Of goddesses and stories: 
gender and a new politics in Achebe

The Almighty looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the Sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty. (Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*)

Although he published the autobiographical meditation *Home and Exile* in 2002, Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) remains the culmination point of his achievement as a writer of fiction, as well as being an elaboration of his earlier novelistic interests. The novel is, as Ben Okri has remarked, Achebe's 'most complex and his wisest book to date'. Dealing in coded terms with Nigeria's calcified power-elite, and the bankruptcy of its post-independence nepotistic politics, *Anthills of the Savannah* is in many respects a sequel to the penultimate novel *A Man of the People* (1966), which explored themes of political corruption and military takeover on the eve of Biafra.

In the fifth and final novel Achebe's view of that elite and its position in the wider African context has become more uncompromising and – at least in theory – more attuned to gender and populist ideas. Unlike in the earlier text, the elite is no longer expected merely to engage in dramatic but gratuitous actions in defence of its political honour. Instead, the imperative is for it to revise its power base and its understanding of leadership, in so doing opening its doors to traditionally excluded groups. Achebe signals this change in his approach by admitting to the narrative representative members of 'the people' – taxi-drivers, a shop assistant, the urban poor and, towards the end, a market woman.

A degree of deliberate design would seem therefore to be animating the writer's new 'populist inclusiveness'. The impression is reinforced by the over-determined development of the novel's two main heroes. The poet-journalist Ikem Osodi comes to realise the importance of establishing 'vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed . . . the bruised heart that throbs painfully at
the core of the nation’s being’ (AS 141), while his friend Chris Oriko, carrying Ikem’s light, works to forge contacts outside his elite group. The charge of deliberateness, however, should not disparage what is Achebe’s obvious commitment to imagining a reformed national politics characterised by top-down inclusiveness and democratic participation, where the nation is restored as a common frame of reference. Expressing at once mature disillusionment and extensively qualified fresh hope, his tentative new vision is manifested, too, in the strategic gender configurations of his central characters.

Opening on scenes of paranoid manoeuvre within a small, male elite determined to keep hold of power, the novel ends with the deaths of all three and a celebratory naming ritual involving three key female figures. The latter troika is made up of: Beatrice, Chris’s old girlfriend, and a new priestess of the Igbo water-goddess Idemili; the pidgin-speaking Elewa, Ikem’s lover; and Elewa’s child by Ikem, called Amaechina, ‘May-the-path-never-close’ (AS 222). This life-affirming sisterhood, headed by the powerful Idemili ‘taliswoman’ (as I will elucidate), and reinforced by its affiliates from various classes, urban and rural, signifies a new conception of rulership, the beginning perhaps of a new era for Kangan, the Nigeria surrogate and nation-state in question. From the point of view of gender representation, the formation of this group certainly signals a new centring movement in Achebe’s work, an attempt to revivify the nation as a unifying mythos by upgrading the position of women. The question is whether this shift indeed represents a thoroughgoing revision of ideas of power and leadership – in Ikem’s terms, a ‘new radicalism’ – or whether it remains in the main emblematic. Is it rather a public enshrining of a canonised and perhaps stereotyped ‘womanly’ authority set up as a last resort in the face of a depraved political situation? Even with respect to a seemingly radical revision, the female gender in Achebe may continue to be a vehicle: woman is the ground of change or discursive displacement but not the subject of transformation. To determine to what extent this might be so, demands that Achebe’s political vision in the novel be more closely scrutinised, in particular the conceptual language he employs to evoke that vision, his idea of the nation as integrative story.

Of the ‘little clique’ that found itself in a leadership position at Nigerian independence, Achebe has noted that it ‘was not big enough . . . it had no perception of incorporating others’. In Anthills of the Savannah Achebe has tried for incorporation – that is, he has attempted to stage a Gramscian ‘top-down’ or passive revolution, one that operates through the appropriation of popular elements by an elite. He has shifted authority out and away from the group that inherited state power in the 1960s, those first interpreters, in Wole Soyinka’s phrase, of African nationalism. In so doing, he has called into question certain of the more inappropriate or destructive political conceptions that subtended the ruling ethos – the assumption of exclusiveness by the leadership, for
example, and its unambiguous maleness. The challenge of his investigation depends heavily therefore on his portrayal of the new leaders, their style of politics and, in particular, on the viability of the class and gender constitution of the reformed ruling group.

