

Mythic Mediation and Feminism: Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* Okeawolam Isidore Diala

Chinua Achebe's fifth novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, was first published in 1987, some fifteen years after his fourth novel, *A Man of the People*. Widely read as a turning point in Achebe's career as a novelist, *Anthills* has been especially discussed as a re-writing of the female narratives in his earlier works. In this regard, drawing on Achebe's interview with Anna Rutherford, Kofi Owusu contends that Achebe's "radical new thinking" on roles to be designed for women in African fiction is demonstrated in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Owusu discerns in Achebe's previous treatment of "the woman issue" "a disembodied female essence or principle that has little to do with women of flesh and blood, of mind and voice" (468), and finds in Beatrice's actions and comments in *Anthills* an exemplification of a radical new thinking (469). Similarly, examining the "problematic relation between knowledge, power and storytelling" and determining "the ways in which power and knowledge impinge upon stories and their tellers" (493), Robin Ikegami contends that Beatrice is not only likely to be the most reliable narrator in a novel of many storytellers, but also, perhaps, the character in whom Achebe is most invested.

Rose Acholonu enthusiastically locates in *Anthills* "a definite artistic bias in favour of women" (318), and is enthralled with the character of Beatrice who, she notes, "in her clear-sightedness, bravery, intellectual brilliance, and understanding, almost over-shadows the men in her world" (314). Yet, while identifying the women in *Anthills* as "representatives of 'Idemili'" (319), Acholonu nonetheless seems baffled by "the actual exclusion of women from the art of governance, as well as their inability to wield power" enough to prevent human calamity (321). The point, however, (to which perhaps only Catherine Bicknell has paid notable attention) is that womanhood, especially as it is epitomized in

Beatrice, is conceived of in terms of the Idemili myth. Whereas the basic artistic consequence of this mythologizing is the idealization of woman, its ideological implication projects woman onto a plane where her essential role is limited to the symbolic. My efforts in this article are directed towards considering Achebe's deployment of the Idemili myth in *Anthills* and its implications for "the woman issue" in the novel.

Achebe's fictional pre-colonial/colonial Igbo world is an enchanted terrain where the paths of mortals and spirits often cross, and the destinies of mortals and deities often mingle. An example of this claim can be found in *Arrow of God*, where Obika, Ezeulu's son, claims to have caught the glimpse of a figure recognized by the Chief Priest as Erua, the god of wealth. In a similar depiction, the Feast of the New Yam is described as a convergence of humans and deities: "The festival thus brought gods and men together in one crowd. It was the only assembly in Umuaro in which a man might look to his right and find his neighbour and look to his left and see a god standing there—perhaps Agwu whose mother also gave birth to madness or Ngene, owner of a stream" (202).

Achebe's affirmation of the existence of the otherworldly in *Anthills* denotes the cultural distance between the world of his first novels and the fictional Kangan Republic of *Anthills*:

That we are surrounded by deep mysteries is known to all but the incurably ignorant. But even they must concede the fact, indeed the inevitability, of the judiciously spaced, but nonetheless certain, interruption in the flow of their high art to interject the word of their sponsor, the divinity that controls remotely but diligently the transactions of the market-place that is their world. (102)

Achebe's statement on general religious skepticism, as well as the negative impact of Christianity on indigenous traditional religion, is made apparent in his descriptions of Beatrice's election as the priestess of Idemili despite her initial estrangement from her cultural background. Here, Achebe suggests that neither the acknowledgement of a deity nor acceptance of a divine calling is a necessary condition of divine reality and of divine election of mortals as protégés: "But knowing or not

knowing does not save us from being known and even recruited and put to work. For, as a newly-minted proverb among her people has it, baptism (translated as Water of God) is no antidote against possession by Agwu the capricious god of diviners and artists" (105). Conceived in the traditional manner as a mediatrix between men and power, Beatrice executes that ancient function in full awareness of the contemporary implication of her priesthood. Her role in *Anthills*, in other words, exemplifies the pattern of Achebe's negotiation of an ancient myth in light of contemporary challenges.

