

Wrestling, In and Out: Revisiting *Things Fall Apart*

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The present paper is an attempt to extend the canvas of Chinua Achebe's magnum opus *Things Fall Apart* beyond the usual investigations into politics, religion, morality and colonialism. It highlights how the sport of wrestling influences the dynamics of things falling apart in the Igbo society. Roland Barthes asserts that wrestling is "a sort of diacritical writing" that "always welcome[s] explanations, constantly aiding the reading of the combat by certain gestures, certain attitudes, certain mimicries which afford the intention its utmost meaning" (6). In the context of the novel, the sport is not an accidental reference or a decorative device. As a metaphor, it runs through the text in terms of action, diction and a symbolic combat between the Igbo people and the British. The cult(s) of community and masculinity, stereotypically associated with the ancient sport, nourish the ideological background of the story.¹ A nuanced reading of wrestling's grammar unfolds the mysteries behind the course of action undertaken by Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel.

Wrestling and the Cult of Community

The Igbo people form an agrarian society. Their social codes – family rituals and religious beliefs, marriage customs and organized feasts, food production and preparation processes – find correspondence with the agriculture activities. Wrestling is linked to the agrarian cycle, "usually being held as part of post-harvest festivities" (Bromber et al. 395). The villagers of Umuofia celebrate the second day of their New Yam (crop) Festival with a wrestling match against the neighbouring village. The novel begins with the account of a combat between Okonkwo and Amalinze the Cat, a great wrestler who was unbeaten for seven years:

The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in the water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one also heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat. (Achebe 3)

The description establishes the primary identity of the protagonist as a wrestler who eventually throws the Cat to become “one of the lords of the clan” (Achebe 19). Wrestling here not merely caters to individual success but also represents the prowess of a community. The image of wrestlers, with the muscles ‘stood out on their arms’, embodies the “masculine ethnic pride” (Carotenuto 1892). Okonkwo’s act of throwing the Cat is not a personal achievement; rather his accomplishment translates into the supremacy of his clan over the neighbouring tribes. Consequently, following a dispute, when Okonkwo is sent to the village of Mbaino as an emissary of war, he returns home with a virgin and a young boy namely Ikemefuna, as rewards of a peaceful settlement.

In the beginning, far from being a mere sport, wrestling appears to be a way of life for the Igbo people: “The whole village turned out on the *ilo* (playground), men, women and children. They stood round in a huge circle leaving the centre of the playground free. The elders and grandees of the village sat on their own stools . . . Okonkwo was among them” (Achebe 33). This image of the wrestling playground displays the communitarian aspects of the sport in more than one way. Firstly, the participation of ‘men, women and children’ as spectators suggests the stakes of the ‘whole village’ in the event. Beating of the drums in the playground “was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulsation of its heart” (31). Secondly, this is an image of a traditional playground where the spectators are not segregated/‘othered’ from the players with the fenced ropes. The villagers, making ‘a huge circle’ around the wrestlers, “roared and clapped” and sang the songs of praise to become one with the spectacle. Moreover, the presence of ‘elders and grandees’ communicates an age old tradition of wrestling events preserved through community festivals. (34)

Among the many ‘things’ that eventually ‘fall apart’ is also the idea of wrestling as a community sport. In the first part of novel, the recurrent wrestling events symbolize the presence of a ‘community’. In the sections that follow, there is no reference to a wrestling match being played, and the absence of wrestling signifies the degeneration of community standards. As a social practice, the sport implies “continuity with a real or imagined

past and [is] usually associated with widely accepted rituals or other forms of symbolic behavior” (qtd. in Bromber et al 392). The continuum with past is threatened due to the arrival of the British in the village. The idea of wrestling as a community sport, hereafter, becomes a mere nostalgia as Okonkwo “mourned for the warlike men of Umoufia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women” (Achebe 129). Nevertheless, having cultivated the behavioural norms from the sport, Okonkwo decides to grapple with the Empire. As he declares, “I shall fight alone if I choose”, wrestling turns out to be an individual endeavour (142). With the demise of actual combat, it takes place in the form of Okonkwo’s actions.

