Of Goddesses and Stories: Gender and a New Politics in Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah

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Abstract

Nearly twenty-one years in the coming, it was to be expected that, when compared to his last novel, A Man of the People (1966), Anthills of the Savannah (1987) would show a marked elaboration in Chinua Achebe’s novelistic interests.1 The novel, as Ben Okri remarks, is ‘his most complex and his wisest book to date’.2 Dealing with the cynical calculations and calcifications of Africa’s latter-day power-elite, and the bankruptcy of Sixties and Seventies nepotistic politics, Anthills of the Savannah is in a sense a sequel to A Man of the People, which explored themes of political corruption and military takeover on the eve of Biafra. But Achebe’s view of that elite and its politics in the wider African context has become more uncompromising and - at least theoretically - more attuned to gender and populist ideas. Unlike in the earlier novel, the elite can no longer be expected merely to engage in dramatic but gratuitous actions in defence of its political honour. Rather, it must revise its power base and its understanding of leadership, opening its doors to traditionally excluded groups in so doing. Achebe signals this change in attitude by admitting to his narrative representative members of ‘the people’ - taxi-drivers, a shop assistant, the urban poor, and, towards the end, a market woman.

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Nearly twenty-one years in the coming, it was to be expected that, when compared to his last novel, *A Man of the People* (1966), *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) would show a marked elaboration in Chinua Achebe's novelistic interests. The novel, as Ben Okri remarks, is 'his most complex and his wisest book to date'. Dealing with the cynical calculations and calcifications of Africa's latter-day power-elite, and the bankruptcy of Sixties and Seventies nepotistic politics, *Anthills of the Savannah* is in a sense a sequel to *A Man of the People*, which explored themes of political corruption and military takeover on the eve of Biafra. But Achebe's view of that elite and its politics in the wider African context has become more uncompromising and – at least theoretically – more attuned to gender and populist ideas. Unlike in the earlier novel, the elite can no longer be expected merely to engage in dramatic but gratuitous actions in defence of its political honour. Rather, it must revise its power base and its understanding of leadership, opening its doors to traditionally excluded groups in so doing. Achebe signals this change in attitude by admitting to his narrative representative members of 'the people' – taxi-drivers, a shop assistant, the urban poor, and, towards the end, a market woman.

In creating a 'populist inclusiveness', Achebe may to some extent be suspected of deliberate design. This impression is reinforced by the rather determined development of the novel's two main heroes: Ikem Osodi, the poet-journalist, comes to realise the importance of establishing 'vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed ... the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being' (p. 141), and Chris Oriko, carrying Ikem's light, forges contacts outside his elite group. The charge of deliberateness, however, should not disparage what is Achebe's obvious commitment to imagining a reformed national politics. Expressing at once mature disillusionment and heavily-qualified fresh hope, his tentative new vision is manifested in the strategic gender configurations of his central characters.
Where the novel opens with paranoid manoeuvres within a male elite determined to keep hold of power, it ends with a celebratory naming ritual involving three key female figures: Beatrice, Chris's old girlfriend, and a new priestess of the goddess Idemili, Elewa, and Elewa's child by Ikem, called Amaechina, 'May-the-path-never-close' (p. 222). Headed by the powerful Idemili 'taliswoman', and together with its affiliates from various classes, urban and rural, this life-affirming sisterhood signifies a new conception of rulership, the beginning perhaps of a new era for Kangan. From the point of view of gender representation, the formation of this group certainly signals a new moment in Achebe's work. Yet the question that remains to be asked is whether the new moment indeed represents a thoroughgoing revision of ideas of power and leadership - in Ikem's terms, a 'new radicalism' - or whether it remains in the main emblematic, a public enshrining of a canonised and perhaps stereotyped 'womanly' authority set up as a last resort in the face of a depraved political situation. Even in the case of a so-called radical revision, it may be that gender in Achebe remains a vehicle: woman is the ground of change or discursive displacement but not the subject of transformation. To determine to what extent this is so demands that Achebe's political vision and, in particular, the symbolic language employed to evoke that vision, be more closely scrutinised.

