

**MEN OF THE PEOPLE:  
CHINUA ACHEBE'S POST-COLONIAL  
INTELLECTUALS AND POLITICIANS**

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Achebe's work records the first steps of newly independent African countries and the instability following the process of independence. In *A Man of the People* and *Anhills of the Savannah* he portrays the two social groups which play a specially significant role in society: politicians and intellectuals. In this article we will see how Achebe characterizes them and stresses their different ethical codes. Politicians, in spite of their apparent social commitment, are mainly interested in the perpetuation of their power, even if this means the persecution of dissenters. The latter are mainly middle-class professionals and intellectuals fighting for their ideas of national reconstruction and political change, sometimes paying with their lives but presented by narrators as the only hope for the future of African post-colonial societies.

In 1958 the Nigerian novelist and critic Chinua Achebe published his acclaimed *Things Fall Apart*, a denunciation of the brutal beginnings of the colonial adventure in Africa which earned him recognition, both in his country and abroad; the author himself considers the work a "contribution to the act of decolonization" (1973, 185). The tension between traditional African values (perceived as a source of social stability) and the cultural and political consequences of European imperialism is the theme of his following novels, *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964).

Nigeria became independent in 1960, ending nearly a century of British rule, but her citizens have not achieved yet the economic prosperity or the political freedom they were expecting. Successive coups d'état and assassinations of political leaders (with only a brief period of civilian administration) plagued the country's troubled last thirty years, as the following table illustrates:

YEAR	RULER	ACCESSION TO POWER
1960	T. BALEWA*	GENERAL ELECTION
1966	IRONSI*	MILITARY APPOINTMENT
1966	GOWON	MILITARY APPOINTMENT
1975	MURTALA*	MILITARY APPOINTMENT
1976	OBASANJO	MILITARY APPOINTMENT
1979	SHAGARI	GENERAL ELECTION
1983	BUHARI	MILITARY APPOINTMENT
1985	BABAJINDA	MILITARY APPOINTMENT

\* Assassinated while in office.

It is clear that independence has not fostered social and political stability and, as the colonial domination fades in time, it is more necessary to consider to what extent African elites themselves are to be held accountable for this fact. In the introduction to the special volume of *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, devoted to African literature, Claire L. Dehon says:

Many changes have occurred on the continent during the eighties . . . a depressed economic situation plagues many countries; heads of state and their cohorts are in many instances all-powerful, tyrannical, and more interested in their personal enrichment than in the welfare of their people. . . . (1991, 7)

Viney Kirpal has stated that contemporary Nigerian writers are “molding the national consciousness as well as drawing sustenance from it” (1988, 53). S. Gikandi has pointed out that “the novel provided a new way of reorganizing African cultures, especially in the crucial juncture of transition from colonialism to national independence” (1991, 31) and, in fact, Achebe has used this artistic form as a means of social reform. The same critic says: “even after the disappointments of African independence and a civil war which will almost tear Nigeria apart, Achebe will still insist that the first goal of African literature is its commitment to the notion of a national community” (33). This attitude leads Richard K. Priebe to consider Achebe a realistic writer concerned with ethical issues, in contrast with Wole Soyinka and other artists who adopt a mythic approach in their works. Priebe argues

in his *Myth, Realism and the West African Writer* that while Soyinka indulges in metaphor, Achebe's technique and intention are basically didactic.

Such didacticism in his writing arises from the fact that Achebe thinks that the writer must be committed to the cause of social justice and political freedom, even if this means acting as a severe critic who denounces any kind of collective malady. As Garret Griffiths expresses it:

from the earliest accounts Achebe has spoken of two major impulses in his fiction, to recover (to teach his culture to value itself, as the paper 'The Novelist as Teacher,' 1964, has it) and to use this as a jumping-off point to liberate the artist from the expectations of the dominant culture to the point where he can satirize his own without feeling that to do so is to betray it. (1987, 25)

Achebe has repeatedly denounced the negative influence exerted by Europe on African societies (*Things Fall Apart* is the most emblematic example). However, he has been able to transcend the constrictions of a critical approach based on a systematic blaming of foreign domination. *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983) is a sincere analysis and a witty essay in which he exposes chronic shortcomings in his country. Thus, tribal rivalry between the more than 250 groups is presented as one of the most serious conflicts in African society, which leads to "social injustice and the cult of mediocrity" (1983, 19). For Achebe, the causes and consequences can no longer be attributed to colonialism twenty years after independence: "We have displayed a consistent inclination since we assumed management of our own affairs to opt for mediocrity and compromise" (1983, 19).