Of Wrestling and (Not) Thinking

John Zilcosky, in his article subtitled “Of Wrestling and (Not) Thinking”, avers that a wrestler is known for his spontaneous actions and non-thinking temperament (18). Okonkwo is a by-product of what wrestling has made of him. The narrator overtly informs that the protagonist is “not a man of thought but of action” (Achebe 48). Despite his being a representative figure, his actions exemplify a defiance of rationality. In the name of the clan’s sacred order, he brutally kills Ikemefuna with his own machete after nourishing him for three years like his own son. Okonkwo’s instinctive act exposes his inability to ponder over and reveals his hidebound disposition. He undoubtedly broods over Ikemefuna’s death but makes no attempt to question his inhuman act:

Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drank palm-wine from morning till night, and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor ... He did not sleep at night. He tried not to think about Ikemefuna, but the more he tried the more he thought about him. (44)

The image of a rat ‘dashed against the floor’ presents Okonkwo as a defeated wrestler who by trying ‘not to think’ attempts to evade even an afterthought to his defeat. As memories of Ikemefuna still keep haunting him, he fancies “[i]f only he could find some work to do” (45). When Obierika, his closest friend, condemns Okonkwo for his heinous act and warns him of the possible consequences, he justifies himself asserting: “The Earth cannot punish me for

obeying her messenger” (47). His cognitive instability reflects not only in his action but also in the justification of his act. Okonkwo claims to be a champion of the clan’s divine rules forgetting that he flouted the same sacred norms by beating his wife during the week of peace. Roland Barthes opines that a wrestler is a man “outside the rules” who “acknowledges the rules only when they are of use to him . . . He takes refuge behind the Law when he supposes it favors him and betrays it when it seems useful to do so” (13).

Maneuvering religious sanction as a hideout for his bestiality, the wrestler attributes the sport with communal violence. Okonkwo’s defense risks wrestling into being a fundamentalist or barbarous exercise. Fundamentalism is generally understood as an unwavering belief system beyond reason. The fundamentalist streak in the protagonist transgresses beyond a strict adherence to a religious order for he considers even manliness akin to religiosity. Confusing masculinity with aggression and violence, the non-thinking protagonist appropriates wrestling into a “militant discourse” (Alter 559).² Having been attacked by a clansman, Ikemefuna runs for protection towards Okonkwo who “drew his machet and cut him down” for he “was afraid of being thought weak” (Achebe 43). In a similar manner, he murders the head-messenger sent by the District Commissioner to stop the meeting of the Clansmen. For an extremist, the body of a wrestler is “a phalanx to ward off penetration and erosion from the outside” (Alter 577).³ Okonkwo reckons Ikemefuna and the head-messenger as agents from the ‘outside’ who seem to test the potency of the clan’s masculine pride with their unwanted presence on the land of Umuofia. Consequently, he eliminates them. Wrestling as a form of play is “uneasily situated on the margin between sport (ordered and rule-bound) and uncontrolled violence” (Marshall 267). The protagonist blindly succumbs to mistaken masculinity which eventually leads him to overlook this significant distinction.

The idea of a wrestling body, warding off threats from the outside, associates the sport with somatic nationalism.⁴ Wrestling is perceived as “an affair of bodies and not words” (Marshall 276). The readers are told at the outset that Okonkwo “was not a man of many words” (Achebe 77), he

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would rather “use his fists” (3). Moreover, he is said to conduct his household with “a heavy hand” (9). His machete, the weapon he uses for killing Ikemefuna and the head-messenger, perceptibly appears as an extension of his arm. The killing of Ikemefuna is followed by a ‘silence’ as neither Okonkwo nor his fellow clansmen utter a word. When Okonkwo beheads the head-messenger, the villagers however mutter, “Why did he do it?”, but the protagonist simply “wiped his machete on the sand and went away” (145). In all these instances, either the body speaks or the silence pervades. The suppression of words in wrestling is perceived as “draining of interiority in favor of external signs” or the “exhaustion of content by form” (Barthes 7).

