Anthills of the Savannah and the Ideology of Leadership

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Abstract
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Achebe was not, of course, silent during those 21 years. Apart from writing poems and short stories, he lectured extensively, published a variety of essays and was generous in granting interviews. A survey of assertions made by Achebe in publications under the last two heads reveals a tendency towards radical populism and an unswerving conviction about the necessity for 'commitment' on the part of writers of fiction. Thus, for example, one finds him asserting that 'the masses own the nation because they have the numbers' and declaring:

These are the real victims of our callous system, the wretched of the earth. They are largely silent and invisible. They don't appear on front pages; they do not initiate industrial actions. They drink bad water and suffer from all kinds of preventable diseases... The politician may pay them a siren-visit once in four years and promise to give them this that and the other. He never says that what he gives is theirs in the first place. (TN, p. 24)

The wretched of the earth are those who have been dispossessed. In his use of Fanon, and his endorsement of 'the African revolution', Achebe here sounds more like the Ngugi of the 1970s than the Achebe of the 1960s. Indeed, as early as 1970 we find him asserting: '...the regenerative powers of the people ... are manifest today in the African revolution, a revolution that aims toward true independence, that moves toward the creation of modern states in place of the new colonial enclaves we have today, a revolution that is informed with African ideologies'.

Political commentary of this tenor was accompanied in the same period by comments on the role of the artist which went far beyond his
often-quoted 1965 comments on 'The Novelist as Teacher' and made it clear that when the long-awaited fifth novel did appear it would be likely to propose socio-political solutions for what Achebe identified as Nigeria's most serious problems. One finds Achebe asserting in 1968, '...this is what literature in Africa should be about today right and just causes' (quoted in Ogungbesan, p. 40), and four years later he is saying: 'I have come to the view that you cannot separate the creativity from the revolution that is inevitable in Africa'. Achebe claims for the writer a role more active, and thereby presumably more influential, than that of a mere reporter: '...the writer's role is more in determining than merely in reporting. In other words his role is to act rather than to react' (quoted in Ogungbesan, p. 40).

_Anthills of the Savannah_ stakes a large claim for the writer of fiction, here wearing the mantle of the story-teller. The Old Man of Abazon is clearly a character for whom the reader's wholly unqualified approval is solicited – partly through the ascription to him of supreme facility both in the use of proverbs and in the art of story-telling. Assessing the respective claims of the story-teller, the warrior and the beater of the battle-drum to being awarded the prize of the eagle feather, the Old Man of Abazon awards it to the story-teller:

The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards – each is important in its own way. But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle-feather I will say boldly: the story.... Because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.

In 1983 Achebe published a booklet outlining what he saw as _The Trouble with Nigeria_. Interviewed after the publication of _Anthills of the Savannah_, Achebe made it clear that one of his intentions in the novel had been to take up issues raised in _The Trouble with Nigeria_ and to use his novel to propose solutions. What will save Nigeria's future progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence is, for Achebe, better leadership. Achebe's interviewer, Anna Rutherford, says: 'I had the feeling that what you were suggesting was that the society reflected the quality of the leadership; if the leadership was corrupt, the society would also then turn to corruption – in other words, the negative aspects in the society could be directly related back to the negative aspects of the leadership.'

Achebe agrees with this interpretation but adds: '...but what I'm really interested in is how you could begin to solve this problem. If you're
going to do that, you have to pinpoint the responsibility specifically before you can even begin to break out of the vicious circle. And it is at the level of the leadership that this break must occur."  

*Anthills of the Savannah* sets out to solve a problem, and makes large claims for the authority of story-tellers in so doing. My intention in the remainder of this paper is to examine, through an analysis of the novel which is more interested in symptomatic readings than purely aesthetic evaluations, the kind of solution proffered, the extent to which it relates to Achebe’s nonfictional assertions about the African ‘masses’ and revolution, and the novel’s potential for ‘determining’ the course of Nigerian history rather than merely reporting it. The terms of the evaluation will, then, have been set largely by Achebe’s own extra-fictional assertions, particularly with respect to the role of the writer.  

