

<AT>Cosmologies of the Sovereign in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*</AT>

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<AB>ABSTRACT

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* concentrates on the problem of political leadership in postcolonial Africa like none of his other post-independence novels—*A Man of the People* or *No Longer at Ease*. It narrates the abuse of power and the failure of political leadership in a way the others do not and has thus generated criticism along this axis. While some critics have explored the nature of brutality in the novel, others have seen it as essentially tragic from various perspectives. It has also generated concerns about Achebe's reaction to political leadership in Africa. The formation of a postcolonial nation-state as presented in the novel has been seen as problematic for reasons ranging from the inability of citizens to integrate and forge a common course to the lack of belonging fostered by visionless, selfish leadership. Most of these concerns have been triggered by the question of leadership performance and the idea of the state as failed. This article, however, investigates the processes by which actors—state and non-state—make and remake the state. By so doing, it seeks to achieve three aims: to expand domains of power and oppression beyond state apparatuses, to investigate

mechanisms of resistance and agency among the oppressed, and to unveil the relationship between play and power within, but not limited to, the political class. </AB>

<A>INTRODUCTION

<FL>The most important question for the humanities today is probably captured in Marina Grzanic’s phrasing: “the question of the social bond and our place inside it.” It is one that raises the ultimate concern of what we are, our capabilities, and our limits, especially in relation to others. It is a question of power. Theorizing and engaging power in postcolonial Africa has been at the center of scholarship for many reasons. Whether regarding structures of oppression in societies in which patriarchal regimes wield influence or in the few domains that women control, whether in political spheres that mark not only women as the other, but virtually all outside the domain of influence where many forms of injustice and denials are perpetrated and sharp distinctions exist between ruler and ruled, subject and subjected, scholars in African studies have focused the gaze on the often intractable nature of power and its use and abuse.

Achebe’s *Anthills* concentrates on the problem of political leadership, involving the entire machinery of state politics in a way that *A Man of the People* doesn’t and much less *No Longer*. Like these novels, it describes a failure of the nationalist dream nursed by the age preceding independence, but it places greater emphasis on the misuse of power in the postcolony. Bill Schwarz notes that it is written to “bring out into the open the prevailing undercurrents of violence and terror” (41) and “inaugurates, in the novel-form, a conception of the postcolonial as tragedy” (46). But Schwarz’s skepticism “whether the novel-form itself can ever amount to an adequate critique of the postcolonial condition” (47) should be overcome, even if hypothetically, by taking the position that the African novel has offered a space broad enough to interact and

investigate power in the postcolonial situation, as his own analysis shows. What Schwarz offers is the appetite to search always for fresh and insightful ways to engage postcolonial literature.

Schwarz is not the only one to have thought of *Anthills of the Savannah* as tragic. Okain Teiko approaches this perspective from the Igbo concept of *chi*, where the use of the term goes beyond the personal to the collective in its significance so that the failure of political leadership is the failure to work in line with the collective (115). How General Sam's ousting, brutality, and death become a result of his "violating his personal deity" (133), however, remains unclear. There is a suspicion that the Igbo concept, which Achebe has written profusely about, has been overstretched and possibly misconstrued. Neil ten Kortenaar reads the novel almost side by side with Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria* because of its concern with political leadership and the disconnect between the leader and the led. In this novel, according to Kortenaar, nationalism is constantly a mirage that needs to be negotiated and renegotiated to close up existing gaps between classes and divides for it to have force (65). It is a "potentially disastrous discrepancy" (64), pulled at both ends by notions of descent and consent (65) that only reinforce each other at the end of the novel and point at the possibility of conceiving a workable nation-state. The failure of this nation-state, resulting from its peculiar use of power and its relation to the citizenry makes the thinking about another paradigm particularly inviting. Moradewun Adejumobi has combined Mbembe's notion of non-resistance with James Scott's infrapolitics in the analysis of Patrice Nganang's *Dog Days* to indicate how concepts describe both the "pessimism about the willingness of subordinate subjects to engage in resistance" as well as "affirm... the necessity for, and efficacy of direct resistance as the primary antidote for social disorder" (438). The idea of non-resistance among the oppressed group, however, needs to be carefully investigated.

This article argues that within the oppressed also is a hierarchized, sometimes often glossed over, space of subjugation and power over others. It also shows the complexity in mapping the border between the oppressor and the oppressed and how this could sometimes be tricky under the force of what Hardt and Negri call Empire. Thus the thrust of this paper is to broaden the scope of social relations and investigate how power and resistance are intertwined even in the most unlikely places. What accounts for this is the various interests involved in shaping the idea of a state. The paper shows how resistance is embedded in the daily rituals of existence and why the idea of resistance in postcolonial Africa, as seen in Achebe's novel, has shifted from what it was in the past even though it is still shaped to a large extent by structures of sense-making that emanate from traditional forms of knowledge. It interrogates Mbembe's concept of play and argue that in *Anthills of the Savannah*, theatricality does not necessarily mark the interactive space between the ruler and the ruled but can also be a vital ingredient of power among the ruling class. First, to develop the argument entails exploring some theoretical issues shaping postcolonial studies in order to foreground the landscapes of power and oppression that guide this paper. Then the paper moves on to engage how power manifests in Achebe's novel via power domains that struggle to define what Kangan means or should mean to them. The next two sections investigate theatricality as an element of power and explore how the oppressed express agency and ingeniously create forms of resistance.

<A>MAPPING THE SPACE OF POWER IN THE POSTCOLONY

<FL>Like most perhaps, postcolonial theory has emerged with some form of indebtedness to its predecessors; and in the course of time, has come to stand in good stead and expand its frontiers. Such forerunners as Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivaki, etc.,

strengthened the early stage through critical insights from Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, and others, according to Jeremy Weate (“Achille Mbembe and the Postcolony” 1). Acknowledging this “intellectual genealogy,” Neil Lazarus has observed that what is currently needed in postcolonial studies is the field’s reconstruction and the articulation of “a credible sociological account of the relation between the field’s problematic and developments in the wider social world” (1). But the terrain of postcolonial studies itself is complex to map out, as he himself shows. The challenge begins with what the “postcolonial” really is.

