

Okonkwo's Suicide as an Affirmative Act: Do Things Really Fall Apart?

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Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has long been considered a tragic figure who is caught up in events that he cannot overcome, a victim *of* rather than an active participant *in* his own fate. Many critics have understood the novel to be "the tragic story of Okonkwo's rise and fall among the Igbo people, concluding with that least ambiguous of all endings, the death of the hero" (Begam 397) without fully examining the ramifications of Okonkwo's suicide upon both the colonial and Igbo cultures. These critics assume that the story follows the mode of tragedy (whether Aristotelian, modern or Igbo) and conclude that his suicide is the end product of his inability to control his own fate; however, this interpretation of Okonkwo's suicide as the final failure of an ill-fated man is simply not consistent with the rest of the text. On the other hand, if we assume that Okonkwo's suicide was an affirmative act, that is, a conscious decision to promote a positive ideal instead of an act of failure, then another interpretation presents itself. Rather than a tragic act, Okonkwo's suicide can be seen as his last attempt to remind the Igbo people of their culture and values in the face of impending colonisation.

The whole interpretation of Okonkwo's suicide hinges on the concept of fate: despite his strength and heroic qualities, is he really in control of his life? Most of the critics who call Okonkwo a tragic figure do so because they believe that he cannot overcome his fate, or *chi* as it is referred to in Igbo culture. *Chi* "is a very enigmatic entity, and this accounts for the diversity of opinions as to its nature. But hardly any opinion contradicts the Igbo peoples belief that *chi* is an entirely personal deity, if it can be called a deity" (Ebeogu 74). Moreover

[i]t is entirely responsible for the fortunes or misfortunes of the individual while on earth, and nothing happens to the individual except his *chi* consents. But, paradoxically, the Igbo folk think that the individual can somehow manipulate this personal enigmatic force called *chi*, and that one's *chi* is always inclined to consent to one's wishes. The relationship between the individual and his *chi* is thus manipulative. (74)

So, then, what is Okonkwo's *chi*? Is it, as some critics have claimed, "determined to lead him into disaster and shame," necessitating Okonkwo's suicide in order to "concede defeat to this enigmatic entity" (77), or is it determined to bring Okonkwo to a position in which he will sacrifice his own life in order to inspire resistance against the colonial

oppressors? In other words, is Okonkwo in control of his *chi*, or does his *chi* control him? Let us look at several key events leading up to Okonkwo's suicide to see if we can gain an insight into this event.

From the novel's opening, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" (Achebe 1), it is apparent that Okonkwo's *chi* is very strong. With no pejoratives to indicate that this fame is the result of some infamous act, we can only assume that he is respected throughout these nine villages. Indeed, his first measurable achievement is the defeat of Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling match, described as "one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights" (1).

This description is important to the narrative for two reasons. First of all, it links Okonkwo with the progenitor of his village, implying a connexion reminiscent of that between Grecian kings and their gods. Not only is Okonkwo famous, but he is now associated with the supernatural. Second, Okonkwo defeats the undefeatable wrestler, which again reinforces this notion of divinity and sets up the claim that Obierika makes at the end of the novel, that Okonkwo is "one of the greatest men in Umuofia" (191). From the onset, therefore, we are meant to believe that there is nothing that Okonkwo cannot overcome, that his *chi* is heroic.

Certainly, his first year as a farmer confirms that his *chi* is heroic. To begin with, due to the fact that his father was more concerned with music than farming, Okonkwo was not able to inherit anything from him (21) and so had to borrow the seeds for his first crop. Unfortunately, the terrible weather during this year almost caused him to lose everything. Instead of simply giving up and becoming an *agbala* like his father, he says that "[s]ince I survived that year, I shall survive anything" (27).

But not only did he survive, he rises "from great poverty and misfortune to be one of the lords of the clan" (28). He starts out in life with nothing, but through hard work he becomes a great leader. If his *chi* was inclined to point him towards disaster, thus far it seems that his "inflexible will" has illustrated the precept that "one's *chi* is always inclined to consent to one's wishes" (Ebeogu 74). With this new rank comes responsibility, and he is soon given the duty of looking after Ikemefuna, the war-ransom from Mbaino given to Umuofia in exchange for the murder of Ogbuefi Udo's wife. For three years Ikemefuna lives in Okonkwo's village, but eventually the elders of the clan decide to execute Ikemefuna for his clan's involvement in the aforementioned murder. Even though Okonkwo is warned by Ogbuefi Ezeudu to "not bear a hand in [Ikemefuna's] death" because the "boy calls [Okonkwo] father" (Achebe 55-56), ultimately Ikemefuna is slain at Okonkwo's hand.