Where reception is concerned, my interest here is in the potential effects, in terms of ideological reinforcement or challenge, this novel is likely to have as a conscious intervention in current Nigerian, and more broadly third world, political debate. If the author’s role is claimed to be ‘determining’, it is obviously legitimate to attempt to assess what political responses the novel is likely to determine. This means that other dimensions of the novel, such, for example, as the symbolic or mythopoeic roles and relationships of the three main characters, so suggestively pointed to by Fiona Sparrow, will not be looked at. The representative status of the characters in terms of Igbo mythology would only be relevant to my concerns if, for example, Beatrice’s role as priestess were to make a significant contribution to the novel’s examination of political leadership and thereby shed light on the ideology of leadership informing the novel. I am not convinced that the symbolic or mythological resonance of the characters impinges significantly on the novel’s political analysis.  

The key to the ideological thrust of the novel lies in the use Achebe makes of Ikem as the primary vehicle for his message, and thereby in the ideology of leadership and reform, rather than revolution, in whose service Ikem lives and dies as a fictional character. One must obviously start by noting that Achebe makes a point of trying in a variety of ways to signal a distance between himself as author and Ikem. The most obvious of these are, firstly, the (generally very mild) criticism which Ikem comes in for from the other characters, most notably Beatrice’s criticism of his attitude to women (p. 65), and, secondly, and potentially rather more tellingly, the omniscient narrator’s comment: ‘By nature he is never on the same side as his audience. Whatever his audience is, he must try not to be. If they fancy themselves radical, he fancies himself conservative; if they propound right-wing tenets he unleashes revolution’ (p. 154).
This would suggest that Ikem’s adherence to any political position can never be taken at face value, and might seem to serve as insurance against the possibility of his being identified as an authorial spokesperson. But it is, nevertheless, Ikem who is made responsible for expounding the central tenets of the political philosophy on which Achebe’s central message about leadership is hung, firstly in the ‘strange love-letter’ (pp. 97-101) he reads to Beatrice (in which he, on the theoretical level at any rate, redeems himself in the face of Beatrice’s criticism of his male chauvinism), and, secondly, in his seminal speech at the students’ union (pp. 152-161).

Ikem’s credentials as an authorial voice are established so clearly that the distancing devices carry very little conviction. Beatrice, who can be taken as a reliable witness throughout, describes Ikem’s treatment of women as ‘about the only chink in his revolutionary armour’ (p. 65). The reader’s sympathy is clearly sought for such statement’s as Ikem’s: ‘While we do our good works let us not forget that the real solution lies in a world in which charity will have become unnecessary’ (p. 155). Key scenes like the public executions on the beach are described through Ikem’s eyes, and Ikem’s perceptions are subsequently authorially endorsed in interview: ‘So you find a leader like the editor of the National Gazette setting himself up to correct the situation. It is people like him who must initiate the action. It cannot be done by the group on the beach who are delirious and obscenely happy and enjoying the execution’ (Rutherford, p. 2).

Most importantly, in that it enables Achebe to provide a continuous (favourable) assessment of Ikem’s performance in the crucial speech to the students, he develops a device whereby description of the audience response serves as an index to the incisiveness and accuracy of what Ikem is saying. Thus, for example, the statement that ‘the laughter had died all of a sudden’ (p. 160) indicates that Ikem has scored a telling point at the students’ expense. This is a device which readers first had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with in the wholly uncontentious context of the long speech given by the Old Man of Abazon at the Harmoney Hotel (pp. 122-128).

Apart from canvassing support for resistance to ‘catchy, half-baked orthodoxy’ (p. 158), ‘modish radicals’ (p. 159) and ‘half-digested radical rhetoric’ (p. 161), the main burden of Ikem’s political message in the novel lies with his elevation of reform over revolution:

The sweeping, majestic visions of people rising victorious like a tidal wave against their oppressors and transforming their world with theories and slogans into a new heaven and a new earth of brotherhood, justice and freedom are at best grand illusions.... Reform may be a dirty word then but it begins to look
more and more like the most promising route to success in the real world. (p. 99)

This is obviously a very far cry from Achebe's earlier endorsement of 'a revolution that aims toward true independence' with its apparent recognition that neo-colonialism and mere 'flag' independence are not susceptible to 'reform'.