In *The Trouble with Nigeria*, the pamphlet which Achebe wrote as an injunction to Nigeria just before the 1983 election scandal that ended in military takeover, light is shed on the political conception behind *Anthills of the Savannah*. ‘The trouble with Nigeria’, as Achebe cites the popular expression in that text, is, quite bluntly, the ‘indiscipline’ of its leaders, a national condition of ‘lawlessness’ and rampant selfishness. The malaise is social, but its root cause and primary cure are to be found not in society at large, but in the nation’s leadership. Leaders combine and so compound their lawlessness with influence and power: ‘[They] are, in the language of psychologists, role models. People look up to them and copy their actions. . . . Therefore if a leader lacks discipline the effect is apt to spread automatically down to his followers’ (TN 31). The theory of the importance of strong and responsible leadership exercises Achebe throughout the pamphlet. Africa’s national leaders have become its curse; they have succeeded in emptying the nation of its symbolic authority over a people. However, he also believes that the national leadership might even so be transformed into the postcolonial nation’s salvation. Noteworthy in this diagnosis is his focus on character and role models, on the performative strategies of rule, in favour of class or neocolonial factors. Addressing Nigeria’s elite as himself a self-conscious member of that group, Achebe is unambivalent in his view of leadership as the chief pivot of political and also of economic transformation. Although he believes that the advent of a new leader should be followed by a ‘a radical programme of social and economic re-organisation or at least a well-conceived and consistent agenda of reform’, he sees the first step in any process of change as being new rulership – in effect, the intervention of personality (TN 1).

In *The Trouble with Nigeria* Achebe upbraids a corrupt African elite; in *Anthills of the Savannah* he sets about deposing one. In the process, developing some of the concepts he introduces in the pamphlet, he begins to suggest what sort of leadership it is that might come in its place. Chris Oriko dies with the phrase ‘the last green [bottle]’ on his lips (AS 216, 231) – it is a cryptic reference to his own description of the increasingly more inward-looking and alienated rulers of the nation, Kangan. In a revelatory conversation with Ikem, Beatrice comments that, from the point of view of the three men trained for power at Lord Lugard College, ‘[t]he story of this country, as far as you are concerned, is the story of the three of you’ – that is, of Sam, the present military Chief of State, Chris, his Commissioner for Information, and Ikem himself, the editor of the *National Gazette* (AS 66). During what will be the last days of his life, Chris comes to the same realisation: ‘We? Who are we? The trinity who
thought they owned Kangan as BB [Beatrice] once unkindly said? Three green bottles. One has accidentally fallen; one is tilting. Going, going, bang! Then we becomes I, becomes imperial We’ (AS 191). As well as being a joke about Sam being left alone in power, the ‘imperial We’ reference also constitutes Chris’s final comment on the obsession with power that, in different ways, motivated and so also undermined each member of the trinity.8

Ironically, however, after their demise, and despite efforts to incorporate and reform, a highly exclusive elite ‘we’ remains in place and in force. The small and still select group that coheres around Beatrice is to be the catalyst of the future. As Achebe remarks à propos of the novel, continuing his leadership thesis: ‘the ultimate responsibility for getting us out of this bad patch is with the small group of people who, in one way or another, find themselves in positions of leadership’.9 Within this group, the tendencies to nepotism and corruption that have compromised elite rule in the past will presumably be mitigated, at least in principle, by the advent of women’s salubrious force. Yet their anticipated beneficent influence does not eliminate other significant paradoxes. If woman is to be included in the new elite because she is uncorrupted by power, once included, how is she to retain that force for good? Is it because essentialised woman is by definition a do-gooder? Putting this the other way about, if the faith in an alternative female rule depends on the stereotypical symbol or idea of woman as inspirer and spiritual guide, does that idea have much hope of practical application?