The Idemili myth as it is depicted earlier in *Arrow of God* presents Idemili as a male deity and associates him with the sky. The Ezeidemili or Idemili priest's explanation of the name of the deity ("Ide" which means "pillar" and "mili" "water") also accounts for the implications of the origin of the deity on the priest's own conduct: "Idemili means pillar of Water. As the pillar of this house holds the roof so does Idemili hold up the Raincloud in the sky so that it does not fall down. Idemili belongs to the sky and that is why I, his priest, cannot sit on bare earth" (41). The subsumed antagonism between this deity and the Earth deity, Ala, becomes more pronounced in the Ezeidemili's account of the ancient and awesome ritual burial given to a priest of Idemili: "When I die I am not buried in the earth, because the earth and the sky are two different things" (41). His head was instead separated from his body and placed in his shrine. In *Arrow of God*, the owner of the sacred python, Idemili has his shrine in Umunneora, the village most antagonistic to Ezeulu and the supreme deity of Umuaro, Ulu. In one of Ezeulu's visions, in fact, Umuaro's creation of a superior deity—Ulu—draws attention to Idemili's loss of power and specifically identifies the epochal conflict in Umuaro as a mortal struggle between himself and Idemili: "leave me to settle my quarrel with Idemili whose envy seeks to destroy me that his python may again come to power ... As for me and Idemili we shall fight to the finish; and whoever throws the other down will strip him of his anklet!" (192).

Observing valid inscriptions of the history of Igbo religious institutions in *Arrow of God*, M.J.C. Echeruo regards the paradigm of the conflict between Ulu and Idemili to be the historical challenges to the supremacy of

Ala posed by the establishment of a heretical sky-based divinity, Igwekala, in Umunneora (present-day Umunoha in Imo State, Nigeria). Drawing attention to Ezeulu's comment that Nwodika's son is "not a poisoner although he comes from Umunneoha" (in reality the home of Igwekala, in Achebe's fiction that of Idemili), Echeruo remarks that both Umunneoha and Igwekala had quite a reputation throughout Igboland. He concludes: "Igwekala was quite simply not only a devilish sect but a heretical one. Its very name was a daring—a consciously daring—challenge to the supreme deity of the Igbo people. This cult placed *Igwe* above *Ala*, and claimed him as supreme. To propose that was in itself an abomination, that is to say, a defilement of the Earth, *imeru ala*" (19).

In Achebe's writings, the mortal rivalry between the deities, of course, serves to offer an insight into a crisis in Igbo metaphysics that enhanced the impact of the Christian conquest. Neither Ulu nor Idemili would be the triumphant in such a conflict, which Ezeulu appropriately appreciates as apocalyptic: "What could it point to but the collapse and ruin of all things? Then a god, finding himself powerless, might take flight and in one final, backward glance at his abandoned worshippers and cry: If the rat cannot flee fast enough / Let him make way for the tortoise!" (229). Significantly, the vision which heralds Ezeulu's final calamity actually ends with a lamentation by Idemili's sacred python, who bemoans the onslaught of Christianity:

I was born when lizards were in ones and twos
 A child of Idimili. The difficult tear-drops
 of Sky's first weeping drew my spots. Being
 Sky-born I walked the earth with royal gait
 And mourners saw me coiled across their path.
 But of late
 A strange bell
 Has been ringing a song of desolation:
 Leave your yams and cocoyams
 And come to school.
 And I must scuttle away in haste
 When children in play or in earnest cry:

Look! a Christian is on the way.
Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha... (222)

After twenty-four years Achebe returns to the Idemili myth, which reappears in *Anthills* with considerable changes.

