

than be a woman. He does not know how to live except as a man. For Okonkwo, there is no nonmartial way of engaging such enemy force as the Christian missionary. The only alternative to war is capitulation.

Steve Biko has aptly noted that the greatest weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. Chinua Achebe's fiction (including his other four novels) powerfully demonstrates the need for a culture to utilize utopian speculative analytical power if it is to develop fruitfully. Umuofia's tragedy lies not in its fall per se. Things (especially the *egwugwu* tradition) needed to fall apart there. The tragedy of Umuofia lies in the fact that when the center eventually falls apart, it falls to another improperly constituted cultural structure or genealogy. Worse still, it falls without the *egwugwu* leaders ever realizing or recognizing that the *egwugwu* economy has very much to do with the fall and inauguration of a colonial regime in Umuofia.

* Okonkwo + Igbo Culture



EUSTACE PALMER

Character and Society in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

The recent publication of a collection of essays on Chinua Achebe edited by Bernth Lindfors and Catherine Innes and entitled *Critical Perspectives on Achebe* clearly demonstrates two main points: the accomplished artistry of the author who now justifiably occupies a central position in African letters and the dominance of his first novel *Things Fall Apart* in the Achebe canon. The essays on *Things Fall Apart* in that volume are not only much better in quality than those on its nearest rival *Arrow of God*, but the authors also go to great lengths to demonstrate its complex artistry. If, however, there is now general agreement about the quality of that novel, opinion is much more divided about the status of its hero Okonkwo and about attitudes (including the author's) towards him. On the one hand are those critics like Killam and the present writer who regard Okonkwo as essentially the embodiment of the major values and norms of his society, essentially a product of his society in fact, while on the other hand there are those like Iyasere, Innes and Carroll who see Okonkwo as deviating from those norms and being essentially out of step with his society.

Solomon Iyasere is most typical of this latter view. In his essay he suggests that the present writer in presenting Okonkwo as the embodiment of his society transforms him from champion to victim, and he goes on to suggest further that far from being an embodiment of the values of his

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society Okonkwo has only a very limited understanding of those values. Where his society is surprisingly flexible Okonkwo is utterly inflexible; where his society is able to accommodate the lazy and unsuccessful Okonkwo has no patience with them; where his society respects age Okonkwo shows scant regard for age; where his society is noted for its discreet blending of the masculine and feminine principles Okonkwo is openly contemptuous of all things feminine. Iyasere unwittingly transforms Okonkwo into a villain with few redeeming features, instead of the truly tragic hero with a blend of attractive and unattractive qualities that most readers know. The essence of great tragedy, surely, is that the hero possesses certain excellent qualities which arouse the reader's admiration, but he simultaneously possesses certain weaknesses which render him incapable of dealing successfully with the forces and circumstances he is confronted with. It is these which lead to his downfall, but the reader's sympathy is never totally alienated from him because he continues to be aware of those excellent qualities. The tragic hero is never completely villain nor completely victim and his tragedy is always brought about by a combination of his own personal inadequacies and external circumstances. Okonkwo is precisely such a tragic hero.

Like the good critic he is Iyasere senses that that the reader's sympathy is never totally alienated from Okonkwo but the position he has adopted at the start of his essay prevents him from pursuing this hunch to its logical conclusion and realising, firstly that Okonkwo has many more admirable qualities than merely not being at heart a violent man (which is the reason he gives for the retention of the reader's sympathy), and secondly that the very predisposition to violence which he so copiously demonstrates has been conditioned in Okonkwo partly by the need to conform to his society's norms. In his attempt to demonstrate the extent to which Okonkwo deviates from his society Iyasere over-idealises Umuofia society and blinds himself to its harshness. He also has a very narrow interpretation of the term "embodiment." Surely, when one says that Okonkwo is the embodiment of his society's values one does not mean that every single aspect of Okonkwo's character has been conditioned by his society; one means that his public attitudes and ideas like attitudes towards women, customs, children or wealth would have been largely determined by his society's norms, but at the same time he would himself possess certain personal idiosyncracies like impulsiveness, ill-temper or nervousness which might themselves contribute towards his downfall, but which still do not mean that he is not the embodiment of his society's values. When talking about the interrelationship between character and society one must be careful to make the distinction between public attitudes, ideas and beliefs which have been adopted in conformity with the society's norms, and more personal qualities.

