

# The Metaphor of “Anthills of the Savannah” in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*

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In a recently concluded symposium on Chinua Achebe,<sup>1</sup> his latest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* was, as was to be expected, the most highly discussed of his novels. During the discussion time that followed a panel session focused entirely on *Anthills of the Savannah*, one of the many vexing issues which puzzled many commentators was that of understanding what the words “anthills” and “Savannah” stood for in the novel.<sup>2</sup> If I remember rightly, I think that the discussants arrived at the following conclusions: that the words “anthills” and “savannah” are used in a metaphorical sense; is that “anthills” as so used means either survivors or indicators of potential regeneration, whereas “savannah” as used in the title of the novel implies a grassland but refers to an unnamed city (Nigeria?) in West Africa.

I have since reflected on these issues and it does appear to me that they are genuine and capable of further exploration. The latter is especially so because we are dealing with literary metaphors which according to Richard Boyd “display what might be termed conceptual open-endedness.”<sup>3</sup> In exploring the issues further, I would prefer to adopt a methodological frame work in which “anthills of the savannah” is treated as a metaphorical statement rather than adopt the perspective at the Achebe symposium in which “anthills” and “savannah” were treated as separate metaphors. This preference arises from a certain perception that the title of the novel, like other of Achebe’s novels, has a message to convey whose meaning cannot be fully understood solely by a simple recourse to an analysis of its major constituent parts. Two reasons support this perception. First, treating the title of the novel as a metaphorical statement would enable us to ask the questions: who are the “anthills” of the savannah? and what are the properties that characterize them as such? Second, *Anthills of the Savannah* is a novel that places the problem of political leadership in a historical perspective without proposing any solutions and so an understanding of the metaphor in which this is couched must be approached from the point of view of problem framing.

The history of the use of the word “anthill” in Achebe’s novels dates back to *Things Fall Apart* where it is used just once, then about six times in *Arrow of God*, and about four times in *Anthills of the Savannah*. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe uses the word in a hyphenated form to describe Obierika’s compound to be “as busy as an ant-hill.”<sup>4</sup> In this context, the word is used as a simile but also almost as a synecdoche because the tenor which conveys the comparison is not the ant-hill. The aptness and vividness of the comparison is brought out in the fact that it is people who are busy in Obierika’s compound.

In all but one instance in which it is used in *Arrow of God*, it is used to describe Nwafor's nose. In this connection, its use simply conveys to us a picturesque impression of the prominence of Nwafor's nose. The second sense in which it is used is in a proverbial form, thus: "The little bird which hops off the ground and lands on an ant-hill may not know it but is still on the ground."<sup>5</sup> Here, it is used as one of a string of proverbs which collectively foreshadow the tragic death of Obika, and by some implication of Ezeulu's subsequent madness. In the context in which it is used here, it is portrayed as capable of generating in the perching subject an illusionary sense of power.

By the time of the *Anthills of the Savannah* the word is used in the plurals for three times and in contexts different from the ones in which it had been previously used in the other two novels. The manner in which it is first used in the novel is suggestive of what meaning attribute we are to give to it. In describing the scorching effect of the sun, the narrative voice tells us:

The trees had become hydra-headed bronze statues so ancient that only blunt residual features remained on their faces, like anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires.<sup>6</sup>

This passage holds the key to an understanding of "anthills of the Savannah" as a metaphorical statement. There are two indications to this. The first and the most obvious indication is conveyed in the second part of quotation, "like anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires," whereas the second but less obvious possibility can be found in the first part of the quotation which suggests that "only blunt residual features remained on" the faces of the trees. The first suggestion, that of "anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires" as meaning "survivors" or "indicators of potential regeneration" tallies with the meaning given to "anthills" at the Achebe symposium already referred to. A second factor which seems to lend support to this interpretation is the way the novel ends, especially with regard to the naming of Elewa's child, AMAECHINA: "may-the-path-never-close" (p. 222), and the coming together, in the last few pages of the novel, of the survivors who were very close to most of the major actors in the novel. It is then these survivors who would tell Amaechina and her generation about what happened to Ikem and Chris. Amaechina as a female is a symbol of fertility, of regeneration, specifically of the likes of Ikem.

