

The Life and Times of Okot p'Bitek

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Abstract

Okot p'Bitek was born on 9 June 1931 to Jebedayo Opii of the Pacua clan in Patiko and Cerina Lacwaa of Palaro-Rajab. In the discussion on his biography, I follow a holistic approach using a chronological methodology which focuses on his education and life until his death on 20 July 1982. I premise my research on autoethnography which is a form of qualitative research in which the author uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience while acknowledging and valuing his/her relationships with other people. My personal knowledge of and shared culture with Okot have added value to my biographical structuring. I collected data using questionnaires and personal and group interviews with Okot's family members, friends and colleagues in Makerere and Nairobi Universities, lecturers in Bristol and Oxford, and teachers in the various schools he attended in Uganda. I also researched his writings and writings about him in various libraries at different institutions, including the School of Oriental and African Studies, the University of South Africa, Oxford University, Makerere University and the University of Nairobi, where Okot's original manuscripts are archived. The data collected is intended to inform scholars about Okot the man. This article is divided into two parts: Okot's biography and the importance of this biographical study.

Keywords: autoethnography; Okot p'Bitek; life; education; work

Part One: Okot's Biography

Okot's Education in Gulu: January 1938 to December 1947

Okot began his schooling in 1938 at Gulu Primary School, founded by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). As the son of the catechist in what Lawino calls "evening speakers' school" (p'Bitek 1966, 78), he received free education. He was closely associated with the church. The wife of the Reverend Colin Moore led the choir and according to Taban Lo Liyong, "[o]ne of her most brilliant students was Jekeri Okot"



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(Liyong 1991, 113). As a teenager, he learnt to play the guitar from the Acoli educationist, Erinayo Opiyo, while baby-sitting his children. Okot therefore combined the mission education with Acoli traditional education from his parents as confirmed in his response to Lee Nichols's question as to what elements in his family background may have influenced his becoming the kind of writer he became:

Well, both my parents were fantastic performers. I think from my father I learnt a lot of stories and style of telling stories. But from my mother I learnt a great deal about poetry, song and dance. And she was always very naughty, you know and teasing me all the time. Whenever she produced a new song she would call me and say, "Listen to this new." And the next week the song would be known throughout the village and danced and performed. (Nichols 1981, 243)

The village was equidistant between the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) and the Church Missionary Society/Protestant Mission.

Okot was his parents' only child, hence his closeness to his mother to whom he dedicated *Song of Lawino* (1966). She shares many of the character traits of the fictional Lawino. For example, her knowledge of Acoli culture and the political discourse seen through her informed comments on the contest between the Democratic Party and Uganda People's Congress are aligned with the reproval she expressed regarding two missions in her neighbourhood (*Song of Lawino*, Chapter 11). Okot also based Lawino's mocking criticism of both the Catholic and Protestant missionaries on his mother's and his own knowledge of the two missions (Chapters 8–9).

His father grew sugar cane and other fruits in the valley between the two missions to supplement his meagre wage as a catechist. Okot was a good salesman: he attributed his intelligence to chewing/eating a lot of sugar cane and his classmates believed that he was clever because of eating sugar cane. They also bought the sugar cane and ate it during school breaks.¹

He passed his Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) in the first grade and was admitted to Gulu High School Junior in 1945 under the headmastership of the Reverend Philips Lees. It was the most prestigious school for children of Protestant converts in the Northern Province. Gulu High School gave Okot a firm foundation in life, as Liyong indicates:

Modelled on Rugby Public School in England, Gulu High School was a school for scandals. No other school could influence one more ... Hazing or harassment of first-year students began very early in the school history ... We were taught to speak up, to ask questions, to enquire, argumentatively if need be, to be resourceful in finding one's

¹ Mrs Terzira Okot confirmed that Okot, her classmate from Primary One to Six, was very clever in all subjects. His best subject was mathematics.

way out of tight spots, and to open closed doors. Okot was more than a typical Gulu High School old boy. (Liyong 1991, 139–40)

The character traits Okot acquired in Gulu High School were noted by the various educational institutions he attended and people who had encounters with him. Joseph Omac (Interview with Joseph Omac, Okot's cousin, 23 July 2007, Gulu) confirmed that one couldn't fail to notice Okot: a handsome mission boy, intelligent, a sportsman and culturally talented. Okot found favour with both white and black teachers but he was more attached to Mr Julius Peter Abe because of sports and Mr Rueben Anywar because of a shared interest in Acoli culture. He was a rising star, but his poor financial background posed a hindrance to socialising with children of chiefs and senior government officials. At the end of the three years, he excelled in his Junior Leaving Examinations and was admitted to King's College, Budo, on an Acoli local government bursary.

