

Superfluous Words: Ecological and Cultural Resilience in *Things Fall Apart*

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In his 1975 essay, "The Novelist as Teacher," Chinua Achebe says: "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (45). Without denying the crucial role Achebe's fiction has played in illuminating Africa's past, in this paper I want to think about his writing and teaching—specifically his 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*—in more prophetic terms. In particular I am interested in the novel's capacity to speak to a contemporary crisis, one whose devastation, like colonialism, touches some places more than others, but that is global in scope. For purposes of clarity, we'll call it the environmental crisis. My argument works on the assumption that environment, culture and politics always have been, but are now particularly, densely entangled. My principal thesis is that *Things Fall Apart* offers a vision and strategy of resilience for coping with the complex, potentially catastrophic, ecological and cultural changes that confront us today. Before looking more deeply into the concept of "resilience," it is worth exploring briefly the idea that art, and literature more specifically, is critical to survival.

The importance of art in promoting cultural sovereignty and freedom is uncontroversial to most people, if not always to their governments. This essay goes a step farther in suggesting we explore the idea of art's contribution to not only human, but also planetary, survival. I'm not sure what Achebe would think of this, though his description of humans as "storytelling animals" (*Home and Exile* 59) suggests he would be willing at least to entertain the idea that art has an evolutionary as well as revolutionary function. One of the first writers to explore this idea (which has been taken up in various ways in the relatively new field of ecocriticism) was wildlife ecologist Joseph Meeker, whose 1972 book, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, offers a theory that speaks to *Things Fall Apart* in interesting ways.

Ecology and Culture

In brief, Meeker argues that the genre of comedy is conducive to ecological health. By this he means not just that comedy embodies ecological values, but that evolution itself follows a comic structure. He

bases his argument on the generic codes of comedy, which include: 1) the absence of a grand moral vision, with emphasis placed instead on the values of durability and survival; 2) protagonists who are ordinary, undignified and vulnerable and 3) a movement towards reconciliation and synthesis. Evolution, which Meeker describes as “the temporal order of the game of life,” “proceeds as an unscrupulous, opportunistic comedy, the object of which appears to be the proliferation and preservation of as many life forms as possible” (20).¹ Western culture, significantly, has tended to be dismissive of comedy, preferring the weightier, more idealistic genre of tragedy. In tragedy, Meeker notes, human dignity and honor are seen as independent of and superior to nature, derived from a transcendent moral code, which is strictly defined, and polarized in terms of good and evil. Tragedy focuses on the singular figure of the tragic hero, whose nobility lies in his/her efforts to overreach rather than adapt to his or her circumstances. In Western culture a tragic vision expresses itself in the form of “goal-oriented behaviour, a need for power and control, a highly polarized scheme for judging good and evil or friends and enemies, and a sense of self that affirms personal dignity and requires deference from others” (23).

From a postcolonial perspective, there are good reasons to be skeptical of the idea of comedy as a survival guide, not least because of its explicit conservatism: the comedic world is a closed one; the concept of rebirth is framed within a known universe, and the possibility of change is constrained by the terms of that universe. The danger and possibilities inherent in catastrophe are subordinated to the goal of resolution: youth triumphs but order is restored. This is not a particularly viable template for understanding postcolonial experience. The more useful part of Meeker's theory, aside from the general point about the evolutionary significance of literature, is the assertion that tragedy—the genre that Western culture has traditionally preferred—is bad for human and planetary health. Not just because it flies in the face of dominant currency of hope, but because it's founding in a metaphysics of transcendence literally confounds ecological sense. The impulse of tragedy is arguably utopian at base, wallowing in the necessary impossibility of reaching for the stars. For this reason, the spectre of tragedy haunts not just the projects of colonialism and industrialization, but also some of those movements' most ardent critics. Idealism, untempered with knowledge of what is going on on the ground, may bring about a revolution whose aims are at odds with (and will ultimately be defeated by) the force of evolution.

Meeker's theory of culture and ecology is productively complicated by the recent work of philosopher and gender theorist Elizabeth Grosz. Insights from her book, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (2005), which highlights the implications of evolutionary theory for contemporary feminism, can be extended to show how postcolonial theory would benefit

¹ Except where otherwise noted, references to Meeker are to the 1997 edition of *The Comedy of Survival*.

from a sympathetic rereading of Darwin's work. Grosz suggests that feminists' dismissal of evolutionary theory tends to be based on a reductive reading of the concept of natural selection as a division of organisms into categories of winners and losers. Against this cartoonish vision, Grosz offers a more nuanced and positive reading of Darwin's account of the proliferation and transformation of diverse forms of life. Like Meeker, Grosz argues for the relevance of evolutionary theory to culture, noting that "if [Darwinism] functions as an explanatory model at all, [it] functions all the way up, from the lowliest species to the most elevated of cultural and intellectual activities" (27).