Of this incident, there seems to be a general consensus among critics. Shelton says that "Okonkwo severely antagonized the *ndichie* (ancestors) and *Chukwu* (the High God, Creator, and Giver of all life and power) by killing Ikemefuna . . . [and] alienated his *chi*" (36). He goes on to claim that Okonkwo's family is cursed, tracing the effects of this through *Things*

Fall Apart and its sequel *No Longer At Ease*. Iyasere is a bit more forgiving, saying that “Okonkwo is in competition with the gods and [kills Ikemefuna] out of his pathological fear of being thought weak—his fear of being perceived as like his father Unoka” (Iyasere 306). Both authors concur on one point: Okonkwo acts wrongly and is ultimately punished for his actions.

However, this conclusion is contrary to the text itself. Even though Obierika says that “if the Oracle said my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it” (Achebe 64-5), Okonkwo’s earlier claim that “[t]he Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger” (64) is absolutely true. His statement is not contradicted in the text, nor is it opposed in any of the critical readings that have been published in the past fifty years, despite the abundance of statements such as “Okonkwo broke the law of the gods . . . [when] he killed Ikemefuna” (Okpala 562). First of all, Ikemefuna’s execution is legally sanctioned: “Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it” (Achebe 56). Second, Ezeudu only *wants* Okonkwo to abstain from becoming involved in his “son’s” death; he is not ordered, in other words, to stay out of it, and so cannot be faulted for disobeying an elder by landing the fatal blow.

From an emotional viewpoint, however, we are deeply shocked when we see that Okonkwo does indeed kill his son instead of letting somebody else commit the act. Why would he do such a thing? To be sure, Okonkwo is widely regarded as impulsive and rarely thinks before he acts (Macdonald 51), but when we take a closer look at the scene we realise that Okonkwo’s actions were not brutal, but were instead relatively humane. The execution has been ordered, without any possibility of reprieve; the novel is clear in this regard. As the execution party marches out of the village, Ikemefuna becomes aware of what is about to happen and runs towards Okonkwo, shouting “My father, they have killed me!” At this point, we have Okonkwo at the rear of the party with the other members ostensibly moving towards Okonkwo; had Okonkwo defended his son as we wish he would have done, not only would Ikemefuna’s fate be cruelly postponed, but Okonkwo would have gone against the will of the Oracle, which is tantamount to turning his back on the clan himself. Shelton’s claim, then, that Okonkwo and his family are cursed because of Ikemefuna’s murder makes no sense—how much more cursed would Okonkwo’s family had been if he had instead defended his son against the Oracle?

By not only killing his son, an act that we have already established as inevitable, but also by doing it swiftly, Okonkwo saves Ikemefuna from the cruel fate of being run to the ground by the other executioners. An image of Ikemefuna trying to escape from a group of men with machetes is much more brutal than a sudden blow that kills him. Not only did Okonkwo obey the Earth’s messenger, but he did so in the most humane and logical way possible. Although the narrator does note that Okonkwo

was “[d]azed with fear” and was “afraid of being thought weak” (59) when he killed Ikemefuna, there is no doubt that Okonkwo could not have thought of a better way to handle the situation under the circumstances. Okonkwo is not the victim of tragedy in this scene, but the architect of his own *chi*.

The killing of Ezeudu's son, however, is slightly more problematic. On the surface, there is no way that Okonkwo could have purposefully forced the gun to explode, consciously or unconsciously, nor could the immediate effects of this be seen as anything other than tragic. By way of punishment for accidentally killing another member of the clan, Okonkwo is forced to leave the village and live in Mbanta for seven years. This not only takes away his status as a lord of a clan and ruins his carefully planted farm, but it also robs his son Nwoye of the chance of taking a title and becoming a prominent member of their society. At the same time, the fact that Okonkwo is removed from the village shortly before the arrival of the missionaries is somewhat fortuitous.

