

ACHEBE'S ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH - A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

An introduction of the leading characters in the novel, Chris, Sam and Ikem, in their elevated political positions in Kangan, the West African State. General Sam, the Head of State is "a Caged Tiger" and this loss of freedom has gripped the whole cabinet, as narrated by Chris.

His point of view is related in the study to that of others including the omniscient one, whose view enables the reader to see this novel for what it essentially is; a philosophical one offering the author's views on modern African society. Implicit in this whole exercise is a tribute by Achebe to the achievement of Nigerian poet - turned - civil war soldier, Christopher Okigbo. Evidence, internal and external adduced for this claim.

Keywords: Tribute, Okigbo, Novel, Narrative, Point of view, Elegy.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty one years' gestation for Chinua Achebe's new novel, *Anthill of the Savannah* attests to the seriousness with which it was conceived. Within the period Achebe abandoned the pen for a while in order, as he told an interviewer, to learn to shoot with a gun. He was referring to his own involvement on the Biafran side in the Nigerian civil war, which well nigh tore things apart. A leading Ibo Writer, the Poet Christopher Okigbo, more than took up a gun: he ended up in an unknown grave for his patriotic effort.

Perhaps Achebe's way of paying tribute to him is to have created the central character in the novel called Christopher Oriko. In the novel, Chris is the Commissioner for Information while in the prophetic poem "Hurray for Thunder", Okigbo intimates the Biafran conflict in the lines,

"If I don't learn to shut my mouth I'll
soon go to hell I, Okigbo, town crier,
together with my iron bell."¹

The identification of Commissioner for words with Town Crier is almost complete. The verbal artist's place in society is recognised in the novel in the

words of Ikem's Abazon country Man at the Har-money Hotel:

The sounding of the battle drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards - each is important in its own way.²

Chris Oriko may be Commissioner for Words or Information but the one who trades in words as a profession is Ikem Osode, Editor of the *National Gazette* as well as the writer of the fine prose poem, "Hymn to the sun" on the misery of his native province. The name of this profession is censorship, external or self-imposed in the West African State of Kangan with its would-be President for-life, General Sam.

West Africa may be the declared setting for this novel but other parts of Africa too have provided Achebe with the necessary grist. Until November 1987 there were two life-Presidents in Africa, both Octogenarians: Habib Bourghiba of Tunisia and Hastings Banda of Malawi, like President Ngongo of our novel. Moreover, Malawi's official National Daily is the *Gazette* as in our novel.

The wise old Tortoise is Ngongo as described in the novel offers Mephistophelean advice to the fledgling Kangan President, product of Lord Lugard (of indirect rule immortality) College and of the elite military institution of Sandhurst:

"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."³

President General Sam's internal problems date from his O.A.U. visit to the old Tortoise's capital. From that time his friends find him no longer at ease.

From East Africa thunders the monstrous voice of Ugandan President Idi Amin Dada, who, alas! once served his Mother Continent as Chairman of the O.A.U. The rest of the world got to know the Swahili word, *Karasi*, chiefly through that strong man, as by it, he reputedly sought to banish or liquidate his victims. *Transition* magazine which used to flourish in Uganda had to transplant itself to Accra because it found itself withering under the blast of that massive force, "Karasi." Thereafter, the magazine devoted almost an entire issue to the evil ramifications of the word.

General Sam, we find, has adopted a word similar in sound and equally peremptory in tone but of Hausa origin, *Kabisa* which translates into English as "Go bury it or him." Decidedly ominous. With that gavel, General Sam has been banning discussions and, interestingly, this verbal habit has filtered down the levels of Kangan society, to an ordinary motor mechanic, who it can be supposed,

uses it mechanically and perhaps innocuously.

In an ironic situation, Elewa, the near-illiterate Mistress of Ikem puns on the pious Christian word "Amen" to zealous Agatha's faithful prayer: "Madam, make you no worry at all" said Agatha. "Whether they look from here to Jericho, they no go find am. By God's power."

"Amin" replied Elewa. Na so we talk."⁸

The novel opens dramatically with dialogue instead of the discursive introduction in *A Man Of The People*, its immediate predecessor. This time His Excellency the President and the Honourable Commissioners are in a cabinet session.

The Head of State, presiding, is brusque almost to the point of brutality:

You are wasting everybody's time, Mister Commissioner for Information. I will not go to Abazon. Finish! Kabisa! Any other business.

"As your Excellency wishes. But."

"But be no buts, Mr. Oriko! The matter is closed, I said. How many times for God's sake, am I expected to swallow my ruling. On anything?"