Acknowledging that in *Anthills* Achebe identifies with Ikem, the poet-activist and editor of the *Gazette*, Ikegami notes that for both the novelist and his character the conception of the storyteller's vocation is that of self-sacrifice (500). There is also a striking correspondence between the evolution of Ikem's thinking on women, as expressed in his "strange love-letter" to Beatrice, and in Achebe's stance in *Anthills*. Through Ikem, Achebe typically reveals his recognition of the power of myths to entrench and perpetuate (ideological) human attitudes as well as the universality of chauvinistic patriarchal myths regardless of the effects of expected local variations. Thus, the Biblical myth of the primal Fall with its inscription of woman-as-culprit is shown to have a correlation in Igbo culture:

The original oppression of women was based on crude denigration. She caused man to fall. So she became a scapegoat. No, not a scapegoat which might be blameless but a culprit richly deserving of whatever suffering Man chose thereafter to heap on her. That is Woman in the Book of Genesis. Out here, our ancestors, without the benefit of hearing the Old Testament, made the very same story differing only in local colour. At first the Sky was very close to the Earth. But every evening Woman cut off a piece of the Sky to put in her soup pot or, as in another version, she repeatedly banged the top end of her pestle carelessly against the Sky whenever she pounded the millet or, as in yet another rendering—so prodigious is Man's inventiveness—she wiped her kitchen hands on the Sky's face. Whatever the details of woman's provocation, the Sky finally moved away in anger, and God with it. (97)

Citing Simone de Beauvoir's observation that women do not have virile origin myths of their own and are thus constrained to dream them-

selves through the dreams of men, Lynn Nwuneli furthers de Beauvoir's characterization of these myths as extreme and ambiguous when she writes, "Woman as Eve and the Virgin Mary, sorceress and healer, source of death and of life, the negation of male efforts and his inspiration" (191). Achebe develops this project further by pointing to the hidden polemic even in the New Testament inscription of woman as the mother of God, and links this tradition with naming (and even name-calling) as a species of myth-making. Thus, if in *Things Fall Apart*, the name, Nneka ("Mother is supreme") is regarded without ironies as an exaltation of womanhood, in *Anthills*, it is shown to be implicated in a subtle (New Testament) brand of chauvinism:

The New Testament required a more enlightened, more refined, more loving even, strategy—ostensibly, that is. So the idea came to Man to turn his spouse into the very Mother of God, to pick her up from right under his foot where she'd been since Creation and carry her reverently to a nice, corner pedestal. Up there, her feet completely off the ground she will be just as irrelevant to the practical decisions of running the world as she was in her bad old days. The only difference is that now Man will suffer no guilt feelings; he can sit back and congratulate himself on his generosity and gentlemanliness.

Meanwhile, our ancestors out here, unaware of the New Testament, were working out independently a paralleled subterfuge of their own. *Nneka*, they said. Mother is supreme. Let us keep her in reserve until the ultimate crisis arrives and the waist is broken and hung over the fire, and the palm bears its fruit at the tail of its leaf. Then, as the world crashes around man's ears, woman in her supremacy will descend and sweep the shards together. (98)

However, where the mutually exclusive images of the woman in the Old Testament and the New Testament are accounted for by a complex transformation in Hebrew theology, which culminates in the birth of a new religion, "Nneka" marks no such distinctive historical moment in the transformation of Igbo thought or theology. It only indicates a du-

alism in the Igbo conception of the woman that may well have always existed with its obverse image of woman-as-villain. At any rate, through sustained analogy, Achebe illuminates his reinvention of the Idemili myth in *Anthills*.

