Chapter 3

“We are gods together...”: Beyond Soliloquies

“Why can’t we be human together?” - T. Obinkaram Echewa

Referring to the lines in his novel The Land’s Lord—“We are gods together! We are gods together...” (145)—Echewa says: “... The question not asked but implied is: Why can’t we be human together?” (Interview). ¹ The novel challenges the existence of “Postcolonial Soliloquies” during moments of cross-cultural encounters. It does not indulge in a mere re-enumeration of the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, re-writing the historiography of European colonization in Nigeria. It questions the very idea of “us” and “them” propagated by Western colonialism, and attempts to look beyond the hierarchies dominating the world. There is a rethinking of the repeatedly traversed terrain—of colonial imposition—to bring out issues which are relatively untraversed, and which question the stereotypical representation of the white and the black as colonizer and colonized. The chapter focuses how Echewa challenges the propensity to indulge in “Soliloquy,” and treat other cultures with condescension, and opens a space beyond “Soliloquies.”

This chapter also deals with Camara Laye’s The Radiance of the King, and Mongo Beti’s The Poor Christ of Bomha. Echewa’s novel is considered—by certain critics—a
re-writing of similar concerns as in Laye and Beti. I have taken up these novels to contest
this notion, and bring out the significance of the issues which Fcheva's highlights in The
Land's Lord.

The body of knowledge produced from the third-world has always had the West as a
reterent. Sometimes this results in challenging certain stereotypes propagated by
colonialism—presenting the African or Asian as barbaric and uncivilized—or, at other
times, this also leads to preserving certain stereotypes - the portrayal of the white man as the
dominating colonizer. Europe always works as a dominating presence in third-world
histories, to avoid the risk of being called “outdated;” while on the other hand, European
historians can very well “produce their works in relative ignorance of non-Western histories,
and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work” (Chakrabarty 28). This “inequality
of ignorance”—to borrow Chakrabarty’s phrase—works because of the hierarchy in
knowledge(s) deliberately maintained; and therefore, “‘Europe’ [remains] . . . theoretically
. . . knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a
theoretical skeleton that is substantially ‘Europe’ ” (29).

During the colonial rule, and in the production of colonial histories, Europe has
engaged in “Soliloquies,” demeaning cultures and histories of the third-world. However, I
would like to argue that the tendency to indulge in “Soliloquy,” which entails a
condescending attitude, is not exclusive to Europe, but is very well witnessed among other
cultural groups in the postcolonial world. It is not only Europe which has engaged—during
the colonial period—in the process of “Othering.” but it is also the diverse cultural groups
and classes from the postcolonial countries, that indulge in the process of hierarchizing
knowledge and structures of thought, looking back at Europe as their “Other.” This often
leads to a violent criticism of Europe as the “Other,” also attempting to generalize Europeans as colonizers, nurturing acrimony.

It is extremely significant to take note of Köchler’s argument—who questions the propensity to treat other cultures with contempt—in this context: “... the fact that I can define myself only vis-à-vis the other (as distinct from that which is not myself) does not encourage any aggressive attitude towards that which is ‘alien’ to myself; on the contrary, it requires respect for the other and his/her distinct perception of reality and cultural value system” (“Philosophical Foundations”). To have a pre-conceived notion of the superiority of one’s own culture—as was inherent in the Western imperialistic worldview—leads to an antagonistic attitude towards other groups, and a denial of other communities and religions: as Köchler writes:

... the “philosophy of the ego” (in the sense of Western subjectivism) has characterized the general approach to inter-civilizational encounters: those encounters have been seen from the viewpoint of raising Western self-awareness, thus sharpening the Western citizen’s social skills, widening the absorptive capacity and increasing the strength of Western civilization. These encounters have been characterized by a missionary ideology, the aim of which is to propagate Western rationality all over the globe ... (“Philosophical Foundations”)

Such dominating ideologies, therefore, work to preserve a hierarchy and deny a space for multiple narratives to interact. These ideas are extremely significant in my reading of Echewa’s novel, in this chapter.
I have also focused on two other novels here: Laye’s novel *The Radiance of the King*, and Mongo Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba.* Eustace Palmer considers Echewa’s novel *The Land’s Lord* to be a re-writing of similar issues highlighted in Beti’s novel, as well as—to some extent—in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* and Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine.* Sarah L. Milbury-Steen points out that in both Echewa’s and Laye’s novels, the stereotypical presentation of Europeans in African novels is transcended. I intend to take up the two novels of Beti and Laye in this chapter, along with that of Echewa, to question these views emphasized by critics; and highlight the entirely different way of handling a repeatedly explored domain—by Echewa—to bring out concerns which hold extreme relevance in today’s world.

This chapter argues that the Nigerian author does not merely re-explore ideas which have been dealt with earlier by African writers, like Laye and Beti. He takes up a story which has been the focus of quite a few African novels, and tells it in a completely different way, unravelling new concerns which have been relatively unexplored in African literature.

Palmer comments on Echewa’s novel *The Land’s Lord*:

The conflict between traditional religion and Christianity is more powerfully explored by Achebe in *Arrow of God*: the problems of a Roman Catholic priest trying to impose an alien religion are much more brilliantly portrayed in Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba* and the power of relentless traditional gods is much more thoroughly presented in Amadi’s *The Concubine.* Echewa’s novel would have been striking if it had been
written twenty years ago, but the African novel has taken great strides forward during the last ten years and *The Land's Lord* is not likely to rate much higher than a competent rendering of an overworked theme. ("T. Obinkaram Echewa" 169)

*Arrow of God* concentrates on Ezeulu's inability to understand the customs of his community, which results in his downfall – as is discussed in chapter two. Achebe draws a picture of whites, their colonial policies and Christian mission, to bring out the attempt made by colonizers to colonize not only the land but also the minds of Igbo. But the novel does not focus on the "conflict between traditional religion and Christianity," ("T. Obinkaram Echewa" 169) as pointed out by Palmer. The theme of the novel deals with the changes in indigenous society due to the imposition of white cultural norms.

