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## The Nation as Imagined Community: Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

### Abstract

The discussion by Chinua Achebe of significant aspects of the postcolonial moment in Nigerian history in *A Man of the People* (1996) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) does not only signal disillusionment with and alienation from important traditional bonds of kinship and community; it also articulates a search for new forms of affiliation within the context of what Benedict Anderson would describe as a nationally 'imagined community'.<sup>1</sup> This essay is concerned particularly with Achebe's 1960 novel, *No Longer at Ease*. It explores the ways in which Achebe represents competing versions of nationalist ideology within the nascent Nigerian nation. Much of the novel's reconstruction of Nigerian society in the years immediately preceding independence is dedicated to examining the socializing course which nationalism takes. Achebe's narrative suggests that the alliances sought by individuals and groups are integral to their visions of the development of the socio-cultural and political processes of Nigeria's post-colonial history.

KWADWO OSEI-NYAME, JNR

## The Nation as Imagined Community: Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

The discussion by Chinua Achebe of significant aspects of the post-colonial moment in Nigerian history in *A Man of the People* (1996) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) does not only signal disillusionment with and alienation from important traditional bonds of kinship and community; it also articulates a search for new forms of affiliation within the context of what Benedict Anderson would describe as a nationally 'imagined community'.<sup>1</sup> This essay is concerned particularly with Achebe's 1960 novel, *No Longer at Ease*. It explores the ways in which Achebe represents competing versions of nationalist ideology within the nascent Nigerian nation. Much of the novel's reconstruction of Nigerian society in the years immediately preceding independence is dedicated to examining the socializing course which nationalism takes. Achebe's narrative suggests that the alliances sought by individuals and groups are integral to their visions of the development of the socio-cultural and political processes of Nigeria's post-colonial history. Achebe has argued that 'What Nigeria is aiming to do is nothing less than the creation of a *new* place and a *new* people.'<sup>2</sup> This view finds symbolic expression at several levels of the narrative in *No Longer at Ease*. The relationship between Clara Okeke and Obi Okonkwo, for example, seeks to initiate a new era of national politics, one which will enunciate the kind of progressive vision of national integration where 'anybody may marry anybody' (p. 68).<sup>3</sup>

Achebe's investigation into the condition of the Nigerian national community can be read within the framework of Ralph Grillo's observation that language is often inevitably politicized in the formation of the nation. As Grillo asserts, 'the politics of language are [always] about ways in which the domains of language use are defined by the [hegemonic] forces which determine those relationships'.<sup>4</sup> We are given an early indication of the politicization of language in the moment of Obi's trial which begins the novel:

*Mercifully* he [Obi] had recently lost his mother, and Clara had gone out of his life. The two events following closely upon each other had dulled his sensibility and left him a different man, able to look words like 'education' and

'promise' squarely in the face. But when the time came he was betrayed by treacherous tears. (p. 2; emphasis added)

By focusing on the images of two women whom we have at this point not yet encountered, the narrative suggests the possibility for Obi of a more harmonious existence without these women. However, when we learn later that Clara, for example, is the one woman who has a particularly prominent place in Obi's personal narrative and in the specific form his imagination of the post-colonial Nigeria nation takes, the passage also clearly directs our reading towards its ironic significance. Achebe uses this incident as a means of analysing the contradictory responses of Obi to his situation. The passage serves as an indictment of Obi's inability to attain a union (or an identification beyond the sexual) with Clara, so that the language of the passage eventually acquires the effect, as Frazer and Cameron point out in another context, of how 'language has been constructed in such a way as to put women "outside" it, so that using language ... becomes, for women, a process of alienation from their own reality'.<sup>5</sup> At this early point in his story, Achebe has effected a situation in which Obi's attempted repression of the memory of Clara serves also to emphasize some of the ambiguities attending the modern period for Nigerians such as himself.

