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SOCIAL AND POWER RELATIONS IN ACHEBE'S *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

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Abstract

People are related to one another in one way or another in societies. In those social relationships, power is sometimes implicated, directly or indirectly. In this work, we particularly base the analysis on social relations and political power relations. We notice a problem of relation in societies, especially when political leadership is involved and that has given us the first impetus to carry out the work. A typical example of social relation is seen in *Anthills of the Savannah* between Sam, Chris, Ikem, and Beatrice before this relation results in a power relation between Sam, Chris, and Ikem when they all engage in power management. A power relation that eventually destroys the social one they have cherished so far. The purpose of this work is two-fold. Firstly, it aims at drawing African people's attention to the status of their social relations without power and when political leadership is involved; and secondly to power relation they cherish with the power holders.

Keywords: Social Relation, Power, Power Relation, political leadership, coercive

Résumé

Dans la société, les gens entretiennent des relations entre eux. Très souvent, le pouvoir est directement ou indirectement impliqué dans ces relations sociales. Nous avons spécialement basé notre analyse sur les relations sociales et les relations du pouvoir dans ce travail. Nous constatons un problème de relation dans la société surtout lorsque le leadership politique est impliqué et ceci nous a donné la motivation de travailler sur ce sujet. Un exemple typique d'une relation sociale se révèle dans *Anthills of the Savannah* entre Sam, Chris, Ikem et Beatrice avant que cette relation ne deviennent une relation de pouvoir entre Sam, Chris et Ikem lorsqu'ils se sont engagés dans la gestion du pouvoir. Une relation qui a finalement détruit la relation sociale qu'ils ont entretenue jusqu'ici. Ce travail a un double objectif. Premièrement, il vise à attirer l'attention des peuples africains sur l'état des relations sociales sans le pouvoir politique et lorsque ce dernier est impliqué; deuxièmement sur la relation du pouvoir que les gens entretiennent avec les détenteurs du pouvoir.

Mots clés: Relation Sociale, Pouvoir, Pouvoir Politique, coercitif, leadership politique.

Introduction

Creative literature is defined as an imaginative piece of work. Admittedly, it is based on the imagination but it is important to know that literary texts do not come from a vacuum. They are generated under certain circumstances that they tend to reflect. The circumstances can be historical, social, political, cultural, and so on. Thus, this is the mainspring of the fact that the themes of a literary work, the events that have been developed in it and even its characters have their wellspring from society. Indeed, all that is described in any literary work is society.

African writers emerged and reacted to the societal and political state of African countries after some well-known events. The two important ones are the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Colonialism. African novels, mainly those written in the years just before and after the decolonisation of African countries, aimed at reconstructing and restructuring African political status taking into account African customs, beliefs, religious life prior to contact with the Western world because after that decolonisation, the African elites in charge of the political leadership develop a very weird use of power. As a result, when they take over the leadership of African nations, the state of social and political lives of Africa becomes unbearable. They so like power that they usually forget what they socially were before getting it. Sometimes, the social relations they have been cherishing with others for years will simply and easily fall apart. Thus, those who have been known to be very close friend will, all of a sudden, turn to be arch enemy. This situation is the current phenomenon in some African countries. When African elites come to power, they immediately and automatically change. They become very difficult to comprehend. Besides, there are some additional problems. Africans people as well as their leaders are not very well aware of what the relations that they have together should be. So, through this work, we aim to draw people's attention to what a social relation is likely to become when political leadership is involved and to what the relation they share with their political leaders is. To achieve

this goal, in the first part, we have deal with a social relation without power influence as shown in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Secondly, we have accentuated Sam, Chris, and Ikem's relation when involved in political leadership. Furthermore, we have analysed the relation between political leaders and the citizens and finally drawn our conclusion talking about steps to have a more or less satisfactory leadership.

1. Characteristics of a Social Relation in *Anthills of the Savannah*

The term society derives from a Latin word “socius” that means association or companionship. Thus society can be defined as a larger group of individuals, who are associative with one another. When the concept of society is carefully analysed, it is a concept that is very difficult to provide with a static definition. For Sergio Labourdette, defining society is getting into a paradoxical task.

