

Review Essay:
Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe

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Abstract

The life of Unoka, the father of Okonkwo, the latter being the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, had been dismissively concluded as inconsequential. This is evident in the fact that Unoka's presence, as the author presented it in the novel, apparently ended in the very first chapter. But the meta-life of Unoka formed an original and inevitable basis for the thought and consequences that pervaded the life of Okonkwo and his first son, Nwoye. None of these three achieved the traditional, metaphysical height that defined fulfilment of a life well spent in Igbo's religio-sphere. Circumstantially, Unoka could not become an ancestor; inadvertently or deliberately, Okonkwo could not become one either; and consciously, Nwoye refused to become one. Thus, through the gristmill of Peircean semiotic pragmatism, which revolves around Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, it is argued that the fates of these three personae in the novel are the same, despite its denial within the text. This is the fulcrum that dictates reconstruction of the meta-life of Unoka, as an original and inevitable foundation that the protagonist, Okonkwo, and his son, Nwoye, could not surpass.

Keywords: Semiotic pragmatism, Okonkwo, Peirce, Igbo's religio-sphere, Unoka.

Introduction

Consequent upon the avalanche of hermeneutic guides provided by Chinua Achebe himself in the construction of *Things Fall Apart*, critics and scholars have, over the past five decades untiringly pursued a myriad of interpretive possibilities in their various discourses on the text. Some of these interpretive channels include, but are by no means limited to, multiculturalism, imperialism or colonialism, intrusion of Christianity and the resilience of traditional Igbo belief: clash of civilisations (Mazrui 2012). In effect, critics have, with good reasons, interpreted Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as his answer to the limited and mostly erroneous presentation of Nigerian life and customs found in literature written and indeed sanctioned by the colonial powers. For instance, Abiola Irele, foremost critic of African literature, states that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* "has acquired the status of a classic...by reason of its character as a counterfiction of Africa, in specific relation to the discourse of Western colonial domination..." (Irele 2000:2). It does appear, as has been put forward by critics, that one of the reasons for which Achebe wrote the novel, *Things Fall Apart* was for the purpose of educating his readers about the value of his African culture. This education was necessitated by the cultural identity crisis and its attendant threat of cultural annihilation – with which the African was faced – occasioned, as it was, by imperialism and a surfeit of existing literary outputs which portrayed the African in much less than pleasant colours. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* are cases in point. On the obviously overwhelming, favourable critical attention which Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in particular received, Achebe himself (Robertson 1980: 106) declares, "I have no doubt that the reason for the high rating of this novel in Europe and America is simply that there it fortifies fears and prejudices." Ernest Emenyonu, (Hunter 2002) speaking in very strong terms, avers, unequivocally, that

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Things Fall Apart is indeed a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the consequences to the rest of humanity, when a belligerent culture or

civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization.

There was therefore a yawning need for cultural renaissance especially in the years immediately before and after Nigeria's independence. This necessarily found a needed haven in the thoughts propounded by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. Ogbaa (1999: 87 cited in Foley 2001:40) sees it as "the African novelists' novel."

While all of these are legitimate interpretations, this present enterprise unearths the fates of a lineage within the Igbo traditional religion itself, and demonstrates how Christianity tended to help in the fulfilment of the metaphysical destinies of Unoka, Okonkwo and Nwoye. This line of thought has not yet been pursued despite the avalanche of review that the novel has elicited. Through the gristmill of Peircean semiotic pragmatism, therefore, we espouse that though the three personae lived different life styles, they were nevertheless bound by a single string of destiny, which they could not help, or escape from.

