

THE AMBIGUITIES OF OKOT P'BITEK'S DECOLONIZATION OF AFRICAN RELIGION

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Abstract

A cursory glance reveals that anthropologists, philosophers, historians, colonial masters and missionaries have understood Africa variously. Unfortunately, this understanding has often been in the negative. This has relegated Africa to the background of mere obscurantism, and misled the world into believing that Africans are savages, primitive and reside in a dark continent where they sleep on trees, eat raw fruits and consort with apes. The need to reconstruct this history, has led to the emergence of positive efforts to re-establish, dig out and recover the stolen and damaged personality of the African by both scholars of African and western backgrounds. Okot p'Bitek remains one of those African scholars who have distinguished themselves in the critique of western misunderstanding or distortion of the African realities or worldview. This piece, therefore, focused on his critique of the western understanding of the African worldview. This work discovered that while trying to make an amend to the disfiguration of the African reality by western and African scholars, Okot showed himself a different class of his western and African counterparts as he is not without the influence of western thinkers. This paper employed the critical approach in the study of Okot p'Bitek's understanding of the concept of African traditional religion by some western and African thinkers. Given the very nature and concerns of this approach in research, it would focus on a reflective assessment of Okot p'Bitek's perspective in order to reveal the power and challenge the structures of his argument.

Keywords: Okot p'Bitek, Decolonization, Hellenization, African Traditional Religion

Introduction

Africa has been understood variously by western anthropologists, philosophers, historians, colonial masters and missionaries. Unfortunately, this understanding has often been in the negative. This has relegated Africa to the background, and in the contention of Onyewuenyi (1994), denied her of her place as the “Mother of world civilization” and “misled the world into believing that Africans are savages, primitive and reside in a dark continent where they sleep in trees, eat raw fruits and consort with apes” (p. 21). This understanding of the African people was taught in schools and popularized in books and movies.

In his *Epinomis* Plato expressed the western cultural pride and superiority, which has continued to affect the thinking of the west. Although the Greeks had borrowed their gods from Egypt, he writes that: “But we may take it that whenever Greeks borrow anything from non-Greeks, they finally carry it to a higher perfection” (p. 56). The implication being that the movement of these gods from Africa to Greece, opened a way for a nobler worshipping of these divine beings. Taking them from Africa, therefore, becomes a noble

act. Following the path of Plato, however, focusing on arts, Goldsmith (1774) in his *History of the Earth* writes that: “Those arts which might have had their inventions among other races of mankind have come to their perfection” (pp. 230-231). Thus, Europe becomes the place where they find their perfection. Taking away the cultural heritage of a people, whatever be the cost, is also considered a noble action.

Hegel (1944) emerged in the 18th century and as a product of his own environment, even though he had never been to Africa, relying on the writings of missionaries, anthropologists, historians, etc., had no consideration for anything Africa. In his piece on *The Philosophy of History*, he writes that:

One is that which lies south of the desert of Sahara. ... Africa proper... the upland almost entirely unknown to us, with narrow coast-tracks along the sea; the second is that to the north of the desert—European African if we may call it... the third is the river region of the Nile... Africa proper... the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of night. (p. 91).

Bentley (1900) who was a missionary to Africa, and in fact one of those that Hegel relied on for information about Africa, sums up his understanding of the African people as such.

An African whether Negro or Bantu, does not think, reflect or reason, if he can help it. He has a wonderful memory, has great powers great powers of observation and initiation, much freedom of speech and many good qualities; he can be kind, generous, affectionate, unselfish, devoted, faithful, brave, patient and persevering; but the reasoning and inventive faculties remain dormant. He readily grasps the present circumstances, adapts himself to them and provides for them; but a careful thought-out plan or a clear piece of induction is beyond him. (pp.27-28).

