

Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow. (p. 55)

What Oduche brings back, however, is a commitment to Christianity which Ezeulu had not foreseen. The result is that, in an act of piety, Oduche imprisons the sacred python of Ezidemili in his foot locker thus further undermining his father's reputation among his enemies in Umuaro.

And yet Ezeulu ought to have foreseen the possible defection of Oduche. Earlier in the novel the defection of Umuaro is foreshadowed as Ezeulu listens to the mission bells ringing in the distance:

Nwafo came back to the obi and asked his father if he knew what the bell was saying.... 'It is saying: Leave your yam, leave your cocyam and come to church. That is what Oduche says. 'Yes,' said

Ezeulu thoughtfully. 'It tells them to leave their yam and their cocoyam does it? Then it is singing the song of extermination.' (p. 43)

Ezeulu is not concerned to respond to the criticism which he knows fulminates against him. As he says to his friend and confidant, Akuebue, referring to the British punitive expedition (described in Things Fall Apart) which razed the village of Abame thus allowing the British to obtain hegemony over Igboland:

"How many white men went in the party that destroyed Abame? Do you know? Five." He held up his right hand with five fingers fanned out.... "With all their power and magic white men would not have overrun entire Ulu and Igbo if we did not help them. Who showed them the way to Abame? They were not born there; how did they find the way? We showed them and are

still showing them. So let nobody come to me now and complain that the white man did this and did that. The man who brings ant-infested faggots into his hut should not grumble when lizards begin to pay him a visit. (pp. 131-32)

What Ezeulu is saying is that the clan is no longer in full control of its own affairs, that political power has been taken from it and that personal animosities are not at issue.

Nevertheless his motives are not entirely disinterested. For while he seeks to understand and accommodate to the power of the new, imposed regime the better to understand and covert it to the use of the clan, he also seeks to exploit new knowledge for personal use. He delays his eating of the ceremonial yams ostensibly to serve the injunctions of his religion but in fact to castigate his community and bring it to heel. The clearheadedness which informs his judgements about the changing nature of the political climate in which the clan exists -- his assessment of

the broader perspective -- is compromised by his calculations on the effect of the punishment he imposes ostensibly at the injunction of Ulu but in fact because of his personal bitterness:

"Every time he prayed for Umuaro bitterness rose in his mouth, a great smouldering anger for the division which had come to the six villages and which his enemies sought to lay on his head." (p. 6)

His anger supercedes his judgement and prevails despite the warning he receives that the will of the clan -- which had created Ulu in the first place -- was greater than the will of a god, that when a god gets out of hand the people can "show him the wood he is made of." The community expresses its will:

... we are Umuaro. Therefore listen to what I am going to say. Umuaro is now asking you to go and eat those remaining yams today and name the day of the next harvest. Do you hear me well? I said go

and eat those yams today, not tomorrow;
and if Ulu says we have committed an
abomination let it be on the heads of the
ten of us here ... Every offence has its
sacrifice, from a few cowries to a cow or
a human being.

Ezeulu ignores their injunction, not appreciating what as
political being he should have seen as foremost in his and their
concerns. He is the creature of his people as surely as is the
god. And he is curiously, paradoxically -- ironically--
unresponsive to the characteristic flexibility of his people in
adjusting to new situations, especially in light of his own
announced intention of calculating the effect of the new religion
and system of government which has been imposed and adjusting to
these circumstances:

Nnanyelugo deftly steered the conversation
to the subject of change. He gave
numerous examples of customs that had been

altered in the past when they began to work hardship on the people. They all talked at length about these customs which had either died in full bloom or had been stillborn. (p. 209)

Ezeulu thus has incurred the suspicion of some and jealousy of other factions within the clan and the anger of the British political officers who impute to him the wrong motives for supporting certain of their political actions.

What he fails to take fully into account is the way in which the governing colonial power has compromised his authority and shifted the balance to something like the old dispensation.

As Emanuel Obiechina specifies:

It is not surprising that institutions evolved to ensure collective security begin to weaken when the threats that gave rise to them are no longer felt. And the effect of the superimposition of a higher

authority with greater power of coercive violence is to create a ferment in the structure of traditional authority itself. Specifically, the older gods of Umuaro accepted the dominance of Ulu as long as the old power structure remained. But now, with the imposition of a higher authority over Ulu, the minor gods see the situation as an opportunity to shake off an irksome hegemony. The resentment that lay dormant in pre-colonial days becomes active again. (p.172)

The antagonism is exacerbated by Ezeulu's seeming alliance with the colonial authority for purposes of increasing his power over the clan. Nwaka accuses him of planning to make himself a king, a claim which Ezeulu contemptuously dismisses: there is no tradition of Kingship in Ezeulu's part of Igboland.

The irony is that the renewed rivalry between the two

priests which threatens to divide the clan is rendered obsolete by the consequences of Ezeulu's decision to castigate the clan by refusing to announce the harvest, by the defection of large numbers of villagers to the Christian fold -- where, in effect dispensation to survive is provided -- by the death of his son Obika who although ill with fever runs a funeral race on behalf of a dead clansman, determined if possible to retrieve something of of father's reputation, and ultimately by Ezeulu's madness:

At any other time Ezeulu would have been more than equal to his grief. He would have been equal to any grief not compounded with humiliation.... Perhaps it was the constant, futile, throbbing of these thoughts which finally left a crack in Ezeulu's mind ... But this final act of malevolence proved merciful. It allowed Ezeulu, in his last days, to live in the haughty splendour of a demented high

priest and spared him the knowledge of the
final outcome. (p. 287)

.....

"Some people expected Ezidemili to be jubilant. Such
people did not know him. He was not that
kind of man and besides he knew too well
the danger of such exultation. All he was
heard to say openly was: 'This should
teach him how far he could dare next
time". (p.285)

The tragic outcome to Ezeulu's life results from his own
rationalisation of his responsibility, the nature of his power and
his decision on a course of action. He is the author of his own
destiny, no external force ultimately is responsible. But
ironically the British authority has been an agent in his destiny.

Achebe explores the relationships between African and
Europeans in various ways. The crisis in the novel is prepared
for when Ezeulu is perceived by both the people of his village and

by Captain Winterbottom to support the British Administration in a dispute over the piece of land between Okperi and Umuaro. As a result of this and when Winterbottom is compelled by his masters in Administrative headquarters in Enugu to appoint a Warrant Chief he determines to appoint Ezeulu. Ezeulu, refuses the offer thus confounding the British and confusing his clansmen. The A.D.O., Tony Clarke, is at first astounded that the priest would refuse the honour and power the chieftancy would confer on him and then angered. Thus Ezeulu is incarcerated, held in jail for two month and released only when colonial policy is changed and warrant chieftancies are abandoned. His clansmen are confused because Ezeulu has repudiated his assumed friendship with "Winterbotta." Thus they fear reprisals. This is of course what happens: because of the period in jail the sacred yams are not eaten and Ezeulu's tragedy unfolds.

But while he is in jail Ezeulu is looked after by one John Nwodika , a clansman from Umuaro in the employ of Winterbottom. Through his talks with Nwodika, Ezeulu gains a

perspective on how the foreign presence is altering, subtly, the character of Igbo life, especially with reference to the introduction of a cash economy. Thus Achebe is picking up, elaborating and dramatising circumstances delineated in THINGS FALL APART. Nwodika's aim is to acquire enough cash to start a small tobacco business. But with the sense of collaborative support natural to a clansman he seeks further to see Umuaro get into and succeed in the competition for money and is bothered by the fact that Umuaro is being outstripped by rival or competing clans.

This is consistent with his function as Chief Priest: for in Igbo society the Chief Priest's function is to "lead the society in uprightness, boldness ... and in being absolutely impartial in all disputes between groups of individuals", a function which "involves constant adjustment to competitive situations". Ezeulu seeks to fulfill this function and his tragedy is that he fails. This despite the fact that he is perhaps more aware of the long-range implications, the historical

importance of the British presence than many of his clansmen, at least those in Umuaro.

As Achebe says of his hero:

"He is an intelligent man and can see what is about to happen. He sees that change is inevitable, and he tries to master the new forces, to use the new forces in order to retain his own position and to manage the inevitable changes in his society.... Ezeulu is no naive man. He does not equate power and right. He is a shrewd political leader, too, when he recognises the necessity for temporary alliances, with some whites, not as an aim but as a tactic. He pretends to welcome some changes in order for his society to absorb them instead of being ruled by them, so that his order, his religion, his

tradition will survive these changes and ultimately regain power."