Theoretical Grounding

Charles S. Peirce is one of the profoundest philosophers whose seminal ideas of what we call 'semiotic pragmatism' have been applied not only in philosophical circles but also in the sciences. For instance, in his "Energy, semiosis and emergence – the place of biosemiotics in an evolutionary conception of nature," Eliseo Fernandez explored Peirce's idea within biological sciences as a special niche within the general sciences. This is arrived at by what Fernandez calls channelling and causation. According to him, "physical causes act by channeling the spontaneous tendency of energy towards its dissipation. This channeling takes place through the agency of resistive constraints, which act through the embodiments of habits, i.e., propensities to reproduce similar behavior each time similar triggering circumstances are reproduced" (Fernandez 2011:3). It is from this process that

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Fernandez espouses his spontaneity, constraint and habit dynamics that corresponds to Peirce's Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. Significant for us in this enterprise is Fernandez's conception of habit that implicates the fact that similar conditions reproduce similar effects within the scope of constraints flow, which he refers to as second order causation. It is on this premise that we find it necessary to give vent to a paradigm shift in the critical study of *Things Fall Apart*, because, as we shall demonstrate shortly, contrast flow of 'energy' reproduces similar metaphysical destiny. This will be demonstrated in the life of Nwoye, who though believes differently from his father and grandfather, yet suffers the same metaphysical fate in Igbo religious cosmology.

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According to Carsten Herrmann-Pillath (2010), Peirce distinguishes between the object, the sign and the interpretand. This triangular structure is germane, "because it goes beyond the simple idea of a dyadic relation between sign and object. Sign and object are essentially related with the interpretand. It is then straightforward to establish equivalence with the components of functions, in a double sense. Firstly, the triadic structure reflects the different structure of causality in relating a cause=object to an effect=sign via a function=interpretand." In this triadic structure, sign forms the core because objects are not directly observable, except through signs. In this thinking, the pivot of "semiosis can be seen as a function in the sense that the fundamental causal relation between an object system *A* and *X* in the function is insignificant, unless it is coupled with the *Z* that results from proper functioning.... Therefore, it is the *Z* that is the sign in the Peircian sense" (29).

Although Herrmann-Pillath argues this in terms of entropy, we argue here that the underlying cause in Unoka, Okonkwo and Nwoye's inability to become ancestors is socially locatable (or to use Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer's (2001: 25) terms, "the social" is necessarily relational), within the text but with deep metaphysical context that calls for investigation. In another breath, Herrmann-Pillath submits, "a sign is seen as an indicator of underlying constraints of the object. The inferred constraints become subject to further interactions between object and interpretand, which can result into a further modification of the sign. Thus, abduction naturalized refers to the evolutionary sequence of signs and interpretands, converging to an underlying set of physical constraints on the object" (30). It is in this context that an underlying sequence of causality is established.

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Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer's (2001) perspective is important here because of the obvious silence on the influence and implication of Unoka's destiny or destination in the context of the main character, Okonkwo. They argue that though semiosis depends on a broader social context, implying the possibility of studying "semiosis in isolation from its context, [such methodology] offers an incomplete account of social causation and risks falling into one or more kinds of reductionism" (1). It is for this reason that the Igbo socio-religio-sphere becomes an inevitable resource to which one must recourse for the understanding of the context of *Things Fall Apart*.

Also important is the problematique of proving. For instance, from the title of this article, it is clear that a logical connexion will be required to ascertain whether or not the argument of this paper is sound. While this is pertinent, it is equally true that in semiosphere, proving should not be supposed to be the main cut and thrust. While proving goes *pari pasu* with reasoning, it is not altogether a necessity to teach the didactic lesson of semiology and critical metaphysics. Hence semiotics, in its original conception, is "the science of signs and their life in society" (Winslow 2004: 1). Ana Hesselbart (2007) expresses the complexity of proof when he argued that what make up human systems such as human language, music, cooking, dressing, etc., are intricately structured; though they have what is common to them just as what is dissimilar in them. Their commonality is sign; sign is used by them but in different ways to communicate different meanings. Hence, "a sign is more than a simple notation, it is a sort of a complex relation in which diverse factors play. First we have to consider that every time we find a sign there is an implicit object involved. An object is a material or abstract 'thing' with certain content which is *represented* in the sign, then when we look at the sign: it has content-of the object *represented* in a particular sign- called the signified and there is a way in which the object is *represented* i.e. the material expression of the sign called the signifier. The concept of what a sign is globalises various aspects at once: the *content*, the *meaning*, the *signifier*, the *signified*, the *object* and even a stating context" (4). A sign is thus better known through noesis, that is, "the intentional act of intellect" or "the action and the effect of understanding" (5). What is immediately implicated here is that even though we claim to