“The social world is a presence and a paradoxical unknown factor, since it shows and hides, exhibits and overshadows, offers and retains, produces and subtracts, enriches and impoverishes, equals and differentiates, though with outstanding variations according to the adopted designs.”⁶

But, some other researchers do not stop their conception of the term society on merely getting large or expanded. They perceive it as an active or a functional community. For them, merely one-to-one relationships cannot be called society. As a result, no matter how large the number of the members of a club, cooperation, team... this cannot be termed as ‘society’. Talking about society is talking about a group of people that decide to share same values, in a nutshell same history and identity. This has been exemplified and clearly shown in the following citation by Amitai Etzioni in his article “The Good Society”. He said:

“A key concept I draw upon in the following characterisation of a good society is the term community. I define it as follows: community is a combination of two elements: A) A web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another-rather

⁶ - Sergio Labourdette, “Social Relations and Power”, Phd. Political Sciences. Researcher in the National Council for Research in Science and Technology (CONICET).

than merely one-on-one or chainlike individual relationships; B) A measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity-in short, to a particular culture.”⁷

From the conceptions above, it is very clear that the primordial and elementary module of society is the individual. So, when individuals come together and interact, they give birth to a social group, not a society. Those groups are simply aggregate of people, for instance, a football team’s players. This is what Umar Farooq, a sociologist researcher explicitly points out. “The social groups interact with each other and develop relationship with each other, leads to a society.”⁸

Social is an English adjective that means ‘of or relating to society’. So, any relation or connection among individuals of a society can be termed as social relation. In the novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe has developed some social relations like friendship and romantic relations. But in the present work, the attention is focused on Social and Power Relations.

In any society, people are related to one another in a way or another. They may be related as friends, family members, members of the same social group or in some other ways. Social relations seem to be perfectly healthy when there is no external power influencing them. Such relations are characterised by some fundamental elements. In the novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe points out some of those characteristics that are examined in the present work.

The novel under study is about three seemingly indivisible good friends: Sam, Chris and Ikem. Each of them befriends some other people such as Beatrice, Mad Medico.... How then is this relation characterised in the novel?

One of those characteristics is Solid Communion or Connection. To be in a social relation like friendship with someone means to be perfectly and absolutely

⁷ - Professor Amitai Etzioni is born on January 04, 1929. He is an Israeli-American sociologist best known for his work on socioeconomics and communitarianism. He leads the communitarian network, a non-profit, non-partisan organisation dedicated to support the moral, social, and political, foundations of society.

⁸ - More information about this can be found at www.studylecturenotes.com/social-sciences/sociology/133-what-is-a-society.

connected to them, if such a relation is healthy. People around them should not normally notice even a mere separation or distance, among them. They automatically become 'family members'. They can tell one another almost everything, sharing almost everything and situation just like siblings. Beatrice, one of the main characters of *Anthills of the Savannah*, while talking about her relationship with Ikem, says this: "I had known Ikem for years – right from my London University day. How he did it, I cannot tell but he became instantly like a brother to me."⁹

Being like a brother or a sister to someone means a lot. Siblings have the same blood running in their bodies. Whatever happened to my brother or sister happened to me, in a good family. The concerns of one's siblings are automatically one's concerns. And there's also something that should not be forgotten: someone we have the same blood with is equal to us. There is nothing we can do to deny that brotherhood or sisterhood.

Well-related people have the same story. What happened to one of them will surely involve others. And when a relation gets to that extent, it becomes very difficult to think or talk about one of them without having the names of the others mentioned, wittingly or unwittingly. During a conversation Chris has with Beatrice at Mad Medico's place, Achebe has shown this through that conversation. When Beatrice asks about Ikem, Chris is quickly tempted to mention the name of Sam and this has made Beatrice react:

“Beatrice: “I ask you about Ikem not His Excellency....And you haven't said anything about yourself. **Chris:** we are all connected. You cannot tell the story of any of us without implicating the others.... We are too close together.”¹⁰

This is one of the fundamental characteristics of a social relation, but not one and only. We also have the fact of helping each other. Another important aspect and

⁹ - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:90.

¹⁰ - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:66

element that characterises a healthy social relation is helping one another. This kind of help does not take into account the causes of the distress, frustration, trials, problem that occurred. It is a causeless help. Through what happens to Mad Medico in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe, shows a palpable example. Mad Medico has completed a full action, despite that, when the consequence of his action comes, Sam has helped him out of it; although Mad Medico deserves what happens to him.

“For Mad Medico has a strange mania for graffiti which was the cause of all the *wahalla*¹¹ that would have cost him his job and residence in the country about a year ago had His Excellency and Ikem not gone to this rescue. The doctors were ready to cut him up alive and I can't still say that I blame them entirely... But I still think the inscriptions were inexcusable and in deplorable taste.”¹²

Comforting One Another in Times of Sorrow is also one of these characteristics. Generally speaking, comforting someone means making them feel better, less worried and less unhappy or cheer up through some gestures or words directed to them when they feel sad or worried. As for sorrow, it is “a feeling of a great sadness usually because something terrible has happened to you”, according to the electronic *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*.