Okot's Education at King's College, Budo: January 1948 to December 1950

King's College, Budo, was founded by Mr Henry Walter Weatherhead on 29 March 1906 with 21 royal Baganda boys.² Mr Weatherhead was credited with bringing "British public school instructions to the African race" (Kings College Budo 1996, 5). Okot came to Budo on merit in January 1948 under the headmastership of Mr Timothy Cobb (1948–57) who "opened Budo to 'commoners' where students are admitted on merit" (Kings College Budo 1996, 5). When the star of Gulu High School, with the assistance of his former headmaster, Mr Erisa Lakor, arrived in Budo, the headmaster noticed that "he was rather backward" but Okot preferred to describe himself as a "bush boy." Three years later, Mr Cobb noted that he had "made a great advance" (Kings College Budo 1996, 8). He quickly established himself in the academic and extra-curricular activities, becoming a founder member of Budo's Nightingales, a glee club. Mr Cobb took an interest in those students who were active and Okot was one of them.

Okot liked classical music, especially Mozart whose style he adapted in composing Acoli songs. The most celebrated of his opera, *Acan*, was influenced by Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. At a performance of *Acan* held at the Anglican Namirembe Cathedral, Okot "won a prize for original compositions which made him a celebrity in the whole country."³ The opera has a twist of irony in it. He fell passionately in love with Rebecca Abitimo, an Acoli girl from a royal family.⁴ She knew of Okot's family's poverty, so she rejected him. Instead of sulking, he composed a new song with a refrain stating that poverty is not a permanent handicap but a condition that can be overcome. With the help of Michael Ssozi and the Nightingales, Okot practised and polished the song which

² Some of Budo's history is embedded in *The Budonian: Kings College, Budo: 90 Years, 1906–1996* (Kigooyina, Mutibwa, and King's College 1996). Weatherhead was headmaster from 1906–12.

³ See Mr Cobb's letter, dated 6 November 1954 in *The Budonian* (King's College 1996).

⁴ Budo was opened up to girls in 1933.

brought him fame. The theme of rejected love due to poverty later became central in his only novel *Lak Tar* (1953), published in English as *White Teeth* (1988).

The cultural nationalistic epic poem of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha*, stirred in Okot the nationalism noted by John Nagenda (Kings College Budo 1996, 4). He remembers Okot as a cultural nationalist who was “writing opera, very tuneful, but with a political message” (4). He places Okot in the same category as Israel Mayengo, Adoko Nekyon, and Ssebana Kizito, who were already embryonic politicians (18). In an interview with Lee Nichols, Okot mentioned among the written influences *The Song of Hiawatha* (Nichols 1981, 245). Okot was either introduced to *The Song of Hiawatha* by Mr Cobb or taught it by one of the English teachers. He was so inspired by it that he began reworking the Acoli cultural myth of “Labongo and Gipir” into a play titled *The Lost Spear*, but he lost the manuscript.⁵

Liyong is positive that Okot was taught the poem by a female teacher who may have been the choir mistress:

When he arrived in King’s College Budo, apart from continuing with his musical interest, he found that the school had an enchanting choir-mistress who also loved poetry. Between choir practices, she entertained Okot by reading Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha*. By some alchemical transmutation, she saw Hiawatha in Okot ... Okot assumed seriously this heroic role that she had foisted upon him. (Liyong 1991, 134)⁶

Budo, its environment, the staff, students and the headmaster, all contributed to making Okot a writer, composer, skilful debater (with David Rubadiri) and cultural activist. However, Mr Cobb had two disappointments in terms of Okot, as he noted in his letter. First,

he obtained a Grade 3 Cambridge School Certificate and could not therefore go to Makerere for a degree and secondly, that Okot could come back to the staff here after his training. I had extremely good reports of him from Kingsley Wood and from Mr. Hammer when he joined the staff at Gulu (Sir Samuel Baker School). (Kings College Budo 1996, 8)

⁵ Okot does not give the name of the author of the play but we know that it was Tom Omara who is a Langi, and this myth is not in their tradition. However, there is no conclusive evidence that the manuscript Okot lost is the same one that Omara published in *Short East African Plays in English* in 1968. Taban has included this myth in *Fixions* (1969).

⁶ Taban Lo Liyong cannot remember the name of the choir mistress. When I visited Budo in December 1996, I was shown a logbook which contains the names of the staff members who accompanied the Nightingale Choir (Okot was one of them) to Namagunga Girls School for a performance. The ladies were Ms Moore and Ms Carnage but I could not establish who was the choir mistress and might have taught Okot *The Song of Hiawatha*.

Mr Cobb and Okot developed mutual friendship beyond Budo. Okot kept him posted on his progress at Kakoba Teacher Training College. For example, when he won a victor ludorum at the provincial athletics meeting in Masaka, he informed Mr Cobb in a letter dated 2 March 1952. When he learnt that Mr Cobb had gone on home leave and would return with his fiancé Ms Josephine, he composed a “romantic song” as an “Engagement Gift” (Kings College Budo 1996, 8).

I feel therefore, proud to have to present this piece of music to you as your Engagement Gift, and wish that by the time you return from England with Miss Josephine, it will have been properly mastered by, I think, the Nightingales, and sung to her as she takes her chair at the High Table, arranged on the Canadian Lawn.

