The Plight of A Hero in Achebe s *Things Fall Apart*

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Although *Things Fall Apart* remains the most widely read African novel, the failure of its hero continues to generate haunting questions in the minds of some of its readers, especially among those who seem to identify with the hero's tragedy. Central to this discomfort is the question: why did Achebe choose as his hero an aspiring but brutal young man who ultimately took his own life? The author himself acknowledges that he has "been asked this question in one form or another by a certain kind of reader for thirty years" (Lindfors 1991, 22).[2] According to Achebe, these readers wanted to know why he allowed a just cause to stumble and fall? Why did he let Okonkwo (the hero of the novel) fail?

Several commentators have argued that Okonkwo's failure is due to his individual character weaknesses. Many blame it on the fragmentation of the Umuofia society and the destruction of its cultural values by the colonial powers.Yet others stress both.[3] There is no doubt that these things played a role in the suffering mind of the hero, but to argue

that they are the reason for his failure is, in my opinion, too limited. Hence, I want to argue, contrary to popular views, that Okonkwo's downfall is not necessarily due to weaknesses in character or departed African glories but rather is a function of heroism in the cultural belief systems of the Igbos. As Okhamafe aptly noted, perhaps "things begin to fall apart in this nine-village Umuofia clan long before a European colonialist missionary culture inserts itself there" (Okhamafe 1995, 134).

Things Fall Apart is not a novel without a cultural context. It is a text rooted in the social customs, traditions, and cultural milieu of a people. The characters and their actions are better understood when they are examined in that light. To do otherwise not only denies the novel a full measure of appreciation, it also renders vague and imprecise the significance of certain events, actions, and actors in the story.

What we have in this novel is a vivid picture of the Igbo society at the end of the nineteenth century. Achebe described for the world the positive as well as the negative aspects of the Igbo people. He discussed the Igbos' social customs, their political structures, religions, even seasonal festivals and ceremonies. He provided the picture without any attempt to romanticize or sentimentalize it. As he said in another occasion, "the characters are normal people and their events are real human events" (Lindfors 1991, 21).[4] Achebe told the story as it is.

The fact of his account is that the Igbo clan (of which I am a member) is a group of African people with a complex, vigorous, and self-sufficient way of life. Prior to the invasion of their land and the eclipse of their culture by foreign powers, they were undisturbed by the present, and they had no nostalgia for the past. In the novel, Achebe portrayed a people who are now caught between two conflicting cultures. On the one hand, there is the traditional way of life pulling on the Umuofia people and one man's struggle to maintain that cultural integrity against an overwhelming force of the colonial imperialism. On the other hand, we have the European style which, as presented, seems to represent the future, a new community of the so-called "civilized world." It now appears this African man, Okonkwo, and the entire society of Umuofia must make a choice between the old and the new—if they have the power. The desire to become a member of European-style society has its attraction. For one, it is conveyed to the Umuofia people, including Okonkwo, as a means of enjoying the spoils of twentieth-century civilization. But Okonkwo refused to endorse the appeal. He recognized that accepting the invitation is done at the expense of the things that comprised his identity and defined his values.

So when some members of the Umuofia community unwittingly accepted the invitation and endorsed "a strange faith," things fell apart for the

Igbo people in Achebe's novel. Umuofia's integrated, organic community was irreparably fractured. Their gods were blasphemed and their hero disabled. Their customs were desecrated and shattered. The people were divided or put asunder. The British District Commissioner took charge and controlled the people. So we have what seems like a total imposition of one cultural, social, and political structure upon another. The hero of the novel found himself plunged into disaster. He had to kill himself. Obierika, one of the characters in the novel, expressed it this way: "That man [Okonkwo] was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself: and now he will be buried like a dog" (1996, 147). This was a tragic act, leading to the exacerbating question of why did Achebe let the hero fail especially among those who have experienced or confronted the harsh face of colonialism. However, Okonkwo's calamitous act was not unexpected. All that happened to him and the fact that he had to take his own life were primarily the function of the Igbo's conception of a hero and, perhaps, the rift within the clan brought about by foreign domination.

