

Ways of Telling: (Re)Writing the Nation in the Novels and Memoir of Chinua Achebe

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Summary

Perhaps the most recognisable thematic feature of Chinua Achebe's celebrated fictional and critical praxis is his keen interest in the social and political transformation of African societies following colonisation and independence. This article focuses on his engagement with African/Nigerian nationhood in his five novels and memoir, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012). The objective is to make evident significant trajectories and changes in Achebe's portrayal of political leadership and history in his thematisation of postcolonial and post-independence nationalism. While using the older novels as a form of background, I concentrate on *Anthills of the Savannah* and *There Was a Country*, and argue that these two works demonstrate a significant – even if not total – narrowing of interest from Nigeria/Africa, to his ethnic group, the Igbo, in a way that radicalises some of his previously well-known positions on postcolonial nationhood. The article demonstrates how changes in Achebe's narration of nation may represent ideological shifts and different “ways of telling”.

Opsomming

Waarskynlik die mees herkenbare tematiese kenmerk van Chinua Achebe se veelbesproke fiksionele en kritiese praxis is sy lewendige belangstelling in die sosiale en politieke transformasie van Afrika-gemeenskappe ná kolonialisasie en onafhanklikheid. Hierdie artikel fokus op sy betrokkenheid by die Afrika/Nigeriese nasieskap in sy vyf romans en sy memoir, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012). Die doelwit is om beduidende trajeksies en veranderinge in Achebe se uitbeelding van politieke leierskap en geskiedenis in sy tematisering van postkoloniale en post-onafhanklikheidsnasionalisme duidelik te maak. Deur die vroeë romans as 'n soort agtergrond te gebruik, konsentreer ek op *Anthills of the Savannah* en *There Was a Country*, en voer aan dat hierdie twee werke 'n beduidende – indien nie totale – verskuiwing van Achebe se verbintenis met Nigerië/Afrika na sy etniese groep, die Igbo, demonstreer, op 'n manier wat sommige van sy voorheen welbekende standpunte oor postkoloniale nasionaliteit radikaliseer. Die artikel toon aan hoe veranderinge in Achebe se voorstelling van nasieskap ideologiese verskuiwings en ander “vertelwyses” kan verteenwoordig.

Chinua Achebe's unwavering commitment to the socio-political condition of postcolonial Africa remains the most salient hallmark of his sterling creative and critical career. In this article, I trace the thematisation of post-independence Nigerian/African nationalism in his five novels and memoir, and foreground instructive continuities and departures in his engagement with political leadership and postcolonial history. I argue that *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) and *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012) reveal a significant, even if subtle, narrowing of commitment from Africa/Nigeria in general to his ethnic group, the Igbo, in particular. First, I present a concise survey of socio-political commitment in the early novels, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *Arrow of God* (1960), and *No Longer at Ease* (1964) – henceforth *TFA*, *AOG*, and *NLAE* respectively – as well as in his critical writing and brief involvement in Nigerian politics. This will serve as background to a detailed examination of the thematisation of political leadership and the retelling of Nigeria's recent past in *Anthills of the Savannah* and *There Was a Country* (henceforth *AOTS* and *TWAC* respectively). Regarding *AOTS*, I analyse Achebe's (1987: 158) idea of “the new radicalism”, the depiction of ethnic/regional difference and the allegorical rehistoricisation of the Biafran War. This leads to an examination of the largely ethnographic and “fact-based” – yet heavily interpretative – accounts that Achebe offers in *TWAC*. Finally, I highlight the ways in which the demonstrable changes in Achebe's narration of nation may represent radical ideological shifts as well as different “ways of telling”.

In 1948, the young Achebe received a scholarship to study Medicine at university, but switched to English (literature), History and Theology after a year (Okolo 2007: 35). This cost him the scholarship, but highlights an ideological disposition that remained central to his literary praxis and invests his narratives with a distinct brand of didacticism. He explains that this is rooted in his realisation, at a young age, of the ways in which colonial representations were implicated in socio-political orders:

“[I] became aware that the stories had been used to set one people against another, and that the depiction of [my]self and [my] color and [my] people and [my] race has been less than just, [I] then realised that [I] had a task. Not necessarily to confront other people, but to save [my]self because [I] was aware that there was a story, that there was another story about [my]self which was not being told. And so all [I] was doing really was to bring that other story that was not being told, bring it into being, put it among the stories and let it interact.”

(Okolo quoted in Holger 2003: 61)

He thus sums up his novels as “re-creations of the history of Africa in fictional terms” (Okolo quoted in Muoneke 1994: 139). From *TFA* to *AOTS*, Achebe engages progressively in the retrieval, transition, exposition, involution, and reconfiguration of African history (see Ekwe-Ekwe 2001).

