THE RELIGIOUS IMPERATIVE: A Comparative Study of Michael Echeruo's Mortality and Christopher Okigbo's Labyrinths

BY

OMBATI MANDERE E.

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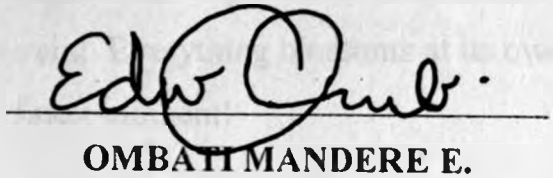
DECLARATION

This thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other University for examination.



OMBATI MANDERE E.

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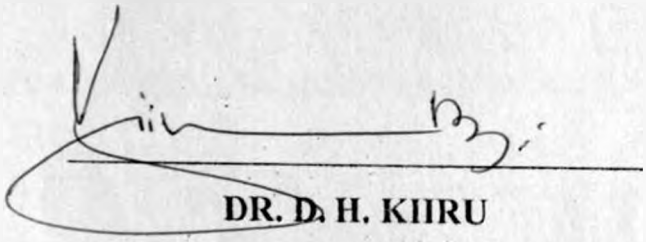

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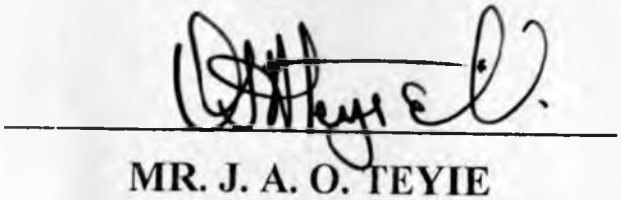

MR. J. A. O. TEYIE

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved parents, my father Patrick Ombati Ogetonto and my mother Mary Kemunto Magare for their tireless struggles through the years to acquire the very best for their children. To them: these struggles were not in vain! Everything blossoms at its own time and, indeed, let this work be your finest moment!

Also dedicated to my ancestors, whom I never saw. This is your Re-awakening. You hold me safe still, in eternal's bosom. You alone will understand.

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My gratitude is also due to Prof. Chesaina, whom I have always regarded as my mentor, Dr. Mweseli for her continued interest in my work, and Dr. Buyu too; for the impromptu discussions we had which spurred me on. Dr. Mwanzi always showed me the clenched fist of determination: my gratitude is in order.

I would not dare forget my brothers and sisters, the whole lot of them, from little Nyabiage and the twins to Onyimbo: our interaction through the years has meant a lot to me – behold the harvest!

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge Pauline Musyoki who diligently typed and formatted this work.

To you all, and everybody else I have interacted with and who has made this moment come true, in M. Echeruo's words I say:

Come, celebrate this mid of year,
before the tubers roll;
The days are warm like handsome men.
O might it hail all night!

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ABSTRACT

This is a study that compares the poetry of Michael Echeruo in Mortality with that of Christopher Okigbo in Labyrinths with a view to establishing the extent to which religious views have shaped these poets' overall vision.

It employs library research as its methodology and it is guided by the theoretical framework as advanced by F.R. Leavis. This approach foregrounds textual criticism through a close reading of the literary text and ultimately links the text to society. This is done through seeking to find out how the text makes a complex statement about human experience.

More specifically, the study examines the centrality of religious abstraction in the poet-protagonist's attempt to locate himself within a cultural-religious sphere he can identify as indigenous to him. It traces the poet-protagonist's conscious struggle and movement to relocate himself from the strictures and imprisoning experience of Christianity. In this way, the study also analyses the alienation that comes with Christianity and appraises the poet-protagonist's denial of this (alienation) in his acceptance of homecoming.

The study also examines ritual enactment in the way it sanctions and gives impetus to the movement away from Christianity. Further it discusses how homecoming, as a "ritual return", is achieved through the poet-protagonist's reconstitution of his lost self and his acknowledgement of the realities of the ancestral religion and culture.

Finally, the conclusion reveals that the poet-protagonist finds fulfilment in the totality of his ancestral heritage. It is also concluded that every religious tradition is essential to that community that evolves it. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that through the poetic use of elements from traditional African religion, the poet-protagonist manages to validly portray and explain his experience of existence while retaining and expressing the totality of his consciousness and worldview.

INTRODUCTION

Michael Echeruo and Christopher Okigbo are two poets who, though expressing a private, individual experience, reflect in their poetry the struggle of society to come to terms with its reality. This reality is to be understood within a particular cultural framework that belongs to that particular society or to that community's understanding of reality: its consciousness and worldview.

Extending this quest to the wider African experience and taking Echeruo and Okigbo as giving a glimpse of this experience, ones sees in their poetry a need expressed for the African person to collate his self-consciousness and communal self-apprehension and link this to his own African religious beliefs. This is in the sense that for the African, his collective experience in relation to present-day contemporary world reality should in a way express a world-view that belongs essentially to him and to the experience he has undergone since time immemorial.

Statement of the Problem

This study examines the extent to which the two poets use religious symbolism, ideas and constructions, in short, the "religious aesthetic" to shape their ultimate poetic vision.

The study therefore examines the preponderance of religious abstraction in this poetry and asks the question why religion is the central consideration in this poetry. It examines how religious views shape, affect and direct this poetry and seeks to find the reason why. In this way it looks at the different ways in which the two poets respond to the question of seeking personal fulfilment through a poetic recourse to religion.

Hypothesis

This study makes the assumption that at the core of human experience are a particular person's religious beliefs which are necessary in his struggle to achieve self-fulfilment.

In this sense, the poet-protagonists in Mortality and Labyrinths are struggling towards self-fulfilment and thus making homecoming journeys within the framework of particular religious beliefs.

This study further makes the assumption that religious experience, as this poetry depicts, is central in a community's struggle towards its self-apprehension as a people.

Objectives

This study intends to demonstrate that in Echeruo's and Okigbo's poetry, the poet-protagonist makes a homecoming journey in the context of his particular people's religious beliefs.

The study also intends to show that a particular religion, as expressed in Mortality and Labyrinths is essential to a person's understanding of himself and thus to a community's apprehension of itself.

Eventually this study hopes to demonstrate the validity of the African's cultural experiences and especially his religious heritage.

Justification

The two poets under consideration in this study, and especially Christopher Okigbo in Labyrinths, have been looked at by many critics and students of poetry as being difficult to comprehend both in their aesthetic and cognitive endeavour. Thus, by implication, their experience and poetry have been regarded as personal and private.

However, there is a lot in their experience that is useful in understanding the evolution and meaning of the different societies they have interacted with, especially the African and Western worlds. As Donatus I. Nwoga says in this connection "... private themes have their validity and significance in establishing the identity, spiritual and

psychological, of the African and his human values" (40). Indeed, as Emmanuel Ngara also argues, "solitary contemplation can lead to wisdom and this is what happens in Okigbo" (46).

One also needs to look at these two poets and thus at their poetry as creations of the clash between the Western world and the African world. In appraising Mortality and Labyrinths, more than just opening up personal experiences, this study investigates questions involving the experiences of the African World in its relation to the outside and, especially, the Western World. Thus, this study looks beyond the personal, individual or inaccessible to a much wider experience. Beyond the esoteric motif that has been preferred against such poets as Okigbo, we examine the meaning of human experience.

This study also takes cognisance of the fact that only scant attention has been paid to the poetry of the so-called difficult poets, at least in this region. For that matter, critical acclaim on the genre of poetry is lacking. Most literary critics have focused their attention on other genres like the novel, owing to what is regarded, ostensibly, as their "direct" approach which poetry is accused of lacking at times. This sentiment becomes indisputable when, for instance, one looks at Okigbo's Labyrinths. However, this study concludes that in its poignancy and immediacy, poetry is a greater pointer to the inner truths of the human condition than most other genres.

Comparative studies of the two poets under consideration in this study are also lacking. This is despite the fact that they are closely related both in the aesthetic and cognitive function and they are, unquestionably, leading voices in their poetic endeavour. In this regard, Echeruo has suffered more than Okigbo in terms of critical attention. Concerning their closeness, Gerald Moore has observed of Echeruo that: "It is in his jealous husbandry of words, as well as in his fondness of 'recherché' literary allusions that he displays most clearly the influence of the late Christopher Okigbo" (Jahn 118).

A comparative study of this nature is not only welcome but is necessary. The fact also that in Africa (oral) poetry and religion are very closely linked [for as Femi Ojo-Ade argues "the most traditional manifestation of African (oral) literature is in religious ceremonies" (48)] makes this particular study a useful and desirable endeavour. The two

poets' preoccupation with religious symbolism and allusion in itself shows the centrality of religion in the quest to claim the African's communal self-apprehension.

In this sense, a comparative study of Echeruo and Okigbo is important because among so many African poets they react in a very detailed and sophisticated way to the question of culture and religion as they concern Africa and especially her interaction with the Western world.

This study is also socially significant. Africans themselves have to find ground from which they can define themselves. That ground is the basis of this study: the African's own ancestral religious beliefs and religious thought. Mortality and Labyrinths adequately address this question. In this regard, as D. Mason argues, in relation to the African-American experience which has many parallels with the African continental experience:

> it is clear that [blacks] cannot borrow themselves from others .... [blacks] should somehow withhold that source within them from which they launch their life – its values and its dreams. (11)

Literature Review

Isidore Okpewho has contested in The Heritage of African Poetry that:

> ... because ... most African poets reject the influence of the colonial experience on African culture, there is a greater tendency among them now than ever before to go back to that culture so as to rediscover and cultivate some of its traditional qualities. (20)

This is the light in which this study considers Okigbo's and Echeruo's poetry. However, again, the argument here is that the modern (African) poet becomes difficult to understand because he is trying to appreciate the world around him through the inner paths of his private mind and conscience (Okpewho 29). In this same light, Donatus Nwoga argues that:

> The modern European poets to whom our modern poets apprenticed themselves were difficult to understand ... even more difficult to imitate because their technical complexity could ... divert the reader and imitator from the essential character of their poetry and their underlying perception of life and art. (35)

What this meant therefore is that modern African poets had to develop a style and tradition that responded to the African situation. In this case, Nwoga has noted that eventually "the sensibility of the poets developed and they acquired their own voices (with) the perceptive introduction and stabilisation of elements from traditional African poetry ..." (36). He gives the example of "the poems of the poet's maturity ... in Okigbo's "Path of Thunder" (36). In this sense, as the study will show, the poets grapple with the difficulties of expression in a foreign idiom to finally make that homecoming even in their poetic expression.

Okpewho has again noted that modern African poets, of whom Echeruo and Okigbo are representatives, "direct their criticism not only at the social and political conditions in which they live but also at the ideas and concepts with which they have been educated" (210). This study considers this in the response of the two poets to Western ideas, for instance, which have formed the basis of their education and their world-view. A reflection of this concern in their poetry, negative or positive, is tackled in this study.

In this same breath, Okpewho's assessment has been that "Michael Echeruo has written some of the most demanding but brilliant poetry of ideas in Africa today" (210). Echeruo's concern has been mainly on religious abstraction especially that clash between Africa and the Western world. Contrasted with Okigbo, in the latter we see "a poet struggling ... to reconcile the various cultural backgrounds that have influenced him, so that he could better understand himself and discover the truly individual voice with which he could express the concerns of his society" (Okpewho 239).

The major concern revealed here thus is that of the quest of the individual towards self-fulfilment. It is from the individual that we look at society at large and we see a society trying to affirm its values. The evaluation of Okigbo's and Echeruo's poetry is thus a reflection of that affirmation of, especially, dislocated African societies. This follows

the experience of colonialism, the subsequent loss, destruction and distortion of these societies' cultural and, especially, religious heritage. Culture entails a community's identity and as Hal Wylie has observed, quoting Frantz Fanon, "The problem of identity is particularly acute for people of the Third World who ... are colonised in their mentality as well as in their social and economic life" (Parker and Arnold 284). Thence we will look at the response of Mortality and Labyrinths to this concern.

Catherine O. Acholonu has examined Okigbo's poetry in "From Rhetoric to Occultism" in which she looks at the poetry as music that seeks to attain fulfilment. In her observation, the quest hero in this journey to attain fulfilment is an observer who seeks out incidents and establishes among them a sequence, however illogical, with the power of his experiences (133). In this article, what emerges is that Labyrinths is seen in itself as a musical progression. As rightly pointed out:

> Through ritual and invocation, through music and drama, Okigbo, the poet from a lineage of priests of the water cult (Idoto worship) roots his poetry in African traditional cultic religion where word magic is not simply the written word but the word which is chanted and danced to musical accompaniments; the word which links man with god through which the creative process is accomplished. (140)

Thus, we see a lot of emphasis put on music and what its role in religion and ritual is. In this study, we are to link this idea of music with how religion or ritual becomes an experience through which the African can regain his self-apprehension. Comparing the foregoing with Echeruo's quest in Mortality one sees Echeruo's thrust in the questioning of the understanding of religious dogma that is centred on the Christian experience. In the two poets, we see a concern raised about fundamental aspects of the human condition, using religion as the base. This is what Acholonu appraises in her analysis of music and ritual in Labyrinths.

In "Graphology and Meaning in the Poetry of C. Okigbo," Modupe Olaogun examines the graphological patterns of Okigbo's poetry as a means of relating the form of that

poetry to its content (108). In relating this to the present study, the quest goes beyond graphology to look at the other issues raised.

In understanding the two poets, again, this study considers their views towards religion. For Okigbo, in his own words, poetry was like a religious calling:

> ... there was a stage when I found that I couldn't be anything else ... than a poet. It's just like somebody who receives a call in the middle of the night to religious service in order to become a priest of a particular cult, and I didn't have any choice in the matter. I just had to obey. (qtd in Ngara 33)

Also, the subject of religion is very much at the forefront of Echeruo's poetic vision. In Ngara's words, which put Okigbo and Echeruo in perspective:

> It is the assimilation into European culture of these two poets – in the sense of what they read and were influenced by, for example Yeats and T. S. Eliot for Okigbo, that resulted in a dramatic recovery of their roots when they finally come to look at their African worlds. (35)

This study therefore investigates how the Christian doctrine of Catholicism influences the two poets and how they respond to it or reflect it in their poetry. This is a poetry, which could indeed be referred to as a homecoming poetry and a rediscovery of the African heritage. Ngara does analyse the aspect of the destruction of African religions by European religions but he does not go further to present the argument of the destroyed religions as a basis for a return or a re-definition of the African person. He only briefly touches on this when he talks of the resurrection of the resilient sunbird in Okigbo's Labyrinths.

Ngara also explores how the "poet recreates the end of his search through a discovery of his vision" (40). According to Ngara, the poet-protagonist in Labyrinths "resolves his ideological and aesthetic contradictions and arrives at his Jerusalem, a philosophy of art that is firmly based on African traditions" (40). Ngara again does argue that Okigbo and

his contemporaries were deracinated Africans and we can, too, put Echeruo in this mould. According to Ngara:

> Okigbo did not take cognisance of the contradiction between a western-oriented consciousness and an African-centred consciousness. The acceptance of Idoto was not the result of a negative reaction to the dominance of Western culture and ideology, (Okigbo) was forcing a synthesis of the two cultures. (43)

This study thence seeks to find out how much such deracination affects the homecoming poetry in Labyrinths and Mortality. Ngara concludes that therefore "Okigbo was an individual searching after ideas and religious experience and thus the spiritual world dominated his artistic vision to the extent of negating the material world around him" (45). What we get from the foregoing is the fact that Okigbo and Echeruo were already in a sense compromised by that same world which they had to negate in their homecoming journeys as seen in Mortality and Labyrinths.

D. S. Izevbaye has examined Okigbo in the article "Okigbo's Portrait of the Artist as a Sunbird." In this analysis, there is an in-depth study of the poet Okigbo mainly focusing on his religious symbolism and its role in his poetry. Allusions are drawn to the influences from the classics; especially the "bard" and the singing bird as seen in Shakespeare's twenty-ninth sonnet (4). The song in its function in the ritual and spiritual realm is analysed. As Izevbaye concludes, "when the song is over, the inspirer goes home to rest, leaving the poet spent but sane" (12).

Romanus Egudu on the other hand looks at the aspect of the suppression of indigenous Western African culture by colonial evangelisation (14). This is in the article "Defence of Culture in the Poetry of Christopher Okigbo" in which he also analyses the aspect of Okigbo as the prodigal who returns to his ancestral gods. This parallels the quest in Mortality. There is therefore the sense of the struggle to retain the cultures that have been despoiled by foreign religions.

In the article "Obscurity and Commitment in Modern African Poetry" by Donatus I. Nwoga, the assertion is that the challenge of the poet is to "contribute to the total of national, human, cultural and therefore social and spiritual growth" (26-27). This is the light in which this study looks at Okigbo and Echeruo. The concern here is that in African literature, poets like Okigbo, Echeruo and Soyinka have been regarded as incomprehensible in their quests. What this study sets out to achieve, in the words of Nwoga is "... to trace a relevance in Echeruo's ... reflections on intellectual and physical conceptions and situations ... and in Okigbo's lyric self-exploration" (41).