Of the 'little clique' that found itself in a leadership position at independence, Achebe has noted that it 'was not big enough ... it had no perception of incorporating others'. In Anthills Achebe has tried for incorporation - that is, he has attempted to stage a type of Gramscian 'top-down' or 'passive revolution', one that operates through the appropriation of popular elements by an elite. He has shifted authority out and away from the group that inherited state power in the Sixties, those first interpreters of African nationalism, and, in so doing, has called into question certain of the more inappropriate or destructive political conceptions that subtended the ruling ethos - the assumption of exclusiveness of the leadership, for example, and its unambiguous maleness. The challenge of his investigation thus depends heavily on his portrayal of the new leaders and, in particular, on the viability of the class and gender constitution of that reformed ruling group.

Light is shed on the political conception behind Anthills in The Trouble with Nigeria, the pamphlet which Achebe wrote as an injunction to Nigeria just before the 1983 election scandal. 'The trouble with Nigeria', as Achebe cites the popular expression in that text, is, quite bluntly, the 'indiscipline' of its leaders, a national condition of 'lawlessness' and rampant selfishness. The malaise is social, but its root cause and primary cure are to be found not in society at large, but in the nation's leadership. Leaders combine and so compound their lawlessness with
influence and power: 'They] are, in the language of psychologists, role models. People look up to them and copy their actions... Therefore if a leader lacks discipline the effect is apt to spread automatically down to his followers' (TN, p. 31). The theory of strong and responsible leadership exercises Achebe throughout the pamphlet. Africa's national leaders have become its curse - but, he believes, they might be its salvation. Noteworthy in this diagnosis is his focus on character and role models in favour of class or neocolonial factors. Addressing Nigeria's elite as himself a self-conscious member of that group, Achebe is unambivalent in his view of leadership as the chief pivot of political and also of economic transformation. Though he believes that the advent of a new leader should be followed by 'a radical programme of social and economic re-organization or at least a well-conceived and consistent agenda of reform', he sees the first step in any process of change as being new rulership, in effect, the intervention of personality.

In The Trouble Achebe castigates a corrupt African elite, in Anthills he sets about deposing one. In the process, developing some of the concepts he introduces in the pamphlet, he begins to suggest what sort of leadership it is that might come in its place. Chris Oriko dies with the phrase 'the last green [bottle]' on his lips (pp. 216, 231) - it is a cryptic reference to his own description of the increasingly more inward-looking and alienated rulers of the nation, Kangan. In her revelatory conversation with Ikem, Beatrice comments that, from the point of view of the three men trained for power at Lord Lugard College, '[t]he story of this country, as far as you are concerned, is the story of the three of you' (p. 66). During what will be the last days of his life, Chris comes to the same realisation: 'We? Who are we? The trinity who thought they owned Kangan as BB once unkindly said? Three green bottles. One has accidentally fallen; one is tilting. Going, going, bang! Then we becomes I, becomes imperial We' (p. 191). In part a joke about Sam being left alone in power, the 'imperial We' reference is also Chris's final comment on the obsession with power that, in different ways, motivated and so also undermined each member of the trinity. Ironically, however, after the demise of the troika, a highly exclusive elite 'we' will still remain in place and in force. The group that coheres around Beatrice is to be the catalyst of the future, or, as Achebe has remarked a propos of the novel: 'the ultimate responsibility for getting us out of this bad patch is with the small group of people who, in one way or another, find themselves in positions of leadership.' In this small group, the tendencies to nepotism and corruption which have compromised elite rulers in the past, will presumably be mitigated by the advent of women's salubrious force. Yet their anticipated beneficent influence does not eliminate other significant paradoxes. If woman is to be included in
the new elite because she is uncorrupted by power, once included, how
is she to retain that force for good? And again, if the faith in an alter­
native female rule depends on the stereotypical image of woman as in­
spirer and spiritual guide, does that idea, whether as stereotype or as
ideal, have much hope of practical application?

