

## Okonkwo's Suicide and Hara-kiri: A Note\*

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### Abstract

The intention of this paper is to focus on the suicide of Achebe's protagonist in 'Things Fall Apart' and present it as a courageous act of protest against the powers of colonialism. Okonkwo is the warrior and lives by its code: death rather than surrender in shame. The paper will compare the Igbo (African) context with the Japanese warrior code of 'bushido' by which the "samurai" confronts destiny and commits "hara-kiri" to retain dignity and thus remain loyal to his code. Okonkwo (the fictional character embedding in 'the African culture) will be compared with the life and final act of the contemporary Japanese author Yukio Mishima.

**Key words:** Samurai, bushido, hara-kiri, Japanese, African, Igbo clan, colonialism, ritual suicide, warrior code.

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is the first African literary work to de-centre the Eurocentric colonial misrepresentation of Africa in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Therefore, it is not surprising that the novel concentrates not only on the rich and varied resources of the life of the Igbo people, but also tries to create an alternative history of their society and culture. In the novel we find how traditional Igbo society and its hierarchy are dislocated, how their culture, loyalty and language are distorted as well as alienated and, finally, how the dislocation, distortion and alienation by the colonizers are misrepresented by a constructed history. In the name of 'the Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger' (Achebe, 1996: 148), the District Commissioner's anthropological study of the black people provides a demeaning classification of the Igbo people (<http://www.freepatentsonline.com>).

In *Things Fall Apart*, this tragic story of the Igbo people is narrated by Chinua Achebe with the parallel tragic story of Okonkwo, the protagonist of the story, who is born and brought up within the cultural richness and sophistication of this society. He represents the dignity, integration as well as extraordinary heroism of his clan. However, when the village life of Umuofia faces the colonial onslaught and is at the point of disintegration, like any other brave son of the land who has professed to save his nation, Okonkwo resists those evil powers, sometimes alone, only to find that the disintegration and disgrace that have come upon his race is not curable. Although he ends his life by committing suicide, we should not see his suicide as apology or failure or ignominy but as protest. In Japanese society, the Samurai Code for such protest is known as

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‘Hara-kiri’. ‘Hara-kiri’ or ‘cutting the belly’ is the most well-known and colloquial term for ‘Seppuku’ or ‘stomach-cutting’. It is a form of Japanese ritual suicide committed voluntarily by a Samurai to die with honour rather than fall into the hands of his enemy. ‘Hara-kiri’ is also a form of capital punishment and is committed by those Samurai who have publicly shamed their community. ‘Seppuku’ is performed by plunging a sword into the abdomen and moving the sword left to right in a slicing motion. When the Samurai is finished with himself, he stretches out his neck for an assistant or a friend to decapitate him. ‘Seppuku’, the more formal term is used by the Samurai, whereas ordinary Japanese use ‘hara-kiri’ and it is this term that is well-known throughout the English-speaking world. In his book, *Samurai: The World of the Warrior*, Turnbull (2003) states:

Seppuku [Hara-kiri] was commonly performed by using a tanto [a knife]. It could take place with preparation and ritual in the privacy of one’s home, or speedily in a quiet corner of a battle field while one’s comrades kept the enemy at bay.

In the world of the warrior, seppuku was a deed of bravery that was admirable in a samurai who knew he was defeated, disgraced or mortally wounded. It meant that he could end his days with his transgressions wiped away and with his reputation not merely intact but actually enhanced. The cutting of the abdomen released the samurai’s spirit in the most dramatic fashion, but it is an extremely painful and unpleasant way to die, and sometimes the samurai who was performing the act asked a loyal comrade to cut off his head at the moment of agony. (Turnbull, 2003: 71).

In *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo is an Igbo warrior who represents Igbo bravery and heroism, dignity and sophistication. At the very beginning of the novel, the ‘solid personal achievements’ of Okonkwo are recorded. At eighteen years of age, he had defeated the seven years reigning champion wrestler ‘Amalinze, the Cat, whose back had never touched the earth’ (Achebe, 1996:3). Afterwards he became the new master-wrestler in the nine villages around Umuofia. He was officially given the authority to fight for the people of Umuofia. The men sang in his praise as the women clapped their hands and rejoiced in his victory thus:

*Who will wrestle for our village?  
... Has he thrown a hundred men?  
He has thrown four hundred men.  
Has he thrown a hundred Cats?  
He has thrown four hundred Cats.  
Then send him words to fight for us* (Achebe, 1996: 36).