The solution proposed by the novel is couched in terms of 'leadership', a preoccupation carried over into the fiction from Achebe's non-fictional statements. The first sentence of The Trouble with Nigeria states quite baldly: 'The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership' (TN, p. 1). Achebe then comments, 'The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership', and he concludes a few pages later that: '...every single day of continued neglect brings (Nigeria) ever closer to the brink of the abyss. To pull her back and turn her around is clearly beyond the contrivance of mediocre leadership. It calls for greatness.... Nigerians are what they are only because their leaders are not what they should be' (TN, p. 10).

In 1988 Achebe can be found interpreting the causes of the Biafran war in exactly the same terms: 'The war resulted from the failure of the leadership of Nigeria to protect significant portions of the population from a pogrom, from destruction.'

In pursuit of this leadership thesis Achebe goes as far as asserting that 'after two decades of bloodshed and military rule' in 'one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun' (TN, p. 9) what his 'society' (wholly undifferentiated) 'craves today is not a style of leadership which projects and celebrates the violence of power but the sobriety of peace' (TN, p. 34). What the wretched of the earth 'crave' as the solution to the 'gargantuan disparity of privilege' between the 'tiny class' of the elite and 'the vast multitudes of ordinary Nigerians' (TN, p. 22) is, it is suggested, a change in leadership style. Achebe concludes that 'if Nigeria is to avoid catastrophes of possibly greater dimensions than we have been through since Independence we must take a hard and unsentimental look at the crucial question of leadership and political power' (TN, p. 59). 'Leadership and political power' constitute a single 'question': the possibility would appear not to be entertained that there might be a separation of the concept of 'political power' from that of 'leadership'.

When this concern with leadership finds direct expression in Anthills of the Savannah we find reference to 'leaders who openly looted our treasury, whose effrontery soiled our national soul' (p. 42). Ikem comes
to the conclusion that the 'prime failure' of leadership in Kangan, the novel's fictionalized version of Nigeria, can be seen as 'the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed of this country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being' (p. 141). But precisely what kind of 'vital inner links with the poor' are envisaged, and how they might be re-established, remain unspecified.

This paper does not allow the space, nor is necessary to my purposes, to take systematic issue with the substance of Ikem's central political arguments in the novel. What I am interested in is, rather, the identification of what seem to me to be tensions and contradictions in Anthills of the Savannah resulting from Achebe's attempt to use the novel as a vehicle for proposing solutions to the socio-political and economic problems of Nigeria. The novel is the fictional product of 21 years of political experience and contemplation on the part of a highly, and deservedly, respected author convinced of the functional obligations of literature and of the writer's duty to teach and lead his or her people, and it invites analysis in these terms.

'Contradictions' derive unavoidably from the conflicting determinations acting on an author: from, for example, the discrepancies between the events of history and conflicting class-based readings of those events; from anxieties about the role of the intellectual and artist in oppositional and, in particular, revolutionary politics; from a discordance between the class-based ideological perspectives of writers and their assumptions about the perspectives of their putative audiences; from the tensions between the content of the message to be conveyed and the aesthetic demands of the form being used. It is one of the functions of criticism to attempt to identify and account for tensions and contradictions in an author's work.

Contradictions can, I think, be discerned at all levels in Anthills of the Savannah, from the fictional devices used, through to the solutions being proposed. Thus, at the simple level, the device of using the assembled students' responses as the index of Ikem's unanswerable incisiveness is seriously weakened by the students' being made to be highly sensitive and reliable sounding boards one moment and immature adolescents in dire need of Ikem's political hectoring the next. The assembled students are described as a 'ticklishly humorous crowd' (p. 156) whose applause, 'redoubled laughter' (p. 160), 'explosion of laughter' (p. 160), 'mixed noises' (p. 159) and 'uproarious laughter' (p. 161) Ikem can manipulate at will. The students come across during the time for questions after the lecture as a bunch of politically naive buffoons out for a laugh. Yet this is the same audience which was used earlier as the sounding board for a speech (p. 153) 'so well crafted and so powerfully spoken it took on
the nature and scope of an epic prose-poem'. The same audience, which
needs to be told 'not to swallow every piece of superstition you are
told by witch doctors [sic] and professors' (p. 161), which is apparently
prone to 'too much parroting, too much regurgitating of half-digested
radical rhetoric' (p. 161), is said to have 'sat or stood silently entranced'
(p. 154) in appreciation of the epic prose-poem.

