Duality and Resilience in Chinua Achebe’s
Things Fall Apart

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Many readers and critics of Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart come to the easy conclusion that the hero of the novel, Okonkwo, exemplifies or represents Umuofia or Igbo culture and traditions and that the author uses Okonkwo’s story to show the process of the collapse of those traditions when they came into conflict with a more powerful colonial culture. Bernth Lindfors, for instance, understands Arlene Elder as saying that Okonkwo is “a typical Igbo man,” used by the author to portray the “suicidal fragmentation of Igbo society” during the colonial era (Lindfors, 17). The result, in Clayton MacKenzie’s reading of the novel, is that “… the Umuofia come to believe in the supremacy of the missionary colonizers as devoutly as they once had in their own theatre of gods” (MacKenzie, 126). However, there are readers of Things Fall Apart who perceive a resilience in Umuofia society which in their view ensures that the center holds, even if things have fallen apart (Sarr, 1993). In this essay, I want to locate the source of that resilience in the twin notions of duality and balance, central to the Umuofia view of life and the world. I argue that these notions form the basis of the conceptual framework which structures the ambivalence at the core of the novel and that they help to explain the Igbo man’s tendency to look both backwards and forwards.

It is not quite correct to assert, as MacKenzie does, that “… the interrelation between the two (the new religion and traditional society) can never be characterized in terms of co-existence, because the economics of Mr. Brown’s religion demand ideological substitution, not concurrence or hybridization.” (RAL) He may be right about the demand, but certainly not right in his characterization of that relationship as “a logical, business transaction” which the clan finds “as compelling as it did obedience to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves.”(RAL) The Igbo metaphysical landscape did not disappear from Umuofia with one straight business deal. Perhaps it is more correct to say that yet another duality, tradition and modernity, entered the landscape to join others like male and female, individual and community, spiritual and material, thereby providing those ready to understand the governing principles and how they are put to profitable use opportunities

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for advancement. This calls for a balancing of ideas and forces both at the personal and social levels. As I shall show, those like Okonkwo, who have not developed the ability to look at both sides, will suffer the consequences of seeing only one, not both. In this respect, then, Okonkwo is not a typical Igbo man and his fall represents the fall of a particular incarnation of the Igbo view of the world.

Achebe, in an interview, had referred to how “...the Igbo culture lays a great deal of emphasis on difference, on dualities, on otherness” (Ogbaa, 2). Asked whether in his view the white man’s culture succeeded in destroying Igbo culture completely, he answers in part:

A culture can be damaged, can be turned from its course, not only by foreigners. . . . [A] culture can be mutilated, can be destroyed by its own people, under certain situations. . . . The Igbo culture was not destroyed by Europe. It was disturbed. It was disturbed very seriously. But . . . a culture which is healthy will often survive. It will not survive exactly in the form in which it was met by the invading culture, but it will modify itself and move on. And this is the great thing about culture if it is alive. The people who own it will ensure that they make adjustments: they drop what can no longer be carried in transition[.]. . . So I think what has happened is that we still have the fundamental principles of the Igbo culture. Its emphasis is on the worth of every man and woman. . . . (Ogbaa, 4)

In his essay, “Chi in Igbo Cosmology,” in Morning Yet On Creation Day (New York: Anchor Books, 1975, 131–45), Achebe makes, among others, three important observations relevant to our discussion:

It is important to stress . . . the central place in Igbo thought of the notion of duality. Wherever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute. I am the truth, the way, and the life would be blasphemous or simply absurd, for is it not well known that a man may worship Ogwugwu to perfection and yet be killed by Udo? (Chi, 133)

Now, the ideal relationship in Igbo thought between Something and Something Else is one of balance arrived at through discussion and consensus, as Achebe’s second and third observations make clear:

The limit (to a man’s aspirations) is not the sky; it is somewhere much closer to earth. A sensible man will turn round at the frontier of absolutism and head for home again. . . . [T]he Igbo are unlikely to concede to the individual an absolutism they deny even to chi. The obvious curtailment of a man’s power to walk alone and do as he will is provided by another potent force—the will of
his community. . . . No man, however great, can win judgement against all the people. (Chi, 139).

