

An Appraisal of Prof. Segun Ogungbemi's Article on Okonkwo and the Polarities of Existence In Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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Abstract

This paper critically discussed issues raised by Segun Ogungbemi in his article on "Okonkwo and the Polarities of existence in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (TFA)" in chapter eleven of his book Philosophy and Development. In the above said chapter he posited that a consideration of Okonkwo's life achievements, failures and social or traditional belief entail an existential trend by which one can philosophically posit relevant questions on human existence. Hence, he avers that the purpose of his article was to raise questions with regard to what Okonkwo represents and the lessons to learn from his understanding of human existence. Thus, he asks: Considering what Okonkwo stands for in TFA, can we say that he was happy or his life was purposeful? This paper exposed some of the problems and challenges inherent in interpreting what Okonkwo represents and lessons to learn from his understanding/misunderstanding of human existence from Igbo ontological point of view; which in my opinion his paper failed to adequately appreciate.

Key words: Polarity; Existence; Okonkwo; Igbo; Things fall apart; Community; Ogungbemi.

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INTRODUCTION

The paper started with a brief description of existentialism in which he summed up existentialism as a philosophical

trend that lay more emphasis on passion than reason. Reason, it said, cannot take the centre stage because human knowledge is limited. Besides the work lays more emphasis on what man should do with his life, since he is a free being. As a free agent, man decides for himself and takes responsibility for his choice and action. Individuality is equally relevant to our understanding of this human existence, hence existentialism reflects on polarities of life; the facticity or the "given" and the possibility, rationality and irrationality, responsibility and impotence, happiness and sadness, anguish and despair, life and death etc, and the role of passion in in human existence. Thus, it summed that the above issues were prominent in Achebe's Things Fall Apart (TFA) but its main concern is as they relate to Okonkwo the protagonist. Ogungbemi explained facticity and possibility as the necessary components through which man can unravel his being, and maintained that both the "given" or facticity and limited freedom or possibility help to explain the polarity in existence. This he opined plays out in both individual and corporate existence, hence like every human being, Okonkwo was first and foremost an individual before he became a member of the society. Without an individual, there cannot be a society, likewise, without society, an individual cannot receive nurture, training, education, growth, development language, moral and cultural norms for social integration among others. So both the individuality and society are necessary and sufficient condition for an individual to know what it means to be in existence (Ogungbemi, 2007, p.146).

To further buttress his point he cited Reinhold Niebuhr's observation that "the community is the frustration as well as the realisation of the individual life," and John Macquarrie that "if individuals tend to disrupt community by self seeking, societies tend to oppress individuals through collective egoism and institutional injustice." (Macquarrie, 1997, cited by Ogungbemi, 2007, 145) Thus, he concludes that there is always an observable

tension in polarity between the individual and society. This is demonstrated in Okonkwo as an individual and as a member of Umuofia society. Our critique will centre on Ogungbemi's interpretation of Okonkwo's fallout with Umuofia society that previously recognised him and conferred on him three titles for his personal achievement.

Ogungbemi's discourse on Okonkwo's fallout with Umuofia society was based on the observation that the community was communal one where obedience to socio-religious and traditional norms were a matter of necessity no matter how well placed an individual was, and to go contrary to its norms and injunctions was viewed as an abomination. Hence, Okonkwo's dane's gun accidental discharge that resulted in the death of Ezeudu's son during the latter's funeral had to be treated as calamity. Punishment was already prescribed for such irrespective of the personality which has already prescribed punishment irrespective of the personality involved. Achebe explains in chapter thirteen:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years. (Achebe, 1988, p.105)

Ogungbemi was right to aver that Okonkwo was at this stage confronted with the reality of corporate existence as opposed to individualistic or subjective moral choice. He had become a victim of the circumstances beyond his control, which raised some existential questions like: Was Okonkwo happy? Did life have meaning and purpose for him at this stage? Did he understand the disorder of existence that had set in his life? Was Okonkwo actually not falling away from authentic existence? Was he going to achieve his authentic selfhood in exile? Okonkwo no doubt was faced with polarities in his existence. Ogungbemi continued that Okonkwo exercised his freedom as an existential being by carrying his dane gun to the compound of the deceased Ezeudu which was normal in umuofia. However, the accidental discharge leading to the death of one of the sons of the deceased, though reprehensible, must be examined vis-a-vis the judgement passed on okonkwo and his family (Ogungbemi, 2007, p.148)