Paradoxes such as these emerge out of the uneasy co-existence in
Achebe between, on the one hand, a political cynicism – not to say
pessimism – which dominates the greater part of the novel, and to
which Ikem gives chief expression, and, on the other, an apparent com­
mitment to gender reform and to the redemptive power of myth, which
comes into its own towards the end. As at once an exponent of the
present politics and the herald of a future vision, Ikem gives us a
clearer sense of these ambiguities. In the incendiary speech to the Uni­
versity which is the immediate cause of his arrest and murder, Ikem
resolutely rejects text-book revolutionary orthodoxies as presumptuous­ly
alien, and as being too theoretical within specific African or Kan­
ganian contexts (p. 158). The abstractions of such theories have per­
mitted every sort of misinterpretation and licence on the part of their
proponents. However, as he has already enjoined Beatrice, ' [n]one of
this is a valid excuse for political inactivity or apathy ... the knowledge
of it [is] the only protective inoculation we can have against false
hopes' (p. 100). His proposal, which recalls assertions of Achebe’s in The
Trouble, is to ‘re-form [society] around ... its core of reality’ (p. 100), that
is, to develop its inner strengths, which in Anthills includes the power
of womanhood. In typically metaphysical terms, Ikem wishes ‘to connect
his essence with earth and earth’s people’ (pp. 140-141), yet is also
aware of the classic dilemma of radical intellectuals, namely, that the
knowledge and experience which constitute their power, also isolate
them. Ironcally, it is precisely his belief in indigenous sources of
healing that tags his status as outsider, one who appreciates rituals as
an observer but does not live them. The same cultural distance marks
off Beatrice’s position as one removed from autochthonous custom. Be­
ing a carrier of redemptive vision does not transform Beatrice into a
representative member of the earth’s core: significantly, her status is that
of special icon, not people’s goddess.

The point of resolution to which Ikem’s meditations lead is captured
in Achebe’s idea of incorporation, or broadening from the top – as op­
posed to, say, democratisation or widening from the base: ‘You have to
broaden out so that when you are talking for the people, you are not
only talking for a section or a group interest.’ Given the need for an
elite and therefore for hierarchy, the main possibility of reconciliation
lies in building and extending person-to-person connections across class,
gender and political hierarchies. The intention is to maintain an elite
leadership within a national framework, but to change its style: to develop responsibility, a newly-gendered image of power, not a little scepticism and a broader support base — in general to 'widen the scope' (p. 158). The leaders approach the 'owners' of the country in order to embrace and take into their bosom certain of their number. So Beatrice, leader, inspirer and new seer, becomes the informing centre of a new select group drawn from various social sectors. According to the leitmotif of the novel, in the anthill that survives after the fires of the harmattan, Beatrice is queen, keeping the colony together. As with Yeats's interlocking gyres, though things threaten to fall apart, though old vortices implode and collapse, centres — stable 'cores of reality' (leaders, elites, women as dispensers of succour) — are needed if there is to be movement and change.

A question which remains unanswered, however, is how the broadened, non-sectional elite is to maintain its structural integrity, as well as its identity as elite, following the broadening process. Then, too, it seems unlikely that this process is always to be as conveniently ad hoc as is the formation of the group around Beatrice. How to avoid the appearance of tokenism? Where are likely elite candidates — women, 'people' — to be found? How might an exclusive Idemili cult be adopted by the mass? At this point, where questions of political identification and structuration arise, Achebe as it were purposively intervenes in his narrative, transposing such difficulties into the medium of the imaginary rather than trying for some sort of practical resolution. Just as story transmits the visions of the past into the future, so Anthills, the African story as novel, carries its own vision of the future in appropriately figural terms. Achebe's 'transposition' is in a number of ways, quite clearly, an avoidance technique, literally, a displacement of the problem. In terms of the revolutionary or Marxist theory — 'orthodoxies of deliverance' (p. 99) — Ikem derides, the cop-out is patently obvious: existing economic and political structures remain firmly entrenched, class hierarchies (such as outlined in The Trouble) are endorsed; a soft-core middle-class moralism is reinforced. From the gender perspective, by implicitly presenting the sisterhood's investiture as, in the main, metaphoric redemption, the danger is that woman's conventional position as inspirational symbol — the mentor who is never a full political actor — is entrenched.