So, without being reductive, the first two novels, *TFA* and *AOG*, may be described as focusing on the precolonial African past. The next two, *NLAE* and *A Man of the People* (henceforth *AMOP*), are more concerned with the immediate post-independent present, while the fifth, *AOTS*, offers suggestions and possibilities for the future of African nation states. Scholars have shown how this correspondence between thematic focus and time of publication enhances the historical relevance of Achebe's works (see Moore 2001). Bernth Lindfors sums it up this way:

Achebe has kept pace with the times by responding to the changing preoccupations of his society. Forty years ago he was a reconstructionist dedicated to creating a dignified image of the African past; today [1996] he is an angry reformer crusading against the immorality and injustices of the African present. His novels thus not only chronicle 100 years of Nigerian history but also reflect the dominant African intellectual concerns of the past four decades.

(Lindfors 1996: 25)

Achebe's thematisation of history is thus imbricated with contemporaneous socio-political anxieties in each novel. In *TFA* and *AOG*, the predominant concerns were the social and cultural conditions under which previously self-governing African societies were overcome by colonialisng forces. As David Ker (2003: 2) notes, these narratives are marked by "nostalgia for the past", and articulate a form of cultural nationalism by rehabilitating the precolonial cultural heritage. Elleke Boehmer notes that one of the ways in which Achebe and his contemporaries textualised this experience and enhanced nationalist awareness was through dramatising "family and compound life which not only championed traditional ways but figured communal and – by implication – national togetherness ... using symbols of recognisably local derivation" (1990: 187). Yet, it must be pointed out that these works equally represent Achebe's critique of the traditional, especially in the delineation of the protagonists, Okonkwo and Ezeulu, whose interpretation and manipulation of tradition to advance personal power results in their downfall. And although the postcolonial nation state was not necessarily the direct subject of *TFA* and *AOG*, they do prefigure the political preoccupation of the texts that follow (see Olaniyan 2001: 22).

The last-mentioned novels, *NLAE* and *AMOP*, offer an "indictment of the [early pre-independent] present" (Ker 2003: 2). These two, like Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Kill Me Quick* (1973) by Kenya's Meja Mwangi, are narratives of disillusion that lament the failure of the emergent African political elite to deliver on the promises of political independence (Kehinde 2004). Thus, Achebe's engagement with contemporary nationalism is more direct and explicit in these novels as well as in *AOTS* that appears much later. Significantly, two of Achebe's most "political" essays – "Morning Yet on Creation Day" (1975) and "The

Trouble with Nigeria” (1983) – were written in the years between the publication of *AMOP* and *AOTS*. It was also during this period that he became involved, albeit nominally, in partisan politics in Nigeria as deputy leader of the left-leaning People’s Republican Party. In a 1996 interview, he explains that this involvement was only a symbolic way to display his interest “in the way his ... society is organised and administered”, an interest of which his “literature is full” (Na’Allah 1999: 187).

The time lapse between *AMOP* and *AOTS* is quite significant. Dan Izevbaye (2009: 31) suggests that it provided Achebe with ample time to reflect on the many “unanswered questions” that arise from the latter. This perhaps informs Ben Okri’s description of the novel as Achebe’s “wisest” (as quoted in Boehmer 1990: 102). Without doubt, *AOTS* represents, in several ways, significant shifts in Achebe’s narratological praxis in general, and in his thematic approach to nationalism in particular (Boehmer 1990; Szeman 2001; Ekwe-Ekwe 2001; Erritouni 2006; Hungwe & Hungwe 2010). In the section to follow, I elaborate on the ways in which *AOTS* departs markedly from the “nationalist idealism” (Boehmer 1990: 232) that characterises the earlier novels. I focus on Ikem’s idea of “the new radicalism” (*AOTS*, p. 158) that summarises Achebe’s manifesto for socio-political change in Africa. I also explore the novel’s allegorical representation of the Biafran War and the ethnic/regional difference in its espousal of a changing narrative of post-independence Nigerian nationalism.

Anthills of the Savannah dramatises the political problems of Kangan, a fictive West African country under a military dictator simply named Sam. The novel follows the tumultuous relationship between Sam and his ex-schoolmates Chris (who is his minister of information) and Ikem (editor of the state-owned newspaper). These three main characters represent post-independent political elites whose actions and whims strongly determine the fates of their countries. But in this novel Achebe also interrogates the roles of common people in nation-building. This marks a change from what Imre Szeman (2003) argues to be Achebe’s previously one-dimensional approach to post-independent socio-political dystopia reflected in his fiction, and by his 1983 declaration that “[t]he trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely the failure of leadership” (Achebe 1983: 1). Szeman thus argues that, prior to the release of *AOTS*,

[a]t its base, Achebe’s politics is straightforward and moralistic: the enemy can be identified, the character of his activity evaluated as good or bad, revolutionary or reactionary, and the appropriate measures then taken. There is, in other words, an epistemological simplicity to his understanding of the political: politics is simply what takes place between powerful figures in the capital of a country.

