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## Interview with Okot p'Bitek

### Abstract

Okot p'Bitek visited Aarhus University during the autumn of 1977. During that term Kirsten Holst Petersen was teaching a class on East African Literature. Okot p'Bitek agreed to meet the class and answer the following questions that had been prepared by the students.

# Okot p'Bitek

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## INTERVIEW

Okot p'Bitek visited Aarhus University during the autumn of 1977. During that term Kirsten Holst Petersen was teaching a class on East African Literature. Okot p'Bitek agreed to meet the class and answer the following questions that had been prepared by the students.

*How much is the style of Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol influenced by the African oral tradition?*

I don't think they are very much influenced by the African oral tradition; they cannot be sung, for instance. Possibly they are influenced by *The Song of Hiawatha* by H. W. Longfellow and also by *Song of Solomon*. These books I enjoyed very much when I was a student and I consider *Song of Solomon* the greatest love song ever.

*What about the imagery you use, is that your own or is it borrowed from traditional literature?*

It is based mainly on the traditional, I think, but one is bound to be influenced by friends, enemies, school, etc., so it becomes all mixed up.

*To what extent is Lawino a character in her own right and to what extent is she a representative of a class?*

First of all she has my mother's name. My mother was a very important woman in my life and she taught me a lot. She was very talented and composed 34 of the songs in *Horn of My Love*. Like my mother, Lawino isn't impressed by little gadgets like tape-recorders and all silly things you collect from the outside. But Lawino is not only an individual character, she is also a representative of the kind of despised, oppressed members of society. She is a village woman, examining society with the viewpoint of the village and I think she does it well.

*Why did you leave out the last section of Song of Lawino when you translated it?*

Well, there is this very difficult concept based on a cooking place which is the backbone of the last chapter. When you make a cooking place, you place three stones to support the pot over the fire. If the pot is big enough, it will fit, but if the pot is too small, you need another piece of stone to support it. That piece of stone we call *ten*. This is a physical thing but there is a social implication which is that a grown-up person doesn't need this social *ten*. He is an independent person who doesn't need all sorts of people to support him with their ideas of political systems, marriage systems, etc. But you know, translation is a terrible thing because you are not only translating words, you're translating concepts from one culture to another and you need to know both well before you can transfer these great ideas and compare them.

*Why did you retain the early Christian misunderstandings like, for instance, the 'clean ghost'?*

Because there is no word for holy in my language, so I think it was very kind to put that clean in. When the early missionaries came, they called it the white ghost which also has racial implications and as God at one point was interpreted as white father, the natives mixed this concept up with the colonials.

*What about hunchback?*

Oh, hunchback, that is a fantastic concept. In 1911 some Italian priests came to Northern Uganda. They collected some of the people and after greeting them one of the priests asked, 'Who created you'? Now, in my language there is no single word for create, but worse still, there is no word for creating out of nothing. So the interpreter said, 'This is impossible to translate, what exactly are you talking about? Give us one specific sense of the verb, to create'. Then this Italian fool, having Genesis in mind, said, 'who moulded you'? Now the elders thought this man was nuts, but one of them said, 'If an otherwise healthy person becomes a hunchback, he is moulded'. Almost every disease has a spiritual counterpart, and the spiritual counterpart of tuberculosis of the spine is called *Lubanga*. So one of the elders said, 'I think he is asking us about the spiritual counterpart of the tuberculosis of the spine', so the answer he gave was *Lubanga*. On Sunday the Italian priest gathered the people and said, 'I have come to tell you about a God who loves you very much, he is called *Lubanga*'. Once more we are dealing with translations, aren't we?

*At one point Ocol is questioning Socialism. Is he serious or is he mocking?*

I think human beings are much more complicated than you think. You are not just one person in the morning, afternoon and all the time. Even an Ocol can sometimes cast doubt in his own mind, everybody has these moments of doubt. So I don't think he is mocking, I don't know, how do I know?

*What social values do you wish to expose in Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol?*

Lawino is very unhappy with the suppression of man in society and with the fact that all African leaders are thieves. She raises

very basic questions such as do we actually understand Christianity. Another aspect dealt with is my favourite one, the question of time: must we be servants of time, or should time serve man?

*What is the role of women in African society?*

Is it very different from the role of women anywhere else? Being good mothers, for instance, and good wives? What kind of role do you have in mind?

*Does she have the same possibilities as a man if she wants an education, for instance?*

I think all societies in history have some way of passing on their morality to the next generation, so there was a tradition before the British came, only they established the formal institutions. As Western civilization was greatly influenced by the teachings of St Paul, who was a great woman-hater, they built more schools for males than for females and in that way the prejudice against women was transferred to Africa as far as this formal education was concerned. Even today you still have fewer schools for women. After Independence, of course, women wanted the right to vote, salaries were made equal and today we have the Women's Liberation Movement which again comes from Europe and America. But it doesn't seem to fit in very well and I think we are going to raise some even bigger issues, for instance what kind of family do we want in terms of the role of the woman, the role of the man, and the role of the children. You have to talk about the whole philosophy of a society, you have to ask questions like what kind of society do we want in terms of roles.

*What is your opinion of negritude?*

Well, I don't like it very much, but perhaps I should explain it in terms of history, in terms of the colonial powers and their impact

on the cultures of the people. I think the French were more thorough in their strangling of the natives in West Africa than the British were when they operated in Nigeria and Ghana, for instance. The French wanted to turn their subjects into real Frenchmen. With the coming of the political agitation for independence, the advocates of negritude began to say, we are not Frenchmen, but they were addressing the French. I think the movement came and went and I think it has been very powerful.

*Do you feel an affinity with other African writers?*

I think they're all more or less engaged in the same search for a useful society, especially after Independence, and by implication offering solutions. I don't read other people very well, I read very fast because I tend to get influenced.

The interviewers were: Dorte, Margot, Anne, Dorthe, Susanne, Ragnhild, Bent, Karin, Gunhild, Else, Annemarie.