Yet Achebe has prepared for his caveat by eulogising the power and importance of myth and story-telling in the novel — in particular through the rhetoric of the Old Man from Abazon (pp. 122-128), in the hymns and the poetic role of Ikem, and in the apotheosis of Beatrice. For the present, the nation is to be redeemed metaphorically — or perhaps metaphysically — only: that is, by London-educated civil servants.
turning into Igbo priestesses, by syncretic ritual and emblematic crossclass and cross-ethnic alliances. Achebe’s general idea seems to be that, in the African context, where much theory has already been uselessly imposed, political postulates, such as those set out in *The Trouble*, do not of themselves offer hope of regeneration. Not by way of clichés from other histories and struggles, but in the figures of gods and rituals drawn from its own local cultures, can the nation (whether Kangan or Nigeria) interpret present confusion and conceptualise a new future – or as Beatrice puts it, ‘[subvert] the very sounds and legends of daybreak to make straight the way’ (p. 109). This is related to Ikem’s idea that humanity be re-formed around what lies within it; that, where ‘times’ will always ‘come round again out of story-land’ (p. 33), one should draw on history and story as it is and has been lived.

Because the metaphoric and allusive images of a future dispensation give primary colour to the hope of *Anthills* – and to Achebe’s own hope for the African nation – his idea of the relation between symbolic transcendence and the presence of women should be more clearly defined. Significant emblematic elements appear in Ikem’s two dense prose poems (the ‘Hymn to the Sun’ (pp. 30-33), and the meditation on Idemili’s power (pp. 102-105)). Masculine images of power and agency are juxtaposed with ‘feminine’ evocations of peace and reconciliation: it is clear that old dichotomous gender distinctions run deep. However, the final scene at Beatrice’s flat, in dramatising and unifying Achebe’s central symbolic meanings, demands the focus of attention. It is here that Beatrice, prefigurement of a ‘gynocentric’ spiritual way, stands forward as the harbinger of a new order. From the initial act of having pointed Ikem in the direction of his vision of woman (p. 96), through being flippantly called a prophetess by Chris, we find Beatrice metamorphosed through sorrow (her suffering is stated not dramatised) into a priestess of Idemili, ‘the unknown god [sic]’ (p. 224) – and also a leader of the naming ceremony (replacing the traditional position of father or male family head (p. 222)). Whether the cross-reference is intentional or not, Achebe rather appropriately draws on the same redemptive Igbo tradition of female devotion and worship as did Nwapa in *Efuru*. With her moral authority, goddess-like carriage and capacity for mediation and inspiration, Beatrice has recognisably become a daughter of the Idemili described in the myth earlier told by Ikem:

In the beginning Power rampaged through our world, naked. So the Almighty, looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the Sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power’s rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty. (my emphasis; p. 102)
The incarnation of Idemili is a redemption of the present political situation, as it is of the neglect of the goddess in the past. Attended by Elewa, child of the people and bearer of the seed of a poet, and a new child, a girl with a male name – Beatrice’s spiritual power as a blessed woman thus represents the fulfilment of Ikem’s final vision of Woman as adopting a new and yet-to-be-imagined role, as signifying new hope (p. 98). To quote Achebe himself, Beatrice and her entourage represent women in their place ‘in the forefront of history’.

