

The Idea of Personhood in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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In this paper, I explore the African normative idea of personhood as a philosophical theme in *Things Fall Apart*.¹ I do this in the context of communalism, which involves the mutual dependence between individuals and community. This dependence, which provides the foundation for people's actions, characters, and identities, is founded on the view that people have complex normative and spiritual relationships with others and with their ancestors in a community. The community and the relationships provide norms that indicate people's obligations, on the basis of which their achievements are evaluated and socially recognized. The recognition of one's achievements and demonstration of what I term "psychological wholesomeness" indicate that one has acquired a normative sense of personhood. I discuss some philosophical accounts of the African idea of personhood as a backdrop for exploring how this theme is utilized by Chinua Achebe. I explore how the ideas of achieving and not achieving personhood based on communal norms, obligations, achievements, and recognition are illustrated in the characters of Unoka and Okonkwo, who did not achieve personhood, and Obierika and Ezeudu, who did.

Philosophical Views of Personhood

There are two philosophical conceptions of personhood in African thought: the descriptive metaphysical and the normative.² A metaphysical account of personhood may seek to analyze the essential ontological make-up of a person, examining, for instance, whether he or she is essentially material or immaterial, or whether he or she has one or two essential natures. Analyses of the nature of the mind and body, and the relationship between them, are efforts to give metaphysical accounts of personhood.³ However, it is the normative and not the metaphysical idea of personhood that is germane to African communal traditions, as personhood is a status earned by meeting certain community standards, including the ability to take on prescribed responsibilities that are believed to define personhood. Such responsibilities may be defined in terms of personal achievements that are worthy of social recognition.

Gail Presbey underscores this point by noting that the African conception of personhood is based on an intragroup moral and social recognition. According to Presbey, "the Massai (and some other African groups') concepts of 'personhood' are not to be understood primarily as metaphysical stances on the nature of the self, but rather as descriptions of intragroup recognition."⁴ The recognition of a person implies the existence of (satisfied) group standards for action and achievement. These standards, in turn, indicate a view of personhood that represents the social and moral identity one acquires. Again, this conception of personhood is plausible only because of the notion of community and its place in people's normative and conceptual scheme. A community is a *collectivity* of persons, principles, processes, and structures that defines social norms, moral expectations, and responsibilities, on the basis of which one is recognized as a person.⁵

The African idea of community, in Menkiti's view, too, has metaphysical, conceptual, and normative implications. It provides the basis for conceptualizing personhood, human relationships, ways of life, and modes of reasoning. The community is at the center of every thought, activity, or practice; it shapes one's ways of life, attitudes, ways of seeing things, and methods of doing things. Many African ideas, beliefs, and values are grounded and made meaningful only in the context of their communalistic conceptual and normative schemes. Traditional African societies are founded on, and sustained by, the idea of communally shared beliefs, practices, and values. J. A. A. Ayoade underscores this by contrasting African thought with Western thought. He says: "One thing which is evident . . . in Western thought is that it is possible to ascribe a particular strand of thought to known individual philosophers. On the contrary this is not true of the African system of thought[,] which is totally communal in origin."⁶ Although the African communalistic conception of personhood is primarily normative, it is also dependent on a descriptive metaphysical view of personhood; one cannot satisfy the criteria of personhood if one does not have the descriptive metaphysical features of a person.

An object, X, must satisfy the descriptive metaphysical criteria of personhood before X can be evaluated and recognized as having satisfied the *communal criteria* of personhood. Hence, an animal or a tree, which does not satisfy the descriptive metaphysical criteria of personhood, cannot be morally evaluated as lacking the normative dimension of personhood. The normative idea of personhood depends on the metaphysical view that a person has volition, is autonomous, moral, and capable of rational deliberation. Trees and animals do not qualify. A person is ascribed moral responsibility in terms of praise or blame by social recognition or lack thereof, respectively.⁷ A person is not simply a "determined" object that is governed by communal rules over which he has no control. The absence of metaphysical features of personhood such as voluntariness or freedom implies that one cannot rationally act to meet communal obligations. Recognition is a validation of one's ability to act voluntarily and freely to meet one's responsibilities based on reason. Hence, according to Wiredu, "A person is not just an individual of human parentage, but also one evincing in his or her projects and achievements an adequate sense of social responsibility."⁸

