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Interview with Michael J.C.Echeruo

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INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL J.C. ECHERUO

Let me begin by asking you a general question about the kind of life you’ve lived during the past fifty years — I mean, the much of it you can remember. At fifty, would you say that you have attained a certain measure of self-fulfilment?

Yes, a great deal of fulfilment. I’m not so sure of self-fulfilment. I didn’t set targets for myself, as it were, decade by decade. Still, I think it’s been a fulfilling life, with many gaps here and there. I don’t know whether that answers your question. Yes, it has been a busy life.

In any specific way?

Well, when I look back, I can’t say I had a set purpose in life, that is taking into account all those years of very early apprenticeship — through primary school, through secondary school, and through the university. Those were virtually uncharted phases in my life. But from the moment I had a sense of either a career or a sense of a rôle in life, yes, I would say I have been able, more or less, to achieve some very basic objectives. I’m sure I could have done a few more things in addition.

Your father was a devout Catholic Knight and schoolmaster and you were brought up in a Christian Catholic environment. In what ways have these facts affected your outlook in life?

Yes, my father was all that. But he was a father. And a father who didn’t demand the fulfilment of any specific targets. He simply expected, as we always thought — probably we were wrong here and there — but we thought he demanded perfection. And that, I think, was his profound influence. He expected you to set your own standards and never to do anything you’d later regret or feel ashamed to have done. It was almost a fundamental law by which you were expected to judge the way you did things. You may call it being catholic, but it was larger than just being catholic. He was basically concerned, and we were brought up to be basically concerned, with doing things the best way we could to our best judgement. In a sense, that has affected practically everything I’ve done in life.

So there was a great deal of freedom. But it wasn’t a protected childhood as such.

Not a protected childhood, no. In some senses, one could say
that it was a prison of a childhood — prison, not in the sense of physically or even occasionally restraining you from doing this or that in delimiting your morality. Whether you were home or not, you were obliged to be aware of the fact that you were encircled by that sense of a life style.

Now, what was the position of your mother in all these? Did she have any direct influence on your intellectual and artistic development?

I think that basically (and people say this quite often), I took to my mother in many ways — emotionally and temperamentally — more than to my father. So, whether people call it genetic influence or actual influence, it was there. She’s been a very simple, unassuming woman. She’s been a very patient woman in almost the Latin sense that she takes suffering as part of the nature of life. She’s been a great influence on me; and more so because, as you may know, my dad was away to Britain during the most formative years of my life — between 1947 and 1953. She was a tremendous influence during those very formative years and she’s given me a great deal, I suppose, of what I may call my self-reliance.

What of your brothers and sisters? What kind of childhood did you have together? Did you have an opportunity to influence one another in any significant ways.

We’re a very unsentimental family. We’ve never had the “clubbing” together that one associates with a clan. It was a polite, almost intellectual relationship, in every sense. Friendly, generous, but unsentimental. We influenced one another, which made the difference, but never as a result of a colloquium or parley. You judged yourself and your conduct by what others would say or do. We’ve moved our different ways but, surprisingly, they’re all converging ways, too. I think, it can all be summed up as being, more or less, the same kind of life. But there are temperamental differences, which we were aware of even as children, which persist till date, naturally. Mutually supporting, I would say, but not in any overt or dynastic sense.

Most of you seem to have developed some kind of interest in the arts in spite of differences in professions?

Yes. We have noticed that and some people say it goes beyond us and our parents, that it was probably traceable to our grandparents and great grand-parents both on my mother’s and my father’s side. It is a trait which continues to date with our own children. I think you’re right.
And what about school — primary school — missionary school and so on? Did they basically alter the kind of upbringing you had in the family? What would you say was the effect of school on you?

No, I don’t remember school — I remember school, to put it more positively, I remember school as an experience of its own kind. I wasn’t aware of its uniqueness at the time. The school was a kind of place where things had to be done right. And it wasn’t different from the experience one had at home. It was an extension, almost, of home. I wasn’t aware of this until much later, on reflection. But, at secondary school, it became even more pronounced, because, then, I was away from home. And then the modes of disciplines were very overt with the Reverend fathers and what have you. Modes of disciplines became laws, and codified, in ways that they were not earlier. So one was at that stage more aware of either breaking laws or obeying laws. All this reinforced, I suppose — if one may use that phrase — yes, reinforced a certain basic habit that was already there. But, even so — even in the fifties when I was in the secondary school — we were breaking laws. There was discipline in the school but there was also indiscipline. And what was, I suppose, most important, after all, was the awareness — the consciousness — that there were rules and regulations and that you disobeyed them conscious of the fact that you did. Some may call it a Catholic kind of conscience: the awareness of sin and of concupiscence.