It is possible to be the embodiment of one's society and yet possess certain personal individual human qualities. This is the case with Okonkwo. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that Okonkwo's virtues are largely the virtues of his society, just as his weaknesses are largely the weaknesses of his society. In this sense, his tragedy is similar to that of his society, for these weaknesses largely contribute to his downfall, just as they surely lead to the capitulation of his society to an alien force. But of course Okonkwo's own personal qualities, such as his impulsiveness, also play a contributory role, but they do not necessarily suggest that he is a deviant from his society.

It is clear that Okonkwo's admirable qualities, such as courage, fearlessness, determination, industry, energy, perseverance, resilience and tribal pride are either qualities he shares with his society or have been produced in him by the need to respond to the demands of that society. Okonkwo accepts most of his society's major attitudes such as its concern for rank and prestige, its reverence for courage, bravery and success in war or wrestling, and its premium on material and social prosperity. In discussion with Obierika about the law which forbids men of title to climb palm trees Okonkwo can say quite categorically that "the law of the land must be obeyed" and all his actions are determined by this conviction. Even when he breaks the week of peace and unwittingly infringes the law, he accepts that he is wrong and that the law is right, and he submits to his punishment. Okonkwo does not deviate from his society's norms and it is inaccurate to say that he has only a limited understanding of them; rather it is the intelligent Obierika who constantly questions his society's values; it is he who suggests that the law forbidding men of title to climb palm trees is a bad law; it is he who questions the throwing of twins into the evil forest and the banishing of a man for seven years from his fatherland for accidentally killing a kinsman. Okonkwo never does; and yet no one has accused Obierika of deviating from his society's norms.

Very early in the novel there is an episode demonstrating that even in his youth Okonkwo is determined to be the personification of those values that his society holds sacred. He goes to Nwakibie to ask for seed yams and says: "I know what it is to ask a man to trust another with his yams, especially these days when young men are afraid of hard work. I am not afraid of work." Critics like Innes and Iyasere might see this as the most towering conceit on Okonkwo's part, but in reality it shows his confidence in himself and his determination to be different from other young men and conform to his society's aspirations. And Nwakibie who is very much in line with his society's norms and is a pillar of that society, agrees with Okonkwo and confirms the truth of what he has just said: "It pleases me to see a young man like you these days when our youth have gone soft. Many young men have come to me to ask for yams but I have refused because I knew they would just

dump them in the earth and leave them to be choked by weeds." To Nwaki, Okonkwo stands for everything that he is looking for in a deserving young man. Later in Mbanta we see an elder identifying Okonkwo with the traditional ways of doing things while castigating the younger generation for deviating from the tribe's paths: "It is good in these days when the younger generation consider themselves wiser than their sires to see a man doing things in the grand old way." The society's recognition that Okonkwo is an embodiment of their values is illustrated in their choice of him as the emissary to Mbaino and the guardian of Ikemefuna. He is also the representative of his village among the nine masked egwugwu of Umuofia. If anything Okonkwo's tragedy is caused not by his deviation from the norms of his society, but because he tries to adhere to those norms too completely.