To underscore the point that personhood is achieved based on excellence, ac-

accomplishments, and recognition, Ifeanyi Menkiti argues that "personhood is something at which individuals could fail. . . . Hence, the African emphasized the rituals of incorporation and the overarching necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives, so that what was initially biologically [or metaphysically] given can come to attain social self-hood, i.e., become a person with all the inbuilt excellencies implied by the term" (*PC*, 173). In Menkiti's view, the notion of an individual who is not shaped by his community, its norms, and interests (i.e., a dangling personality that is abstracted from the community) does not make sense in African cultures. The community's interest involves the interests and responsibilities of individuals, because without the community, one is nothing but a dangling and socially disembodied metaphysical entity. Such a "dangling person" is not able to apply communal norms to guide his conduct for personal interests and communal needs; he is not truly a person in the African view. In this sense, the interests or responsibilities of individuals and those of their community are not mutually exclusive. Heidi Verhoef and Claudin Michel indicate this point by arguing that "an individual is obligated to contribute to the community not because it is expected of him or her, but because *it [the community] is him or her.*"⁹

The idea of the mutual relationship between an individual and community is underscored by John Mbiti's popular dictum: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."¹⁰ Jonathan Lee and Fred Hord give credence to this dictum and the idea of realizing personhood in a community by arguing that the idea of communalism in African thought involves "the idea that the identity of the individual is never separable from the sociocultural environment. Identity is not some Cartesian abstraction grounded in a solipsistic self-consciousness; rather, it is constructed in and at least partially by a set of shared beliefs, patterns of behaviour, and expectations."¹¹ The idea of communalism on the basis of which personhood is conceived can be illuminated when contrasted with the metaphysical view of a person on the basis of which Western liberal individualism is conceived. Menkiti alludes to this contrast as follows:

[W]hereas most Western views of man abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entities aspiring to the description "man" must have, the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, man is defined by reference to the enviroing community (*PC*, 171).¹²

The conclusion Menkiti draws from this contrast is that, in the African conception, the interests of the community are *logically prior* to the interests of the individual; individual interests are shaped by those of the community. Logically, this does not imply the *moral* priority of the community over the individual, it simply means that the attitudes, sentiments, and moral dispositions of individuals are formed by virtue of belonging to a community with requisite norms.

Thus, the dynamics of the community have implications for how one morally

identifies people. A moral person is not simply a rational and autonomous individual who is capable of reasoning abstractly and independently about universal and objective principles. Rather, a moral person, in the African view, is a rational, emotional, and autonomous person who has been sufficiently shaped and equipped by the norms, attitudes, and structures that are engendered by the realities of his community. To acquire personhood, it is not enough to have the requisite descriptive features, cognitive categories of understanding, rational conceptual scheme, and metaphysical freedom. A moral *person* must also appreciate the communal reality and must internalize the requisite attitudes and values of the community. From the "internalist" point of view of someone trying to achieve personhood, the community is not simply a reference to an "externalist" moral and social structure of justificatory principles for conduct. Instead, the community represents internalized principles that rationally motivate people to act. These principles require people to refrain from acting in ways that threaten human welfare (including their own) and the moral equilibrium of the community. Communal principles are adhered to because they are seen by people, from an internal point of view, as useful means of achieving personhood. People are able to live as persons only within a community with developed normative structures, principles, and processes of upbringing that help them to acquire personhood.

The idea of "personhood" invokes a set of rights and responsibilities that is acquired developmentally by participating in communal life and social recognition. In Menkiti's view, the developmental process of acquiring personhood represents a hierarchy that involves different normative levels. A person may progress developmentally from the status of an "it" as a child to acquiring full personhood as an adult, to "elderhood," and subsequently, to "ancesthood." Menkiti notes that "After birth the individual goes through the different rites of incorporation, including those of initiation at puberty time, before becoming a full person in the eyes of the community. And then, of course, there is procreation, old age, death, and entry into the community of departed ancestral spirits—a community viewed as continuous with the community of living men and women, and with which it is conceived as being in constant interaction (PC, 174)." Presbey indicates that "Recognition of a person comes at different levels, both when one achieves the benchmarks of success (as outlined by the society in a conformist sense), and for some, when they excel in an individualist way, for example as heroes or healers, in what Honneth describes as the transition from 'person' to 'whole person'" (MCP, 257).