Thus having proved himself to be a worthy warrior of his clan, Okonkwo secured a position among the Ibos. He was ‘revered’ by them and was elevated to an equal status with the elders. Like a true Samurai, he put his faith in the individual quality of ‘manliness’ and all that he resented was ‘failure and weaknesses’. Beside this branded heroism, in the agrarian community of Umuofia, Okonkwo was a successful farmer who ‘could feed his family on yam from one harvest to another’. Within the Igbo society which was principally governed by the political and religious structures of the society, he was one of the elders who controlled either institution. He also managed his household of three wives and eight children ‘with a heavy hand’. He wanted

that his son, Nwoye would be as promising as himself and value the warrior code as much as he did that 'the young sucker will grow when the old banana tree dies' (Achebe, 1996: 46).

Therefore, in *Things Fall Apart* the protagonist Okonkwo is not just a warrior who gained a superior position in his clan by means of his bravery and hard labors, he also lived by that code. And once he was crowned by the honour and responsibility to save his clan from all form of disintegration and dishonour, his loyalty to his clan became fundamental to him. As a warrior, he remained devoted to that code and defended it. He was proud of his clan which in return, treated him as its pride. In Japanese samurai community, such code of conduct by which an ideal warrior leads his life is known as 'bushido'.

The term 'bushido' literary means 'way of the warrior'. It is a Japanese code of conduct and a way of samurai life. Sometimes it is loosely applied to the concept of chivalry. Actually 'bushido' originated from the samurai moral code which stresses frugality, loyalty, martial arts mastery and honour unto the death. Born out of the two main influences - the violent existence of the samurai as well as the wisdom and serenity of Confucianism and Buddhism, the concept of 'bushido' was developed between 9th to 12th centuries in feudal Japan. It eventually became a well-established code of conduct by which a warrior could live and die. It is under the 'bushido' ideal that if a samurai failed to uphold his honour, he could regain it by performing 'seppuku' or ritual suicide. Other 'bushido' philosophy covers methods of raising children appearance and grooming and most of all constant preparation for death. One might say that death is at the very centre of 'bushido' as the overall purpose - to die a good death and with one's honour intact (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is basically a vivid representation of how completely and fully Igbo lived their life before the European colonial invasion. But it also shows how deeply the people of this community felt for death. They believed that "a man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer to his ancestors" (Achebe, 1996: 86). The novel in fact, has numerous death references: 'good death' and 'bad death', homicides and infanticides, 'abominable' and 'admirable' deaths. Since the opening, a remarkable number of characters die in the novel. At the outset, Okonkwo's father Unoka died 'a bad death' out of swelling and 'was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die' (Achebe, 1996: 13), Ikemefuna, the adopted son of Okonkwo, died the most unnatural and undeserving death. The nine children of Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi died at their tender age following the 'evil circle of birth and death' (54). However, the most significant death was of Ezeudu, who was 'an important elder', 'a fearless warrior', had enough wealth, received 'the rare achievement of three titles', as well as 'had lived a long life':

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... (Achebe, 1996: 86).

As a "true" warrior Okonkwo, who had led the nine villages of Umuofia at war and had 'cut five human heads', could have desired to die like Ezeudu. But obviously, the presence of the British

colonial power in Umuofia and British success in making converts was a matter of disgrace for Okonkwo and the heroic code which he upheld. His own son Nwoye was enraptured by the ‘gospel singing soul’ of the Christians and was converted to the usurper’s religion. Upon his return to Umuofia (from an exile in his motherland Mbanta for accidentally killing a fellow villager of his fatherland at a feast), Okonkwo found himself lost in the village: no place, no position and no dignity. He reacted ferociously and tried to recover his honour by attacking Christian church. For that moment after the church attack he was euphoric: “...they had listened to him with respect. It was like the good old days again, when a warrior was a warrior” (Achebe, 1996: 136).