Lazarus recalls that as a result of the political climate, the term, as used by Hamza Alavi and John S. Saul, delineated the time “immediately following decolonisation” (Lazarus 10). At this time, it “was a periodising term” that “bespoke no political desire or aspiration, looked forward to no particular social or political order” (11). It was Homi Bhabha, according to Lazarus, who first articulated it “[a]s a mode of analysis” (*Location of Culture* 173; Lazarus 12). But the use of “postcolonial” to delineate a historical time period is still in contention in terms of its coverage. While Crawford Young argues that “the post-colonial moment appears to have passed” (49), in the 1990s the collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a period of “irresistible pressures for liberalization,” the effect of which was “poorly captured by the notion of post-coloniality” (24–25). Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni recently argued that “[a] postcolonial African world is not yet born” because African nations are yet to take control of their destinies from “the strong but invisible colonial matrix of power” (63). Only at that time shall postcolonial Africa emerge. Like Bhabha, Bill Ashcroft reminds us that the term is better understood as “a way of reading the continuing engagement with colonial and neo-colonial power” (1). Referring not to post-independence but the “post-invasion” of formally colonized nations, Ashcroft holds that it is

neither reducible to “a chronology nor a specific ontology—it is not ‘after colonialism’ nor is it a way of being” (1).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s phrase “the strong but invisible colonial matrix of power” is the “world-system” (Lazarus 9) that has yoked postcolonial states pitilessly to the big economies that determine their fate through policies and the global market. Such injurious alliances have “truncated the African liberation project” and given “birth to a problematic and fragile African nation-building process” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 4). In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri show that postcolonial liberalist optimism is “highly ambiguous” (106). The futuristic progressive nation is only a rallying point of attack against external forces; once self-determination is achieved, the postcolonial nation itself becomes “a dominating power that exerts an equal and opposite internal oppression, repressing internal difference and opposition in the name of national identity, unity, and security” (106). There is something wrong in the way the struggle for self-determination from the colonies was organized: it mostly “involves a *delegated* struggle in which the modernization project also established in power the new ruling group that is charged with carrying it out. The revolution is thus offered up, hands and feet bound, to the new bourgeoisie” (133). But the postcolony “did not begin with African leaders,” Maurice Taonezvi Vambe and Abebe Zegeye write. It began with “the structural dynamics of colonialism... continued in the form of neo-colonialism” (16). Samir Amin’s solution to the constraints imposed by this yoking of Africa unto the global economic system is to delink, to reconstruct the “world system on the basis of polycentrism,” where nation-states will be guided by “the varying imperatives of their own internal development and not the reverse” (xii). For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the main problem is epistemic. Postcolonial emancipatory projects “do not question the core logic of Western modernity that globalized Euro-American views of the world

and that constructed a racialized, hierarchical, hegemonic, patriarchal and capitalist global social system” (4), and African intellectuals have contributed in undermining African liberation by adopting Euro-American models of analysis that have ensured that no “robust and critical perspective of Euro-American hegemonic knowledge and the asymmetrical power relations it enables” is articulated to confront the issue (5).

What is required then is a new mode of thinking that is completely African and that has the capacity to challenge the status quo. Ndlovu-Gatsheni is not alone in this quest. Muiu and Martin have initiated the Fundi wa African approach, premised on the principle that the “core of the state is the people who reside within its boundaries” whom it must serve (191; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 5). Emanating from within an African sociocultural environment, Fundi wa Africa is a brave attempt, but using indigenous African knowledge domains to chart the way and contemplate what and how the postcolonial state should be is not the best move, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni. What is needed first is to study thoroughly the colonial matrix of power before evolving an articulate indigenous/African paradigm that has the capacity to expose, confront, and undermine the various strands of control mechanisms through which Western domination has maintained its hold on Africa from the outset of colonial conquest to now. Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s approach to this is critical coloniality, which he uses to investigate three thematic areas: the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge, and the coloniality of being (7).

Hardt and Negri’s reminder of the ambiguity that has defined the postcolonial state should not be taken lightly even though the picture they paint appears irredeemably pessimistic and irretrievably juridical: that “[a]s soon as the nation begins to form as a sovereign state, its progressive functions all but vanish” (109). Such pessimism, accepted almost as fated, is the position of Achille Mbembe. For Mbembe what accounts for this pessimism is the absence of

agency among the oppressed group. Like Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Mbembe has protested the reliance on Western models to interrogate power in the postcolony. For instance, he holds suspect attempts to construct domination through all binary relations, believing that binary “oppositions are not helpful; rather, they cloud our understanding of postcolonial relations” (*On the Postcolony* 103). Postcolonial power relations are, for him, characterized by “witnessing” (110), not contestation; and both the ruler and the ruled “share the same living space” (104) without necessarily clashing. His view of binary relations is so strictly delineated that he fails to understand the dynamics of social relations that could easily overturn the dyad. Maurice Taonezvi Vambe and Abebe Zegeye argue that Mbembe’s idea of opposition, “an emplotment of resistance organised around political movements,” is old fashioned because his impression of the masses indicates “an anonymous ‘abject’ object that should make resisting exploitation a life-long vocation” (17).

Jeremy Weate points out that the problem is that by favoring textualism, Mbembe unduly forecloses that analysis of power from the point of view of lived experience, thereby showing a “reductive understanding of power” (‘Postcolonial Theory on the Brink,’ 14). Kimberly Wedeven Segall attributes this to “cultural blindness, an academic imperialism” (617-18; Weate 14) and Mikael Karsltron notes Mbembe’s “overestimation of the ideological power of the postcolonial state and a radically and unjustifiably pessimistic portrayal of state-society relations in postcolonial Africa as terminally mired in inherently dysfunctional political dispositions and practices” (57). It is also apparent, Vambe and Zegeye stress, that Mbembe does not question why the oppressed are always found in the company of those who oppress them, that is why, according to him, “the masses join in the madness (of vulgarity) and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power to reproduce its epistemology” (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 133). Vambe

and Zegeye are of the opinion that ordinary people “never really think of themselves as ordinary in the sense of having limited aspirations or baser instincts” (17).

The entangled relation of ruler and ruled within a convivial space accounts for Mbembe’s view that the postcolonial African state is perhaps unredeemable. It is a world that normalizes the bizarre and thrives in oppression and impunity. Vambe and Zegeye suggest that this view is wrong, that “disentangling ‘oppression’ between the West and Africa, between African leaders and the masses, and among the masses themselves” is not a hopeless exercise Mbembe implies (18). It is the power of agency among the oppressed that Mbembe undermines in his theory. Karlstrom opines that non-state actors have the vitality to generate critical responses to the aberrant dispersal of power by the state (72), and Weate suggests that a focus on grassroots resistance could have enriched Mbembe’s theory (“Achille Mbembe and the Postcolony” 38). In his reflections on the legacies of Franz Fanon for postcolonial studies, Immanuel Wallerstein argues that the reason why Fanon appeals to us today is because of his anti-imperialist position, which reflects on three thematic areas of his work: “the use of violence, the assertion of identity and class struggle” (119; Lazarus 181). These, he argues, define our situation today:

<EX>Whether we can emerge collectively from this struggle and into a better world-system is in large part dependent on our ability to confront the three dilemmas discussed by Fanon—to confront them, and to deal with them in a way that is simultaneously analytically intelligent, morally committed to the “disalienation” for which Fanon fought, and politically adequate to the realities we face. (125; Lazarus 181)</EX>

<FL>Developed alongside the world-system were “new forms of power and authority” (Ferguson 102; see Hagmann and Péclard 542) that “effectively facilitated the return of local

power centres in Africa to the detriment of the centripetal agenda of existing nation-states” (von Trotha 1617; Hagmann and Péclard 542) These forms of power and authority have impacted on the postcolonial state in a way that the state-failure perspective has perhaps not investigated. Hence Hagmann and Péclard argue that “[c]ontemporary accounts of statehood in Africa abandon a narrow focus on formal state actors and institutions for a more sociological reading of the multiple ‘power poles’... that exist within, at the interface, and outside of the bureaucratic apparatus” (542–43). The state is never static but always negotiated by various actors within and outside its borders and within and outside its official apparatuses. Such a conception helps to understand the dynamics of power and oppression within every strata of the state and provides a nuanced notion of social interactions between state and subject and among subjects themselves.