Ikem's concluding injunction, towards which the whole speech to the
students leads, is itself contradictory, given Achebe's apparent ascription
of all responsibility for social ills to 'leaders'. Ikem tells the students:

I have no desire to belittle your role in putting this nation finally on the road
to self-redemption. But you cannot do that unless you first set about to purge
yourselves, to clean up your act. You must learn for a start to hold your own
student leaders to responsible performance; only after you have done that can
you have the moral authority to lecture the national leadership. (p. 160)

This confuses matters considerably. If so heavy a weight of respon­
ability lies with the leaders, it cannot also lie with the led. The whole
leadership thesis obviously falls down if it is the responsibility of those
who are led to 'hold ... (their) leaders to responsible performance' –
irresponsible performance then becomes the responsibility of those who
failed to keep an adequate hold on their leaders.

The novel's concluding message, as explicated in interview by Achebe,
seems equally problematic:

I think this group around Beatrice has learnt a lot in the course of the story.
They have learnt, for instance, that the little clique that saw themselves as
leaders was not big enough, that it had no perception of incorporating others.
You have to incorporate the taxi drivers, the market women, the peasants, the
workers, the students. You have to broaden out so that when you are talking
you are talking for the people, you are not only talking for a section or a group
interest. (Rutherford, p. 3)

What is needed is not a little clique of leaders but a larger group of
leaders; the group must broaden out to enable it to talk 'for the people',
who, crucially, are still presumed to be unable to talk for themselves.
But as you broaden out how do you retain your concept of 'leader­
ship'? If, as Achebe maintains, the role of leadership is 'to create the
circumstances in which the people begin to act with awareness' (Ruther­
ford, p. 3), do the incorporated taxi drivers, market women and peas­
ants then represent the 'people' beginning to act with awareness, or are
they now 'leaders'? It would seem from the distinction Achebe draws
elsewhere between the 'elite' and the 'people' that leadership is prob­
bly, in fact, the preserve of the elite: 'The elite are important because
they have been given special training and education and qualifications
and their duty is to use it to initiate the upward movement of the people' (Rutherford, p. 5). But it is awkward, at the very least, for a political analysis so dependant on a concept of 'leadership' to have the boundary between the leaders and the led becoming so blurred.

For all Achebe's sympathy for 'the wretched of the earth', and his recognition that when politicians give hand-outs to the people what they are 'giving' the people already, in fact, belongs to the people, some of Achebe's formulations suggest that he is putting some distance between himself and 'the people'. Thus, for example, one finds him asserting, in the context of manifestly vicious, incompetent and corrupt leaders, that 'the people get the leadership they deserve up to a point' (Rutherford, p. 2). More tellingly, he denies 'the people' any capacity to think: 'leaders' are defined by virtue of their being 'the few thinking people' (Rutherford, p. 2).

Where Anthills of the Savannah is concerned, the obvious question to ask is why Achebe should choose as the central scene, representative of the essence of 'the people', the public execution on the beach. It isn't adequate to answer: 'The fact (is) that the people are prone to this kind of behaviour' (Rutherford, p. 2). The people are also prone to other kinds of behaviour. Ikem, through whose eyes the execution scene is portrayed, is much taken by the Gelegele Market: 'I never pass up a chance of just sitting in my car, reading or pretending to read, surrounded by the vitality and thrill of these dramatic people. Of course the whole of Gelegele market is one thousand live theatres going at once' (p. 47). Yet Achebe does not choose to make any of the thousand live theatres of the Gelegele Market central to his depiction of 'the people'. That he doesn't do so can, I would suggest, be attributed to the fact that the Gelegele Market offers no obvious occasion for demonstrating the need for leadership - which the execution scene, by contrast, clearly does:

The fact that the people are prone to this kind of behaviour, that they could come to a stage where they could relish this kind of scene, must make the leadership say to itself, 'Why is this possible? How can this happen? It is wrong. We must do something about it.' So you find a leader like the editor of the National Gazette setting himself up to correct the situation. It is people like him who must initiate the action. (Rutherford, p. 2)

What Ikem does is to have the public executions stopped. This is obviously a good thing, but it in no way even begins 'to do something about' the prior 'fact that the people are prone to this kind of behaviour'.