(Szeman 2003: 122)

In contrast, *AOTS* offers a rigorous exploration that recognises the complexities of post-independence politics. Importantly, it decentres political agency to the effect that, along with the ruling and intellectual classes, ordinary citizens are revealed to be complicit in the establishment and perpetuation of oppressive power structures (see Soucar 1991; Proyect 2003). This is done mainly through Ikem's extensive reflections on the political culture of Kangan's lower classes reflected in his observation of peasants (including his girlfriend, Elewa), two taxi drivers, students (see *AOTS*, pp. 137, 157), and "the gullible [common] people ... famous for dancing in the streets at every change of government" (p. 218).

Another way in which this novel is different in its portrayal of nationalism is the significance it places on the frosty relationship between the central Kangan government and its drought-stricken, rebellious Abazon province that is victimised by the dictator because its people had denied his wish to become life president. I argue that this can be read as an allegory of Nigeria and Biafra, and that Achebe's apparent interest in Biafra in this regard manifests what Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992: 152) describes as a tendency to privilege Africa "and its people" rather than the colonially produced state in some recent reconstructions of nationalism in African fiction. Yet, Achebe's apparent shift in *AOTS* may not necessarily be seen as a disavowal of the broad ideas of nation itself, but of the idea as it is currently expressed in much of the formerly colonised world in general, and in Nigeria in particular. Through the lyrical Ikem – the novel's major ideologue – Achebe proposes a set of ideas about postcolonial socio-political transformation captured by the words "the new radicalism". An interrogation of this philosophy reveals subtle ways in which the novel plumbs post-Biafran Nigerian nationalism in unique ways.

Ikem's "new radicalism" represents a rejection of what he calls "[t]he present orthodoxies of deliverance", which, Ikem says, fail to recognise the complexity of oppression and the diversity of oppressed peoples – women, peasants everywhere, ethnic and religious minorities and castes and others – that "inhabit each their own peculiar hell" (*AOTS*, pp. 98, 99). In this regard, Ikem discredits "universal" models of emancipation and argues against "dominant modes of political thought" (Szeman 2001: 123). He thus proposes that individual communities of oppressed people need to adopt context-specific paths to freedom. He also proposes a greater role for people from different social groups, especially women. This is vigorously canvassed throughout the narrative by the distinctive role accorded to Beatrice, reinforced in the novel's closing scene where she leads a gathering of people from different ethnic, social and religious backgrounds to perform the symbolic naming ceremony of a newly-born *girl* child.

Very importantly, Ikem declares that nation-building may indeed follow different possible paths, stating: "I limit myself to the *most promising* rather than *only* [routes]" (*AOTS*: p. 99; italics in original). However, the specific

forms of these proposed alternatives are deeply ambiguous, as critics have observed (see Gikandi 1991: 125). Szeman (2003: 128) notes how Achebe's proposal that common people take greater control of national politics is presented in an "extremely complex manner" and that "it is unclear what form a postcolonial African politics might take". But as Szeman also notes, Achebe very self-consciously refrains from making definite prescriptions for the changes the novel advocates, repeatedly and explicitly declaring through Ikem that the writer's role is to "ask questions" rather than "give answers" (*AOTS*, pp. 157, 158). Achebe himself reinforces this point in an interview shortly after the publication of *AOTS* in which he says that "[a] good teacher never prescribes, but *draws out*" (Wilkinson 1992: 47; italics in original).

Yet, although he does not provide definitive, fully formed prescriptions, Achebe does volunteer a couple of "possibilities" (Erritouni 2006: 50) that may be better understood in the text's depiction of social identity and shared history. It is in this regard that the text's metaphorical representation of Biafra as Abazon becomes profoundly instructive. And, as Neil ten Kortenaar (1993: 59) instructively notes, *AOTS* is the novel that broke Achebe's "long literary silence ... after the defeat of Biafra". The novel recalls this crucial historical moment when, in the second chapter, we are told that "[t]he Rebellion" had happened in Abazon (*AOTS*, p. 18), a deft gesture by which Achebe establishes the war as a symbolic point of reference in the unfolding story. We soon learn, furthermore, that in addition to being plagued by severe drought, the Abazonians are victimised by the central government for denying Sam support in his bid to become life president. In this way, the narrative sets up, symbolically, the ensuing depiction of Abazon as oppressed national Other.