The developmental stages of personhood represent "age groups" that are not necessarily defined in terms of chronological age but in terms of responsibility, achievements, and recognition. If one has not satisfied the requisite responsibilities associated with an age group, one cannot be elevated, incorporated, and initiated into a higher age group. Each stage in the process of one's acquisition of personhood represents a status that is conferred as a title by a ceremonial process of initiation and recognition. For instance, it is communally acceptable that only men of a certain age group may marry because they have proven by their consistent actions and status that they can take on the responsibilities of caring and providing for a family. As a stage in the developmental process of acquiring personhood, marriage

has a normative connotation. A communally sanctioned marriage is a recognition of one's ability to meet the communal standards, expectations, and responsibilities of an adult, husband, wife, mother, or father. In addition to one's achievements, recognition is accorded based on one's ability to demonstrate, by responsible actions, a knowledge and understanding of the traditions and values.

Personhood and Achievements: Unoka and Okonkwo

Achieving recognition, and perhaps ultimately personhood, or even elderhood, depends on one's ability to use communal norms to guide one's actions. An elder is not simply someone who is chronologically advanced in age. Age is respected, certainly, but age alone does not bring the recognition associated with personhood; personhood or elderhood comes from achievements and excellence. This idea is supported by the proverb "it is one's deeds that are counted, not one's years."¹³ Achebe illustrates this point about the relative importance of age and the emphasis on achievements as the basis for the normative conception of personhood among the Igbos when he said of Okonkwo: "Age was respected among his people, but achievement is revered (*TFA*, 12)." Wiredu also indicates that the respect that is given to age in African cultures is not arbitrary (*CUP*, 68). The justification for such respect comes from the expectation that a person of old age ought to have the requisite personal and social achievements, experience, knowledge, and judgment to warrant recognition and respect.

However, young people who have substantial personal achievements may also receive relevant social recognition. Achebe exemplifies this idea, *in part*, in the character of Okonkwo, who at a young age, had achievements that were worthy of recognition. I say "in part" because I shall show that based on Achebe's account, Okonkwo did not, for other reasons, achieve elderhood, in spite of his achievements. Achebe introduces the character of Okonkwo at the beginning of the novel by indicating that he "was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat (*TFA*, 7)." This echoes my earlier point that one's recognition depends on one's community, and also the honor that one's achievements bring to the community. In reference to Okonkwo, Achebe says: "As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders (*TFA*, 12)." Achebe's point is that a young person can achieve the social recognition and status that elders and kings get if he works hard to achieve personal and communal honors.

Based on the view that personhood is acquired based partly on one's achievements, one gets the sense that Okonkwo was on a sure path to achieving personhood or elderhood. In spite of the fact that he was not old, he was respected and recognized in his community for his achievements. But Achebe uses the character of Unoka, Okonkwo's father, to show that not all old people are accomplished enough to warrant recognition and respect. Unoka is an individual who was not considered a "person" or a grown-up in the moral sense because in spite of his old

age, he had no socially recognizable achievements. The novel begins with a description of Unoka as lazy man, a debtor—someone who could not provide food for his family. According to Achebe, “Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer (*TFA*, 9).”

That Unoka was a failure as a grown-up suggests that he failed to achieve the status of a “grown-up” in the African sense, in the sense of *becoming an elder*, even though he grew old. The distinction in African cultures between being “old” and being “an elder” as an earned moral status can be illuminated by an interesting distinction I saw on a bumper sticker: it said, “*Growing old* [chronologically] is mandatory but *growing up* [as an earned moral status] is a choice.”

Unoka was also a failure because he did not receive any title and had no achievements or respect; he did not get social recognition, which is required in the community for achieving personhood or elderhood. Elderhood is a high social and moral status. It is earned; it does not automatically come with old age.

Again, the idea of elderhood as a high moral and social status does not necessarily imply that all old people are morally virtuous or have recognizable achievements. It appears that Gyekye does not quite appreciate the distinction in African thought between age (one’s total years lived) and the idea that one’s recognition is based on one’s achievements. The distinction between “growing up” (doing deeds) and “growing old” (passing years) is aptly recognized by Menkiti. Gyekye misunderstands Menkiti as saying that *all* old people are necessarily moral. In his critique of Menkiti’s view, Gyekye argues: “For, surely there are many elderly people who are known to be wicked, ungenerous, unsympathetic: whose lives, in short, generally do not reflect any moral maturity or excellence. In terms of a moral conception of personhood, such elderly people may not qualify as persons.”¹⁴ Gyekye does not seem to fully appreciate that Menkiti’s account of personhood—which is illustrated and underscored by Chinua Achebe—is normative, and that being an elder is an *earned* status.