Over the course of the seven years that Okonkwo is in exile, major changes occur in Umuofia, beginning with the slaughter of the village of Abame. A white man comes to the village and tries to communicate with the villagers, but ostensibly since he cannot communicate with them, the villagers kill him. In retribution, the white men's fellows wait until the villagers are all at the market and then kill them. Okonkwo says of the incident that “they were fools” and since they “had been warned that danger was ahead [,] [t]hey should have armed themselves with their guns and their machetes even when they went to market” (130).

Two years later, when the missionaries have established a mission in Mbanta, he discovers that his son has converted to this new religion and has forsworn the customs of his ancestors. When Okonkwo considers this new situation, “[a] sudden fury rose within him and he felt a strong desire to take up his machete, go to the church and wipe out the entire vile and miscreant gang” (Achebe 142). At first, Okonkwo dismisses the villagers of Abame as foolish for not being prepared for an ambush, but after seeing the “demasculating” effects of the white man first-hand he realises that the situation is much more grave than he at first believes. Had Okonkwo first experienced the missionary-invaders in Umuofia, it is certain that he would have done as his fury had dictated and attempt to directly fight back against the white man. Furthermore, Okonkwo is not as concerned since this all takes place in Mbanta and not in his own village; Okonkwo already thinks that the people of Mbanta are weak, so he is not surprised when they allow the missionaries to gain inroads in the village. Although he is not fully in control of the events that lead to his exile, we can attribute the accidental killing of Edeuzu's son to his fortuitous *chi* which saves his life at this point so that he can sacrifice it at a later point for a greater gain. The fact that he prospers while in exile seems to support this, that “his *chi* might now be making amends for the past disaster” (Achebe 158).

This sacrifice comes immediately following the slaying of the messenger, an event that again shows Okonkwo to be in control of his *chi*. After Okonkwo returns from exile, he learns that the missionaries have further encroached into his culture than he could have believed. He is saddened because his people have “so unaccountably become soft like women” (168) and have lost their martial spirit. Tension between the church and the village escalates until finally Enoch, a convert, tears off the mask of an *egwugwu*, killing an ancestral spirit (171). The village retaliates by burning the church to the ground, which redeems the village in Okonkwo’s eyes: “[i]t was like the good old days again, when a warrior was a warrior” (176). With Okonkwo back in the village, it seems as if the clan is returning to its war-like state, and he has reason to hope that the village might actually gain enough courage to “kill the missionary and drive away the Christians” (176).

This hope is important to the scene in which Okonkwo kills the messenger, which takes place shortly after Okonkwo and several of his peers are tricked into captivity as retribution for the destruction of the church. In the meeting that follows, it appears as if the village has had enough. Okika, one of the “great men” of the village, gives this speech:

If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansmen. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done . . . We must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the side of evil we must root them out too. And we must do it *now*. (187)

Okika’s speech is then interrupted by an Igbo messenger who tells the assembly that “[t]he white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop” (188), at which point Okonkwo kills the messenger, his “machete descend[ing] twice and the man’s head lay beside his uniformed body” (188).

Unlike the accidental killing which led to Okonkwo’s exile, this murder is specifically designed to incite the village to revolt against the white man. Everything up to this point indicates that Okonkwo’s actions are “correct”: the village “listened to him with respect” when he urges action against the church, joins him as they burn down the chapel, and takes Okika’s speech to be dogma—in other words, there was no other response for Okonkwo to take without it being completely out of character. If Okonkwo had *not* killed this messenger, Okika’s speech would have been meaningless—what would have been the point of an immediate call to action if the men of the village had meekly shuffled off at the first sign of trouble? His *chi* was not against him when he killed the messenger; he killed him because he was attempting to uphold the culture of his people in the face of the impending colonisation by the white men and their collaborators.

