TRADITION, PARADOX AND THE POETRY OF SEGUN ADEKOYA

BY

CHRISTOPHER ANYOKWU

Abstract
Segun Adekoya in his poetry furnishes an archeological hermeneutics of the old questions about ambiguity, tension, complexity, obscurity and paradox, intractable issues which seem to define competing ideological and aesthetic camps in contemporary African poetry. In an ingenious attempt to develop his own voice, Adekoya stands on the shoulders of older poets like Soyinka, T.S. Eliot, and Andrew Marwell, among others, and draws upon his native Yoruba oral poetry as well. In this paper, we examine the extent of the poet's indebtedness to 'tradition' in this regard as well as his exploration of paradox as the fulcrum of his poetic vision.

Key Words: Tradition, Paradox, Oral, Poetry.

Introduction
We are accustomed to thinking of Tradition in terms of how T.S. Eliot has theorized it in his famous oft-anthologized seminal essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. The persistent hold or fascination of his theory for most of us tends to inhere in the apparent universality of his insights; and, without dilly-dallying further on the details of his essay, suffice it to say that Eliot, in succinct terms, cognizes Tradition as the sum of what he refers to as 'the existing monuments'; that is, the whole of pre-existing poetry prior to the advent of the living poet. In the same vein, he conceptualizes Tradition as an awareness of 'poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written' (qtd. in Rabaté 215).
Eliot goes on to demonstrate to us how the living poet may come by this body of poetry collectively termed 'Tradition'. In his exegetical excursus on Ezra Pound’s poetry, T.S. Eliot signals the founding lodestones of his theory thus:

A large part of any poet’s “inspiration” must come from reading and from his knowledge of history. I mean history widely taken; any cultivation of the historical sense, of perception of the poet’s relation to poets of the past…
[T]his perception of relation involves an organized view of the whole course of European poetry from Homer (cited in James Longenbach 182).

Eliot’s theory of Tradition, however, focuses exclusively on written poetry, thereby occluding oral forms of poetry. Our understanding of Tradition in the African experience necessarily comprehends both written and oral forms of poetry. To that extent, therefore, ‘Tradition’ in this paper implies the totality of the pre-existing body of both written and oral poetry, notably poetry in English (African and non-African) and Yoruba oral poetry, that is, the indigenous poetry of the cultural group from which Segun Adekoya hails.

For the African educated in the Western style, he necessarily draws inspiration from two epistemico-ideational founts, to wit: the West and his indigenous (African) matrices. This reality makes, as Bill Ashcroft et al argue, his text ‘cross-cultural’, relying on the aesthetic principles of syncreticity, hybridity and appropriation (Ashcroft et al 38-44). All literature from post-colonial spaces, therefore, manifest this ‘crisis of consciousness’ or what Soyinka calls the syndrome of a ‘half-child’, or, put another way, ‘a child of two worlds’. (See Irele 1984). Thus, our notion of Tradition must always reflect this dual heritage of African autochthony and Western derivationism. But then, we need...
to pause in our textual investigation to put the following questions to ourselves: To what extent does Segun Adekoya rely on foreign sources in the composition of his poetry? And, to what degree does he depend on his native Yoruba (African) artistic patrimony? The answers to these questions shall be sought in the areas of the poet’s handling and deployment of language, technique, theme and poetic vision.

Paradox, the second area of focus in this paper, has been defined as ‘a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes sense’ (M.H. Abrams 209). Paradox is also defined in another context as ‘a statement that although seemingly contradictory or absurd may actually be well founded or true’ (Holman and Harmon 342). Paradox can be found and is, indeed, pervasive in many cultures and societies of the world. The mythic substrata of most cosmogonies are essentially anchored on the paradoxical thesis, as can be gleaned from the proverbial lore, folk-wisdoms as well as cultural ideologies of many societies. Even Jesus Christ is credited with constructing his message of Redemption around the paradoxical vision: ‘whosoever seeketh to save his life shall lose it but whosoever loseth his life… shall save it’ (Luke 17:33). And, of course, His Apostles, particularly Apostle Paul, carried on this philosophical legacy of paradox. At some point in his ministry, Paul cried, saying, concerning the cares and burdens of the church, ‘I die daily’ (I Cor. 15:31). This Pauline death-in-life conundrum is coterminous with the dialectical interpretation or, more accurately, complementarity encoded and couched in the Igbo worldview popularized by Chinua Achebe who posits that ‘where one thing stands, another thing stands beside it’ (Achebe 1975, 70). To be sure, Achebe further valorizes and recuperates this paradoxical cast of mind in the novelistic context when he narrates as follows:

In the vocabulary of certain radical theorists contradictions are given the status of some deadly disease to which their opponents alone can succumb. But contradictions are the very stuff of life. If there had been a little dash of contradiction among the Gadarene swine some of them might have been saved from drowning. Contradictions if well understood and managed can spark off the fires of invention. Orthodoxy whether of the right or of the left is the graveyard of creativity (Emphasis added; Achebe 1987, 91).

