A Ugandan Critique of Western Caricatures of African Spirituality: Okot p'Bitek in Historical Context

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Abstract

While foreign missionary endeavours in Uganda beginning in the late 1870s resulted in massive numbers of conversions during the next several decades, and with the vital assistance of countless indigenous evangelists, the gradual religious metamorphosis of that British colony, there was also significant, if less well documented resistance to the proliferation of Christianity. Part of this reaction was intellectual and cultural. Among the most prominent critics of the Christian faith was the eminent literary artist and cultural figure Okot p'Bitek, whose study of *African Religions in Western Scholarship* formed one crucial part of his defensive response.

At least when gauged by the number of people who converted to Christianity, the evangelisation of the erstwhile British colony of Uganda must be regarded as one of the greatest success stories in the history of the church. On the Anglican side, representatives of the Church Missionary Society began to proclaim the Gospel in the Baganda province in 1879. Catholic counterparts from the Missioners of Africa, popularly known as the "White Fathers", followed in their wake two years later. By the end of the nineteenth century these two groups had won large numbers of converts, initially in the principal city of Kampala. From there the Christianity proliferated westward, eastward, and northward, and during the early decades of the twentieth century a remarkable religious transformation of the colony took place. Many dimensions of this noteworthy chapter in African church history have

been laudably described in broad terms in such surveys as the massive *A History of the Church in Africa* by Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed (2000: 510, 859-860), and M. Louise Pirouet (1978) dealt in detail with the crucial growth period 1891-1914 in her specialised monograph. The Danish scholar Holger Bernt Hansen (1984) contributed a massive study of the relations between church and state in Uganda before 1925 to the body of professional literature.

Much less analysed, however, are critical Ugandan reactions to Christianity, and in tandem therewith, defensive reactions to "Western" criticism of indigenous African religions, responses which also form an integral component of the broader story. At the intersection of African religious, literary, and cultural history lie the reactions of numerous Africans to how the spiritual beliefs and practices of their tribes were described in the West. Their rejoinders varied immensely, as did the descriptions themselves. At one end of the spectrum, certain African Christians agreed with criticisms which sought to invalidate their traditional religions. At the opposite extreme, some radical critics of colonialism reacted defensively and protested that their ancestral ways were not being understood or justly treated. Between these poles lay a number of mixed responses by Africans, especially converts, who expressed views partly critical of indigenous religions while also indicting foreign caricatures of the same. This article analyses the views of one such critic who turned vehemently against the Christianity he came to know initially in Uganda and subsequently in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Few names in East African letters gained more international prominence during the 1960s and 1970s than that of Okot p'Bitek (1931-1982), who initially caught the attention of literary critics with his book-length poem, *Song of Lawino*, which was initially published in 1966. This diversely gifted member of the Acholi tribe of northern Uganda subsequently garnered further accolades for three other long poems (*Song of Ocol, Song of Prisoner,* and, *Song of Malaya*) and for his rendering into English of Acholi verse and tales. Yet Okot's talents extended beyond creative writing and translation. As a renowned soccer player, he competed internationally during the 1950s. He also studied several disciplines at universities in Wales and England, taught at universities in the United States of America, Uganda, and Kenya, directed cultural festivals in his native land, fell foul of the Idi Amin dictatorship during the 1970s, and entered into a debate in religious studies with a noteworthy but almost completely ignored study of how European scholars had long misunderstood and intellectually abused African spiritual traditions, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1971).

My primary concern in the present essay will be with this last-named treatise as a historical and theological document. I shall first examine Okot's presuppositions and principal contentions, then highlight crucial flaws in his argumentation. My underlying purpose is to underscore how this champion of African culture allowed both the limits of his perception and his overarching concern for the defence of

traditional ways during the early years of post-colonial political hegemony in the light of ongoing Western cultural domination to colour his thinking and, in turn, shape the arguments he put forth. To bring Okot's positions into bolder relief, I shall juxtapose some of them with corresponding but conflicting views of his acquaintance, the internationally orientated Anglican theologian John S. Mbiti from Kenya. It should be emphasised that a critical awareness of *African Religions in Western Scholarship* can be beneficial not only to scholars of religious conflict but also to students of post-colonial literary history, because an understanding of the views put forth in this lengthiest of Okot's published nonfictional works and a cognizance of the prejudices revealed therein can contribute to a deeper comprehension of the cultural and religious dimensions of his poetry.