<A>GEOGRAPHIES OF POWER IN *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

<FL>In today’s postcolonial state, power is spread among numerous interest groups in a variety of forms and degrees. Scholars have attributed this devolution to impacts of globalization and neoliberalism. Such powers sometimes come into collision as interests clash. As the state is in a state of constant becoming such collisions are inevitable. The processes that allow this are the forces that shape and swing the ever-emerging state. Though unequal, these forces never really neutralize each other completely. The processes unveil the dynamics of interactions involving different groups—political and non-political, high and low, state and non-state, local and foreign, and so forth.

Understanding relations among various groups is important in order to broaden investigation of power domains in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*. Such a “sociological” account probes the various interests and power manifestations as the state is constructed and

deconstructed. Hagmann and Pecard write that at the core of state formation processes are “attempts to institutionalize and legitimate physical coercion and political power” (543). But this power, they note, is not restricted to political authorities alone. Other actors use power as well, only they rely on a different set of legitimization strategies (543).

One strategy of legitimating authority in Kangan is brute force, made to appeal to the popular world in order to veil its humiliation and at the same time implant obedience unto the psyche of the subject. A display of such cruelty is often accompanied with a peculiar attraction, as seen in the public execution:

<EX>By two o'clock there was no standing room on the beach, neither on the hot white sand nor the black granite boulders of the great breakwater wall stretching out to sea. On ordinary days only suicidal maniacs climbed those giant rocks that halted the galloping waves as the fierce horsemen at the durbar are stilled by an imaginary line before the royal pavilion. But this was no ordinary day. It was a day on which ordinary people went berserk. The crowd on the perilous sea-wall had a fair sprinkling of women. And even children. (36)</EX>

<FL>The exceptional glamor of the occasion is attributed to the leadership's sense of taste. Much as the “death preparations” and antics of professionals and priests present to ritualize the act appear odd to Ikem, what really shocks him to the marrows is the attitude of the crowd, “the thousands who laughed so blatantly at their own humiliation and murder” (37), the ones who give “an ovation” (38) in solidarity with the authority that crushes but is culpable of crimes more serious than the one it prosecutes.

Anthills does not limit such displays of power and cruelty by the authority to the masses alone. The show is no less spectacular between General Sam and his Cabinet when they engage

in their empty parliamentary debates. On such occasions, reading His Excellency's body language requires competent skills at one's disposal if one must stay out of trouble. As a legitimate apparatus of the state, the Cabinet is almost a dummy. Its power is highly undermined.

The opening of the text is most telling:

<EX>“You're wasting everybody's time, Mr Commissioner for Information. I will not go to Abazon. Finish! *Kabisa!* Any other business?”

“As Your Excellency wishes. But...”

“But me no buts, Mr Oriko! The matter is closed, I said. How many times, for .God's sake, am I expected to repeat it? 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 ruling.” (*Anthills* 1)</EX>

<FL>The Cabinet's importance as an institution of the Kangan state wanes, its power drifts, and its legitimacy flattens. As His Excellency acquires more power, the Cabinet is reduced to “a circus show” (113), going back at least to the time the President returned from his first meeting with other heads of state from the OAU (48). The real actors of state power are to emerge later as a cult of business magnates among whom Kangan's apparatuses and business interests are partitioned and privatized. Beatrice encounters them during her visit to the Retreat at Abichi where she witnessed Ikem tried and convicted in absentia. One of these power brokers of Kangan is the taciturn, cunning, and deadly Alhaji Abdul Mahmoud who, Chris tells us,

<EX>“has in the last one year knocked all other Kangan millionaires into a cocked hat. Eight ocean liners, they say, two or three private jets; a private jetty (no pun intended). No customs officials go near his jetty and so, say rumour-

mongers, he is the prince of smugglers. What else, fifty odd companies, including a bank. Monopoly of government fertilizer imports. That's about it. Very quiet, even self-effacing but they say absolutely ruthless. All that may or may not be standard fare for multi-millionaires. What I find worrying and I don't think I can quite believe it yet is that (voice lowered) he may be fronting you know for... your host." (111)</EX>

<FL>These are "[t]he real Cabinet," according to Chris (113), "the power-brokers around His Excellency" (72). It is within them that key decisions on issues of state are taken.

The privatization of "social provision" that has resulted from globalization, that "consciously framed political project or strategy" that was deceptively weaved onto the world stage by neoliberal ideology (Lazarus 7), "marked," according to Jorge Larraín, "the beginning of the huge expansion of the Third World's international debt" and made the chances of financial independence of the third world impossible (133; Lazarus 7–8). According to Lazarus, globalization came with policies to:

<EX>discipline..., domesticate... and render... [the third world] subservient to the needs of the global market. They also became a means of ensuring that postcolonial states would retain their peripheral status, neither attempting to delink themselves from the world-system nor ever imagining themselves capable of participating in it from any position of parity, let alone power. (9)</EX>

<FL>This incapacity to emerge as an equal in the global arena ensures that the postcolonial nation remains perpetually a beggar nation and will never have control of its destiny.

Colonialism therefore has been retooled to create what Hardt and Negri call an Empire, "the

new global form of sovereignty” (xii) that has created “new forms of rule that operate on a global scale” (134).

At the helm of this global Empire is America, described in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* as “the adolescent and delinquent millionaire” (48). The millionaire delinquent feeds on the resources of others and cares little or nothing about its victims. As a delinquent it observes no rules and breaks protocols. Miss Cranford, the American journalist who has visited Bassa “to see if all the bad news they hear about [Kangan and its leadership] in America is true” (70), does not waste time to show what her primary interest is. This is how she begins her lecture:

<EX>Without any kind of preamble she began reading His Excellency and his subjects a lecture on the need for the country to maintain its present (quite unpopular, needless to say) levels of foreign debt servicing currently running at slightly more than fifty-one per cent of total national export earnings. Why? As a *quid pro quo* for increased American aid in surplus grains for our drought provinces! (74)</EX>

<FL>With Beatrice, Cranford hopes to “talk about things in general. Especially the women’s angle” within “the next seven days” (71). There is no doubt where her priority is. The information she supposedly seeks is what, as a reporter, she “could stroll in anytime and get it all direct from the horse’s mouth,” according to Beatrice (71). Miss Cranford has taken the Kangan government “hostage” (76), almost forced it obsequiously on its knees, and enjoys the privilege accorded her by the interest she represents.

Not minding the sickening economy of Kangan, His Excellency is eager to plunge the nation into more debt because he seeks endorsement by the global empire/umpire. Because the

relationship between the global capitalist empire and postcolonial states is skewed in favor of the former, there is no “chance of [third world countries] ‘catching up’ and keeping a clean balance sheet [has] disappeared definitely, and probably forever” (Lazarus, 8); and where a loan is to be provided, the condition is such that “the recipient nations [are] not in a position to refuse” (9). This situation embedding a highly structuralized domain that settles postcolonial Africans down a rung where they remain perpetually peripheral is what Spivak calls the “postcolonial neo-colonised world” and to which critics like Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Muiu and Martin seek a redress through indigenous knowledge domains.