Unfortunately, perhaps, I wrote it in Acholi, and could only give a literal translation of it. But I hope that by proper singing and expression the African sense of romance in it will be clear to the unacclimatized ears of the one it will be directed to. (Kings College Budo 1996, 10)

Okot’s friendship with Mr Cobb was deep-rooted as he kept him posted on life outside Budo. Mr Cobb too followed Okot’s progress in life outside Budo.

Okot’s Education at Kakoba Teacher Training College in Mbarara: January 1951 to December 1952

After Budo, Okot was admitted for a Grade Three Teachers’ Certificate at Kakoba Teacher Training College in Mbarara in western Uganda. He actively participated in sports and music which he combined with English and Religious Education as his teaching subjects. He completed *Lak Tar*, his only Acoli novel, published in 1953, after approval by the Acoli Language Board, which had originally rejected the first draft citing the vulgarity of the language. In this novel, a poor orphan boy, Okeca Ladwong, falls in love with Cecilia, a beautiful girl whom he cannot marry because he cannot afford the bridewealth demanded by her parents. Okeca travels to Kampala in search of a job to raise 1000 Shillings, a very high sum for an orphan. He eventually gets a job in Jinja at a sugar cane factory, but even here he fails to raise the money. He returns to Acoliland even poorer than when he left. This is Okot’s criticism of Acoli parents who “sell” their daughters at a very high price and the resultant suffering poor Acoli men undergo in search of the bridewealth. It was also while in Mbarara that he composed, among other songs, the Acholi district anthem, “Lobo Acholi,” in three stanzas with a refrain:

*Lobo Acholi wamari mada
Piny-nye ber laporre pe.
Joo Acholi gigeno in keken
Cwiny-gi yom pi kwo kany ba.
Acholi wa do, Acholi wa yee
Lutino Acholi gucung pi in.
Acholi wa piny me kuc*

Lutino Acholi gube tiyo pi in.

[...]

Lutino Acholi bi too pi in.

(Acoliland, we love you very much

Your beauty is incontestable.

The Acholi people love only you

Living in this land brings them joy.

Acoliland, our Acoliland

Your children are united behind you.

Acholi is land of peace.

Your children will work for you.

[...]

Acholi children will defend you unto death.)

My “literal” translation is an attempt to convey the beauty of Acoliland and its people as Okot saw it from the hilly countryside of Ankole. This is the grassland which is the setting of one of his poems, “The Cattle Egret,” incorporated into *Song of Prisoner* (1971). From the anthem, we note Okot’s growing desire for political unity, as noted earlier by John Nagenda (Kings College Budo 1996, 4). The anthem is written in verse, a hallmark of *Wer pa Lawino*, but this is lost in the translation of *Song of Lawino*. Okot eventually graduated from the Kakoba Teacher Training College in December 1952.

Okot the Teacher at Sir Samuel Baker School in Gulu: January 1953 to August 1956

In January 1953, Okot was posted to Sir Samuel Baker School. He taught Religious Education, English and Music in the junior section of the school but was choirmaster for the whole school.

The major events in Okot’s life at this stage include his passionate love for Mary Anek, a beautiful nurse at Gulu Hospital. There was no rejection as it happened in Budo, since both were children of peasants. Further, Okot’s marriage to Mary in 1953 did not stop him from being his mother’s only child. He often came home to enjoy her songs and also to spend time with his first child, Agnes Oyella, who was adopted and breastfed by his mother. Mary was pregnant with their second child and could not continue breastfeeding Agnes. His mother’s songs became a source of inspiration for him, as he told Lee Nichols:

Whenever she produced a new song she would call me and say, “Listen to this one.” And the next week the song would be known throughout the village and danced and performed. And she kept on doing this until one day I wrote *Song of Lawino* ... And I read to her the first version which was only thirty pages and she liked it. (Nichols 1981, 244)

Okot's statement to Lee is corroborated by Agnes Oyella who authoritatively confirmed that her grandmother was a prolific composer-singer and dancer.⁷ Okot's mother challenged him to compose songs like her. This challenge inspired him to start composing what became *Wer pa Lawino/Song of Lawino*. Liyong confirmed that Okot used to read pieces of the composition to them between 1953 and 1954 (Interview with Taban Lo Liyong, 2 April 2015, Lacor, Gulu Town). From the corroborated evidence, my contention is that the composition of *Wer pa Lawino* began at Sam Baker School and not Budo. Okot also composed the school anthem, "Sons of Northern Uganda." The title indicates his desire for excellence in education leading to socioeconomic development. His footballing career too flourished and he played for the following teams: Acoli District, Northern Uganda and the national team, the Cranes. In August 1956, he was selected for the national team to play a series of matches against the English team. One of the items he packed was the 30 pages of *Wer pa Lawino*.

In one of the matches, the Cranes, playing barefooted, managed to beat the English Olympic team. At the end of the tour, Okot was one of three Acoli members of the national squad who remained in England, where he had the opportunity to further his education. The other two were Daudi Oceng (one of the referees) who went to Wales and Ocaya Aluko, who stayed in England (Interview with Apollo Lawoko, 24 May 2018, Gulu).