Again, Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* portrays "the problems of a Roman Catholic priest trying to impose an alien religion" (169)—as Palmer highlights—but fails to deal with the psychological nuances of indigenous characters, as well as to question the "Soliloquies" which limits the space for each other's stories to interact. Palmer declines to realize the fact that Echewa's novel is not merely about a priest trying to spread Christianity in Nigeria. His novel upholds issues which are much more complex, and challenges not only white stereotypes but certain Igbo cultural norms as well, while questioning the bitterness which ensues from discordant encounters.

Palmer further finds an identification of Echewa's novel with Amadi's *The Concubine*, on the issue of the portrayal of "the power of relentless traditional gods" ("T. Obinkaram Echewa" 169). The question which crops up is that: Is Echewa at all making an
attempt to deal with “the power of relentless traditional gods,” like Amadi? He, instead, focuses on the differing religious beliefs of Igbos and whites, the importance of the Land in Igbo culture, and talks about the need of a space for mutual dialogue. Amadi’s novel, on the other hand, deals exclusively with indigenous Igbo life and the importance of the water-spirit in Igbo culture. It “weaves an entangling web of myths around Ihuoma supposing her to be married to a marine deity, thus being responsible for the seemingly coincidental deaths of her spouses” (Fonchingong 138). One finds that: “Amadi’s depiction of a peaceful village life . . . is disturbed by an unseen water-spirit. This spirit eliminates whoever among the villagers dares to marry Ihuoma. This extraordinary village woman herself will be detected later by Dibias, as belonging to the spiritual world especially the sea-spirits” (Abdou 219).

The themes of Amadi’s and Echewa’s novels are widely dissimilar, and therefore cannot claim comparison.

The novels of Echewa, Laye, and Beti taken up in this chapter, question the omnipotence of one dominant culture, that of Europeans, and open up variegated perspectives of different African societies, be it the Igbos, the Guineans, or the Cameroonian. A European is placed under the lens of an African. It is no more the white man writing about a black man with all his racial prejudices. The blacks rip apart the stereotypes put forward by whites, and question the false beliefs of superiority nurtured by Europeans about themselves. Echewa in his novel, not only challenges black stereotypes upheld by whites—as Laye and Beti—but also questions the very idea to nurture a superior view of one’s own culture and treat other cultures as inferior. He does not merely bring out the multiple perspectives of whites and blacks, but highlights questions which disturb one’s thoughts: When multiple voices find expression in diverse narratives, why is there still
lurking the danger of "Postcolonial Soliloquies?" What are the reasons which lead to acrimony when discordant stories attempt to interact?

Laye's novel *The Radiance of the King* gives voice to the repressed culture of an African society, and exposes the erroneous beliefs which dominate European thought. Austin J. Shelton writes: "In Laye's work we see the African writer 'turning the tables' as a method of demonstrating his value system. Clarence's individualism is shattered by his need to adopt African ways, and with his individualism go all the various 'false' values resulting from his Europeanism" (357). The colonial situation of the black man being always at the mercy of whites, craving to have an existence of his own, is completely reversed here. It is "the white man at the mercy of black men, lost and bewildered in a culture that he does not understand" (Palmer, *An Introduction* 96).

The novel is told from Clarence's point of view, and in the very beginning of the novel one finds him—being alienated from his community—pushing his way through a crowd of black men, where his presence is of no importance to the native people in Africa:

"The black people whom he was shoving aside . . . seemed to be unaware of his presence, or pretended to be . . ." (*The Radiance* 5). His racial prejudice of considering himself to be superior among black men—for he is a white man—deflates, when he expresses his wish to meet the king:

"I came here in order to speak to the king," he said . . .

"But it's unheard-of!" said the black man. "... Young man, do you think the king receives just anybody?"

"I am not 'just anybody,'" replied Clarence. "I am a white man."
“A white man?” said the black man.

He made as if to spit, but stopped himself just in time. (8-9)

Clarence is treated as a subject of study, under the lens of a black man, who is a beggar, and questions his sense of dressing and his ignorance of African ways of life. His initiation into African culture begins with his interaction with the beggar. He gradually comes to a more detailed understanding of indigenous customs after his encounter with the two boys Noaga and Naoga. Samba Baloum, Akissi, Diallo, the Master of Ceremonies and Dioiki, before he meets the “king of kings” (16). He suffers from a false racial pride which needs to be shed, for him to acculturate to African society. This is well-evident in his conversation with the beggar, who advises him regarding his service to the king:

“I could have been a simple drummer boy . . .” [Clarence]

“That is not a simple occupation,” said the beggar. “The drummers are drawn from a noble caste and their employment is hereditary. Even if you had been allowed to beat a drum, your drumming would have had no meaning. You have to know how . . . You see, you’re a white man!” (36)

Cultural differences are highlighted, and Clarence is reminded of his outsider status in an African society.

