiscing," International Conference on the Poetry and Life of Christopher Okigbo, Co-Sponsored by Boston University, Harvard University and University of Massachusetts Boston, Old Faculty Refectory, University of Massachusetts Boston, September 19, 2007.

¹² For studies of the Nsukka School of Nigerian writing in the early 1960's, see Azuonye, 1972 and 1990; Beier, 1965, unpublished); Echeruo, in Lindfors, 1974; Maduakor, 1980; Obiechina, 1990; and Thomas, 1968a, 1968b, 1972, 1974, 1981 and 1996;

¹³ For an early collection of the writings of this generation of Nsukka student writers, see *Nsukka: An Anthology of Poetry dedicated to Christopher Okigbo*, ed. Ulli Beier (Unpublished: Ulli Beier Archival Files); Oshogbo: Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding, and *Nsukka Harvest: Poetry from Nsukka, 1966-1972*, Azuonye (1972); for history and criticism, see Obiechina; Maduakor, 19xx; and Nwachukwu-Agbada.

¹⁴ The books include: *Igbo Traditional Life, Culture and Literature*, ed. with Emmanuel Obiechina (Austin, TX.: Conch Publishers, 1971); *Joyce Cary and the Novel of Africa* (Lagos: Longman, 1971/1973, and New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1973); *Mister Johnson*, By Joyce Cary, a critical edition with an introduction (London: Longman, 1975); *Victorian Lagos: Aspects of Life in Late Nineteenth-Century Lagos* (London: Macmillan, 1977); *The Conditioned Imagination: Studies in the Exo-cultural Stereotype from Shakespeare to Conrad* (London: Macmillan; New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978); *Joyce Cary and the Dimensions of Order* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press and New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979); *Shakespeare's The Tempest. ed.*, with Introduction and Notes (New Swan Shakespeare, Advanced Series, London: Longman (1980); *Igbo-English Dictionary, with English-Igbo Index* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, and Ikeja, Nigeria: Longman, 2001); For sample articles and chapters in books, see his online resume: http://echeruo.syr.edu/biodata/echeruo_index.htm.

¹⁵ These: Phi Beta Kappa Award, 1965; Phi Kappa Phi Award, 1965; Nigerian Octagon National Award in Education, 1986; Distinguished (Nigeria) Author Award for 1986; Hon. D. Litt. (University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE, USA, 1991; Hon. LL D (Abia State University, Nigeria), 1995; Hon D. Litt (Imo State University, Nigeria), 2002;

¹⁶ As Echeruo himself recalls, "I won the first prize in Africa for poetry in 1963 when it really mattered, ahead of people of great talent such as Dennis Brutus, Christopher Okigbo, and others; and with a major poet like Langston Hughes⁹⁵ as one of the judges. Love and the Hermitage, as the winning collection of poems was titled, was my first published poem sequence. It was submitted for the competition, not by me, but by the editors of Black Orpheus.⁹⁶ In fact, I was at Cornell University as a postgraduate student when I got news of the award. It felt very good to have

won the prize. But, frankly, although I continue to write poems now and then, I have not tried that hard to be a poet" (in Onyerionwu, Forthcoming, 2011; Chapter 3).

¹⁷ But Okigbo is not impressed. Presented with the list of "the winning entries for the African writers' competition," he comments wryly: "I find it interesting, but I found Michael Echeruo's poetry a bit academic. I didn't find sufficient feeling in it. On the other hand, I found Dennis Brutus a very sensitive poet. Well—a real poet, not just an academic versifier" (Duerden, 1963).

¹⁸Echeruo recalls: "It was submitted for the competition, not by me, but by the editors of Black Orpheus. In fact, I was at Cornell University as a postgraduate student when I got news of the award. It felt very good to have won the prize. But, frankly, although I continue to write poems now and then, I have not tried that hard to be a poet" (in Onyerionwu, Forthcoming, 2011; Chapter 3).

¹⁹ For my recent study of this second collection, see Azuonye (2011a).

²⁰ See Azuonye, Chukwuma, "A Preliminary Reading of Echeruo's *Khaki No Be Leather*" (Forthcoming).

²¹ For the sense in the term, "deschooling," extrapolated from Illich (1972) is used here, see Azuonye 2011b.

²² In his interview with Bernth Lindfors (1974: 5), Echeruo describes himself as "essentially a critic—a critic/teacher in that order. In some other ways, yes, a poet, but that's secondary role."

²³ Echeruo entered the University College, Ibadan, in 1955 and graduated in 1960.

²⁴ In both Church and art history, it has long been accepted that the inspiration for Michelangelo's representation of God and Adam comes from the medieval hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus* ("Come creator Spirit"), which invokes the "finger of the paternal right hand" (*digitus paternae dexteræ*) to confer the power of speech to the faithful.

²⁵ See Beattie, 1968, 1976; Beidelman, 1961; Crandall, 1996; Evans-Pritchard, 1953; Hertz, 1909, 1960, 1973; Needham, 1960, 1967, 1973; Smith, 1952; Stenning, 1959; Vogel, 1974; Werner, 1904; Wieschhoff, 1938.

²⁶ See Appadurai, 1974; Beck, 1970; Emeneau, 1987; Granet, 1933; Mines, 1982; Wolfson, 1986.

²⁷ See Palka, 2002

²⁸ As a matter of fact the poem can easily be translated into the poet's mother tongue, Igbo, e.g. the opening lines:

Akaekpe bụ aka Chukwu
Aka Ekwensu n'ofe ihe efu

The key phrases—"God's hand" (*aka Chukwu*) and "Devil's hand" (*aka Ekwensu*) dovetail easily into the syntactic structure of the Igbo idiom.