When Okonkwo discovers, then, that his village does not in fact support his actions because they “had let the other messengers escape,” he does not rave, he does not go out and attack the court, but he

contemplatively “wip[es] his machete on the sand and [goes] away” (188). We discover shortly thereafter that Okonkwo has hung himself on a tree behind his compound. This act of suicide is what has troubled and confused critics; despite the fact that we have seen that Okonkwo has been in control of his *chi* thus far, Ebeogu claims that “he suddenly realises that his *chi* is determined to lead him into disaster and shame. So he takes his own life in order to end it all” (77). Macdonald says that “Okonkwo knows they will never go to war and that his act of hope has now sealed his destruction because he is completely alone in his opposition to the new authority. The only alternative to the ignominy of hanging in the white man’s gaol is to take his own life, ironically an abomination to all he stood for in the past” (59). In other words, Macdonald claims that Okonkwo kills himself because the only other option is his execution at the hands of the white man.

However, this runs contrary to Igbo beliefs on suicide. Ukwu and Ikebundu say that suicide is

considered an “*nso ani*,” a sin against the Earth. The Igbos do not concede to the difficulties of life or to the demands of everyday life. They do not accept suicide, in any form and at any age, as a solution to any problem regardless of the complexities. Suicide is believed to be a terrible and evil way to die. The Igbos strongly believe in reincarnation. Reincarnation is one of the ways they share their love with their loved ones who have passed. Consequently, death by suicide is believed to be an evil and “a bad death.” If one committed suicide, that person was never (and never will be) at peace with him/herself, the community (i.e. village), relatives, and most importantly the gods.

As we can see, suicide is one of the worst acts that an Igbo person can commit as it is both a crime against the individual and against the village. Macdonald claims that Okonkwo commits suicide because it is better than dying at the hands of the white man, but being murdered, it seems, is infinitely more desirable than taking one’s own life. A murdered clan member at the very least would be able to join their ancestral spirits or be reincarnated, but for somebody who commits suicide there is nothing beyond life. There is no other alternative, then, than the interpretation that Okonkwo chooses to commit suicide rather than being executed by the white man.

However, as the above passage illustrates, this opens up a multitude of problems. I have claimed that Okonkwo’s act of suicide is a positivity rather than the end result of some tragic flaw, and we have seen that throughout the entire novel that, at the very least, Okonkwo and his *chi* seem to be working together towards a positive end. What, then, was Okonkwo hoping to achieve from such a “terrible and evil” act? I believe that Okonkwo is lamenting the village’s turn away from their traditional customs, and by committing the worst possible offence in Igbo culture, he hopes to turn back the overwhelming tide of movement towards the white man’s ideology.

The progression of the novel makes it clear that the village is moving further and further away from their traditional customs. After Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna, a rift appeared between Okonkwo and Nwoye; Nwoye had already questioned the killing of Ikemefuna and the traditional custom of leaving twin newborns in the forest to die, but it is not until he hears the missionaries singing that he feels “relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul” (137). We sympathise with Nwoye because we too as readers feel uncomfortable over these acts in the novel, but Okonkwo does not feel the same way: after thinking about Nwoye’s act of leaving his house and becoming a Christian, he realises that

his son’s crime stood out in stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye’s steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospects, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man’s god. (142)

Okonkwo is caught in a difficult situation: if he allows the white man to influence Nwoye and the rest of the village, then there will be nobody left to worship him or his ancestors when he dies, leading to the situation as described in the above passage.

The scene in which Enoch unmasks an *egwugwu* and kills an ancestral spirit also exemplifies this slide into colonisation. Such an act was absolutely unheard of; after he had killed the spirit,

the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming—its own death. (171-2)

Certainly Okonkwo hears this portent, which again echoes his previous thoughts on Nwoye and the slow movement of the clan towards Christianity. Not only are its children becoming Christians, but the converts are committing gross acts of sacrilege. As we have already seen, the chapel is torn down in retribution, but the chapel can be rebuilt, whereas nothing can bring that ancestral spirit back to life.

So when faced with the choice of either humbly going home at the messenger’s request or attacking him for his disrespect, to Okonkwo there is no other choice: he must act, and he must kill. But when he realises that he is alone and that Umuofia will not go to war to fight for their customs and traditions that are slowly slipping away, Okonkwo has another choice to make. He could allow himself to be killed, thus assuring his reincarnation or his enshrinement along with his ancestors, but as we have already seen this would be a futile act: being ignored while their children are worshipping the white man’s God (which would happen if Umuofia

loses more converts and traditions) is exactly “the prospect of annihilation” (142) that Okonkwo fears.