In *Anthills*, Miss Cranford’s reaction to Ikem’s editorials on the dangers of Kangan’s overreliance on global economic policies shows how complex the issue is:

<EX>The editor who I think is a Marxist of sorts appears to imagine he can eat his cake as well as have it, as we all tend to do this side of democracy. Admiring Castro may be fine if you don’t have to live in Cuba or even Angola. But the strange fact is that Dr Castro, no matter what he says, never defaults in his obligations to the international banking community. He says to other, “Don’t pay,” while making sure he doesn’t fall behind himself in his payments. What we must remember is that banks are not houses of charity. They’re there to lend money at a fair and reasonable profit. If you deny them their margin of profit by borrowing and not paying back they will soon have to shut down their oppressions and we shall all go back to saving our money in grandmother’s piggy banks. (74)</EX>

<FL>Cranford holds that postcolonial democracies are a different sort: they require assistance, but they don’t want to pay the price. The warped logic is that this is an era of progress and has to

be sustained lest we relapse into the primitive old days. And His Excellency looks on in “martyred justification” of her position: “Go on; tell them. I have gone hoarse shouting the very same message to no avail” (74). Postcolonial nations are however made to depend on the big economies, to be in a situation where these economies discipline, domesticate, and render them subservient (Lazarus 9). The desire to seek legitimacy and endorsement from foreign powers or the inability of the postcolonial state to be self-reliant comes with a price. His Excellency the President has become a mere tool to a regime greater and more powerful than his, such that, like the Cabinet that tremors before him, his ego is completely flattened before the American journalist who has become so “outrageously familiar and domineering” to him that “she would occasionally leave him hanging on a word she had just spoken” and shift her attention elsewhere. All her “effronteries” (73) receive “grins of satisfaction,” notwithstanding (74), thus it is the humiliation and holding hostage of a nation-state and its entire machinery by a stronger one (76).

In *Anthills*, it is sometimes not clear what one’s position is in the state negotiation process. Where the status is misread, the result could be disastrous. This is perhaps why the Cabinet is always cautious and ready “to disappear into [its] hole” until it is able to read properly how “His Excellency gets out of bed in the morning” (2). But the event of His Excellency’s Life Presidency dream shows how complex negotiation with the state could be. At the Harmony Hotel, the leader of the Abazon delegation recounts his encounter with state officials regarding General Sam’s ambition:

<EX>There was another thing that showed me there was deception in the talk.

The people who were running in and out telling us to say yes came back one day and told us that the Big Chief himself did not want to rule for ever but that he was being forced. Who is forcing him? I asked. The people, they replied. That means

us? I asked, and their eyes shifted from side to side. And I knew finally that cunning had entered the matter. (121)</EX>

<FL>By recognizing himself as one of the “the people,” the old man has believed that he is a major actor in shaping Kangan. However, the reaction of the officials doesn’t seem to concur. It is an indication of surprise, perhaps outright shock. The truth is that he has never been considered a stakeholder and his opinion is not sought in the strict sense of the word. But his answer has jolted them on his ignorance about the new rhetoric that the other regions, including the Cabinet, have mastered. The second visit was to let him know the cost of his ignorance:

<EX>More shifting-eyes people came and said: Because you said no to the Big Chief he is very angry and has ordered all the water hole-holes they are digging in your area to be closed so that you will know what it means to offend the sun. You will suffer so much that in your next reincarnation you will need no one to tell you to say yes whether the matter is clear to you or not. (121)</EX>

<FL>The second-person pronoun has become a singularized, isolated, shrunken, and excluded plural, shed off from “the people” and the “us” above and singled out as Kangan’s minority province (5), a region that breeds trouble, the home of the Rebellion (17), whose reward for disobedience is drought. Abazon has become the enemy of the sun, a metaphor used for His Excellency throughout the novel.

One way in which His Excellency molds the social and political life of Kangan is to shut himself out of the reach of the masses and exclude them from the state-building process. He has banned demonstrations because they are “[s]heer signs of indiscipline,” whether from market women complaining about prices of imported food items or the scheming intellectuals, they are

all the same for him (15–16). Banning them also means not accommodating his subjects' views, not recognizing such people as stakeholders in the Kangan project.

From the moment Ikem and Chris fall out with General Sam, participating in the affairs of Kangan becomes something they do from the periphery, and, that is to say, something they do at the risk of life. The lecture at the university gave Ikem the opportunity to discuss Kangan with a mixed audience and to explore the contributions of people shaping Kangan outside the political class. Because these categories of people are not different from their political leaders, Ikem articulates what the condition one must attain is in order to “have the moral authority” to demand accountability from the political class (153). Almost every sector needs a cleaning up: workers' leaders who exploit their unions instead of serving them, staff of the Electricity Corporation who issue arbitrary bills to consumers, young graduates who destroy facilities built by peasants because they don't want to be deployed to the suburbs to serve, and the civil servants who have failed to see that “they are not the party of the oppressed but of the oppressor” (152). In all, these Kangan people create regimes of power and multiply spaces of oppression. However, shaping the consciousness of the people as Ikem does is considered inimical to the “real” power brokers of Kangan. His lecture is an invasion of state authority and considered treasonable.

Within the peasant group, Ikem finds himself isolated despite efforts to make them participants in Kangan affairs. Their construction of Kangan excludes the likes of him, and they make sense of events in the country in their own way. The second-hand clothes dealer at Gelegele market doesn't see the sense in taking offense at the army officer who assaults him, despite what his friends think. He chooses to believe what he wants to believe. That is how he and his likes shape their participation and find a space to accommodate themselves in Kangan. We read:

<EX>Within ten minutes the life of the group was so well restored by this new make-believe that when the offending soldier returned to his car to drive away his victim of half an hour ago said to him:

“Go well, oga.” To which he said nothing though it diminished him further still, if such a thing could be conceived. And then I was truly glad that I had not interfered with that impeccable scenario. (45)</EX>

<FL>It is from the isolated distance as an elite, the editor of *The Gazette*, that they feel Ikem’s struggle for them. Close to them, he is almost unknown. So despite his relationship with Elewa he never really understands the poor of Kangan and never fully gets integrated into their affairs. He only admires the ease with which they bond, participate in their own Kangan, as well as dream their own Kangan of the future and how they will inhabit it. The same realization hits Chris as he makes his escape. In Emmanuel he has seen a section of Kangan he never knew existed, felt the power of their resourcefulness, and even regretted their isolation. For Ikem, fighting for the masses could make one suspect. Ikem understands that his attachment to the poor does not make him one of them or even make them see him so. Rather, the feeling among the poor is that he is part of a privileged class that deprives them of a means of sustenance by not giving them the opportunity to earn a living (132), a class that intimidates them because its members live in the “bigman quarter” with “so so wahala” for the poor (34), that, like the police, capitalizes on their ignorance of the law to harass them (34), and that walks in disguise as “some jagajaga person” (131) to mock and prevent them from knowing their identity and taking precaution not to enter into trouble.