Resisting the temptation attractive to cultural theorists on both the left and the right to read into evolution a moral or political movement of progress, Grosz, like Meeker, emphasizes the amorality of evolution, its randomness and the governing principle of chance. However, where he emphasizes the principle of conservation, the preservation of existing orders of being, she highlights the adaptive strategy of openness to an indeterminate future: "Evolution is a fundamentally open-ended system which pushes toward a future with no real direction, no promise of any particular result, no guarantee of progress or improvement, but with every indication of inherent proliferation and transformation" (26). The emphasis on transformation is key, as Grosz stresses, so that evolutionary success is not defined by dominance at a particular moment; rather it characterizes those species that are "most open and amenable to change" (21).

The temporal logic of evolutionary theory is an interesting spin on Marx's observation about the determining force of circumstance: "the past is not the causal element of which the present and future are given effects but an index of the resources that the future has to develop itself differently" (38). Life, as Grosz puts it, "exceeds itself, its past, its context, in making itself more and other than its history: life is that which registers and harnesses the impact of contingency, converting contingency into history, and history into self-overcoming, supersession, becoming-other" (40). In this way evolution resonates with political struggles to overcome oppression, which Grosz defines as "systems of harm and injustice that privilege the bodies and activities of some at the expense of others" (28). The imperative to survive impels oppressed individuals to processes:

not of remediation (remediation literally involves undoing what cannot be undone) but of self-transformation. . . . Darwin makes it clear that self-overcoming is incessantly if slowly at work in the life of all species. Politics is an attempt to mobilize these possibilities of self-overcoming in individuals and groups. The logic by which this self-overcoming occurs is the same for natural as for social forces, and social forces borrow the energy and temporality of natural systems for political modes of resistance and overcoming. (28-29)

To see politics in evolutionary terms is to emphasize its hopeful anticipatory character, not as some abstract, speculative quality but as an

active capacity to mobilize elements already latent in the present.

Resilience

Survival in these terms isn't predicated on dominance, but on resilience. An ecological term that has gained currency in a variety of fields including economics and psychology, "resilience" refers to the ability of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedback (Walker et al). Put more simply, it is the capacity to deal with change and to continue to develop (*What is Resilience?*). The focus on resilience replaces earlier ecological models that emphasized values of stability and homeostatic balance with a view of ecosystems as dynamic, interdependent networks characterized by periodic collapse and renewal. First developed by biologist Crawford "Buzz" Holling in the early 1970s, resilience was a way to make sense of breakdown as a constitutive rather than an accidental element of complex systems. Integral to Holling's theory is the concept of adaptive cycles, whereby ecological systems move through a succession of stages, including not just growth and conservation or balance, as was traditionally thought, but also breakdown and renewal. Crucially, the collapse can ultimately benefit the system's health: as old networks break down, new spaces open up, and once-marginal species can flourish. Plants and animals begin to interact in different ways, and because the system is less tightly bound together, these "experiments" can occur without the risk of failure reverberating across the whole system. As successful adaptations take hold, a different kind of organization starts to emerge and the growth phase of the cycle begins again.

Among the elements that distinguish resilience theory from other models of ecological change is its emphasis on a seemingly paradoxical correspondence between efficiency and growth on the one hand and loss of resilience, or vulnerability, on the other hand. In Holling's words, "periods of success carry the seeds of subsequent downfall, because they allow stresses and rigidities to accumulate" (399). A second critical feature of Holling's theory is his recognition of the nested nature of living systems - what he termed "panarchy," such that each cycle exists within larger or "higher" adaptive cycles, which are themselves contained within cycles, and so on. The "higher" cycles (e.g. a climatic region) operate on a slower time scale, their stability acting as a check on the variability of lower cycles (e.g. a forest). Within this panarchic system, the variability of the different cycles is critical to the health of the forest, and its ability to withstand a shock, such as a fire. It is important, in other words, that all the systems, functioning relatively independently, are at different phases of vulnerability at any given time so that the consequences of a breakdown in any single system are buttressed by relative stability on either side. Major disruptions in the macro-cycles (e.g. climate change) can affect the severity of breakdown and prospects of recovery. A number of factors help to promote resilience, including diversity (while the goal of

efficiency depends on the elimination of redundancy in a system, resilience depends on it), a strong but porous organizational structure (tight enough to enable quick feedback when a shock occurs, but not so tight that a tiny event cannot reverberate across the whole system), and adaptive capacity—the ability to experiment and innovate.

