The Individual, the Collective and Resistance in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract
This paper is a study of Chinua Achebe's debut novel, *Things Fall Apart*, to understand how resistance is offered, individually and collectively, and what difference each of these forms of resistance can make on an individual and upon the society. Resistance in the novel is embodied most fully in the protagonist, Okonkwo. The paper argues that Okonkwo as an individual drives the concept of collective individualism to the extreme—whereby he, the individual, also usurps the role of the collective, making himself the collective individual. This makes him an easy target for tragedy and a lone actor even when he suffers from the delusion of acting for, and as, the collective. The interpretation of Okonkwo's tragedy as a communal disaster affecting the whole people of Umuofia is refuted here, and shown to only subsist in acknowledging his self-imposed identity as the collective Umuofia, a community that already exhausts itself as his fantasy. The paper concludes that Okonkwo's tragedy is personal and a consequence of usurping the collective in an otherwise noble act of resistance.
Key words: Collective individualism; Resistance; Things Fall Apart; Okonkwo; Chinua Achebe

Introduction

> Okonkwo 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 honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights (Achebe, *TFA* 5).

Those are the sentences that form the opening paragraph of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. On a close reading of this paragraph, two things immediately stand out about the world of Umuofia, where the story is set (and by extension, the world of *Things Fall Apart*). The first is the symbolism of the number seven. The number seven is mentioned three times in the five sentences of that opening paragraph. Upon examination, one sees that this number is used to denote completeness and the zenith of an action, event or being. For 'seven years' Amalinze 'was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino.' Also, the founder of Umuofia 'engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.' In these two instances the number seven comes to represent a *complete* completion. By being unbeaten for seven years, Amalinze has shown that he is not just a great wrestler but a complete one who *held out his tenure.* Okonkwo's throwing of Amalinze therefore is significant and worthy of praise for the eighteen-year-old, who is yet

to escape teenagehood, has dethroned a champion at the prime of his reign. It is important that someone does so, for the societal balance that 'no man however great [is] greater than his society' (Achebe, *Arrow* 512) not to be disturbed. To continue to win into the eighth year would have placed an individual wrestler, Amalinze, above the society as a whole. This is an important point that would be returned to later in the paper. In a like manner, the founder of Umuofia engages the spirit of the wild for seven days and nights. This marks a sense of a complete, all-out struggle, and considering that Umuofia exists, it also enunciates a victory over the spirit of the wild.

The second significant thing that stands out from the opening paragraph has led to the adoption of the concept of *Collective Individualism* in this paper. At the surface level, it may sound at best a paradox, at worst, some incoherent and inchoate mumbling. How can one talk of individualism as collective or of collectivism as individual? The rest of this paper is devoted to establishing that, rather than being a 'bipolar dimension' (Sinha et al 134) written as 'collectivism-individualism' and held to be mutually exclusive concepts, both can co-exist and do co-exist (Triandis and Gelfand 42). This is done by following the authorial voice in *Things Fall Apart* and examining the character of the protagonist, Okonkwo, who embodies both the mutuality of the two concepts and also an example of their differences and how a failure to recognise and reconcile these differences can break an individual.

Okonkwo's 'fame rested on solid *personal* achievements' (emphasis added), yet, he brought honour not to himself but 'to his village' by throwing 'Amalinze the Cat' (Achebe, *TFA* 5). In the individualistic act of his triumph over Amalinze in wrestling, Okonkwo brings honour to a collective, 'his village.' We see the collective sharing in his individualism, and his fame growing 'like a bush-fire in the harmattan' (Achebe, *TFA* 5). That is not to suggest in any way that Okonkwo was stripped of his individualism and now speaks and breathes his village—far from that—but to suggest, as I will later show, that even when there are distinct separations between the individual and the collective, sometimes these two are lumped together and it is Okonkwo's failure to differentiate when the individual is just a mere individual and when he embodies the collective that leads to his tragic end.

Conceptual Analysis

Collectivism and individualism are two opposite concepts that seem to be socio-culturally and even economically informed. Triandis and Gelfand, for example, note that '[w]hen resources are abundant there is more individualism. Cultures that are relatively isolated from other cultures, and in which making a living requires people to work together very frequently are likely to be more collectivistic' (503). In those cultures that are collectivistic, 'the self is conceived as an aspect of the collective—family, tribe, work-group, religious group, party, geographic district, or whatever is considered as an ingroup by members of the culture' as against individualistic cultures where the 'definition of the self is unrelated to specific collectives' (Gelfand et al. 399).