If Okonkwo wishes to try to save his culture, then, it seems as if there is only one other plausible option: suicide. He could have gone on a rampage and attempted to take on the white men himself, but then his village too would be destroyed like Abame, which would have negated any attempt to move the villagers back towards their traditions. If he commits suicide instead, at the very least his people would survive to feel the effects of his act.

Ukwu and Ikebudu have already made it clear that suicide for the Igbo people is a terrible act, and as such it is likely that it is an extremely rare event. Certainly, suicide is not mentioned anywhere else in the novel. On the other hand, the arrival of the white man and Christianity is a singular event, one that by definition cannot be repeated. It is understandable that the people of Umuofia are swayed by the novelties of the white man, including Christianity and the trading store, which is why Okonkwo undertook such a drastic step in order to force his people to remember and consider the customs that they are throwing away. If they were swayed at first by the prospect of merely selling palm-oil and kernels, then how much more would they be concerned over the suicide of one of their clansmen, especially one who is “one of the greatest men in Umuofia?” (191)

This act is perhaps not the most prudent, especially considering that Okonkwo would essentially cease to exist according to Ukwu and Ikebudu, tell us about Igbo culture, but given the situation it is the most effective. Influential men, including Nwoye, the son of one of the greatest men in Umuofia, have left the clan in order to become Christians. The missionaries built their chapel in the Evil Forest, which instead of destroying them only showed that the white men’s medicine was strong. Enoch kills an ancestral spirit. Finally, when Okonkwo kills a messenger and all but starts a war between the white men and Umuofia, his peers prove to be too “womanly” to do what is necessary: “kill the missionary and drive away the Christians.” Okonkwo is faced with a singular event that is much too large for him to effectively combat with outward violence alone, so he turns the violence inwards and kills himself; in other words, he fights the singularity of the white men with the singularity of suicide in Igbo culture.

The suicide in and of itself achieves nothing, but since it is such a rare event in Igbo culture it compels the villagers to recollect the customs and rites associated with it. It forces them to think about Okonkwo, once a great man, who has been driven to suicide by the arrival of the white man. It would provoke thought and discussion in Umuofia about Igbo culture and values and perhaps even beyond, as he would be remembered for his infamous act rather than his fame as a mere wrestler in his youth. I would contend that the very act of remembering these values presents a powerful affront against the missionaries, who encourage Umuofia to forget their

culture and history and join with them in worshipping a god who has not even existed for them until just recently. Moreover, in the language of the church, Okonkwo has become a “martyr” for his beliefs, and as the church well knows, once dead, martyrs cannot be silenced.

But Ukwu and Ikebudu tell us that suicide is “an ‘*nso ani*,’ a sin against the Earth.” Would Okonkwo really commit such a grievous act against the gods in order to turn the people back towards the gods? First, throughout the novel it is apparent that Okonkwo is not exactly concerned with what the gods think. During the Week of Peace, Okonkwo beats his wife Ojiugo because she forgets to cook the afternoon meal. Although such an act is forbidden during the Week of Peace and his wives remind him of this, “Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess” (31). Although he is concerned with the culture of his people (as evidenced by the fact that the offering he makes to Aní, the earth goddess, is more than what is required), it is apparent that he shows this concern in his own way and by his own time.

Second, although the act of suicide is fairly rare, the fact that the Igbo culture in Umuofia is slipping away is a brand new concept in the clan. Up until this point, Okonkwo’s clan was protected by not only a complex system of beliefs but a system of inter-tribal warfare: if one clan has offended another (as in the case of the murder of Ogbuefi Udo’s wife) and if no peaceful arrangement can be achieved, then the two clans go to war. Okonkwo is fully aware of this system, having shown “incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars” (12), but with the arrival of the white man and their ability to kill an entire village without even being seen, the balance of power has shifted. The entire system of peace was dependent on the threat of war; with such a threat being impotent against the interlopers, the concept of peace is now meaningless. This might be assuming a bit much, but surely Umuofia’s gods would not want their worshippers to go to war against the white people with the end result of being completely obliterated. Surely it would be much more reasonable for one man to sacrifice his life in order for others to have the chance to realise their mistake and turn back to their gods. We cannot know for sure how the gods would react to this situation, but reason would seem to dictate that one life sacrificed for the greater good is infinitely better than a total loss of worshippers to either death or Christianity. In a sense, not to take action would be suicidal for the Igbo people.

