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Abstract

This full issue is available in Kunapi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapi/vol12/iss2/1
Amalinze was the slayer of many men, a name given him because his bare body was so swift and his eye so quick. He was called the Cat because his bare body was so fast and his eye so keen; it seemed to our ancestors that he was always a step ahead of all others. He was a fright to see, a monstrous creature. His eyes were like the eyes of a lynx, his whiskers like those of a wild cat. He had a wild look in his eye, and it was said that when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slant of anger and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father. Special Issue in Celebration of Chinua Achebe

In many of the villages and beyond, his fame had spread. People went on pilgrimage to honor to him. Amalinze was the slayer of many men, a name given him because his bare body was so swift and his eye so quick. He was called the Cat because his bare body was so fast and his eye so keen; it seemed to our ancestors that he was always a step ahead of all others. He was a fright to see, a monstrous creature. His eyes were like the eyes of a lynx, his whiskers like those of a wild cat. He had a wild look in his eye, and it was said that when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slant of anger and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father. Special Issue in Celebration of Chinua Achebe

The drums beat in a rhythm which the spectators heeded, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a cat, the muscle stood out on his back, and the breaths were heaving and one could hear the outer point. In the end, the drum was beaten, and during this time Okonkwo howled like a bush-fire in the forest. He was tall and his bushy eyebrow and wide nose gave him a severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slant of anger and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father. Special Issue in Celebration of Chinua Achebe
Kunapipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet, and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

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IN CELEBRATION OF CHINUA ACHEBE

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Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
For
Chinua Achebe

Foreword.

In January 1966, I was sent to the North East Region of Nigeria by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation to interview Chinua Achebe. It was a most pleasant occasion. After the return journey, we arranged a meeting to talk about Achebe's new book, 'Things Fall Apart'. It was a wonderful encounter and I was thrilled by his sharp insights into Nigerian life. Achebe is a remarkable writer and his work has had a significant impact on African literature. His novel 'Things Fall Apart' is a masterpiece that has captured the essence of African culture and has been translated into many languages.

I hope that this interview will give readers a glimpse into Achebe's world and his contribution to African literature. It is through his work that we can understand the struggles and challenges faced by the African people. His stories are not only entertaining but also powerful, providing insights into the complexities of African society.

I am grateful to Achebe for sharing his wisdom and for allowing me to capture his thoughts in this interview. His words are a testament to the resilience and beauty of African culture. I believe that his message will continue to inspire future generations and contribute to the rich tapestry of African literature.

I wish him all the best in his continued efforts to promote African literature and culture. May his work continue to inspire and educate readers around the world.

Yours sincerely,
Anna Petersen
Foreword

In January 1990 one of us went to the South Bank lecture to hear Chinua Achebe. After the lecture and questions there was a reception, and over a glass of wine we got Chinua Achebe’s permission to publish the talk he had just given. This was an unexpected piece of luck and it gave rise to the idea of devoting an entire issue of Kunapipi to the writing of Chinua Achebe, using his own contribution as the centre piece.

The present volume, then, is to celebrate Chinua Achebe’s 60th year. The best way to honour a great writer is not simply to heap praises on him – they get repetitive after a while; a much better way is to show the scope, the variety and the depth of the scholarship which concerns itself with his writing, and this is what we have tried to do. The contributors range from fellow writers like Ama Ata Aidoo and Gabriel Okara to young academics around the world like Rosemary Colmer from Australia and Margaret E. Turner from Canada. The range is not just wide geographically, but also in terms of theme and approach. There are post-colonial interpretations, Marxist interpretations, feminist interpretations and linguistic approaches.

However, behind the literature which gave rise to all those approaches is the man, and apart from writing Chinua Achebe has contributed greatly to the development of African literature through his editorial work and his encouragement of young writers. This aspect is discussed in the interview with the editors of the African Writers Series.

Chinua Achebe, we have put together this tribute to show our appreciation of the great contribution you have made to African and world literature; we hope that it will give you pleasure to read and that you will continue to let your voice be heard in the large and growing and diversifying body of African literature.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN
ANNA RUTHERFORD
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African Literature as Restoration of Celebration

Just under two years ago, I was one of a dozen or so foreign guests at a Writers' Symposium organized by the Irish Arts Council to commemorate one thousand years of the founding of the City of Dublin. The general theme of that Symposium, chosen, I believe, by the novelist Anthony Cronin, was LITERATURE AS CELEBRATION.

Some of my colleagues, as I recall, appeared to have difficulty with that subject. For my part, I found it almost perfect; it rendered in a simple form of words a truth about art which accorded with my traditional inheritance and also satisfied my personal taste in the matter. The brief paper I presented on that occasion was the genesis of the reflections I wish to share with you today in this 1990 South Bank show lecture concerning African literature, a body of writing which in our lifetime has added an important dimension to world literature.

But, before I start, I wish to repeat a disclaimer which I made in Dublin. On the morning of my presentation, the Irish Times carried a prominent story in which a very kind columnist referred to me as the man who invented African literature. So I took the opportunity of the forum given me at the Symposium to dissociate myself from that well-meant but blasphemous characterization. Now, before you run away with the idea that my disavowal was due to modesty on my part, I should tell you right away that I am actually not a very modest man (a fact which you probably would have discovered on your own before very long). No, my refusal was due rather to an artistic taboo among my people, a prohibition – on pain of being finished off rather quickly by the gods – from laying a proprietary hand on even the smallest item in that communal enterprise in creativity which my people, the Igbo of Nigeria, undertook from time to time, and to which they gave the name Mbari. Mbari was a celebration through art of the world and of the life lived in it. It was performed by the community on command by its presiding deity, usually the Earth goddess, Ana. Ana combined two formidable roles in the Igbo pantheon as fountain of creativity in the world and custodian of the moral order in human society. An abominable act is called nso-ana, taboo-to-Earth.
Once every so often, and in her absolute discretion, this goddess would instruct the community through divination to build a home of images in her honour. The diviner would travel through the village and knock on the doors of those chosen by Ana for her work. These chosen people were then blessed and separated from the larger community in a ritual with more than a passing resemblance to their own death and funeral. Thereafter, they moved into the forest and, behind a high fence and under the instruction and supervision of master artists and craftsmen, they constructed a temple of art.

Architecturally, it was a simple structure, a stage formed by three high walls supporting a peaked roof; but in place of a flat door you had a deck of steps running from one side wall to the other and rising almost to the roof at the back wall. This auditorium was then filled to the brim with sculptures in moulded earth and clay, and the walls with murals in white, black, yellow, and green. The sculptures were arranged carefully on the steps. At the centre of the front row sat the earth goddess herself, a child on her left knee and a raised sword in her right hand. She is mother and judge.

To her right and left, other deities took their places. Human figures, animals (perhaps a leopard dragging along the carcass of a goat), figures from folklore, history, or pure imagination; forest scenes, scenes of village and domestic life; everyday events, abnormal scandals; set pieces from past displays of mbari, new images that had never been depicted before – everything jostled together for space in that extraordinary convocation of the entire kingdom of human experience and imagination.

When all was ready, after months or even years of preparation, the makers of mbari, who had been working in complete seclusion, sent word to the larger community. A day was chosen for the unveiling and celebration of the work with music and dancing and feasting in front of the house of mbari.

I used the words stage and auditorium to describe the mbari house; let me explain. Indeed, the two side walls and the back wall encompassed a stage of sorts, in which the community in the foreground is the audience looking into the enclosure with its festive walls and the massed arrangement of sculptures on the steps. But I believe the event does invite a second way of apprehension in which the roles are reversed, and those still and silent dignitaries of moulded earth seated on those steps in the royal pavilion become the spectators of the world as a lively scene.

The problem some of my colleagues had in Dublin with the word celebration may have arisen, I suspect, from too narrow a perspective on it. Mbari extends the view, opens it out to meanings beyond the mere remembering of blessings or happy events; it deliberately sets out to in-
clude other experiences – indeed, all significant encounters which man makes in his journey through life, especially new, unaccustomed and thus potentially threatening, encounters.

For example, when Europe made its appearance in Igbo society out of travellers' tales into the concrete and alarming shape of the District Officer, the artists immediately gave him a seat among the moulded figures of *mbari*, complete with his peaked helmet and pipe. Sometimes, they even made room for his bicycle and his native police orderly. To the Igbo mentality art must, among other uses, provide a means to domesticate that which is wild; it must act like the lightning conductor which arrests destructive electrical potentials and channels them harmlessly to earth. The Igbo insist that any presence which is ignored, denigrated, denied acknowledgement and celebration can become a focus for anxiety and disruption. To them, celebration is the acknowledgement of a presence, the courtesy of giving to everybody his due.

Therefore, the celebration of *mbari* was no blind adoration of a perfect world or even a good world. It was an acknowledgement of the world as these particular inhabitants perceived it in reality, in their dreams and imagination. The white District Officer was obviously not a matter for dancing. But he was not alone in that. Consider another disquieting presence – a man whose body was covered with the spots of small-pox, a disease so dreaded that it was personified and alluded to only in quiet, deferential tones of appeasement; he was called the Decorator of its victims, not their killer. As for the woman depicted in copulation with a dog, was there much to choose as oddities go between her and the white man?

I offer *mbari* to you as one illustration of my pre-colonial inheritance – of art as celebration of my reality; of art in its social dimension; of the creative potential in all of us and of the need to exercise this latent energy again and again in artistic expression and communal, cooperative enterprises.

And now I come to what I have chosen to call my Middle Passage, my colonial inheritance. To call my colonial experience an inheritance may surprise some people. But everything is grist to the mill of the artist. True, one grain may differ from another in its powers of nourishment; still, we must in the manner of those incomparable artists of *mbari* accord appropriate recognition to every grain that comes our way.

It is not my intention, however, to engage in a detailed evaluation of the colonial experience, but merely to ask what possibility, what encouragement, there was in this episode of our history for the celebration of our own world, for the singing of the song of ourselves, in the din of an insistent world and song of others.
Colonization may indeed be a very complex affair, but one thing is certain: You do not walk in, seize the land, the person, the history of another, and then sit back and compose hymns of praise in his honour. To do that would amount to calling yourself a bandit; and you don’t want to do that. So what do you do? You construct very elaborate excuses for your action. You say, for instance, that the man in question is worthless and quite unfit to manage himself or his affairs. If there are valuable things like gold or diamonds which you are carting away from his territory, you proceed to prove that he doesn’t own them in the real sense of the word — that he and they just happened to be lying around the same place when you arrived. Finally if the worse comes to the worst, you may even be prepared to question whether such as he can be, like you, fully human. From denying the presence of a man standing there before you, you end up questioning his very humanity.

I have used the word presence quite a few times already. Now I want to suggest that in the colonial situation presence was the critical question, the crucial word. Its denial was the keynote of colonialist ideology. Question: Were there people there? Answer: Well ... not really, you know ... people of sorts, perhaps, but not as you and I understand the word.

From the period of the Slave Trade, through the Age of Colonization to the present day, the catalogue of what Africa and Africans have been said not to have or not to be, is a pretty extensive list. Churchmen at some point wondered about the soul itself. Did the black man have a soul? Popes and theologians debated that for a while. Lesser attributes such as culture and religion were debated extensively by others and generally ruled out as far as Africa was concerned. African history seemed unimaginable except perhaps for a few marginal places like Ethiopia where Gibbon tells us of a short burst of activity followed from the seventh century by one thousand years in which she fell into a deep sleep, ‘forgetful of the world by whom she was forgot’ to use his own famous phrase.

With Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of History at Oxford in our own time, no bursts of light, no matter how brief, have ever illuminated the dark sky of the Dark Continent. A habit of generosity to Africa has not grown since Gibbon’s time; on the contrary it seems to have diminished. If we shift our focus from history to literature we find the same hardening of attitude.

In The Tempest, Caliban is not specifically African; but he is the quintessential colonial subject created by Shakespeare’s genius at the very onset of Europe’s Age of Expansion. To begin with, Caliban knew not his own meaning but ‘wouldst gabble like a thing most brutish’. However, Shakespeare restores humanity to him in many little ways but especially
by giving him not just speech but great poetry to speak before the play's end. Contrast this with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* three hundred years later. His Calibans make 'a violent babble of uncouth sounds' and go on making it right through the novel. Generosity has not prospered.

So these African creatures have no soul, no religion, no culture, no history, no human speech, no I.Q. Any wonder then that they should be subjugated by those who are endowed with these human gifts?

A character in John Buchan's famous colonial novel, *Prester John*, has this to say:

I knew then the meaning of the white man's duty. He has to take all the risks.... That is the difference between white and black, the gift of responsibility, the power of being in a little way a king, and so long as we know and practice it we will rule not in Africa alone but wherever there are dark men who live only for their bellies.¹

John Buchan, by the way, was a very senior colonial administrator and novelist. One suspects he knew his terrain.

So let us add to our long list of absences this last item – the absence of responsibility. If we should now draw a line under this list and add up all the absences reported from Africa, our grand total would equal one great absence of the Human Mind and Spirit.

I am not quite certain whether all the field-workers who reported these absences genuinely believed their report or whether it was some kind of make-believe, the kind of alibi we might expect a man arraigned for a serious crime to put together. You see, it is significant, for example, that the moment when churchmen began to worry and doubt the existence of the black man's soul was the same moment when the black man's body was fetching high prices in the market-place.

On the other hand these reporters may well have believed their own stories – such was the complex nature of the imperial vocation. The picture of Africa and Africans which they carried in their minds did not grow there adventitiously but was planted and watered by careful mental and educational husbandry. In an important study of this phenomenon Philip Curtin tells us that Europe's image of Africa which began to emerge in the 1870s was 'found in children's books, in Sunday school tracts, in the popular press. Its major affirmations were the "common knowledge" of the educated classes. Thereafter, when new generations of explorers and administrators went to Africa, they went with a prior impression of what they would find. Most often, they found it...²

Conrad's famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, first published in 1899, portrays Africa as a place where the wandering European may discover that the dark impulses and unspeakable appetites he has suppressed
and forgotten through ages of civilization may spring into life again in answer to Africa’s free and triumphant savagery. In one striking passage in this novel Conrad reveals a very interesting aspect of the question of presence. It is the scene where a French gun-boat is sitting on the water and firing rockets into the mainland. Conrad’s intention, high-minded as usual, is to show the futility of Europe’s action in Africa: ‘Pop would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech – and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding.’ About sanity I cannot speak. But futility, good heavens, no! By that crazy act of shelling the bush, France managed to acquire an empire in West and Equatorial Africa nine to ten times its own size. So whether there was method in the madness, or not, there was profit quite definitely.

Conrad was giving vent to one popular conceit that Europe’s devastation of Africa left no mark on the victim. Africa is presumed to pursue its dark, mysterious ways and destiny untouched by explorations and expeditions. Sometimes Africa as an anthropomorphic personage steps out of the shadows and physically annihilates the invasion – which of course adds a touch of suspense and even tragedy to Europe’s enterprise. One of the best images in *Heart of Darkness* is of a boat going upstream and the forest stepping across to bar its return. Note, however, that it is the African forest that takes the action: The Africans themselves are absent.

I think it is interesting to contrast Conrad’s episode of the French gun-boat with the rendering of an analogous incident in *Ambiguous Adventure*, a powerful novel of colonization by the Muslim writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane from Senegal, a country which, as you know, was colonized by the French. Conrad insists on the futility of the bombardment but also the absence of human response to it. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, standing as it were at the explosive end of the trajectory, tells a different story. The words are those of one of the characters, the Most Royal Lady, a member of the Dialloble aristocracy:

> A hundred years ago our grandfather, along with all the inhabitants of this countryside, was awakened one morning by an uproar arising from the river. He took his gun and, followed by all the elite of the region, he flung himself upon the newcomers. His heart was intrepid and to him the value of liberty was greater than the value of life. Our grandfather, and the elite of the country with him, was defeated. Why? How? Only the newcomers know. We must ask them: we must go to learn from them the art of conquering without being in the right.

Conrad portrays a void; Hamidou Kane celebrates a human presence and a heroic struggle.
The difference between the two stories is very clear. You might say that difference was the very reason the African writer came into being. His story had been told for him and he had found the telling quite unsatisfactory.

One of the earliest short stories I wrote was called ‘Chike’s School Days’, and it ended like this:

The first sentences in his New Method Reader were simple enough and yet they filled him with a vague exultation: ‘Once there was a wizard. He lived in Africa. He went to China to get a lamp.’ Chike read it over and over again at home and then made a song of it. It was a meaningless song. ‘Periwinkles’ got into it, and also ‘Damascus’. But it was like a window through which he saw in the distance a strange, magical new world. And he was happy.

And so the young African boy enthusiastically opened his heart and mind to the exciting, wider world unfolding around him. That boy was me.

I went to a good school modelled on British public schools. I read lots of English books there. I read Treasure Island and Gulliver’s Travels and Prisoner of Zenda, and Oliver Twist and Tom Brown’s School Days and such books in their dozens. But I also encountered Ryder Haggard and John Buchan and the rest, and their ‘African’ books.

I did not see myself as an African to begin with. I took sides with the white men against the savages. In other words I went through my first level of schooling thinking I was of the party of the white man in his hair-raising adventures and narrow escapes. The white man was good and reasonable and intelligent and courageous. The savages arrayed against him were sinister and stupid or, at the most, cunning. I hated their guts.

But a time came when I reached the appropriate age and realized that these writers had pulled a fast one on me! I was not on Marlowe’s boat steaming up the Congo in Heart of Darkness. I was one of those strange beings jumping up and down on the river bank, making horrid faces. Or, if I insisted on the boat-ride, then I had to settle perhaps for that ‘improved specimen’, as Conrad sarcastically calls him, more absurd than a dog in a pair of breeches trying to make out the witchcraft behind the ship’s water-gauge.

That was when I said no, and realized that stories are not innocent; that they can be used to put you in the wrong crowd, in the party of the man who has come to dispossess you.

And talking of dispossession, what about language itself? Does my writing in the language of my colonizer not amount to acquiescing in the ultimate dispossession? This is a big and complex matter which we cannot go into fully here. Let me simply say that when at the age of
thirteen I went to that school modelled after British public schools, it was not only English literature that I encountered there. I came in contact also for the first time in my life with a large number of other boys of my own age who did not speak my Igbo language. And they were not foreigners but fellow Nigerian youth. We lived in the same dormitories, attended the same morning assembly and classes, and in the evenings gathered in the same playing fields. To be able to do all that we had to put away our different mother tongues and communicate in the language of our colonizers. This paradox was not peculiar to Nigeria. It happened in every colony where the British put diverse peoples together under one administration.

Some of my colleagues finding this too awkward have tried to rewrite their story into a straight-forward case of oppression by presenting a happy monolingual African childhood brusquely disrupted by the imposition of a domineering foreign language. This historical fantasy demands that we throw out the English language in order to restore linguistic justice and self-respect to ourselves.

My position is that anyone who feels unable to write in English should of course follow his desires. But he must not take liberties with our history. It is simply not true that the English forced us to learn their language. On the contrary British colonial policy in Africa and elsewhere emphasized again and again its preference for native languages. We see remnants of that preference today in the Bantustan policies of South Africa. We chose English not because the British desired it but because having tacitly accepted the new nationalities into which colonialism had grouped us, we needed its language to transact our business, including the business of overthrowing colonialism itself in the fullness of time.

Now, that does not mean that our indigenous languages should now be neglected. It does mean that these languages must co-exist and interact with the newcomer at the present time and into the foreseeable future. For me it is not either English or Igbo, it is both. Twenty-one years ago when Christopher Okigbo, our finest poet, fell in the Biafran battlefield, I wrote for him one of the best poems I have ever written, in the Igbo language, in the form of a traditional dirge sung by his age-grade. Fifteen years ago I wrote a different kind of poem, in English, to commemorate the passing away of the Angolan poet and President, Agostinho Neto. The ability to do both is in my view a great advantage and not the disaster some of my friends insist on calling it.

It is inevitable, I believe, to see the emergence of modern African literature as a return of celebration. It is tempting to say that this literature came to put people back into Africa. But that would be wrong
because people never left Africa except in the guilty imagination of Africa's antagonists.

I must now emphasize one final point. Celebration does not mean praise or approval. Of course praise can be part of it, but only a part. Anyone who is familiar with contemporary African writing knows how we stand in this matter; we are no flatterers of the Emperor. Some years ago at an international writers' meeting in Sweden, a Swedish writer and journalist said to a small group of Africans present: You fellows are lucky. Your governments put you in prison. Here in Sweden nobody pays any attention to us no matter what we write. We apologized profusely to him for our undeserved luck!

The running battle between the Emperor and the Poet in Africa is not a modern phenomenon either. Our ancestral poets, the griots, had their way of dealing with the problem, sometimes direct, at other times oblique.

I shall end by telling you a very short Hausa tale, from Nigeria: a miniature masterpiece of the story as a two-edged sword:

The Snake was once riding his horse curled up, as was his fashion, in the saddle. As he passed the Toad who was walking on the road, the Toad said: 'Excuse me sir, but that is not how to ride a horse.'

'It's not?,' asked the Snake. 'Can you show me then how it's done?'

'With pleasure,' said the Toad.

The Snake slid out of the saddle down the side of the horse to the ground. The Toad jumped into the saddle, sat bolt upright and galloped most elegantly up and down the road. 'That's how to ride a horse,' he said.

'Very good,' said the Snake. 'Very good indeed. Please descend.'

The Toad jumped down and the Snake slid up the side of the horse back into the saddle and coiled himself up as before. Then, looking down at the Toad on the roadside he said: 'To know is very good, but to have is better. What good can superb horsemanship do to a man without a horse?' And he rode away.

Everyone can see in that simple tale the use of story to foster the status quo in a class society. The Snake is an aristocrat who has things like horses because of who he is. The Toad is a commoner whose horsemanship, acquired no doubt through years of struggle and practice, avails nothing in this hierarchical society. The Hausa who made this story are a monarchical people and the ethos of the story accords with the ruling values of their political system. One can imagine the Emir and his court laughing boisterously at the telling of that story.

But quite clearly the griot who fashioned that story, whether he was aware of it or not, concealed in the voluminous folds of the laughter the hint and the glint of iron. In the fullness of time that same story will stand ready to serve a revolutionary purpose using what was al-
ways there: an unattractive, incompetent and complacent aristocracy, exposing it not to laughter this time but to severe stricture.

The new literature in Africa is aware of the possibilities available to it for celebrating humanity in our continent. It is aware also that our world interlocks more and more with the worlds of others. For, as another character in Ambiguous Adventure says to a Frenchman: 'We have not had the same past you and ourselves, but we shall have strictly the same future. The era of separate destinies has run its course' (p. 79).

If we accept that, and I don't see that we have much choice, then we had better learn to appreciate one another's presence and to accord to every people their due of human respect.

NOTES

Towards the Evolution of an African Language for African Literature

Language as a problem in African literature has existed (recognised as such or not) from the outset when Africans started to write in the languages of their colonial rulers. The problem surfaced through the writers' own process of self-discovery, and there have been varying degrees of perception and awareness of the problem ranging from indifferent casual scrutiny to the realization that it is a problem which the serious African writer must face and must resolve to overcome.

The Nobel Prize has not changed the need felt for an African language for our literature. The problem still exists crying out for an urgent solution. Though it has not changed things, the Nobel Prize, as the symbol of European literary excellence and presumably of world acclaim, may create in some African writers the tendency to regard the self-evident language problem as non-existent or, at least, as one dreamed up by those who want it as cover for their deficiency in the use of the English language. Also, the uninhibited may come out to say that the so-called problem is a hindrance to their hopes of ever winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. Indeed, there is no glimmer of the Nobel Prize at the end of the tunnel; but for us who have dedicated our pens and minds to overcoming the problem of language, the search for a solution is a worthwhile task.

The debate, I think, actually began at the Makerere conference of African Writers in Kampala in 1962. It has continued ever since, and two schools of thought have emerged. One holds the view that there is no problem at all in the use of the English language as our medium of expression. Our Africanness will show anyhow, since a leopard never changes its spots. Those who belong to this school of thought I call the 'Neo-metropolitans'.

The second school of thought, to which I belong, feels that there is a need for something to be done to the English language in order to make it an adequate transmitter of the African message. This group of writers I call the 'Evolutionists/Experimenters'.
Quite recently, another school of thought has raised its strident voice to announce its bold stand against the other two. It advocates a total rejection of the English language as the medium of expression of African writers. This school of thought feels that authenticity and the artistic integrity of African creative writers can only be attained if they use their native African language as the medium of creative expression.

Meanwhile, let us go back a little in time, to examine how the English language has insinuated itself into the very core of the life of a very important and articulate segment of our society. To this segment of our society, the middle class, English is no longer an alien language; to them and many more, English has become a *de facto* African language. It seems to me that when speaking your native language becomes a conscious activity, it has lost its premier position to another which comes more easily and naturally to your lips. The urban middle-class dwellers and others less affluent, but who are also urban dwellers, have thus become speakers of some form or other of the English language in preference to their native languages. They only speak their native languages, some even haltingly, when it is absolutely necessary.

Such an outcome is inevitable when many of the children of the middle-class urban dwellers attend special expatriate schools. In these schools the girls are taught to curtsey and the boys to bow, from the waist up, with a flourish of the right hand holding a top hat, imitating the elegance of Elizabethan ladies and gentlemen! The most telling of all is the phenomenon in some middle-class families of mixed marriages in urban centres. The offspring of these families are now monolingual, not in their mother tongues, but in English. This may not be true of all such families, but the mustard seed of monolingual families has been sown in our society. And the number of such families will certainly grow by the simple but natural law of seed multiplication and dispersal or, like the leaven, it may over the years change the very complexion and tone of our society.

I am not given to hyperbolic statements but the situation as I see it is so ridiculous that I am driven to a state of mind which can only be appeased by such a flamboyant literary device to make a point, a statement, about some of the realities with which we are faced. Now here is a little story of alienation. It is a true story though much abbreviated by me.

A boy about eight years old went with his middle-class father, for the first time, to their home village. The boy became pressed for the toilet and told his father so. He was taken to a little hut at the back of the main house. That, he was told, was the toilet. He quickly went in and rushed out as quickly, shouting, ‘I can’t, I can’t, I can’t, that’s no toilet.’ It was a pit latrine!
Some of the factors which have contributed to this state of affairs are: the imported technologies and the life style which these promote, and our educational system, patterned after those of metropolitan Britain, with English as the medium of instruction. The very systems of government are adaptations of those of America and Britain – the Presidential and the Parliamentary – alternating between the two, or a combination of them, as the politicians attempt by trial and error to find one suitable to their countries' temperament. These systems of government are operated under the same laws, rules of conduct and ethics of the metropolitan ones. Even the laws of the land are replicas of those in metropolitan Britain. All agencies of government which regulate the lives of the people – the Judiciary, the Police and others – conduct their statutory functions in English and in the British tradition. These and the other examples above are all obvious facts, truths, which cannot be ignored when considering English as an African language.

Nonetheless, English has been of great benefit, whether radicals acknowledge it or not, in the countries where it is spoken as a second language. In such countries this European language is an insurance of their continued corporate existence. English is their official language and it is a bona fide lingua franca of these countries.

In a televised discussion in the United States of America, Chinua Achebe was asked a question pertaining to the use of European languages in African literature and his answer was as follows: 'The linguistic situation is quite complex in Africa. In Nigeria you couldn’t talk about Nigeria one minute longer as the country is today if you were to remove the English language.' That was in 1973, but I do not think the situation in this country has changed. If anything, English is getting itself more and more enmeshed in the fabric of our society.

Apart from the impact of European technologies which tend to change the life style of the people, there are many complex and sensitive reasons for this phenomenon. These countries are made up of several ethnic groups with their hundreds of languages and dialects, particularly in the larger ones such as Nigeria. No one ethnic group, especially the large ones, in any of the countries under consideration, would acquiesce in the use of any language other than their own as the lingua franca of their countries. The ethnic groups in reality are different countries, sometimes very disparate ones, brought together in groupings with imposed names and geographical identities. Thus the imposition of any one language as lingua franca would only work over the dead bodies of those whose languages have been relegated to the background. This was what Achebe referred to in his answer to a question during the televised discussion.
Witness Sri Lanka’s fratricidal war between the Tamil-speaking minority and the Government. The insurrection was sparked off by the replacement of English by Sinhalese, the language spoken by the majority, as the lingua franca of Sri Lanka. The Tamils want their own autonomy, a government of their own, in order to retain and sustain their own identity just as their kith and kin, separated only by a few nautical miles of sea, in their teeming millions in India. The anglophone and francophone countries have been spared this tragedy yet, because they see the wisdom of not undertaking such a perilous enterprise, a course of action which has been indicated by the recent unfortunate example of Sri Lanka.

Having seen the increasing hold the English language has on our lives, let us now turn to the three debating groups – the Neo-Metropolitans, the Evolutionists/Experimenters, and the Rejectionists.

THE NEO-METROPOLITANS

Those who belong to this school of thought were very vocal and assertive in their opposition to the Evolutionists/Experimenters at the beginning of the debate. Their slogan was ‘a leopard cannot change its spots’. That means that an African should not waste his time and energy worrying himself, at the risk of developing hypertension, about the Africanness of his writing as this will show whether he likes it or not. There is therefore no need to do anything to the metropolitan language the African uses to express his African ideas. We should therefore write in impeccable English, surpassing, if possible, even the best of native English writers. I know many young writers who write profusely and with vibrant youthful exuberance in this style, but who have not come out to espouse their course. This, I believe, is due to lack of opportunity, and not due to lack of enthusiasm.

THE REJECTIONISTS

This group advocates the total rejection of all metropolitan languages as the languages of African literature. They should be rejected in their entirety as the medium of African literary expression.

By rejecting these languages Ngugi wa Thiong’o believes he is dealing a final blow aimed at eradicating cultural imperialism from the continent of Africa and thus getting closer to the goal: cultural freedom. No African writer who values his African heritage would fault Ngugi wa Thiong’o on this. It would have been a privilege to be one of his flag
bearers if not for the little problem of continental application. African reality would not permit this sort of thing now and would therefore brusquely consign the idea to the realm of dreams and confine it there as long as the balance of literacy remains weighted heavily in favour of the metropolitan languages. This will remain so far some time yet to come.

Pre-dating Ngugi’s move, there have been writers who have been writing in their own languages and dialects. Some contemporary writers, Kunene, Okot p’Bitek, and Ngugi himself, are bilingual while the famous Fagunwa, the Yoruba story teller, wrote in Yoruba and Ogunde, the veteran playwright, continued to write his plays in Yoruba until his death recently. I am sure there are also similar writers practising their craft without fanfare, in the francophone countries. But the problem with writing in African languages is that such works are only known and appreciated in the localities where the languages are spoken. They become localised in a few pockets of the continent. This obviously falls far short of the Pan-Africanist vision of a continental literature written in a continental language.

Ngugi has declared that from now on he would write only in his native Gikuyu or Swahili. His works would now appear in English as translations only. Hear Ken Goodwin on Mazisi Kunene’s English translations of his own Zulu poems: ‘Kunene’s English versions often representing a rather truncated version of the original are nevertheless important poems in their own right...’\(^2\) I have a feeling that Ngugi would not like his works to appear in English as ‘truncated’ versions of his excellent Gikuyu originals.

Suggestions have been made over and over again for a language for Africa and its literature. At a conference in Tanzania, Swahili was suggested as such a language. I do not think this suggestion went beyond the thundering shouts of applause, the hand clappings and foot stampings with which it was acclaimed. It died with the last sound of the applause. The sudden realisation of the immensity and complexity of the problems which would have to be overcome before its implementation killed it. But like an ogbanje the idea is born again and again tauntingly at conferences, but only to die again and again with a mocking smile playing on its lips.

THE EVOLUTIONISTS/EXPERIMENTERS

The Kampala conference of anglophone writers in 1962 marked the beginning of the articulation of the search for an authentic African literature and the suggestions of how this could be achieved. And if I were
writing the history of African literature in English I would say that this also marked the second phase, a follow-up, in our search for our cultural identity. The first phase which was characterised by the so-called informational and anthropological novels had established the fact that Africans have a culture and are proud of their heritage.

The second phase has carried the search further into the mode of application of the metropolitan language as our means of literary expression. For it is now an established fact that our African ideas, philosophy and culture, as experienced and expressed in our African languages, cannot be expressed effectively in English. The corollary to this of course has been the continuing quest, through experimentation, for a mode of employing the English language, which we have appropriated, to give full expression to our culture and our point of view, to our message, without our seeing ourselves, or others seeing us, as through a distorting mirror. This is the stand of the Evolutionists/Experimenters.