Hofstede gives a more detailed comparison of the concepts:

> Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive ingroups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (qtd in Triandis and Gelfand 504).

Some characteristics run through these definitions and comparisons, but the two most important ones for determining whether a culture is individualistic or not are: point of reference, (the self or the collective?) and goal priority (whose goals are prioritized, that of the self or of the group?) (Triandis and Gelfand; Jetten et al.).

Since culture is 'a multi-dimensional phenomenon' (Mironenko and Sorokin qtd in Bakke 2), it may be misleading to speak of one culture as exclusively collectivistic and another as exclusively individualistic, for the individual is always in a relationship with the collective thereby making the concepts not to be 'a bipolar dimension' (Sinha et al. 134). Hernes and Hippe coin the term *collective individualism* to 'explain the transactional relationship that exists between the individual and the state' (qtd in Bakke 3). Collective individualism as a concept establishes that insofar as a group exists inside which an individual, either by choice or by accidents of nature, finds themself, individualism can never be spoken of exclusively from collectivism, for the two are in constant interactions and negotiations. It is 'spatially delineated individual expressions of self that are aggregated into community definition' (Poindexter 609) which necessitates that 'throughout their journey people are in a continuous transactional relationship with a higher-order system providing a package of possibilities and security for their individual in exchange for some limitations and obligations' (Bakke 3).

To further show that the lines drawn between collectivism and individualism under the concept of collectivism-individualism may not be as clear as they seem, Sinha et al. report differences that may exist between behaviours and intention. Bakke in researching 'collective individualism, egalitarianism and work-centrality in the career thinking of Norwegian teenagers' discovered that, while for some of these teenagers, academic excellence is an 'individualistic pursuit of success,' the teenagers from the rural areas see this individual success 'rather as a contribution to the collective and fulfilment of the responsibilities of the social contract' (3) which fits perfectly into what Sinha et al. categorize as IC, which is 'individualist behaviour with collectivist intention or followed by collectivist behaviours.' Other categories include: Collectivist behaviour with collectivist intention (CC); Individualist behaviour with individualist intention (II); Collectivist behaviour with individualist intention or followed by individualist behaviour (CI) and a mix of collectivist and individualist intention and behaviour (C&I).

What these categories reveal is that actions that might be considered individualistic may be aimed at achieving a collective goal while the ones that may be deemed collectivistic may have lurking beneath it an individualistic intention and this challenges the distinction between collectivism-individualism and presents collective individualism as a better concept for understanding individual-group relationship.

In a loose fashion, I use the concept of collective individualism to encompass various interactions and relationships between the individual and the collective. These interactions are characterised by negotiations, such that allows the individual to embody the collective without really becoming *the* collective. Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, is seen as the character in whom such negotiations are most visible in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.*

The Man Called Okonkwo

Okonkwo is a man of no small repute. He is the typical example of a man starting from nothing (having an artistically talented but financially wretched Unoka as his father) and acquiring everything of worth amongst his people. He earned his place among the elders for 'age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered' (Achebe, *TFA* 8). Okonkwo is also a deeply flawed man. He does not understand when the power of the individual must yield to that of the collective. That is his greatest undoing.

Okonkwo, it appears, allows himself to drown in his shortsightedness brought about by a delusion of grandeur and over-bloated sense of self-importance and might. Some of the actions taken by Okonkwo before his final beheading of the messenger suggest that the problem is not really with Umuofia, disintegrated as she has become in the face of colonial intrusion, as much as it is with Okonkwo's failure to understand that he is Okonkwo and *not* Umuofia.

Okonkwo has a mature sense of self but not an adequate maturity in interpersonal relationships. This lack of balance in the development of the two dimensions is problematic since a "mature sense of self is contingent on interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, the continued development of increasingly mature interpersonal relationships is contingent on mature self-definition" (Poindexter 622). It is his lack of mature interpersonal relationship that informs his "brusqueness in dealing with less successful men" especially when they contradict him which strikes the people as odd considering that Okonkwo himself comes from a poor background.[i] His lack of mature interpersonal relationship leads the narrative voice of *Things Fall Apart* to comment that 'Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit" (Achebe, *TFA* 21).