These perspectives among others denigrated the African personality as everything black was categorized bad and everything white was considered good. It affected not just the history of the African person but his is-ness. This led to the emergence of positive efforts to re-establish, dig out and recover the stolen and damaged personality of the African by both scholars of African and western origins (Kanu 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015&2016). It was from this background that scholars such as Senghor, Nyerere, Kenyatta, Danquah, Azikiwe, Awolowo, Nkrumah, etc., emerged. However, in this paper, the researcher would focus on the position of Okot p'Bitek on the perspective of western and African scholars on African traditional religion. Okot p'Bitek remains one of those African scholars who through their writings challenged the arrogance of the west in their portrayal of Africa in different modes that were derogatory and which did not mirror the reality of the African world. His concern was not just about the western scholars and missionaries who did this but also who went the western way in the analysis of the African reality.

Methodology

This paper would employ the critical approach to the study of Okot p'Bitek's understanding of the concept of African traditional religion by some western and African thinkers, mainly missionaries and anthropologists. Given the very nature and concerns of this approach in research, it would focus on a reflective assessment of Okot p'Bitek's perspective in order to reveal the power and challenge the structures of his argument. This work would rely majorly on primary and secondary sources, that is, books, journals,

internet sources, etc., written by Okot and that have discussed the position of Okot p'Bitek's on this matter. The evaluation approach would further be employed so as to solve the basic problems in Okot p'Bitek's position and if need be, to refine his position as a development of the discourse on western conception of African traditional religion. In addition, this piece provides a deeper understanding of Okot p'Bitek as a scholar with passion for his roots.

The man Okot p'Bitek

Okot p'Bitek, the Ugandan poet, novelist, and social anthropologist was born on 9th June 1931, at Gulu, in northern Uganda to the family of Mr Opii Bitek (a story-teller and dancer) and Mrs Serina Laca (a song composer and dancer). As a young man, **Okot** published a novel in the Acholi language, however, later published in English in 1989 as *White Teeth*. He was very good at sports, which explains why he was enlisted in the Ugandan national football team. He had his primary and secondary education in Gulu, and from 1951-1952 he studied at the Teacher Training College Mbarara which prepared him to teach English and Religious Education at Sir Samuel Baker's School, Gulu. While at Gulu, he went into politics and was elected a member of the Acholi District Council under the Uganda National Congress.

In 1956, Okot left for England, where he furthered his studies bagging a diploma certificate in Education from the University of Bristol in England. He also pursued a bachelor in Law from the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth. Developing a passion for his roots, he added to this is a degree in Anthropology from the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford. It was at Oxford that he met scholars like Evans-Pritchard, Lienhardt, Beattie, and in the contention of Rinsum (2004) "His stay at Oxford played an important role in shaping his ideas about western dominance as manifested... in how anthropologists viewed Africa" (p. 26). After his return, he taught at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda from 1964 to 1966.

Terminating his appointment as lecturer in Makerere University in 1966, he served as director of Uganda's National Theatre and National Cultural Centre from 1966 to 1969. He was dismissed in 1969, most probably because of his criticism of politicians in his works. From 1971-1978 p'Bitek served as a senior research fellow and lecturer at University College, Nairobi, Kenya and later between 1978 -1982, he taught at the University of Ife in Nigeria, while serving as visiting lecturer to various universities in Africa. In 1979, when General Idi Amin had left power, he returned back to Makerere University where he became a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Social Research.

His major works include *Song of Lawino* published in 1966 in which he addressed the conflict between the western and African cultures. He uses the image of a woman who lamented on how her educated husband has become a misfit in the face of what traditional African concept of manhood holds. He also wrote the *Song of Ocol* published in 1970 which contains the response of the husband to the woman's lamentations in the first book. A third is the *Two Songs* which include *Song of a Prisoner* and *Song of Malaya* published in 1971. They have very important places in any serious discussion on African poetry. His other works include *Africa's Cultural Revolution* published in 1975; *The Horn of My Love*

published in 1974 and *Hare and Hornbill* published in 1978 (Adams, et al 1998). He died in Kampala on 19th July 1982, five months after he was appointed Professor of Creative Writing.