The idea of community or 'nation' is also one which is legitimated by the modern Umuofians. The question arises in the narrative as to what the relocation of people from their traditional abodes connotes, and Achebe's narrative suggests that by leaving their 'home town to find work in towns all over Nigeria' (p. 4), the Umuofians construct for themselves a new identity within which Umuofia is given legitimacy as a town within the nascent Nigerian nation. In Benedict Anderson's terms, the movement to the centre or capital (here, Lagos) is indicative of the means through which individuals and groups transform themselves into a nationally 'imagined community'. Characterized as such, the pre-colonial village and town are now also part of the 'modern' world and part of the contested space of the nation set in 'disjunctive time'.<sup>6</sup>

The Umuofians however have a more ambivalent view of nationhood. They see themselves, for one thing, as merely visitors to Lagos, and their allegiance to communal bonds takes precedence over the idea of a common national identity. When the President of the Umuofia Progressive Union reminds Joshua Udo that his aim in coming all the way to the capital is to work, another Umuofian corrects the President's mistaken impression by informing him that 'it is money, not work' (p. 72) that has brought them to the city. Communal unity here militates against national interests.

For the urban Umuofians and for other constituencies within the Nigerian nation, the resources dispensed by the state may be appropriated in the desire for upward mobility and a national ethic of productivity must not be allowed to interfere with the promotion of personal wealth. The

pertinent issue here is the improper ethical values of individuals and groups within the new Nigerian nation, and the kind of cultural attitudes that are propagated and countenanced by their actions. Achebe uses these projections as a means of zeroing in on prevalent cultural attitudes in order to expose the ideologies which inform the behaviour of individuals and groups even as Nigeria endeavours to forge a coherent sense of national identity. In seeking a scholarship for his sister, Mark reverts to speaking Igbo in his bid to get Obi to do him a favour. For Mark and other Nigerians, social mobility can be achieved by forging a sense of identity which is contingent on an appeal to ethnic allegiances.<sup>7</sup> Mark switches from speaking English to Igbo when the lines of communication break down between himself and Obi. Thus communication is seen as more open when an indigenous language is chosen over the modern one. By rejecting Mark's overtures outright when the latter appeals to their common culture by speaking Igbo, Obi reveals his conviction that the bonds of ethnicity are not adequate for the formation of a national community.

Communal solidarity apart, the Umuofians also identify themselves as active participants in the project of nation building. One of their primary concerns seems to be that nation-building must be accomplished through a conscious effort to 'make legitimate citizens'.<sup>8</sup> The President of the Umuofia Progressive Union makes the point on behalf of the members:

We are pioneers in building up our families and our town. And those who build must deny ourselves many pleasures. We must not drink because we see our neighbours drink or run after women because our thing stands up. You may ask why I am saying all this. I have heard that you [Obi] are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry, and even thinking of marrying her. (p. 75)

In the new nation, the Umuofians consider that Obi's obligations to his community necessitates self-denial; Obi is their kindred and they are the custodians of tradition. For, as Michael Olisa has argued, '[b]eyond the family, the kindred is the closest-knit group to which the Igbo individual belongs and the most vital for his identity as a member of the total autonomous community'.<sup>9</sup> In this connection, the Umuofia Progressive Union can 'achieve unanimity easily and can therefore think and act as a collectivity in both its internal affairs and in the affairs of the town [or nation]'.<sup>10</sup>

Within the terms of the President's speech, Obi's desire for a girl of 'doubtful ancestry' is evidence of the perverse nature of his sexuality and his individualism. Obi's headstrong behaviour signals further the threat to the community of Umuofia which Obi's marriage to Clara Okeke, an *osu*, is likely to occasion. Achebe's story of the Nigerian nation evokes a discourse which illustrates the relevance of Doris Sommer's argument about the direct relationship between 'conjugal passion' and 'modern patriotism', and within the context of what Sommer describes as 'a history of national and familial consolidations'. If 'romance' within the modern

nation, as Doris Sommer argues, is 'fuelled by a patriotic, productive mission' then the Umuofians see the relationship between Clara and Obi as detrimental to the wider project of nation-building.<sup>11</sup> In their eyes, Obi is incapable of either 'coordinating feeling with reason [or] passion with productivity'.<sup>12</sup> As we learn from the narrative, Obi's friend and confidant, Joseph, informs the President of the Umuofia Union about 'Obi's engagement to an outcast girl ... in the hope that he might use his position as the father of Umuofia people in Lagos to *reason* privately with Obi' (p. 82; emphasis added).