Okonkwo's wrestling with Amalinze is a pivotal action to be considered. We may not be privy to the selection process that brings Okonkwo as the final contestant against Amalinze but we can find clues from the wrestling scene in the sixth chapter of the book where Maduka, the son of Obierika, who is Okonkwo's good friend, proves to be a promising talent in wrestling (Achebe, *TFA* 35-36). We can imagine that Okonkwo did wrestle in the appetizer bouts of the nights of wrestling and is 'carried home shoulder high" (Achebe, *TFA* 38) with his carriers "danc[ing] through the cheering crowd' (Achebe, *TFA* 36). At this point his strength is discovered by his people and thus he receives the collective approval to embody his village in the contest against Amalinze. For that, his victory is celebrated, not as an individual, but as a collective honour.

A similar instance of Okonkwo receiving the collective approval to embody the group occurs when Umuofia decides to send him as an emissary to Mbaino whose people have murdered 'a daughter of Umuofia', the 'wife of Ogbuefi Udo' (Achebe, *TFA* 10). Okonkwo is sent, after a communal gathering of some ten thousand men, deliberated on an appropriate response to the homicide. The narrator says that '[m]any others spoke, and at the end it was decided to follow the normal course of action,' (Achebe, *TFA* 10) which is to send emissaries

for a possible peaceful negotiation and resolution. When Okonkwo returns, the same narrator tells us that '[t]he elders, or ndiichie, met to hear a report of Okonkwo's mission. At the end, they decided, *as everybody knew they would*, that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo, to replace his murdered wife' (Achebe, *TFA* 11; *emphasis added*).

Here we see a collective decision to send Okonkwo, an individual, to represent, embody or, even, to become the collective. We also see the collective coming together to decide on what to do with the girl Okonkwo returns with, even though individually they already know what will happen. This is another point that will prove useful in our final analysis.

The third instance is the killing of Ikemefuna. The shocking act has become something of a feast for many critics and scholars (Hoegberg; Iyasere; Kortenaar; Nwabueze, "The Execution"; Nwabueze, "Theoretical Construction"; Opata, "Eternal Sacred"; Opata "Structure"; Rhoads) who have examined it, resulting in an overwhelming conviction of Okonkwo over his action. Rhoads, for example, contends that apart from the 'unjust system of the white man,' Okonkwo's tragedy is self-made 'because of his defiance of the sacred laws of the clan' (66). The details include his desecration of the Week of Peace and his killing of Ikemefuna, an act that Obierika warns him is a great abomination against the earth: '[w]hat you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families' (Achebe, *TFA* 48). Even so, a few critics differ, insisting that Okonkwo has committed no crime in killing Ikemefuna. Rather, as Opata ("Eternal Sacred") contends, he has acted out the will of the gods. The scholar maintains that 'Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna is an unconscionable act, but we cannot logically go beyond that to establish that by killing Ikemefuna he committed a crime' (Opata,"Eternal Sacred" 79). He further questions the reliability of the authorial voice which says that '[d]azed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut [Ikemefuna] down. He was afraid of being thought weak' (Achebe, *TFA* 45).

Trying to determine the truthfulness of the authorial voice as it concerns the murder of Ikemefuna is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, my focus is to analyse Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna within the framework of collective individualism to determine if, like the two instances earlier discussed, Okonkwo has the full support of the collective to embody it.

The critical nature of the drama that ensues at the border between the elders and Ikemefuna is subtle and easily missed when the focus is wholly on Okonkwo's act of filicide. The question must be asked: why did an elder, who is supposedly a distinguished warrior, fail to correctly target Ikemefuna's neck, but rather, strikes the pot on his head? (Achebe, *TFA*). It is puzzling that such a warrior would be that helpless before an unarmed kid. Even more puzzling is the fact that Ikemefuna runs to the rear, passing at least nine elders—'a group of elders from all the nine villages of Umuofia' (Achebe, *TFA* 42)—to meet his death at the hands of Okonkwo. Is he that fast that other elders cannot stop him and finish what the first elder has failed at until he gets to Okonkwo? The only logical explanation available to me is that these individuals—the elders who are chosen to carry out the will of the collective—retain their individualism. Such a retention makes them to remain dazed, for it is far easier to cut off an enemy warrior's head in the battlefield when the blood is hot and men are called to valour, than the head of a helpless, hapless, harmless, unarmed little kid. The excuse of self-defence cannot be used to calm the mind that is bound to rage at such an (almost) senseless killing. I ratiocinate that the other elders become individuals and lose sense of the fact that they are embodying the

collective while battling their individual sense of, maybe, mild repulsion at a killing that is almost unjustified (and are momentarily lost as to what to do). An impulsive Okonkwo carries out the killing. Later, the act leaves him so broken that he 'did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna' (Achebe, *TFA* 46). He never heals from that brokenness.