Writers of this third group therefore take a position between the two extremist ones we have already discussed briefly. They are of the opinion that while English remains, at least for the time being, their medium of expression, it must be used in such a way as to make their creative writing indisputably African in concept and execution. Members of this group may differ in their individual approaches, which is healthy, but they have one burning purpose: to evolve a way in which to make the English language express the totality of the message of African culture in their works. In the televised discussion already quoted, Professor Achebe who belongs to this group speaks more about what the group is doing: ‘What we are trying to do in a way is an experiment... But if we keep the metropolitan, the English language, then it certainly has to be able to cope with our experience. In other words, we ought to be able to do something to it that it can carry our particular message.’ That is exactly what we are doing, though our approaches may be a little different. Some writers of this group have, however, had critical acclaim while others have received both acclaim and critical uncertainty or have been led to despair.

Only a few discerning critics were aware of what was happening or what we of this group were trying to achieve by the way we used the English language in our individual approaches to the problem of authenticity and identity. We were looking for a form of language evolved from English, a literary language common to all anglophone countries in Africa.

It will not be African English like American English, Canadian English or Australian English. These are possible only because the nationals of these countries have the metropolitan culture as their reference
culture. An African cannot claim such a reference. His culture is different. His culture is rooted nowhere else but in Africa. If, therefore, an African wishes to use English as an effective medium of literary expression, he has to emulsify it with the patterns, modes and idioms of African speech until it becomes so attenuated that it bears little resemblance to the original.

There is a parallel to this would-be phenomenon in music. Our brothers and sisters introduced a form of African music to America which came to be known as jazz after it had been assimilated into the idiom of main-stream American music. Jazz has now assumed classical dimensions the world over. We the Africans, the originators, have to learn not only how to play it but also how to enjoy it. Now only historians of jazz would trace it back to Africa. There is another example, this time in the plastic arts. When Picasso could no longer get inspiration from Europe he turned to Africa. His eyes fell on the so-called 'primitive' art. He liked it, and it fired his imagination. He incorporated some of the African art forms into his own works. This gave him instant fame! Again, only historians of Picasso's art would note that his later works were informed by African so-called primitive forms of art. We should indeed evolve a language that could only be traced back as a derivative of the English language.

The triumvirate of scholars, Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, in their book *The Decolonization of African Literature*, Vol. 1, endorses what the Evolutionists/Experimenters have been doing for decades:

A necessity for linguistic experimentation lies in the fact that Africans do not use English the way the English do, and in the fact that the rhetorical devices of each African language and community are peculiar to it and are a legacy of its cultural inheritance.

If a flavour of African life is therefore to be captured in novels written in English, the English language has to be flexed and bent to allow these idiomatic and rhetorical usages to be presented. Several African writers have experimented to this end. Some have been more successful than others.4

We who have put our pens to it, will continue undaunted to do the flexing and bending, and even brow-beating, of the English language until some common language emerges. We cannot now retreat into our countless languages as languages of African literature. That would be building a Chinese wall in the twentieth century to exclude what is already very much within.

It would be a futile effort. We let in the Trojan Horse hundreds of years ago. We have appropriated the English language. Let us assimilate
it into our African systems and patterns and evolve the new language we need for the effective expression of our African message.

NOTES

A decade and a half after Achebe revised Conrad's jaundiced vision of men-eating Africans in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958),¹ socio-linguists were noting that the anthropophagi were not African but European and devoured not men but words. As the French Marxist-influenced linguist, Louis-Jean Calvet, contends in his *Linguistique et colonialisme* (1974), 'Le premier anthropophage est venu d'Europe. Il a dévoré le colonisé ... il a dévoré ses langues; glottophagie donc.'² 'Glottophagia' thus refers to the fact that many African languages were 'devoured' by the colonizing powers and supplanted by the European languages which, Gérard reminds us, had themselves fallen prey to the Romans' Latin linguistic imperialism.³ Modern colonial glottophagia was achieved, according to Calvet, by demoting African languages to the status of 'patois' or 'dialects' in a way analogous to the Victorians' demotion, in the vocabulary, of African kings to chiefs and of non-Muslim priests to 'witch-doctors'. Calvet pushes the argument even further by suggesting that the turn-of-the-century practice of linguistics inexorably completed the process of glottophagia in the colonies under European rule: 'La linguistique a été jusqu'à l'aube de notre siècle une manière de nier la langue des autres peuples, cette négation, avec d'autres, constituant le fondement idéologique de notre "supériorité" de l'Occident chrétien sur les peuples "exotiques" que nous allions asservir joyeusement' (*Linguistique*, p. 10). Linguistic imperialism is here presented as the most insidious and pervasive aspect of colonialism, for, more than economic or political imperialism, it depersonalizes the colonized to the extent of estranging him from his own language and his linguistic group.

My own recent findings bear witness to a form of glottophagia or even neo-glottophagia in West African Europhone literature.⁴ We shall call it 'textual glottophagia', an extension of linguistic glottophagia. Such a phenomenon is most apparent in the case of 'indigenization', that is, when the writer attempts to convey African concepts, thought patterns and linguistic features via the European medium. This is most pointed-
ly epitomized in Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice*, where the sedimentary Ijo etymons gnaw at the European language and where, conversely, the repressed Ijo tongue falls prey to a textual glottophagia by which English devours the African etymons and morphemes which now function as the linguistic debris of a near-extinct language. By an analogous process, the Ijo world-view becomes a decaying vision. By exhibiting the dominant language’s protean possibilities of adaptation, indigenization (‘relexification’ in linguistics) can thus help revitalize and recirculate the target language in a perversely neo-colonial fashion at the expense of the source language. This mutual cannibalism is endemic, I believe, in all acts of indigenization and, more generally, in all strategies of literary decolonization and revanchism.

When extended to the Igbo-informed novel and, more specifically, to the Igbo gnomic or proverbial discourse in the Nigerian novel of English expression, glottophagia becomes discursive and, as we shall see, this glottophagia provides an ironic comment on the manducation of the word, since proverbs are made of words which are destined to be ‘eaten’.

The Igbo-informed novel is made of discursive segments that belong to the vast corpus of African traditional oral material like the myth, the panegyric, the agonistic contest in eloquence, rules of address, praise-names, dirges, proverbs, maxims, apophthegms and epigrams. When transposed to the written text of West African novels, in an attempt to recapture traditional speech and atmosphere, these discursive elements constitute what Alioune Tine has called the ‘ethno-text’. I here propose to analyze the stuff the Igbo ethno-text is made of and, in the latter part of this paper, to theorize over the eventual death of all African formulaic tradition.

The grafting of the ethno-text onto the novel is common practice among Europhone West African writers. The first characteristic of the Igbo ethno-text is that its constitutive elements recur in various forms in all novels that share the Igbo ritual patrimony. Such is the case with the prayer over *oji* or cola made every day in Igboland. Variants can be found in *Things Fall Apart* (p. 22), in Onuora Nzekwu’s *Blade Among the Boys* (p. 48) and Nkem Nwankwo’s *Danda* (p. 13). All three variants of the prayer over *oji* have a common denominator: the characteristically Igbo proverb or *ilú* concerning the kite or hawk and the eagle: ‘Egbé bërè ùgò bërè nké sì ibè yá ébélá, kwá yá nkù.’ This *ilú* marks the ethno-text as specifically Igbo.

African proverbs have been described as repositories of communal wisdom, mnemonic devices for effective communication, and educational tools. Because they have their origin in specific communal experiences and are reproduced by a memory, their epistemological basis may give
us insight into the (male) African apperceptive mode. In the Igbo art of conversation, proverbs are both modes of communication and retrievers of communication. As the Yoruba say: 'Owè l'esin òrò bí ọró bá ọsonù ọwe l'ài fì nwá a', that is, 'proverbs are the horses of speech; if communication is lost, we use proverbs to retrieve it.'

The use of proverbs in Chinua Achebe's native culture-based novels - Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God (1964) - had often been considered as an embellishment or a stamp of authenticity and it was only in the early seventies that critics became aware of their functional significance. Bernth Lindfors, for example, convincingly ascribes to proverbs 'a grammar of values' after Herskovits's phrase. Austin Shelton is the only scholar thus far to have provided a detailed analysis of those ilu in Achebe's fiction. His work also has the merit of initiating the shift away from what Arnold termed 'the tired, basic topics ... like "oral elements in the writings" of a few well-known authors' on to a refinement of concern for the specificity of the ethno-text.

Shelton distinguishes three types of proverbs: 'those drawn from ilu used among the Igbo in general, those of Achebe's Awka-Onitsha area, and those which he created or modified' (Shelton, 109). Although it is incorrect to credit Achebe with any proverbial 'creation', I will focus on the modification that he may have brought to the original ilu. I will therefore expand and systematize Shelton's thematic organization, as it applies to Arrow of God. These new categories of proverbs bear witness to both an evolutive itinerary and a gradual erosion, as if words were eaten away at.

The first category of proverbs are those that are recognizably Igbo ilu used (although less and less) among the Igbo. For example, let us consider these two proverbs in Anambra Igbo which are related to change, as most proverbs in Achebe's novels are. Both proverbs comment on the Igbo village's first contact with the new religion, although only the first appropriately identifies Christianity as the 'white disease':

(a) 'As soon as we shake hands with a leper he will want an embrace' (AG, pp. 177, 42), relexified from

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{i} & \quad \text{naa onye árụ-ọcha aka,} \\
\text{(if) you} & \quad \text{take person body-white(s) hand,} \\
\text{ọ} & \quad \text{kaf kie bié yá omá.}
\end{align*}
\]

he want(s) that you him {embrace.}
(b) ‘The man who brings ant-infested faggots into his hut should not grumble when lizards begin to pay him a visit’ (AG, p. 163; also pp. 72, 178) from the Igbo,

Ónye kpátara nkú ahụihu ziri ngwere ọkụ. (Shelton, 104)
Person who carries in firewood infested by ants invites lizard.

or a variant from another area of Igboland:

Ónye kpátara nkú arụru dí
Person (who) fetches firewood ants are (in)
yá lèé anya ngwere n’ụlọ yá.*
he (should) look eye (for) lizard in house his.

The second category groups proverbs whose usage may be restricted to Achebe’s Oka-Onitsha area or to the speakers of a particular area, as in this ilú of ‘riverside Igbo origin’ (Shelton, 105): ‘The Chief Priest raised his voice and pleaded with them to listen but they refused saying that they must bale the water while it was still only ankle-deep’ (AG, p. 159). Incidentally, this proverb, couched as it is in English aphoristic terms, may lure one into assuming that it is English and therefore foreign to the Igbo ethno-text.15 On the other hand, this Central Igbo ilú – ‘When a man chases two rats at a time, he ends up catching none’ – is only remotely related to what is in use in Achebe’s area: ‘We are like the puppy in the proverb which attempted to answer two calls at once and broke its jaw’ (AG, p. 232):

Nkitá zaa (úzọ ọku ọbụọ ọku úzọ ọbụọ ọgbá ekwòjie yá.*
Dog answer call places two jaw breaks it (dislocates it.

Although this last proverb, like many others, can easily be translated into English proverbial wisdom, the cultural context from which it originates is not easy to identify for the non-African reader. Indeed, it refers to the dog which, while being within hearing distance of nursing mothers calling him to come and lap up their children’s excrement, hears two such calls simultaneously and gets confused. This proverb is unambiguously traditional and rural, for this social reality may be on the verge of disappearing in urban centres. If the social reality that sustains it disappears, the proverb will not survive oral mnemonics.

The third category of proverbs are ilú that Achebe modified by (a) substituting elements (i.e. the slave for the chicken) or (b) omitting elements such as the reference to slavery and slave-catching:
(a) ‘Let the slave who sees another cast into a shallow grave know that he will be buried in the same way when his day comes’ (AG, p. 32), from the Igbo:

Ọkúkó nọrọ ọga ánàbó

(Let) chicken remain where they are butchering

ọkwa mara ótu esì ábó yá. (Shelton, 100)

bush fowl to know how to butcher it. (i.e. how it would be butchered)

(b) ‘When the handshake goes beyond the elbow we know it has turned to another thing’ (AG, p. 16), from the Igbo:

ìkwé n’aka fëéla isi-hkù ákà,

(If) to shake the hand passes elbow,

ó ghọplá ókpụkpà. (Shelton, 103)

it has become seizing (as one snatches a slave).

Achebe’s omission to slave-catching, in the second example, may be construed as a concession to his audience (but it is unlikely because in the first instance, the original chicken has been replaced by a slave), to the English language or, more conceptually, to text-formed thought. Yet, it may also be interpreted as a ‘structural amnesia’ reflecting what may happen in contemporary Igboland for, as Walter Ong contends about the Gonja’s genealogies in Ghana, ‘the part of the past with no immediately discernible relevance to the present [will] simply fall away.’

Homeostasis thus refers to the subordination of the integrity of the past in proverbial discourse to the integrity of the present.

Contrary to the proverbs of the third category that tend to expand meaning, these proverbs in the fourth category abstract the essence of an original ilú, albeit in a more prolix style: ‘If anyone asks you why you should be sent to learn these new things tell him that a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time’ (AG, pp. 233-34):

úrì pùtara n’ázi, 

Dance (that) came out for a generation,

ázi a gbá yá. (Shelton, 103)

(that) age-group should dance it.

The movement from the first to the fourth category corresponds to Achebe’s itinerary from synchronic to diachronic representation. Indeed, he moves from the representation of ilú as Igbo speakers would make use of them (e.g. between 1850 and the turn of the century in Things Fall Apart) to the literary, imaginative use of gnomic speech. The dual function of the ilú is thus to lend verisimilitude to Igbo traditional speech and to allow the writer’s artistic temperament to shape the literary situation. In his commitment to this dual function, Achebe takes it upon himself to be the retriever of communication when the narrative
cannot by itself carry the full weight of the Igbo ethno-text. Achebe does what an ingenious user of ilu does: he proverbalizes.

As a proverbalizer, Achebe adapts original proverbs and maxims as used in the traditional/rural milieu to the urban milieu by bastardizing the terse form of the ilu and vulgarizing its meaning. This is an immediate consequence of homeostasis, the symbiotic link a proverb establishes with the present moment. For instance, in *A Man of the People*, Mrs Nanga, the wife of a corrupt politician, says: 'My brother, when those standing have not got their share you are talking about those kneeling.' This in fact refers to an ilu which is rendered in its full form in a novel set entirely in tribal society, *Things Fall Apart* (p. 5): 'Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them' from an original Igbo ilu:

\[
\text{Anwù gà-èti ñdí kwụ ọtụ túpụ ọ tiwé ñdì gbúsíri ìkpèrè}
\]
\[
nà-òkpúrù há.*
\]

At-under them.

Similarly, Mrs Eleanor John in the same novel tries to render an ilu in Pidgin. The result is one of 'utter trivialization and vulgarization', as Obiechina remarks: 'My people get one proverb: 'they say that when poor man done see with him own eye how to make big man e go beg make e carry him poverty de go je-je' (MP, p. 16), meaning that when a poor man realizes what is involved in becoming a big man, he will beg to carry on with his poverty without ceremony. In this and other examples, Achebe aims at showing how the urban Igbo speaker is alienated from the traditional art of conversation and the proper use of proverbs. The implication is that what may survive is, for reasons linked to homeostasis, the Pidginized form of the original Igbo ilu.

If we except a novel like *Things Fall Apart* (which contains 29 ilu, presumably to show the falling apart of things proverbial), the density of proverbs in rural novels (a minimum of 129 in *Arrow of God*) are in inverse proportion to their scarcity in urban novels (a minimum of 27 in *A Man of the People*). This testifies to their gradual extinction in increasingly urbanized contexts. This does not mean, however, that any ilu transposed to an urban setting is systematically bastardized. Achebe simply adapts them to modern realia, when advisable. Such is the case with sayings involving the Igbo concept of *chi*, which are used in various forms, depending on the rural or urban setting. The core conflict of the individual vs. the community in *Things Fall Apart* revolves around the Igbo concept of 'chi' that Achebe rendered as 'personal God'. The 'Chi' often comes up in this common saying:
or in several variants involving the bird 'nza': 'His [Okonkwo's] enemies said good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird nza who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his chi' (TFA, p. 22) which is said of Okonkwo when he beat his wife during the Week of Peace. This can be traced to two variants of ìłu:

(a) ñà ríjúè áfó ó mákwāgh ónyé kéré yà.
    wren satisfied belly, he knows not who made him.

(b) ñà ríjúè áfó gà, échéfúè chi yà.
    wren satisfied belly his, forgot chi his. (Shelton, 91)

The Chi-based adages can be traced not only throughout Things Fall Apart (e.g. pp. 13, 19, 92) but also throughout Arrow of God, for Okonkwo’s breaking of the communal bond may be compared to the village Umuaro’s conceit when going to war against another village (AG, pp. 14, 27). It is also therefore appropriate that in No Longer At Ease, set in an urban milieu, Joseph Okeke should use Igbo to caution to Obi, Okonkwo’s grandson, who has just been acting cockily at a job interview: ‘And I can tell you that a man does not challenge his chi to a wrestling match’ from ‘Mmádú ánàghí échéré chi yà ákà mgbá’ (Shelton, 93). Here the saying has been adapted to suit the urban modalities of ‘wrestling’ with a prospective employer in the post-colonial, pre-Civil War context of No Longer At Ease. Wrestling is here controlled by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now’ (Ong, p. 47). Wrestling may thus become an archaic reference, a noetic ‘white’ metaphor that is empty because no longer homeostatically linked to the present. The reference to the Chi or to the bird nza in turn may become the meaningless ‘trace’, to use a chirographic metaphor, of a traditional ìлу, like children’s nonsensical syllables from orally transmitted songs. Moreover, such a proverb, not being part of the original, vituperative context, is no longer agonistic and thus ceases to exist as proverb.

Referring to a popular politician’s challenge of the national hero at the end of No Longer At Ease, Achebe deftly juxtaposes the seemingly insipid English ‘translation’ with the Igbo ìлу:

‘He is a foolish somebody,’ said one of the men in English.
‘He is like the little bird nza who after a big meal so far forgot himself as to challenge his chi to a single combat,’ said another Igbo.19
Incidentally, the chi-based sayings can be traced not only through Achebe’s novels but also in any novel with an Igbo ethno-text such as, for instance, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, which contains thirty references to the Chi.\(^{20}\)

To understand the gradual erosion of gnomic speech, it is crucial to understand what proverbs are and what happened to them when reduced to writing in English. Before being written down, proverbs were rhythmic, mnemotechnic, and formulaic. Proverbs are essentially ‘word-events’ (from the Hebrew ‘dabar’ meaning both word and event) that were ‘sounded’ and thus power-driven. Their structure is mnemonic, that is intertwined with memory systems (Ong, pp. 33-34) and thus highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall. They reflect orally patterned thought and are therefore not occasional as they are in Achebe’s novels but incessant. They used to form ‘the substance of thought itself’ and even ‘the substance of the law’ (Ong, p. 35).

Since proverbs come from a sound-dominated verbal economy, committing them to writing has a ‘diaeretic, separative function’ (Ong, p. 61). Writing is closely associated with death. This is best illustrated in the still widespread practice of pressing living flowers to death between the pages of a printed book (or the modern *liber*) and of appending both proverbs and locutions in Latin, now a dead language, to the *Petit Larousse illustré*. But, paradoxically, just like the deadness of a text ensures its endurance and its phoenix-like capacity for resurrection into limitless living contexts, the Igbo *ilu* may be resurrected by its own destroyer, the urban English-oriented context, or recuperated by another genre outside of the novel or by the new electricity-based orality.

Transposing proverbs from the oral to the written medium is thus disabling and foreshadows the death of a species, for proverbs are generally collected in writing when about to die. The further transposition of orally-bound formulae into an alien language is thus doubly disabling. This phenomenon has historical antecedents. It is similar to the disappearance of the Aramean *besōretā* and all mnemotechnic procedures that ensured its oral transmission, when it was committed to Greek writing.\(^{21}\) Achebe himself in his foreword to Whiteley’s *Selection of African Prose* had mentioned the difficulty of ‘translating Igbo proverbs and riddles (inu) because of the resulting isolation from the whole pattern of allusion and direct cultural reference in the African language’.\(^{22}\)

Thus isolated and cut off from their original context, proverbs fall prey to a textual glottophagia whereby Igbo proverbs are 'eaten up' by the English words of the European narrative. Yet, ‘proverbs,’ Achebe tells us, ‘are the “palm-oil” with which words are eaten’ (*TFA*, p. 4) – *ilú ká n’ējí èrí úkà* (Shelton, 86). In order to be memorized orally, words had to be manducated or 'eaten', as if by a mandibular mouth.\(^{23}\)
In the universal tradition of ‘eating the Book’ before or during alimentary rites, oral proverbalizers are thus mouths or articulate mandibles that recite and recall.

The eating of words is not only characteristic of the Igbo art of conversation but also, for instance, of European medieval vocalization when manuscripts were commonly read aloud or sotto voce. Poised vocalization helped the reader ‘eat’ the words qua sound units that were going to become visual units in print cultures. Proverbs thus function not only as the main discursive elements of the Igbo ethno-text grafted onto the novel but also as the oral mindsets that reveal the historical origins of all literature out of oral verbalization.

As in all oral or residually oral cultures, the words of the Igbo proverb are taken from the mouth of the proverbalizer to another mouth to be eaten. Committing these proverbs to writing is thus a treason in many ways: in the sense in which the familiar Italian maxim understands transliteration and translation as treason, ‘traduttore, traditore’; in the sense in which Robert Escarpit understood ‘creative treason’ as adding one’s ‘creative mite to a continuous, collective creation’, but specifically as a treacherous kiss. The kiss that signalled the beginning of echoic recitation between the talmid and the Rabbi has been turned into a Judas kiss. The message has indeed been corrupted in that it has not been transmitted from mouth to mouth. It is not ‘echoed’ nor ‘sounded’ when reduced to writing. To pass the proverbs on from mouth to text, that is not by word of mouth is unnatural to the proverb or the byword, as a proverb is also called. To further pass them on from text to the reader or ‘eater of the book’ short-circuits the original process, for the mouth that receives those nurturing words can only swallow, digest and churn them into ‘food for thought’.

Because the proverb, in the Igbo art of conversation, is compared to the ‘palm-oil’ that aids digesting or manducating the words, the proverb may be considered as a discursive lubricant. Once the palm-oil of the Igbo traditional art of conversation, proverbs are now more like a narrative lubricant helping in the expert transplanting of the ethno-text onto the Europhone novel. Like a scion grafted onto a main body, the ilú remains an unfamiliar utterance.

Proverbs in the Igbo-informed novel of English expression have thus been reduced in quantity and quality and are now part of a residual orality. Proverbs, like other gnomic material, are becoming a minor rhetorical device or a minor gnomic tool in both the society and the novel, as was the case in European societies after the Renaissance period, when proverbs were deliberately down-graded. Although, as Gérard reminds us, ‘it is often unwise to regard literary artifacts as faithful reflections of a social situation’, the Igbo-informed novel mirrors not the
present but a future where Igbo culture will become increasingly chirographic at the expense of proverbial discourse.

The gradual extinction of a discursive species such as the Igbo ilu and other orature-based devices recuperative of the ethno-text could signify the gradual death of Igbo and all African oral formulaic tradition. In a chirographic context, discursive glottophagia replaces the manducation of the word. What is being eaten here is the logos or verbum of the proverb or proverb. Achebe qua proverbalizer voices non-sounded words. The present-day proverbalizer is thus textually bound to be a logos-eater.

NOTES


8. My original informant is Mr Oko Okoro, Dept of English, University of Lagos, Nigeria. His samples are marked with an asterisk. They were later nuanced by Cyprian Ekwensi (‘Personal Interview With the Author’, Dakar, Senegal, 22 March 1989).


12. Austin Shelton, 'The “Palm-Oil” of Language: Proverbs in Chinua Achebe’s Novels', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 30, No. 1 (1969), 103. Further cited in the text and referred to as Shelton. The samples are his, unless otherwise indicated. The diacritics have been provided by Prof. Philip A. Nwachukwu, Dept of Igbo and Linguistics at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, Nigeria, and the Center for Cognitive Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, U.S.A.


15. Kenneth Harrow contends that this ilú is an English aphorism and therefore a ‘foreign element’ that has ‘fatally infiltrated Okika’s speech to Umuofia in Part Three of *TFA’*. He concludes that the proverb using the metaphor of Eneke the bird preceding this ‘English aphorism’ is in fact ‘now recalled, not as a living word but as a relic’. In ‘Ringing the Changes: Proverb and Metaphor; Master Troupe/Feminist Discourse in *Things Fall Apart*’, a paper read at the ALA Conference in Dakar, 20-23 March 1989, MS, p. 11.


18. Emmanuel Obiechina, 'Language', op. cit., p. 177.


21. The example concerning the besoretá and all mnemotechnic procedures is a bit more complex than it appears at first, for the targoumiste's words are the result of oral calquing, rendered accessible through the targoum midrāshisant from the Hebraic written word of the Tôrâh, the Miqra, that which is shouted, into the Aramean verses of the Mishna. See Marcel Jousse, La Manducation de la parole (Paris, 1975), p. 193, n. 37.


*) A modified version of this paper has been published in Semper Aliquid Novi: Littérature Comparée et Littératures d’Afrique: Mélanges Albert Gérard, ed. János Riesz & Alain Ricard (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990), 305-16.
Achebe, Hegel, and
the New Colonialism

In *Beautiful Losers* Leonard Cohen states: 'History decrees that there are Losers and Winners. History cares nothing for cases, History cares only whose Turn it is!'\(^1\) Whose turn to win, that is, and whose turn to lose. In the Hegelian system there are winners and losers, masters and slaves; in history's movement toward the universal and homogeneous state there are winners and losers as well. Like history, though, Hegel does not appear to care for the cases of individuals. Nor does the historical process of colonization and cultural confrontation and domination. Colonization, in fact, is remarkably similar to J.M. Coetzee's definition of war: compelling a choice on someone who would not otherwise make it.\(^2\) In Hegel's thinking the universal and homogeneous state is the peak of historical progress and will signal the end of history. For Hegel, that state arrived with Napoleon. The universal - every place - and homogeneous - equality for every person - state is the desired goal, because it ends the dialectic of the master and slave.

The problem with the theory of the universal and homogeneous state, aside from George Grant's objections to it,\(^3\) is that it is refuted by fact: the universal and homogeneous state did not arrive with Napoleon, nor has it yet. When the theory is examined closely in the light of historical events we see that we are more accurately speaking of the process of colonization: cultural domination by a superior power which wishes to extend its realm of influence and increase its wealth. The colonizer exerts power; the colonized falls or is beaten into submission. History has, until recently, favoured the colonizer, whose turn it has been to win; the individual cases of the losers receive little attention. Nonetheless, the position of the colonized casts new light on the universal and homogeneous state. Frantz Fanon puts it this way:

The colonized person, who in this respect is like the men in underdeveloped countries or the dispossessed in all parts of the world, perceives life not as a flowering or a development of an essential productiveness, but as a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death. This ever-present death is experienced as endemic famine, unemployment, a high mortality rate, an inferiority complex and the absence of any hope for the future...\(^4\)
History is on the side of the winner, and since the great age of western European imperialism that winner has been for the most part capitalist, white, and male, although as Fanon says, ‘[I]n France, as in England, humanism claimed to be universal’. Rather than universalizing and homogenizing, the colonial situation creates two separate worlds: one of masters and one of slaves. Or in other words, the old system is perpetuated but in terminology which makes it appear new. The so-called slaves are the people who are forced into this universalizing and homogenizing system – the differences which remain are suffocated by power and violence, both physical and psychological:

On the unconscious plane, colonialism therefore did not seek to be considered by the native as a gentle, loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts. The colonial mother protects her child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology, its biology and its own unhappiness which is its very essence.

Chinua Achebe’s trilogy, Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, and No Longer At Ease, refutes Western standards of literature and Western ideology, in this case Hegel’s universal and homogeneous state, by showing that both constitute aspects of the new colonialism. The discussion of the literature of a so-called developing nation – Achebe’s Nigeria – poses special problems and involves the Western reader in questions of politics and of critical standards. Achebe has precisely isolated the issue: ‘I suggested that the European critic of African literature must cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to his limited experience of the African world and purged of the superiority and arrogance which history so insidiously makes him heir to.’ That limited experience of the African world, which has historically provoked the reaction of superiority and arrogance, causes the Western reader to be struck by the strangeness of the world in African literature, a strangeness not only on a realistic level but more significantly in the cultural world view, or what Achebe calls the metaphysical landscape (p. 50). This of course involves the political and ideological considerations which are part of that landscape. The roles of the writer and critic are extremely complicated by the circumstances of an historical accident: the colonization and recent independence of African states. Political and ideological questions are particularly complex for the political thinker and imaginative writer in an independent African state. They are also impossible for Chinua Achebe to ignore.

Achebe is very frank about the purposes of his writing. His anger at white imperialist power is implicit in the three novels discussed here
which depict the historical process of cultural confrontation and domi-
nation, and explicit in his poetry and essays. He complains about critics
who lay ‘claim to a deeper knowledge and a more reliable appraisal of
Africa than the educated African writer has shown himself capable of’
(p. 5). His own role as artist is to educate his people, teach their his-
tory, and awaken cultural nationalism: ‘I would be quite satisfied if my
novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my
readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one night
of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf de-
levered them’ (p. 45). It is very easy, however, to move from necessary
education to propaganda and parochialism thereby failing the universal-
ity test, another political issue which Achebe indicts: ‘I should like to
see the word universal banned altogether from discussions of African lit-
erature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the
narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe...’ (p. 9). Not surprisingly,
in Achebe’s words we hear an echo of Fanon’s earlier statement.

Achebe interrogates the neutrality of Western and universal critical
methodology and standards of literature. He also studies the bitter and
ambiguous experience of colonialism and the accelerated change which
has occurred in African nations, criticizing imperialism primarily for re-
ducing an integrated and functioning community to chaos. The facts of
history determined that his people would live out this peculiar tragedy
of colonization, which is very close to the modernist sense of the ab-
surd. He shows that the Africans had to succumb totally to the imper-
ialist power or be destroyed, while the brave like Okonkwo in Things
Fall Apart destroy themselves; the struggle to retain a system of values
and an awareness of the past is a precarious enterprise on both the cul-
tural and personal levels.

Each of Achebe’s novels presents a personal and cultural tragedy, but
not according to the Aristotelian definition. As Bruce F. MacDonald ex-
plains it, the intrusion of the European into the African world made the
basis of tragedy unworkable: because of the conflicting sets of values
no transgression against either can be seen clearly as the cause of an
individual’s fall. Rather than catharsis, a cleansing of the emotions
through the re-establishment of moral order, a vague uneasiness and
dissatisfaction remain after each novel:10 the time is out of joint for the
protagonists whose values no longer have authority within their society.
The fact that Achebe presents both sides of the colonial situation in bal-
anced fashion guarantees a continued tension. He does not choose be-
tween the two sets of values – neither order is adopted as the right one
– and the potential remains for more tragedies after Okonkwo, Ezeulu,
and Obi. Achebe proposes an alternative definition which is particularly
apt in the context of colonialism: real tragedy is one that goes on
These tragedies represent a humanist concern and in the context of the historical confrontation and the phenomenon of imperial rule, a nationalist theme as well. The novels avoid the charge of propaganda and are highly valued according to ‘universal’ or Western standards. At the same time they also fulfil very powerfully Achebe’s political purposes: in a sense he plays it both ways and wins.

*Things Fall Apart* details the first and crucial step in the process of cultural disintegration in the traditional Igbo society. The process is begun by the arrival of the white colonizers, who have ‘put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart’. Achebe shows through his protagonist just how the touch of that knife is able to bring the whole world tumbling down. Okonkwo is a respected leader among his people and oriented to achievement, partly to compensate for his father’s failure to live up to the clan’s standards of material success, which required his son to provide for the family, and his own unclean death and burial in the Evil Forest. Okonkwo is afraid to be like his father Unoka because he does not want to be thought weak or cowardly, and does not understand the contribution his father has made to the oral culture:

He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka’s band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. (p. 2)

Unoka is a failure in material terms, but not if his stature is measured on a scale one might think is Achebe’s own – ensuring the survival of the culture by recording deeds of past greatness and lessons for continued living.

Unoka’s failure to achieve material success is partly attributed to his bad *chi* (p. 13). Okonkwo’s success is likewise attributed partially to his *chi*, who agreed when Okonkwo said yes very strongly (p. 19). The notion of the personal god points up the ambivalence of this ethical system: a man controls his own fate, but only as far as his *chi* allows and agrees. Paralleling this ambivalence are the clan laws, which maintain a balance between personal initiative and fate, between individual freedom and responsibility to the clan. The collected wisdom of the clan is expressed in proverbs which show the flexibility of the system, but the existing laws must be inflexibly enforced because the survival of the clan depends on them. The laws are both pragmatic and sacred: a crime against the law is a sin against the clan, the earth, and the past, and re-
quires atonement. Okonkwo lives up to his village’s reputation (land of the brave) and obeys the laws of piety – in Igbo society the fulfilment of religious obligations, and respect for parents, homeland, and the elders who represent dead ancestors – which in turn sustain the whole social order of the tribe. Okonkwo is defined according to his social identity; without it, there is no spiritual meaning to his existence.