Ezeulu fails because he strikes his community in a way which will bring about its destruction through starvation. Personal motives become entangled with public political and religious motives and in the end through Ezeulu's destruction the Igbo aphorism that "no man however great can win a judgement against the clan" is proven. In other words, he fails to integrate the present circumstances with his recognition of his priestly role.

In the end the collective will, determined to ensure survival of the villagers, prevails. Survival is more important than ritual. The god created to secure the tribe against threats to its existence is now abandoned when he in turn and paradoxically threatens the clan's existence. Ezeulu, the carrier of the clan's burdens, as emblematised in the "Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves," now is seen as the cause of the famine which threatens its existence. Where once he walked proudly at the head

of his clan, he now walks alone. To the end he is convinced he has followed the will of his god: "Why, he asked himself again and again, why had Ulu chosen to deal thus with him, to strike him down and cover him with mud? What was his offence? Had he not divined the god's will and obeyed it?" (p. 286)

The implications of these closing passages, of what actually happens to Ezeulu, of why the god deserts him have occasioned a good deal of critical commentary. Interesting and useful as this comment may be it seems one can perhaps rely on Achebe for the final statement:

"So in the end only Umuaro and its leaders saw the final outcome. To them the issue was simple. Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest and thus upheld the wisdom of their ancestors -- that no man however great was greater than his people; that no man ever won judgement against

his clan.... In his extremity many an Umuaro man had sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity. Thereafter any yam that was harvested in the man's fields was harvested in the name of the son."

The opinions of the villagers in accounting for Ezeulu's downfall is over-simple. Ezeulu has chosen to risk the destruction of his people for the reasons examined in the telling of his story. They have no knowledge of the tragic dimension of his struggle to make his choice. Like all leaders faced with similar propositions he takes the biggest risk himself. There is a kind of nobility in this revelation of ultimate frailty in the context of the magnificent gamble he is prepared to take:

...Our fathers have told us that it may even happen to an unfortunate generation that they are pushed beyond the end of

things, and their back is broken and they are hung over a fire. When this happens they may sacrifice their own blood. This what our sages meant when they said that a man who has nowhere else to put his hand for support puts it on his own knee. That was why our ancestors when they were pushed beyond the end of things by the warriors of Abam sacrificed not a stranger but one of themselves and made the great medicine called Ulu. (p. 165)

In the end the wheel has come full circle: in the end not a stranger but one of themselves, their priest, is sacrificed. But the ambiguity of Ezeulu's motives and actions is not resolved. The speculations of Akuebue, the man closest to Ezeulu, who knows that the priest suffers with his people even though he is perceived as being the agent of that suffering, specifies the ambiguity:

Perhaps Akuebue was the only man in Umuaro who knew that Ezeulu was not deliberately punishing the six villages. He knew the Chief Priest was helpless; that a thing greater than n̄te was caught in n̄te's trap.

(p. 219)

Of the broadest implications of these closing lines Achebe has said, adumbrating the widest and most profound implications of the story that he has been telling:

In the society we have been looking at in the story you do not do things in the name of the son but in the name of father. The legitimacy is with the elders, the ancestors, with tradition and age. We now have a new dispensation in which youth and inexperience [gain:sic] a new legitimacy. This is something new and different. Wisdom belongs to the elders, but the new

wisdom is going to the young people. They are going to go to school, to go to church, and will tell their fathers what it is. This almost amounts to turning the world upside down. I think that Ezeulu himself sensed it coming; he had some kind of psychic vision. This why he sent his son to the British. Something told him that it might be necessary. He found some other explanations for doing it, but in fact he sensed what he was doing. This was confirmed the first time he was interviewed by the English administrator Clarke, and Ezeulu looked up and the image in his mind was that of a puppy, something unfinished, half-baked, too young; and yet there was authority. Now, this reversal itself is tied up with the colonial

situation. There is no other situation in the world where power resides with inexperience and young people. A young man would not approach the seat of power in England, but in the colonial situation he is given power and he can order a chief around. In a very deep sense this reversal is the quintessence of colonialism. It is a loss of independence.

The consequences of the loss of predictable political power at the village level are one thing: at the national level a quite different thing. And it is to this latter reality that Achebe turns in his fourth--and to date last--novel, A Man of the People. The novel is set in the post-colonial period in an independent African country. The governance of the country is, nominally, in the hands of the people and it is the quality of the leadership and the response of the people to that leadership which

concerns Achebe. There is no collective will in the people. There is no responsible leadership. A collective voice manifest at the village level and through which collective agreement is articulated as we have seen in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, no longer exists:

The language a man speaks is the best guide you have to his character. If you don't listen carefully enough then all kinds of charlatans and demagogues will steal the show which is what is happening. Not only in Nigeria but in many other parts of the world. The language is very important. You see, the oral tradition of Iboland worked because the community was small in size, and the man who got up to speak was not judged entirely by what he was saying then; he was judged by what was known of him ten years ago, you see. So

if he got up to speak and they said, "Oh, yes, 'That thief'", they were immediately on their guard. But you can't have that kind of safeguard today in the context of an 80 million nation. You simply do not know the man who is talking to you and therefore you must devise more sophisticated ways of assessing him.

A Man of the People is about the man you can't know, about Chief Nanga and his colleagues, senior Ministers of Government, and their rivals in other political parties who have produced what Achebe describes as a "fat-dripping, gummy, eat-and-let-eat regime . . . which inspired the common saying that a man could only be sure of what he had put away safely in his gut or, in language more suited to the times: 'you chop, me self I chop, palavar finish . . .'" (p. 148-9.)

Where the novels set in the past displayed a society which a balance between collective religious observance and individual

monetary pursuits was achieved, contemporary society is revealed as devoid of religious concerns. Only a vestige remains of the religious beliefs which kept the acquisitiveness of the society in balance. Religion in A Man of the People is not a subject of concern in the book but there is one brief and telling scene which reveals the extent to which spiritual values have diminished to the point of ineffectuality. It is Christmas time and Odili, the (anti-)hero of the novel is visiting the wife of Chief Nanga, M.P., the "man of the people" of the book's title. Among other things, comment is made on a new house that is being built for Nanga. One townsman says:

"Look at the new house he is building.

Four storeys! Before if a man built two

storeys the whole town would come to

admire it. But today my kinsman is

building four."

Odili, who telling the story, observes:

The house in question was the very modern

four-storey structure going up beside the present building and which was to get into the news later. It was, we were to learn, a 'dash' from the European building firm of Antonio and Sons whom Nanga had recently given the half-million pound contract to build the National Academy of Arts and Sciences.

While this talk goes on a group of masked boy dancers entertain the Christmas guests:

The last, its wooden mask-face a little askew and its stuffed pot-belly looking really stuffed, was held in restraint by his attendants tugging at a rope tied round his waist as adults do to a real, dangerous Mask. The children sang, beat drums, gongs and cigarette cups and the Mask danced comically to the song

Sunday, bigi bele Sunday

Sunday, bigi bele Sunday

Akatakata done come!

Everybody run away!

Sunday, Alleluia

While the mask danced here and there brandishing an outsize matchet the restraining rope around his waist came undone. One might have expected this sudden access to freedom to be followed by a wild rampage and loss of life and property. But the Mask tamely put his matchet down, helped his disciples retie the rope, picked up his weapon again and resumed his dance. (pp. 96-97.)

The scene offers an exact ironic reflection on the extent to which religion, a restraining force in traditional society, has been reduced to the status of entertainment. In this connection

Achebe has written:

A man's position in society was usually determined by his wealth. All four titles in my village were taken--not given--and each had its own price. But in those days wealth meant the strength of your arm. No one became rich by swindling the community or stealing government money. In fact a man who was guilty of theft immediately lost all his titles. Today we have kept the materialism and thrown away the spirituality which should keep it in check.

We have therefore in A Man of the People an atmosphere of unrestrained acquisitiveness in the midst of political corruption, where there is no national voice but only (we infer) a confusion of competing village voices, an atmosphere where it is every man for himself in acquiring as large a piece of the national

financial cake as possible and by whatever means are the most effective. Odili, when we meet him, is a cynical and politically disaffected university graduate who had placed his faith on university trained public-minded leaders who would ensure through their education and actions that a unified nation, economically viable and politically stable would be developed in the post-colonial period. But political opportunists, prominent among them Nanga, have ensured that highminded, disinterested well-educated leaders are discredited in the name of Africanisation thus ensuring that they, people of the people as it were, extend their personal fortunes at the expense of the taxed public purse.