Bode Sowande in his epic drama Tornadoes, Full of Dreams remarks that: ‘contradiction is the friction by which history obtains motion’ (39). Little wonder, the German Marxist playwright, theorist and exponent of the Epic Theatre, Bertolt Brecht is quoted as saying that contradiction will save us. Those who hold a contrary view may be charged with half-education., which, Alexander Pope tells us is dangerous; and, as such the nay-sayers may be said to be suffering from tunnel-vision. These are literalists befuddled by the one-dimensionality of surface experience. Hence, Alexander Pope notes that:

At other times, too, the circle of fate is broken, Like water, only to reassert Homage to paradox: All Discord, Harmony not understood; All partial Evil universal Good (Essay on Man)

Derek Wright captures a similar paradoxical insight when he avers, in relation to Soyinka’s writing, that: ‘superficial differences and oppositions in the Yoruba worldview are bound at a deeper level by a structure of complementarities in which all elements are contained in and are outgrowths from their opposites’ (10). Soyinka himself sets forth the Yoruba paradoxical outlook on life and experience:

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication Studies
Good and evil are not measured in terms of offences against the individual or even the physical community, for there is knowledge from within the corpus of Ifa oracular wisdoms that a rupture is often simply one aspect of the destructive-creative unity, that offences even against nature may be part of the exaction by deeper nature from humanity, of acts which alone can open up the deeper springs of man and bring about a constant rejuvenation of the human spirit (Soyinka, ‘The Fourth Stage’ 157).

Segun Adekoya himself asseverates that the paradox of human nature, plumbed or accessed through or with the “inner eye”, is ‘symbolized by Abiku, Ogun, the Mobius Strip, and the Ourobus’ (Adekoya 2006, 3-4). Adekoya adds that: ‘so fundamental is the truth of paradox in Soyinka’s creative universe that he makes its knowledge and expression the test of the degree of imaginative profundity of every artist’ (4). Still pursuing the paradoxical mindset, Adekoya tells us that, ‘Each entity is split and suffers the curse of imperfection. From the poet’s paradoxical point of view, however, imperfection is a blessing in disguise, for it provides the basis for change and continuity’ (9). Further, Adekoya enthuses that: ‘paradoxical in its functions, poetry [itself] is both benevolent and malevolent. It spreads social contagion by exciting ignoble passions such as animosity, hatred, and xenophobia and is simultaneously therapeutic by giving hope, feeding people on deodorized illusions, and enlarging their imagination and vision of love possibilities and paradise. It saves and destroys souls...’ (10).

So central and pivotal is this paradoxical vision to Adekoya’s own poetry that it merits a book-length examination; but we have chosen to analyse and assess the elements of paradox within the context of tradition in his verse. And to do that, we analyse a few representative poems from four of his poetry collections, namely: Escape, Guinea Bites and Sahel Blues, Chameleon and Chimeras and Here and There. Adekoya opens the collection entitled Escape with an invocatory poem captioned ‘Osupa Ijio’, literally translated into English as ‘The Moon of Ijio’. According to the poet, ‘Osupa Ijio is a big diamond boulder that was deified by the people of Ile-Ife. It was believed to have either been stolen by foreigners hunting for treasures or sold to them by traitors’ (2). According to the poet, ‘Diamond light’, i.e.; the boulder demonstrates generosity of spirit, love and tolerance by ‘shedding your love on the rogues’, in spite of their evil intentions, i.e.; pillaging and defrauding their host community of its treasures and rare keepsakes. The poet appeals to the precious numinous boulder to straighten his ‘twisted life’. ‘Osupa Ijio’, in accordance with traditional Yoruba oral poetry, sets the tone for the entire volume as it acts as the ‘awure’ (i.e., a song for rallying goodwill) for the poet-escapee to traverse the land, at once celebrating life in its variegated forms and satirizing societal ills.

The poem ‘The Silk-Cotton Tree’ is deployed by the poet to dramatize the paradox of nature. Composed of a series of three-line stanzas (fifteen in total) the poem whose lyrical power is greatly enhanced by a regular rhyme scheme is a quasi-panegyrical piece detailing the silk-cotton tree’s qualities. ‘Regally’ erect, imposing and ‘broad’, the tree provides ‘a sure shade for children’ (13); and yet it can be ‘felled by a sawyer and sliced into slivers’ and used by man to meet a variety of needs. However, during the dry Harmattan season, the silk-cotton tree is ‘singed’ its ‘leaves shrivel up’ as the Harmattan ‘robs/The hirsute forest of its frills and furbelows’. The tree provides man wool for making cloth such as ‘wedding suit’, among others. But the poet counsels:

When in a cold cot your body shrinks,
Think of the pall that warms a coffin
Before into a cosy grave it gently sinks.
And learn from paradox the power in seeds
That aid the silk-cotton tree to meet
According to season, contradictory human needs (15)
Thus, the tree provides both ‘wedding suit’ and shroud or coffin for man, ‘according to season’. This is the great good in the wood’. (15). ‘Love’s Cycle’, like Abiku, dramatizes the ebb-tide motion of life itself, just as the Abiku is born-to-die repeatedly, ad nou seam. The first stanza of the poem deploys the images or register of a tree torched by fire; and the fire image metaphorizes the sexual urge or libidinous drive in humans which leads to coitus and, thereafter, a post-coital disgust. This anti-climatic denouement is taken up in stanza two where love’s cycle ‘like bitterness in bile’ unfurls in the form of ‘past priestesses’ whose commitment to love is ephemeral. Even so, in death, the germ or the kernel of life takes root and germinates. This poem, therefore, dramatizes and conveys the popular myth of Eternal Return – of the birth-death-rebirth continuum. In ‘Hurray for The Sun: Manifestos Galore’, Adekoya uses nature imagery to indulge his love for landscaping or scenic painting. In order to enhance this Romantic indulgence, the poet also typically employs puns, repetition, alliteration and assonance. The lyrical or musical vibrancy of this pattern or/pictorial poem helps concretize its mnemonic effect: while the first stanza talks of ‘a wide milky robe/fold on fold/down, down, down’; the second one goes: ‘a wide milky robe/mould on mould/up, up, up…’ (41).