Good friends care for one another. Their objective is the happiness of their fellows; the peace of their fellows is their pride. That is the reason why they find it necessary to console their fellows when they are sad or disappointed, to comfort them when they are worried, to embolden them so as to be brave to face daily circumstances, to encourage them to be ready to move forward, and to hearten one another any time they seem pessimist. Achebe points this out in *Anthills of the Savannah* in the character of Beatrice when Ikem was murdered. As a result his wife, Elewa overmourns his death. Beatrice, who could not any longer bear that state of Elewa, uttered the following statements in Pidgin English to console her.

¹¹ - *Wahalla* is a word from Yoruba language spoken in Nigeria. It simply means ‘trouble’.

¹² - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:55.

“You no fit carry on like this at all, if you no want save yourself, then make you save the pickin¹³ in your belle. You hear me? I done tell you this no be time for crying. The one wey done go done go. The only thing we fit do now is to be strong so that when the fight come we fit fight am proper. Wipe your eye. No worry. God dey.”¹⁴

We also have an essential element which is the fact of protecting one another. Keeping one another safe from harm, damage, illness, injury, or loss is one of the things well-related people also give themselves to. When Chris is persecuted, he comes to him in order to arrange his escape from the city with him and protect him.

“‘Why have you come to me?’ Chris asked him, not on the first day nor the second but as they ate a hurried breakfast.... ‘For protection,’ said Emmanuel who was revealing a new side of himself as a clown of sorts.”¹⁵

When a healthy relationship has the prelisted characteristics, it will simply appear as a wonder to people

2. From a Social Relation to a Power Relation in *Anthills of the Savannah* between Sam, Chris And Ikem

In any society, people are usually related to one another. And some of those relationships have the appearance of the one that has been shown in the previous chapter. Unfortunately, and very painfully, when an external force influences those social relations, unexpected events ensue.

The Italian-German philosopher Romano Guardini (1885-1968) gives a short and concise definition of power: “Power is the ability to move reality.”¹⁶ V. Kessler in “Leadership and power” has shown the close link between ‘leadership’ and ‘power’. He also dealt with the theological reflections on power. Besides, he mentioned the link between power and responsibility and showed the difference between ‘power’ and ‘authority’. Later on, while dealing with the ethics of power, he stated that:

¹³ - Pickin is used here to mean foetus.

¹⁴ Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:174-175

¹⁵ - Ibid, P:189

¹⁶ - Romano Guardini revised edition by ISI Books, ISBN 978-1-882926- 23-7 (1998:121)

“When is it legitimate to use power? A short answer is: the exercise of power is legitimate if and only if it is carried out in order to create something good or to prevent something bad”.¹⁷

In this section, we deal with how a healthy social relation ends when those who were socially related become engaged, all of a sudden, in power management. It has been mentioned that the novel relates the story of three good friends. And fortunately, one of them becomes the Head of their State and then, the two others were systematically appointed in the management of the power. Just like what is happening nowadays in some African countries where we see very good friends that become associates in power management. The inquisition here is to know if that relation lasts and prosper. Definitely, it does not. Some unexpected things happen; awful things. But, of course not just after their getting into power. Some few times after getting into power, their relation becomes healthier and more vivid than ever. Nonetheless, this vivacity will not last longer. But when Sam gets to know what power really is and the privileges that cling to it, he has drastically changed. So, the relation takes another aspect. Now, the new episode of power relation will be developed. Authoritarianism takes place and many other events ensue.

When power is now really engaged in the game, the very first thing that the leaders develop towards their friends is hierarchical distance. Indirectly, they will be showing that they are henceforth superior to them.

“For a full minute or so, the fury of his eyes lay on me. Briefly, our eyes had been locked in combat. Then, I had lowered mine to the shiny table-top in ceremonial capitulation. Long silence. But he was not appeased... Without raising my eyes, I said again: ‘I am very sorry, Your Excellency.’”¹⁸

¹⁷ - “Leadership and Power”, Research Fellow: Department. of Philosophy & Systematic Theology University of South Africa Pretoria and Dean of Akademie für christliche Führungskräfte Gummersbach, Germany.

