

Chinua Achebe is arguably the most discussed writer of his generation. Things Fall Apart, his first novel has become a classic in its own time. It has been read and discussed by readers throughout the anglophone world and through translation into some forty foreign languages. Sales are estimated at in excess of 3 million copies. His other novels -- No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God, A Man of the People and Anthills of the Savannah -- are equally respected (even if they have not yet attained the same sales). A substantial body of scholarship and criticism has grown up around each of the books.

Achebe was born on 16th November, 1930, in the village of Ogidi in Eastern Nigeria. His father was a catechist for the Church Missionary Society and Achebe's primary education was in the society's school in his village, Ogidi. He was eight, he tells us, when he began to learn English and 14 when he went, as one of the few boys selected, to the Government College at Umuahia, with Government College Ibadan in western Nigeria and

Ughelli school in the Niger delta, one of the best schools in West Africa. He matriculated in 1948 to the recently founded University College, Ibadan as a member of the first class. He intended to study medicine. He soon switched to English literary studies and followed a syllabus which almost exactly resembled the University of London Honours degree, Ibadan being then a constituent college of the University of London. He contributed stories, essays and sketches to the University Herald. (These stories were published in 1972 in a larger collection entitled Girls at War and Other Stories.) It was after graduating in 1953 that he became confirmed in his purpose to be a writer, the incentive supplied by his response to the depiction of Nigeria in the Joyce Cary novel, Mister Johnson.

Achebe's success as a writer proceeds from his art: he is a master of the craft of fiction; he has renewed the form by locating it in a new and unexplored locale and he has extended the capability of English beyond the limits it had achieved to the

point when he published his first novel. His control of language is absolute and his range of usage exactly appropriate to the multiplicity of his interests. Nothing is out of place in his imaginative work.

Things Fall Apart first received attention, however, because of the social purposes he assigned to it and to himself as writer. The novel was published in 1958, two years before Nigerian Independence. The timing was superb. For while Africans -- Nigerians in this case -- looked forward with excitement and optimism to the political freedom they would attain after more than a half-century of colonial rule, Achebe understood the necessity of showing his countrymen the strength of their own cultures as assisting in the task of nation building, a strength if not lost then greatly diminished through the effects of the imposition of an alien culture:

. . . as far as I am concerned the
fundamental theme must first be disposed

of. This theme -- put quite simply -- is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that African people all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain. 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 Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art

is important but so is education of the
kind I have in mind.

Interested in stories and story-telling from his youth, Achebe had his interest in becoming a writer confirmed when he encountered Cary's novel:

. . . one of the things that probably finally decided me was a novel set in Nigeria by Joyce Cary. I regard him as one of the outstanding British writers of the first part of this century. Now he was in this country as an Administrative Officer during the First World War and he wrote this novel called Mister Johnson, which is quite famous, and I feel that it's not -- in spite of this man's ability, in spite of his sympathy and understanding, he could not get under the skin of his African. They just did not communicate. And I felt if a good writer could make this mess perhaps we ought to try our hand.

For Achebe, then, Johnson represents the worst kind of presentation of Africans by Europeans, the more so because Cary was working hard at getting the presentation right and not writing fiction which deliberately, often cynically, exploited the stereotypes of Africans and African society which informed the hundreds of novels written by Englishmen about Africa during the imperial-colonial period. It was precisely because Cary was a liberal-minded and sympathetic writer as well as colonial administrator that Achebe felt the record had to be set straight.

Achebe's purpose then is to write about his own people and for his own people. His five novels to date form a continuum of time over some 100 years of Igbo civilization. Europeans have not yet penetrated Umuofia, the setting of the first novel, when it begins. When it ends colonial rule has been established, significant change has taken place and the character of the community, its values and freedoms, substantially and irrevocably altered. Arrow of God, the third published novel, has much the

same setting as Things Fall Apart with the difference that colonial rule has been consolidated and the lives of the villagers ^{are} ~~is~~ completely circumscribed by it. The action of No Longer at Ease (the second published novel) takes place in the period immediately before independence from British colonial rule in Nigeria; A Man of the People and Anthills of the Savannah are located in unspecified African countries (strongly resembling Nigeria) in the immediate post-independence period. The novels therefore form an imaginative history of a segment of a major group of people in what eventually became Nigeria seen from the perspective of a Christian Igboman.

