

Okonkwo's fate and the worldview of *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

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*This article argues that despite the apparently exhaustive critical attention paid to Chinua Achebe's **Things Fall Apart** (1958), certain key aspects of the novel's meaning remain unresolved. At the heart of the problem lies the question of how to interpret the reasons for Okonkwo's downfall or fate. The article suggests that a number of different sources of explanation appear to be plausible at various levels, but it goes on to demonstrate that at least some of these putative explanations are incompatible if not mutually exclusive. The more general difficulty arising from this is that several of these explanations are underpinned by worldviews which differ from and even conflict with each other. The article intends, therefore, through an exploration of the possible reasons for Okonkwo's demise, to consider what worldview the novel finally supports and, indeed, whether the novel's outlook is coherent at all. The chief conclusion is that although the overall perspective of the novel is highly complex, it does not necessarily follow that the actual meaning of the novel itself is either illogical or self-contradictory.*

1. Introduction

At a conference in November 2000 organised to celebrate his 70th birthday, Chinua Achebe was acclaimed as "the founding father of the modern African novel in English" (Jaggi, 2000:26), an estimation which echoed the sentiments of the many voices gathered by Ezenwa-Ohaeto

(1997:266-286) at the end of his biography of Achebe. More specifically, Bernth Lindfors (1997:ix) has hailed *Things Fall Apart* (1958)¹ as the most widely read and studied African novel of the last forty years, while Kalu Ogbaa (1999:87) has termed *Things Fall Apart* “the African novelists’ novel”. And yet, despite the novel’s status and the copious critical material which it has inspired, some fundamental questions about the actual meaning of the novel remain unresolved. At the heart of the problem lies the issue of how to interpret the reasons for Okonkwo’s downfall, or, to use a more richly amorphous phrase, his fate. Is his destruction to be seen merely as the result of pure chance – a combination of personal misfortune and the accidents of history – or does the novel suggest a more purposeful explanation? If the latter is the case, is the nature of this explanation primarily psychological, sociological or even theological? The difficulty is that each of these putative sources of explanation appears, at various levels, plausible, and yet at least some of them are contradictory if not mutually exclusive. More pointedly, several of these explanations are underpinned by differing and even conflicting worldviews. The question which then arises, and which requires careful consideration, is what worldview the novel finally supports, or, perhaps, whether the novel’s overall perspective on life is coherent at all.

The underlying concept which this article confronts, therefore, is that of the worldview of *Things Fall Apart*, and so some prefatory remarks concerning the notion of a worldview may be useful at this point. In his pioneering study, *Igbo Philosophy*, the Nigerian scholar T. Uzodinma Nwala (1985:2) defines a worldview as “the basic beliefs which a people have or a person has about the origin, nature and end of the universe, life or existence, whether the ideas are explicitly stated or implied in action”. He goes on to differentiate, for example, the “traditional” worldview of the Igbos from the “modern” Igbo worldview. Following the work of Nwala and others, Raisa Simola (1995) applies this concept of worldviews to literary criticism in general and to the works of Chinua Achebe in particular. In so doing, Simola (1995:9) draws an important distinction between the worldview(s) in a literary work – which she calls *Weltbilder* – and the worldview of the author himself or herself – for which she uses the term *Weltanschauung*. Put another way, *Weltbilder* refers to the fictive worldviews of the characters in a literary work or to the worldview which the literary work in general expresses; *Weltanschauung* signifies the author’s own personal outlook on life.

1 All references to the novel are taken from the Heinemann African Writers series edition of standardised pagination and glossary, and all quotations from the text will be cited by means of page number only.

For reasons both of scope and practicability, this article will confine its attention to the former meaning of the term worldview, *Weltbilder*. While Achebe's own comments about *Things Fall Apart* or about the world generally must naturally be taken into account in arriving at an understanding of the novel, it will be assumed that authorial intentionality is not the final determinant of literary meaning. Similarly, the aim of the article is not so much to deduce Achebe's personal perspective on things at the time of writing the novel as it is to elucidate the nature of the worldview or worldviews which *Things Fall Apart* itself as a literary text actually supports.

However, in spite of her concentration on the concept of worldviews in Achebe's work, Simola's particular discussion of *Things Fall Apart* tends to ignore or gloss over the apparent inconsistencies in the novel's outlook. What is at stake here is not merely an issue of textual ambiguity or interpretative complexity. It has, after all, long been an accepted tenet of liberal aesthetics as well as postcolonial criticism² that literary texts are susceptible of multiple readings. Nor is it simply a matter of different characters in the novel holding divergent beliefs about the world. The question, rather, is one of possible illogicality and incoherence in terms of the perspective on life which the novel as a whole advances. It does not seem possible, for instance, for existence to be both random and not random at the same time; nor does it seem logical simultaneously to assert and to deny the reality of divine justice as a controlling principle in the universe. Yet this seems, on the face of it, to be precisely what *Things Fall Apart* does in supporting at least two, if not more, mutually contradictory worldviews.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to clarify and resolve some of these fundamental questions concerning the worldview(s) of *Things Fall Apart*. It will attempt to do so by examining in some detail the key issue of the reasons for Okonkwo's fate. There are four main areas of potential explanation for his 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. Each of these areas of

2 Throughout his engagement with postcolonial issues in his work and life, Achebe has remained a liberal writer, as Raisa Simola (1995:236-237) and Alastair Niven (in Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 1997:285), for example, point out.

explanation will be examined in turn, as well as the degree to which they might be regarded as complementing or contradicting each other.