Arguing that Ala (rather than even Chukwu) is the Igbo supreme divinity, Echeruo contrasts the Igbo conception of God with the Christian, indicates the centrality of *Chi* in Igbo religious thought, and traces the concept of an Almighty divinity to the Chukwu cult of Arochukwu (in present day Abia State, Nigeria). Remarking on the excesses of that oracle, Echeruo discerns a carefully thought-out strategy which did not merely give the Igbo a new name for God, but indeed revolutionized the Igbo concept of God: “That achievement was made possible by three considerations, namely, the integration of *Chi* into this religious system, its avoidance of conflict with *Ala* and, finally, its decisive separation of *Eke* from *Chi* in the Igbo metaphysics” (20). Whether the founders of the Chukwu oracle at Arochukwu had the divine prescience to know the precise three factors that would work in their favour is, perhaps, unascertainable. Moreover, Echeruo does not indicate if “Chukwu” as the name for God predates “Chineke,” the other widely used Igbo word for God (again controversially traced by some to Christian influence), nor does he actually account for the paradox that Chukwu as a concept survived by the “separation of *Eke* from *Chi*,” while Chineke also survived by integrating them. Regardless, there is hardly any conclusive proof that the word ‘Chukwu’ and the concept of God it embodies do not predate the oracle. A deep-seated skepticism which characterized Igbo attitudes towards the Chukwu cult is typically expressed with proverbial indirection in the saying, “Onye Aro anaghi agwa onye Aro ibe ya na Ibini Ukpabi si ka ekene ya” (“An Aro man does not tell another Aro man that Ibini Ukpabi—the Chukwu oracle—asked after him”). Even if this interrogation of the reality of the divinity of the Chukwu oracle came later in the history of the cult, it was sufficiently devastating to raise grass on the path to that oracle, especially for a people who thought the mortality of oracles possible. Thus, in Igbo metaphysics, the retention of Chukwu as a word for God, with absolutely no irony intended may well have proved impossible.

Achebe, on the other hand, adopts the more orthodox Igbo belief that Chukwu is supreme (Chukwuka) and in *Home and Exile* identifies Chi as “Chukwu’s agent, assigned exclusively to [an] individual through his or her life. This chi, this presence of God, in attendance on every human being, is more powerful in the affairs of the person than any local deity or the conspiracy of any number of such deities against that person” (14). Significantly, if in *Arrow of God*, Ezeidemili claims that unlike Ulu, “Idemili was there at the beginning of things” (41), in *Anthills*, Idemili is the child of Chukwu, the Almighty. Of far greater consequence, however, is that unlike in *Arrow of God*, in *Anthills*, Idemili is presented as a female deity.

In the two novels, Idemili is associated with both a pillar and with water, and is thus depicted as an “indescribable Pillar of Water fusing earth to heaven at the navel of the black lake” (103). In *Anthills*, however, Achebe interprets the water symbolism of Idemili in terms of a balancing agent who holds the ferocity and aggression of the (male) power of the sun in check: “In the beginning power rampaged through our world, naked. So the Almighty, looking at his creation through the round, undying eye of the sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around power’s rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty” (102). In this regard, Achebe invents a new relationship between the Idemili myth and institutional power in terms of “the powerful hierarchy of *ozo*” (103) and in the process creates a new role for the woman who necessarily leads the seeker of the *Ozo* title to Idemili:

This young woman must stand between him and the daughter of the Almighty before he can be granted a hearing. She holds his hand like a child in front of the holy stick and counts seven. Then she arranges carefully on the floor seven fingers of chalk, fragile symbols of peace, and then gets him to sit on them so lightly that not one single finger may be broken. (104)¹

Ironically, though, in spite of Achebe’s daring innovations in rewriting the Idemili myth, it still amounts to only a variation of “the New Testament” inscription of the woman, a mythical version of the attitude

embodied in the female name, “Nneka.” For rather than empowering the woman, Achebe’s reinvented Idemili myth inscribes her in a ceremonial space where, as a symbolic conduit to power, she is herself excluded from its exercise. The power base has hardly shifted, and it is indeed revealing that in his description of the splendor of Idemili as a female deity, Achebe instinctively reverts to a subsumed but iterative patriarchal register and phallic imagery: “It *rises* majestically from the bowl of the dark lake *pushing* itself upward and *erect* like the bole of the *father* of Iroko trees its head commanding not the forest below but the very firmament of heaven” (102). Thus, the Idemili myth in *Anthills* complements the role of the Earth goddess, Ani/Ala, in Achebe’s earlier fiction. Arguing that Achebe generally treats the significance of men’s roles in a realistic fashion and those of women symbolically, Bicknell notes that Achebe’s ideal is balance, rather than equality, of the male and female principles. Remarking on Ani and the concept of Nneka as the symbols used to describe that balance (in *Things Fall Apart*), Bicknell observes: “Ani represents the female principle acting as a restraint on the male principle. Crimes of violence, particularly against a kinsman, are abominations to the earth goddess. Woman, then, is seen in her role as peacemaker, as moderator of the aggressive impulses of men. Mother as supreme is another aspect of the Eternal feminine, the idea of woman as the one who can always be counted on for comfort, sustenance and protection when all other resources have been exhausted” (266–67). In the same vein, Beatrice, as priestess in *Anthills*, functions as a mediatrix between men and power.

