

Beasts and Abominations  
in *Things Fall Apart* and *Omenuko*  
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**Abstract:** This article argues that the beast whose spectre W.B. Yeats raises in “The Second Coming” has been a constant presence in Nigerian writing. It discusses two early manifestations of this beast, as they appear in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Peter Nwana’s *Omenuko*, and focuses on the problem of abominations, particularly suicides, in traditional Igbo culture. In so doing, it contests Adélékè Adéèkó’s assertion that Nigerian writers continually return to the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart* because of “dissatisfaction with Okonkwo’s failure to negotiate historical transition” (“Okonkwo” 84). This article argues that, while Adéèkó is right that Nigerian writers frequently return to *Things Fall Apart*, they do so because Okonkwo’s body is both literally and metaphorically an abomination that cannot be buried. As such, it anticipates what the historical transition brings: mere anarchy.

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*Ezebuilo*: a king is an enemy

-Common Igbo given name<sup>1</sup>

The title of Chinua Achebe’s first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, could serve as a generic subtitle for virtually any narrative from Genesis to, say, *Great Expectations*; things always, at some point, fall apart. In Achebe’s story, however, things do not get put back together again. They may, in fact, never get put back together again; *Things Fall Apart* shares with the poem that supplies its title a suspicion that the thing born in the desert is a beast of pure negation. That is, the second coming anticipated in William Butler Yeats’ poem is axiomatically *not* the second coming of Revelations. That coming, however terrifying, will be a restoration of

that which has fallen apart; Yeats' is an inversion, the birth of the superman or anti-man who, though moved by the will to power, will restore neither grace nor lost natural human virility<sup>2</sup> but merely release the catastrophic energy produced by the suspension of law.

This beast, sometimes seen clearly, sometimes registering only as a disturbance amongst the desert birds, has been a constant presence in post-colonial Nigerian writing. It appears in sharp focus in Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*, for example, in which Field-Marshal Kamini is modeled explicitly on Idi Amin and, to borrow Soyinka's description of Amin himself, is "not so much human as anti-man" (Soyinka, "The Anti-Man Cometh" 45). But it is also present in texts such as Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda*. Although *Danda* does not feature a character who might be called an anti-man (Danda is a charismatic idler and buffoon),<sup>3</sup> it nevertheless finds abominations at every turn; the accumulation of these moral failures eventually registers as the loosing of Yeats' "mere anarchy" on the world despite the novel's light tone (Yeats 211). Obviously, I cannot make a comprehensive case for this observation here, but I will make a start by discussing two early manifestations of the beast as it appears in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Peter Nwana's *Omenuko*, an Igbo novel that pre-dates *Things Fall Apart* by twenty-five years. This discussion will respond to two articles by Adélékè Adéèkò, which together offer an intertextual reading of Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. At the risk of using Adéèkò rather unfairly, I will enumerate several objections to his reading, on the way to arguing that the protagonists of *Things Fall Apart* and *Omenuko* are not anti-colonial heroes so much as premonitions of the postcolonial beast, slouching toward Bethlehem.

Both *Arrow of God* and *Death and the King's Horseman*, Adéèkò argues, are "end-of-era stories about colonial conquest" that "find the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart* unsatisfying and therefore keep . . . re-imagining it" (Adéèkò, "Okonkwo" 72–73). His reading hinges on the observation that, in both Achebe's and Soyinka's texts, "the protagonists disappear and the communities continue because the leading men speak and act for the aspirations of specific segments of the society whose claims to hegemonic power have been repudiated by the colonial order"

and that “tragic closure (or avoidance thereof) in these stories sublimates the waning power of class factions and not just the defeat of a few strong men” (Adéèkó, “Okonkwo” 73). Adéèkó argues that while *Things Fall Apart* shows a “disjuncture between the hero’s tragic ending and the continuous story of the larger community that baffles storytelling,” Olunde’s death in *Death and the King’s Horseman* “is untragic; his society expects it” (Adéèkó, “Okonkwo” 79). In this way, “Soyinka’s play reconfigures . . . the insufficient attention Okonkwo gives to the law-making element of forceful will” (“Okonkwo” 84).

At the heart of his analysis is what Adéèkó calls “the Okonkwo topos in Nigerian writing” (“Okonkwo” 73), the figure who “worries about the future, in contrast to the anti- Okonkwo, who acts as though tomorrow does not exist . . . and cares about communal sustenance [whereas] the anti-Okonkwo cares only for selfish libidinal pleasures” (“Great Books” 40). Confronted with colonial *commandement*, he “prefers death to the humiliation of ceding self-governance to foreigners” (“Great Books” 37). I certainly agree with Adéèkó’s assessment of the importance of an “Okonkwo topos” in Nigerian writing. Adéèkó notes its presence in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, Chris Abani’s *Graceland*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, and Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, and I agree, although I suspect we have different characters in mind as “Okonkwo types,” because I take issue with Adéèkó’s assessment of what the topos means and why it has so often been revisited. In fact, I object to the argument Adéèkó builds around the topos on several counts.