Nwoga therefore looks at commitment vis-à-vis African poetry, especially that regarded in some quarters as "escapist," "personal," or "private". Commitment is in the sense of "showing a sense of seriousness and a sense of responsibility (in the literary works) geared towards finding solutions to the internal and external problems of Africa" (26). One could say that what Echeruo and Okigbo do is address one of the root problems of Africa: the legacy of colonialism and thus the question of identity. Religion, their major concern, is the one place from where the African can start seeking solutions to the "problems of Africa". This is because, as Nwoga argues, "Africa's problems, which have provoked the call for commitment among our writers, have been complicated by the uncertainties of the moral, psychological, and social, bases for tackling them" (39). The traditional religious base that Echeruo and Okigbo front is one sure way, thus, of beginning to tackle these problems.

One could again, thus, argue that in their seeming obscurity, Echeruo and Okigbo are committed poets. Indeed, as Nwoga concludes, "commitment should be seen in its dual possibilities of external call to action or internal orientation of awareness" (39). Again, "commitment should not be tied only to public themes" (39). Nwoga concludes that, therefore:

> Commitment should be identified with the concept of significance, with the search for, and expression of, human values, in public and private consciousness and life. Commitment then becomes a factor of sensitivity of the poetic consciousness to the environment and life at all levels within the society of the poet. (40)

In this sense, Nwoga defends the poetic endeavours of poets considered inaccessible such as Echeruo and Okigbo.

In Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric, Sunday O. Anozie offers a detailed study of the poet Okigbo. He notes that "the problem of identity ... emerges as one of the dominant themes in Okigbo's poetry" (181). He further goes on to note that "in these poems there exists a deep-seated consciousness of certain shifts in the personality structure of the main characters ... with the corresponding desire for fulfilment and integration" (181). He does analyse the poet's preference "for exiles ... the uprooted or the prodigal as protagonists" (181). In this sense, he looks at the whole expanse of Okigbo's poetry in Labyrinths and incorporates the centrality of religion in the protagonist's quest. It is in this way that he analyses the use of myth and ritual in the poetry to illustrate the ideal form of artistic experience.

In tracing the movement of the protagonist towards "homecoming" Anozie analyses the way the poet goes through internal contradictions to emerge after purgation and purification which

> enactment follows the well-known pattern of purification and initiation so as to rise above the existentialist angst imposed by the spiritual and physical worlds, in order to give forth an expression compatible with 'organic voice', the imprint of (an) own selfhood. (182)

Anozie looks at the fulfilment the poet acquires from all angles, whether spiritual or artistic or other. This, according to him, is what outlines "the course of true catharsis," what indeed the experiences of Mortality and Labyrinths provide.

Bernth Lindfors, in "Okigbo as Jock" attempts to relate Okigbo's life with his poetry. He argues that the events of the poet's life had a definite bearing in his poetry as, for instance, his playing soccer. The perfection with which he approached sports, Lindfors argues, is the same with which he wrote his poetry. What emerges, however, is that, as Lindfors himself implies, "biographers can err in making assumptions about works based

on what they know of the artist, just like critics may err in making assumptions about an artist based on what they know of his works" (Parker and Arnold 209).

Ali Mazrui's The Trial of Christopher Okigbo retains a romantic idea of the poet. Being a fictional account, it is not tied down to specific realities of the poet but goes on to present the poet, in the words of Lindfors, as a "frail aesthete" who retains the "stereotype of the artist as impractical, mercurial visionary" (Parker and Arnold 202). In the end, Okigbo is conceived as a "romantic symbol incarnate , an aloof and mystical green cloud above the forest" (Parker and Arnold 203). In thus sticking to the stereotype presentation of the poet, this fictional account misses the main point of what Labyrinths actually achieves as a work of art.

In his tribute to Okigbo "Don't Let him Die" Chinua Achebe asserts that though Okigbo has been charged with obscurity, "occasional inaccessibility" would be a more accurate phrase. He goes on to state that:

> even at his most arcane moments, there is never a blocking of vision in his poetry .... Barring a few obvious mystifications ... the obscurity in his poetry comes from a "straining among the echoes" to deliver his own authentic lines. (80)

Achebe looks at Okigbo's poetry as having achieved its aim. He says, "There is nothing in Nigerian poetry and little in any poetry ... to surpass the haunting beauty, the mystic resonance and clarity of the final movements of the protagonist's quest in "Distances" (80). In this sense, Okigbo's poetry achieves its ultimate aim.

Amateshe A. D. in "The Social Function of Poetry in Underdeveloped Society" analyses the question of commitment vis-à-vis poetry. His contention is that the poet should communicate with his audience. The private poets, and Okigbo is mentioned in this regard, are isolated from the audience and the committed poet "deeply portrays a clear picture of his age" (19). The bottom line becomes that the "public" event is favoured more than the "private" but then, as we shall see in the study, there are private moments that have a positive impact upon public themes.

Also in his work, "Local Significance and the Importance of the Local Audience," Bahadur H. Tejani examines Okigbo's place in African Literature through the guideline that:

> for Okigbo, the act of creation was a blend of many influences, and was never to be restricted by or interpreted through a definite use of the term 'African' or 'unAfrican'. (3)

What this study deliberates on, however, is that pursuit of "homecoming" or fulfilment, which in Okigbo retains a unique description of that (African) experience which symbolises homecoming. Though there is that multi-faceted approach identified in Okigbo, as Tejani shows, the former's experience inevitably, from all perspectives, has something "African" about it – even though the "African" is linked to various other experiences. Lewis Nkosi in Tasks and Masks discusses, under the heading "Modern African Poetry: its themes and styles", "the intellectual training of the modern African intellectual" under which the modern African poet falls. He concludes that this training is artificial and lacks in coherence and thus shows "the alienation of the African intellectual from his true heritage through his embrace of bourgeois Christian values" (132).

He recognises that "the theme of social dislocation, the focus on the problem of achieving continuity between traditional cultures and the new modern social structures" (157) becomes thus a major concern of modern African poets. In this study we see both protagonists engaged in that quest towards a reconciliation of the many conflicting forces they face. In Okigbo's consideration, Nkosi argues that the poet "seems to have maintained a consistently high standard of craftsmanship while showing a deepening emotional response to experience" (155). This becomes the case when one compares him with other Nigerian poets such as Wole Soyinka and John P. Clark. The "deepening emotional response" is well illustrated in Labyrinths as this study confirms in examining the unfolding events towards the poet-protagonist's homecoming.

Nkosi sees Okigbo's career as "one of expanding human interest as well as a refinement of poetic technique" (155). He does, however, agree that Okigbo's generation was "weaned on Eliot, Pound and the Classics" (155) which essentially marks the alienation

this study discusses. The French symbolist tradition is another aspect of the foreign influence on the poet. Nevertheless, Okigbo, in Nkosi's evaluation, turns round these alien influences to fit "his kind of interests and temperament" (155) and this eventually "advances his technique" (155).

Nkosi again notes that "Okigbo's earlier poems are mostly about a young man's quest for experience and the attainment of true self-knowledge" (156). In this study the poet-protagonist is seen as always seeking self-fulfilment. Okigbo also attempts to "fuse Christian and African forms of religious ritual ... into a unified sensibility able to resolve the personal dilemma arising out of the conflict between the Western – Christian culture ... and the African indigenous tradition" (156) but as we shall see in this study, this fusion fails and the eventual fulfilment is achieved only within the African indigenous religious tradition.

Again, in referring to the poet's alienation, Nkosi notes that "Okigbo was acutely aware of the spiritual distance he had already travelled from his native culture ... and part of his poetic effort," (156), as this study also reveals "is directed toward regaining this lost equilibrium by reintegrating himself into his indigenous culture and religion" (156). The experience of Labyrinths, as evaluated in this study, confirms this.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by textual criticism as advanced by F. R. Leavis. This approach advocates a focus on close reading of the literary text. In the words of John Peck and Martin Coyle this allows for a discussion of the "artistry and effect of the work" (153). The underlying idea is that this kind of analysis will enable us to "reveal the complexity and subtlety of what is being said ..." (153) in the sense to see "... how the text makes a complex statement about human experience" (153).

This approach does not divorce literature from society. It maintains that literature and society are related because then a literary text "makes a statement about human experience." "Human experience" belongs to life and life belongs to society.

There is thus the possibility of showing the connection between "how the text is written and what it says" (Peck and Coyle 153). The central contention of this approach is thus that "the text has something substantial to say about life" (154). This approach also allows a movement from a discussion of the text to an impression of the view of life it expresses. Our task, according to Leo Lowenthal, therefore is "to relate the experience of the imaginary characters to the specific historical climate from which they stem" (144).

A focus on the form and content of the text is made possible (Peck 153). Ultimately what this approach aims at is to "explore the text in a careful and imaginative way so as to arrive at a clear view of its aesthetic and moral coherence as a work of art" (Peck and Coyle 155). In the final analysis, in relation to this study, this approach affirms that literature does not occur in isolation but is a reaction, expression and projection of man vis-à-vis his physical, psychical and historical epochs.

Methodology

This study involves library research as its methodology. It focuses closely on the two collections of poetry by the two poets: Mortality by Michael Echeruo and Labyrinths by Christopher Okigbo. Emphasis is laid on the subject of religion as it emerges in the poetry under study. There is an assessment of religious thought informing the two poets. On the one hand, there is traditional African religious thought and on the other there is Christian religious thought, especially Catholicist thought. This analysis is then projected out and ultimately linked to religion's role in the issue of communal self-apprehension in the African world. In the converse, the issue of cultural alienation and its implications are explored.

Thus, the question guiding the methodology of this study is: How have Okigbo and Echeruo, in their poetry, portrayed religion as a tool or experience of a community's struggle to gain or lose its identity or apprehension as a people?

Each chapter has within its body an analysis of the style of rendition of the poetry and there is a consistent comparison and contrast of the two poets.

Chapter Breakdown

This is an introduction to the whole study. The first chapter provides an introduction to the poetry in the sense of the general concerns raised in Mortality and Labyrinths. It looks at the place of religion and its role in a community's understanding of itself. It then traces the poet-protagonist's conscious attempt to relocate himself away from the strictures of Christianity.

The second chapter looks at how Mortality and Labyrinths respond to the question of cultural alienation and thus loss of identity among African societies that embrace Westernism and Christianity. It discusses how Christianity, as a cultural force, dislocates the protagonist from the realities of his cultural and historical experience.

The third chapter looks at how Echeruo and Okigbo in Mortality and Labyrinths respectively, portray the aspect of ritual enactment and sacrifice as a means of seeking a return or as a statement of communal self-apprehension for dislocated African societies. It examines, thus, how ritual enactment sanctions and gives impetus to the movement away from Christianity.

The fourth chapter looks at how Echeruo in Mortality and Okigbo in Labyrinths provide a resolution or imply a homecoming for dislocated peoples. It discusses, thus, how the "ritual return" is achieved through the protagonist's reconstitution of his lost self, an acceptance of his ancestral religion and a denial of Christianity.

The conclusion offers a summation of the study. This is in the sense that traditional African religion is a major factor in the poet-protagonist's quest for reclamation of his lost identity. Indeed Traditional African Religion is indispensable in the struggle towards communal self-apprehension for the protagonist.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MOVEMENT AWAY FROM CHRISTIANITY

This chapter traces the poet-protagonist's movement away from the religion of Christianity in his attempt to situate himself within the sphere of his ancestral religions. This is in search of his cultural identity. Both experiences of Labyrinths and Mortality present this quest.

All forms of religion indeed create a supreme being or force whom everything is afforded: at once from whom everything ensues and whence it winds. The conflict between the West and Africa as reflected in Echeruo's Mortality and Okigbo's Labyrinths stems from the destruction of African worship systems and their replacement by Western worship systems, the latter being the source of that destruction. This is the beginning point of this study.

Therefore, what has provoked the poet-protagonists' quest in Mortality and Labyrinths is that estrangement of the African world from its gods and its uncritical embrace of European gods. Thus the need to return home to mother Idoto, to use Okigbo's imagery. Max Weber, in a discourse on religion has argued that "each society has its own conception of deity" in his proposition that "religion stands as ideology and as a conceptual system within a society" (Capps 381). In this sense, the African societies portrayed in Okigbo and Echeruo also have their own "conception of deity" in Weber's terms. The question the poetry tackles is that of the loss by Africans of their conception of deity, the subsequent alienation from their own selves and the struggle to reclaim those selves once the realisation of that loss is made.

This poetry explores, then, the place of religion, dogma and doctrine and ultimately relates this to religion's role in a community's understanding of itself. Thence arises the issue of "communal self-apprehension" or that cultural identity of a group or community of people that emerges from that people's interpretation of reality as sanctioned within their religious tradition. Religion in this way becomes a major component in the

understanding of what man refers to as reality: his historical experiences, travails, hopes and fears.

In Mortality, Echeruo's focus is on religious questions; especially on how religious issues and concerns have been defined for the African world from a Christian-centred consciousness. This compares closely to Okigbo's focus in Labyrinths whose thrust is "a struggle to reconcile various cultural backgrounds" (Okpewho 239). His major concern is religious also. He explores the religious clash between African traditional forms of worship and Christianity. The poet, in evaluating this situation, recognises and acknowledges the powers of the supernatural. These are the same powers that man tries to comprehend through the religious experience. Thus, at the very onset, we see a conflict between traditional African and Christian religious images. This is because either situation engenders religious meanings that suit its positioning in time and space. Okigbo's quest becomes one of seeking fulfilment in the context of his ancestral people's religious experience. His protagonist takes on the stature of a pilgrim who has to undergo an arduous journey in order to answer his ultimate call.

Both Okigbo and Echeruo seek an ultimate fulfilment in both cultural and religious terms. We link this fulfilment to the African experience which they invoke and it is in this sense that a "homecoming" becomes inevitable in all the areas of the black man's endeavour.

The centrality of religion, thus, in the poetry of Okigbo and Echeruo cannot be overlooked. Religion takes a central role in not only the understanding of natural and other phenomena but in the ordering of experience itself. For Okigbo poetry was, in his own words, "like a religious calling" (Ngara 33). This study, in examining the focus on religion in the poetry, looks at how religion becomes responsible for a certain understanding of conventions, norms and order in various communities. Subsequently we appraise its role in enhancing or not enhancing society or otherwise.

The two poets are not critical of religion per se but question the trend in which phenomena and experience are interpreted from a "unilineal religious–evolution tradition." This tradition assumes that all religions develop towards a unique apex. It places Christianity at this singular apex. This would of course invalidate all other

religious traditions, especially African. It would also involve a demeaning of their cultural roots and experiences. In a word, it would deny the existence of the black African person. The satirical stand of both poets against especially Christian Catholicism is a reaction against this. Their celebration of African traditional religions is thus central in the movement away from Christianity.

Okigbo in "Heavensgate" celebrates his return to the mother-god Idoto:

> Before you, mother Idoto,
> naked I stand;
> before your watery presence,
> a prodigal (I, 1-4)

Similarly, Echeruo, in "Talk, Patter, and Song" declares his allegiance to the gods of his ancestral people:

> But the love I swore to you,
> .....
> That only will I keep.
> You only can feed me from the harvest
> Of our mother's pot. (32-36)

The rich symbolism of love for the motherland is unmistakable. The mother figure symbolises the creative essence of the ancestral gods, a role which is linked only to the Christian god in the era in question. The two poets engage in a quest for reacceptance into their own cultural-religious traditions. In their poetry, one notes a constant motif of homecoming. They set out to subvert the view of the superiority of one religious tradition over others. This is in order to accord each religious tradition its due place in the experience of mankind. Both Mortality and Labyrinths portray religion as man-centred. In this case, therefore, different societies of man evolve a religion that would suit their physical, psychical and historical epochs. No one religious tradition can be universal. Indeed, as Berger has argued:

> It can be said that religion has played a strategic part in the human enterprise of world building. Religion implies the farthest reach of man's self-externalisation, of his infusion of reality with his own meanings. Religion implies that human order is projected into the totality of being, that is, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant. (Capps 383)

Different societies come up with varying religious ideals. This is what Echeruo and Okigbo communicate in their poetry. Mortality and Labyrinths, as experiences of "homecoming," insist on the validity of traditional African religions. They emphasise that each society's religious outlook is valid for that particular society and so it should not be destroyed. Echeruo reveals this in "Talk, Patter, and Song" when the poet-protagonist confronts his predicament. He accepts his fault in allowing for the destruction of his own basis of understanding reality:

> You came to his house,
> the dragging river-crocodile
> as if Times' foibles
> and Time's weight
> had after all robbed you
> of the wisdom of your fathers. (95-100)

There is recognition here that even the protagonist's past is adequate to explain his own experience. This is because the reference to "the wisdom of your fathers" implies that the protagonist has a valid point to draw from. He should not depend on the "dragging river –crocodile" which is a derogatory way of referring to the incoming cultural and religious experience. The "dragging river-crocodile" consumes and destroys. This negative symbolism is a consistent feature of Echeruo's attack on Christianity which he sees as having come to consume traditional religious systems. This is again evident in "Patter" where "Westernism" is equated to a frog:

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? (37-41)

Christianity is an intrusion against which the protagonist has to struggle. The stranger has "poison in his heart" and must be approached with care: "Should we then run into the heart / of the cave / ignoring the footmarks by the door?" (42-44). The poet thus cleverly subverts the early notion of the Christian missionaries who saw the African as a savage beast in need of redemption and light. In situating the stranger in a cave, the poet implies that the savage beast is not the local inhabitant but the stranger. The new religion is held up in contempt for it is vicious, savage, poisonous and destructive. We see this through the image of the dragging river-crocodile.