The questions that are raised for Okonkwo, the clan, and Achebe when Okonkwo’s gun explodes and a clansman is killed, requiring Okonkwo’s exile, are the questions that prompt Okonkwo’s first son’s conversion to the white missionaries’ religion. Okonkwo is horrified by his son’s act, partially for the dishonour it brings on him personally and partially for what it represents: he foresees the threat of annihilation for the whole clan if the worship of the ancestors is abandoned. This would render the universe meaningless and Okonkwo’s life unlivable – which is, of course, precisely what happens in the course of the novel. Okonkwo murders one of the white missionaries’ messengers, but the clan will not support his act. In a world which will not recognize the values it has taught him, Okonkwo is a tragic anachronism. He ends by committing an abominable act – suicide – which ensures that like his father, he will be buried in the Evil Forest and in all ways outside of the values the clan understands. The white commissioner’s response is to make of Okonkwo’s suicide ‘a reasonable paragraph’ in a projected study of the colonial process, The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger (p. 148).

There is no return to an order of morality at the end of the novel, only to an order of power. No solution speaks to reason or justice; the question of justice remains unresolved here, as it does in the other novels. Neither is there a sense of relief that would accompany a return to order, nor can a part of Okonkwo’s personality be designated as the cause of these events:13 the historical fact of white imperialism shortcircuits these responses. In the conflict between systems of values power wins, and with a winner there must be a loser. Imperialism in Things Fall Apart – bringing natives into the modern world, saving their souls, exploiting their resources – transformed an integrated, cohesive community into anarchy. This is surely the working out of some kind of tragedy, but not Aristotle’s. Because neither set of values is dominant in Achebe’s novel, no act against either is the cause of Okonkwo’s fall. His betrayal of the clan makes his death doubly ironic, as it comes from his attempt to assert moral responsibility where the basis of responsible action has been destroyed, and from his perception of the helplessness in which the forces of history have trapped his people. Moral action and insight lead to hopelessness and a pathetic, useless end,14 a real tragedy according to Achebe’s definition. The clan and the
hero are destroyed by a shift of power, not by moral tension;\textsuperscript{15} Okonkwo's end is absurdly inevitable.

The action of \textit{Arrow of God} follows \textit{Things Fall Apart}, but the uneasy co-existence of the white colonial power and the traditional tribal society is intensified by Achebe's concentration on the priest and the question of religious meaning. \textit{Arrow of God} is the central novel in Achebe's work as it describes the relationship between religion and the social order. The loss of spiritual bearings causes the collapse of both the individual and the social order. As in \textit{Things Fall Apart}, there is no return to a moral order at the death of the hero, no sense of justice or tragic inevitability. Another stronger power takes over and claims converts and yams; the people abandon their customs; Ezeulu is alienated from his people and his god.

The issue is also one of power: Ezeulu comes into conflict with his god and his people over power. He is accused of wanting ""to be king, priest, diviner, all"".\textsuperscript{16} His power is refuted when the son he sends into the white man's world to help his clan adjust to the threat of the colonizer is lost to him. The world has been turned upside down by the white man (p. 16), and Ezeulu's actions have far different results than he had anticipated. The clan laws cannot accommodate the change in the world for which there are no precedents. Neither is there hope of escape from the white colonizers and a return to normalcy: ""I can tell you that there is no escape from the white man. He has come. When Suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool. The white man is like that"" (p. 84). Ezeulu does not dispute the justice of the white man's position, which is of course patently unjust, but tries to find a way for himself and his clan to live with it. Eventually he is pulled between the old order and the new circumstances of the village until his own and his god's credibility is destroyed. At best Ezeulu is attempting to force the village back to unquestioning belief in the god and the god's priest. At worst he is indulging his own ambition. Achebe allows the ambivalence to remain, and does not in the end say whether Ezeulu convinces himself or is ordered by Ulu not to eat the yams of the moons which passed while he was in the whites' prison. He delays the New Yam Feast and threatens the harvest, not only breaking the bond between faith and function, but running counter to the consensus of his people. The worship of Ulu is abandoned and the white missionaries benefit: 'Thereafter any yam harvested in his fields was harvested in the name of the son' (p. 230).

Achebe does not resolve the ambiguities which provide the basis of faith and belief. Ezeulu has to find his position in a universe which suddenly resists explanation, and he is cruelly disappointed. His col-
lapse is due to the tension in both maintaining two worlds and attempting to reconcile their conflicting demands: ‘Perhaps it was the constant, futile throbbing of these thoughts that finally left a crack in Ezeulu’s mind. Or perhaps his implacable assailant having stood over him for a little while stepped on him as on an insect and crushed him under the heel in the dust’ (p. 229). Ezeulu is tragic according to the traditional faith, and laughable in the eyes of those who have changed their allegiance. He is negligible in the eyes of the imperial power which is responsible for the crisis which destroys him.

No Longer At Ease, the third novel in the chronology, finishes the examination of the process of colonization as the Westernized African protagonist – a ‘been-to’ – lives out the definition of modern tragedy he provides near the beginning of his story:

‘I remember an old man in my village, a Christian convert, who suffered one calamity after another. He said life was like a bowl of wormwood which one sips a little at a time world without end. He understood the nature of tragedy... Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot...’ (pp. 43-4)

Obi loses his determination to reform his country on his return from England as he does not know how or where to start, and he eventually succumbs to the system of corruption to which he was so opposed. His conflict, similar to Okonkwo’s in Things Fall Apart and Ezeulu’s in Arrow of God, is with his dual cultures and dual value systems; Achebe underlines that sense of duality with his quotations from Western poetry. At the beginning of Things Fall Apart at least, the individual’s first obligation was not a question: Okonkwo knows his greatest good comes with the greatest good of the village. Obi, on the other hand, is not so willing to share the good fortune of his civil service job with his clansmen because he is not willing to accept the tribe’s claims on him. Nor do his clansmen understand how his attempt to be successful in the new life puts him in direct conflict with their expectations. Obi’s lack of any system of value, and of religion – either the ancient beliefs of his ancestors which once gave meaning to the empty rituals his clansmen now perform, or the Christianity of the convert whose story Achebe does not tell – make him vulnerable in both societies. Obi is actually between cosmologies, unattached, and at ease in neither. Achebe describes with humour and understanding the precarious game of balancing that the clansmen must now perform to keep their community of defectors and loyalists stable: “Bless this kola nut so that when we eat it it will be good in our body in the name of Jesu Kristi. As it was in the beginning it will be at the end. Amen.” Everyone replied Amen and cheered old
Odogwu on his performance' (p. 55). Obi does not participate in either the old or the new dispensation, and accordingly does not belong to the community which is struggling to maintain itself. He is eventually left to sip wormwood in an untidy spot as he presaged early in the novel. Clearly Okonkwo's solution would not be appropriate here, but it is difficult to see what would be. Death would be a release, but not a tragedy. As in the earlier novels, the protagonist is confronted with two orders of morality, neither of which is restored in the end with any sense of moral justice. Nor is there hope that Obi's or Okonkwo's or Ezeulu's tragedy will change the process in which their culture is caught.

The discussion of relative standards of literary excellence is off the point in this context, in which the diminishment of all human life is absurd and immoral. The white colonizer shares that diminishment - the colonial system was not adequate for him either:

... [Green] loved Africa, but only Africa of a kind: the Africa of Charles, the messenger, the Africa of his gardenboy and steward boy. He must have come originally with an ideal... But when he arrived, Africa played him false. Where was his beloved bush full of human sacrifice? There was St George horse and caparisoned, but where was the dragon? (p. 103)

In these terms, all literature is political if morally committed. If the price of becoming 'universal' and politically neutral is forgetting his past and his future, Achebe will not pay:

Take care
then, mother's son, lest you become
a dancer disinherited in mid-dance
hanging a lame foot in air like the hen
in a strange unfamiliar compound. Pray
protect this patrimony to which
you must return when the song
is finished and the dancers disperse;
remember also your children
for they in their time will want
a place for their feet when
they come of age and the dance
of the future is born
for them.17

White imperialism forced Nigerian society, and continues to force other third world societies, from a so-called primitive culture into the modern world. In Achebe's trilogy this is done in the space of three generations - an acceleration of history. Achebe demonstrates his belief that the movement into the universal and homogeneous state is not a
natural historical maturation for Okonkwo and his people, but a tearing leap which puts enormous strain on both community and individual. He questions the values of the modernity into which his people have been thrown: power, force, and violence make winners and losers, while issues of morality and justice are not raised. The conflicts and individual tragedies caused by progress toward the universal and homogeneous state are obvious. The problem with that state is that it is defined according to white western capitalist definitions. The division into separate worlds remains: 'we' continue to compel 'them' into the best of our world. 'We' remain the colonizers; 'they', the colonized, are denied the right of self-determination.

Achebe's novels show the damage that the imperial power does to its own and to the colonized people. As Coetzee puts it:

[Our alienation from the cycles of nature] is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.¹⁸

That compulsion to prolong the era of empire puts enormous pressure on the two groups, the powerful and the powerless. And since the creation by empire of the time of history, we have lived in time as history, making our own values and meaning while believing in our right not to have our freedom limited. But the colonial situation, of course, drastically limits the freedom of both parties and forces them to make choices which they would not otherwise make: the white Commissioner is pathetic in his strictly professional anthropological interest, and Green is similarly so looking for dragons – or windmills – to charge.

Unfortunately the losers in the colonial situation, both colonizers and colonized, cannot live 'outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects'.¹⁹ They must struggle on with the old and now meaningless story, locked into a historical process which continues to be propelled by its own momentum. Whether the power is imperialism, sexism, racism, or technology, historical time seems to have declared that it is power's turn to win. The individual cases – in Achebe's terms imperialists and natives – are all losers. Hegel's universal and homogeneous state is a variation on the process of colonization that continues to be played out in history. That process ultimately ensures that there are indeed no masters or slaves, simply individuals whose victimization differs in degree. Colonialism denies human rights to human beings whom it has subdued by violence and keeps in a state of misery and ignorance by force. The colonizer, by denying the
humanity of the colonized, is dehumanized.20 The end of history would seem to be tyranny and catastrophe, hardly the utopian ‘fact of being a recognized citizen of a universal and homogeneous State ... of a classless society comprising the whole of humanity’.21 Empire does not allow the possibility of ‘fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages’.22

NOTES

3. Grant holds that the universal and homogeneous state is tyranny, perhaps the most complete tyranny imaginable, and opposes the ideology and non-human nature. With only relative standards by which to judge good, evil, or justice, there are no limits to our actions: no appeal to the good will persuade us to limit our freedom to make – or unmake – the world as we choose. See Lament for a Nation (1965); Time As History (1969); Technology and Empire (1969).
6. Ibid., p. 170.
15. Ibid., p. 59.
Chinua Achebe and the Possibility of Modern Tragedy

It is often said that the conditions for the creation of tragedy in art do not exist in the twentieth century. Modern man has lost a universal acquiescence in the existence of God. We all aspire to be materially prosperous members of a small nuclear family, neglecting or even unaware of our extended family. Modern government and taxation encourages self-interest rather than a sense of community. The lines which Calphurnia, Caesar’s wife, speaks on the morning of the fatal Ides of March - ‘When beggars die there are no comets seen;/ The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes’ - reverberate less persuasively in an era of republicanism. It was not the heavens which blazed forth the death of President Kennedy or the fall of Nikolai Ceausescu but the television cameras and the newspapers. Can tragedy possibly exist in a world where the innermost sexual secrets of our leaders are frequently made public knowledge or where atomic devastation and environmental pollution threaten the annihilation of our species?

I believe that modern tragedies are possible and that the writings of Chinua Achebe conform broadly to their traditional demands, whilst at the same time they help us to re-define for the modern world what we mean by the term ‘tragedy’. Although I shall argue my case from a reading of Achebe’s works themselves, I start by rejecting many of the assumptions I summarised in my opening remarks. I do this almost instinctively. A few months ago, for example, I sat in a crowded studio theatre in London watching a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company of Titus Andronicus. Over four hours in length it was among the most harrowing expositions of suffering and grief I have ever witnessed. The audience communally explored the darkest shores of their humanity. It was the sense of shared experience which made it so anguishing an occasion. In an age when so many of us cocoon ourselves in a private relationship with the television or video screen it is salutary to be reminded that great theatrical tragedies demand an interflow of feeling between members of an audience as well as between the audience and the cast of actors. I have long hoped that Achebe would turn his hand to drama since the moral view I shall ascribe to him in this talk, as well as his experience in creating lively dialogue, seem to equip
him for the tragic stage. I was encouraged two years ago when I inter­viewed him for South magazine that he expressed interest in the possi­bility.

The simplified view of the late twentieth century, which states that tragedy is no longer imaginable, points to the essentially domesticated and at times even suburbanised worlds of its main practitioners. Are not Ibsen, Hardy and James a hundred years ago, Arthur Miller, Graham Greene and Athol Fugard today, examples of writers who take potentially tragic themes and transmute them into works about problems and issues? More immediately, the argument goes, have not Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Günter Grass and Carlos Fuentes taken the grandest themes and trivialised them with fantasti­cation? I am not going to engage now with these examples but merely use them as reminders that they are often cited in order to demon­strate the unsustainability of the tragic form in twentieth-century literature. As Rushdie’s personal predicament today more clearly illustrates than any example I could take from a book, such a view is highly questionable. Ibsen, Hardy, James, Miller, Green, Rushdie, Márquez and Fuentes may individually have no worshipping concept of the divine – or, at best, as with Greene, a tormented and tentative one – but they all write about communities which struggle for it. Tragedy is about the struggle for knowledge and enlightenment, and I would argue that evidence of this struggle is present in a great deal of modern literature. As we enter the 1990s, perhaps the greatest clash of ideologies for more than a century lies just ahead of us, that between liberalism and materialism on the one hand and religion and doctrine on the other. It is hard to say that the conditions for tragedy are extinct when one reflects on the gulf which currently exists between these two world views.

Nor is it necessarily true to say that concern for self and an abnega­tion of interest in community values has become a fact of life. As a generalisation it was never globally true. No African, for example, needs to be told that his family relationships extend much wider than such relationships tend to do in Northern Europe or the United States. Community schemes are not devalued or even ridiculed by African govern­ments, as sometimes they are in the world of Margaret Thatcher or George Bush. Mankind’s inter-dependence is demonstrable still in many parts of the world. Even in the most materially advanced nations we are recognising that for decades we have been sowing the seeds of envi­ronmental destruction. In the last year or two politicians and writers have met on common ground in recognising that a tragedy to eclipse all tragedies could be born out of our blinkered self-regard if we do not take steps to prevent it by urgently protecting our surroundings.
My preamble, therefore, attempts to define the context for considering Achebe’s work. Is modern tragedy possible? My sense is that it is possible, and that Chinua Achebe is as good an example of how it can be fashioned as we can find in the English-speaking world. But, just as African literature has been a factor in forcing Eurocentric literary critics to cease assuming that there are universal aesthetic criteria applicable to all cultures, so does it require someone like Achebe to extend the Aristotelian concept of tragedy with which I was educated. Ibsen may fall short of true tragic stature because he cannot wholly relate his domestic world to the larger issues of society— he tells us what is wrong in society but not always what it ought to believe in—but Achebe articulates not only the destructive forces in the social systems he describes but also the positive values against which they can be measured.

The word ‘tragedy’ is much abused in modern parlance. We use it of an air crash, or of the death of a friend, or sometimes even of a missed train or a minor disappointment. ‘It was tragic. The bank had just closed when we got there.’ In its proper sense tragedy must entail the threefold inter-relationship of man, society and God. Whatever our personal understanding of these terms there can be few people who do not recognise that each individual has to accommodate himself or herself to a broader social context, and that underpinning that social system is a moral order which defers either to a specific deity or to an agreed set of guiding assumptions about right and wrong. In western tragedy the compass needle darts between the three aspects of the inter-relationship I describe, the individual, his society, and the gods, but eventually it usually settles on the individual. In Greek tragedy this was not so (Sophocles’ Oedipus for example) but we remember Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Hardy’s Mayor of Casterbridge first and foremost as individuals who try to determine their own destinies and who end up crushed by fate and presaging a changed social order. In African tragedy the focus is more evenly distributed. Indeed, some would say that the dominating factor in the relationship of man, society and God is the middle one of the three. I used to share this view and glibly say of African writing as a whole that it places much more emphasis on community values than it does on the individual, but a re-reading of Achebe’s books tells me that this is not so. Ezeulu, Okonkwo, Obi and Chris Oriko are fully conceived characters. But nevertheless the community has an equal status with the individual protagonists. The moral authority of the gods, meanwhile, weighs even-handedly upon both the people and their heroes. What I am proposing is that in Achebe’s work we find a balance of interests better sustained than in most European tragedy, from the Renaissance onwards. It would require a longer
exegesis than this to prove it, but I want to assert now that Achebe’s writing finds a way of re-balancing the tripartite partnership of individual, society and the divine which European obsession with the primacy of self has tilted too much in one direction.

Just over twenty years ago Achebe, like all Nigerian writers, was embroiled in the Civil War. In a paper he gave at Makerere University, Uganda, in August 1968 he spoke of the war as though it were a mirror of the larger issues with which the whole African continent was engaged.

The fact of war [he wrote] merely puts the matter in sharper focus. It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.¹

It is a measure of the gulf which has grown up between the literatures of Africa and Europe that it is now only too easy to substitute the word ‘European’ or certainly the word ‘British’ for the word ‘African’ in this sentence and by mildly adjusting the syntax end up with an unfortunate home truth. The European writer today, especially the novelist, only rarely engages with the big social and political issues of the contemporary world and thus frequently seems marginalised and ‘irrelevant’. Achebe has preached throughout his whole career the message of inter-action between the writer and his times but the Biafran war was a human tragedy on so large a scale that it made his statements at the time reverberate with more than academic or pedagogical force. The writer became the conscience of humanity, as Solzhenitsyn was simultaneously becoming in the Soviet Union.

In the poems which he wrote at the time of the Civil War, Achebe expressed the swift impersonality of war

It comes so quickly
The bird of death
from evil forests of Soviet technology

A man crossing the road
to greet a friend
is much too slow.
His friend cut in halves
has other worries now
than a friendly handshake
at noon.²

Any concept of tragedy of which I am aware entails the arbitrariness of fate. Oedipus meeting his father on the road to Thebes or Macbeth
the witches on the heath begin a road to destruction and self-knowledge which seems casual at the start but which can only be perceived as fatally intended when the consequent chain of events has been unravelled. The inter-connections of chance and fate are the stuff of tragedy. They run through Achebe's work. Okonkwo's gun explodes, kills Ezeulu's son, and so precipitates Okonkwo's banishment. In *Arrow of God* Captain Winterbottom's sudden illness enhances Ezeulu's reputation for magical propensities at exactly the moment when his authority is being questioned. The arbitrariness of dreams play their part in Achebe's world. One recalls Obi Okonkwo's mother:

'I dreamt a bad dream, a very bad dream one night. I was lying on a bed spread with white cloth and I felt something creepy against my skin. I looked down on the bed and found that a swarm of white termites had eaten it up, and the mat and the white cloth ... I did not tell anybody about that dream in the morning. I carried it in my heart wondering what it was. I took down my bible and read the portion for the day. It gave me some strength, but my heart was still not at rest. In the afternoon your father came in with a letter from Joseph to tell us that you were going to marry an osu. I saw the meaning of my death in that dream.'

The list of chance interventions goes on. In *A Man of the People*, for example, the narrator Odili writes, 'I don't know what put it into my head to go to Chief Nanga's inaugural campaign meeting.' It is on that occasion that Odili is recognised in the crowd and provoked into publicly condemning the corrupt politician, the prelude to his own personal nemesis. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, which has the most sophisticated narrative structure of any of Achebe's novels, we perceive the same events through two or three different pairs of eyes. An event which seems sudden and inexplicable to one narrator is explained by another. The novel demonstrates, however, the impossibility of any individual having an omniscient overview of human behaviour. Everything may in time have to be accounted for rationally, but it does not seem like that as our lives unfold.

It is for this reason that I have called this paper 'Chinua Achebe and the Possibility of Modern Tragedy'. Achebe demonstrates an essentially tragic view of human action whereby we cannot easily determine our own destiny or even understand the pattern of it, much as we may plan to do so. Like Oedipus, in either the Sophocles' version or in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, we can try to forestall our fate beyond our individual sphere of influence and knowledge but other agencies, human and divine, have other intentions for us, the purposes and outcome of which we shall probably never know. Beatrice Okoh, Achebe's most developed female character, a woman whose illuminating
self-knowledge suggests hope for humanity even in the most corrupt surroundings, has a glimpse of what I am trying to express when at the start of Chapter 7 of *Anthills of the Savannah* she describes her sense of how we can only see fragments of the history we are living.

For weeks and months [she writes] after I had definitely taken on the challenge of bringing together as many broken pieces of this tragic history as I could lay my hands on I still could not find a way to begin. Anything I tried to put down sounded wrong – either too abrupt, too indelicate or too obvious – to my middle ear. So I kept circling round and round.

Achebe is surely here describing his own experience of writing tragedy, as well as his understanding of how the partial view of destiny we all possess – what the Bible means when it speaks of looking through a glass darkly – is itself part of the tragic process which humanity is doomed to experience.

If it is a part of any definition of tragedy that fate should impose arbitrarily upon human action it is also clear in Achebe’s view that tragedy is about ignorance and about failures in self-knowledge. Hence his insistence, in essay after essay, that we must strive to know as much as possible about our circumstances, imperfect though that knowledge will always be. I see his famous remark in ‘The Novelist as Teacher’ – that ‘I would be quite satisfied if my novels ... did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them’ – as more than a clarion call to his African readers to remember their heritage but as an even larger statement about the perpetual urgency for human beings to attain maximum knowledge in their search for a way out of their tragic spiral.

Is such an exit to be found? This brings me to a further condition of tragedy, that we should feel the world is shifted by the process of the action and that some redemptive power for good has been revealed even if it does not triumph. I would argue that both conditions are met in Achebe’s work, but in the most qualified and humanist of ways. As Okonkwo swings from his tree, as Ezeulu retreats into madness, as Obi gets sucked into corruption and imprisonment, as the people fail to remove their corrupt leaders in *A Man of the People* and as Chris Oriko falls victim to a rapacious police sergeant, we may feel that there is not much prospect of a better future. I do not wish to sentimentalise Achebe’s bleak view of African political development by suggesting that he sees much prospect of a better society about to dawn at the close of his novels. On the contrary, the seeds of corrupt disintegration seem to be bearing fruit in all too fertile a way. The novels end not just with personal disaster for the protagonists – only Beatrice Okoh in *Anthills
of the Savannah is an exception – but with the passing of bribes, the hardening of colonial authority, or the imposition of military rule. There is no Fortinbras or Malcolm to start a cleansed social order, as there is at the end of Hamlet or Macbeth. Yet Fortinbras has shot his way into Elsinore and Malcolm only succeeded to the throne with the help of the traditional enemy to Scotland, the King of England. In no tragedy that I can think of is the new order unpolluted. What we do find in the greatest tragedies, in Achebe’s work among them, is evidence that human goodness, whilst it can be corrupted and brutalised, cannot be eradicated. No one could read one of Achebe’s major works without perceiving that there is a moral sense inherent in humanity, however obscured we allow it to become. The pragmatic fact is that we destroy it through avarice and political misgovernment. The more longterm and genuinely fatalistic hope is that eventually it must triumph.

For six years I was Director of the Africa Centre in London. Almost every day in my time there we presented writers, journalists, art historians and educationalists in a programme of commentary upon contemporary Africa. There were moments when a casual dropper-in would have had his worst prejudices about Africa confirmed. I recall the supporters of President Obote and ex-President Lule of Uganda nearly tearing the meeting hall apart as they presented their opposite views about their country. I recall Chinua Achebe himself, stoical and dignified as ever, being rounded upon by a young radical with the words ‘You have betrayed the revolution’, because he declined to give a neat socialist panacea for the problems of Africa. But overarching these particular memories of dissent and negativism, I recall the perpetual evidence of a continent in progress. We regularly complained at the Africa Centre that the world’s press neglected the achievements of African people, concentrating only on their wars, struggles and poverty – as though these in themselves did not have an heroic dimension. The successes of independence, often brought about despite the undermining economic pressures of the very nations who were most prone to criticise, were little noted in the western press but they were the stuff of our programme at the Centre. Time after time I found myself saying to people who were sceptical about our contention that there was another side to the Africa they read about in their newspapers or saw on their televisions, ‘Read Achebe.’ I did so with the utmost confidence that in his work they would find evidence of that other Africa we knew existed. This was an Africa politically tragic in much of its destiny to date, but culturally and humanly so rich that the underside of tragedy, which is self-knowledge and an eventual accession to a better future, was inevitable. ‘Read Achebe’ became my defence and my justification for everything we sought to say about Africa, for he was clear-eyed, realistic,
practical, fatalistic, and supremely confident in the eventual worth of humanity.

I have tried so far to describe Achebe's gifts as a tragedian by focusing on his depiction of human character, since he peoples his novels with so many rounded and interacting individuals. In ancient tragedy - whether it be Greek, Sanskrit or in the praises of Sundiata and Shaka - all human drama is enveloped in a cloak of impersonality. Men are the playthings of the gods, doomed to a cyclical re-enactment of folly and insignificance in the wake of divine justice and supremacy. Although I am from a modestly Christian family and would describe myself as a churchgoer, I was educated, like the majority of my generation in Britain and the United States, to believe that faith was slightly embarrassing, best left dormant and unexpressed. Everyone seemed to know that religious conviction was slowly dying and that the future lay with science and rationalism. It has come as a shock to western liberals to realise recently that this comfortable agnostic tenet was not universally shared. The Salman Rushdie case has dramatised the issue explosively and in terms specific to literature. Faith is on the march in all the great religions of the world - not just in Islam, but in Christianity, Hinduism, Shintoism and Judaism. I can not easily think of a recent western writer who has recognised this, though Rushdie might claim to do so. Achebe, like Elechi Amadi, in this respect no less relevant an example, has had no difficulty in encompassing the fluctuating relationships of men and gods. Some might assert that Achebe concerns himself with the divine only in those novels set comparatively far back in time, in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, in both of which the place of priests, rituals and retribution is explicit. But it is there too in a work as contemporary as *Anthills of the Savannah*. Here is Ikem Osodi composing his Hymn to the Sun:

'Undying Eye of God! You will not relent, we know it, from compassion for us. Relent then for your own sake; for that bulging eye of madness that may be blinded by soaring notes of an incinerated world. Single Eye of God, will you put yourself out merely that men may stumble in your darkness. Remember: Single Eye, one-wall-neighbour-to-Blindness, remember!

What has man become to you, Eye of God, that you should hurt yourself on his account? Has he grown to such god-like stature in your sight? Homeward-bound from your great hunt, the carcass of an elephant on your great head, do you now dally on the way to pick up a grasshopper between your toes?

Great Messenger of the Creator! Take care that the ashes of the world rising daily from this pyre may not prove enough when they descend again to silt up the canals of birth in the season of renewal.5

There are few modern novelists who would attempt this great prayer. It is only possible for Achebe to do so because he writes within a tradi-
tion of story-telling in which orality and text seem at times almost interfused. I have a theory, too tentative to be explored now, that tragedy can only really be created at times when the written word is still dependent on a central living oral tradition. Homer, Aeschylus and Sophocles; the authors of *The Mahabharata*; Shakespeare and Racine; Dostoevsky and conceivably Ibsen lived at such moments. Arthur Miller today does not live at the meeting place of oral and written cultures and so, in my view, does not produce true tragedy. Achebe does. And evidence for this exists in all his major works. Furthermore, it is a condition of true tragedy that ultimately the divine forces should act in their own and not entirely in mankind's interests. 'You will not relent, we know, from compassion for us,' Ikem writes in the passage just quoted. 'Relent then for your own sake.' Hence the unpredictability and apparent arbitrariness of the gods in all great tragedies. As Euripides expresses it,

Gods manifest themselves in many forms,
Bring many matters to surprising ends;
The things we thought would happen do not happen;
Things unexpected God makes possible.⁶

I have always advised people to read Achebe's principal work in the chronological order of the history they relate from 1890 to the present day. *Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, No Longer at Ease, A Man of the People, 'Girls at War', the war poems, and Anthills of the Savannah*, chronicle different phases in the development of modern Africa. Each work is wholly different in character from the others but together they legitimately can be seen as aspects of one gathering sequence of human imperfection. At the end of *The Trouble with Nigeria* Achebe writes a sentence that, with the substitution of one hundred years for twenty-five, could speak for the whole century he has covered in his fiction. 'I can see no rational answer to the chaotic jumble of tragic and tragi-comical problems we have unleashed on ourselves in the past twenty-five years' (*The Trouble with Nigeria*, p. 62). There may be no rational answer and hence no single pragmatism which will solve either the national crisis of Nigeria or the follies of the twentieth century, but there may be a fatalistic optimism possible if we can bring ourselves to recognise the power of human goodness. The thesis of *The Trouble with Nigeria* is, after all, that the example of great men like Gandhi may point a way to redemption. Local heroes such as Murtala Muhammed and Aminu Kano are on the same path. There is a way out of our tragic vortex but we need moral resolution to follow it. Great tragedies are about the subjugation of self-interest. The protagonist usually fails to show that ability and so falls, his power removed and his cause a mess.
I am conscious that my view of Achebe's work here has been a sombre one. I am of course aware of his humour and ebullience in much of what he writes. I have just quoted his sentence in The Trouble with Nigeria about 'the chaotic jumble of tragic and tragi-comical problems'. Comedy is not always the antithesis of tragedy, however. No tragedy is more ironic than Oedipus the King, no tragic hero wittier than Hamlet. Myshkin in Dostoevsky's The Idiot can be considered one of the great comic creations of nineteenth-century fiction, though he is indubitably tragic.

My contention, however, is that Achebe, this reasonable, compassionate and humane writer, has a fatalistic view of African history and of human behaviour which may even override his commonsense instinct for pragmatic courses of action. He does not believe that we can laugh our way out of misery. He does infer, however, that a renewal of moral integrity will help us on the way. The rest is in the lap of the gods.

NOTES

2. ‘Air Raid’, from Beware, Soul Brother.
3. No Longer at Ease, p. 135.
4. Anthills of the Savannah, p. 82.
5. ibid., pp. 30-31.
6. Alcestis, closing lines, translated by Philip Vellacott.

Editions of Chinua Achebe's books to which page references refer:

The Trouble with Nigeria (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1983).
For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika

In one sense then [there is] a travelling away from its old self towards a cosmopolitan, modern identity while in another sense [there is] a journeying back to regain a threatened past and selfhood. To coax from it such unparalleled inventiveness requires the archaic energy, the perspective and temperament of creation myths and symbolism.

Chinua Achebe

So important have ... stories been to mankind that they are not restricted to accounts of initial creation but will be found following human societies as they recreate themselves through vicissitudes of their history, validating their social organizations, their political systems, their moral attitudes and religious beliefs, even their prejudices. At ... critical moments new versions of old stories or entirely fresh ones tend to be brought into being to mediate the changes and sometimes to consecrate opportunistic defections into more honourable rites of passage.

Chinua Achebe

ANTINOMIES OF POST-COLONIALITY

To write a critical tribute to any writer at the present time calls for a special kind of political criticism. This is perhaps even more daunting when that writer happens to be Chinua Achebe who, beyond the fact of his being one of contemporary literature's most widely read and internationally prominent authors, has always figured as a complex, ambiguous presence in the post-colonial politics of identity and ideological affiliation. Perhaps nothing better expresses this ambiguity than the fact that much as Achebe's works have been invoked as powerful, exemplary texts of nationalist contestation of colonialist myths and distortions of Africa and Africans, it is also the case that these texts have only been minimally concerned, at least at the thematic level, to depict or explore resistance to colonialism; rather, they have been particularly imbued with a melancholic sense of the falling apart of things with the
collapse of pre-colonial societies and cultures. Another distinct, but related expression of the ambiguous politics of Achebe's works pertains to his known identification with left-wing, anti-capitalist groups and intellectuals in his native Nigeria, and more broadly in Africa, at the same time that this identification has been fraught with problems and controversies. Another distinct, but related expression of the ambiguous politics of Achebe's works pertains to his known identification with left-wing, anti-capitalist groups and intellectuals in his native Nigeria, and more broadly in Africa, at the same time that this identification has been fraught with problems and controversies. Achebe is, in this sense, very much in the company of other post-colonial writers like Wole Soyinka, Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer and Carlos Fuentes whose left-identified politics sit very uneasily with the orthodox Left and its set revolutionary perspectives and objectives.