The centrality given to the 'delirious and obscenely happy' (Rutherford, p. 2) crowd at the execution scene, however accurate a depiction
of such an event the scene may be, is not 'natural' or inevitable, it is the product of ideologically determined selection on the part of the author, who had many other options open to him. It is clearly directed towards proving the necessity for 'leadership' of the inherently brutish masses by an elite. As Achebe himself asserts: 'Stories ... are not innocent' (Rutherford, p. 5).

Achebe's overall view of human nature in this novel appears to be pessimistic. Ikem is allowed, for example, to reflect: '...I grab my torchlight and take her down our unswept and unlit stairs. Whenever I go up or down those stairs I remember the goat owned in common that dies of hunger' (p. 36). (Authorial approval of Ikem would appear undismayed by the fact that, as one of the common owners, he presumably bears part of the responsibility for the goat's death.) It must be assumed to be this unenthusiastic view of 'human nature' that underlies the undemocratic tendency of Achebe's preoccupation with 'leadership'. Chris's final message in the novel, a message uttered with his dying breath, is interpreted by Beatrice as a declaration that: 'This world belongs to the people of the world not to any little caucus, no matter how talented...' (p. 232). Yet nowhere in the novel, or in The Trouble with Nigeria, is the possibility ever entertained that 'rule' by an elite leadership might be replaced by genuinely democratic structures, whereby the people could become responsible for the government of the world that is said to belong to them. The logic of Achebe's preoccupation with 'leadership', as embodied in this novel, would lead not to democracy but to enlightened dictatorship by the elite – an outcome very much at odds with the populist tendency of some of Achebe's views quoted earlier. Though it is not, of course, at odds with the role claimed for the intellectual, and the writer in particular, through the award of the eagle-feather to the story-teller.

For a writer who aspires to a role that lies 'more in determining than merely reporting', what Achebe provides by way of guidance for his society for the future is not perhaps as convincing as one might expect from some of the acclaim with which Anthills of the Savannah has been greeted.

We find a surprisingly passive (if also unusually frank) acceptance of impotence as a price one is told one must be prepared to pay for freedom of thought – articulated by the student leader Emmanuel, but derived from Ikem: '...we may accept a limitation on our actions but never, under no circumstances, must we accept restriction on our thinking' (p. 223). We find an assertion that the world belongs to the people of the world, but no suggestion as to how those people can become involved in the government of their world. Instead, we are presented with a view of the people sufficiently unflattering for us not to be
particularly enthusiastic about encouraging their involvement in government. We are told that 'experience and intelligence warn us that man's progress in freedom will be piecemeal, slow and undramatic' (p. 99) but we are given little insight as to what should be demanded of that 'freedom'. We are shown the unsatisfactory relationships and attitudes of a group of leaders, but this is done in such a way as never to call oligarchical 'rule' or 'leadership' per se into question. Although the head of state is a military officer who owes his position to a coup, the answer to the problems appears not to lie with political structures but to be a matter of leadership style. We are not told how a change in leadership style can solve the structural problems inherent in creating out of a society characterised by massive inequalities 'a world in which charity will have become unnecessary' (p. 155). The recipe for an acceptable leadership style - the reestablishing of 'vital inner links ... with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being' (p. 141) - is not precise enough to be very helpful.

There are obviously many other facets to this profoundly engaging novel than are dealt with in this paper, but *Anthills of the Savannah* is an avowedly political novel and, among other possible responses, it accordingly invites critiques directed primarily at its political implications. The solutions Achebe's fiction here proposes to what its author sees as the problems afflicting contemporary Nigeria seem to me to be unlikely to have the durability of the anthills of the savannah, capable of enduring many seasons of grassfires.

NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble With Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1983), p. 25. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text and are referred to as TN.


6. Anna Rutherford, Interview with Chinua Achebe, *Kunapipi*, 9, 2 (1987), p. 2. All further references to this interview are included in the text.