Although Achebe gives Beatrice a first-class degree in English from a British university, he privileges her cultural background as the crucial foundation of her life. The Western education she receives, like the Christianity into which she was born, is indeed treated as a source of her initial estrangement from her roots. Beatrice did not know the traditions

and legends of her people because they played but little part in her upbringing. She was born as we have seen into a world apart; was baptized and sent to schools which made much

about the English and the Jews and the Hindu and practically everybody else but hardly put in a word for her forebears and the divinities with whom they had evolved. (105)

She conceives of artistic inspiration in terms of Agwu-induced possession, and acknowledges her predecessors' inventive oral bards which transform even immemorial birdsong into memorable lore: "So, two whole generations before the likes of me could take a first class degree in English, there were already 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 my way" (109).

Achebe equally constructs the history of Beatrice's rebellion against male chauvinism in terms of her Igbo (African) background. Even as a child, Beatrice's resentment and denunciation of her Igbo name "Nwanyibuife—A female is also something" (87) arose from her recognition that naming, like name-calling, is an ideological attempt by society to imprison girls by the citation of authorized time-honoured modes of (female) conduct: "Somehow I disliked it considerably less in its abridged form, Buife. Perhaps it was the Nwanyi, the female half of it that I particularly resented. My father was so insistent on it. 'Sit like a female!' or 'Female soldier' which he called me as he lifted me off the ground with his left hand and gave me three stinging smacks on the bottom with his right the day I fell off the cashew tree" (87). Beatrice's denial of Europe as the source of her revolt against male chauvinism is defiant:

I was determined from the very beginning to put my career first and, if need be, last. That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like woman's lib. You often hear our people say: But that's something you picked up in England. Absolute rubbish! There was enough male chauvinism in my father's house to last me seven reincarnations! (88)

In Beatrice's resistance against colonial influences and male domination, she performs her priestly duties while simultaneously drawing on her peculiar powers.

Significantly, Beatrice's earliest instinctive desire to be driven by the spirit is linked with her indignation against her tyrannical father's physical mistreatment of her mother and a desire to transform him: "It always made me want to become a sorceress that could say 'Die!' to my father and he would die as in the folk-tale. And then, when he had learnt his lesson, I would bring him back to life and he would never touch his whip again" (86). However, being rejected by her mother, as she attempts to console her on one such occasion, leads Beatrice to discover her mother's resentment for her for being a girl child: "I didn't realize until much later that my mother bore me a huge grudge because I was a girl—her fifth in a row though one had died—and that when I was born she had so desperately prayed for a boy to give my father" (86–87). Driven inwards by her estranged family, and subjected to a curriculum that excluded her cultural background, Beatrice could only become a split personality. The internal competition between her several selves initially affects her election to the priesthood:

So she came to barely knowing who she was. Barely, we say though, because she did carry a vague sense more acute at certain critical moments than others of being two different people. Her father had deplored the soldier-girl who fell out of trees. Chris saw the quiet demure damsel whose still waters nonetheless could conceal deep over-powering eddies of passion that always almost sucked him into fatal depths. Perhaps Ikem alone came close to sensing the village priestess who will prophesy when her divinity rides her abandoning if need be her soup-pot on the fire, but returning again when the god departs to the domesticity of kitchen or the bargaining market-stool behind her little display of peppers and dry fish and green vegetables. (105)