But this essay is not about 'literary fellow-travellers', a designation which always said as much about the Party's claims of privileged access to superior truths as it did about the writer's putative ambiguous, wavering political and moral affiliations. What I wish to explore in this short critical tribute is how a profoundly but subtly emancipatory politics figures in Achebe's work, especially his first novel, Things Fall Apart, as a sustained project of demythologization of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial myths of legitimation and delegitimation: legitimation of forces of reification and dehumanizing violence; delegitimation of oppositional constructions of community and ethical rationalism. Inevitably, this takes us to the over-determined space of post-coloniality. A few observations might serve both to illustrate this point and to contextualize its ramifications beyond Achebe's own work, the focus of this tribute.

Most of the recent books and essays in the field have argued persuasively that the post-colonial in literature and critical discourse essentially consists of the cultural representation of the destabilization of the fixities and bounded structures of the age of empire and colony under British and European world hegemony: the bounded colonial territory as an exclusive 'sphere of influence' of one metropolitan country under the regime of nationally administered capitalisms; the crystallized identity of the 'native' and the formation of subjectivities like the 'evolve' or 'assimile' within the generalized 'native' identity; the emergence of a nationalist anti-colonial challenge to foreign domination and external usurpation of sovereignty. If all this marks the world of coloniality, post-coloniality comes with the epoch in which hegemonic American (and later Japanese) multi-national, 'late' capitalism replaced the world domination of old-style European imperialism. This is the age that one writer has characterized as 'imperialism without colonies'. It is with respect to this dismantling of bounded enclaves and subjectivities that to be post-colonial is to be more than merely and adventitiously 'ex-colonial'.

Within this general pattern two distinct antinomic conceptions and articulations of post-coloniality have been forming, and are being in-
scribed as textual practices and discursive, rhetorical strategies. It is pertinent to our purposes in this essay to briefly indicate the broad outlines of these divergent, conflicting articulations of the post-colonial.

There is, first, the post-coloniality of what I would call normativity and proleptic designation in which the writer or critic speaks to, or for, or in the name of the post-independence nation-state, the regional or continental community, the pan-ethnic, racial or cultural agglomeration of homelands and diasporas. In this post-coloniality of the nation, of the regional community, or of a far-flung 'Black World', 'Arab World' or 'Latin America', one finds a Ngugi writing to and for a Kenya that is and the Kenya that is to come; one finds Mahfouz identifying himself as both an Egyptian writer and a voice from the Arab World and its literary traditions; one finds also Octavio Paz, in his appropriately titled book, One Earth, Four of Five Worlds, enunciating the dynamics of Latin American modernity by assailing what he identifies as 'anti-modern' currents in the culture of the South American regional community. If normativity in this conception of the post-colonial usually entails what Cabral has called 'return to the source', a reassertion or reinvention of traditions which colonialism, not without considerable success, had sought to destroy or devalue, there are also varying degrees of critical vigilance against the inscription of cultural norms and traditions as comforting but enervating myths of pure origins, and as uncontaminated matrices of the self.

This is the dominant, more pervasive literary and theoretical elaboration of post-coloniality. It is by no means a monolithic or homogeneous formation and this is perceptible if one compares the positions and perspectives of its most influential theorists and pundits like Fernandez Retamar of Cuba, Paik Nak-Chung of South Korea, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o of Kenya and Andre Brink of South Africa. This is also the tradition of post-coloniality within which Achebe has elaborated the powerful novelistic and essayistic project of demythologization which is the subject of this essay.

It is no easy task to take a measure of the other crystallized literary and theoretical formation of post-coloniality, a formation which, for want of a better term I shall call interstitial or liminal. The interstice or liminality here defines an ambivalent mode of self-fashioning of the writer or critic which is neither First World nor Third World, neither securely and smugly metropolitan, nor assertively and combatively Third Worldist. The very terms which express the orientation of this school of post-colonial self-representation are revealing: diasporic, exilic, hybrid, in-between, cosmopolitan. Not only does the writer, theorist or critic refuse to speak on behalf of, or primarily to, the developing world, but more crucially, he typically calls into question the com-
peting, polarized claims of centre and margin, metropole and periphery, Western and non-Western. It is perhaps on account of this dual movement that V.S. Naipaul does not belong in this post-coloniality of disavowal, even though he has made disavowals the abiding thematic centre of his work: the trajectory of this work bears the trace of a one-way path leading away from the island nation to ‘an enigma of arrival’ at the metropolitan suburbia.

Like the more dominant, more pervasive post-coloniality of reassertion and reinvention of identity and community of developing nations and their writers and critics, the post-coloniality of interstitiality and transnationality does not come as a monolith. This, neither in its literary expressions – as between its perhaps most paradigmatic figure, Salman Rushdie, and diverse other writers like Derek Walcott, J.M. Coetzee, and the late Dambudzo Marechera – nor in its theoretical, critical elaborations in such divergent texts as Trinh T. Minh-ha’s Woman, Native, Other,14 Homi Bhabha’s Nation and Narration,15 Gayatri Spivak’s The Post-colonial Critic,16 and Anthony Appiah’s essay ‘Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism’.17 For this reason, these conflicting, contradictory formations of post-colonial discourses and representations will not be explored here. What needs to be done is, I believe, to weave the salience of this categorical, antinomic divide of post-coloniality into the elaboration of the subject of this essay: Achebe’s demythologizing literary aesthetics. The salience of this divide can only be summatively presented here.

To my mind three essential points express the salience of this categorical antinomy. First, the writers and theorists of the second formation – cosmopolitan, hybrid, exilic, diasporic, interstitial post-coloniality – enjoy far greater visibility and acclaim in the academies, journals and media of the metropolitan First World countries than the post-coloniality of the more nationalistic, counter-hegemonic expression. This is due not only to the fact that most of the writers and theorists of the former are physically and institutionally located in the metropole, though this is indeed not without its own significance. Rather, the visibility and acclaim derive from a second salient point: the intersection of this post-coloniality with the most ‘advanced’, fashionable artistic and intellectual currents of Europe and America, especially post-modernism and High Theory. Thirdly, and this seems to me to be the most important issue, except for a few prominent cases which we shall briefly explore hereafter, these two formations of post-coloniality have had very little to say to each other that is productive. The burden of this critical tribute to Achebe is to argue that his work belongs to these few exemplary cases.
THE REPRESENTATION OF IMPERIALISM, THE IMPERIALISM OF REPRESENTATION

The general celebration of *Things Fall Apart* as a work of great realistic fiction which more or less inaugurated the novelistic exploration by African authors of pre-colonial and colonial Africa has often, quite appropriately, acknowledged the superb irony of the novel’s last page as a rhetorical trope, a narrative tactic of great power and cogency.\(^{18}\) This issue requires a closer, more nuanced scrutiny, with regard to some perspectives of contemporary critical theory and in relation to the subject of this critical tribute. For what is figured in this last page of *Things Fall Apart* in this short, narratological and rhetorical space, goes to the heart of the politics of representation as a central concern of post-colonial fiction and critical discourse.

The details can be quickly, summatively recalled. Obierika, leading the party of the colonial District Commissioner – a figure of great political authority in the colonial context – to the dangling body of Okonkwo who has hanged himself, asks the great man to have the corpse brought down by one of his men. Then we are told: ‘The District Commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs’ (p. 147). A dialogue then ensues in which the Commissioner, now become an inquiring cognitive subject, questions Okonkwo’s people about the customs and ritual practices which forbade them to touch Okonkwo’s body, thus requiring the assistance of strangers to do the simple, humane service. A few paragraphs later, the ‘student of primitive customs’ having received ‘data’ from his native informants, is transformed into a figure, not merely of political, administrative power, but also of *narrative, discursive, epistemic* authority, as the following ruminations from that much quoted, much admired final paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* reveal:

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.* (pp. 147-48)
Much critical commentary has been made on the ironic juxtaposition of the Commissioner’s projected ‘reasonable paragraph’ on the tragedy of Okonkwo with the entire narrative space of *Things Fall Apart* of which it is indeed a part: the last paragraph of a whole narrative sets itself up in an authoritarian fashion as the only significant detail in the narrative; far more tellingly, for the District Commissioner, the banished, excluded substantive narrative, as a version of the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized, simply doesn’t exist. In other words, already in 1958 when *Things Fall Apart* was first published, Achebe had in this short, condensed narratological moment of the text, prefigured the post-modern scepticism toward the *grands récits* of the transcendent cognitive (European) subject, the grand, totalizing meta-narratives of the bourgeois-imperial imagination of European culture, especially in its encounter with ‘native’ peoples and cultures.19 This is a point that Edward Said, among other contemporary critics and theorists, makes in relation to Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* which, according to him, works so effectively precisely because its aesthetics and politics . . . are imperialist; and that, by the time Conrad wrote, seemed an attitude that was inevitable and for which there could be no alternative. For if we cannot truly understand someone else’s experience and if, as a result, we must depend simply upon the assertive authority of the sort of power Kurtz wields in the jungle or that Marlow possesses as narrator, there is no use looking for non-imperialist alternatives in a system that has simply eliminated, made unthinkable, all other alternatives to it. The circularity of the whole thing is unassailable.20

Achebe’s famous, and must discussed (and much controverted) essay on Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* is thus only one further instance, one further elaboration of Achebe’s novelistic and essayistic engagement not only of the representation of empire and imperialism – in the light of images, distortions, myths and stereotypes of ‘native’ peoples and cultures – but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the imperialism of representation which, in this historic case, excludes, or simply ignores (alter)-native versions and constructions ‘from below’.21 This battle over representation has continued as a central problematic of post-colonial discourse, as we shall see later in the concluding section of this essay. Meanwhile, it is important to note here that part of this battle over representation involves the trench war of preferred versions: A V.S. Naipaul being more preferred than say a Mahasweta Devi as a ‘witness’ to the agony and contradictions of post-colonial India, or an Isak Dinesen being more beloved than an Ngugi wa Thiong’o on Africans in East Africa caught in the dilemmas and antinomies of the cultural representation of the colonial encounter.22
Achebe looms large then in post-colonial discourse on account of the quality, wit and intelligence of his engagement of this war over representation which pits the post-coloniality of the developing world and its writers, theorists and critics against residual metropolitan colonialist preferences and predilections. What is more important, however, is that this engagement goes much deeper, for his purview has also taken into account the same totalizing, exclusionary and reifying representational logic within the cultural and signifying ensembles of the colonized: Okonkwo, in the multiple ironic articulations of the narrative which constructs him, also prefigures the ‘assertive sovereign inclusiveness’ which Said identifies in Marlowe and Conrad, and which we find so brilliantly encoded in the District Commissioner’s projected ‘reasonable paragraph’ on our tragic protagonist. This is a perspective, a narratological ‘alienation effect’ which we obtain through Obierika, Okonkwo’s great friend and alter ego.

HISTORY, DOXA, PARADOX(A), DIALECTIC

Concerning Obierika the character and his author, Chinua Achebe, the following excerpt from a long interview I once had with the author is an appropriate frame for the reflections in this critical tribute on the post-colonial politics of identity and (self)-representation:

Jeyifo: If I may ask a question which I’ve always wanted to ask you but which is . . . I know it’s always a little too bold to see a writer in terms of his fictional characters . . . However, I have always wanted to ask if there is something of Achebe in Obierika in Things Fall Apart?

Achebe: Yes, that is very bold indeed! Well, the answer is yes, in the sense that at the crucial moment when things are happening, he represents this other alternative. This is a society in Things Fall Apart that believes in strength and manliness and the masculine ideals. Okonkwo accepts them in a rather literal sense . . . [and] the culture ‘betrays’ him. He is ‘betrayed’ because he’s doing exactly what the culture preaches. But you see, the culture is devious and flexible, because if it wasn’t it wouldn’t survive. The culture says you must be strong, you must be this and that, but when the moment comes for absolute strength the culture says, no, hold it! The culture has to be ambivalent, so it immediately raises the virtues of the women, of love, of tenderness . . . and holds up abominations: You cannot do this, even though the cultural norms say you must do it . . . Obierika is therefore more subtle and more in tune with the danger, the impending betrayal by the culture, and he’s not likely to be crushed because he holds something in reserve.
It is widely recognised that in Achebe’s texts names and naming convey layers of cultural codes and information. We need to stress the analytic extensions of this principle, for it is within this that the name Obierika achieves its tremendous resonance. Two sets of terms are linked in the name: ‘Obi’, heart, soul or mind; and ‘rika’, great, fulsome, capacious. There is also a sense in which ‘obi’, with a proper tonal inflection, is the hut, or the homestead, in its more social, affective connotation. From these aspects of the etymology of the name we may project several linked or associative meanings: great-heartedness, generosity of spirit; capacity for fellow-feeling; the mind/soul/heart of an individual, a group, a people is infinite in its potentialities. It should be added that the name does imply in all of these possible significations, an ethical, rationalist cast of mind or disposition: ‘greatness’ here is not an ethically neutral capaciousness, even if it does not exclude an imaginative or reflective awareness of the ‘banality of evil’, in Hannah Arendt’s famous words.

Even the most cursory textual scrutiny of Things Fall Apart would reveal that Obierika ‘lives his name’, so to speak; in other words, the significations encoded in the name inhabit the character’s experience of intersubjective sociality. He is astute in discerning the small, barely tangible but socially cementing velleities of personality and character; he is deeply humane and sensitive; he is imbued with a sagacious but unflaunted moral imagination. He is also of a generous, tolerant disposition and where his friend is a man of few or no words, much of the information about, and reflection on the realities and consequences of the invading colonial capitalism is given by Obierika. And he is not only Okonkwo’s ‘greatest friend’, his is that loyalty in friendship that is deeply informed by a balanced sense of the friend’s strengths, weaknesses and even neurotic susceptibilities.

While a moral and psychological portrait would find abundant textual details to cast Obierika as his friend’s alter ego, the upshot of our interest here points away from such moralism and psychologism. For the crucial factor here is that Obierika is a device in the text of Things Fall Apart; he is a nexus of significations which allows us considerable purchase on a perception of culture as a necessary but expendable medium through which identity is negotiated between the self and others. It is this heuristic structure which subtends the textually pervasive inscription of both characters as fundamentally discrepant cultural avatars: Okonkwo as the culture hero who is doomed because of his rigid, superficial understanding – really misrecognition – of his culture; Obierika as a sceptical, dissenting and prescient observer of the culture’s encounter with the self and the colonizing Other. The problem with most critical commentaries on these aspects of Things Fall Apart is
to have almost completely missed out on the demythologization of identity and culture within the pre-colonial social order while fastening one-sidedly on the novel’s ironic deflations of the binarisms and polarities of the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized.

Thus, it is Obierika who registers the falling apart of things; it is Obierika who records the collapse of the most vital identity-forming connections of the culture: kinship, community, ritual and ceremonial institutions. And it is significant that Obierika has to insist on this tragic insight – tragic because he is utterly helpless before its historic, and not merely metaphysical inevitability – against the wilful refusal of Okonkwo to see the cracks in the culture’s fortifications:

‘Perhaps I have been away too long,’ Okonkwo said, almost to himself. ‘But I cannot understand these things you tell me. What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?’

‘Have you not heard how the white man wiped out Abame?’ asked Obierika.

‘I have heard,’ said Okonkwo. ‘But I have also heard that Abame people were weak and foolish. Why did they not fight back? Had they no guns and machetes? We would be cowards to compare ourselves with the men of Abame. Their fathers had never dared to stand before our ancestors. We must fight these men and drive them from the land.’

‘It is already too late,’ said Obierika sadly. ‘Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame.’ He paused for a long time and then said: ‘I told you on my last visit to Mbanta how they hanged Aneto.’

‘What has happened to that piece of land in dispute?’ asked Okonkwo.

‘The white man’s court has decided that it should belong to Nnama’s family, who had given much money to the white man’s messengers and interpreter.’

‘Does the white man understand our custom about land?’

‘How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.’ (pp. 124-25)

But Obierika’s melancholy bears a janus face: he registers the myths and distortions of the colonizer about the ‘natives’ which both justify and inscribe the violent usurpation that is the regime of colonialism; at the same time his discomfited gaze had taken in the negating, destructive myths and hypostatizations in the central, identity-giving
institutions and practices of his culture. It is indeed not over-extending the significations embedded in the text to read in Obierika a divided, alienated subjectivity long before the avalanche of colonizing reifications of the 'native' culture arrives on the scene and initiates a new epoch. 'If the Oracle said that my son should be killed,' Obierika had spat out his condemnation of Okonkwo's participation in the killing of the youth, Ikemefuna, 'I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it.' This split is more poignantly and powerfully rendered when Obierika had to, by the force of cultural compulsion, enact, with others, the despoliation of his friend's homestead:

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezendu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman.

Obierika was a man who thought about these things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his obi and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led to greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? (p. 87)

It is important to recognize that Obierika's scepticism toward his culture achieves its tremendous force precisely because he bears deep, positive currents of values, predispositions, identity from the very same culture. A case in point is his notion of abomination which astutely plays upon, and somewhat secularizes its normative, sacral connotations. Another affecting instantiation of this point comes across in the following exchange in which the discussion turns on customary prohibitions and exclusions of the titled 'ozo' holders from some mundane activities of the work-a-day world:

'Sometimes, I wish I had not taken the ozo title,' said Obierika. 'It wounds my heart to see these young men killing palm trees in the name of tapping.'

'It is so indeed,' Okonkwo agreed. 'But the law of the land must be obeyed.'

'I don't know how we got that law,' said Obierika. 'In many clans a man of title is not forbidden to climb the palm tree. Here we say he cannot climb the tall tree but he can tap the short ones standing on the ground. It is like Dimaragana, who would not lend his knife for cutting dogmeat because the dog was taboo to him, but offered to use his teeth.' (p. 48)
In the very idiom of his critical disquisitions on his culture, Obierika draws from the culture’s common stock of imagery, rhetoric and humour.

There is thus at work in the mesh of significations in the construction of Obierika as a complex heuristic device a dialectic of, on the one hand, cultural affirmation and on the other hand cultural critique and deflation. One pole, the pole of affirmation, may be said to coalesce around *doxa*: belief, opinion, or custom perceived in terms of elementary structures of ordered meanings, and centred, cohering values. *Things Fall Apart* may be regarded in this respect as a vast doxological compendium of Igbo culture before the advent of colonialism. Indeed, it has been so critically examined by several scholars. At the opposite pole from *doxa* we have of course the pole of para-*doxa* (a), or irony and dialectic. This is the pole of cultural demystification of which *Things Fall Apart*, like Achebe’s third novel, *Arrow of God*, is also an exemplary textual articulation. If *Things Fall Apart* bears a special significance for post-colonial discourse it is to the extent that these two contradictory, dialectic poles of cultural affirmation and cultural demystification find balanced textual inscription in the novel. For one pole is freighted with the discourse of the post-coloniality of nationalist assertion against colonial and imperial cultural subjugation, displacement or depersonalization; the other pole is infused with the discourse of the critique of nationalism such as we find, in different but apposite demythologizing registers, in Cabral’s notion of a necessarily critical ‘return to the source’, or Fanon’s famous exhortations on the ‘pitfalls of national consciousness’.

In moving to the concluding sections of this essay, I would like to briefly explore the ideological assumptions and the narrative machinery through, and by which Achebe is able to consummate this double articulation.

To Leopold von Ranke is credited an expression which, I believe, superbly captures the spirit of Achebe’s narrativisation of nationalist self-assertion in *Things Fall Apart*: all ages are equally immediate to God. This bears a striking homology to a Yoruba proverbial expression: ‘Kosi ede t’olorun Ko gbo’—there is no language or tongue that is unintelligible to God. Both expressions seem to affirm the underlying premise of cultural relativism: each age or epoch, each culture or society is an integrated, systematic, coherent whole or totality which obeys its own laws and is comprehensible in terms of its own reference points, no matter how imperfect these may be. This conception in turn accords, in almost all respects, with the following statement of intent by Achebe relatively early in his novelistic and essayistic career: ‘I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past— with all its imperfections— was
not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.  

Given the ideological and emotional charge of this statement of intent by Achebe, it is remarkable that it has not led to consummated grand narratives of emancipation, or for that matter, meta-narratives of retrieval of an absolutely originary past. It is also remarkable that this has not been adequately critically examined, given all the critical attention which Achebe has attracted to his work as a sustained response to the colonialist master narratives of European writers like Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, Graham Greene and Joyce Cary. In other words, why hasn't Achebe written a master narrative like *Heart of Darkness* or *A Passage to India*?

The answer to this question seems to be that since Achebe had, perforce, to write reactive counter-narratives to these meta-narratives of Western representations of the colonizing Self and the colonized Other, he was thus structurally precluded from producing a master-narrative. But this seems too mechanistic an expression of something more complexly inscribed in the interstices of history, ideology and artistic discourse. One answer surely lies in the historic fact that the post-colonial writer is axiomatically and imaginatively excluded from the kind of intuitive, subjective access to the ideology of imperialism which makes the production of colonialist master-narratives possible.

Speculations such as these somewhat occlude the specificity of Achebe's narrative art and, more pertinently, the fact that this narrative art involves a representational economy located at a juncture between the totalizing meta-narratives we now identify with a hegemonising imperialism of representation and the counter-narratives and fictions of de-totalizing, fragmenting discourses and inscriptions from the margins and from below. Thus the 'main' narrative logic of the text is linear, omniscient, centred around Okonkwo's 'inevitable' tragic destiny. For this, Achebe adopted the 'objectivity' and 'impersonality' which many scholars have remarked as the 'realistic' provenance of *Things Fall Apart*. Some of the expressions of this 'objectivity' are quite exceptional in the tradition of African post-colonial fiction of the colonial past, both in their conception and execution. For instance, it is hard to find in this fictional tradition the kind of ethnographic self-distancing which allows Achebe's authorial voice such articulations as: 'Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them' (p. 7). Or: ‘In Umuofia’s latest war he [Okonkwo] was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head, and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank the palm wine from his first human head’ (p. 8). Moreover, this omniscient narrative logic presents both the pre-colonial social order
and the new colonial presence, at least in their respective self-representations, as contending totalities. We are told that the ‘new religion and government and trading stores’ constituted an integral formation in the evolving consciousness of the historic encounter; and the representation of the pre-colonial order is itself all-encompassingly systemic: the democratic village assemblies and ritual-judicial institutions as political-administrative units; the inscription of conversational arts and a vast stock of proverbs, aphorisms, myths, legends, ceremonies as embodiment of an elaborate superstructural symbolic realm; farming, trading, warfare, recreation and the separate, parallel but hierarchically bounded orders of men’s and women’s lives and activities as the content of a mundane but primary sociality. Inside these totalities the logic of tragedy and ‘inevitability’ works itself out, propelled by the polarised agency of an Okonkwo among the colonized and among the colonizers by the manichean-minded missionary, Mr Smith who ‘saw things as black and white’ (p. 130).

Outside this omniscient totalizing meta-narrative, however, are the counter-narratives ‘from below’, the stories within stories, the fragments, episodic fictions, motifs and tropes which reveal a far more complex, dynamic, ambiguous and paradoxical world than that of the closed circuit of the ‘main’ narrative line, a world which in particular calls into question Okonkwo’s rigid, authoritarian and masculinist identity. As I have argued elsewhere, the most central of these stories, motifs and tropes collectively inscribe a topos within the text of Things Fall Apart which explores the fundamentally gendered nature of Okonkwo’s world (and not merely his personality or subjectivity, as most critics have tended to see it). In this topos, there are ‘men’s stories’ and ‘women’s stories’, ‘male’ crops and ‘female’ crops, ‘male’ and ‘female’ crimes and abominations, as well as, more centrally, ‘male’ and ‘female’ deities. It is indeed significant that the ‘female’ deity Ani (by the way, ‘the most important deity in the lives’ of Okonkwo’s people) has a male priest, Ezeani, while the ‘male’ deity of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has a female priestess, Chielo. But this is a point beyond Okonkwo’s ken: he completely represses the ‘female’ principle and values in himself and his tragedy in fact largely derives from his remarkable success in this venture.

One cannot read the countless fragmentary stories around ‘minor’ characters like Unoka, Chielo, Ogbuefi Nbulue and his wife Ozoemena, Ikemefuna and Nwoye, Ekwefi and Ezinma, Okonkwo’s uncle Uchendu, Akunna, Obiako and many others, without consciously or unconsciously feeling oneself in the presence of a narrative and discursive logic which admits of illogic and which makes everything negotiable, including the most sacrosanct values of the culture. Obiako’s ‘story’ which confounds
one of the supposedly most inviolable ritual and psychological injunctions of the culture – deference to the cult of the ancestors – is particularly trenchant in the way in which it as much questions Okonkwo’s reified conception of the culture and the ‘inevitability’ of his fate:

‘Obiako has always been a strange one,’ said Nwakibie. ‘I have heard that many years ago, when his father had not been dead very long, he had gone to consult the Oracle. The Oracle said to him, ‘Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him.’ Do you know what he told the Oracle? He said, “Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive.”’ Everybody laughed heartily except Okonkwo, who laughed uneasily because, as the saying goes, an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb. Okonkwo remembered his own father. (p. 15)

This story of Obiako, like many of the other fragmentary stories within the main linear, totalizing narrative of Okonkwo’s tragedy and historic colonial ‘pacification’, has an emblematic significance within the double, fractured narrative scheme of the novel. The main totalizing narrative as it were deals with History capitalized, with the ‘great’ events and epochal shifts, all with a seeming inevitability, if not with a secret Hegelian telos. But the story fragments, the episodic fictions about the Obiakos deal with histories, with the interstices of the ‘great’ epochal movements. It is significant that these ‘mini’ narratives have to do with ‘small people’ in the community, not the ‘lords of the land’, the male ‘ozo’ title holders like Okonkwo who, it seems, always dominate discussions at the otherwise ‘democratic’, egalitarian village assemblies. Indeed, in the deeply gendered discourse of personality and identity in the novel, the other name for these small people, where they are men, is agbala, which means ‘woman’; collectively both men and women within this subaltern group are named efulefu, which means ‘worthless’. Among many of the ironic twists and articulations of Things Fall Apart is the fact that while the main narrative line about Okonkwo leads to tragedy and a general sense of social malaise, the fragmentary stories and motifs of the agbala and the efulefu move this social category to restitution at the end of the novel. Almost all the first converts to the new religion, the first minor functionaries of the colonial administration, the first teacher-pupils of the new school, are drawn from this subaltern group. For this group, things certainly did not fall apart! However, Achebe’s ironic vision extends as well to their ‘liberation’ by colonialism: already at the very inception of their incorporation into a new social and economic order, new forms of subjectivity are crystallizing as the corruptions and alienation of a new social class are prefigured in the venality, insensitivity and brutality of the messengers and petty officials of the colonial administration and over-zealous Christian
converts like Enoch. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise Achebe's depiction of the process of 'othering' within the pre-colonial social order, a process which creates a vast body of marginalised Others made up mainly of the osu (slaves), social outcasts and, significantly, women.

HISTORICAL CONFIDENCE AND DIFFIDENCE;
PREFERRED NARRATIVES AND DISCOURSES

Obiako in the short, fragmentary story we examined above takes on the attributes of resilience and the salutary, worldly and human-centred scepticism which we find brilliantly encoded in Obierika. Obierika, on the other hand, leads us to the paradigmatic narrative and discursive stance of his author, Chinua Achebe in many of his novels and essays: stubborn hope, and an ethical rationalism marked by a deeply ironic view of history and existence.36 We are some three decades into our post-independence disillusionment, and at this stage of our neo-colonial history when things, again, seem to be falling apart, we can learn much from this resilience. Historical calamities like the many civil wars and the endless run of inter-communal strife on the continent; political disasters like the regimes of the likes of Idi Amin, Bokassa, Nguema, Mobutu; and the seeming historical impasse of arrested decolonization: all these contradictions and negations will not crush us. This resilience, though, is not without its predicament: unlike Okonkwo, Obierika is not crushed; but his survival, and the survival of the agbala and the efulefu of the neo-colonial present, is haunted by a sense of failure, of diffidence before these historical negations.

My reading of Things Fall Apart in this essay in terms of a narrative economy which both totalizes and detotalizes, which presents, on the one hand, a grand narrative of the colonial encounter as History capitalized and unified around great personages and events and, on the other hand, counter-narratives and fragmentary stories of decentred, overdetermined histories and identities of subaltern groups, might seem to indicate that Achebe's art and discourse are easily assimilable to post-modernist, post-structuralist or deconstructive perspectives. Nothing could be further from this, for Achebe has remained rather wary of modernist aesthetics, not to even talk of post-modernism and post-structuralism.37 What I have tried to show in this critical tribute is that Achebe's particular brand of realist fiction and his profoundly ironic, demythologizing vision entail some of the problematics of cultural representation highlighted by post-modernism and post-structuralism. This is particularly true of the dangers and pitfalls of self-essentialization in
the construction of community, identity or tradition by ex-colonised nations and peoples, and by minority, non-canonical or 'popular' cultural currents in the 'First World' context. I do not by this wish to imply that Achebe's texts are crying for post-structuralist, post-modern critical condescension and patronage. Rather, I wish to underscore the fact that post-colonial critics and theorists who think that these problematics of identity and representation are substantively or brilliantly articulated only in contemporary post-structuralist discourses may want to consider the case of Achebe, as elaborated here. It is important also to add that other texts of Achebe like Arrow of God and Anthills of the Savannah are also superb, engaging exemplifications or inscriptions of these issues. Indeed, on a much wider social and cultural terrain, the most important theorists and critics of post-colonial writings in the Third World are of this intellectual and ideological expression in their involvement in a vast project of demythologization of cultural production and cultural politics from the residue of colonialist myths and their more neo-colonial re-codings. 

The potential contribution of post-modern, post-structuralist theoretical methods and perspectives to this project is incalculable, especially with regard to the thematization of language and signification as the very grounds of both self-essentialization and the possibility of its demystification. But the consummation of this potential contribution, it seems, is conditional upon two factors, among others. First, it is conditional upon a salutary self-awareness of post-structuralism that the critique of essentialism did not start only in the last two decades. Secondly, there is also the need to recognise that post-structuralism breeds its own pieties, its own mythologies and reifications as well, some of these indeed assuming the paradoxical character of neo-colonial fetishism. An instance of this, which is pertinent to the subject of this essay, is the view that grand, totalizing discourses and narratives are exhausted and historically and culturally regressive. For post-colonial writers and critics to accept this without qualification is to accept the delegitimation of any and all attempts to construct identity and community in the face of the continued ravages and displacements of neo-colonial barbarism, even of self-critical, politically sophisticated constructions of community and identity. Achebe is not post-modernist in his aesthetic sensibilities and predilections, at least in the contemporary theoretical understanding of the 'condition', but the way in which he combines totalizing and detotalizing narratives and discourses, doxa and paradox(a), is a powerful critique of smug, fashionable pieties that an embrace of, or an interest in totalization in the ultimate in artistic and intellectual naivety.
NOTES


3. Achebe was closely associated with the left-of-centre People's Redemption Party (PRP) during the civilian Second Republic in Nigeria (1979-83). He was Deputy National President of the party and was even rumoured at one stage to being seriously considered as the party's Presidential candidate in the federal elections of 1983. Achebe's leftist, somewhat social-democratic political inclinations, with all their ambiguities, are clearly woven into his fourth and fifth novels, A Man of the People and Anthills of the Savannah.


5. Things Fall Apart (Heinemann African Writers' Series, 1958). All page references are to this edition and are hereafter incorporated in brackets in the text of this essay.

6. See Hany Magdoff, 'Imperialism without colonies' in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds., Studies in the Theories of Imperialism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972). The terms 'post-coloniality' and 'coloniality' in the context of this essay refer to writings dealing with these historical and cultural phenomena considered as disciplinary formations, that is as objects of study.


17. Anthony Appiah, 'Out of Africa: Topologies of Nativism', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall 1988, pp. 153-178. Given his well-known coolness toward deconstruction and post-structuralism from the standpoint of analytic philosophy, it may seem out of place to include Appiah's essay within this formation of a post-colonial discourse which is deeply imbricated in post-structuralist theory. The inclusion is justified, I believe, in the fact that if one conceptualises this expression of post-coloniality as one of 'disavowal', as I do here, then Appiah is entirely at 'home' within this formation. Nothing so much expresses this as the fact that if one is at first startled by Appiah's title – 'Out of Africa' – which comes from Isak Dinesen's text of that title, one looks in vain for any ironic deployment of the title in Appiah's essay. All cultural-nationalists in Africa's post-colonial cultural politics are, it seems to Appiah, little more than varieties, or 'topologies' of *nativism*, where nativism means naive, uncritical self-essentialization in the politics of identity. For a longer critique of Appiah and what I call 'post-coloniality of hybridity and disavowal' see my 'Literary Theory and Theories of Decolonization', forthcoming.


22. For a vigorous discussion of this point see 'The Post-Colonial Intellectual: A Discussion with Conor Cruise O'Brien, Edward Said and John Lukacs' in *Salmagundi*, No. 70-11, Spring-Summer 1986, pp. 65-81.

23. The rash of nostalgic films about the British Raj in India, and films like 'Black and White in Color', 'Gorillas in the Mist' and 'Out of Africa', all projecting a yearning for the lost world of the colonials in East Africa attest to the commodity value of this residual colonialist nostalgia in popular cultural production.