No other issue illustrates Okonkwo's oneness with his society than his regard for the concept of manliness. Iyasere and Innes would have us believe that Umuofia society, while adhering to the concept of manliness, holds the female principle in very high regard, and its world view is based on a subtle blend of the masculine and feminine principles, a subtlety which Okonkwo is incapable of understanding. Iyasere cites the aged Uchendu's words of caution to the exiled Okonkwo when the former tries to explain the meaning of the adage "mother is supreme", illustrating that the mother, and therefore the female principle, stands for sympathy and compassion. Furthermore the importance of the female principle in Umuofia society is illustrated by the fact that the powerful earth deity Ani is feminine, and the no less powerful Oracle Agbala is represented as female, as is her mouthpiece—the Priestess of Agbala. It is true that Umuofia society gives some regard to the female principle, but there is little doubt that in the novel itself much greater importance is attached to the masculine principle and the concept of manliness. Okonkwo's regard for manliness is no more and no less than his society's regard for it. This is particularly demonstrated in the symbolic importance of the yam. We are told quite early in the novel: "His mother and his sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop." And Achebe's rhetorical guidance suggests that this is the view, not just of Okonkwo, but of his entire society. This is even more obvious in "Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed." The almost proverbial ring in "he who could feed his family" suggests that this is the point of view of the entire society; it is part of the tribal wisdom. The New Yam Festival is linked with manly men: "The New Yam Festival was thus an occasion for joy throughout Umuofia. And every man whose arm was strong, as the Ibo people say, was expected to invite large numbers of guests from far and wide." If Okonkwo exalts the

concept of manliness into a kind of shibboleth, it is precisely because his society reveres men whose arms were strong and who in moments of crisis did not behave like shivering old women. On their way to kill the ill-fated Ikemefuna the men of Umuofia pour ridicule on those "effeminate" men who had refused to come with them. It would probably have been more human for Okonkwo to have stayed away as the aged Ezeudu advised him to do, and as Obierika himself did; but there is little doubt that the majority of masculine opinion in Umuofia would have considered him a coward. When at the betrothal of Obierika's daughter the suitor's family's pots of wine begin to number more than thirty "the hosts nodded in approval and seemed to say 'now they are behaving like men.'" The concept of manliness is paramount. If Okonkwo rules his family with a heavy hand, it is because basically his society believes that women and children must be kept in check: "No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man. He was like the man in the song who had ten and one wives and not enough soup for his foofoo." Once more Achebe's rhetorical guidance suggests that this is the point of view, not just of Okonkwo, but of his entire society. The proverbial saying in the song from the oral tradition gives it the weight of tribal wisdom. When Okonkwo encourages his boys to sit with him in his Obi and listen to stories of war and bloodshed it is because his society reveres masculine prowess in war and he feels the boys have reached the stage when they should hear such stories. And the young and rather feminine Nwoye knows what his society believes; he knows it is right to be masculine, even though deep down he prefers his mother's stories. Conclusive proof that this is a male oriented society whose views are very much like Okonkwo's is provided by the discussion during the betrothal proceedings:

"The world is large", said Okonkwo. "I have even heard that in some tribes a man's children belong to his wife and her family."

"That cannot be", said Machi. "You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children."

As in most things he does, Okonkwo probably carries this regard for manliness too far, but it is basically a central tenet of his society's beliefs and in adhering to it one cannot say that he deviates from his society's norms, the subtle discriminations of which he is incapable of understanding. Moreover, the female principle which is supposed to be subtly blended with the masculine and to represent compassion and sympathy, does not, in practice, suggest anything of the kind, does not make for flexibility. The Earth Goddess Ani

is a harsh unrelenting deity who is dreaded by the people. It is in obedience to her dictates that twins, suicides and those who die of the swelling sickness are cast off into the evil forest and a man is exiled for seven years for the accidental slaying of a kinsman. Some of the most repulsive and most cruel practices of this society are caused by its adherence to the will of the Earth Goddess, and her will is totally inflexible. The Oracle of Agbala is not much better. If it directs that a young child must be carried away from its mother into the depths of the forest in the dead of night, or that a young and innocent hostage must be killed, then its will must be unquestioningly obeyed. And the Oracle has no more compassion for the lazy Unoka than his male-oriented society. If anything the female principle induces terror. We must never forget that the most active ingredient in Umuofia's war medicine which is the terror of its neighbours is an old woman hopping on one leg. It is inaccurate to suggest that the female principle, representing compassion and sympathy, modifies the masculine and that the two are subtly blended and that Okonkwo is blind to this subtle blending. If anything the female principle merely reinforces the male with its harshness.