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

As interpreted by Ogungbemi, what happened was mere human error which normally should not have been visited with such a severe punishment. After all, the earth goddess was aware that okonkwo did not deliberately disobey her injunction, Ogungbemi therefore asked why couldn't be the earth goddess intervene in the matter through her priests or priestesses? One wonders why the elders had to obey a rigid rule simply because it was

ordered by the goddess. He therefore noted a utilitarian consideration on the part of umuofia community on their decision to send okonkwo and his entire family on exile which was intended to maximise their collective interest or happiness on the ground that the earth goddess whom Okonkwo offended by shedding his clansman's blood would if not properly appeased, restrain the earth from producing for them, without food their existence would be threatened. Hence, it would appear to be better to send Okonkwo and his family on exile rather than have their corporate existence threatened. He further queried, considering the above utilitarian position of umuofia community vis-a-vis the right of the individual, whether Okonkwo's was generic, bearing in mind that it was okonkwo who, by accident, offended the goddess and not his family members and property. At least the interest of his wives, children, animals, etc, ought to have been protected as innocent individuals. Or could some forms of propitiation in forms of animals or any other not have assuaged the anger of the goddess, since Okonkwo's family members were not directly involved in the offence? (Ibid., p.148)

As we appreciate the above issues raised by Ogungbemi one must not lose sight of the fact that the punishment prescribed for Okonkwo by his community was not a product of impromptu judgment, but based on the ontological belief of his community and the judgement for his actions. Hence, our evaluation of Ogungbemi's interpretation of Okonkwo and polarities of existence will be done here in the light of Igbo ontology as it relates to individuals and corporate existence in Igbo traditional society.

The traditional Igbo society from which Achebe drew his fictional narrative of TFA is a society that ontologically reveres wealth and wisdom. Thus, respect and reverence are accorded any man who possesses these two attributes. In fact, to be really successful in Igbo understanding a person has to sensitively be aware of the basic ontological principles underlying human conduct and relationships. At the centre of this Igbo ontology, as it relates to TFA, is the principle of duality, which implies discretionary application of balance and equilibrium in human affairs. For the Igbo, life is a continuous struggle to maintain harmony and equilibrium in this world. This is ensured through a continuous checking and balancing of relationships between human beings, and visible and invisible realities. The traditional Igbo understands his life and the surrounding world in terms of complimentary realities. They have this ingenious way of fashioning unity out of opposites, agreement out of contrary opinions. They are always in search of the uniformity in the various varieties that characterise human existence with the aim of arriving at non homogeneous complementarities. V.C. Uchendu averred that:

[...]the Igbo world is a world peopled by the invisible and the visible forces, by the living, the dead and those unborn. It is a

world in which all these forces interact, affecting and modifying behaviour, a world that is delicately balanced between opposing forces, each motivated by its self-interest, a world whose survival demands some form of cooperation among its members, although that cooperation may be minimal and even hostile in character. It is a world in which others can be manipulated for the sake of the individual status advancement, the goal of Igbo life. (Uchendu, 1965, p.20)

How then does the Igbo apply the above principles and beliefs in their every day activities? The traditional Igbo society

was a community in which the worldly and the other worldly, the political and religious were closely bound together. As a result political, social and economic lives were underlined by a religion centred on the worship of a pantheon of gods and generation of the ancestors.

Aligwekwe equally observed that:

[...]the harmonious relations between the cosmic being were effectuated through emotional activities, rhythmical participation and dialogue between the elements. The beings and the elements were in search for complementarity among themselves. For the traditional Igbo this could be realised by rituals, magic and techniques. (Ibid.)