Okot at Bristol University: October 1956 to June 1957

During the Cranes' tour of Britain, Okot got in touch with some powerful people (what is known today as godfathers) whom he had known in Uganda. One of them was Professor William Stanley James, who had been a lecturer in the Education Department at Makerere University College. He had known Okot from when he visited Sam Baker School where Okot was teaching. Okot contacted him for a reference. There was also a letter of recommendation from the then Acoli education officer to Professor Ian Wills, head of the Education Department in Bristol University. Miss Murray Taylor, the departmental secretary, confirmed that there were other "powerful" letters of recommendation from London (Colonial/Commonwealth Office) which paved the way for Okot's admission to Bristol University in October 1956 for the postgraduate diploma in education. He combined charm with intelligence which endeared him to the Education Department staff.

There was a new development in Okot which he had not realised because of the great influence of his parents and the CMS brand of Protestantism. When Okot was confronted by Professors M. Wilson, a Quaker and pacifist, and F. S. John, a Catholic

⁷ This was confirmed in an interview the author conducted with Agnes Oyella on 9 February 2017 in Gulu. Agnes was brought up by her grandmother who even breastfed her since her mother became pregnant soon after she was born and could not therefore continue breastfeeding her. She learnt much later that her real parents were Okot and Mary.

priest and philosopher, he realised that he had unquestioningly accepted the Protestant faith without much understanding. Perhaps it is this unease with his Christian upbringing and the colonial culture that he had to “acquire” to be accepted in the Bristol community that Prof. Wilson noticed as “confusion” in Okot. I have put the words “acquire” and “confusion” in inverted commas because Okot uses them in *Song of Lawino* (Chapters 1, 3, 12 and 13) when discussing the changes in Ocol because of the colonial education he had “only recently acquired” (*Song of Lawino*, Chapter 13). It was at Bristol that Okot dropped his Christian name, Jekeri, although he nominally maintained it up until 1963, as is evident in his B. Litt. thesis where he used the initial J. p’Bitek Okot. From 1964 when he returned to Uganda until his death on 20 July 1982, he was either Okot or p’Bitek.

One of the staff members who knew Okot well was Wendy James. She knew him through her father and she spoke warmly of his charm, stature and good performances at private staff house parties or in public. On these occasions, Okot sang mostly Acoli songs but translated them into English for the benefit of his audience. What Okot was doing was carrying on the tradition of the Acoli oral composer-singers who were often invited to perform during social occasions to entertain guests. Okot often marshalled his fellow African students to perform Acoli dances to the great joy of his audience. An example of a public performance was at the Bristol railway station (Interview with Apollo Lawoko wod Okello, 21 September 2016, Gulu). Whatever money they raised, they shared to augment their meagre student allowances.

On a personal level, Miss Taylor was charmed by Okot’s handsome stature, his performing abilities, zeal for studies and creative writing. She therefore developed a friendly relationship with him as she used to type some of his assignments and creative writings both in Acoli and English. I learnt he left some of the writings with her, but she had thrown them away while moving into a new house because she had lost contact with Okot (Interview with Ms Murray Taylor, secretary at the Department of Education, Bristol University, 1 November 1983). We shall never know what she threw away.

At the end of the academic year, Okot passed the June 1957 exams and was awarded the higher diploma which would allow him to teach in the senior section of any secondary school in Uganda.

Okot at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth: October 1957 to June 1960

Okot did not return to Uganda but went to the University of Wales in Aberystwyth to study law. Two factors influenced his choice of Wales: a number of prominent Ugandan lawyers such as Grace Stuart Katebiriirwe Ibingira had studied law at Aberystwyth from 1954–8 and passed cum laude. Daudi Oceng, who had travelled with the Cranes team as a referee and a close friend of Okot, had also studied forestry there while Okot was in Bristol. Secondly, the Law School had sports and arts centres that were part of its attraction for Okot, besides its excellent reputation for the quality of teaching and open-door policy to international students.

As to the choice of law and not education, Okot was responding to a challenge:

[A] colonial magistrate in Gulu called Barber had taunted him that he could not master Law. So, to prove a point and shame the devil, Okot took up the wager and passed Law cum laude. He then wired Barber the results. (Liyong 1991, 138)

This seems fair enough and fits into the three positive qualities Mr Cobb identified in Okot in Budo: “He was serious and capable of hard work and of sticking to a job (Kings College Budo 1996, 8). However, Barber may have been right in that Okot could not cope with the rigorous requirements of Bar training following the law degree. Liyong adds another dimension which indicates that Okot’s acceptance of Barber’s challenge was a public reason, but he had a hidden agenda:

In those pre-independence days Law looked to be a very good background for anybody who wanted to go into politics for decolonizing one’s country. There were numerous West Africans who were lawyers, the most relevant for our discussion was Chief Obafemi Awolowo. [...] Once he proved that he could study Law and pass it cum laude, there was no more need to continue with Law. [...] Involvement in the politics of the UNC, of which he was a founder member, was one possibility. Awolowo had written a book called *Path to Nigeria’s Freedom*. During those days Okot also drafted *Path to Uganda’s Freedom*. (Liyong 1991, 138)

If Okot’s hidden motive for studying law was to become a political leader, he was too late to participate in the General Elections in 1962. His party (Uganda People’s Congress) had already selected Peter Oola as its candidate, for whom Okot campaigned, but he failed to be elected. The two other politicians were Alija Latim (Democratic Party elected) and Otema Alimadi (Independent) (Leys 1967, 5). Okot’s criticisms of the bickering politicians form Chapter 11 of *Song of Lawino*.