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know a sign and its meanings in everyday life, there is a sense in which we are confused on sign components. Conversely, the components of sign and their meaning may also transcend the obvious, ordinary or everyday meanings, thus making signs fluid or changing, but without breaking totally from its traditional conception. This is attested to for instance, when one devotes a quantum of time to investigate the metamorphosis and polysemy of particular signs. This will become clearer when we stitch together the form of 'pragmatic' connectivity in the destinies of the three characters we investigate in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

In Peirce's pragmatism, one finds a fundamental paradigm that defines a chain of serial inter-actions guided by normativity, and in our context, meta-normativity. The essence of his pragmatism is expressed in his words thus: "the full meaning of a conceptually grounded predicate implies certain types of events that would likely occur during the course of experience, according to a certain set of antecedent conditions" (cited in Queiroz and Merrell 2006: 39). This is realised through semiosis in its interrelatedness and interaction in a context and the role of interpreters.

João Queiroz and Floyd Merrell's (2006) weave of Peircean pragmatism and Rescher's semiosis lucidly brings out the beauty of semiotic pragmatism pursued in this essay. According to Rescher, semiosis is processual in that it involves "a coordinated group of changes in the complexion of reality, an organized family of occurrences that are systematically linked to one another either causally or functionally" (Rescher, 1996: 38, cited in Queiroz and Merrell, 39). Peirce's semiotics, that is, "formal science of signs" and pragmatic notion of meaning, that is, "action of signs" formed the basis of his philosophical enterprise, which undergirds our discourse. This, according to Queiroz and Merrell, can be discerned in his concept of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. In the Firstness categories, we think of actions that have no sequel to any causal effect. In the Secondness categories, we can think of actions that are caused but not necessarily related to the Thirdness categories. The Thirdness categories can be conceived as actions that are capable of enacting a relationship between Firstness and Secondness in the same way as such actions relate themselves to the first two categories. Firstness is a pure state of uncausality; mathematically, the point of origin, or literarily an alpha point. While

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Secondness is a state of reaction, differentiation, oppositionality or brutal action, Thirdness is a state of mediation or cognition that tends to be predictable given certain set of conditions (39-40). This is distinguished from Firstness that involves becoming, and Secondness that is viewed in terms of “presently existing,” a surety.

This triadic structure of Peirce’s semiotic pragmatism is consciously crafted to correspond to the three personae being considered in this work. In the meantime, it is necessary to introduce the cosmology of the Igbo people among whom the novel was primarily written.

The Igbo People of Nigeria

As one of the major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, the Igbo are traditionally situated in the south-eastern part of the country. Although a plural ethnic nation, the Igbo possess high “individualistic ethic” (Achebe 2012: 75), which they operate within the context of communality. Otternberg has said that the Igbo “consists of more than two hundred independent territorial groups, each composed of one or more villages or dispersed residential groupings” (cited in Nnoruka 2009: 176). Mostly farmers, fishermen and business people, the Igbo are well exposed and travelled.

Religiously, the Igbo believe in the supreme deity called Chukwu or Chineke, believed to be the creator of the universe. They venerate such important lesser deities as Amadi-oha, the god of lightning and Ani, the god of the earth, among others. The pride of place the ancestors occupy in Igbo cosmology cannot be over-emphasised. Nnoruka (2009: 177) posits that the “ideology of ancestor worship occupies an important place in their religious philosophy.” It is this that society’s morality is basically anchored, the same concept that explains their metaphysical worldview as well as their socialisation process – anamnesis.

The rites of passage begin with birth and continue until the memory of an ancestor is lost on the living. Becoming an ancestor is a revered desire of the Igbo; it is the ultimate space for the communion with others who had earlier become one. Such things that

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prevent one from attaining that metaphysical feat are cautiously avoided during one's life. Particularly important for us here are suicide and denial of burial which preclude a person from assuming ancestor-hood. Again, Nnoruka (2009: 185) avers: "suicide is another abominable offence against the land. Life is precious to the community. So he who removes his life is an enemy of the community. Such a person is buried without any ceremony. He, of his own accord cut himself off from the community and the community cannot bid him the final fare well." This captures squarely the fate of Okonkwo. Such a person is buried like a dog, just to prevent any environmental hazard; he has no grave and therefore cannot be venerated. Since death is not "a definitive end" because at death, a fulfilled "one rejoins the ancestors," burial constitutes the real process for the preparation for the admission into the realm of the ancestors (216). Indeed, "a befitting burial is what every Igbo person wishes for himself. This is because with it one remains part of the community and will continue to play the role of the ancestor" (Ezekwonna 2005: 45).