Clarence has to undergo a transformation to understand African ways of life, and in the course of the novel, his European persona does change: “Frequently disguised as dream, disorientation, or confusion, events and encounters designed to invite perception accumulate as Clarence’s Western eye gradually undergoes transformation” (Morrison, xix). In the court scene, one finds how Clarence is at a loss for not being able to understand the judge’s
point-of-view. His shedding of clothes is necessary, for “these outer vestiges of Clarence’s culture must give way before there can be any inner changes within the man himself” (Larson 184-185). He gradually realizes that being a white man does not confer on him a superior identity, that he is an ordinary human being like others in Africa. In order to be a part of the African society he has to accept native customs and ways of life. His European notions about life, that “being a white man is important, . . . time is important. . . . sacrifice of the innocent and the pure is wrong. . . . only economic criteria can determine the value of work, . . . over-emphasis upon sex, the symbol of animal rather than spiritual values,” (Shelton 354) have to be shed in order to assimilate African culture.

Later in the novel, Diallo, the blacksmith helps Clarence to educate himself about African culture. When Clarence interferes in the process of justice being accorded to the Master of Ceremonies, stops his public whipping, and denies to spit at his bottom, he fails to see that different cultures have different ways of giving justice. Spitting would have given some relief to the convict, but Clarence does not realize that. Diallo questions his insensitivity, and reveals the consequences of his act:

“The master of ceremonies will enjoy no respite now, and all through you. If the display had been allowed to pursue its rightful course, he would have been able really to enjoy the respite, the sense of relief that the conclusion of a well-regulated torture always affords. . . .”

“. . . it is only like feeling half the pain, to receive strokes . . . felt them bite into one’s flesh, and to have felt the fresh smart like fire, and then not be able
to display one’s weals is to suffer meaninglessly. In the end, no one will be satisfied—neither the people, nor the master of ceremonies himself.” (208-209)

Diallo makes it very clear to Clarence that matters of sensitivity are relative, and are different in different cultures. In this case, “Clarence may ascribe his refusal to follow this custom to his ‘sensitivity,’ [but] the local people see it as a sign of his callousness” (Milbury-Steen 172).

Gradually Clarence is “being brutally stripped of his personality,” (emphasis added) (Brench 20) and even his notions about sex being more physical rather than spiritual, gets transformed in his encounter with Dioki. He gains a vision of the king approaching Aziana when Dioki experiences an orgasm with the snakes. It is symbolic, that “the vision of the king who does not reject Clarence in spite of his sexuality occurs in this highly sexual setting [which] helps Clarence to understand at last that there is no barrier between pure love and sex” (Scarboro 34). When Clarence is stripped of all his baggage of European false prejudices, he ultimately meets the king. One finds that, he is no longer disturbed by his nakedness. In fact, he realizes that he is as mundane as other people, and there is no false pride of superiority in him anymore: “‘Yes, no one is as base as I, as naked as I,’ he thought. ‘And you, lord. You are willing to rest your eyes upon me!’ Or was it because of his very nakedness? . . . ‘Because of your very nakedness!’ the look seemed to say. [. . . ]” (278).
The French policy of assimilation is found to be reversed. The European has to assimilate the culture and customs of Africans in order to gain acceptance in their society. The novel also symbolizes a white man coming in search of salvation in a black society, which he can attain only when he gets rid of his false racial pride as well as European culture. When Clarence succeeds in reaching that state, he is accepted by the black king, and the last words of the novel are symptomatic of the long-awaited salvation which only the "king of all kings" can confer: "Then the king slowly closed his arms around him, and his great mantle swept about him, and enveloped him for ever" (279).

The novel challenges the racial beliefs of Western culture and highlights the need to understand each culture according to its own norms—not from a Western perspective—but at the same time, it fails to question those African customs and cultural aspects which need to be shed for Africans to understand other cultures. There is also a lack of a space for dialogue in the novel; for, instead of the European marginalizing the Africans, it is the other way round. Clarence needs to understand the African culture and shun his racial prejudices, as one finds in the novel. The African society, in questioning the dominance of "a single story" of the Europeans, also gives rise to another "Soliloquy," that of the Africans themselves, thereby rejecting the other culture—that is, the white culture—its norms and practices.

The space for a dialogue, for carving out an arena for other "Soliloquies" to interact, is stifled when Clarence's personality undergoes a transformation, when he has to shed his cultural beliefs and assimilate African culture. He experiences an "Africa without resources, authority, or command." (Morrison, xx) but the fact that it is he who is marginalized, needs to be questioned. The typical colonial mentality to suppress other cultures, which results in
the dominating presence of a single culture, predominates. The hierarchy maintained by Europe is questioned in the novel, but the narrative gives birth to another hierarchical order. How can cross-cultural encounters take place within a space for mutual recognition and respect, when the structures of thought generated by postcolonial narratives work to preserve a hierarchy?

Mongo Beti in his novel *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, depicts the character of a European missionary Father through the eyes of an African. The incapability of whites to impose their religion on native African society becomes very prominent as the story unfolds. The Father considers himself to be the embodiment of Christ; and he declares to the indigenous people of Africa that he and Christ are the same: “...the Father assured them that Christ and himself were all one. And since then all the boys of my [Dennis] village call the Father ‘Jesus Christ’” (3). But Christian principles fail to work in the village of Timbo, and his religious practices are questioned by village people because the imposition of his religious beliefs on native society cause rift between them. Taking into consideration this and other novels written by Beti, Edmond Mfaboum Mbiafu and R. H. Mitsch uncover the technique Beti adopts to accord individual voices to African characters: “The most significant aspect of Mongo Beti’s strategy remains his urgent need to produce a literature where blacks are no longer an object of reflection, but a subject of self-reflection” (13).