One of the mainsprings of Okonkwo's actions is his rather negative revulsion against everything his father had stood for. Humiliated by his father's shameful life and even more shameful death Okonkwo is determined to be everything his father was not. He must be brave and materially successful, he must take the highest titles, he must provide for and rule his womenfolk and children and he must never be thought weak or a coward. In the process he becomes dehumanised, but Okonkwo's determination is conditioned by his society's attitudes and beliefs. If he reacts violently against everything his father stood for, it is because his society despised his father. It is surely inaccurate to suggest, as Iyasere does, that Umuofia society adapts its code to accommodate less successful men. It does not banish them, of course, since they are still members of the clan, but all the evidence suggests that it regards them with the greatest contempt. For instance, all the men are amused by Obiaka's retort when informed that his dead lazy father wants him to sacrifice a goat to him. "Ask my father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive." When Okonkwo hints that his son Nwoye has too much of his mother in him Obierika says inwardly that the young man has too much of his grandfather in him. The priestess of Agbala lashes out at Unoka in the harshest terms when the latter goes to consult the Oracle on the question of his failure. Iyasere suggests that Okonkwo should have given his father the respect due to age in conformity with the norms of his society for "while achievement was revered, age was respected." But Iyasere unwittingly turns the text on its head for the text actually reads: "Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his

hands he could eat with kings." The drift of the entire passage is the premium that these people place on achievement, rather than on age per se; "among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father." There is nothing to suggest that in secretly despising his father and repudiating all he stood for Okonkwo was violating a necessary aspect of the society's code of values. On the contrary, Okonkwo's attitude is completely shared by his society. Of course one would agree with Iyasere that in suppressing his fears and those attributes he considers a sign of weakness Okonkwo denies human responses of love and understanding; and, responding to Achebe's rhetorical guidance, we do realise that Unoka has very human qualities which Okonkwo would have been the better for possessing and that in repudiating him the latter was also repudiating positive qualities of love, compassion and sensitivity. But it is the reader who thinks so, not Okonkwo's society. Many of Okonkwo's weaknesses are also the weaknesses of his society.

There is very little sign of the tolerance and flexibility that critics like Innes and Iyasere see in Umuofia society. Okonkwo's own inflexibility, intolerance and conservatism are merely reflections of his society's. On essential questions of religion, justice and class Umuofia shows no flexibility. The penalties imposed by the gods and by custom must be adhered to. If a cow strays accidentally into somebody's field its owner must pay the full penalty even though no damage has been done and the real culprits are some negligent children who were put in charge of the cow. The question of the osus vividly illustrates the clan's intolerance on essential matters. Even the Christian converts, many of whom are themselves among the underprivileged in their society, refuse to have contact with the osus.

On one matter and one matter alone the clan seems to demonstrate some tolerance, and this is in its attitude towards the new religion. Initially they allow the new converts and their missionaries to practise their religion unmolested, but this is in line with the clan's general courtesy to strangers, and in any case the new converts are still regarded as members of the clan and cannot therefore be ostracised without infringing the clan's own rules. In fact, the clan harbours the most sovereign contempt towards the new converts who in their view are the *efulefu* or worthless excrement of the clan and therefore not worth bothering about. Initially Okonkwo's attitude towards the missionaries is exactly the same as the clan's; it is one of amused tolerance, for he, like the clan, thinks that the missionaries are mad. In reality the tolerance is only apparent, for at Mbanta the clan secretly hopes to bring about the death of the new missionaries. When the latter ask them for land to build their church, they offer them the evil forest in the hope that they will all die there. The clan will not modify its own beliefs and it will allow the new