Okigbo advances the same line of thought. At the beginning, the poet-protagonist makes a strong statement seeking a return to another way of worship than Christianity. He invokes the "oilbean", sacred in the pantheon of his people and surrenders himself to mother Idoto. Mother Idoto is a goddess, unlike the god of Christianity; the implied message being that the universality Christianity claims is a sham. It is in defiance of Christianity that the quest-hero makes this declaration in "Heavensgate" as already seen;

Before you, mother Idoto
naked I stand;
before your watery presence,
a prodigal

leaning on an oilbean,
lost in your legend.

He thus swears eternal allegiance to the religious traditions of his ancestors. Echeruo does the same in "Talk, Patter, and Song" when his protagonist invokes, also, the image

of the oilbean, "By the foot of the oilbean / riding the first winds / of the harmattan!" (72-74). Immediately after this, he reverts to the symbol of love, woman and newness:

> The storm is on the wing,
> my love,
> Whirling
> the seeds of the New Year
> in the bosom of Woman,
> and she –
> will she bear them? (75-81)

This is a reference to the traditions of his people. These are expressed through rich symbolism involving reproduction and birth thus ensuring life and continuity. The view of life which the African religions advance is therefore wholesome unlike the incoming religion which seeks to destroy this wholesomeness. The new religion compartmentalises life as Okigbo observes in "Initiations,"

> Or forms fourth angle –
> Duty, obligation:
>
> Square yields the moron,
> Fanatics and priests and popes,
> .....
> the rhombus – brothers and deacons,
> liberal politicians,
> .....
> the quadrangle, the rest, me and you ... (24-34)

The incoming tradition is mechanical and fragmentary. It is introducing these aspects into the invaded cultural traditions which are fluid and tied to nature. We see this in Echeruo's reference to the "harmattan", "storm on the wing," and "seeds of the New Year." The protagonist becomes aware of the destructive nature of the new religion and realises he has to fight in order to perpetuate himself.

Okigbo's protagonist also fights. The forces of the new religion are so destructive that he has to seek protection. "Newcomer" expresses this. The bells of exile invite him to alien worship:

Time for worship –

Softly sing the bells of exile,
The angelus,
Softly sings my guardian angel

Mask over my face – (1-5)

The protagonist is in exile. He can only survive this exile by masking his true self. What comes to mind is "masking" as a strategy used by black African slaves to survive slavery in the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this sense, the protagonist is "surviving" in the new religion awaiting the right time to declare his freedom. For the time being, he needs protection while in exile. This protection would come through the mask or the protective spirit of Anna, a mother figure who is an echo of the goddess Idoto:

Anna of the panel oblongs,
protect me
from them fucking angels;
protect me
my sandhouse and bones (10-14)

The mask as a protective device derives from the idea of ancestral protection in times of great need. The protagonist denies that the mask is ancestral, thereby affirming that he would have equally appealed to his ancestors for protection. The reason he does not is that he thinks his is a personal struggle he has to wage using his own energies:

Mask over my face –
my own mask, not ancestral – I sign:
remembrance of Calvary,
and of age of innocence, which is of …

Time for worship: (5-9)

We feel, with the protagonist, a sense of defilement of his innocence through initiation into Christianity. The structure of this poem reveals this aspect in the way "the bells of exile" tolling "Time for worship" sharply interrupt a reverie he is about to enter involving the "age of innocence." This symbolically shows that even as an innocent he is not allowed to think or deliberate freely for himself. Every time he tries to do this, the bells of exile toll, ordering him to worship. At this time, in desperation, he beseeches "Anna of the panel oblongs" to protect him from "them fucking angels" (10-12).

The initiation into Christianity is painful. Symbols of pain that accompany the protagonist's alienation from the ways of his people confirm this. Okigbo's protagonist in "Initiations" reveals this:

Scar of the crucifix
over the breast
by red blade inflicted
by red-hot blade,
on right breast witnesseth (1-5)

Thus, through implantation into Christianity, the protagonist gets, painfully, a new identity. In the process, he loses his original identity. This poem further reveals the meaninglessness of the Christian religion to the poet-protagonist. During the initiation into Christianity, "man loses man, loses vision;" (15) and accepting this new life means accepting "life without sin" (19) which would be impossible, for life is dual, both good and evil as we see in Echeruo's "Harvest-time:" that life is lustful and kind. This is further discussed in chapter three. "Life without sin" would mean living "without / life" (19-20) a paradox, and if this is accepted then the "way leads downward / down orthocenter / avoiding decisions" (21-23).

For the protagonist, the new faith is full of contradictions, like "living without life." It is a faith that transfers all personal responsibilities elsewhere so that the individual, having found a scapegoat, can avoid making any decisions of his own. Its way leads downwards. The new religion is rigid unlike traditional religion which is fluid as already seen in Echeruo's "Song" (75-81). We see this rigidity through images of mechanical and mathematical nature that describe it such as "square," "rhombus," and "quadrangle." Rigidity implies imprisonment, stagnation and retardation. For the protagonist, all these come along with Christianity. This is the painful initiation he has to undergo, losing his original identity for a new identity. The new identity is branded on him by "red-hot blade" (4). This shows the pain involved. From then on, he is a prisoner of his new identity. He is retarded and he cannot grow.

The protagonist thus seeks to escape from the meaninglessness of Christianity. A prodigal, he has to return home. In "Watermaid" his vision clears and the situation unravels, "Eye open on the sea, / eyes open, of the prodigal;" (1-2). This leads on to "Lustra" where images of traditional worship abound, especially the "long-drums," the "cannons" and the "palm grove," (33-35). Here, "the spirit is in ascent" amidst "Thundering drums and cannons / in palm grove" (26-28). The protagonist, a prodigal, is preparing himself for a return home from exile.

Echeruo's protagonist is also alienated. The confusing experience of not knowing his true identity incapacitates him. We see this in "Outsider" which shows an interplay of the opposing spiritual forces. "Clever lad of a goddamn tribe!" (8) is juxtaposed against "happy child of the new testament!" (12). The "tribe" stands for that identity which he would lose. The transition from "clever lad of a goddam tribe" to "happy child of the new testament" shows the movement of conversion to Christianity. In Okigbo this comes in "Initiations." The protagonist thus moves from the supposed savage tribe to the "redeeming power" of Christianity. Thus starts his alienation and destruction. He fights back by challenging his new space of religious accommodation through this plaintive cry in which he declares his claim to humanity:

> There were tears, when I was born,
> There were aches, too, when I was born.
> Tears to drop, and hearts to ache, (13-15)

This describes experiences that are common to all human beings. This is in the sense that he belongs to humanity, and should be allowed his freedom and choice. This is the basis of Echeruo's attack on Christianity. It does not allow the individual freedom to choose. In the same desperation as Okigbo's protagonist towards the end of "Heavensgate" in "Newcomer," Echeruo's protagonist finally cries out "Send, O send me away!" (22). He is fleeing from Christianity at the point Okigbo's protagonist cries out "Protect me / From them fucking angels" (11-12).

For Echeruo's protagonist, the new religion was, at first, like gold. Later he finds out that that was illusory, "Let the gold I loved which never was / Delude its glory-minded prodigy" (20-21). So, as already seen, finally he cries out, "So take, take me away! Send, send me away !" (18-19). The confusion and desperation that occurs in the clash of two religious traditions marks an identity crisis. The protagonist wishes to be sent away from this crisis. This sending away would then involve the painful search, akin to that of the prodigal in Okigbo, for the motherland and mothergod.

In "Defections," "The heart resigns itself / In agony / To the fragmentation of itself" (1-3). The protagonist cannot reconcile the two forces fighting over his heart. He succumbs under the weight of this war between preservation of his ancestral ways and the destabilising Christian religious ideal. From the confusion revealed in "Send, O send me away!" we get to the fragmentation and destruction of the individual. Christianity, in both Echeruo and Okigbo, is fragmentary and destructive. This is in contrast with the traditional religions which are wholesome and life-giving as we see in Echeruo's images of reproductive fertility which surround his presentation of traditional forms of worship. The "woman" figure and images of harvest stand out prominently.

However, the protagonist fights the forces that want to destroy him. In "Talk" he cries out:

> I have sworn my love to you,
> O my father!
> .....
> You only can feed me from the harvest
> Of our mother's pot (10-36).

This is the ultimate cry of the prodigal returning home. In the words of the critic Ken Goodwin, this homecoming cry is uttered by the poet- protagonist when he has reached a stage where he:

> expresses a longing for an achievement of unity of being as the result of an often long and difficult journey; seeing himself as having been subverted by European values or having drawn away spiritually and often physically from his homeland. He experiences the need to return and expresses the culmination of this homeward journey in images of sacrifice, sexual union, feasting, singing and dancing. (xvii)

In this sense, therefore, the protagonist anticipates a homecoming. This homecoming is grasped in a religious sense, thence the movement away from Christianity. In "Sophia," Echeruo subverts the biblical "Increase and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28) to "Increase and till the earth" (7) followed immediately by "Plough on virgin-land is temptation" (8). "Tilling" and "filling," apart from the obvious consonance of their rhyme, both have reproductive and hence sexual connotation. In this context, "tilling" is followed by "planting" which eventually means growth, reproduction and harvest. In the biblical context, the earth was to be filled with people through sexual reproduction by Adam and Eve. The poem's title in this case is "Sophia," a woman's name, which takes us back to Idoto, a goddess, and homecoming. The sexual insistence and its pervasiveness at this point is crucial because this becomes the spring of life, which life religion attempts to order and give meaning.

In "Mortal Songs" the poet ridicules the West and Christianity while asserting religious traditions indigenous to the African person. "Defections" is the central movement in Mortality. It denotes the protagonist's decision to make that movement away from Christianity and embrace his ancestral religions. In,

> I watched the Saracens in the tumult of a feast
> Extol their fathers in the name of some god,
> Call themselves the children of god!
> God answered with a rainbow in the sky; (12-15)

the poet ridicules Christianity's claim to universality; its creation and possession of the only valid god to whom the rest of humanity should look up to. At this point the protagonist denounces all the "marvels" and "novelty" of Christianity with its "palaces of steel and gold / Engines of great ingenuity / wonders passing comprehension" (16-18) for he has "loved them all till now / ... ... / calling all mine that fed me the fruit / Of another's mother's harvest!" (19-23).

From now he breaks free. He realises that Christianity is a foreign heritage; somebody else's. He too has got a heritage of his own: his ancestral religions. He has his own mother, too, whose harvest he can claim instead of "another's mother's harvest" (23). At this point he turns and we can claim to hear a clear voice of homecoming: "Go seek the vices now / Of the world that bore you!" (24-25). The protagonist's decision here is one of acceptance of himself, his religion and cultural heritage – in whatever state all these might be in: "Where, how, who knows how? Caverns, ruins, imponderable hearts? / Vices, too?" (26-28). The idea is for him to embrace his own in all its vice and virtue. "Talk" ends by swearing allegiance to the "ancient gullible faith" (29) saying that, as we have already seen, "You only can feed me from the harvest / Of our mother's pot" (35-36).

At a symbolic level, the protagonist has come to the realisation that he too has a mother whose pot too contains harvest.

"Patter" as a rejoinder to "Talk" explores the discrepancies of the African's blind entry into a tradition that would destroy all his values, including family and communal values. The West is a stranger "having poison in his heart" as we have seen earlier. The presence of the African in Westernism and Christianity is "without mother," (56) thus he has no guidance. The mother figure, as we have seen, is central to both Okigbo's and Echeruo's inquiry. In Okigbo, the goddess Idoto is a mother. Therefore the absence of "mother" in this case leads to the "learning of lewd jokes from the sitter" (67) on "Thanksgiving Day"? (70) which should be a day of ritual to be kept holy and clean. Africa can only expect a bad harvest, "Hence the harvest!" (71).

Africa is married off to the "wild west" where she is eventually destroyed. The children she gives birth to out of this union are not complete, "They grow big and fat and strong /

And wander all the wilds of the West" (59-60). There is thus destruction of African family values and her communalism under Christianity. This heralds the total destruction of the African person.

"Song" talks of what eventually befalls the African person: he is destroyed by Christianity. It starts by restating the swearing by the "oilbean" as seen earlier on in this chapter. However there is doubt about the strength of the African person to hold forth his own for he can only "lament the violation / of the rites of (the) fathers" (88-89) without doing anything. This section is hard-hitting on the African person because he fails to fight for his own. It also criticises the blindness and naivety with which he embraces the stranger:

You came
(with a handshake) to his house
not seeing
the faeces
by his door.
You came to his house,
the dragging river-crocodile,
as if Time's foibles
and Time's weight
had after all robbed you
of the wisdom of your fathers. (90-100)

The protagonist challenges history and historical events arguing that were the African strong and tactical enough, he should not have succumbed to the weight of history. It is a rebuke: the African agreed to embrace his enemy who ends up destroying him. He even comes to his enemy's house "with a handshake" (91), an enemy comparable to "the dragging river-crocodile" (96). Bereft of all dignity, emptied of all honour, the African is now like "... an unfeathered bird" (101), exposed and insecure; like "... an unclassified gift to their museums" (104-105), an object of no consequence. "Song" finally admits, "So, here I am!" (110).

This section thus captures the predicament of the African person, as seen through the protagonist, the spectrum of his woes right from his "Initiation" or "Debut" into Western religion to the present moment. Even the present moment is defined not by himself but by what he has undergone in his marriage to the "wild west." A re-appraisal of the last line of this sequence "So, here I am" (110) bears witness to the foregoing assertion. The protagonist's or African's situation in the present is a consequence of all the distortions his warped self has undergone in the experience of Westernism and its ritual of Christianity.

"Poems to God and O'Brien" is the apex of the denunciation the poet-protagonist feels against Christianity. The supposed divine moment takes place besides a jukebox. As we see in "Prologue" it is here that commences "... the apocalypse / of a sordid generation" (23-24). "The Signature" continues the same satirical approach against Christianity and especially Catholicism. Here people line up "to tell O'Brien they have sinned" (6) and then "... kneel and hope / for the promise of the Latin spells" (9-10).

The poet brings together images from African worship and juxtaposes them with Christian ones. We look at African spells vis-à-vis Latin spells and "spirit men" versus Christian priests. The poet implies that none is superior to the other, only that they are peculiar to their different traditions. This brings us to the final satirical rebuttal, "The priests and elders of my past / would love to see O'Brien's paradise" (47-48), which is delivered with an ironical undertone. Father O'Brien would be an irrelevance to the priests and elders of the protagonist's past. This is a dismissal of Christianity in Africa. However, the protagonist realises that his people have been confused by Christianity and as a result, they are driven wherever the forces of the new religion will without their questioning. "Daedalus" captures this in its echo of "Melting-pot" that "The Century's blind man!" (19). People would follow and obey foreign ideologies and concepts as if they were blind. There will always be people "Telling tales, condoning fables" (6) as if they were true:

> Between this and the generation
> Of a tribe
> .....
> Some stand today before the warped memory
> Of a silent people; (7-12)

The "silent people" are the ones for whom the "tale-tellers" (6) "spin out fine the thousand profundities / of my as-it-were good people" (13-14). This is an attack on those who take advantage of the gullibility of a group of people and spin for them "the thousand profundities" (13). The protagonist implies that Christianity took advantage of the gullible nature of the Africans and spun for them "the thousand profundities" which underlie Christianity's doctrinal basis and convinced them that this was the universal truth. Christianity's manner of entry into Africa was thus in very good guise, easy-going parlance of "as-it-were, my good people" (14). In this way, it fooled many and this is why the protagonist has determined to reverse its effects through an embrace of the traditional religion.

"Daedalus" corresponds very well with "Path of Thunder" in Okigbo. Structurally, they are both removed from the rest of the movements that make up the experiences of Mortality and Labyrinths. They offer a summation of the struggle of both experiences. "Daedalus," as we have seen in the foregoing, presents Christianity as a tale which has been spun to confuse the Africans and hence the necessity to make that movement away from its visage. "Path of Thunder" is a real and actual celebration of homecoming. It tackles the real problems of human existence: political, social and cultural, which latter aspect (cultural) entails the religious but in a sphere where Christianity has been renounced and traditional religion embraced.