Achebe has said in various places that the fact of his Christian upbringing was important in his evolution as a writer:

✓ I was born in Ogidi in Eastern Nigeria of devout Christian parents. The line between Christian and non-Christian was much more definite in my village 40 years

ago than it is today. When I was growing up I remember we tended to look down on the others. We were called in our language "the people of the church" or "the association of God." The others were called, with the conceit appropriate to the followers of the true religion, the heathen or even "the people of nothing" We lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today On one arm of the cross we sang hymns and read the Bible night and day. On the other my father's brother and his family, blinded by heathenism, offered food to idols. That was how it was supposed to be anyhow. But I knew, without knowing why, that it^s was too

simple a way to describe what was going on
. . . . What I do remember was a
fascination for the ritual and the life on
the other arm of the crossroads. And I
believe two things were in my favour --
that curiosity, and the little distance
imposed between me and it by the accident
of my birth. The distance becomes not a
separation but a bringing together like
the necessary backward step which a
judicious viewer may take to see a canvas
steadily and fully.¹⁷

The duality Achebe describes in his experience of the
religious traditions of his people, viewed from a "little
distance", the Christian rituals which shaped his upbringing, he
later detected in the Igbo religion itself and it is this
recognition that has shaped his art, which might be said to be a

controlling metaphor of it. He writes:

✓The Igbo world is an arena for the interplay of forces. It is a dynamic world of movement and flux In some cultures an individual may worship one of the gods or goddesses in the pantheon and pay scant attention to the rest. In Igbo religion such selectiveness would be unthinkable. All the people must placate all the gods all the time! For there is a cautionary proverb which states that even when a person has satisfied Udo completely he may be killed by Ogwugwu! The degree of peril propounded by this proverb is only dimly apprehended until one realises that Ogwugwu is Udo's loving consort. ↙

Given Achebe's purposes as an artist -- the duty to the art and the social purposes he has said he means it to serve -- one can say that his is a distinctly Igbo sensibility (whatever correspondences one might identify between his and those of artists in other places and cultures). His art reflects in all of its variety the endless permutations of the essential duality of Igbo life. The connection between this world view and artistic irony is of course apparent. Achebe's art is essentially an art of irony, from the simple to the profound. What makes Achebe's irony different from that of writers from purely literary cultures is that while their uses of irony are cultivated, his is instinctive, generating as it does from the substance of the culture and inseparable from it.

Even so there was a 5 year gap between the stories which appeared in the university paper and the publication of Things Fall Apart. In that interval Achebe taught for a year and then

embarked upon a twelve year career as a Talks Producer for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. In 1957 he went to London to attend the British Broadcasting Corporation Staff School. One of his teachers there was the British novelist and literary critic, Gilbert Phelps. Phelps recognised the unique quality of Things Fall Apart and recommended it for publication. So on its first try the book which has become a twentieth century classic went safely into print. Achebe has remarked that he never had the experience of the struggling artist.

The struggle of course went on in the creation of the novel. Conceived first as a story which dealt with the lives of three men in a family over three generations -- of Okonkwo, Nwoye (who became Isaac) and Obi Okonkwo -- the novel was divided into three parts with two of the parts eventually expanded to tell the story of separate lives, Okonkwo's and Obi Okonkwo's. Nwoye's story has never been told (though interesting speculative articles on what that life comprised have been published by critics and

scholars in the field of literary criticism.)

There are a number of related reasons why there was a gap between the stories of student days and the publication of Things Fall Apart. There was the purely practical reason of finding time to write in the midst of a full professional life. As Achebe has said, he and his peers among Nigerian writers "wrote with their left hands" as it were. But the reasons were more profound. Having determined that one of his purposes was essentially a political one -- to set straight the record propounded about Nigerian life by Europeans, to establish in fictional forms that "African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty," he had to find out in more detail than he knew at the time what that philosophy was, and in what consisted its depth and value and beauty. More than that, and most difficult and elusive in accounting for, he had to discover the appropriate form and

language for his fictional evocations.