Through the responses of Joseph and his fellow Umuofians, Achebe engages in a pointed critique of the exclusivist attitudes which Obi attempts to transgress in his search for a suitable union with Clara. For Achebe, the attitude of the Umuofians also indicates, as he states in a lecture, one of 'the many manifestations' within which 'society itself, can pressure, can begin to act' so that the relationship between the individual and his or her society is determined by the power of 'authority'. This kind of relationship is one in which the individual always inhabits a subordinate role and 'has always been problematic' and therefore 'raises the wider issue of the nature of the [national] story'.<sup>13</sup> Obi's obligation to his community is perceived as more important than his personal desire, particularly as his desire for Clara, an *osu*, is seen to conflict with the Umuofian's familial and communal traditions. When the Umuofians censure Obi for what they consider to be his irresponsible behaviour, they also seek to identify a point of connection between his sexual deviance and his lack of a proper sense of communal responsibility. If the Umuofians are forced to ponder the question of the nation by invariably connecting the question of national development with Obi's individualism and his sexuality on the one hand, and Clara's identity on the other, there seem to be legitimate reasons for their doing so. In citing the reasons for their disappointment with Obi, the President of the Umuofians in Lagos, does not merely suggest the primacy of the familial network, he intimates also that there is a continuity between the proper organization of familial life and the sustained reproduction and development of the national body. However, there are contradictions inherent in the Umuofians' appeal to the idea of a community, and a nation, problems which also impinge upon the self-interest of individuals like Obi and Clara.

As the nationalist historian, Paul Stern argues, while '[t]he genius of nationalism as a social invention is to equate the nation symbolically with family and community', such equations also 'generate emotions and ... elicit behaviour that is against the self-interest and the interest of other groups with which people identify - including, ironically, *families* and communities'.<sup>14</sup> From Obi's perspective, the Umuofians' attitude to his alliance with Clara would also impinge upon his own 'self-interest' and upon the alternative familial bonding which the consummation of his relationship with Clara will articulate. Homi Bhabha would argue that

such an ambivalent legacy of tradition as constitutes the Umuofians on the one hand, and Clara and Obi on the other, engenders a liminal space of culture, one in which 'the discursive conditions of enunciation ... ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity', while also guaranteeing that 'the same signs can be appropriated, translated and rehistoricized and read anew'.<sup>15</sup>

The Umuofians denounce further Obi's irresponsibility and his misplaced sense of duty:

That is what Lagos can do to a young man. He runs after sweet things, dances breast to breast with women and forgets his home and his people. Do you know what medicine that *osu* woman may have put into his soup to turn his eyes and his ears away from his people? (p. 145)

We can surmise that the Umuofians' indictment of Obi as, 'without doubt, a very foolish, and self-willed young man' (p. 5) speaks not only to their disappointment that Obi has undermined the patriotic mission they envision for him when they sent him to England 'to read law so that when he returned he would handle all their land cases against their neighbours' [Obi reads English instead] (p. 6). The Umuofians' indictment of their kinsman speaks particularly to their evaluation of Obi as a man who demonstrates a failure of imagination regarding the choice of an appropriate female partner to facilitate the reproduction of legitimate national citizens.

In their search for legitimate forms of alliances, the Umuofians regard the possibility of Clara's marriage to Obi as an illegitimate union, a marriage which will be counterproductive to the search for authentic forms of identity within the Nigerian nation. Because the Umuofians perceive Obi's relationship with Clara and his potential marriage to her not only as a sign of his misguided individualism, but also of a lack of proper commitment to communal and national values, Obi's relationship with Clara further provides a means of demonstrating how the 'constructions of love and country' become 'promising for a meditation on modernity in general and nationalism in particular'.<sup>16</sup> At the meeting which the Umuofians hold to discuss Obi's bribery case, one of them again illustrates his disappointment with Obi: 'We paid eight hundred pounds to train him in England ... But instead of being grateful he insults us because of a useless girl' (p. 4).