First, there are problems with the contrast Adéèkó makes between *Things Fall Apart* and *Death and the King’s Horseman* and the conclusions that he draws from it. Adéèkó reads Okonkwo’s and Olunde’s suicides as straightforwardly intertextual and does not account for the differences between the two. Okonkwo is Igbo and Olunde is Yoruba. They come from different cultures that hold extremely different views on suicide. As Adéèkó notes, ritual suicide was an accepted part of Yoruba culture both before and during the colonial period, and title holders were often expected “to commit suicide upon the death of the king in order to accompany him to the hereafter” (Adeboye 199). Olufunke Adeboye observes that “politically motivated suicide” was both acceptable and

sometimes even valorized, a cultural attitude reflected in the saying “*iku ya j’esin*’ (death is preferable to ignominy)” (190). Suicide is also dramatized in the myth of Sango, orisha of lightning, who became a god only after committing suicide to avoid the ignominy of defeat and exile.<sup>4</sup> In everyday and non-aristocratic cases, certainly, suicide “was considered abominable and a pollution of the community” (Adeboye 197), but the practice was “valorized . . . among the elite whenever it occurred within the context of a political contest or as a ritual obligation” (197).<sup>5</sup> This is the situation in T.M. Aluko’s *His Worshipful Majesty*, for example. Faced with the ignominy of being dethroned by the colonial government, Oba Olayiwola Adegoke kills himself; Bada, the king’s horseman, promptly “[follows] his royal master on his way to the Land-of-the-Dead” (Aluko 175). Both deaths are recognized as honourable.

This is the Yoruba context in which Olunde’s and Elesin’s suicides occur in *Death and the King’s Horseman*. In the play, set during World War Two, the British District Officer prevents Elesin, an already wavering king’s horseman, from performing ritual suicide. In order to avoid catastrophe, Elesin’s son Olunde replaces his father in the ritual and accompanies his king into the world of the spirits. He will be honoured by the community and will, no doubt, eventually be reborn. Elesin, although he does so belatedly, also commits honourable suicide and follows Olunde and the king. Admittedly, his “passage is clogged with droppings from the King’s stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung” (Soyinka, *Death* 76), but what is important is that he will arrive: “However sunk in debt he is no pauper’s carrion abandoned on the road” (*Death* 76). He is not, as Tejumola Olaniyan suggests, dispatched “into perpetual oblivion” (103). That is, he commits suicide to *avoid* consigning himself to perpetual oblivion. Had he not committed suicide, he would have become, like Oba Ovonramwen in Ola Rotimi’s *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, *homo sacer* “pitifully hiding in the shrubs, a cowering wretch” (Olaniyan 104). Adéékó’s use of Yoruba proverbs as subtitles suggests that this is the context with which he is most familiar and from which he generalizes. It is not, however, the context in which Okonkwo’s suicide occurs in *Things Fall Apart*. Igbo culture has no place for ritual or politically motivated suicide; all suicides are considered abominable of-

fenses against the earth,<sup>6</sup> comparable in seriousness to “patricide, incest, stealing of yams and sheep, bestiality, willful abortion . . . and the killing of sacred animals” (Arinze 34).<sup>7</sup> Traditionally the body of a person who committed suicide was discarded in the “bad bush” along with other inhuman things, his spirit was lost, and he could neither join the ancestors (not even “all stained in dung”) nor be reborn. Such is the fate of Madume in Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*. He, like Achebe’s Okonkwo, hangs himself; he is cut down by strangers and taken to “the forest into which bodies rejected by the earth were thrown” (Amadi 76). Whereas Olunde’s ritual suicide in *Death and the King’s Horseman* is, to borrow Émile Durkheim’s terms, altruistic, a martyrdom, Okonkwo’s is anomic and, perhaps more importantly, egoistic, a final rejection of all social and moral obligations.<sup>8</sup> In the world depicted by *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s suicide could never be anything else.