Hence, we can infer from the above that the maintainability of harmony and equilibrium in the universe for the traditional Igbo is more of an ethical and religious issue. G. Ikeobi stated that

the world of the Igbo...is full of activity.... It is not an indifferent universe.... Nothing happens in this universe by chance or in isolation. Thus, every type of sickness from severe headache to stomach upset is caused by forces, evil spirits, witchcraft, angry divinities, and machinations of enemies in the former of sorcery (ogwu or nsi). Although the medicine expert is consulted in these cases, yet the priest has to offer sacrifices to appease the power concerned. (Ikeobi, 1988, p.192)

Afigbo (1981, p.340) also affirms the above when he stated that “[...]because they believed that most illnesses were caused by malevolent spirits and wicked men, for them preventive medicine came to mean largely helping to adjust relations between the living and the living, the living and the dead.” (Afigbo, 1981, p.340) Since the harmony of the universe must be maintained, any neglect of this duty on man’s side immediately boomerangs. It is therefore the belief of the traditional Igbo that the universal equilibrium is dislodged when a member of the community commits a heinous crime. The gods, the spirits and ancestors as well as the living and even the yet unborn are all affected.

Thus, Achebe reiterated this traditional Igbo tendency/urge to maintain harmony and balance, when he narrated in chapter four that

[...]at dusk on the day that Okonkwo committed the abomination of violating the annual ritual week of peace, normally observed just before the planting season begins, by beating up Ojiugo his youngest wife, the Ezeani-priest of the goddess Ani came to him. He refused Okonkwo’s customary welcoming gesture of the presentation of Kola: Something a visitor could do only as sign of enmity, anger, protest and resentment. He rather told

Okonkwo. Take away your kola. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors. [...]You are not a stranger in umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crop in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a hard word to his neighbour. We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil [...]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 [...] you will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries. (Achebe, 1988, p.37)

The provision of the above items by Okonkwo to the chief priest of Ani is all that is needed in order to re-establish the cosmic balance caused by his abominable act. P.E. Aligwekwe further reiterated the above fact when he stated that

[...]natural cataclysms as drought, famine, epidemics, which could disturb the equilibrium of the cosmos or of life in the world took their roots, they thought in the sins or wrong doing of man, such as practice of sorcery, violation of taboos, homicide or other acts termed aru or nso (abomination). (Aligwekwe, 1991, p.195)

Hence, the traditional Igbo must always repair any breach of harmony caused in order to restore harmony and equilibrium with his/her ancestors, gods and the universe. As C. Okafor stated:

Duality or the phenomenology of pairing is another very important aspect of Igbo cosmology. In Igbo thought, nothing can exist by itself, since wherever something exists, something else exists beside it. As the proverb says: Ife kwulu, ife akwudebe ya. (When one thing stands, something else stands besides it.) Thus, there can be no unpaired manifestation of any force or being. Arising from this phenomenon is the Igbo concern for the maintenance of balance in one’s life. Because Igbo cosmology envisages the simultaneous functioning of numerous and sometimes, antagonistic forces, one is counseled to tread one’s way cautiously so as not to offend any of the contending spirits. Extremism of any kind is thus perceived to be dangerous, as is encapsulated in the following proverb: ife belu n’oke ka dibia n’agwo (The healer can cure only something within bounds). (Okafor, 2004, p.87)

Okonkwo often violates the above complementary and harmonious principle that pervade every aspect of Igbo existence. S. C. Nwodo explains functional duality of this principle in terms of “male-female principle which manifest itself in many ways and at various levels from individual to the community and even to the gods.” (Nwodo, 2004, p.13) The traditional Igbo believed that human conduct in the society should be moderated and guided by “the subtle and careful balance of the ontological principle of duality often manifest in a complementary manner of strong masculine element and gentle feminine side” (Ibid.) in human affairs. Early European scholars like Major A. G. Leonard who carried out research on Igbo culture and religion have attested to the centrality of this dualistic principle in Igbo life. Leonard stated that “[...] it is in their own personalities

most of all that they see and feel this dualism.” (Leonard, 1906,13) Recently, R. M. Wren while commenting on the history and cultural context of novel of Chinua Achebe states that “while this is but one of the many relevant qualities Leonard describes, it comes closest to the duality that is central paradox of Things Fall Apart.” He added that “the male-female spiritual duality is the organising principle upon which the following discussion is based, though some other dualities will be noticed in passing.” (Ibid.)