A hero, in the Igbo cultural belief system, is one with great courage and strength to work against destabilizing forces of his community, someone who affects, in a special way, the destinies of others by pursuing his own. He is a man noted for special achievements. His life is defined by ambivalence, because his actions must stand in sharp contrast to ordinary behavior. So a hero is not made in isolation; rather he is a product of the social matrix within which he operates. The person's determination to pursue his individual interest concomitantly with that of the society is a constant source of dynamic tensions because his obligations to his society can become an impediment to his individual quest for fame and reputation. However, this impediment must be overcome if he is to be a hero. Paradoxically, a hero becomes both the disrupting and integrating principles of the community. Okonkwo, the central character in *Things Fall Apart*, is the epitome of this complex concept and the personification of the cultural ambiguity of the Igbo people.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe made it clear that Okonkwo's single passion was "to become one of the lords of the clan" (1996, 92). According to Achebe, it was Okonkwo's "life-spring." Okonkwo wanted to be a hero. Unfortunately, the road to heroism in the Igbo's belief system is chronically fraught with difficulties of varying degrees.

The first challenge Okonkwo was expected to overcome was his father's reputation—in this case his father had none. However, he was determined to succeed in whatever respect his father had failed, knowing full well that among his "people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father"(1996, 6)—a juxtaposition of opposing claims about which the narrator (quite understandably) made no attempt to recon-

cile.[5] His father, Unoka, enjoyed gentleness and idleness. He "was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow" (3). Unoka was said to rejoice in song, dance, and drinking of palm-wine as his way of avoiding responsibility. In fact, he preferred these things to tending his yam-field. He was a man without title in the village of Umuofia, and he could not endure the sight of blood (8). Biologically, he was a male, but among the Igbo, he was never a man. So people laughed at him. In order to become a hero, Okonkwo felt he must overcome this public estimation of his father. At the outset of the novel, Achebe made the following remarks about Okonkwo: "His fame rested on solid personal achievements." "He had no patience with unsuccessful men" (3). "His whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness" (9). So Okonkwo hated what his father was and became the opposite.

Not only is a hero expected to overcome the reputation of his father, he is also expected to surpass the reputations of his peers. In other words, he must outperform people in his age group or those he grew up with. Among the Igbos good effort is respected, "but achievement was revered" (1996, 6). Okonkwo must achieve concrete things to be a hero and he did. Here is Achebe's account of his achievement:

> If ever a man deserved his success, that man was Okonkwo. At an early age, he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck At the most, one could say that his chi or personal god was good. But the Igbo people have a proverb that when a man says yes, his chi says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly: so his chi agreed. And not only his chi, but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands. That was why Okonkwo had been chosen by the nine villages to carry a message of war to their enemies unless they agree to give up a young man and a virgin to atone for the murder of Udo's wife. (Achebe 1996, 19-20)

Okonkwo's accomplishments in Umuofia earned him the respect and honor of the elders and the people. He defeated Amalinze the Cat and was proclaimed the greatest wrestler in Umuofia and Mbaino. He demonstrated exceptional skills as a warrior of the clan by bringing home five heads during inter-tribal conflicts. Achebe portrayed him as a man with "incredible prowess" and passion to conquer and subdue his enemies (1996, 6). He was a successful farmer and married three wives—clear evidence among the Igbos of a strong and wealthy man. The ultimatum of war that he delivered to the enemy of Umuofia yielded immediate results. Achebe wrote: "When Okonkwo of Umuofia arrived at Mbaino as the proud and imperious emissary of war, he was treated with great honor and respect, and two days later he returned home with a lad of fifteen and a young virgin. The lad's name was Ikemefuna, whose sad story is still told in Umuofia unto this day" (9). Okonkwo started with nothing, but through hard work and determination he became successful.

Another barrier one is expected to overcome in the quest for heroism is the person's obligation to the society, which, of course, may adversely affect his individual quest for reputation. The nature of the dynamic tensions this can create was evident in Okonkwo's lifestyle. Perhaps this accounts for the reason some interpreters of *Things Fall Apart* think that Achebe paints "a paradoxical portrait of a protagonist who is both a typical Igbo man as well as an individual" (Lindfors 1991, 17).[6]

Among the Igbos, a person's obligation to the society calls for cooperation. It calls for submission to the counsel of elders, the precepts, and laws of the land, which are established for the good of the society. I think the most difficult aspect of it all is the subordination of one's own interest to that of the group or society. Okonkwo had a scrupulous desire to fulfill his obligation to the society, but he often realized that it only brought him to a crossroad of conflicting loyalties. A typical example of this happened on the night when the Priestess of Agbala came to take Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter, for Agbala's blessing. In spite of his inexorable commitment to support and defend the laws of the land, Okonkwo felt the natural pull to resist established social order. He was expressively unapproving of the untimely visit by the Priestess. He perceived her arrival as an intrusion to his family's domestic life. However, his insistent but unsuccessful protestations only elicited a scream from the Priestess of Agbala, who warned: "'Beware, Okonkwo!' 'Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!'" (Achebe 1996, 96). Albeit, the Priestess took Ezinma to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves and returned her safely to Okonkwo's family the following day. But we learned from the narrator that Okonkwo was noticeably worried, and wondered about these conflicting loyalties.