The origins of *African Religions in Western Scholarship* have caused confusion. In 1984 a prominent authority on post-colonial African literature, Professor Bernth Lindfors (1984: 144) of the University of Texas, suggested in a detailed article about Okot p'Bitek in G.D. Killam's symposium, *The Writing of East and Central Africa*, that it "may have been written originally as his D.Phil. thesis in religion at Oxford". This squarely contradicts Okot's own published testimony about the etiology of the work. He declared in its preface (1971) that "much of the research for this book was done at the State University of Iowa [*sic*]", where he had spent one academic year in 1969 and 1970. Furthermore, Okot's endnotes contain numerous references to works published after he had submitted his unsuccessful thesis at Oxford (where he failed to receive a doctorate), and to a considerable extent he crossed verbal swords with Mbiti, to whom he also expressed his gratitude for many insights and intellectual stimulation. Far from being the fruit of an academic exercise in England, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* sprang from many years of broad reading, observations in East Africa, and reflective cogitation about the confrontation of Christianity and European intellectual traditions on the one hand and Okot's perceptions of certain African religious practices and beliefs on the other.

Okot's Multicultural Background and Cultural-Intellectual Sojourn

Okot p'Bitek's multicultural background in the Acholi tribe, his protracted, multidisciplinary studies in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, and his many years in both Nairobi and western Kenya afforded him considerable insight into the contours of cultural change and Westernisation in Africa but also appear to have made a greater impact on him than he was generally willing to acknowledge. Okot was born in 1931 as the son of a teacher in the north-western Ugandan city of Gulu, which by then was an important Roman Catholic missionary centre. By 1923 there were no fewer than nineteen Verona priests and thirteen

sisters as well as six lay brothers in Gulu, where they co-operated with approximately 300 indigenous catechists. As Sundkler and Steed (2000: 860) have noted, the total size of this interracial staff nearly trebled by the mid-1930s. Yet northern Uganda did not become an exclusively Roman Catholic mission field; Anglicans in the service of the African Inland Mission were also active there during Okot's formative years (Sundkler & Steed 2000: 859). Okot received his secondary education in the distant capital, Kampala, where he attended King's College Budo, an Anglican school which Revd H. W. Weatherhead of the Church Missionary Society had founded in 1906, before earning his teaching credentials at Government Training College in Mbarara in the southernmost part of the country far from his tribal area. A recognised sportsman, he played on the Ugandan national soccer team and taught for three years in the Gulu area during the mid-1950s, whereupon he left his native land to undertake studies in pedagogy at the University of Bristol, law at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth, and social anthropology at the University of Oxford, earning a B.Litt. at the last-named institution. His thesis there, completed in 1964, was a study of traditional songs of the Acholi and Lango peoples.

After several years at these English and Welsh universities, interspersed by research visits to Uganda, Okot returned to join the Extra-Mural Department at the respected Makerere University College in Kampala. This young Acholi's career seemed to rise meteorically in East Africa and beyond. To some observers, he may have appeared to be something of a cultural and intellectual rolling stone. In 1966 he was appointed director of the Ugandan National Theatre and Cultural Centre, and before the end of the following year he became affiliated with the Western Kenya section of Nairobi University College's Extra-Mural Department. In that capacity, Okot played a key role in launching the Kisumu Arts Festival, which was held in December 1968. Less than twelve months later, Okot left Africa to take up a temporary fellowship at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, where he began the research which eventuated in his study of *African Religions in Western Scholarship*.

Ever interdisciplinary in his approach to academic endeavours, he returned a year later to Kenya as a research scholar at the University of Nairobi's Institute of African Studies and part-time lecturer in sociology and literature. Owing to Idi Amin's persecution of the Acholi, Okot remained in the Kenyan capital, apart from brief stints at the University of Ife and the University of Texas, until the overthrow of the Ugandan dictator allowed him to return to Makerere. He was appointed professor in its Department of Literature in 1982 but died a few months later, having gained international renown as a poet, social commentator, cultural theoretician, and amateur theologian (Lindfors 1993: 226). A few days after Okot's death, he was eulogised in *The Times* of London as "a pivotal figure in discussions of how that Continent's [*i.e.* Africa's] literature can marry its past with its future". The

same British writer, however, noted that "he could veer from wild conviviality to profound moroseness," a candid assessment of bipolar behaviour which few readers of Okot's works could fail to appreciate (Anonymous 1982: 12).

Juxtaposition with John Mbiti

The historic and intellectual place of Okot's protests against Christianity and religio-cultural imperialism as represented in *African Religions in Western Scholarship* can be understood better when juxtaposed with central emphases in an almost simultaneously published work by one of his internationally esteemed colleagues at Makerere University, the Kenyan theologian John S. Mbiti (b. 1931). This Anglican priest and contemporary of Okot, who had earned his theological doctorate at the University of Cambridge in 1963, served a parish in the Church of England, married a European wife in 1965, and would become the director of the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland, in 1974, had published his *African Religions and Philosophy* in 1969.