From the standpoint of collective individualism, it is clear that Okonkwo has forced himself into the suit of the collective, though he has not fully buttoned it up. While the collective has decided that Ikemefuna is to be killed, they hardly expect Okonkwo, the doomed kid's adoptive father, to be the killer. In fact, Okonkwo is not even there when the decision is made; he is only told after the decision has been taken (Achebe, *TFA* 42). The collective also chooses the elders to undertake the mission; Okonkwo, who is not chosen, chooses himself, to join the team. Opata ("Eternal Sacred") argues that this might be to keep to the illusion that they are taking Ikemefuna home and maybe offer some sort of solace to the boy who will be strengthened by the thought of having a protective agent, his father, with him. If that is the aim, it fails woefully because nobody in his household, not even his son Nwoye, is deceived by the façade Okonkwo puts up (Achebe, *TFA*). At any rate, instead of being the young lad's source of solace and protection, Okonkwo strikes the fatal blow. Here, Okonkwo starts borrowing feathers like the tortoise in Ekwefi's folktale (Achebe, *TFA*), in preparation for bearing the name *All of You.* However, he has not quite usurped the collective as an individual in his killing of Ikemefuna as the killing has been ordered by the collective, but he is getting close to it. Interestingly, he thinks his killing of Ikemefuna is a 'show of manliness' (Achebe, *TFA* 48). Even Opata, most sympathetic to Okonkwo in his killing of Ikemefuna, concedes here that Okonkwo's tragedy is that 'he refused to learn and adhere to the traditional logics of order' (Opata, "Structure"). Such order demands you do not gloat over the death of someone, much less a 'son' you killed.

The final instance has to do with Okonkwo's beheading of one of the messengers working for the invading White administration. Before we examine that episode, it is imperative to detour to Okonkwo's exile as that will afford us a deeper understanding of his mindset, in particular how he places himself in any setting.

Okonkwo's Exile

Okonkwo's accidental fatal shooting of Ogbuefi Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son leads to his exile to Mbanta, his mother's village (Achebe, *TFA*). Many critics and scholars have their speculations as to why such a tragic misfortune would befall Okonkwo: why would his bullet kill the son of the man being buried? Opata ("Eternal Sacred") points out that critics like Carroll, Nnolim and Killam believe that the tragic events that happened to Okonkwo after the killing of Ikemefuna can be traced to that killing and can be said to be 'a type of punishment from the gods' for his filicide. He faults Oladele Taiwo's submission that Okonkwo's situation might be an ironic situation where someone displeases the gods in the act of trying to please them. Opata ("Eternal Sacred") argues that such is an overstretched logic borne out of a backfired search for literary motifs. He contends that the same argument can be made against Ogbuefi Ezeudu; after all, why must his own son die at his funeral?

For Opata ("Eternal Sacred"), these critics seem to be in the business of extreme speculative reading, a point I agree with. Is this not the same Okonkwo that the authorial voice

tells us 'had not killed a rat with his gun'? (Achebe, *TFA* 29). Is this not the same Okonkwo who aims at his wife, Ekwefi, from a close distance, and still misses his target? It is an established fact that Okonkwo is not good with the gun. In fact, the main reason he misses Ekwefi is, paradoxically, because he aims at her. Now, this is the same man who starts shooting aimlessly 'after dark with only a glowing brand to light the sacred ceremony' (Achebe, *TFA* 86). A man that cannot aim properly in daylight picked up the gun to shoot at dusk. Whatever happens next lies not in the hands of the gods. He gets Ezeudu's son because he does not aim at him. Had he aimed at him, Ezeudu's son would have still been alive and Okonkwo may have no need to go on exile.