And finally:

It is not surprising that the Igbo held discussion and consensus as the highest ideals of the political process. . . . [A] man may talk and bargain even with his chi at the moment of his creation. And what was more, [according to an Igbo religious belief] Chukwu Himself in all His power and glory did not make the world by fiat. He held conversations with mankind. . . . (Chi, 145)

It should not surprise us, given all of these beliefs, that an Igbo traditional priest or priestess was thought to be capable, by virtue of the religious office, of theologically functioning within a conceptual frame of negotiating a healthy and sustainable balance within a historical identity believed to be half-human and half-spirit.

In the following discussion of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, I want to temporarily move away from the understandable emphasis of readers and critics of the novel on the grand narrative of imperial domination and exploitation of the Igbo by the British colonial power which frames the novel. I want to read the novel from the perspective of those who more astutely perceive that a fuller understanding of the fictional Igbo world requires that we pay equal attention to how Achebe balances, in his narrative, that colonial point of view with several other levels of equally powerful discourses, quite obvious upon a deeper, more sophisticated reading of this book, as well as of Achebe's other complex historical novels. Indeed, I want to draw attention to how things fell apart in Umuofia partly because the Umuofia people, due to the contingency of collective memory and the exigencies of present needs, largely forgot or ignored the principle of balance as enunciated above, a principle enshrined in their cultural morality and societal institutions by the founding fathers.

But we must begin by giving Okonkwo his due. He rose in what he considered a heroic defense of his culture, sacrificing everything he worked so hard for all his life and ultimately throwing that life away in the struggle. Whatever we say about Okonkwo's personal motivations and circumstances, he had achieved enough and gained such recognition among his people, that his decision to take his life can only be explained in terms of a strong sense of outrage he felt in the face of the humiliations of an invading culture. It is an irony that Okonkwo's decision to take his life demonstrates his final realization that personal fame, wealth, and status, as important as they are, nevertheless constitute only a part of what one should aspire to in life. All of these achievements, without a good measure of dignity in the face of the other, it would appear, lose for the Igbo person much of their importance. Within and outside the novel, the fascination Okonkwo's life and death has provoked in the popular imagination, in spite of his glaring weaknesses, may have to do with how his having the courage to make the ultimate sacrifice in defense of his sense of this dignity resonates with an added significance in a highly materialistic world. This, too, is the only possible explanation for Obierika's great eulogy for a man
who, because of the strict requirement of a culture that abhors suicide, could not be given even a simple, private or public, burial.

However, Okonkwo's sense of dignity is flawed by the absence of patience, accommodation, and a sense of balance. And the morality of the culture appears to have been unremitting in punishing him for that self-misunderstanding. Umuofia would not go to war with the white man because, more than Okonkwo, however great he was, the community knows that things have fallen apart and that Something Else now stands beside Something. The Something Else is, however, not entirely "other" to the Something: any particular co-emergence of Something and Something provides those who understand the requirements of an Igbo culture an opportunity for a new and other kind of dialogue. To Umuofia, the emergence of the new is an occasion for renewed pursuit of and a consensus about a stronger handle on existence. As we see in Achebe's other masterpiece, Arrow of God, any god in the Igbo pantheon (and this presumably includes foreign gods in their midst) who fails to attend to this dialogic construction of the real is courting disaster.

Okonkwo did not represent the best in Umuofia traditions. As Okika's opening speech at the ill-fated community meeting indicates, Okonkwo was not the only one extremely outraged by the turn of events—the appearance of colonial officers—in Umuofia. But Okonkwo's understanding of the people's traditions, it must be admitted, were too limited by his personal needs and ambitions. The differences and the exchanges between the points of views represented by Okika and Okonkwo lead me to contend that, with all its limitations and imperfections, the Umuofia society portrayed by Achebe in Things Fall Apart is squarely in the tradition of the modern novel best described by Mikhail Bakhtin: Achebe's Umuofia contains, within itself, alternative discourses and enough opportunities for a more balanced development of character than Okonkwo was able to avail himself of. Indeed, Okonkwo may have privileged some of the cultural values at the expense of others. But anyone aspiring to be at the forefront of the defense of his culture would at least show a fairer insight into—and more balanced understanding and better judgment—about the complexities within that same culture.