One gets the distinct impression that the poet is bowled over by the dramatic interaction between the tropical sun and a rocky terrain, like some parts of Eastern and South-West Nigeria. The conflictual interaction between ‘down, down, down’, and ‘up, up, up’, conveys life’s principle of complimentarity, dialectics and paradox. Implicit in this short poem is an intimation of mortality and decadence anchored on change. In the poem entitled ‘Football Match’, Segun Adekoya appears to be fascinated by a game of soccer being played by neighbourhood boys amid cries of joy and excitement. But beyond this apparent game, the poet seizes upon the match as an allegorical trope for a more serious, metaphysically ambitious project of mythopoeia and mythography:

Spiked, Lion roars in rage. Elephant catches the sting
And flings snake away into a perilous pit. Snake spirals
In the burning bowl, finds the net and folds up
Chewing his tail: the winner!... (53)

In a useful glossary, Adekoya explains that Lion symbolizes Obatala/Jehova, Snake-Atunda/Satan and Elephant-Ogun/Jesus (53). Adekoya also reveals that this poem is ‘A re-enactment of the Christian and the Yoruba myths of creation, the match ends in cataclysm: the Apocalypse, perhaps caused by a nuclear conflagration’ (53). Furthermore, the poet approximates the players to Ogun Sango and Oya, leading divinities and deities in the Yoruba pantheon. According to Yoruba mythology, Oya, Ogun’s charming wife, had to desert Ogun for Sango because of Ogun’s habitual absenteeism and wanderlust. The ensuing rivalry between the gods provides some of the sub-plot of metaphysical conflict, which in turn informs human fate. Exploring the paradoxical vision at the heart of life, Adekoya writes:

…[A]nd pours in its deadly dose of patent paradox –
As if in mock imitation of the primal scene
That opens all eyes to the beauty of sin – (53).

The phrase ‘beauty of sin’ teems with paradoxical nous: on the face of it, sin is naturally evil and abhorrent and yet it is said to be ‘beautiful’. This Janus-facedness of entities is copiously explored in poetic terms by the poet all through his oeuvre. In the closing poem captioned ‘Nature’s Revenge’, Segun Adekoya meditates on some of the deleterious effects of climate change. As has been argued, climate change manifested in the form of volcanic eruptions, acid rain, land tremors, earthquakes, flash floods and mudslides, forest fires and tsunamis, is caused by the unethical, unhealthy actions of man. Besides, man’s inventions such as automobiles also account for countless automobile accidents which claim many lives and occasion loss of property. The technologization of nature, to be certain, invariably

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication Studies
results in an extreme violation of nature. In a balance of force or terror, nature revenges against man’s incessant infractions by taking human life and destroying property. This theme of ecocide runs through Adekoya’s poetry as we shall demonstrate later on. Indeed, ‘Nature’s Revenge’ paints a grim and depressing picture of the unsavoury state of affairs in which contemporary experience finds itself. Listen to the poet:

Violated villages with rent roofs plugged with rags,
With rickety windows of rotten wood—all vanish, ravished
By the bellowing blaze and frenzied floods
Whose froth is fraught with disaster and death. (79).

What comes through in this long poem is a picture of gloom and doom, the ‘post-modern’ condition. The second collection entitled Here and There is a 60-poem volume comprising a welter of pieces of varying lengths, but most of them quite lengthy, running into several pages. While ‘Here’ focuses on sundry socio-economic and political happenings and events in Nigeria, the poet’s country of origin, ‘There’ vouchsafes and furnishes a poetic kaleidoscope of social activities in USA; and the third section of the collection captioned ‘Here and There’ captures general human issues irrespective of location. The opening piece entitled ‘Big Building Blocks’ is a 27-line poem composed mostly of one-liners which are designedly cryptic, and, hence, paradoxical. As the title suggests, the poem is made up of a series of large existential issues encapsulated in brevity. We, then proceed to a second poem, ‘Another Waste Land’. Fittingly, the poet invokes T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘The Waste Land’, a most iconic epoch-making poem which dramatizes the ‘immense panorama of futility and anarchy’ which is post-World War I global dystopia. A poem which changed forever the way Modernist poetry or even poetry itself is thought of, ‘The Wasteland’, relying on the masterful use of what Eliot calls ‘objective correlatives’, memorializes the psycho-social malaise and the Hobbesian ennui of Europe and the rest of the world.