Not only did Unoka fail to acquire personhood or elderhood (community recognition), he also failed as a man, father, and husband in the normative sense of these terms. In African thought, being a “man” or “father” or “husband” is not just a descriptive reference to certain biological features or relationships—these terms have normative meanings and evaluative features attached to them, involving the ability to meet some requisite personal and communal obligations. This normative sense of manhood is also illustrated by Achebe in Okonkwo’s confrontation with Osugo in a kindred meeting where they were discussing the forthcoming ancestral feast. Osugo challenged Okonkwo’s idea, and Okonkwo said to him: “This meeting is for men (*TFA*, 28).” This statement was made because Osugo had no titles or socially recognizable personal and communal achievements—was not a “man.” In a normative sense, then, Okonkwo called Osugo a woman, which underscores the idea that gender or being a man in African cultures, similar to personhood or elderhood, is normative and socially constructed; it is not simply a reference to age, biological feature of sex, or some metaphysical features.

Okonkwo was motivated by Unoka’s failure, and as such, he made conscious

efforts to strive for elderhood. He did everything to avoid the path of his father. He understood the communal responsibilities and expectations and internalized the principles of acquiring titles, working hard, and being strong. Unlike Unoka, he was *internally motivated* by such expectations to develop into elderhood. Achebe underscores Okonkwo's drive by indicating that: "When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father (*TFA*, 11)." The worth of a person in the African conception of personhood is based on whether or not one has taken a title, achieved social status and recognition, and taken on the social responsibilities that are demanded by the community. Okonkwo tried very hard to be a man, father, and husband by being a good provider for his wives and children. Unlike his father, Okonkwo cultivated a large farm, he worked hard to tend to his yams—a symbol of manhood. He always reaped good harvests—enough yams to feed his family until the next season.

Achebe indicates that for the Igbos, "Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed (*TFA*, 34)." It is not socially acceptable or manly to be lazy. When Okonkwo saw signs of laziness in his son, Nwoye, he wanted to stamp it out. He "wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man (*TFA*, 34)." Okonkwo never wanted to be reminded about his father's bad qualities—laziness, being a debtor, having no title, being unable to provide for his family. Yet Nwoye brought this to mind, and Okonkwo was uncomfortable about it. This came up when Okonkwo was admiring Obierika's son. He complained to Obierika, saying: "I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man but there is too much of his mother in him. Too much of his grandfather, Obierika thought but he did not say it (*TFA*, 64)." Obierika did not say it because he knew that this was a sore spot in Okonkwo's life. Apparently, "The same thought also came to Okonkwo's mind. But he had long learned how to lay that ghost. Whenever the thought of his father's weakness and failure troubled him, he expelled it by thinking about his own strength and success (*TFA*, 64)."

Laziness, weakness, and failure to meet one's obligations, as we saw in Unoka, are considered unacceptable because they prevent one from contributing to the community and acquiring personhood. Doing what is unacceptable in the community—for instance, harming oneself or not pursuing one's interest or welfare—is regarded as an affront to the community. An insult to the community is also a blow to one's own long-term interest and the interest of others in the community. To refuse to act in ways that enhance one's ability to achieve personhood or similar dispositions is seen as a violation of communal norms. Hence, it is unacceptable for a man to be lazy or commit suicide or refuse to seek treatment for illness or seek help for problems. Such acts may threaten the person's own interests in terms of acquiring personhood (bearing in mind that the interests and welfare of a person and those of the community are mutually dependent). If someone is lazy and cannot provide for himself or his family, then other people will have to take on the responsibilities. For instance, when Unoka could not provide for himself, his wife,

and his children, the responsibility fell on others. When Okonkwo came of age, he took on the responsibility of providing for his mother, father, brothers, and sisters. This was an added duty that made his life more difficult. Moreover, he did not have the benefit of a father who could give him seed yams to start farming in order to "build a barn." "Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had. He did not inherit a barn from his father. There was no barn to inherit (*TFA*, 19)." His father was lazy and could not farm.