Achebe's narrative is also designed, however, to reveal the contradictory ways in which the nation is imagined by the individuals and groups within it. For the majority of the Umuofians, the nation is an alien concept:

'Have they given you a job yet?' the chairman asked Obi over the music. In Nigeria the government was 'they'. It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and people's business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble. (p. 29-30)

Censuring Obi for his so-called improper conduct, they reveal their own corruption. Achebe specifically focuses on the behaviour of Umuofians, such as Christopher and Joseph, as a means of prosecuting a critique of the politics of individual self-consciousness. Joseph, for example, has a string of girl friends whom he abandons each after the other, and the callousness of Christopher, a London-trained economist, is revealed in his unrepentant confession to Obi: 'When I was in the East a girl came to me and said: "I can't find my period." I said to her: "Go and look for it."' (p. 131). Sexual promiscuity and irresponsibility become recurrent tropes for the domination of women. The narrative highlights the selfishness of politicians, like Sam Okoli, who combine a sheer adulation of materiality with their sexual promiscuity in ways which are detrimental to the health of the new nation. If the Umuofians indict Obi for his perverse sexuality and his individualism, then Achebe suggests that, by their own behaviour, the Umuofians themselves negate the authority by which they criticize Obi. *No Longer at Ease* thus reveals a concern with the question of commitment. At the end of the day, along with people like Christopher and Joseph, Obi is also censured since his eventual abandonment of Clara is another iteration of Achebe's deep concern that relationships within the nation be defined by a sense of responsibility.

Through his representation of Clara, Achebe confronts the problem of nation-building, and the contradictions of the nation's exclusivist agenda. Clara's identity is signified from different positions within the nation's multiple cultural and socio-historical contexts, and from both the traditional and modern viewpoint. Although an *osu*, and an outcaste, whose status derives from the traditional practices of exclusion which marginalize people of her kind, she reinvents her self within the new nation, and the grounding of her new identity within culturally legitimate forms of socialization is consistently suggested, for example, in the fact that she hums 'popular song[s]' (p. 84).

As a 'been too' (p. 85), Clara is a product of the cosmopolitan culture associated with modern Nigeria and this makes her a potential contributor to the development of the nation. She is one of the group of young students and intellectuals sent abroad on merit to be trained in various professional positions and, like Obi and Christopher, she emerges as an important figure, one whose usefulness acquires a value within the structures of social and cultural organization which define a national body. In other words, Clara's renegotiation of her identity is grounded upon a simultaneous marginalization and inclusion in her community's past tradition, for, as Homi Bhabha argues in a different context, '[t]he recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification'.<sup>17</sup> Thus Clara's profession as a nurse provides a clear instance of her usefulness; both literally and symbolically, she contributes to the health of the new nation. But while her profession as nurse enables her to administer to people afflicted with diseases, Clara's other identity as an *osu* is



unfortunately related as a disease which the Umuofians uphold as detrimental to their project of nation-building. Through Clara, Achebe grapples with the contradictory claims of national identity. It is obvious that Clara escapes total marginalization by fashioning for her self a new identity and a new position within the national community. Achebe seems concerned with the relationship between, on the one hand, Clara's 'subaltern' status which marginalizes her within society, and on the other, the openings her identity as a post-colonial subject provides for a reimagining of the idea of the 'nation'.

Through Clara, Achebe evokes the memory and destiny of not only the *osu*, who in *Things Fall Apart*, are 'set apart – a taboo for ever, and [their] children after [them]' from the community, but also the contemporary existential predicament of traditional figures of subalternity within the new national community. Clara is representative of the marginalized in traditional society who aspire to new positions in society within the Nigerian nation. Through Clara, Achebe suggests that a nation in search of new ideals and values must incorporate everyone into its national body. Clara's search for an alliance with Obi is complicated further by the attitudes not only of the Umuofians in Lagos but also of the new Christians in Umuofia, such as Obi's father, Isaac Okonkwo. Like the Umuofians living at the heart of the national community, Lagos, Isaac Okonkwo is deadset against the relationship. He considers Clara's father, Josiah Okeke, 'a good man and a great Christian. But he is *osu*' (p. 121), and he goes on to point out:

*Osu* is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg of you my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children unto the fourth and third generations will curse your memory. It is not for myself I speak; my days are few. You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. *Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry?* Think of that my son. We are Christians, but we cannot marry our own daughters. (p. 121; emphases added)

