Things Standing Together: A Retrospect on Things Fall Apart

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Abstract
Two voices there are but, unlike those in the J.K. Stephen Wordsworth parody, both are deep and highly articulate and, though they betoken conflicting forces, they are themselves seldom at odds in Achebe's novel. 'Wherever something stands,' runs an Ibo proverb, 'something else will stand beside it.' The dual vision of Things Fall Apart is evidence, at least at the narrative level, of things not falling apart.

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Things Standing Together: A Retrospect on *Things Fall Apart*

Two voices there are but, unlike those in the J.K. Stephen Wordsworth-parody, both are deep and highly articulate and, though they betoken conflicting forces, they are themselves seldom at odds in Achebe's novel. 'Wherever something stands,' runs an Ibo proverb, 'something else will stand beside it.' The dual vision of *Things Fall Apart* is evidence, at least at the narrative level, of things not falling apart.

There are, as Neil McEwan has observed, two distinct narrative voices and they can be divided into the two broad categories of 'traditional-communal' and 'modern-individual'. The first of these, which is predominant in the first two thirds of the novel, is the 'communal' voice of one or a number of sympathetic elders who provide eye-witness accounts of Iboland in the 1890s through a mixture of anecdotes and gossip, folk-tales and proverbs, in which the emphasis is on experience that is shared rather than as it appears to any individual consciousness. The second voice, which intrudes increasingly in the last third of the novel, is the urbane 'editorial' voice of a modern Nigerian of the 1950s who sees beyond the viewpoint of the villagers, who are now 'they' rather than 'we', and who presents the decay of traditionalism, the colonial mentality and the coming of Christianity from a larger, more balanced and detached perspective, and in a more distanced and elaborate style: 'There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia' (p. 126). This more sophisticated register is heard again at Nwoye's conversion: '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' (p. 104).

The first of these voices speaks of 'the world' in terms of 'strangers' from surrounding villages and describes a life which is circumscribed and localized around solid centres such as a titled man's obi or the village square. For the second voice - increasingly present after Okonkwo's exile during which these centralizing traditional controls
have broken down – ‘the world’ has taken on a global meaning which includes government, school, court and prison, and the author intrudes a vocabulary for which there is no Ibo equivalent: pastor, church service, heathen, devil. Even in the earlier episode of the killing of Ikemefuna, the narrator, perhaps reading back 1950s judgements into an 1890s setting, has Nwoye sensing ‘evil’ and feeling a vague ‘chill’ of horror at the crying of exposed twins in the Evil Forest (p. 43). But, in my own experience of teaching the novel, the intrusions are rarely noticed at first reading: the voices blend to perfection and the dualistic centre holds.

The two voices are equally weighted, with an adroit and complex neutrality. Achebe, as the son of a missionary teacher whose own father welcomed the missionaries into Ogidi (Achebe’s birthplace), cannot completely identify with the values of his tribal past: these are only half of his inheritance. As Gareth Griffiths puts it, ‘the modern African intellectual is the descendant of the tribal underdog ... Achebe is the inheritor of Nwoye’s revolt as well as Okonkwo’s sacrifice.’ In the changing world of Umuofia, Nwoye’s ‘failure’ guarantees his survival whilst Okonkwo’s ‘success’ ensures his downfall. The paradox is compounded by the language problem. The District Commissioner only appears to have the last word in the novel; in fact, it belongs to the African writer who is now writing in the District Commissioner’s language. Achebe is aware that the acquisition of a speaking voice betrays his involvement with the process of destruction he records; that he can celebrate the value of Ibo culture only with the language-tools acquired in the act of destroying it. The modern African writer has to use the colonial language to rehabilitate the pre-colonial African world.

The narrative of *Things Fall Apart* modulates, through its interchange of narrative voices, from the communal life of the village to the individual consciousness and back again, so that the two interpenetrate. Private worries are aired and formalized in communal decisions and the laws governing the punishment of individuals are not a matter of idle superstition but are community-enhancing, geared as they are to the maintenance of the whole society. There are still ‘strong characters’ in Achebe’s world – Okonkwo, who thinks he can make his chi obey him, Uzowulu who will listen to no lesser voice of judgement than the egwugwu – but their individuality, while not repressed or denied, is held in check by communal solidarities. Ethics and justice are social-oriented: after accidentally killing a fellow villager, Okonkwo must go into exile because the earth would take revenge upon the whole community; the chief concern of the egwugwu in their settling of the Odukwe-Uzowulu dispute is not that the truth should be unearthed or that justice should be done but that the disputants should be reconciled.
in a way that makes for the peaceful continuation of the tribe, for this, in the end, is the supreme and only criterion.