In this poem ‘Another Wasteland’, Adekoya threnodises Nigeria’s endless bouts of false starts and missed opportunities, no thanks to military dictatorship. Possibly written when Nigeria was 33-years-old as an independent nation-state, the poem excoriates and pillories soldier-politicians who betrayed their bounden duty of defending the territorial integrity of the country, just to carve up and parcel out for themselves large chunks of the proverbial National Cake while the polity continued to reel and roil in self-destruct:

Decrees and decrees till the land is dead;
Kill and kill and kill till the hand is red:
Thus is a country fed on decrees
Thus a country led by decrease,
Thus a country fed on screes,
Thus a country bled to freeze (8)

Besides its reliance on repetition, parallelism and assonance and alliteration, this poem succeeds through its disciplined use of regular rhyme scheme that goes thus: a a , b b , c c , d d ad infinitum. In addition, the poet displays felicitously his penchant for sound imagery and symbolism through the use of, as earlier stressed, repetition, wordplay, alliteration and assonance as the excerpt above shows. The homophones ‘solder’ and ‘soldier’ which are also eye-rhymes, are interesting and ingenious as ‘solder’ means to ‘reconstitute’ to ‘re-member’ or ‘re-couple’ a dismembered entity; to heal and to repair. On the other hand, ‘soldier’ in the context of this poem implies to destroy, to pillage, to ruin:

Decrees, decrees, decrees till the land is dead;
Lies, lies, lies till the eyes turn ice red…
Oh, we’re slowly, slowly, roasting, roasting
In the brand new fire neat and clean;
Thus is a modern nation sold by soldiers,
Clean and mean, to the same old slavers (14).

Adekoya continues in the same vein in subsequent poems like ‘The Rape of A Nation’ (15-20), ‘Masks’ (21-23), ‘Divine Poetics’ (24-25), ‘The Border Within’ (26-27), ‘Nepa Night’ (28-30) and ‘This Bitch of a Life’ (For Fela) (37-38). In the poem entitled ‘Under the Bridge’, Adekoya continues in his advocacy for the lumpen-proletarian elements in society who mostly dwell under bridges in cities and towns in Nigeria. He refers to them as ‘God’s buildings’, who are, ‘battered and broken/yet they stand and sweat under the blasted bridge:/The cesspit for all the filth of Lagos…” (45).

These poor urban dwellers daily endure privation, poverty and millennial miseries of various types as they struggle to eke out a living in the hellhole called Lagos. The men are mostly labourers content to do menial work to subsist while the women and girls are mostly whores and small-time sellers of household stuff. Adekoya particularly focuses on the mode of transportation in Lagos as he calls attention to the molue, a kind of ‘moving coffin’ on which commuters in large numbers cramped like herds of cattle destined for the abattoir, go to their respective destinations:

- Hard, sleazy seats, squelching buttocks, rattling bonnets,
- The greasy ground that fells passengers’ forlorn feet
- And tired tyres that wear away the scorching tar;
- Hot, roast plantain that cauterizes cancerous palates (49-50).

And after this hellish trip, Lagosians return to their ‘gloom-wrapped rooms, broken hearts begin/To heal and heave, like life, under the bridge’ (52; emphasis added). The poem entitled ‘Reflection’ briefly ponders the antics, the shenanigans and the dubieties of the religious consciousness. Religion is characterized here by the agonistic poet-seeker as mere belief, a faith or, put baldly, a superstitious ruse, which Freud dismissed as ‘consoling myth’ for the credulous multitudes bereft of life’s munificence. Distrustful of the ways of ‘Agents peddling the Eternal Word’, the poet meditates on the truth-value of religion, especially Christianity and submits:

- Salvation thaws out-an illusion;
- Inner reflections reveal
- Life-word is death-word
- Steal souls, fixing stones,
- Petrifying the life-gourd (58)

Dismissing ‘Revelations’ (or religious epiphanies) as ‘opium’, Segun Adekoya casts doubt, if not aspersions on everything religious as he sets great store by the pragmatic, the rational, the sensible. In the second section of the poetry volume captioned ‘There’, the poet gives us 25 pieces which furnish varied and multifarious aspects of the New World, or the US. Like Wole Soyinka’s Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems, particularly the poems dealing with American pop-culture, Adekoya in his own collection provides poetic travelogues or diary entries-in-verse detailing his largely unpalatable first-hand experience of life in USA. Of particular interest to us here are poems such as ‘City Angels’, ‘The American Dream’ and ‘Divided City’. As a kind of update or postscript to Soyinka’s poems on America in Mandela’s Earth, Adekoya in ‘Divided City’ characterizes New York as ‘Babel’ where ‘Each soul gropes in the grove for an idol/To cherish in a cell, warm but nightmarish’ (71). Living in America is compared to a life in a cell, in a prison cubicle, claustrophobic and spooky. People merely drift about in search of meaningful existence, but the reality is that most of them are simply drift-wood, human detritus, hooked on dope and ‘cool crack’. As always, the women sell their bodies for money:

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication Studies
'The strumpet strums her trumpet without blushes or force;/The bawd opens many wide doors to bored whores,...' (73). This 'sodomization' of America in general and New York City in particular is the theme of 'City Angels'. The poet croons: 'the women you meet on Fifth Avenue and Broadway/so delicious you dream of sex every second of the day'. He talks of how the fear of AIDS 'jails the joy of sex' as every Dick 'now dons a condom' (80). Sex, illicit sex and 'con commence' conjoin to make the social space a veritable locus of vice where otherwise wholesome and healthy men and women are morally and spiritually corrupted and ultimately destroyed. ‘The American Dream’ ironically dramatizes the false promises of the good life that USA boasts, the desert-like illusions of great things that define America’s social ethos:

- A dream desires a lantern
- To light up its lovely line.
- One is impaled on the liberty tree
- And prays fervently to be free (83)

Other poems in the section like ‘New York Dolls Bake Boredom Cakes’, ‘Vulture Culture’ and ‘AIDs’ are variations on the same theme of the American Nightmare misnamed ‘American Dream’. And, finally, the poem entitled ‘Here and There’, possibly the title poem, tends to draw parallels between America and Nigeria as both countries teem with negativity. Adekoya, however, returns to his favourite trope of paradox as he chants:

- Living is dying:
- Essence is existence,
- Assent is dissent,
- Growth is decay

He continues:
- All is energy
- All is dinery
- All is synergy (156)

He goes on and on:
- Filial love is a wile
- To live awhile, die
- And continue to live (159).