Okonkwo relies on ‘external signs’ or the physical ‘form’ to convey his message. His decision to eliminate himself, so as not to face the humiliation of living under the British rule, is not voiced out verbally. He rather hangs himself as an ‘external sign’ to exhibit his disapproval of the foreign existence on their land. The British contrarily thrives on ‘content’ to establish their rule in the Umuofia. The missionaries persuade the fluctuating minds with the power of preaching and convert them to Christianity. Okonkwo’s own son, Nwoye is bent towards the captivating potential of words: “He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth” (Achebe 104). The reliance on ‘content’ continues to be the sole strategy of the British authorities even when the protesting villagers burn their church. Following the blasphemous act, the District Commissioner sends “his sweet-tongued messenger” to convince the leaders of the clan for a dialogue (Achebe 136). Furthermore, the authorities choose five court messengers over armed troop to interrupt the meeting of the clansmen. The frequent communication through the messengers exhibits their intent to exchange the words. The British thus employ the verbal ‘content’ as a counter pull to overshadow Okonkwo’s obsession with ‘the body’.

The clash between the Igbo society and the British is symbolic of the interface between two different sporting ideologies. Wrestling as a sport of agrarian Igbo class is a complete antithesis of cricket as its British counterpart. When Mr. Brown realizes that a frontal attack on the clan would not succeed, he decides to build a school in Umuofia for he understands that “religion and

education went hand in hand” (128). However, there is no direct reference to the sport of cricket in the novel, but the establishment of school signifies a lateral existence of cricket. Cricket is an offshoot of the British public school culture and the sport serves as a medium of education. This puritan sport was hegemonically used to make people conformist in England and its colonies by propagating ‘fairplay’ and gentleman spirit through it (James 34-35). The ideology of wrestling conversely espouses “foul play” since “[e]vil is wrestling’s natural climate” (Barthes 11). The Igbo society plays ‘foul’ with the effeminate, outcasts and titleless men who are excluded from the clan’s traditional activities. Consequently, among the villagers who convert to Christianity “were mostly the kind of people that were called *efulefu*, worthless, empty men” (Achebe 101). As the cricket-playing nation’s authorities treat them ‘fairly’, they become the strength of the Church.

Wrestling’s Algebra

Roland Barthes professes that the game of wrestling is a spectacle in which a “wrestler’s function is not to win but to perform exactly the gestures expected of him” (4). Being a public man, a wrestler is entrapped in “the obviousness of the roles” (5). Okonkwo, as a representative of the Igbo society, is a victim of the same community expectations. The death of a boy who calls him ‘father’ is a personal loss to him; nonetheless, the cult of heroic associated with the sport disguises the personal tragedy into a public responsibility. Okonkwo’s juxtaposed emotions consolidate the subtlety of such a situation:

‘When did you become a shivering old woman,’ Okonkwo asked himself, ‘you are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war. How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo you have become a woman indeed.’

He sprang to his feet, hung his goatskin bag on his shoulder and went to visit his friend, Obierika. (Achebe 45)

The description catalogues contrary emotions and displays a conflict between the “private self” and “the public man” (Nnoromele 155). On the one hand, Okonkwo feels like a ‘shivering old woman’, and at the same time, he contemplates his ‘valour in war’. At one point, he seems to be falling ‘to pieces’

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because of Ikemefuna's demise, and suddenly, he is just another 'boy' for him. In this battle between the personal loss and the public responsibility, the wrestler delivers the wonted expectations. As he 'sprang to his feet' to begin his mundane life once again, the community hero suppresses the father within him.

Things Fall Apart embodies Okonkwo's continuous grapple with the events happening in his life. Each moment of this combat is "a kind of algebra which instantaneously discloses the relation of cause with its figured effect" (Barthes 7). Ikemefuna's murder results in the rebellion of Okonkwo's biological son, Nwoye. He questions the 'foul play' of his clan when he "heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest" (Achebe 43). Nwoye and Ikemefuna grew up like twins, sharing food and work with each other and listening to the stories of tribal wars from their father. The killing of Ikemefuna consolidates his rebellion against the ethos of his clan, and eventually, he converts to Christianity. Okonkwo chokes him by his neck but 'the falcon cannot hear the falconer' and, hence, the 'things fall apart'. The sport of wrestling is based on "a quantitative series of compensations (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth)" (10). The act of dissidence by Nwoye thus is a "mathematical justification" to Okonkwo's own defiance against his father, Unoka (13).