But the poor also replicate power domains both within their present marginal existential spaces and the Kangan of their dreamed future. One can think of Agatha, Beatrice’s “dry-as-dust,

sanctimonious, born-again” maid who denies Elewa food despite the latter’s condition (176), and of Chris’s companion who engages the security man in a conversation and unveils the glamorous lifestyle he intends to live whenever he stumbles upon wealth (185). As the new community forms toward the end of the novel and debates about Kangan gear up, the centrality of the argument is what the Kangan of the future will be. Part of the old man’s prayers is that those concerned should remember the young and the old as they plan. One thing the naming ceremony unveils, thereby leaving open the constant undercurrent of power that struggles endlessly to shape Kangan, is that the country is never going to be a nation without crisis.

Anthills of the Savannah indicates that there is no singularly marked space for negotiating statehood, neither are there always clearly established rules on what and how statehood is to be negotiated. Constructing and deconstructing the postcolonial state provides a complex set of domains and equally complex, multiple power nodes. As these intriguing multipart networks weave in and out of these complexes, it becomes impossible to really know what a state is at any given point. What manifests at every stage is the question of power, domination, and the struggles therein.

<A>THEATRICALITY AND/AS POWER

<FL>Having adequate knowledge of a character is usually difficult, especially when a character’s attitude toward life is premised on play. Such characters are not new in Achebe’s fiction; the amiable Chief the Honourable Minister A. N. Nanga (MP) easily comes to mind. In *A Man of the People*, Nanga’s guile is so manipulated and easily put to use that he can pass for the amazing man celebrated by the Cabinet in *Anthills*. Of course, he is such a figure. This aura makes challenging him politically look almost like an irresponsible act in the opinion of the

people. Thus, Odili's political ambition, in itself a product of spite, is clearly misunderstood by his people, but not without unveiling the mask behind the man of the people. There is a link between Chief the Honourable Minister M. A. Nanga and His Excellency the President, General Sam of *Anthills*. Both men are successful in the eyes of the people and have found themselves in positions of prominence by some stroke of chance—both occasioned at a crucial time in the destiny of a postcolonial state. Nanga's position in the parliament has been anything but spectacular until the day he spoke in favor of an unpopular government policy at the crucial time that government strategizes for a forthcoming election. It was a moment that changed his destiny. Sam reaps the "reward" of a coup he never participated in when a group of young soldiers thrust the leadership of Kangan on him after ousting an unpopular civilian regime. From being a teacher, a politician, and then a minister and from an amiable, easily sought-after student of King's College, through a career in the army, to a head of state, both Nanga and Sam, respectively, have had their personalities assessed and discussed at various critical moments in the life of the postcolonial nation-state by other characters in the respective texts. And the outcome has been challenging.

Ikem's reflections on Sam's life are based on his long-term association with him as a friend and schoolmate. On this basis he makes projections and assertions about him as head of state. A few incidents reinforce his trust in his opinion about Sam. One is Mad Medico's case, where his and Sam's interventions saved the expatriate from being deported. Another is the policy on public execution, which, he thinks, his editorials have made Sam rescind. Ikem's thought that Sam is redeemable and incapable of being a tyrant is based on Sam's modeling of his life after that of an "English gentleman of leisure" (47). Such an assessment is so sure of itself that what needed to be confronted is the attitude of others surrounding the leader, those

who apparently do not share in the events that have shaped this perception over the years. Ikem reflects:

<EX>There is something... about Sam which makes him enormously easy to take: his sense of the theatre. He is basically an actor and half of the things we are inclined to hold against him are no more than scenes from his repertory to which he may have no sense of moral commitment whatsoever.... In fact the sort of intellectual playfulness displayed by Sam must be less dangerous than the joyless passion for power of many African tyrants. As long as he gets good advice and does not fall too deeply under the influence of such Rasputins as Reginald Okong we may yet avoid the very worst. (46)</EX>

<FL>By calling Sam's ruthless use of power "scenes," Ikem reduces everything further to fiction, in the sense of being unserious, without commitment. Sam becomes a fictional character, a performer, and Kangan a theatrical space. The official space of the postcolony thus blurs with the unreal, the make-believe, becomes a world separated from any sense of moral commitment whatsoever, and where almost everything is reduced to "intellectual playfulness" demonstrated with amazing skills that endear this character to his spectators. Thus he is "enormously easy to take"; and, of course, as play, does not constitute a threat. His actions are set in contradistinction to those of other leaders in the postcolony, the African tyrants who are known for their "joyless passion for power." Sam has not slipped to this, according to Ikem, and his sense of theater should not be confused with tyranny. Despite Ikem's claims to know Sam better than most people, he is nonetheless a tyrant, as Ikem is to discover later himself. His mastery of the theatrical is his greatest tool of oppression.

Sam's skills for play are not new, as Ikem himself has noted. He always had them back at Lord Lugard's College. In those days he was a great success, the guy all the girls worshipped, and who "seemed so perfect and so unreal, in a way" though not as intelligent as Ikem and Chris (61). This trait of being "unreal" yet so successful marks him out: the young army officer who never took part in a coup but who was sought out and handed power over to, the young head of state in the midst of octogenarians who call him "boy" admiringly to emphasize his meteoric rise and welcome him to the cult of African leaders (49). But it appears his new political career has offered him other opportunities to explore its use. After his first outing as a Head of State he begins to ape other African dictators and to dream of a new political image for himself. Part of what he has taken away from the meeting is *kabisa*, a word that signifies finality and the stamping of the imprints of power. But Ikem observes that this is not the only thing His Excellency the President might have taken from the meeting:

<EX>It is unlikely that Sam came away with nothing but *Kabisa* in his travelling bag. I may be wrong but I felt that our welcome at the palace became distinctly cooler from that time.... I set it down to Sam's seeing for the first time the possibilities for his drama in the role of an African Head of State and deciding that he must withdraw into seclusion to prepare his own face and perfect his act. (49)</EX>

<FL>By the time he is encountered at the beginning of the text, this metamorphosis has been completed already. The first witness to the charade is Chris Oriko, who is hanging on in order to make these "farcical entries in the crazy log-book of this our ship of state" (2) and who is worried by the caliber of those drawn into the spectacle. The confrontation with Chris following his appeal for a visit to the drought region is couched in the idiom of sport: it is a "kind of

contest, like the eyewink duel of children” (1), but so serious, unlike children’s plays, that its margin is within the tragic. Chris has always “thought of all this as a game that began innocently enough and then went suddenly strange and poisonous.” There is no placing a hand to say when things “went wrong and the rules were suspended,” so the suspicion is that “the present was there from the very beginning only” (1) but that Chris “was too blind or too busy to notice” (2).

The sense of the dramatic, according to Mbembe, is what makes oppression bearable for the frequently dehumanized postcolonialized subject. It provokes and sustains a laughter that is harmless, that registers one’s presence as a witness to the abnormalities of power in the postcolony, especially within the space shared by both the dominant and the dominated. Dramaturgy also benefits wielders of state power because it is through this that they show off the privileges associated with their offices and become the envy of the popular world. This is why simulacrum underlies the relationship between the ruler and the ruled in the postcolony. It accounts for a mutuality influencing each divide in the power game and results in the zombification of both sides. Thus while the popular world cannot resist its oppressor, according to Mbembe, it has the capacity to “travesty the metaphors meant to glorify state power” at the slightest occasion, an upturning that helps it say the unsayable and still remain unhurt in the presence of tyranny (106).