In the context of the total meaning of *Anthills of the Savannah*, what would the construal of the metaphor of "anthills of the savannah" as meaning "survivors" or "indicators of potential regeneration" imply? Before attempting an answer; it is pertinent to note that the "or" in the possible two meanings just given above is not used in a disjunctive sense. In other words, the metaphorical statement "anthills of the savannah" could mean, at the same time, both "survivors" and "indicators of potential regeneration" or simply any of the two without necessarily excluding the other. But this is as far as it goes. If we construe the metaphor as meaning only survivors, then we are faced with the question: survivors of what? A possible answer might be survivors of political bestiality, corruption, and high handedness. The examples of such survivors would be typified by Beatrice, Elewa,

Emmanuel, Adamma, Braimoh, Captain Abdul, etc. A further question which might arise at this stage is what is predicated of these survivors? If we took these survivors as representatives of civil servants, students, taxi drivers, soldiers, prostitutes, maids, and peasants, it could be inferred that what they signify is that no matter the level of political high-handedness and brutality, we would always have survivors, and of course victims too. This meaning is rejected on the grounds that it cannot be the moral or lesson of so complex a novel as *Anthills of the Savannah*.

The other possible meaning, “indicators of potential regeneration” is derived from the image of the anthills. In the anthill are always the ants which are untouched by brush fires. These ants are the ones that will go on to build more and bigger anthills. Brush fires and anthills are familiar features of the savannah. The constant co-existence of the anthills and the brushes in the savannah, their continued subjection to the same experiential reality of the fire coupled with a higher survivalist tendency of one over the other tends to portray a certain sense of dualism characteristic of Igbo life and thought. In this context, the dualism is constituted by some type of binary opposites, of the resilient and the fragile, the resistant and the non-resistant. The fragile and the non-resistant yield easy way to fires whereas the resilient and the resistant would stay on substantially unaffected and unchanged. In the context of *Anthills of the Savannah*, we find that the structure of the novel is based on this co-existence of opposites. We find the likes of Ikern Osodi and Chris Oriko counterposed against characters such as His Excellency, Professor Okong, and Major Ossai. This dualism is comically but graphically portrayed in the scenario between Chris and one of the people who gathered on the Great North Road on hearing the announcement of the coup that toppled his Excellency’s Government. The following passage succinctly brings out this dualism that is based on opposites.

‘Go and have a drink,’ one of them said to him, like a man who before his present state, had been used to exercising authority. ‘I have had a drink. Several drinks,’ said Chris, sounding superior without perhaps intending to.

‘If you have drunk.... as I have drunk.... Why are you standing straight like that? Or is it my eyes?’ The fellow’s head was going from side to side like an albino, though he was shiney-black like ebony.

‘I am not standing straight,’ said Chris, unaccountably mesmerized by this highly articulate drunk.

‘No, it is not my eyes.... You are not standing... I mean to say, you are standing as straight as a flag-pole. You get me? My difficulty then is: if as you say you drank as much beer as myself, why are you standing straight? Or put it another way. If two of us ate the same palm-oil chop, how come one of us, i.e., yourself, is passing black shit? That is what I want to know mister. Two people ate palm-oil soup.... (p. 214)

Two people ate the same palm-oil soup but do not pass shit of the same colour. Two people are subject to the same experiential reality but the outcome is different in each case. It is

instructive that the man asks Chris why he (Chris) should be “passing black shit?” The residual object here is the “black shit,” not Chris. The “black shit” is analogous to the anthills whereas the unmentioned yellow shit is analogous to the brush and grass of the savannah. One is easily affected by the phenomenon of fire whereas the other is substantially unaffected by the same experience.