"*Those people again*" is how the minister Okong responds to information about Abazon in the early part of the story: Sam, for his part, refers to the province as "*their region*" (*AOTS*, p. 16; my italics). Coming from the country's leaders, these comments demonstrate how the province and its people are estranged from the central government and, by implication, from the nation. This characterisation is reiterated by Mad Medico, the expatriate doctor who calls it "the drought place" (p. 57), and when Chris flees to Abazon to avoid persecution by government security agents later on in the story, a local Abazonian addresses him and his company as "you people from the South" (p. 208). A very important dimension to this difference and alienation from the centre manifests in the rationale provided for Chris's choice of Abazon as a place of refuge from the tyrannical government. In addition to the fact that the province is on the country's geographical periphery in the north-west, it is revealed that "[t]he choice of Abazon as sanctuary came quite naturally ... [as] it was a province of unspecified and generalised disaffection to the regime" (p. 195). The province also had a "vast deployment of police and troops larger than any [outside the capital] Bassa" (p. 209), reinforcing the oppositional nature of its relationship to the

state and the rest of the nation. Perhaps the most forceful manifestation of this portrayal occurs towards the end of the story as the vehicle in which Chris and his friends are travelling approaches Abazon. The changing landscape becomes a powerful metaphor for difference and opposition:

The impenetrable rain forests of the *South* through which even a great highway snaked like a mere game track began to yield ground most grudgingly at first but in time a little more willingly to less prodigious growths; and a couple of hundred kilometres further north, unbelievably, to open parklands of grass and stunted trees

Even the asphalt on which [the vehicle] sped towards the *North* told its own story of *two countries*.

... The towns and villages on the Great North Road responded in appropriate ways to the general scaling-down in the size of structures as one pushed out of *the rain country* slowly towards *the land of droughts*.

(AOTS, pp. 205, 206; my italics)

And when he finally arrives at Abazon, Chris observes that “provincial boundaries drawn ... arbitrarily by the British fifty years ago ... sometimes coincided so completely with *reality*” (p. 208; my italics). In this way, the narrative renders as natural boundaries that are actually constructed, thus reinforcing difference and opposition. I have argued in relation to another text that

[t]his image of fundamental contrast is especially important as it references a historically salient political dichotomy dating back to the pre-1914 colonial formation of Nigeria as a single political unit. Before this date, the Muslim-dominated north and the mostly Christian south were distinct political entities (the protectorates of Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria, respectively). The 1914 amalgamation of these two protectorates to form a unified administrative entity was famously called a “mistake” in 1953 by the northern politician, Tafawa Balewa who later became Nigeria’s first indigenous prime minister (see Akinjide 2000; Aboro 2005). The view that the two parts of the country should have stayed separate remains current in Nigerian nationalist discourse as well as in how the country is perceived internationally.

(Akpome 2013: 33-34)

One implication of this representation is that while highlighting the fragility of the Nigerian nation as it is currently constituted, the text might – perhaps unwittingly – be suggesting a return to an equally questionable political arrangement.

Another gesture towards this earlier era of regional separateness is the reference to Frederick Lugard, the colonial administrator under whom the 1914 amalgamation occurred. Though Chris, Ikem and Sam had been friends at school, Chris argues that their continued association is probably

not meant to be. He tells Beatrice: “We are too close together, I think. Lord Lugard College trained her boys to be lonely leaders in *separate* remote places, *not cooped together* in one crummy family business” (*AOTS*, p. 66; my italics). And he agrees with Beatrice’s observation that “[t]he story of this country as far as you are concerned, is the story of the three of you” (p. 66). Indeed, Chris, Sam and Ikem can be read as symbolising the triumvirate of so-called “major” Nigerian ethnic groups (Hausa/Fulani-Igbo-Yoruba) that dominated Nigeria’s three regions from 1954 to 1963, and continues to dominate its endemically “tribalised” politics. It then becomes entirely plausible that the whirlwind relationship between Sam, Ikem and Chris, at one level of representation, parodies the tumultuous relationship between the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani, whose tenuous union within post-independence Nigeria underlines the many recurring political fractures and splits that continue to dog Nigeria, and that are allegorised in *AOTS*.