Paradoxes such as these emerge out of the uneasy co-existence in Achebe between two conceptions of national politics. On the one hand lies his political cynicism – not to say pessimism – which dominates the greater part of the novel, and to which Ikem gives chief expression. On the other hand is his apparent commitment to gender reform and to the redemptive power of myth and the homogenising national story, which comes into its own towards the end. As at once an exponent of the present politics and the herald of a future vision, Ikem gives us a clearer sense of these ambiguities.10 In the incendiary speech to the university which is the immediate cause of his arrest and murder, Ikem resolutely rejects textbook revolutionary orthodoxies as presumptuously alien, and as being too theoretical within specific African or Kanganian contexts (AS 158). The abstractions of such theories have permitted every sort of misinterpretation and licence on the part of their proponents. However, as he has already enjoined Beatrice, ‘[n]one of this is a valid excuse for political inactivity or apathy . . . the knowledge of it [is] the only protective inoculation we can have against false hopes’ (AS 100).

Ikem’s proposal, which recalls Achebe’s own assertions in The Trouble with Nigeria, is to ‘re-form’ [society] around . . . its core of reality’ (100), that is, to develop its inner strengths and traditions, which in Anthills of the Savannah includes the conventionally respected power of womanhood. In typically
metaphysical terms, Ikem wishes ‘to connect his essence with earth and earth’s people’ (AS 140–1), yet is also aware of the classic dilemma of radical intellectuals, namely, that the knowledge and experience which constitute their power also isolate them.11 Ironically, it is precisely his belief in indigenous sources of healing that tags his status as outsider, one who appreciates rituals as an intellectual and observer but does not live – or live through – them. The same paradoxically autochthonous custom marks Beatrice’s position. Adherence to a redemptive vision does not transform her into a representative member of the earth’s core: significantly, her status in the final ritual is that of specially elevated icon, not ‘people’s’ goddess.

The point of resolution to which Ikem’s ambivalent meditations lead is captured in Achebe’s idea of incorporation, or broadening from the top – as opposed to, say, democratisation or widening from the base. As Achebe says, ‘You have to broaden out so that when you are talking for the people, you are not only talking for a section or a group interest.’12 Given his belief in an elite and therefore in hierarchy, the main possibility of reconciliation for Achebe lies in building and extending person-to-person connections across class, gender and political differences – and then to back these up with compelling stories. The intention is to maintain an elite leadership within a national framework, but to change its enunciative style: to develop social responsibility, a newly gendered image of power, not a little scepticism and a broader support base – in general to ‘widen the scope’ (AS 158). The leaders need to approach the ‘owners’ of the country in order to embrace and take into their bosom certain of their number. In keeping with the leitmotif of the novel, in the anthill that survives after the fires of the harmattan, Beatrice, seer and leader, inspirer of a select new group drawn from various social sectors, also serves as the queen who maintains the coherence of the colony. She may even represent the encapsulating anthill itself. As for Yeats’s interlocking gyres, so important to Achebe as the signifier of his own anti-colonial practice, though things threaten to fall apart, though old vortices implode and collapse, centres – stable ‘cores of reality’ (elites, women as dispensers of succour) – are required if there is to be movement and change.