After completing the law degree, Okot enrolled in the Middle Temple to begin his training as a barrister. Part of the training required a three-month resident course in International Justice, at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. During the course in Legal History Okot was amazed that even Europeans practised what his Acoli people practised in determining the guilt or innocence of a person. The professor who was the lecturer of the course called this section of the course “Trial by Ordeal.” There are many Acoli folktales that Okot knew of that involve trial by ordeal. He therefore expressed interest to follow this up. His professor advised him to apply to Oxford’s Institute of Social Anthropology where he could learn more by taking a certificate course in cultural anthropology. Okot abandoned the Barrister Course and enrolled in St Peter’s College, Oxford in October 1960.

Okot at Oxford University: October 1960 to December 1963

In the Anthropology Department, Okot met renowned Africanists Edwards Evans Pritchard and the Leinhardt brothers (Godfrey and Peter) who were authorities on the Nilotic of the Sudan and John Beattie, an authority on the Banyoro of Uganda. If the

Quaker and Catholic professors at Bristol's Education Department confused Okot's religious mind, the Oxford Africanists brought to fruition Okot the scholar. He read extensively in the areas of anthropology, philosophy and religion for the certificate and later degree in anthropology. However, he rebelled against the wishes of the professors who wanted to stifle his cultural growth by regimenting him into a research scholar. Despite the rebellion, his multiple talents endeared him to many people, except those who were uneasy with his directness and teasing manner of presenting even very scholarly debates. Dr Wendy James recounts incidents where Okot turned formal lectures into storytelling or singing sessions. Okot could not separate cultural aesthetics from dispassionate scholarly discussions. Professor Godfrey Lienhart too defended Okot against the older academics and administrators (Interview with Dr Wendy James and Professor Godfrey Leinhardt, 2 November 1983, St Peter's College, Oxford). To Okot, whatever opinion anyone had of him didn't matter as long as he had his way. The psychological explanation for this is in his upbringing as an only child who always had his way with his parents and people in general.

Okot's formal education ended at Oxford with the examination of his thesis, "Oral Literature and Its Social Background among the Acoli and Langi," by Professor Edward Evans Prichard and Dr W. Whitely in the Trinity term of 1963. He was awarded a Bachelor of Letters (B. Litt.) degree. He was not happy with the downgrading of his thesis since he had originally submitted it for a D. Litt degree. The downgrading, according to Dr Wendy James, was because Okot did not conform to the rigour demanded by Oxford for a D. Litt degree. Okot left Oxford immediately and returned to Uganda.

Okot in Uganda

In 1964, Makerere University employed Okot in the Extra Mural Studies Department headed by Gerald Moore, who posted him to start a regional centre in Gulu. Okot and Gerald Moore became great friends and Okot gave him the nickname *Wod Otara* (son of the whites). Apart from duties at the centre, Okot surrounded himself with some of the great Acoli composer-singers whom he had met during his fieldwork, some of whom are mentioned in the preface to *Wer pa Lawino/Song of Lawino*.

At a private level, the main challenge he had was persistent complaints from his European neighbours about the frequent celebratory parties at his house. Okot chose to ignore them and decided to take the dancing and singing to the public arena, Acoli Inn, a local hotel. He recalled the annual performing arts festivals in Wales (the National Eisteddfod) and the Edinburgh International Festivals in Scotland which he participated in as a student in Britain (1956–63). He organised the Gulu Cultural Festivals for two years running (1964–65), which were well attended. He was a star recognised by the Obote government. In 1966, he was appointed the first African director of the National Cultural Centre in Kampala.

Once he established himself at the Centre, which he renamed the National Theatre, he joined the national performance troupe, the Heartbeat of Africa, which coined its name from Uganda's poetic name, "the Pearl of Africa," given to it in 1907 by Sir Winston Churchill.⁸ Okot used his position to bring African traditional performances to the Centre which was still dominated by "foreign cultures." With support from Mrs Miria Obote, Okot developed plans to set up regional theatres which the Obote government rejected, claiming that they would be unsustainable in the weak economy.