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The clash of civilisations and multiculturalism hinted earlier come to play in *Things Fall Apart* and in contemporary pluralist Igbo religio-cultural context. Consequent upon the importance of ancestor-hood and the inevitability of the infiltration of Christianity, an inculturation theology evolved that sees Jesus Christ as the Proto-Ancestor, that is, the First Ancestor, to whom all other ancestors are joined. "Hence he [Jesus] gets a transcendental recognition in which the life of all ancestors depends on him" (Ezekwonna 2005: 241). Malingo expressly states in this regard: "until the people see the role of Jesus as being in the hierarchy of spirit-world that is of our ancestors, it will be hard to uproot completely from their beliefs" (cited in Ezekwonna 2005: 241). The critical argument that this philosophical religion and culture championed by the Catholics, which obviously Achebe disregards in relating the traditional religious and metaphysical reality of the Igbo is, would Jesus, who was killed on the cross, be qualified to be an ancestor in the Igbo context, given that Okonkwo died on a tree too? Starkly speaking, would the Igbo say that Jesus Christ met the traditional Igbo qualifications to be their ancestor? These questions are germane because they border on the fate of Nwoye, the son of Okonkwo who had become a Christian even before the death of this father. Okonkwo readily understood the implications of his son becoming a Christian: he, that is, Okonkwo would not be venerated as an ancestor because

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Christians had denounced such practice as idolatry; Nwoye himself would also not become an ancestor because in Christianity, there is no place for ancestorhood. Therefore, this is not just a “clash of ideologies or kingdoms” as Shenk (1988) says, neither is it only a “clash of civilisations” as Huntington (1996) has said, but an “unqualified dialogue” as Ezekwonna (2005: 27) suggests.

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Unoka: Circumstantially Misses Ancestor-hood

In *Things Fall Apart*, Unoka, the father of Okonkwo is introduced as a wretched, poor, “lazy and improvident” persona who brings nothing but disgrace to himself and family (Achebe 3). He is framed as unable to fend for his family and consequently equally unable to take the least title in the community. He is a debtor par excellence, because he shrewdly borrows from everyone he possibly could borrow from despite his inability to pay back. Bravery and success in his community are defined in terms of the number of heads a person is able to bring home from war, barn of yams, wives, children, titles, etc. Unoka’s life is a stark opposite of such definition. He ‘manages’ to marry a wife and raises a few children, and no more. Although, Unoka is described as a failure even at what gave him the best mood in life – music – he leaves a memory of what he could make of life. His melancholic mood is short-lived or disappears whenever he is on his flute. Achebe derogatorily puts it thus:

He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka’s band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three to four markets [about sixteen days], making music and feasting (Achebe 4).

Even though Unoka could not do farming, he also could not break even in his music enterprise. At any rate, he is an excellent musician and a good music teacher, invited by other villages: this is in recognition of his musical knack. His soul is tied to music, but in a community where music does not bring wealth, Unoka is considered a weakling and failure. Unoka, like any other traditional African, thinks that his failure is due to some metaphysical cause or force that needs to be appeased. As would others, he consults the gods of the land to find out what is responsible for his failure in agriculture. According to him, 'every year... before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yams. I clear the bush and set fire to it when it is dry. I sow the yams when the first rain has fallen, and stake them when the young tendrils appear. I weed' (Achebe 12-13). But the priestess needed no consultation with the god to diagnose the cause of Unoka's failure. It is common knowledge that his blight is "the weakness of your matchet and your hoe" (Achebe 13). Whereas real men cultivate "virgin forests," Unoka invests his little strength in over-cultivated land that has exhausted all its nutrients.