"Thunder can break" opens in a violent celebration of homecoming, achieved in "Distances," "Fanfare of drums, wooden bells; iron chapter; / And our dividing airs are gathered home" (1-2). We are now distanced from the intricacies of Christian ritual which occupied the protagonist's search earlier in the experience. The protagonist can now "face the thunder" and tackle problems beyond the shroud of escapist Christian speculation: "This day belongs to a miracle of thunder; / .... / Bring them out we say, bring them out / .... / The stories behind the myth, the plot / which the ritual enacts" (3-16).

The protagonist cannot hide any longer in Christianity's "safe" cocoon which asks for "life without sin, without / life (19-20) as we see in "Initiations". Everything must be revealed in its stark naked reality so that he can face it and confront it like in the violence of thunder. This is the message contained in "Daedalus" too. The protagonist has to go

beyond the mask that pretends it is laughing when it is crying. "Daedalus" looks for actual solutions to problems beyond mere Christian mythical explanations. "Fanning memory into gales / of innocent daring beyond runic and scroll" (1-2) reveals this. "Runic" and "scroll" stand for Christianity beyond which the protagonist must look for solutions to the problems he is faced with.

Homecoming thus involves solving problems that face the protagonist: whether political, social or cultural. "Daedalus" and "Path of Thunder" are answers to the protagonist's earlier doubt in both experiences as to what problems face his homecoming. As already seen, Echeruo's protagonist asks in "Defections" of his homecoming: "Where, how, who knows how? / Caverns, ruins, imponderable hearts? / Vices, too?" (26-28). Now he has to solve his problems without depending on Christian answers. This involves looking deep within himself which makes it necessary for him to rediscover himself. It is only in the traditional religions that he can rediscover himself and therefore he has to renounce Christianity if he must confront the reality of his homecoming.

Okigbo's protagonist in "Distances" also asks of his homecoming "But what does my divine rejoicing hold?" (I, 5). "Path of Thunder" provides the answer in that he has to confront all realities involved in this homecoming.

"Daedalus," as "Path of Thunder" also opens violently and seeks answers beyond the Christian experience as we have already seen. "Fanning" and "gales" in "Daedalus" are violent images which correspond to the breaking of thunder. The emphasis is that the protagonist has to confront the realities of his homecoming. The line "... like motion into stillness is my divine rejoicing" (21) in "Elegy of the Wind" shows that his rejoicing of homecoming is painful. In "Come Thunder" and "Hurrah for Thunder", we realise that he does not escape from the painful side of his homecoming. He confronts the source of this pain as we see in "Daedalus" where Echeruo's protagonist dares "beyond runic and scroll" (2).

The celebration is clear, "Now that the triumphant march has entered the last street corners / Remember, O dancers the thunder among the clouds" (1-2). This shows the celebration and contrasts it to the pain of homecoming. This is revealed by "triumphant march" vis-à-vis the warning of "thunder among the clouds."

"Elegy for slit-drum" tackles the political problem in homecoming. Eventually "Elegy of Alto" reminds us of the return to Mother Idoto. Regardless of the problems that arise with homecoming, the protagonist has returned home to his ancestral deities. This enables him to cry to the mothergod; "O mother mother Earth, unbind me; let this be / my last testament" (17-18). He should thus overcome any problems homecoming raises and the end is hopeful. There is a triumph of immortality for the protagonist. His movement away from Christianity is thus sanctioned when the "old star" (38) departs with his alienated self and a "new star" (39) appears, with his homecoming which becomes an eternal quest.

The protagonist makes a movement away from Christianity into his ancestral religions. This is an act of self-affirmation. It is denial of the alienation that is involved in his sojourn in Christianity. It is this alienation that the next chapter explores, tracing the protagonist's reaction in his struggle to achieve a homecoming.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EXPERIENCE OF ALIENATION

This chapter explores the alienation of the protagonists from their cultural roots due to initiation into Christianity. Christianity, as a religion and cultural force, is responsible for this alienation of the protagonists from the cultural roots of their own ancestral religious experiences. We shall also look at the struggle against alienation; a struggle which marks the movement towards homecoming. The protagonist realises that if he has to reclaim his true self, then he has to fight against the alienation engendered by his sojourn in Christianity.

A sense of alienation pervades Mortality and Labyrinths. The poets use symbols which allude to experiences that are foreign to them as we shall show subsequently. This, at a symbolic level, reflects this alienation. Echeruo's protagonist sees himself as an outsider to a tradition that is not his. We see this in the poem "Outsider." The alienation is based on the loss by the African person of his ancestral religion. Religion is the only tool that would tie him to and make him responsive to his ancestral community of people. Romanus Egudu has argued that "... for Christianity has done him two wrongs. First it has estranged him from his indigenous system of worship ..." (17). This estrangement is what characterises both Okigbo's and Echeruo's protagonists. In the words of Isaac Yetiv, this kind of estrangement is to be seen in the sense it made one "become a stranger to his tribe, to his religion, to his traditions and to himself" (qtd in Smith 87). The protagonists in Mortality and Labyrinths "cannot be accommodated in the Christian religious experience where they feel exiled ... they go back to the indigenous religion to revive it ... and retain it" (Egudu 19). They do this in order to consolidate their identity and assert their humanity. Religion thus becomes the only agency through which the protagonist can wage a war against alienation. This is the reason why, in Labyrinths, "the poet-protagonist stands before mother Idoto as a prodigal desiring to return to her who is his parent and deity" (Egudu 19).

In Mortality, we encounter the "twosomeness" of the protagonist. The destruction of the means to self-identity of the protagonist brings out indecision of which "Crossroads" is a

symbol. The poem is characterised by symbols of a journey that should end in union with an ideal. The images here reflect a sailor in the Western understanding. The underlying idea derives from the spiritual journey of the Christian mystic; a journey usually represented as that of a loved one (the soul) seeking reunion with the lover (God) in Christianity's explication as the poet elaborates (Echeruo 53). The poem also evokes the Spanish Catholic mystic and poet, St. John of the Cross, the patron, in the Catholic faith, of these journeys of spiritual love (Echeruo 53).

Juxtaposing "Crossroads" with "Distances" in Okigbo, we get the same idea of a journey that seeks reunion with an ideal. This ideal is one of self-fulfilment accompanied with an understanding of oneself in order to comprehend the meaning and purpose of one's existence if any. The poet writes of the experience represented in Labyrinths. "The self that suffers, that experiences, ultimately finds fulfilment in the form of psychic union with the supreme spirit" (xii). This fulfilment would entail an arrival at an identity the protagonist, who has been alienated by the experience of cultural subjugation, is fulfilled in. The anxiety and fear in the search for this fulfilment is revealed in "Crossroads,"

> I have felt at this confluence
> of two destinies
> the heart-searchings of an uncertain tide
> and have watched the shriller winds
> beckoning the stars to death. (5-9)

The experience of cultural destruction through initiation into Christianity brings about an individual who is two-fold: belonging to two different cultures one of which destroys the other. The protagonist therefore has to resolve the dilemma and make an arduous pilgrimage that would liberate him from the alienating influences of the new culture. The protagonist's alienation is brought out vividly through allusions in which images of Catholicism are prevalent. "O dichosa ventura" (17) is the ecstatic cry of fulfilment by the Spanish Catholic mystic and poet already mentioned (Echeruo 53). This cry welcomes home the "loved one" (soul) to the "lover" (God). In the circumstances of this poetry it is a cry of fulfilment beyond the reaches of the Christian experience which has alienated the protagonist from his own self and the cultural reality of his ancestral people.

The idea of this pilgrimage towards reunion, though not peculiar to the Christian experience, is furnished with images that reflect a Christian consciousness. Though the understanding is that the protagonist is making a return to a milieu that should be essentially his, this return is conveyed in totally alien terms. This means that the protagonist has been alienated so much that his mind is warped. He is aware of seeking a return but the way of his return is that already fashioned out and defined for him by Christianity. We experience the pain, the indecision, the fear and confusion involved in his return. This is best revealed by the lines, "the heart-searchings of an uncertain tide / and have watched the shriller winds / beckoning the stars to death" (7-9).

In Okigbo, this pain is even more poignant. "Distances," the culmination of the pilgrimage in Labyrinths, is marked by a trail of pain. When the protagonist declares that "I am the sole witness to my homecoming" (VI, 41) he implies that the pain and anguish of the whole experience is best felt and defined by him. The individual thus goes through a personal struggle and comes to a fulfilment he can understand. "Distances" again presents the transformation of the protagonist, which involves pain. There is a transmutation from flesh into phantom (I, 1) and images of pain abound. In section II, we see that,

> Death lay in ambush ....
> .....
> And the eye lost its light,
> the light lost its shadow.
> .....
> anguish and solitude ...
> Smothered, my scattered
> cry, the dancers,
> lost among their own
> snares; ...
> the hands held captive
> the interspaces
> reddening with blood; (I-28)

This shows the stages of the protagonist's suffering as he seeks the supreme spirit. In section III, as in Mortality, the quest takes up the image of a Christian pilgrimage,

> In the scattered line of pilgrims
> bound for Shibboleth
> in my hand the crucifix
> .....
> In the scattered line of pilgrims
> from Dan to Beersheba. (1-6)

The image of the "crucifix" leaves no doubt about the nature of this pilgrimage. The protagonist sees salvation coming in the context of the structures of the Christian experience which has already alienated him. However, ultimately, both poet-protagonists claim their eventual return within the dictates of the experience reflected in their own cultural and religious realities. In Labyrinths, the return is claimed through mother Idoto and the protagonist in Mortality swears by the "oilbean" which symbol takes us back again to mother Idoto.

In "Melting-pot", Echeruo's protagonist makes us aware of the pain and loneliness he experiences within the Western situation. He is aware of his alienation within Christianity and the reference to "melting-pot," meant to indicate a fulfilment of different cultural desires, now rings hollow. He states that, "It is dark, now, and grave" (1). He cannot bring to bear his true identity for he feels that this kind of a world is stifling him. The darkness hinders his movement and curtails his progress. Thence, he cannot develop as a full human being.

> This bowl of a world
> That rings me round and round
> And will not let me marvel enough
> At this dull sky
> At the ignorance of these men
> Who cannot know what chance can do.
>
> I shudder
> Before this bowl of a world, (2-9)

The protagonist experiences outrage and turbulence at being hemmed in and denied a chance to be what he is capable of being. The world of Christianity is blind for it cannot see his potential to be full human and denies him that chance to be himself. Christianity's significance is thus lost on him. This is why in "Easter Penitence" the protagonist finds Catholicism meaningless. This is shown in "O crucible, / O furnace / from the darkness and delirium / the emptiness of another ecstasy" (1-4). Thus, the whole experience he is being initiated to is empty and without meaning. This is again revealed in the structure of this poem in which the repetition of the exclamation "O", which should emphasise the aura of sacredness of the moment, instead turns out to be empty:

> O crucifix
> O chalice
> .....
> O Sunrise! (5-9)

The patterned repetition implies an aspect of non-concentration and a lack of commitment. It is a repetition by rote. This shows the emptiness the protagonist feels in Christianity. He has to escape from it because in "Outsider" the protagonist cries out, as we have already seen in chapter one, "So take, take me away! / Send, send me away!" (18-19).

In "Mortal Songs" the protagonist tries to make the best of the experiences of the two worlds he lives in but he fails. In "Defections" especially in the poem "Talk, Patter, and Song" he shows his acceptance of his own cultural tradition. This is the reason in "Harvest-time" he affirms and asserts the values of the harvest that belongs to him and his ancestral people in "Village maidens / are the bearers of my harvest" (38-39). This harvest is described in richness and in images and symbols of fertility. This implies birth and newness, which would ensure life and continuity indicating its acceptance by the protagonist:

Here is a wild bloom of maidens
full-blown and alluring
smiling through forms and so-forth
so healthful and hard and lovely
in this harvest-time.

.....

They are breaking into laughter
at this pregnant encounter. (31-43)

Thence we see the use of reproductive images by the poet to imply the richness of the experience the protagonist is struggling to reclaim. This is in his quest to regain his identity and flee from the alienating experience represented by Westernism and especially its religion.

In "Come, Come Spring," centred on season, life is juxtaposed against death while in "Harvest-time," also related to seasons, images of life abound:

Our idols and maggots
devour the remnants of entrails
striking, entwining, disgorging
responding to that odd delight. (2-5)

This description has the intimations of the beginnings of life in the primeval sense, especially when we look at "idols" and "maggots." These two aspects indicate life at its very beginning. Maggots develop into other life forms and idols, as gods, ensure life. Relating this to the image of harvest as relayed in the same poem, the "harvest" symbol becomes very significant. Indeed, we can link it to Eldred Jones' analysis of the same motif of harvest in his consideration of Wole Soyinka's Idanre in which he says

> Harvest is a culmination of the essential rhythm of life; the cyclical rhythm of the death of seed, followed by growth which in turn leads inevitably to death even in the harvest. (145)

Death and life therefore become interlinked and the two poems "Harvest-time" and "Come, Come Spring" bring out this idea. However, there is the unstated claim that the protagonist sees life before death. This is why, in contrast with "Harvest-time" which stands as an African image, "Come, Come Spring," which has the imagery of Western seasons, starts and ends in death:

> early shoots sprout to life
> and are dead
> before summertime
> in the spring rain. (1-4)

whereas "Harvest-time" is filled with life,

> In harvest-time,
> the mellowed earth beckons:
> the ruptured earth yielding the seed
> of another fertile year (20-23)

Thus, for the protagonist, his experience of alienation puts him in a situation in which death comes before life. This is why he has to revert to his own experience described in images of life for, as we have already seen, "Come, Come Spring" ends as it begins: in death. "Come, come Spring! Come Summer!/ Come all hope, and all blossoms! / Come all, and die!" (19-21).

There is, therefore, a definite movement away from his estrangement in the alien culture, which he sees as already dead. In approaching home, the protagonist is actually coming to the end of his pilgrimage and arriving at a union with his eternal self. In his fulfilment, he is to confront his true personage and true identity.

In "Ure Igne ..." even when Nnena is totally immersed in the act of communion in the Catholic Mass, her thoughts are wandering in her ancestral religious traditions. We see this in her reverie which is captured in,

If I met you outside, I would kiss you
and none would despise me.
I would lead you and bring you
into the house of my mother,
into the house of her, that conceived me. (51-55)

Nnena's soul is searching as we see in:

Arrested
in the heart of a moment of reflection,
soul searches oracles for solace,
for gestures, ritual, communion,
for the logos. (1-5)

She is not satisfied with what the Catholic Mass offers and goes further "into the house of my mother / into the house of her that conceived me" (54-55). Taking into consideration the significance of "mother" in both Mortality and Labyrinths, as we see throughout this study, we realise that the protagonist is finding his way home to mother Idoto and thus to his true identity. We also see that even as "Nnena (of the choir) sings Salve Regina" (56) she is "lost in thoughts of other realms" (57). These "other realms" refer to the African ancestral religions the protagonist is fighting to reclaim.

A similar movement towards a return also characterises Okigbo's protagonist in Labyrinths. The desire to return home is expressed at the very beginning as we saw in chapter one. However the journey to acquire this fulfilment is, as Ngara argues, "a torturous one" (41).

The experience of alienation is so painful that the protagonist in his repentance and need for acceptance to mother Idoto in "Passage" utters, as Ngara argues, "the De Profundis from the depth of his heart in a manner similar to the way in which Catholics used to cry to the Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven in the prayer Salve Regina, Hail Holy Queen" (35). We see this in the lines "out of the depths my cry: / give ear and hearken ..." (11-12). This is the same prayer: "Salve Regina," Nnena sings in Echeruo's "Ure Igne ..." while her mind is lost in thoughts of other realms.

The death of the sunbird is the background against which this alienation is seen in "Heavensgate." The protagonist is thus mourning the death of his self and his religion, represented by the sunbird through which he would identify himself. Alienation involves a lot of pain.

Me to the orangery
Solitude invites,
.....
a sunbird to mourn
a mother on a spray. (18-23)

"Silent faces at crossroads" in "The Passage" compares with Echeruo's "Crossroads" in "Debut." There is a sense of hurt, pain, anxiety and indecision in the two poems. The protagonists live in a dual world which does not fulfil their desires. We see both agonising: "O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong, / hear us at crossroads at the great hinges" (36-37) is the cry of Okigbo's protagonists while Echeruo's laments:

He has departed at mid-day!
the pilot who draws the lots
draws the charts.
He threw the compass overboard. (1-4).