Chinua Achebe has made use of multiple stylistic devices to get his message across. *The Trouble with Nigeria* is remarkable for its argumentative, logical and pedagogical reasoning, resembling in some parts scientific prose. The evils of tribalism are exposed in this highly analytical way:

Let us take a hypothetical case where two candidates A and B apply to fill a very important and strategic position. A has the right qualification of competence and character but is of the 'wrong' tribe, while B, less qualified, belongs to the 'right' tribe, and so he gets the job. A goes away embittered. B throws a party and then messes up the job. (1983, 19)

Similarly, he advocates the need for good manners and discipline in the behaviour of his fellow citizens:

There is no provision in the Laws of Nigeria or the Constitution which says that a man who comes first to a public counter should be served before the man who comes later. But our sense of natural justice and our intelligence tells us that it should be so because (a) it is only fair and (b) experience has shown that any other way is liable to create disorder and delay. (1983, 27-28)

Achebe's avowedly analytical intention also leads him to concern himself with calculations, as the one which makes him conclude that the money paid to non-existent Federal Government workers would be enough to build two airports or three refineries. Examples taken from other societies perfectly suit the intention of the critic and social reformer. Thus, he is very effective when he wonders why poverty-stricken Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) is able to provide its citizens with a better electricity supply than oil-producing Nigeria.

He also employs a great variety of idioms and other features of colloquial speech so as to adopt a man-in-the-street approach towards the issues discussed:

Recently the Shagari administration found it difficult to pay the new national minimum wage . . . One had thought that the chance would be seized to peg salaries at the top for the next five years or so. But not on your life! You might as well expect landlords to form a national committee for the sole purpose of lowering house rent! (1983, 23)

A further element of immediacy to the text is provided by addressing the reader directly, asking him at the same time for a sympathetic emotional involvement in the writer's preoccupations: "Dear reader, you may think I over-draw the picture" (1983, 25), "And please, please remember" (1983, 39).

In *The Trouble with Nigeria*, above all, Achebe identifies Nigeria's lack of a competent and honest political leadership as one of the main hindrances to her development. He regrets the fact that politicians, engaged in all kinds of corruption, have not been able to understand the need for an efficient administration. He mentions the enormous amount of oil revenue squandered on luxurious imports and: "Embezzled through inflated con-

tracts to an increasing army of party loyalists who have neither the desire nor the competence to execute their contracts. Consumed in the escalating salaries of a grossly overstaffed and unproductive public service" (1983, 3). Other African intellectuals have expressed similar points of view; R. N. Egudu equates the period of colonial power with the post-colonial administration, stating that while the European ruler was perceived as "the agent of social disruption", the new authorities are considered agents of "social injustice". This scholar from the University of Benin concludes that "as subjects of literature, both have proved very effective since each constitutes a sufficiently ugly background that has yielded some great literature" (1983, 120).

Thus, Achebe's work is pervaded by his concern about the way power is exerted; as Kofi Owusu writes: "With varying degrees of emphasis, all of Chinua Achebe's novels to date explore the use and abuse of power by those who wield it" (1991, 459). This preoccupation is especially visible in the novels of the post-independence period; O. Udumukwu considers these as: "Achebe's reaction against the negation of the expectations of national independence from colonial rule" (1991, 472).