"I am sorry, your Excellency. But I have no difficulty swallowing and digesting your rulings."⁹

Obviously the sarcastic tone in the narrator's reply is not all lost on his Excellency because he glares on him in hate. This scene portrays the cabinet as a craven subservient lot. Of the Commissioner for Education we are told, "As soon as he had sniffed peril in the air he had begun to disappear into his hole, as some animals and insects do, backwards."¹⁰

Professor Reginald Okong, Commissioner for Home Affairs is plain toadyish. He is also a noted man of words, having come to national attention, thanks to Chris Oriko, then Editor of the *Gazette*.

Okong's journalistic style is said to be characterised by hackneyed clichés such as his description of the overthrow of the civilian regime before the coup as a "historic fall from grace to grace" a favourite phrase of the *Evening News* in Ghana of the first Republic.

However, the Professor can evince some humour in words such as this piece of the gallows' variety, when he is peremptorily summoned before his irate Excellency after the said cabinet meeting. He tells his cabinet colleagues,

"I go to prepare a place for you, gentlemen... But rest assured I will keep the most comfortable cell for myself."¹¹

The narrator of this opening chapter, Chris sets the record straight with

"He had his day and then went into partial eclipse. But I hardly think he is due for prison, yet."¹²

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

So far, the narration of the story reads like Odili Samalu's in *A Man Of The People*. In that novel we see how Achebe's use of irony occasionally qualifies Odili's pompous assertions, thus distancing the author from his apparent mouthpiece. In *Anthills on the Savannah*, the technique could be seen as a mixture of multiple first person omniscient kind. That is to say, Achebe uses the all-knowing narrator who knows and understands everything as in some chapters and also, "an actual, credible, knowable person who lives and moves entirely within the world of the novel."¹⁰

Thus in Achebe's novel, chapters one and three are narrated by Chris Oriko, chapter six about the Byzantine state dinner at the Presidential retreat is told by the involuntary guest, Beatrice Okoh, who also tells the story in the following chapter, where she runs through events of the country's tragic history.

Self consciously in the course of this she says, "But I didn't set out to write my autobiography and I don't want to do so. Who am I that I should inflict my story on the world?"¹¹ Chapter four is narrated by Ikem. Indeed, the chapter is introduced with the heading: "Second Witness - Ikem Osodi." just as the whole novel was introduced thus "First Witness - Christopher Oriko." The closing chapters are generally taken up by the all-knowing objective narrator, when the participant narrators leave the stage in turn, through tragedy. The virtue in using the multiple narrative method is that the same historical event is reported by three living, knowable characters whose combined testimony attests to the truth of the record..

But the early chapter three uses the omniscient narrator and it is he who gives us from Ikem's prose poem, "Hymn to the sun," our approach to understanding the title of the novel:

"The trees had become hydraheaded bronze statues so ancient that only blunt residual features remained on their faces, like anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires. Household animals were all dead. First the pigs fried in their own fat, and then the sheep and goats and cattle choked by their swollen tongues."¹²

The chapter ends this evocation of the bleak waste land from the myth and legend of the Ibos two pages later with

"And now the times had come round again out of the story land. Perhaps not as bad as the first times, yet. But they could easily end worse."¹³

It is also appropriate that the chapter about Chris's heroic death should be told by the omniscient narrator. It enables the reader to grasp the tragic irony in Chris's misreported last words, "The Last Grin," which turn out

to be a tragic pun on "The Last Green." The latter phrase refers not only to the last green beer bottles but also to the last three innocents: Chris, Sam and Ikem who, for all their formal achievements, do not know the real world like the poor Taxi Driver, Braimoh, who advises Chris thus,

"But Oga you see now, to be big man no hard but to be poor man no be small thing.
N a proper wahala. No be so?"¹⁴

On the same page, and as if in tragic drama, Chris the central protagonist gains wisdom too late,

"Thank you" said Chris
"I must remember that.....
to succeed as small man no be small thing."¹⁵

Chris's last joke is explained by the Omniscient narrator by way of a dramatic chorus:

"The bottles are up there on the wall hanging by a hair's breadth, yet looking down pompously on the world"¹⁶

A NOVEL OF IDEAS

The three bottles stand for Sam, the trained officer - Gentleman with his British notions of fairplay,

"I certainly won't stand for my Commissioners sneaking up to me with vague accusations against their colleagues. It's not cricket. No sense of loyalty, no *esprit de corps*. Nothing."¹⁷

His classmates from Lugard College are the two other green bottles. This "troika" thought they owned the world because they were talented and they all end sadly. Indeed, at the naming of Ikem's posthumous child, we are told that it is better to have no illusions than to be disillusioned. "No, this baby would not like in cushioned safety from the daily stings of the little ants of the earth floor"¹⁸

Perhaps it is significant that the only African novelist whose name is mentioned in *Anthill of the Savannah* is Sembene Ousmane.