Another way in which the opposition between Abazon and the Kangan nation may be understood is through the allegory of struggle between oppressed and oppressor that is the predominant trope of the novel’s political philosophy, “new radicalism”. There is a strong sense in which this signifying scheme, operating as metaphor, figures Abazon as oppressed and the Kangan state as oppressor in a way that may echo the Biafra versus Nigeria scenario. But, of course, any understanding of Abazon as a metaphor for Biafra (either definitive or partial) has to be grounded on a prerequisite understanding of Kangan as referent (again, whether definitive or partial) for Nigeria. This is necessary in view of Szeman’s (2003) significant observation that Achebe sets the events in *AOTS* in a fictional nation state. This is a break from Achebe’s previous practice of using Nigeria and Igboland in largely metonymic terms, as symbolic backdrops for themes relating to Africa and the postcolonial world in general. In this regard, Kangan and Abazon may be understood to be operating simultaneously as both metaphor and metonym: At one level therefore, Kangan symbolises Nigeria, which becomes representative of other African and/or postcolonial nation states at another level of figuration.

Evidence abounds in the novel that support this portrayal of Kangan as a deliberate, even if subtextual, narrative strategy. The allusions are compelling: its location on the West African coast; the oil boom; the currency; the river Niger; the four provinces that easily correspond to the Eastern, Western, Northern and Mid-Western Regions of Nigeria between 1963 and 1967; the public power utility that is rendered once as the National Electric Power Authority and the Electricity Corporation of Kangan;¹ the

1. Nigeria’s former power monopoly was first called ECN (Electricity Corporation of Nigeria), then NEPA (National Electric Power Authority) and Power Holding Corporation of Nigeria before it was scrapped in 2013. It was still NEPA at the time *AOTS* was published.

use of Nigerian names and languages, prominently Pidgin and Igbo;² the list is endless (respectively, *AOTS*, pp. 64, 8, 88, 37, 45, 153). Bassa, the capital city, which experiences chaotic traffic jams, has yellow taxi-cabs and a beach where public executions are held (p. 39), is surely a version of Lagos, which was still Nigeria's capital at the time of the release of *AOTS*. Chris's reference to the Kangan government/elite as "the hope of the black race" (p. 2) resonates with Achebe's persuasion that the Nigerian nation represents "Africa's [h]ope" in an opinion essay he contributed to the *New York Times* (Achebe 2011). Furthermore, the circumstances of Sam's emergence as head of state in Kangan are reminiscent of the two 1966 coups in Nigeria that had originally been planned by junior officers who later invited more senior officers to head the government. It is in this context that an understanding of the delineation of Abazon as (at least partly) representative of Biafra and the Igbo people by extension becomes less far-fetched.

In his tale of the leopard and the tortoise, the old man from Abazon encodes layers of signification, one of which highlights the strong link between historical narrative and politics. This specifically draws attention to the importance of narrative to political contestation in a way that recalls Lukács's (1962) and Jameson's (1981) notions of narrative as invariably referring to socio-political realities. In this way, the psychology of struggle and kinship that permeates the old man's tale may be understood in terms of the distinctive ethnic dimension of the Biafran War, which is rehistoricised in this novel in a peculiar fashion. Rather than focusing on the specific circumstances and mundane details of the war, the orientation of *AOTS* is largely interpretive and teleological. Making extensive recourse to mythology, the text situates the Biafran moment within a broad historical continuum, a sort of "big picture", and thus invests an otherwise irrational event with significance. Thus, different and seemingly irreconcilable phases of experience are held together as a united and cohesive continuum by narrative, as the old man explains:

[I]t is only the story [that] can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters ... it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets *one people* apart from their neighbours.

(*AOTS*, pp. 123, 124; my italics)

This narrative strategy reflects Jameson's (1981: 28) observation that individual period formulations always secretly imply or project narratives or "stories" – narrative representations – of the historical sequence in which

2. There are a few Yoruba words in the text – "ojare", "wahala" (pp. 35, 55). Braimoh, the name of one of Chris's later accomplices, is a common name among Muslims from some southern minority ethnic groups.

such individual periods take their place and from which they derive their significance. The apparent goal of constructing such a continuing historical narrative is identified by Benedict Anderson (1991: 5) as central to the discursive construction of the nation as an entity that “loom[s] out of an immemorial past and ... glide[s] into a limitless future”. Furthermore, in line with the closing part of the quotation above, Michael Echeruo (1998: 66) foregrounds the ethnic character of the historicisation in *AOTS* (which draws mainly on allegory and mythology), describing it as “the story of a people”. Echeruo argues that Achebe’s concern is the inscription of “a life and a purpose” onto the history of the Abazon people. He goes on to explain that this mission, rather than being in the service of the rebuilding of the Kangan state, is in fact in aid of negotiating a destiny for Abazonians:

[T]he climactic experiences in the novel return us, not to the state (or country), but to kindred (or nation). The final debate in Harmony Hotel is not about the future of the state, but of the people. The struggle which the elder speaks about is the struggle of the Abazon people

(*AOTS*, p. 67)

Echeruo’s argument may be understood, in a sense, by Achebe’s extensive deployment of mythology in the narrative. This serves, not only to symbolise alternative patterns of socio-political behaviour based on general indigenous African belief systems, but also as a more specific referent for material (Igbo) culture. Eriks Uskalis (2000) offers a similar reading of the copious use of mythology in *AOTS*. Noting that mythology becomes an effective form of signification only within the context of “historically specific” referents – in this case Igbo people and culture – Uskalis argues that its pervasive presence in this novel has the effect of “contracting” the many alternative socio-political scenarios offered in the narrative into a privileged one, which, I suggest, is a commitment to the destiny of ethnic Igbos.