It cannot be denied that the potential of woman as celebrated at the end of Anthills represents a significant advance in the African novel, being most distinguished perhaps by Achebe’s refusal to dictate exactly how that potential will be fulfilled. Space is made for woman to be herself the prefiguring subject of a new social and political vision. Yet at the same time, despite the efforts at ‘rescheduling’ power, it is also true that the way in which Achebe privileges woman continues to bear familiar markings for gender, and that this must to a certain extent compromise his re-imaged hope. Symptomatic of Achebe’s difficulties is Elewa’s transmogrification through the implantation of Ikem’s seed (p. 184). As part of the same symbolic logic, Amaechina’s name – May-the-path-never-close – is translated as the ‘Shining Path of Ikem’ (p. 222). The implicit idea of inheritance along a male line – of masculine influence as life-giving, and of man as passing the rod of leadership on to woman – can of course be justified in terms of Achebe’s belief in continuity: ‘The remnant-shall-return’ (p. 222). Yet it equally signifies that maleness remains potently generative: as Beatrice discovers the day she dances with His Excellency, ‘the royal python’ still stirs ‘[gigantically]’ in the ‘shrubbery’ of Idemili’s shrine (p. 81)!

Certain traditional gender-specific spheres of influence appear to remain in force. In their time-honoured way, women in Anthills, especially the heroine who lacks ‘book’, wield power through sex and their bodies, whereas man continues to control the word (Ikem’s poetry) and also, we presume, the rule of the word that is politics. As in earlier nationalist writing, the artist, the one who defines first the vision of the future and transmits the myths of the people, is male. Towards the end of the novel, it is true, a woman does decisively obtain control of vatic power. However, in that her transfiguration is, almost by definition, symbolic, she remains trapped in a role that women have occupied many times before in the mythologies of nations, states and polities; she incarnates the ideals and the desire of men. On the same point, one might ask to what extent Beatrice’s induction into the cult of Idemili is in part a specific development of a stereotype, the inverse of the image of woman as unclean, or as body? As in more traditional evocations of
Mothers of Africa, woman in *Anthills* is represented as mystical, in touch with the unknown, as mentor or genius of the (renewed) nation. As problematic as cross-gender filiation are relationships within ‘the sex’. In this case, differences of class complicate gender status, returning us to the question of the constitution of the ideal elite. In another representative scene, Beatrice plays the central role; Elewa – or perhaps Ikem – is the main catalyst of the situation. Conflict arises during the time of crisis after Ikem’s death when Agatha, Beatrice’s maid, will not serve Elewa because she is of her own class. Beatrice then treats Agatha roughly, pushing her aside to do the job herself. At this point Achebe equips his chief heroine with a fair amount of defensive rationalisation: she is concerned to repeat that Elewa’s ‘emergent consciousness’ has acted with transfiguring power, singling her out from the mass represented by Agatha. It is this special ‘almost godlike’ touch which, in addition to being ‘Ikem’s girl’, Beatrice concludes, has ‘[transformed] a half-literate ... girl into an object of veneration’ (p. 184), and someone she is able to befriend. Beatrice makes quite clear that the ‘complaining millions of men, Who darken in labour and pain’ are to be saved, not by their own efforts, but by those with inner light – a capacity which would further separate the elite from the mass. Yet given this chasm of consciousness, how are the elite of enlightened humans – even if female – to interact with those in the masses, like Agatha, who do not have the gift of ‘luminosity’ (unless this is sympathetically transfused), or, with class barriers still in place, do not come into contact with those who have light? The apotheosis of women figures, impelled by the need to save the elite from itself, finally brings us back to the original problem of how to form an enlarged caucus, a problem now compounded by the distancing effect of the canonization of woman.

These difficulties are serious, especially as Achebe would want his novel to give hints and guesses of a new and ‘regendered’ order. However, to criticise him for such inconsistencies or moments of oversight might not be to give sufficient regard, as he so emphatically does, to the redemptive art of narration and composition, and the metaphysics of that art. Where the problems of elite politics remain for the moment insoluble, symbol and story may provide a powerful means of thinking forwards. To borrow a phrase from Gayatri Spivak, a tale may become a “non-expository” theory of practice’; in Frederic Jameson’s terms, ‘plot falls into history’. ‘What must a people do to appease an embittered history?’ asks Beatrice. The answer is there in the eyes of her guests: they recognise in her act of articulation ‘the return of utterance to the sceptical priest struck dumb for a season by the Almighty for presuming to set limits to his [sic] competence’ (p. 220). ‘Truth is
beauty,' Beatrice explains at the very end of the novel – it is the truth that lies in the last image of Chris withstanding his assailants like ‘Kunene’s Emperor Shaka’ (p. 233); and the truth contained in the prominent image of the anthills holding their own truth of the past. Implanted in the ‘truth [is] beauty’ postulate is an inevitable suggestion of abstraction from real, material life: it is in keeping with this that Beatrice’s new vocation, if we are to believe Nwapa, demands retreat from everyday life. Yet Beatrice’s assertion is also a practical adaptation of the doctrine of aesthetic appreciation to a context, where, as Soyinka has also held, myth and ritual continue to thrive as living presences; as beauties of ceremony to be redeemed for their truth, their lived reality, as much as for their patterned form. 21