This raises a problem of accepting the metaphor of “anthills of the savannah” as meaning indicators of potential regeneration. What is destroyed is that which imbues the savannah with a sense of beauty. The anthills are not known to offer good visual aesthetics and it is indeed remarkably noteworthy that we are told that “perhaps it was seeing the anthills in the scorched landscape that set him (Chris) off revealing in details he had not before experienced how the searing accuracy of the poet’s eye was primed not on fancy but “fact” (p. 209). There is no doubt that the anthills represent hidden life, but to see in them indicators of potential regeneration in the sense of giving spiritual reform or strength—which is what regeneration is all about—to the society and people of Kangan is only a dim hope, a hope as suspect as the unusual giving of a boy’s name, AMAECHINA, to a girl in a fit of unreflective ‘feminitude.’ Because of these reasons, the two possible interpretations of the metaphor of the “anthills” as arrived at during the Achebe symposium are here rejected. This means then that we must look for firmer footings on which we can ground a more plausible reading of the metaphor of the “anthills of the savannah.”

It is possible that a more appropriate construal of this metaphor is to be found in a political context or reading of the novel. The first factor which lends credibility to this view is that the anthill as a phenomenon can be regarded as primarily a political symbol. In traditional Igbo societies, a popular riddle derives its being from the anthill. The riddle is as follows:

Question: Gwa m Gwa m Gwa m eze Chukwu kpubelu okpu na-oma agu.

(Tell me Tell me Tell me a King that is crowned by God in the Wilderness.)

Answer: Ikwube. (Anthill.)

From this, it can be said that in the traditional Igbo imagination, the anthill is ascribed with some naturally endowed power features, even if it be the power of surviving brush fires. The anthill too is a familiar feature of the savannah grassland. That it features as a constant image in many an Achebe novel is not quite surprising. Its resilience and ability to survive brush fires and its noticeably irresistible presence after such brush fires, coupled with its primal linkage with power in the folk imagination make it suggestive that an artist with such a keen sense of observation and sensitive imagination like Achebe may—consciously or unconsciously—begin to link its survival potential with the unusual tendency of political corruption to persist in West African states in spite of all attempts to eliminate it.

Secondly, *Anthills of the Savannah* is primarily a political novel. Consequently, any meaningful construal of its total meaning must centre around a political problematic. This makes it necessary for a true meaning of the metaphor of the “anthills of the savannah” to be sought within a political contextualization of the title of the novel especially if consideration is taken of the message which the titles of Achebe’s novels convey. “Things Fall Apart,” “No Longer at Ease,” and “Arrow of God” are, in this regard, some type of literary cryptograms.

But *Anthills of the Savannah* is quite unlike the ironic *A Man of the People*. In *A Man of the People*, we find the formulation of a problem, that of political corruption, which cannot be solved by the emergent intellectual elite because they lacked the means to do so and were selfishly motivated too. As such a solution is found in military intervention. Twenty-two years separates *A Man of the People* from *Anthills of the Savannah* a novel in which we find a graphic portrayal of the contemporary political situation in (Nigeria?) in a diachronic perspective. In this novel, the novelist abdicates the responsibility of offering solutions for the social problems of his society. Thus at the end of the address which Ikem gave to the students of the University of Bassa and in which he was challenged to “move to the higher responsibility of proffering prescriptions” for society’s social problems, Ikem is made to reply. ‘Writers don’t give prescriptions.... They give headaches’ (p.161). In other words, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe addresses himself to the task of setting in a historical perspective the political ills or problems which have plagued many a West African State. The choice of the title of the novel, may then have arisen in a conscious attempt by the novelist to create an image that best captures these problems from a historical perspective. These problems include “massive corruption,” “subservience to foreign manipulation,” “second-class, hand-me-down capitalism,” “damnable shooting of striking railway workers and demonstrating students,” “the destruction and banning thereafter of independent unions and cooperatives,” “the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed of this country” (p. 141), “tribalism,” “religious extremism,” “electoral merchandising” (p. 160), etc.