A highly philosophical poem, ‘Here and There’ encapsulates the poet’s paradoxical vision of existence as he ranges through nature, science, arts, human nature and phenomena in order to plumb the rich and complex depths of the dialectical interfusion of all matter and essence. Hence, he tells us:

- Paradox is so corny and pervasive that human beings do not take cognizance of it until they encounter it either in speech or writings [...] All pairs of opposites are paradoxical viz: creation and destruction, beginning and end, male and female, birth and death, heaven and earth, body and spirit, fullness and emptiness, hot and cold, good and evil, rise and fall, strength and weakness, day and night, light and darkness, paradise and hell, black and white, knowledge and ignorance, literacy and illiteracy, water and fire, land and sea, noise and silence, God and Satan, ad infinitum. We live in paradox, and life itself is one gigantic paradox (Adekoya 2008, 3).

In introducing the third collection entitled Guinea Bites and Sahel Blues to the reader, the blurb announces the work as ‘a bold attempt to capture in vivid, pungent images the rape of a once buoyant nation abused, debased and raped by brigands donning the garb of imperial majesty’ (see Blurb). The
blurb goes on to also add that ‘Guinea Bites… is a chronicle of a chapter in our sordid history’. What the blurb writer does not, however, disclose is which nation the poetry is written about: is it Nigeria, the poet’s nation of birth or any other African country, say, Senegal where the poet had spent a sabbatical year as most of the poems collected in the volume show? And, besides, if we must briefly indulge in semantic hairsplitting, do we really have ‘nations’ in Africa? Are what exist in Africa not simply, at best, nation-states? Perhaps, in walking ourselves through Guinea Bites and Sahel Blues we may be able to definitively answer the question of which ‘nation’ it is written. We start from the opening poem captioned ‘Creation Paradox’ (7):

A lone man who drains doleful drums, seeing
The sums of his beloved sons set, rising
curls of smoke curving back to the earth to rest,
Beheaded serpents turning wheels in a pot
of fire, a bum-juggler dropping her ringer,
furious questions losing their dots in haste
As mortar quickly melts it he Word’s mouth (7)

It is not very clear in what manner the man in the poem ‘drains doleful drums’, either he allows the substance drain off or he drinks up the drums’ contents, seeing his progeny probably losing all promise of continuity in procreational or artistic terms. The lines: ‘Beheaded serpents… in a pot of fire, a bum-juggler dropping her rings’ come across as deliberately ambiguated complex of images drawn from disparate religio-artistic sources to approximate and intimate the primal paradox of existence as symbolized by Abiku, Ogun, Ouorobu and the Mobius strip (see Soyinka’s ‘Idanre’). Items such as ‘mortar’, ‘Words’s mouth’, ‘Flame’, ‘potter’ and ‘Baked’, among others, suggest the, activity of moulding or creation/creativity. ‘The sacred clay’ which ‘rapidly decays’ reminds one of the Igbo Mbari concept of creativity in which moulded or sculpted clay objects of intricate beauty are deliberately left at the mercy of the elements, and, are, therefore destroyed. And, thereafter, the process of re-creation recommences the following season, ad infinitum. This creativity-decay nexus and continuum symbolizes life-flux, continuity, open-endedness, change., also, the reference to ‘that heed Head’s creed decree. Humans’ mass is to marry marasmus’ (7) brings to mind Soyinka’s enigmatic character, Forest Head in his play A Dance of the Forest, a character who symbolizes the Supreme Deity, probably Edumare or God Almighty whose exclusive portfolio is to oversee the affairs of all humanity. All told, designedly opaque and recondite, ‘Creation Paradox’ is a preface poem, a sort of an ‘opening glee” introducing the reader to the poet’s creative ideology anchored on his autochthonous Yoruba (African) paradoxical worldview. The poem ‘After Rain’ is both descriptive and narrative in nature as the poet recalls the uncomfortable experience of intense heat after rain in a village near Saint-Louis in Senegal. It is a personal experience of the force of nature in a largely desert environment; such is the terrain of the village that, rather than bring coolness, rain unleashes prickly heat, provoking reactions such as described in the poem: mosquitoes invade rooms, biting the inhabitants mercilessly, there is sweltering heat, domestic animals like fowls and goats become sexually active, just as humans, old and young alike. In fact, it is a hellish scenario of disorder, confusion and disquiet that is unleashed by rain which is supposed to, ordinarily act as balm, as soothing agent, a source of revitalization, therapy and health. Adekoya uses the poem to ponder, as usual, ‘the paradox of dry and wet’: the dialectical interaction between healing and disease, dearth and plenty, ‘mangrove’ and ‘baobab’, ‘The desert’ and ‘the forest’ and ‘seng twigs’ and ‘broad bamboo’. This is to demonstrate that ‘where one thing stands, another thing stands beside it’, to quote Achebe again. All entities, as the poet rightly observes above are split, like a snake which, at once, produces venom and an antidote against its own venom.