The predicament of Father Drumont is revealed in this novel, through his young convert servant Dennis, who narrates the story, and who is full of praises for the Father. However, at the same time the author also highlights the atrocities committed by Drumont on native people; and a few black men such as Zacharia constantly question his deeds and his words which in the name of God and religion, control people’s minds and impose the
Biblical word on African societies. The dominant part played by missionary priests and their sermons in laying the foundation for the colonial machinery to function smoothly is challenged. It is significant in this context to highlight the role adopted by priests to support colonialism, as Mbiafu and Mitsch point out: "... through the epic of missionaries who leveled the paths and helped build the mental environment that was to facilitate the idea of domination and submission to the colonial authority. The more the Gospel was spread, the more the freedom of Africans was limited" (14). In the conversation between Father Drumont and the colonial administrator Vidal, the author uncovers the strategy used to impose colonial culture and religion, by both the administrator as well as the Father, on native people. When Drumont says that priests at least do not make use of forced labour as administrators do, Vidal exposes the tactics of Christian missionaries, which is no less than forced labour: "... You say to them: 'Go and work at the mission. or you'll all go to Hell.' Is that not a worse constraint than any earthly one?" " (36).

The novel reveals how Drumont exercises complete authority over the native people of Bomba, and one witnesses his atrocious behavior with a woman in the Church when he drags her "along by her left arm. . . before the table and forced her down on her knees" (4). He also expels a woman from the mass—before he begins his sermon—for her child has been wailing. The Church becomes a place for corrupt practices, as is very well evident from Dennis’s comments regarding the Church income: "After all, don't all the unmarried Christian girls bring their babies for baptism, paying a special fee fixed by the Father himself? Isn’t that an extra source of money for the mission coffers?" (9). Among the converts, most of them are found to take advantage of being a part of the Church and indulge in wrong deeds, such as Zacharia, who is "always demanding girls, palm-wine.
goats and other things from the faithful . . . ;” (10) while the Father denies to acknowledge the corrupt state of affairs.

However, it is Zacharia, who challenges and questions the shallow preaching of the Father, as well as exposes the futility of religious sermons which are alien to his native place, unlike Dennis for whom Drumont seems to be an incarnation of Christ on earth:

“. . . such sentiments [preached by the Father] are utterly ridiculous. . . . he [Zacharia] says, no one understands what’s meant by a good shepherd, since we have no shepherds in this country. . . . Secondly, people here like to feel pity for a stranger, but they certainly don’t relish being pitied in their turn . . .” (25-26). In his visit to Tala, where Drumont finds people reluctant to follow Christianity, or the “true religion” as he calls it, Zacharia, out of disgust uncovers the naked truth behind the conversion of native people to Christianity, and questions the missionary ideology. He challenges the very basis of Christianity, and lays bare the material aspects associated with converting oneself:

‘[. . .] The first of us who ran to religion, to your religion, came to it as a sort of . . . revelation. [. . .] a school where they could learn your secret, the secret of your power [. . .] Instead of that, you began talking to them of God, of the soul, of eternal life, and so forth. Do you really suppose they didn’t know those things already, long before you came? [. . .] Later, they saw that if they had money they could get plenty of things [. . .] They are turning from religion and running elsewhere, after money, no less. That’s the truth of it. Father. As for the rest, it’s all make-believe. . . .’ (30)
When Father comes to know about the corruption in the Church at Bomba, where the girls at the “sixa”—a missionary house for young African women—are exploited by the converts in the Church to serve their sexual needs, and a contaminated disease like Syphilis spreads wide due to such practices, he realizes the failed attempt of the Christian missionaries to impose their religion and culture on the Africans.

Taking into consideration the failed attempt to impose colonial culture at Bomba as well as Tala, Drumont realizes how unwanted and unacceptable the new religion is to native people. He tells Vidal: “... This resistance was especially sharp in the country where we are now, the Tala country. I tried everything with these famous Talas, but to no avail! And yet I couldn’t ignore them, for they were by far the most numerous tribe in my care. [...]” (154). His role as a priest, as a white man in Africa, is threatened; as is revealed in his conversation with Vidal:

*All I know is that you protect us and that we prepare the country for you. softening the people up and making them docile. The saddest thing is that I am completely trapped in my European race and my white skin. That’s what they are always throwing in my face...* (155-156)

The white man looks into his cultural beliefs and religious practices, and uncovers the racist attitude inherent among European colonizers.

Dumont leaves Africa, but that does not stop white administrators to establish their rule and cause utmost destruction to indigenous men and women. Dennis reveals the “real reign of terror” (218) which is about to begin after the new road through Tala is complete, when “even women are being driven into the labour gangs” (218).
Christian missionaries and their practices in Africa to make the colonial machinery run smoothly, are repeatedly questioned by indigenous men like Zacharia, who reveal the futile attempt of a foreign religion to dominate Africa. Dennis remains a loyal servant to the Father, and declines to question any of the missionary practices in Africa. In the novel, however, one fails to find a complete character portrayal of Dennis; he remains more as an appendage to the Father.