While Okot enjoyed the limelight at the national level, at the family level, his marriage was crumbling. Mary, a trained hospitality manager, stayed in Kampala to work with Uganda Hotel when Okot moved to Gulu in 1964. Okot, a handsome, dashing young man, was attractive to many women. Mary heard about the struggle women had over him. When she learnt of his infidelity, she tried her best to rekindle their love, just as Lawino pleaded with Ocol to remember when he loved and admired her youthful beauty (*Song of Lawino*, Chapters 1, 4 and 13). Okot rejected her pleas and when Mary finally conceded to the divorce in 1966, she wrote him a cheque equivalent to the bride price he had paid. He captured this shocking action in a poem "Return the Bridewealth."⁹ In the poem, Okot briefly narrates the traditional marriage process a young man goes through when he has identified the girl he wants to marry. Once the family "gathers" the bridewealth required by the girl's parents, the marriage ceremony takes place. In case the marriage breaks down completely, it is the father of the girl who returns the bridewealth. In the poem, it is the woman who returns her bridewealth in the form of a cheque and this is what shocked Okot:

I tell the woman I cannot trace her father.
 I say to her I want back the bridewealth that my father paid
 When we wedded some years ago...
 The woman reaches out for her hand bag
 [...]
 She takes out a new purse,
 She takes out a cheque
 [...]
 She screams,
 Here, take it! Go marry your bloody woman!
 I open the cheque
 It reads,
 Shillings One thousand four hundred only!

⁸ See Sir Winston Churchill's *My African Journey* (1908). He visited Uganda in 1907 and was so impressed by the beauty of the country compared to the others he visited that he called it "the Pearl of Africa." The Ugandan dancing team, made up of dancers from all over Uganda, was named by the selectors "the Heartbeat of Africa."

⁹ The poem was originally published in the journal *Transition* (p'Bitek 1996a), but it was reprinted in Cook and Rubadiri's *Poems from East Africa* (1971, 130–31).

Once freed from the marriage to Mary, Okot married Caroline Auma in 1967.

Okot's Dismissal from the National Theatre

Okot and Elimu Njau, a well-known Tanzanian artist based in Nairobi, were invited by the Zambian government to participate in the National Arts Festivals at the country's Independence celebrations on 24 October 1967. Okot presented a paper on "Indigenous Social Ills"¹⁰ and Njau's paper was on "The Role of the Artist in Independent Africa." Okot also improvised a performance of *Song of Lawino* with himself as Lawino and Njau as Ocol, as seen in the photo below (Figure 1). After the celebrations, the two boarded an East African Airways flight. It was on board that they read in the *Uganda Argus* of 1 November 1967 under the heading "National Theatre Chief Sacked" of his dismissal from his post as director of the National Theatre. When the plane landed in Nairobi, Okot decided to disembark. He became Njau's guest while looking for a job in Kenya.



Figure 1: Okot and Njau performing in an improvised *Song of Lawino*

¹⁰ This paper was published in *Africa's Cultural Revolution* (p'Bitek 1973).

In an interview with Elimu Njau, he described Okot as “vibrant, dynamic, spontaneous, open-minded and would enliven any situation he found himself in” (Interview with Elimu Njau, 31 October 2016, Paa ya Paa Gallery, Nairobi, Kenya). I asked him if Okot told him the reason(s) for his dismissal. He said Okot’s reply was that it was because of his criticism of the politicians in *Song of Lawino*. Njau’s view was that Okot had been openly critical of the Obote government in some fora. In an interview with Francis Odida, a former employee at the Centre, I learnt that Okot was accused by some white male board members of being a drunkard, a womaniser and unfit to be a director and reported to the Obote government (Interview with Rwot [Chief] Francis Odida, 24 January 2017, the Royal Palace in Rackoko, Pader District). Apollo Lawoko, a former Ugandan board member, concurred with Odida but added that the whites in general and some religious groups, especially the Catholic Action, were unhappy that Okot was making radical changes in the theatre, including bringing African artists and performances into the predominantly white theatre. For example, he brought in the Heartbeat of Africa and the Acoli *dingi-dingi* (girls only) *lararakaraka* (courtship) dancers, whose dances were construed as immoral. Ironically, Lawino, in her “Song,” praises African dances and condemns the European dances as immoral (Chapter 3). Was it a case of the monkey behind laughing at the tail of the monkey in front?

Another dimension of Milton Obote’s displeasure with Okot was that he was using his intelligence to glorify the Acoli at the expense of the Langi (Obote’s tribe) in his writings, thus being a tribalist. Further, Okot was accused of installing an Acoli drum at the Centre which is a national centre. Okot had also been critical of the quality of some civil servants employed in the process of Africanisation (Interview with Apollo Lawoko wod Okello, 24 July 2018).¹¹

The official position was that Okot left for Zambia without informing any of the board members. The board chair, Hon. Narendra M. Patel, in a press conference in which he announced Okot’s dismissal, said the theatre had been in “financial straits for some time and owed a considerable amount of money. We are not blaming Dr p’Bitek for this situation. But we are not satisfied with his management of the Theatre. We feel he has not pulled his weight.”¹²

Okot in Kenya

Okot stayed with the Njau family until 1968 when the University of Nairobi employed him as the director of Extra Mural Studies in Kisumu. He worked hard to establish the centre using the experience he gained in Uganda. Towards the end of that year, he organised a week-long Kisumu arts and cultural festival. The guests included Wole

¹¹ Lawoko confirms Njau’s view that Okot had been critical of the Obote government in some fora.