It is misleading, then, to suggest that *Death and the King’s Horseman* “reconfigures . . . the insufficient attention Okonkwo gives to the law-making element of forceful will” (Adéèkó, “Okonkwo” 84). In fact, it is a mistake to suggest that Okonkwo is in any sense a figure of law-making violence. He is, rather, to use Giorgio Agamben’s term, a figure of *pure* violence, “violence that exposes and severs the nexus between law and violence and can thus appear in the end not as violence that governs . . . but as violence that purely acts and manifests” (Agamben, *State of Exception* 62). One could hardly ask for a more apt description of the violence of Okonkwo’s murder of the court messenger at the end of the novel. My second objection, then, is to Adéèkó’s suggestion that Okonkwo is representative of a traditional ruling class whose power, confronted with colonial *commandement*, is waning. Here I partly follow Neil ten Kortenaar, who argues that “[t]he problem that Okonkwo is designed to solve for his author is the problem faced by the new citizens of Nigeria who *took over* the commandement” (Kortenaar, “Things” 168; emphasis added). For Kortenaar, *Things Fall Apart* “testifies not to 1900, when the novel is approximately set, but to 1958, on the eve of Nigerian independence” (“Things” 168). Okonkwo is not a representative of a traditional ruling class but a harbinger of something new, “a father figure wielding all the authority of the British” (“Things”

169). The characteristic feature of this new thing is that he “wants to be his own ancestor . . . [H]e wants to step outside the human generations and to deny paternity, both his father’s and his own responsibility as father” (Kortenaar, “Oedipus” 195–96). I argue that this new thing, Okonkwo, is the beast that Yeats anticipates in “The Second Coming,” a beast of no nation whose power is, in the language of Achille Mbembe, merely necropower.

The colonial *commandement* that Kortenaar recognizes Okonkwo as symbolic of is, Mbembe argues, the source and prototype of contemporary necropolitical power, “the absolute power to give death any time, anywhere, by any means, and for any reason” (Mbembe 13), or, one should add, for no reason at all. Indeed the closer violence approaches unreason, the more it becomes something that “purely acts and manifests” (Agamben, *State of Exception* 62). Its first defining feature is that it is “based on a *régime d’exception* – that is, a regime that depart[s] from the common law” (Mbembe 29), or, as Achebe puts it, a regime which is “the end of government itself, where government leaps beyond the precipice, dismisses itself, and joins ranks with crime” (*There Was a Country* 248). It entails “a form of sovereignty drawing some features from royal power” (Mbembe 29), inasmuch as royal or sovereign power is, as Thomas Hobbes says, perpetually in “a posture of War” (Hobbes, *Leviathan* 90). Mbembe writes that “such sovereignty rather resembles the supposed ‘state of nature,’ allowing itself to do whatever it wishes” (34). Agamben clarifies this idea: this “state of nature” is “a principle internal to the State revealed in the moment in which the State is considered ‘as if it were dissolved’” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 36). Agamben adds, “[it] is . . . not so much a war of all against all as, more precisely, a condition in which everyone is bare life and a *homo sacer* for everyone else” (*Homo Sacer* 106; emphasis in original). It is also, therefore a condition in which all violence is sovereign, unencumbered by law, and politically impotent, incapable of making law. Under such circumstances, the people who govern themselves by Hobbes’ covenants of mutual trust inevitably lose all conviction, and those who have already announced themselves as beasts of no nation are filled with a passionate intensity. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo quite explicitly plays the role of the latter

when, without consulting the people of Umuofia, he goes to war and kills the court messenger. It is an exercise of an irrational will to power, an act whose very nature must appear incomprehensible to those still humanized by covenants of mutual trust. “Why did he do it?” Umuofia asks (Achebe, *TFA* 145). It is the only possible response to Okonkwo’s abomination.

Two observations follow: first, concerning Adéèkó’s assumption that Nigerian authors continually return to the “unsatisfying” ending of *Things Fall Apart* (and to the Okonkwo topos) in order to re-imagine it and end the story in a more satisfying way. Adéèkó sets out to explain what he sees as a problematic “disjuncture between the leaders’ final decisions and the resolution of the societies to persist after conquest” (“Okonkwo” 73), and between “the hero’s tragic ending and the continuous story of the larger community” (“Okonkwo” 79). In doing so, he makes two assumptions: that Okonkwo’s death is tragic and that it represents an ending. However, decades of student essays and *CliffsNotes* written from a Westernized perspective notwithstanding, no suicide can ever, in the Igbo context, be properly tragic. The death of a tragic hero is by definition cathartic; it is cleansing or expiatory (the root of the word is *katharos*, “pure”). Okonkwo’s suicide, by contrast, is an abomination; his body is thought to be so evil that “only strangers may touch it” (Achebe, *TFA* 147). Certainly his death is pitiable. As his friend Obierika observes, Okonkwo “was one of the greatest men in Umuofia . . . and now he will be buried like a dog” (*TFA* 147). This is a lamentable turn of events, but it is not tragic. When a tragic hero dies, his successor says, “Let four captains/Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage” (Shakespeare 5.2.397–398); he does not say, “He will be buried like a dog.” In other words, the perplexing problem of the ending of *Things Fall Apart* is not that it aims at a satisfying closure and fails but that it does not aim at closure at all.