Okonkwo the hero of TFA was a wealthy man in his clan who rose from grass to grace through personal achievement, but was not reckoned among the wise men of umuofia, because on many occasions in his life he failed the test of life that would have ranked him among them. This is owing to the fact that he failed to recognise and apply the Igbo ontological principle of duality, which cautions one in life endeavours to balance and harmony in ones attitude to life and actions. Achebe aptly narrated the various occasions in the novel when Okonkwo failed to apply this cautionary principle because he allowed fear of being called a failure which is as result of his father's poverty that created a pathological fear of failure he could not overcome. “This fear propelled him to greatness but it also maladjusted him to demands of his traditional community and drove him a number of times to rash actions” (Odimegwu, 2016, p.67) at beclouded his sense of balanced judgment in human affairs. Achebe in chapter four showed that Okonkwo was a man of action (warrior) but not thoughtful, wealthy but not wise, at least, to the level that is necessary to admit him to the fold of wise men of the clan. When Okonkwo committed the abomination of breaking the sacred week of peace by beating his younger wife Ojiugo, two incidents in this narrative clearly brought out the character of Okonkwo as one who does not apply caution in human affairs. Achebe (1988, pp.36-37) stated that in his anger to Okonkwo

had forgotten that it was the week of peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody halfway through, not even for fear of a goddess. (Achebe, 1988, pp.36-37)

Secondly, when Ezeani who was the priest of the earth goddess, Ani, that Okonkwo's action offended came, he blamed Okonkwo for not applying caution and patience in dealing with the situation when he admonished him, “Your wife was at fault; but even if you came into your obi and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her (Ibid., p.37). Even when he had appeased the goddess as commanded by Ezeani the Chief priest and feeling repentant, people considered his previous attitude as having no respect for the gods of the clan. His enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird nza who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his chi.

Hence, one would not be surprised that, when the decision was taken on the fate of Ikemefuna in chapter seven by umuofia, Okonkwo who had been the boy's guardian for three years was not consulted. He was simply told the decision of umuofia, and to his greatest surprise, the decision of the clan was that the boy should be killed. Whatever might have led to such a decision on the part of the clan was not stated. Achebe simply told us that this message was conveyed to Okonkwo by Ogbuefi Ezeudu “the oldest man in this quarter of umuofia”. He had been a great and fearless warrior in his time and was now accorded great respect in all the clan (Ibid.). As he informed Okonkwo of the decision of Umuofia on Ikemefuna he advised him not to participate in the boy's death, since he called him “father.” Okonkwo failed to heed this advice. The ripple effect manifested in Okonkwo's family, as it affected his already fragile relationship with his first son Nwoye. Thus, Nwodo commented:

...looked at closely, Okonkwo might have been the hero of “Things Fall Apart” but not its philosopher. That honour is reserved to Obierika. In fact Achebe tells us explicitly that: “Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action.” Unfortunately, the admiration many of his people have shown for obvious and observable achievements has been sometimes so conspicuous and loud that the impression is often created that Okonkwo represents the Igbo ideal, Achebe never gave that impression. (Nwodo, 2004, p.12)

Okonkwo's failure was largely as result of his inability to assimilate and apply the Igbo ontological principle of balance. Nwodo succinctly explained:

Balance is an intrinsic constituent element of this particular duality. It is the element of balance that constitutes this duality into the type of duality that it is, a complementary dualism...the element of balance spreads its function far beyond male-female duality to the relationship between the individual and the community between the living and the dead, the ethical and the religious. It is on the maintenance of this delicate balance that the sustenance of every aspect of the clan life depends. When viewed from another perspective it would appear that the clan is oppressive of the individual, that the individual loses his individuality in the overwhelming dominance of the community. (Ibid., p.14)

At the pragmatic level, this principle of dualism allows individual growth through personal achievement which identifies and situates the individual in his community. It provides a harmonious balance where both the individual and the community complements each other in a mutual cooperation. Nwodo further alluded that

the community and the individual complement each other in a harmonious balance that allows the wise and not so wise, the warrior and the coward to make their contribution freely in the assembly of people, where decisions are taken only “after everybody has spoken”. (Ibid., p.15)

Okonkwo failed to appreciate the significance of some of these ontological principles, as Achebe told us, that he was at times forced to learn and conform as he did in chapter four when he called his kinsman, Osugo, a woman

at the kindred meeting. He was compelled by the kindred to apologise to Osugo, his inferior in social rank, because he discovered that everybody in the kindred meeting took side with Osugo. Again, Okonkwo's thoughtless action of killing the court messenger was a unilateral decision, not an unanimous decision taken "after everybody has spoken" "as custom of his community demanded. And so was his suicide a unilateral decision that negated the beliefs of his community.