What motivates Okonkwo to fire even when he knows how terrible he is with the gun? Could it be the gods pushing him to his own doom? Is it the case of the proverbial housefly marked for death losing its sense of perception of faeces? While these may be speculated, what can be said for sure, in keeping to the narrowly realistic world of *Things Fall Apart,* is that the cause is Okonkwo's personality. It is his persistent delusion of grandeur, his constant internal drive to show manliness, his overweening desire to be numbered among the consequential men in Umuofia—it is all these that pushed him into an unprepared exhibition of his gun.

When Obierika visits Okonkwo in exile, their discussions illustrate their feelings about the encroaching colonialism. They are both saddened by the phenomenon.[ii] This intruding colonialism will present the greatest dilemma to the idea of resistance in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.* All through his exile, Okonkwo persists in dreaming about how historic his return to Umuofia would be. For him, Mbanta is just a preparatory ground for his return to Umuofia. Like a prophet, Uchendu, Okonkwo's maternal uncle and host in exile, delivers a resonant speech aimed at changing Okonkwo's mindset. The speech even highlights and undermines the idea of suicide as an escape for the suffering:

> 'You think you are the greatest sufferer in the world? Do you know that men are sometimes banished for life? Do you know that men sometimes lose all their yams and even their children? I had six wives once. I have none now except that young girl who knows not her right from her left. Do you know how many children I have buried—children I begot in my youth and strength? Twenty-two. I did not hang myself, and I am still alive. If you think you are the greatest sufferer in the world ask my daughter, Akueni, how many twins she has borne and thrown away. Have you not heard the song they sing when a woman dies?
>
> "For whom is it well, for whom is it well?
> There is no one for whom it is well."
>
> 'I have no more to say to you.' (Achebe, *TFA* 95).

By mentioning his disavowal of suicide, Uchendu intends to teach Okonkwo to adapt to adversity instead of maintaining a rigid stance that things must go his way. Okonkwo hardly learns the lesson. For his "inflexible will," (Achebe, *TFA* 20) which he has credited with enabling him to resist suicide and survive the social ruin and economic disaster that marked his

first foray into sharecropping, also leads to his death when he is faced with the social problem of 'failed reintegration'[iii] (Ukwueze & Okey-Agbo 263).

Okonkwo's Return and his Final Dance

Ukwueze and Okey-Agbo have convincingly demonstrated Okonkwo's return to Umuofia as one marked by a failed reintegration. 'His reintegration fails because his return is a conservative one; he does not accept and adapt to the new social, economic, political dispensation' (Ukwueze and Okey-Agbo 255). A return to the symbolism of the number seven will aid us to make sense of the tragic events that follow Okonkwo's return from exile. His exile to Mbanta is for a period of seven years. We have earlier underscored, from antecedents, that seven marks completeness in Umuofia. It is not far-fetched to state that Okonkwo's alienation from Umuofia is a complete and total one having lasted for seven years. Okonkwo, while still considering himself a full Umuofian, has totally lost touch with the Umuofian reality. The authorial voice states that '[s]even years was a long time to be away from one's clan. A man's place was not always there, waiting for him. As soon as he left, someone else rose and filled it. The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail, it soon grew another' (Achebe, *TFA* 121)

In fact, the authorial voice states that 'Okonkwo knew these things' (Achebe, *TFA* 121). Okonkwo may know 'these things,' but he certainly does not accept them. At this point, he has not only borrowed the feathers of the birds, but he has also taken upon himself the name *All of You.* Everything his friend Obierika tells in his exile to shatter his illusions of grand self-importance, apparently fall on deaf ears. He yearns for action. Even though he tries to mask that desire as an attempt to uphold Umuofia's culture, he comes across as wishing to preserve a setting where he can become the lord of the clan. He is desperate to become the head of a community that sees him as a replaceable tail.

At the outset of the novel, Okonkwo's defeat of the seasoned wrestler, Amalinze, is necessary to uphold the balance that no individual can be greater than the collective. Just as the forces that maintain that imperative balance act through Okonkwo to dethrone Amalinze after seven years of the latter's reign as the wrestling champion (an outcome which, it can be inferred, the latter peacefully accepts), the same forces take the period of Okonkwo's seven-year exile to effect his dethronement. Unfortunately, he stubbornly refuses to read the times or to accept his position within the new reality, unlike Amalinze. Okonkwo witnesses tension between his conservatism (and his wish to return conservatism to Umuofia) and an Umuofia in transition and that tension snaps him (Ukwueze and Okey-Agbo).