The implications of resilience theory for understanding human as well as non-human ecologies are exciting, but fraught with pitfalls. In popular economic discourse in particular, the word “resilience” is often used in a simplistic way that mirrors the traduction of Darwinism into Social Darwinism, such that the idea of natural selection becomes “the strongest survives,” and the fact of evolutionary change is enlisted to support an economy of “creative destruction” (Joseph Schumpeter), or what Naomi Klein more polemically calls “disaster capitalism.” The use of resilience in these contexts is suspect, not just ethically, in its naturalization of violence as an agent of change, but also ecologically, for the paradoxical reason that its understanding of change is not disruptive enough. That is, it does not go far enough to imagine a total dissolution and redistribution of energies, resources and patterns of communication. When it is used as a term of approbation to describe either capitalism or individuals in a capitalist system, the term “resilience” is usually meant to signal the preservation and consolidation of existing relations of production and concentrations of wealth rather than their wholesale reconfiguration. It is precisely that effort to maintain the efficiencies and growth imperative of the global economy that, resilience ecologists would argue, contribute to the *unresilience* of the system and the likelihood that, when collapse occurs, as it inevitably will, recovery will be prolonged and painful.

A crucial element of ecological and cultural resilience concerns is a capacity to understand and cope with uncertainty, and with the occurrence of black swans as an integral rather than an exceptional part of life. “Black swan” is mathematician Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s term for an event that occurs outside the realm of predictability. That such random events will occur resilience theory regards as one of the certainties of living systems (black swans were thought to be a zoological impossibility until their 17th century Australian European “discovery”).² The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are often referred to as a black swan. Resilience, in cultural as in ecological terms, is predicated on the anticipation of black swans, or what Thomas Homer Dixon describes in his book *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization* (2006) as “moments of contingency.” These moments—September 11th is again a good example here—produce vulnerability, which in turn produces polarities of hope and fear. Easily exploitable as occasions for shoring up

² The likelihood that Australia’s Aboriginal inhabitants were always acquainted with black swans highlights the Eurocentrism of the term’s origins, a point highlighted by the example of 9/11, whose significance as a “black swan” depends on where you’re standing.

certainties and reverting to old calcified ways of seeing and being, they also represent possibilities for new life. Thomas Homer Dixon uses the term catagenesis to describe “the creative renewal of our technologies, institutions and societies in the aftermath of breakdown” (23).

Falling Apart

Postcolonial literature is a particularly rich site for exploring the implications of catagenesis, *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that has come to be regarded as archetypal imaginary depiction of the colonial encounter, illustrates its danger and its possibilities with particular clarity. *Things Fall Apart* has often been read as a tragedy (see for example Begam; Okpewho 8). Achebe himself has acknowledged the tragic elements of the Okonkwo’s story, of the spectacular demise of “the man who’s larger than life, who exemplifies virtues that are admired by the community, but also a man who for all that is still human” (*Interview* 179). However to place undue emphasis on Okonkwo’s self-destruction is to miss the point that critic Harold Scheub has made, and that Achebe underlines more explicitly in *Arrow of God* (1964), that “no man however great was greater than his people” (230)—a message with obvious specific political resonances, but that also signifies within a project of nurturing resilience in broader terms. *Things Fall Apart* confirms Joseph Meeker’s argument about the fatal implications of tragedy, not just for the hero who dies, but for the society that celebrates the principled existence to which he aspires. Tragedy, inspired as it is by the ideals of progress, the transcendence of nature and History with a capital “H,” is not conducive to cultural or biological survival.

If this were the only message of Achebe’s novel, it would still have something to say about ecology. What makes it a great book, I think, and what gives it its special contemporary valence as a primer for resilience, is where it counters Meeker’s comic model of ecology. Maybe not coincidentally, the values associated with this traditional model of natural balance were also often attributed to pre-colonial societies—idealized indigenous communities that lived harmoniously amongst themselves and with the land, and that had done so for millennia, achieving a homeostatic balance that was shattered with the arrival of colonizers and the fall into history. Among the problems with this view, as pointed out by Jared Diamond in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2004), is that denying any resemblance between past peoples and ourselves prevents us from seeing the contemporary relevance of their strategic successes and failures. In debunking the myth of the dark night of savagery, Achebe did his people (and the rest of us) no less of a service in challenging the idea of primordial innocence. As Neil ten Kortenaar has persuasively shown, the Umuofia community was not “an ahistorical, organic whole disrupted and set upon the path of history by the brutal entry of the Europeans” (139); based on numerous instances in the text, the instability and contradictions were already present, notwithstanding

Okonkwo's attempt to surmount them.