Another ontological principle on which existence is structured in Igbo world that played significant role in identity construction of Okonkwo is the concept of "chi". In Igbo traditional religion chi is believed at times to be a personal god or guardian spirit responsible for the success and failure of a person in life. Achebe occasionally uses the term "personal god" to translate it. For instance, in chapter fourteen, he stated that

at most one could say that his chi or personal god 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 affirms. Here was a man whose chi said nay despite his own affirmation. (Achebe, 1988, p.110)

Nwodo added that:

...chi means a personal god in the sense of being personally attached to the individual. It is personal also because it is endowed with intellect and will thereby making its decision and actions rational rather than blind, subject to blind fate. But there is in the concept of chi the added notion of fate that is, and at the same time not, fatalistic. In a way, with the Igbo things are never quite fatalistic; there is always room for renegotiation. (Nwodo, 2004, p.16)

The above assertion is reinforced by Mahood that in Igbo world view, "the world is a market place and that is subject to bargain." (Mahood, 1979, p.183) Odimegwu went further to draw comparison of the problem encountered in explaining the complexity involved in interpreting what chi represents in Igbo cosmology when he stated that:

The concept of Chi in Igbo cosmology introduces a problem similar to the problem of the relation between the omnipotent of God and moral responsibility of man in Christian philosophy, or the problem of freedom and determinism in ethics. On the one hand, a person's chi determines his fortune in life; On another hand, the Igbo believes that if one says yes, his chi says yes; And yet this Chi can decide not to acquiesce to the yes of the person thereby barring the progress so wished and intended. (Odimegwu, 2016, p.56)

Nwodo also added:

...what dominates here is the role of the individual and the acceptance or concurrence of chi with the designs of the individual, hence the saying: *onye kwe chie ekwe* (If one says yes, his chi affirms too). Connected with this notion is the nagging suspicion of personal responsibility, of a share in the blame or reward as the case may be. There is a further suggestion in this direction that one had a previous choice and had bargained with destiny so that whatever happened later in life was as a consequence of that primordial choice. (Nwodo, 2004, p.16)

Whatever interpretation given to the concept of chi, one thing that is clear in this context is that Achebe sees it as divine in nature, often regarded as two being *Chi* and *Eke* often written as *Chineke*, being part of the Great *Chiukwu* the Supreme Being in Igbo religion. However, the concept has an inbuilt belief that the individual is bound to fail in any combat against his chi, but there is another belief that the power of chi in human affairs is not infinite or omnipotent, it has certain limitations, which made this belief ambivalent. Achebe told us in chapter fourteen that "perhaps Okonkwo's chi was not made for great things, clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi." (Achebe, 1988, p.110)

This ambivalent type of belief has consequences in practical living among the traditional Igbo, while for some people like Unoka Okonkwo's father he capitalise on this to blame his poverty or failure in life on bad chi, while for others like Okonkwo who have the courage to dare keep on moving ahead against all odds repeating to themselves the elders saying: "If a man says yes his chi also affirms." This later belief inculcates in the individual the an inbuilt spirit and determination to dare and move ahead, despite setbacks believing that there is a time room for renegotiation of one's destiny. Hence, for their success in life to a greater degree depends on personal god.

Thus, Okonkwo was perhaps right in questioning the saying of the elders in the present calamity he found himself on his being sent on exile by his community following the accidental discharge of his gun that killed his clansmen, but he was rather interpreting the elders say perhaps narrowly to suit his present circumstance. To understand and apply the concept of chi correctly in Igbo traditional life one must interpret it in the context of its double role in one single coin, and that is in the context of identity construction within the Igbo traditional family and community life.