Finally, at death, Unoka "had no grave" (13). He has no grave because he dies a bad death. Bad death is a death that is not peaceful: death caused by accident, evil sickness, or death at young age. Such people who die as a result of any of these are not buried. Unoka dies as a consequence of "swelling which is an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die.... The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rotted away above the earth, and was not given the first and second burial. Such was Unoka's fate. When they carried him away, he took with him his flute" (Achebe 13).

The above is instructive in this work. And one cannot grasp its import without some knowledge of the cosmology and ontology of the Igbo. T. Uzodinma Nwala (1985:2) delineates two worldviews, the "traditional" and the "modern", both being coterminous as at time of the writing of the text. In the traditional Igbo worldview, therefore, the phrase, 'had no grave,' means that Unoka was severed from his family and community at death. The grave is not just a piece of land where a person is buried; it is much more. It is the symbol

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Stylistic variation so as to avoid the repetition of 'could' in the same sentence.

of a connecting space for the full reunion of the deceased and his essence first and foremost. For at birth a new baby's placenta is normally or 'ritually' buried in the earth. The placenta is believed to be waiting for its other grown part (the person) to reunite with it at death (Bujo 1997). By virtue of not being buried, Unoka loses that full personal reunion with himself. Because Unoka is not buried, he also loses the privilege and right of being venerated as an ancestor, the highest goal an African wishes to attain. "The dead rightly claim honour, reparation, libation of food as well as other things" (Bujo 153). It is only the dead who have graves that can claim such rights and privileges. As it stands in the case of Unoka, his son Okonkwo had no obligations to him neither did he to his son in return. Unoka is therefore lost forever from the community of ancestors of the people. His remembrance is cut off; his relationship with the living permanently erased, except for didactic lessons which are spoken in whispers to warn the living of the consequences of such death.

Although Unoka is presented as weak and fearful, he is nonetheless very philosophical and brave at death. One wonders how best to describe a man who knew he was going to die a bad death and yet accepted it with a philosophic equanimity; he takes with him his flute to the evil forest, where he is to be abandoned to die quietly but excruciatingly. Even though the community regards Unoka's flute as a sign of poverty and weakness, we can see it as a symbol of courage and peace of the soul. The flute should not always be viewed as the generality of the people saw it; it must also be seen from the perspective of the flutist himself, and how Unoka uses it as a sign or symbol of accomplishment against the tide of failure and rejection by his community. To die fluting is, to Unoka, to die in his trade: making peace and melody, not for the depreciable body but for the eternal soul. This is significant because as we shall demonstrate later, Okonkwo who believes his father is his only blight does not die as peacefully as his father, though they both die in unacceptable manner. Unfortunately, Okonkwo defiantly does not take his father's philosophical and prophetic words seriously. For him, those words are product of a weak and sickly mind ready to expire a moment later. We hear Unoka encouraging his son: "Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud

heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails *alone*" (Achebe 18). And indeed, Okonkwo failed alone!

Achebe's 'photorealistic' description of Unoka's flute evokes a metaphysic sign-image that can be deciphered only if it is viewed beyond the prism of economic practice. Although Unoka's flute reflects a kind of everyday instrument, Agnieszka Juzefovic (2013: 124) argues that "everyday objects have something particular, even metaphysic – they remain not simple tools by mysterious things themselves." It is partly in this sense that we can grasp the essence and authenticity of life Unoka's flute uncloses to the Igbo. As Martin Heidegger (1977: 163, cited in Juzefovic, 2013: 126) lucidly puts it: "the equipmental being of the equipment consist indeed in its usefulness. But this usefulness itself rests in the abundance of an essential Being of the equipment." Thus, Unoka's meditative or contemplative approach uncloses more than what an aggressive, unreflective approach to life does offer. Also, we can agree with Wilde (2007: 131, cited in Juzefovic, 2013: 124) that Unoka's flute can be interpreted as a demonstration of an artist's instrument that produced encyclopaedic information; a reflection of "leading or serious artist [who] could be expected to have had some sophisticated knowledge and reflective understanding of the tradition in which he or she was working." In realistic terms, the flute is not just an instrument, it is a barrel of wisdom, and a 'discloser' of secret acts hidden from the glare of the community. That Unoka dies fluting is a sign of a personal 'burial' even though the society disregards it.

