OKOT P'BILEK

1930–1982

"I really hold very strongly," Okot p'bitek (Ô' kêt pê bê tak') said in an interview shortly before his death, "that an artist should tease people," and stick "needles into everybody so that they don't go to sleep and think everything is fine." This desire to raise awareness and stir up controversy is nowhere more evident than in p'Bitek's popular book Song of Lawino (1968), a sequence of poems about the clash between African and Western values.

Like other Africans of his generation, p'Bitek experienced this clash of values firsthand. He was born in Uganda, a small, beautiful, densely populated country in east-central Africa, which at the time was still under British domination. The colonial system, with its English-speaking schools, Christian missionaries, and centralized government, stood in sharp contrast to traditional Ugandan society: a patchwork of separate hereditary kingdoms, speaking many different languages and dialects, and practicing African religions.

p'Bitek himself embodied this contrast of cultures. He attended English-speaking schools in Uganda but never lost touch with traditional African values. From an early age, he used his wide array of talents to pursue his interests in both African and Western cultures. While still in college, he composed and produced an opera. In his early twenties, he published his first novel, written in the Acoli dialect of the Luo language.

He then traveled to Britain as part of Uganda's national football team. p'Bitek stayed on in Britain and studied education, law, social anthropology, and literature at various universities.

When he returned to Uganda, he taught at Makerere University College and subsequently held teaching positions in Kenya, Nigeria, and the United States. He became Director of Uganda's National Theater and Cultural Center and organized several regional arts festivals in both Uganda and Kenya. In 1967 he returned to Oxford to complete a doctorate in religion.

Despite all of his diverse activities, p'Bitek published a steady stream of books, in a variety of genres, promoting the value of African cultures. A sequel to Song of Lawino, called Song of Ocol, appeared in 1970. This was followed by two studies of religion, African Religions and Western Scholarship and Religion of the Central Luo. In 1974 he published Horn of My Love, a collection of Acoli songs, followed by Hare and Hornbill, a collection of African folk tales. When an interviewer marveled at how p'Bitek managed to do the many different things that he did, he replied, "I think that there is always time for anything you like to do, anything you are interested in." When p'Bitek died in his early fifties, one commentator wrote that his death was "like the splitting of a drum."

Drawing on the oral techniques of traditional Ugandan poetry, Song of Lawino has been called the "first important poem in English to emerge from Eastern Africa." Though p'Bitek originally wrote the poem in the Luo language, he translated it and published it in English. He describes the book as "a big laugh by this village girl called Lawino, laughing at modern man and modern woman in Uganda." In Lawino's opinion, Westernized Ugandans have abandoned their heritage and are out of touch with the real Ugandan culture. Lawino's "song" is a plea for such people to look back to traditional village life and recapture African values. Like p'Bitek himself, Lawino sticks "needles into everybody" so that they won't think everything is fine with modern life.
from Song of Lawino

Commentary

Cultural Conflict. A culture is a set of values that finds expression in the countless ways people are expected to conduct their lives. Think of some of the unspoken rules that govern your life, for example: how you are expected to dress for certain social occasions, to greet friends as opposed to strangers, and to behave toward your elders and persons of authority. Many of the world's cultures share values and can live side by side in harmony; however, there are often occasions when cultural conflict results from intolerance or ignorance of the ways of others.

Though bloodshed can be one outcome of cultural conflict, another outcome is the abandonment of one culture for another, supposedly superior, one. In Africa under colonialism, some Africans abandoned traditional ways of life that had been centered for centuries on the village. They moved to the cities, the centers of colonial power, where everything modern was considered a sign of "progress." There they attended European schools, learned to speak English or some other European language, donned European clothes, converted to Christianity, and worked for European-owned companies. They considered themselves superior to those they left behind in the village; nevertheless, their European overlords never considered them their equals. In time, these Westernized Africans no longer felt comfortable when they returned to visit their village homes. They had become cultural exiles within their own countries. Their heritage had died within them.

This is the kind of cultural conflict that Okot p'Bitek explores in Song of Lawino. Lawino is an old-fashioned "village girl" who complains that her Westernized husband, Ocol, has become a "stump" in a "forest of books."