For one, it is doubtful whether the Cabinet are part of the government or occupy the other side of the dyad in the ruler-ruled dichotomy. Much as one knows they are, events in *Anthills* show they suffer humiliation from His Excellency perhaps more than the ruled or as much as them. So conviviality in this text is not between the people and their political leaders as such, but within the leadership. The excerpt below demonstrates the anxiety of the Cabinet before the

President during an almost catastrophic meeting. Contrary to the Cabinet's expectation, His Excellency suddenly becomes,

<EX>almost friendly and conciliatory, the amazing man. In that instant the day changes. The fiery sun retires temporarily behind a cloud; we are relieved and immediately celebrating. I can hear in advance the many compliments we will pay him as soon as his back is turned: that the trouble with His Excellency is that he can never hurt a man and go to sleep over it. (3)</EX>

<FL>This kind of performance is always there. It is invoked by the presence of His Excellency as well as by his absence. The only difference is that he directs it when he is around. Behind his back, his Cabinet continue with this play—the only refinement still remaining, according to Chris, is that they wait until he is not there before they talk about this aspect of his personality. Thus the play recreates the real and presents it as it is not; it denies its reality and substitutes it with something else. Whenever the Cabinet is threatened by reality, or a shadow of it, or a suspicion that it is about to creep in, there is always tension and members are edgy and ready to crawl back into their holes for safety unless the “amazing man” does his magic and gives a signal of friendship.

When Chris opts “to dissociate [him]self from the Attorney-General's reference to a saboteur” the performance suffers a brief shock (5). The Cabinet think he is pulling off the mask. Not even His Excellency could withstand the shock of the potential danger to follow. But unlike the others who wind up feeling relaxed after “the look of terror” when Chris's meaning is revealed, the President is filled “with anger.” He is not one to be trifled with, to be teased. He is the one who directs all performances, who initiates all plays and controls all and not the one

subject to the control of others, even in frivolities such as play. Being made the object of play undermines his supremacy.

For His Excellency, to assert one's power doesn't entail being center stage for all to see at once; it means having control from wherever one is. It is to make others struggle to access desires, feelings, and ambitions buried within him that he allows to emerge, veiled and in bits. This is how he sells his ambition for Life Presidency without appearing to be interested in it, and the Cabinet takes it up as if it was their own initiative. Though he regulates and monitors the debates and all processes of enforcing its actualization, the General enjoys appearing to be almost coerced into the project. This guile is articulated in a play form. Chris explains this love for simulacra and the goal it serves thus:

<EX>Well, *appearing* is very important to him. *Not appearing* is, of course, the worst kind of disgrace. And all this is tied up in his mind with his failed referendum for Life President. The pain still rankles. I don't think I told this to either of you at the time. But after the failure of the referendum he had complained bitterly to Professor Okong that I had not played my part as Commissioner for Information to ensure the success of the exercise and that you had seen fit to abandon your editorial chair at the crucial moment and take your annual leave. (140–41)</EX>

<FL>But his desire for Life Presidency fails to appear vividly for his friends to grasp, whatever their opinion about it might be. When reminded that his posture lacked firm force and that he was therefore misread, he becomes "hopping mad": "*I didn't*, he said, *and you know I didn't but the moment it was decided upon you had a clear responsibility, and Ikem, to see it succeed. You chose not to.* I never before heard so much bitter emotion in his voice@ (141). This sense of

responsibility is what Prof Okong articulates earlier in the novel: the binding power on a collective that assigns both responsibility and blame on each member to protect and dance to the quims of the ruler. And as has been said earlier, it isn't something one is certain about. Of importance also is his continued, game-like, hide-and-seek poise to discourse: "... *the moment it was decided upon...*" The expression marks how vague his participation was and how "removed" he was from the debates; yet, he dominated the discourse all the way. Appearing also has a dissimulating effect where one is made to have "ghost" responsibilities in order to downplay excessive use of power and mask abuse of proceedings. His Excellency the President has requested that Chris, having just been relieved of his position as Commissioner, issue a sack letter to the editor of *The Gazette* "to do him [Chris] the honour of appearing to be still in charge of [his] ministry" (139). During the visit of the Abazon delegates, his instruction to Professor Okong is to "[f]ind some nice words and say to them," to "humour them..., [g]auge the temperature and pitch your message accordingly" (16). And it is also used to diffuse tension and divert attention, as seen in the setting up of "a high-level inquiry" (162) to investigate Ikem's death, thus making the government look responsible and innocent. Where *appearing* is no longer effective as a tool, so that he requires some firmness to press home his point, His Excellency casts off his mask. Chris recalls, as he contemplates quitting the Cabinet, one such moment during the Life Presidency debate: "For one brief moment he shed his pretended calmness and threatened me: If anyone thinks he can leave the Cabinet on this issue he will be making a sad mistake" (113).

Sam has never suspended his love for play, it is only that those close to him do not know when and how he applies his skills most often. It is natural to him, and he has perfected it, extended its use, and adapted it to situations in the course of his political career and the dreams

that have come with it. Perhaps his associates have thought it was something about his informal life, such as his sexual escapades they often joke about, and are unaware it could feature in a more serious, formal life like political leadership. When they come to terms with it the play has already been enshrined as a useful strategy to manipulate power. His period of apprenticeship, when, like a wise man, he has called on his friends to guide him in his new role, is over. Now he is fully in charge and will no longer “allow [Chris] and others to call the shots.... any more” (138). His being fully in charge is not missed at the beginning of the text; it is what decides and dictates the conduct of his Cabinet members. Though foregrounded on a play structure, the valence of power is never mistaken, and one is not left in doubt who the boss is and where the source of power lies, or who the predator is and who is preyed on. It is a game that turns disastrous for the weak once they make a miscalculation.

<A>WITHER THE CONVIVIAL?: THE QUESTION OF RESISTANCE

<FL>The analysis of play as seen above is beyond the space Mbembe allows it in the postcolony; yet, it connects with power. Part of the criticism here is associated with the dualistic paradigm Mbembe continues to employ in his analysis, despite his thesis. This has been explored by critics like Weate. What needs to be added is that “an intimate tyranny [that] links the rulers with the ruled” (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 128) does not necessarily implicate “ordinary people” in such a relationship, as Mbembe supposes. In his theorizing, the popular world “dance[s] public[ly] for the benefit of power,” “reaffirm[s] that... power is incontestable,” and, therefore, plays along with it (129). In *Anthills*, where public demonstrations are outlawed and His Excellency distances himself, there is little or no conviviality between classes, as found in *On the Postcolony*. Rather it is the agents of the *commandement* themselves—the Cabinet—that

both play and complement the tyrant by dramatizing power and providing loyalty via complicity. But that is not all. Here play is not a critique of power as such; there are no opportunities for it to be deconstructed, to say the unsayable and challenge the officialese (108). Rather play creates metaphors that strengthen and legitimize state signs, even if it calls them forth in the first place. The relationship is not between the popular and the state, as Mbembe argues, but between the state and its agents, that is, within the state's body of power. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, dramaturgy, in a sense close to Mbembe's use, is performed largely by the Cabinet; and there is nothing to show that these agents of government are not also the oppressed, perhaps even more than people farther removed from His Excellency's daily routine of power.