Even Obierika, who seemed to disapprove of Okonkwo's commitment to the central doctrines of his culture, observed and agonized over the lack of equilibrium between the pull of private values and public expectations. The force of this pull is succinctly captured in the following passage:

> He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others. (Achebe 1996, 88)

Obierika, like Okonkwo, felt the endemic tensions of conflicting cultural values—the incessant discord between public loyalty to the goddess of the clan and private loyalty to the family. But the difference between Okonkwo and Obierika was, Okonkwo was a man of few words. He allowed his actions to speak for him. However, the cumulative effects of all these things led to

his eventual suicide. This is the kind of dilemma one confronts on the road to heroism and it can be overwhelming. A hero, in Okonkwo's world, must face (it seems) a constant strife between two sets of values, the societal and the personal, but he never can find the equilibrium. It is, therefore, not a surprise to see Okonkwo take his own life. I believe this was precisely what Sarr observed when he critically remarked that at times, the reader of Achebe's novel, is faced with contradictions. "Ibo society" he added, "is full of contradictions." "It is a male-dominated society, in which the chief goddess is female and in which proverbial wisdom maintains 'Mother is supreme'"—a sustained duality in belief systems common to much of Africa (1993, 349).[7] Central to this observation is the fact that the Igbo community is a society that is at once communal and individualistic. Such a worldview or ambiguous value system reveals, Sarr properly concluded, "the dilemma that shapes and destroys the life of Okonkwo" (349).

Although Okonkwo expressed rigidity and inflexibility in his life, Achebe told us that down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. I believe the most charitable way to understand this is by looking briefly at different manifestations of Okonkwo's esoteric life. For example, when he violated the peace week by beating his youngest wife, which was an offense to the goddess, Okonkwo agreed to make offerings as demanded by the custom of Umuofia. In fact, he offered an additional pot of palm-wine, which was a distinct indication of genuine repentance and cooperation for the good of the community. Achebe had Ezeani say to Okonkwo:

> You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbors. We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil. [As Okonkwo heard this] He brought down his staff heavily on the floor. Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your Obi and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her. [As soon as Okonkwo heard this] His staff came down again. The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish. His tone now changed from anger to command. You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries. He rose and left the hut. (Achebe 1996, 22)

Okonkwo made the sacrifices to the earth goddess.

In another occasion, we learn that Okonkwo breathed a heavy sigh of relief when he found out that his wife, Ekwefi was unharmed after he had fired at her in a fit of rage. Thus, we observe within some of these occasional flashes of cruelty, a rare manifestation of tenderness. Similarly, on the night when the priestess of Agbala carried Ekwefi's daughter off to the Oracle of

the Hills and Caves for the young girl to pay homage to her god, Ekwefi followed in terror for her child. Cognizant of his wife's state of terror, Okonkwo joined Ekwefi to provide re-assurance. When Ekwefi noticed Okonkwo's presence, "Tears of gratitude filled her eyes" (Achebe 1996, 106). As both of them waited outside their home in the dawn, Achebe said, Ekwefi remembered the generous love with which Okonkwo had taken her at the moment she became his wife. Perhaps Okonkwo was not a cruel man. For these occasional episodes are seemingly indications of a kind-hearted man.