In "Initiations" in Okigbo, the protagonist takes us through the pain of the experience of alienation. He is forcibly introduced into the new tradition and so forced out of his own. In this way he loses his identity as he is painfully branded into the religion of another race as we saw in Chapter one: "scar of the crucifix / over the breast / by red blade inflicted" (1-3). The discrepancies of the new religion are clear to him as we have seen and this intensifies his alienation. In the way of Echeruo's protagonist, as seen earlier in this chapter, in the poem "Easter Penitence," the protagonist sees a meaninglessness of the whole experience. He cannot accept its dogma and doctrines and he ridicules the whole experience in "Initiations."

In "Watermaid", the protagonist moulds an idea which he calls a secret. He is taking action to escape from his alienation. The moulded secret appears, though briefly: "so

brief her presence / match-flare in wind's breath - / so brief ..." (24-26). This is a vision of the protagonist's eventual desire for the reclamation of his true identity through a regaining of his religion. This vision is seen in the image of "my white queen" (35), a reflection of mother Idoto. "Watermaid" ends thus with a vision of the protagonist's anticipated acquisition. However the vision has not materialised and only its shadow is visible, "But the spent sea reflects / From his mirrored visage / Not my queen, a broken shadow" (36-38).

"Lustra" starts with the idea of "Watermaid" developing into a strong urge to move on, "So would I to the hills again / so would I" (1-2). The protagonist resolves to go for a cleansing to be renewed so as to reclaim his identity: "So would I from my eye the mist / .... / thro' moonmist to hilltop / there for the cleansing" (9-12). The urge is unstoppable and "Lustra" becomes a symbol of the return to the gods of his ancestors. He ridicules the idea of his expectation of his salvation through Catholicism when he derides Christianity: "*Messiah will come again / After the argument in heaven / Messiah will come again ...*" (19-21). He has decided not to wait for this coming and he instead offers a sacrifice immediately asking for forgiveness from his own ancestral gods:

> Fingers of penitence bring
> to a palm grove
> vegetable offering with five
> fingers of chalk ... (22-25)

Immediately after, "the spirit is in ascent!" (28). The protagonist is, in symbolic form, achieving that identity which has been snatched from him. He comes to the palm grove and the drums and cannons invite him. "Newcomer" follows in which he is a newcomer to his own religion and identity. The vision thus achieves its ultimate form but it has not materialised yet. Psychologically, however, the protagonist is getting ready to embrace his own identity from which he has been alienated. "Limits" becomes an actual preparation for his return.

"Limits" itself starts suddenly as the vision engendered towards the end of "Heavensgate" is in rupture. The protagonist is being freed from the shackles of the imprisoning experience of alienation under a foreign religion. We see this in:

Suddenly becoming talkative
like weaver bird
Summoned at offside of
dream remembered (1-4)

"Siren Limits" shows that a ritual has been performed for the mothergod and a sacrifice offered.

Between sleep and waking
I hang up my egg shells
To you of palm grove
Upon whose bamboo towers

Hang, dripping with yesterupwine,
A tiger mask and nude spear ... (5-10)

"... you of palm grove" refers to the ancestral gods with the symbols of "tiger mask" and "nude spear" being very explicitly unchristian images. The protagonist makes it clear why he has taken on this new, bold, vibrant mood; evoking the figure of "woman" in Queen: "Queen of the damp half light / I have had my cleansing" (11-12).

However, the preparations are not all ready for soon we find out that "The mortar is not yet dry" (III. 3). Even though the protagonist has had a cleansing, he is not ready and has to wait till "Distances" to actualise his embrace of the traditional gods in a denial of alienation. The dream here, vibrant at the beginning, falters: "And the dream wakes / the voice fades / In the damp half light / like a shadow" (III, 34-37). The protagonist begs the godly influence of the Queen to bear him through the quest and inform him when he should take his step,

When you have finished
& done up my stitches
Wake me near the altar,
& this poem will be finished ... (IV, 11-14)

This implies that the protagonist cannot achieve union with his god until all tasks assigned to him have been performed.

Throughout "Siren Limits" we see why "the mortar is not yet dry." The influence of the foreign experience is too much and there is danger abounding for the traditional experiences:

> But the sunbird repeats
> Over the oilbean shadows:
>
> 'A fleet of eagles,
> over the oilbean shadows,
> Holds the square
> under curse of their breath. (1-6)

It is these same forces that destroy the traditional religions upon which a basis of an identity for the protagonist would be built:

> And to us they came
> .....
> And climbed the bombax
> And killed the Sunbird.
> .....
> And the ornaments of him,
> And the beads about his tail;
> And the carapace of her,
> And her shell, they divided. (1-25)

The magnitude of this destruction is subtly paralleled to that destruction of the Christian god in Christian legend. This section alludes to the Roman soldiers casting lots to divide the garment of the crucified Christ in Christian mythology. This should embody the death of the protagonist and the end of his dream. The devastation wrought by the new religion and its alienating influence are too much to bear. We see that:

... the gods lie in state

.....

without the long drum

And the gods lie unsung,
Veiled only with mould,
Behind the shrinehouse.

Gods grow out,
Abandoned; (1-8)

But then the poet says that religions and gods never die for at the end of "Limits," "The Sunbird sings again / From the LIMITS of the dream" (2-3). In the same circumstances, Echeruo's protagonist in "Defections" in the poem "In Memoriam" says: "It will rest, sleep, but phoenix-wise, / will erupt with a want, a feeling" (17-18).

The protagonists thus maintain that even if the basis of their lives and communal identity have been destroyed when their religions have been usurped by the Christian religion, once again their religions, will transcend this destruction. Like the mythical phoenix bird, after three centuries lying in cold ash, they will rise and flex their wings ready for new flight. This is why at the end of "Limits" "The Sunbird sings again" (XII, 2). The insistence of both poets on the bird motif in relation to traditional religion shall be explored in chapter four.

We realise that in Echeruo's "In Memoriam" the poet-protagonist is able to say " – Eat, o my little pretty boy!" (24) in reference to traditional religion. The image of "pretty boy" and why he must eat and thus be nurtured is significant because this is an experience the protagonist as "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
on the milkmaid crests. (4-10)

This means that the experience of tradition the protagonist is fighting to reclaim is his own ancestral people's creation; something whose good and whose bad sides he understands. He is ready to suffer in order to reclaim it. "Silences" thus, in Labyrinths in which we get two lamentations, prepares one for the end of the journey and a reclamation of the lost experience. It is the last cry of the protagonist in his quest. The "Lament of the Silent Sisters" shows the barrenness of the experience the protagonist is forced to subsist under. The Catholic religion does not allow nuns to marry and bear children and so the lament, as Egudu argues, is one in which "the sisters sing the futility of themselves and their life" (19). At a symbolic level, therefore, the experience the protagonist is undergoing under Christianity is barren, futile and vain. Hence the anguish of the sisters:

Crier: Is there ... Is certainly there ...
For as in sea-fever globules of fresh anguish
immense golden eggs empty of albumen
sink into our balcony ... (1-4)

Their helplessness is shown in that they still cling to their cross, knowing that it will not save them, "Crier: The cross to us we still call to us, / In this jubilee-dance above the carrion ..." (13-14).

In "Lament of the Drums," the anguish experienced by the protagonist is still felt. As Egudu says, "this lament deals with oppression, captivity and suffering, robbery of others' right and freedom and the resultant desolation" (17). In this lament, the protagonist starts by imploring the ancestral spirits representing the destroyed gods and indigenous religions,

Lion-hearted cedar forest, gonads for our thunder,
Even if you are very far away, we invoke you:

Give us our hollow heads of long-drums ... (1-3)

Though defeated and desperate, the protagonist still evokes the valour of his religious tradition and its persevering power: "Lion-hearted" though now it is "very far away." But he seeks whatever is left, even the "hollow heads of long drums" which stand for the traditional gods.

The protagonist at this point prays for strength in the same way Catholics would invoke their saints in the prayer called the Litany of Saints. Through different praise names, he invokes his ancestral gods, asking for their presence and protection. This style is closely tailored on the Litany of the Catholic religion. However, the protagonist's invocation is as follows;

> Antelopes of the cedar forest, swifter messengers
> .....
> Many-fingered canebrake, exile for our laughter,
> .....
> Thunder of tanks of giant iron steps of detonators, (4-10)

which in each respective case is followed by,

> Hide us; deliver us from our nakedness ...
> .....
> Come; limber our raw hides of antelopes
> .....
> We are tuned for a feast-of-seven-souls ... (6-12)

But then the gods have all been destroyed and nothing remains afterwards except "broken tin-gods whose vision is dissolved" (III, 16).

"Silences" thus ends dramatically at the destruction of the gods. The title is significant because after lamenting over destruction, silence follows:

> ... with the killing of the twin-gods and the sunbird which is sacred ... and which indeed symbolises the traditional African priest, then ... the process of suppression of the indigenous religion is complete. (Egudu 16)

The experience of alienation that consequently follows is so devastating that it renders the protagonist silent. But there is another side to this silence, in the sense of "there-is-a-lull-before-a-storm" for it now prepares one to accept "Distances." Alienation involves and is a function and consequence of cultural destruction. The only way the poet-protagonist can reconstitute and rebuild himself is to accept, in the converse, and in defiance, the destroyed gods of his ancestors. Indeed, "Silences" as it stands before "Distances" is subtly symbolic of the prodigal lying prostrate before his own ancestral gods acknowledging his sin and begging to come back home. It is a recreation, on a larger and grander scale of the prodigal before mother Idoto at the beginning of Labyrinths.

In this sense, the transition from "Silences" to "Distances" is a symbolic artistic masterpiece in the sense that it captures in clear terms the resolution of the crisis the poet protagonist has found himself in through no fault of his own. Hence the protagonist fights a war against alienation in order to, in W. E. B. Du Bois' words, "attain self-conscious (humanity)" (215) through regaining his lost self and evolving it into a "better and truer self" (215) among his ancestral gods.

The protagonists in both experiences of Labyrinths and Mortality thus "struggle against and repudiate colonialist and racist assumptions, structures and values of white superiority in Western culture" (Chapman 44). This repudiation takes the form of a "counter movement away from subordination to independence, from alienation through refutation to self-affirmation" (Turner qtd in Chapman 37).

In thus celebrating the humanity of the black African person, the protagonist overcomes alienation through reverting to traditional African religions whose rituals ensure his cleansing so that he can be accepted back home. It is this ritual enactment that the next chapter shall explore.

CHAPTER THREE

RITUAL ENACTMENT

This chapter is going to explore the impact of ritual in the protagonists' attempt to realign themselves as closely as possible to their ancestral traditional religions. It is also going to look at how the poets portray this aspect of ritual and how they relate it to the overall idea of a return and an achievement of homecoming. This will mark a denial of alienation as discussed in chapter two.

Both Mortality and Labyrinths set off to a ritualistic beginning. The enactment of ritual serves the purposes of reconciliation or penance. This involves sacrifice. In one sense "mortality" itself is the "ritual-culmination" of life; the realisation that life is fulfilled at its demise. Without death, life bears no meaning and without life, death bears no meaning either. All ritual and sacrifice involve death or transition which latter aspect invokes death at a symbolic level. Thence, "mortality," the realisation of the limitation of life at its own fulfilment, is a clear position from which one can understand Echeruo's Mortality and Okigbo's Labyrinths. Symbolically, both experiences are sacrifices or ritual enactments. These ritual enactments take various forms but both poets persistently parody the rituals as reflected in the Christian dispensation.

The two experiences are thus ritualistic sacrifices by the protagonist to the ancestral gods. The works are a symbolic witness of the poet-protagonists' desire to return to the ways of worship of their ancestral people. the experiences reflected in both works add up to a symbolic sacrifice and ritual enactment by the poet-protagonists on behalf of all who have undergone alienation from their cradleland and belief. They beseech the gods to forgive and accept them back to the fold of their ways and traditions.

In Echeruo's protagonist, we see a homecoming personage, a prodigal, whose "mortality" is to be viewed in the sense that he undergoes death in his alienation from home in order to gain immortality in his homecoming. We view the resiliency of the sunbird in Okigbo along this same perspective: death occurs in association with Christianity and the

"phoenix-wise" resurrection that occurs at the end of "Limits" is in anticipation of and within the realm of homecoming. Homecoming itself is, thus, a ritual event.

In this way, ritual is intended to appease a wounded consciousness. In seeking a return to traditional African ways of worship, society is being made whole for the alienated person is finally coming to terms with his own reality as it is and not as it is defined for him. Ritual enactment is necessary because in this situation, as portrayed by the poets, one segment of humanity has been denied its wholesomeness. In the protagonists' quests we see this segment seeking this wholesomeness, hence ritual enactment in order to reclaim the totality of their lost consciousness in their own terms and thus claim their space among the rest of humanity. The enactment of ritual and the offering of sacrifice is thus done in the sense of consolidating society and assuring it of an ideal future in which it would perpetuate itself in the best way possible.

Ritual enactment and sacrifice again become necessary because the poet-protagonist feels he has wronged his cradleland, beliefs and traditions. He is a prodigal who needs to make a return and this is expressed at the beginning of "Heavensgate" in Labyrinths. At this point the prodigal stands, a repentant supplicant before mother Idoto. In D. S. Izevbaye's words:

> Ritual offering is necessary only because the poet-hero has been a prodigal and is therefore technically a stranger requiring ritual cleansing before being readmitted into communion with his goddess. (10)

It is only through sacrifice, which is enhanced in the realm of ritual that the prodigal can reach her, the symbol of his fulfilment. Thence ritual-sacrifice is evoked in homecoming. Since ritual-enactment and sacrifice take place within the realm of religious explication, the poet-protagonist needs space where he can perform his ritual sacrifice. This is the reason behind his quest for a return to a religious base he understands and can identify with. D. S. Izevbaye again says, "religion ... helps to define the unpleasant experiences which force the prodigal to accept the necessity for homecoming" (6).

The poet-protagonist cannot perform a meaningful ritual or sacrifice within the milieu of the alien religion. For him to unite with the ultimate, represented by mother Idoto in Okigbo, he has first to renounce the Christian faith and revert to his ancestral beliefs and deities;

> Thus begins the prodigal's progress from separation through bewilderment and alienation, which are the preludes to his renunciation of the Christian religion. (Izevbaye 7)

For the protagonist, thus, to succeed in his mission, his ritual will have to be re-enacted in the environment of his own ancestral deities.

"Debut" in Mortality is the opening of ritual. It prepares the protagonist to start his search,:

> Have we not looked the whole world out,
> searched the whole hearth out
> till we saw the palm-nuts again
> by which we were to live? (6-9)

This poem also introduces symbols with allusions to biblical images which have the meaning of religious ritual though grasped within a Christian-centred consciousness, "Hence the debut of white and crimson corals / of the velvet shield of incarnation" (17-18). The reference to "white" and "crimson" brings to mind both the Psalmist's (Psalm 51) and prophet's (Isaiah 1: 18-20) assurance to the sinner that though his sins be as red as "crimson" they shall be washed as "white" as snow. The prodigal in Mortality and Labyrinths too asks for repentance and there is a promise of forgiveness. This forgiveness will be accessed through ritual ceremonies which both experiences present.

"They" reveals images of sacrifice which we witness throughout the ritual enactment as part of seeking that return the prodigal needs. Here two personae are introduced, a "he" and a "she" which brings about images of "sexual union" as part of the ritualistic return. We see "... dawn on May morn / digesting earth's hangovers / after the mysteries of the night" (3-5). This brings out the image of ritualistic feasting which is revealed in the

poem "Harvest-time" as will be seen later. The lines "Nun in scarves of coal/after miracles of the blood" (12-13) points at Christian ritual which must be renounced. The poem "Wedding" like "They" reveals subtle sexual symbols which again point at the sexual union aspect of the ritual of homecoming as seen above. Goodwin, mentioned in chapter one, elaborates on the "sexual-union" metaphor as seen. The images of "blood," "roots," "trunk" and "bloom," all seen against the backdrop of "sultry maid of evening time" (12) point at the richness of life we encounter in Echeruo's symbolism. The streak that runs through this poem is of a ritualistic offering of life itself in order to sustain and perpetuate its own kind:

> Tap-roots beneath the giant
> speak like the gods
> and life comes
> like a spasm of light. (4-7)

The image of a blossoming plant is very cleverly handled and the linkage to "sultry maid of evening time" (12) is not accidental in the sense of its sexual connotations:

> Erect, root and trunk
> and bloom besiege the world
> Root will strain and stretch
> to the core of this earth –
>
> Sultry maid of evening time. (8-12)

"Wedding" becomes the way in which the protagonist acknowledges the centrality of ritual in his life. "Nocturne" leads us to music and sacrifice, inseparable concomitants of ritual. The reference to the "unresolved spirit-dance" (2) takes us back to music and ritual and the conclusion evokes the "mother" image so central in both Mortality and Labyrinths, "... like a tired mother / happy even in her perpetual wistfulness" (16-17).