Especially where, as in the quotidian reality of Third World military regimes or dictatorships, neither is found in great abundance, Achebe appears to want to hold the two ideals, truth and beauty, in balance, the one intimating or anticipating the other:

Man’s best artifice to snare and hold the grandeur of divinity always crumbles in his hands. And the more ardently he strives the more paltry and incongruous the result. So it were better he did not try at all; far better to ritualize that incongruity and by invoking the mystery of metaphor to hint at the most unattainable glory by its very opposite, the most mundane starkness – a mere stream, a tree, a stone, a mound of earth, a little clay bowl containing fingers of chalk. (p. 103)

So, just as a relatively ordinary woman may become, through her spiritual understanding, an example or ‘shining path’ to her companions, in the same way an ordinary stick in the sand is transformed through ritual into a pillar of Idemili, the connection with ‘earth and earth’s people’. The real functions as index to the beautiful. In this way, too, a random collection of individuals can come to represent the ritual passage into the future of another Kangan. In ‘serious’ politics, symbols and supernatural signs such as these might seem superficial and, certainly from a gender point of view, compromising. Yet, where other options and modes of recompense are unsteady or have failed, symbols stand for points of intersection with, as Achebe would have it, the very present divine: as introjections of spirit, ‘transactions’ between the marketplace and goddesses.


3. Martin Turner has commented that *Anthills* shows signs of a ‘flirtation with bien passant ideology’. Martin Turner, review, ‘The story is our escort’, *Wasafiri* 9 (Winter 88/89), pp. 31-32. Odia Ofeimun, *The Guardian*, Lagos, 20 November 1977, concurs, observing that Achebe has been learning from new trends in literature, and to some extent still shows himself to be a neophyte, the contemporary themes having been rather roughly assimilated into the novel’s ‘thin’ plot structure.


7. That is, Sam, the present military Chief of State, Chris, his Commissioner for Information, and Ikem himself, the editor of the *National Gazette*.

8. Neal Ascherson comments: ‘The three murders, senseless as they are, represent the departure of a generation that compromised its own enlightenment for the sake of power – even the power of bold opposition enjoyed by Ikem Osodi.’ Neal Ascherson, review, ‘Betrayal’, *NYR*, 3 March 1988, p. 4.


11. As Ikem discovers in his second encounter with Braimoh, the taxi-driver. The ceaseless circlings of such cogitations about ‘the people’ are of course a measure of Achebe’s political pessimism. See Ascherson, p. 3.

12. Rutherford, p. 3.

13. On interpreting the past ‘creatively’, see also Rutherford, p. 4.


15. Ikem’s observation, that myth has been used to marginalise women (p. 98), is also echoed by Achebe, both in the Rutherford interview, and in ‘Achebe on editing’, *WLWE* 27, 1 (Spring 1987), pp. 1-5, especially p. 2.


17. Ifi Amadiume, ‘Class and Gender in *Anthills of the Savannah*’, *PAL-Platform* 1, 1 (March 1989), p. 9, has also suggestively pointed out that while the Almighty in Achebe’s (Ikem’s) myth is male, she knows of ‘no translation from Igbo which would render God a he and a man’. In addition, Amadiume believes, Idemili in the Igbo pantheon is usually not given a father.


21. See also Rutherford, p. 4.