As Achebe admits he largely "picked up" the history of his society: "this was the life that interested me, partly the life I lived and the life that was lived around me, supported by what I heard in conversation -- I was very keen on listening to old people -- and what I learned from my father, so it was sort of picked up here and there. There was no research in the library if that is what you mean." But Achebe was aware of and read the writing of colonial administrators and missionaries, especially the quasi-anthropological treatises of G.T. Basden who was a close friend of Achebe's father (he in fact married Achebe's parents and was hono^red by Achebe's village, Ogidi, with a carved tusk.) Like Cary, presumably Basden's heart was in the right place and it was precisely because he was sincere and earnest that his woefully wrongheaded interpretations of Igbo customs could not go unchallenged. He was, ineluctably, one of those who through his writing, contributed to the "almost complete disaster for the

black races . . . the warped mental attitudes of both black and white . . . the traumatic experience [that] possesse[d] the sensibility" which was the legacy of Africa's long encounter with Europe. Achebe read Basden's and others' accounts and absorbed them into his sensibility.

But while he conceived his role as partly that of "teacher" -- "perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares?" -- he is not a "preacher":

I'm very fully aware and fully conscious of the dangers of idealizationI bend over backwards to paint in all the unsavoury, all the unfavourable aspects of that culture. Because what I think I am is a kind of witness and I think I would not be doing justice to my cause if I could be faulted on the matter of truth.

(Ravenscroft-Johnson interview) ~

In this comment we see reconciled two impulses in Achebe: his authorial methods and craftsmanship belie the nonchalance of his comment on applied as distinct from pure art, and the implied paradox that for the application to be fully effective the art must be consummate is resolved.

Things Fall Apart is "an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son." The novel tells the story of Okonkwo and his life and career in the village of Umuofia. Born of a dilatory father, Unoka, a wastrel, a man known in "all the clan for the weakness of his machete and his hoe", (who nonetheless embodies qualities admirable in themselves if not admired and supported in the clan), Okonkwo is determined through hard work to achieve the highest titles in his clan. He embodies the qualities most valued by his people (if in an exaggerated form) -- energy, a strong sense of purpose, a sense of communal cooperativeness which at the same time is marked by a strong sense of individuality. When we meet him, Okonkwo's fame is already

established: "Okonkwo was well-known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements". As a young man he had thrown Amalinze ^{the} / The Cat, "the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten from Umuofia to Mbaino." He thus brought "honor to his village". Since that time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a "bush fire in ^{the} harmattan": he had achieved wealth and wives and children and was a member of the highest council of the clan. Okonkwo's rise to a position of wealth and authority is in part accounted for by the strength of his will and his arm. Burdened with an improvident father and early failure as a farmer, Okonkwo does not yield to despair which would have crushed a lesser man: "it always surprised him that he did not sink under the load of despair. He knew he had been a fierce fighter, but that year had been enough to break the heart of a lion." Recognising his capacity for survival he believes that "since I survived that year"... "I shall survive anything". He put it down to his inflexible will". And it is more than this: as we are

told Okonkwo's whole life was "... dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness ... and so Okonkwo's whole life was ruled by one passion -- to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved." In metaphysical terms, however, in accordance with the beliefs of the clan his success is attributed to his "chi". In the concept of the "chi" Achebe secures the philosophical basis of the novel, and reveals the essential duality of Igbo belief. Okonkwo's success is attributed to a benevolent "chi". The Ghanaian writer and critic Kofi Awoonor says that "the 'chi' is a personal god or man's deital expression, the ultimate mission brought by man from the creator's house, a deity that makes each man's unique personality or being " and relating this to Achebe's achievement writes:

Achebe's thematic construction and dramatisation of the conflict in Things Fall Apart utilises the 'chi' concept. The structure of the novel is firmly based in the principles that are derived from this piece of Igbo

ontological evidence. Okonkwo's life and actions seem to be prescribed by those immutable laws inherent in the 'chi' concept. It is the one significant principle that determines the rhythm and tragic grandeur of the novel. Okonkwo's rise and fall are seen in the significant way in which he challenges his 'chi' to battle." (p. 260)

Okonkwo's story is worked out against the background of daily life in Umuofia, an agrarian society governed by fixed rules in religion and politics, always discussed, debated and amended as circumstances dictate. It is a democratic society where titles are taken (or given) on merit -- they are earned -- and can equally be taken away if the proscriptions for holding them are violated. The tension in the society and at the same time its stability arise out of the balance struck between individuality -- which in Okonkwo's case displays itself in a single-minded pursuit of acquiring wealth and thus respect and influence -- and communality. Individual enterprise is valued and

rewarded. But a strong religious principle keeps this individualism in check. Achebe has written that "Ibo society has always been materialistic. This may sound strange because Ibo life had at the same time a strong spiritual dimension -- controlled by gods, ancestors, personal spirits or 'chi' and magic."