That these problems are looked at from a historical perspective is very obvious from the first two pages of the novel. Thus, the reminiscences of the first witness, Chris Oriko, the Commissioner for Information is, in itself, informative.

I have thought of all this as a game that began innocently enough and then went suddenly strange and poisonous. But I may prove to be too sanguine even in that. For, if I am right, then looking back on the last two years it should be possible to point to a specific and decisive event and say: it was at such and such a point that everything went wrong and the rules were suspended. But I have not found such a moment or such a cause although I have sought hard and long for it. 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. (pp.1-2)

The very easy phrase “And so” which introduces the last sentence in this passage indicates a conclusion, even if tentative, which focuses the scenario of action not only on the present military administration but also extends it far back into the past, into the “very beginning” of time. If so, the political problems facing the city of Kangan become not just indexical properties of an emergent totalitarian regime but also a recurrent character of the politics of West African states. Any wonder then that these political vices can begin to assume some type of residual and survivalist character in the imagination of the novelist. No fitting image can better become that of the “anthills of the savannah” in recapturing this essence.

With this type of understanding, the metaphor of “anthills of the savannah” can be said to represent the primal instincts of the Hobbesian man: raw, naked, and brutish and therefore giving rise to these residual and continuing political problems in (Nigeria?). After the brush fires, the anthills would stand out in their nakedness, having been pruned of all green grass and brush which both help to cover and beautify the anthills. Bereft of these naturally endowed appurtenances, the anthills cannot but look charred and ugly. Since these are the features which remain after they have been pruned of supportive surrounding beauty, they can be construed to be symbolic of residual political vices which continue to plague West African States in spite of whatever attempts that are made to eradicate them. The ants which survive within the anthills would then represent man’s basic primal brutish instincts which would continue to produce more anthills, more political vices.

In conclusion then, it has to be re-stated this essay adopts a methodological approach which treats the “anthills of the savannah” as a metaphorical statement in preference to the perspective adopted at the Achebe symposium in which the words “anthills” and “savannah” were treated as different metaphors. The construal of the metaphorical meaning of “anthills” as either “survivors” or “indicators of potential regeneration” has also been rejected. We have then argued that “anthills of the savannah” as a metaphorical statement means residual political vices which tend to survive in many a West African state in spite of attempts to the contrary, this meaning construal is in agreement with both the general political nature of the novel and its problem setting framework undertaken from a historical perspective. This last point is underscored by Elewa’s uncle, even if naively so. Thus in his kola invocation in the last few pages of the novel, he says: “We have seen too much trouble in Kangan since the white man left because those who make plans for themselves only and their families.” (p. 228) If we then understand the metaphor of “anthills of the savannah” as meaning residual political vices in West African states in general and Nigeria in particular, the implication is that the leaders of West African states are like the anthills in the savannah: they would always be the same, manifesting the same selfishness, greed, and political bestiality no matter whether they are civilians or soldiers turned-politicians. Not even the brush fires given a purificatory signification can change them. They would always be like the anthills, like Kings crowned by God and behaving as such, unaccountable to no human, not even to God himself, and therefore unmindful of the consequences of their political acts.

## References

<sup>1</sup>A symposium to mark Chinua Achebe’s both Birthday was held from 12th to 14th February, 1990, at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

<sup>2</sup>The scholar who first called attention to this problem was Professor Viney Kirpal.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Boyd, “Metaphor and Theory Change: What is ‘Metaphor’ for?” In *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979; opt 1980), p. 362.

<sup>4</sup>Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), p.78.

<sup>5</sup>Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, 2nd Edition (London: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 265, and 210.

<sup>6</sup>Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd, 1988) p. 39, all subsequent page references to this novel refer to this.