It is important to note, however, that this commitment neither detracts from, nor invalidates the text’s multifaceted exploration of Nigerian/African nationalism. As many commentators have noted, the closing scene of the novel does project the utopian possibility that the postcolonial nation may yet succeed in its envisaged role as unifier of the diverse ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural groups that were insensitively lumped together in moments of colonial myopia and self-interest. Even so, Achebe’s return, 25 years after *AOTS*, to a “personal” story of Biafra in his 2012 memoir, *TWAC*, illustrates the enduring role of ethnic subjectivity to his changing narration of contemporary Nigerian nationalism as adumbrated in the paragraphs to follow.

In *TWAC*, Achebe negotiates between ethnography, autobiography, history, politics, and culture criticism, and succeeds in blending reportage, analysis and opinion into a vivid, compelling, and polemical account of the

Nigerian Civil War and aspects of his own life story. In his overarching representation of the events and issues relating to the war, Achebe reveals an unmistakable preoccupation with ethnicity that at times contradicts his better-known positions on postcolonial Nigerian/African nationalism. Specifically, his argument that the war was caused, in essence, by primordial “hate and resentment” of the Igbo (*TWAC*, p. 77) by Nigerians of other ethnicities, is both problematical and a radical departure from a wartime comment in which he roundly rejected the idea that the conflict was a manifestation of “tribalism”. During a speech in Norway at the time, he had argued that the “myth of the tribe is the greatest block to an understanding of Africa by the white world. It makes it impossible for the white world to know and understand what is going on in Africa” (Lindfors 2009: 237). Yet, this “myth” permeates the representation of Igbo ethnic culture and Nigeria’s recent history in *TWAC* that are explored in the subsequent paragraphs.

Achebe’s preoccupation with ethnic particularity manifests from the very first sentence of the narrative in which he writes of his father’s birth during “an era of great cultural, economic, and religious upheaval in Igbo land” (*TWAC*, p. 7). This is how he begins the book’s first part, which contains accounts of his family background, education as well as his early broadcasting and writing careers. These accounts are set against a rigorous depiction of Igbo ethnic culture in terms that are worryingly monadic and totalising: “*the* Igbo community” (p. 16), “Igbo phenomenological thought” (p. 18), and even of “[t]his *group*, the Igbo” (p. 69; my italics). This becomes particularly problematic in the section titled “A History of Ethnic Tension and Resentment”, in which he argues implicitly that Igbo culture is superior to the cultures of compatriot ethnic groups, especially the Hausa/Fulani and the Yoruba. He claims that “[t]he Igbo culture” is “receptive to change”, and that “the Igbo man ... [u]nlike the Hausa/Fulani” is “unhindered by a wary religion, and unlike the Yoruba, he was unhampered by traditional hierarchies”, enabling the Igbo to advance in virtually all spheres of life above all other Nigerians (p. 74). This is why, he argues, the Igbo were hated by other Nigerians, a situation that eventually led to the civil war.

To say the least, this representation lacks nuance, and fails to consider the existence of fluid and conflicting definitions of ethnicity and culture in general, and in particular to the Igbo and Nigeria’s other ethnic collectives. This also applies to his claims that Nigerians were (and are) united in harbouring a “common resentment of the Igbo” (p. 74), and that “[t]he Igbo were not and continue not to be reintegrated into Nigeria, one of the main reasons for the country’s continued backwardness” (p. 235). Nothing could be further from reality: it is well known that the absence of any serious form of national unity remains a key cause of the country’s endemic socio-political problems. Moreover, in making declarations such as “[t]he Igbo are

a very democratic people” (p. 246; my italics), and positing that the Biafran secession was “the decision of an entire people” (p. 91), Achebe presumes and projects the Igbo as a homogeneous, undifferentiated, and centrally organised political unit, something that did not exist before the war, and will probably never exist (see Allison & Akpome 2013). Appiah (2011: 89-108) discusses this homogenising impulse in the philosophical construction of the idea of nation as it is expressed by Arjun Appadurai and Johann Gottfried Herder. Appiah remarks that what Appadurai “calls the ‘ethic genius’ of the nation, Herder called its ‘*Volksgeist*’: the spirit of its people, and he taught that every member of a people shared that spirit with every other” (p. 100). Appiah then goes on to argue that

[h]ardly any nation states fitted the Herderian picture of the homogenous mono-cultural nation living under a single government. Those few states that do fit something like this have usually been forced into it over a couple of centuries of violent civil strife: the homogenous nation is the result, not the pre-condition of modern statehood.