The novel is a retrospective narration told in the first person by Odili and the novel's purposes are revealed in the relations between Odili and Nanga and their various political activities, and in the confrontations between them which culminate in a national economic crisis and scandal, a rigged election and finally military intervention. A principal and related purpose is the examination of public and private motives which inform

political action as told by Odili as he records his personal examination for discovery.

At first wholly cynical about the motives of the political leadership of the country, Odili, a school teacher in his own village, keeps a scornful distance from any political activity. His sole motive is to win a scholarship for study abroad and to abandon his country. But Nanga, his former teacher in the same school, makes a visit, remembers Odili, offers him assistance in obtaining the coveted scholarship and a visit to his home in the national capital, Bori. Odili is swept away by the Nanga charisma and for a time sits at the feet of the political master. Achebe blends perfectly narrative control which allows for current experience and retrospective accounting to meld:

My host was one of those people around whom things were always happening. I must always remain grateful to him for the insight I got into the affairs of our country during my brief stay in his house.

From the day a few years before when I had left Parliament depressed and aggrieved, I had felt, like so many other educated citizens of our country, that things were going seriously wrong without being able to say just how. We complained about our country's lack of dynamism and abdication of the leadership to which it was intitled in the continent, or so we thought. We listened to whispers of scandalous deals in high places - sometimes involving sums of money that I for one didn't believe existed in the country. But there was really no hard kernel of fact to get one's teeth into. But 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 by the almost ritual lifting of the clouds, as I had been one day, watching for the first time the unveiling of the white dome of Kilimanjaro at sunset.

This is the first stage in the re-education of Odili.

Under Nanga's sway he re-examines some of his attitudes to the uses of political power:

A man who has just come in from the rain and dried his body and put on dry clothes is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors all the time. The trouble with our new nation--as I saw it then lying on that bed--was that none

of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say "to hell with it." We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us--the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best--had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in.

Odili, then, begins to question the relations between political idealism and the practical application of political beliefs. As David Carroll points out "Odili is discovering the paradox that detachment implies lack of understanding, while involvement precludes objectivity."

Odili's amicable relationship comes to an end when Nanga steals Odili's mistress, Elsie, from him. Odili has spoken in "derogatory terms about women in general" and so Nanga feels the way is clear. Odili's sympathy turns to hostility, he confronts and denounces Nanga who is baffled by his reaction.

The hostility continues to the end of the story and the novel moves into its second part. Odili plans to seduce Edna, Nanga's "parlour wife" to avenge the affront to his manhood. Coincident with this he joins a new political party, The Common People's Convention Party, founded by his friend Max Kumalo: "It would add a second string to my bow." (italics mine) Initially Edna is the target and politics of secondary concern. But as Odili engages in an election struggle, prompted by a political-economic scandal which brings down the government, his motives gradually shift as he probes more deeply into political realities in relation both to his own motives and into the possibilities of there being the chance to create a just system of government within the heterogeneous groupings of ethnic interests which go to make up the nation.

Achebe examines this proposition in various ways and through various, sometimes seemingly unconnected scenes. A leit-motif which displays the erosion of communal values in the novel is the story of Josiah, a village trader. So corrupt is Josiah

personally that early in the novel he steals a blind beggar's walking stick. He is scorned by the villagers who boycott his store: "Within a week Josiah was ruined; no man, woman, or child went near his store." Collective communal will asserts itself to right a wrong because, as the proverb has it, "Josiah has taken away enough for the owner to notice." But Josiah appears again at the critical time of Odili's campaign against Nanga. First he offers his support to Odili who scorns his offer. And when Odili appears at Nanga's election rally in the village in order to denounce the latter's corruption and blackmailing of the villagers for purely personal purposes it is Josiah, now appearing as a supporter of Nanga, who denounces Odili. As a result Odili is beaten by Nanga's bodyguards and is in hospital when civil order breaks down entirely. Max is killed by a jeep driven by one of Chief Koko's men; Koko in turn is shot by Eunice, Max's girlfriend. Fighting breaks out between bodyguards of the various contending political factions and when Nanga tries to disband his bodyguard it goes on a rampage. The Prime Minister cynically

reappoints his cabinet whereupon the thuggish anarchy becomes so extreme that the military intervenes and locks up the government.

Accounting for the fall of the regime of which Nanga is a part, Odili's father says, employing the proverb associated with Josiah: "Koko had taken enough for the owner to see." But this is not a satisfactory accounting so far as Odili is concerned:

My father's words struck me because they were the very same words the villagers of Anata had spoken of Josiah, the abominated trader. Only in their case the words had meaning. The owner was the village, and the village had a mind; it could say no to sacrilege. But in the affairs of the nation there was no owner, the laws of the village became powerless.

The strength of the argument of the book, summed up in Odili's statement that mere anarchy has replaced the laws of the village, proceeds from the tension in the relationship between Odili and Nanga as this develops throughout the novel. Nanga is

an engaging and credible character: this is what makes his apostacy so terrifying. David Carroll referring as well to Josiah, sums this up as well as anyone:

But his [Josiah's] national counterpart, Nanga, is rewarded for his crime. He has stolen from the constituency its traditional ethic, its only guide in the complexity of the modern state. He has turned this against the people by cynically corrupting it into the ethic of the national cake. Now they are completely dependent upon him, their representative, for their welfare and survival. What was once their strength has become their weakness, for this man operates in the sphere of national politics where they can neither understand nor control him. "In the affairs of the nation there was no owner, the laws of the village became powerless." The traditional reciprocal relationship between leader and people

has become a parody of itself and no longer is it true to say that "no man ever won judgement against his clan." The only language the villagers now understand is that of self-interest, and they assess their representative in his own terms, by the amount of loot he brings back to the constituency. In their apathy and cynicism the people have become the blind buyers of the politicians' wares.

The novel is open-ended: an impasse in the political system has been reached: military intervention is plainly not a solution to the problems of public governance. Achebe has said in another context about military coups:

There's no question at all that the military intervention was popular. It was a great relief because we had almost come to an impasse. The whole point of constitutional government is that the

rules must be obeyed, must be followed.

And the basic rule of this is that there

is the possibility of change through

elections. Now when the electoral process

is abused and manipulated you really don't

have any other recourse but perhaps

violence or something like a military coup

. . . . I don't think they [the military]

will stay in power forever, in fact I

don't think they'll be there unduly long

because Nigerians are highly political.

And it's up to the military, the people

who are in power now, to do whatever they

have to do as quickly as possible and

create the possibility for return to

civilian government. This is the ultimate

hope.

This is where the novel ends. Nigeria--and other African

countries as well (thus the applicability of the circumstances Achebe dramatises in A Man of the People to African states--or to any other countries in like circumstances)--have gone through hard political times and a series of military coups. There is still the ultimate hope.

The novel is more, however, than about public political life in a post-independent African state. It is about Odili's "self-analysis" within the public political context, thoroughly intertwined though the public and the private issues are. Fresh out of university Odili sought to become "a full member of the privileged class whose symbol was the car." This motivation in turn gives way to disillusionment and a "vow never to be corrupted by bourgeois privileges of which the car was the most visible symbol." At his nadir he simply puts in time, cynically distancing himself from the life around him, until he can leave the country altogether. But his meeting with Nanga initiates his self-analysis. As he pursues his political activities, aware that by hiring bodyguards and using party funds to buy a car, he is in

danger of compromising his idealism in the same way as Nanga and his like have done, he begins to sort out his real motives from those he first imputes to himself. First, he recognises that he wants Edna for herself and not as some atavar of revenge on Nanga. He then comes to the conclusion regarding his election fight that "Although I had little hope of winning Chief Nanga's seat, it was nonetheless necessary to fight and expose him as much as possible." Odili's self-analysis is complete when he faces Nanga at his political rally, attempts to denounce him, is soundly beaten by Nanga's thugs and taken away to hospital. His stance is the reverse of the one he adopted at the beginning of the novel. Selfless public declaration has replaced cynical distanced disillusionment.

A Man of the People completes a tetralogy of novels which reveal the changes wrought in Nigerian life during the twentieth century, from the time of the Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger to the immediate post-independent period. Against a background of changing and evolving social and political

realities, Achebe reveals his concern with individual humanity and with the responses of his heroes to the social problems in which they become enmeshed. His interest is in failure, in the tragic destinies of his heroes for out of their responses to their failures (and out of our awareness of the causes for these failures) new possibilities arise. This is why A Man of the People is open-ended. At the end of the novel: "Odili begins to have a sense of what needs to be done." Out of Odili's discoveries perhaps a new political attitude will emerge.