¹² Hon. Narendra M. Patel made this announcement in the *Uganda Argus*, Friday, 1 November 1967, p. 9 in an article titled “National Theatre Chief Sacked.” Hon. Narendra M. Patel was the speaker of Parliament from 1963 to 1971.

Soyinka, David Rubadiri, artists and business people from all over East Africa, the Heartbeat of Africa and Okot's former dance team from Gulu. The 1969 festival was a huge success too, but, according to George Otieno, the organisers were left with a huge debt which, years later, was written off. Despite the financial losses, the festivals brought Okot and the younger generation who were involved in the organisations fame.¹³

Okot at Nairobi University Main Campus: 1971 to 1979

In 1970, Okot was funded by Nairobi University to attend the Writers School in Iowa University in the USA. On his return, he joined the Institute of African Studies (IAS) as a senior research fellow. In 1974 he was transferred to the Department of Sociology. He also lectured on the oral literature course in the Department of Literature.

Okot had challenges in the university. Firstly, some academics in the Departments of Sociology, Religion and Philosophy rejected him on the grounds that he didn't have sufficient academic credentials though he had relevant publications. Secondly, although he enjoyed the support of the administration, he wasn't promoted due to lacking a master's degree. To Okot, this was an insult since he felt his publications were adequate credentials compared with most of the senior academic staff with master's and PhD degrees but no significant publications (Interview with Professor Chris Wanjala, 27 November 2016, Nairobi, Kenya).

Okot in Nigeria, 1978

In 1978, Okot, either in anger or frustration, applied for a one-year leave of absence and left for the University of Ile Ife in Nigeria where he and David Rubadiri were invited by Wole Soyinka. Okot and Rubadiri taught in the Department of English and also the Department of Dramatic Arts where Soyinka was. In addition to lecturing, Okot was often invited to give public lectures, just as he did at Nairobi University. He also had a few interviews but did not do much in terms of creative writing. He used his time to edit the collection of Acoli folktales which he later published as *Hare and Hornbill* in 1979. In an interview with Prof. Arthur Gakwandi, he testified to Okot's poor state of health, partly due to his social habits and partly due to a lack of proper medical care, which he was used to receiving in Kenya from Dr Joel Okullu Edom, his personal Ugandan doctor (Interview with Professor Arthur Gakwandi, 21 January 2017, Kampala, Uganda). On his return to Kenya in 1979, according to family members, he was taken from the airport to Nairobi Hospital and admitted. However, in a characteristic Okot manner, he discharged himself when his eldest daughter, Agnes Oyella, came to see him. A few Nairobi University staff members who met him testify that he was a poor shadow of the

¹³ I was a student in Namilyango College in Uganda and president of the College's Writers' Club. I had known Okot in Gulu. I attended both the 1968 and 1969 festivals in Kisumu and teamed up with George Othieno of Kisumu Boys High School to support the festivals. Othieno is currently a medical consultant in Kisumu.

man they had known previously. When he reported to Nairobi University, he was given a two-year contract and transferred to the Department of Literature. He declined the offer and left for Uganda on 29 September 1979.¹⁴

Okot in Uganda: 29 September 1979 to 20 July 1982

Okot's return to Uganda was a family event. His first port of call was Makerere University, which promptly appointed him senior research fellow in the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR). He rejected the appointment. The problem was, where do you place him—in the Department of Literature, the Department of Sociology, or perhaps MISR? He clearly saw his place in the Department of Literature as a professor of literature. While waiting for Makerere to make up its mind, he opted for the position of director of culture and arts at the centre founded by his old friends Apollo Lawoko and Obol Ocola.¹⁵

In 1981, Professor Margaret Macpherson retired and the position of professor and head of the Department of Literature in Makerere became vacant. There were two candidates vying for the post: Okot p'Bitek and Timothy Wangusa. At the end of the interview, the job was given to Wangusa. Okot raved and wrote another letter to the administrators entitled "Jesus, Respect and Makerere," which forms part of the *Artist the Ruler* (2011, 9–10). The ravings were similar to those he raised in Nairobi University: how could Makerere choose someone without publications over him with a "wheelbarrow load of publications?" (2011, 9–10). The ravings reached the ears of the University Council. The Department of Literature was restructured and a new position of professor of creative writing was specifically created to accommodate him in January 1982. He was still unhappy that he had to report to the man who "robbed" him of headship. Okot barely served seven months as professor. He died on 20 July 1982.¹⁶ The position of professor of creative writing was buried with him, confirming that it was personal to the holder.

Okot the man died but his legacy lives on in his writings and family. Professor Margaret Macpherson's eulogy immortalises Okot: "When a singer dies, the song, if it is a good one, lingers on. Okot's songs will be read in this tradition for a long time." In the words of Prof. Mamdani, "he was a world man, known in many nations and cultures. He is

¹⁴ This information was obtained from the personnel record at the University of Nairobi. Okot left with his family, leaving his property. He donated his old Jaguar car to the Faculty of Engineering.