¹⁸ - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:1

‘The fury of his eyes lay on me’. This sequence of sentence shows that someone is telling their younger siblings, their employees, their learners or their subjects off. It should not be forgotten that Sam and Chris were good friends but now, Chris cannot any longer withstand his face, not even for a single minute. He lowered his face to apologise by also adding a word that completely put him very far from Sam: “Your Excellency”.

What ensues is that, because of power, social relations filter away. People, who have been known to be inseparably connected, easily fall apart as soon as power gets involved. What is surprising is that no matter how long the relation has been being cherished or sustained, most of the times, it deteriorates, when power is at stake. For instance, Chris, Ikem and Sam got acquainted when they were boys of thirteen or fourteen years of age. And they have been sustaining their acquaintance twenty-five good years before getting into power¹⁹. All the same, it deteriorates.

“Of course Chris had kept me posted on the steady deterioration in their relationship... Was I going to find myself be listening to awkward recrimination between two friends who’d known each other since I was in nappies; well not exactly, but almost”²⁰

Now that the relation has completely filtered away, trust will also disappear. Because of power, old friends can no longer trust one another. Consequently, the disappearance of trust gives place to suspicion.

Listening to intelligences or suspecting one another create unbelievable stories among long-date-friends. This can easily happen because when some people always tell you bad stories about some and let you know his bad intentions towards you as a leader of a nation, you will have to react, most of the times. Be the information you receive true or false. Such intelligences, in return make people resent one another. The same thing has happened to Sam, the leader in *Anthills of the Savannah*. During their conversation, Beatrice asks Chris some questions that clearly show that Sam is really resenting his two old good friends.

¹⁹ - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:12

²⁰ - Ibid, P. 71

“Do you²¹ know how much he²² resents you now?” she asked in a sudden change of tack. I don’t think you are even aware of it. It bothers me because it was not there before. I can see plenty of trouble ahead for the two of you.... You are right about the resentment.^{23,24}

This attitude of distrust, suspicion and of giving oneself to intelligence that Sam practices, eventually leads, apart from resentment, to false charges. Through our analysis, we finally discover that false charges are solutions to an equation: how to nullify the reputation of somebody or how to get rid of them? In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Ikem has been charged with plotting with people from Abazon against the president. Simply because Ikem, through his newspaper, hampers Sam to rule as he wishes, Sam has accused him of being involved in a call paid to the palace by the Abazon elders. To dramatise that simple visit, Sam calls it a march to the palace.

“Well, let’s not waste time by getting into who knows what, now... Intelligence reports have established that he was involved in planning the recent march on this palace by agitators claiming to come from Abazon. In fact they were found on careful investigation to be mostly motor-park touts, drug pushers and other criminal elements right there in Bassa.”²⁵

Eventually, Sam gives himself to abducting and killing his friends. He hides behind and sends security forces forward to do the job. In our societies today, there are many stories all over the nation such ‘he was indoor yesterday night but he cannot be found this morning’; ‘she left her office but she did not reach her house and she could not be found anywhere’ and so on. This is exactly what happens to Ikem in *Anthills of the Savannah*. “Ikem’s not in his flat though he went to bed there last night.”²⁶

²¹ - You, here is Chris.

²² - He refers to Sam, the president.

²³ - This portion is said by Chris.

²⁴ - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:65.

²⁵ - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:143.

²⁶ - Ibid, P.164

3. Power Relation Between Leaders and the Citizens in *Anthills of the Savannah*

From the 1990s up to now, most of African nations are ruled after a system called democracy. Democracy can be defined as a system of government in which every citizen in the country can vote to elect its government officials.

Presidents are elected to govern and to govern means to officially and legally control a country and make all the decisions about some elements at the prospect of the well-being of the citizens. Their well-being lies on some basic elements like caring for them, being clear to them, guaranteeing their rights and so on. Instead of having a very clear, commendable and laudable relation, we have a pathetic and lamentable relation between government officials and citizens in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

One of the most regretful facts we experience is that the relation between Sam with the citizens has been turned into a relation of Lord and Servant. Someone who has servants can treat them as they wish. Moreover, servants cannot query the authority of their boss. “Those who mismanage our affairs would silence our criticism by pretending they have facts not available for the rest of us.” (Achebe, 1987:38)

Apart from perceiving the relation between power holders and citizens as a relation of ‘Lord and Servant’, we also have a relation of ‘the haves and the have-nots.’ And definitely, it is a question of beggars and rich people. It’s a pity that those who are supposed to be served are now turned into beggars by people who are supposed to serve them

Another important view is that Most of African Heads of States make light of the dire needs of their citizens. They do not want to be disturbed, just as Sam. Punishing citizens is also part of this relation between power holders and citizens. Sam comes in power with some grudges towards particular regions. So, he deliberately decides not to help individuals definitely because of what they have previously done to him. Those ‘offences’ are committed during the election campaigns, because people certainly do not vote for them or when they say no to a decision they have made.