A Man of the People is a prophetic novel. It was published in January, 1966 and coincided almost exactly with the first military take-over in Nigeria. Facts emulated art. The worsening political situation in Nigeria led to persecution of Igbo people at first those living outside of Igboland, most notably in Northern Nigeria where a series massacres took place. Achebe, who had been Director of External Broadcasting for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service since 1961, resigned his appointment after these acts of genocide and returned to his homeland. The

Eastern Region declared itself an independent state, Biafra, in 1967 and shortly after a 30 month civil war began. Throughout the war Achebe travelled widely on Biafran affairs, to Europe and North America. There was neither time nor inclination to write long fiction during this period. Rather, Achebe produced most of the poems in the volume Beware Soul Brother and Other Poems, 1971 (later revised and enlarged and published in the United States and entitled Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems, 1973.)

There are five parts to the volume which has thirty poems in all: a Prologue with four poems; Poems About War with seven; Poems Not About War with twelve; Gods, Men and Others with four poems; and an Epilogue with three. In a note to the poem, "Misunderstanding", Achebe writes: "The Igbo people have a firm belief in the duality of things....Igbo proverbs bring out his duality of existence very well. Take any proverb which puts forward a point of view or a 'truth' and you can always find another that contradicts it or at least puts a limitation on the absoluteness of its validity." (p. 65-66.) In most of the poems

in the slim volume Achebe exploits this cultural axiom as an elaborated, controlling, sustaining poetic device whether the poems deal with considerations of the social and humane implications of the devastating civil war in Nigeria or with explorations of the implications of theological positions in Igbo culture.

The opening poem, "1966", offers a contrast between the indifference to the possibility of civil war in Nigeria in 1966, and the increasing immanence of the war itself. Similarly, in the section "Poems About War", 'Christmas in Biafra' contrasts the Christmas setting -- the manger, the palms, the plaster-cast scene of the divine birth in Bethlehem, the serene holy family and the "Child Jesus plump wise-looking and rose-cheeked", the complacent Magi -- and mocks fiercely this artificiality, with the Biafran woman and her dying child which lay:

...flat like a dead lizard

on her shoulder his arms and legs

cauterized by famine...a miracle

of its own kind

Here anger and pity blend surely and Achebe's instinct as poet is nowhere more certain than in this scene where the ordinariness and tenderness of the mother's love for the child, coincident with the love of the mother of Jesus, is contrasted with the senseless, futile, pitiless horror of the holocaust.

In "Remembrance Day" Achebe evokes the living gulf which exists between those killed in the war and those who have survived and, the hatred and resentment of the dead which may unleash a blood-feud which will annihilate the living:

Therefore fear them! Fear

Their malice your fallen kindred

wronged in death. Fear their blood-feud;

tremble for the day of their

visit!

Flee! Seek

asylum in distant places till

a new generation of heroes rise

in phalanges behind their purified
child-priest to inaugurate
a season of atonement and rescue
from fingers calloused by heavy deeds
and tender rites of reconciliation.

In "Poems Not About War" 'Love Cycle', 'Question' and 'Answer' present the opposition between love and anger, life and death, fear and courage and quiescence and energy. "Gods, Men and Others" presents two poems contrasting the actions of Igbo men and gods, and two poems contrasting Igbo religion with Christianity.

Achebe has said of the Igbo insistence of the duality of things that "Wherever Something stands, there also Something Else will stand." There is a seeming preference for impartiality in the poems reflecting this cultural attitude, as K.L. Goodwin observes:

There is a semblance of impartiality, even of
indecision, but then a poem will move with
assurance to an absolute preference for one

attitude over its rival."

This is consistent with Achebe's attitude that historical cultural preferences will always inform contemporary considerations -- indeed, as his political writings show plainly it is important that they do so. Nothing is static. What is important is that dualities and cultural premises must be examined carefully so as to determine what among them will prove serviceable to a contemporary generation of Nigerians. Out of such considerations, examinations and choice come the materials for building an adequate society and providing a vital leadership.

Reconciling, or simply acknowledging and setting aside as moribund antagonistic elements, ethnic groupings from the past Achebe, in light of his concern for the personal plights of those who have suffered terribly through the war, passes on the responsibility to those who survive and to whom will fall the responsibility -- if they have the vision and the courage -- to:

inaugurate

a season of atonement and rescue

from fingers calloused by heaven deeds

the tender rites of reconciliation.

Achebe's short stories, collected as Girls at War and Other Stories were published in 1972. He writes in the Preface to the volume (which contains thirteen stories in all) that "it was with something of a shock that I realised my earliest short stories were published as long ago as twenty years in the Ibadan student magazine, "The University Herald" and that "a dozen pieces in twenty years must be accounted a pretty lean harvest by any reckoning."(p. iii) The stories display the conflict between traditional and modern values; and intimately related to this nature of religious belief as this is apposite to the present; secondly, those which display the social contexts of contemporary Nigerian life in circumstances which transcend the values agreed upon and upheld at the local or village level; thirdly those stories which deal with aspects of the Nigeria-Biafra War, one of which stories gives the volume its title. In the stories as in the novels Achebe's vision is multi-faceted, scrupulously honest

and layered with irony. "Dead Man's Path" is typical of the first grouping, "Vengeful Creditor" of the second, and "Girls at War" the third.

"Dead Man's Path", first published in 1953, tells of the attempts of a young headmaster, Michael Obi, to introduce modern ideas into a village school. Obi's ideas of 'modernity' are fairly superficial and consist in part in arranging the school yard to resemble an English garden. To this end he plants across a pathway which leads to a traditional burial ground; when the villagers continue to use the path he plants even more densely. The village priest tells him that the path must be kept open for the village people. For each the path is a symbol: for the priest it represents the continuity of life and religion: "The whole life of the village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming to be born...."(p.81) But for Obi the path symbolises out-of-date attitudes which have no place in the modern world: "The whole purpose of our school ... is to eradicate just

such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic."(p.82)

Tradition proves inflexible. "What you say may be true ... but we follow the practises of our fathers," says the priest. "If you re-open the path we shall have nothing to quarrel about." Obi is adamant. When a few days later a baby dies Obi "woke up ... among the ruins of his work. The beautiful hedges were torn up and the flowers trampled to death." Ironically the Government Supervisor comes to inspect the school and since the school stands for the modern Obi may be judged to have failed.

Achebe is impartial here: neither side is supported. The actions, and the positions they imply, are allowed to reveal themselves without authorial intervention. Obi's attitudes lack depth, perhaps, but neither does the priest question the validity of the religious beliefs he expounds. Rapprochement is still necessary.

"Vengeful Creditor" is the longest and in many ways the most telling of the stories. It evokes the atmosphere engendered

when a three-month experiment in universal primary education ('free primadu' it was called) was undertaken in Nigeria and how this affected the lives of various representative people. The fictional examination of the theme provides Achebe with the opportunity for wry and ironic comment on the self-interested actions of supposedly disinterested public bodies - on politicians whose public advocacy of the necessity and virtue of widespread primary education belies their concern with political survival by toadying to the opinions of their voters; on the cant of missionaries who offer little consolation and no practical help to an African woman whose mission-trained carpenter husband dies and leaves her in complete ruins; on Mrs. Emenike, a social welfare worker (who visits her cases in a Mercedes 220S) but whose sole interest is self interest and whose actions in the social sphere repudiate her designation as social welfare officer of the state.

In this story we see how self-interest fostered through preferred public office creates a confusion of values, disparity between rich and poor through the creation of an ever widening

gap, which foreshadows the breakdown in society which Achebe explores at greater length in A Man of the People. (In this connection The Voter, which deals with political hooliganism and bribery in high places, evokes an atmosphere which permeates the society of the fourth novel.)