The "chi" is the dominating ambiguous force in the life of an individual; but his life is also circumscribed by gods, ancestors (made visible at certain festive times) and magic. All of these forces contain the community in Things Fall Apart which displays them in dynamic relationships with the seasons, subject to periods of intense labour in the planting and harvest seasons broken by periods of leisure; subject to the vagaries of the climate, leavened by song and dance and music.

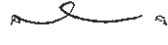
This is the society we see in the first (and longest) part of the novel, a homogeneous society not without its inner tensions and problems, both personal and communal. But which operates upon

codes of religious and political belief supported by custom. The extent to which Okonkwo reflects the values of the society of his time is clear from what Achebe has said about that society:

One of the most important things a man should aim at, first of all, is to be strong. I mean not necessarily physically strong, though that helps too. I mean a man who keeps his word, a man of character. Oratory comes into it too -- you should be a man who can stand up and make your case, because the government of a unit was simply by deliberation, and if you want to arrive at any decision, all kinds of arguments are put forward -- not just a smart talker, your position must come from conviction. And things like truth and so on -- because we had titles,

and these titles were more or less bought with money -- I mean you had to be wealthy, had to have big farms and so on to be able to afford them. And to keep these titles you had to be above certain things. I mean you weren't supposed to tell lies, or to steal, and if you stole all your titles went.... Even with the Ibo who were very, very pragmatic, there was nothing that was firm and final.... For everything there is an exception and this is one of the fundamental things about Ibo society". (Whitelaw interview).

Things Fall Apart has three sections to it: the first is set in Umuofia before the coming of Europeans and it is here that Achebe best demonstrates his concern -- without sacrificing the convincingness of his art -- that:

... the past needs to be recreated not only for the enlightenment of our detractors but even more for our own education. Because ... the past with all its imperfections, never lacked dignity 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 recreate will be called to question and he will defeat his ~~won~~ purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. 

Part One which comprises 13 chapters presents the Umuofian agricultural year, the games and festivals which are its climax, the affairs of prominent citizens and their relations both as individuals and as families within the clan; the arrival in the clan of Ikemefuna, the boy who becomes as a son to Okonkwo and, more importantly in terms of the novel's purposes, almost a brother to Okonkwo's son, Nwoye. Following these affairs and events in the succeeding chapters of Part One are chapters which focus the crisis in Okonkwo's life culminating in his seven year banishment to the village of his mother..

Part Two of Things Fall Apart is situated in Mbanta and here we learn of the arrival of the white man, and of the religion and system of colonial government that are gradually introduced into the area. The economy of Achebe's prose and his restraint in telling his story believ^e the complexity of the issues evoked. Because the coming of the foreigners is gradual the processes by which these new values are established are insidious. At first the

Christian Church attracts ^{only} ~~on~~ the "worthless" members of village society. But gradually men of prominence in the clan join the ranks of converts and this, together with the establishment of a political-judicial system administered by Europeans (and supported by African police) and the introduction of a cash trading economy, causes things to change irreversibly.

Okonkwo witnesses, without being able to rationalize^z ~~ize~~ them, the inevitable processes of historical change. The new religion has sufficient appeal to undermine traditional religion. At the same time, through the incentives of the new value placed on palm-oil and palm-kernels, the acquisitive nature of the society is enhanced. The traditional balance is upset.

Part Three of the novel, proceeding from Okonkwo's return to Umuofia, brings the novel swiftly to a close. The climax of the story is reached when, after a sacred python -- the embodiment of a sacred spirit -- is killed by a Christian, reprisal is taken by the villagers who burn the Christian church.

The District Officer calls Okonkwo and other elders to his office on the pretext that he wishes to discuss the animosities between the two factions but behaves treacherously by putting them in jail and in irons. Following this, for Okonkwo there is nothing left to do but fight. He kills a Government messenger and when he sees that he stands alone hangs himself. This is an abominated form of death, ironically earning for him what he had sought all his life to avoid, a dishonorable burial like his father.

The final paragraphs of the novel reveal irony of a different kind. The dangling body of Okonkwo is merely an "undignified detail" to the D.C. who plans to write a book on the Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. In this book Okonkwo's story will make "... interesting reading " even if only an almost incidental detail.

The meaning of the book is sustained by the consummate control Achebe has over his materials as these are presented in a English which is appropriate to all of the moods and modes of the

story and which accounts for its complete convincingness. Achebe has said in many places that the words must sound right in his ear before he sets them down. His statement about the kind of English appropriate to the writer's task is well-known but worth setting down again:

~~The~~ 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 for 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.