The question that remains unanswered, however, is how, following the broadening process, the non-sectional elite is to maintain its structural integrity and representativeness, its invented identity as indigenous yet elevated cultural clique. It seems unlikely that the broadening process is always to be as conveniently ad hoc as is the formation of the group around Beatrice. How then to avoid the appearance of tokenism? Where are likely elite candidates – women, ‘people’ – to be found, and how will they be incorporated? How might an exclusive and reinvented water-goddess cult be transmitted to the masses? At this point, where questions of political identification and inclusion arise, Achebe as it were purposively intervenes in his narrative, transposing such
difficulties into the finally irresolvable or numinous medium of the imaginary rather than trying for any sort of practical resolution. Just as oral story transmits the actions of the past into visions for the future, so *Anthills of the Savannah*, the African story in the form of a novel, carries its own vision of the future in appropriately figural terms. Achebe’s transposition is in several ways quite openly an avoidance strategy, literally a displacement of the problem. In terms of the revolutionary or Marxist theory – ‘orthodoxies of deliverance’ (AS 99) – Ikem derides, the cop-out is patently obvious: existing economic and political structures remain firmly entrenched; class hierarchies (such as outlined in *The Trouble with Nigeria*) are endorsed; a soft-core, middle-class moralism is reinforced. From a gender perspective, by presenting the sisterhood’s investiture as, in the main, metaphoric redemption, the danger is that woman’s conventional position as inspirational symbol, the mentor who is never fully a political actor, becomes entrenched.

Achebe prepares for his caveat by eulogising the power and importance of myth and story-telling in the novel – in particular via the rhetoric of the Old Man from Abazon (AS 122–8), in the hymns and the poetic role of Ikem, and in the mythic apotheosis of Beatrice. For the present, the nation is to be redeemed metaphorically – and perhaps metaphysically – only: that is, by London-educated civil servants turning into Igbo priestesses, by syncretic ritual, and emblematic cross-class and cross-ethnic alliances. Achebe’s general idea seems to be that, in the African context, where much metropolitan theory has already been uselessly imposed, political postulates, action plans and blueprints, even such as those set out in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, do not of themselves offer any hope of regeneration. Not by way of clichés from other histories and struggles, but in the figures of revivified gods and rituals drawn from its own local cultures, can the nation (whether Kangan or Nigeria) interpret present confusion and conceptualise a new future. Or, as Beatrice puts it, only with (implicitly homegrown) story is it possible to ‘[subvert] the very sounds and legends of daybreak to make straight my way’ (AS 109). This is related to Ikem’s idea that humanity be remade around its own rich, inner resources; that, where ‘times’ will always ‘come round again out of story-land’ (AS 33), one should draw on history and story as it is and has been lived. The baby’s name Amaechina significantly means ‘May-the-path-never-close’: tradition is cyclical, ongoing and constantly reinvented.

As the allusive, metaphoric images of a future dispensation give primary colour to the hope of *Anthills of the Savannah* – and to Achebe’s own hope for the African nation – it is important to clarify the relation between symbolic transcendence and the presence of women that he attempts to forge. Key emblematic elements appear in Ikem’s two dense prose poems, the ‘Hymn to the Sun’ (AS 30–3), and the meditation on Idemili’s power (AS 102–5). In both, masculine images of power and agency are juxtaposed with ‘feminine’ evocations of
peace and reconciliation: it is clear that dichotomous gender distinctions run deep. The final naming ceremony at Beatrice’s flat dramatises and unifies some of these central symbolic meanings. It is now that Beatrice, prefigurement of a ‘gynocentric’ spiritual way, at last presents herself as the harbinger of a new order. From her initial act of pointing Ikem in the direction of his redeeming vision of woman (AS 96), through her being flippantly called a prophetess by Chris, we at last find Beatrice metamorphosed through her bereavement (though her suffering is stated not dramatised). She steps forwards as a priestess of Idemili, ‘the unknown god [sic]’ (AS 224). Simultaneously she also becomes the leader of the naming ceremony involving the baby Amaechina, replacing the traditional position of father or male family head (AS 222).