Girls at War spans nearly the whole of the civil war period in Nigeria. The principal characters are Reginald Nwankwo and Gladys, he a senior official in government and she an idealistic young woman determined to serve her country by enlisting in the army. He is moved by her disinterested idealism: he recognises her as one of "thousands of young men (and sometimes women too) [who] were daily ... coming forward burning with readiness to bear arms in defence of the exciting new nation."(p.98) Months later he finds her at a check point where her zeal is unabated as she forces him to submit to a thorough search of his car despite his senior position. But some eighteen months later when their paths cross again things in the country have gotten very bad. Achebe writes:

Death and starvation having long chased out the headiness of the early days, now left in some places blank resignation, in others a rock-like, even suicidal defiance. But surprisingly enough there were many at this time who had no other desire than to corner whatever good things were still going and to enjoy themselves to the limit. For such people a strange normalcy had returned to the world. All those nervous checkpoints disappeared. Girls became girls once more and boys boys. It was a tight, blockaded and desperate world -- with some goodness and some badness and plenty of heroism which, however, happened most times far, far below the eye - level of the people in this story -- in out-of-the-way refugee camps, in the damp tatters, in the hungry and bare-handed courage of the first line of fire. (p.101)

Nwankwo pilfers foodstuffs, in front of starving people, to sustain his own family. Gladys now, he can tell by the way she dresses, is likely "in the keep of some well-placed gentleman, one

of the piling up money out of the war." Someone like Nwankwo himself. There is an air of frantic euphoria -- a pitiful party at which goat meat, chicken and rice is served with one little bread roll for each of the guests, a bottle of Scotch and another of Courvoisier (supplied by the Red Cross!); where specious and contradictory vows are taken about personal actions in the midst of the war; where as much personal comfort as possible is extracted from a desperate situation. The idealism which earlier had prompted selfless service to the new state has been replaced by relentless self-servingness. Gladys has become for Nwankwo "one of those girls at war", one of those who returns from a flight from Libreville "loaded with shoes, wigs, pants, bras, cosmetics and what have you which [you] will sell for thousands of pounds." She has become, in Achebe's words, "a mirror reflecting a society that has gone completely maggoty and rotten at the centre". Nwankwo condemns her for being what he himself has become. Like him she does what she does in order to survive. While he understands how this comes about and while he lacerates the

practises of those people he displays Achebe reveals a compassion as well in the need that Gladys has for understanding.

In the end moral speculation is made irrelevant by the war. Nwankwo and Gladys in attempting to save the life of a wounded soldier get caught in an enemy air attack. Nwankwo is wounded and Gladys killed.

This story, and Civil Peace which deals with the period immediately after the war has ended -- and evokes an atmosphere in which there is little distinction between war and the anarchy of peace where citizens are hounded by bands of armed thugs-- reveals that nothing is gained in war, that human suffering is the result and that ideologies are lost in the wake of the individual human suffering that wars promote.

Perhaps Achebe is correct in saying that the harvest of stories is small. But it is not lean. The stories display his full range as a writer -- from the humour and wit of "Uncle Ben's Choice" through the various levels of irony in "The Madman", "The Voter", "Akueke" and "Dead Man's Path", to the scathing assault on

the final follies on men in the political sphere.

No further imaginative writing has appeared since the poems and short stories were published in the early 1970s. In 1970 Achebe published a volume of 15 essays entitled Morning Yet on Creation Day, written between 1962 and 1973, on various literary and political subjects. The collection is divided into two parts. "Part One" has eight essays dealing specifically with the role of the African writer in his society: Achebe discusses the central position of art in African society -- "artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their art for the good of that society" -- and addresses the question of the language the artist should employ, the role of critic and the kind of critical standards which should be developed to evaluate the new literatures from Africa. In part, these essays are a rebuttal of some of the critical standards which were developed and applied by expatriate critics of African literature. These essays are not so much concerned with the abstractions of literary criticism, though this is part of their importance. Their major thrust is

with the function of the writer and critic -- and each is in dynamic relationship -- "in assuming responsibility for our problems and our situation in the world...." The essays in the Second Part are more personal in nature although there is here as well a public application to the conclusions drawn. Of special interest here is the essay on "'Chi'in Igbo Cosmology" for the obvious reason of the light it throws on the chi in Achebe's first and third novels.

Achebe has been at work on a fifth novel and there is the hope that that will be published soon. He has been much honoured at home and abroad with honorary degrees, visiting academic appointments, involvement in literary activities within Nigeria and abroad. And he has continued to comment on the political life of Nigeria in the press and through various journals. The question of the kind of leadership which would best serve the country is at the centre of his concern. In 1983 in the face of an impending federal election he published The Trouble With Nigeria. The opening pages of the book declare its thesis:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. 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.

He describes the country as "One of the most disorderly, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun"; as "dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar." But he says that his statements proceed from love of his country, that they are not negative but are predicated on the belief that change is possible in Nigeria. The political system of democracy left by the British did not work in Nigeria and Nigerian leaders have been

too complacent about finding a political system which will work. The questions which must be addressed, the problems which must be solved if such a system is to be found are suggested in the various chapter headings in the book -- "Tribalism," "False Images of Ourselves," "Patriotism," "Social Injustice and the Cult of Mediocrity," "Indiscipline," "Corruption" and "The Igbo Problem". The final chapter "The Example of Aminu Kano" comments on the qualities of the ideal leader for Nigeria in Achebe's view. Aminu Kano was, in Achebe's words, a man "I admired [for] his commitment to the welfare and redemption of the oppressed. He was a saint and a revolutionary at the same time." Kano died before the election and Achebe was asked to stand as a presidential candidate: "I wanted to be involved but not that involved." Instead he became the deputy national president, an honorary title.

Before the election was held the military intervened and it has been suggested in some places that Achebe's words in part prompted this action. Whatever the truth of these assertions he

says of the book:

You must remember that the book we are talking about was actually published before the election. It was intended to be a kind warning. We are now looking at it as a postmortem, but it was not initially intended to be that. At that point in time I was appealing to this generation of educated Nigerians, the younger Nigerians, to get out of the rut, not to follow what I call the "old performers"....those [who] have by and large decided that it would perhaps take too long to set up their own political structures and that perhaps the quickest thing would be to make use of existing structures through the old masters of the game, and so perhaps change the system from the inside. Now I think we must think again.

Achebe continues to be involved in the quest to determine a just system of governance for Nigerians and to ally his thoughts

to the place of literature in serving society's needs. Achebe was recently awarded the Nigerian National Merit Award for the second time. In his Award Winner's acceptance speech he acknowledges that "the comprehensive goal of a developing nation like Nigeria is, of course, development or its somewhat better variant, modernization" and that literature is central in the quest of achieving this goal:

Literature, whether handed down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality; enabling us to encounter in the safe manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts, a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within our problematic and incoherent

selves or in the world around us. What better preparation can a people desire as they begin their journey into the strange, revolutionary world of modernization?

Flaubert, in one of his letters to Turgenev, said that there was nothing new for the writer to say, but there had to be new ways of saying the old things. Such is not the case with Achebe: the old things which were said about Africa over a long period of history, things predicated on denigrating racial assumptions, were not worth saying again; indeed they had to be refuted. Achebe has new things to say, important things to say. And he has found a new way of saying them. His control of language and speech is complete. And through this language -- a new English exactly suited to the environment the writing evokes -- he sets the record of history straight: no one can think about Africa in terms which applied before his first novel was written. He restores his peoples' faith in themselves and provides a context by which his people can "articulate their values and

define their goals in relation to the cold, alien world around them."

Works About Achebe

Achebe is discussed in nearly every book and survey article written on African literature in English. This selected bibliography lists only those books and articles that deal exclusively or primarily with him and his works. Asterisks

precede essays collected in this book.

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Hanna, S. J. "Achebe: A Bibliography," Studies in Black Literature, 2, 1 (1971), 20-21.

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Severac, Alain. "Chinua Achebe: I. Notes biographiques; II. Bibliographie," Annales de la faculte des lettres et sciences humaines, Universite de Dakar, 2 (1972), 55-56.

Silver, Helene. See under Biography and Autobiography below.

BEGIN PAGE 130 ORIGINAL TEXT

AFTER QUOTE

Anthills of the Savannah, published in 1986, illustrates, at least in part, the thinking that must still be done in this respect. It takes up the enquiry initiated by A Man of the People two years after a military regime has replaced the Nangalism of the fourth novel. Things have gone from bad to worse: political chaos has been replaced by anarchy; cynical self-interested leadership has been replaced by military megalomania. And Anthills of the Savannah illustrates and adumbrates many of the problems Achebe identified in The Trouble With Nigeria.

