The turmoil of the period in a nation’s history where in anarchy prevails, its cultural heritage suffers a decline. When the hedonistic past of the pre-historic human animal resumes its ‘might is right’ regime, anarchy has certainly made its point for some time. This is the theme that Achebe treats effectively in his fourth novel, *A Man of the People*, which came out in 1966. D.A.N. Jones conceives the novel as,
... a modern comedy as distinguished and as relevant to his society as those grander essays in homage to the past.¹

The novel, *A Man of the People* witnesses the contemporary political situation in Nigeria. Achebe’s mission which played ‘God’s Advocate’ by extolling the virtues of the Ibo past and performs the ‘duty for the devil’ as well, by bringing into focus the evils of the contemporary society.

Achebe has dealt the fundamental themes of African culture, philosophy, poetry and dignity in depth, in the earlier novels. In this novel, *A Man of the People*, Achebe turns to the ‘legitimate theme’, as he terms it of the contemporary political climate and city life. Many critics have been confounded with wonder whether *A Man of the People* ends on a “prophetic” note or contains “shrewd for knowledge.”

*A Man of the People* portray, the continuing process of distintegration, which started with the colonial regime, and mirrors forth the confusion, and chaos of a society, which witnesses a total breakdown of values.
In his lucid analysis of the evils around and attack on political corruption and thuggery, Achebe resorts to the use of an unconventional device, i.e., an anti-hero, the narrator persona, Odili Samalu. The novel elucidates Achebe’s statements:

*Europe conceded independence to us and we promptly began to missuse it, or rather those leaders to whom we entrusted the wielding of our new power and opportunity.*

Despite the strongest of anarchic odds, the Ibo culture refuses to be swept away altogether and makes itself felt to a considerable extent, in Odili, a key figure of sufficient but suffocated enlightenment.

A keen observer of national politics, Odili defies the opportunity to be stationed in civil service and settles down as a teacher in a backwater, to allow himself a little freedom of action.

What is noteworthy about Odili is his ability to involve himself in the milieu and at the sometime stay detached to analyse and comment on it. When Chief Nanga recognizes him and insists on his going to the capital, Odili, out of decency, visits the minister. Chief
Nanga’s lack of modesty does not surprise him because he is aware that modesty is but ‘inverted pride.’ He appreciates Nanga’s impatience with hypocuisy which the –

\[\text{Starry-eyed idealists strove vaingloriously to bring into politics” with the help of “niceties and delicate refinements that belonged elsewhere.}\]

The fault of the culture in the Ibos of Okonkwo’s times is not to be found in Odili. The extravagant life style of of the erstwhile schoolmaster turned politician does not colour the judgement of Odili. He frankly admits that he is not ascetic to renounce this juicy morsel that fortune has placed in his mouth. He feels like a man

\[\text{Who has just come in from the rain and dried his body and put on dry clothes is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors all the time.}\]

He is aware of his and his people’s situation, where none of them

\[\text{Had been indoors long enough to be able to say ‘To hell with it’}.\]
He also is well aware of the confusion and squandering of the moral values brought in the wake of independence, take over the administration, not giving the others a chance to enter the tightly barricaded bureaucratic enclave.

Regarding the episode of Chief Koko, a ministerial Colleague of Chief Nanga, who gets fussy over the issue of his tea, O dili’s incise ve criticism brings to our attention the rotten pattern of life which assigns different codes of conduct to the public at large and to those in high places. The tea that cjoef Koko finds near fatal is no other than the product processed by –

**OHMS – Our Home Made Studd – was the popular name of the gigantic campaign which the Government had mounted all over the country to promote the consumption of locally made products.**

We find restraint and refinement in Odili’s attitude as against the crudeness and hastiness in the crowd around him. This sense of social commitment comes to the fore when Chief Nanga seduces Elise, his girl friend. The incident creates in Odili a deep aversion towards Nanga, whose meanness, greed for power and money, and
lust he comes to realize. He decides to enter politics to wreak vengeance. But being cultured, very soon he becomes introspective and self-critical:

*How important was my political activity in its own right? It was difficult to say; things seemed so mixed up; my revenge, my new political ambition and the girl.*