"Easter Penitence" brings us to the realm of Christian ritual. In the experience it describes of Easter, life overcomes death through resurrection. This occurs as a form of cathartic release in the realm of mythic explication. The poem turns into a satire of the

Christian ritual of Easter as we saw in chapter two. Thence "Debut" starts with an acknowledgement of ritual and sacrifice as necessary as catharsis for man in confronting his world. However, in the end the protagonist dismisses Christian ritual in its involvement within his religious milieu. This is done through the Easter satire of "Easter Penitence" which talks of Easter as "the emptiness of another ecstasy" (47).

As we have seen, both protagonists assert that it is only in their dual, contradictory and paradoxical relationships that life and death bear meaning and not in the triumph of one over the other. Ritual enactment and sacrifice, as purgation, balance the two incompatibilities. The poet-protagonist, thus, sees the central experience of Christianity, in its assertion of life over death through resurrection as a misreading and misrepresentation of ritual from the understanding in his people's religious traditions. Easter purports to offer the last sacrifice but the protagonist does not agree with this. Romanus Egudu talks in this connection of the "fertility ritual" in which a god is killed or hanged as an old pagan practice (16). This is the practice which Christians have, through Easter, transformed and made to sound and seem peculiarly their own. The protagonist does not accept this. This ritual, or variations of it, formerly considered "pagan" and therefore unchristian, seems to have found favour with Christians who would claim it at the exclusion of other members of the human race. It is why the protagonist reacts against this in the satire of "Easter Penitence."

"Threnody" introduces a rebirth, which is encompassed by death,

> The spring dove sang
> Of earth's rebirth
> .....
> The sky went cold
> When I caught my dove
> In the heart of spring
>
> And I was dead! (4-13)

The images involved in this poem refer to a Western dispensation in terms of seasonal change. Spring comes with "rebirth" but it also comes with death. "Threnody" thus

becomes a ritual lamentation which we can link back to "Nocturne" especially in its wistful plaintiveness.

"The Singers" is a continuation of the seasons and their significance. It also introduces the "harvest" which is crucial to sacrifice and ritual as we have already seen in chapter two. The image of death, shown in "Threnody" is intensified here. The interlinkages of death and life on the one hand and the interrelationship with harvest, ritual and sacrifice on the other is clear. This is brought out in "The Singers" with subtle allusions to the "fertility cult rituals" as already seen; an aspect further enhanced in "Rain." The stylistic element is also very significant in that "The Singers" implies "song." We have already seen that ritual and sacrifice go hand in hand with song and feasting. The structure of the poem in itself is like a song in which one group (The Mothers) sings and the other (The Daughters) replies.

Harvest and ritual are invoked throughout the poem. The significance of this is that the protagonist is beginning to grasp the meaning of the rituals of his own ancestral people. The "woman" figure is very important in both Echeruo's and Okigbo's quests. So, for "The Singers" to have both "mothers" and "daughters" is doubly significant probably because the protagonist can go ahead with the enactment of his ritual. This is in the attempt to "come back home" to his mothers. The mother figure is further presented as the genesis of life and in this sense, the "homecoming" ritual is an acceptance of life. The sacrifice offered is in order to enable a movement away from the rituals of Christianity. It is in this light that "The Singers" commences:

The Mothers:
For we, too, have fought
the dry north-wind;
Survived the mad fires
of late December. (1-4)

There is an emphasis of capability expressed over life. The mothers have overcome nature's trials, tribulations and travails, hence the ritual. Ritual enactment is thus a way to achieve harmony with nature and overcome conflict brought about through not

understanding the supernatural. It is fitting that the daughters introduce the "seed" and "harvest" for they are the right heirs to their mothers:

The Daughters:
We unfolded April's finery
for birds to pick the seed;
And yet December came on us,
the harvest on our laps. (6-10)

This ritual promises not only continuity but also fulfilment through the seed to the harvest. This sequence is further elaborated in "Rain" by way of the death of the seed to get more life.

The Daughters call for celebration: "Come, celebrate this mid of year, / before the tubers roll" (9-10), but then the mothers have to pave way for the daughters. This is through ritual-death, a sacrifice of life through death for life again. Thus, death is necessary for life:

The Mothers:
The breeze came from the sea,
a cold caressing wind;
Death came with the breeze
caressing all our agony. (15-19)

In Echeruo, therefore, death is a sacrifice for life; it is a way to life.

In "Defections", ritual and sacrifice are enhanced by images of harvest, song and growth. In this movement, the poet protagonist offers himself to the gods of his ancestral people. The union with the mothergod is consummated and sealed, thus the protagonist accepts his own rituals and traditions. "Talk, Patter, and Song" is a confrontation against and a rebuke of Christian ritual. The protagonist asserts his right to life within the sphere of the rituals of his ancestral people.

We can link this poem to "The Singers" where the same idea of continuity through harvest is enhanced. The "woman" is, as seen already, a symbol of life. She is at the centre of the harvest, through reproduction, and thus at the centre of ritual and sacrifice. This is because harvest is central to both ritual and sacrifice. The mother figure again represents that return the protagonist seeks. She controls, thus, the ritual return.

It is in "Song" that we hear a direct lamentation at the destruction caused by Christian ritual on traditional ritual:

> He called you names
> in front of the mother
> of your children,
> And all our men
> Shrugged their shoulders
> looked each other in the face
> lamenting the violation
> of the rites of their fathers. (82-89)

This becomes the basis from which the protagonist opposes the encroaching ritual of Christianity. He is aware that "the rites of (his) fathers have been violated (88-89). He is "called names / in front of the mother / of ... children" (82-84). Knowing, again, as elaborated in chapter two and earlier in this chapter, the significance of "mother" in both Okigbo and Echeruo, the magnitude of "the violation of the rites of the fathers" becomes very clear. This compares to "Limits" in Okigbo where the protagonist describes the destruction of the ancestral gods; "And descended upon the twin gods of Irkalla" (X, 21) and parallels its intensity to the crucifixion of the Christian god in:

> And the ornaments of him,
> And the beads about his tail;
> And the carapace of her,
> And her shell, they divided. (22-25)

"Harvest-time" is the culmination of ritual in Mortality. This is the actual point at which the protagonist's union with his ancestral gods and religious traditions is achieved. He

offers his harvest here and it is accepted as we see in chapter two in "Village maidens / are the bearers of my harvest" (38-39). "Harvest-time" thus, in its depiction of the fulsome "woman" figure presents a ground to link the protagonist's ritual-sacrifice and his union to her, the mothergod. "Harvest" thus becomes the symbol of the protagonist's acceptance of his own ritual in his quest to fulfil himself. It also represents the crest of the wave of homecoming in the sense of the "rich, fertile" harvest anticipating that ritual-sacrifice that would unite the seeker to the sought:

> At dawn, or nightfall, notice
> their frantic emergence
> the glad disposal of offals
> that husband's subscribe
> to lure the deities of harvest
> to lust and to kindness. (6-11)

The deities thus accept this sacrifice. They emerge and dispose of it. Here again we see a two-fold emergence of life, of "lust" and "kindness" (11) as opposed to that "life without sin" (19) in "Initiations" advanced by Christianity. The protagonist's ritual ceremony, performed in his own ancestral religion, recognises that life is paradoxical: both evil and good: "lustful" and "kind." In this ritual ceremony, he accepts this life in this way and does not seek that "life without sin" that is advanced by Christianity.

"Rain" follows "Harvest-time" in befitting sequel in that it seals the ritual sacrifice offered by the harvest in the latter poem. It re-enacts the fertility cult at a higher level in its nostalgic recall of a wistful past. In the process, the remembrance serves as a sort of fulfilment: "I remember too much / After one evening in the rain" (22-23). The rain makes this fulfilment possible in its relationship with crop and harvest and thus ritual and sacrifice. The symbolism here gets metaphoric. The fulfilment is similar to that of Okigbo's protagonist in the sense both situations remain a secret only revealed to the supplicant before the ancestral gods. Okigbo's protagonist claims that he is "the sole witness to his homecoming" (VI, 41) in the sense Echeruo's protagonist says, "You may not understand the parable" (18), presumably of homecoming. It is the protagonist who understands it. Both situations thus imply that the individual searcher must be totally

committed to his pursuit. He should be driven by his own sincere urge to embrace the truth of ritual as represented by his ancestral deities. Echeruo's protagonist further says:

> If you plucked a dry grain from the cob
> And planted it in the rich rain
> Would you not propitiate the memory?

In this way death, represented by "plucking", gives way to life through "planting in the rich rain" (19-20). The protagonist, therefore, has to die to all those rituals alienating him and must "plant himself among his own gods" so as to "propitiate the memory" of his gods. This is the climax of Echeruo's search.

In "Come, Come Spring," as we saw in chapter two, death and life are evoked at the realm of ritual. It introduces death in the midst of rain. That the protagonist sees only death here points at the aspect of alienation he encounters under Western forms of ritual. The season of spring is symbolic of Westernism, as seen earlier. In this sense, death and life are not presented in their dual relationship of one leading to and out of the other but in a sense of the finality of one over the other. As we saw, this is the basis of the Easter satire of "Easter Penitence." Thus, "Come , Come Spring" expresses the hopelessness involved in Christian ritual as it pertains to the protagonist. Everything which would signify life such as "spring," "summer," "hope" and "blossom" (19-21) is only invited to a celebration of death.

However, this death is not conveyed in positive terms as that of the seed in "Harvest-time," "The Singers" and more especially in "Rain." It is a death under alienation. The protagonist cannot enact his ritual in the space provided by Christianity.

The element of eating and feasting is introduced in "In Memoriam" which, when understood in the sense of the immortality it evokes, points at endless ritual. The image of the "phoenix" (17) also implied in Okigbo at the end of "Limits" points at endless life. The poem signifies the endlessness of both life and death. The protagonist is caught in this cycle of endlessness and wants to perpetuate a ritual that is essentially his within the sphere of this endlessness.

"Fanfare for June" brings back "joy, music and celebration" and links them to ritual and sacrifice:

> We are
> in the midst of joy
> in the midst of trumpet thunders!
>
> A fanfare of horns
> blasting out loud, afar,
> that here is our inheritance. (1-6)

But there is a note of caution for this sphere does not belong to the protagonist. June is a "strange and alien covenant" (13). The protagonist concludes: "June is not, really, our inheritance," it is a foreign inheritance. This paves the way for "Poems to God and O'Brien" in which this foreign inheritance of ritual is exposed and finally disposed of.

"Poems to God and O'Brien describes Catholic ritual in order to reveal the emptiness the protagonist feels in it. "Prologue" is an introduction to Catholicism through the "Angelus" (5), the prayer Okigbo's protagonist is forced to recite in "Newcomer." This poem reveals the pandemonium and chaos that attend this moment for as some sing "Save us, O save us" (9) others sing "Hail! Alleluia!" (13) and in the meantime "We could hear other noises / from the jukebox" (19-20). This scene shows the chaotic nature of Christian, and especially Catholic, ritual for the protagonist. Their apocalypse, as shown, begins at the commencement of their ritual offering. They are a "sordid generation" (23-24).

"Man and God Distinguished" talks of the inevitability of death. There can be no fulfilment from "fresh dew in the morning / from wife ... home or ... life" (11-12). What stands is that "Afterwards, Man dies" (15). Death is the last ritual man performs as a living creature. Everything else, in the long run, does not seem to matter. So, we again look at death as a ritual passage that is very significant. For the poet-protagonist, however, as seen earlier, life must precede and indeed follow death.

"Ure Igne …," which again presents Christian ritual, states that the human being is ever searching for fulfilment. This is shown in "soul searches oracles for solace / for gestures, ritual, communion" (3-4). Thus, ritual-sacrifice, within a defined religious framework, is one avenue through which the search can be conducted. The only discrepancy is that the way through which the protagonist can offer his ritual sacrifice has been usurped and destroyed by Christianity. He is in Christianity as a last resort because his own ancestral gods have been killed. It is in this sense that the soul searches in vain for "oracles, … gestures, ritual, communion … the logos" (3-4)/ Finding none, it is forced to supplicate in the Christian fashion: "Self, droops, then remembers and exults" (6). What it remembers is the Catholic Mass (7). The latter is the ritual ceremony which signifies what has replaced all the protagonist has lost in his own ritual ceremonies. He is forced to offer his ritual in this foreign fashion.

The whole poem, fashioned along the Catholic Mass celebration, is a satire against Catholicist ritual, especially the one that requires Catholic priests to abstain from matters of sex. The priest is exhorted thus:

> Not food, my child, not air and water,
> not necessity; not inevitable!
> Turn passion back to base self
> with a cross, like the saints … (39-42)

The poet-protagonist sees this requirement by Catholicist ritual as unnatural. This is the reason why Nnena is finally presented as "Poor banished daughter of Eve" (58) in the same way we see the lament of the sisters in Okigbo in their hopelessness. Nnena is banished and alienated from her own people and yet finds no fulfilment in Christianity here symbolised by Eve.

The protagonist doubts the promise of Christian ritual:

> Storms rage; fires consume
> and after (so they say),
> all shall be restored in the Lord,
> all shall be forgiven by the Lord –

or so has he promised O'Brien. (59-63)

This clearly shows that the protagonist doubts the efficacy of ritual as presented by the religion of O'Brien, a Catholic priest. This is clearly seen in "... (so they say)" (60) and "... so has he promised O'Brien" (63). This compares closely to Okigbo's treatment and enunciation of the same issue in "Lustra" in this dismissive proclamation:

Messiah will come again
After the argument in Heaven
Messiah will come again ... (19-21)

Christianity's obsession with resolving matters in the future does not augur well for the protagonist. The future "restoration" in Echeruo and the seeming "second coming" in Okigbo are inconsistent with ritual enactment as it is understood in the milieu of the protagonist. "Future restoration" and the "second coming" translate into meaningless speculation for the protagonist. The restoration is here and now for catharsis cannot be postponed that long.

The introduction of the "order of Melchisedech" (67) in "Ure Igne ..." brings to the fore the meaninglessness of Christian ritual to that situation represented by the protagonist's quest. This involves a reclamation of the destroyed ancestral deities, the religious traditions they symbolise in concert with the world-views they engender. The "order of Melchisedech" is out of place here. The poet's irony is thus very clear here:

The Lord made to him a covenant of peace
that his sanctity of office
shall be his forever
according to the order of Melchisedech. (64-67)

This line of thought is carried on to "The Signature" which becomes the ultimate renunciation of Christian ritual and sacrifice and in the converse asserts the veracity of traditional ritual enactment. This has already been discussed in chapter one.

The Christian priests are spirit men with "Latin spells" whose single ulterior motive is the destruction of ritual as professed by the protagonist and those he represents. The protagonist thus sees his own priests as even more effective than the Christian priests. When he compares the two, he finds out that their mission is the same. All priests or medicine men claim to lead man to what is right and what fulfils the purpose of human life:

> From priests and spirit-men
> around a witching oji-tree
> May sign a relevant testament
> on the foreheads of the just. (35-38)

Thus the central task of all priests, traditional and Christian, is the same: "To palm the fears of men away" (44), which indeed is cathartic. The protagonist dismisses Christian sacrifice and ritual, for it is not in any way more significant or more profound than his ancestral people's sacrifices and rituals. Indeed, for the protagonist, his rituals and sacrifices are better for they are his ancestral experiences and they reflect his own experience of reality. This is seen in the almost rapturous, ecstatic and defiant mood expressed towards the end of this poem:

> How witches, too, have faith enough
> To palm the fears of men away –
>
> With spells and cowries that clatter
> Like saints and beads in Saint Charles's Church? (43-46)

In other words, even the traditional African priests are just as good as the Christian ones; or even better. This is the sense in which the poet-protagonist accepts and embraces the ritual ceremonies of his people and through them assures and asserts his religion and identity.

In Okigbo, "Heavensgate" is a ritual event as argued earlier. It is a sacrifice offering of the prodigal as he presents himself in order to be accepted back to mother Idoto. His repentance is, symbolically, a sacrifice. As in Echeruo, therefore, sacrifice and ritual are

central concerns in Okigbo. The protagonist seeks a ritual cleansing which is necessary because, again as we have seen, the rituals of Christianity have defiled him. They have indeed led him to blaspheme against his own cradle deities and consequently against his customs, traditions and the essence of his being. As Egudu argues, "The loss of the indigenous religion is a serious loss for it implies the loss of innocence" (15). And therefore "Christopher Okigbo's reaction to the Christianity that has suppressed his home religion and its gods is that of contempt and sharp criticism" (17).

Consequently the poet-protagonist has to undergo a ritual ceremony and be cleansed of the influences of Christianity. The repentant supplicant we encounter at the beginning of "Heavensgate" is a pointer towards the return the protagonist seeks through ritual and sacrifice.