Christopher Anyokwu

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication Studies
'Chichidodo' (dedicated to Ayi Kwei Armah) is the title of our next poem. According to Segun Adekoya, ‘Chichidodo’, is ‘A Ghanaian bird that hates excreta and feeds on maggots’ (42). It is important to state also that the story of the Chichidodo has been made popular by Armah in his modernist novel, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. In the novel, Armah uses this bird as trope to excoriate hypocritical, self-righteous pretenders who are either politicians or civil servants or creative artists in post-colonial Africa. What the poet does in his poem is to engage Armah’s text in inter-textual dialogue, and, using the novel in question as springboard, satirizes the pervasive culture of holier-than-thou, of hypocrisy and duplicity among African literati, specifically literary artists – poets, novelists, dramatists, film makers, culture impresarios, and, to a lesser degree, the political class and other social formations or groups. The poem ‘Chichidodo’ talks of leading African scholars and writers, thoroughly westernized and, hence, reaping the fruits of their acculturation (such as the mastery of the English language, the deployment of the western creative-cum-critical aesthetic paradigms, global exposure and stardom) who pretend to hate the West and all it stands for and preach anti-westernization to their star-struck acolytes; ‘The damned of your dope’ (42).

The miffed poet is, therefore, calling attention to the western artistic features and elements in their cultural production, notably, the literature of these human ‘maggot-eaters’. The hypocrisy inheres in the use of mass poverty and deprivation leavened with the patrimonial elements of the people’s artistic heritage, e.g. proverbs and saws in order to lend authenticity and legitimacy to their ‘hybrid’ art. Pared down to their bare-bone structure, these works betray their western indebtedness a la Obi Wali. Thus, Adekoya counsels these pretentious two-faced quislings’ followers or mentees to recognize their ‘matadors’ for what they do: ‘Mine the East without rest. The eyes sign with lust in the West’ (41). He, additionally, invariably endorses the artist’s unabashed deployment of all humanity’s creative heritage, regardless of race, creed or colour. The essential common brotherhood of humankind rebukes all sundering polarities and the divisive politics of exclusions.

The next poem entitled ‘Change’ is a sonnet, like both its Petrarchan and the Elizabethan precursors, which thematizes the problematic of change. The Carpe Diem (“Seize the Day’) was made popular by the English metaphysicals and William Shakespeare in some of his sonnets. Down the ages, writers, poets and philosophers have theorized the subject of change, a subject that engaged the creative imaginations of 20th-century modernist and post-modernist writers and philosophers, notably Nietzsche and Heidegger, Joyce, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeasts. To date, opinion is still divided on whether change is desirable or not, a subject Achebe himself muses on in Things Fall Apart with particular reference to the cataclysmic encounter between the animist indigenous culture and the conquering Christian civilization which eventuated into irreversible change and the tragedy of history. Change, ipso facto, is paradoxical, at once a blessing and a curse. Little wonder, Adekoya references ‘shroud’, ‘debt’ and ‘dirt’ which constitute the compost for growth and rebirth: ‘Grey goes green’. The birth-death-rebirth cycle is intimated in this poem even as the poet echoes Wole Soyinka’s poetry, notably ‘Season’, ‘Idanre’ ‘Abku’ and William Blake’s ‘The Rose’, among others. The paradox of change is also played out in ‘The Tyro’, a poem which narrates how the poet-persona tries to make love to a woman who spurns him on account of ‘my religion!’ (29). Overpowered by lust and blinded by ‘the cloak of libido’, the poet-persona’s eyes refuse to see ‘the blights of beauty’. But he consoles himself by taking solace in the fact that ‘weird is the world’s dance,/it goes round like the ouroborus’ (29). Here is the paradoxical whirligig of life as enunciated by Adekoya:

The dainty dishes change to dung,
The sun slowly burns itself out
As stars are ripened by time,
The giant trees turn into ashes… (29-30).
And the poet adds that: ‘dust is the destiny/And from it flowed the life spring’ (30). The closing poem ‘The pantheon farts’ tells of ‘a fat man’ who ‘farts aloud’ in a ‘department of langue’ because he is suffering from diarrhea, in all probability. Those who hear him fart make jest of his predicament, seeing this cameo performance, the poet is inspired to indulge his mythopoeia. Accordingly, he uses the fat man’s fart as the originating stimulus for philosophizing. On the one hand, the poet entertains with the incongruous farting incident as organizing principle for re-staging the Yoruba creation myth a la ‘Idanre’. Adekoya gives us a roll-call of the major deities in the Yoruba pantheon, avatars such as Ogun, Oya, Esu, Obatala, Atanda, Sango and Ifa. He re-enacts each god’s feats according to myth and relates these to the production and cultivation of culture with its defining elements such as language:

Oro, logos, owner of words, carries
On his wit’s head a bundle of lexis…
The coat that cuts the structure of language (86-87)

The poet homes in on the subject of paradox in the primal context of race-origination, of Being and Becoming:

Ogun looks at life with the inner eye
And fires the double-barrelled gun of paradox
At foes and friends fleeing the phone field… (87)

Adekoya goes on to poetize Esu’s principle of chance, indeterminacy, disorder and contingency; a neither-nor essence which complicates the plot of temporal commerce, of life:

You are the metaphor of metaphor,
The central pull in symbolists’ pool
That figures the rhetoric of poetry.
Your fart articulates the fat of art,
Defines its role, founds form, deconstructs norms (88)

While giving Obatala his due as ‘The King of deities, Primal Essence/Genial Genius’, the mythographic bard explores the centrality of Ogun to the paradoxical lineaments of culture: ‘…Ogun writes on all tablets as done: steel steals, steel protects, steel kills and steel frees’ (89). Thereafter, the poet salutes Atunda, ‘a trope of re-creation’, the primal Revolutionary, whose ‘revolution frees toilers not from toil/But the demon craze of monocracy/The monologue of monotheism’ (89). The poet concludes with the feats of Ifa-Orunmila and Sango as he circles back to the comedy of farting that initially set him off in his mythopoeic musings.