24. 'Intellectuals in the Postcolonial World', p. 49.

25. C.L. Innes in *Chinua Achebe* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) has related these aspects of Achebe's narrative style and technique to Brechtian and Bakhtinian perspectives. This is a novel, fruitful approach to Achebe’s fictional art, especial-
ly since Innes stresses that Brechtian or Bakhtinian motifs in Achebe are not so much a matter of the direct influence of literary intertextuality as one of ‘similarity of effects’ based on the fact that all three ‘learned those techniques and concepts of the relation between author/narrator and audience from a non-literary tradition’, Achebe from an African one, Brecht and Bakhtin from European oral folk sources. What I have done here is to relate these aspects of Achebe’s narrative art to post-modern, post-structuralist themes in post-colonial critical discourse, especially with the move away from the grand récit of European colonialist narrative and discursive traditions.


27. I must thank Don C. Ohadike of Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, for help with my etymological analysis of the name Obierika. I should say, however, that I have taken the heuristic possibilities in the nomenclature way beyond Professor Ohadike’s more exact, literal rendering; hence any errors or solecisms in this exertion remain mine.

28. This pertains to his mythological but moral and philosophical interpretation of the ‘abomination’ of Okonkwo’s participation in the killing of Ikemefuna, an action which, in his view, could bring ruin on whole families, as retribution from the earth goddess. Chapter 8, p. 46.

29. An example of this kind of scholarship on Achebe’s works is Robert Wren, Achebe’s World: the Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe (Longman, 1980).


33. This point is made with perspicacity by Timothy Mitchell in Colonizing Egypt, op. cit. See especially Chapters 1 and 2. See also, for the response of the colonized to this ‘historical confidence’, Bill Ashcroft et al., eds., The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature (London and New York: Routledge, 1989). One of the most theoretically sophisticated explorations of this subject, from the standpoint of modern intellectual and cultural history is Samir Amin, Eurocentrism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).


35. C.L. Innes explores this rather sharply in Chinua Achebe, op. cit., as does Carole Boyce Davis in ‘Motherhood in the Works of Male and Female Igbo Writers: Achebe, Emecheta, Nwapa and Nzekwu’, in Carole Boyce Davis and Anne Adams Graves, eds., Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1986). My point here is that Achebe takes the question of gender beyond its neurotic, pathological expression in Okonkwo’s masculinist, misogynist personality to the very division of knowledge and reality on gender terms. Consequently Things Fall Apart ought to be read as a critique, mostly implicit, of the dominant national-masculine tradition of post-colonial African fiction. This is a point I develop further in a monograph, For Chinua Achebe, forthcoming from Africa World Press.

37. Achebe's reserve and coolness toward the aesthetic aspects of the works of writers like Armah and Soyinka comes largely, in my view, from this disdain for modernist aesthetics. See, for an example of his disdain, his remarks on Soyinka in 'Class Discussion' in Karen L. Morell, ed., *In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka* (Institute for Comparative and Foreign Area Studies, University of Washington, Seattle, 1975), pp. 50-51.

38. This is a subject I explore more extensively in *Postcoloniality: Paradigmatic Theories*, forthcoming.
QUESTIONS
– for us: 'Today's African Leadership'

They say
all beings
fight to live:

the mole
the lion and
the crow.

They say
all creatures
must fight to be

in the air
on land
in water.

And as for
human
you and me,

we shoot
like wild mushrooms
– in the dark –
sneak up like snakes
claw like cats
pounce
and
trample,

conquer
kill
consume.

Then we go limp:
like wild mushrooms
– at high noon.

So
where do We
come in
Who
feel bad
just to be
firm?
damn all else?
do our own nice or nasty thing?

Surely, My Brother,
500 hundred years is
too long to take
the kicks
without a murmur?

And for what
do we still come with cup in hand,
begging,
pleading and
endlessly shifting?

Who would have us
be human in a world
of cruel beasts
and even more cruel men?

How dare we trust,
when
Trust took a vacation – several million years ago – and
never bothered to come back?
Put quite simply,
in whose name do we ever act?

Whose tomorrow do we sell?

II

MODERN AFRICAN STORIES 11

Yes,
strange as it may sound,
it is true.

I got deported this morning from
my home, my village, my country and the land which
my forefathers and foremothers bled for, and tilled
from the beginning of time.

My crime?

I look like My Cousin from across the border, and
His President and My Prime Minister
do not see
eye to eye.

Mind you,
My Brother the Professor protests that
theoretically and linguistically,
‘it simply doesn’t make sense!’

No one can ever be deported from
their native country.’

I was packing as he was talking.

I had no time to stop and tell him to look
around:
in a land where
former freedom fighters
are vagrants, or buy respectability only
by guarding the property for those they mortgaged
their youths to fight against,
the factories and the homes they crawled
at night – in the good old days – to burn...

one can be deported from one's birthplace.

And
I
was.

This morning.

III

NEW IN AFRICA 1

Was Pliny serious
when he said:
'out of Africa always comes something new.'?

Shamwari, since he couldn't have foreseen,
he couldn't have meant the last 500 years:

when
Time closed in on itself and
Europe closed in on us, and
the only new things
we served ourselves and
our enemies dished to us
were very old potions:

– nearly always violent –
just warmed over
every one hundred years or so.
As for Africa herself,
conquered
raped
re-conquered
re-raped,

She wriggles still: just like Snake
before Ananse finished him.

So we also struggle on
— clear eyed or blind —
sometimes with song,
often with dance,

and always,
with a prayer on our lips.
Two voices there are but, unlike those in the J.K. Stephen Wordsworth-parody, both are deep and highly articulate and, though they betoken conflicting forces, they are themselves seldom at odds in Achebe's novel. 'Wherever something stands,' runs an Ibo proverb, 'something else will stand beside it.' The dual vision of *Things Fall Apart* is evidence, at least at the narrative level, of things not falling apart.

There are, as Neil McEwan has observed, two distinct narrative voices and they can be divided into the two broad categories of 'traditional-communal' and 'modern-individual'. The first of these, which is predominant in the first two thirds of the novel, is the 'communal' voice of one or a number of sympathetic elders who provide eye-witness accounts of Iboland in the 1890s through a mixture of anecdotes and gossip, folk-tales and proverbs, in which the emphasis is on experience that is shared rather than as it appears to any individual consciousness. The second voice, which intrudes increasingly in the last third of the novel, is the urbane 'editorial' voice of a modern Nigerian of the 1950s who sees beyond the viewpoint of the villagers, who are now 'they' rather than 'we', and who presents the decay of traditionalism, the colonial mentality and the coming of Christianity from a larger, more balanced and detached perspective, and in a more distanced and elaborate style: 'There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia' (p. 126). This more sophisticated register is heard again at Nwoye's conversion: 'It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him... It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow' (p. 104).

The first of these voices speaks of 'the world' in terms of 'strangers' from surrounding villages and describes a life which is circumscribed and localized around solid centres such as a titled man's obi or the village square. For the second voice – increasingly present after Okonkwo's exile during which these centralizing traditional controls...
have broken down – ‘the world’ has taken on a global meaning which includes government, school, court and prison, and the author intrudes a vocabulary for which there is no Ibo equivalent: pastor, church service, heathen, devil. Even in the earlier episode of the killing of Ikemefuna, the narrator, perhaps reading back 1950s judgements into an 1890s setting, has Nwoye sensing ‘evil’ and feeling a vague ‘chill’ of horror at the crying of exposed twins in the Evil Forest (p. 43). But, in my own experience of teaching the novel, the intrusions are rarely noticed at first reading: the voices blend to perfection and the dualistic centre holds.

The two voices are equally weighted, with an adroit and complex neutrality. Achebe, as the son of a missionary teacher whose own father welcomed the missionaries into Ogidi (Achebe’s birthplace), cannot completely identify with the values of his tribal past: these are only half of his inheritance. As Gareth Griffiths puts it, ‘the modern African intellectual is the descendant of the tribal underdog ... Achebe is the inheritor of Nwoye’s revolt as well as Okonkwo’s sacrifice.’ In the changing world of Umuofia, Nwoye’s ‘failure’ guarantees his survival whilst Okonkwo’s ‘success’ ensures his downfall. The paradox is compounded by the language problem. The District Commissioner only appears to have the last word in the novel; in fact, it belongs to the African writer who is now writing in the District Commissioner’s language. Achebe is aware that the acquisition of a speaking voice betrays his involvement with the process of destruction he records; that he can celebrate the value of Ibo culture only with the language-tools acquired in the act of destroying it. The modern African writer has to use the colonial language to rehabilitate the pre-colonial African world.

The narrative of Things Fall Apart modulates, through its interchange of narrative voices, from the communal life of the village to the individual consciousness and back again, so that the two interpenetrate. Private worries are aired and formalized in communal decisions and the laws governing the punishment of individuals are not a matter of idle superstition but are community-enhancing, geared as they are to the maintenance of the whole society. There are still ‘strong characters’ in Achebe’s world – Okonkwo, who thinks he can make his chi obey him, Uzowulu who will listen to no lesser voice of judgement than the egwugwu – but their individuality, while not repressed or denied, is held in check by communal solidarities. Ethics and justice are social-oriented: after accidentally killing a fellow villager, Okonkwo must go into exile because the earth would take revenge upon the whole community; the chief concern of the egwugwu in their settling of the Odukwe-Uzowulu dispute is not that the truth should be unearthed or that justice should be done but that the disputants should be reconciled.
in a way that makes for the peaceful continuation of the tribe, for this, in the end, is the supreme and only criterion.

The interplay of individual and communal lives in the novel offers no support, however, for the view that Okonkwo, as the ‘great man’ of Umuofia, is a symbolic embodiment or personification of Ibo values. On the contrary, Okonkwo is out of step with the village values which he sees himself as upholding, a fact made clear early in the novel by his impatience with enforced idleness during the New Yam Feast and his disturbance of the Week of Peace. Okonkwo’s impetuous, aggressive individualism and the belief behind it – that he must wipe out his father’s memory by succeeding in everything his father failed at – are out of harmony with a society which is renowned for its talent for social compromise and which judges a man according to his own worth, not that of his father. Okonkwo is an entirely self-made man among villagers who do not believe that a man is in complete control of his destiny. His cult of virility, by mistaking the nature of courage and confusing gentleness with weakness, upsets the sexual equilibrium that maintains a delicate balance between male values and female and maternal ones. Where the village is flexible and open-minded, he is static and fixed in purpose. Incapable of changing himself, he resists change in others and in the world at large and, returning from exile to find a radically altered society, can only resort to the violence which is no more the code of his community at the end of the book than it was at the beginning. Far from embodying or personifying the communal ethos, Okonkwo repeatedly violates both it and the organic balance of human life, nature and the clan gods which it sustains.

The dominant paradox is that, as David Carroll has argued, Okonkwo’s inflexible will brings him success in a society which is remarkable for its flexibility. Carroll makes an interesting comparison between Achebe’s hero and Henchard in Hardy’s The Mayor of Casterbridge. Both are wrongheaded, fiercely single-minded individuals who flout all the traditional values but who, when the status quo is threatened by powerful alien forces, spring to its defence and champion communities of which they are untypical, only to find that the community has already capitulated and that they stand alone. Okonkwo, like Henchard, performs more than is expected of him, sacrificing himself to an exaggerated, almost pathological (and therefore selective) sense of duty to a community that is embarrassed by his fanaticism. His recklessness and extremism lead him to transgress the traditions he is trying to embody, to distort the values he seeks to defend, and to neglect or ignore other traditions which his village holds equally dear (for example, his disturbance of Peace Week). Obierika is really a more typical Umuofian. Okonkwo is, in Gerald Moore’s words, ‘a sort of super-Igbo; an exag-
geration of certain qualities admired by his people, but at the expense of others which the founded man is expected to possess'. That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia,' Obierika vainly tells the District Commissioner at the end of the book (p. 147). The 'great man' in this particular traditional African society, somewhat like the tragic hero in the European tradition, turns out to be the man who is most unlike his community but who, through his great strength and his ability to do more than it has ever asked of him and set examples it does not require, belatedly becomes its representative. In the dilemma over Ikemefuna, Okonkwo spurns the easy option, the humane but casuistical compromise offered by Ezeudu (offend neither the gods by hindering nor one's own conscience by helping): a compromise by which the community tries to evade its own cruelties and which betrays its lack of courage in its own convictions. In his fanatical, ruthless rectitude and his heartlessly literal-minded pursuit of the letter of the law, Okonkwo can be seen as testing the limits of his society's integrity and exposing its real failure to provide for humane and compassionate feelings.

What causes things finally to fall apart in Umuofia? It is now a critical commonplace that the coming of the white man's missionary Christianity is only an indirect influence, as much a symptom as a cause. The Yeatsian title and epigraph are important here. Yeats's vision of history as a succession of alternating civilizations, each giving way to one another through its inability to contain all human impulses within one enclosed scheme of value and being replaced by all that it overlooked or undervalued, all that its own heritage had incapacitated it from understanding, is never very far from Achebe's novel. It is a standard feature of Yeats's system that things collapse from within before they are overwhelmed from without and that one process is continuous with the other. The novel, no more than the system, does not portray the sudden opposition of separate, self-contained and mutually exclusive forces – African and European, traditional and modern – but is concerned as much with their continuity as their confrontation: neither of the contending forces were static, settled cultures at the turn of the century and Anglican missionaries had been established in Iboland by the mid-nineteenth century (a long-standing European presence is evidenced in the availability of guns and tobacco).

On the surface, Umuofian society is undone by its own sophisticated relativism. It is rendered vulnerable by its enlightened and tolerant sense of alternative possibilities, as summed up in that Ibo proverb 'wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it', and it appears that Okonkwo, in his wrongheaded way, may have been right in his wish to repulse the missionaries before any accommodating contact with the alien could be made. But this is in reality a superficial
relativism, into which a narrow, intractable conservatism is woven; a relativism which seldom goes beyond acknowledgement into genuine accommodation and which in fact does nothing to mitigate the persecutions and exclusions of Umuofian society. 'The world has no end,' says Uchendu, 'and what is good among one people is an abomination with others', a sentiment anticipated earlier in the novel by Obierika's eldest brother (pp. 51, 99). Yet he and his fellow elders go on abominating osu, albinos and twins, aware though they are of the arbitrary and relative nature of these abominations, and it is the community's cruelty towards these disaffected minorities - a cruelty embodied catalytically in Okonkwo, who does not pretend to subscribe to this relativism - which drives them into the arms of the new religion.

It is here that the Yeatsian pattern comes into play, for it is a hallmark of that pattern that the misfits and rejects of one civilization become the ready converts for the conquering faith of another one. It is significant that the sect joined by Nwoye has established itself in the Evil Forest, the place where the Umuofians deposit everything they have no use for and therefore either abominate or devalue: tabooed slaves, albinos, twins, victims of the swelling-sickness, the diseased and defective, and, ironically, Okonkwo himself, whose suicide, like his father's shameful sickness, denies him an honourable burial. Reverend Smith's dogmatic Christianity, with its anti-communal emphasis on individual salvation, thrives on its exclusiveness - 'Narrow is the way and few the number' - and flourishes in the place of exclusion. Christianity makes its incursions into Ibo culture not by a full frontal assault but by responding to an already existing need which the indigenous civilization has made no allowance for and it is constituted out of what the latter has discarded. Civilizations, by creating their own misfits and malcontents, select their own executioners and conspire with their own downfalls.

Umuofia has, simply, excluded too much in human experience and the cracks resulting from the strain of repression have been showing for some time. Gerald Moore claims that Okonkwo's exile is made to seem 'like divine justice rather than arbitrary misfortune' and that 'in any case, the society in which he lives does not recognize the possibility of a misfortune that is not rooted in one's actions or one's personal fate'. But it is the very arbitrariness and inadequacy of such Ibo schemes of justice - the shooting is an accident, after all - which the novel lays open to question, as instanced in Obierika's speculation that such a possibility can be recognized: 'Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? ... He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?' (p. 87). The conflict of loyalties - personal and tribal,
human and religious – has long proved too much for Obierika, who is compelled to comfort his friend and then burn his house, to father twins and then destroy them. The coexistence of these two orders of allegiance, emblematized in the egwugwu who are simultaneously the villagers and their ancestral spirits, is becoming more difficult, especially in the presence of men like Okonkwo who pursue the letter of the law unflinchingly for fear of being thought weak.

The wisdom-literature of proverb has also become increasingly unsatisfactory because its insistence on the repetitiveness and predictability of experience renders it insufficiently flexible to cope with experience beyond the reach of traditional knowledge, disabling it when confronted with the totally unprecedented. There are, for example, no traditional punishments for killing the python or unmasking egwugwu since these were unthinkable in traditional society, and there are no proverbs to guide the people when the missionaries rescue abandoned twins and order their converts into conflict with their fellow-villagers: ‘Our fathers never dreamt of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them’ (p. 144). All of these things are excluded from the scheme of experience because they are unforeseen, unproverbed and unprecedented. In the terms of the previously quoted proverb, the value-order that stands fails to see what is standing close beside it – in this case, too close now for comfortable coexistence. Those who move beyond the proverbalized culture and adapt to these new things survive. In a sense, therefore – as commentators have never tired of pointing out – the novel’s title has a misleading finality because Umuofia, rejecting Okonkwo’s counsel of a war of resistance which would have meant total obliteration, does not fall apart: it changes in order to go on.

NOTES

7. A.G. Stock makes brief comparisons between the visions of the two writers in her essay, 'Yeats and Achebe' in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, pp. 86-91.
Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart: A Classic Study in Colonial Diplomatic Tactlessness

‘Does the white man understand our custom about land?’
‘How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.’

Very often the novel, Things Fall Apart is seen as a classic study in character – the complex character of the hero, Okonkwo, memorable and indelible, in much the same way as Thomas Hardy’s Michael Henchard or Shakespeare’s King Lear. The perspective emphasizes Okonkwo’s inflexibility, his stubborn individualism, his resistance to change and his perfect role as a clog in the wheel of inevitable progress. His death, therefore, had to be, if Christianity and Western civilization must permeate the ‘dark continent’. The colonial over-lord is exonerated. The die-hard, one-track-minded missionary would deserve praise for being the link through which Western European techniques reached the Africans in a way that made sense and in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

This approach misses the real universal significance of Things Fall Apart as world literature. Written and published when most of Africa was still under colonial rule, the political intentions of the novel must be appreciated. An over-concentration on the character analysis of Okonkwo, indomitable as Okonkwo may be as a hero, diminishes the cultural anguish of the Africans at the time which Achebe meant to portray in all its ramifications. No matter how couched in proverbs, images and innuendoes, the intense virulence of Achebe’s indictment of colonial diplomatic tactlessness and absurd human high-handedness
cannot be lost to the perceptive reader. And often Achebe is not that soft-spoken as the opening quote above amply illustrates. Okonkwo's heroism pales in the light of the systematic emasculation of the entire culture of his people. No matter how irresistible the urge, the crude decimation of Okonkwo's seeming larger-than-life posture must not be seen as the central concern of the author of *Things Fall Apart*. For, *Things Fall Apart* is indeed a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the consequences to the rest of humanity, when a belligerent culture or civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization. Seen from this perspective, the lesson of *Things Fall Apart* comes across clearly as the unique manifestation of human blindness and blissful ignorance at a point in time. The actual truth is that those who suffered blindness and folly were not the dwellers of the 'Dark Continent', but those who came with 'light' on a civilizing mission.

*Things Fall Apart* is built on a rising structure of cross-cultural conflicts. Each conflict cuts into, and does damage to the edifice. By the time it reaches the final act, the collapse has already been assured. It should be clear to the reader before he gets to the final scene, that even if Okonkwo had not killed the white man's messenger, the stability of Umuofia's socio-political and cultural structure had been so consistently and pervasively eroded that it was bound to collapse. Okonkwo's act merely gave a final push to an already tottering structure. Even this fatal act must not be seen purely in terms of the colonial master's symbolic blindness and perennial error of judgement in human relations: Rather the disintegration and concomitant tragedy must be perceived in terms which reach beyond the life of a small Igbo community and the domain of one man's life. Achebe's preoccupation was with the fate and destiny of a large section of humanity and not necessarily the rise and fall of one man, his towering personality notwithstanding, or, for that matter, one culture, its immediate disaster and predicament notwithstanding either. The immediate setting acquires allegorical dimensions when viewed from this point of view.

The story of the novel is set in Igboland at the turn of the 20th century when the early Europeans were coming into that part of Nigeria for the first time. The indigenes of the land are set in their ways, including their religious life and beliefs. There is an established order in social relationships. Devotion to gods and ancestors is taken for granted and compliance is expected of every adult member of the society. The wishes of the gods are made known to the public by special agencies known as *Oracles* and *Diviners*. So absolute was the belief in the inscrutability of the gods that no one dared question the decree of the gods as pronounced by the high priests, even
if this meant an order to throw away one's twin babies or sacrifice (murder) one's own son. The Christian missionaries who arrive and settle among the Igbo have come primarily to convert the people from their old ways and religious beliefs and practices, not through persuasion, but by sheer force of an obtrusive dogma. The colonial administrators, known as District Officers (Commissioners), have also come to colonize and secure the Igbo territories for the British Government. Traditionally, the Igbo do not part with their land on a permanent basis to strangers. The two divergent groups (the Igbo and the European), meeting for the first time deeply resent and mistrust each other. The Igbo find the blundering, indiscrete white man irritatingly amusing. They do not understand why or how strangers could audaciously interfere with the way of life of their hosts to the point of meddling with such sacred things as their (the Igbo) freedom to worship the gods of their land or pay homage to their protective ancestors. The Igbo are well known for their hospitality and effusive generosity to strangers in their midst, but a stranger who turns unbearably presumptuous and arrogantly insulting automatically forfeits his welcome. (The Igbo have an adage which invokes the disease of hunch-back for the discourteous guest on his way home!) The stranger at this point is advised to remove himself from the vicinity or he is thrown out if he appears recalcitrant. An Igbo novel, Omenuko by Pita Nwana which was published in 1933, twenty-five years before Things Fall Apart, is a good illustration of this Igbo philosophy of co-existence.

As a people the Igbo are hard-working and dynamic. They depend on the land for their subsistence. They toil to cultivate the land in order to feed their families from one planting season to another. In effect they revere the land and the earth goddess is placated and appeased frequently to maintain the harmonious relationship necessary to ensure good harvests. The culture placed emphasis on hard work and personal achievements; among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father... Age was respected ... but achievement was revered' (p. 6). This is still very much true of the Igbo today. In the society of the novel, a man established his worth by the size of his barns, the number of wives he had, and the number of human heads he brought home from war. These are the distinctions possessed by Okonkwo at the beginning of the novel. He was, therefore, a visible symbol of the standards by which success was measured and attained in his society. His degradation at the hands of the white colonialists was a source of irreparable disharmony in social relations between the strangers and the hosts.

The Christian religion also ran into conflict with the traditional culture in the concept and status of social classes. Whereas the traditional
society excluded the so-called ‘low-born and outcasts’ (the slaves and
the Osu) from communicating socially, politically, and religiously with
the free-born (diala), the new Christian religion did not discriminate be­
tween people. When the free-born who joined the Church started mix­ing freely with the outcasts who formed the bulk of the congregation
in those days, it was seen by the elders as an abomination and they
lamented that ‘The church had come and led many astray. Not only the
low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it’
(p. 123). This reference was to Ogbuefi Ugonna who, being a titled man
and well respected in the village, ‘had cut the anklet of his titles and
cast it away to join the Christians’ (p. 123).

In the novel we see the Igbo as a people without kings or Chiefs, yet
they operated a highly efficient democratic government. The government
was through the cultural and traditional Council of Elders (Ndichie),
Council of Masquerades (Egwugwu), the Oracles and their Chief Priests
who were the liaison between the people and the gods. The traditional
government had a set of rules and law which must be obeyed by all.
The Council of Masquerades was presided over by the ‘Evil Forest’, the
leader of Umuofia. They tried cases and inflicted punishments. The law
of the land was no respecter of persons as was the case with Okonkwo
who, himself a titled man, was fined for beating his wife during the
Week of Peace. The following verdict by Ezeani, the priest of the earth
goddess, on Okonkwo’s crime is an example: ‘“You will bring to the
shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a
hundred cowries”’ (p. 22). These were for appeasing the gods. For more
serious offences like murder, the offender was required to go into exile
for a period of seven years, as in the case of Okonkwo who fled to
Mbanta.

The coming of the white man with his government disrupted this age­
long tradition and there was a great conflict between the new and the
old order. The white man established his own court which was pre­
sided over by the District Commissioner. The District Commissioners
were said to have ‘judged cases in ignorance’ because they were for­
eigners and did not know the customs of the people especially in land
disputes. The Court Messengers, who were agents of the District Com­
missioners, were disliked also because they were strangers. They came
from Umuru which was regarded as a foreign land. Obierika described
them as ‘arrogant and high-handed’. The white man had no regard for
Umuofia titled men and they, in turn, did not recognise the white
man’s brutal government. The white man had two major types of pun­
ishment. For minor offences the people were flogged and in murder
cases the offenders were hanged. In the traditional system these re­
quired only sacrifices to appease the gods or exile in cases involving
killing or spilling of human blood. On the new judicial system Obierika tells Okonkwo, "'I told you on my last visit to Mbanta how they hanged Aneto'" (p. 124). Aneto had killed Oduche and fled the village as required by custom. The court Messengers, however, arrested him and he was hanged at Umuru. Hanging was seen as an abomination and was abhorred by the people, while the white man regarded it as a legal act.

There was also a lack of social interaction between the foreigner (the white man, the court messengers and the interpreters) and the people. There was complete lack of trust between the two groups. The white man was said to be ignorant and did not speak the native language and so was unable to understand or learn the culture of the people. The messengers were ridiculed as well. The special prejudice is clearly seen in the song by the prisoners:

Kotma of the ash buttocks,
He is fit to be a slave
The white man has no sense,
He is fit to be a slave (p. 123)

This song shows nothing but the hatred the people had for the 'foreigner'. The white man, on the other hand, said that the customs of the people were bad. The new converts agreed with the white man but the rest of the people did not see anything bad in their culture. However, the new religion badly weakened the traditions and customs of the people. From every indication it destroyed total unity among the people and they could no longer fight a common enemy as before. This was the greatest harm done to the Igbo society by the white man as portrayed in the novel. It was contrary to the Igbo culture to yield to invaders (which the white men were). The duty of fighting Christianity by Okonkwo became impossible when some of the people joined the new religion prompting Obierika to ask: "'How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?'" (p. 124). It is in this sense that the novel Things Fall Apart can be seen as an African classic, a story which transcends time and place. The universality of its thematic preoccupation as a study in colonial diplomatic blunder must not be missed by the perceptive reader.
NOTES


Quis Custodies Custodiet?  
The Development of Moral Values in A Man of the People

A Man of the People,¹ Achebe's fourth novel, may be seen as part of the progressive development throughout his work of a single theme: the moral relations of an individual with his society. All five novels present an historic overview of the processes by which a colonised society, overwhelmed by British influence and forced to open itself to the outside world, loses simultaneously its self-regulatory power and its moral base. Thus the individual within the new society, educated to behave in ways which are beyond what traditional law envisions or his contemporary community is prepared to legislate upon, must look within himself for moral purpose.

There is no doubt that Achebe presents the ideals of Okonkwo's society² as admirable when they are properly balanced and Okonkwo's opposition to them as atypical and misguided, though noble, or that he sees Odili as right in opposing his apathetic, immoral society. In Achebe's two historical novels, the society chooses to reject grand dreams propounded by ambitious individuals, and opts instead for survival, but the way to survival lies perforce through fragmentation of the community and confusion of moral values. In A Man of the People, the instinct to survive which led Umuro to choose life and Christ over starvation and Ulu³ has produced the self-seeking spirit of Anala and Urua. Things have indeed fallen apart, and the community which was once the source of wisdom and law now apathetically endorses any corruption which will bring it food.

Achebe may on the surface seem to have turned to a new kind of social commitment in A Man of the People, but the novel is closely linked in its essential argument with the earlier ones. There was the place where the rain began to beat the people; here, now, is where they must begin to dry themselves. Anthills of the Savannah⁴ continues the argument, two decades later, in a world where the necessity to identify the right moral behaviour, and to find the courage to see it through, still confronts the central characters.
A Man of the People looks at the possibilities of right government, and finds a dearth of right-minded men to make up such a government. Where society has ceased to be the guardian of the moral well-being of the community, there is no other potential guardian who is not himself a danger.

As in the earlier novels, Achebe is dealing with a central character who is regarded by most of his society as a misfit. Things Fall Apart examines the traditional Ibo ideal by showing how Okonkwo, who aims to embody it, in fact fails to realise it. Arrow of God shows a man exalted by his community who abrogates to himself the power which is in the gift of the community. No Longer at Ease investigates the modern ideal by comparing the practical expectations of the Umuofians with the abstract moral principles of Obi, and by showing through Obi's failure (both in relation to the bribery charge and in his behaviour towards Clara) the sort of social pressures which have produced the Umuofian way, and against which Obi's idealism must be strong enough to stand if it is to justify itself.

In A Man of the People we have again a protagonist who sets himself against the tide of public judgement, but because he capitulates on some of the material issues, he survives. For the same reason he is a less sympathetic character than Obi, whose swiftly narrated lapse of principle is not allowed to detract from the effect established by his idealistic stand on corruption in the rest of the novel, and whose treatment of Clara is shown to be to some extent forced on him by his concern for his mother. Okonkwo and Ezeulu are noble in their stand for a principle, even if it brings them into conflict with the valid (and pragmatic) terms of reference of their community. Obi's principles are equally admirable, but he fails them. Odili Samalu constantly vacillates between moral sentiment and underhand action, so that what audience sympathy he has is established by the narrative form, not by his firm stand for a moral philosophy. As readers we are wary of statements about his feelings and intentions given by a first-person narrator who is evidently both gullible and devious in his actions.

Despite the novel's unlocated setting (Nigerian characters in a vaguely East African geography), it clearly deals with a generalized version of the political situation in Nigeria at the time it was written. The issues, however, are not directly political but moral. Corruption is a vital concern, and issues specifically connected with politics are raised, like the question of popular representation in government. (Although Max's motives originally appear to be more worthy than Nanga's, he is in fact less able or less willing to represent the real views of the apathetic mass of the population.) To this extent the novel shows a more immediate social engagement than the earlier three. But again
Achebe focuses on the moral dilemma of the protagonist, the way in which his ideals conflict with the community ethic, and the extent to which he is true to his own beliefs. From the first scene in the novel, Odili is faced with the question of what are the proper standards to apply: 'I knew I ought to be angry with myself but I wasn’t. I found myself wondering whether — perhaps — I had been applying to politics stringent standards that didn’t belong to it’ (p. 9).

Who will keep the politicians honest when even a self-proclaimed idealist falters? The people’s view is now manifestly an immoral one. Almost any crime is tolerated, and the criminal admired for his success. Town and clan loyalties are carried into the political arena as well as into personal life. Odili is critical of his friend Andrew Kadibe who feels he cannot oppose Chief Nanga’s visit to the school because they come from the same town, but once this behaviour is translated into political terms it becomes more sinister. Odili’s candidature is welcomed in his home town, Urua, when Max makes the point which Odili finds ‘unworthy of him or of C.P.C.’, that the town will share in the good fortune of its elected son, and that it is time for Urua to have its turn. This is the one point in Max’s speech which is heard by the audience, and to which they respond warmly. In the words of the next speaker:

There is one word he said which entered my ear more than everything else — not only entered but built a house there. I don’t know whether you others heard it in the same way as I did. That word was that our own son should go and bring our share... That word entered my ear. The village of Anata has already eaten, now they must make way for us to reach the plate. No man in Urua will give his paper to a stranger when his own son needs it. (p. 141)

Achebe is highly critical of this new spirit in society which measures good only by the immediate benefits in cash or kind. The people see nothing wrong with the politicians making money, as long as they too have some share in the wealth: The ex-policeman put it very well. “We know they are eating,” he said, “but we are eating too. They are bringing us water and they promise to bring us electricity. We did not have those things before; that is why I say we are eating too”’ (p. 139). Odili’s father joins them in approving Odili’s political activities as long as they bring him money and a car, his tacit assumption being that one enters politics in order to make money.

Achebe’s indictment of this society in general is nevertheless tempered with an understanding of its causes. The expansion of the world from village to nation has made it impossible for the enlarged community to regulate and control the behaviour of its members. The world has grown too large for social disapproval to be expressed unanimously and
the result is an apathetic attitude to national issues. When a single member of a small community offends, he can be punished with social ostracism, as Josiah is, but Odili comes to realize that no sector of society assumes responsibility for regulating the behaviour of people like Nanga. Although, after the downfall of the government, people speak of Koko in the terms they used of Josiah, that he 'had taken enough for the owner to see', Odili is forced to recognize that a nation does not have the unanimity of a smaller community, and cannot act as a whole on moral issues.

