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Robert Fraser

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Abstract

There seems to be no general critical agreement as to the reason for the suicide of Okonkwo, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. Gerald Moore in his *Seven African Writers* simply records the incident, his only clue as to its interpretation being his earlier statement that 'Okonkwo cannot reconcile himself to the paralysis of will which he senses around him'. In Arthur Ravenscroft's monograph the emphasis is slightly different: 'he hangs himself, not to avoid arrest but out of despair for the future of his people'. G. D. Killam in his more extended study of the writer is even less committal. Observing simply that 'Okonkwo's suicide is reported off-stage', he neglects entirely the question of motive, contenting himself with the admitted dramatic irony of Okonkwo having provoked the very kind of shame he fought all his life to avoid.

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There seems to be no general critical agreement as to the reason for the suicide of Okonkwo, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*.¹ Gerald Moore in his *Seven African Writers* simply records the incident,² his only clue as to its interpretation being his earlier statement that 'Okonkwo cannot reconcile himself to the paralysis of will which he senses around him'. In Arthur Ravenscroft's monograph the emphasis is slightly different: 'he hangs himself, not to avoid arrest but out of despair for the future of his people'.³ G. D. Killam in his more extended study of the writer is even less committal. Observing simply that 'Okonkwo's suicide is reported off-stage',⁴ he neglects entirely the question of motive, contenting himself with the admitted dramatic irony of Okonkwo having provoked the very kind of shame he fought all his life to avoid.

The reticence of such an impressive battery of critics is perhaps nevertheless hardly surprising since, suicide being the most private of acts, the question of its motivation is especially delicate. In a case like this where the novelist himself has displayed considerable tact, a critic who imposes too strict an exploration is apt to betray himself. The difficulty here is pre-eminently one of submitting the event to a reasonable perspective. Intuition can only help the reader if he has an intimate awareness of the cultural context – pre-colonial Igboland – and not many of Achebe's commentators have. It is not, however, any more fraught an issue than other refinements of motive in a book whose style precludes full elaboration. In other places, where intuition has failed us, the social sciences, and especially anthropology have come to the rescue.⁵ There is no reason why they should not be of help here also.

Achebe does help us out with two clues. Firstly Okonkwo's is

not the first suicide by hanging in the book. At the beginning of his career, Okonkwo, who has been deprived of his birthright by an idle father, is forced to borrow seed-yams to start his farm. His endeavour is frustrated by perversities of the weather. We read 'That year the harvest was sad, like a funeral, and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams. One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself' (p. 22). The other clue is the Igbo reaction to suicide voiced by Obierika after his friend's death: 'It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen' (p. 186).

These two facts together tend to suggest that suicide, in itself disgraceful, is often a reaction to a different sort of disgrace. Thus the individual will only commit it should the social disgrace he suffers outweigh the ignominy of the act itself. If this is true and applicable to Okonkwo the question arises as to what form of disgrace he had experienced. It might be the anticipated disgrace of arrest. Arthur Ravenscroft, as we have seen, denies this, and with reason: Okonkwo has been arrested before, after the church-raiding incident, and his reaction then was defiant: 'Okonkwo was choked with hate' (p. 176). The only other possibility is that he feels the disgrace of the homicide he had just perpetrated against the Commissioner's messenger. This would be surprising, however, since it is in accordance with just the aggressive policy he has been advocating. To kill an enemy, furthermore, is not necessarily seen as culpable in Igbo society, though caution is sometimes advised. This, at least, is the strong impression left by the public reaction to the slaughter of a white stranger by the people of neighbouring Abame. 'Those men of Abame were fools' says Uchendu (p. 127), not 'those men were wrong'.

The explicitly shameful nature of suicide also rules out the possibility that Okonkwo killed himself in order to retain his integrity, after the Roman manner. No possible sort of honour could accrue from a course of action which would result in his being hurled into the bad bush to rot like his despised father Unoka.

Okonkwo is a man far too careful of social acceptance for that.

Some sort of explanation has to be sought elsewhere, and this is where I intend to flee for aid to the social scientists. Who better, in this instance, than Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology, who in his seminal study of suicide published in 1897⁶ has left us an invaluable model by which to test our speculations. Durkheim divided suicides into three types, claiming that avowed or officially recorded motive was less significant than the social climate such deaths reflected. The first type, particularly characteristic of Protestant Europe, was egotistical suicide, caused by a diffused, tolerant society which allowed its citizens to wallow in purely private misery. The second, its polar opposite, was altruistic suicide caused by contempt for individual destiny and the desire to accord to the rigid moral code of a tightly organized culture. This he thought especially characteristic of non-European societies. The third, most complex, was anomic suicide, stimulated at periods of rapid change which caused the individual to lose his bearings. His evidence for this latter type was drawn principally from the economic disruptions experienced in various European countries in the 1870's and 80's. Durkheim further admitted that a combination of these different types was possible.