Umuofia society in which Okonkwo was born and bred was a pervasively communalistic one in which the life of the individual is tied to the communal bond, a socio-religious bond which can be better explained in the Mbiti's classical formulation: "I am because we are; and since we are therefore I am." (Mbiti's 1969, pp.108-9) Umuofia community exemplified the above communal bond of living and understandably a do arming the factor in the life of Okonkwo. Odimegwu while commenting on the above complexity in African communal bond stated that:

As more and more scholars today conceptualize the mode of living that formed the identities of individuals and communities in traditional Africa, there is still common agreement on the prevalence of the community in the life, thought and self-conceptions of the people. The identity of the individual is forged in and through the multiple and intersecting dialogues of the individual, the community and with the community [...] Even when the individual is holding his private dialogue

with himself in his introspection regarding the things he has done and/or not done, and the things that have happened to him, this is private talk of the self with the self is inevitably a conversation with the community for it is either ruminating within the accepted norms of the community or it is questioning the communal status quo. Either way, the person is engaged with the community. (Odimegwu, 2016, p.60)

Indeed communal ethos and norms of Umuofia community was played a serious role in identity construction of Okonkwo and he often ruminates on these norms and values, but he hardly questions it, this was to be left to Obierika his friend who is more disposed to dynamics of social change which is inevitable in every human society. Umuofia community despite their belief in traditional values possessed these dynamics for social change when it becomes inevitable. Hence, there was room for change and growth, but it was a healthy rational change. People grew up both in age, wealth and wisdom through initiation into their various social hierarchies and ranks. Certain customs and laws were criticised, modified or completely dropped according to the people need and perception of them. In chapter four Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in his village, was telling two other men who visited him that the punishment for breaking the peace of Ani which Okonkwo had broken by beating his second wife, Ojiugo, during the sacred week of peace in dishonour of the Ani goddess had become very mild in their clan.

It has not always been so, he said my father told me that he had been told that in the past a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while this custom was stopped because it spoils the peace it was meant to preserve. (Achebe, 1988, p.38)

Even when one of the young men reminded Ezeudu that in some clans it was an abomination for a man to die during the week of peace. He replied thus:

It is indeed true [...] They have such custom in obodoani. If a man dies at this time he is not buried but cast into the Evil Forest. It is a bad custom which these people observe because they lack understanding. They throw away large numbers of men and women without burial. And what is the result? Their clan is full of the evil spirits of these unburied dead, hungry to do harm to the living. (Ibid., p.38)

Okonkwo could not comprehend these aspects of change in all ramifications, the same applies to the new Christian religion and colonial government that came to umuofia, he could not bring himself to accept the white man's religion, government, education and trade. For him they were all bad, accepting them meant for him abandoning his cherished Igbo traditional life, in fact a total destruction of those value he had lived by, without which life had no more meaning. Okonkwo seem to be alone in this feeling. Achebe told us in chapter twenty-one that:

There were many men and women in umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also

built a trading store and for the first time palm oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into umuofia. And even in matters of religion there was a growing feeling that there might be something in it after all, something vaguely akin to method in the overwhelming madness. (Ibid., p.146)

At various times in the book Obierika and Ogbuefi Ezeudu made us to understand that Igbo traditions and religious beliefs and practices are not dogmatic orthodoxy, they are indeed open to interpretation from time to time as the need arises. Obierika questions the rationality behind certain customs in chapter thirteen where Achebe stated that:

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 complexity. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just the offender. As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others. (Ibid., pp.106-6)

So as the new religion preached against some of the above practices, it raised some feeling among the people that there might be something in it after all. In fact some of the people saw some elements of logic and truth in the new religion and felt some doubt about the validity of their own customs and beliefs. Hence, when Okonkwo in chapter twenty suggested using force to chase away the white men, his religion and government, Obierika cautioned:

It is too late[...] Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. They are only two of them. But what of our people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame. (Ibid., p.144)

Other people like Nwoye Okonkwo's first son who was troubled and embittered about the gruesome death of Ikemefuna and the cries of the twins in the bush saw in the new religion something to console and patch his embattled soul. There are others like the *Osu* and the other social outcasts who on account of the discrimination they suffered had joined the new religion. Particularly "Nneka, the wife of Amadi[...] was very heavy with child. It was her fifth pregnancy. And she might have twins like the previous ones, that had been immediately thrown away." (Ibid., p.122) As the new religions preached against the practices the people saw elements of logic and truth in it, and doubted the validity of their own customs and beliefs. Nwodo added:

People like Obierika had been puzzled over the morality of throwing away innocent twins; Nwoye over Ikemefuna's death.