Were you exclusively interested in books or did you do any sports?

I don’t remember myself as having been associated with books. No, I don’t remember school as a period of great study; I remember it as a very busy period of doing the things that one did in school. Maybe some of my friends would probably look back and say I was particularly concerned with my books. I wouldn’t have noticed that. As for sports, I’ve never been a very active sportsman, but I was involved. I was in the school team, probably the second eleven, or something. Nothing else profound. In either sense, I don’t think I was ever a bookworm.

No, no, I wasn’t suggesting that. But what about writing? Did you do any juvenalia in school? Any poetry?

No, I’d almost regard myself as not having had the stimulation, in the early years of secondary school, to do any kind of writing. Well, we did sketches — I mean, artistic sketches — line drawings, sculptures, pieces of that kind, but in terms of writing — creative writing — in the sense we know it today, I hardly did any of that.
It's a situation that continued right through to the university. Even there, I didn't do much writing. So, there was, perhaps — it never became an active part of my life to express myself and I think I've never really ever expressed myself.

**But did you make any contributions to school magazines?**

I don't think we were fortunate enough to have a school magazine. This was a young secondary school, fledging then. There are allusions to persons such as Father O'Brien and other Catholic priests in your poetry? Who was Father O'Brien and what is the significance of people like him in your experience of life and letters?

Well, Father O'Brien is no one priest in particular. It's, well, who else but a catholic priest — Irish born — that would have featured in my life at the time. There were several priests who made a tremendous difference to my life and I remember them with great pride. The principal of my school was a great priest — a very very great priest — teacher, father, counsellor. They were those things. But the O'Brien of my poems is really... is my looking back — a result of my looking back on the entire priesthood. When one considers the deprivations, the conditions under which they worked, you must wonder sometimes at how they even perceived the people to whom they ministered. And when I talk, I think, (in one of the poems) or "the sin-flanked queues" at St. Charles' Church, the priests must themselves have noticed it, been aware of the irony of it all. And it is this paradox of their position — the God-sent saviours of the African world of sin, among people who are quite incredulous. And they were quite a lot of these priests, some of them very young and very idealistic indeed. I think, for some of them, it must have been slavery of the worst order. So, my attitude to them had been complex. I use the word complex advisedly. But it is actually, to say the least, a complicated response to their idealism as well as to human frailty which was part of their daily experience. The poems involve a lot of extrapolation whereby I have imposed an interpretation on their experience rather than simply summarize their experience. Father O'Brien is to me the symbol of that phenomenon. For him, as for me, the priesthood is an absolute calling, an eternal order and one who enters into it, gets initiated into it forever.

**Melchisedech?**

Melchisedech, O.K. Melchisedech. Yes, and that's the way I see things. I will never belong to a group unless I have a total
commitment to that. That’s what they have committed themselves to and they go through the traumas — the ordeals of the initiated.

Did you ever consider the option of becoming a priest?

Yes, certainly, I mean, any, or rather, 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 throw away, 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.

The images of the priesthood and Catholic ritual in your poetry stand side by side with those of traditional ritual. Is this a deliberate juxtaposition for any particular effect or just a reflection of the kind of cultural milieu in which you find yourself?

Well, you’ve talked about the poetry. You’ve talked about an intellectual construct. It is a proposition towards truth, and, it made sense to me to understand the things I was saying by obliging my readers (and) obliging myself, in the process, of evolving an idea... into placing these notions side by side. Some would call me a neo-Christian and some say neo-pagan. The point is that, quite frankly, I do not see traditional religion, or I do not see religion in those very simplistic terms of faith. “The priests and elders of my past would love to see O’Brien paradise.” That’s what I’m saying. They are not really in disagreement with O’Brien. They couldn’t be in disagreement, but they would have loved to see his version of paradise. I mean, they would reserve an opinion until they saw O’Brien’s paradise. But Justice and Good-
ness, you know, survive faith:

Force those fingers down the pot
And grab with love that blessedness
Which yields to those who come to know
How witches, too, have faith enough
To palm the fears of men away —

Faith saves.
Yes.
And that’s whether it’s “the witching Oji-tree” or “St. Charles Church”. And that’s the point of the comparison. And there is no judgement implied, and perhaps that’s the weakness of most of the things I do. I’m not, in judging people, placing concepts side by side and helping out thereby to illuminate an idea.

Yes. Let’s return briefly to your family life. In what ways has your family life affected your intellectual and aesthetic pursuits. Is there any difference between the period before and after (your marriage)?