Okonkwo is persuaded, like the modern Umuofians in Lagos, that Obi's marriage to Clara will produce a community of unacceptable children and thus illegitimate citizens. While the authority Obi mobilizes to challenge his father derives from his conviction that he speaks in favour of the new forms of alliances and identifications sought within the modern Nigerian nation, and while Obi perceives himself as a representative of the new nation, fellow Umuofians and modern Nigerians, like Joseph, share Isaac Okonkwo's rigid stance. As with Isaac Okonkwo the modern Umuofians presume a direct relationship between familial affiliations on the one hand and national development on the other in a way which seems to escape Obi.

Through Isaac Okonkwo, Achebe delves into the inconsistencies

characterizing the attitudes of the early African Christians. Nwoye's defiant stand against tradition and the authority of his father, Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*, is with the hindsight of history rendered paradoxical. In much the same way as Nwoye questioned the authority of tradition in *Things Fall Apart*, Obi repudiates the authority of tradition by exploiting the dissonances within its discourses, and by drawing his authority from the same Christian doctrines to which his father adheres. As Obi informs his father, 'The Bible says that in Christ there are no bond or free' (p. 120).

From Obi's viewpoint then, his marriage to Clara will be a bond constituting precisely the kind of fresh interconnections and alliances needed to knit the Umuofians into a coherent national community. Clara's relationship with Obi speaks to Achebe's desire for an all-inclusive nation in which the mobility of individuals and groups would not be inhibited by the uncritical discourses of exclusion. In censuring the Umuofians, in questioning the inconsistencies of their ideology, and in asserting through his representation of the relationship between Clara and Obi the possibility that the independent Nigerian community will accommodate everyone, Achebe's narrative makes a claim for an appropriation by the nation's members of all its valuable resources.

In this connection, in *No Longer At Ease*, Achebe prompts us to read the story of the homecoming of Clara and Obi as an allegory of the nation. This section of the narrative is strategically located at the point when Clara, Obi, Stephen Udom and other Nigerians are 'returning [from London] to Nigeria the same day on the same boat' (p. 19). Achebe places the homecoming of the modern Nigerians at a significant moment in the narrative, intimating the extent to which the actions of Clara, Obi and other Nigerians, like Stephen Udom, are related to the forms of consciousness which these individuals embrace. Achebe represents the 'fitful progress' of the ship on which these individuals are travelling as symbolic of the movement of Nigeria/Africa from colonialism to independence, and positions the different characters as members of an international African community. On the ship there is a genuine feeling of neighbourliness, a sense of each one caring for the other, seen partly in Obi's concern over Macmillan's fall, and in Clara's caution to Macmillan about the 'tawdry trinkets' (p. 25) which he purchases.

Achebe locates the return of these individuals in the liminal space of culture as 'a mediatory movement between what was and what will be'.<sup>18</sup> Read as an allegory of the nation, the disposition of Achebe's narrative differentiates between the identities of individuals by highlighting the reality of their existential situations within the Nigerian nation. While the overthrow of colonial power is signalled in the fact that Macmillan, the British colonial 'administrative officer in Northern Nigeria' (p. 20) is 'heard ... treading heavily and briskly and then fall[ing]' (p. 22), Obi rolls 'from one edge of the bed to the other in sympathy with the fitful progress of the ship'. (p. 22), or the nation. Achebe's textual strategy here invokes

that 'special kind of language use which, like metaphoric speech, symbolic language, and allegorical representation, always means more than it literally says'.<sup>19</sup>