In "Passage" the protagonist's mourning for the sunbird introduces the aspect of death which is central to ritual and sacrifice. "Initiations" shows the ritual ceremonies that convert the protagonist from his cradle beliefs to those of Christianity. Through the ritual of Christian baptism, the protagonist is painfully initiated into Christianity as we saw in chapter one:

> mystery which I, initiate,
> received newly naked
> upon waters of the genesis
> from Kepkanly. (6-9)

The same sincerity and innocence on his part with which the protagonist is initiated into Christianity is the same with which he now longs to be reaccepted back to mother Idoto. This is revealed through the "nakedness" expressed in both instances. In "The passage" he claims: "Before you, mother Idoto / Naked I stand" (1-2) and in "Initiations" we see: "mystery which I, initiate / received newly naked" (6-7). Thus the protagonist bares his soul for a new experience among his ancestral deities. This will involve pain and agony as he goes through the ritual of homecoming. "Initiations" involves ritual; both as a recall of the old ritual that introduces the protagonist to Christianity and as an expectation of the new ritual that should usher him into the ways, traditions and religion of his own community of people.

"Lustra," as we saw in chapter two shows how the protagonist offers a sacrifice for his cleansing. This cleansing is achieved in "Distances" which is the climax of the ritual-sacrifice and it is the final ritual enactment for a return. "A bowl of incense" (I, 6) indicating a celebration and ritual opens this movement. Death is introduced as the chief celebrant of this ritual ceremony (II, 31). This death is, however, symbolic of the death to alienation and a regaining of immortality in homecoming. As in Mortality, images of "fire," "blood," and "entrails" (II, 38-41) abound; in a similar manner to Echeruo's "Harvest-time." There is an invitation to a celebration: "Come into my cavern," (VI, 5) and "Lo, it is the same blood that flows ..." (VI, 9) signifies sacrifice through blood. Finally the protagonist declares:

> I have entered your bridal
> Chamber; and lo,
>
> I am the sole witness to my homecoming (VI, 33).

Thence, the union with the "maid" (VI, 33) symbolising traditional African gods has been achieved through ritual and sacrifice:

> and in the orangery of immense corridors,
> I wash my feet in your pure head, O maid
>
> and walk along your feverish, solitary shores, (32-34)

The return is thus to the mothergod, Idoto, who is a watergoddess as the symbols indicating water show. This we see in the "washing of feet" (33) as a ritual of cleansing and the "walking along the solitary shores" (34) of the watergod. This ritual enactment involves a movement away from Christian ritual and sacrifice into the inner sanctum of the ancestral deities. In this way, the protagonist is fulfilled in his own ritual and he can now claim a homecoming which aspect shall be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

HOMECOMING

In this chapter, we look at the protagonist's attempt, in both experiences of Labyrinths and Mortality, to make a fulfilment of himself within the religious sphere of his ancestral peoples. This fulfilment we shall call a homecoming. This develops from the struggle of the protagonist through religion, the experience of alienation and the eventual ritual enactment, as seen in the preceding chapters. This is all aimed at arriving at a socio-cultural situation he can identify as his own. Homecoming, thus, encompasses an acceptance of his own identity and an assertion of the cultural-religious experience of his ancestral community of people. In a word, this becomes a positive affirmation of the protagonist's experience of existence. This must then be seen in relation to the fact of the protagonist's departure from home and from the ways of his people and the struggle to reclaim these in the face of intense opposition.

Homecoming, therefore, becomes a necessity for the protagonist. It is the only option available to him in the predicament that has befallen him. This develops from the sense of alienation and subjugation he experiences away from home. He feels his loss and the awareness that he has been violently torn off his own domain catapults him into the need to reclaim his homeland – through religious explication. We trace similar movements in both experiences of Mortality and Labyrinths. As seen in chapters two and three, the protagonist's desire in Mortality is fulfilled at the consummation of harvest in "Harvest-time" and in Labyrinths the protagonist fulfils his desire in "Distances" as revealed towards the end of chapter three. Homecoming is therefore the only avenue left through which the protagonist can come to terms with his existence. From here, he can then progress within a realm that is of his own understanding.

"The Passage" in Labyrinths reveals an anticipation of homecoming in "Dark waters of the beginning" (13) are pierced by "Rays, violet and short" (14) which "foreshadow the fire that is dreamed of" (15). The "Rainbow" (16) also "foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of" (17). "Rain" and "sun", therefore, become positive images of homecoming. This is because while "rain" is linked to "water" which points us towards mother Idoto,

[the water goddess who represents the ancestral deities] "sun" is linked to the "sunbird", a symbol of the traditional deities also. The interplay of these two symbols in "The Passage" is thus very significant. The two symbols are juxtaposed in confrontation – not of destruction but of a re-invigoration of life which will eventually ensure the protagonist's fulfilment. The inclusion of "bird" cements this confrontation and channels the powers of the contrasting sides of the deities into a tremendous force that would carry the protagonist through the struggle that awaits him. This we see in:

> Rain and sun in single combat;
> on one leg standing,
> in silence at the passage,
> the young bird at the passage. (24-27)

"Rain" and "sun" become life-giving and life-affirming forces. The same is the case in Mortality where both symbols are associated with homecoming. Echeruo's "harvest" which is tied very strongly to the protagonist's ritual return is closely linked to both "rain" and "sun" in the sense of the role both play in ensuring that harvest is achieved. This is revealed in the poems of "Harvest-time," "Rain," and "The Singers," all of which have as their central concern the "harvest" which epitomises Echeruo's homecoming as we see in chapters two and three . In this regard, "sun" and "rain," as symbolic of life, are central to the protagonist's quest. The symbol of the bird is also significant in both quests. In "The Singers", we see the Daughters "unfolding April's finery / for birds to pick the seed" (7-8). The seed takes us back to "harvest" and homecoming as already seen.

"Crossroads" in "The Passage" is, as we saw earlier in "Crossroads" in Mortality in chapter two, a symbol of the agony of alienation in Christianity from which the protagonist seeks to escape. It is at this point that he invokes "Anna of the panel oblongs" (36). Anna is a saving grace and an assuaging influence from whom the protagonist seeks assistance to escape his predicament. Representative of a woman figure, Anna is reflective of mother Idoto with whom the eventual homecoming is to be consummated. As seen already in both chapters two and three, the woman figure is symbolic of life and continuity which are entailed in homecoming.

"Watermaid" reveals the necessity of homecoming in the acknowledgement by the protagonist that he is a prodigal who needs to go back home: "Eye open on the sea, / eyes open, of the prodigal" (1-2). It also presents the images of "sun" and "rain" and introduces the figures of "man" and "woman". This compares closely with Echeruo's "sexual union" symbolism which aspect is strongly attached to and is a function of the ritual return. We see this in the following lines: "Shadow of rain over sunbeaten beach, / shadow of rain over man with woman" (15-16). Thus, the interplay of "rain" and "sun" against the background of "man with woman" can be linked back to "The Passage," as already discussed, in their relationship with homecoming. The expectation is that rain will fall and this takes us back to Echeruo's, rain, "harvest" and homecoming.

We see the ritual return in terms of elevated grandeur in "Watermaid." The vision of its anticipation is seen thus: "and the waves escort her / my lioness / crowned with moonlight" (21-23). "Lustra" also presents the vision of the ritual return. Its necessity is shown through the sacrifice offered as seen in all the preceding chapters. "Newcomer" puts forth the expectation of victory by the protagonist over all the negative forces of Christianity. It indicates that a homecoming, (compared in its painful enactment to the passion of the suffering Christ in Christian legend) to a different way of worship is possible. The alternative way is based upon traditional African religion into which the protagonist is a "newcomer."

"Limits" takes us through the arduous pilgrimage the protagonist must make in his struggle to achieve a homecoming. Though there is a positive image of growth in "A green cloud above the forest" (II, 18), the journey takes on the pain and anguish involved in a religious pilgrimage. "Banks of reed / Mountains of broken bottles" (III, 1-2) is the landscape through which the protagonist has to traverse. The anguish is expressed in, "Then we must sing, tongue-tied, / Without name or audience" (III, 11-12) which implies painful curtailment. The urgency that follows shows that the homecoming journey is surrounded by many dangers. This is shown in the way the protagonist is asked to:

Hurry on down –
Thro' the high-arched gate –
Hurry on down
little stream to the lake; (III, 20-24)

The situation is further complicated by the fact that "the mortar is not yet dry" (III, 32-33). The protagonist has to hurry but the situation is not ripe for his homecoming. He invokes, at this point, the "oblong-headed lioness" (IV, 5) which points back at "Anna of the panel oblongs" (10) in "Newcomer" and the lioness in "Watermaid": "Bright / with the armpit-dazzle of a lioness" (17-18). The protagonist is thus asking for protection from the goddess in his homecoming quest.

"Fragments out of the Deluge" becomes a concentration of great pain for the homecoming personage. A despairing figure of the Christ appears in Section VI:

> He stood in the midst of them all
> and appeared in true form
> He found them drunken, he found none
> thirsty among them. (1-4)

This indicates that the protagonist despairs. The poet here, as Echeruo does in "Talk, Patter, and Song" ridicules the idea of a "chosen people": "And they were the chosen, / mongrel breeds" (VI, 21-22). Echeruo in Mortality satirises the same situation thus as we saw in chapter one:

> I watched the Saracens in the tumult of a feast
> Extol their fathers in the name of some god
> Call themselves the children of god
> God answered with a rainbow in the sky; (12-15)

This satire is to be comprehended in the context of the poet-protagonist's radical departure from Christianity and thus his bold claim of the religions of his ancestral people. Thus, in the midst of the painful struggle home, the protagonist has to dismiss the claim of Christianity as being the only valid way to ultimate fulfilment and overall understanding of the experience of human existence.

A god-like Moses figure who is linked to the Christ, bringing the old and new testaments of Christianity together, emerges here: "They cast him in mould of iron, / And asked him to do a rock-drill" – (VI, 11-12). This is reminiscent of the Israelites in the wilderness

when they carve out an image of their god to worship. It also alludes to the time when Moses strikes a rock and water comes out. In the end, all this points at the reconstitution Moses brought the Israelites. In this sense, the protagonist in Okigbo is seeking reconstitution also. Later we see that:

> And they took the hot spoils off the battle,
> And they shared the hot spoils among them:
> Estates, among them; (VI, 18-20)

This is a reference to the situation in which Christianity, as argued, claims a universality that is detrimental to the existence of the protagonist's religious traditions. The "hot spoils of battle" (18) and the "Estates" (20) refer to mankind's common religious heritage which Christianity appropriates for itself at the expense of other religions as that represented by the quest-hero in Labyrinths. This is the notion the poet entirely dismisses and it is a subtle attack on Christianity and its claim of superiority over the traditional African religions. This compares closely to Echeruo's enunciation of the same idea in "Defections" where he ridicules and dismisses Christianity as we saw in chapter one in the poem "Talk."

Both protagonists clearly ridicule and negate the historical evolution of Christianity and deny in strong terms its absolutist claim to universality. Echeruo's protagonist expresses this defiance more when he says, in "Talk": "Go seek the vices now / Of the world that bore you!" (24-25) as we saw also in chapter one. The protagonist must therefore deny the influence of Christianity and Westernism and struggle home to his own ancestral religious traditions: "... the world that bore you!" (25). This asserts that in his homecoming the protagonist must fight against Christianity which is the source of his alienation and which underlies the cultural forces out to destroy his cultural basis. It is for this reason that in "Limits" (VIII) the Sunbird, a symbol of traditional religion, warns of the appearance of eagles representing the Christian religion (1-6) which is out to wipe off the traditional religion.

In section X, as we saw in chapter two, the eagles desecrate the forest of the oilbean and destroy the sunbird.

"Silences" opens with a sense of emptiness and vain despair: "immense golden eggs empty of albumen / sink into our balcony" (I, 3-4). This was discussed in chapter two. The achievement of the dream of homecoming seems beyond reach: "Where is there for us an anchorage / A shank for a sheet, a double arch - " (9-10). This is indeed the commencement of a sequence of mourning for the dead gods and a prayer for their resurrection. The stylistic element initiated by the "Crier" and "Chorus" is appropriate for the painful mourning period. This period is shown in images of anguish and pain:

Chorus: This shadow of carrion incites
and in rhythms of silence
Urges us; gathers up our broken
hidden feather-of-flight
To this anguished cry of Moloch: (II, 1-5)

The desperation is clearly evident: "Chorus: And there will be a continual going to the well, / Until they smash their calabashes" (II, 12-13).

The protagonist is in a state of utter helplessness but he does not give up. He still believes: "We shall wear the green habit of kolanuts" (IV, 10) which inevitably points towards the completion of his journey and that acceptance into the fold of his ancestral deities.

"Lament of the Drums" starts strongly with a powerful invocation of the spirit of the dead ancestral gods. The poet-protagonist is thus not only asking for the gods' protection but also that they accompany him home as seen in chapter two. The emergence of the drums, though in lament, is a positive sign of homecoming: "Long drums we awake / like a shriek of incense," (II, 5-6). Though the mood is down, yet: "But distant seven winds invite us and our cannons / To limber our membranes for a dance of elephants" (II, 23-24). There is thus a celebration ahead as symbolised by "dance." Whether of life or death is not the concern. Homecoming is a big celebration involving, as already discussed, pain and pleasure, sadness and happiness, indeed life and death. The presence of the "cannons" (23) ties this moment to the cannons of "Lustra" which announce that "the spirit is in the ascent" (35).

However, the emptiness still persists. The image of Palinurus serves to express this:

> Palinurus, alone in a hot prison, you will keep
> The dead sea awake with nightsong …
> .....
> Palinurus, unloved in your empty catacomb,
> You will wear away through age alone …
>
> Nothing remains, only smoke after storm –
> .....
> Masks and beggar-masks without age or shadow:
> Broken tin-gods whose vision is dissolved …
>
> It is over, Palinurus, at least for you. (III, 3-17).

Thus the lament gets into total despair and takes on the form of an imploring helplessness:

> Fishermen out there in the dark - O you
> Who rake the waves or chase their wake –
> Weave for him a shadow out of your laughter
> For a dumb child to hide his nakedness … (III, 25-28)

The protagonist almost gives up on his quest. This is because the drums, representing the gods, are no more for the gods are now just "broken tin-gods whose vision is dissolved …" (III, 16). However, the last section of this lament turns recklessly daring, ready to confront the inevitability the quest to claim a homecoming entails. All the positive paraphernalia of homecoming is invoked and placed vis-à-vis the helpless situation that has been occasioned by Christianity's usurpation of traditional religious expressions:

> And the drums
> Once more, like masked dancers,
> .....
> Long-drums dis –

Jointed, and with bleeding tendons,
Like tarantulas
Emptied of their bitterest poisons, (IV, 1-8).

This situation evokes the beginning of "Silences" and the vain emptiness of "immense golden eggs empty of albumen" (I, 3) only that now it is like "tarantulas / Emptied of their bitterest poisons" (IV, 7-8). This, in Labyrinths, becomes the strongest statement symbolically detailing the loss of the African person of his religion and religious traditions and ideals. It is a loss of the essence [of the African person] in its totality. It is a death: for an egg, however immense, without albumen, is lifeless. A tarantula, without its poison, is as good as dead. This is indeed the situation that characterises the African person. Without his religion, which is his essence, he is dead. Echeruo has also detailed this destruction of the African person in "Song" discussed in chapter one, which is his strongest rebuttal of Christianity. Here the African person is "bereft of all dignity and emptied of all honour" such that he is like, in "Song": "an unfeathered bird / white and spruce and clean / in their spring" (101-103). He loses all that is his and changes to conform to the Christian tradition: "white and spruce and clean" (102) is used in a very ironic manner. The black African person, presumably dirty in his own religion, is washed "of his sin" and he turns white. To be human, the protagonist implies, is to be white and Christian – so as to fit "in their spring" (103) which does not accept black. This accounts for both poets' satire against Christianity at this point.

It is such destruction that the poet-protagonist must counter in his homecoming journey. It is a destruction of the spirit that can only be reversed through the enactment of the ritual of the return as discussed in chapter three. But it is also a destruction that puts the protagonist in doubt as to the eventuality of his quest. "Lament of the Drums" queries: "And to the Distant – but how shall we go? / The robbers will strip us of our thunder ..." (IV, 9-10). The protagonist then relapses back to the emptiness expressed at the beginning of "Silences":

- So, like a dead letter unanswered,
Our rococo
Choir of insects is null
Cacophony

And void as a debt summon served
On a bankrupt; (IV, 11-16).

However, again, in his reckless daring, the protagonist cannot give up his quest at this point. This is why he still, defiantly, accepts the "cacophony" of his choir. This is that distorted self of his and his ancestral people who have undergone a warping of a terrible magnitude under Christianity. It is indeed a converse acceptance of all those forces opposed to Christianity; even the ones which have been maimed in the effort:

But the antiphony, still clamorous,
In tremolo,
.....
The distant seven cannons invite us
To a sonorous
Isthar's lament for Tammuz: (IV, 17-23)

Where the "cannons invite us" (21) takes us back to "The thundering drums and cannons" (26) of "Lustra" as we have already seen. This is where the vision of the ritual return is first enacted "in palm grove / (where) the spirit is in ascent" (27-28).