Whether the cross-reference is intentional or not, Achebe draws on the same redemptive (and ethnically specific) Igbo tradition of female devotion and worship as does Flora Nwapa in her 1966 novel Efuru.¹⁴ That is to say, he adopts a well-established woman’s tradition of exercising communal authority. With her moral gravitas, goddess-like carriage, and capacity for mediation and inspiration, Beatrice has recognisably become a daughter of the Idemili described in the myth earlier told by Ikem:

In the beginning Power rampaged through our world, naked. So the Almighty looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the Sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power’s rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty. (AS 102, emphasis added)

The incarnation of Idemili is a redemption of the present political situation, as it is of the neglect of the goddess in the past.¹⁵ Attended by the pidgin-speaking child of the people Elewa, bearer of the seed of a poet, and a new child, a girl significantly carrying a male name – Beatrice’s spiritual power as a blessed woman represents the fulfilment of Ikem’s final vision of woman adopting a new and yet-to-be-imagined role. Woman in the final ceremony is in every respect the signifier of new hope (AS 98). In Achebe’s own words, Beatrice and her entourage represent intrinsically compassionate women in their place ‘in the forefront of history’.¹⁶

It cannot be denied that the potential of woman or women as celebrated at the end of Anthills of the Savannah represents a significant advance in the representation of women in the male-authored African novel (to the extent that such matters are teleological). It is most distinguished perhaps by Achebe’s refusal to dictate exactly how that potential will be fulfilled. The novel clears a space for women to be themselves the prefiguring subjects of a new social and political vision. Yet at the same time, despite the efforts at rescheduling power, it is also true that the way in which Achebe privileges woman continues to bear familiar markings for gender, and that this to a certain extent compromises his
reimaged hope. Symptomatic of Achebe’s difficulties is Elewa’s transmogrification as a woman of the people through conceiving Ikem’s child (AS 184). As part of the same symbolic logic, Amaechina’s name – ‘May-the-path-never-close’ – is part-translated as the ‘Shining Path of Ikem’ (AS 222). The implicit idea of inheritance along a male line – of masculine influence as life-giving, and of man as passing the rod of leadership on to woman – can of course be justified in terms of Achebe’s belief in cyclical continuity: ‘The remnant-shall-return’ (AS 222). Yet it equally signifies that maleness remains potently if also laughably generative: as Beatrice discovers the day she dances with His Excellency, ‘the royal python’ still stirs ‘[gigantically]’ in the ‘shrubbery’ of Idemili’s shrine (AS 81).

Traditional gender-specific spheres of influence, too, appear to remain in force. In their time-honoured way women in Anthills of the Savannah, especially the heroine who lacks ‘book’, wield power through sex and their bodies, whereas man continues to control the word (Ikem’s poetry) and also, we presume, the world of politics. As in earlier nationalist writing, the artist, the one who first defines the vision of the future and transmits the myths of the people, is male.17 Towards the end of the novel, it is true, a woman does decisively obtain control of vatic power. However, in that her transfiguration is, almost by definition, couched in symbol, Beatrice remains confined within a role that women have occupied many times before in the mythologies of nations, states and polities; she incarnates the ideals and the desire of male rulers and powerful spokesmen. It is made clear that she, too, will become a writer in her own right, but her work will appear in the form of a memoir. It will be very much post hoc, an after-shadow, concentrating on the exploits of her powerful men friends. On a related point, to what extent is Beatrice’s induction into the cult of Idemili a specific development of a female ‘spiritual’ stereotype, the inverse of the image of woman as unclean, or as body? As in more traditional evocations of Mothers of Africa, or even of Mary Mother of God, alternative woman in Anthills of the Savannah is represented as mystical, in touch with the unknown, as mentor or genius of the (renewed) nation.