To say this, however, is not to deny one of the severe limitations of the oral traditions in societies without modern systems of transportation and communication, namely, that knowledge is localized and deprived of the beneficial influences from a great variety of outside and distant sources. It is true that in pre-literate societies like Umuofia, where there are no public libraries or advanced, institutionalized arrangements for the production, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge, the oral traditions of storytelling, rituals of life and rites of passage, divination and festivals together constitute a dynamic pool for the kind of knowledge we acquire from libraries. But it is a pool severely limited by the contingent and sometimes opportunistic nature of human memory. Even people who possess incredible memories are unlikely to transmit all they know to coming generations before they die. So stories of other peoples, their beliefs and customs, come into Umuofia only randomly and are subject to the whims of individual memory and prejudice. The result is that Umuofia's beliefs and cultural practices, while open to challenge and criticisms from inside, do not have the kind of effective challenge
from outside that could strengthen or replace them without seeking to destroy, for exploitative purposes, the main cultural fabric. (For example, many cultures of the world, including the colonizing British one, abandoned some of their evil practices, including the burning of innocent people at the stake as witches or the oppression of women, without going through the processes of transatlantic slavery or colonization.) There is evidence in *Things Fall Apart* that Umuofia also abandoned some evil practices on their own, although benign foreign influences would have helped to speed up the process. In any event, things fell apart in Umuofia partly because of certain beliefs and evil practices which were exploited by the invading culture.

Let me therefore restate that Achebe tells the story of the rise and fall of Okonkwo (and Umuofia) against the backdrop of an Umuofia that has more to offer her people than the story of Okonkwo’s life (the Umuofia that fell apart) and the colonial culture would have us believe. A good understanding of the structure of values of that backdrop can be acquired if we pay attention to what is necessarily only hinted at or implied by the form and content of the novel, since Achebe’s main focus is on the Umuofia that fell apart. Let me now focus on how those hints show how an alternative Umuofia, in the Bakhtinian sense, provides opportunities for balance in individual and collective conduct by first examining the question of masculine and feminine principles.

The Igbo principle, “Wherever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it” is realized in Umuofia in something as culturally fundamental as the personalities of the gods of the community. Wherever a god stands, a goddess will stand beside it. It is important to note here that the male gods have women as their chief priestesses; for the female gods, men are the chief priests. The male deity that dwells in the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, for example, has a woman, Chielo, as his chief priestess, and the great goddess of the Earth, Ani, has a man, Ezeani, as her chief priest. We are told that Umuofia’s great strength in war depended on “a war medicine as old as the clan itself,” but “the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg.” (*TFA*, 8–9). Okonkwo—and, it seems, at least at times, Umuofia—often forgot this complementary and balancing power by gender. That is most likely why Okonkwo’s personification of patriarchal values, in an Umuofia apparently headed for a momentary cultural disturbance if not outright collapse, could go unchallenged. We are not surprised, then, that this already decadent Umuofia also chooses to have nine masked spirits, all male, as dispensers of justice in the land. That this masculinism is portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* as a moral failure in the existing culture is quite obvious: clearly, the rulers of colonized Umuofia cannot plead lack of cultural precedence in its founding principles as the reason for the exclusion of female egwugwus.

But the mention of Chielo reminds us of the Chielo-Ekwefi-Ezinma sequence in the novel. There, Okonkwo had to play second fiddle as his wife, Ekwefi, defied Chielo and the spirits of the night due to concern over her daughter. That scene offered more than a hint of what women in Umuofia could do if they felt very strongly about any matter. The actual history of Igbo women is not devoid of brave individual and collective acts that respond to issues going beyond concerns for children and domestic matters. Achebe therefore subtly reminds the reader of this resil-
ience in the balance of principles of gender in this and other ways. Take, for another example, his characterization of Ezinma and Nwoye, Okonkwo's daughter and son, respectively. Okonkwo sees in his daughter masculine qualities and in his son feminine ones. Perhaps this was meant to convey that there are masculine and feminine qualities in each human being, each culture bringing them out in different ways in men and women. But more to the point, we get characters in the novel in whom the so-called masculine and female qualities are developed in a balanced way.