In this Firstness, we meet Unoka, who is not introduced as having a father; neither is his so-called failure caused by forces beyond himself. He is the architect of his misfortune. Not cared for, Unoka dies a bad death and loses the right of veneration to a sickness that could have been cured should he be attended to. A cultural-metaphysical foundation of 'gravelessness' has been inadvertently laid, which future generations would build upon though from different circumstances. Even though Diana Akers Rhoads (1993) extensively explored the cultural basis of the novel, she definitely missed this metaphysical aspect that linked the destinies of the three personae. Had Unoka been catered for as culture

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demanding, a different story would probably have been created and the fatal destinies averted. We now turn to his son Okonkwo the protagonist of the novel.

Okonkwo: Inadvertently or Deliberately Misses Ancestor-hood

Much has been written about the heroism of Okonkwo, the protagonist in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. While many critics have, with strong reasons deducible from the text, cast him in the Aristotelian mode of a tragic hero, others have argued, cogently, that Okonkwo, though possessing some qualities which lend credence to such interpretation, ultimately lacks what it takes to fit perfectly into that mould. None the less, on account of his heroism and obvious personal achievements, Okonkwo is seen as a contrast to his father in every way life could afford. In other words, his is the very opposite of the life his father led. If there were things associated with his father, he was sure to counter them demonstrably. Though we could say his father is courageous in failure, Okonkwo fears failure and does everything humanly possible to avert it even if offending the gods and his conscience as shown in the beating of his wife in the Week of Peace and in the killing of Ikemefuna. There is no evidence in the text to suggest that Umuofia clan judges a man on the strength of his father's achievement and success on the one hand or fault and failure on the other. On the contrary, the author is quick to point out that "among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father". In spite of this Okonkwo allows the fear of being thought to be like his father to rule his life, perhaps detrimentally. Thus with uncommon nimbleness Okonkwo wrestles both literally with his physical opponents like Amalinze the cat, and figuratively with life itself. He becomes a successful farmer, a brave warrior and a respected member of the clan. Again, though Okonkwo is outwardly heroic, he is not introspective enough to discern the reality that surrounds him. He forgets, rather he dismisses his father's prophetic warning and thinks that he too is going to assume the pride of being an ancestor. He subdues the "prospect of

annihilation” (Achebe 108) hanging around him and rationalises it away. “He saw himself and his father 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. If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo would wipe them off the face of the earth” (Achebe 108). One the one hand, while Okonkwo’s negative fantasy is credible, he fails to realise that even then he has never offered any sacrifice to his ‘unburied’ father. One the other hand, Okonkwo is unconsciously philosophical and prophetic in that eventually, he, like his father does not enjoy the privilege of veneration.

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Another critical sign that portrays the reality of Okonkwo’s life could be seen in his disjointed life with his *chi*, his personal god. Ruled by passion for greatness, Okonkwo does not underscore the belief that in the traditional African setting, of which he was a repository, life is greatly influenced by destiny. At critical turn of his life, he deliberately ignores signs that either warn or restrain him from taking some steps. Rather than realigning with his traditional belief, his thinking goes the other way round: “clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true – that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation” (Achebe 92). But was there actually a conflict between Okonkwo and his *chi*? We look in vain to justify the assumption that the elders’ saying was wrong. Rather we can suppose that Okonkwo recklessly runs faster than his *chi*. It is only when things go contrary to his ambition that metaphysical interpretation is read into it, just as it is in the case of his father.

The critical question being asked is: why does Okonkwo commit suicide? Answers to this question are variant but largely centred on three reasons. First, it has been suggested that he wants to remain a strong man till the very end. He consistently abhors weakness, cowardice and failure, which he thinks are epitomized in his father, Unoka. He would not want to be seen as ‘womanly,’ considering the earlier helpless and shameful mistreatment he and five other chiefs received from the hands of British officials. Second, he knows he would be hanged by the British and therefore prefers to kill himself. In other words, he wants to deny the British the honour and satisfaction of hanging him, knowing that he would definitely and ultimately be hanged by them. Three, he wants to maintain his

unrepentant defiance to and angst against Western culture and religion that had irresistibly infiltrated his community, thus remaining loyal to his traditional faith to the end.