We also have a crisis of communication. This crisis of communication is in three dimensions. “Citizens receive information but they are false: that is Telling Lies; “Citizens receive information but they are restricted, reduced: that is Restriction of Information” and “no communication at all: that is Absolute Silence”.

The freedom of speech is also violated. Some citizens in *Anthills of the Savannah*, most of the times, are not listened to. They are not even asked to give their opinion.

4. Avoidable Steps to tend to a Satisfactory Leadership

“No one is above mistake”, people say. Mistake is used to refer to a performed action, judgment or decision made which produces an unwanted or unintentional result. This fact is noticeable in all domains of life though it is dangerous and risky. Both citizens, associates to power and political leaders are responsible for the ambiguous power relations people experience. They all have particular roles to play to have a more or less satisfactory leadership.

The very first mistaken action at the level of individuals is performed when it is time to entrust power. People should normally entrust power by very objective judgment and evaluation of the person to whom power is going to be entrusted. Unfortunately, what happens is not the case. Power is entrusted by hatred and revenge; Kangan citizens choose Sam, the President in punishment for the former president. This passage makes it clear.

“therefore, when our civilian politicians finally got what they had coming to them and landed unloved and unmourned on the rubbish heap and the young Army Commander was invited by the even younger coup makers to become His Excellency the Head of State he had pretty few ideas about what to do.”²⁷

Associates to power in Kangan make some mistakes that contribute to the ambiguous power relations. Those mistakes constitute, in a way or another, a hindrance to a better and a satisfactory power management. Firstly, instead of serving the states,

²⁷ - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:12

those associates give themselves to worshipping the Head, Sam. Secondly, some of the associates give themselves to rumours; they carry rumour against their fellows. It is very sorrowful and regretful that people who are supposed to work together to achieve a common set goal stand against themselves. Jesus Christ, one the messengers of the Almighty God said something very important about this issue:

“And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them. Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city and house divided against itself shall not stand” The Holy Bible Matthew chapter 12 verse 25.²⁸

There are some crucial and noticeable mistakes at the level of Sam, himself. The first thing to make clear enough is that the President is a servant, not to be served. Another thing is that Sam does not forget what he has been as a citizen. He does not want to put off his garment of soldier. Being previously a soldier does not mean that a head of state should turn to a tyrant. Another critical mistake is that Sam has made no preliminary preparation before becoming presidents. These are prejudicial for a healthy power relation.

“You all seem to forget that I am still a soldier not a politician... When we turn affairs of state back to you and return to barracks that will be the time to resume your civilian tricks.”²⁹

But he seems to forget that: “‘Yes, Your Excellency’, replied the Attorney-General boldly. ‘The people have spoken. Their desire is manifest. You are condemned to serve them for life.’” (Achebe, 1987:5)

Conclusion

In any society, people are either socially or politically related. Often, people do not really know how to handle the relations they cherish in order to make them sustainable.

But, surely, socialising makes people feel good if they take interest in a social relation’s characteristics and respect them. What usually happens is that social relations,

²⁸ - Beulah’s Bilingual & Parallel Bible, King James Version, Beulahland Bible Publishers, Ibadan, Nigeria.

²⁹ - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:4

at long last, fall apart but not always. Does that mean that people are always ignorant of how to handle them? Definitely no! Sometimes, there are some external forces that influence social relations and eventually destroy them, even if they were well cherished. Among those external elements, power is an outstanding one. . When power is involved in a social relation game, it can quickly destroy it if care is not taken. It has the ability to make people change themselves as rapidly as possible. Even Sam who has been known to be social and caring eventually changes. “He was not like that right away. In fact he kept very close to us in the first six months or so.”³⁰ Thus, social relations that have been being cherished for a long time, collapse. Power is then perceived as a wicked thing. But is power really evil? In 1951, the Italian-German philosopher Romano Guardini (1885-1968) had the following message: In itself, power is neither good nor evil; its quality is determined by him who wields it. ... Thus power is as much a possibility for good and the positive as it is a threat of destruction and evil. The danger grows with the growth of power, a fact that is brought home to us today with brutal clarity.” (Guardini, 1998:124)

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³⁰ - Chinua, Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Ltd 1987:67

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