Achebe is one of the first graduates from the University of Ibadan, founded in 1947 to become in a short period of time the germ of the intellectual urban middle class with which he identifies. We can trace throughout all his work the belief that there is a basic distinction (and conflict) between the politician, a man of action, and the artist, basically a witness. Claire L. Dehon also refers to the hostility politicians show towards intellectuals, and more specifically writers, in post-colonial Africa:

No African government permits freedom of speech as we understand it in the West . . . To reduce their impact, administrations find ways of discrediting writers by declaring them parasites in a revolutionary society, accusing them of moral turpitude, of accepting Occidental values, and often they denounce them for not being 'true' Africans . . . African governments behave in an even more authoritarian manner than the colonialist ones in this matter of writing. (1991, 8-9)

Edward Said, one of the most prominent Third-World thinkers, points out: "the problems of democracy, development and destiny are real ones, attested to by the persecutions of intellectuals who have carried on their thought and practise publicly and courageously" (1986, 45). Many other

critics and historians have referred to that moment when the metropolises left their colonies and, as Conor Cruise O'Brien states, "Intellectuals . . . expected to be the inheritors of their newly liberated countries because they had been the challengers of the colonial governments" (1986, 65). The Irish writer and critic witnessed how this dream did not come true:

In the Gold Coast, which became Ghana, the old intellectual elites, known in colonialist mythology as the educated Africans, were preparing to take over . . . But then the scenario speeded up, and they couldn't follow. So a new elite of less educated people, people who were not University graduates mainly, and had done maybe one year in high school, realized that if they stepped up their rhetoric and shouted 'get out', the highly educated would leave, because they were ready to get out anyway. (1986, 77)

Austin Clarke, a Barbadian-born intellectual now living permanently in Canada expresses an opinion, after a brief intervention in the public affairs of his country, which might be easily shared by Achebe himself: "[politicians] cannot see the society in the same way as artists amongst the people can see it as a society. So perhaps that is why the politician will never be able to solve the very obvious problems of the people over whom he is lording" (Craig 1986, 125).

The conflict between African intellectuals and political leaders, and the inadequacy of the latter to exert power in a democratic way is the subject of an increasing corpus of fiction and scholarly criticism. R. N. Egedu points out how in Wole Soyinka's poem "Gulliver", "the artist-thinker is shown as a victim of the politician's anti-intellectualism" (1983, 126). This critic gives the examples of J. P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo (both graduates of the University of Ibadan) who also "see the Nigerian politician as a thoroughly corrupt individual, and politics itself in Nigeria as a corrupt affair" (1983, 127).

Okigbo himself, killed in the Biafran war, is a victim of the Nigerian socio-political turmoil. Wole Soyinka, kept in prison for two years, thinks that artists and intellectuals must play an active role in the affairs of contemporary Africa, fighting totalitarian rule: "When the writer woke from his opium dream of metaphysical abstractions, he found that the politician had used his absence from earth to consolidate his position" (Wanjala 1983, 348). Chris Wanjala also advocates the active presence of writers in African

societies since they “need the artist as well as they need the technician, the lawyer, and the medical doctor” (1983, 336).

These ideas are developed in Chinua Achebe’s fiction of the post-colonial period. In *A Man of the People*, Chief Nanga is portrayed as a cabinet minister who accidentally meets and takes an interest in Odili, a former pupil who has become a schoolteacher. The latter is invited to visit the minister’s home in the capital, permitting a privileged account of a top politician’s public and private life from the point of view of a member of the educated middle class.

The inevitable antagonism between the minister and Odili is anticipated in the first references to Chief Nanga, which indirectly present him as an anti-intellectual character. At the beginning of the novel we are taken back in time to the period of crisis in the country brought about by a slump in the international coffee market. The Minister of Finance presents a plan to the government which is bluntly turned down because of opportunistic electoral interests. The narrator is clearly sympathetic to the Minister, recurrently mentioning his intellectual capacity: “a first-rate economist with a Ph.D. in public finance” (1967, 3-4); “Dr Makinde read his speech, which was clearly prepared” (1967, 6); even the physical description reinforces this positive characterization: “Dr Makinde . . . got up to speak —tall, calm, sorrowful and superior” (1967, 6).