2. The impact of colonisation

From the outset it is important to acknowledge that the primary motive cause for Okonkwo's destruction must be located in the fact of British colonisation of Igboland. Put bluntly, if the British had not come to Umuofia, the clan would not have fallen apart and Okonkwo would not have been led to commit suicide. Of course it is true that there are flaws and contradictions in Umuofian clan tradition which give rise to internal tensions and which alienate certain members of the society. These include such specific instances as the throwing away of twins³, the irrational taboo of the *osu* or outcasts, as well as, at times, the apparently senseless decrees of the gods and oracle, which produce fear and uncertainty rather than stability in the society. More generally, there is the societal privileging of masculine, warrior-like qualities which leads to the marginalisation of the gentle and the weak, such as Unoka and Nwoye; of the unsuccessful, who are labelled *efulefu*, or worthless men; and, most notably, of women, who are everywhere rendered subordinate to patriarchal domination. There is also the instance of Okonkwo's seven-year banishment from the clan, which seems an overly harsh penalty for an inadvertent crime, and which causes Obierika, at least, to question the fitness of the punishment.

Nevertheless, Achebe is at pains in the lengthy first part of the novel to establish that Umuofian society is generally stable and coherent, and that such flaws as do exist are insufficient in and of themselves to cause the implosion of the clan. So much is clear from the sheer fact of the clan's persistence through time, as well as from the degree of flexibility and ethical discrimination which it demonstrates itself capable of on occasions. For instance, Ogbuefi Ezeudu reveals that Umuofia at some time in the past repealed the death penalty for breaking the Peace of Ani "because it spoilt the peace which it was meant to preserve" (23), and further that it has rejected as "a bad custom" (23) the practice of neighbouring clans such as Obodoani of regarding a man dying during the Week of Peace as an abomination. Thus it seems likely that had the British not come to Umuofia, the clan would simply have continued much as it had done in the past, and that Okonkwo would have returned from

3 It is worth noting that the Yoruba in the west of Nigeria actually celebrate the arrival of twins, so that this particular Igbo custom, though common in West Africa, is by no means universal.

exile to a largely unchanged situation in which he would have been able to strive once more for a place of eminence in the clan.

As it turns out, however, Okonkwo returns to a society which is not merely somewhat different from the one he knew, but which is, rather, radically and comprehensively transmuted in the deepest possible sense. As he soon discovers on his homecoming, “the clan had undergone such profound change during his exile that it was barely recognizable”, and hence he mourns “for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart” (129).

The degree of this social change may be measured by contrasting the two “great assemblies” which take place in the novel. The first, described in chapter two, occurs prior to colonisation, and highlights the orderly and cohesive nature of Umuofia as a typically acephalous, pantisocratic Igbo clan. The assembly has been called to determine what to do about the murder of an Umuofian woman by a man from the neighbouring clan of Mbaino. The whole clan gathers at the market-place and after everyone has been given an opportunity to speak, the clan collectively decides “to follow the normal course of action” (8) by despatching an ultimatum of war through its emissary, Okonkwo. This decision, however, is conditional upon the sanction of its Oracle, for the clan would never embark on “a fight of blame” (9). When Okonkwo returns with a virgin and a youth as Mbaino’s payment of compensation, he reports to the elders, or *ndichie*, who decide “as everybody knew they would” (9) that the girl should go to the widower (though the lad’s fate remains undetermined at this point). Elsewhere in Part One of the novel, justice is seen being dispensed in the clan by the priests of the gods, and by the *egwugwu*, or masked manifestations of the clan’s ancestral spirits. As such, the impression created is of a society with multiple centres of power – great assembly, elders, ancestors, oracle, gods – in which the material and spiritual domains co-operate in an integrated and harmonious way to ensure the efficient functioning and survival of the clan.

However, by the time of the second great assembly, depicted in chapter twenty-four, everything has changed. The assembly, which is called to debate what to do about the missionaries and their converts, seems doomed to futility from the outset as the social conditions which gave such assemblies meaning have been irrevocably undermined. For example, on this occasion not all the clan is present at the meeting as many former members “have broken from the clan and gone their several ways” (143). Instead of clan unanimity, there are deeply conflicting opinions. Instead of following customary procedures of inter-clan warfare, the clan is faced with the unthinkable and unprecedented prospect of civil war and of having to shed clansmen’s blood. Instead of

relying on oracular guidance, the power of the Oracle seems to have utterly dissipated – indeed, the last reference to the Oracle occurs some time earlier when the priestess, Chielo, scatologically excoriates the Christians, though, tellingly, only in her personal, secular capacity (101). Finally, instead of the clan collectively deciding on a course of action, Okonkwo, confronted by the District Commissioner's *kotma*, acts impulsively and alone in cutting him down. In response, the great assembly, far from supporting Okonkwo, breaks up into tumult and fright.