In fact, Okonkwo’s death is a perverse birth. In death he becomes the embodiment of the abominable violence with which he has threatened Umuofia throughout the novel. The first inkling of this violence occurs when Okonkwo breaks the sacred peace of the Week of Peace, something “unheard of” in Umuofia (Achebe, *TFA* 22). He then kills his

adopted son, “the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families” (*TFA* 46), in an act of capricious human sacrifice. The capriciousness of the act is significant. In Igboland, human sacrifices were made only “in exceptional circumstances” (Arinze 89). Such sacrifices were offered when “a very serious public good was at stake, [during] a persistent epidemic or influenza (as that of 1918) . . . when a great public disaster from a spirit was felt to be imminent, or at the conclusion of a peace treaty after an inter-town war” (Arinze 90). None of these conditions are present when the Oracle of the Hills demands, and Okonkwo provides, the sacrifice of Ikemefuna. There has been peace for three years, harvests have been good (the New Yam Festival has just been celebrated), and the British have barely appeared on the horizon. The arbitrariness of the sacrifice—no explanation at all is given for it—suggests that something is out of joint in Umuofia. And Okonkwo is, of course, at the heart of it.

Okonkwo is again at the centre of capricious violence when he accidentally kills a clansman. Ironically, this occurs when his gun explodes at a funeral, turning a ritual designed to facilitate the passage of the dead into an abomination.<sup>9</sup> And, finally, he murders the court messenger. In each case, he acts alone in a way that sets him progressively further apart from the community and makes him increasingly dangerous to its continuity. He is widely called, with approbation, the “Roaring Flame,” but even Okonkwo knows that “Living fire begets cold, impotent ash” (Achebe, *TFA* 108–09).

Okonkwo’s death does not end the danger to the community; at the end of the novel, the abomination Okonkwo represents has yet to be dealt with. That is why it is an event to which Nigerian writing so often returns. Indeed, *Things Fall Apart* actually returns to it itself; Nwana’s *Omenuko*, the first novel in Igbo, approached the problem several years earlier. Arguably, discussions of the threat can be traced to even earlier narratives. *Things Fall Apart* dramatizes its own return to a problem confronted by traditional Igbo storytelling when Okonkwo’s wife Ekwefi tells the story of the Tortoise and the birds’ feast. In the story, the trickster Tortoise’s actions threaten the destruction of the community and nearly lead to his death. But I think Okonkwo and Omenuko represent



something new, something more difficult to understand than the anti-social violence of the trickster. Here it will be useful to discuss *Omenuko* in some detail.

*Omenuko* is a fictionalization of the life of Chief Igwegbe Odum, whose praise name was Omenuko Aku, “he who displays largess in times of great scarcity” (Nnolim 28). The novel tells the story of the titular character’s shrewd rise to power in early twentieth-century Igboland, and there is certainly something about Omenuko that is amorally appealing in the same way that the Tortoise is appealing. Throughout the novel, Omenuko is consistently one step ahead of those around him; he cunningly manipulates and anticipates both his enemies and allies. As Frances Pritchett observes in the preface to her translation of the text, Omenuko’s popularity, even today, hinges partly on his adroitness at “exploiting both the British colonial officials and the traditional practices of his home area.”<sup>10</sup> The novel’s precipitating event even sounds like a trickster story, insofar as it involves a ludicrously shortsighted, greed-motivated miscalculation on Omenuko’s part. He sells his carriers and apprentices—including some of his own relatives—into slavery, ostensibly in an effort to recoup his losses when his market-bound goods are swept away by a swollen river.

However, more than mere tricksterism takes place in the novel. Having committed one abomination, Omenuko returns to his village, Ezi Nnachi, and undertakes another; he plans “for himself and the chiefs and the fathers of the children he had sold to die all at the same time, by lighting a fire in two containers of gunpowder and placing them under his loincloth” (Ch.1). The relationship between the two abominations is significant. Omenuko’s despair over the first does not lead to the second; instead, the first is a pretext for the second. Omenuko’s misery over his lost wealth makes him wish for death; selling his people is merely a way to ensure that death. He explains to his brothers:

They had all then fallen into the river and since God in Heaven saved everyone, no one drowned, but all of his goods had been lost. Their ancestors and God in Heaven had saved his life, but death would have been better. He went on to say, “On account

of this, death is better than life to me just now, and I will surely die. Therefore, you both must start looking for your own salvation [from the townspeople's anger], because for my part I am prepared to die." (Ch. 2)