This is what Achebe does. There are many different voices in his writing, voices exactly appropriate to the contexts in which language is used.

Things Fall Apart (and Arrow of God) is an account of colonial history from the point of view of the colonized rather than the colonizer (as defined, partially, in The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger) and by inference through the novel itself. The perspective is African ontology instead of Eurocentric historiography. That ontology consists of a novel which explores the philosophical principles of an African community, unique and autonomous at the outset. The discussion, direct and inferred, does not have the depth of the third novel, Arrow of God -- and it was for that reason Achebe says he returned to the theme in his third book.

But here as elsewhere Achebe's vision is impartial but informed: he sees the inevitable processes of history which he presents without idealism or sentimentality. He is the most

trustworthy of historical witnesses.

Achebe's second novel, No Longer at Ease (1960) is set in modern Nigeria in the days immediately before political independence from British colonial rule. The novel reveals the changes to Nigerian society which result from foreign intervention, the extent to which things have fallen apart. The nature of these changes ^{is} ~~are~~ revealed through the experiences, actions and beliefs of Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of the hero of Things Fall Apart. No Longer at Ease records Obi's professional, social and moral decline as these arise from and run parallel to a confusion of values in modern Nigerian society. Obi is a highly individualized character who may nevertheless be understood to be typical in many ways of young Nigerians of his generation. Obi's is the tragic story of a modern man: his values are shaped by his links with his Igbo culture as revealed by his mother; but they are contorted by his formal, alien education overseas -- he is a B.A. Hons in English from London University. The novel also tells

the tragic story of a modern state, for through Obi's experiences Achebe provides a record, transmuted by his personal vision of, on the one hand, the nature of "modernity" -- in terms of its social, political and economic implications -- derived through colonial rule as Nigerians have accommodated themselves to these, and, on the other hand, the price Nigerians have paid for this kind of modernity.

Obi is not an admirable character -- his distanced, literary and supercilious responses to events in his community, both the traditional society of his village and to his "European" job in the capital city, are smug and callow. His tragic flaw is that he has no moral reserves with which to deal with the calamities he brings down on his own head. Yet his experiences testify to the oppressive weight of doubt, guilt and regret that the colonial experience has occasioned in Nigeria.

Achebe returns to the past in his third novel Arrow of God, possibly the most consummate expression of the craft of fiction of its generation, where all of the elements of the novel are supremely integrated. Here Achebe evokes a world much like that of Okonkwo's but a more dynamic world, evoked in comprehensive detail, a world redolent of the complexities of daily domestic, social, political and religious living, but further complicated by the religious and political proscriptions which the presence of the colonial force have introduced into Igbo society and which are now institutionalized. Arrow of God ... "goes back to the past, not as remotely as [Things Fall Apart] [because] I've learned to think that my first book is no longer adequate. I've learned a lot more about these particular people ... my ancestors." The dynamics of the life of the people of Umuaro are rendered with vivid detail for the purpose of displaying the tragedy of Ezeulu, Chief Priest of Ulu and the spiritual and political leader of his people. When we meet him,

Ezeulu's power is supreme. But secure as his power and influence are, he is compelled to defend it against Nwaka, a wealthy Chief and principal supporter of Ezidemili, Chief Priest of the god Idemili, a once powerful deity whom Ulu has displaced.

The novel is a meditation on the nature and uses of power, and on the responsibility of the person who wields it. Ezeulu becomes engaged in a struggle for power with both the people of his village and the Officers of the British ^{Colonial} ~~Political~~ Service. Always sensitive to the source of his power by virtue of the reasons for it being given to him, Ezeulu is forced to try to reconcile the contending impulses in his own nature to serve the needs of his own people as their protecting deity and his human desire for greater personal power through pushing his authority to its very limits. Out of this attempt to reconcile these contending impulses his tragedy arises.