(Appiah 2011: 103)

Achille Mbembe echoes this point in a discussion on post-apartheid South Africa, arguing with reference to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1991) that “imagined national communities were never homogenous” (Shiple 2010: 671). There is a strong sense therefore, that Achebe’s depiction of Igboness in *TWAC* can be seen as a set of discursive strategies (see Anderson 1991; Bhabha 1990) in aid of the construction of a desired, rather than an existing, monocultural Igbo nation. This reflects James Clifford and Ed Markus’s (1986: 2) views on “the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts” and the “historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation” of culture.

The apparent bias towards Igboness and Biafra is highlighted in other important aspects of the text’s overall historicising project. Achebe’s rendition and analysis of key events as well as his characterisation of prominent historical actors tend to be ethnically determined. Perhaps the most notable is his controversial assertion that Obafemi Awolowo (the first premier of the Western Nigeria region) was “concerned about what he saw as the domination of the NCNC³ by the Igbo elite”, and that Awolowo’s party “galvaniz[ed] political support in Yoruba land and among the riverine and minority [ethnic] groups in the Niger Delta who shared a similar dread

3. Initially called the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), a political party, when it was founded in 1944, the NCNC became the National Council of Nigerian Citizens in 1959 after south-western Cameroonian territories were excised from Nigeria in that year (see Ilega 1988).

of the prospects of Igbo political domination” (*TWAC*, pp. 45-46). Further on in the narrative, Achebe describes Awolowo as someone who “was driven by an overriding ambition for power, for himself in particular, and for the advancement of his Yoruba people in general”, and who “saw the dominant Igbos at the time as the obstacles to [his] goal” (p. 233).

Reaction to this attack on Awolowo dominated the response to *TWAC* in Nigeria in the months immediately after its release in September 2012. The debate pits those who disagree with Achebe and respect Awolowo as a legitimate Nigerian nationalist against those (mainly Igbos) who take Achebe’s view. At the time that this article was written, a leading Nigerian newspaper, *Vanguard*, has a dedicated section (aptly titled “Avo-vs-Achebe”) on this debate. The often acrimonious exchanges on this platform and elsewhere foreground the sharply conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable historicist traditions of the war in particular and of Nigeria’s past in general. Furthermore, the predominant ethnic and regional dimension of the debate indicates that Achebe’s stated objective of “elevat[ing] the national discourse” (p. 244) by *TWAC* is seemingly not being achieved at the moment. Indeed, this is the only publication to elicit such divisive commentary in Nigeria, where Achebe has long been venerated.⁴

Under a section titled “The Major Nigerian Actors in the Conflict: Ojukwu and Gowon”, Achebe provides fairly detailed personal portraits of the wartime leaders, Nigeria’s Yakubu Gowon⁵ and Biafra’s Emeka Ojukwu. In

4. There is a suggestion that Achebe’s seeming ethnocentrism in *TWAC* has somewhat “diminished” him (Adibe 2013). In an interview, Wole Soyinka says light-heartedly that he would have “take[n] [Achebe] on with some friendly fire” (as quoted in Vanguard Media 2013) on the controversies in the memoir. He also describes Achebe’s accusations against Awolowo as “a matter between him and Awolowo – which, however, Chinua did let degenerate into tribal charges”. In a particularly severe response to *TWAC*, northern academic, Ibrahim Bello-Kano attacks both *AOTS* and *TWAC* for their perceived regional and ethnic biases, arguing that *AOTS* “presents a veiled dystopian narrativization of northern Nigeria ... variously called ‘the scrub-land’, ‘the scorched landscape’ ... etc.” (Bello-Kano 2013). He also argues that *TWAC* is Achebe’s “most disappointing book”, marked by “open myopia of blind ethnic solidarity”. Similarly, a *New York Times* review describes *TWAC*’s views on Biafra as “jaundiced” (Nossiter 2012). In a forthcoming article, I explore the silences and marginalisations of the historiography represented in *TWAC* and how these escalate negative ethnic rhetoric in Nigeria.