In a moment of perplexity, Christopher Oriko, Beatrice's fiancé and the Commissioner for Information in His Excellency Sam's military regime, confesses: "I don't know what has come over you. Screaming at me like some Cherubim and Seraphim prophetess or something. What's the matter? I don't understand" (113). Beatrice's later explanation of this

occasion locates the tradition of her priesthood in the Igbo culture, and identifies her predecessor in the Achebe oeuvre: “You called me a priestess. No. A prophetess, I think. I mind only the Cherubim and Seraphim part of it. As a matter of fact I do sometimes feel like Chielo in the novel [*Things Fall Apart*], the priestess and prophetess of the hills and the caves” (114). On another occasion, in the midst of advocates of two of Nigeria’s recognized religions—Christianity and Islam—Beatrice refers to herself as “the priestess of the unknown god” (224).

The circumstances of Beatrice’s parting with Chris awaken her priestess-like powers to their fullest. Ostensibly on a brief visit to Chris’s one-room hideout, Beatrice, who has a deep premonition that it may well be their final meeting, resolutely decides to stay for the night in spite of causing a greater inconvenience to the family who grants them refuge: “And so she rebelled with a desperate resolve grounded on a powerful premonition that Chris and she had tonight come to a crossroads beyond which a new day would break, unpredictable, without precedent; a day whose market wares piled into the long basket on her head as she approached the gates of dawn would remain concealed to the very last moment” (196). As arrangements are made to accommodate her resolution, Beatrice sits “immobile as a goddess in her shrine, her arms across her breasts” (196). Like the visible radiance of a saint’s halo, the glow of Beatrice’s immanent priesthood permeates her presence:

Chris had noticed it from the very moment she had walked in that evening that she carried with her a strong aura of that Beatrice whom he always described in fearful jest as goddessy. And then lying in bed and summoning her to join him and watching her as she finally rose from her chair in the thin darkness of the room she struck him by her stately stylized movement like the Maiden Spirit Mask coming into the arena, erect, disdainful, high-coiffured, unravished yet by her dance. (199)

Unsurprisingly, Beatrice’s premonition proves prophetic.

Yet, even though she had prophesied the upheavals that claim the lives of Ikem, Chris and Sam, the reality of the events nonetheless strike Beatrice dumb. Her return to speech is again significantly interpreted

by her audience in terms of the mysterious experiences of priesthood: “It was rather the ending of an exile that the faces acknowledged, the return of utterance to the skeptical priest struck dumb for a season by the Almighty for presuming to set limits to his omnipotence” (220).

Commenting on the soul-searching utterance that marks the end of Beatrice’s exile—“What must a people do to appease an embittered history?” (220)—Bicknell identifies this question as the political point of *Anthills* (270). She notes further that by ignoring Beatrice’s warning Ikem, Chris and Sam become part of the blood sacrifice demanded by the gods for the expiation of guilt (271). Citing Ali Mazrui, she identifies the guilt to be expiated as an attempt to embrace “modernity” without establishing cultural continuities, and argues that by unknowingly serving as a priestess of Idemili, Beatrice is a bridge with Africa’s past (271). The point indeed is that where Idemili in *Anthills*, just as in *Arrow of God*, is particularly sensitive to rival deities, in her new role as a female deity Idemili is not completely clear on the strategies of the struggle against male chauvinism, nor on its aims.

Achebe’s description of Beatrice’s encounter with the female American journalist, Lou, at Sam’s party evokes the terms of Beatrice’s possession and therefore marks it out as an aspect of her priestly duties. Reflecting on her instinctive unfriendliness to the journalist, Beatrice’s explanation is an invocation of powers beyond her: “I knew I had been unduly shrill in our brief exchange. But I seemed not to be fully in control of my responses. Something tougher than good breeding had edged it aside in a scuffle deep inside me and was imparting to my casual words the sharp urgency of incantation” (76). That what Beatrice rejects is Lou’s suggestion that they discuss “the woman’s angle” (75) is significant: the issues dear to Beatrice’s heart are cultural, not the western-established notion of the ‘woman question.’ Noting that the “word ‘incantation’ suggests that this is one of those instances when Beatrice is under the influence of her goddess” (272), Bicknell has also observed that given Lou’s attempt to manipulate Sam, she represents a rival god, an observation which is borne out by the narrative description of the American’s eyeballs as “popping out of her head like the eyeballs of a violent idol” (106). Beatrice’s priestly responsibilities against (cultural) *imperialism* are clearly defined here.