The complexity of the Igbo world Achebe represents resists both Okonkwo's and the reader's efforts to draw clear lessons from the events that occur in it. A case in point is the brief discussion near the beginning of the novel of Unoka, Okonkwo's father. It is Unoka's negative example ("he was lazy and improvident" [3], "a failure" [4] and "a coward" [5]) that inspires Okonkwo's aspirations to success, as well as his many failures, including his participation in Ikefuma's death, and his eventual suicide. The novel's clear indictment of Okonkwo's single-minded quest to be different from his father—tough, principled, unyielding, contemptuous of "soft" and "feminine" pursuits like music and storytelling—invites the reader to read the father (and Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who inherits his grandfather's softness) more sympathetically. But the novel ultimately resists—is arguably uninterested in—passing moral judgments on its characters, whose autonomy is buffeted from all sides by powers both natural and supernatural. In addition to the determining influence of *chi*, whose significance has been much debated, natural and cultural processes play crucial roles in shaping the Igbos' lifeworld. Largely uncontrollable, they are ignored at the characters' peril.

The complex effects of what Holling might term "panarchic" environmental processes are illustrated repeatedly by contingencies that defeat conventional demonstrations of wisdom and strength: there was the year, early in Okonkwo's career as a yam farmer when "nothing happened at its proper time" (17). As a consequence of the unusual patterns of rainfall, diligent farmers like Okonkwo, who planted their seeds at the right time, lost their entire crop, while "lazy easy-going ones who always put off clearing their farms as long as they could" turned out under the circumstances to have been "the wise ones" (17). Rather than vindicating one planting method over another, this event illustrates both the complexity of human and ecological cycles, such that strategies that work in some circumstances (industrious effort, the observance of conventional wisdom) fail in others, and the inevitability of periodic, catastrophic disruption, of which the incursion of colonizers is but one particularly painful example. *Things Fall Apart* (and resilience theory in general) certainly does not condemn efforts to prevent disaster, but suggests instead that such efforts must reflect a recognition of the complexity and connectedness of the human and non-human ecologies in play. More crucial perhaps, and more relevant to the message of Achebe's novel, is the way we respond to disaster when it occurs.

Resilience is the capacity to undergo change—to fall apart, even—without ceasing to exist. Three characteristics are key to the quality of resilience in ecology that have particular bearing on *Things Fall Apart*. One is that it's based on principles of interdependence; in anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose's formulation (drawing on Gergory Bateson): "the new ecology starts with this fundamental assertion: that the unit of survival is not the individual or the species, but is the organism-and-its-environment in relationship. It follows from this that an organism that

deteriorates its environment commits suicide” (188); two, that resilience is predicated on adaptive capacity, i.e. the degree to which the system can build the capacity to learn and adapt (Carpenter et al 766); and three, that resilience is based on self-organization (versus lack of organization, or organization forced by external factors) (Carpenter et al 766).

The first point is the most straightforward, that resilience is predicated on interdependence. Rose puts it this way:

[In ecological terms,] resilience. . . refers to relationships within ecosystems and is attuned to the instability of living systems. Each living thing has its own will to flourish, its own “conatus” in philosophical terms. The will to flourish brings every living thing into relationship with other living and non-living parts of its environment. When those relationships work to enable life to flourish, the system itself may be said to be resilient. . . In human terms, resilience has a similar meaning, referring to the capacity of groups of people to sustain themselves in flourishing relationships with their environment, to cope with catastrophe, and to find ways to continue. (6-7)

Things Fall Apart depicts a vibrant community in which human society is not at one with nature, but rather densely entangled with it. As noted above, environmental crises—drought, locusts, along with the quotidian challenges of weather and sickness—are part of Igbo life, managed within a system of agricultural, political, social and spiritual practices that have evolved over time. Drawing on practical knowledge infused with an elaborate mythology, in which the concept of *chi* jostles against the authority of ancestors and strictly delimited spheres of masculine and feminine power, the Igbo negotiate—not always successfully or in ways that accord with contemporary ethical understanding—tensions between cosmological and mundane forces, between fate and contingency. One of the key ways this negotiation occurs is through stories, which speaks to the second point—the ability to learn and adapt.