In terms of collective individualism, Okonkwo's beheading of the White administration's messenger represents his total usurpation of the collective and desire to subject it to himself, the individual. The collective is not known to yield to such usurpation, though. Therefore, it is Okonkwo who ends up breaking into pieces like the tortoise in Ekwefi's folktale.

After some of the revered elders of Umuofia are detained by the colonial authority and subjected to all manners of indignities, the community meets to deliberate on the next course of action. It is evident that tension is high. Okika, one of the first elders to speak, suggests the viability of a violent response to the colonial power's outrageous provocation. In fact, it may even be said that the men already *know* what to do and what it is that they will do has been voiced by Okika. Even so, the collective has not formally decided when Okonkwo strikes

beheading an insolent messenger sent by the colonial authority to shut down the communal meeting. What Okonkwo did is purely an individualist act. It is much worse than his earlier individualistic and rash act of calling a man who contradicted him at a kindred meeting 'a woman,' because the man 'had no titles.' That earlier insult amounted to excluding the man's participation from a kindred meeting to which *the* kindred consider the man a participant. Akwanya (*No Longer*) observes that with the advent of the colonizer, a movement occurs in the tribe, from collectivism to individualism.[iv] This is especially true for Okonkwo, for he moves from embodying the collective with the collective's permission to seeking to force his individual desire on the collective.

I disagree with Opata ("Structure") who suggests that Okonkwo is the soul of his community.[v] He is not. Okonkwo's rigidity is a personal trait whereas Umuofia is a republican society. Umuofia is not a society where one person reigns supreme. Therefore, the idea of an individual being the soul of the collective sounds preposterous in the Umuofian situation, even if meant metaphorically. In Umuofia, '[c]ommunity definition is the sum of the aggregate individual self-definitions' which follows and 'changes with the residents of the community' (Poindexter 622). 'The clan rules all, and the collective will of the clan can be established only by the group' (Rhoads 63), not by Okonkwo, however powerful and revered he may deem himself. Umuofia is also not as rigid as Okonkwo. The society is always ready to evolve, to accommodate or even to assimilate. After all, didn't Ogbuefi Ezeudu narrate how Umuofia modified her capital punishment for those who break the Week of Peace, adopting the much milder option of fining offenders? That is why Ukwueze and Okey-Agbo maintain, and I agree, that Okonkwo's defeat is not 'a defeat of the society as such; for society is bound to experience transition, no matter how rough the beast that engineers it is, but a defeat of himself, his pride' (257). Most important is the fact that Umuofia does not view Okonkwo as her soul. This point is borne out when we consider how Ogbuefi Ezeudu relays to Okonkwo the decision to kill Ikemefuna. 'Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him,' Ezeudu discloses, indicating that Okonkwo was not even present when the community as well as the 'Oracle of the Hills and Caves' (Achebe, *TFA* 42) made the pronouncement. This implies that not only is Okonkwo not Umuofia or her soul, but also that he is not always a core representative of Umuofia even.

Okonkwo's attempt to remake himself, an individual, into the collective earns him a sharp communal rebuke. The collective, Umuofia, dissociates from Okonkwo and renders him a spectacle (Akwanya, "Why") and an object of curiosity. 'Why did he do it?' (Achebe, *TFA* 143) the people of Umuofia ask after Okonkwo beheads the messenger. Here, the community is not just curious as to his motivation; they also indicate that he has not acted on their behalf. It is a dissociation of the collective from the individual. By such dissociation, it becomes clear that Okonkwo's tragedy lies in his inability to properly situate his individualism in the collective and his misinterpretation of collective individualism. True, for a period he served as the poster face of Umuofia. This is buttressed by the numerous instances where Umuofia sent him to *be* Umuofia. Sadly, he misinterprets this representation to mean that he is the collective individual, when, in essence, the collective individual is the community (Poindexter 623) and not the individual at the top stratum of the community. The 'community as a collective individual …is a bottom-up approach. The self-definitions of individual inhabitants comes first. The sum of these self-definitions then defines the community' (Poindexter 624). Obierika's

lamentations—'Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger' (Achebe, *TFA* 124); 'Now he [the white man] has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one' (Achebe, *TFA* 124)—are evidences that the Umuofians, no matter how undesirably, have begun to re-define themselves and thus their community. Okonkwo is just but one member of this community, which means that his self-definition, no matter how dignified and good-intentioned, cannot supersede that of the community which is the collective individual.