It is vital to see, therefore, that Umuofia as a clan *qua* clan does not survive. Individual members of the clan may adapt to and even prosper under the new Anglo-Christian dispensation, but the overarching traditions of the clan as a socio-religious entity are effectively obliterated. And it is equally vital to recognise that for Okonkwo the destruction of the clan is personally catastrophic. All the ambitions and efforts of his life have been indissolubly bound up with the traditional values and institutions of Umuofian culture: his prestige and wealth as a successful farmer; his prowess at wrestling; his renown as a warrior and the emissary of war; his position as one of the nine *egwugwu*; his endeavours to take further titles; his seemingly inevitable elevation to the status of elder. All of this is summed up in his express career ambition to become “one of the lords of the clan” (19). But the missionary dispensation clearly espouses a very different system of values: universal brotherhood and equality, acceptance of the weak, and pacifism. Nor is this evangelical mission politically or economically neutral, but is closely connected, as Obierika realises (124), with British political and trade interests. And indeed, such interests are to be imposed as part of a ruthless imperialistic project (personified in the novel by the District Commissioner) which regards the autochthonous cultures as “primitive” (148) and whose intention is to subjugate the indigenous peoples to British colonial rule. It is clear, therefore, why Okonkwo is so grimly determined to extirpate the foreigners and to restore the old traditional order, for it is only under the old order that he can succeed, and his whole life has been driven by his obsessive need for personal success and his fear of failure. When the second great assembly breaks up, he realises that the clan itself has disintegrated and his whole life's endeavour has been reduced to nothing. He commits suicide, not out of fear of the inevitable judicial retribution of the new administration, but rather out of the knowledge that the very meaning of his life has been destroyed.

To this it must be added, as numerous commentators have noted, that Okonkwo is in any event temperamentally unsuited to change. Partly as a result of his own peculiar psychological disposition, and partly as a result of the social and familial circumstances which have helped form

his personality, he cannot bend or adapt. A violent, misoneistic, authoritarian character who is fiercely self-dependent, he believes he can survive anything because of his “inflexible will” (18). When, however, he and his clan are confronted by a militarily superior alien force which cannot be defeated by weight of arms, it is Okonkwo’s wilful inflexibility itself which renders him incapable of adaptation and which makes his destruction ineluctable.

3. Okonkwo as tragic hero

In the previous section, it has been argued that were it not for colonisation, Umuofia would not have fallen apart and Okonkwo would presumably not have been destroyed. Yet the novel is not solely concerned with the issue of colonisation, and there are several other evidently significant aspects of the story which have bearing on Okonkwo’s downfall. The novel seems to suggest, in other words, that colonisation may be merely one factor in a much larger framework of meaning within which Okonkwo’s fate is played out. In seeking a comprehensive understanding of the range of interpretative possibilities available in the novel, it is necessary to take all of these factors into account.

Perhaps the most obviously obtrusive of these factors lies in Achebe’s apparent attempt to provide a structural frame of reference for the story which bears many of the hallmarks of classical tragedy. As Neil McEwan (1983:30) has pointed out,

Achebe might appear to be highlighting aspects of Ibo culture which would recall ancient Greece to a European reader: wrestling matches, and social status achieved by prowess at games; public debate; sacrifice of cocks; Oracular counsel; personal and household gods. Certain English terms needed in the novel automatically recall Graeco-Roman antiquity: ‘priestess’, ‘goddess’, ‘oracle’, ‘hostage’, ‘shrine’ and even ‘abomination’ in the sense of a religious offence requiring drastic purification.

Many of Achebe’s earliest critics, in fact, both recognised this feature of the novel and utilised it as a hermeneutic guide for explicating the meaning of Okonkwo’s story. Abiola Irele, for instance, in his article, “The Tragic Conflict in Achebe’s Novels” (1967:167), was one of the first to observe that

Achebe has chosen the tragic medium in handling his theme ... For tragedy implies the working out in man’s lives of a rigorous fatality that transcends the individual’s ability to comprehend or to arrest its pre-ordained course of events.

He goes on to identify "Okonkwo's inflexibility" as his "tragic flaw" (1967:171). Moreover, even a recent critic such as Christophe Tshikala Kambaji (1994:97) contends that *Things Fall Apart* is written in tragic mode and that Okonkwo closely fits the role "of a hero of classical tragedy".