Okot's Perspective on Western Concept of African Religion

Evans-Pritchard (1956) in his work on Nuer Religion had equated *Jok* (Acholi god) with *Kwoth* (Nuer god) referring to both as names of the supreme being. The implication being that the Nuer and the Acholi have concepts of the supreme being in their traditional religion. Ogot (1961) agreed with Evans-Pritchard and employed Tempels' concept of hierarchy of forces to explain the relationship between the spiritual forces in nature, and which places the supreme being at the zenith of the forces in the universe. Contrary to these positions, Okot (1971) argues that the concept *Jok* stood for a totality of the spiritual world and that its meaning is dependent on context. This implies that it does not stand for the supreme being as posited by Evans-Pritchard and Ogot. His reasons are that unlike other tribes like the Nuer and Dinka, the Acholi and Lango were more concerned with the ancestors rather than any other spiritual being, ultimate power or God; and also focused on the spiritual causes of particular effects rather than concerned with a particular being that was central and the cause of all effects- that is a supreme being (Okot 1963).

From the foregoing, Okot (1964) believes that the problem of misinterpretation by the missionaries and anthropologists was due to their employment of a wrong anthropological method of trying to know the African people and their religious believes. The wrong methodology was speculation, through which they tried to get answers to their questions and never minded whether they were true or not; they tried to understand the African people from a distance rather than by being with them- through participant observation, which he considers a sound anthropological fieldwork methodology.

Still focusing on the misconceptions of the missionaries, Okot (1971) did a criticism of the pattern of Religious Studies of his time, especially as it relates to the discourse on African traditional religion which limited the content of African traditional religion to the conceptual framework of the west. African religion was understood not the way it is but the way the west could understand it. He called this process of imposition of framework 'Hellenization' (Okot 1969). He traced the process of Hellenization to the time of the encounter between Christianity and Greek philosophy. He avers that this era was when Christian apologists, obviously non-Jewish converts to Christianity Hellenized the Jewish Yahweh into a Person or Trinity of persons creating an imposing "theological system that man ever erected" (Okot, p. 69, p.6). He argues further that some African and western scholars were in the same fashion, modelling African religion after Hellenized Christianity of the west. He called these scholars Intellectual Smugglers with John Mbiti as the chief of them who "smuggled enough Greek metaphysical material to hellenise three hundred African deities" (Okot 1972 p. 29); and they were doing this in three ways by three groups of persons:

1. They were using the African deities to prove that the Christian God does exist and is known among the African people. Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt fall within this category. This became obvious for Okot when Evans-Pritchard spoke of *Kwoth* in relation to the Christian God.
2. The second way were basically African nationalists who were trying to prove to the west that the African is also civilized, and thus, they clothed African deities in

hellenistic as they paraded them before their western counterparts. These African scholars include Kenyatta, Senghor, Danquah, etc.

3. The third group were mainly western missionaries like Edwin Smith, John Taylor, Placid Tempels, etc., who wanted to demonstrate to their audience of African elites that they, as Saint Paul in Athens are highly religious people. With this, they hoped to win them over to Christianity.

These notwithstanding, Okot's problem with these western and African scholars was their methodology which has led to several false conclusions.

Critical Evaluation

Okot p'Bitek remains one of those African scholars who have distinguished himself in the critique of western misunderstanding or distortion of the African realities or worldview. As a thorough going anthropologist, he rightly emphasized the need for participant observation or a strong anthropological fieldwork methodology rather than loosely arriving at conclusions through speculation; conclusions that lack the required substance for addressing major theological issues and concerns. Okot (1971) advises that for a student to understand the religion of a people which is a relationship between human and superhuman powers, "It would be necessary for the student to stay longer than seven months and get a deep knowledge of the language of the people, and also to soak himself in the everyday life of the people" (p. 53). Thus, Wiredu (1988) refers to him as the pioneer of conceptual decolonization in African philosophy.