converts to practise their religion only for as long as its own position and religion are not threatened. When some over-zealous converts boast openly that they are prepared to defy the gods by burning all their shrines they are seized and beaten until they stream with blood. When another convert kills the sacred python Okonkwo suggests that the abominable gang should be chased out of the village with whips, but although many do not agree with him, he is certainly not isolated in his view for we are told that many of the elders spoke at great length and in fury. In the end those who suggest gentler measures prevail. And when Okonkwo expresses the view that such a thing would never happen in his own fatherland Umuofia, we must realise that he speaks with the authority of one who knows how his clan would have behaved on such an occasion. Mbanta is by all accounts a gentler clan than Umuofia; but even so the women who are sent for red earth to decorate the church are severely whipped and when they go to the stream for water they find themselves debarred, an unheard of thing. To suggest that the clan is flexible and that Okonkwo's inflexibility is due to a lack of understanding of the subtle variations within the code, is to misread the novel.

The killing of Ikemefuna illustrates the essential inflexibility and brutality not just of Okonkwo, but of the entire clan. It is difficult, in fact, to accept the charge of brutality that critics like Iyasere would bring against Okonkwo in the killing of Ikemefuna. It is the society which is brutal for it is this society which has asked the men to perform a brutal task. On a personal level, perhaps it would have been more human for Okonkwo to have heeded Ezeudu's advice not to have a hand in Ikemefuna's death since the boy regarded him as his father. It is a point we hold against Okonkwo, but we hold it against his society as well, for if Okonkwo decides to accompany the men it is because he knows that if he does not do so he would be considered weak and womanish, and the comments of the men as they take Ikemefuna to his death reinforce this. Some critics feel that in disregarding the aged Ezeudu's advice Okonkwo shows scant regard for age which his society reveres and is therefore going against the norms of that society. But Ezeudu's advice is a personal one which does not necessarily have the backing of his society, for otherwise he would not have felt compelled to offer it. All the evidence suggests on the contrary, that the majority of masculine opinion in Umuofia expects Okonkwo to be a part of the delegation.

In reality, Okonkwo never intended to bear a hand in Ikemefuna's death. He had become extremely fond of the child whom he had come to regard as his own son. Indeed, the relationship with Ikemefuna brings out in Okonkwo those human qualities which we have hitherto missed. When it is announced that the boy must be killed Okonkwo is thrown into the depths of despair and although he accompanies the men on their mission of death

he keeps to the rear thus demonstrating that he has no intention of lifting his hand against the boy. He fully intends, in his own way, to heed Ezeudu's advice. When he hears the murderous blow he turns his head; he cannot bear to see a boy whom he regards as his son struck down before his eyes. If that first blow had done its work Okonkwo would never have borne a hand in the killing of Ikemefuna; if Ikemefuna in his terror had not run towards Okonkwo with his anguished cry "they have killed me father" the former would never have cut him down. By making that cry Ikemefuna was invoking the help of Okonkwo as a father and defender against those murderous men and all eyes must have been on Okonkwo to see whether he would yield to what they must consider sentimental ties rather than demonstrate loyalty to his clan and obedience to the dictates of his gods; and for Okonkwo outward displays of sentimentality are out of the question because he does not want his clan to consider him weak; and loyalty to the clan and the dictates of the gods are of over-riding importance. So he cuts Ikemefuna down.

Even so Okonkwo is aware that he has done something which goes against his best instincts and he is racked by internal torment for days afterwards. We see human dimensions here in Okonkwo that we have never suspected before. In his despair he even longs for companionship and sends for the now hostile Nwoye to sit with him in his obi. A number of critics would have us believe that Nwoye's attitude towards his father hardens because he sees the latter as having killed Ikemefuna. This is an oversimplification of the actual position. We are told that the moment Okonkwo walked into the obi Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed and something seemed to give way inside him like a tightened bow. Nwoye does not, and cannot, accuse his father of having cut down Ikemefuna since he was not present at the killing and could not possibly know that Okonkwo had dealt the final blow. What he blames his father for is taking part in the general clan brutality. That this is so is demonstrated by the anecdote of the twins in the bush which was the first occasion when Nwoye had had the feeling of something giving way inside him. That anecdote also relates to the general brutality of this society and it is this which now impresses itself once more on Nwoye's mind when he has that same feeling. In deciding, in consequence, to join the Christians who are more compassionate and humane, Nwoye rejects not just his father, but his entire society.