But *Anthills* is a strange text when viewed within Mbembe's theoretical lens. Bill Schwarz has argued that its language, especially the opening chapter, is a "collateral corruption" ("After Decolonization, After Civil Rights" 48). In other words, we can say that its officialese is already upended, its metaphors already impure, already travestied—though the aim is never to dismantle the signs of power but to create, legitimize, and expand the borders of power's reign. It would perhaps, therefore, be excessive to have both groups, the state and the postcolonized subject—the powerful and the powerless—"play," exchange qualities, and be "zombified" outside the bastardized official proceedings of the Cabinet. Apart from the anxiety it would create, this may be part of the reason public demonstrations of any sort are taboo in Kangan: they have nothing to add to the portfolios of wielders of state power. The state is able to generate and dramatize its own signs as well as be the spectator that bears witness as they are played. The failure of the visit embarked on by the delegates from Abazon to create the dramaturgy—its circumstance notwithstanding—is a demonstration of this and so is the little incident involving the army officer and the secondhand clothing dealer at the Gelegele Market (44–45). Where the masses share a space with state power and bear witness to power's obscenity in the sense Mbembe articulates, it is as a reminder of their existential precarity, a form of 'a social transaction' (115). The execution scene already seen above exemplifies this witnessing as a practice that both confirms and celebrates power over the other by the very victims of tyranny. But it also contests the absoluteness of this power by indicating that its grip on the other is not total. First is one of the condemned criminals whose defiance to authority is remarkable. The other are 'his innumerable doubles' who perpetrate their acts in the execution ground and bring to immediate fulfilment the former's prophecy. These criminals show that power, even in its very presence and despite its raw nakedness, can still be challenged.

Schwarz opines that in *Anthills*, there is no "civil society given meaning by a shared conviviality," but rather "a low-level, banal instrumentalism, suggesting that a psychic

dissociation scars even the most intimate forms of sociability” (49). The reason could be sought in the disintegration of society and the emergence of miniature regimes of power here and there. Such fragmentations and multiplication of platforms of authority have been attributed to globalization. *Anthills* builds worlds within its world, each with its dreams and aspirations, its techniques of survival and oppression, and each shapes and is shaped by the larger world of which it is a part. Such fragmentation hardly allows for an organized civil society; yet it builds a strange kind of hope for the survival of its members. Here wealth doesn’t necessarily reflect hard work. This is why individuals are optimistic even when the skills for actualizing their dreams may be lacking and why they may play along with their oppressors, scheming for their survival, because they know all doors are not yet closed to them. It is also “why sometimes close relationships of antagonism and dependency between the rulers and the ruled” exist according to Vambe and Zegeye (16). There are “constantly negotiated lines of alliances and cleavages” between the divides. Beatrice reminds us that

<EX>in the absurd raffle-draw that apportioned the destinies of post-colonial African societies two people starting off even as identical twins in the morning might quite easily find themselves in the evening one as President sitting on the heads of the people and the other a nightman carrying the people’s shit in buckets on his head. (175)</EX>

<FL>Such vagaries motivate the oppressed and exploited poor to await their own opportunities to come to wealth (or rather have wealth come to them) and even look forward to subjecting their lot to abuse. Chris’s companion during his escape expresses this as he parries off suspicion from the security officer quizzing the Commissioner, and his attitude recalls Weats’s position “that resistance as a possibility is inherent within every instance of complicity” (“Postcolonial Theory

on the Brink” 14). The conversation with the security officer veers off to whether the latter does patronize Chris’s motor spare parts business. Though the security man has no vehicle, he is encouraged not to despair:

<EX>Make you no mind. No condition is permanent. You go get. Meself as I de talk so, you think say I get machine? Even common bicycle I no get. But my mind strong that one day I go jump bicycle, jump machine and land inside motor car! And somebody go come open door for me and say *yes sir!* And I go carry my belle like woman we begin to pregnant small and come sitdon for owner-corner, take cigarette put for mouth, no more kolanut, and say to driver *comon move!* I get strong mind for dat. Make you get strong mind too, everything go allright.
(185)</EX>

<FL>The image of the protruding, rotund stomach likened to pregnancy in its early stage, the chauffeur-driven government official with his cigarette in his mouth, and his seat of power from which he orders his driver around all bear this out. This is juxtaposed with the image of the usually hungry-looking, dutiful, obsequious driver with no identity apart from that allowed him by his profession: driver. Such a character is the victim of the “absurd raffle draw,” as Beatrice puts it.

In a nation like Kangan where civil society is weak, resistance doesn’t take the form of building a huge, vibrant front where all the oppressed pull their energies and engage a common enemy. Perhaps there is hardly a common enemy anymore, especially within. Society has become “chaotically pluralistic” (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 102). Resistance therefore exists in fragmented, sometimes less obvious, forms among separate individuals and groups. The popular world located far from Kangan’s seat of power creates ingenuous signs of resistance,

hidden from yet public to state power, that others like Ikem could lean on for “personal enlightenment” (*Anthills* 115). Weate has argued that this mode of resistance is buried in “culturally expressive forms of the moment” (40). In his “Postcolonial Theory on the Brink” Weate opines that a more useful tool in Mbembe’s theory would emerge only if a blend of existential phenomenology and post-structuralism is established. The remaining part of this section will therefore try to explore how daily existential issues that are textualized and find narration in folklore offer the route to resistance.

Weate argues that *On the Postcolony* glosses over the existence agency within the marginalized, i.e., “*power to* (power as capacity and agency)” not “*power over* (power as limitation and imposition)” (“Achille Mbembe and the Postcolony” 32). Bennetta Jules-Rosette calls individuals with such capacity “grassroots intellectuals” or “organic leaders” who “occupy an empty space of creativity where new ideologies and cultural strategies are shaped and developed” (see Weate, “Postcolonial Theory on the Brink” 12). Their career has a long tradition in *Anthills*. It is found among “barely literate carpenters and artisans of British rule hacking away in the archetypal jungle and subverting the very sounds and legends of daybreak to make straight [Beatrice’s] way” (104). They are the peasants who take and blend into their cultural repertoire whatever comes their way, whatever becomes part of their history, and subject it to use in their daily struggle against oppression.

