

T. Obinkaram Echewa: *The Land's Lord*

The blurb on the back cover of the Heinemann edition of T. Obinkaram Echewa's new novel *The Land's Lord* is right in at least one point: in its preoccupation with traditional life, with the conflict between traditional religion and an alien religion and with the power of the traditional Gods, it obviously brings to mind similar efforts by more established authors such as Achebe, Amadi, and Munonye. Another author the blurb might have mentioned is the francophone writer Mongo Beti who, like Echewa, makes a white man the hero of his *The Poor Christ of Bomba* which brilliantly analyzes the unsuitability of the Christian religion for traditional Africa. *The Land's Lord* is suffused with religious matters. Father Higler, like Beti's Father Drumont, comes to Africa with the intention of bringing the Christian message to a proud people with a thousand years of history and indigenous religious traditions. Conflict and confusion inevitably result, and the Father's mission is doomed to failure.

Initially the Father makes some converts, but Echewa convincingly demonstrates that even those who accept the Christian faith do not entirely abandon their traditional beliefs; they still believe in consulting medicine men and in the efficacy of jujus. With some deft ironic touches Echewa reinforces the point that in these parts Christianity is a religion which is only superficially understood: "He then turned round and intoned in Latin: '*Credo in unum deum. . .*' Mumble, mumble, mumble, which God understood but the congregation did not. There were those among them, in fact, who maintained that God understood only Latin and English, especially Latin. That was why the priest always prayed in Latin and why their own prayers often went nowhere and brought no results. God like the priest had his difficulties with Igbo" (p. 17). Again and again the author stresses the irrelevance for a traditional African community of a Western-based Christianity which seemed to belong more appropriately to the cathedrals of Europe: ". . . on the other hand God seemed to have created Africa and fled from its heat and its jungles and from the savages he had placed thereon, and if he were to show up unannounced in that little chapel or on Sunday among the sweaty black faces that knelt in church, he would look very strange indeed" (pp. 26-7).

The conflict occasionally takes horrifyingly physical form as in the battle in a graveyard between the faithful and the adherents of traditional religion who object to the corpse of a Christian being buried with Christian rites on their traditional soil. In a most grotesque scene, which does not really do much credit to the author, the coffin is hurled out of the grave, banded from hand to hand and almost ripped apart. Nor is the situation eased by the simple-mindedness of the Father's message. Lacking the intellectual rigor of Beti's Father Drumont or the pragmatic curiosity of Achebe's Mr. Brown, the Father completely fails to see that traditional religion does have some points in its favor and that those traditionalists who refuse Christian baptism must not necessarily be branded as pagans who are doomed to roast in hell-fire. Thus with remarkable lack of sensitivity he urges the dying Nwala, a champion of traditional religion, to be baptised before his death. The Father's obstinate stupidity is thus more like Father Le Guen's in *King Lazarus* than Father Drumont's.

And yet there is no doubt that Father Higler is much more attractive than the highhanded, autocratic Drumont or the unyielding, self-centred Le Guen. The main reason for this is that Father Higher is a humble, genial,

and human figure who is highly conscious of his own personal inadequacy. He had come to the priesthood not out of a genuine vocational urge, but as a deserter from the bomb-ridden battlefields of the war. He is often plagued by despair and doubt about his personal suitability for the task and about the efficacy of his religion which at times seems to provide no refuge and no reassurance.

This sense of personal inadequacy draws the Father closer to his cook and server Philip, the most prominent among the faithful. He, like the Father, had been a coward in his youth and had joined the Christian Church as a refuge from the harsh demands of traditional religion which required him to perform stupendous feats at his initiation. Thus, he ran away from his hereditary position as acolyte of the family gods to become the white man's "potboiler," an action for which he is almost universally despised. When he is subsequently named by the seers as the accidental cause of the deaths of two clansmen in the graveyard fight, he is called upon to perform expensive rituals to appease the "Land's Lord," the bulwark of traditional religion. On the advice of the Father he refuses to perform the pagan rituals and is regarded by everyone as a doomed man. In the end he commits a taboo by an act of incest and destroys himself.

If Echewa has any new insights to convey in his treatment of an extremely overworked theme as far as the African novel is concerned, it is his insistence, perhaps, on an almost total disillusionment with religion of all kinds. If Christianity provides no refuge or reassurance, the traditional gods are treated at times with almost equal skepticism. Old Ahamba regards some of his peevish gods as a nuisance and is forced to threaten and bully them occasionally. This kind of view is generally in line with Echewa's rather detached, sarcastic, and cynical tone in his novel.

Echewa emerges from *The Land's Lord* as a fairly competent craftsman, writing in a remarkably lucid prose style. His command of his linguistic medium can hardly be faulted, although some readers may well feel that he seems unaware of the attempts of Achebe and other writers to modify the English language in order to convey genuine African insights and an African environment. His descriptive passages, fortified by a most impressive use of detail, are likely to be among the most memorable aspects of this novel. Indeed Echewa belongs to that new wave of African novelists who are beginning to give the lie to Charles Larson's dictum that the African novel is quite different from the Western because of its differences in description (particularly of landscape), in plot, and in characterisation by means of dialogue and introspection. The evocation of setting, especially of landscape, is remarkably well done in this novel; the plot is simple but tightly knit, and as for characterization, the portrait of the Father is particularly compelling. He is a kind of central consciousness through whose eyes most of the events are viewed, and as we remain most of the time with him we get very convincing passages of introspection during which the Father analyzes the problems he is faced with. The portrait of Philip is less skillful; his deterioration as he is torn by the pull of both traditional requirements and threats and Christian teachings is convincing, but his sudden access of courage at the end, when in a bid for self-destruction he deliberately chooses to commit the taboo as a way out of the predicament, seems out of character. One would also like to place a question mark against a tendency in the novel to drift into melodramatics, particularly at the end.

But the greatest reservation readers are likely to have about this novel in spite of the remarkably controlled artistry is caused by the uncomfortable feeling of "deja vu." After all, Achebe, Beti, and Amadi have covered precisely the same ground before and Echewa has very few new insights to convey. Even in the presentation of the traditional, Echewa's sociological scenes pale into insignificance besides those of Achebe which are immensely more dignified and dramatic. 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.

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