²⁹ In some dialects, *aka ìkpà*. The etymology of both variants of the keyword (*ìkpà* and *èkpè*) is rather obscure. But it may not be farfetched to assume that *kpà* in *aka ìkpà* is the same word as the Igbo verb for "snatch" or more generally stealth of hand, as in *-kpa aka ànị*—"be mischievous; play tricks" (Williamson, 2006). The left hand is the hand of stealth and wily-dealing. On the other hand, *èkpè* may be related to the name of the secret society, *Èkpè*, as carefully distinguished by Amankulor (1972: 37-47) from the homonymous word, *Ekpè*, with a high-low tone-pattern. However the relationship of this to the negative connotations of the left hand is a matter for further research.

³⁰ Dialectal variants of *ibitè*—a common toponymic code, with the postcolonial spelling, *ibitte*—include *ìfìtè* (ifitte), *ihitè* (ihitte), and *ìvitè* (ivitte). Generally used to denote the left-side or West as opposed to the right-side or East (*ikengà*) of the four cardinal points in Igbo place names, its occurrence in every day idiomatic expressions and in some ritual utterances is connotative of attracting something untoward by taking hold of, grasping, or pressing with one's hand with reckless abandon. This sense of the verb bite is explicit in the proverb, *otù mkpūrū akā bite mmanū, ò zùò ibè ya* (when one finger carelessly presses on oil, it spreads to all other fingers). See Williamson's (2006) gloss of *-bitū aka* (take hold of; grasp; press with hand lightly (e.g. as when feeling the temperature of a person with hand)). The left hand then is the hand of light reckless touch that is prone to attract dirt, hence the present gloss of *aka ibite* as "unclean hand."

³¹ Studies and review essays on this central icon of Igbo thought are numerous, among them, Leonard, 1906; Basden, 1921; Smith, 1929; Meek, 1931 and 1937; Green, 1938; Wieschhoff, 1938; 1948; Jeffreys, 1951, 1954, 1956a, 1956b; Horton, 1956; Ottenberg, 1958 and 1977; Nzekwu, 1959 and 1960; Ilogu, 1964; Henderson, 1972; Odita, 1973; Tagbo, 1974; Aniakor, 1973; Arinze, 1970; Shelton, 1971; Boston, 1959 and 1977; Cole, 1972; Ikenga-Metuh, 1981; Nwoga, 1984; Onwuejeogwu, 1981; Picton, 1980; Stevenson, 1985; Talbot, 1926; and Bentor, 1987 and 1988.

³² See for example, Egudu's translation of *agū* (leopard) as "tiger" in *Poetic Heritage: Igbo Traditional Verse*, ed. Egudu and Nwoga, Enugu: Nwamife books, 1972.

³³ I see this as a useful Africanization of the Garden of Eden that links the Judeo-Christian Eve with the Mitochondrial Eve that flourished 200,000 years ago on the African soil.

³⁴ In the Mbaise dialect of Imo State, *nwaanwiri* refers to the cat in terms of sneakiness, softness and feminine attributes that are often suggestive of sexuality (personal communication, Mrs Chioma Azuonye, born and raised in Obizi, Ezinihite, Mbaise).

³⁵ Cf. *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

³⁶ Cf. *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

³⁷ Online Encarta Dictionary.

³⁸ Cf. *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

³⁹ Cf Vol. 6 (Index) of Thompson, Stith *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature : A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*. Revised and enlarged edition. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1955-1958. Six Volumes.

⁴⁰ No. 12 of the thirteen virtues, created by the author at the age of 20 (1726), as reported in his autobiography (*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 1771, Harvard Classics #1, 2008), with a view to developing his own character.

⁴¹ See the myth of *Ala* (Earth Goddess) in Green's (1947) *Igbo Village Affairs: Chiefly with Reference to the Village of Umueke Agbaja* and Leith-Ross' (1939) *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria*, the former a study of women's village organizations in Echeruo's native Mbaano Local Government area, the latter a study, in part, of similar organizations in Nneato, in the old Okigwe Division, of which Mbaano was a part.

⁴² A similar question ("Christopher, do you think of yourself as an *African* poet?") was posed to Okigbo by Whilelaw (1965), to which he responded: "I think I am just a poet. A poet writes poetry and once the work is published it becomes public property. It's left to whoever reads it to decide whether it's African poetry or English. There isn't any such thing as a poet trying to express African-ness. Such a thing doesn't exist. A poet expresses himself."

⁴³ Achebe, Chinua, "The Novelist as a Teacher," *Hopes and Impediments*, New York: Doubleday, 1989, reprinted from *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London: Heinemann, 1975; originally published in *Nigeria Magazine* in 1965: "Three or four weeks ago my wife, who teaches English in a boys' school, asked a pupil why he wrote about winter when he meant the harmattan. He said the other boys would call him a bushman if he did such a thing! Now, you wouldn't have thought, would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do."

⁴⁴ As theorized in Aristotle's *Poetics*, with reference to the representation of geographic, historical, social or cultural reality in literature, as opposed to *artistic error*, or the misuse of the material of literary art—phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, semantic and stylistic.

⁴⁵ In Nigeria (West Africa), "a tree in the center of a village in which spirits are believed to rest at night" (Online Encarta Dictionary).

⁴⁶ Cp. *Heavengate* III (i): *Watermaid*: "Shadow of rain over sunbeaten beach,/ shadow of rain over man with woman" (lines 20-21) and *Distances* VI: I have fed out of the drum/ I have drunk out of the cymbal/ I have entered your bridal/ chamber; and lo,/ I was the sole witness to my homecoming (lines 155-159).

⁴⁷ Cf. Achebe, 1990.