The novel is set in the West African country of Kangan. Kangan is ruled by a Military Governor and a cabinet of civilian ministers. It is not a regime which can take any credit for its accomplishments: it is not better--it is in fact worse--than the regime it replaced: as one of the principal characters muses:

The prime failing of this government also began to take on a clearer meaning for him. It can't be the massive corruption though its scale and pervasiveness are truly intolerable; it isn't the subservience to foreign manipulation,

degrading as it is; it isn't even this second-class, hand-me-down capitalism, ludicrous and doomed; nor is it the damnable shooting of striking railway-workers and demonstrating students and the banning thereafter of independent unions and cooperatives. It is the failure of our rulers to 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. (141)

The concern here as it has been in one way or another in all of Achebe's writing is with leadership, what kind of leadership will best serve the general good and, more particularly, to what dangers do leaders expose themselves. The dimension which Anthills of the Savannah examines is the danger of replacing leaders of a corrupt civilian regime with someone ill-equipped because not trained for political office and subject to the blandishments and egocentrism that unrestrained power can offer.

Sam/HE, current governor and aspiring President-for-Life is the creation of other people--"His major flaw was that all he ever wanted to do was what was expected of him." (49)

Urged by John Williams, his headmaster at Lord Lugard School, to

pursue a career in the army, Sam goes to Sandhurst where he

becomes the "catalogue model of an officer". Achebe

characterises his career in a paragraph:

From school to Sandhurst; then first African
Second lieutenant in the Army; ADC to the
Governor-General; Royal Equerry during
the Queen's visit; Colonel at the time of
the coup; General and His Excellency, the
Head of State, after. (67)

Sam/HE does not have the qualifications for the job of

Head of State: even so his are better than the joyless passion

for power of some African tyrants. Ikem Osodi, one of his oldest

friends who with another, Chris Oriko (Minister of Information in

Sam's cabinet), was instrumental in helping Sam/HE to power,

muses:

Perhaps I am so indulgent about Sam's
imitation of the English because I
believe that a budding dictator might
choose models far worse than the English
gentleman of leisure. It does not seem
to me that the English can do much harm
to anybody today. After a long career of
subduing savages in distant lands they
discovered the most dangerous savage of
all just across the English Channel and
took him on and brought him to heel. But
the effort proved too great and the cost
too high, and although they acquitted
themselves with honour they made sure
they would not be called upon to do it
again Whatever fear the ghost of
British imperial vocation may still hold

over the world's little people was finally removed when a renegade Englishman and his little band of thugs seized Her Majesty's colony of Rhodesia and held it for thirteen years. No, the English have, for all practical purposes, ceased to menace the world. The real danger today is from that fat, adolescent and delinquent millionaire, America, and from all those virulent, misshapen freaks like Amin and Bokassa sired on Africa by Europe. Particularly those ones. (52)

Achebe's comments on the British are not gratuitously offered. No one was better at exposing the arrogant, narrow, sanctimonious, supercilious nature of British Christian Imperialism when that was necessary. British Colonial Rule can be held to account for creating the conditions out of which Kangan's [read Nigeria's] current political problems arose:

"They told us they had left a democracy, but we could not make it work. It is a lie. The Governor-General in Lagos was as powerful an autocrat as Breshnev". But that is in the past. It is the present that matters and having exposed the historical legacy Achebe is forgiving in the present:

"If they have the will . . . the influence for good that Britain can exercise is the influence of persuasion, of demonstrating a superior wisdom and knowledge, of showing a talent for

kindness, concern, humaneness. Britain is in a position to do this. Apart from what it has learned overseas, there is its own long history of struggle for freedom. It is not for nothing that first parliament was in Britain."

And no one has exposed the dangers of the new imperialism to which Africa seems particularly susceptible more tellingly than Achebe. But if Sam is headed in the direction of Amin and Bokassa, and subject to those influences and inducements which shaped them, he is not as the novel opens set in that direction. Ikem says that "as long as he gets good advice and does not fall too deeply under the influence of such Rasputins as Reginald Okong (Professor of political science, member of Sam/HE's Cabinet, a man with "no sense of political morality" and perhaps "more responsible than any other single individual except myself for the remarkable metamorphosis of His Excellency) we may avoid the worst." (50)

But in fact Sam/HE is surrounded by "court jesters" and advised by "mesmerised toadies" and after attending a meeting of the OAU in Addis Ababa where he meets Haile Selassie (not named

by aptly characterised in the novel) and the fictional though archetypal President-for-Life Ngongo, Sam's megalomaniacal dreams of ultimate and enduring power begin: he "sees for the first time the possibilities for his drama in the role of an African Head of State and withdraws to prepare his own face and perfect his arts." (53)

In barest outline, then, Anthills of Savannah, complex, resourceful, demanding in structure and ideas, told from a multiplicity of view points, contemporary in its setting yet mindful of historical tradition, tells the tragic story of Sam/HE, Ikem Ososdi and Chris Oriko, friends for 25 years and each prominent in the affairs of Kangan in what are the closing months of the regime they serve in their separate ways. Boyhood friends become grown-up victims. Ikem and Chris are suspect by Sam/HE because of advice given to him by President-for-Life Ngongo and nurtured by Sam/HE's Attorney-General: "Your greatest risk is your boyhood friends, those who grew up with you in your village. Keep them at arm's length and you will live long." (23)

A referendum proposing Sam/HE as President-for-Life is defeated when the northern territory of Abazon vote against the referendum. (Their leaders say that Ikem, noted for his strong opinions on issues of national importance, has not written in support of the referendum. They take this as disapproval by a son of their soil and vote accordingly.) When drought overtakes Abazon a delegation petitions Sam/HE for help. Sam/HE anxious and embittered refuses. He succumbs to the machinations of his advisors, particularly those of Major Johnson Ossai, Director of State Research Council (read: Secret Police/Gestapo) and Ikem is accused of assisting the Abazonians in a plot to overthrow the government and of "regicide" when he makes a snide remark before a large public audience about Sam/HE's intention to have his face minted on Kangan currency: "My view is that any serving President foolish enough to lay his head on a coin should know he is inciting people to take it off; the head I mean." (162) He is arrested and murdered. Chris who to this point has sought a mediating role, acts to reveal the causes of Ikem's murder, is

forced into hiding and, fleeing the city for the Northern Territory, is shot and killed by a soldier bent on raping a young woman whom Chris tries to save. Chris dies as the news of Sam's overthrow is announced to the nation.

Beatrice, Chris's fiancée and friend to Ikem and his pregnant girl-friend, Elewa, survives the "unbelievable violences" of the regime which replaced Sam's to tell their story.

This novel has more action than Achebe's early books: usually he brings his novels to sudden and dramatic closes. That happens here to the extent that Ikem's death is sudden, expected and reported off stage. Chris's death is sudden and unexpected. But the "the hide and chase" sequences prefiguring Chris's death show that Achebe can generate suspense as readily and skilfully as his more "popular contemporaries in the cloak and dagger trade".

But Anthills of Savannah like all of Achebe's novels and however much human action and inter-action they possess is a

meditation--or a series of meditation--on a series of wide yet related subjects and themes--on leadership, on politics, on culture, on language, on history, on love, on faith and on belief--all of which are contained by considerations of "story".

References and allusions to "story"--to storytelling, to art and to writers and writing--are presented in various voices and registers throughout the novel, suggesting and affirming the scope and breadth of its influence: "The story owns and directs us. The story is everlasting . . . like fire when it is not blazing it is smouldering under its own ashes or sleeping and resting inside the flint-house"; "Every artist contains multitudes and expresses the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy"; "Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all the champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit--in state, in church or mosque, in party congresses, in the university or wherever"; "Writers don't give prescriptions--they give headaches"; and the long apostrophe

to "story" spoken by the leader of the Abazonian delegation--in

chapter nine--which begins--

So why do I say that the story is chief among his fellows? The same reason I think that our people will sometimes give the name Nkolika to their daughters-- Recalling-Is-Greatest. Why? Because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlines the sound of the 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. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we own the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different than cattle; it is the mark on the fact that sets one people apart from their neighbours. (124)

--and continues over several pages.

Moreover there is a self-reflexive element in the novel where Achebe writes that "a novelist must listen to his characters who after all created to wear the shoe and point the writer where it pinches."

Anthills of the Savannah is a demonstration of the claims Achebe makes for art in the essay "What Has Literature Got to Do With It?" in his second volume of essays, Hopes and Impediments:

Literature, whether handed down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality; enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us. What better preparation can a people desire as they begin their journey into the strange, revolutionary world of modernization? (177)

It is more than the presence of a number of references to "story" and "storytelling". It is how these references coalesce in revelation in the text, and how they prompt the action which replaces the stasis in the novel.