In a situation where fairplay and justice are in question, odili’s progress in his moral upliftment is remarkable and convincing and bears out a round character. He is forever growing and is engaged in a process of evolution and refinement. He discovers,

*The contradictions of his individual position with what is projected as a native searching for the ‘right’ way, for himself and for the nation.*

Though he vows never to buy himself a car and refuses to be corrupted by bourgeois privileges” he motors around his constituency because he feels that to fight an unjust regime, it is necessary to use a similar set of tools. The change for the better in the character of Odili is gradual and total. Presently he emerges from this starry-eyed
idealism not only into active politics on the national level but also into the realm of true love. Forgetting his carefully worked out scheme to steal Edua, Nanga’s intended “parlour wife” in order to avenge his robbing him of Elsie, Odili says:

At that very moment I was suddenly confronted by a fact I had been dodging for sometime. I knew then that I wanted Edua now (if not all along) for her own sake first and foremost and only very remotely as part of a general scheme of revenge.⁹

Achebe’s opinion of Odili is,

He starts off treating women as objects, but he ends up changing his ideas completely. In my view this is measure of his growth.¹⁰

Odili’s growth in character is seen in his ability to separate his personal relationship with Edna from his political ambition. He,

... grow up from narrow-mindedness, political ignorance and sexual prurience to a politically mature African ready to play his part in the African future.¹¹
The progress from idealism to disillusionment convincingly paves the way to the recognition of the harsh reality and possible salvation for the country. While his country is in chaotic state, Odili maintains his equilibrium and comments on the events with a detached observation that leaves us in no doubt of his culture and refinement. However,

*It is a sad truth of our nature that man becomes too easily brutalized by circumstance.*

Despite his virtues, Odili is no exception to this truth. Several times he gives into the anarchy of his mind. In spite of his righteous indignation at the fallen standards of politicians like chief Nanga, his own varity is tickled when he is invited to the capital to enjoy Nanga’s lavish hospitality, with the offer of an overseas scholarship added to it. Odili knows that the latter’s only qualification to be an administrative head is his personal ambition and desire to acquire things like

*three blocks of seven - storey luxury flats at three hundred thousand pounds each in the name of his wife and that*
these flats were immediately leased by British Amalgamated at fourteen hundred a month each.\textsuperscript{13}

Against a background of corruption and erosion of traditional values the likes of Nanga live solely for themselves amassing wealth by plundering the nation. Men like him do not hesitate to sell their “mothers for a mess of potage”, and yet pose as men of the people. On the other hand, there are people like Odili who try to keep themselves above the morass of marchy and retain their integrity.

The flaw in the character of Odili, however, is that knowing fully well the uncultured nature of the minister of culture, he too becomes a part of that hollow life and makes grave mistakes such as terming Elsic a mere “good time girl.”

In spite of his high opinion about many features of his society, Odili is never actively interested in its welfare. His lack of warmth, his contemptuous nature and attitude towards others prove him “cold-blooded, egocentric, and alienated.”\textsuperscript{14} His inherent anarchy makes him adopt a superior stance foregetting that he is only a part of the organic whole of his community. The frailty of his mind is
evident when his first impression of Nanga starts crumbling, once he is recognized by the grandiose minister. He begins to wonder if he had been applying to politics rather stringent standards that didn’t belong to it.\textsuperscript{15}

His enforced detachment loosens its hold on Odili when he starts living with Chief Nanga:

\begin{quote}
... sitting at Chief Nanga’s feet. I received enlightenment; many things began to crystallize out of the mist some of the emergent forms were not nearly as ugly as I had suspected but many seemed much worse.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

His earlier idealism is seriously undermined as he starts circulating in the society that surrounded chief Nanga. Odili who states earlier that he wouldn’t stop “to obtain a scholarship in any underland way”\textsuperscript{17}, does stoop, displaying him rather oversized ego. His lack of culture surface, when he speaks of Elsie in a derogatory manner.