Like the Senegalese author of *God's Bits of Wood* and lately the *Last Of The Empire*, Achebe's novel is one of ideas and the contextual man of ideas is the Marxist, Ikem Osodi. His encounter with the feminist intellectual, Beatrice, sharpens the man's wits no end. He acknowledges his debt for the insight into the oppressed of the world, to Beatrice's feminist perception,

"The women are, of course, the biggest single group of oppressed people in the world and, if we are to believe the Book of Genesis, the very oldest but they are not the only ones.
There are others - rural; peasants in

every land, the urban poor in industrialized countries. Black people every where including their own continent, ethnic and religious minorities and castes in all countries.....Free people may be alike everywhere in their freedom but the oppressed inhabit each their own peculiar hell."¹⁹

In the same context, Osodi goes on,

"Revolution may be necessary for taking a society out of an intractable stretch of quagmire but it does not confer freedom, and may indeed hinder it"²⁰

To Beatrice's taunt that he is a bloody reformist, Ikem sentimentiously continues,

"Society is an extension of the individual. The most we can hope to do with a problematic psyche is to reform it"²¹

Ikem thus portrays himself as an unrepentant revolutionary thinker.

From the Francophone world, Achebe further draws in the ideas of negritude Poets Leopold Senghor and David Diop, especially the former's concept of universal civilization which has made him a Mondigaul, a cultural hybrid of the Mandigas and the Gauls; not to forget that the French word for the world is *Le Monde*. The Mondigaul is an apotheosis of the "Our forefathers the Gauls had blue eyes" as recited by Francophone school children from Abidjan to Libreville, and here gently derided.

Underlying the whole tragedy of his Excellency President General Sam and his mates is Lord Acton's celebrated dictum about power. In this regard is to be seen Ali Mazrui's description in *Transition*, quoted in this novel, of President Kwame Nkrumah as a "Leninist Tsar" whilst Frantz Fanon's influence is felt behind most of Ikem's utterances, as if straight out of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

In the English literary tradition, while *ANTHILL OF THE SAVANNAH* may be a novel of ideas, it is less like that associated with Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* which may be described as saturated with ideas or D.H. Lawrence's *Women In Love* than with Graham Greene's fiction, usually divided by the author into "Entertainment" and "Novels."

In fact, Graham Greene is mentioned in the text of Achebe's novel significantly. For, the whole affair involving the farcical Mad Medico with the quintessential English name of John Kent and the Editor of the bizarre poetry journal *Reject* is worthy of Greene land in absurdity.

Again with Chris and Beatrice we enter the cloak-and-dagger atmosphere of some novels out of the English writer's work: as the lovers of Achebe's novel try to elude the repressive and inexorable laws of Kangan. The tenderness demanded by the flesh ensures that there is love making between the two characters even in the make shift bedroom of Braimoh,

with the relative crowd of the driver's children looking on. The reader is reminded of many a Greene novel not excluding the travelogue, *Getting To Know The General* set in Panama under Omar Torrijos whose Assistant is perhaps the more famous Noriega.

In the vein of Greene's novels, "the fallible saint." Chris Oriko dies gallantly standing up for a school girl being brutalized. However, in his death he continues to live in Emmanuel Obete, an admirable young man in Chris's own eyes. Emmanuel also claims that he has gained a lot from Chris's dignified end. The student leader, mostly called in the novel Emmanuel (God with Us) enables us to see the religious, Christian Connotation in Chris's name and career. Oriko is the Christ figure who is survived by the young generation with divine assurance and hope: "greater love hath no man than this" is a familiar Biblical text.

A DIRGE IN PROSE

But the elegy for Chris must be left with his lover Beatrice (the one who blesses, from the latin) who for this solemn purpose invokes Romantic Poet John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" to immortalise the first witness of our story. Beatrice says "Truth is beauty, isn't it: It must be you know to make some one dying in that pain, to make him... smile. He sees it and it is... How can I say it... It is unbearably, yes, *unbearably* beautiful. That's it. Like Kunene's Emperor Shaka, the spears of his assailants raining down on him. But he realized the truth at that moment, we are told, and died smiling... oh my Chris."²²

Doubtless, her companion and comforter, the slightly funny Agatha (Good, from the Greek) would agree with Beatrice.