A few examples will do: Okonkwo's show of "manliness" in the killing of Ikemefuna is condemned by his closest friend, Obierika, and this generates an argument between them (TFA, 46-48). Take note of how Achebe here surreptitiously brings in Ofoedu to clinch the argument and educate an uncomprehending Okonkwo through the example of Ogbuefi Ndulue. The lesson was that there is no necessary contradiction or opposition between great strength on the one hand, and love, gentleness, and respect for loved ones on the other hand, even in a man. It is remarkable in this regard how Ikemefuna, at his age, was made to win the hearts and satisfy the yearnings of two people as different as Okonkwo and his son, Nwoye. The chances are that had Ikemefuna lived, he would have grown into another person like Ogbuefi Ndulue. It is symbolically very significant for the purposes of this discussion that Okonkwo helps to kill Ikemefuna and that he had only contempt for Ndulue. Additionally, by the end of the novel, Okonkwo had drifted apart from his more balanced and stable friend, Obierika. We see in our last example, the character Okoye (Unoka's creditor), a man who loved music as much as Unoka, and in fact was in the same band with him. But unlike Unoka, Okoye's love of music and the musician's stereotyped "feminine" profession did not stop him from providing for his family and taking the highest titles in the land.

On the question of the relationship between an individual and his community, nothing supports the point we have been trying to elaborate about duality and resilience more than the structure of the novel and the movement of the story itself. Okonkwo's growth and popularity in the land of his father, threatened by carelessness, is safeguarded and complemented by his maturity in the land of his mother. The significance of this does not dawn on him. Again, when at the beginning of his career Okonkwo experiences general crop failure, along with everyone else, his father admonishes him with remarkable prescience:

Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone (TFA, 18).

Because he was so obsessed with being everything his father was not, Okonkwo did not listen to the kernel of wisdom in that admonition. He spends his entire life acquiring, unlike his father, fame, wives, wealth, and titles, only to end up exactly like his father, alone and unburied in the evil forest.

Such great irony is made more poignant by our feeling of Okonkwo's immersion and involvement in the life of Umuofia at the beginning of the story. He grad-
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ually moves from the heart and center of the community to an unknown place in the periphery. The climax is his abrogation of the process of dialogue and consensus that was bound to be slow at such a difficult time. True, the white man was not willing to engage in dialogue, but Okonkwo’s action may, ironically, have helped to put an end to future meetings for planning a more meaningful resistance. Obviously, the true worth of a person is not decided by him or herself but, rather, by the community. What all of this comes to, to the extent one can speak about the “Igbo character” of *Things Fall Apart*, is that there is a balance everyone has to strive for between the demands of the self and those of the community. Okonkwo fails to carry his community along in his struggle to defend Umuofia’s culture when it came under the attack of the forces of the colonial empire, partly because of a lack of understanding of the power of resilience in duality—what I have called balance—in his moral character.

It appears to me that the need to strive for this balance, especially by a person who aspires to lead a community to action, is predicated on the fact that Umuofia society, indeed most African societies, would consider alien and unsatisfactory a civilization which has as its goal individual power and accomplishments. Most philosophers of African thought from Tempels to Wiredu agree that the goals of different cultural traditions in Africa are directed toward the continuous improvement of human relations in different human communities. As Wiredu puts it:

> But in the consciousness of moral humankind there is a finely graduated continuum of the intensity of this feeling (of sociality of human existence) which ranges, in an ascending order, from the austerely delimited social sympathies of rigorous individualism to the pervasive commitment to social involvement characteristic of communalism. It is a commonplace of anthropological wisdom that African social organization manifests the latter type of outlook. Akan society is eminently true to this typology . . . [being] of a type in which the greatest value is attached to communal belonging (Coetzee and Roux, 311).

Okonkwo’s story is one of moving from “pervasive commitment to social involvement,” exemplified in consensus to the preemptive “rigorous individualism” of his last social act. But the reasons for his failure include, but ultimately go beyond, Okonkwo’s inflexible will and limited understanding of his culture. After all, it can be argued in his favor that if he was inflexible and limited in his understanding of the dynamics of cultural manifestations, so, too, was the invading culture, especially as represented by Rev. Smith. It was Smith, you will recall,

who saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal (*TFA*, 130).
The only difference between Okonkwo and Rev. Smith is that they belong to two opposing forces and that one force was more powerful than the other. As Ezeulu, the major character of *Arrow of God*, will discover, flexibility will not save his culture from collapse under the multi-pronged imperial attack of the colonial powers: commercial, political, and cultural, especially religious. There was no escaping the white man. Apart from his gun power, the emergence of Europeans in Africa brought with it new attractions to new articles of trade, new schools for social mobility, new health clinics for new kinds of medicine, and new religions. All of these combined effectively to help conceal the white man’s real intentions and sweetened the bitter and risky pill the Umuofia people had to swallow. What is more, some of the beliefs and cultural practices of the Umuofia people came under severe test and were exposed for what they were. Let us examine some of these beliefs and practices.