As Achebe indicates, "for a young man whose father had no yams, there was no other way [besides share-cropping] (*TFA*, 25)," which was a very slow way to build a barn. But "what makes it worse in Okonkwo's case was that he had to support his mother and two sisters from his meagre harvest. And supporting his mother also meant supporting his father. She could not be expected to cook and eat while her husband starved. And so at a very early age when he was striving desperately to build a barn through share-cropping Okonkwo was also fending for his father's house (*TFA*, 25)." The expectation was that if Unoka was truly in tune with his moral self in the context of the community's norms and his obligations, he should have been duly motivated to work hard or feel a sense of shame for his laziness. But Unoka did not internalize his communal norms, was not motivated by them, and did not feel a sense of shame. He was not in equilibrium with communal expectations or with any personal and social responsibilities. Various roles and relationships in African communities, including that of an elder, father, mother, and uncle, ascribe social and moral responsibilities that are dictated by both personal and communal interests. Such roles and relationships provide the normative basis for evaluating people with respect to personhood. Unoka did not use communal norms to guide his conduct in order to achieve elderhood. Hence, at death, he did not make the transition to ancestorhood in the developmental process of personhood. (When an elder dies and makes such a transition, his funeral involves a celebration and recognition of his life's achievements.)

Menkiti indicates that "ancestorhood . . . is part of the continuing process of elderhood, with those who have achieved its status still tied to the living, still invoked as members of an ongoing moral community."¹⁵ If an elder is able to maintain personhood by continuing to act responsibly, then at death, he subsequently makes a transition from elderhood to the status of an ancestor. Menkiti argues that, "with the death of an older person [an elder], the burial ceremony becomes more elaborate and the grief more ritualized—indicating a significant difference in the conferral of ontological status (*PC*, 174)." The "ontological status" that is conferred on a person at death, which indicates that the person has become an ancestral spirit, is also normative, in that it represents an evaluation and recognition of a person's achievement.¹⁶ Such elaborate funeral celebrations mark the ritualistic incorporation of the dead into the spiritual world of ancestors. The African idea of communalism is founded on the interrelationships among persons, ancestral spirits, and divinities in the context of a community. As Achebe indicates, "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a

series of transitions rites which brought him nearer to his ancestors (*TFA*, 115)."

The status of ancestorhood that is conferred on an elder at death is substantiated by Achebe's description of the elaborate ceremony surrounding the death and funeral of Ezeudu. As a sign of his achievement and social recognition, Achebe indicates that "Ezeudu had taken three titles in his life. It was a rare achievement. There were only four titles in the clan, and only one or two men in any generation ever achieved the fourth and highest" (*TFA*, 114–15). Achebe goes further to indicate that

Ezeudu was a great man, and so all the clan was at his funeral. The ancient drums of death beat, guns and cannon were fired, and men dashed about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on the roof. It was a warrior's funeral, and from morning till night warriors came and went in their age groups. They all wore smoked raffia skirts and their bodies were painted with chalk and charcoal. Now and again an ancestral spirit or *egwugwu* appeared from the underworld, speaking in a tremulous, unearthly voice and completely covered in raffia. . . . It was a great funeral, such as befitted a noble warrior. As the evening drew near, the shouting and the firing of guns, the beating of drums and the brandishing and clanging of machetes increased (*TFA*, 115).

This description illustrates Menkiti's point about the ritualistic funeral of an elder that indicates the transition into ancestorhood. The ritualistic role of *egwugwu*, i.e., the masquerades who represent ancestral spirits, illustrates that the community is made up of living people and the dead. The relationship between the living and the dead indicate the collective "we" and the organic and transcendental nature of the community, which is based on the normative and spiritual relationships among people and between people and ancestors in a community.

Personhood: Beyond Achievements

Complex communal relationships, which involve the moral and psychological integration of a person into the community, also provide the foundation for people's rational and emotional character and identity. Such relationships indicate that a robust sense of personhood goes beyond mere achievements. Achebe indicates in the character of Okonkwo how, in spite of one's achievements, one may fail to achieve personhood, and subsequently ancestorhood, simply because one lacks some necessary psychological elements. In order to achieve personhood, an individual must be "psychologically wholesome," emotionally and rationally stable, communally well adjusted, and must consistently show excellent judgment. We see in the character of Unoka an older person who did not display the requisite qualitative features of achievements that warrant recognition. In the character of Okonkwo we see a man who had achievements and recognition but lacked other necessary psychological conditions for achieving personhood. In contrast, Achebe

displays in the characters of Obierika and Ogbuefi Ezeudu how one can achieve personhood not only by one's achievements, but also by displaying rational and emotional wholesomeness that is exemplified in the full integration of a person into a community. Such integration involves being molded by the community to internalize its norms as the basis for action. Rational and emotional wholesomeness enables one to adhere to communal norms and to use them to guide one's actions and mold one's character to achieve personhood. Okonkwo lacked the right temperament and the necessary rational and emotional wholesomeness. He was hot-tempered and could not control his anger. He did not fully internalize the communal norms and did not sufficiently allow these norms to mold his character and guide his conduct. He eventually failed to complete the process of achieving personhood because of these flaws.