Writing

Many people associate anything new with "progress" and would dislike being labeled "old-fashioned." What are some of the pros and cons of progress? Freewrite, exploring your thoughts on this subject.
Listen, my clansmen,  
I cry over my husband  
Whose head is lost.  
Ocol has lost his head  
In the forest of books.

When my husband  
Was still wooing me  
His eyes were still alive,  
His ears were still unblocked,  
Ocol had not yet become a fool  
My friend was a man then!

He had not yet become a woman,  
He was still a free man,  
His heart was still his chief.

My husband was still a Black man  
The son of the Bull  
The son of Agik  
The woman from Okot  
Was still a man.

An Acoli

My husband has read much,  
He has read extensively and deeply,  
And he is clever like white men  
And the reading  
25 Has killed my man,  
In the ways of his people  
He has become  
A stump.

He abuses all things Acoli,  
30 He says  
The ways of black people  
Are black  
Because his eyeballs have exploded,  
And he wears dark glasses,  
35 My husband’s house  
Is a dark forest of books,  
Some stand there  
Tall and huge  
Like the tido tree . . .

The papers on my husband’s desk  
Coil threateningly  
Like the giant forest climbers,  
Like the kimbusa tree  
That squeezes other trees to death;  
45 Some stand up,  
Others lie on their backs,  
They are interlocked  
Like the legs of youths  
At the orak dance.

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1. Lawino (la vë’ nô): The speaker, a woman.  
2. The son of the Bull . . . Agik (a jik’): References to the ancestors of the speaker’s husband.  
4. Acoli (a chol’): A people of northern Uganda, sharing a cultural, linguistic, and geographic heritage,  
5. orak (o râk’): A traditional dance; an inner circle of young women and an outer circle of young men dance intricate steps until the two circles are intertwined.
Like the legs of the planks
Of the gogo fence,
They are tightly interlocked
Like the legs of the giant forest climbers
In the impenetrable forest.

My husband’s house
Is a mighty forest of books,
Dark it is and very damp,
The steam rising from the ground
Hot, thick and poisonous
Mingles with the corrosive dew
And the rain drops
That have collected in the leaves . . . .

O, my clansmen,
Let us all cry together!

Come,
Let us mourn the death of my husband,
The death of a Prince
The Ash that was produced
By a great Fire!

O, this homestead is utterly dead,
Close the gates
With lacari* thorns,
For the Prince
The heir to the Stool is lost!

And all the young men
Have perished in the wilderness!
And the fame of this homestead
That once blazed like a wild fire
In a moonless night

Is now like the last breaths
Of a dying old man!

There is not one single true son left,
The entire village
Has fallen into the hands
Of war captives and slaves!
Perhaps one of our boys
Escaped with his life!
Perhaps he is hiding in the bush
Waiting for the sun to set!

But will he come
Before the next mourning?
Will he arrive in time?

Bile burns my inside!
I feel like vomiting!

For all our young men
Were finished in the forest,
Their manhood was finished
In the class-rooms, . . .

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6. lacari n.: Large thorns, some as long as three inches. The branches of the lacari tree are woven together to make a natural barbed wire that is used to protect homes and livestock.
7. heir to the Stool: Determined by birth to be a chief.

Reader’s Response: Do you feel more sympathetic toward Lawino or her husband? Explain.
From "Song of Lawino," WM 1354

**Before Reading**

Okot p’Bitek, author of “Song of Lawino,” said, “An artist should tease people [and stick] needles into everybody so that they don’t go to sleep and think everything is fine.”

1. What do you think this quote means?

2. If you were p’Bitek’s kind of artist, and you were trying to “stick needles into everybody” about a certain topic that you feel is important, what would it be, and why?

**During Reading**

3. Who is the speaker of the poem?

4. Identify 4 metaphors used to describe Ocol.

5. Describe the metaphor used to describe Ocol’s papers.

6. Describe the metaphor used to describe Ocol’s house.
7. Describe what has happened to Ocol.

8. How does Ocol’s situation affect the rest of the village, according to Lawino.

After Reading

9. Write two more stanzas that would finish the poem, leaving the tone as it is.

10. Write two more stanzas that would change the tone of the poem.
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