Laye and Beti have explored the dilemmas of white characters in their novels. The practices associated with colonial imposition and domination are not only questioned—in Laye—but their cultural norms and beliefs are also “suppressed,” and they are re-initiated into another religious culture, that of the Africans. In Beti, Father Drumont’s imposition of a foreign religion is challenged; but at the same time, he remains a Christ-like figure, and Dennis fails to question his eurocentric activities. Realizing his incapability of enforcing the practice of Christian religious norms in Africa, Drumont leaves the place. In both these novels, there is a questioning of the dominating hierarchical worldview unleashed during the colonial rule. But when these discordant cultures of whites and Africans attempt to interact in these novels, is there a propensity to engage in mutual dialogue? What are the nuances of thoughts which predominate the tendency to suppress the presence of other stories? Also, indigenous characters fail to find apt portrayal, and their dilemmas are not brought to the fore, in these novels.

Echewa completely reverses the situation in *The Land’s Lord*. It is no more the portrayal of a white character through the eyes of an African; rather, it is an African character who is brought forward through those of a European. He questions the “Soliloquies” which frustrate dialogue. His novel raises questions which challenge the
prioritizing of any one single story, any one single culture: What happens when disparate “Soliloquies” interact with each other? Is there a space for mutual respect and recognition?

In *The Land’s Lord*—set in 1930s Nigeria—there is a:

... sustained presentation of an African through European eyes and its narrative is remarkable for the skill with which the African servant is slowly brought forward, in all its existential complexity, from the shadows of the white priest’s obtuse perception, without wavering from the latter’s angle of vision. (Wright, “T. O. Echewa” 257)

The white priest Father Anton Higler, who has come to an Igbo village to spread the word of God, is himself enmeshed in a dilemma regarding his mission, which is highlighted in the very first paragraph of the novel: “The mission was ahead. The village was behind. He looked in one direction and then the other, uncertain which way salvation lay. He opened his breviary as if the answer could be found there” (*The Land’s I*). Echewa presents a de-romanticized portrait of Africa; and not only an alien religion like Christianity is questioned, but the drawbacks of native religious beliefs are also challenged (as explored in this chapter).⁵ One finds that: “Not only are Father Higler’s faith and mission mocked by events but the rituals of pagan animism ... are themselves shown, in the novel’s crises, to be makeshift and outworn” (Updike 145).

A want of confidence in Higler regarding his mission is well-evident in the novel. He is unsure of the Christian mission, of the ideology upheld by colonial government to shun Igbo religious beliefs and practices. When his convert black servant Philip is accused of shooting at his uncle Nwala—though it has actually been an accident—and is asked by the
villagers to make certain sacrifices. Higler has no answer to Philip’s dilemma of either following the ways of his native land or that of the Christian mission:

“Fada, what do I do? What I can do?”

The servant’s plea echoed again and again in his heart. And so did his own helpless answer, “Nothing, Philip. Nothing. Nothing need be done. There is nothing to do. Nothing can be done...” (61)

Being a deserter from the French Army, he has taken up the vocation of a priest to dedicate himself to the cause of spreading the light of God in Africa. But the European lens through which he perceives Africa as a place where the “forest sat there as ever... festering with shadows and mysteries the sun never penetrated,” (1) as a place where people are unaware of the true God, is repeatedly challenged by native people; and his helpless condition is brought to the fore: “‘Fada Nwambee,’ his parishioners had called him when they first saw him. ‘The Orphan Priest.’ He had looked like an orphan to them, underfed and ill-used. Ill-used by circumstances. Undernourished by God’s actual grace” (2).

It is no more the white priest who treats native people as objects, and preach the existence of the “One true [Christian] God”; rather, it is the priest himself who needs to defend his beliefs; and realize that the only religion that can lead to salvation is not Christianity. Every religion serves the needs of indigenous people of a particular place:

‘But your god is a stranger here.’ Old Man Ahamba would say. ‘Like you.

... How can he provide our needs?... He is not a native of our soil, our skies or our forests.’

Father Higler would reply. ‘He most certainly is.’
'He is? He is here among us?'

'Yes. The almighty and eternal God is everywhere.' . . .

'Even before you came he was here?'

'Yes, even before I came. From all eternity he has been among you.'

'Then why did you come?'

He had no answer. He swallowed once, twice. The question was

subversive; it sought to make his coming redundant. . . (15-16)

The Western ethnocentric view of considering the white culture as superior and other

cultures as debased, is questioned.

In fact, the white priest and the black servant share similar predicaments. The novel

reveals the vulnerability of Higler as well as that of Philip, as the story unfolds (discussed

later in this chapter). The attempt to challenge Western stereotypical representation of

African culture gets a matured handling in Echewa, whereby, neither white culture is

considered as inferior, nor black culture glorified. The novel shows how Christianity is alien

in the Igbo village, and how the Father fails to defend his claim to follow Christian beliefs

and reject Igbo traditions. His attempt to preach Christianity and the "One true God," and to

claim that native religious beliefs are false, is vehemently opposed by villagers, who refuse
to be objectified by an alien in their native land:

One true God?

Which god is true?

Our own gods are false, then? (55)
When Higler stops Philip from following the customs of his Land, Ahamba educates Higler regarding the importance of Land to native inhabitants. Since Philip belongs to the Land, he has to adhere to the norms: "He is of this soil. this soil here!" [... ] There is no escape. [...] four days later when the stalk of the umbilical cord falls off, we bury it also in the soil, and plant a young tree over it. The tree grows with the child... You see, there is no difference between us and the Land of our origin, no separation" (61-62). Even Philip explicates his inseparability with the Land: "... my first name, the one they gave at my birth is Njoku. Ihi Njoku is the god of the farm. When I was born, they consecrated me to him, to serve him" (89). However, Higler denies to understand the customs of Igbo people, and brushes them aside: "That is all rubbish" (89). Philip suffers from a dilemma but gets no convincing reply from the priest.