The novel is poised at that moment in time when an attempt at resolution of the dilemma is forced on him. For reasons

elaborated below, Ezeulu is put in jail at British administrative headquarters. During his period of imprisonment two new moons pass, two sacred yams, by which ceremony the calendar year passes and the planting season is determined, remain uneaten while Ezeulu determines to thwart both the British administration and, more importantly, his own clansmen. On his return to his village after being released by the British, and despite the warm welcome accorded him, Ezeulu determines to eat the two yams in sequence, thus delaying the harvest. New yams rot in the ground and the clan is faced with a famine. Ultimately the clan -- and his god, Ulu, -- abandon Ezeulu. The Christian mission offers succour to members of the clan, some of whom bring thanksgiving offerings to the Christian mission. It is at the time when Ezeulu wrestles with his conscience, seeking to respond to the absolute need of his people to harvest their annual food supply and yet determined to honour his god by observing and defending absolute custom with reference to the eating of the ceremonial yams which determine the

appropriate rhythms of the seasons. He makes the wrong choice and his tragic end results. Achebe displays the processes, both social and psychological, which bring down the Priest-leader and his god.

A religious ambience pervades the society and Achebe, according to Kofi Awoonor, through his dramatization of Ezeulu's function in the community is able "to centralize the theological arguments that emerge in an African religious situation which outsiders may think is devoid of intellectual debate." Awoonor goes on:

One of the most important functions of the priest-medium in most African societies is the running of the sacred race, a duty that vividly underscores the scapegoat concept and at the same time emphasizes the priest's divine role and the sharing of the essence of his god.

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The priest's apparent immunity to the severe visceral angers of his god is revealed in the race. It also symbolises his struggle on behalf of his deity against malevolent forces that are bent on undermining the god's benevolent work and place in the community. The priest maintains an eternal spiritual state, a condition of purity at all times, which enables him to transmit regular messages and interpretations of events past, present and future. The spiritual state expresses his readiness to be "used" by the god; induction into states of trance, of somnolent suspension, of spiritual dying in order to be reborn with knowledge and affirmation of the god's purpose for

man, emphasizes the bearer or carrier concept. In essence, the priest, even though the supervisory agent in divine affairs, is the one who makes himself available for the symbolic sacrifices that are demanded regularly of the diety. On the occasion of greater festivals, the priest's role is the carrier, the bearer of terrible truths. Publicly, on behalf of the people, he bears the sacrifice and undergoes the purification and runs the symbolic race.

Achebe has said "we make the gods we worship" and, recognizing this, Ezeulu has persistent cause to meditate on the nature of his power:

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops

and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the Feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and the New Yam feast; but he did not choose the day. He was merely a watchman. His power was no more the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive it was his; he would find it food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know who the real owner was. N o !
the Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that. If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival -- n o planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not

dare. ↗

As well as offering a statement of the ambiguous nature of the priest's powers, the passage presages the way in which events in the novel will unfold. Circumstances arrange themselves in such a way that Ezeulu's consideration of his powers becomes more than speculation. With the presence of the white man and with his recognition that here is an influence which will alter and reshape his society, Ezeulu is determined that he will understand this influence and turn it to his own profit (and that of the villages). Ezeulu knows 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.

Ezeulu thus incurs the suspicion of some and jealousy of 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.

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.

.....

The tragic outcome to Ezeulu's life results from his own rationalization 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.

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^s 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. 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~~ ^{gain} 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 w a s 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 inexperienced 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 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.

Moreover, 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 ⁱⁿ 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. 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, who tells the story, is, when we meet him, 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 Africanization 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.

The strength of the argument of the book is summed up in Odili's statement that mere anarchy has replaced the laws of the village and 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.

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 dramatizes 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.

A Man of the People continues Achebe's contemplation of 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-independence 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.

A Man of the People is a prophetic novel. It was published in January, 1966 and coincided almost exactly with the first military coup d'etat 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 of 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 this 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." 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, ^gThe 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 the nature of religious belief as this is apposite to the present. There are, as well, stories 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 there are 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.

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 humor^{ar} 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 of men in the political sphere.

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.

This volume has been superseded by Hopes and Impediments (1988) which retains some of the essays of the earlier volume and adds essays and addresses produced in the intervening years. Of special notes are "The Truth of Fiction" and "What Has Literature Got to Do with It?" (this latter Achebe's address on receiving the Nigerian National Merit Award).

In the midst of a busy literary life Achebe has been recognized at home and abroad with honorary degrees, visiting academic appointments and involved 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 center^{BA} 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.⁴ 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. 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."

Achebe confirmed his place as the leading African novelist with the publication of Anthills of the Savannah in 1986. It is not going too far to say it is the major publishing event in

Africa in twenty years.