On the other hand, the idealization of Beatrice as priestess/goddess complicates her second(ary) project, feminist activism. As a mediatress between man and rampaging power, Beatrice is perhaps understandably a bit too anxious to avoid complicity with power: "I never embarked on anything beyond my own puny powers. Which meant finally that I couldn't be ambitious. I am very, very sensitive about this—I don't mind admitting it" (87). This probably accounts for Achebe's failure to depict her in her vocation as Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. And, although many writers have commented on Beatrice's appropriation of a traditionally male role in the naming ceremony of Ikem's and Elewa's daughter, the action should be set in the proper perspective. Beatrice does not edge the men out; not only does Elewa's uncle arrive late, but in the first instance, as Beatrice notes, referring to the late Ikem, "In our traditional society ... the father named the child. But the man who should have done it today is absent" (222). Demanding new roles for women in contemporary society, Beatrice enthuses, "the way I see it is that giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough, you know, like the women in the Sembene film who pick up the spears abandoned by their defeated men folk. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late!" (91–92). Ironically, this is the role Beatrice plays at the naming ceremony; moreover, a naming ceremony is legitimately a priestly duty.

Yet Achebe's scheme is not only to suggest new roles for women through Beatrice, but also to reclaim and idealize some older roles and strategies. If, then, Ikem describes Elewa's lovemaking as "just sensational" (37), Chris's experience with Beatrice is a pilgrimage, a veritable "mystical" experience:

She uttered a strangled cry that was not just a cry but also a command or a password into her temple. From there she took charge of him leading him by the hand silently through heaving groves mottled in subdued yellow sunlight, treading dry leaves underfoot till they came to streams of clear blue water.

More than once he had slipped on the steep banks and she had pulled him up and back with such power and authority as he had never seen her exercise before. Clearly this was her grove and these her own peculiar rites over which she held absolute power. Priestess or goddess herself? (114)

The painstaking depiction of Beatrice's sexuality as god-possessed notwithstanding, Chris is led to no profound mystical illumination. Sex still exercises its ancient powers to induce a momentary obliteration of consciousness—its obligatory swoons—that categorizes it as diversionary: “Would he survive? This unending, excruciating joyfulness in the crossroads of laughter and tears. Yes. I must, oh yes I must, yes, oh yes, yes oh yes. I must, must, must. Oh holy priestess, hold me now. I am slipping, slipping, slipping. And now he was not just slipping but falling, crumbling into himself” (114). Thus, in spite of the mystification and idealization of sex, two rather conflicting but ancient images of the woman are revealed in this scene. First, standing aloof, reciting her potent incantation, Beatrice is a seductress/enchantress: “just as he was going to plead for mercy she screamed an order: ‘OK!’ and he exploded into stars and floated through fluffy white clouds and began a long and slow and weightless falling, crumbling into himself” (114). Asked if she also had slept, her response is, “Priestesses don't sleep” (114). Second, Beatrice is inscribed as mother: “he woke like a child cradled in her arms and breasts her eyes watching anxiously over him” (114). Of course, priestesses usually do not have babies either! At any rate, if both as Eve, and as mother, woman exercises some power over man, in neither capacity can Beatrice embody Achebe's “radical new thinking” on the woman question.