O.K., artistic and intellectual. The artistic, you may say, that came to an end. But expression has been limited to Mortality and to Distanced subsequently. Mortality was written before I was married, Distanced after I was married. Distanced is a product of the war rather than of my marriage. I don’t think my marriage or my family life subsequently has affected my artistic life. There has been a certain compromise between what I would have thought was my life style and what it now is. My intellectual life has not suffered as a result; my creative life, if you like, may well have suffered but only hypothetically because, as I said earlier on, I do not know how far I would have been willing to give expression to myself — I mean expressing my ideas, expressing — giving vent to the motions of my intellect. That I would regard as a separate experience from the poetic and I have never let myself go. So, it’s been that. But I have also been, of course, very much more aware of myself as more than the “lonesome bird of the wilds”. I am no longer just that. So, the children have been a constant reminder to me of what, if I had been inclined to giving expression to — giving vent, if you like, to the creative side of my life — I might have done.

In your early manhood, your family had become a leading middle-class family. Your father had become a graduate, school principal, company executive and, later, a politician, regional minister and traditional ruler. You had also received an elitist education at Ibadan. To what extent have these facts distanced you from the problems of the man in the street? Or would you regard yourself as
a writer and intellectual who has always identified himself with the masses in certain ways?

But it's the kind of question I don't answer because it's really — there is no way you can phrase it right. First, I wasn't even aware that I had an elitist education — I wasn't even aware, and when I say aware, I mean internally, aware of the fact that I had a middle-class background or even to say that my parents were in a position or my dad had a status in life that made all that difference. I wasn't very much aware of that at all. And I grew up believing, feeling like I was in the village. I grew up that way. So, I have never been aware of that dichotomy. At the same time, of course, I know that I am not in exactly their situation. I can see, physically see, the differences. No, I think I am at heart a village-boy, deep down my heart. But that doesn't mean, for one moment, that I am a common man's man. I don't believe in and I don't express myself in those terms. There are certain virtues and certain notions which belong to the ordinary man. But in a class sense, I don't think that there is enough of that kind of dichotomy in this country really for anybody to claim to have any — some ingrained sense of class. If you see what I mean. It is only a put-on stance, rather than an ideologically-derived stance people like to adopt. I am not — If I may summarize what I've been saying — I am not unaware of the distance that now exists between myself and many other persons in our society because of the experiences I've had. I'm not unaware of that, but I am also fully capable, I believe, of seeing that we are not that far apart really in terms of our common perception of our predicaments and joys and so on. That's why I say that I still see myself as a village boy.

Yes. There's so much talk about political commitment in African writing and there is a new generation of writers who have espoused what has been described as the revolutionary aesthetic, trying to change society by their writing. What do you think about these generally? Commitment and the revolutionary aesthetic.

Well, one should be able now frankly to do a history of criticism — Nigerian criticism — since the fifties, as part of an intellectual exercise and one can see that in the fifties — during the late fifties, Communism (or Marxism, as it is now known) was still some strange object. It was a thing with which we used to intimidate the colonial masters. You espoused it because you wanted to be out there, the agent of pressure and a potential victim of imperial censure. And it served that purpose. Even at the University of Ibadan, I knew many of our colleagues as under-
graduates who kept carrying copies of Das Kapital about them. I mean, it was a good thing to hold on to, you know, like the Bible or an amulet. Student clubs put up notices announcing that they would be discussing particular sections of The Manifesto,13 and things of that sort. But it was only a way of saying something else. And Marxism — the particular book, the particular document, was the excuse for it. Now, in the sixties, of course, with the disillusionment of the post-Independence period, alternatives were sought in socialism and whatever. Dr. Otegbeye still had the ear of many undergraduates. He was the Marxist intellectual, par excellence. What all this amounts to — and I am just being very summary in all this — is that inbetween the late fifties and the mid-sixties there was no alternative doctrine. The only book that really came out was H.O. Davies' and one might as well say that the new commitment we are talking about, — which we hear about in literature, would have been hard to come by. So, there had to be new voices asking for new commitments of one kind or another and I can imagine no other commitment in our contemporary circumstances capable of filling that gap than the socialist one now being canvassed. Unfortunately, in the area of literature and society, my own generation came a decade too early. We did not found "schools". We did not, like missionaries and politicians, create traditions and parties of our own. We did not create allegiances to self. We were not champions of unique causes. That came with the generation immediately after us. They had a mission, and a larger numbers base; so, historically, one can understand it when one thinks of Chinua Achebe who ended up becoming a teacher, just as did J.P. Clark and Wole Soyinka. It is the generation that came after them that became very active in "politics" and they were influenced, if I may say so, by traditions of thought very much, as you are aware, in vogue, at the time outside Africa — in Europe and America. These activists have been the motivators of the new commitment which in itself has been accen- tuated by political developments in Africa — which made their concern all the more urgent. I've given only a historical explanation of what is happening and I'm sure you weren't asking about whether it ought to be or not.