5. There is a strong sense in which the fictional Sam in *AOTS* may be read as a parody of Gowon as the latter is characterised in *TWAC*. Sam is a “social paragon” (*AOTS*, p. 65); Gowon was “charismatic, eloquent, [and] personable”. Both are Sandhurst-trained, young officers who are invited to rule after coups d’etat by younger officers (*AOTS*, p. 12). Most tellingly,

this section, he mentions a very interesting dimension to the war – but unfortunately one that is poorly explored. It is the idea that the conflict was, in a sense, “a personal war and collision of egos” between former military peers – Gowon who became head of state after the July 1966 counter-coup, and Ojukwu, who, according to some commentators, “looked down on” (p. 120) the former. The analyses that follow the profiles of the two leaders are perhaps the most nuanced in the entire book as they point to the complexities – political, historical, psycho(social) and otherwise – of the war in particular, and of post-independence Nigerian nationhood in general. Achebe states that: “The internal rivalries that existed between Gowon and Ojukwu, and the pathological intraethnic dynamics that plagued the Nigerian military and wartime government, contributed in no small measure to the scale of the catastrophe that was the Nigeria-Biafra War” (pp. 123-124). Unfortunately, the full import of these valuable insights is overshadowed by his determination to advance the highly problematical theories of Igbo cultural superiority and tribal conspiracy:

No small number of international political science experts found the ... [w]ar baffling, because it deviated frustratingly from their much vaunted models. But traditional Igbo philosophers, eyes ringed with white chalk and tongues dipped in the proverbial brew of prophecy, lay the scale and complexity of our situation at the feet of ethnic hatred and *ekwolo* – manifold rivalries between the belligerents.

(*TWAC*, p. 123)

Yet through these elaborate portraits of some of the key actors of the period, Achebe reiterates his well-documented conviction about the crucial role of individual political leaders and the ruling classes. This idea is reinforced in the postscript that pays tribute to Nelson Mandela’s exemplary leadership as president of South Africa and flays Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, Togo’s late president, Gnassingbé Eyadema, and Teodoro Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea. And although he states that he is concerned with “leaders at every level of government and sphere of society” (p. 245), Achebe seems to retreat to his pre-*AOTS* position that post-independence African nation-building remains overdetermined by the actions of a few, those who Szeman (2003: 122) calls “powerful figures in the capital of a country”. This idea is reinforced by Achebe’s declaration in the final part of *TWAC* that the “principal problem” of post-war Nigeria was finding “*the* right leader with the right kind of character, education and background” (p. 244; my italics).

while Sam’s anglophilia is overt – he admired the English “sometimes to the point of foolishness” (*AOTS*, p. 49) – Gowon’s is implied: he “was a particular favorite of the queen and other members of Britain’s royal family, a fact *he relished immensely*” (*TWAC*, p. 121; my italics).

There is a sense in which the closing sections of *TWAC*, which contain a summation of Nigeria's political dilemmas as well as suggestions for "State Resuscitation and Recovery" (*TWAC*, p. 251), can be read together with an earlier section (in Part 2) that offers what may be regarded as a utopian conceptual map for post-independence nationalism. Here, Achebe gives a spirited account of his role as a leading member of the intelligentsia who crafted Biafra's official principles of statehood. He also offers brief depictions of some symbols of Biafran "national culture" and pride. This ideological exegesis and romanticisation of stillborn "indigenous nationalism" (Nossiter 2012) reflects Achebe's nostalgia for the definite historical moment and experiences it attempts to relive. Still, it can also be interpreted as a non-fictional working out of the hazy "new radicalism" proposed in *AOTS*.

Accordingly, the principles outlined in the section titled "The Intellectual Foundation of a New Nation" function in both literal and connotative ways. In this regard Biafra and even Nigeria begin to operate in a less denotative sense and more as metonyms for the postcolonial world in general. This highlights an instructive parallel in *AOTS* where, as ten Kortenaar (1993: 60) notes, Abazon is also a referent for "traditional Africa", and where "the nation-state, the ethnic culture, and the continent" are conflated. These referential oscillations thus demonstrate Achebe's shifting commitments to the Igbo, to Nigeria and as "spokesman for Africa" (p. 60) in a way that may gesture towards the fragmented and often protean nature of postcolonial subjectivity.

Thus Achebe's commitment to the socio-political condition of postcolonial Africa has tended to metamorphose progressively over time. In particular, his representation of post-independence Nigerian/African nationalism in his five novels and memoir reveal instructive continuities and departures in his engagement with political leadership and postcolonial history. The brief survey of socio-political commitment in the earlier novels, *TFA*, *AOG*, and *NLAE* as well as his brief stint in Nigerian politics provided a background to the discussion. Focusing particularly on *AOTS* and *TWAC*, I highlighted the ways in which the demonstrable changes in Achebe's narration of nation represent radical ideological shifts as well as different "ways of telling" and how the two works reveal a significant narrowing of commitment from Africa/Nigeria in general to his ethnic group, the Igbo, in particular.

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