The fourth collection entitled Chameleon and Chimeras signposts its reliance for meaning on sound and sound symbolism and imagery through the similarity in the sounds of ‘chameleon’ and ‘chimeras’. Needless to say Segun Adekoya has, from the first poetry collection, signalled his predilection for wordplay, punning, alliteration, assonance, idiophones et cetera in the firm belief that poetry as verbal art is best realized through the Barthesian speakerly dimension. That is not to say that Adekoya’s poetry easily lends itself to easy rendition and, more importantly, quick or easy comprehension. Far from it. In keeping with tradition, particularly the tradition of Soyinka’s poetry and that of his ilk, Adekoya tends to hold the view that ‘poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult’ (T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays [1950], p. 248, qtd. in Longenbach 178). Whether or not difficulty in poetry is a virtue depends on what side of the debate you belong. But Adekoya leaves no one in doubt as to the side of the debate he belongs to, considering the often-ambiguous and hardgoing texture and tone of his verse. Like Wole Soyinka, his mentor, Adekoya zestfully favours obscurity, embraces complexity and cultivates riddling. Asked by this critic why he writes difficult poetry like William Stevens and Wole Soyinka, Adekoya replied: ‘The important thing is to continue struggling to
understand that which is dark and hard, just as we do with life’ (Adekoya’s short message via the phone, 28th June 2015).

The twin tropes of ‘chameleon’ and ‘chimeras’ fundamentally foreground these riddling complexities that undergird his poetry, more so in the present collection under analysis. Furthermore, his thematization of paradox complicates and simplifies the matter in equal measure: complicates it because, paradox by nature is enigmatic and contradictory; and simplifies it because with paradox you know what you have coming – it’s complexity all the way. Accordingly, the preface poem ‘Agemo’ is about the chameleon which, according to the poet, is a ‘symbol of regal power, fertility deity, death cult and the paradox of continuity and change in perpetuity in Ijebuland’ (3). ‘Agemo’, thus, is an *oriiki* of the chameleon who flaunts his many feats and magical acts, among which are the incredible adaptability of its body, its eyes, feet, skin, tongue, tail, gait and behaviour traits. Agemo boasts that humans try vainly to imitate his antics, mannerisms and magic:

- Mimicking the Lord of the road of life
- Competing with the owner of colour,
- The spirit that spits out both life and death
- Whose tongue writes rights and wrongs, curses and cures
- As it bears the burden of the mystery… (5)

Agemo, according to Segun Adekoya, symbolizes ‘change’ that keeps ‘churning continuity!’ (5). A symbol of the wisdom of the Yoruba race, Agemo totalsizes the principle of caution, uncertainty, vision, tactfulness, grace, harmony and intuition. The second poem entitled ‘Kongi’ is rendered in a quasi-panegyric manner, a style, Ruth Finnegan describes as ‘laudatory apostrophizing’ (Finnegan 1970). Eulogizing his mentor, Wole Soyinka, Adekoya painstakingly scours Soyinka’s *oeuvre* - drama, prose fiction and poetry-pinpointing alleged areas of contention and controversy between the Noble Laureate’s admirers and his detractors. Soyinka, according to the poet, in this poem, is accused of the following: Anglophilia, the Hopkins’ Diseas* or willful obscurity and private esotericism, the traducing of Negritude as well as the text-based thematic and stylistic deformities and the vulgarization of paradox, liberal or bourgeois humanism, anti-feminism, Art-for-art’s sake *a la* Walter Pater. In this 30-page poem, Adekoya effectively rifles through the entire gamut of the major areas of controversy in modern African literature in general and Soyinka’s work in particular. Specifically, Adekoya singles out Chinweizu *et al* of the *Toward The Decolonization of African Literature* fame and cuts them and their criticism to size in his stout defence of Soyinka’s aesthetic ideology.

In the poem captioned ‘The Two Trees’, Segun Adekoya indulges his erotic sensibility as he catalogues the pairs of both the flora and fauna species engaged in copulation. This is to demonstrate that, for growth, regeneration and life to be propagated, both the male and the female principle in every entity must come together. Hence, in this poem, ‘Two venomous snakes hide/In the hollow between the trees/… /And mate’ (70). He continues:

- Barks creak and crack;
- Birds begin to sing;
- Two doting pond toads
- Chorus the love lyric (70)

In celebrating the sexual activity in nature, the poet muses rather darkly on the tragedy of history characterized by ‘The long misrule/In gore-girt glory by / which a hag husks history’ (72). The hag that holds history hostage, be it a degenerate ruling cabal, an absolutist dynasty, an autocratic tyrant, or a mulish citizenry, squanders history’s potential by committing costly errors in judgment and by being irresponsible.