Okot had criticized Edward Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey Lienhardt and their African colleagues for modelling African gods after the western Christian images, and yet, he was also a victim of the same pattern of modelling. The concept Hellenization was taken after the western counterparts who had used it before him. He was influenced by Dewart (1967) who used the concept when he called on theologians to go beyond demythologization to de-Hellenization of the Christian doctrine of God within the context of resolving the friction between the experience of Post-war generation and the traditional Christian images of God. He also rode on Robinson (1963), who developed the idea that traditional Christian images of God were metaphysical, a pattern of thinking that the new generation of Christians were not open to. In this, Okot showed himself an African student of Oxford, and a Hellenized Hellenizer.

The fact that Okot (1972) stated clearly that "I admit I am neither a Christian nor a pagan. I do not believe in god or spirits. I do not believe in witchcraft or supernatural forces. Heaven and hell do not make sense to me and for me metaphysical statements are nonsensical" (p. 31), raises several questions regarding his position on Hellenization. His understanding of heaven and hell, god and spirits, witchcraft and supernatural powers as nonsensical also points to the influence of David Hume's thorough going empiricist philosophy on his thinking. Although he was interested in the decolonization of the African people, he employed western patterns in his philosophy of decolonization. It is also interesting that although he had denied the existence of god and spirits, he still preoccupies himself with defending the Acoli/Lango-African concept of God. How a person borders himself with a reality that he considers non-existent is very surprising. Also observable is that while he opposed the use of concepts like 'primitive' and 'savage', he did not consider it equally offensive to use the concept 'pagan' as can be seen in the above quotation. The concepts 'primitive', 'savage' and 'pagan' are all derogatory

concepts.

More so, Okot went further to condemn the use of concepts by African scholars like John S. Mbiti; concepts such as omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscience, eternal, etc., as Christian concepts in replacement for African traditional concepts like great, strong, wise, old, etc., respectively. This manifests a major concern in Okot's pattern of argument: he condemns without being able to make a replacement that carries at least the same weight with what he has condemned. In relation to the divine, omnipresent is not a match for great; omnipotent is not a match for strong; omniscience is not a match for wise and eternity is not a match for old. One would have expected a concept that stands stronger than the ones employed by the hellenizers.

It is also questionable why Okot made Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt the major objects of his concern in his works. Could it have been a revenge mission? Trying to pay back the people he could not face as supervisors in England. Evans-Pritchard and the linguist A.N. Tucker were his supervisors and they made it clear in their report about his thesis that it had too many typing, spelling, grammatical and other errors; they also raised questions about the clarity of his position and the content of the work; they observed that his thesis was not on the approved topic. What was approved by the Anthropology and Geography Board was: 'Religious ideas of the Jopalwo of Northern Bunyoro'. Since he eventually did not fulfill the conditions for obtaining a doctorate, it is possible that his critique of these scholars was only a spillover of his frustration.

Conclusion

The foregoing, reveals that Okot stands on an academic ground that rejects a blind and slavish embrace of the western culture that looks down on or makes a false presentation of the African world by both the western cultural colonialism and the African elite that accepted to be its tool. Whether this be a product of his experience or an academic passion in him, the truth remains that he pursued a worthy cause. He was proud of who he was- an African; thus, Altobai (2020) writes that Okot:

Like the Negritude poets, Okot is proud of the African ways of life and he romanticizes them. To him they are graceful and beautiful. He asserts their value and emphasizes the need to preserve them. He attacks not only the European institutions and practices responsible for the cultural alienation of Africans but he also targets almost everything western. Thus it can be concluded that Okot (in Song of Lawino) subscribes to the idea that the African culture and ways are superior to the western culture and ways. (p. 25).

Okot would always be remembered as one of those post-colonial writers in Africa who constructed serious criticism on the colonial and missionary discourse on who the African was and what constituted his environment.

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