The inroads to misfortune can be anticipated from the way Okonkwo walks. His body language acutely exemplifies the destructive force in him. In the very beginning, the readers are told: "When he walked, his feet hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody" (Achebe 3). The description presents the typical gait of a wrestler. The word 'pounce' calls for attention since it is stereotypically associated with the world of combat. In wrestling, the winner emerges out of his capacity to remain on top avoiding his contact with the earth. Similarly, Okonkwo's feet, hardly touching the ground, purport "defiance of gravity" or "a denial of the earth" (McDougall 13). Moreover, a walk is also symbolic of one's tryst with the future. A semiotic understanding of a wrestler's physique suggests that like the characters of *Commedia dell'Arte*, wrestlers "display in advance, in their costumes and postures, the future contents of their role" (Barthes 6). Defying the attraction of the earth, Okonkwo's walk scripts his future and in the end he could be seen dangling on a tree.

In a wrestling match, the “Exhibition of Suffering” is “the very finality of the fight” (Barthes 8). Okonkwo’s dangling body thus is an image out on the display. The method he adopts for suicide corresponds to the world of wrestling. The rope on his neck invokes the spectacular image of a ‘hold’ in the sport. Since Okonkwo does not seek his adversary’s hold on his neck, he hangs himself. His decision to publically exhibit his agony conveys that, like a true wrestler, he is not ashamed of his suffering (5). Unlike other sports, the defeat in wrestling “is not a conventional sign, abandoned once it is achieved: it is not a way out, but quite the contrary a duration, a showing forth, it resumes the oldest myths of public Suffering and Humiliation: the cross and the pillory” (9-10). Okonkwo’s defeat culminating in his suicide conforms to ‘the oldest myths’ of suffering in more than one way. His suicide is against the custom of the land and his body can “not be buried by his clansmen” (Achebe 147). What is all the more humiliating is the fact that he would be redeemed by the “strangers”, and that too, the British who “drove him to kill himself” (147). Okonkwo’s suffering resumes further as the District Commissioner decides to write a “reasonable paragraph” on him in his upcoming book on the primitive subjects (148). The protagonist’s defeat thus is not ‘a way out’ for even after his death he is ‘no longer at ease’.⁵

Conclusion

The spectacle of wrestling provides alternative insights to the understanding of the novel. Seeking constant explanations, the sport subverts the previously established meaning(s) of the novel and aids the story with a fresh layer of signification. It serves as an epistemological source that allows an extensive comprehension of the unified social mechanism maintained by the Igbo people before the arrival of the British. The cult-generating game lends the text its ideological substance and the narrative reciprocates by tracing the history of wrestling from its ritualistic prime to its becoming a residual form of culture. What enables the ancient sport to have a dialogue with the canonicity of the text is its historical relation with religion, ethics and politics. As a result, any reflection on the sport’s mythology turns out to be a simultaneous examination of these grand narratives. Feeding the aesthetic core of the narrative, wrestling emerges out to be a link between the novel’s diverse sources.

Endnotes

- 1 The sport of wrestling is frequently mentioned in Greek art, literature and mythology. In Greek and Roman literature, the evidence of wrestling is more abundant and more varied than any other sport. Prominent writers like Ovid, Homer and Pindar describe the wrestling scenes involving the powerful men of their times in concrete details (Gardiner 14).
- 2 The bodily nationalism of wrestling is essentially non-sectarian. Nonetheless, some fundamentalist groups overlay ideology with athletics. For example, some fundamentalist groups in India used *akharas* (wrestling gymnasia) to rally their recruits (Alter 559). Similarly, in the Soviet Union, the ruling Communist party exploited the “symbolism of wrestling (struggle, strength, masculinity, determination, and courage) to convey ideological messages” (Bromber et al. 393).
- 3 For example, Hindu fundamentalists in India consider two elements of a Hindu’s consciousness i.e. *sanskriti* and *dharma* as “immutable and transcendent” (Alter 577). According to them, these ideals are constantly threatened either by some foreign influence or by the very idea of secularism. Therefore, the body of a volunteer is trained with drills and physical fitness exercises in order to protect these ideals (577).
- 4 Follow endnote 3.
- 5 *No Longer at Ease* is the second novel of the African trilogy written by Chinua Achebe. It is generally considered as a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*. The third novel in the series is *Arrow of God*.

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