This may have informed Opata's ("Structure") contradictory positions that "[s]ymbolically, Okonkwo is definitely 'the soul of the tribe' [Umuofia]" and that Okonkwo seeks what is good for himself and 'supposedly for his people.' In effect, Opata concedes that Okonkwo is an individual who places himself above the collective, and who assumes that whatever is good for him is good for the collective and vice versa. Opata phrases this observation so clearly that one is left befuddled that he can still propose that Okonkwo is the soul of Umuofia:

> Okonkwo wants what is good for himself and supposedly for his people, but he does not want both the good of the colonial administration and that of the Christian converts. He is the kite that would perch and refuse the eagle a perching place. His suicide is symbolic of this idea of his having broken his wings. That he cannot be buried by his people corroborates the fact that as a result of his broken wing, he has been rendered unable to perch in Umuofia – even as a spirit ancestor. Thus, it is that peace returns to Umuofia with Okonkwo failing to live to experience this epistemic catharsis of his undoing"[vi] (Opata, "Structure" 86)

Conclusion

In this study, I have sought to understand Okonkwo's resistance in the novel, *Things Fall Apart,* by contextualizing it within the notion of "collective individualism," illustrating where he seems to lose a sense of the difference between the individual and the collective. I have established that such a difference exists and that, no matter how both concepts of collectivism and individualism may overlap, the individual and the collective still have their distinct identities, especially in relation to the idea of resistance. The failure to properly understand this difference breaks an individual. In light of this understanding, I conclude that Okonkwo's tragedy is personal. It is entirely brought about by his failure to understand the place of the individual and that of the collective in a resistance against an attack on the collective and by his attempt to usurp the collective and recognize himself, rather than the community, as the collective individual.

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[i] Umezuruike (2021) writes of 'receptive subjects' who undermine cultural norms that impede the 'viability of every life' out of human empathy (p. 21). Defining receptivity 'as the openness the self expresses in acknowledgement of the other's suffering' which 'marks the prior state signalling the stirrings of identification—a precondition for empathy,' he employs the concept in his study "as an analytic to reformulate assumptions about masculinity" (p. 21). In the context of (violent) masculinity seen in *Things Fall Apart,* the "receptive subject" refuses to perpetuate such male violence thereby representing an alternative masculinity (p. 49). Most times, like Nwoye, son of Okonkwo, these receptive subjects are themselves victims of violence. In the case of Nwoye, it is because victimisation "connects [Nwoye] to the marginalised, the efulefu, for instance, he is well-positioned to highlight [male violence] operations in Umuofia" which he actively refuses to partake in (p. 69). The people must have expected Okonkwo to be some sort of a receptive subject, just like Nwoye. After all, he was a victim of psychological male violence, that comes in form of the shame he must have endured being the son of a father who even though is biologically male, is regarded socially as a woman. It is important to note that this social reception of Okonkwo's father, Unoka, as a woman has nothing to do with the agency of Unoka but everything to do with the equivocation of femininity with weakness. Rather than developing empathy and being a receptive subject from such experiences, we see Okonkwo meting out violence, both physical and psychological, including referring to a man as a woman, in the novel. In the case of Okonkwo, the victim does not become a receptive subject but grows into a victimiser himself.

[ii] While both Okonkwo and his friend Obierika are saddened by these developments, it is Okonkwo who takes the drastic action of striking ahead, and without the permission, of the collective. The reason may not be far from Obierika's philosophical disposition as a

storyteller "whose pronouncements issue from a nuanced understanding of the story and the storyteller in the social and cultural changes happening around him" (Ouzgane & Okome, 2009, p. 136). This disposition allows Obierika some depth in thinking that is lacking in Okonkwo who is not given to too much words (and indeed, serious thoughts). Obierika's disposition may be problematised as that of one who merely documents changes in the society, but does not in any way contribute to it. "Obierika's philosophical liminality as regards taking a position in the clash between the local and the global is problematic. He is merely 'subjectified 'as the philosopher, the one who thinks, in contrast to the central character, Okonkwo, who does not think things through before acting" and this, it may seem, makes Okonkwo the better change agent in the society (Ouzgane & Okome, 2009, p. 136). To accept such a submission is to downplay the position of tact and diplomacy at stages of transition. Obierika, unlike Okonkwo, understands what the elders mean when they say that the fly that has perched upon a man's scrotum can only be removed with tactfulness. He understands that the community is beyond him and Okonkwo, even if they are amongst the most respected members of the community.