In spite of such critical claims, however, it is apparent that there remain many areas of the novel which do not easily fit into the terms of pure, Aristotelian tragedy. Most obviously, it proves very difficult in a careful examination of Okonkwo's character to identify exactly what his supposed tragic flaw might be. To limit it to his inflexibility, as Irele does, seems hopelessly inadequate, especially given Okonkwo's numerous other defects of character. Even his undoubted pride and ambition, which some critics have likened to a kind of *hubris*, are asserted in social and anthropological circumstances which seem very distant from those of classical antiquity. Furthermore, although Okonkwo does seem in many ways to be a victim of forces beyond his control, it again proves difficult to identify the precise nature of these forces, which could be interpreted as anything from blind fate to divine justice to something as culturally rooted as the particularistic Igbo concept of the *chi*. Perhaps most problematically, there is the issue of the cultural clash between traditional Igbo society and Western civilisation. It is by no means easy to reconcile the rigidly patterned requirements of classical tragedy with this unprecedented and essentially modern historical phenomenon. The point is made cogently by Bruce F. MacDonald (1980:55), who maintains that "the intrusion of the European into the African world made the basis of tragedy unworkable: because of the conflicting sets of values no transgression against either can be seen clearly as the cause of an individual's fall". He concludes that at the end of *Things Fall Apart*, "rather than catharsis, a cleansing of the emotions through the re-establishment of the moral order, a vague uneasiness and dissatisfaction remain". MacDonald (1980:61-62) argues therefore that although *Things Fall Apart* is undoubtedly tragic in some sense, it is of a different form to that of Aristotelian tragedy. He himself uses the intriguing though undeveloped term, "colonial tragedy", while provocatively directing attention to the definition provided by Achebe, or at least Obi, in Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960:36): "Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot".⁴

4 Obi is, of course, following W.H. Auden in *Musée des Beaux Arts*.

It is debatable, however, whether this definition brings us much closer to an understanding of the reasons underlying Okonkwo's demise, especially since it is presented in a very different social and historical context from that of *Things Fall Apart*, one which is modern, urban, incidentally post-colonial, and in which the claims of the traditional Igbo belief system have all but withered away.

Comments on tragedy made elsewhere by Achebe are only partially helpful. In an early interview with Robert Serumaga in 1964 (Serumaga, 1972:14), he uses the term, "tragic", in its colloquial sense, observing that his "sympathies were not entirely with Okonkwo ... Life has to go on and if you refuse to accept changes, then tragic though it may be, you are swept aside". More recently (in Wren, 1990:61), Achebe has suggested that his sense of the tragic is similar to that of Thomas Hardy, and that although he acknowledges the relevance of comedy, he feels that "the things that really make the world, the human world, are the serious, the tragic". In fact, critics such as David Carroll (1990:60) and Derek Wright (1991:78) have remarked on the propinquity between Okonkwo as a heroic individual and some of Hardy's characters, especially Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (though as Achebe [in Wren, 1990:61] observes, he had read only *Far From the Madding Crowd* by the time he came to write *Things Fall Apart*).

Not many critics, however, have fully recognised that Achebe's deployment of the tragic mode raises serious questions about the nature of the worldview which is presented in *Things Fall Apart*. One of the few who has is the South African critic, Ian Glenn (1985:14)⁵, who identifies a key dilemma which confronts the reader trying to make sense of the worldview of *Things Fall Apart*: does the novel, he asks, "in fact betray a central uncertainty ... as to whether we are in a universe where character is fate (and tragedy is thus to some extent deserved and the way to show a moral lesson), or in a universe where man is the plaything of indifferent or even hostile gods?"

5 It must be noted though that some of the solutions Glenn proposes are somewhat vitiated by a limiting Marxist emphasis on literary sociology. For example, in advancing a strictly materialist interpretation of the novel, Glenn (1985:17-18) argues that Chielo, the priestess of the Oracle, punishes Okonkwo for beating Ekwefi, his wife and her friend, by "shortly afterwards" pronouncing that Ikemefuna must die. Yet between the two events the novel explicitly states that "the moons and the seasons passed" (38), and, in any event, it is not at all clear how Chielo could have known that the execution would have "disastrous consequences for Okonkwo", as Glenn claims. For these and other reasons, it seems wiser to take seriously the religious aspects of the novel in a comprehensive account of Okonkwo's fate.

The difficulty, as this article will continue to show, is that both of these interpretative options seem, at some level, plausible. In one sense, Okonkwo does seem to exemplify Heraclitus' dictum that character is fate, and thus may be seen in large measure to bring his downfall upon himself. In another sense, however, Okonkwo appears to be the hapless victim of cruel destiny. In this latter regard, Glenn usefully recalls George Steiner's assertion in *Language and Silence* (1967:424) that "genuine tragedy", far from being predicated upon a fundamental morality in the universe, seems instead "inseparable from the mystery of injustice, from the conviction that man is a precarious guest in a world where the forces of unreason have dark governance".

It should be clear from the discussion thus far that the worldview presented in *Things Fall Apart* is neither straightforward nor univocal, but rather highly complex and perhaps even inconsistent. The novel seems, from a narrowly historicist standpoint, to propose that Okonkwo's demise is the direct result of the material fact of the British colonial enterprise. Yet the text also invites one to view Okonkwo's story through the prism of tragedy, whether classical or not, and then to consider what this reveals about the kind of universe humankind inhabits. Such consideration necessarily leads to the examination of a number of other pertinent aspects of the novel, which are liable to complicate the picture still further.