Love and responsibility to the Nigerian nation play a pivotal role in determining the course of the narrative, and Achebe offers us insights into the way the characters interact. Throughout the journey, in spite of Obi's effort to reciprocate what he believes to be Clara's hostility towards him through his 'rehearsed' 'coldness and indifference' (p. 21), he is 'completely overwhelmed' (p. 21) by Clara's sensitivity to his sea-sickness. In this play of emotion and authority, Clara's composure is set against Obi's loss of control. But Clara, apart from noticing that Obi is not 'looking well' (p. 21), is generally responsive to the plight of her fellow travellers for she provides 'enough [tablets] for all the passengers' (p. 22). Achebe represents Clara as a woman attuned to the needs of her community, and points poignantly to the fact that she realizes she must locate her existence within the context of her *usefulness* to others. If Clara will have any role within the new nation, it is thus identified through her humane disposition. Critics have discussed Achebe's novel without accounting for its female perspective and have thus ignored, as Patrocínio Schweickart asserts in another context, the project of affirming 'womanhood as another, equally valid paradigm of human existence', and 'of recovering, articulating, and elaborating positive expressions of women's point of view in spite of the formidable forces that have been ranged against it'.<sup>20</sup> Reading the figure of Clara in order to establish the relationship of women to the nationalist text compels an emphasis on women's point of view, one which retrieves the stories from all levels of the text's signification.

Clara, very much aware of the objectifying gaze of Obi and other men, signals this awareness through her initial hostility to Obi (p. 19) while at the same time leaving herself open to a proper relationship with Obi founded upon love. Throughout their relationship back home in Nigeria, Clara is always sensitive to Obi's needs and this enables Obi to begin to contemplate the real meaning of love:

Until Obi met Clara on board the cargo boat *Sasa* he [Obi] thought of love as another grossly over-rated European invention ... he had been quite intimate with a few in England ... But these intimacies which Obi regarded as love were neither deep nor sincere. There was always part of him, the thinking part, which seemed to stand outside it all watching the passionate embrace with cynical disdain ... With Clara it was different. (p. 63)

While his previous encounters with women mark his quest for Clara as a desire for sexual fulfilment, rather than as a search for genuine love, Obi is very much disoriented when his expectations fail to materialize. When they first met at a dance for African students in London, 'Obi had been struck by her beauty and followed her with his eyes around the hall' (p. 19). While entranced by her beauty, Obi also imagined Clara to be one of

his 'victims'; however, the emphasis on Clara's aloofness serves also to expose Obi's views about women as invalid. Obi's disorientation is complicated further by the fact that, when they met the second time on their journey home, 'Clara had treated him just like another patient' (p. 22). That Obi is very much 'flustered' (p. 19) by Clara points to Achebe's argument that she must be identified on grounds other than her sexuality.

It is interesting that Macmillan and Obi in turn employ the terminology within which nationalist discourse objectifies 'woman'. Macmillan asks, 'How old do you think Miss Okeke is?' while Obi's idolization of 'woman' as a timeless and ahistorical object of beauty leads him to reply, 'Women and music should not be dated' (p. 24). In Achebe's critique of male nationalist ideology, Obi equates Clara with spirituality, with 'music', with 'the true self, the traditional/spiritual sense of place', which 'is exiled from the processes of history'. As Radhakrishnan argues further, 'The result [of such a project] is a fundamental rupture, a form of basic cognitive dissidence, a radical collapse of representation' within the male nationalist text.<sup>21</sup>

Discussing the eventual collapse of the relationship between Clara and Obi, Palmer comments that Clara's

motives for breaking off the engagement are obscure. Clara's conduct is implausible and we are given no insight into her feelings which might explain it. The affair is destroyed not by the clash between the old and the new, but by Clara's unreasonable behaviour.<sup>22</sup>

Palmer's view does not take account of Obi's contribution to the break-up of the relationship. *No Longer at Ease* also evokes the tragedy of Obi's relationship with Clara as a consequence of his vacillating attitude, in particular his inability to sustain the relationship beyond its sexual attractions. Obi is thus neither a victim of tradition nor of Clara but of his own attitude.<sup>23</sup> Achebe relates Obi's tragedy as a failure to maintain his sense of responsibility and to affirm a will to pursue his otherwise laudable ideals. As Abiola Irele asserts, part of Obi's tragedy is that, in spite of his idealism, he ends up being 'a man with a narrow sense of values' because 'his application [of his idealism] is limited to specific delimitations, rather than to the total field of his social situation'.<sup>24</sup>