From the African Pantheon, Shaka is a fitting symbol of the hero's undying spirit, with its glorious epiphany but perhaps, as Achebe's borrowed a line from W.B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" for its equally famous title, "Things Fall Apart", it would not be out of place to sum up Beatrice's elegy with a line from the same Irish Poet "Easter 1916", namely "A terrible beauty is born", if indeed truth is beauty, beauty is truth, the price is high, terrible in Chris's case.

However, it seems we do not have to go far to rummage in English Literature but we can dwell on the line penned by Poet Christopher Okigbo in *Distance*.

"Miner into my solitude
Incarnate voice of the dream
You will go,
With me as your chief acolyte
Again into the anti-hill
I was the sole witness to my home
coming"²³

We have already noted in this study that in this novel of Achebe's, Christopher Oriko is the *First Witness*. Surely there is a legal, forensic meaning to that noun as Achebe remarks in the essay "Thoughts on the Afri-

can novel," where he writes by way of dissociating himself from Ali Mazrui and his Ghanaian character Apollo Gyamfi, Chief Prosecutor of Christopher,

"Thus in a curious novel entitled
The Trial of Christopher Okigbo
Ali Mazrui has a poet tried
in the hereafter for throwing
aways his life on the battlefield
like any common tribesman"²⁴

By implication, could Achebe's own novel then be attributed to the Poet - Soldier? Internal evidence from the the novels chapter seven, "The Complex and Paradoxical Cavern of Mother Idoto"²⁵ recalls Christopher Okigbo's penitent stand before his village deity "Mother Idoto" for whom he was dedicated before the alien cult of Roman Catholicism claimed him, albeit for a while, in the auto biographical poem "Heaven's gate." Thus there is enough evidence to suggest that the fictional Christopher Oriko is modelled on the Poet Christopher Okigbo: both Town criers, Commissioners for Words.

Achebe once expressed in a lecture at Harvard University the following view of the Poet's work:

"The late Christopher Okigbo was perhaps a good example of an artist who sometimes had and was producing immaculate poetry. He was in the view of many, Africa's finest poet of our time
....In fact poetry becomes for him an anguished journey back from alienation to resumption of ritual and priestly functions.

His voice becomes the voice of the sunbird of Igbo mythology, mysterious and ominous... But at least one perceptive Nigerian critic has argued that Okigbo's true voice only came to him in the last sequence of poems, *Paths of Thunder*, when he had finally and decisively opted for an African inspiration... Unfortunately when he was killed in 1967 he left us only that little, tantalising hint of the new self he had found. But perhaps he will be reincarnated in other poets and sing for us again like his sunbird whose Imperishable song survived the ravages of the eagles"²⁶

The pride of place accorded the poem "Africa" by Negritude Poet David Diop in the novel's chapter entitled "Impetuous son" is clearly significant in this discussion. David Diop was the militant Poet, par excellence. Yet the last two lines of his poem.

"And its fruit gradually acquire
The bitter taste of liberty"²⁷

agreeably attract the following cynically wise comment at the end of the "Impetuous Son" chapter thus,

"Therefore what is at issue in all this may be alleviated by a good spread of general political experience, slow of growth and obstinately patient like the young tree planted by David Diop on the edge of the primeval desert just before the year of wonders in which Africa broke out so spectacularly in a rash of independent nation states."⁹

CONCLUSIONS

That Achebe has been preoccupied with the intriguing question of what more Christopher Okigbo would have lived to achieve is attested to by a very recent essay of Achebe's entitled "Daddy, Don't let him die," quoting the very words of Achebe's own son when the child heard of Okigbo's death. He had been the boy's friend.

Arguably, with this novel from the founding Editor and "Father" of the Heinemann African Writers' Series, the African novel in English can be said to have come of age, delivering the excellent work in the genre by such modernists as Ngugi W'A Thiongo, Ayikwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor and others. To enlist the cliché, Achebe blazed the trail towards the award in 1986 of the Nobel Prize in Literature to an African. Wole Soyinka got the nod because being a Poet, Dramatist, Essayist, Prisoner of Conscience as well as an only Novelist, he was more versatile. But novel for novel, Soyinka's *The Interpreter* is baffling and a misnomer. The average reader is none the wiser after encountering it because it is famously obscure whereas the prose of the typical Achebe is refreshingly lucid. The answer lies in Achebe's favourite self-image: "The Novelist as Teacher

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