A mature handling of master-servant relation is witnessed here, when Philip narrates an incident of cowardice from his life to Higler—how he ran away on his first night of initiation—and Higler identifies with his black servant, since he has also resorted to an act of cowardice by leaving the army. They share similar dilemmas, and therefore, Philip ceases to be a mere object to Higler who genuinely gets concerned about Philip:

Empathy. Fellow-feeling and comradeship. Father Higler now felt drawn even closer to Philip. For here in the middle of darkest Africa was a man whose life coincided with his own in the present... whose past was also a replica of his. Philip was no longer a faithful servant, but a brother. They were survivors of similar past hazards, co-expectants of similar futures...
The stereotypical presentation of white and black as master and servant is transcended:

“Father Higler’s relationship with Philip demonstrates the process of dispelling a stereotype through increased understanding” (Milbury-Steen 164). Philip also shares an incident from his childhood with Higler, when the moment of shared joy gives a new dimension to their relationship.

Higler fails to provide a solution to Philip’s dilemma, who commits an abomination to the Land by sleeping with his own daughter. When native Igbo villagers decide to punish him, Higler tries to save him. Instead, Philip saves Higler from the enraged villagers, and commits suicide. Echewa emphasizes how: “Philip modulates from the stereotype of the mute docile servant, inexplicably working without pay as the white man’s ‘pot boiler,’ into an intricately developed psychological portrait, and the white colonist’s discovery of the African’s fellow humanity is . . . a subtly graduated mode of transformation” (Wright, “T. O. Echewa” 257).

The otherwise passive servant speaks out at points in the novel, which reveal his impassivity, and his desire to act against the norms of his community which imprison him: “Did I choose to be born? I was born a slave to duty. I had no choice and no voice. My pains and sufferings, my sweats and tears did not justify me . . .” (138). He denies being the eternal escapist, as is evident in his words to Higler: “. . . At a point a man has to stop running and say to what is after him: Here I am! What about it?” (28). He confronts the villagers, and puts an end to the dilemma of either following the native jujus or the Christian God: “He waved the machete at the elders. ‘Yes, I will die, but I will not die at your hands, like a goat in sacrifice, so that your hearts can stop their trembling and your minds can have
peace. Ha-ha. See how I die – at my own hands! . . . ‘” (143). He becomes, in true sense, “the Land’s lord” (Milbury-Steen 165).

Thereafter, Ahamba takes Higler with him, and he “immersed his head three times in the dirty foot waters of the river, re-baptizing him” (Echewa, The Land’s Lord 144). The entire power dynamics is inverted: a black man baptizes a white man. But unlike the whites, Ahamba does not dictate Higler to change his beliefs. Blacks have always been objectified by whites during colonial imposition; however, Ahamba does not objectify Higler by denying his Christian beliefs. When Higler asks, “What are my choices?” (145) Ahamba replies: “My friend, you make them yourself” (145).

The novel opens out a space beyond “Soliloquies,” where stories engage in mutual dialogue. Echewa’s novel questions the tendency to immerse oneself in “Soliloquies,” and take a judgmental stance towards other cultures. Higler realizes the falsity in one’s attempt to objectify other cultures and consider them as inferior: “He lifted his eyes to the horizon where the gilded edge of the sky touched the dark green top of the forest. Joining hands, sky and land were swaying to and fro like two dancers, humming: ‘We are gods together! We are gods together . . . ’” (145).

Laye’s The Radiance of the King portrays an alienated white man who comes to Africa in search of salvation, which can only be offered by the black king, a godly figure - the “king of kings.” Clarence has to shed every trait of his European personality and assimilate completely African culture and customs, to attain salvation. The tendency to consider European culture as superior is challenged here, but what Laye highlights is simply a reversal of power-relations. Christianity claims that the Christian God can confer salvation
on being a true Christian, and therefore—during the time of colonization—Europeans have dismissed the existence of other religions and cultures and have considered them as inferior, imposing Christian beliefs and culture on the colonized. Here, Laye shows that black society rejects Clarence’s beliefs of individualism and other European cultural traits, and he is made to assimilate their indigenous cultural notions before he can attain salvation, which they claim, can be conferred only by the black king. The false racial prejudices and other eurocentric colonial notions are questioned; but Clarence’s entire personality is transformed before he is granted salvation and is taken under the auspices of the king. The French assimilation policy is simply reversed. Cultural differences are emphasized, and instead of black culture submitting to white culture, it is the other way round. One also remains completely unaware of the psychological dimension of African characters in this novel. They are present as characters who teach Clarence about their ways of life.

Now, taking a look at Echewa’s The Land’s Lord, there is a reversal of the power dynamics, when—at the end of the novel—Ahamba re-baptizes Father Higler. But what I would like to point out is that, Higler is neither objectified nor does he give up his culture and religion and assimilate African traditions. Ahamba does not direct him regarding his choices. He is free to make his own choices, and follow the culture that is native to him. The ending of the novel questions the absence of mutual dialogue when discordant stories encounter. It challenges the idea of the imposition of any one dominant culture, and makes an attempt to transcend the tendency to preserve a hierarchy.