Achebe's reflection on the politics of his nation through the relationships established between Clara and Obi, and between the pair and other Umuofians, hints at the limitations he perceives in the concept of nation-building as a whole. Reiterating his desire for a new sense of community and for a rejuvenative politics, Achebe intimates that, if there is any validity in the affirmation that the nation is an imagined community, this community can be remoulded through social and cultural interaction. Using his narrative as a commentary on societal relations, Achebe reveals his conviction that the identity of progressive minded individuals, such as Clara, within the new nation cannot be circumscribed by the logic of

exclusivism. This philosophical position is also articulated in Achebe's affirmation in his essay, 'The Truth of Fiction', that the imagination provides the individual with the ability to create 'a different order of reality from that which is given' and enables one 'a second handle on existence'.<sup>25</sup>

Achebe's representation of Clara's relationship with Obi appraises how the crises of identity within his community makes the project of nation-building an agonizing one. For, though Clara and Obi occupy central positions within the new nation, they both end up being marginalized. Clara suffers the disadvantages of being an *osu*, while Obi's idealism is undermined both by his own lack of resolve and by the pressures of community. Achebe's deliberation on the question of national identity in *No Longer at Ease* is most relevant in a contemporary era marked by the search for viable forms of identification within the Nigerian nation. One notes in Achebe's reflections his persistent concern with still problematic attitudes relating to tradition and culture. His concern is to relate how such attitudes hinder the formation of a coherent sense of national identity, and he suggests that exclusions based on unjustifiable grounds are detrimental to the general well-being of the national community. Achebe's argument draws its strength and validity from its symbolism, for he represents the contradictions within society as indicative of some of the anxieties informing nationalism's construction of a narrative of identity. The disharmonious relations of his characters emerge as pivotal to Achebe's representation of the Nigerian nation's failure to forge a legitimate sense of identity.

## NOTES

1. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991). For other essays on the 'nation', see *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), particularly the essays by Doris Sommer, Geoff Bennington and James Snead. Snead's essay, 'European Pedigrees/African Contagions: Nationality, Narrative, and Communitarity in Tutuola, Achebe and Reed', pp. 231-49, is particularly illuminating on Achebe.
2. Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987* (London: Heinemann, 1988), p. 116; emphasis added.
3. Chinua Achebe, *No Longer At Ease* (London: Heinemann, 1987). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
4. Ralph Grillo, 'Anthropology, Language, Politics', in *Social Anthropology and the Politics of Language*, ed. Ralph Grillo (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 8.
5. Elizabeth Frazer and Deborah Cameron, 'Knowing What to Say: The Construction of Gender in Linguistic Practice', in *Social Anthropology and the Politics of Language*, p. 27.
6. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, p. 294.

7. Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), provides a detailed account of the origins and patterns of pre-modern and modern processes of national formation and the role of ethnicity in them.
8. Doris Sommer, 'Love and Country in Latin America: An Allegorical Speculation', in *Reimagining the Nation*, eds. Marjorie Ringrose and Adam J. Lerner (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1993), p. 29.
9. Michael Olisa, 'Igbo Politics and Governance', in *Groundwork of Igbo History*, ed. A.E. Afigbo, (Lagos: Vista, 1991), p. 165.
10. Olisa, 'Igbo Politics', p. 165.
11. Sommer, 'Love and Country', p. 29.
12. Sommer, 'Love and Country', p. 31.
13. See 'Achebe Reading to his Swedish Audience', in Raoul Granqvist, *Travelling* (Umeå: Umeå University, 1990), p. 2.
14. Paul C. Stern, 'Why Do People Sacrifice for their Nations?', in *Perspectives on Nationalism and War*, eds. Paul C. Stern and John Comaroff (Sydney: Gordon and Breach), p. 115; my emphasis.
15. Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 37. For a fruitful discussion of the uses of space in the novel, see Simon Gikandi, 'Chinua Achebe and the Poetics of Location: The Uses of Space in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*', in *Essays on African Writing: A Re-evaluation*, ed. Abdulrazak Gurnah (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993), pp. 1-12.
16. Sommer, 'Love and Country', p. 30.
17. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 2.
18. Victor Turner, 'Comments and Conclusions', in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. Barbara Babcock (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 279.
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22. Eustace Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel: A Critical Study of Twelve Books* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 70.
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24. Abiola Irele, 'The Tragic Conflict in the Novels in Chinua Achebe', in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, eds. C.L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 16.
25. Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments*, pp. 95-6.