Okonkwo was not always rational and deliberative. He acted on emotions and was not always in control of the emotions of fear and anger. In contrast, Achebe indicates that "Obierika was a man who thought about things (*TFA*, 117)." Throughout the novel, Ezeudu is presented as a stable and well-reasoned person. For instance, when the Oracle ordered that Ikemefuna be killed, Obierika and Ezeudu advised Okonkwo not to have anything to do with the boy's death. Ezeudu visited Okonkwo and met him sitting with Ikemefuna and Nwoye, drinking palm wine. Okonkwo invited him to join him for a drink, but Ezeudu declined. Achebe says, "He refused to join in the meal, and asked Okonkwo to have a word with him outside. And so they walked out together, the old man supporting himself with his stick. When they were out of earshot, he said to Okonkwo: 'That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death (*TFA*, 55-6).'" But Okonkwo would not heed the advice. In fact, he was the one who eventually killed Ikemefuna. In Achebe's account: "Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak (*TFA*, 59)." Ezeudu's sentiment was also expressed by Obierika after Ikemefuna had been killed. Okonkwo visited Obierika and asked why he did not join them to kill the boy. He confronted Obierika, saying:

"I cannot understand why you refused to come with us to kill that boy." "Because I did not want to," Obierika replied sharply. "You sound as if you question the authority and the 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 (*TFA*, 64)."

The point here is to underscore the contrast between the irrational outlook of Okonkwo, which is motivated by fear, and the outlooks of Obierika and Ezeudu, that are based on moral reasonableness. In spite of Okonkwo's strengths and achievements, he did reprehensible things as a result of his psychological flaws, which then mitigated his social recognition and status in the community. For instance, during the Week of Peace, he beat his youngest wife because she went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return in time to prepare his afternoon meal. "In his anger he 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 half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess (*TFA*, 31)." This was a violation of the Week of Peace, which required people to show restraint and reverence for the gods. As Achebe says, "it was unheard of to beat somebody during the sacred week (*TFA*, 34)." Okonkwo ruled his household with terror, and his wives feared him. He had a penchant for being rash and arrogant, and he was driven by an irrational fear of failure. He was motivated by the need to prove that he was strong and not lazy. He did not allow the community, its values, and the recognition of his achievements to tame his arrogance and irrational fears. As such, he violated important communal norms. He lacked rational, moral, and emotional stability; he did not properly internalize the communal norms and values.

Because of Okonkwo's fear of being perceived as weak and lazy, he did many unreasonable things. These things prevented Okonkwo from being fully grounded in his community's norms. He did not like to be idle: idleness reminded him of his lazy, weak, and unaccomplished father, who never worked but instead was found loafing, eating, and drinking. Okonkwo was subconsciously haunted by the image of his father; he wanted to run away from this image. He lacked the ability to enjoy the restful and festive periods of the new yam festival. He thought resting was a sign of weakness and laziness. Achebe notes that "he was always uncomfortable sitting around for days waiting for a feast or getting over it. He would be very much happier working on his farm (*TFA*, 38)." This need to be different from his father led him to be stern with his family. He became an extremist and never had balance in his life, actions, or thinking.

The lack of balance in Okonkwo's life, which is exemplified in his need to avoid idleness and the perception of laziness and weakness, motivated him to go hunting during the new yam festival. When he brought out his old rusty gun and his second wife teased him about his inability to hunt, he nearly killed her. This, after Okonkwo had severely beaten her for cutting some leaves from a banana tree to wrap food. According to Achebe's account,

although Okonkwo was a great man whose prowess was universally acknowledged, he was not a hunter. In fact he had not killed a rat with his gun. And so when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot. Unfortunately for her, Okonkwo heard it and ran madly into his room for the loaded gun, ran out again and aimed at her as she clambered over the dwarf wall of the barn. He pressed the trigger and there was a loud report accompanied by the wail of his wives and children. He threw down the gun and jumped into the barn, and there lay the woman, very much shaken and frightened but quite unhurt. He heaved a heavy sigh and went away with the gun (*TFA*, 39-40).

This passage further illustrates Okonkwo's lack of emotional stability, his tendency to act without thinking of the consequences. His sigh of relief when he realized

that his wife was unhurt shows that he did not think of the outcome before shooting the gun.