In other words, Omenuko threatens the community with general destruction. This is not the act of a trickster. The Tortoise may do damage in his search for advantage, he often causes a breach in the social order that must be corrected, and his bad behaviour may even seem to threaten the existence of the community, but only ever by way of ultimately affirming its continuity. As Achebe observes, "He is a rogue, but he is a nice kind of rogue. . . . He's not allowed to get away with murder. He does something and he is punished, but he still lives to appear again. . . . Tortoise is wicked, but he is not irredeemably so. Tortoise is not evil. He's just naughty" (qtd. in Baker and Draper 22). Murder-suicide, then, is quite definitively not part of a trickster's remit. Omenuko threatens to become something other than a trickster in the moment in which he contemplates the second abomination.

In a much-referenced interview with Bill Moyers, Achebe speaks about the Igbo proverb "[w]herever something stands, something else will stand beside it." He says that "[i]t means that there is no one way to anything. The Igbo people who made that proverb are very insistent on this—there is no absolute anything. They are against excess—their world is a world of dualities" ("Chinua Achebe"). The choice of the term "dualities" is perhaps unfortunate, suggesting to some commentators a world of Manichean binaries. Adéèkó, for example, applies the proverb to Okonkwo, who lacks "duality" and forgets "that gruffness should be balanced with amiability, rigidity with softness, masculinity with femininity" ("Great Books" 40). David Whittaker and Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, however, are more on point when they interpret the proverb Moyers and Achebe discuss to mean that "wherever something exists there will always be a *complementary* or opposing force beside it" (45; emphasis added). Complementarity comprises both contradiction and addition, completion by apposition as well as by opposition. The thing that "stands beside" does not simply balance but modulates, con-

textualizes, and makes meaningful. As Whittaker and Msiska write, “In Igbo thought, nothing can exist in its own terms” (45). And yet, Achebe remarks in another interview, there is also “Something That Doesn’t Even Wear a Necklace,” that is, something for which there is no second presence—not even a necklace—something that exists entirely on its own terms. That thing is, Achebe observes, “a complete picture of evil” (qtd. in Baker and Draper 23). It is this “Something That Doesn’t Even Wear a Necklace,” a thing “completely alone,” that Omenuko threatens to become.

Pritchett argues that Omenuko is able to “reconcile two worlds”: the world of the traditional Igbo village and the world of the colonial British (Pritchett, “Translator’s Preface”). I am not sure, however, that this is the case. At certain points Omenuko does, as Pritchett observes, successfully exploit two worlds, but only at the expense of belonging to neither, and at the risk of becoming a thing completely alone. Significantly, Omenuko is prevented from definitively becoming this evil thing by his brothers, who persuade him to abandon his suicidal plan and flee with the rest of the family to another village. The remainder of the story, in its broadest outlines, is an account of Omenuko’s redemption and eventual return to his home village. Through shrewdness and eloquence, he grows wealthy during his exile in Ndi Mgborogwu, becomes acting-chief of the village, and is eventually chief of his own, new-founded village, Ikpa Oyi. He then uses his wealth to buy the freedom of those he once sold into slavery and perform the expiatory rites that permit his return to Ezi Nnachi. There he eventually becomes “a man of the people . . . doing good deeds all his life long” (Ch. 15). As Nwana’s introduction explains, this narrative affirms the deeply-held Igbo belief that “if anyone goes to another town and lives there as a guest . . . he will always be reminded that he is a guest in that land and he will be preparing himself for his inevitable return to the town of his birth . . . [where his] people will welcome his return” (Introduction). But Omenuko’s story has a shadow, this something-that-doesn’t-even-wear-a-necklace.

Omenuko becomes chief of Ndi Mgborogwu when his predecessor dies without an adult male heir and tentatively designates Omenuko regent—tentatively because such an appointment is entirely at the dis-

cretion of the District Commissioner. Omenuko becomes a Warrant Chief, a position invented by the British to facilitate Indirect Rule in an area that traditionally did not have a centralized power structure. The Warrant Chief system was introduced in the 1890s, “[making] mushroom kings grow where there [were] none before,” as Achebe writes in *Arrow of God* (70). The system was generally seen by the Igbos as an unwanted imposition, and the result, Elizabeth Isichei notes, was that very often “the Warrant Chiefs were not the traditional elders of a town. These tended to suspect the Greeks bearing gifts and put forward junior members of the community or even slaves” (161). This situation is dramatized in *Arrow of God* when Ezeulu, chief priest of the village of Umuaro, refuses the British Administration’s warrant because “Ezeulu will not be anybody’s chief, except Ulu” (Achebe, *Arrow* 215). James Ikedi, on the other hand, “who had been among the very first people to receive missionary education” and was not a person of importance in his own town (*Arrow* 69), seizes the opportunity and earns himself the title “Destroyer of Compounds” (*Arrow* 69). The District Officer, Captain Winterbottom, observes Chief Ikedi’s corruption and wonders how a “blood brother” of the people could treat them so viciously (70). He decides it must be a “cruelty of a kind which Africa alone produced” (70). Winterbottom is, of course, wrong. Chief Ikedi’s cruelty—like Okonkwo’s violence—is an entirely novel kind that can be produced only in the no-man’s land between Africa and the British Administration.<sup>11</sup> Isichei writes:

[The Warrant Chiefs’] abuse of office, which was to become legendary in the colonial period, was perhaps due less to their inexperience than to the novelty of their roles. Positions of responsibility of traditional society were surrounded by a network of duties, expectations and obligations. These were known both to the incumbent and to society as a whole. If he failed to fulfill them, he would feel the weight of popular disapproval, and the community would apply various sanctions against him. The Warrant Chief filled a new role, upon which traditional practices could shed no light. He was responsible,

less to the community he served, than to the colonial master, who alone had power to dismiss him. It was perhaps inevitable that the Warrant Chiefs tended to use their positions for personal aggrandizement. In a world of rapid change, of conflicting values and of manifold uncertainties, perhaps personal prosperity seemed the one thing certain. (161)

The narrator of *Omenuko* sings a praise song for Omenuko as chief of Ndi Mgoborogwu: “He was a friend to the poor and the rich alike. . . . Because of Omenuko’s good deeds toward his fellow men, no one remembered that he was a stranger in the land he was governing, nor did anyone remember that it was Obiefula’s Warrant that Omenuko was using to govern the land” (Ch. 6). But the praise is undercut at every turn by recent history. Whatever Omenuko’s (un-enumerated) good deeds, his position as a Warrant Chief identifies him as part of a discredited institution. This is no mere subtextual element that may or may not be pertinent. *Omenuko* was published in 1933, four years after fifty-five women were killed by colonial troops during the “Women’s War,” a series of mass demonstrations against the Warrant Chief system. The government report on the uprising concluded that the Warrant Chief system was illegitimate and recommended a total reorganization of the administration. As a result, “[b]y 1935 many different forms of native administration existed in southeastern Nigeria, most based to some extent on clan or village councils, and these forms of administration were much more in tune with traditional political models” (Falola and Heaton 133). Coming in the middle of this revolution, the narrator’s praise of a Warrant Chief who, by the narrator’s own reckoning, “amassed far more wealth than he had when he lived in our town,” sounds distinctly hollow (Ch. 6).

Hollow too is the observation that “no one remembered that he was a stranger” (Ch. 6). This does not mean that anyone actually forgets he is a stranger, only that, so long as his chieftancy is not too onerous or inconvenient, no one feels the need to remind him that he is a stranger. But the village elders continue to meet behind Omenuko’s back, and as soon as Mgoborogwu’s son is of age, they tell Omenuko that the war-

rant is not his. Omenuko puts on a display of indignation and laments, “[Y]ou have counted me out from among you and set me apart as a stranger. Because of this it will be better for me if I remain indeed a stranger” (Ch. 6). Yet he is already maneuvering to secure himself another warrant and persuades the District Commissioner to make him chief of a new settlement. His new village is, significantly, located in “bad bush,” a stretch of evil forest where abominations are disposed of: “[T]hose who had died of swollen bellies, those who had hydrocele, those who were killed by smallpox” (Ch. 6). The narrator observes that Omenuko now holds “his own Warrant instead of one belonging to someone else,” but this is truly an ironic ascendancy (Ch. 7). He is now the illegitimate chief of abominations; the shadow of something-that-doesn’t-even-wear-a-necklace surrounds him. As Omenuko himself notes, reflecting on this period of his life, “I was not one of the Mgborogwu, nor did I belong to the people of our land” (Ch. 8).

Omenuko’s return from this bad bush to Ezi Nnachi entails, first, the reclamation of the people he sold into slavery. This process and the various transactions it involves are detailed in the longest chapter of the novel (nearly one quarter of the book); Nwana’s intention, presumably, is to emphasize the scale of Omenuko’s labour. The symbolic value of his labour is also emphasized by the fact that, when Omenuko undertakes his work—or rather employs one of his brothers to undertake it for him—the colonial government has already freed the slaves in Igboland. As Ezuma, one of the slave owners, acknowledges, “these are the times of the white man – if these children themselves want to go away, they can go, even if we do not agree that they should be bought back now. Perhaps it will cause trouble, and when they go home they will not pay any money at all” (Ch. 8). He is more than happy to return Omenuko’s kinsmen for exactly the price he paid. Omenuko’s purchase of his kinsmen, though unnecessary under colonial law, is thus doubly symbolic. It is both penitential labour and an honouring of contracts. The latter is more important than it may seem. To have simply gone from compound to compound reclaiming kinsmen would have been to, once more, exploit two worlds while being part of neither.

