

to ignore his suggestion for a modest role for economists: to predict not specific outcomes, but the effects various economic arrangements have upon the choices of individuals.

Arts & Letters

ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH

by Chinua Achebe
Doubleday, 1988
216 pp. \$16.95

In his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1959), Nigerian author Achebe depicted a thinly fictionalized West African society gone rotten as a result of colonialism. In *Anthills*, however, Achebe suggests that laying the blame for present-day African ills on "capitalism and imperialism" is an evasion. A greater problem facing the Africans in Achebe's fictional Kangan is their failure to confront the question asked by the heroine, Beatrice Okoh, at the conclusion of the novel: "What must a people do to appease an embittered history?"

One thing they must do, Achebe implies, is to resist the "lies" and "madness" of their corrupted leaders. The Kangan head of state, identified only by his Christian name, Sam, is a charismatic military president who falls into the trap of the personality cult. His failure to become "President-for-Life" has embittered him. It has also brought him into conflict with two childhood friends, Chris Oriko, commissioner for information, and Ikem Osodi, poet and editor of the state-run newspaper. Both had earlier helped bring Sam to power but now refuse to lie for him. Yet even while they resist Sam, Chris and Ikem see their own friendship tragically founder.

This study of crumbling friendships allows Achebe to develop another imperative facing Africa's elite: the need to face conflicts between traditional and Westernized Africans. These conflicts also emerge in the book's most striking character, Chris's lover Beatrice. An educated, independent woman, she knows traditional Africans resent her advantages, just as she resents, and resists, their proverbial wisdom: "That's when you hear all kinds of nonsense talk from girls: Better to marry a rascal than grow a moustache in your father's compound . . ." Yet for the elite to turn their backs on tradition, Achebe knows, is to lose all contact with the "poor and dispossessed" whom they claim to lead.

Shortly before being murdered by state security

agents, Ikem tells a group of students that the writer's role is to give "headaches," not "prescriptions." Facing complexity is always a headache, but the alternative, Achebe shows, is to accept the death of conscience.

MANY MASKS: A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright
by Brendan Gill
Putnam's, 1987
544 pp. \$24.95



America's best-known and most imitated architect was also a liar, a philanderer, a self-promoter, an unscrupulous businessman—in short, a charlatan. Can genius excuse such failings? Biographer Gill, who met Wright during the last decade of his life (1867–1959), seems to suggest that it can.

Wright, one learns, reinvented his Wisconsin childhood, changed his name and birth date for his autobiography, and even glossed over the truth about his education (bad grades, no high school diploma, barely three terms of college at the University of Wisconsin, Madison). He habitually took all credit for buildings designed during his apprenticeship to Chicago architects Louis H. Sullivan and Dankmar Adler; and after he went on his own, tossing off house after newfangled house in the Chicago suburbs, he even took credit for his former firm's design of the Seattle Opera House—which had never been built!

Wright's houses and buildings (e.g., the majestically impractical S.C. Johnson Wax Co. in Racine, Wisconsin) stand in 36 states and reflect his eclectic borrowings—from Bauhaus to Tudor to Japanese pagoda. All make strong statements. Indeed, says Gill, Wright would have despised the current architectural fad for "contextualism." His strange "Usonian" or "Prairie" houses bullied their neighborhoods with their "carports," massive chimneys, and wide-eaved low roofs. Wright never acknowledged professional mistakes. When Dallas retailer Stanley Marcus complained that there were no bedrooms in his house, Wright replied, "In your climate you don't need bedrooms."

He rarely apologized for his personal life either, even though he wreaked havoc on his family and the various women who threw themselves under the train of his affection (including his first mistress, who died in 1914 in the fire that engulfed his Taliesin home in Spring Green, Wisconsin).

Gill has provided readers with an amusing glimpse behind Wright's masks. But if finally we are less charmed by Wright than Gill seems to be, it may be because we never met the man.