The Umuofia people believed that the missionaries and their followers would die in a matter of days in the evil forest. When they didn’t die, it was felt that this was because these people were foreigners, and thus were immune to the attack of the Umuofia gods. But when the osus, efulefus, and other indigenes, even if they were in the words of Chielo, “excrement of the clan,” joined the church and didn’t die, it became clear that native beliefs must be reviewed or abandoned. Even the masked spirits, the people discovered to their dismay, could be profaned without the expected instant retribution from the gods! The Umuofia people began to feel that the new god must be a very powerful one. It did not help matters that twin babies continued to be thrown into the forest to die or be rescued by Christians. The rescued victims, along with the increasing number of those said to be outcasts excluded from full membership of the community, went to swell the rank of those attracted by both the austere “poetics” and the obvious material efficacy of a new religion.

It is however restating that even before the arrival of the colonizers of Umuofia, people like Obierika and Obiako had started questioning cultural beliefs and practices. Obierika agonized over and questioned the sense in throwing away innocent babies. As Biodun Jeyifo points out:

> It is important to recognize that Obierika’s skepticism toward his culture achieves its tremendous force precisely because he bears deep, positive currents of values, predispositions, identity from the very same culture. (Petersen & Rutherford, 60)

The same can be said of Obiako, who challenged an ancestor, his father. We also read that the practice of dragging an offender along the road until he died was abandoned because it no longer made sense to the same people whose grandparents had practiced it. This is why it may be right to argue that the great crime of colonialism is not that it brought about changes in Umuofia, but that it removed from the people the power to direct changes from the point of view of their needs and perspectives.

I therefore think it is fair to ask: What difference would it have made if
Okonkwo and the Umuofia people in general lived up to the original principles of balance and fair play for everyone, as enshrined in their culture by the founding fathers? Could they have been able to escape the colonial European yoke? My only answer is that the story of colonialism would probably be, in that case, different. I am suggesting that a balanced mind, as I conceive of it, is in a better position to recognize what is and what is not of lasting value within a culture. Because such a mind also recognizes and accepts that Something Else stands beside it, it is likely to learn from the other, even under conditions of oppression, in ways that will not diminish its self-esteem, since it will see in the Other so much of the likeness of its own self. Such a mind is likely to be free from the power and arrogance of a vision of itself or of the world held by the Other, because one would be more predisposed to recognize in one’s own culture as well as in that of the Other a similar need and order of beliefs, and thus would come to regard the Other and oneself as potential co-producers of wisdom and knowledge. It may well be that Okonkwo and Umuofia parted ways because the latter came to recognize in the new, more institutionalized arrangements—the school and church, for example—opportunities for dialogue and mutually beneficial co-existence at the heart of the developmental ethos of Umuofia’s founding cultural traditions.

I hope I have said enough so that I may suggest, in conclusion, that Things Fall Apart is more than a simple story of how some primitive African tribe was colonized by a more powerful and better culture as exemplified by the rise and fall of its simple-minded, if brave, hero, Okonkwo. As Achebe has pointed out in another context, “An open society,” like the United States, with its “dazzling achievements in industry and technology; in agriculture; in business, science and medicine; and in literature, music and film,” just like an open mind, “will receive the good and the bad, the useful as well as the useless.” But the hallmark of an open mind, just like the open society, is the ability to distinguish between good and bad and useful and useless, “no matter the packaging.” (Bates College Commencement Address, May, 27, 1996). What Achebe, in this context, characterizes as the educated mind or society is not all that different from what, in the context of Umuofia, I refer to as a balanced and resilient mind. It embodies transcendence of the bad and the ugly, beyond the sufferings, no matter their packaging.

Works Cited