Paradoxically, Okonkwo would never achieve heroism among the Igbos if he totally subordinated his interest to that of the society at large. Hence, it was incumbent on him to exhibit other qualities that might be perceived as a threat to social order. "And he did pounce on people quite often" (Achebe 1996, 3). As Achebe said, Okonkwo made people wonder whether he respected the gods of the clan. He "was popularly called the 'Roaring Flame'" (108). "Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody halfway through, not even for fear of a goddess" (21). In his culture, a man who was unable to rule his own family was not considered a real man, not to mention a hero. So Okonkwo "ruled his household with a heavy hand" (9) and made people afraid of him. A hero should be impervious to emotions. The narrator told us that Okonkwo expressed no emotion, except anger. He was stoical to the harsh realities of life and appeared immune to problems. This is the life of a hero, a self-made man. Sometimes Okonkwo acted as if he was answerable to no one, and at other times he was the opposite. Obierika (Okonkwo's closest friend) pointed to this cultural ambiguity in the system when he sought (as he always did) a compromise from Okonkwo between conflicting loyalties. But Okonkwo responded impatiently, "The Earth (goddess) cannot punish me for obeying her messenger" (47). It would seem, for the Igbos, a hero must lead a life of self-contradiction; and Okonkwo was one primary example. It is, therefore, not surprising why contemporary commentators like Wasserman and Purdon contended that "Okonkwo represents a type of selfish individualism that is in essence a threat to Ibo notions of clan, and culture" (1993, 327).

In the opening lines of chapter seven, the narrator said, it seemed the elders of Umuofia had forgotten Ikemefuna (the lad who was entrusted to Okonkwo's care) but not the oracle. For three years Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household. He was wholly absorbed into the family and Okonkwo became fond of him. Suddenly, the announcement came from the Oracle that Ikemefuna must be killed according to the tradition of Umuofia. The boy at this point regarded Okonkwo as a father. So, Ogbuefi Ezeudu specifically warned Okonkwo to stay at home. "The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him (Ikemefuna) outside

Umuofia as it is the custom, and kill him there. But I warn you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you father" (Achebe 1996, 40).

The cultural practice was that when the gods or goddesses demanded anyone for sacrifice, the family must be excluded because the Umuofia people believed that the emotional attachment the family might have for that individual would interfere with the process or the obligation to execute the demands of the Oracle. Hence, Ogbuefi Ezeudu sought for at least a passive compromise from Okonkwo. Since Okonkwo's passion was to be a hero, he felt his manliness might be called into question; therefore, he defied his friend's admonition and accompanied the procession into the forest.

What happened next would be used in the novel partly for the downfall of Okonkwo. Ikemefuna had to die. The values of the whole clan of Umuofia would be tested, if not forever, by this journey in which Ikemefuna would be killed. Achebe explained the episode in these words:

> As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot (of palm-wine) fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought *weak*. (Achebe 1996, 43; emphasis is mine).

The death of Ikemefuna invoked varying or contrasting emotional reactions from both Okonkwo and Nwoye (Okonkwo's son) which dramatizes what Okonkwo apprehended as a dichotomy between strength and gentleness. Achebe said, as "soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna [someone he had come to know and treat as a friend] had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow. He did not cry. . . . He just hung limp" (1996, 43). Nwoye would have loved to cry, but couldn't, because Okonkwo had tried to raise him up like himself. In Okonkwo's world, real men do not show effeminate emotion. Crying is not a masculine attribute.

In Chapter Eight, we are told that Okonkwo himself could not sleep. He was distraught and deeply affected by the death of Ikemefuna and his son's reaction to it. As Achebe told us, Okonkwo was not a man of many words (something traditionally viewed as a masculine quality in the Umuofia's belief system), so he bottled his feelings within his heart. For two whole days he ate nothing as he struggled to erase the memory of killing a child who called him father. It was the cumulative effects of these things, including the impact the death of Ikemefuna had on his son that paved the way to Okonkwo's eventual suicide. But the death of Ikemefuna had no immediate impact on the Umuofia people. It was however, definitely an apocalyptic step towards things that were yet to come.

Later at the funeral of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, Okonkwo's gun accidentally discharged and killed the son of Ezeudu. Even though this was an accident, it was viewed as an abomination in the land, for under no circumstances would someone kill a clansman. Okonkwo and family had to flee the land before the cock crowed. They found refuge in his mother's village, Mbanta. He and his family endured seven years in exile. In the meantime, offerings were made in Okonkwo's compound, after their departure, to cleanse the land and placate the gods. Okonkwo saw this sojourn to Mbanta as a training experience in the wilderness. While he was in the village, he found out that the Mbanta clan was allowing missionaries to establish Christian churches and make converts especially among the untouchable. He saw how the missionaries defied the power of the local gods. His son, Nwoye, who suffered from inner turmoil as a result of the death of Ikemefuna,[8] decided to attend the mission school. He left his father's house and joined the Christian church. This was the straw that broke the camel's back. Okonkwo was furious and disappointed. He tried unsuccessfully to get the Mbanta clan to chase the missionaries out. When they couldn't get the missionaries out, Okonkwo sighed heavily and longed for his father's land, where according to him, men were men, bold, and war-like (Achebe 1996, 141).