Echewa repeatedly shuns the tendency to suppress other voices. very well highlighted in the words of the village men about Higler: “Yes, he has been gifted with his own lips, so let him speak! . . . He will speak because it is no show of strength to maltreat a
hapless stranger” (43). Higler’s attempts to enforce an alien religion in Africa are subjected to questioning by indigenous men. Also, when he stops Philip to commit sacrifices to the Land as it is a pagan practice, he is made aware of African ways of life and the importance of Land to indigenous people. His eurocentric racial and religious prejudices are placed under African lens, and are repeatedly challenged. But at the same time, he is not asked to assimilate African culture. When Europeans have always been keen to prove other religions and cultures inferior, and therefore convert people from other religions to Christianity, the author points out the falsity in one’s attempt to question the credibility of other religions. The novel challenges and disrupts the typical colonial mentality, as is well-evident in the following conversation between Ahamba and Higler:

'I imagine given the chance you would like to convert me to your kind of juju worship,’ Father Higler said . . .

‘Convert you? Why should I convert you? What advantage to me? I hold no commission from anyone, god or man. [...] I cannot ask you to have a haircut like mine because our faces are not alike. . . .’ (emphasis added)

(130-131)

It is through Philip’s inner thoughts that Echewa brings out similar predicaments of people belonging to different religions, different cultures: “His [Higler’s] God was like other gods, like the idols and the jujus. . . . The gods demanded duty and sacrifice—Fada’s God as well as the jujus—but owed nothing!” (112). The author sketches a psychological portrait of not only the white priest but also his black servant Philip. Philip’s dilemma is given a vibrant presence in the novel, unlike the indigenous characters in Laye’s novel.
Black-White relations receive a different treatment in the hands of Echewa when Philip ceases to be an object to Higler, and when at a moment of crisis each makes attempts to save each other. The priest identifies himself and his situation with that of Philip. Echewa not only questions the power-relations between whites and blacks but also expounds the equal importance of all the cultures in the world, shattering hierarchies; therefore, highlighting the need for mutual dialogue, with due respect to differences: as is clearly expressed in the Igbo proverb:

_Egbe bere!
Ugo bere . . .
Let the kite perch!
Let the eagle also have a perch . . . (45-46)

Just as The Land's Lord portrays a white priest who has come to Africa to preach Christianity, similarly in Beti's novel The Poor Christ of Bomba, a white missionary is portrayed. Beti's white priest and his activities are brought to the fore by the narrator, his black convert servant Dennis, who praises Father Drumont's concern for native people, and detests people like Zacharia who questions Drumont's attempts to impose a foreign religion and culture in Africa and indulges in corruption. In Drumont's journey to Tala, and in his conversation with Zacharia, the power relation gets reversed. His mission in Africa is repeatedly challenged, and lastly Drumont has to accept the impossibility of his mission to establish an alien religion and culture in Africa. Like Philip in The Land's Lord, Dennis continues working for the Father without raising any questions regarding the Father's mission. However, Beti's portrayal of the black servant fails to reveal the psychological dilemmas which a convert faces in a black society, who, despite being indigenous, works for
a foreign mission. Echewa, on the other hand, confers Philip with individuality, who expresses his predicament in his conversations with Higler. When Higler dismisses native beliefs as evil, and asks Philip not to indulge in pagan rituals, Philip makes it clear to him that though he is a convert, he still belongs to his native Land, and if his native people have something evil in them, then it is there in him too:

"... The devil is alive in those relatives of yours. I saw him only too clearly this afternoon." [Higler]

"In me too, I have a devil inside me." [Philip] (28)

Higler has decided to take up a priestly vocation after being a war deserter. He himself is not found to be very sure of his mission. After Nwala denies to be baptized, and questions the very basis of Christian beliefs which Higler propagates. Higler reassures himself of his mission, depending on superficialities, like the strength of the Church walls:

"... he moved close to the wall, put his hand gently on it. Then he hit it with his clenched fist, as if to test its durability. He was reassured" (79). At the same time, native culture is not given a romanticized portrayal by Echewa. The follies of indigenous cultural practices are highlighted here. The repeated references to sacrifices in the novel, which indigenous Igbo make to native juju—and also ask Philip to do the same when accidentally a bullet from his gun hits Nwala—points to the shallow customs of a religion, which needs to be abandoned.

Bet also provides a de-romanticized portrait of native society in his novel. The novel uncovers the corrupt practices carried out in the missionary house for African women. These incidents highlight the impossibility of imposing a foreign culture in Africa.
In Echewa, Higler is presented as a mundane human being with the same dilemmas and moments of cowardice as others. Beti, on the other hand, presents Father Drumont as an exception among colonial missionaries, whose primary concern seems to be the welfare of his people, and who ultimately leaves the village for he realizes the failure of his mission to establish discipline and true Christian culture there. The author's note before the beginning of the novel highlights the great stature he confers on the Father: "... There has never been a Reverend Father Superior Drumont in African experience, probably there never will be one—not if I know my Africa. That would be too much luck for us..." (1). The European cultural imposition and the inroads made by colonizers are challenged, but Drumont remains a figure, whose mission although questioned by some native people, yet he stands out as a character. This is too naïve a portrayal of a white missionary coming in Africa to spread Christianity. This also holds true for the portrayal of Dennis who ceases to have an individuality of his own. The characters of Drumont and Dennis lack a dynamism, which is exhibited in Echewa's treatment of the characters of Higler and Philip in his novel. Dennis remains a loyal servant to Drumont, and their relation maintains the protocol of white-black relations, as that of colonial master-colonized servant: while the relation of Higler and Philip is given a new dimension by Echewa in his mature handling of the issue of power-relations whereby Higler identifies himself with Philip. The stereotypical representation of white-black relationship is surpassed.