Odili suggests at the end of the novel that only the individual can act against those who are beyond the control of the community. Eunice can avenge the death of Max Kulamo, when the people would not. Odili's own stand against P.O.P. and P.A.P., and the way he conceives the role of the C.P.C., suggest again the importance of the stand of an individual for an ideal, in the face of public apathy. Odili's most sympathetic feature is his belief in the effectiveness of honesty as a weapon against cheating and corruption. He is deeply disturbed by Max's venture into a further realm of dishonesty than even Nanga has tried: accepting a bribe and then refusing to honour the agreement. Odili insists that while the agreement may not have been legal, it had moral force (p. 142), and he fears that 'Max's action had jeopardised our moral position, our ability to inspire that kind of terror which I had seen so clearly in Nanga's eyes despite all his grandiloquent bluff, and which in the end was our society's only hope of salvation' (p. 144). Odili's refusal to accept Nanga's bribe has impressed Nanga in a way which Max's duplicity has negated.

One significant stand by an individual is Odili's father's refusal to dissociate himself from his own actions by signing Nanga's document. He attributes his action to a respect for traditional behaviour: 'Our people have said that a man of worth never gets up to unsay what he said yesterday. I received your friends in my house and I am not going to deny it' (p. 152), but the parallel with Odili's refusal to sign a similar document (pp. 132-133) is too close to be ignored. Traditional morality and individual idealism are united in this action.

The novel has been likened to the Rake's Progress; it might also be seen as a perverse Pilgrim's Progress, in which Odili, although professing high ideals, is continually led astray into error instead of persisting on the right path. Each episode, each confrontation (and the novel is structured as a set of confrontations between Odili and one or sometimes two other characters), provides Odili with the chance to make a moral choice: to act according to his ideals, or to compromise.

In the first half of the novel he makes his loudest claims to idealism, but succumbs to the temptation of Nanga's patronage. The period under
Nanga’s influence is a valuable experience which gives him some real knowledge and understanding of the world. In the second half of the novel Odili brags less about his ideas (recognising instead that his motives may be ignoble or personal), but some of the moral choices he makes are good ones, as when he refuses to accept Nanga’s scholarship and cash bribe (pp. 118-119). His earlier experience has enabled him to withstand this temptation, but he has not yet acquired the experience or the self-knowledge to resist temptations which may come in other forms. “He that knows not and knows not that he knows not is a fool” (p. 117) is a warning Odili should heed. He is blindly, wilfully ignorant of many things he should make it his business to know, from the source of his party’s funds, to his own father’s character:

I thought to myself: You do not belong in this age, old man. Men of worth nowadays simply forget what they said yesterday. Then I realized that I had never really been close enough to my father to understand him. I had built up a private picture of him from unconnected scraps of evidence. Was this the same D.O.’s Interpreter who made a fortune out of the ignorance of poor, illiterate villagers and squandered it on drink and wives or had I got everything terribly, lopsidedly wrong? Anyway, this was no time to begin a new assessment; it was better left to the tax people. (p. 135)

With such flippancies, Odili dismisses the need to know. And yet the whole novel affirms the importance of knowledge as the basis of right moral judgement.

Ironically, the novel is narrated in the first person in retrospect, by a narrator who uses the opportunity to criticise, correct or reaffirm his judgements as he recounts his thoughts and actions. Achebe uses clichés and casual, slangy language to establish the tone throughout the novel. The clichés are symptomatic of Odili’s commonplace mind but they are frequently used jocularly, as if between friends, as a way of establishing the narrator-narratee relation, and are in effect an undergraduate dialect. Odili is addressing his peers. The narratee is constantly informed that the narrator believes himself to be a more experienced, more cynical fellow than his earlier self. The cynicism extends to the smallest details: ‘I had just bought [my watch] and believed the claim that it was everything-proof. Now I know better’ (p. 43). At times he is devastatingly honest about past mistakes; at other times he tries to improve on the record: ‘Sitting at Chief Nanga’s feet I received enlightenment; many things began to crystallize out of the mist – some of the emergent forms were not nearly as ugly as I had suspected but many seemed much worse. However I was not making these judgements at the time, or not strongly anyhow. I was simply too fascinated’ (p. 45). The maturing political vision is offered before the honest
admission that at the time Odili was too stunned to think through the implications of the things he was seeing, so that Odili implicitly claims credit for both the developing vision and the honesty. The narratee is constantly being invited into a conspiracy with Odili to whitewash him: 'No doubt it was a measure of my changed – or shall we say changing? – attitude to the Minister that I found myself embarrassed [by] ... these fulsome praises flung at his face' (p. 12). To have changed his attitude completely in five minutes would not be very creditable behaviour for Odili, so he posits a narratee who is as willing to be talked into glossing over Odili's faults as Odili is to ignore Nanga's.

Our consciousness of the Odili of the present who tells the story is as important as our awareness of the Odili of the past of whom he tells us – and, to give him his due, the narrator usually gives us the truth about himself, even if the truth comes with a request to us to ignore it and substitute something more comfortable. The process of judgement is for the reader a complex process, reflecting the complicated matter of taking a moral stance in the Nigeria Achebe was writing about. We need to see Odili in a number of situations before we are able to assess the differences between the character and the narrator. Moreover, the Odili who is the narrated object is changing as the story progresses, and the changes are bringing him closer to the Odili who is the narrator.

The Odili who meets Nanga at the beginning of the novel is an educated, idealistic young man, but he is a self-righteous prig and he lacks experience. He is willing to put his ideals into practice, and to sacrifice his chance of a well-paid job in an administration of which he disapproves in favour of a poorly paid job as a teacher with little immediate prospect of advancement. He believes strongly in the value of education and has suffered a reaction against his former teacher, Micah Nanga, when he heard him leading a witch hunt against intellectuals in government, and one honest and competent intellectual in particular. Most importantly, he knows little about practical politics and nothing at all about people, individually or collectively. Worse, he is not aware that his knowledge is dangerously limited, and he passes up many chances to improve his understanding (such as the chance to get to know his own father better). David Carroll points out that because of his family background Odili has grown up lonely, alienated and selfish.

The Odili who narrates is the Odili of the end of the novel. He has learned a few lessons about people, and this has made him both genuinely more idealistic and more cynical. He is still demonstrably selfish, still alienated from the people, but he has learned to recognise that separation at least. The cynicism with which he views the past enables him to see his past actions and attitudes as ridiculous, so that we
receive Odili's ironic narrative vision of Odili (the object of the narration), but we also view ironically Odili the narrator.

Because he makes the process of judgement more complex for the reader with Odili than Obi, and because Odili himself is searching for a standard while Obi believes he has found one, Achebe is able to present a much more subtly analyzed picture of Nigerian society in *A Man of the People* than in *No Longer at Ease*. Obi was caught in a simple two-way choice, ultimately, between the values of Mr Green and the values of the Umuofia Progressive Union. Odili's moral world is more complex, not least because it contains two Odilis, the narrator and the narrated object.

The novel opens with one of Odili's disarming admissions: Nanga, whatever else he may be, is approachable, a man of the people. Our narrator knows that this is both a virtue and a vice, and what kind of vice it is (not mere demagoguery, but a true reflection of the apathetic immorality of the people); the Odili who is about to meet him does not. Locked in his own value system he can only feel bitter and scornful of the 'silly, ignorant villagers' (p. 2). He cannot enter into the people's enthusiasm, nor can he (even now – the comment is in the present tense) enjoy their pleasures: 'Personally I don't care too much for our women's dancing' (p. 1), although even he has to admit to being carried away by Grammar-phone's song. This Odili knows what the attitude of the people is: 'Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you – as my father did – if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth' (p. 2), but he cannot understand this view. The Odili who narrates the scene understands.

The opening remarks about the reception being prepared for Nanga are followed by an inset incident in which there are three levels of time: 1960, when Odili the enthusiastic student supporter of P.O.P. begins to realise that politics is a dirty game; 1960 to 1964, when Odili weeps over Hansard and loathes Nanga; and the present, from which the narrator looks back at all his earlier naivety. Odili winds up the scene with a careful explanation to the reader of his motives for including it at this point. The stage has been set for Odili's first moral trial to begin.

Nanga's arrival at the Anata school is the beginning of Odili's real education in life. In a delightful comic reversal, one minute Odili is scowling icily at the display of enthusiasm by Nanga's constituents, and the next he melts in the sunny rays of Nanga's recognition, as Nanga greets him as a former pupil and revives an old nickname, 'Odili the great'. In that moment he learns what it is to be singled out by a man of the people for praise and attention.
I became a hero in the eyes of the crowd. I was dazed. Everything around me became suddenly unreal; the voices receded to a vague border zone. I knew I ought to be angry with myself but I wasn't. I found myself wondering whether — perhaps — I had been applying to politics stringent standards that didn't belong to it. (p. 10)

Odili has faced his first trial, and has failed it. The parallel scene (pp. 138-140) when Nanga plucks him out of the crowd gathered in the Anata court some months later for an election rally, sarcastically calls him 'Odili the great', reviles him and has him beaten up, is clearly foreshadowed here.

The narrator is embarrassed by the memory of his rapid capitulation ('I'm ashamed to admit'). As his narration of the scene progresses he tries to improve his image in the narratee's eyes with the alteration of 'changed' to 'changing' mentioned above and with comically apologetic remarks like 'I like to think that I meant it to be sarcastic' (p. 10).

His present understanding of politics and the people, gained by experience, leads him to reflect back wryly on Nanga's lack of modesty:

We all like to think we are first-class people. Modesty forbids us from saying so ourselves though, presumably, not from wanting to hear it from others. Perhaps it was their impatience with this kind of hypocrisy that made men like Nanga successful politicians while starry-eyed idealists strove vaingloriously to bring into politics niceties and delicate refinements that belonged elsewhere.

While I thought about all this — perhaps not in these exact terms — the fulsome praises flowed all around the dais. (p. 12, my emphasis)

Although these were not his thoughts at the time, the narrator obviously wishes they had been, in spite of his new cynicism about the motives of idealists. Yet the narrator seems barely aware that it is the praise heaped on him by Nanga that made him so tolerant of the extravagant praises of Nanga chorused by his electorate. Odili is ashamed of a great deal of his past behaviour, not always from the best of motives. Odili's defensiveness echoes throughout the first part of the novel. Once he ceases to defend his own actions and begins to criticize those of other people, like Max's speech for the C.P.C., we are dealing with an Odili whose values have matured to the level of the narrator's.

On his visit to the capital, Bori, Odili's moral equivocations cannot conceal the fact that he willingly lays himself open to temptation. Yet while he is dazzled by Nanga's life, he is not completely blind to the moral contradictions he sees. Even at the time he is aware of the irony in Chief Koko's belief that he has been poisoned when he tastes the home-grown product his government promotes, and he greets Nanga's fear at the suspected poisoning with an appropriate proverb: 'When one slave sees another cast into a shallow grave he should know that when
the time comes he will go the same way' (p. 40). Yet Odili's revolt against Nanga does not spring from political motives. He is inclined to enjoy being in temporary possession of seven gleaming, silent-action water closets, an enjoyment in no way lessened by reading the municipal regulations about bucket latrines or by his tour with Jean of the city slums and the streets named after Nanga:

I had to confess that if I were at that moment made a minister I would be most anxious to remain one for ever. And maybe I should have thanked God that I wasn't. We ignore man's basic nature if we say, as some critics do, that because a man like Nanga had risen overnight from poverty and insignificance to his present opulence he could without much trouble be persuaded to give it up again and return to his original state. (pp. 41-42)

The cynical Odili who narrates provides no excuse, justification or correction to these views, suggesting that his present opinion of human nature is unchanged.

What motivates Odili's split with Nanga has nothing to do with politics or corruption; it is Nanga's appropriation of Odili's girlfriend Elsie. Although it has long been a joke among Odili's acquaintances that he is merely an assistant to Elsie's real boyfriend, Ralph, and although Odili has praised Elsie for making no demands on him, he is horrified when she deserts him as quickly as she had attached herself to him. He even suffers the temporary 'incredible delusion' that Elsie is being raped. Once he understands the situation, he sees it as a territorial incursion by Nanga. Ignoring the fact that he himself had been at pains to inform Nanga that he did not intend to marry Elsie and that she was 'just a good-time girl', and forgetting his own annexation of Jean, Odili determines on a much more serious incursion into Nanga's territory, in the person of Nanga's bride-to-be, Edna.

As he walks the streets in a fury of resentment, Odili sees the slums and the night-soil men emptying the bucket latrines he has despised, but the sight means nothing to him. Achebe is emphasising Odili's blindness at this stage in the novel to the social issues which ought to concern an idealistic young politician. Uppermost in his mind is his sexual humiliation. Elsie has changed in his mind from the friendly, generous girl he goes to see at the hospital (pp. 63-66) and to whom he laughingly suggests that Nanga might want to swap girls, into 'a common harlot' (p. 80), and then, when his image in the eyes of others is concerned, into 'a casual acquaintance whom both Chief Nanga and I knew' (p. 87).

Odili's fury and resentment of Nanga's role in Elsie's desertion is of a piece with his behaviour elsewhere in the novel. Nanga finds a way into Odili's heart when he hails him like a long-lost son before a large
audience; but when Odili's recognition of the writer, Jalio, is not reciprocated, he immediately resolves to despise him: Jalio 'replied hello and took my hand but obviously he did not remember my name and didn't seem to care particularly. I was very much hurt by this and immediately formed a poor opinion of him and his silly airs' (p. 69). Clearly Odili's judgement is formed according to the enthusiasm others show for him. His remark that the talk at Jean's party was very good is immediately followed by the reason for this judgement: 'My closeness to the Minister gave everything I said heightened significance. And - I don't know whether this happens to other people, but the knowledge that I am listened to attentively works in a sort of virtuous circle to improve the quality of what I say' (p. 55), and he follows this with an example of his own brilliance. Nanga's appropriation of Elsie is taken as a personal insult, and Odili's overreaction is proportionate to his former enjoyment of Nanga's regard for him. Odili realises that he has become, not the Minister's pal, but the Minister's pimp, and it is the attitude to himself which he bitterly resents.

Each trial that Odili faces is interpreted by him as a challenge to his pride, and all too often he fails to see that the tests are moral ones.

Odili's conversion to the cause of the C.P.C. is clearly motivated by revenge rather than by political altruism, yet in the scenes with Max and his friends he shows more sense than anywhere else in the novel. These scenes raise moral issues to do with political representation and accountability. His objection to the intellectual background of the members of the Common People's Convention, and the question he tries to ask about party funds (p. 80) show practical common sense, but although intellectually equipped to see what questions need to be asked, Odili has not the persistence to follow them up.

The question about party funds is never properly answered, though his ignorance about their source recurs in the novel as a measure of Odili's political stupidity, and Max flatters Odili into acquiescing in his plans. Odili proceeds with his own plans by insinuating himself into Mrs Nanga's house and then into Edna's, breaking every conceivable rule of decency and good manners. Yet during his pursuit of Edna, in an attempt to look big in her eyes, Odili performs his first atypical action when he stands up to a threat of violence. His technique with both Nanga and Nwege has been to insult and run, but when Edna's father threatens him with a machete he stands his ground and is saved by Edna's mother whose cruelly accurate comment that Odili and Nanga are 'both white men's people' (p. 119) defuses the situation.

In his political activities Odili begins to show signs of a new maturity. He still enjoys recognition, and watches the placards of the opposition for his name, but he also shows that he understands the nature of his
own, rather limited power. His only hope is in his honesty. Max's attempt to appeal to the greed of Odili's electorate is recognised as a betrayal of the ideals which Odili wants to uphold, while his father's refusal to deny his past actions is seen as morally correct behaviour. Odili is learning to understand the people's cynicism, but he is learning also the value of his own idealism. The Odili of the present sees his past actions of this period as naive but right. He still runs from Nanga (p. 133), but he knows that Nanga is more afraid of his honesty than of Max's political opposition. He is able to dismiss his chagrin at the fact that Max's bribe was four times the size of the one he was offered, and to see that the real issue is one of honesty. By refusing two hundred and fifty pounds he has made himself greater than Max, who accepted a thousand.

In a novel which is deeply concerned with the question of who shall be the guardian of the public conscience, or, to put it in other terms, who decides when the thief has taken enough for the owner to see, Odili's refusal to accept the bribe shines out as the one gesture which raises him above the others in the novel, and it is this moral stance which Nanga fears. Odili's incorruptibility makes him a potential watcher set upon the watchman. Honesty in the electorate may keep the elected politicians honest.

Odili's stand against Edna's father has marked a new kind of maturity in his approach to Edna. His final confrontation with Nanga is distinguished by a similar access of courage. Publicly accused by Nanga of dishonesty, Odili confronts Nanga and calls him a liar. In a practical sense, the incident saves Odili by putting him out of action until after the election when it is again safe to be the man who opposed Chief Nanga. Morally, it puts him in open opposition to the values Nanga represents.

Yet so great is Odili's ignorance and moral blindness that he cannot see the extent to which his own behaviour has come to resemble Nanga's.

Violence breeds violence. Boniface, Odili's bodyguard, argues necessity, since Nanga will not be playing by gentleman's rules: 'Dem tell you say na gentlemanity de give other people minister...? Anyway wetin be my concern there? Na you sabi' (p. 114). Wilful ignorance, however, remains Odili's hallmark. Although he has allowed his campaign car to be filled with weapons of violence, Odili blithely dismisses them as 'strictly for defence' (p. 112), enumerates five machetes, two double-barrelled guns, 'a few' empty bottles and stones, referring to these as 'the minimum of weapons', and is astonished to learn (p. 141) that he is under arrest for being found in possession of dangerous weapons: "'Found where? Who found me?'" is his inadequate response.
Odili’s moral laxity, his unwillingness to apply stringent standards to his own behaviour which he still applies elsewhere, leads to his own implication in a world of violence, where a coup d’état ‘obliged us’ and a girl can pull a gun from her handbag as easily as she might take out a handkerchief. The death of Chief Koko may be poetic justice, but it is also murder. Odili’s approval of instant, violent vengeance (which has earlier led him to admit that he would strike back at his own father if struck) is understandable, but it is one which neither his own village community nor the imported code of legal justice would support. What remains of the old code would ensure that a man who struck his father would be ostracised as surely as a trader who robbed a blind man of his stick.

Odili’s standards are certainly less than stringent when it comes to inquiring about the source of his own campaign funds:

‘But na who de give the er weting call ... P.C.P. money?’ asked Boniface puzzled.

‘Some friends abroad,’ I said with a knowing air to cover my own ignorance which I had forgotten to worry about in the heat of activity. (p. 114)

Forgotten ignorance is to be covered up with a knowing air. The words condemn.

Those same funds from dubious sources have an even more damning end. Odili has learned how to survive from the cynicism of the people, and quietly helps himself from the party funds entrusted to him.

The main evidence on the moral state of Odili at the end of the novel must come from the voice of the narrator throughout the novel. He approves of his past idealism, but laughs at his own naivety. He invites us to admire his prowess, both as speaker and as lover, and his recognition of his own craving for admiration does not lead him to any radical reappraisal of his own self-concept. He is honest enough to let the truth appear to the reader, but not honest enough with himself to change his concept of himself. The most important change in him is his recognition of the importance of honesty and integrity in the individual, coupled with his new understanding of what it means to be ‘a man of the people’, but these are not enough to prevent him, by the end of the novel, applauding murder as an unselfish act and embezzling party funds.

While there might have been many in Nigeria in 1966 who found a military coup preferable to the existing political corruption, or who could read Eunice’s revenge as heroic, the misappropriation of party funds is petty pocket-lining of the most blatant kind. Odili’s trials and his many errors have not brought him to any firm moral ground. He has acquired a vast cynicism, a limited experience, and very little ap-
preciation of the extent of his own ignorance. We may well say, in Odili's own words, that 'a man who avoids danger for years and then gets killed in the end has wasted his care' (p. 109).

Odili begins the novel idealistically opposed to Nanga, and contemptuous of the villagers: 'They were not only ignorant but cynical' (p. 2). He ends the novel guilty of most of the same moral errors and even the same crimes as Nanga; he is guilty too of the same errors as the villagers, ignorance and cynicism. 8

NOTES

6. Achebe invents the particular political scandals in this novel, but they bear a strong resemblance to the generally corrupt and turbulent state of Nigerian politics at the time.
8. I must acknowledge here a debt to the late Arthur Ravenscroft, whose reproof of my assumption that cynicism was a literary virtue led me to rethink my views on A Man of the People.
Of Goddesses and Stories: Gender and a New Politics in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*

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.

In creating a ‘populist inclusiveness’, Achebe may to some extent be suspected of deliberate design.³ 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 à 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 alternative female rule depends on the stereotypical image of woman as inspirer 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 commitment 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 University 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 Kanganian contexts (p. 158). The abstractions of such theories have permitted 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. Ironically, 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. Being a bearer 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 opposed 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 cross¬
class 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 day-
break to make straight the way’ (p. 109).13 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 tran-
scendence 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 meta-
morphosed 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.14 With her moral authority, goddess-like carriage and
capacity for mediation and inspiration, Beatrice has recognisably be-
come 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 pon-
dered 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.¹⁸ 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;¹⁹ in Frederic Jameson's terms, 'plot falls into history'.²⁰ '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.
NOTES


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.


10. On Achebe’s endorsement of Ikem views, and on his revisionist liberalism, see: David Maughan-Brown, unpublished paper, ‘*Anthills on the Savannah*’s solution to *The Trouble with Nigeria*’, ACLALS Conference, University of Kent, Canterbury, 29 August 1989, pp. 4-5.

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.
Achebe as Artist: The Place and Significance of Anthills of the Savannah

Before we assess Achebe's contribution to the development of African literature we must put the record straight and see things in their proper perspective. It is necessary to start by stating categorically that Achebe was not the first to write realistic fiction in Anglophone Africa. It is a well-known fact that Cyprian Ekwensi, the Nigerian writer, published his People of the City in 1954, four years before Things Fall Apart saw the light of day. In South Africa the first novel in English by a black writer, Sol Plaatje's Mhudi, was published in 1930. In Zimbabwe the first novel to be published in the Shona language, Solomon Mutswairo's Feso, came out in 1957, one year before Things Fall Apart.

Be that as it may, the name of Chinua Achebe is synonymous with the rise and development of modern African literature because Achebe is a pace-setter. At the time when Africa was awakening from the deep sleep of colonial domination Achebe was one of the first to record and promote the rising consciousness of the African in the process of fighting for nationhood. His first novel, Things Fall Apart, and Camara Laye's The African Child together heralded the rise of the modern African novel, and Things Fall Apart overshadowed any work that was published before it. The two novels, together with Negritude poetry, marked the awakening of nationalist consciousness in Africa and pointed the way for the rest of African writers, particularly novelists. Thus the publication of Things Fall Apart was a landmark in the cultural and political development of Africa.

A perceptive analysis of the development of African history and literature will also show that the publication of A Man of the People was another turning point. During the struggle for independence the African politician and the African writer joined hands in the campaign against colonialism and cultural imperialism, but in less than a decade of their rule many African leaders proved that they were incapable of providing adequate leadership. Instead, African rule was characterised by neo-colonialism, economic mismanagement, tribalism, corruption and other
social ills. Achebe would summarise the whole problem as a leadership problem. Consequently, while Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Camara Laye's *The African Child*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and Negritude poetry had been a response to Africa's encounter with Europe and the consequent rejection of European cultural and political domination, it was now incumbent upon the African writer to ask questions about the way things were going in independent Africa, and Achebe led the way. *A Man of the People* was the first major novel of disillusionment in Anglophone Africa. Published in 1966, two years before Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, it was the first novel in English to seriously tackle the theme of corruption in high places.

It is my contention in this paper that Achebe was destined to be the doyen of African fiction writers for two principal reasons. The first of these is that he was a talented writer and a genuine artist. There are many who have been given the talent to use words and to tell interesting stories, but the genuine artist strives to go beyond the telling of a good and captivating story and endeavours to communicate something of significance and lasting value; to tell a story which captures the history of a whole generation, of a nation, at the same time as telling the story of particular individuals. The genuine artist causes us to reflect on our own lives, on the lives of our nations and the history of humankind as we read about individual characters in a novel.

In Achebe's authorship character is intricately bound up with history and social circumstance. Okonkwo, Obi and Ezeulu are genuine characters with individual qualities and traits and yet their behaviour is influenced by history and social conditions. In Odili and Chief Nanga Achebe has created characters with very distinct personal qualities, but their story is also the story of Nigeria soon after independence, and, I dare say, the story of many an African country. The death of Okonkwo is the death of an individual character, but it is also a symbol of the destruction of the social fabric of Igbo society as a result of the onslaught of western cultural, political and economic influences. The same is true of the demise of Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu. The experiences and predicament of Obi Okonkwo are a mirror of the experiences of any African intellectual who found himself in a responsible position during the transition from colonialism to independence in the 1950s and 1960s. What all this means is that as we follow the progress of Achebe's characters we are engaging in an interpretation and assessment of the progress and failures of African nations.

And yet the success of Achebe's art does not only consist in his creation of characters. His work has other enduring qualities; one of these is his use of language. I have said of *Arrow of God* that 'Achebe writes in Standard English, but by no means in conventional English. He di-
verges into different directions depending on the interlocutor, the historical and social context and on the interlocutor’s age, sex, education and so on. Consequently, Achebe uses language that is appropriate to character and circumstance. This does not happen by accident. It is in line with what Achebe says in the essay ‘The African Writer and the English Language’ in which he declares:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.

Character portrayal and the use of language alone do not fully account for the success of Achebe’s art. There is, in addition, the writer’s skill in telling the story, his narrative technique. In his first four novels our author’s plots are basically linear and the story is told in chronological order (there is a slight variation in No Longer At Ease).

An aspect of narrative structure is point of view. In the first three novels Achebe adopts the omniscient narrator point of view. However, in A Man of the People he adopts a different technique. Here the author employs the first-person narrative, with the story told by the protagonist who is Odili. The first-person narrator technique enables the writer to project Odili, not only as a commentator on what goes on in the novel, but as a spokesperson from whom the author can distance himself. Achebe masters both techniques; relying on the omniscient narrator technique in Things Fall Apart, he has created a story full of power and beauty, and in A Man of the People the author exploits the first-person narrator technique to create an ironic situation in which the protagonist is both the author’s spokesperson and one of the prime objects of criticism. Consequently A Man of the People is a humorous novel which invites the reader to at once condemn and laugh at human foibles and misdemeanours.

Successful as they are in character portrayal, the use of language and narrative technique, Achebe’s novels would not be as great as they are if the author did not have a social vision and a clearly articulated philosophy of art. This is the second of Achebe’s qualities referred to above.

One of the hallmarks of Achebe as a creative artist is that he is a committed writer who firmly believes that the writer has a mission in society. Way back in 1964 he had this to say: ‘The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self respect. The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.’ Here Achebe was
referring to what he called 'the fundamental theme' that had to be disposed of first, namely, 'that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans'. To perform this task, Achebe went on to say, and to explore the human condition in depth, the writer had to have a proper sense of history.

What Achebe called 'a proper sense of history' explains two fundamental features of his art. The first is that reading Achebe's novels is like reading about the history of Africa from pre-colonial times through colonialism and the early days of independence to the present, a fact which ties up with what I said earlier about Achebe's characters who have distinctive traits and at the same time epitomise the experiences of African nations and peoples. Second, and this is very important, Achebe's works are characterised by realism.

To have a clear understanding and appreciation of the aspect of realism we must distinguish between authorial ideology and aesthetic ideology. Authorial ideology is the social vision of the writer which can be defined in terms of whether he or she is a nationalist, a liberal democrat, a radical, a revolutionary and so on. Judging from what Achebe says about 'the fundamental theme' and going by his pronouncements in other essays such as 'The Novelist as Teacher' in which he sees himself espousing a revolution consisting in helping his society 'regain belief in itself and put away years of denigration and self-abasement', it becomes clear that from the point of view of authorial ideology Achebe is a nationalist or liberal democrat. As a nationalist writing during the period of agitation against colonial domination he might have been tempted to glorify African culture and the African past. But that is not Achebe's way of doing things. From the point of view of aesthetic ideology, from the standpoint of his theory of artistic representation, our author is a realist. This means, among other things, that he does not give us a false or biased view of the historical epoch he sets out to portray. In his 'old world' novels, he makes use of a wide variety of characters to represent different social groups and points of view. His characters are typical and the circumstances under which they operate are natural and convincing. In Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God he gives us a truthful and balanced picture of Igbo society and does not gloss over its weaknesses despite his declared intention to dispose of 'the fundamental theme'. This is not just a matter of talent – it is a result of the author's reflections on the functions of the writer in society and on the problem of the mode of artistic representation in literary creativity. In other words, it is an expression of the author's social vision and philosophy of art. In 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation' Achebe has this to say about re-creating the past:
This is where the writer’s integrity comes in. Will he be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those facts which flatter him? If he succumbs he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness. But it is not only his personal integrity as an artist which is involved. The credibility of the world he is attempting to re-create will be called to question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other people’s pasts ours had its good as well as its bad sides.7

What Achebe is alluding to here is that in literary creativity there is often a contradiction between authorial and aesthetic ideology, between the author’s political and social views on the one hand, and the demands of art on the other. The writer has to be careful not to let the imperatives of political ideology triumph over artistic creativity. From what I have said it is clear that Achebe’s art is a model of the triumph of realism over the claims of nationalism. This is why I say Things Fall Apart is a greater work of art than The African Child. In the latter book Camara Laye gets carried away by the imperatives of nationalism and so nationalism tends to triumph over realism. As Achebe puts it, The African Child is ‘a little too sweet’ because the author has not realised that ‘any serious African writer who wants to plead the cause of the past must not only be God’s advocate, he must also do duty for the devil’.8 This brings us to Achebe’s latest novel, which is the subject of the rest of this paper.

First published in 1987 by William Heinemann in Britain and in 1988 by Anchor Press in New York, Anthills of the Savannah saw the light of day thirty years after the publication of Things Fall Apart and just over twenty years after its immediate predecessor, A Man of the People. Before the publication of his latest novel, many commentators thought that our author had dried up. Then, when the world least expected it, Anthills of the Savannah appeared on the world’s literary scene.

When I learned about the publication of the book, a series of questions immediately presented themselves to my mind: Does Achebe have anything new to say? Does the new novel indicate a development in social vision and artistic creativity? Is Achebe capable of maintaining the artistic excellence of his first novel, Things Fall Apart? Is the publication of this new novel another landmark in the development of African literature? What, in short, is the place and significance of Anthills of the Savannah relative to Achebe’s own works and in relation to African history and the development of African literature?

Elsewhere I have argued that Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s ideological perspective has developed from nationalist politics to revolutionary politics,
from critical realism to socialist art. The suggestion here is that a writer who is continually coming to grips with the problems of society and art is likely to develop to higher levels of social consciousness and, as a consequence, to strive for new forms of artistic representation, forms which match his or her quest for democracy and social transformation. The burden of this paper is to show that a sensitive and perceptive reading of *Anthills of the Savannah* will reveal that Achebe has risen to new heights in both artistic excellence and social vision. Let us briefly examine the various features of his art outlined in the previous section, starting with the use of language.