The Ikemefuna episode copiously demonstrates that Okonkwo is not really an inhuman person. He does have warm, human feelings, even of compassion and love. If he appears dehumanised and inflexible it is because in order to please his society, conform to its norms and measure up to its demands on him, he is forced to smother his best instincts. This is one of the reasons why we continue to sympathise with him. Okonkwo might bully his

boys in order to get them to be manly in line with his society's demands, but he knows inwardly that the boys are still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing yams. He might be pleased inwardly at his son's development but he knows he must keep his feelings tightly under control. Okonkwo is what his society has made him, and there is very little support in the text for the view that he is what he is because of a radical misunderstanding of the subtle shades of his society's codes.

Okonkwo, of course, possesses certain harsh personal qualities which are not the result of conditioning by his society. The most conspicuous of these is his uncontrollable temper which is related to his impulsiveness. It almost seems as though there is some irrational ungovernable force within Okonkwo propelling him to insane outbursts of anger and wildly impulsive actions which have increasingly disastrous consequences. In this sense he is rather like Hardy's Michael Henchard. Thus he terrorises the young Ikemefuna when the latter refuses to eat, viciously beats one wife thus breaking the week of peace and murders another with his gun for making disparaging references to his ability as a hunter. We are meant to see the slaying of Ezeudu's son, though an accidental occurrence, as the culmination of a number of increasingly serious and senseless acts partly motivated by his impulsiveness and irrational temper. We are also informed of his brusqueness and impatience with less successful men; he knew how to kill a man's spirit. There is also a basic restlessness in Okonkwo; he always seems to be charged with an overabundance of nervous energy and is always yearning for action. These are qualities, of course, which are related to his impulsiveness and they contribute to his disastrous actions. But Okonkwo is always full of regret for these acts when he comes to himself. His impulsiveness may lead him to forget the week of peace and break the law, but he regrets immediately, accepts that he has been at fault and accepts his punishment. When ever he transgresses against his society's laws, he does so unwittingly or accidentally, never deliberately, and he is quite willing to take full responsibility later. When he insults a clansman by calling him a woman, the people take sides with the man against Okonkwo, and he decently apologises. Okonkwo's harsher personal qualities, therefore, might contribute to his eventual downfall, but they do not suggest that he is a deviant from his society's norms.

A number of people in the novel make disparaging comments about Okonkwo, but we must not necessarily assume that Achebe endorses these; we must follow his rhetorical guidance in order to ascertain his point of view. When Okonkwo insults the man at the meeting for instance, the oldest man present says sternly that "those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble." But Achebe's rhetorical guidance suggests that the man's judgement is quite wrong, motivated in

all probability by envy at Okonkwo's achievements and sudden rise to prominence though still a young man:

But it was really not true that Okonkwo's palm-kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit. He had cracked them himself . . . If ever a man deserved his success, that man was Okonkwo . . . At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo 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.

The old man fails to give due weight to Okonkwo's personal determination and industry. Similarly when Okonkwo breaks the week of peace his enemies go around saying that he has no respect for the gods of the clan and that his good fortune has gone to his head. But Achebe guides us by openly terming these people 'enemies' and he informs us in any case, that inwardly Okonkwo was repentant. It is simply not true that he has no respect for the gods or that success has gone to his head. Generally Achebe remains most sympathetic towards Okonkwo, while recognising his faults, and he succeeds in generating this sympathy in the reader as well.