Chief Nanga, an unknown MP biding his time for promotion, sides, from his parliamentary back bench, with those who irrationally attack the competent minister and his team. The first words he utters in the novel clearly present him as a vulgar demagogue: “‘They deserve to be hanged’”, “‘They have bitten the finger with which their mother fed them’” (1967, 5). The chorus of voices from the public gallery stresses the opposition between the educated and polite Dr Makinde and the shouting crowd: “‘Traitor’, ‘Coward’, ‘Doctor of Fork your Mother’” (1967, 6).

Part of the campaign of agitation against the Minister is based on the simple idea that intellectuals are suspicious citizens: “Other newspapers pointed out that even in Britain where the Miscreant Gang got its ‘so-called education’ a man need not be an economist to be Chancellor of the Exchequer or a doctor to be Minister of Health. What mattered was loyalty to the party” (1967, 5). The Prime Minister solemnly declares: “‘Never again must we entrust our destiny and the destiny of Africa to the hybrid class of Western-educated and snobbish intellectuals who will not hesitate to sell their mothers for a mess of pottage’” (1967, 6). Ironically, the Students’

Union takes an active part in the turmoil and asks for the detention of those top civil servants, referred to as “miscreants”.

The fall of Dr Makinde strengthens the position of the Prime Minister. After the latter’s speech in parliament he is acclaimed as “the Tiger, the Lion, the One and Only, the Sky, the Ocean and many other names of praise” (1967, 5). No explicit criticism of such verbal extravaganza is made in the novel, but the overall effect is as ironic as that of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* when he describes the model of the self-indulgent mock tyrant: “GOLBASTO MOMAREN EVLAME GURDILO SHEFIN MULLY ULLY GUE, most mighty Emperor of Lilliput, Delight and Terror of the Universe . . . Monarch of all Monarchs, taller than the sons of men . . .” (1967, 79).

When Chief Nanga is eventually rewarded by being appointed, in a cabinet reshuffle, Minister of Culture, Achebe will find it easier to take the politician versus intellectual dichotomy to an ironic extreme. The incident which takes place when the minister has to address a meeting of the Writer’s Society is highly illustrative. He has to be briefed about the chairman, the renowned author of *The Song of the Black Bird*, but this title proves to be a source of confusion for the politician who, in his speech, refers to the writer as “‘the President of this Society which has already done much to project the African Personality. I believe Mr Jalio himself has composed a brilliant song called . . . erm . . . What is it called again?’” (1967, 64-65). At this point, the narrator cannot avoid introducing a moral digression:

Chief Nanga was a born politician; he could get away with almost anything he said or did. And as long as men are swayed by their hearts and stomachs and not their heads the Chief Nangas of this world will continue to get away with anything . . . I remember the day he was telling his ministerial colleague over the telephone in my presence that he distrusted our young university people and he would rather work with a European. (1967, 66)

The same idea had been anticipated when it was clearly stated that there is an “anti-intellectual feeling in the country. In 1948 Mr Nanga could admit, albeit lightheartedly, to a certain secret yearning for higher education; in 1964 he was valiantly proving that a man like him was better without it” (1967, 26). The narrator is now willing to make explicit mention of the Minister’s limited intellectual capacity: “Chief Nanga was one of those fortunate ones who had just enough English (and not one single word more) to have his say strongly, without inhibition, and colourfully” (1967, 69).



The fact that this same character is presented at the beginning of the novel as a teacher means that some kind of formal education is necessary to help oneself into power, but this practical purpose discards further intellectual motivation or ambition. The same pattern is repeated when Nanga makes the necessary arrangements to get a doctorate degree from “some small, back-street [American] college” (1967, 26). He merely tries to complete his formal address, as one of his aides admits: “‘So the Minister will become Chief the Honourable Doctor M. A. Nanga’” (1967, 19).