But this euphoric mood was, sadly short-lived, as the colonial power subjugated him again. Within three days, he was arrested along with five other elders and imprisoned. During his imprisonment he and his fellow elders were insulted and humiliated:

As soon as the District Commissioner left, the head messenger, who was also the prisoner’s barber, took down his razor and shaved off all the hair on the men’s heads.... They were not even given any water to drink, and they could not go out to urinate or go into the bush when they were pressed. At night the messengers came in to taunt them and to knock their shaven heads together (Achebe, 1996: 138).

After his release, Okonkwo planned his revenge through a counterattack:

As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the white man’s court, and he swore vengeance. If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards, he would go out and avenge himself (Achebe, 1996: 141).

But soon he understood his bid to resist the colonial power was in vain. His struggle to regain the dignity of his clan was futile. He realized that he had gone beyond reasonable limits in championing his society’s cause. Therefore when he killed the messenger of the colonial administration in the market place and took his ‘revenge’, he thought as he stood contemplating the dead man’s body:

that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: ‘Why did he do it?’

He wiped his matchet on the sand and went away (Achebe, 1996: 145).

Actually, by this time, the black warrior already knew what was to be done - he had to kill himself. This para-judicial decision of this African warrior to hang himself would be an apology to his own people for not being able to defend the village any more in the face of the adversarial powers. But Okonkwo’s suicide is also a protest against those adversarial powers and a symbolic sacrifice to uphold the honour of his homeland. At this point, Okonkwo’s death can be compared to any ritual seppuku of a samurai who would prefer death to dishonour. In modern Japan, the famous author Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) too like Okonkwo lived and died according to the code of ‘bushido’. Mishima was the first Japanese post-Second World War writer to attain

international fame. In 1970, he committed a public seppuku as a protest against the dishonour done to his country after the Second World War.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's suicide is not as ritualistic as Mishima's; rather, it is committed silently and without the benefit of an audience that could share his grief or anger. At the end of the novel we learn about his death when the District Commissioner is informed of it by Obierika, one of Okonkwo's close friends. Here, Obierika is very much like Morita or Koga, the friends of Mishima who also took part in the ritual hara-kiri. Obierika waits upon his friend's dead body to help him. As the District Commissioner comes, Obierika asks him to help bury his dead friend, since the code of his clan would not allow anyone of his own clan to touch such a body and bury it except for the 'strangers.'

However, what is most significant of these two deaths is the effect they produce. Although Mishima committed hara-kiri following the millennium old tradition of his country, he failed to essentialise his purpose. Rather he was mocked and jeered by the soldiers on the spot. Kakutani, (<http://en.nytimes.com>) mentions it as an act of 'notoriety'. On the other hand, Okonkwo is an allegorical figure and his suicide was generally considered to be "an act of abomination" to his own people and "an offence against the Earth". Nevertheless, Chinua Achebe, by means of the death of the fictional Okonkwo, is able to move the reader and evoke their sympathy. The apology that Okonkwo made to his people and the protest he registered against the colonial power both are fairly understood and accepted. At the end of the novel, Obierika, as one of his clansmen successfully decodes Okonkwo's message and turns suddenly to the District Commissioner to state: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself." On the contrary, the District Commissioner was the European colonial spokesman. He came to Okonkwo's household along with 'an angry and red face' to arrest 'this primitive tribal leader' who had killed two native colonial agents. He also wished to reduce the 'warrior code' of Okonkwo into a single paragraph in a racist European text. This District Commissioner too, at the sight of Okonkwo's uncompromising death 'stopped dead' and 'changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs' (Achebe, 1996: 148).

Since literature is one of the most valuable tools we possess for imagining life in other cultures, the emotion and belief with which Okonkwo, the fictional character embedded in the African culture, ended his life is thus no less worthy of honour or of admiration than was bestowed upon a samurai. Moreover, the personalities and the final acts of Okonkwo, and the actual contemporary Japanese writer Mishima, have become legendary to elevate them to the level of 'cult' figures.

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