When he finally returned to his fatherland, little did he know that the missionaries had penetrated his father's land too and made converts of different categories of Umuofia clan, ranging from the low-born and the outcast to the men of title and stature. They also established white government with a courthouse where "the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance" (Achebe 1996, 123). Obierika explained it this way: "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceable with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (125). Fallen apart indeed! "Okonkwo's return to his native land was not as memorable as he had wished" (129). He never received the hero's welcome he dreamed of. He returned to a different Umuofia from the one he had known. In the present Umuofia, "men [have] unaccountably become soft like women" (129). He wanted to fight, but Obierika said to him: "It is already too late. . . . Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the strangers. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. . . . How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?" (124).

Okonkwo left and killed himself, not because of character weakness, or the departed African glories. Rather, it was the inevitable consequence of the Igbos' complex concept of a hero. As Sarma keenly pointed out:

> One cannot some-how lay the blame on Okonkwo. His action at the end, hasty though it was, was quite in accordance with the traditional values. It was an act of conviction, almost religious, and the end vindicated the char-

> acter of Okonkwo, who emerges as the lone representative of the Igbo value system while the entire community lay around him in a shambles. (Sarma 1993, 69)

Okonkwo, who had a resolute hunger to become a hero, was not afraid of the forces that surrounded him. However, he was so overwhelmed by the cumulative effects of his experiences on the road to heroism that he felt the only thing left to do was to commit suicide. Okonkwo had to maintain his integrity as a hero. The truth of this profound, but ambivalent act is reflected in the Igbo proverb that says: "The thought that led a man to truncate his own existence was not conceived in a day." It was not just one single thing or event that forced Okonkwo to kill himself. His suicidal act was an ultimate expression of the compound effects of his own experiences in his unflinching desire to become a hero. Okonkwo was a hero. Hence, he had to depart from the battlefield as one. A hero would rather die than be captured and/or humiliated by the enemy. Okonkwo's death cheated his enemies, the European colonizers, of their revenge. But to the Umuofia people, it was unambiguously imprinted in their minds that there had been an irreversible break with the past. Umuofia would never again be what it was.

Contrary to the charge that the author of the novel allowed Okonkwo to stumble and fall, Achebe did not cause the hero's downfall. He was not responsible for Okonkwo's tragedy. Achebe saw his role as that of a neutral narrator. Thus, he presented, in a non-committal fashion, the tensions and conflicts between traditional values and alien culture, the "private self" and "public man" and their attendant consequences in a pre-colonial society.

Notes

[1] Special thanks to all my colleagues and students in the Honors Program whose thoughtful questions stimulated and sustained my interest in writing this article. I am also grateful to the following reviewers, Michael H. Bright, Ronald J. Messerich, and Salome C. Nnoromele whose valuable suggestions and useful criticisms helped shaped this essay.

[2] Achebe did respond to the question (without sufficient elaboration) by saying: "the concepts of success and failure as commonly used in this connection are inadequate. Did Okonkwo fail? In a certain sense, he did, obviously. But he also left behind a story strong enough to make those who hear it. . .wish devoutly that things had gone differently for him" (Achebe 1991, 22-23).

[3] For this and other contemporary interpretations of the novel, see Lott and Lott (1993). This volume contains an extensive bibliographic essay on *Things Fall Apart*. See also McDougall (1986, 24-33).

[4] The characters in this novel, including the gods or divinities, ancestors, and the events, are actual representations of the Igbo people and their cultural belief systems.

[5] Among the Umuofia people, a hero is expected to overcome the reputation of his father. Yet the society maintains that one is not judged by the worth of one's father.

This is a contradiction, an unresolved discrepancy so indicative of the Igbo traditional values. Achebe made no effort to reconcile or extract a true version from these conflicting accounts, because he was writing from the standpoint of a neutral narrator.

[6] See also Devi (1993, 79-86).

[7] See, for instance, Adams (1982).

[8] Nwoye could not express his emotion as felt, because his father, Okonkwo reacting to his own father's effeminacy, had taught Nwoye to believe that the expression of effeminate emotion was a sign of weakness. Thus, Nwoye tried to bottle his feelings in his heart. The unavoidable consequence of this was the despair and inner turmoil he suffered in his life.

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