4. Fate, fortune and *chi*

Any analysis of the reasons for Okonkwo's downfall inevitably involves a consideration of the kind of worldview which the novel supports, and, as the foregoing sections have suggested, the nature of this worldview is far from clear. The difficulties surrounding these questions are exacerbated by the ambivalence of the attitude which the novel evinces towards religion, whether traditional or Christian. As the issue of human destiny is intimately bound up with such religious concepts as divine pre-ordination, justice and teleology, it is imperative that Okonkwo's fate be investigated also from the perspective of religious philosophy.

In the first place, it may be argued that what befalls Okonkwo is the result of nothing more than blind fate. From a purely secular position, Okonkwo's various misfortunes may find their explanation merely in the random events of a material universe. His exile, for instance, arising out of his inadvertent killing of Ezeudu's son at the old man's funeral, may be regarded as the product not of some fore-ordained divine plan but rather of pure chance – though it is certainly made possible by Okonkwo's foolishness in carelessly handling his "rusty old gun" (27). Similarly, the coming of the missionaries and the formal British colonisation of Igboland

is part of a global history whose impetus was greatly strengthened at the Berlin Africa Conference of 1884-1885, which decreed that a European country could only lay claim to a territory (and its resources) if it occupied it. The fact that this period of colonisation happened to coincide with Okonkwo's lifetime is, again, simply an accident of history. That the missionaries met with the success they did may further be explained on sociological grounds as the result of certain inherent flaws within Umuofian society which rendered many of its members susceptible of conversion and the clan as a whole vulnerable to infiltration and ultimately internal collapse. All of these things, it seems, may be explained from a rational, laical point of view without recourse to theological interpretation. Indeed, Achebe himself has commented that his "view of the world is scientific" and had been so long before he wrote *Things Fall Apart* (in Wren, 1990:63). As he rather tartly pointed out in reaction to his stance being unfavourably compared with Wole Soyinka's retention of traditional Yoruba faith, "I have no faith in any religion, so there's no point in pretending that I have more faith in the efficacy of traditional religion, in the sense in which my grandfather had it, than I would have in Christianity the way my father had it" (in Wren, 1990:64-65).

On the other hand, however, Achebe has also claimed, in an interview with Kalu Ogbaa (in Gikandi, 1991:31), that what he is doing in a novel like *Things Fall Apart* "is presenting a total world and a total life as it is lived in that world ... I am writing about my people in the past and in the present, and I have to create for them the world in which they live and move and have their being". An assertion such as this would certainly seem to affirm the validity of the traditional Igbo worldview rather than to undermine it. Taken together, these two potentially conflictual positions emphasise the caution which must be exercised in uncritically utilising the author's own comments as the basis for literary analysis. They serve, moreover, to confirm the dangers inherent in relying on what is perceived to be the author's own worldview (*Weltanschauung* in Simola's terminology) as an interpretative guideline. It is for this sort of reason that the present article has limited its focus to a consideration of the worldview(s) of the novel itself as a literary text (the *Weltbilder*, in other words).

In any event, however, the fact remains that the influence of traditional religion in the life of Okonkwo and the Umuofian people is so pervasive and emphatic that it demands to be granted serious consideration within its own frame of reference in any discussion of the possible reasons for Okonkwo's fate. One of the most important concepts to consider in such a discussion is that of the *chi*, which remains one of the most puzzling in all of Igbo faith. Though its centrality in the Igbo belief system is undoubted, it has proved virtually impossible, even from the perspective of

cultural anthropology, to provide an exact account of its meaning (see Wren, 1980; Simola, 1995). Matters are not helped by the rather misleading definition Achebe himself provided in the glossary to the novel in which he explained the word as “personal god” (149), or by the fact that the account he offers in his essay “*Chi* in Igbo Cosmology” (1975) differs from and at times contradicts the image of *chi* in his novels. There is no scope in the present article for a detailed discussion of Achebe's usage of the concept in his work, but, for our purposes, it may be noted that the most important meaning attached to the term is that the *chi* functions as the divine agent whereby an individual is created and through which that individual's life-destiny is determined.⁶

Throughout the novel, therefore, there are references to Okonkwo's fortunes being governed by his *chi*. At the outset the novel reveals that Okonkwo's success has not been the result of luck but rather of hard work coupled with a resolute affirmation which has in some way positively influenced his *chi*: “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” (19).

However, after his banishment from Umuofia, Okonkwo in exile comes to the conclusion that his *chi* was not good after all:

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* had said nay despite his own affirmation (92).⁷

And the ill nature of his *chi* seems confirmed when his despised son, Nwoye, converts to Christianity:

Why, he cried in his heart, should he, Okonkwo, of all people, be cursed with such a son? He saw clearly in it the finger of his personal god or *chi*. For how else could he explain his great misfortune and exile and now his despicable son's behaviour? (108)

But then, as he enjoys some measure of success in exile and plans to return to Umuofia with a flourish, he begins to sense that his *chi* “might now be making amends for the past disaster” (121). As it turns out, of

6 Other meanings include spirit-double, individual deity, and even something similar to the notion of a guardian angel as seen when Ekwefi narrowly avoids being shot by Okonkwo (34) as well as in the case of the survivors of the Abame massacre (98).