Achebe's metafictional purpose in his self-conscious references to writers is made plain when we recognise that three of the main characters in the novel are writers. Chris writes a "detailed diary of what is happening day to day" and defends his reason for remaining in HE's corrupt cabinet by saying "I wouldn't be writing this if I didn't hang around to observe it all." At this point his attitude is private and cautionary and he advises Ikem to adopt a similar stance and publish

superficial and distorted--and therefore dishonest--accounts of

political issues and events in The Gazette. But Ikem,

recognising the possible futility of his "crusading" editorials,

feels a moral imperative to continue publishing them:

Chris keeps lecturing me on the futility of crusading editorials. They achieve nothing. They antagonise everybody. They are essays in overkill. They're counter-productive. Poor Chris. By now he probably believes that crap too. Amazing what even one month in office can do to man's mind. I think that one of these days I shall set him down in front of a blackboard and chalk up for him the many bull's-eyes of my crusading editorials. The line I have taken with him so far is perhaps too subtle. But supposing my crusading editorials were indeed futile would I not be obliged to keep on writing them? To think that Chris no longer seems to understand such logic! Perhaps I have been too reluctant to face up to changes in my friends. Perhaps I should learn to deal with him along his own lines and jog his short memory with the many successes my militant editorials have had. Except there is a big danger in doing it. (38)

For Ikem the role of the writer is "not to marshal

facts" but to marshal passion--"Passion is our hope and

strength." The passion he raises results in the success of a

campaign against the "ritual obscenity" of public executions.

Ikem gives his account of the event which led to his writing the

editorial. Four criminals are to be shot by a company of army executioners. Huge crowds gather in the blinding sun awaiting the arrival of spectators privileged to have shaded seats, and the criminals themselves. One of the latter goes to the post crying out that he will be born again: to which one of the massed thousands of jeering spectators cries out: 'Na goat go born you nex time, not a woman':

My tenuous links with that crowd seemed to snap totally at that point. 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. I still ask myself how anyone could laugh at the proclamation of such a terrible curse or fail to be menaced by the prospect of its fulfillment. For it was clear to me that the robber's words spoken with such power of calmness into the multitude's hysteria just minutes before his white lace reddened with blood and his hooded head withered instantly and dropped to his chest were greater than he, were indeed words of prophecy. If the vision vouchsafed to his last moments was to be faulted in any particular it would be this: that it placed his reincarnation in the future when it was already a clearly accomplished fact. Was he not standing right then, full grown, in other stolen lace and terylene, in every corner of that disoriented crowd? And he and all his innumerable doubles, were they not mere emulators of other who daily stole more from us than mere lace and terylene? Leaders who openly looted our treasury,

whose effrontery soiled our national
soul. (42)

When he speaks at the university and engages in a heated question and answer session with students; when he insists that the moral role of the writer is to ask questions and to cause questions to be asked; when he insists that the writer's role is "to give headaches"; when he calls for a "new radicalism" in public life, Ikem provokes HE to fire him as Editor of the Gazette. Ikem's words inspire the students to question HE's corrupt regime. He is in the dead of night and murdered by his captors when, even though handcuffed, it is alleged he tried to draw a gun from a pocket.

Chris, to this point passive, uses his connections with the international press to have Ikem's murder reported and expose HE as his murderer. Chris goes underground, is hunted, forced to flee the city and dies--"the last grin", the last green bottle-- the ironic designation that Sam, Ikem and Chris had given themselves as boyhood friends.

Beatrice is the third writer in the novel. Throughout the book she refers to her "friendship with strange words" and to an insistent narrator's voice coming through in the background. She is a "B.A. Hons. in English" and she writes short stories which Ikem, a respected poet as well as a journalist, praises for their "muscular" and "masculine" style. And it is Beatrice who pieces together with difficulty the story of the "unbelievable violences we went through" in the retrospective Chapter Seven:

For weeks and months 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 put down sounded wrong--either too abrupt, too delicate or too obvious--to my middle ear. (82)

The most powerful female figure Achebe has created, Beatrice, as this passage suggests, is the central character in the novel. Not only is she closely linked to HE, Ikem and Chris in life; she lives to tell story of their involvement in--and in the case of Chris and Ikem their sacrifice--to contemporary history.

Moreover, in sensing her identity with "Chielo in the novel, the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and Caves" and through her recognition of the founding legend of Idemili and the role of Mother Idoto in fostering it, Beatrice is a link with the past and a protector of its values and concerns.

Achebe tells us that Beatrice "did not know these legends and traditions of her people because they played but little part in her upbringing". He adds with a spoofing irony:

She was born as we have seen into a world apart; was baptised and sent to schools which made much about the English and the Jews and the Hindu and practically everybody else but hardly put in a word for her forebears and the divinities with whom they had evolved. She came to barely knowing who she was. Barely, we say though, because she did carry a vague sense more acute at certain critical moments than others of being two different people. (105)

And, as Achebe writes, "knowing or not knowing does not save us from being known and even recruited and put to work. For, as a newly-minted proverb among her people has it, baptism (translated in their language as Water of God) is no antidote

against possession by Agwu the capricious god of diviners and artists. (105)

Beatrice is intuitively aware, like Chielo in Things Fall Apart, of her dual, mythic identity and, like Chielo, she undergoes a transformation, indeed transportation, when the goddess possesses her for divine purposes.

The reference to Water of God, to christian baptism, provides a link with the Idemili legend, set forth in Chapter Eight after Ikem, on a visit to Beatrice, walks through a "pillar of water". According to legend, the Almighty sent his daughter, Idemili, down to earth to temper man's power. She took the form of a pillar of water rising from a dark lake and in time created the River Niger so that the scattered Igbo villages could share her blessing. The river goddess Idoto was one of her offsprings. In the ritual worship of Idemili the pillar of water became "a dry stick rising erect from the bare, earth floor." (103) Men who wished to take the powerful ozo title had to seek her blessing and she punished with death those who misused the

authority he conferred on them--in his parable Achebe says that Idemili was sent to wrap "around Power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty". (102) The power of Beatrice as Idemili's avatar is revealed when she is invited--commanded--by HE to attend a dinner at the Presidential Retreat. Among the guests-- "the new power-brokers around His Excellency"--is a special guest, Lou Crandfield, an American journalist who presumes, after several drinks, to tell the President how to run his country. Beatrice assumes the role of avenging goddess, determined to remind HE of and prevent him from abusing his power:

I did it shamelessly. I cheapened myself. God! I did it to your glory like the dancer in the Hindu temple. Like Esther, oh yes like Esther, for my long suffering people.

And was I glad the king was slowly but surely responding! Was I glad! The big snake, the royal python of a giant erection began to stir in the shrubbery of my shrine as we danced closer and closer to soothing airs, soothing our ancient bruises together in the dimmed lights. Fully aroused he clung desperately to me. And I took him then boldly by the hand and led him to the balcony railings to the breathtaking view of the dark lake from the pinnacle of the hill. And there told him my story of Desdemona. Something possessed me as I told it.

"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? (181)

Achebe, later, in recounting the parable of Idemili's
coming, says that the Pillar of Water fused "earth and heaven at
the navel of the dark lake" and equates HE, by implication, with
"a certain man handsome beyond compare but in randiness as
unbridled as the odorous he-goat" who petitions Idemili for
membership in ozo but who so angers her by flouting her
injunctions that she sends her royal python to bar the way to his
village, "its head lost in the shrubbery to the left and its
tail likewise to the right." (105) The man, proving himself
unworthy of possessing the power of the ozo soon dies. Achebe
presents the myths of the ancestors as having a sustaining power
in the present.

The scene that leads to the telling of the parable is the
last meeting between Beatrice and Ikem. He arrives at her flat
soaking wet: "It was literally like barging into a pillar of

rain, you know. You could stand there with one foot wet and the other dry". (93). Ikem has brought a prose poem which he reads to Beatrice. Their conversation turns to a consideration of the rights and lives of women in their society and extends further to a discussion on the means and impediments to achieving freedom. Through Ikem, Achebe conveys his beliefs in the complex and often paradoxical elements that shape individual destinies. Achebe's humanist and populist sentiments are quite plainly stated through Ikem:

Society is an extension of the individual. The most we can hope to do with the problematic individual psyche is to re-form it. No responsible psychoanalyst would aim to do more, for to do more, to overthrow the psyche itself, would be to unleash insanity. No. We can only hope to rearrange some details in the periphery of human personality. Any disturbance of its core is an irresponsible invitation to disaster. Even a one-day-old baby does not make itself available for your root-and-branch psychological engineering, for it comes trailing clouds of immortality. What immortality? Its baggage of irreducible inheritance of genes. That is immortality.