It was obvious to both Obierika and Nwoye that some of their people's religious practices and commands of their gods were not morally justifiable. They wondered how their own gods could command something morally wrong. This was a typical case of the difference between religion and morality within the traditional situation, where morality is used to judge or critique certain religious practices. (Nwodo, 2004, p.23)

Western education that came with the new religion equally held attractions and appeal to some of them following the earlier appeal and advice of Reverend Brown that they should send their children to school because only those who trained in the colonial western and missionary education would be able to work with the white man in his government, his church or his trade. Hence those who are inclined to spiritual dispositions joined the missionaries in evangelism as teachers in the school and church, while those who joined the colonial government's administration exploited the opportunity to amass wealth through corrupt manipulation of the process, and others "who joined the commerce through trading companies had plenty of opportunities to satisfy the acquisitive side of the Igbo dualism. What is important is that each person accepted what appealed to him or her." (Ibid., p.24) Thus, Okonkwo saw the above new dispensation from a different perspective. Everything in it was bad as far as he is concerned, and accepting any of them meant total disintegration and ruining of his people's cherished customs and traditions ordained by their ancestors. Hence, the tragedy of his life was to a certain extent a way of rejecting what he could not fully understand, while some others who could not fully comprehend the new religion applied the Igbo ontological balance of caution as a survival strategy.

2. EVALUATION

The major contention in this paper has been to draw attention to Ogungbemi's position that Okonkwo had existential ethical right to decide what was the best option for himself in the face of the polarity of existence created by his actions especially by taking his life and argue that this is contestable in the light of the Igbo cultural values and traditions Okonkwo tried to defend. He also raised the issue that hope, the enduring virtue that is vital to human existence, was not abandoned by Okonkwo when he opted for suicide, because his belief in hereafter would provide succour for him instead of his living among those who no longer share the same moral and traditional values. Ogungbemi therefore, concluded that:

Considering the circumstances that made Okonkwo end his life, it is plausible to believe in oneself and not the crowd. Following one's mind is instructive as an individual in the corporate existence. Okonkwo, a man of strength and success, followed his mind in the midst of polarities of existence and perhaps, that was what constituted the meaning of life to him. (Ogungbemi, 2007, p.156)

Yes, Okonkwo if we consider his actions from the individualistic existentialist perspective has the ethical right to decide what is best option for him in the circumstance of the polarity of existence he found himself after killing the court messenger, but the options must be made within the ontological boundaries of his community ethos, customs and beliefs. Okonkwo as earlier noted though was eager to defend the customs and values of his community, but often times found himself at the opposite end violating the norms and injunctions of the institutions he was ready to put his life on the line to defend. Early in the narrative already noted Achebe told us that Umuofia identified and recognise Okonkwo as rising star and great achiever after defeating the great wrestler Amalinze, "who for seven years was unbeaten from Umuofia to Mbaino." After this defeat, Okonkwo's personality grew from the great wrestler to a determined and resilient young man, who though "did not have the start in life which many young men usually had," because his father Unoka was poor not out of misfortunes, but "due to the weaknesses of his machete and his hoe," Achebe (1988, p.28) made the then young Okonkwo to face life with determination to be successful despite his poor background. However, this poor foundation generated two attitudinal behaviour in him namely: Fear and detest for any sign of weakness or compassion, and an unwavering determination to succeed. Achebe narrated in chapter three that "indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life and shameful death." (Ibid., 29) In fact, this fear and detest for weakness became the propelling power in him to always strive for greatness, but also maladjusted him and consequently led him to a tragic end.

Thus, if we critically analyse the context of this pathological fear in Okonkwo in the light of his community's ontological principles of masculine-feminine discretionary balance in human activity, we will see Okonkwo's inability to apply and maintain this balance affected his relationship with people, even his immediate family. Achebe, in chapter two told us that "he ruled his household with a heavy hand," not necessarily because he was a cruel fellow but because

his whole life was dominated by fear, a fear greater and deeper than the worst fear that the most malevolent spirit could generate in the most effeminate heart of the coward. His family, lived in perpetual fear of him, not by his preference but as his inevitable lot. (Ibid., p.25)