7 Other characters who are believed to have bad *chi* are Unoka (13) and Ekwefi (56).

course, his return is not particularly memorable, and the course of his life soon takes a terrible turn.

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of these passages is how expediently and self-servingly Okonkwo interprets the concept of *chi*. When things go well, he ascribes this to his own wilful determination which persuades his *chi* to accede; but when things go badly, he absolves himself of all responsibility and identifies the source of his misfortune as his *chi*. This lack of moral accountability coupled with an overriding thirst for success lends weight to his enemies' adverse depiction of him in proverbial terms as the little bird *nza* who actually tried to challenge his *chi* (22). Such an action is both futile as well as morally offensive and can lead only to ruin. Okonkwo not only fails to accept his personal destiny for what it is, but he fails even to acknowledge that his destiny has any limits at all. The inevitable result, in the sequence of events that brings the novel to its close, is his destruction. The rationale for his fate, in this specific Igbo sense of the word, is adumbrated in Achebe's (1983: 215) account of the Igbo belief in the necessary equilibrium between individual potential and human limitation:

... the Igbo postulate an unprecedented uniqueness for the individual by making him or her the sole creation by a unique god agent, *chi* ... And yet the Igbo immediately balance this extraordinary specialness, this unsurpassed individualism, by setting limits to man's expression of it. The first limit is the democratic one which subordinates the person to the group in practical social matters and the other is a moral taboo which sets a barrier to personal ambition, surrounding it with cautionary tales whose moral is that the limit is not the sky but a much more modest height closer to the earth.

In one sense, then, Okonkwo's fate may be interpreted as mere blind chance, and Okonkwo may be regarded as a victim of the accidents of history, of the arbitrary events of a purely material existence. However, the novel also supports an alternative view of fate, one in which Okonkwo fails to acknowledge properly the nature of his destiny in terms of his *chi*, and so is destroyed. In this view of fate, the universe is not just random and physical, but governed by a purposeful spiritual dimension in which the principles of moral order and justice are fundamental. There is a sense, in other words, that Okonkwo brings his downfall upon himself by transgressing this cosmological order. In the following section, this idea will be explored with regard to the wider theological framework of divine justice which also forms a constitutive element of the text.

5. Okonkwo and divine justice

Throughout the novel, it is clear that the world of Umuofia is predicated upon a spiritual dimension to existence, and particularly upon a sense that the universe is ordered and controlled by divine justice. Given this religious aspect of the text, it is worth considering to what extent the novel supports the notion that Okonkwo is punished for violating the divine order. More specifically, it is necessary to examine precisely how the novel conceptualises this divine order and, consequently, whether or not Okonkwo's fate ought to be regarded as just and deserved.

There is little in the text to support the view that Okonkwo is destroyed as a result of his rejection of the Christian God, though clearly this is how the Reverend Smith might interpret events. Unlike his accommodating predecessor, Mr Brown, who "trod softly on [the clan's] faith" (126), the Reverend Smith

... saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal combat with the sons of darkness. He spoke in his sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal (130).

In the context of the novel as a whole, however, the power and attractiveness of Christianity derives not so much from any perceived commination as from its promotion of progressive and enlightened social values, its facilitation of material prosperity, and its vision of a universal community of humankind. As such Christianity's role in Okonkwo's demise seems limited to historical coincidence rather than evidence of a specific divine intervention in human affairs.

On the other hand, a very different impression of the puissance of the divine is provided from the perspective of traditional Igbo religion. In the Igbo pantheon, the supreme creator, Chukwu, has withdrawn from his creation and is seldom approached or propitiated because his will "is too great to be known" (128), as Akunna tells Mr Brown. Instead, and typically for an agrarian society whose very survival depends on the success of their crops, the most important deity in the life of the Umuofian people is Ani, the earth goddess, who acts as "the ultimate judge of morality and conduct" (26). Now, 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. Early on in the novel, for instance, Okonkwo breaks the Week of Peace by beating his youngest wife, Ojiugo, and even when reminded that the time is sacred to Ani, he continues, for "Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-

way through, not even for fear of a goddess” (21). He is subsequently rebuked and punished by Ezeani, the priest of Ani, who declares that “the evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish” (22). But even though Okonkwo is contrite, and in fact makes even greater reparation than is required, he does so secretly and thus appears, publicly at least, to be unrepentant. Later on, Okonkwo tries to shoot his second wife, Ekwefi, in a fit of rage when she mocks his lack of skill as a hunter. He misses – characteristically – but had he killed her, especially during the Feast of the New Yam, he would have been sentenced to perpetual banishment for committing the most serious of crimes against the earth goddess. The person he does kill is Ikemefuna, the hostage-compensation from Mbaino, despite being warned by the elder, Ezeudu, to have nothing to do with the execution for “that boy calls you father” (40). Even his friend, Obierika, is moved to condemn Okonkwo’s deed: “What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families” (46). When Okonkwo protests that “the Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger” (46), Obierika retorts that Okonkwo should neither have disputed the oracular pronouncement nor have been the one to carry it out.