Second, Omenuko attempts to make ritual atonement for his abomination. Ernest Emenyonu observes that “Omenuko is required to offer a sacrifice of atonement in the highest terms ever prescribed” (88), but this is not the case. The sum of Omenuko’s sacrifice is “one female sheep, one hen, one cock, eight chicken eggs, a duck egg, a basket of yams, a basket of cocoyams, one pod of kola, one pod of kola pepper, forty pieces of native chalk, wine in a pot whose bottom has not touched the ground, a pot of raffia palm wine, a pot of oil palm wine, and an eagle” (Ch. 9). For a man of Omenuko’s wealth this represents a fairly insignificant outlay, and indeed he freely offers more than is required by the priest Iyiukwa to “show how sincere he is” (Ch. 10). What matters is not the price of the sacrifice but the symbolism of its disposition:

[The people of Ezi Nnachi] would take a chicken egg, touch it to the mouth and throw it away, and some people would eat little bits of it. All of those things are involved in the ritual eating together of man and spirits. Those things would all be killed and cooked, everyone would eat a little bit of them, each item in turn, from the first person to the last, at the same time. (Ch. 9)

The cow, chickens, and yams are all used by Ezi Nnachi in “ritual eating together, in order to reconcile them from that day forward” (Ch. 9). Community is affirmed and reconciliation is accomplished. But Omenuko’s return is not yet complete. Throughout the proceedings he lives in Ikpa Oyi and continues his ascent through the ranks of Warrant Chiefs to become Paramount Chief, much to the chagrin of the chiefs of the twenty-six villages under his warrant. They lament, “No, this will not happen in our land—a stranger being the head over all of us. If he is going to be the government, let him go to his own village—he will not stay in our village” (Ch. 12). The chiefs attempt various conspiracies against Omenuko, all of which are foiled, until things begin to get out of hand and several men are killed in a skirmish. At this point, the District Commissioner steps in and asks Omenuko to return to Ezi Nnachi to avoid further bloodshed. He adds, “I have not found anything against you that is so bad that [it] will cause you to lose your position of leader-

ship. . . . [A]fter you have reached your land and have rested, when you want your warrant, come and see me so I can give you a paper which you will give to the District Commissioner” (Ch. 14).

Significantly, despite entreaties from those around him, Omenuko never reclaims his warrant and forsakes his chieftainship in favour of becoming a beloved and forward-thinking “man of the people” (Ch. 15). A significant discrepancy between Nwana’s narrative and the biography on which it is based is worth noting. Chief Igwegbe Odum’s tenure as a warrant chief ended in 1918, not because he foreswore it but because the District Officer terminated it. After a police investigation, “Chief Igwegbe was publicly reprimanded in front of other chiefs . . . and he retired discredited” (Nnolim 28). But this turn of events would not serve Nwana’s purpose. *Omenuko* only achieves closure if Omenuko willingly and purposefully rejects the chieftaincy which made him something-that-doesn’t-even-wear-a-necklace. Although he makes sure that his children are educated and either set up in trade or placed in white collar jobs with the Railway Corporation, he remains ostensibly both a bulwark of the traditional community and a protector of its future.

This conclusion is, presumably, what Pritchett has in mind when she observes that Omenuko reconciles two worlds. However, as the discrepancy between the novel and the biography suggests, this reconciliation and the closure it allows are factitious, achieved by hastily and improperly burying the spectre the novel has raised. *Things Fall Apart*, by contrast, refuses closure; Okonkwo’s abomination cannot be buried (either literally, by the Igbo community it threatens, or metaphorically by the Nigerian writers who have, as Adéèkó says, tried to “re-imagine” the ending of *Things Fall Apart* (“Okonkwo” 73)).