As problematic as the novel’s networks of cross-gender filiation leading from male leaders to female spiritual guides, are relationships within the group of women. Here differences of class significantly complicate gender status, a problem which connects with the question of the impossible constitution of the ideal elite. In another representative scene, conflict arises during the crisis period after Ikem’s death when Agatha, Beatrice’s maid, will not serve Elewa because she is of her own class. In response Beatrice treats Agatha roughly, pushing her aside to do the job herself. Achebe equips his heroine with a fair amount of defensive rationalisation at this ungoddess-like behaviour. She is exercised enough to repeat that Elewa’s ‘emergent consciousness’ has acted with transfiguring power, singling her out from the masses represented by
Agatha. It is this special ‘almost godlike’ touch which, in addition to being ‘Ikem’s girl’, Beatrice concludes, has ‘[transformed] a half-literate . . . girl into an object of veneration’, and someone she is able to befrend (AS 184).18

Beatrice makes quite clear that the complaining millions are to be saved, not by their own efforts, but by those with inner light – a capacity which further, mystically, separates the elite from the mass. Yet given this chasm of consciousness, or mystery of social redemption, how are the elite of enlightened humans – even if female – to interact with those in the masses, like Agatha, who do not have the gift of ‘luminosity’ (unless this is sympathetically transfused)? Conversely, with class barriers still in place, how are the masses to come into contact with those who have light? The apotheosis of the main women characters, impelled by the need to save the elite from itself, decisively brings the narrative back to the original problem of how to form an enlarged caucus, a problem now compounded by the reinforced distancing effect produced where symbolic women are (once again) canonised.

These difficulties are serious, especially as Achebe would want his novel, itself a restorative narrative, to give hints and guesses of a new, regenerative and ‘regendered’ order. That said, to criticise him for inconsistencies and moments of oversight is perhaps not to give sufficient regard, as he so emphatically does, to the redemptive art of narration and composition, and the metaphysics of that art. Where the problems of elite politics remain for the moment insoluble, symbol and story for him provide powerful, indeed crucial, means of thinking forwards. To borrow a phrase from Gayatri Spivak, a tale may become a “non-expository” theory of practice”,19 in Fredric Jameson’s terms, due to narrative, ‘plot falls into history’.20 ‘What must a people do to appease an embittered history?’ asks Beatrice. The answer is there in the eyes of her guests: they recognise in her act of articulation ‘the return of utterance to the sceptical priest struck dumb for a season by the Almighty for presuming to set limits to his competence’ (AS 220). It is in the radical adaptation of a mythical tradition and of indigenous oral resources that the new dispensation may be figured out.

In recent years Achebe’s efforts to hone ‘a new discursive space for a genuinely postcolonial [national and yet postnational] beginning’, to quote from Simon Gikandi, has underscored his return to his Igbo roots.21 In his sternly anti-colonial memoir Home and Exile (2000) he excavates further back in tradition for a genuinely native African state paradigm. Reading a national if pre-modern formation into Igbo precolonial society, he claims its internally co-operative conglomerate of villages and of market networks run by women, as radically egalitarian and as a possible model for present-day society.22 If, as he strongly believes, ‘re-storying’ people following colonial dispossession is an essential process, it is in this Igbo tradition of organising communal space, therefore, that a key ‘enabling story’ must lie.23 At least in this text it would seem that Achebe, challenged by the imponderability of his vision of a new African
state, has managed to find, albeit in a highly idealised form, the woman-friendly space that in *Anthills of the Savannah* he was still groping towards.

‘Truth is beauty’, Beatrice explains at the very end of the novel. It is the truth that lies in the final (if masculine) image of Chris withstanding his assailants like ‘Kunene’s Emperor Shaka’ (*AS* 233); as well as the truth contained in the prominent image of the anthills holding their own truth of the past. Of course, implanted in the Keatsian ‘truth [is] beauty’ postulate is an inevitable suggestion of abstraction from real, material life: it is in keeping with this that Beatrice’s new vocation, if we are to believe Flora Nwapa, demands retreat from the everyday. Yet Beatrice’s statement is also a practical adaptation of the doctrine of aesthetic appreciation to a context, where, as Soyinka, too, has held, myth and ritual continue to thrive as living presences. They provide beauties of ceremony that may be redeemed for their lived reality or ‘truth’ as much as for their patterned form.24

Especially where, as in the quotidian reality of Third World military regimes or dictatorships, neither truth nor beauty is found in great abundance, Achebe appears to want to hold the two ideals in balance, the one intimating or anticipating the other:

Man’s best artifice to snare and hold the grandeur of divinity always crumbles in his hands, and the more ardently he strives the more paltry and incongruous the result. So it were better he did not try at all; far better to ritualise that incongruity and by involving the mystery of metaphor to hint at the most unattainable glory by its very opposite, the most mundane starkness – a mere stream, a tree, a stone, a mound of earth, a little clay bowl containing fingers of chalk. (*AS* 103)

So, just as a relatively ordinary woman may become, through her spiritual understanding, an example of a ‘shining path’ to her companions, in the same way an ordinary stick in the sand is transformed through ritual into a pillar of Idemili, the connection with ‘earth and earth’s people’. The real functions as an index to the beautiful. In this way, too, a random collection of individuals can come to represent the ritual passage into the future of a new Kangan. In ‘serious’ politics, symbols and supernatural signs such as these might seem superficial and, certainly from a gender point of view, compromising. Yet, where other options and modes of recompense are unsteady or have failed, symbols stand for points of intersection with, as Achebe would have it, the very present divine: as introjections of spirit; ‘transactions’ between the marketplace, goddesses and the world (*AS* 102).

Notes

1 Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Heinemann, 1987), p. 102. References to *Anthills of the Savannah* will be included in the text along with the abbreviation *AS*. 
4 Martin Turner, review, ‘The story is our escort’, *Wasafari*, 9 (Winter 88/99), 31–2, has commented that *Anthills* shows signs of a ‘flirtation with *bien passant* ideology’. Odia Ofeimun, *Guardian* (Lagos, 20 November 1977), concurs, observing that Achebe has been learning from new trends in literature, and to some extent still shows himself to be a neophyte, the contemporary themes having been rather roughly assimilated into the novel’s ‘thin’ plot structure.
7 Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1987), pp. 1, 27. References will henceforth be included in the text along with the abbreviation *TN*.
8 Neal Ascherson, ‘Betrayal’, *New York Review of Books* (3 March 1988), 4, comments: ‘The three murders, senseless as they are, represent the departure of a generation that compromised its own enlightenment for the sake of power – even the power of bold opposition enjoyed by Ikem Osodi.’
10 On Achebe’s endorsement of Ikem’s views, and on his revisionist liberalism, see David Maughan-Brown, unpublished paper, ‘*Anthills of the Savannah’s* solution to *The Trouble with Nigeria*’, ACLALS Triennial Conference, University of Kent, Canterbury, 29 August 1989, pp. 4–5.
11 As Ikem discovers in his second encounter with Braimoh, the taxi-driver. The ceaseless circlings of such cognitions about ‘the people’ are of course a measure of Achebe’s political pessimism. See Ascherson, ‘Betrayal’, p. 3.
12 Rutherford, ‘Interview’, p. 3.
15 Ikem’s observation, that myth has been used to marginalise women (AS 98), is echoed by Achebe, both in the Rutherford interview, and in ‘Achebe on editing’, *WLWE*, 7:1 (Spring 1987), 1–5, especially p. 2.
17 Ifi Amadiume, ‘Class and gender in *Anthills of the Savannah*’, *PAL-Platform*, 1:1 (March 1989), 9, has suggestively pointed out that, although the Almighty in Achebe’s (Ikem’s) myth is male, she knows of ‘no translation from Igbo which would render God a he and a man’. Moreover, Amadiume believes that Idemili in the Igbo pantheon is usually not given a father.
18 Bearing in mind the dichotomous characterisation of the ‘girl/militiawoman Gladys in Achebe’s short story ‘Girls at war’ (see my introduction), the progression from ‘girl’ into sanctified object via a form of national service is revealing. See Chinua Achebe, *Girls at War and Other Stories* [1972] (London: Heinemann, 1986), pp. 103–23, as well as the reading of this story in chapter 1.


23 Achebe, *Home and Exile*, pp. 79, 60

24 See also Rutherford, ‘Interview’, p. 4.