Throughout the novel, then, Okonkwo is presented as being, whether wilfully or not, in repeated violation of the moral code of Ani. As such, the novel seems to suggest that Okonkwo’s eventual downfall is neither accidental nor arbitrary but rather the deliberate judgement of the earth goddess against him. In the Igbo theological paradigm in which no suffering occurs without a reason, Okonkwo’s destruction is to be interpreted not as tragic misfortune but as condign punishment for continual moral and religious transgression.

The first manifestation of the goddess’s wrath occurs at Ezeudu’s funeral where Okonkwo’s gun explodes and kills the old man’s son. Even though the homicide is not deliberate, it remains “a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman” (87), and Okonkwo is exiled from the clan for seven years. In addition, his animals are slaughtered and his property destroyed by his clansmen, not out of malice, but because, significantly, “it was the justice of the earth goddess” (87). But this punishment, however galling to Okonkwo, is merely a foretaste of the far grimmer fate which the goddess has in store for him. When he kills the court messenger at the second great assembly and finds that no one will support him, he is forced into the brutal realisation that the clan has indeed fallen apart and that his entire *raison d’être* has been extinguished. In total, crushing despair, Okonkwo commits suicide, the

worst possible crime against Ani; as one of the villagers tells the District Commissioner, "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. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it" (147).

The implications are of the direst kind, for it means that Okonkwo will be interred without proper ceremony in the Evil Forest by strangers, and so will not join the ancestors. It means indeed that Okonkwo's worst fears have come to pass, those that earlier caused "a cold shudder to run through him" when he contemplated "the terrible prospect, the prospect of annihilation" (108).

It is important to notice that Okonkwo's "annihilation" completes an intricate and detailed series of ironies in the story. It would require another article altogether to explicate all of these ironies, though some specific examples may suffice to establish the point. In particular, the two main episodes in which Okonkwo is punished recall earlier actions of his which were deemed offensive to Ani. When Okonkwo's gun explodes at Ezeudu's funeral (the very man who told Okonkwo to have no part in the killing of Ikemefuna), it ironically evokes his attempt to shoot his second wife with the self-same weapon. Similarly, his impulsive cutting down of the court messenger with his matchet mirrors how he killed Ikemefuna out of fear of being thought weak when the boy ran to him for help. And the fact that Okonkwo commits suicide and is cast into the Evil Forest seems an ironic re-enactment of his reviled father's fate, which he has sought all his life to avoid. Additionally, it seems as though Okonkwo's determined contempt for all things associated with the feminine comes to rebound back on him in ironic fashion. He pathologically suppresses any conventionally feminine qualities in himself, he despises what he perceives to be the weakness and muliebrity of men like his father and his son, and he reveals utter contumely for womankind in general. What Okonkwo fails to realise is that, as Muoneke (1994:103-104) points out, "while women do not enjoy equal treatment with men in Umuofia, the feminine principle operates in the culture with its own authority", and that "it pervades the spiritual and moral life of the society".⁸ It is piquantly ironic, therefore, that he should be punished for committing the "female" form of the crime of homicide, and that he should have to seek refuge in his mother's clan of Mbanta. More particularly, it is a female goddess in the form of Ani who is the one to wreak her vengeance on him. Much of the novel's diction and imagery thus forms a closely woven pattern of

8 For a detailed discussion of the gendered nature of Umuofian society, see Biodun Jeyifo (1991:51-70).

ironic reversals in which Okonkwo's earlier infractions are fittingly revisited on him later on. At least one purpose of these multiple ironies is to underline the hypothesis that there is an essential system of justice in the universe and that those who violate and abuse it will receive their appropriate punishment.

Having said all this, however, it must also be acknowledged that the idea of Okonkwo's fate being deserved does not hold up completely under careful critical scrutiny. In particular, it must be conceded that for the most part, Okonkwo's infringements have been committed impetuously rather than out of deliberate apostasy, and that in each case he makes proper and full reparation. In the instance of his exile, the severity of Okonkwo's sentence for a wholly unintentional action certainly seems to Obierika at least to be supererogatory, just as he finds the Earth's condemnation of twins to be irrational:

Obierika was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his *obi* and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities (87).

What Obierika is sensing is the possibility that the deities controlling the destiny of humankind may not be just and moral after all, but may instead be "evil and capricious gods" (9), the kind of malevolent divinities "who kill a man when his life is sweetest" (see 75). Such a possibility has taken this discussion full circle, for it seems strangely consonant with George Steiner's account of the meaning of tragedy (Steiner, 1967:424): namely, that from the tragic perspective, God may be present in the universe, but any "compensating mechanism of final justice and retribution" is utterly absent.