Are you aware of the feeling among your colleagues and juniors that you are far too high-pitched in your poetry and thought for the ordinary person? Is this a deliberate alienation effect or just the natural consequence of your experiences and background?

I am taken aback sometimes by that kind of reaction. I mean a
poem is a statement. It's a statement I’ve made. It’s also unfortunately a public document. I expect people to read it and I imagine most people will understand it. Some may not understand it, and I expect that there will be difficulties. I don’t in any way underestimate that difficulty. But it is an honest poem written the way I wanted to. I think, I have to say that they are not trivial poems. They are absolutely not. I myself look back on some of those phrases and think they still speak my mind for me. They took — I won’t say years — they took quite an effort to put in that form. I don’t know about the common man. I don’t use that phrase. But I’ve addressed myself to those who have cared to listen. It may take me a longer time to explain myself perhaps but I’d be explaining what I would already have said.

Yes.

O.K. and I’ve never also believed that the explanation or paraphrase should be a substitute for that statement — the ultimate statement. It may need paraphrasing; it may need further explaining, but you’re best saying the thing the way you want to.

Let us look at the poems closely. To begin with Mortality, what exactly is the significance of the title and which poem or poems in the volume would you regard as summing up the meaning of the collection.

Mortality, fragility, the total impermanency of existence. Everything in that poem is about mortality, but not in the sense of actual physical death. We are all mortal; we are vulnerable. We are precious little things. So, in just about every aspect of life — when I wanted to talk about intellectual life in “Sophia”, when I was talking about cultural alienation in the crowd looking up into the high roof “with grimaces on their faces, waiting for angelus and candlelights,” it didn’t matter what — you’re dealing with the limitations of our being, as humans; and its seems to me that nothing expresses that ultimate qualification to that state of being that the word ‘mortality’. Now, of course, we come very close to death in the images of the lilac, the lark, spring, the seasons. In some of those poems one comes so close to death that one particular poem ends with the line: “I was dead”. But such poems are not the heart of Mortality. Mortality is about the vulnerability of all existence: intellectual, moral, physical, cultural, political. “Easter penitence” says that. You end up with Raca. In that sense, it is a rejection of man’s own attempt to even come to terms with God. So, that’s mortality. The title came, of course, later than the poems. The title itself is its own poem: it’s an attempt to comprehend what had gone on long before that. The
earliest of the poems is of course the one that talks about “This bowl or a world/That rings me round and round”, 18, which I wrote at Nsukka in 1961 when I first joined the University. But it is still about fragility. It is this fragility that Mortality is talking about.

In your second volume, Distanced, one gets the feeling that you are disillusioned about “the fatherland”? What “father-land” do you have in mind? Looking back over the last 17 years — since the end of the war — would you say that your attitudes have changed?

Distanced is “distanced”. Perhaps, one ought to have written poems during the war. One didn’t. One only made sketches. The war was too real for some of us to allow for that. But at least, some of the poems were actually first drafted during the war. It was after the war that some of those poems came to be re-made in their kind of form and I thought that they were distanced from the original experience. That’s the title. But Distanced also is the experience explored in the poems and the question was: will it, years from now tell what had happened. I was so distanced from it that the telling can only be sur-real. So, that’s Distanced. There is no disillusionment. In general, I think it is the agony of the fatherland that one recalls. O.K., let’s put in differently. The “fatherland”. There are at least two of them in that collection. In some cases, it is the fatherland, our fatherland, our present fatherland. In some cases, it is the fatherland as at ‘67, — Biafra, the real fatherland, so to speak. And so, there are resonances of sorts: sometimes I was talking about Nigeria as my fatherland, sometimes about Biafra as my fatherland, sometimes both in the same context. But, I think, Distanced was also a reaction to some of the war poems of the time, specifically, J.P. Clark’s or his new name.16 You can sometimes “look the sun in the face”.20 You can also “see God and live”. Some have infact seen God and they live, in a sense like Biafra. So in a sense, the death of Biafra is real, but in another sense, they only can see God who are dead, who could look Him in the face. So there is no disillusionment, only agony at the loss of a fatherland, I mean the losses of both fatherlands.

I thought there was a pun on “fatherland” — something distant?

As I said, I lost two fatherlands.