Echewa's novel not only opens out a space beyond "Soliloquies," but questions the very moment of encounter between disparate cultures. What Wright says of I Saw the Sky Catch Fire, can well be applicable to The Land's Lord as well, marking out his unique
contribution that takes one a step further to a more nuanced understanding of the present world with multiple cultures residing together:

The subject matter of the novel—and, indeed, of all Echewa’s work—is, on the surface, the well-travelled, custom-staled territory of colonial conflict and cultural collision. What rescues it from the usual banality with which such material has so often been treated, and what has come to be the distinguishing mark of Echewa’s writing, is a sophisticated trans-cultural awareness that makes equal allowance for both the relativities of cultures and their broad underlying universals, their alterities and affinities. (emphasis added) (“T.O. Echewa” 262)

The next chapter concentrates on his novel The Crippled Dancer, and focuses on the nuances of perspectives marking the moments of interaction between a grandfather and a grandson, whereby certain indigenous cultural norms and practices are challenged.
Notes

1 The Land’s Lord, 145. See Echewa.

2 “A Rendezvous with T. Obinkaram Echewa.” Interview by Anwesha Das, 13 April, 2012, Washington D.C.


4 In his Introduction to Laye’s The Radiance of the King, Toni Morrison writes:

... Clarence provides us with an unprecedented sight: a male European, de-raced and de-cultured, experiencing Africa without resources, authority or command. Because it is he who is marginal, ignored, superfluous; he whose name is never uttered until he is “owned”; he who is without history or representation; he who is sold and exploited for the benefit of a presiding family, a shrewd entrepreneur, a local regime; we observe an African culture being its own subject, initiating its own commentary. (sic) (emphasis added) (xx)

5 Dennis’s notions about the Father is very well brought out in his comments about Zacharia: “What does Zacharia see in the Reverend Father? An organizer? A builder? A man of business... Certainly not the representative of God on earth... But it’s clear that the Father has been doing so [working ‘just for the love of God’] for years and years. Why can’t Zacharia see him with my eyes? He won’t... allow himself to admire a man like that” (The Poor 15).

6 Wright’s comment is significant to look at, in this context:

Echewa’s presentation of traditional Igbo life is in fact pervaded by an earthy and occasionally shocking realism, including graphic descriptions of dogs’ heads on sacrificial stakes and punitive amputations for transgressions, and is on the whole less
sparing of the unsavoury aspects of village life and values than the more nostalgic,
warmly celebrative portraits drawn in the early novels of Amadi, Nwapa and Munonye.
("T.O. Echewa" 257)

7 Ahamba reveals Philip's act of cowardice to Father Higler:

'He [Philip] is something he should not be, in addition to being a coward. He ran away
from initiation! Three nights he was to stay in the bush by himself [since his wife had
died]. That is custom. But he ran the first night [...] He stayed and stayed with the other
one who came before you and so become pot boiler instead of Njoku ...' (The Land's
Lord 103)

Higler, who has similarly been a war deserter when he was sent for a suicide mission to the Germans,
finds an identification with his black servant. Just as Philip has chosen to be a pot boiler for he has run
away from circumstances, in the same way Higler has taken up the vocation of a priest, for he has been a
coward to run away from the war. It is very clearly brought out in his conversation with father Morris:

'Exactly when did you leave the army?'
'Three weeks ago.'

Father Morris was startled. 'You mean the same time you had your
vocation?' he asked.
'Yes.'
'You mean? – You mean, you mean you are a deserter?'
'Yes!' (35)

Milbury-Steen has also talked about this aspect of Higler-Philip relationship. See Milbury-Steen, 163.

8 Philip recounts a story from his childhood to Higler, and talks about his mother and
his siblings. The author highlights Higler's thoughts on this episode: 'The story had given a new
dimension to the lacklustre servant, a human dimension. Philip was at one time a happy and prankful
youngster, not always the somber and morose adult that he now was ...' (94).
 Whereas Higler “meets God’s injustice with a sense of helplessness,” Philip “opts for action. . . . His acts of blasphemy serve as his revenge against the gods, his refusal to be further victimized by them. It is in overcoming the gods that Philip becomes for a few exalted moments the Land’s lord” (Milbury-Steen 165). Updike has also commented on the Philip’s act of killing himself: “In an ending reminiscent of Nabokov’s ‘Invitation to a Beheading’—wherein, to our great relief, the novel’s confining scenery all tumbles down—Philip smashes the jujus and terrorizes the village elders and becomes himself ‘a present and immediate god, vindictive and wrathful, mindless’” (146).

 When Higler approaches Nwala—who is in his death-bed—to baptize him, the conversation which ensues among both of them, is significant to look at:

 ‘. . . without baptism there can be no salvation. That is what the Scriptures say.’ [Higler] [. . .]

 ‘Why should I save my soul? What will the water you pour on my face do for me against this big, raging fire of the other world? Will it quench it? [. . .]’

 ‘Have you saved your own soul?’ Nwala asked at length. ‘And your pot boiler?’

 He sighed. He had not saved his own soul for sure, had he? There were no reserved tickets to heaven. [. . .] ‘No,’ he was forced to admit. ‘Not for sure. There are no guarantees . . .’ (77)

 Higler is unsure of his own preaching regarding salvation and saving one’s soul from suffering in Hell.

 In one of his conversations with Higler, Ahamba’s words reveal the predicament of Igbo who question their own gods themselves: “. . . I tell you, White Man, we already have gods here that do nothing for us but are hungry for our sacrifices. What we need is a god who does something for us. . . .” (8). However, at the same time, Echewa also highlights how Christianity too—in challenging the practice of making sacrificial offerings to Igbo gods—claims for material offerings at the Church.
Works Cited