No doubt, the African political elite, represented by Nanga, is portrayed in *A Man of the People* in a predominantly comic way, as the final reference to him indicates: “We were told Nanga was arrested trying to escape by canoe dressed like a fisherman” (1967, 148). This character may be even endearing, especially when compared with his counterparts in *Anthills of the Savannah*. This book takes up the theme, and somehow the plot, of the previous novel. It is extremely significant that after a twenty-year span between both books, Achebe must still write about the conflict between the committed intellectual, trying to improve his country’s lot, and the corrupt politician who fights him, sometimes causing his destruction.

There is an upgrading of the main political figure portrayed now, no longer a minister but a head of state who is a whimsical tyrant surrounding himself with meek parvenus. Several points of view are used in the novel, the third-person narrator alternating with first-person narratives in charge of the three main characters, Chris, Ikem and Beatrice. They all share different degrees of involvement with the dictatorial regime playing, at the same time, a significant role as members of the opposition to the dictatorship.

Chris and Ikem are journalists who witness the degradation of the personality of the dictator, an old friend of theirs. The fact that both characters can trace their friendship back to university times stresses their stance as members of an emerging intellectual elite. Christopher Oriko, as Commissioner for Information, has a political appointment and provides us with a first-hand reference of the arbitrariness of the president:

‘Why do *you* find it so difficult to swallow my ruling. On anything?’

‘I am sorry, Your Excellency. But I have no difficulty swallowing *and* digesting your rulings’. (1987, 1)

He also gives an account of his uncomfortable position as advisor and increasingly aware critic:

And so it begins to seem to me that this thing probably never was a game, that the present was there from the very beginning only I was too blind or too busy to notice. But the real question which I have often asked myself is why then do I go on with it now that I can see. (1987, 2)

Chris, from his cabinet post, sadly concludes that “Our present rulers in Africa are in every sense late-flowering medieval monarchs, even the Marxists among them” (1987, 74).

Ikem Osodi, unlike Chris, is not directly involved in politics; consequently he is freer to devote more time to intense intellectual activity. He has written a novel and a play and, as the editor of a newspaper, he has a more militant attitude towards the dictatorship. The lecture Ikem delivers at the local university is an exceptional occasion to outline his views on the role of the African artist. He advocates reform, not revolution (a favoured term for most African politicians at the time), as the way to introduce the necessary changes his society needs. In a context of one-party political systems, he is radically against orthodoxy, a negative term associated with three P’s: partisans, patriots and party-liners. He thinks that the artist and the intellectual must be aware of the fact that reality is complex and that it is their task to expel radicalism from their own mind if they are to produce a serious analysis of the social environment.

This critical approach departs from the discourse of the politicians, who make simplistic and demagogic interpretations of the African post-colonial reality based on a generic blaming of the colonial and imperialistic forces of the present and the past. Ikem, when addressing the university students, is bold enough to admit: “‘To blame all these [negative] things on imperialism and international capitalism as our modish radicals want us to do is . . . like going out to arrest the village blacksmith every time a man hacks his fellow to death’” (1987, 159). He believes that the most serious problems have their origin (and, therefore, must have their solution) in the African societies themselves: “The prime failure of this government . . . is the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed of this country” (1987, 141).

Friendship with Chris and Ikem leads Beatrice, a politically uncommitted intellectual, to an increasing involvement in the turmoil of her country. When the president holds an official reception for some foreign guests she is invited on account of her reputation as a brilliant graduate. He values

especially the fact that she comes “‘not from a local university but from Queen Mary College, University of London. Our Beatrice beat the English to their game’” (1987, 75).

During her stay in London she was already aware of her distinct personality which set her apart from the average expatriate African student. At a moment of personal crisis she felt the need for Ikem’s company, “someone different from that noisy, ragtag crowd of illiterate and insensitive young men our country was exporting” (1987, 92). Her attitude is especially militant concerning her role in life as a woman. It is ironic that a person of her accomplishments, who has developed a successful career, should have been rejected at birth by her parents because of being a girl. She sadly admits that African women are second-class citizens, even victims of violence from males in their families. She blames Ikem, a progressive-minded intellectual, for having “no clear role for women in his political thinking” (1987, 91). Fiona Sparrow, in her review of this novel, has shown that the author demonstrates he has a particular liking for this character, as representative of a new generation of African women: “Beatrice is the most important female character that Achebe has created” (1988, 58).