- She grabs her crotch, sobbing
- “I’m lust! I’m lost! I’m lust!” (72)
The next poem ‘mortality’, as its name clearly indicates, is about death or passage. Using himself as a paradigmatic representative of mankind, Segun Adekoya reflects on the brittleness of joy and the fragility of optimism. Life, to the poet, like Shakespeare also remarks in Macbeth, is like a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Also, ‘Mortality’ recalls Andrew Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’ in its thematic exploration of the brevity of human life. The poet, therefore, is cut to the quick that this ‘fine body of mine/still breathes and eats and shits,/ Ants and mosquitoes prey on its slits/while they lie buried in a bedded shrine; (117). He squirms to imagine how, ‘Virile virus, worms, bad bacteria/and parasites fasten on its fattening grain’ (117), and, is sorrowful that when he dies, his eyes shall close ‘To the wonders of the world’. He comes to the realization that ‘dust is the destiny of all flesh’.

The last sub-section of the volume is captioned ‘Transition’, and contains a maximum of 5 long poems, all of them dealing with the subject of death and transition. To conclude this paper, we briefly comment on the poem entitled ‘Ogunba’ (121-129). Professor Oyin Ogunba, now late, was a leading critic of African Literature. He was noted for his simplicity and clarity of expression both in conversational discourse and, more importantly, in his critical writings. Particularly on Ritual Drama, Soyinka’s writing, African oral literature research and scholarship and Shakespeare studies. Clearly a well-liked and highly respected doyen of African literature, Ogunba held sway in the critical reception and exegesis of the subject between the early 1970s and early 2000. Here in this tribute poem, at once valedictory and celebratory, Adekoya, a former student and colleague of his, mourns his demise, much in the tradition of Ijebu-Yoruba orature. As a respected Yoruba elder, Oyin Ogunba’s death should be celebrated against the elegiac strains of Osugbo rhythm. The Osugbo is ‘a ruling conclave of powerful elders who have a deep insight into mysteries’ (121). Fittingly, Adekoya summons Ogun, Yoruba god of war, the principle of the duality of life, and the quintessential symbol of paradox, to mourn Ogunba:

Ogun shakes my hand
And my hand shakes no more;
Praise the Lord!

The poet repeats this couplet a number of times as if he is trying to chant himself into a state of possession by Ogun, from whom the departed elder derives his name: Ogunba. Thus, completely enveloped or/and ridden by the deity, the poet sets forth eulogizing the dead, employing the flora and fauna as objective correlatives to concretize essence:

Pedantic pedagogues mistake your power point for poverty/A loose joint ripped in a large city redoubt,/But the initiated pray your pen play in prime parodies,/make jest of jokes and pour paint on pain’s bounty (124)

Oyin Ogunba, Adekoya notes, habitually makes light of potentially heavy or tragic situations. An Unoka-surrogate in the most heroic sense, Ogunba shuns obscurantism, sham profundity of thought and expression and gives everybody to believe that the very top is achievable with labour and determination. A seminal purveyor of African oralities, Oyin Ogunba single-handed introduced the teaching of Orature to the University of Ibadan, and, by implication, to the African academy. Amid this poetic valediction, the poet of paradox intones further:

The antidote to what ails quail and whales
Ants and elephants, every chimera pocked
With paradox that cloaks the pox of nature,
From invisible microbes to mammoth oaks;
From mysterious dark energy to jumbo-sized Jupiter? (126)
In the true Yoruba fashion, Segun Adekoya wails, declaims, recites, and chants Ogunba’s praise as the final curtain falls. In his inaugural lecture, Adekoya tells us that:

The paradox of poetry consists in comparing two things that are dissimilar and seeing a similarity between them. It involves the juxtaposition of illusion and reality, calling things that do not exist as if they were real and using what is real to create a world that is unreal. Cleanth Brooks avers: “the language of poetry is the language of paradox” (Brooks 1949: 1). To Jonathan Culler, poetic discourse is “ambiguous and ironical” and all successful poems have “tension and paradox” (Culler 1975: 162). Poetry could be appropriated as the work of Esu who, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is “the epitome of paradox” (Gates 1988:30). If Esu’s sexuality and venery are indeterminate and insatiable respectively, then significations of poetry are ambiguous and upended and the appetencies for the convoluted and the involuted are infinite (Adekoya, 2008, 6)

In this study, we have tried to interface the poet’s theory of paradoxical vision and its praxis as exemplified in his poetry. We have also investigated his reliance on and his deployment of elements of tradition as can be instantiated in the poetry of older poets such as Soyinka, T.S. Eliot, Andrew Marvell, William Blake and the figural elements of Yoruba orature. Both in terms of style and technique, ideology and poetic vision, Segun Adekoya conflates resources drawn from his native culture and Western poetic tradition to compose his poetry as the classic instance of cross-cultural post-colonial textuality.

References
Adekoya, Segun. Homage To Paradox. (An Inaugural Lecture Delivered At Oduduwa Hall, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife), On Tuesday January 22nd, 2008.


Ironies and paradoxes. Much of Wilde's impact comes from his ability to turn a common saying on its head. His capacity to come up consistently with the unexpected leads his audience at first to laughter and then often to thought. Frequently, there is a message in the jokes, and one should not be taken in by their outward lightness or profusion. Wilde's witticisms are not always consistent with each other. Many of his saying come in fact from the mouths of his characters. Thus we have the extreme cynicism of Lord Henry Wotton in The Picture of Dorian Gray or of Lord Illingworth in A Wo