Your threnodic pieces in Distanced seem restrained. In “The Blade”21, for example, you seem to be reluctant to come out with the praises of the war hero whom you obviously admire? Does this restraint come from the feeling that the hero is afterall a victim — a
sacrificial lamb — in the grim politics of war?

Quite far from that, it is my ultimate tribute. I could never find other words for praise. And I had in an early poem in Mortality talked about the blindman stumbling on an Udara fruit and losing it in the search for more.\(^22\) And at the time, I thought I had done a fine job in transmitting a traditional image into other purposes. But that was not to be. I mean, I’m sure that there are people who have done much better at that than myself. But I think in the threnodic pieces you are talking about — “The Blade” — that to me is the closest, the nearest, I could have thought I’d reached to a tribute which would be in the tradition of our people and still be informed by the language I’d used. In fact, it is an ultimate rebuke to anybody who couldn’t see that heroism. And the names were irrelevant.

The whole concept of the hero in Igbo life and culture is a vexed one. Do the Igbo have any clearly discernable concept of the hero? Or do you share the view held by some scholars that the Igbo are a people without heroes?

Mind you, I have not given as much thought to this question as I should have, but in my Ahiajoku lecture in 1979\(^23\), I did talk about some other thing akin to it. The Igbo cultivation of “strength” may well be taken to be the summation of heroism: the hero is the man who dares. He may turn out to be a fool subsequently. But Okonkwo does what a man should do: take a knife and kill the messenger. That is what a man faced with that situation should do. But that’s foolhardy, too. It is not calculating enough. So the Igbo hero tends not to be as calculating as other heroes. It’s almost romantic: the urge to triumph, the shere triumph, the shere brazeness against all odds, in fact in the face of all odds. The hero, as the calculating leader — the behind-the-scenes-man who harnesses the resources of all persons to a triumph which may come after him — that is not, to my mind, the Igbo conception of the hero. The hero is the triumphant actor in life and death. Out of conviction, he decides that some heroic act, some great act, is necessary. Now, there are people who would do such things, who would undertake similar acts in the tradition of that heroism. I gave an instance at the Ahiajoku Symposium. It has its coarse side, but it also has its idealistic side. Yes, the Igbos do have heroes. They do admire people who dare... It may be egocentric but it is not egotistical. They may have done it to prove themselves. The hero never does it for self. There is always a sense in which he is doing it for others. He does it to humour himself, I mean. He thinks he is
doing it for all; of course, without consulting them or without even getting their blessing for it. No, as I said, I hadn’t really thought through this subject but I do know that the Igbo do have this concept of the hero...

*But there is a prevalence of the image of the failed hero in Igbo life and culture?*

Yes, because how can you be a hero for ever? You’re a hero in your turn. I’ve heard a comment somebody made and I won’t tell you who did — or who said about Ojukwu that he shouldn’t have lived. He should have made sure he didn’t survive.

*He should have committed suicide?*

Yes, I mean — you know — when you have been such a hero. And I know an old man in my village who said, talking about armed robbery, and he said he would kill one of the robbers and be killed than have them rob him and get away, O.K. If he’s able to get one of the robbers killed — and be killed, that would be fine; he would go to his ancestors proud. So, the failure of the hero is built into the system of the great triumphant act because, after it, the people would will say “Well, why did he do it?” The Igbo hero will always fail.

*What would you regard as the major effect of the crisis and civil war of 1967-70 on the psyche of the Igbo man? Do you share the view that the war has destroyed the Igbo enterprising spirit for ever?*

Well, let’s leave “forever” out of it. I can’t talk about “forever”. Immediately after the war, as you know, a group of us met for quite a while in Enugu and talked about the long-term effects of the war on the Igbo. Our people had virtually given up, wanted almost to give up — wanted almost to give up their own names. Our daughters spread out all over the country and got married to the erstwhile “enemies”. People sought to make their own separate peace — in finding jobs, and new contracts, etc. That would be total alienation. It’s one of the points made in our report that everything had to be done to enable our people regain their sense of self-confidence... But, it’s always like that after wars. What was difficult with our experience, immediately after the war, was that we were not sovereign. There is a difference between a defeated sovereign nation and a defeated non-sovereign people. A defeated sovereign nation would lick its wounds and begin to re-build. Its leaders would speak to its people — talk of reassurance, even if it is overstretched. There was no such leader to do that hence the loss.
of that impulse to re-emerge, that enterprising spirit. I don’t think it would go on for very long. It was the consequence of a genuine leadership not having emerged that was partly to blame for all the suffering. Chief Asika, unfortunately, was not the figure to say to ex-Biafrans: “We fought, we lost”. He had no way of saying that. He was in no position to say that. He could only say “You fought; you lost”. And he did say that. And, therefore, he drifted apart from the people, and the people from their roots.