This, then, is what I identify as the “Okonkwo topos” to which Nigerian literature continually returns: not the figure Adéèkó reads, who “worries about the future” and “cares about communal sustenance” (“Great Books” 40), but the figure whose will to power is a thing beside which nothing stands, and who consequently threatens both the future and the community. Nigerian writing so often turns to this figure partly because, in the years since the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, men who seem to embody it have dominated Nigerian public life. Arguably,



this tendency reached its perfection with that “sheer carapace of brutality” Sani Abacha (Soyinka, *The Open Sore* 106), but Fela Kuti had already diagnosed Muhammadu Buhari and his predecessors as “beasts of no nation” (Kuti). The creatures who emerged in the postcolony were born, as Mbembe observes, out of colonial *commandement*. *Omenuko* witnesses the birth, although Nwana seems to be—willfully or not—unaware of it. Perhaps, as an early Christian convert and a teacher at a Methodist college, he was too much a part of *commandement* to recognize its progeny.<sup>12</sup> Of course Achebe, son of an Anglican teacher and evangelist and a graduate of Government College, was every bit as imbricated in colonial *commandement* as Nwana. But Achebe seems to have retained what he identifies as a characteristically Igbo awareness of “the menace of those with the will to power” (*There Was a Country* 246). On the eve of independence, he saw it all too clearly, and the legacy of *Things Fall Apart* is not so much its reconstruction of a pre-colonial Igbo past as its anticipation of a postcolonial Nigerian future.

## Notes

- 1 Achebe writes, “The Igbo have long been a very democratic people. They express a strong anti-monarchy sentiment with the common name Ezebuilo, which translates to ‘a king is an enemy’” (Achebe, “Nigeria’s Promise, Africa’s Hope”).
- 2 That is, not as Nietzsche supposes, something bred out of “the domestic animal, the herd animal” (Nietzsche 115–16), but to something that is created only when humanity is reduced to the animal.
- 3 As Lynn notes, “Danda explicitly identifies himself with the . . . Tortoise of Igbo folklore” (3); this identification with the Trickster, I argue, fundamentally distinguishes him from the beasts of no nation I discuss in this paper.
- 4 In Yoruba cosmology, God (Olodumare) takes no direct interest in mankind; humanity’s dealings with the spiritual world are limited to the ancestors and the lesser deities—*orishas*—who are facets of Olodumare. There are hundreds of *orishas*, many of them local, some of them—like Sango—universally recognized.
- 5 Several critics have pointed to the “inexorably reactionary” quality of this ideology both historically and as it plays out in Nigerian drama (Olaniyan 106). See Jeyifo’s *The Truthful Lie*, Booth’s “Self-Sacrifice and Human Sacrifice in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*,” and Olaniyan’s “Suicide and Ideology.”
- 6 Arinze notes that “Ani, the Earth Spirit, and the ancestors are regarded as the special guardians of morality. Special grave moral faults are called ‘*alu*’ or ‘*nso Ani*’ (abomination)” (34).

- 7 The depiction of a funeral where a slave is “supposed to jump into the grave willingly, happy to accompany her mistress” in Emcheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (23) is dramatically effective but historically spurious. The killing of slaves “to give the deceased personality an honourable following of servants to accompany him to the great beyond” (Arinze 88) was not uncommon in nineteenth-century Igboland, but the slaves were victims, not willing ritual suicides (Law 72; Arinze 89–91).
- 8 Joiner and Rudd summarize Durkheim’s theory tidily:  
Durkheim . . . identified four basic subtypes based on the environmental conditions surrounding suicide: 1) egoistic, 2) altruistic, 3) anomic, 4) fatalistic. He identified suicides occurring due to a lack of social integration as egoistic, while altruistic suicides were characterized by insufficient individuation and by “finding the basis for existence beyond earthly life” (e.g. religious martyrs . . .). According to Durkheim, anomic and fatalistic suicides were associated with situations involving deregulation . . . and hyperregulation . . . respectively. (Joiner and Rudd 54)
- 9 Arinze observes that, at a funeral, “The more gun shots the better . . . to help the dead go much quicker to the spirit land” (14).
- 10 Pritchett’s translation of *Omenuko* is available online through Columbia University. The document lacks pagination, but I will cite chapters. All quotations from *Omenuko* are from this online translation.
- 11 My point here is not that cruelty and suicide were unheard of in Igboland before the arrival of the British but that Winterbottom’s observation about Africans makes a convenient, self-serving mistake. It is the same mistake Major Arthur Glyn Leonard makes in *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes* (the real-life model for the book the District Commissioner is writing at the end of *Things Fall Apart*, and which Winterbottom subsequently reads in *Arrow of God*). In that book Major Leonard observes that “[Africans] will commit self-murder on the slightest provocation, even when they have been only abused or chaffed” (qtd. in Kortenaar, *Postcolonial Literature* 33). But the anomic violence Leonard (or, interchangeably, the District Commissioner or Winterbottom) takes to be a characteristic of Africans is, in fact, a characteristic and quite unprecedented effect of colonial *commandement*.
- 12 See Omenuko’s “The Author of Omenuko,” available online through Columbia University.

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