Many critics have not been alive to the full significance of Okonkwo's absence for seven years from his fatherland at a time when the new religion is consolidating itself and making inroads into traditional society. That accidental slaying of Ezeudu's son was a shrewd masterstroke of the author's with an important bearing on the plot and on the development of the themes and Okonkwo's character. For during that absence the clan changes profoundly while Okonkwo does not; and it is only now that a gap appears between Okonkwo and his society. But it is not so much Okonkwo who deviates, as his society which is forced to shift from the old paths. Nor is the shift in the society's position due to its flexibility, to a willingness to welcome change. It simply recognises the presence of a militarily superior force, and it is cowed in spite of itself into submission. Furthermore it has been racked by internal disunity enhanced by its own rigidity and lack of compassion. The osus, the mothers of twins and all those who are outcasts from this society or who have something to dread from its harsh unrelenting laws flock to the new religion. There are those, of course, who welcome the new regime, because it has brought trade and prosperity, and we know that Umuofia society has always been materialistic. The downfall of the society is already in progress when Okonkwo returns, and it is brought about, in part, by those very qualities which will also contribute to Okonkwo's own disaster.

So far is Okonkwo from deviating from his society's norms that on his return he is one of the very few who still hold on to the old values—the belief in courage, tribal independence, and pride in the tribe's traditions. That these values have not entirely been lost sight of, that the tribe does not willingly submit to change and to the white man's rule and that Okonkwo's attitude is not such an aberration as commonly supposed, is authenticated by the discussion at the great meeting called to discuss the white man's humiliation of the clan's elders. Sensing the resurgence of the tribal spirit Okonkwo takes heart and gets down his war gear. At the meeting itself Okika the great orator speaks out powerfully for war, thus suggesting that Okonkwo is not entirely isolated in his championing of the old values.

The killing of the messenger is one of Okonkwo's impulsive and foolish acts which have disastrous consequences. This is why certain voices ask why he did it. He attempts to force his society's hand by an act which would almost certainly result in war, whereas his clan would have wanted to take the decision in a more rational way. But there is little doubt that the old Umuofia would have backed Okonkwo, for this would not have been a war of blame since the court messengers were not really messengers but haughty aggressors attempting to stop the meeting by force. But the present, much changed Umuofia would never go to war, as Okonkwo correctly realises; it is cowed by this manifestation of the white man's power into final submission. This is the real death knell of traditional Umuofia society. It is his realisation of this which leads to Obierika's impassioned outburst against the uncomprehending District Commissioner: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog . . ." Iyasere is surely wrong in suggesting that Obierika at this point loses all sense of objectivity. Obierika has been the sanest and the most sensible man throughout the novel and we can be sure that at this stage he carries Achebe's endorsement. Okonkwo has been one of the greatest men in Umuofia, endorsing all of his society's norms to the very last, even when others are cowed into submission. He is neither victim, nor villain, but a truly tragic hero, a man with admirable qualities reflecting those of his society, and weaknesses also reflecting those of his society; but in spite of these he never loses the author's or the reader's sympathy. His tragedy resides partly in the fact that the society which he has championed for so long is forced to change, while he finds that he cannot.

RICHARD K. PRIEBE

*The Proverb, Realism and Achebe:
A Study of Ethical Consciousness*

More people have read Chinua Achebe than any other African writer. This is no less true outside the continent than it is within it. And this is constantly reflected in the fact that more critical attention is paid to his novels than to the work of any other writer. Find someone who has read but one African literary work, and the odds are that the work will be Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The reasons for this are not hard to surmise. Achebe writes in a style that is at once accessible to the individual who knows nothing of Africa and intensely compelling to even the most knowledgeable Africanist. He was one of the first writers to effectively dramatize the most important historical, political and cultural issues facing Africa, and he has remained among the best. Moreover, he is a consummate artist; he always tells a good story.

One result of his accessibility and popularity is that Achebe has become something of a standard against which other African writers are measured. Often when writers like Soyinka and Armah are attacked for their obscurity, or their use of scatological imagery, there is the implicit, if not explicit comparison with the "model" writer, Achebe. In saying this I wish to take nothing away from Achebe's well-deserved reputation. In fact, the act of prejudging what a writer should do has led to problems in interpreting Achebe as well as Soyinka and Armah. Approaching the mythic consciousness is

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