In response to the incredulity of many of the Igbo to outrageous stories about Europeans’ military power and practice of slavery, Okonkwo’s uncle Uchendu sagely cautions his nephew and his friend Obierika that “there is no story that is not true” (99)—a saying that surely has resonance for the colonial encounter more generally. This is a particularly significant saying in a novel that is filled with them, as it highlights the way that stories and proverbs, which shape social meaning but are also open to interpretation, constitute a general strategy for managing change. A proverb, according to Achebe, “is a very careful observation of reality and the world, and then a distillation into the wisdom of an elegant statement so that it sticks in the mind” (*Interview* 180). Proverbs represent an archive of knowledge, which, “like citing the precedents in law,” as Achebe notes (*Interview* 180), helps people to understand what to do in the present based on what has happened in the past. They also serve a less tangible but equally critical emotional function: in telling us “similar things have happened before,” the proverb “gives one a certain connectedness; it banishes, it helps to banish the sense of loneliness, the cry of desolation: why is this happening to me, what

have I done, woe is me!” (181).

Much has been written about the limitations of oral systems of communication when it comes to dealing with situations unprecedented in living history - the arrival of a bunch of white men with guns, say, or an environmental event like an earthquake: without a written record there is no way to anticipate the event, no way to access knowledge about similar events that may have occurred in the distant past. As Tzvetan Todorov further points out, in his book *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1994), the meaning-making systems of many indigenous groups, oriented as they are to observable phenomena in the natural environment and rooted in place, turned out to be insufficient to contend with the arrival of alien social systems. The colonizing culture’s capacity for abstraction—for disembedding itself from place—enabled it to imagine and conquer new realities. Abstraction, along with the linear processes of inductive and deductive reasoning characteristic of scientific rationalism, is a powerful vehicle for the generation of knowledge about the behaviour of objects and systems. However, without the additional tools supplied by metaphor and alternative forms of narrative connection, abstract linear thought is inadequate as a survival strategy for humanity and other living beings.

Part of the power of *Things Fall Apart* is the way it imaginatively reproduces different ways of making meaning—orature, placed-based spirituality, history-making—while illustrating the potentially fatal consequences of crushing that diversity of storylines under one abstract universal history—the District Commissioner’s story of the *Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger* which he begins typing in response to Okonkwo's suicide. One crucial argument in favour of seeing *Things Fall Apart* as an illustration of resilience is that the District Commissioner’s report takes up one line in a much richer more interesting continuing story. The official version of events is swallowed up in Achebe's novel by the richness of the “superfluous words” in Igbo culture, the use of which so infuriates the District Commissioner. Things fall apart, the centre cannot—must not—hold if life is to continue. The District Commissioner’s story, like Okonkwo’s, is ultimately doomed by its monological inflexibility, its Manichean insistence on the integrity of its own identity.

However, that is not to say that the District Commissioner’s story has died, or will die easily. As Achebe observed of the hegemonic force of racist ideologies like those that informed colonial literature as much as policy, “there is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like. Just as in corrupt, totalitarian regimes, those who exercise power over others can do anything” (25). So stories, in and of themselves, are not keys to cultural or ecological resilience. Throughout Achebe’s long career, the time and energy committed to writing is easily matched by his efforts in promoting the kind of infrastructure—cultural and political—that enables the dissemination of

African stories. His criticism, his championing of the Heinemann African Writers Series, his founding of the journal *Okike: A Nigerian* (later, *An African*) *Journal of New Writing*, and finally, his work as journalist and politician in support of freedom of expression, all contribute to the central goal of what he calls “re-storying” the voices of people who have been “knocked silent by the trauma of . . . dispossession” (*Home and Exile* 79). This brings us to the final crucial element of resilience: it’s based on “self-organization” (versus lack of organization, or organization forced by external factors).

Achebe’s understanding of the power of narrative—an understanding partly brought about through his encounter with the narrative of colonialism - led him to the crucial realization that: “The story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well-intentioned” (*Hopes and Impediments* 25). *Things Fall Apart* is important not just for the story it tells, but also for its exemplary role in the process of African literary production. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, as the force of decolonization washed over the world, the commercial imperatives of the publishing industry meshed with the nationalist agendas of educational institutions in places like Nigeria and Kenya, Australia and Canada, to enable an amazing flowering of new literatures. To say that that process is in danger of withering today is not to underestimate the constraining power of ideology, or to overestimate the tolerance for diversity thirty years ago. Neither is it to deny the vibrancy of the global publishing industry or the strength of postcolonial literary studies in the academy today. However, I think it is fair to say that the neo-liberal narrative that dominates our lives at the moment has allowed neither art nor life to flower except in the narrowest, most economic sense. One of the most quoted proverbs from *Things Fall Apart* is that “when a man says yes, his *chi* says yes also.” Can we assume that the converse is true, not just for individuals but for societies? In order for the force of life to flourish, we must say “yes” to it, through our institutions, our commitment to democracy and, not incidentally, through our vigorous support for art, even when it might seem like superfluous words. That way, when things fall apart again, as it seems they will, we will be ready.

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