Although you are essentially an occidentalist, specialized in English literary studies, you have also have deeply involved in Igbo studies. What kind of future do you see for Igbo studies?

O.K., let’s say 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, if I may use that phrase. What are we? What can we be? My concern is with our language, with its meaning, with the way it works — that’s almost a professional kind of interest. As an intellectual, I want to go a little beyond that — I want us to go beyond that to see how we live, what we think, how we perceive the world around us, the structures that have formed our kind of being. Of course, finally, how do we relate to the larger world we live in. History is on the side of all these things. Peoples have always done that kind of thing, not necessarily in their own self-interest but in the interest of the larger world.

What of the Igbo Dictionary Project? What is the present state of the work?

The dictionary project has not progressed as fast as I would have loved to see it. I hoped, actually, even as Vice-Chancellor that I would have the resources or the technical resources — to engage somebody to do the tedious job. But, I think an Igbo Dictionary — the type of an Igbo Dictionary I had in mind — is no longer as urgent, or as problematic, as I thought, because the computerized work I’ve done has shown me that the language is so organized that you can generate a word list with less than that kind of detailed tedious lexicographic work. What is critical is the format: its
I haven’t seen any worthwhile work on the grammar of Igbo to make sense of what the wordlist reveals. Now, if the Dictionary is a word list and if our language is what I’ve come to understand it — I may not be right here since I’m not a professional linguist — well, if it is based on those monosyllabic units and every word is an accretion, unlike other languages where you can say, even generally-speaking, that you are dealing etymologically with polysyllabic units. If as I say, that is the kind of language we are dealing with, then, until we understand how it means, how it evolves meaning, we can’t talk about the structure of the dictionary. Take a particular form like “gbu”. What kind of Dictionary are you talking about? Are you talking about “gbu” first and, “gbuda” and “gburie” or “gbuchaa” or what? In any event, what does “gbu” mean? What does “cha” mean? And, so, the grammar of the language — and I use “grammar” in its widest sense — the nature of the language will determine the kind of Dictionary we will eventually come up with. But an interesting phenomenon that results from my work is that there are long segments of the computer print-out that are totally meaningless, which suggests to me that even though we are dealing with these accretions, we are dealing with segments of the phonemic, or the phonetic, corpus, which Igbo excludes completely. We are talking about things like ten thousand sequences that obey all the other rules but are simply excluded from the Igbo corpus of meaningful words. That are not even in dialects?

They are not in dialects. The question then is: What general rule can we evolve that explains this selection of phonetic sequences? So, the Dictionary project is — I think it’s going to be a major project. Now, getting a computer print-out and getting somebody to tell me what each entry means, is not the problem. I have never had that difficulty, except for some dialectal words where the problem is with field work and competent correspondents. But the problem doesn’t seem to be in having a text that tells me what a word means. Or, for that matter tell me what it means in English, or some other language. That is not important. I think what we haven’t done yet is to get to an understanding of our language and perhaps out of it frame a dictionary for our language. That’s about as far as I have gone with it.

Has your interest in Igbo studies also affected your writing in any way? Have you written anything in Igbo?

No, I haven’t written in Igbo and I haven’t tried to write in Igbo.
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You see, I’m 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 exercise, pure and simple. I can only encourage those who have the ability to do so.

Your evolutionist view on Igbo traditional Drama has been challenged by the relativist view that the Igbo ritual is not the germ of a yet unrealized drama but a fully developed dramatic form with its own conventions deriving from its particular socio-cultural milieu. Have you had time to re-think your position on this issue?

There is nothing to re-think. I don’t feel particularly anxious to argue the case. But as I said before, I have seen no grounds to lead me to thinking that, perhaps, I was wrong. Let me also say that if the question were simply, what are the traditional forms of dramatic presentation in our society, we would describe those. We would describe what enactments take place in traditional society and we wouldn’t be wrong. We would do the same thing for the Greeks. I don’t think we are asking that kind of question. I assert that every society has a sense of ritual or dramatic presentation. Professor Ugonna of Lagos (Univerity) has done some work on the "mmanwu. Where are the elements of the mmnawu as drama? Finnegans has said that there must be costumes, so what? There has to be dialogue, why not? There has to be a stage too, even if it is a market place. I mean, I don’t see how you can talk about an event that has no personae, that has no dialogue, no costuming. These are not the issues. I tried to describe what happens in my community with regards to the festivals. That still remains. But the moment you want to perform more than the festival, you are on to something else. The Yorubas have created, have amplified on the rituals, and taken the mythos and expanded on it. It was a hunch I had then, it was not based on extensive research, but I’d like to see it become the issue of further discussion. I think the most sustained commentary on it was by Amankulor.