[iii] A similar opinion is held by Enekwe (1988, as cited by Ouzgane & Okome, 2009). Though not strictly in terms of migration and failed reintegration, Enekwe maintains that Okonkwo is "a misfit in Umuofia" (p. 137) and this, Ukwueze & Okey-Agbo (2020) attributes to his inability to properly re-enter the community he left behind, for the community has changed but not Okonkwo.

[iv] This movement he studies under the theme of "no longer a tribe," a tweak on the title of Achebe's second novel, *No Longer At Ease*. In Akwanya's study, this movement, the shedding off of tribal affiliations, is initiated in *Things Fall Apart*, but continues in four other novels of Achebe. "The theme of no longer a tribe announces a new insight which mandates a grouping of the novels into three, the first group comprising *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, the second *No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of the People*, the third comprising *Anthills of the Savannah* alone" (Akwanya, 2022, p. 33-34). In the first group we see tribes still rooted, even though they face the onslaught of colonialism. In the second group, members of this tribe are now moving away from the ancestral hearth, yet still, in some ways connected to it, while the third group makes stark the reality of the individualised post colony. "This yields a movement from the constricted and inward-looking world of a tribe rooted in a patch of earth settled by ancestors who give it spiritual value, and with this, emotive moorings deeply etched, to a widened horizon where the settling of one's existence may be a long way away from the ancestral place … Up to *No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of the People*, who one was remained tied to where one's 'umbilical cord 'was earthed. There is an infinitely wider horizon in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Here, there are characters for whom the umbilical cord is a distant memory; and there are some still for whom there seems not to be even a memory of an umbilical cord. Rather, existence has become … much more individualised" (Akwanya, 2022, p. 188).

[v] Irele (2000) even extends the argument beyond Umuofia, making the tragic end of one character not just that of a community, but also that of a whole continent. For him, "[Okonkwo] is not merely a character in a novel but the representative figure of African historicity" (p. 4). There is a sense in which Okonkwo, and indeed every African fictional

character, represents an aspect of "African historicity," but that is only to the extent that they are Africans and that the aggregation of these individual realities makes an African reality. The failure of one African character, therefore, cannot be interpreted as the failure of Africa (or of the soul of Africa) but may point to some aspects in which the continent or a community, like Umuofia, has failed.

[vi] While Opata problematises Okonkwo's assumption that whatever is good for him as an individual is supposedly good for his society, Nnoromele (2000) insists it is a characteristic of a hero in the socio-cultural setting of Okonkwo, to affect, "in a special way, the destinies of others by pursuing his own" (p. 148). To be the hero he aspires in such a setting, Okonkwo must be "the disrupting and integrating principles of the community" (p. 148); he must also submit to "the counsel of elders, the precepts, and laws of the land, which are established for the good of the society" (p. 150). The paradox of heroism, in this context, Nnoromele points out, is that "Okonkwo would never achieve heroism among the Igbos if he totally subordinated his interest to that of the society at large. Hence, it was incumbent on him to exhibit other qualities that might be perceived as a threat to social order" (p. 152). The most difficult hurdle the hero must pass is to reconcile submission to the community and pursuit of his individual ambitions. Nnoromele concludes that Okonkwo's tragedy was "the inevitable consequence of the Igbos' complex concept of a hero" rather than due to a personal weakness or even Umuofia's disintegration in the face of colonialism (p. 154). This I find to be quite ambiguous, for it is implied in the same work that the disintegration of Umuofia makes Okonkwo a "disabled hero" (148). Strictly speaking, when one considers the hurdles a hero must face to become a hero as enumerated by Nnoromele, Okonkwo does not qualify as a hero, disabled or not, for he fails the most difficult task: reconciling his loyalty to his community and his ambitions. When read in that strict sense, Okonkwo's tragedy becomes personal, the failure of an individual's quest to heroism.