The novel is set in the West African country of Kangan which to all intents and purposes can be seen as Nigeria. It takes up the enquiry initiated by A Man of the People. A Man of the People ended with a military coup and Anthills of the Savannah ends with yet another a military coup: history goes on repeating itself, a measure of how far the country is from solving its political problems. Achebe examines the consequences of military as opposed to civilian rule. By all accounts military leadership is not much better than the Nanga-ism of the regime it replaced. In fact it is worse: political chaos has been replaced by a dictatorship; cynical self-interest has been replaced by megalomania. Anthills of the Savannah elaborates and adumbrates many of the problems Achebe identified in his political pamphlet The Trouble With Nigeria.

Kangan is ruled by a Military Governor and a cabinet of civilian Ministers. It is a regime which can take no credit for its accomplishments: as one of the characters in the novel 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)

In barest outline Anthills of the Savannah, complex, resourceful, demanding in structure and ideas, told from a multiplicity of view points, contemporary in setting yet mindful of the relevance of historical tradition, tells the tragic story of Sam, His Excellency and would-be President for Life; Ikem Osodi, poet and editor of The National Gazette; and Chris Oriko, Minister of Information in HE's cabinet. They have been friends for twenty-five years and Ikem and Chris have been instrumental in helping Sam to power. Achebe characterizes Sam's career in a paragraph:

From school to Sandhurst; then first African
Second Lieutenant in the Army; ADC to the Governor;
Royal Equerry during the Queen's^s visit; Colonel at the

time of the coup; General and His Excellency, then

Head of State, after (67)

Noting that Sam, through his Sandhurst training, has cultivated the style of an English Gentleman, Ikem says that Sam could do worse:

"...I believe that a budding dictator might choose models far worse than the English gentleman of leisureThe English have for all practical purposes, ceased to menace the world....'The real danger 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.'

hiding and while seeking safety in the northern territory of the country is shot and killed by a soldier, ironically, on the day when Sam's overthrow is broadcast to the nation.

For Achebe the trouble with Kangan is a problem of leadership. The Trouble with Nigeria is a gloss on the novel (or the reverse). Admitting that external factors have a bearing on the problems which beset the nation, he has Ikem say: "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." (159). Nor is the leadership problem to be solved by a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat" because if the proletariat is composed of workers and students, as Ikem is informed at a public meeting at the university, then no two bodies have been more derelict than workers and student in their commitment to public and civil causes. Ikem castigates both groups roundly in Chapter Twelve of the novel, the core of Achebe's

analysis. Achebe's solution is a humanist one: "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.... It has to be the same with society. You reform it around what it is, its core of reality; not around an intellectual abstraction."(100-101)

The writer's role is central in affecting this solution. Anthills of the Savannah is a novel about "story". There are persistent references to the role of "story" and the "storyteller" in the book: "the story owns and directs us ... the story is everlasting"; "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"; "every artist contains multitudes and expresses the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy"; "Writers don't give prescriptions -- they give

headaches". There is, moreover, a metafictional element in the novel the purpose of which is made plain by the fact that three of the principal characters -- Ikem, Chris and Beatrice -- are writers: it is Beatrice who tells the story of the closing days of Sam's regime, of the integrity and sacrifice of Ikem and Chris and of the horror of the regime which replaced it. And it is because of the power of story that the self-reflexive reference to Things Fall Apart is included. Beatrice senses her identity with "Chielo in the novel, the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and Caves", an avatar of the ambiguous purposes of the deity. She knows as well the legend of Idemili and the role of Mother Idoto in advocating it. Idemili was sent to wrap "around Power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty".(102). When that power is abused by Sam, Beatrice assumes the role of avenging goddess and by seducing him reminds him of his responsibility.

Anthills of the Savannah exemplifies the claims that Achebe makes for art in his essays "The Truth of Fiction" and "What Has Literature Got to Do With It" ⁱⁿ the volume Hopes and Impediments:

... stories serve the purpose of consolodating whatever gains a people or their leaders have made or imagine they have made in their existential journey through the world; but they also serve to sanction when it can no longer be denied. At such 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

Achebe in Anthills of the Savannah aims at giving the story back to the people, at reclaiming the art of storytelling in a society where oral wisdom is in danger of dying out because of the increasing development of the modern technocratic society and where the communal -- and public -- act of storytelling is yielding to the private form of the printed word. Anthills of the Savannah reveals that the two distinct forms can meet, can assist in closing the gap between the educated and the uneducated (the use of a good deal of "pidgin" in the novel promotes this cause as well) so that the story is capable of fulfilling its traditional role.

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.

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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