The tragedy of Obis and Odilis of modern Africa is largely due to their incomplete understanding and assimilation of European
culture. The tendency of alienation in Odili, which is compared to that of Dickensian characters by David Carroll, arises not naturally but as though it is assumed. It is his lack of understanding and sympathy towards his society that alienates him. Odili is

... motivated by chance, not free will, greed not social good, sexual pique rather than honour.\textsuperscript{18} 

Reflecting a decayed pattern of life, the vain glorious odili brings Elsie, a trusted girl friend of his college college cays, to enjoy the hospitality of Chief Nanga, he proves verily a modern Hamlet by procrastinating and pays for it by losing Elsie to Nanga. The incident brings out not only Odili’s chicanery but also his sinister ambivalence. His predecessor Obi Okonkwo shows much the same attitude towards clara. While this lack of sympathy and true feeling belongs to the present, there was a time, when the elder Okonkuo generously gave his protection and love to Ekwefi the damsel in distress.

The devious scheme of revenge he hatches against Chief Nanga is another sign of anarchy in Odili. He tries to steal Edna the innocent, the intended parlour wife of Nanga. He forms a false
friendship with her with the help of the unsuspecting first wife of the minister. In order to succeed in his plans he conceals his identity from Edua’s father and pretends to be a friend of Nanga. He flings libelous slang at Edna when she discovers his plan. Thus his refarious friendship negates the aim of his education. He hurts the feelings of Edua and breaks her heart. Just as he keeps his father at a distance so he keeps his nation and his people away from true understanding.

Odili is moved by the miserable predicament of compatriots who are surrounded by a “cesspool of corruption” in the wake of independence and are subjected to a regime where the police force is a puppet in the hands of ministers.

The evolution in Odili’s characters comes full circle, as we witness his attitude progressing from cynicism to optimism. In the end he integrates his knowledge, love and action together and intends to found a school of a new type in memory of Max, the martys, symbolic of a new dawn on the Nigerian cultural horizon:

*Culture may compel the atypical individual to adhere to forms of behavior which are repugnant to him, but when such...*
behavior is repayment to the bulk of a society’s members, it is culture which has to give way.¹⁹

This, in brief, seems to be the state of Nigerian society depicted in A Man of the People. Chief Nanga is far from being a man of the people. He is no longer the savior to sacrifice himself and save his society but a veritable Ingo, forever smiling and given to sabotage, deceit, demagogy, and greed of the crudest kind.

Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga, M.P. is an absorbing portrait of a fraudulent and immoral traitor of the people. Though he calls himself a public servant, he is the very antithesis of a minister of culture. Beginning his career as a village school teacher had an eye on the main chance. Well-versed in the game of national politics, he rapidly rises to the cabinet level. The ambiguity in Nanga’s character muscles the people. He is a political opportunist, feels the pulse of the people. He manipulates everything in his favour. He has no scale of values nor any intentions of doing the nation good. His clamour is only “to retain his hold on his constituency and there he is adept.”²⁰

A born Knave, he tries to steer Odili to his side only to strengthen his party, to add one more feather to his already shining
plume. Two other feathers already with him are his private secretary who has a B.A. degree from Oxford, and his westernized educated ‘parlour wife’. Nanga is projected as a man who intends to make full use of his opportunities. Though popular, he is yet a scoundred and honestly corrupt.

Indeed, Nanga’s hypocritical approach to his role of a benevolent politician clarifies the connection between ‘honest’ national aims and personal hypocrisy. The society in A Man of the People is no society at all. If there is one, it is in the throes of ancarchy, to be soon dissolved if the chaos continues because without order there can be no society, and without society there can be no human perfection.

Achebe says that “A Man of the People is a rather serious indictment – if you like of post –independence Africa.” Life is presented as an endless stretch of waste land, the terrible plight of a nation, as its precious cultural resources are trodden upon by the present power-hungrey generation. The moving stream of the impressions of Odili records the abominable political system that reverses the very definition of democracy where instead of the will of
the people, a handful of worthless individuals decide the fate of nation. Life is an amorphous mass, lacking a wholesome quality, devoid of a sense of identity and culture. Hence the title of the novel, *A Man of the People*, is an epitaph on the decline and fall of a great culture. While recounting and commenting on the upheavals faced by a society’s culture, also hints at the possible regeneration.
References


13. Ibid., pp. 99-100.
17. Ibid., p. 23.