The interplay of individual and communal lives in the novel offers no support, however, for the view that Okonkwo, as the ‘great man’ of Umuofia, is a symbolic embodiment or personification of Ibo values. On the contrary, Okonkwo is out of step with the village values which he sees himself as upholding, a fact made clear early in the novel by his impatience with enforced idleness during the New Yam Feast and his disturbance of the Week of Peace. Okonkwo’s impetuous, aggressive individualism and the belief behind it – that he must wipe out his father’s memory by succeeding in everything his father failed at – are out of harmony with a society which is renowned for its talent for social compromise and which judges a man according to his own worth, not that of his father. Okonkwo is an entirely self-made man among villagers who do not believe that a man is in complete control of his destiny. His cult of virility, by mistaking the nature of courage and confusing gentleness with weakness, upsets the sexual equilibrium that maintains a delicate balance between male values and female and maternal ones. Where the village is flexible and open-minded, he is static and fixed in purpose. Incapable of changing himself, he resists change in others and in the world at large and, returning from exile to find a radically altered society, can only resort to the violence which is no more the code of his community at the end of the book than it was at the beginning. Far from embodying or personifying the communal ethos, Okonkwo repeatedly violates both it and the organic balance of human life, nature and the clan gods which it sustains.

The dominant paradox is that, as David Carroll has argued, Okonkwo’s inflexible will brings him success in a society which is remarkable for its flexibility. Carroll makes an interesting comparison between Achebe’s hero and Henchard in Hardy’s The Mayor of Casterbridge. Both are wrongheaded, fiercely single-minded individuals who flout all the traditional values but who, when the status quo is threatened by powerful alien forces, spring to its defence and champion communities of which they are untypical, only to find that the community has already capitulated and that they stand alone. Okonkwo, like Henchard, performs more than is expected of him, sacrificing himself to an exaggerated, almost pathological (and therefore selective) sense of duty to a community that is embarrassed by his fanaticism. His recklessness and extremism lead him to transgress the traditions he is trying to embody, to distort the values he seeks to defend, and to neglect or ignore other traditions which his village holds equally dear (for example, his disturbance of Peace Week). Obierika is really a more typical Umuofian. Okonkwo is, in Gerald Moore’s words, ‘a sort of super-Igbo; an exag-
generation of certain qualities admired by his people, but at the expense of others which the founded man is expected to possess'. That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia,' Obierika vainly tells the District Commissioner at the end of the book (p. 147). The 'great man' in this particular traditional African society, somewhat like the tragic hero in the European tradition, turns out to be the man who is most unlike his community but who, through his great strength and his ability to do more than it has ever asked of him and set examples it does not require, belatedly becomes its representative. In the dilemma over Ikemefuna, Okonkwo spurns the easy option, the humane but casuistical compromise offered by Ezeudu (offend neither the gods by hindering nor one's own conscience by helping): a compromise by which the community tries to evade its own cruelties and which betrays its lack of courage in its own convictions. In his fanatical, ruthless rectitude and his heartlessly literal-minded pursuit of the letter of the law, Okonkwo can be seen as testing the limits of his society's integrity and exposing its real failure to provide for humane and compassionate feelings.

What causes things finally to fall apart in Umuofia? It is now a critical commonplace that the coming of the white man's missionary Christianity is only an indirect influence, as much a symptom as a cause. The Yeatsian title and epigraph are important here. Yeats's vision of history as a succession of alternating civilizations, each giving way to one another through its inability to contain all human impulses within one enclosed scheme of value and being replaced by all that it overlooked or undervalued, all that its own heritage had incapacitated it from understanding, is never very far from Achebe's novel. It is a standard feature of Yeats's system that things collapse from within before they are overwhelmed from without and that one process is continuous with the other. The novel, no more than the system, does not portray the sudden opposition of separate, self-contained and mutually exclusive forces — African and European, traditional and modern — but is concerned as much with their continuity as their confrontation: neither of the contending forces were static, settled cultures at the turn of the century and Anglican missionaries had been established in Iboland by the mid-nineteenth century (a long-standing European presence is evidenced in the availability of guns and tobacco).

