

## The Flute and the Matchet

Chinua Achebe is perhaps the most famous of contemporary black African writers and of his four novels,<sup>1</sup> *Things Fall Apart*<sup>2</sup> is deservedly the best known. The central character, Okonkwo, is strong, heedless of personal danger, impetuous and immediate in action. A man of strength, he had no need of the wit and clever evasions which his father had to use sometimes. In him are exemplified many of the positive aspects of traditional society, and his fall like a great tree crashing in the forest, signals the cessation of a way of life.

Unfortunately Okonkwo dominates the novel to such an extent that the judgements of this fictional character are often mistaken for those of the novelist. This is particularly illustrated in the presentation of Unoka, Okonkwo's father. The total references to Unoka, constitute about five pages, and much of what is conveyed within these pages is Okonkwo's opinion of his father. We are led to see him as an unsuccessful man, "lazy and improvident" (p. 4); a debtor who "owed every neighbour some money" (p. 4); a wanderer whose wife and children had barely enough to eat (p. 5); a coward who could not bear the sight of blood (p. 6) and a "woman" who had earned no "titles" of respect in the community (p. 13). It is not surprising that Okonkwo over-compensating for his father's weakness is ambitious, self-disciplined, hard working, and harsh. Going further, fear—even if it be the fear of failure—breeds cruelty and Okonkwo does not refrain from participating in the sacrificial murder of his own foster son, Ikemefuna: "He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, 'My father, they have killed me!' as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo draws his matchet and cut him down" (p. 55).

In contrast, Unoka's childhood was normal and free from obsessions and ruthless drives. Like Wordsworth, Unoka can look back to a childhood response to, and joy in, nature:

"Unoka . . . loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty. And it was not too hot either, because the cold and dry harmattan wind was blowing down from the north. Some years the harmattan was very severe and a dense haze hung on the atmosphere. Old men and children would then sit round log fires, warming their bodies. Unoka loved it all, and he loved the first kites that returned with the dry season, and the children who sang songs of welcome to them. He would remember his own childhood, how he had often wandered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky. As soon as he found one he would sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey, and asking it if it had brought home any lengths of cloth. (pp. 4-5)

In Unoka, the love and education of nature bred gentleness, wisdom and a joy in human fellowship: "If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime" (p. 4).

Okonkwo was no doubt a stout defender of his society and its way of life, but one suspects that in defending his society, he was really defending himself and the position which he had won within a certain code and way of life. Besides, Okonkwo is a barrier to adaptability, survival, and progress.

He is a conservative in the negative sense of the term, able neither to understand nor to accept the inevitability of change. His killing of the messenger, a representative of British imperial government, is not only due to a mistaken belief that one act of physical courage can stem the whole tide of history but an admission that his simple code has no place in the coming, complex order of things.

Okonkwo may seek to defend and to perpetuate a way of life but it is Unoka who brought joy and enriched that life. Unoka's sensitivity and responsiveness find expression in music. He and his band of musicians entertained not only their village but were invited by neighboring communities to play for them and to teach them new tunes and melodies. Achebe makes clear that music for Unoka was not a mere pastime but that it had the force and compulsion of a "possession." Whilst he played his flute, his face had an expression of "blessedness and peace" (p. 4). Even to speak about music brought an animation to his otherwise "haggard and mournful" face. Music was his true element: "He could hear in his mind's ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the *ekwe* and the *udu* and the *ogene*, and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them, decorating them with a colourful and plaintive tune. The total effect was gay and brisk, but if one picked out the flute as it went up and down and then broke up into short snatches, one saw that there was sorrow and grief there" (p. 6).

The jibe most often cast at Unoka is that he is a coward but, whereas Okonkwo's is a courage which passes into cruelty, Unoka expresses the quiet but stubborn courage of nonconformity. He is indifferent to the values of his society—wealth, titles, physical courage—and is therefore treated with scorn. Yet there is an innate charm and wit in the man which enables him to continually borrow from others and, beneath his sad exterior, an irrepressible joy which company or music immediately brings to the surface.

It was then the custom that if a "man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die. There was the story of a very stubborn man who staggered back to his house and had to be carried out again to the forest and tied to a tree. The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rotted away above the earth, and was not given the first or the second burial" (p. 17). It was perhaps terror and not stubbornness which made the man stagger back to human company, for from infancy the Evil Forest was pointed out and talked about with awe and fear. Children did not even go near it. Then to be taken not near but into that dreadful forest and left there alone to die must break the nerve of many a man. The two sentences which immediately follow the above extract are significant: "Such was Unoka's fate. When they carried him away, he took with him his flute." Thus, even at his death, Unoka affirms life. There is no doubt that Achebe here intends the reader to contrast Unoka's philosophic self-possession and courage with that of the "stubborn" man. Okonkwo and his society, in calling Unoka a coward, are shown to have a limited conception and but one criterion of courage. It is ironic too that the manner of Okonkwo's death is also an abomination, a worse abomination: "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it" (p. 186).

The contrast between Okonkwo and Unoka is a contrast between two attitudes to and conceptions of life. The former sees life in the puritan terms

of discipline and stern labor; the latter sees the joy, the beauty, and delicacy of life. One can easily picture Unoka having an honored place at some royal court, together with the philosophers and the other artists. It is a criticism of Unoka's society that instead of recognizing his creativity and giving it scope, he was forced to follow one narrow, rigid pattern. The criticism cannot be of Okonkwo only, for society approved of him even as it mocked Unoka. Okonkwo is both champion and representative of a way of life.

It is a measure of Achebe's genius that within a few pages he achieves a vivid portrayal. Okonkwo the colossus may bstride the novel but like the music of Wordsworth's *Solitary Reaper*, the tragedy of Unoka the flutist persists poignantly, and his music is heard long after the novel is ended. The harsh heroism of Okonkwo may wring an admiration but one responds more intimately to Unoka. To emphasize Okonkwo to the extent of overlooking Unoka is not only to miss much of Achebe's implicit criticism of traditional society but also to miss the moving portrayal of a talented but misunderstood and lonely man. The final triumph is that of the seemingly fragile flute, for Unoka's sad-faced grandson Nwoye rejects Okonkwo's pitiless creed and takes to the "poetry" of Christianity: "It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him . . . It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul . . . The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth" (p. 134).

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Things Fall Apart*, 1958; *No Longer at Ease*, 1960; *Arrow of God*, 1964; *A Man of the People*, 1966.

<sup>2</sup>References are to the African Writers Series edition, London, 1969.