Although the above suggestions bear some plausible interpretations, they clearly omit the metaphysical link which Unoka's death has with Okonkwo's. It is therefore pertinent to point out that Okonkwo, like his father has no grave. He dies a bad death; a violent death! Death by suicide is abominable; only strangers can carry Okonkwo down from the tree and throw his body into the Evil Forest where he metaphysically belongs like his father. But his father had prophetically cautioned him against pride; the consequence of which was dying alone. Unoka had said: "It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails *alone*" (Achebe, 18). As the novel closes, we come face to face with this being fulfilled; Okonkwo kills the colonial messenger thinking the people will follow suit. Disappointingly, nobody responds to the challenge he had thrown. He thus fails alone and dies alone by hanging himself. Whether or not he hangs himself, it is crystal clear to him that death awaits him. Shelton, cited in Alan R. Friesen argues that Okonkwo could have enjoyed veneration by the community had he allowed himself to be murdered by the white men. Foley observes that Umuofia society as presented by Achebe is one with multiple levels of power- the great assembly, elders, ancestors, oracles and gods. Okonkwo, having enjoyed power at the levels of the great assembly and the elders, (he even becomes one of the nine *egwugwu*) fails to become an ancestor just as his father. Shelton avers that "[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." Whichever way the pendulum swings, it can still be argued that Okonkwo was destined to die without a grave.

Nwoye: Consciously or Decidedly Refuses to become an Ancestor

The third person in the lineage is Nwoye, the heir-apparent to Okonkwo's estate. From the very beginning when Nwoye is introduced, his father Okonkwo shows a great disgust because he feels he is a 'woman.' In Okonkwo's reckoning, Nwoye is the incarnate of his late father, Unoka. In fact, he and Obierika think, independently, that Nwoye is not manly enough to be regarded as Okonkwo's son and first son for that matter. On one occasion, Okonkwo resignedly admits that "living fire begets cold, impotent ash" (Achebe, 109). Okonkwo sees his twelve year old son, Nwoye, as an "incipient" lazy boy that can only be brought back to the track of bravery and strength expected of him via "constant nagging and beating. And Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth" (Achebe 10).

In response, Nwoye has a struggle with himself: he is meek at heart but wants also to show some outward courage to elicit his father's favourable disposition. Deeply, he abhors his father's roaring tonality and finality with which he handles issues, even at the domestic level. "And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him" (Achebe 38). But the fact is that just as Okonkwo does not resemble his own father Unoka, he also observes sadly "that my children do not resemble me" (Achebe 46).

Nwoye has to contend within himself for a while whether or not to live his life under the false shadow of his father. His soul is attuned to solemn, philosophical questions and mysteries that others would easily push aside. For instance, he is captivated by the Christian religion as soon as he comes in contact with it. As Achebe relives, "there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul- the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of

the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled" (Achebe 103-104).

Nwoye shares a soulful relationship with his grandfather, Unoka, when it comes to the love for music. Music serves as food, giving satisfaction to their souls and making them to see the world from the right perspective. Little wonder then that he is soon irredeemably captivated by the hymns which the Christians soulfully render. And braving it through, Nwoye decides to define himself and thus separates from the unreal apron string of his father by becoming a Christian. By becoming a Christian, Nwoye inadvertently forecloses the chances for Okonkwo to be venerated as an ancestor. This action earns him being disowned by Okonkwo. As he summons his sons, Okonkwo declares: "You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am still alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck" (Achebe 121-122).