Okonkwo's lack of rational and emotional wholesomeness was also manifested in his arrogance, brashness, and lack of humility. People did not like these qualities in him. Such perception watered down his recognition, achievements, and the respect that people accorded him. Achebe remarks about these features of Okonkwo's character and how people perceived him in an account of what happened when he violated the sacred week and was punished. According to Achebe: "Inwardly, he was repentant. But he was not the man to go about telling his neighbors that he was in error. And so people said he had 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* (TFA, 32-3)." Achebe illustrates a similar attitude of arrogance when Okonkwo could not tolerate being contradicted by Osugo, a man without a title. An old man who observed this about Okonkwo "was struck, as most people were, by Okonkwo's brusqueness in dealing with less successful men (TFA, 28)."

Although achievement is revered in African cultures, it is also expected that the person who has achieved should exhibit certain moral virtues, such as humility, in dealing with others. It was well known that Okonkwo did not always exhibit this virtue. Hence, in his arrogant confrontation with Osugo, people did not agree with him. "Everyone at the kindred meeting took sides with Osugo when Okonkwo called him a woman. The oldest man present said sternly that those whose palm kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble (TFA, 28)." Okonkwo's lack of humility was manifested in many of his ill-tempered, ill-judged, ill-advised, and ill-mannered actions, indicated above. His lack of psychological wholesomeness led finally to his downfall and, eventually, his suicide.

While Okonkwo was in exile in his mother's land, Mbanta, European missionaries came to his fatherland, Umuofia. And before he completed his years of exile, the missionaries had also arrived in Mbanta. To his consternation and dismay, his first son, Nwoye, had become a convert and joined the missionaries. This created a rift between Okonkwo and Nwoye. Subsequently, Nwoye volunteered to be trained as a missionary. This brought him to Umuofia. When he arrived in Umuofia, Obierika saw him and was surprised. This prompted Obierika's visit to Okonkwo in Mbanta. When he arrived and asked about Nwoye, Okonkwo was not willing to talk about him. Obierika was, however, able to get some information from Nwoye's mother. It seems Okonkwo was embittered by Nwoye's action. He was overcome by extreme anger about the missionaries who invaded and desecrated his homeland. Okonkwo was single-minded and not deliberative about what had to be done; he wanted his people to go to war to completely wipe out the invaders.

He would not rationally and critically think about the implications of violently wiping out the missionaries. He did not learn any lesson from what happened to the village of Abame, which was wiped out because the inhabitants killed a missionary in order to get rid of all missionaries (TFA, 161). Okonkwo thought that the people of Abame were weak and foolish, and that they simply refused to

fight back. He thought you could solve every problem by a show of strength, an idea which comes from his irrational fear of being seen as weak. Obierika was more deliberative, circumspect, and rational in his thinking. He told Okonkwo that it was too late to fight back against the missionaries because their own clansmen had joined the missionaries. This would make it difficult to build a formidable resistance against the missionaries, he said. The people feared that if they killed all the missionaries, they would also have to kill their kinfolks who joined the missionaries. It was an abomination to kill a clansman; this very act was what led to Okonkwo's banishment to Mbanta.

After his seven-year exile, Okonkwo returned home to Umuofia with anger for the missionaries. In his irrational and angry stupor, he wanted to take things into his own hands and do something. His single-mindedness culminated in his final irrational actions: the killing of the head messenger and his own suicide. The clan of Umuofia met to decide what to do about the missionaries. Okonkwo was impatient and was not interested in deliberating with his kinfolks. During the meeting, five court messengers were sighted coming to put an end to the meeting. Their sighting angered Okonkwo. "He sprang to his feet as soon as he saw who it was. He confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate, unable to utter a word. The man was fearless and stood his ground, his four men lined up behind him (*TFA*, 187-8)." The people of Umuofia asked the messengers what they wanted, and the head messenger replied: "The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop (*TFA*, 188)." Okonkwo could no longer control his anger, and his rationality had been overtaken by his emotions. "In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body (*TFA*, 188)."