It has to be the same with society. You re-form it around what it is, its core of reality; not around an intellectual abstraction. (100-101)

Ikem has been identified as Idemili/Idoto as avenger of man's misuse of power. When he leaves Beatrice she sees in a prophetic trance that he is going to his death. Ikem is sacrificed to a dark and evil power as was his namesake, Ikemefuna, the sacrificial victim to the dark side of Okonkwo's world.

Chris Oriko (his name echoes Christopher Okigbo's, Achebe's close friend, sacrificed in the Nigerian Civil War, a poet and priest of Idoto whom he celebrates in his book of poems, "Heavensgate") like Ikem, recognises the mythic dimension of Beatrice's character and her connection with Idoto. (Here, too, the connection with Chielo and the dual nature of the person possessed by the deity is subtly alluded to):

Chris saw the quiet demure damsel whose
still waters nonetheless could conceal
deep overpowering eddies of passion that
always almost sucked him into fatal
depths. Perhaps Ikem alone came close to
sensing the village priestess who will
prophesy when her divinity rides her
abandoning if need be her soup-pot on the
fire, but returning again when the god
departs to the domesticity of the kitchen
or the bargaining market-stool behind her
little display of peppers and dry fish

and green vegetables. He knew it better than Beatrice herself. (105)

And when he and Beatrice make love he senses that he enters the sacred grove of the Priestess:

More than once he had slipped on the steep banks and she had pulled him up and back with such power and authority as he had never seen her exercise before. Clearly this was her grove and these her own peculiar rites over which she held absolute power. Priestess or goddess herself? No matter. But would he be found worthy? Would he survive?

Chris is, like Ikem, found worthy when he puts his life on the line for Ikem's sake: he does not survive: the duality of existence is once again revealed: Idemili blesses or destroys without explanation: no man, whatever his earthly power, can feel secure.

Achebe believes in the importance of the traditions and beliefs of the past and the ways in which these may be valuable in tempering the excesses of the present.

Circumscribed by a mythic structure, Anthills of the Savannah is political novel and is pre-eminently about the present and about Nigeria. Men do not always harken to the

lessons of the past and in any case there is no one answer to political problems. Novels raise questions, affording a widening of understanding and of vision. Achebe's position regarding political ideologies is neither doctrinaire nor simplistic. The core of his analysis of the Nigerian situation is found in Ikem's answers to questions raised by students at the university meeting and the targets he identifies as providing impediments to the creation of a just society are various. Responding to the suggestion that "the nation ought to be put under the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat" and told that this body is comprised of workers and students, Ikem responds:

Workers and students. Let's take workers first. Who are they? The same workers who go on strike when outdated and outrageous colonial privileges like motor vehicle advances and allowances are threatened; whose leaders cannot give satisfactory accounts of millions they collect every month from compulsory worker's check-off scheme; who never in their congresses attack absenteeism, ghost workers, scandalously low national productivity. Above all, whose national president at last year's All-Africa Congress refused to leave his hotel room until an official Peugeot 504 assigned to him was replaced with a Mercedes. His reason you remember: the worker's leaders are not, in his very words, ordinary riff-raffs. You find that

funny? Well I don't. I find it tragic and true. Workers' leaders are indeed extraordinary riff-raffs. (157)

.....
Now what about students? Perhaps someone can show me one single issue in this country in which students as a class have risen above the low, very low, national level. Tribalism? Religious extremism? Even electoral merchandising. Do you not buy and sell votes, intimidate and kidnap your opponents just as the politicians used to do? Are you, as you should be, more competent than those of our countrymen and women not nearly as lucky as yourselves on whom we have squandered our meagre educational resources? Do you not form tribal pressure groups to secure lower admission requirements instead of striving to equal or excel any student from anywhere? Yes, you prefer academic tariff walls behind which you can potter around in mediocrity. (160)

Admitting that external factors have a bearing on the conduct of public affairs, Ikem says that "to blame all these things on imperialism and international capitalism as our modish radicals want us to do is, in my view, sheer cant and humbug. . . . It is like going out to arrest the village blacksmith every time a man hacks his fellow to death." (159)

Through the questions that Ikem raises Achebe poses a number of questions which relate directly to the state of the nation and what can be done to make it better. These are

practical questions which require practical solutions. And, as well, the contribute to the over-riding, all-encompassing the questions asks of a nation some thirty years after it came into being: "What must people do to appease an embittered history?"

The novel ends at an impasse. According to Beatrice's account the new regime is no better than the one it replaced. History repeats itself once more. But the novel also ends on a note of hope as Ikem's ideas live on through the voice of Emmanuel, the disaffected student leader who was with Chris when he died:

It wasn't Ikem the man who changed me. I hardly knew him. It was the ideas he set down on paper. One idea in particular: that we may accept a limitation on our actions but never, under no circumstances, must we accept a restriction on our thinking. (223)

And there is further hope in the presence of Ikem's child, born after his death to Elewa and called AMAECHINA: May-the-path-never-close.

A number of commentators in their first responses to the novel note how the "harsh experience of 22 years" have made for

and "intellectual growth, self-criticism, deepening understanding and . . . discipline of skill" which confirm Achebe's place in the forefront of contemporary writers. Some felt in adopting a structure more complex than his earlier writing and especially his increased use of "pidgin" in the novel he has lost a part of his international audience. To judge thus is to miss the complexities of the earlier writing (which continues to attract the attention of critics to a greater extent than that of any other African writer) and to perhaps miss the point that Achebe is seeking means, through his use of pidgin, to close the gap between those who are educated and those who are not. Much is made of the fact that contact with the people has been all but lost: it is the heart of the problem of leadership--"We have seen too much trouble in Kangan since the white man left because those who make plans make plans for themselves only and their families" (228)--it is a theme reiterated in this book and identified in A Man of the People.

It is a formidable problem to solve (with writers anywhere).

Achebe has gone a long way to solving it.

Achebe's latest published book is Hopes and Impediments.

Where in the early essays of Morning Yet on Creation Day (some of which are reprinted in the present volume) were discreet pieces on the social responsibility of the Writer, on the question of the use of English as a literary medium or critiques on individual pieces of literature here we have coalascing of the forces and convictions which motivate Achebe as imaginative writer so that in "The Truth of Fiction" and the "Writer and His Community" the place of the writer in the centre of his community and the resources he must possess and integrate in order to serve his community are revealed as being at one.

There are still individual pieces: a critique on The Palm-Wine Drinkard (which places Tutuola's his writing into the main stream of African writing and takes it out of "the fascinating cul-de-sac" where Achebe earlier had put it.); on Kofi Awooner's Breast of Earth which pays generous tribute to the

novel while suggestion that it might have fulfilled a greater purpose were it not for the despair with which the book ends; and the profoundly sensitive personal tribute to Christopher Okigbo.

The major essays in the book set out to provide firm if provisional answers to the question posed in the last essay in the volume--the address Achebe gave on receiving the NNAM for the second time--"What Has Literature Got to Do With It."

One reads these essays as a gloss on the novels, short fiction and poetry; as an expression of the central position of art in the community, of the role of the writer to provide ways and means of enlarging the experience of the reader for the purpose of deriving other options and building a more just society.

As the title of the volume implies the "Impediments" to the realisation of the "Hopes" that cause the writer to assume his role are plainly presented--hopes and impediments go together to produce the tension in the writing.

Achebe addresses the question of the art of storytelling in a society where oral wisdom is in danger of dying out because of the increasing development and domination of the modern technocratic society, where the communal--and public--act of telling a story is yielding to the private form of the novel. What he seeks to say here--and reveal in the novels: especially in Anthills of the Savannah--is that the story lives forever, is conscious of its place in society, and is capable of fulfilling its traditional and historic role. He is a writer who quietly, reflectively and unobtrusively has modified the traditions of fiction, whose forms are distinctively his own and who sees the connections between traditional and experimental without being in any way self-conscious. His is a talent which arrives at narrative form--a process expounded in these essays--for envisaging and conveying experience which is deeply convincing.

This is a slim volume. But it reveals, as do the novels, short stories and poems--the deceptive profundity, the discriminating insight, the mental and moral fastidiousness, the

elegance and lucidity--which are the hallmark of Achebe's

writing.