It was Enekwe, I think.

O.K.

In your Ahiajoku lecture, in 1979, you made a number of claims, in superlative terms, about the uniqueness of Igbo culture, especially religious culture. Do you, in hindsight, have any reservations about these views?

Well, I don’t know which ones, specifically, you’re talking about.

For example, chi as one of the most complex religious ideas ever
O.K. I’d have to look at the text again to see how superlative they are. When I was thinking out my views on the concept I listened to close to over twenty hours of women’s songs, and I was amazed how recurrent the idea of *chi* was in the life and thought of our people. And I found, nevertheless, that there was no one simple definition of it. It seemed like such an all-embracing concept — *chi gi* and *chi m*; but it is still *chi* in the most generalized, non-personalized sense. And, it explained — and I think that was said in the Ahiajoku lecture — it explained everything. Perhaps, if one were talking about a concept which was thought to have somehow been recognized as analogous to Jehova, to the Almighty — *Chineke* is the one who creates and all that — if one weren’t dealing with that other interpretation, one might not have perhaps gone so far as to talk about it in the superlative terms that you describe it. But one is in danger of seeing *chi* as analogous to God, as almost identical to the Judaic God... The concepts are so utterly different and one has to recognize them as such. And, let me also say that my attitude to *chi* and to Igbo culture has been influenced a great deal by what I have been saying earlier on about language. Until one has concluded that other study, we wouldn’t be able to speak absolutely about the uniqueness of “*chi*” and other such concepts.

You have an article in *Odenigbo*, a students’ journal, entitled “Method and System in Igbo Studies”. I get the impression that you have noticed some parallels or relationship between Igbo mythology and Yoruba mythology, for example in Ekwensu and Eshu and so on. I don’t know whether you’ve seen *Ndi Ichie Akwa Mythology* by I.N.C. Nwosu which takes the argument a little further.

O.K. let me say I haven’t read Nwosu’ book. Indeed, I haven’t done the kind of research that would give me the right data for larger conclusions. But in that particular article you quote — I think, it was a paper I presented at a conference on Igbo Language and Literature — my concern was that though we had our gods, we had not given them “flesh” or “given character”. When I say “given character”, I mean that community artists, not necessarily with the consent of the community, do endow these beings with some of their features. When I thought, for example, of constructing toys for Igbo children and I thought of the god, Amadioha, I wondered how I would represent him. This isn’t to say that there is no fossil of an idea. I think that idea — or the elements of that idea
— has not been given body within the mythos — into a notion of the God or gods. Gods have to become persons, have to become incarnate. They have not become so in Igbo. The distinction I want to make is that whereas the studies you are now talking about go into the details of these beings in a comparative sense, I was only concerned just to notice that there wasn’t that same kind of elaboration in the particulars of our gods. It may well be that further reconstruction will show that they were or used to be such elaborations which we are not now aware of.

It would appear that all your life you’ve done no other thing than teach. As you move into, shall I say, the next phase of your life, what do you see as the benefits and status of the teaching profession at the present.

As they say a fool at forty is almost a fool forever. No, I know nothing else to do or can do than teach. That’s all one can say. What I would like to do with the rest of my life is to do more teaching to a wider public and not just to my immediate undergraduates. Although I have resisted attempts to write books for schools, even for university students, in that general sense, I do want now to be able speak to them and to my colleagues the best way I can in continuation of my profession. And it might well be that, just as one moves outside one’s area of specialization, drawing not on one’s original work, but on work which other people have in fact done, we should be able to attempt some larger statement of the state of things. Well, I’ve done no other thing actually than teach. I think the war was some experience — something that one did; which one would never have thought one would or could do. But even that experience also imposes an obligation on one not to ignore the environment in which one lives. So that too is going to be part of my future, I’m sure.

You don’t have any plans for direct participation in public affairs.

What do you mean by public affairs?

Well, you don’t see yourself in any political role?

No, I can’t exclude that. I can’t exclude it at all. I cannot see how I can, after the war, distance myself from what is going on. But the roles I can play are very limited by temperament and experience.

You are right now involved in creating a new University — the Imo State University. What is the idea behind this University? Is it really a worthwhile venture in the face of the current economic situation in Nigeria.

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Well, I take the question in two parts. The first is, it is not my university. It is what the people of Imo State have always wanted and to that extent, they have their own expectations and they are aware of the cost to them of that enterprise. So, I don’t think one needs to elaborate on their own conception of their need for such an institution. And I am not sure also they are unaware of what it has cost them in alternative resources. But I come into it because I was asked to realize that dream. And I think what I suppose has happened is that I have had to mediate their aspirations. I have had to bring my experiences and competence into play. I have built for them a university with character and direction. It has been an entirely worthwhile venture.