This also explains his ambivalent attitude to the ransom lad, Ikemefuna, who grew to be liked by Okonkwo because he judges him to personify what he thinks a boy of his age should be and was gradually turning Okonkwo's first son Nwoye around to the deep satisfaction of Okonkwo. Notwithstanding this well merited fondness Okonkwo still killed him, not minding the forewarning of the old and highly respected warrior Ogbuefi Ezeudu that "he calls you father. Do not bear

a hand in his death. "On that fateful day, Ikemefuna ran to him crying, "my father they have killed me! [...] dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak." (Ibid., p.58)

Obierika his friend appears as a more balanced ideal Igbo person who applied discretionary and cautious Igbo attitude in interpreting and carrying out the demands of the customs and commands of the gods as we saw in chapter eight where Achebe narrated to us the conversation between Okonkwo and Obierika after the killing of Ikemefuna:

"I cannot understand why you refuse to come with us to kill that boy", he asked Obierika. "Because I did not want to", Obierika replied sharply. "I had something better to do." "You sound as if you question the authority and decision of the Oracle, who said he should die." "I do not. Why should I? But the Oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision." "But someone has to do it. If we were all afraid of blood, it would not be done. And what do you think the Oracle would do then?" "You know very well Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood; and if any one tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. The is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families." "The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger," Okonkwo said. "A child's finger is not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm." "That is true," Obierika agreed. "But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it." (Ibid., p.62-3)

The reason for quoting the long passage is to emphasize the abominable implications of Okonkwo's participation in killing Ikemefuna despite it being decreed by the Oracle. In fact, it's effect later manifested in the inadvertent accidental discharge of his killing a clansman, because Okonkwo's hand is already stained with innocent blood of a boy who calls him father. Nwoye his first son's running away from home to join the missionaries became the later manifestation. Worthy of note also in the above passage is the distinction Achebe subtly made between the virtue of valour and courage and the vice of foolhardiness, where Obierika represents the calm and usually thoughtful / discerning type, while Okonkwo represents the blind and thoughtless zealous type who hardly toe the path of caution and discretion. On their conversation following the news of the death of Ogbuefi Ndulue and the demands of Ozo title, Okonkwo could not understand how a warrior and titled man openly succumbed to the love of a woman to the extent that he hid nothing from her when the story of the closeness between Ogbuefi Ndulue and his wife was told, nor did he question the aspect of the Ozo title that was becoming anachronistic as well as impeding the growth and development. He felt the pain of seeing his tall palm trees killed by lousy young tappers, whereas he would have done better, but for the inhibition of Ozo title and yet he insisted that:

"The law of the land must be obeyed." (Ibid., p.64) Of course he made himself a slave instead of an operator/custodian of the laws and customs of the land unlike his friend Obierika.

CONCLUSION

Okonkwo and the polarity of existence presents two complementary insights into the existential reality of the individual in Igbo world. Okonkwo rose to greatness from the harsh poverty of his family background that created in him a fear he could not overcome, which though propelled him to greatness, but maladjusted him to the demands of his community, Umuofia, and made it difficult for him to adjust to changing times brought about by the colonial and missionary enterprise. This eventually led him not only into rash actions but an ignoble death of suicide. Obierika expressed the sadness of Okonkwo's death in the following words to the District Commissioner: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (Ibid., p.167) By committing suicide, Okonkwo had eternally excluded himself from the community of the living, the dead and the yet unborn. This is the implication of Obierika's lamentation of his "being buried like a dog." Thus, for such a titled man like Okonkwo to be denied decent burial and befitting funeral which will admit him into the ancestral world is an eternal calamity. Hence, the question of hereafter providing succour for his spirit is an elusive statement that has no basis in Igbo cosmological belief, because the revered ancestral world is for only those who merits it by good life, good death, decent burial and befitting funeral rite. Okonkwo had lost the last three, his spirit would rather join the *akalogeli* malevolent spirits that hover between the land of the living and the dead. Thus, Okonkwo polarised himself eternally by committing an abominable death of suicide, because of his inability to practice balance in his assessment of situations, which often made him to take extremist positions in life. Besides, his decision to kill the court messenger portrayed him as a poor leader in Umuofia, because he failed to wait for consensus decision on how they will respond to the colonial government imprisonment of their elders which is the hallmark of leadership in his community.

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