6. Conclusion

In the light of the evidence considered so far, is it possible to decide which of the competing worldviews (or *Weltbilder*), if any, the novel finally supports? On the one hand, many elements in the novel seem to suggest a worldview which is coherent and unified, within which Okonkwo's fate may be seen as part of a general dispensation of justice in the universe. It may be that Okonkwo is punished for transgressions against the Earth in the form of Aní, its goddess; or his destruction might be self-inflicted through his violation of certain cardinal principles in the moral order of things; or it might be that his lot ought to be regarded as part of

a fore-ordained destiny worked out in conjunction with his *chi*. As Achebe himself has noted (1975:165), the Igbo believe that

... when a man's misfortune is somehow beyond explanation [it] can only be attributable to an agreement he himself must have entered into, at the beginning, alone with his *chi*; for there is a fundamental justice in the universe and nothing so terrible can happen to a person for which he is not somehow responsible.

However, there are other factors in the novel which seem to militate against interpreting Okonkwo's fate in terms of such an ordered and purposeful outlook. It may be argued that Okonkwo's demise has nothing to do with justice or morality at all, but is simply the product of chance, of the arbitrary events of a universe which is ultimately meaningless and absurd. From a purely material perspective, he may be regarded as a victim of the accidents of history, an inconsequential statistic in the vast transcultural drama of colonisation. Or his end might be ascribed to a random causal amalgam of social conditioning and psychological determinism. In all these accounts, however, Okonkwo's fate appears less the disbursement of divine justice and more the result merely of the chance occurrences of human existence.

It is perhaps necessary to conclude, therefore, that the novel does not support one worldview at the expense of the other, but that at least two potentially valid cosmological orientations are coterminously present in the text. That is, the novel presents, at the same time, *both* a traditional Igbo religio-cultural perspective which asserts that the universal order is fundamentally just and meaningful, *and* a modern, scientific outlook which regards the universe as ultimately neutral in matters of individual human destiny.

It is, moreover, the contention of this article that this apparent self-contradiction is not necessarily destructive of the novel's ends. It is possible, in fact, from within each of these opposing worldviews, to find justification for this conflictual state of affairs. From the traditional Igbo point of view, it is worth remembering that the Igbo cosmology is an inherently dualistic one, in which a thing and its opposite are always simultaneously existent, a belief summed up in the proverbial expression, or *ilo*: "Wherever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it" (see Achebe, 1975:159-175). As Solomon O. Iyasere (1978: 98) has pointed out, "throughout the novel, the complex, dualistic nature of the customs and traditions" of Igbo society is highlighted: "these elements are set in opposition to one another to give a complete, if self-contradictory, view of the society. To accept and emphasise only one

aspect is to oversimplify and defend, as does Okonkwo, a limited perception”.

Similarly, from a modern, scientific perspective, it might be proposed that what is presented in *Things Fall Apart* is not internally unintelligible but is rather a perfectly valid contemporary vision. In the context of the deepening uncertainties of twentieth century social and natural sciences, the vision which the novel offers is of necessity relativistic, indeterminate, refusing univocal closure, but engaging with the full range of interpretative possibilities. As Oladele Taiwo (1976:112) has noted, it is indeed characteristic of Achebe’s novels to look

... at a situation from very varied points of view, sometimes bringing them before the reader simultaneously. The reader finds, almost invariably, that no one point of view is wholly acceptable and that, to reach a satisfying conclusion, several points of view have to be taken into consideration.

Both worldviews, then, the traditional and the modern, must be regarded within the context of the story, as not only equally plausible but equally necessary, for the overarching meaning of the novel itself is after all crucially concerned precisely with this conflict of perspective.

Although it is beyond the scope of the present essay, a further potentially fruitful line of enquiry would be to explore how the narrative structure helps to reinforce and give shape to the dualistic and relativistic worldview of the novel. Neil McEwan, for example, has argued persuasively that the novel is characterised by a persistent “narrative ambiguity” (1983:26) in that Achebe “discreetly merges two voices, one of which belongs to the village-world [of Okonkwo’s time] and the other to a more urbane Nigerian of 1958” (McEwan, 1983:22). The narrative, in other words, admits the viewpoint of a westernised intellectual of contemporary Nigeria while at the same time describing, celebrating and seeking to understand the traditional, pre-Nigerian past within its own frame of reference. Simon Gikandi (1991:45), moreover, has identified how “the narrator’s shifting focalization” gives rise to a “double voice” in which “the narrator seems to promote one perspective or worldview but in the process also calls our attention to the negative side of this point of view”.

However the question of the worldview of *Things Fall Apart* is approached, the novel emerges, as this article hopes to have demonstrated, as an extraordinarily compelling work of art whose meaning remains intriguingly complex and peculiarly elusive. A clue to the nature of the novel’s meaning (though by no means the last word on the subject) may be located in a rather tangential comment made by Achebe himself. In

an article entitled, tellingly, "The nature of the individual and his fulfilment" (1983:214), he suggests that the fate not only of characters such as Okonkwo, but of all human beings perhaps, cannot ever finally be resolved, for we are all, in the end, "subject to non-human forces in the universe – call them God, chance or what you will; I call them the powers of event, the repositories of causes and wisdoms that are as yet, and perhaps will always be, inaccessible to us".

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