¹⁵ The centre was formerly a cinema building. Apollo Lawoko, with Obol Ocola as his lawyer, applied to the custodian board responsible for properties of the former Asians expelled by President Idi Amin in 1972. It was allocated to Lawoko who turned it into a cultural arts centre. Okot was one of the directors appointed by Lawoko and Obol to run the centre.

¹⁶ He died during the night of 19 July, though the death was not discovered until the morning of the 20th and hence the official date of his death is 20 July 1982. The post-mortem showed that Okot succumbed to pressure in the head caused by a blow to the head which left visible swelling.

gone but we remember him through his poetry.”¹⁷ Okot was buried in Gulu at St Philip’s Church where his formal education and singing career began. He is survived by his wife, Caroline Auma-Okot and six children.

Part Two: The Importance of Okot’s Biography

Okot’s biography is as colourful as the man himself. Okot was born in the house of Miss Cave Brown, one of the teachers in the Church Missionary Society (CMS), in Gulu on 9 June 1931. His father, Jebedayo Opii, was one of the African catechist teachers in the Protestant mission. Okot’s parentage and the geographical place of his birth made him a mission boy from birth and even in death, as he was buried at the church where he was baptised and began his schooling and singing career. To understand better who Okot was, I focused on his biographical identity, which is also known as biographical structuring. Rosenthal (2004) argues that the link between biographical structuring and individuals can only be understood sufficiently by analysing the development of the individual’s personality from birth to death. During the course of their lives, individuals accumulate diverse biographical experiences. In the case of Okot, some of these diverse experiences I, as the biographer, have shared personally and others I learned of by closely following the subject’s life and through qualitative research. To date, a brief biography of Okot has been provided by Cliff Lubwa p’Chong, a former close friend and the son-in-law of Okot, which was published in *Artist the Ruler* (2011). Lubwa’s biography is limited to his personal knowledge of Okot in Uganda, and does not include his exile years and details from his time in the universities in the United Kingdom. The gaps are filled by my extended biographical structuring, which is a case study of Okot’s life history, his experienced life and life story. What I missed is his narrated life, some of which I have gleaned from the various interviews he had during his life. I had to make choices in terms of what to include in this paper; the details that have been left out will be included in the book I am working on.

Okot is well known for his creative work in particular, but also for his polemical interviews, both published and recorded, which are held in the Institute of African Studies in Nairobi University and the German Goethe Institute in Nairobi. Okot first attained fame in 1966 with the publication of his translation of *Wer pa Lawino* as *Song of Lawino* (1966). This was followed by the publication of *Wer pa Lawino* (1969) and *Song of Ocol* (1970). The creative writing school in Iowa University afforded him the opportunity to produce and publish *Two Songs: Song of Prisoner and Song of Malaya* in 1971. These publications as “songs” were instrumental in propelling Okot in the literary world, not only in East Africa, and establishing Okot as the “founder” of the “Song School.” When the East African Examinations Council, the successor to the Cambridge Examinations Board, selected *Song of Lawino* as a school textbook for literature, Okot became a household name in East Africa and beyond and the sales of

¹⁷ Prof. Mamdani spoke these words in a speech given at the Makerere University in celebration of 50 years of *Song of Lawino* (1966–2016) in May 2016.

the book brought huge financial success to the publishers, according to Bethwell Ogot (2011, 218–20). In Kenya when he was working at the University of Nairobi, he and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o went on a tour of schools promoting their books and some of the students who met Okot later became his students at Nairobi University. *Song of Lawino* has been translated into many languages. However, very little was known about Okot then and even now and hence the importance of this biographical study. The objective of my passionate study of Okot the man dates back to 1981, having known Okot personally since 1964 when he was posted to Gulu by Makerere University College to start extra mural studies. He became our idol and when he organised the first cultural festival in Gulu, we actively participated as we admired his active participation in the festivals regardless of his highly educated status and that he had studied at Oxford. When he went into exile in Kenya and organised the Kisumu arts and cultural festivals, I followed him there for the two years the festivals took place. As part of the Ugandan team from Gulu, I personally spent more time with Okot than I had in Gulu. I later met Okot on and off between 1971 and 1977 at the University of Nairobi. I knew his family (Mary and the children in Uganda) and later Caroline (his second wife) and some of the children in Nairobi where I also became a refugee in 1977. Our interactions became more frequent and I got to know many of the staff in Nairobi University, which later made it easy for me to interview them for my biographical study of Okot. It is this rich experience and personal knowledge of Okot and our shared Acoli culture that makes me an objective and good autoethnographer who has used a qualitative research methodology to bring to light Okot the man.

My biography has limitations too, but I hope other scholars can build on it to give a more complete picture of Okot the great Acoli and African creative writer and scholar whose works have been read and studied widely. A starting point for other biographers on Okot could be his one-year stay in 1978 at the then Ille Ife University, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife. I have had little success in obtaining information from scholars at OAU and in Nigeria.

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