NOTES

1. This interview was recorded on February 26, 1987, in the Owerri residence of Professor Echeruo in anticipation of his 50th birthday which fell on 14 March. It was originally intended for the press, but in the course of the transcription and editing, it became clear that the bio-bibliographical information covered in it are much wider than would appeal to the ordinary newspaper reader. Indeed, the interview has turned out to be the first comprehensive overview so far of the life and times of the interviewee, touching upon a number of details which are decidedly crucial in the fuller understanding of not only his poetry but of his wide-ranging scholarly contributions to the humanities as well as his current role as the Vice-Chancellor of fledgling Imo State University.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Isidore Okpewho on whose timely prompting the interview was made. Thanks also go to Miss Anne-Marie Ibuza of the Department of English, University of Nigeria, for her valuable assistance in the recording and transcription. To Professor Echeruo and his wife, Rose, I am deeply grateful for the audience and the facilities provided.

2. The poet’s father, the late Chief Joseph Michael Echeruo was a cabinet minister in the East Regional Government of Dr. Michael Okpara, from 1961 to 1966.

3. The poet’s brothers are the artist, Kevin Echeruo (1946-1969) and the former Senator, Mr. Emeka Echeruo. His only sister, Mrs. Rose Okoli, died in 1984.

4. Echeruo attended the Stella Maris College, Port Harcourt from January 1950 to December 1954.

5. Echeruo’s two collections of poetry are Mortality (Longman, 1968, second impression 1970) and Distanced (IK imprints, Box 108, Enugu, 1975). The later was published in a very limited edition.

6. The Principal of Stella Maris College then was the Rev. Fr. Curtin.

7. Melchidesech is alluded to in Echeruo’s poem, “Ure Igne” (line 67), in Mortality, p.45.

8. Quoted from “The Signature” (Section iv, lines 1-10) in Mortality, p. 47.

9. Quoted from “The Signature” (Section iv, lines 2-6) in Mortality, p.47.

10. The phrase is from “The Signature” (Section iii, line 7), in Mortality, p.47.

11. There are references to “St. Charles’ Church” throughout “The Signature”, in Mortality, pp.46-47). The village church in the poet’s home (Umunumo, Mbano, Imo State), is also called St. Charles’ Church.

12. Echeruo married Rose now a consultant Gynaecologist at
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15. See “Prologue” (Mortality, p.41). The lines alluded to here are in stanza 1, as follows:

They turned their glances
to the high roof;
anxious with grimaces
on their obvious faces:
waiting for Angelus
and candlelights
in the stagnant summer heat.

16. The poem referred to here is “Threnody” (Mortality, p.18).


19. J.P. Clark’s new name is J.P. Clark-Bekederemo.

20. See J.P. Clark’s Casualties (Longman, 1970). The poem alluded to here is “Song” (p.1).

I can look the sun in the face
But the friends that I have lost
I dare not look at any.....

21. See Distanced, p.10.

22. The lines alluded to here are in stanza 4 of “Melting-Pot”, in Mortality, p.10:

The blind man of the city
Stumbled on an udara underfoot
And lost it in the search for more....


24. Echeruo’s contributions to English literary and cultural studies include several articles in scholarly journals across the world and the following books: Joyce Cary and the Novel of Africa, Victorian Lagos and The Conditioned Imagination from Shakespeare to Conrad.

25. In 1971, Echeruo edited a special edition of The Conch on Igbo Life, History and Literature with Professor E.N. Obiechina, a publication which marked his formal entry into Igbo studies.


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Owerri, in 1968.

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RESUME

ENTRETIEN AVEC MICHAEL J.C. ECHERUO

Cette entrevue a été enregistrée le 26 Février 1987 au domicile du Professeur Echeruo à Owerri à l’occasion de son 50e anniversaire, qui tombait le 14 Mars. Elle était à l’origine destinée à la presse, mais au cours de sa transcription et de son édition, il est devenu évident que l’information bio-bibliographique qu’elle contenait était beaucoup trop vaste pour être du goût du lecteur moyen d’un journal. En fait, l’entrevue s’est révélée la première vue d’ensemble des différentes époques de la vie du Professeur, touchant à un certain nombre de détails essentiels à une meilleure compréhension, non seulement de sa poésie, mais de l’ampleur de ses contributions érudites au domaine des Lettres et de son rôle actuel de recteur de la toute jeune université de l’État d’Imo.