The end of "Silences" thus, as a progression and an affirmation of the intention of the vision of "Lustra" becomes the pointer to the actualisation of the vision of the ritual return. The protagonist can, therefore, at this instant, embrace "Distances" and the homecoming it consummates. However, this cannot be done before the last lament; Isthar's lament for Tammuz. Here he must lament and wail for the destruction his warped self has experienced under the alien sphere of Christianity and all it has entailed in the destruction of his ancestral deities. It is at this point that the totality of his defiance must unequivocally crystallise into an unambivalent denial of the Christian religion and become a completely radical acceptance of mother Idoto; a reaffirmation of an eternal belief in his ancestral deities.

Therefore, he must "lose himself in Idoto's legend / and wait under her power" (6-7) in the words of the repentant prodigal in "Heavensgate." The wailing is "for the far removed / for the Distant ..." (V, 2-3). The protagonist has been alienated from his gods,

from his self and from his people. He has indeed been "far removed" (2) and for this reason, he has to wail and lament in seeking repentance. In this wailing, he prays for life through his ancestral deities. The prayer is against "barrenness" (8) and against the blasphemy and the despoiling that Christianity has engendered against the traditional religions. The protagonist prays that these religions grow, for they are the "fields of crop" (V, 4) for his people and in growing they beget more children and thus blossom and prosper. For their perpetuation, they have to go against their destruction. They are, under destruction, like "The barren wedded ones / ... perishing children" (V, 8-9). Their destruction means their lifelessness but the protagonist must counter this destruction. He therefore wails and laments, ready for penance and for the reclamation of his destroyed religious traditions.

In this way, the protagonist marches on to "Distances" ready to embrace the water goddess. "Distances" states its intention immediately it starts. It is the culmination of the quest. The search by the protagonist has come to an end for he has arrived home but through a long, winding, torturous and indeed arduous journey which befits the title of Labyrinths. His painful experience is captured in the line: "From flesh into phantom on the horizontal stone" (I, 1). The experience has transformed him from man to spirit. At the arrival home, he is more of spirit than man. The physical sense has been obliterated. The protagonist feels the triumph, the ecstasy of homecoming. The major function of his pilgrimage is indeed fulfilled in this victorious and triumphant declaration: "From flesh into phantom on the horizontal stone / I was the sole witness to my homecoming ..." (I, 1-2).

As in Echeruo, homecoming raises various queries, the uncertainties inherent, as we have seen in chapter one where the protagonist in "Talk" asks of homecoming:

> Where, how, who knows how?
> Caverns, ruins, imponderable hearts?
> Vices, too? (24-28)

The protagonist, having been away from home for so long, does not know what to expect once he makes the ritual return. Okigbo's homecoming protagonist in "Distances" asks the question, also concerning the homecoming: "But what does my divine rejoicing hold?

/ A bowl of incense, a nest of fireflies?" (I, 5-6). The "rejoicing" arises from his triumphant return home.

The protagonist does however reassure himself that it is the homecoming that is paramount with everything else proceeding from here. This is why he quickly says: "I was the sole witness to my homecoming" (I, 7) immediately after he expresses doubt. The reference to "the oblong window" (II, 19) brings us back to "Anna of the panel oblongs" (36) in "Heavensgate" and points to mother Idoto, with whom the protagonist consummates his search.

His homecoming can and should be understood within a religious perspective. It is in "Distances" that the protagonist affirms his belief in his ancestral religious experiences and his quest to arrive home is "mated and sealed / in a proud oblation" (V, 13-14). This directly leads us to the following memorable lines: "and in the orangery of immense corridors / I wash my feet in your pure head, O maid" (VI, 32-33). This is the instant the whole of Labyrinths prepares for. It is the culmination of Okigbo's poetic genius: The mothergod is finally receiving the searcher. Mother Idoto, the water goddess and god of life – for water is a symbol of life – welcomes the prodigal home.

The act of washing is very significant at this point. The prodigal is getting the final cleansing before he finally consummates his search. The line: "and walk along your feverish solitary shores" (VI, 34) shows the amount of trust and faith the prodigal has put in the mothergod. This rather romanticised portrayal befits the ending Labyrinths has prepared for:

> I wash my feet in your pure head, O maid
> .....
> I have fed out of the drum
> I have drunk out of the cymbal
>
> I have entered your bridal
> Chamber; and lo,
>
> I am the sole witness to my homecoming. (VI, 33-41)

This cinematic conclusion, romantic in all senses, seals the search of the repentant prodigal. He is able to make a homecoming into the godhead of his ancestral people's traditional religion.

Echeruo's homecoming, in contrast to Okigbo's, is much more tangible in the sense he ties it with images of "rain," "harvest" and "woman" which are readily available to the psyche. Okigbo's symbolism is eclectic with the romantic and idealised images such as the "water spirit," "oblong-headed lioness," and "white elephant". However, we see that the two aspects of "woman" and "water" feature prominently in both experiences of the ritual return. Both are life-affirming forces as we have discussed throughout this study. They engender life and their linkage to homecoming shows that the experience is a life-giving one, seeing again, as in Mortality, that the alienation from home is presented in terms of death.

The bird is another symbol that is of importance in the two quests. Its introduction towards the end of "Debut" in Mortality is very significant. As we saw earlier in this chapter, the "sunbird" is sacred in Okigbo. "Easter Penitence" in Mortality presents the "sun" (sunrise) as a bird. In Labyrinths, the "sun" takes the positive connotation implying a homecoming as already discussed. In Mortality we see:

> O Sunrise
> Bird of glory at dawn
> Bird of wonder at dawn
> Reigning forever in glory! (9-12)

There is thus again, as in Labyrinths, the linkage of "sun" and "bird." Therefore, when we look at the "bird" in both experiences, "sunbird" is not merely fortuitous but is doubly significant, anticipating that eventual triumph that must await the prodigal once he makes the homecoming journey.

Elaborating further on the bird motif and homecoming, "Outsider" in Echeruo also retains the idea of "bird." The bird here asks to be "let away" from its captivity. This captivity is seen as Westernism and Christianity which have imprisoned and curtailed the

growth of traditional African religions. The bird flies as it is wont to but with the introduction of Christianity, its flight is denied meaning and it feels empty:

> Between the oyster beach and the greens ...
> Sea and barren coast.
> Between tresses of dark silver and reels of danger ...
> lonesome bird of the wilds! (1-4)

Indeed, it has almost become inconsequential and lonesome, as shown in the last line above. Like for the sunbird in Labyrinths, danger lurks everywhere, brought about by Christianity, here shown in the line: "Between tresses of dark silver and reels of danger ..." (3) being the space where the bird flies.

As we see, the bird's flight is rendered meaningless by the danger that abounds, as shown also in Labyrinths in "Limits" (X), due to the eagles that represent Christianity. Since flight is everything for a bird, if it cannot fly anymore it can only wait for death. What emerges here is that the traditional religions are destroyed and rendered impotent and barren by the experience of Christianity. "Outsider" therefore is a very strong statement by the poet against the Christian influence which has brought more death than life. In R. Egudu's words: "Christianity has waged a terrible war against the indigenous gods" (15). Okigbo captures this in "Limits" as we have already seen in chapter two when he writes:

> And to us they came -
> .....
> And climbed the bombax
> And killed the Sunbird. (X, 1-4)

The protagonist is saying that Christianity's entry into Africa was short, brutal and violent.

It is against this destruction of innocence that "Outsider" reacts in a plaintive lamentation against Christianity. Egudu again says in this consideration: "The loss of the indigenous religion is a serious loss for it implies the loss of innocence"(15). The bird in "Outsider" lived and played happily in a world he thought was fair:

I spat on the world from between my gums,
Shouted at the moon from between my lungs,
Hooted at the chirrupy mermaid of the dusk ...
clever lad of a goddam tribe! (5-8)

Then, as we saw in chapter one:

Then came the winds, flushing hearts,
The rains came, drenching all their mirth,
Came thunder, scattering all irrelevance ...
happy child of the new testament! (9-12)

We see that, as in Okibgo, Christianity's entry into Africa is in the manner of a violent storm which we again see as short, brutal and violent. It scatters "all irrelevance," (11) this referring to the traditional religions, and when it subsides, the protagonist (the sunbird) has been washed clean of his attachment to his ancestral religions. He now becomes "happy child of the new testament!" (12) from "clever lad of goddam tribe!" (8). This idea is further expounded in "Song," as already discussed, in that the African looks like "an unfeathered bird / in their spring / white and spruce and clean" (101-103). He thus becomes like his captors and is now a Christian convert washed clean of his ancestral religion. In the words of Paul Freire, the invaded (the African) becomes:

> alienated from the spirit of [his] own culture and from [himself] ... he wants to be like the invader; to walk like [him], dress like [him] .. (34)

By extension, this implies, "worship like him." Thus, Echeruo's symbolism of homecoming, centred on the harvest, seed and woman, hence reproduction and life, is strengthened by the symbol of "bird." The bird becomes not just a conduit home but a necessary agent in the quest.

In his homecoming, Echeruo's protagonist makes it clear that he is aware that he is not returning to an ideal state but to one that is prone to all the vicissitudes of the human condition as we see in "Talk": "Vices, too?" (28). Thus he does not delude himself but is

ready to embrace the good and the bad of his homeland. His is not an idealised, romantic return but a homecoming that is necessary and recognises the fallibility of human nature. At this point, there is a divergence in Echeruo's and Okigbo's portrayal of the ritual return. As seen already, Okigbo's return is really idealised and romanticised.

The similarity of the two depictions of homecoming is, however, inescapable. The symbols of "woman," "fertility," "water" and "reproduction" abound in both portrayals. The agreement of the two protagonists is therefore that homecoming entails life. Nevertheless, whereas Okigbo's protagonist takes a circuitous route to state this, Echeruo's protagonist is very clear in his statement. This is the reason why Labyrinths as a whole progresses much more intensely with more of pain than Mortality does. Mortality again, we add, is a much more tangible experience where Labyrinths becomes esoteric and eclectic.

Both protagonists insist that Christianity is not the final or absolute answer in any way to the vagaries of the human condition. They assert further that other religious traditions are also valid and deserve their chance to guide those who have evolved them. "Poems to God and O'Brien" basically says this. In a sense, therefore they are saying that no religious tradition should consider itself superior to others or universal, for that matter. For the reason that Christianity has done this in regard to the African traditional religions, the poet-protagonist is not left with much choice but to oppose this and even satirise such a situation. It is in such a sense that Kimani Gecau has argued:

> Neither theorists of development nor good writers can be blind to relations which stunt the growth of individuals in society. In our present era, these have been relations of imperialist domination which go back to colonial days. The suppression of the culture of the colonised was intended to negate their achievements and accumulated consciousness up to that point. Since culture is not only the product of a people's history but also a condition of their progress, cultural suppression would affect the colonised's perceived ability to master their reality and to control it by developing their talents and skills to suit their needs and aspirations. (22)

This is the reason why both experiences of Labyrinths and Mortality are so totally opposed to Christianity. They negate the superior status it puts on itself and bring it down, as other religions, to its basic function of ritual and mythic exploration of existence. Indeed they portray Christianity's entry into Africa as a tool of cultural imperialism and this is what we see throughout Echeruo's "Poems to God and O'Brien" in this study. In "Prologue", Echeruo for instance, dismisses Christianity on the understanding that by now the protagonist should have seen his mistake and embraced his ancestral deities in his own traditional fashion. This poem crystallises the struggle of the two protagonists in their movement away from Christianity.

Looking back at Okpewho, we again argue that modern African poets, and this we see in this study: "direct their criticism not only at the social and political conditions in which they live but also at the ideas and concepts with which they have been educated" (21). Christianity is one such concept and we see Okigbo and Echeruo, as representative of modern African poets, directing their criticism at that concept.

The poet-protagonist's return to his own ancestral gods is essential for the reconstitution of himself and an acceptance of himself and thus his perpetuation through space and time in the sphere of his own gods. In this sense, homecoming, in the way of that African communal identity revealed through the African's own religious explication is achieved in both experiences of Labyrinths and Mortality and both protagonists are able to say:

"I am the sole witness to my homecoming"(VI, 41) in "Distances" and with a little alteration to Echeruo's protagonist's utterance in "Harvest-time": "I cannot [now] persist and blaspheme / under the stress of this certainty" (44-45) which is the certainty of homecoming.

A cultural identity is thus possible but only through reclamation of the African's traditional, ancestral religions outside of which lies not only the pain of alienation but the spectre of self-delusion, self-negation and a denial of one's existence; indeed a non-acceptance of the self. The poet-protagonist's quest, in both experiences, goes against such or any other form of self-abasement and celebrates humanity through an acceptance of the self. This is by way of recognition of the validity of the cultural experience of the black African person and indeed his experience of religion under his culture. In

Achebe's words, this is an affirmation that the Africans' past and the totality of their experience as it relates to this past "with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (30).

The poet, in this sense, has a mission to accomplish. Still, in Achebe's words, the quest towards the African's self redefinition becomes a major concern for the African writer, who should also be "a cultural nationalist" (qtd. Innes and Lindfors 38). For the creative writer, then, as this study reveals through Okigbo and Echeruo, this concern becomes:

> ... an adequate revolution ... to espouse - to help ... society regain its belief in itself and poet away the complexes of the years of (the) denigration and self-abasement ... For no thinking African can escape the pain of the wound in our soul. (Achebe qtd. In Innes and Lindfors 38).

This is in recognition of the fact that "The period of subjection to alien races has brought disaster upon the African psyche" (Innes and Lindfors 38). The homecoming of the protagonists is in the sense of society regaining "its belief in itself and putting away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement".

CONCLUSION

In our study, we have endeavoured to demonstrate that both poet-protagonists in Mortality and Labyrinths make homecoming journeys. This is in the sense of a reconstitution of their dislocated selves; a predicament they encounter in the alienation in Westernism and Christianity. In thus making this homecoming, they evoke their religious traditions which act as the avenues through which the ritual return is achieved. Homecoming therefore implies an acceptance of their traditions and cultural backgrounds. In our study both protagonists can claim this radical acceptance of their selves and their realities as we see in Echeruo's "Harvest-time": "I cannot (now) persist and blaspheme / under the stress of this certainty" (of homecoming) and Okigbo's "Distances" in "I am the sole witness to my homecoming."

What therefore the poet-protagonist puts forth is the centrality of religion and religious beliefs in any community's understanding and fulfilment of itself. In our study, we see that both protagonists centre their quest on religious explication. Their alienation in Christianity is a consequence of religious consideration as is the reclamation of their selves in their homecoming journeys. Indeed, this study has shown that a community's religious traditions are essential in explaining who a person is and what his purpose is within that community, the wider world and ultimately within the entire cosmos. It is through religion that the protagonist can understand and explain his existence, but this religion has to be one that has evolved from his own environment. A foreign religion, as we have seen throughout this study, would dislocate and distance the individual from the realities of his own ancestral peoples' cultural and historical experiences. The individual accepts his ancestral religious traditions and uses this as a basis of understanding himself. This is what leads to a particular community's understanding and apprehension of itself.

Both experiences of Mortality and Labyrinths, as shown in this study, demonstrate the validity and significance of different religious traditions to those communities that evolve them. In this sense, this study demonstrates the validity and significance of the African's cultural experiences and especially his religious heritage. This is because the new religious traditions such as Christianity presented African religious traditions as backward and unsuitable for the very same societies who had evolved them. In the

attempt by the former to replace the latter there is a dislocation of the individual and his alienation from his own realities. This is what Mortality and Labyrinths counter.

This whole study therefore, in the sense of ritual, looks at the validity of not only traditional black African religious traditions but all others beyond especially those that have been overwhelmed by foreign intrusions. They too have unique ways of responding to the challenges of our present epoch. The triumphant homecoming in both Mortality and Labyrinths bears witness to the foregoing observation. It is indeed only in this sense that one can comprehend the religious imperative in Mortality and Labyrinths and see their assertion as an experience affirming the cultural and historical validity of the African person. Traditional African Religion, in the sense of the role it plays in this quest of homecoming, becomes an encapsulation of the experience of communal self-apprehension.

Ultimately, this study opens a ground in which literature can be sued as an effective means of tackling socio-cultural concerns. Again, it goes to show that poetry, and indeed literature as a whole does have a relationship with society. Literature does not occur in isolation but is a reaction, expression and projection of man vis-à-vis his physical, psychical and historical epochs.

The study therefore raises pertinent socio-cultural questions which it would be interesting to study further, especially in comparing how various African poets, apart from Okigbo and Echeruo respond to these issues. This is because the subject of religion has occupied the creative endeavour of many African writers especially in how it relates to the search for individual and communal identities. The way in which other African poets have handled this subject is of major significance (in literary circles) requiring further research.

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