On the surface, Umuofian society is undone by its own sophisticated relativism. It is rendered vulnerable by its enlightened and tolerant sense of alternative possibilities, as summed up in that Ibo proverb 'wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it', and it appears that Okonkwo, in his wrongheaded way, may have been right in his wish to repulse the missionaries before any accommodating contact with the alien could be made. But this is in reality a superficial
relativism, into which a narrow, intractable conservatism is woven; a relativism which seldom goes beyond acknowledgement into genuine accommodation and which in fact does nothing to mitigate the persecutions and exclusions of Umuofian society. 'The world has no end,' says Uchendu, 'and what is good among one people is an abomination with others', a sentiment anticipated earlier in the novel by Obierika's eldest brother (pp. 51, 99). Yet he and his fellow elders go on abominating osu, albinos and twins, aware though they are of the arbitrary and relative nature of these abominations, and it is the community's cruelty towards these disaffected minorities -- a cruelty embodied catalytically in Okonkwo, who does not pretend to subscribe to this relativism -- which drives them into the arms of the new religion.

It is here that the Yeatsian pattern comes into play, for it is a hallmark of that pattern that the misfits and rejects of one civilization become the ready converts for the conquering faith of another one. It is significant that the sect joined by Nwoye has established itself in the Evil Forest, the place where the Umuofians deposit everything they have no use for and therefore either abominate or devalue: tabooed slaves, albinos, twins, victims of the swelling-sickness, the diseased and defective, and, ironically, Okonkwo himself, whose suicide, like his father's shameful sickness, denies him an honourable burial. Reverend Smith's dogmatic Christianity, with its anti-communal emphasis on individual salvation, thrives on its exclusiveness -- 'Narrow is the way and few the number' -- and flourishes in the place of exclusion. Christianity makes its incursions into Ibo culture not by a full frontal assault but by responding to an already existing need which the indigenous civilization has made no allowance for and it is constituted out of what the latter has discarded. Civilizations, by creating their own misfits and malcontents, select their own executioners and conspire with their own downfalls.

Umuofia has, simply, excluded too much in human experience and the cracks resulting from the strain of repression have been showing for some time. Gerald Moore claims that Okonkwo's exile is made to seem 'like divine justice rather than arbitrary misfortune' and that 'in any case, the society in which he lives does not recognize the possibility of a misfortune that is not rooted in one's actions or one's personal fate'. But it is the very arbitrariness and inadequacy of such Ibo schemes of justice -- the shooting is an accident, after all -- which the novel lays open to question, as instanced in Obierika's speculation that such a possibility can be recognized: 'Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? ... He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?' (p. 87). The conflict of loyalties -- personal and tribal,
human and religious – has long proved too much for Obierika, who is compelled to comfort his friend and then burn his house, to father twins and then destroy them. The coexistence of these two orders of allegiance, emblematized in the egwugwu who are simultaneously the villagers and their ancestral spirits, is becoming more difficult, especially in the presence of men like Okonkwo who pursue the letter of the law unflinchingly for fear of being thought weak.

The wisdom-literature of proverb has also become increasingly unsatisfactory because its insistence on the repetitiveness and predictability of experience renders it insufficiently flexible to cope with experience beyond the reach of traditional knowledge, disabling it when confronted with the totally unprecedented. There are, for example, no traditional punishments for killing the python or unmasking egwugwu since these were unthinkable in traditional society, and there are no proverbs to guide the people when the missionaries rescue abandoned twins and order their converts into conflict with their fellow-villagers: ‘Our fathers never dreamt of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them’ (p. 144). All of these things are excluded from the scheme of experience because they are unforeseen, unproverbed and unprecedented. In the terms of the previously quoted proverb, the value-order that stands fails to see what is standing close beside it – in this case, too close now for comfortable coexistence. Those who move beyond the proverbalized culture and adapt to these new things survive. In a sense, therefore – as commentators have never tired of pointing out – the novel’s title has a misleading finality because Umuofia, rejecting Okonkwo’s counsel of a war of resistance which would have meant total obliteration, does not fall apart: it changes in order to go on.

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