The contrast between the politician, on the one hand, and the intellectual and the artist, on the other, is emphasized throughout *Anthills of the Savannah*. Severe criticism is accorded to Professor Okong, an upstart whose degree, like Chief Nanga’s, is a mere instrument in his attempt to ascend the social ladder. Ikem is reported to have said that “Professor Okong deserved to be hanged and quartered for phrase-mongering and other offences.” (1987, 11). Chris is instrumental in exposing another politician’s illiteracy:

‘Your Excellency, let us not flaunt the wishes of the people.’

‘Flout, you mean,’ I said. (1987, 5).

The struggle between the politician and the intellectual ends with a clear victory for the latter in *A Man of the People*, a novel in which Odili witnesses the fall of Chief Nanga, who has also proved unable to retaliate effectively against the schoolteacher. On the contrary, Ikem and Chris have a tragic end in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Christopher is a victim of social turmoil and widespread violence; he attempts to rescue a young girl from an armed police sergeant who is about to rape her, but the heroism implicit in the action is toned down by the absurdity of his unexpected death: “Chris stood his ground looking straight

into the man's face, daring him to shoot. And he did, point-blank into the chest presented to him . . . Chris sank first to his knees in a grotesque supplicatory posture and then keeled over sideways before setting flat on his back" (1987, 215).

Ikem is one of the casualties of the regime's repression, his death being carefully planned by the secret service. First they uncover a conspiracy, as the government-controlled radio station announces. Empty rhetoric is used to accuse Ikem, on very feeble grounds, of " 'inciting the students of the University to disaffection and rebellion against the government and the life of His Excellency the President and the peace and security of the State' " (1987, 169). Regretfully enough, Chinua Achebe must have found in African politics many real examples of such communiqués, anticipating the death of the person mentioned. Ikem's is reported in a predictable way, behind the uncommitted tone of official statements:

In the early hours of this morning a team of security officers effected the arrest of Mr Osodi . . . and were taking him in a military vehicle for questioning at the SRC Headquarters when he seized a gun from one of his escorts. In the scuffle that ensued between Mr Osodi and his guards in the moving vehicle Mr Osodi was fatally wounded by gunshot. (1987, 169)

It is significant that in spite of such repression the political careers of the rulers in the two novels discussed have a violent end. The coups d'état that take place in these pieces of fiction are a mimetic reflection of real events in Nigeria and other African countries in the post-colonial period. In *A Man of the People* we are told that "the army obliged us by staging a coup at that point and locking up every member of the Government. The rampaging bands of election thugs had caused so much unrest and dislocation that our young Army officers seized the opportunity to take over" (1967, 147-48).

The absence of criticism of the military actions might be interpreted as a sympathetic attitude on the part of the narrators. We may say that they consider take-overs as a beneficial cleansing ritual which enables society to get rid of —otherwise perennial— corrupt dictators. If we analyse the role played by coups d'état in fiction, we will conclude that they act as a kind of poetic justice by means of which the evil characters are punished. But we cannot expect Achebe to enshrine militiamen as the saviours of Africa: he knows that those who seize power will soon adopt the practices of their

predecessors, creating the conditions and the need for a new military intervention, in a vicious circle.

As a conclusion it can be said that Achebe analyses the personalities of politicians (mainly in *A Man of the People*) and intellectuals (especially in *Anthills of the Savannah*) and feels compelled to expose the former who, under the guise of social saviours, are merely pursuing personal ambition in their political careers. On the contrary, he emphasizes the potentialities of educated and competent professional civilians who should be instrumental in building a new democratic African society. Achebe, like many other African writers and scholars, believes that artists and intellectuals (not politicians) are the real men of the people.

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