Beatrice's anxiety over how to defend Sam from the imperialistic manipulation of Lou, the American journalist, sets in relief the limits of seduction as a woman's form of political intervention, as well as her instinctive awareness of its implication in the image of Eve. Indeed, the invocation in the scene of the primal Fall and of Eve as temptress could hardly have been more precise, given the apparent conflation of the Idemili python with the Biblical snake of Genesis: “And was I glad

the king was slowly but surely responding! Was I glad! The big snake, the royal python of a gigantic erection began to stir in the shrubbery of my shrine as we danced closer and closer to soothing airs, soothing our ancient bruises together in the dimmed lights. Fully aroused he clung desperately to me” (81). If Beatrice fails, of course, Sam pays with his life. The point, however, is that Beatrice must strain to exalt seduction by the invocation of the ideal of patriotism and (female) models of self-sacrifice; “I did it shamelessly. I cheapened myself. God! I did it to your glory like the dance in a Hindu temple. Like Esther, oh yes like Esther for my long-suffering people” (81). The way in which Achebe employs the Idemili myth quite often seems indebted to the very myths (*Eve/Nneka*) he aspires to debunk.

The myth of woman as priestess/goddess that runs throughout *Anthills* as an opposition to the myth of woman as villain revolves around Beatrice, rubbing off only once on Elewa. Significantly, Ikem is drawn fully into the picture. He first discerns in Beatrice a god-like essence, and at his death, the impact of his last visit to Beatrice’s house is like a light revealing Elewa (pregnant with his child) with a sense of wonder: “it was perhaps the strong, spiritual light of that emergent consciousness that gave Elewa, carrying as it turned out a living speck of him within her, this new luminosity she seemed to radiate... a touch, distinct, almost godlike, able to transform a half-literate, albeit good-natured and very attractive, girl into an object of veneration” (184). Beatrice’s memorable last meeting with Ikem was, of course, the occasion of his passionate espousal of the need for a new myth for contemplating woman and designing new roles for her. Beyond this recognition, however, Ikem can hardly proceed:

I can’t tell you [Beatrice] what the new role for Woman will be. I don’t know. I should never have presumed to know. You have to tell us. We never asked you before. And perhaps because you’ve never been asked you may not have thought about it; you may not have the answer handy. But in that case everybody had better know who is now holding up the action. (98)

If, however, neither Ikem, nor Beatrice could point to the ‘new role’ with any certainty, the reason certainly is that they embody Achebe’s own dilemma.

Meditating on the enormities of the military state in a fictionalized African nation, as he does in *Anthills*, Achebe is struck by two major components of the irresponsible appropriation of power: man’s will to absolute power and Western imperialistic interests. He reinvents and contemporizes the Idemili myth as a check on both. But where Idemili easily adjusts to the familiar war against rival deities and cultural imperialism, the myth of woman as priestess and goddess entails a fundamental idealization that can have only a symbolic relevance for the woman question. Deification, like demonization, feeds on fantasies. *Anthills* demonstrates Achebe’s deep insight into naming as a species of myth-making and the role of myth-making in the processes of deification and demonization. Through its deification of woman, Achebe’s Idemili myth re-creates the ceremonial glorification of the woman inscribed in “Nneka.” Beatrice herself suspects that the name of the new woman should be neither Eve nor Nwanyibuife, neither Nneka nor Mary, but “AMAECHINA: May-the-path-never-close” (222), the male name she gives to Ikem’s and Elewa’s daughter. By its construction of that path above the earth, the Idemili myth excludes female mortals—women. If Amaechina, like Beatrice, must not denounce her name, she would require an enabling myth that, mediating between idealization and denigration, allows her to appreciate and act in contemporary African society.

Notes

1 In two recent separate interviews conducted by the Reverend Anyasodo, both Elder Okika, the priest of the ancient shrine of Idemili at Nri, and Anameka Aname, the priest of Idemili at Obosi, completely denied knowledge of any such tradition, with the latter suggesting in fact that such a practice would amount to a sacrilege.

Elder Okika also tells a variant version of the myth of Idemili’s origin, tracing it to prehistoric Nri. Nsekpe Onyinumagha of Diodo Nri who had gone to inspect a ditch he dug for trapping animals had found water instead in the ditch. Bewildered, Nsekpe sought for the explanation of the strange phenom-

anon from an oracle that ascribed that water to a powerful deity later to be identified as Idemili. A sacrifice was recommended, and thereafter annual sacrifices were made to the protector-goddess first of Nri people and later of all the people through whose lands her river passed.

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