If we turn to view Okonkwo's suicide against this model the first thing we notice is that the type which Durkheim thought most characteristic of non-European societies is in fact the least applicable to his case. Igbo society in the book is described as being neither rigid nor especially cohesive. In it considerable prestige is given to personal merit, observable in terms of wealth, land, prowess, and eloquence. The clan or village group is governed, not by an exclusive hereditary élite, but by a council of able and responsive elders. It demonstrates in fact an extreme instance of what anthropologists term 'achieved status'. Individual life is much prized, except in instances of abhorrent disease or some other monstrosity, in which cases the victim is cast into the bad bush. Okonkwo himself has attained considerable recognition by his people for his perceived skills. His death certainly does not

correspond to any pre-conceived notion of honour, so that for all these reasons altruistic suicide is out of the question.

Durkheim thought egotistical suicide a distinctively European disease, but, since Igbo society is seen to be so loosely organized, such a classification is at least possible. When Okonkwo is obliged to leave Umuafia after killing a kinsman, and to withdraw to his mother's village, his reaction displays a certain amount of morbidity. But when he is reproved for this by his uncle Unchendu, he soon recovers and settles down to establishing a new life with alacrity. His characteristic mode of expressing personal peak is usually seen to be aggressive action, as when he beats his younger wife Ojiugo during the week of peace (p. 27). His petulant defiance against the white man, which is unrelenting, and his final assassination of the messenger show that he is not the man to dwell uselessly on imagined slights or deprivation.

But Okonkwo has also been deprived of something more fundamental, not merely respect or freedom, but also his precious sense of himself. At the beginning of the book we can see how his personality has been formed in reaction to his father's. Unoka was weak, idle, artistically sensitive. Technically his character approximated to the female ethical principle, which although institutionalized in the form of Ani, the earth goddess, in practice tended to be despised. Okonkwo set a distance between it and himself by committing himself totally to the active pursuits of the tribe, and repressing his own tremulous responses. Consequently he is continually being reprimanded for offences against Ani, his exile being only the worst instance of this. In other respects his policy is an almost complete success: he takes all but the highest of the clan's titles. When the missionaries come they appeal to the thwarted lyrical impulses, the sense of loss or failure, the cry of the twins in the wilderness to which Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son, responds. As their influence spreads, the masculine assertive principle is undermined by that softer undertremor to which the people have paid all too little heed. Hence, challenged by the

authority of the stranger, they react by conciliation. Okonkwo, with his wilful allegiance to the assertive ideal, finds himself supplanted. Personal prowess, which had been for him the path to social acceptance, finally isolates him.

Ironically it is Unoka, who, earlier in the book, puts his finger on the aspect of his son's makeup which works his undoing. When the harvest fails, and the young Okonkwo's courage survives, we are told that 'He put it down to his inflexible will' (p. 23). But Unoka has a subtler interpretation: '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' (p. 23). Okonkwo ultimately could take that failure because it marked him out as a farmer amongst others, a man among men. Later, after his banishment, his anguish is more severe, because, we read, 'His life had been ruled by a great passion – to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had been broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish on to a dry, sandy beach, panting' (p. 119). That, however, had been a merely circumstantial exclusion: he had understood and respected the reason for his exile. His final disgrace, however, is one which cannot be explained by the mores of the tribe as he perceives them. By all established criteria he should have been praised for his defiance, instead of which he is met with perplexity. After the decapitation incident, 'The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messenger escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discovered fright in that tumult'.

Igbo society has been plunged into anomy by the intervention of the British. In this new world of slipping realities the villagers have lost their bearings. Okonkwo, in some ways their most typical hero, is completely at a loss to explain the change. He experiences much the same sense of vertigo as Durkheim diagnosed

amongst the recently bereaved.⁷ Durkheim had believed anomy to be a European phenomenon, because he thought of other societies as being fundamentally stable. He reckoned without the drastic upheaval of colonial interference. Okonkwo is, in one sense, a victim of colonialism, in another of himself. Caught between the two, he destroys himself through mere confusion.

NOTES

1. All page references in this article are to the Heinemann Educational Books edition of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (first published 1958).
2. Gerald Moore, *Seven African Writers* (London, O.U.P., 1962) p. 64.
3. Arthur Ravenscroft, *Chinua Achebe* (British Council and Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1969) p. 18.
4. G. D. Killam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* (London, Heinemann, 1969) p. 31.
5. A considered account of the book which takes note of anthropological material may be found in Emmanuel Obiechina, *Cultural Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 1975).
6. Emile Durkheim, *Le Suicide, Etude de Sociologie*. The edition referred to here is that published by Libraire Félix Alcon of Paris, 1930.
7. Durkheim, *ibid.*, pp. 289-311.