When writers make their debut with a classic of the quality of *Things Fall Apart* it is often not easy for them to match that first performance in later works. In my own estimation *Things Fall Apart* stands head and shoulders above the other three novels. With regard to the use of the language it may be argued that although he over-played the importance of proverbs in *Arrow of God*, his skill in that particular aspect has become so perfect that the language of the third novel is superior to that of any of the other novels, *Things Fall Apart* included. But when we read *Anthills of the Savannah* we are struck by a new and refreshing quality in the use of language, a quality that is perhaps discernible in *No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of the People*, but not in the same degree of excellence. Achebe’s basic philosophy regarding the use of the English language by the African writer has not changed. There is, for instance, a clear distinction between the language of relatively uneducated people like Agnes, Beatrice’s housemaid, and Elewa, Ikem Osodi’s girlfriend. These consistently speak Pidgin, unlike Beatrice, Chris, Ikem and His Excellency, all of whom belong to the educated elite and would normally use standard English. It is also clear that the bearded old man who is one of the leaders of the Abazon delegation that meets Ikem at Harmony Hotel in Chapter 9 is reminiscent of the likes of Ezeulu, those who represent traditional wisdom and are blessed with the gift of eloquence. His English is meant to be Achebe’s rendering of the Igbo he would have spoken. This is all familiar to Achebe’s readers, but there are some new elements now. Achebe is such a master of the English language that he is able to skilfully combine what sounds like conventional English spoken and written by linguistically talented mother tongue speakers with a local educated variety of the language and the idiom of non-English speaking characters, to produce a style which is almost classical but almost with an underlying informal touch that saves it from being stilted. Consider, for example, this passage from the first chapter of the novel:
On my right sat the Honourable Commissioner for Education. He is by far the most frightened of the lot. As soon as he had sniffed peril in the air he had begun to disappear into his hole, as some animals and insects do, backwards. Instinctively he had gathered his papers together and was in the very act of lifting the file-cover over them and dragging them into his hole after him when his entire body suddenly went rigid. Stronger alarms from deeper recesses of instinct may have alerted him to the similarity between his impending act and a slamming of the door in the face of His Excellency. A fantastic thing happened then. He drops the file-cover in such panic that everyone now turns to him and sees him perform the strangest act of all: the scattering again of his Council Papers in panic atonement and restitution for the sacrilege he has come so close to committing. Inadvertently. Then he glances round the table until his eyes meet His Excellency’s and fall dead on the mahogany.\(^\text{10}\)

The following passage from Chapter 7 is also worthy of the reader’s attention:

I was determined from the very beginning to put my career first and, if need be, last. That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like Women’s Lib. You often hear people say: But that’s something you picked up in England. Absolute rubbish! There was enough male chauvinism in my father’s house to last me seven reincarnations! (p. 88)

The first passage represents Chris Oriko’s language and the second Beatrice’s. The features which are clearly noticeable in the two passages are the conversational style, the natural flow of the language and how easily readable the extracts are. It is also worth noting that in these and many other passages Achebe is able to maintain a fine balance between informality and formality. This is partly because he employs the first-person narrator point of view. At the same time he does not lose the opportunity to exploit the use of local idioms which even highly educated people like Professor Reginald Okong are wont to use in appropriate situations. In the following passage Professor Okong is attempting to curry favour with His Excellency the President:

‘But Your Excellency, you are too generous. Too generous by half! Why does every bad thing in this country start in Abazon Province? The Rebellion was there . . . If you ask me, your Excellency, God does not sleep. How do we know that that drought they are suffering over there may not be God’s judgement for all the troubles they have caused in this country. And now they have the audacity to write Your Excellency to visit their Province and before you can even reply to their invitation they carry their nonsense come your house. I think Your Excellency that you are being too generous. Too generous by half, I am sorry to say.’ (p. 18)
It is amazing how Achebe manages to combine a wide variety of stylistic features and to slide into different moods with great ease. The style is on the whole lighthearted. The novel deals with very serious matters but the tenor of discourse is relaxed and sufficiently informal to allow the reader to reflect and digest the ideas without being overburdened by a heavy style. This is also true of *A Man of the People*, but I believe that it is more difficult to achieve in *Anthills* because whereas in the former novel the principal characters, Odili and Chief Nanga, are not portrayed as serious-minded characters, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, all the major characters are addressing what they believe to be grave matters but in a manner which is never so serious as to bring about a feeling of depression in the mind of the reader. On the contrary there is even irresistible humour in many a passage when Professor Okong refers to the overthrow of the civilian regime as ‘a historic fall from grace to the grass’ (p. 12) and in passages depicting His Excellency the President's wit and wry humour.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* the use of language is intricately bound up with the author’s narrative technique. As already explained Achebe’s plots in the first novels are basically linear and he adopts the omniscient point of view in all the novels except *A Man of the People* in which he experiments with the first-person narrator technique. *Anthills* has a far more complex plot than any of its predecessors. This is partly a result of the fact that the author makes a complicated use of the first-person narrative and combines it with the omniscient narrator technique. The story is told from the point of view of three characters – Chris Oriko, the Commissioner for Information in the Republic of Kangan; Ikem Osodi, editor of the *National Gazette*; and Beatrice Okoh, Chris’s girlfriend and a Senior Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. In addition to these three narrators there is the omniscient narrator who takes over from each one of them at a convenient point. For example, the events that take place in Chapter 1 are narrated by Chris Oriko who, like Beatrice, puts his observations in writing. But in Chapter 2 the omniscient narrator takes over. In Chapter 4 we have the first-person narrator point of view, Ikem Osodi being the storyteller, and in Chapter 5 the omniscient narrator takes over again, and this goes on and on. An important consequence of the technique is that the author is able to explore in depth a wide variety of issues from different angles. Instead of seeing the events through the eyes of one storyteller as in *A Man of the People*, we are presented with the versions of at least four major narrators. Take the character of His Excellency the President, for example. We get to know him from what Chris says about him, from what Ikem says, from Beatrice's internal monologues as well as her conversations with Chris, and also from the events described by the
omniscient narrator. As a result His Excellency emerges as a rounded character who does not only have distinctive features and qualities, but also gives us a genuine insight into the behaviour and ideology of some African Heads of State and into their relations with their ministers and other senior government officials. Through the omniscient narrator we get an insight into the President’s capacity to keep his ministers on their toes by playing them off against one another, and through Beatrice’s narrative we begin to see a sharp contrast between his ability to control his own ministers and the ease with which Westerners, even mere journalists, can dominate his thinking and behaviour, as in the case of Lou Cranford, the American journalist we meet in Chapter 6. The upshot of this multiple narrator technique is that Achebe creates four main characters each of whom gives us a view of the society and political set-up depicted in the novel.

As if the multiple narrator technique is not sufficiently complicated in itself, Achebe adds to the complexity of the plot by making generous use of the flashback and other modes of narration. For example, we get to know about the past lives of His Excellency and of other characters through the recollections of Chris and Beatrice. For instance, we meet His Excellency exercising his power as Head of State at the beginning of Chapter 1 and only at the end of the same chapter does Chris explain how Sam came to be President and how his education and military training prepared him for the position. What is more, we only get a clear account of the relationship between Sam, Chris and Ikem at the end of Chapter 5.

There are other features which add to the complexity of the narrative structure of Anthills of the Savannah. One of these is the use of symbolism in conjunction with myth and allusion. A supreme example of this feature is Ikem’s ‘Hymn to the Sun’ (pp. 30-33) which foreshadows the disaster that follows in the novel and is probably a comment on the self-destructive tactics of His Excellency who, in an attempt to preserve his own power, resorts to destroying his former friends and is himself destroyed in the process. There is also the reference to David Diop’s poem, ‘Africa’, whose last lines encapsulate one of Achebe’s suggestions about the way forward for Africa – that what is at issue, is not so much a political system, as the patience to develop, through experience and over a long period of time, a viable political and economic system (see pp. 23-128). Finally, there is the naming ceremony for Elewa’s daughter which symbolises a new major development – that the world of Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God has now gone and has been replaced by new social values in that, contrary to custom, the naming has been done collectively by young people and the old man from the village who was supposed to perform the task realises that social values
have changed and so accepts and blesses what the young people have done (see ch. 18).

What I have outlined so far is sufficient evidence of new developments that have taken place in Achebe as an artist. But the question still remains: Are there any new changes in social consciousness and artistic vision? Has there been a significant development in authorial ideology and aesthetic ideology? From the point of view of dialectical criticism it is pertinent to ask whether Achebe has developed from a basically nationalist consciousness or liberal democracy to socialist or revolutionary consciousness, and from critical realism, the aesthetic ideology that characterises his first four novels, to socialist realism. My point of departure is that unlike Ngugi wa Thiong’o Achebe has not become a Marxist. Consequently, the development that has taken place between the publication of *Things Fall Apart* and the writing of *Anthills of the Savannah* is not comparable to the transformation that took place between the publication of *The River Between* and the writing of *Petals of Blood*.

For one thing, like many other African writers, Achebe’s analysis of African society is presented from the point of view of one class – the petit bourgeoisie, or, to be more precise, the intelligentsia. All his major characters – Chris, Ikem, Beatrice and Sam (Him Excellency) are members of the educated elite class. The intelligentsia occupies the centre of the stage in Achebe’s world while the other classes are either pushed to the periphery or relegated to oblivion. The two major classes of oppressed and deprived people, the peasants and the workers, are given a place in the world of *Anthills*, but they are given minor roles to play in the drama of that world. The peasantry is represented by the delegation from Abazon and by Elewa’s mother and uncle who visit Bassa for the naming ceremony. The working class is represented by the taxi-drivers who form an alliance with Ikem. These are minor characters and our author does not give us sufficient insight into their lives and into their response to the events and problems that plague the Republic of Kangan. Indeed the peasants of Abazon Province come to Bassa in an effort to reach an accommodation with ‘the big Chief’ with a view to persuading the Government to continue with the work on bore-holes which was stopped because of the people of Abazon’s refusal to support His Excellency’s claim to life presidency, and indeed Chris Oriko ultimately flees to drought-stricken Abazon and dies there in the company of Emmanuel Obete, the President of the Students’ Union, and Braimoh, one of the taxi-drivers; but we as readers do not have firsthand information about the living conditions, life style and predicament of the inhabitants of rural Abazon. As for the most privileged class, the class of rich people who own the means of production, our
only encounter with it is through a brief reference to Alhaji Abdul Mahmoud, Chairman of the Kangan/American Chamber of Commerce who wallows in the filth of wealth and corruption (p. 117).

Some will no doubt accuse me of telling Achebe to write a novel he did not set out to write. The accusation may well be justified but I submit that the point I am making is a valid one – that Achebe gives us a somewhat partial view of the social fabric of the Republic of Kangan because the story is presented from the point of view of one class, the class to which the author belongs, namely, the petit bourgeoisie and, in particular, the political and intellectual elite. In *Petals of Blood* Ngugi goes beyond the confines of his own class and portrays in some depth the activities of workers and peasants. Dialectical criticism maintains that the vision of a non-Marxist writer like Achebe is constrained by the limitations of the writer’s ‘false consciousness’ and so he or she will display a limited world view with regard to the place of various classes in society. Consequently what such a writer presents is a partial view of the epoch he or she has chosen to write about.

In spite of the limitations of authorial ideology referred to above, I want to argue in the remaining part of this paper that *Anthills of the Savannah* demonstrates some major developments in Achebe’s political philosophy and artistic vision. I wish to start by quoting Georg Lukacs who has said, The difference between the Marxist and the non- or pre-Marxist revolutionary democrat consists in the fact that the latter is not conscious of the social and epistemological connections which underlie the unity of his theory and practice and that he fulfils this unity generally on the basis of a “false consciousness”, often full of illusions.’ Lukacs then goes on to make a very important observation which clarifies what sometimes appears to be a contradiction between a writer’s authorial ideology and his or her aesthetic ideology, between the writer’s professed political belief and the ideology projected in his or her writings. I refer here to instances where a writer who is not a revolutionary or radical projects a revolutionary or radical world view in his or her works. One has in mind writers like Balzac and Tolstoy who were royalist in political inclination but wrote novels that projected the rebellious spirit of the peasantry. Says Lukacs, ‘But the history of literature proves that if a writer is deeply rooted in popular life, if his writing stems from this intimacy with the most important questions of popular life, he can, even with a “false consciousness”, plumb the real depths of historical truth.’

One of the major indications of Achebe’s development in social consciousness is his portrayal of women. In the earlier novels women are given minor roles and all the major parts are taken by male characters. There is one significant exception to this and that is Clara in *No Longer
At Ease, but while she is a fully developed character, she finds herself acting in a world dominated by men, and while Obi genuinely loves her, he tends to patronise her and is portrayed as her intellectual superior. Beatrice, on the other hand, is neither intellectually inferior to Chris nor dominated and patronised by him. Their relationship is a relationship of equals who have a natural attraction for each other. While she rejects the Western concept of Women’s Lib, she is certainly of the view that woman is equal to man and a woman can live a complete life without a man. It is indeed significant that Beatrice is the only government official who is brave enough to tell His Excellency off. Disgusted by the excessive deference His Excellency shows to Lou, a mere journalist, because she is an American, Beatrice is bold enough to accost the Head of State who normally reduces his ministers to the status of mere boys: “If I went to America today, to Washington DC, would I, could I, walk into a White House private dinner and take the American President hostage. And his Defence Chief and his Director of CIA?” (p. 81).

It is also significant that Beatrice is closely connected with Ikem’s daughter, who symbolises hope for a better future, and worthy of note that Ikem’s child is a girl. It is Beatrice who names the child and the symbolic significance of the child is captured in the name Beatrice chooses for her: ‘We have our own version of hope that springs eternal. We shall call this child AMAECHINA: May-the-path-never-close. Ama for short’ (p. 222). So the struggle for justice and democracy continues and the seed of revolution Ikem Osodi has planted shall grow again patiently and obstinately until its fruit gradually acquires the bitter taste of liberty, as David Diop says in his great poem which is quoted as an epigraph at the beginning of Chapter 10.

But what is this seed that Ikem has planted? It is my contention that if there is any character whose ideas and views are most closely related to Achebe’s views about art and politics, it is Ikem Osodi. Through the opinions of Ikem and other characters, Achebe persuades the reader to reflect on a number of topical issues – the place of women in society, issues relating to class struggle and theories of revolution, the African predicament, as well as issues relating to literary theory and the role of the writer in society. As a novelist and a journalist and also as one who is not directly part of His Excellency’s government machinery, Ikem appears to be the most appropriate character to raise some of these questions and to reflect on them.

With regard to the question of women, his views are deeply influenced by his interaction with Beatrice who has definite ideas about the place of women in society. Among other things, Beatrice holds the view that ‘giving women today the same role which traditional society gave
them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough' (p. 91), and she sees this as a weakness in Ikem's original political position, as a fact which blurs his vision as a writer. It is her discussions with him on questions such as these that lead him to formulate his new theory on women and other oppressed social groups. His reflections on the problem of women result in the formulation of a radical theory of social class. 'The women . . . are the biggest single group of oppressed people in the world,' says Ikem, . . . but they are not the only such group. There are others - rural peasants in every land, the urban poor in industrialised countries, Black people everywhere, including their own continent, ethnic and religious minorities and castes in all countries (p. 98). Using Ikem as a mouthpiece, Achebe comments on the theory of class and class struggle and calls to question some of the fundamental tenets of historical Marxism, including the idea of a millennium in which there is no oppression of one social group by another after the establishment of communism. Ikem believes that the orthodox Marxist position proposes a simplistic remedy to the problem of oppression. For his part, he does not believe that once a socialist and communist revolution has taken place, all the social problems of society are bound to disappear:

'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. The rising, conquering tide, yes; but the millennium afterwards, no! New oppressors will have been readying themselves secretly in the undertow long before the tidal wave got really going.' (p. 99)

From these universal issues let us turn to some of Ikem's reflections on the African predicament. In A Man of the People Achebe exposes the corrupting power of privilege and position. In A Man of the People we see how people who have been given positions of authority in society are tempted to abuse those positions and indulge in self-aggrandisement and personal pleasure at the expense of the majority. In Anthills of the Savannah we are made to reflect more deeply on the problem. There is indeed massive corruption; there is subservience to foreign manipulation, which is despicable, there are the problems of capitalism; but that is not all. There is a deeper problem, as Ikem begins to realise: 'The prime failure of this government began also to take on a clearer meaning for him . . . . It is 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). The leadership does not have the interests of the people at heart and has lost contact with the people. In this connection it is pertinent to
note that if there is any Nigerian politician Achebe holds in high esteem, it is the late Mallam Aminu Kano. And why does he extoll Aminu Kano? The answer is given in The Trouble with Nigeria: Aminu Kano gave the example of ‘a selfless commitment to the common people of our land whom we daily deprive and dispossess and whose plight we treat so callously and frivolously’.12

Ikem Osodi looks at all the issues referred to above and others in relation to his function as a writer. In the course of articulating his political philosophy he is in the same breath propounding a theory of artistic creativity. His rejection of aspects of the orthodoxy of historical Marxism is closely linked with his views on the relationship between art and any belief. Referring to Graham Greene, a staunch Roman Catholic who does not idealise Catholic priests in his novels, Ikem asks: ‘‘Why then does he write so compulsively about bad, doubtful and doubting priests?’’ And the answer he gives is, ‘‘Because a genuine artist, no matter what he says he believes, must feel in his blood the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy’’ (p. 100). This harks back to what we said about realism: that through its own dynamics it forces the writer to depict the world as it is rather than as he or she would like it to be. Ikem in fact refers to this in his discussion with Beatrice in Chapter 7. The writer must not seek to constrain his or her characters but must let them go ahead and say or do things which make the creator uncomfortable. ‘‘It simply dawned on me two mornings ago that a novelist must listen to his characters who after all are created to wear the shoe and point the writer where it pinches’’ (pp. 96-97).

In his lecture to university students in Chapter 13 Ikem addresses the all-important question of the function of the writer. The writer does not provide solutions to problems, he argues; a writer does not give answers, but asks questions. Writers do not give prescriptions, they give headaches. Writers are therefore gadflies that prick our consciences. The most important function of the writer is to induce people to reflect upon the condition of their lives, to raise their consciousness so that they can begin to ask why things are as they are, why things are going wrong:

No I cannot give you the answer you are clamouring for. Go home and think! I cannot decree your pet, text-book revolution. I want instead to excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives because, as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living. . . . As a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self-examination. (p. 158)
What conclusions can we draw about Achebe’s development as an artist since the publication of the first four novels, and what is the significance of *Anthills of the Savannah*? It should be clear from what has been said in the main body of this essay that a Marxist interpretation of the novel will see some weaknesses in Achebe’s social analysis, and consequently in his mode of representation. But there is no doubt that in *Anthills of the Savannah* our author has produced a novel whose complexity in narrative structure is second to none, a novel which raises questions about, and probes profoundly into a wide variety of, fundamental issues. For instance Ikem’s point about all certitude being suspect (p. 99) and his scepticism about a millennium has been vindicated before our very eyes in this decade. In Eastern Europe and Asia socialist countries have come to the realisation that the mere adoption of socialism as a political ideology is not in itself a panacea that presents ready solutions to all problems of social and economic development. After going through a fervent cultural revolution China abandoned the approach in 1978 and adopted an open-door policy and a form of socialism that is suited to Chinese conditions. In the Soviet Union, Gorbachev has followed suit with his perestroika, while one of the former leaders of the German Democratic Republic, Mr Krenz, recently called for a redefinition of socialism. This is not to say that there is necessarily something inherently wrong with socialism, but simply to emphasise the point Achebe makes that simplistic remedies like the dictatorship of the proletariat are likely to fail.

Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* ends with a wonderful vision of workers and peasants leading the struggle to bring about an end to exploitation and class struggle:

> From Koitalel through Kang’ethe to Kimathi it has been the peasants, aided by the workers, small traders and small landowners, who had mapped out the path. Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system and all its prying bloodthirsty gods and gnomic angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh. Then, only then, would the kingdom of man and woman really begin, they joining and loving, in creative labour...

This is the kind of enthusiasm about which Achebe is saying: ‘Wait a minute. Is it really going to be as simple as all that? Is there no likelihood of new oppressors emerging from among the victors?’ Commenting on this very passage in *Art and Ideology in the African Novel* I have had occasion to make the point that ‘socialism is an ideal to fight for since its aim is to end the exploitation of man by man, to reduce inequality and to improve the quality of life for everyone, but it is
important to admit that contradictions can never be completely wiped out'.

Part of the greatness of Anthills of the Savannah lies in the fact that it does not only raise such questions. It compels the reader to reflect upon them, and there is no greater achievement writers can hope for than to be able to persuade their readers to reflect on the issues raised in their works. Anthills of the Savannah challenges the reader to address fundamental questions about society and art and to engage in the process of self-examination. In comparison with Achebe's other works, the latest novel is at least as great as Things Fall Apart and is a far more complex novel. In the context of African literature I rank it with some of the finest works to have come out of the continent, works like Petals of Blood, God's Bits of Wood and In the Fog of the Season's End. Furthermore, I believe Anthills of the Savannah is another landmark in the development of African literature for coming a decade after the revolutionary fervour of works like Two Thousand Seasons and Petals of Blood it re-examines, in a particularly incisive and pointed manner, fundamental issues relating to political leadership, the place of women in society, the role of the artist and the whole question of revolution and social change. We may disagree with his analysis of some of these issues but we are bound to concede that he succeeds in making us re-examine our assumptions. For this reason we can safely claim that with the publication of Anthills of the Savannah Achebe has truly become the great eagle that soars to the heights of committed literary artistry to perch on the giant iroko so that birds of weaker feathers look up in great amazement and dare not scale the mountain.

NOTES

8. Ibid., p. 9.


Repossessing Time: Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*

And what is the difference between what the historian (and literary criticism is a branch of history) remembers, and what the poet remembers? Time. To the dictator time is a given period of which he is terrified – for him there is no consolation in the fact that his bronze image will be at least bad art or that the bard who sings his achievements can take permanent revenge by writing badly about him.

_Derek Walcott, ‘Caligula’s Horse’_

The first one-and-a-half pages of *Anthills of the Savannah* contain over twenty references to time. In a sense, it would be surprising indeed if a novel by Achebe did not concern itself with the past and the movement of time and its effects. All his previous novels have blended and reworked the often contradictory forms of classical realism and historical romance into an African context to the extent that he has largely set the agenda for the subsequent development of the African novel. An early critic of Achebe’s, the Canadian novelist, Margaret Laurence, recognised the importance of his achievement and its determining effects upon African writing when she wrote that he sees ‘History in terms of people with names and conflicts and places of belonging. His sense of social injustice is like a white-hot sword wielded through his powerful irony.’ Yet history, without diminishing its importance in a post-colonial context, can be made and remade almost at will, given the right circumstances and a voice empowered by indignation and sympathy. But time is different from history – more fluximal, elusive, challenging, and the novel’s recurrent references to time require a closer investigation of temporal structures and what is being articulated through the novel’s representation of time.

The keywords in Laurence’s assessment of Achebe allude to the fundamental forms of a particular kind of fictional realism: ‘people’, ‘names’, ‘places’, ‘conflict’. Such minimal definitions of realist narrative are supplemented in Achebe’s fictions by the equally minimal and fundamental narrative strategy of cause and effect or the sequential nature of events in time. Achebe’s foregrounding of time in *Anthills of the*
Savannah marks a new enquiry into the nature of narrative as a way of apprehending and controlling fictional worlds through the temporal sequence of events. Achebe’s text offers a glimpse into fiction’s ‘atomic structure’, as it were, and takes as its principal subject the nature of narrative in an age of oppression.

Christopher Oriki’s witnessing of time is destabilised in the presence of His Excellency. The first words of the novel refer to time being ‘wasted’ or repeated. ‘How many times, for God’s sake, am I expected to repeat it?’, ‘I would never have said it again that second time.’ Minutes grow to ‘fullness’, silence is a matter of duration, not quiet, which ‘grows rapidly into its own kind of contest’. Recorded time, ‘the crazy log-book of this our ship of state’, falsifies the past making it impossible ‘to point to a specific and decisive event and say: it was at such and such a point that everything went wrong’. Sequence is distorted for the ‘present was there from the very beginning’ and ‘now’ is the past, and ‘long ago’ – ‘a year ago?’, ‘two years?’ – becomes ‘the end’. A day is not time but quality since ‘days are good or bad for us now according to how His Excellency gets out of bed in the morning’ (pp. 1-2).

It is not merely the State which the dead hand of His Excellency rests upon, for his dark and ludicrous dominion spreads to encompass the perception of time itself. The novel begins by asking how, in these dark days, can narrative be made when time itself is usurped? How can the novelist repossess time, which has been stolen, and return it to narrative to order events into stories? Repossessing time becomes imperative for the artist who lives under tyranny, for the control of time is an unendurable despotism, more terrible than the control of history. Under despotism, history, however distorted, can still be written: bad art or bardic praise can, as Walcott states, take a kind of revenge. But without time narrative is impossible. The insistence upon a regard for temporality makes Anthills of the Savannah a radical text because it views the production of narrative as profoundly political in the context of a struggle against oppression for the right and means to order experience into coherence. Time, as a main constituent of narrative, becomes the first and last line of defence against tyranny.

Time proceeds relativistically; its dimensions are not single and unilinear, but multiple and interrelated. The narrations are framed within ‘temporalisations’ of an intricate and diagnostic kind. In Chris’s narration, for example, tenses are used to indicate unfolding dimensions of time and tyranny. The narration foregrounds the present tense which discloses a distinctive attitude towards its subject. The ‘present is a signal’ which identifies ‘this discourse as an observer’s language’: the world of the tyrant is seen, observed. The present tense normally indicates ‘shared time’ or ‘coevalness’ – observer and observed caught at
the same point in time. Achebe asserts coevalness but only to depict the way in which the regime denies participation in the present. His Excellency promulgates the notion that time and the state are shared, common property, but simultaneously, the dictator is in sole possession of both the state and the present: ‘His Excellency speaks...’ ‘I say nothing...’ (p. 3). The present implies a closeness of contact, face to face, even intimate. Yet in Achebe’s usage it affirms the opposite – difference and distance. Through the use of the present tense, Chris and His Excellency appear to occupy the same place at the same time, yet conversely, the text demonstrates the opposite, that the dictator has taken possession of this discourse.

But His Excellency is not entirely successful. Whenever the present tense is used, it is used as a signal for the narrator to present a commentary on the event just witnessed. In this quotation, the present opens upon an alternative and subversive commentary:

But His Excellency speaks instead. And not even to him the latest offender but still to me. And he is almost friendly and conciliatory, the amazing man. In that instant the day changes. The fiery sun retires temporarily behind a cloud: we are reprieved and immediately celebrating. I can hear in advance the many compliments we will pay him as soon as his back is turned: that the trouble with His Excellency is that he can never hurt a man and go to sleep over it. (p. 3)

The text creates a double present tense whereby event and commentary share the same temporal dimension. Irony is achieved by the evocation of events which are happening, and a commentary which is provided simultaneously, in an alternative ‘now’ as it were. The dictator is outside the dialogue between narrator and reader. Only the narrator and his reader possess human texture since they share jokes, allusions and stories which renders their ‘now’ more substantial, more ‘real’ than that other ‘now’. The dictator’s present is denied such textured reality and emerges as the negative reflection of the substantial presence of narrator and reader who are engaged in secret dialogue. His Excellency may lay claim to the present but his claim is undercut by a narrative which seeks an alternative dimension in the present. The narrator, again and again in this novel, achieves his or her status as narrator by transcending the dictator’s present and attaining a level where he or she can negotiate a dialogue with the reader. The narration passes beyond the dictator’s present tense to reconstruct other times, other conspiracies.

A similar kind of narrative strategy is employed in the relationship of time to language. In this case the double present tense of narration aligns exactly with the two languages of despotism and dissent. Chris is tuned to the subtle nuances of spoken and unspoken dialects. He can ‘read in the silence of their minds’ (p. 2) the states of despair afflict-
ing his colleagues. Chris’s own subtlety is contrasted with His Excellency’s logocentric simplicity: ‘Soldiers are plain and blunt’ (p. 4). Again, as with time, the struggle for the control of words establishes the workings of tyranny as appearing to share a language from which one is, in reality, excluded: ‘I was excluded from what he was now saying; his words were too precious to waste on professional dissidents’ (p. 4). Yet again, however, the act of exclusion from language makes language the site for an ironic confrontation. The denial of dialogue within the hierarchy of power enables dialogue outside that hierarchy between narrator and reader: ‘I liked the look of terror on my colleagues’ faces when I used the word disassociate and the relaxation that followed when they realised that I was not saying what they feared I was saying’ (p. 5). The reader needs to be tuned into Chris’s playful language to follow its twists and turns. Perhaps the word ‘dissociation’, with which Chris has so much fun at the expense of his colleagues is not such a bad term for Chris’s kind of irony which requires one not to say what one is saying. This capacity to generate other kinds of lightfooted speech multiplies as the novel progresses.

The ‘Commissioner for Words’ (p. 7) gives way to Beatrice with her first-class degree in English, a degree won with the help of ancestors who hacked ‘away in the archetypal jungle’ and ‘subverted the very sounds and legends of daybreak to make straight [her] way’ (p. 109). There is a paradoxical quality about this metaphor of language, as if to ‘make straight’ the language one has to bend it with ‘subversion’. In the face of His Excellency’s ‘plainness and bluntness’, one must use a language of chiaroscuro and difficulty. Elaborate metaphors become, by their very complex nature, subversive of the official language of brutality. ‘I knew then that if its own mother was at that moment held up by her legs and torn down the middle like a piece of old rag that crowd would have yelled with eye-watering laughter’ (p. 42). This deeply disturbing image of violation perfectly expresses the ‘blunt’ world of mass violence where dictatorships thrive. To counter this kind of language, its alternative must become twisted into fantastic shapes of elaborate metaphors to envisage a possible world of speech coeval with this world of brutality.

The birds that sang the morning in had melted away even before the last butterfly fell roasted to the ground. And when songbirds disappeared, morning herself went into the seclusion of a widow’s penance in soot and ashes, her ornaments and fineries taken from her – velvets of soft elusive light and necklaces of pure sound lying coil upon coil down to her resplendent breasts: corals and blue chalcedonies, jaspers and agates veined like rainbows. So the songbirds left no void, no empty hour when they fled because the hour itself had died before them. Morning no longer existed. (p. 31)
Ikem's hymn to the sun is one of many experiments with language contained in the novel as each narrator attempts to discover a language freed from the taint of oppression and expressive of a personal and communal autonomy. This piece of lapidary expenditure with its personifications, dialectics and use of special terms such as 'void' seems resonant of the style of Soyinka at its most exotic and undisciplined. The whole is done with a degree of irony at Ikem's expense as the lyricism gradually digs itself into a hole of hyperbole. Ultimately, this kind of language offers no viable alternative to His Excellency in the politics of language which the novel establishes. Although its power is acknowledged, it leads nowhere and in its excess, it turns in on itself and constitutes its own self-parody.

For Beatrice, the liberating agency of language is contained in the mixture of a child's game and 'her friendship with strange words':

World inside a world inside a world, without end. *Uwa t'uwa* in our language. As a child how I thrilled to that strange sound with its capacity for infinite replication till it becomes the moan of the rain in the ear as it opened and closed, opened and closed. *Uwa t'uwa t'uwa t'uwa; Uwa t'uwa.*

*Uwa t'uwa* was the building block of my many solitary games. I could make and mould all kinds of thoughts with it. I could even rock it from side to side like my wooden baby with the clipped ear. (p. 85)

The beautiful authenticity of this quirky and familiar remembrance goes, as in the case of the matter of time, to the foundations of narrative. Beatrice imaginatively reconstructs an area of cultural autonomy and personal privacy out of the formative stage of language. 'All kinds of thoughts' are reconstructed out of these 'building blocks' in a way which is reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's enquiry into the 'faded poor souvenirs of passionate moments' when he asks: 'Why for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion? ... Such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer.' The effects of such epiphanies of the fundamentals of language are felt throughout Achebe's novel as emblems of a certainty of a 'world inside a world' which His Excellency cannot control and out of which the 'infinitely replicated' narratives pour.

I shall elaborate this point shortly, but it should be said that Beatrice's 'friendship with strange words' embodies a spirit of optimism not previously present in Achebe's fiction, but it is a pretty close-run thing. Certainly, the apparent facts of life under His Excellency do not look auspicious. The nation is deracinated and silenced by a regime which elevates these conditions to a 'fact of life'. More than once, the novel asks
if its narrators are doomed 'travellers whose journeys from start to fin-
ish had been carefully programmed in advance by an alienated history?' 
The text asks despairingly, 'what must a people do to appease an em-
bittered history?' (p. 220).

Yet the spiral of decline begins to unwind itself in the novel, firstly 
through a type of ironic self-referential humour. Beatrice at one point 
responds to Ikem's statement that 'a novelist must listen to his charac-
ters who after all are created to wear the shoes and point the writer to 
where it pinches'. With the words, 'Now hold it! Are you suggesting 
I am a character in your novel?' (p. 97). Beatrice points to the fabri-
cated nature of the text she inhabits, just as Dante's guide pointed to 
the main sights in her tour of the created universe. She ushers in a tor-
rent of referential devices enclosed within her text like 'worlds within 
worlds' or words within words. She gestures towards Achebe's own 
writing: 'Girls at war! thought Beatrice with a private smile' (p. 115).
'As a matter of fact I do sometimes feel like Chielo in the novel, the 
priestess and prophetess of the Hills and the Caves' (p. 114). But the 
referential nature of the text spills out beyond Achebe's work to 
Aristotle, for example, when Ikem says, 'As the saying goes, the unex-
amined life is not worth having.'8 Or to Okigbo with the strategically 
placed reference to Mother Idoto (p. 101). Anthills of the Savannah is, 
in part, an essentially optimistic manifesto of the power of 'the literary' in 
all its variety and humanistic potential to offer an alternative epistemol-
gy to that of the state, another constellation of meaning and an arena 
for the outlawed disputation of political ideologies.