Third, putting aside the issue of the gods completely, it is also apparent that Okonkwo is more concerned about the lack of ancestor worship than the fact that the gods will not receive as much adulation. He mentions the image of him and his ancestors huddling over their cold ancestral shrine, whereas when “things” start to “fall apart” he shows no interest in how the gods would view the situation. He might, therefore, be willing to grieve the gods if his ancestors receive the worship that they deserve.

We cannot be certain, but it is more likely that Okonkwo would risk angering the gods by committing suicide in order to bring his people back to the traditions that he considers to be important rather than doing nothing, resulting in total colonisation or launching a one-man attack on the Christians, which would lead to total annihilation. However, was his attempt in vain? It is a bit difficult to measure the effects of Okonkwo's suicide given the fact that the novel ends a page after we discover his death, but there is one significant statement made just before the novel closes: Obierika ferociously says to the commissioner that "[Okonkwo] was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog" (Achebe 191). Throughout the entire novel, Obierika is "the conscience of the clan" (Champion 274), the voice of reason that stands in contrast to Okonkwo's own words and actions. Obierika questions some of the traditions of the clan, asking at one point "[w]hy should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently?" (118) and later grieves for his twin children that he himself had thrown into the Evil Forest (118). It is fitting that this man, both progressive and yet remaining true to his culture, would give Okonkwo's benediction of being "one of the greatest men in Umuofia."

Furthermore, the fact that Achebe uses the literary technique of *inclusio* ("one of the greatest men of his time/in Umuofia") indicates that he too agrees with Obierika's pronouncement. At the beginning of the novel, at the height of his fame the narrator says that "although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time" (12). The fact that Obierika repeats this phrase almost word-for-word validates Okonkwo's suicide: even after killing himself and performing one of the most heinous acts an Igbo man could think of undertaking, he is still "one of the greatest men in Umuofia." His suicide could not, then, have been merely the result of a tragic flaw or *hamartia*; would a fatal flaw and a useless death be so celebrated by the novel's most rational character? At the beginning of the novel, Okonkwo is a great man because he is wealthy, he has achieved fame, and he has taken two wives. At the end of the novel, after he commits suicide, he is a great man because he has made the ultimate sacrifice of his immortality (in Igbo fashion), his honour and the honour of his family and village in order to remind his people of what they would lose if they turned away from their past and instead looked towards the white man's God.

Finally, if we see Okonkwo's suicide as a failed act, then we can only assume that Achebe supports the act of colonisation as described in the novel. If Okonkwo really does "function as the true representative of his people . . . [by] committing what is a form of collective suicide by submitting to the British . . . [and preceding] his people in their communal destruction" (Begam 400), then either Achebe is giving us the novel in order to lament the death of the Igbo people or he tacitly supports the transformation of the Igbo people from proud and self-dependent to "improved specimens." If, on the other hand, Okonkwo's suicide is a

positive act designed to immortalise the traditions that his people are so close to throwing away, then Okonkwo's death is not a "form of collective suicide" but is instead the transference of Igbo culture from the physical to the mythic. As reflected in his ties to divinity in the opening passage, Okonkwo is no longer a mere mortal who is powerless to act against the colonisers, but is a symbol of anti-colonialism to rally around, a martyr for the Igbo people.

Although *Things Fall Apart* can be interpreted in the tragic mode, the novel is much more meaningful if we interpret Okonkwo's suicide as an act of wilful resistance rather than an act of shame and dishonour. Within the text itself, the effects of Okonkwo's suicide are barely felt in the colonial world; the commissioner is still planning on writing his study, Nwoye is still lost to Igbo culture, and even Obierika's fierce words fall upon deaf ears. But on the other hand, if we consider Okonkwo's suicide to be a positivity rather than an act of defeat, then in a sense Igbo culture still lives on; perhaps things do not fall apart after all.

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