When the chief delegate from Abazon speaks about their visit to the Big Man who holds the yam and the knife today, it is in terms of coping with and resisting oppression. They have come to say their own “Yes” and are “ready to learn new things and mend [their] old, useless ways” (122). But within this solidarity is embedded resistance in the form of a narrative: a fight between unequal enemies—the tortoise and the leopard. Such a struggle definitely is not in favor

of the tortoise; but in his wisdom he engraves his efforts in history for all to see. When allowed a few moments to prepare for his death, “the tortoise went into strange action on the road, scratching with hands and feet and throwing sand furiously in all directions” (122), so that “*anyone passing by this spot [will] say, yes, a fellow and his match struggled here*” (123). Perhaps this is the point that connects subject and sign in Achebe’s *Anthills*, that “interstitial space somewhere between poststructuralism and existential phenomenology” that Weate tells us Mbembe is unable to traverse in his theory but which is relevant in the new criticism of power in postcolonial Africa (“Achille Membe” 27). The tale connects economies of the signs with lived experience so that within its body is found both the experiential knowledge of being under the weight of power, and of struggle, and the code of resisting power (Ibid. 29). In the creative economy of this struggle, the sign-writers of Kangan play a significant role too despite their limitations. They etch their resistance in “body decorations and beauty marks” (*Anthills* 194). With all its beautiful decoration *Luxurious* has inscriptions, which form part of this beauty, on its body; and each with its own message: “The one at the back of the bus written in the indigenous language of Bassa, concise in the extreme and, for that reason, hard if not impossible to translate said simply: *Ife onye metalu*—What a man commits.” (193)

Located openly “in free-for-all market-places under the fiery eye of the sun” these calligraphers are able to articulate, “wrapped in an archaic tongue and tucked away at the tail of the bus” (195), their philosophy as a mode of resistance, caution, and hope. Such an inscription is paradoxically both accessible to and hidden from their oppressors like Chris. In its extremely concise form and local color, its meaning stands ominous yet ungraspable—“a statement unclear and menacing in its very inconclusiveness” (194).

Chris's notion that there has been "undirected and therefore only half-realized" progress at the bottom (193) (i.e., among the oppressed) without any at the top is a scholastic bias. It is the delusion that the elites have a monopoly on knowledge and power and are the ones to create, map out, and supervise, as superiors, the Kangan project; that the relationship has to be horizontal with the favored elites occupying the top. This is not very different from Ikem's view expressed during his lecture at the Bassa University. The reality is that peasants negotiate and shape their existence—as their situation allows—in a way the elites are unaware of.

Neil ten Kortenaar has made an interesting observation regarding the novel's focus on the elites. Although *Anthills* "calls for a radical decentering of the nation," he writes, "it remains itself centred on Chris, Ikem, and Beatrice. The overt message is that Chris and Ikem must learn the importance of ordinary citizens, but the novel itself focuses more upon the manner in which they learn this lesson than upon the people they must learn from" (62). The attention on how one learns instead of from whom makes it possible for such knowledge to be stumbled on sporadically. Thus both Chris and Ikem and even the Cabinet (the Abazon delegation visit, for instance) continue to stumble on the creative domains of the oppressed and to learn whatever they are able to almost by hindsight without ever mastering their world.

The forms of resistance associated with the peasants are internalized as part of the contents of memory, more lasting than the public demonstrations that the President outlaws. It most potently comes in the form of traditional tales. It is the story of the bush-fowl that alerts the farmer to the danger awaiting him at the farm (118), of the cock that cries from the household of its owner, but whose "voice is the property of the neighbourhood" (117), of "immemorial birdsong" (104) from "the diligent chamberlain" that endlessly reminds the treasury guards to be vigilant to their duties (103), of the tale itself "that owns us and directs us" (119). It is the

narrative buried in the bowels of history that Ikem explores in his poetry, the stories invented of old by “barely literate carpenters and artisans of British rule hacking away in the archetypal jungle and subverting the very sounds and legends of daybreak to make straight [the] way” of generations yet unborn (104).

It is buried in a mythic mind potent enough to create and energize thought through such materials like naming, thereby opening the path to comprehend and resist oppression. The Idemili narrative is the mythic resonance of political leadership in the hands of His Excellency the President, who, with impunity, abuses his office and tries to impose his supposed supremacy over others via his Life Presidency dream. His mythic counterpart is Nwakibie, a name that literally means “a child greater than his peers.” The Life Presidency ambition of His Excellency is the supremacy Nwakibie lays claim to via his *ozo* titular name, while the latter is destroyed after his encounter with Idemili’s royal python, Beatrice, *as this* python has symbolically “stretched [herself] right across [Sam’s] path” (99) to save Kangan from destruction. This resistance to oppressive regimes is instituted again through the path that is kept open—the path of Ikem, the path of struggle. *Amaechina* therefore becomes the counter-narrative to oppression, to the arrogance and claim to supremacy in Nwakibie and President for Life.

Kortenaar makes the point that Chris and Ikem’s deaths “bring together the friends of the slain, who come from different classes and speak different languages” (66). For Echeruo, this new community has a mythic connection with anthills. He argued that the result is not necessarily a selfless society where everyone has their due, but a return to the beginning of things, a rebirth or renewal of history that ensures the survival of struggles, “the preservation of the seed, the eternal wish for the path to remain open” (83). This keeping vigil on recurrent

historical patterns does not necessarily incorporate a feeling of loss for the failures of Kangan or even of patriotism for Kangan, according to Echeruo. Struggles are of a regional nature, at least from the perspective of the Abazon delegation, the implication being the absence of a “lament for Kangan at the end; only a regrouping for another start in Abazon” (69). But Kortenaar suggests that this regrouping “acquires a myth of origin that is blood in the dual sense of paternity and sacrifice” and therefore could be seen as the ratifying of Kangan’s legitimacy in accordance with tribal norms associated with cohesion (66). Whether this act, “a conjunction that must be made on a larger basis throughout the nation” (67), has the capacity to truly unify Kangan is a different thing altogether. It is significant that this new opening of the path of resistance is presided over by *Nwanyibuife*, who, in mythic times, was charged with being a medium through which those who seek power presented themselves before the Almighty. Her association with Mary, Esther, etc., shows she is not a stranger to mediation, to being “recruited and put to work” (100) in spite of herself. Within the bounds of her father’s home and culture, *Nwanyibuife* also signals a renegotiation of patriarchal spheres.

As in Achebe’s other novels, and especially *Arrow of God*, the past and the present always interact in *Anthills* through mythic resonances that help to weaken the borders between the now and the then and bring history into conversation with the present. What is invoked here is the entire history of struggle and resistance against oppressive regimes, a history that has the markings of each epoch that defines as well as is embedded within itself, so that the moment does not know itself without knowledge of this past. Beatrice has called characters in such narratives “forerunners” and by so doing entrenches the past in the present where she exercises agency made possible by what has gone before, an agency that enables her, like others, to lay the

foundation for future struggles in a manner the present allows but that also connects with the enduring tradition of the past that has produced her, in myth.

<A>CONCLUSION

<FL>This article has examined the different ways power is contested in *Anthills of the Savannah* within and outside the political arena. It has shown how both internal and external pressures define political actions and influence social relations. It has also investigated the relationship between drama and power by shifting the focus on theatricality away from the convivial space inhabited by both the tyrant and the oppressed masses—a space Mbembe assumes to wither the vitality of both—to that inhabited mainly by authority. Through this, the paper is able to show the important role that dramaturgy plays in understanding the complex nature of power and its oppression in the novel. In this novel, theatricality is a way of seeking, excising, and consolidating political power not necessarily from the masses but from other political actors of the state. The paper has also shown how resistance is built in every day activities and cultural practices sometimes hidden away from the oppressive regime in the form of tales, proverbs, and other mythic materials. In such a way, the oppressed are able to make meaning out of their existence and build dreams with which they cope with the realities confronting them.

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