Achebe's text is founded upon the Romantic notion of the contrary 
and the contradictory nature of appearances. Art is defined in the terms 
of an 'ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy' (p. 100). Art's role 
is to contradict and as such it moves in ways which are themselves 
contradictory. Art fails in its task of capturing the grandeur of divin-
ity, so it 'ritualises incongruity' and by 'invoking the mystery of meta-
phor', art captures the 'unattainable glory' by its opposite – 'mundane 
starkness' (p. 108). This oppositional character of art does not signify, 
for Achebe, the chaotic and unstable nature of human experience; on 
the contrary, by its paradoxical nature art affirms the irreducible and 
unchangeable stability of the human personality.9 'We can only hope to 
rearrange some details in the periphery... Even a one-day-old baby does 
not make itself available to your root-and-branch psychological engineer-
ing, for it comes trailing clouds of immortality' (p. 100). The movement 
from the peripheral nature of understanding to the central core of 
'clouds of immortality' is, perhaps, too easy a transition for any but the 
believer in a leap of faith which art can accomplish. If, paradoxically, 
the diffuse and apparent chaos of the social world Achebe depicts is
but the artistic form of representation of deeper, permanent and implicit meanings, where are these to be sought and found in his own artistic practice?

One such possible source lies with the myth of Idemili which Achebe recounts in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Idemili was sent to temper masculine power by ritualising access to titles in traditional society. A man only knows if his supplications to Idemili have been successful if he remains alive three years after the rituals have been performed. His Excellency does not observe the proper forms of the ritual and ignores their results. Reading from ritual practice to the practice of political power, His Excellency has, metaphorically, broken one of the fingers of chalk; the key test in Idemili's rituals of supplication. Idemili claims what is rightly hers and the rejected despot is dead within three years. 'Such is Idemili's contempt for man's unquenchable thirst to sit in authority on his fellows' (p. 102).

This tentative theological interpretation renders the narrative pattern visible as mythological history. Time and language are remade and repossessed by myth. Reading is revelatory and involves a typological reading from one mythical narrative to the variety of social and political narratives the novel contains. Ultimately such reading is celebratory and optimistic since myth enables disorder to be theologically rendered. In *A Man of the People*, Chief Nanga is not only unpunished but rewarded for his crimes because, as the novel puts it, there is no owner to reclaim what is rightfully his. *Anthills of the Savannah* marks the return of the owner in a myth of righteous retribution which acknowledges the strategic importance of variety but ultimately insists upon the efficacy of the mythical narrative to order experience and to enable fiction. Myth, as archetypal story, is not only the means by which we read the signs, it is the means by which social justice is enacted. Human society is a work of art to Achebe, inasmuch as it 'ritualises incongruity' into the ultimate order of mythology.

Achebe's mythological principle is also, of course, a historiographic principle since it condenses the historically various into the mythological narrative. But this is a two-way street, for myth is not the terminus of history and the process can be reversed. Myth only becomes significant when vitalised by history. Without the historically specific, mythology is a reference without referent: it is simply exotic decoration. Conversely, without myth history is an alienated journey of the embittered. "It is the story ... 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. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns and directs us" (p. 124).
There is a danger, however, that such theological readings compose too comforting a unity for this challenging novel. The novel’s final challenge concerns Chris’s legacy which is, typically, a problem of language. The process of deciphering his last words again foregrounds the act of interpretation with which Chris began the novel. Emmanuel and Beatrice both interpret his words differently, both weave them into webs of significance. The final device of the novel replicates the novel’s narrative strategy as the multiple narrators construct a triangulation around a ‘centre which cannot hold’ – it is unknown, misunderstood, misheard or variously interpreted. The condition is familiar from the earliest of Achebe’s texts where the British colonialists misunderstand and misinterpret the novel the reader has just read as The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. It is a repeated pattern in Achebe’s work that misinterpretation, in the case of Things Fall Apart, symbolically crystallises the crisis of colonial intervention. Anthills of the Savannah marks a departure from that cycle of misinterpretation. Communication, in this novel, is partial and fragmentary; interpretation is plural and productive. Both Emmanuel and Beatrice construe the words differently, but both find the solace of meaning. The ‘centre cannot hold’, in the sense of offering an absolute specificity, but in this novel only His Excellency’s ‘blunt and plain’ language demands the absolutely specific; the Commissioner for Words offers a liberation which is more contingent, but also more various.

NOTES
6. I mean by this an almost Fielding-like ironic quotation from other writers’ work. Compare Ikem’s language to Soyinka’s in Idanre, for example, where ‘void’ is a particularly Soyinkan word, both in that poem and in The Interpreters. See also the description of Oya and the use of the exotic description of gems.

8. Chinua Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah, p. 158; Achebe could have extended the quotation to include the alternative term as in Hugh MacDiarmid's poem 'Second Hymn to Lenin': 'An Unexamined life is no worth ha'in / Yet Burke was right: owre muckle concern / Wi life's foundations is a sure sign of decay.'

9. Compare Achebe's statements on art to those of Schelling ('The poetic gift ... [is the] one whereby we are able to think and to couple together even what is contradictory.') or Schlegel ('At the root of personification, we find this imperative: Make spiritual all that is perceptible. At the root of allegory: Make perceptible all that is spiritual. The two together determine art.') Cited in Tzvetan Todorov, Theories of the Symbol, translated by Catherine Porter (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), pp. 185 & 186.
Anthills of the Savannah and the Ideology of Leadership

The publishers' contribution to the back-cover blurb on the paperback edition of Anthills of the Savannah consists of a single, wholly unexceptionable, sentence: 'Chinua Achebe's new novel, his first for 21 years, has been received with great acclaim.' The message is clear: Achebe is so well known that there is no need for biographical notes; this novel has been 21 years in the gestation and critics, as one might expect, have recognised the greatness of so long-awaited a novel from so fine an author.

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 mythopoetic 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 Harmonie 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 responsibility 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 'leadership'? If, as Achebe maintains, the role of leadership is 'to create the circumstances in which the people begin to act with awareness' (Rutherford, p. 3), do the incorporated taxi drivers, market women and peasants 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 probably, 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 inno-
cent’ (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 pre-
sumably 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 preoccu-
pation 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 free-
dom of thought – articulated by the student leader Emmanuel, but de-
\ned from Ikem: ‘...we may accept a limitation on our actions but
\never, under no circumstances, must we accept restriction on our think-
ing’ (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.
The following contribution is based on two interviews, one with James Currey and Keith Sambrook, and one with Alan Hill, both recorded in August 1990 in London.

On 17 June 1958 Heinemann published Things Fall Apart, written by an unknown Nigerian. They played safe and printed only 2,000 copies. The book went on to sell upwards of 3,000,000 copies in the U.K. edition alone, not counting the American editions, the reprints throughout Africa, and the translations into forty-five different languages; but apart from achieving such international acclaim it also gave the impetus to a new publishing venture which came to be the springboard for the astonishing new wave of writing from independent Africa. Alan Hill tells the story of its way to publication.

Alan Hill: I was the educational books director of Heinemann when Achebe’s manuscript came into the office. I don’t think he had any idea of the importance of what he had done. It did not occur to him that he was the first great African writer in the English language. He had just sat down and written a novel – in manuscript as he didn’t have a typewriter; and there were no carbon copies, neither was there a photocopier in those days. He just parcelled up the one copy of the manuscript in brown paper and sent it by ordinary mail to London, in response to an advertisement in The Spectator: ‘Authors’ manuscripts typed.’ He got an acknowledgement and a request for a £32 fee, which he sent by British postal order, and he heard nothing more for a year. He sent follow-ups but nothing happened and he was getting very depressed. So one of his colleagues in the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, who was on a visit to London, went to this typing agency and found the manuscript lying in a corner gathering dust. They eventually typed it and sent the manuscript back to him with one typed copy. Years later, I asked Chinua what he would have done if the manuscript had in fact been lost. ‘I would have been so discouraged,’ he replied, ‘that
I would probably have given up writing altogether... and if I had re-written it, it would have been a different book.'

Shortly afterwards he came to London on a course at the BBC. He showed it to his course officer who sent it round to Heinemann's. Heinemann's normal fiction reader read it and did a long report, but the firm was still hesitating whether to accept it. Would anyone possibly buy a novel by an African? There were no precedents. So the rather doubting bunch at the top of Heinemann's thought of the educational department, who after all sold books to Africa and were supposed to know about Africans. So they showed it to one of our educational advisers, Professor Donald MacRae, who was just back from West Africa. He read it in the office and ended the debate with an eleven-word report: 'This is the best first novel I have read since the war.' We took the book and printed 2,000 copies.

Kirsten Holst Petersen: How about editing the book. Was there any editing?

AH: No, we didn't touch a word of it. We brought it out and it was very well reviewed in The Times Literary Supplement, and C.P. Snow reviewed it and all round it had very good and respectful reviews.

This led Alan Hill to look further into publishing possibilities in Africa.

AH: Achebe could not be unique. I felt there must be other potential authors among the new university-educated generation in Nigeria. So the following year, 1959, I went to West Africa and I took the book around with me. Everywhere I was greeted with total scepticism that a recent student from the University of Ibadan should have written a novel that was of any significance at all. I then went on to travel round the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, and when I got back it was clear I needed specialised help if we were to find and publish new African authors - a feat which none of the famous British publishers who were long-established in Africa had ever attempted.

Fortune favoured me. In 1960 Nelson's talented West African specialist Van Milne had a flaming row with his boss and resigned. I at once invited him to join me. Though he was only to stay two years, his contribution was crucial. We decided to make a really cheap paperback of Things Fall Apart - 25p in fact - and look for some other books to go with it so that we could put out a package. Achebe by now had written a second book, and Van picked up Kenneth Kaunda who was just out of prison and was writing a book about the independence struggle in Zambia. Van finally approached Cyprian Ekwensi who had made something of a name for himself by writing for Hutchinson, and
he dug out a manuscript from his bottom drawer called *Burning Grass*. This made a group of four books, and by 1962 we were able to launch them as the first of 'The African Writers Series'.

Both Alan Hill and Keith Sambrook emphasise the pioneering work done by Van Milne.

**Keith Sambrook:** The African Writers Series was started by Van Milne who had joined Heinemann to develop their African publishing; he persuaded Alan Hill to back the idea in 1961, and was able to do this because Heinemann already had the copyright of the two earlier Achebe novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer At Ease*, and he got Cyprian Ekwensi to write a simple novel about Northern Nigeria, *Burning Grass*, and worked with Kenneth Kaunda on *Zambia Shall Be Free*. Those were the first four titles launched in 1962. Van had left Heinemann, when I joined in January 1963, and left behind him four manuscripts, one of which was Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*. That had come to Van through Achebe at a writers' conference in Makerere in 1962.

However, Achebe's role soon became crucial.

**AH:** Van's early departure back to Nelson's - his old boss having retired - left us in only a mild quandary. We just didn't realise the scale and importance of what we had embarked upon, as was exemplified in Van's reasons for leaving us: 'So far as Africa is concerned, Heinemann is cottage industry. I want to get back to the big time!' Suitably humbled, I invited Keith Sambrook to join us in 1963 as Van's replacement, and he worked with me until I retired.

But before he arrived I felt the need for a General Editor 'on the ground' to develop the series. So in November 1962 I sent out my number two, Tony Beal, to Nigeria to meet Chinua to invite him to be general editor. The two met in Lagos, in the Bristol Hotel, and Chinua at once said 'yes'. For the next ten years, Chinua edited the series - we published 100 titles in ten years, an average of ten per year. He read them all, commented on them, said whether he thought they were worth publishing or not, and in addition to the hundred there were many more that we didn't accept. In many cases he did major editorial work, recommending to authors important improvements to their work.

**KS:** Achebe had told Van Milne that Ngugi was a very promising young writer. What I think you must remember is that Van Milne and I were academic and school book publishers. This was our entire training and background, and we thought in terms of books for use by stu-
dent. Van also had strong political interests in Africa, and that explained the Zambia/Kaunda book. Achebe clearly didn’t think first and foremost in terms of educational books and when he directed Van towards Ngugi, the slant of the series changed somewhat. It was no longer viewed simply as an extension of educational publishing, but as a series that launched new writing.

AH: By this time you may be wondering why a major creative writing series was being handled by an educational publisher. I must emphasise that, from the very start, we knew we were not now in the business of publishing school textbooks. Van and I had long discussions as to what our publishing role should properly be. Looking back on a list of 300 titles, it is easily answered in retrospect. But in 1961 we had just two novels by Achebe, and beyond that we faced the unknown... complete darkness. We decided in the end to be guided by literary quality – to publish anything of real merit which came our way, irrespective of its ‘category’. In point of fact, the great majority of the first titles were new fiction, interspersed with poetry and drama. The fact that some of the titles were set for school and university examinations was an incidental, though very welcome, bonus.

Then why Heinemann Educational Books? The reason is simple. We were the only firm with the faith – the passion almost – and the will to do the job; and we had Chinua Achebe’s first two novels to give us a flying start. Also – and this was quite essential – we had the necessary business set-up to sell books within Africa itself. The big fiction houses were useless; they just didn’t reach black Africa, for the book trade in that continent was almost entirely educational. William Heinemann, our fiction and general company, had never sold books in Africa outside the European communities. Only the educational company had the know-how and the marketing organisation to bring the African Writers Series to the ordinary African.

For the first ten years Achebe was editor of the series and he did all this work for nothing. He did it for the good of African literature. And, you know, this is what the younger generation of critics just don’t realize, that he made an enormous contribution to the African Writers Series. His name was the magnet that brought everything in, and his critical judgement was the decisive factor in what we published. And in addition to that, the fantastic sales of his own books selling by the million provided the economic basis for the rest of the series. I did a calculation in 1984, by which time we had published getting on for three hundred titles, and one third of the sales revenue from the entire list came from Achebe’s four novels. And so his freely offered literary
judgement plus his own tremendous sales were the backbone of the African Writers series.

In those early days I used to go out to see Achebe in Nigeria, in Lagos. He was the very image of a modern Nigerian ‘yuppie’ in those days. He had a very handsome British colonial-type house, he used to wear a sharp suit, dark glasses, and he had a Jaguar car. At first sight he was a perfect Nigerian ‘yuppie’. But of course, once one started to talk to him, one realized that there was something very different below the surface. We had a very agreeable relationship, he was a very understanding and accommodating author.

KHP: What was the pattern of this working relationship? What role did Achebe play?

James Currey: Here again, I think that Achebe is very important. He of course read most of the manuscripts, and he was a very very strong encourager of the other potential writers. Another important thing was that he was very well regarded by Alan Hill, the founding chairman of Heinemann Educational, so if Chinua said a book ought to be published, Alan tended to agree and side with us against the rest of our colleagues.

KS: I think that from very early on, when the new manuscripts came in, particularly from Nigeria, we automatically consulted Achebe, and once Aig Higo became manager of Heinemann’s office in Nigeria in 1965, we more or less put everything through him if it was Nigerian or West African, indeed increasingly from anywhere in Africa, because he has such a very good literary judgment and insight. So between them, Achebe and Higo were filters for everything we published and in this way we found a lot of new writing by new authors.

AH: Keith has already mentioned a very good example of how Chinua attracted a new author. It happened like this: I was at a board meeting at our offices in Kingswood in Surrey and I had a telephone call from Van Milne in Makerere. There was a symposium going on in Makerere, organized by the Council for Cultural Freedom, a CIA-funded outfit which was a mixture of the British Council and the Pentagon. They were running this thing, and Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe were both there. Anyhow, Van Milne phoned me up and said a young student at Makerere had shown to Achebe an almost finished manuscript of a novel he’d written. Achebe was very impressed with it and he’d shown it at once to Van Milne. Van Milne read it and told me over the
telephone: 'I think it’s terrific, and I want your agreement to take on this book sight unseen.' And I said, ‘You’ve got it,’ and went back to the meeting. The book was Ngugi’s *Weep Not, Child*. Now that would never have come to us in that way if the author hadn’t taken it and shown it to Achebe. And that is how the African Writers Series was built up.

By 1967 it was clear we were onto something big, and we could no longer run the African Writers Series as an ‘add-on’ to our educational publishing. So I invited James Currey of the Oxford University Press to join us and run the African Writers Series as his specialism.

KHP: *Did Achebe’s involvement with the crisis in the East affect your working relationship?*

JC: Yes, definitely communication became more difficult during the Biafran War. During the war, Chinua Achebe came to London from time to time, but less frequently as the war progressed because he was visiting the United States as unofficial Biafran fund-raising ambassador. I do remember him occasionally coming through, and this was exciting because he had this tremendous enthusiasm and vision of the new Biafran state. This meant that he found it more and more difficult to have a regular dialogue with us on the African Writers Series, but nevertheless he was tremendously supportive and we, who were becoming more and more confident, would say, ‘We’ve got this and this which looks interesting, and these are the reports.’ And Chinua had more and more an overview and less and less reading of the individual manuscripts of that time. We would talk things through with him, and as a sympathetic ear he was very very good.

Then the Biafran war ended, and that was obviously an extremely difficult period for Chinua Achebe because he was in the East, and the recently re-opened university at Nsukka was struggling. In 1971 I remember visiting him in his house on the university campus which, like all the other houses on the campus, had blackened walls – there was no electric light, the whole university was a shell and had been through various military occupations. It was then that Chinua said, ‘Look, during this period I’ve been unable to give you as much advice as I would have liked to have done. I think it should be handed over to another writer, and I would suggest that Ngugi should be the advisor.’

KHP: *You published his collection of short stories, *Beware, Soul Brother*, which were about the Nigerian Civil War. Did this not cause some difficulties as Britain supported the other side?*
AH: Oh, no. There were no problems there. During the Civil War he used to come over to London. He used to get into a clapped-out Super Constellation aircraft at the Uli-Ihiala airstrip and he'd fly to Lisbon; then he'd transfer to an ordinary commercial aircraft and come to London. And he'd come strolling into the office as cool and as humorous as if he'd just come from Chelsea or Kensington. We used to hold parties and receptions for him. When Chinua finished ten years as general editor, the event coincided with the publication of the one hundredth book – which was his own book, Girls at War. So we celebrated with a party at the Athenaeum Club, attended by many literary celebrities. Chinua now (1972) resigned his position as general editor, and decisions were taken in London, James Currey being editorially in charge of the series.

KHP: You were originally educational publishers. Did this change represent a 'drift' into fiction, or was it a definite policy?

KS: Well, very little had been published at that time, so to continue the series Chinua encouraged us to look for new writers and writing. This was to some extent resisted at Heinemann Educational Books, and in order to obtain any kind of general trade marketing for books outside Africa we had to enlist William Heinemann, our general publishing colleagues, and persuade them, often against their will, to publish hardbacks of these early novels. In this way, the new books stood a chance of being noticed in the trade.

KHP: Why did you want hardbacks?

KS: Well, that was the only way you get them into the trade. Otherwise they were simply going to be seen as school textbooks.

JC: Paperbacks hardly existed in Britain at that time, except for Penguin. Also they did not get reviewed.

KS: The authors, of course, wanted that kind of exposure. And there was a growing interest in African literature at the time.

KHP: You must have faced some opposition.

KS: Well, scepticism and certainly cynicism from some of our colleagues. But to be fair, Alan Hill had great enthusiasm for the African Writers Series. Alan was outgoing, and he wanted to establish Heinemann in Africa because he believed in Africa and in African progress.
But I think that he was the only one amongst our colleagues who had anything but profound scepticism. They tended to regard it as an obligation and a waste of time. Later on, they changed their minds, because the second Ngugi novel, *The River Between*, began to sell, and in 1964 it was reviewed by people whom they regarded highly. Also Achebe’s *Arrow of God* was widely acclaimed in 1964 and did very well.

JC: Another thing against us was that whilst our colleagues at Heinemann were happy about creative writing as long as the author was dead (D.H. Lawrence) they found it very hard to come to terms with an educational series by living writers. The other important factor that happened during the period of decolonisation — and this is the period we’re talking about — was the establishment of examination boards in both East and West Africa. These boards were all part of the enthusiastic decolonisation process, and they insisted quite rightly that everything needed to be more African oriented. When it came to literature, initially they were pretty conservative — Shakespeare, etc. But there was a great interest in and enthusiasm for things that were African, and fairly rapidly they realized that there were interesting works being produced by young Africans and examination questions could be asked about these works.

But as publishers we came up against a general problem: what was appropriate for an educational publisher to publish? Fiction was for a general publisher. William Heinemann had the proud record of being one of the most enterprising London-based fiction publishers. But even they needed their arms twisted a bit to publish these books. Meanwhile there was a demand building up in Africa for ‘set’ books. As publishers who were interested in literature, as both Keith and I were, we managed to override our colleagues’ initial scepticism and get away with it because of the sales success of the series as a whole. However, one of the great pleasures of the African Writers Series was all the different books which one published in hope, and publishing in hope is always a risky business. It turned out, however, within the context of the ’60s that Heinemann with its growing educational market, with mailings to schools, contact with inspectors and universities, etc. was actually able to get these books into the educational network in Africa.

KS: However, it is still true that initially the African Writers Series attracted more interest outside Africa than it did inside Africa. That was not the intention. Our original intention was to provide books at a price which readers in Africa could afford. But they hadn’t heard of Achebe in Nigeria, so it took a little while to establish him in his own country. The interesting thing is that it happened in a surprisingly short
space of time. It started in 1962 when the first four volumes came out, and by 1965 we were selling quite a large number of the first ten titles in Africa itself.

Publishing policy was obviously important.

KHP: Would Heinemann's reasons for doing the series and Achebe's coincide? Obviously Heinemann was in it for the market and the money.

AH: Well, Heinemann was me.

KHP: All right, you, then. As a British publisher you would be thinking in terms of a market and money...

AH: That's right.

KHP: ...and Achebe would be thinking of furthering Nigerian writing.

AH: Yes, but you have to remember that we were not dominated by a money-grabbing ideology in those days. Publishing has changed a lot since then, and I don't really care for the accountancy-ridden profit-making of present-day publishing firms which are now in the grip of big corporations who are only interested in the profits which the products make.

As I said, in the earlier days, like Achebe whose ten years' editorship was entirely unpaid, we were very idealistic. Africa was an immensely exciting country. Independence was coming, we published Things Fall Apart when Nigeria was still an English colony moving towards independence, and there seemed to be a tremendous dawn, 'the wind of change', as everyone said, and this was something we wanted to be in on, and if splendid writing was being written in these countries we were going to publish it. Whether it was profitable or not wasn't really our major consideration. The fact that the overall series was profitable, of course, meant that nobody interfered with us. We later on published a whole lot of books that weren't profitable. But these were carried by the profits generated by some 'big-selling' authors: Achebe, Ngugi, etc.

KHP: Many of the later titles can't have sold many copies. There was a whole spate of intermediate books.

AH: Yes, quite. We have been criticized by people who have said, 'You should not have published these books.' But when you're pioneering
in an unknown field, I felt that we should cast the net as wide as possible, rather than try to be over-meticulous and over-selective. So we cast the net wide, and we had some real surprises.

KS: Quite consciously we decided that if we were going to publish new writers we had to take on people who were not in the Achebe and Ngugi class. This built up the Series and encouraged good writers like Kofi Awoonor to come and give us his novel and Lenrie Peters his poetry. In the meantime Clive Wake and John Reed encouraged us to look at writing from Francophone Africa, either works already in translation or works which could be translated.

JC: Thirty titles in the Series sold over 100,000 copies each. I think that Chinua Achebe was very important in encouraging us in treating the African Writers Series not just as an educational series, but as a series which could sustain sufficient sales on the open market, and that school teachers would just have to be careful about what they selected. An important factor in this transition was the question of s-e-x. One of the early titles which Chinua strongly supported in the African Writers Series was the translation of Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala*. The translation was published in 1964 and it was set in East Africa for the old East African Examination Council in the early ’70s. They ordered the book – *Mission to Kala* sounded quite a safe bet in a mission school – but they were absolutely horrified by it when it actually arrived. It was a fully adult novel written by Mongo Beti in the ’50s for the French fiction market.

S-e-x was a very important thing, but the other thing was s-h-i-t. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is very scatological. In fact, it would have been too way out for an English school at the time. But by the time I started working for the series in 1967, it was so successful that there need be no holds barred, the best fiction or poetry there was could be published, and we would find a market for it. After all, even though the African market was an educational market, there were people like Sam Cofie running the University bookshop in Legon, and he provided a cultural centre for school teachers, peace-corps volunteers, African students, etc. They wanted to buy paperbacks, and you must remember that Penguin paperbacks were orange in England, and we used the colour unashamedly, so the series became known as ‘the orange series’. One could say that the Allan Lane, Penguin revolution begat the African Writers Series, in a way. Paperbacks were still comparatively rare in 1960-61.
KHP: Would you say that Achebe’s opinions have altered the direction of the series?

AH: No. It didn’t alter the direction. I think, principally, having him was the magnet which drew all the writers to the series. That was really the thing.

KHP: How did the rest of the publishing world in London look at this new venture?

AH: Well, they were astonished. They were glad that someone had done it. Some of them wished they had done it. There wasn’t a vast field of writing from which you could pick and choose to fit some ideological preconception. Whatever it was, if it was good, we would take it.

KHP: This ‘goodness’, was this a literary criterion?

AH: Yes, basically it would be a literary criterion. The intention was to publish African literature wherever it sprang up and wherever we could find it. It was simply a trade matter. The books were sold through the educational book system because there wasn’t any other in West Africa.

JC: Although Heinemann Educational was an educational publisher it published a general fiction and poetry series. I think Chinua Achebe gave us enormous support in publishing fiction. This is so much the matter of the publisher’s self image, which is related to the thrust of the publisher’s marketing, and by then we could sell a general series in Africa. With Chinua’s help and encouragement the series was a general series rather than an educational one, because of the cultural, educational and social context in which we were operating. Meanwhile, the strength of Heinemann’s own marketing and distribution in Africa was always growing. But the most important thing was that people in Africa had an intrinsic part in choosing and recommending titles, and Chinua Achebe, more than anyone else, re-shaped the literary map of Africa.
A Personal Note

We met only briefly at Derry Jeffares' home in Leeds in 1964 on the evening of the day Chinua read his paper 'The Novelist as Teacher'. We met again at Nsukka in the month preceding the separation of Biafra. Geoffrey Hill, the British poet, had come to Ibadan for a term on leave from Leeds. Desmond Maxwell, Dean of Arts at Ibadan at the time, very kindly let us have the Peugeot 404 Faculty wagon for our journey. We trekked to Benin and then to Nsukka on a two-day hop. On the west of the Niger it was easy enough: after Asaba/Ontisha one had a portent of things to come. We found Nsukka, then a wonder of a University, aglow with health and enquiry and forwardness, everything that should exist to serve the nation with disinterested enquiry, helpful comment on nationhood.

But the hospital grounds, in the outlying areas of Enugu, were literally littered with maimed and injured bodies of victims of the Northern Pogroms of the November/December of 1966. Okigbo showed a photo-book of horrible injuries sustained by Northern Igbos, photos on the verso, captions on the recto. Achebe said: 'I don't think the captions are necessary.'

We came to know each other well – even though we had met willy nilly over the years – when he kindly accepted an invitation to spend some time at Guelph 1986. At the suggestion of Mr Ric Throssell, Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, I nominated Chinua for the award of a Senior Commonwealth Practitioner which after a period of deliberation he accepted.

What a fine time it was. I had nominated Chinua for an honourary degree from my university as well and he had accepted our offer. That was the beginning of a two-month visit which was memorable in many ways – for his meeting again with Margaret Laurence, a friend of long standing with whom, Chinua had said, 'I seem to have complete intellectual rapport'; for a memorable meeting with Northrop Frye and a memorable visit to give a talk at the McLuhan Institute at the University of Toronto; for active participation in teaching workshops with colleagues and friends from Cameroon; and in presenting a 'Letter from Canada' to Nigeria on the Overseas Service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.
Chinua addressed the graduands of the Arts and Social Science Colleges on the day he received his D.Litt. The ceremony was conducted under unique — in the history of convocations — conditions. The convocation was planned for out-of-doors. It rained. Graduands were trekked into the basement of the convocation hall. Chinua read his address to graduands assembled a floor below him. His words were seen over a television screen. Chinua's equanimity was never more certain than here.

His convocation address was judged by the President of the University, the Vice-Chancellor and the Dean of the College to be among the most compelling presented to Guelph convocations. It reads in part:

Although honorary doctorates are highly prized — and deservedly so — the real heroes and heroines of Convocation are the young men and women admitted to their various bachelor's degrees. I crave the indulgence of Convocation to address them directly.

First, my congratulations on your initiation. I wish you success and happiness in whatever career you may embark upon hereafter. You have now a responsibility to live up to those ideals of universality for which your Alma Mater has been praised. That is what university education is and should always have been about but often was not. But for you and your generation there can be no evasion, not any more.

You are inheriting a world which differs fundamentally from the world your parents inherited — different indeed from the world ever inherited by any previous generation of mankind. When the atom bomb was dropped on Japanese cities in 1945 a horrendous new factor was brought into the affairs of mankind which had never been there before — the power offered to man to destroy himself completely and all his works with him. The rough beast prophesied by Yeats, its gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, had stirred in the desert and was slouching towards Bethlehem to be born.

Perhaps it is true, as we are sometimes told, that there is an irresistible bent in us to make war on our fellows. Certainly we seem to have done it as long as myth and memory can go. And in all that time we got away with it! And then one morning we wake up and find that the game is up.

Actually, that is not quite accurate; we didn't wake up; we haven't woken up; perhaps we cannot wake up. Perhaps all is futility. Perhaps the answer to Wilfred Owen's anguished cry is: Yes, it was 'for this the clay grew tall'. But somehow I don't think you should accept that answer. I believe you have a responsibility to try to save the world for yourselves. You might say: 'But how can we do it? We have no power.' But power is precisely the problem, not the answer. Consider for a moment the two most powerful men in the world. They are old men reared in a world in which war was safe, even honourable; two old men brought up in the psychology of seeing the world divided in the stark, Manichaean polarity of self and other, us and them, black and white, good and evil, superior, inferior; light, darkness; subject, object. Two old men, in other words, doing precisely what mankind has always done. They have the power — to blow up the world many times over.

But there is another kind of power. The power of creation. The power that the
creation myths of all peoples bear witness to – the power of the mind and the word. In the beginning was the Word.

I will end with two short celebrations of that power from widely separated regions of the earth. First an Eskimo poem:

That was the time when words were like magic
The human mind had mysterious powers
A word spoken by chance
Might have strange consequences
It would suddenly come alive
And what people wanted to happen could happen
All you had to do was say it.

Note the last two lines particularly:

And what people wanted to happen could happen
All you had to do was say it.

And finally to Africa, to the Wapangwa people of Tanzania:

The sky was large, white and very clear. It was empty; there were no stars and no moon; only a tree stood in the air and there was wind. This tree fed on the atmosphere, and ants lived on it. Wind, tree, ants and atmosphere were controlled by the power of the Word. But the Word was not something that could be seen. It was a force that enabled one thing to create another.

I suggest that the force that enables one thing to create another can be available to you. Your education in a university that takes its international vocation seriously is one aspect of it. Your personal commitment to redress the parochialisms and prejudices of the past is another. The new world is not some starry-eyed utopian metaphor. It is a practical question of life and death. Either a new world or a dead world. I wish you success.

These words are an epitome of the man. They show the spiritual and moral qualities that reveal themselves in all his writing and make him one of the most widely read and discussed of contemporary writers. They also reveal the innate modesty, call it even humility, of the man one meets and comes to know. There is nothing ostentatious in his manner. And why should there be: the power is in the word.

Achebe dominates the African novel, and has a central place in contemporary literature, because he, more than any of his peers, reflectively and unobtrusively has modified the traditions of fiction, derived forms which are distinctively his own for the purpose of envisaging and conveying experience which is deeply convincing. Deceptive profundity, discriminating insight, mental and moral fastidiousness, elegance and lucidity, these are the hallmarks of Achebe’s art.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN has taught at the University of Aarhus, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and Adelaide University and worked at the Scandinavian Institute for African Studies, Uppsala. She has published widely in the field of post-colonial studies. Her publications include *Criticism and Ideology: Papers from the Second African Writers' Conference, Stockholm* and, with Anna Rutherford, *Cowries and Kobos, A Double Colonization and Enigma of Values*.

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Chinua Achebe: 'African Literature as Restoration of Celebration';
Gabriel Okara: 'Towards the Evolution of an African Language for African Literature';
Chantal Zabus: 'The Logos-Eaters: The Igbo Ethno-Text';
Margaret E. Turner: 'Achebe, Hegel, and the New Colonialism';
Alastair Niven: 'Chinua Achebe and the Possibility of Modern Tragedy';
Biodun Jeyifo: 'For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika';
Ama Ata Aidoo: Three Poems for Chinua Achebe;
Derek Wright: 'Things Standing Together: A Retrospect on Things Fall Apart';
Ernest N. Emenyonu: 'Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Classic Study in Colonial Diplomatic Tactlessness';
Rosemary Colmer: 'Quis Custodies Custodiet? The Development of Moral Values in A Man of the People';
Elleke Boehmer: 'Of Goddesses and Stories: Gender and a New Politics in Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah';
Emmanuel Ngara: 'Achebe as Artist: The Place and Significance of Anthills of the Savannah';
David Richards: 'Repossessing Time: Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah';
David Maughan-Brown: 'Anthills of the Savannah and the Ideology of Leadership';
G.D. Killam: 'A Personal Note'