After he had killed the man, Okonkwo wanted his clansmen to join him in going to war against the missionaries to drive them out of the clan. It then dawned on him that his people were not going to side with him: "He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape (*TFA*, 188)." He sensed that his people were afraid when he heard people asking why he killed the man. In disappointment, he cleaned his machete and went away. Because he did not internalize and did not give much thought to his community's norms, he went to commit suicide by hanging himself on the branch of a tree in a bush behind his house. When the District Commissioner learned of the death of the head messenger, he sent his soldiers to arrest Okonkwo. The soldiers found Obierika and others in Okonkwo's compound pondering his calamitous end. When the District Commissioner asked about Okonkwo, Obierika went to show him his lifeless body dangling from the branch of the tree. Obierika asked the District Commissioner's people to help them take down the body and bury him. When the District Commissioner asked why the clansmen could not do it, one of the men accompanying Obierika replied: "It is against our custom (*TFA*, 190)." He told them: "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen (*TFA*, 190)."

Angered by the circumstances of his friend's death, Obierika turned to the District Commissioner and said in a rather ferocious tone: "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 (TFA, 191).” Because Okonkwo took the abominable step of committing suicide, he, in death, became a failure like his father, partly because he wanted to avoid the fate of his father, in his effort to achieve personhood. He also failed to achieve ancestorhood because he did not allow his character, identity, and personhood to develop according to communal principles. The actions and character traits that displayed the rough edges in his personality, which finally led to his downfall, were not guided by communal principles. In fact, some of his character traits were plainly inconsistent with communal rules, expectations, and obligations. A successive series of irrational actions that violated communal moral norms would culminate in his tragic end. Many of these actions were the result of his anger, the fear of being seen as weak, and his inability to be reasoned and deliberative in the proper context. However, his friend, Obierika represents a balanced moral character who achieved full personhood. In the end, Okonkwo failed to achieve full personhood, failed to achieve elderhood in order make the transition to ancestorhood.

Notes

1. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1993); cited subsequently as *TFA*.
2. This is a commonplace view, that the African conception of a person has two related components. See Segun Gbadegesin, “Eniyan: The Yoruba Concept of a Person,” in eds. P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux, *The African Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 175; Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 125–9. Wiredu’s book will be cited as *CUP*.
3. See ed. Lee M. Brown, *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), for a compilation of essays that provide various metaphysical accounts of personhood in African cultures. Also see Kwame Gyekye, “Akan Concept of a Person,” in ed. Richard A. Wright, *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 199–212.
4. Gail M. Presbey, “Massai Concepts of Personhood: The Roles of Recognition, Community, and Individuality,” *International Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2002): 257; cited subsequently as *MCP*.
5. Menkiti distinguishes among three sense of community: collectivities, constituted, and random. In contrasting the African idea of community with other senses, he argues that the African idea involves collectivities in the truest sense. See Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, “Person and Community in African Traditional Thought,” in ed. Richard A. Wright, *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, cited above at note 3, 179–80. This essay will be cited subsequently as *PC*.
6. J. A. A. Ayoade, “Time in Yoruba Thought,” in ed. Richard A. Wright, *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, cited above at note 3, 96.
7. See the essays by Segun Gbadegesin, Ifeanyi Menkiti, and D. A. Masolo in ed. Lee M. Brown, *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, cited above at note 3.

8. Kwasi Wiredu, "Morality and Custom: A Comparative Analysis of Some African and Western Conceptions of Morals," in ed. Albert G. Mosley, *African Philosophy: Selected Readings* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 400; cited subsequently as MC.
9. Heidi Verhoef and Claudin Michel, "Studying Morality Within the African Context: A Model of Moral Analysis and Construction," *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 26, no. 4 (1997): 389–407. The authors quote L. J. Myer, "Transpersonal Psychology: The Role of the Afrocentric Paradigm," *Journal of Black Psychology*, vol. 12 (1986): 31–42, quote from 35.
10. John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 141.
11. Fred Lee Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee, *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 7–8.
12. The contrast between the African sociocentric and the Western egocentric conception of personhood has been criticized by eds. Michael Jackson and Ivan Karp, *Personhood and Agency: The Experience of Self and Others in African Cultures* (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990); Didier Kaphagawani, "Some African Concepts of Person: A Critique," in eds. Ivan Karp and D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 66–82; D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).
13. N. K. Dzobo, "African Symbols and Proverbs as Source of Knowledge and Truth," in eds. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies I* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992), 97.
14. Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 49.
15. Ifeanyi Menkiti, "Physical and Metaphysical Understanding: Nature, Agency, and Causation in African Traditional Thought," in ed. Lee M. Brown, *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, cited above at note 3, 130
16. Kwame Gyekye suggests in his critique that Menkiti's view of personhood is solely a metaphysical view. See *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, cited above at note 14, 37.

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