Nwoye becomes enlisted into the seminary where he is tutored to become a catechist. Achebe (1960: 8) ensconces that Nwoye, "being a Christian convert---in fact a Catechist---he could not marry a second wife. But he was not the kind of man who carried his sorrow on his face. In particular, he would not let the heathen know that he was unhappy." Nwoye whose baptismal name is Isaac argues defiantly with the traditional religionists on rain-making. He holds the view that Satan puts such thoughts into men's hearts that they can either allow or prevent rain from falling with magical powers. In fact, the people wish that rain falls to truncate his excitement about the home-coming of his son, Obi, from England. "The only trouble was that it might rain. In fact, many people half wished it would rain heavily so as to show Isaac Okonkwo that Christianity had made him blind. He was the only man who failed to see that on an occasion such as this he should take palm-wine, a cock and a little money to the chief rain-maker in Umuofia" (Achebe 1960: 37). Nwoye not only refuses to permit a ritual breaking of kola nuts at the reception held in

honour of his son, he is also quick at reminding the elders that thinking that his son, Obi is his father's (Okonkwo's) avatar is against his Christian faith. Christians, he insists, do not believe in reincarnation or veneration of the dead. The goal of a Christian is not to become an ancestor and be venerated but to make it to heaven. He is to actively dissuade the people from venerating the dead whose destiny, he believes lies in hell. Thus, Nwoye will not become an ancestor because by becoming a Christian he invariably takes a conscious decision not to become an ancestor.

Conclusion

It is clear from existing critical discourse on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* that critics and scholars are yet to consider the interrelatedness in the fate that befell Okonkwo, his father Unoka and his son Nwoye with particular reference to its concomitant implications in the Igbo religio-sphere. Much has been written, however, on why Okonkwo suffers such an inglorious fate. Ogbaa cited in Nwala (1985) identifies

four main areas of potential explanation for his (Okonkwo's) destruction: first, the British colonisation of Igboland and the consequent disintegration of all that Okonkwo valued in Umuofian clan tradition; second, Achebe's deployment of the tragic mode and the question of whether Okonkwo fits the role of tragic hero; third, the possibility of Okonkwo being the victim of blind fate or of some kind of pre-ordained destiny; and fourth, the sense of divine justice, from whatever source, being meted out to Okonkwo.

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The source of the divine justice as many have suggested is *Ani*, the Earth goddess. Foley avers, "it is *Ani* herself whom Okonkwo at several points in the novel offends, so that it becomes potentially plausible to interpret Okonkwo's destruction as the working out of the goddess's vengeance on him". Writing in a similar vein, Shelton as quoted by Friesen says that "Okonkwo severely antagonized the *ndichie* (ancestors)" (Friesen 2006:36) whom, incidentally, he cannot connect with, metaphysically, without proper burial. Should one

pursue this line of argument, what then is Unoka and Nwoye's sin against *Ani*? Foley, (2001) interestingly, counters this view by stating that Okonkwo's infractions are "committed impetuously and are not necessarily acts of deliberate apostasy". This position absolves Ani of any complicity in Okonkwo's calamitous end.

Thus against the background of the fact that critics have seemed to examine Okonkwo's fate in isolation of the fate of both his father, Unoka, and his son, Nwoye, this paper set out to establish a connexion in their ultimate destinies or destination. The paper, using the Piercian semiotic concept of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, has attempted to establish the connexion. According to Pierce, Firstness is the category of vagueness, novelty and originality in which its subject is such as it is regardless of anything else. Unoka, for whom nothing is said about his background fits into this. Secondness is the category of reaction, opposition and differentiation. We posit that Okonkwo fits into this. This perhaps, explains Okonkwo's unmitigated struggle to differentiate himself from his father whom he sees as a loafer. Thirdness is the category of mediation, habit, conceptualisation or cognition. This is for us where Nwoye belongs thus establishing the pattern first observed in Unoka. We have therefore argued that though Unoka and Nwoye are ordinarily seen to be essentially different from Okonkwo in that Okonkwo is presumed to be a great achiever, the trio ultimately suffer the same fate in that none of them achieved the venerated position of ancestorhood considered to the highest position of honour in the Igbo religio-sphere.

Though we examined briefly the various reasons being advanced for the fate of Okonkwo, it is outside the purview of this paper to say in concrete terms what could be responsible for his fate. However, having established sameness in their ultimate destinations, we suggest that in trying to locate the reason for Okonkwo's inglorious end, it may be necessary to look beyond the protagonist and consider also the fate of his father, Unoka, and his son, Nwoye.

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