Before turning to that internationally known and frequently republished work, we can briefly consider one of Mbiti's other books, *Concepts of God in Africa* (which, although issued a year after *African Religions and Philosophy*, essentially antedates that study), as it provides exceptionally valuable insight into this theologian's presuppositions. Written in Uganda and Germany during the mid-1960s and incorporating data that Mbiti had gleaned from a fairly broad spectrum of published studies and essays in which his students at Makerere had described the beliefs of their particular ethnic groups, *Concepts of God in Africa* is a comprehensive if superficial catalogue of descriptions of the attributes of the divine as perceived by more than 200 African tribes. What is particularly valuable about this book for our purposes, however, is the candid declaration in Mbiti's (1970: xiii-xiv) preface: "I assume in this book, that there is but One Supreme God." Proceeding from this assumption, he perceived in his observations and reading about African religions that large numbers of ethnic groups had arrived at this conclusion, as well as at religious concepts that paralleled those of the Bible in general but especially of the Old Testament, although varying "geographical, historical, cultural, and social-political factors" had influenced local reflection on the nature of the divine.

The structure of *Concepts of God in Africa* also underscores the European roots of Mbiti's Christian presuppositions and illustrates his inductive methodology. He proceeded systematically through attributes of divinity in a manner reminiscent of catechetical instruction. Mbiti's (1970: 3, 5) opening section, for instance, deals with "The Omniscience of God". He argued that "by attributing omniscience to God, African peoples are placing him in[to] the highest possible position." Relying for his evidence on J.B. Danquah's study of 1944, *The Akan Doctrine of God*, Mbiti declared that "the Akan refer to God as 'He who knows or sees all'." He then

proceeded to "The Omnipresence of God" and, drawing on a student's essay at Makerere as well as on G.M. and A.T. Culwick's *Ubena of the Rivers*, which had been published in 1935, declared that the members of that Tanzanian tribe believe that God "is everywhere at once". One could multiply examples from *Concepts of God in Africa* to illustrate the consistency of Mbiti's approach and, arguably, his indebtedness or captivity to European culture in his analysis of that of Africa.

Whereas Okot postulates a fundamental unity in what he categorises collectively as "African religions," the intellectually more discriminating Mbiti took a two-fold approach to this pivotal matter. On the one hand, he emphasised "the unity of African religions and philosophy in order to give an overall picture of their situation." Yet Mbiti repeatedly illustrated the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in Africa which should be apparent to any student of them. As a vital principle in this regard, he pointed out (in direct contradiction to Okot's dismissal of Christianity as a foreign intrusion) that both Christianity and Islam must be regarded as with lengthy historical warrant "indigenous", "traditional", and "African". In places Mbiti (1969: xii, 277) discussed similarities between Christianity and other indigenous African religions. Indeed, one purpose of his study was to argue that there is much common ground between Christianity and those religions which are generally perceived as "African" and that "Islam and the other religious systems [are] preparatory and even essential ground in the search for the Ultimate."

When comparing the relative scholarly merits of these two scholars' works, it should be borne in mind that Mbiti was far better versed in theology than was Okot and also a more refined writer who was less prone to make unqualified and unsubstantiated generalisations or otherwise violate fundamental principles of Western scholarship, which Okot, too, sought to respect. The Kenyan was also a decidedly less embittered man, and his published work appears to have benefitted from considerably more demanding editing than Okot's *African Religions in Western Scholarship* received.

African Religions in Western Scholarship

Published by the East African Literature Bureau in 1971, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* spans 140 pages and is divided into twelve thematic chapters. The text concludes with an epilogue of some thirteen pages by the Islamic Kenyan political scientist Professor Ali Mazrui, then of Makerere University. Drawing on his extensive though palpably inconsistent reading in anthropology, theology, and other subjects, as well as on his own ethnographic research in Uganda, Okot devoted his first two chapters to a criticism of the links between nineteenth-century anthropology and colonialism and to a critique of condescending uses of the term "tribe". He then presented highlights of European perceptions of Africa, especially that continent's religious life, beginning with pre-Christian classical Greek descriptions of Africans

as both heroic and savage. In subsequent chapters, Okot explored ostensibly "present studies in African religions" (which, however, were to a considerable extent already quite dated), described how ethnocentric Western scholars had tended to distort images of African deities by describing them in theistic terms familiar to Christian theology, and suggested that the God of Christianity should be "de-Hellenized" in the interest of Biblical fidelity. *African Religions in Western Scholarship* is presented as a scholarly treatise in conventional European and American form embellished by more than 200 endnotes.

A few caveats are in order. First, this is a very unsatisfactorily edited book. Anyone with a strong concern for the *akribi* of scholarship may be alienated by its many technical and linguistic flaws which were characteristic of much East African publishing during the early post-colonial period. Numerous instances of fractured orthography, incomplete sentences, and other kinds of errors mar its text. Secondly, Okot's endnotes are woefully incomplete and in some cases simply do not relate directly to points he sought to make. Their single-entry character diminishes the cogency of Okot's argumentation and underscores the superficiality of his research. Thirdly, and more substantially, in the international debate over "Negritude" in which the Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor and others engaged during the 1950s and 1960s, Okot stood squarely on the side of believing in the essential, underlying unity of black African peoples. This conviction influenced his perception of the continent's indigenous religions. Fourthly, although Okot had extensive personal acquaintance with certain East African cultural and religious traditions, he does not appear to have possessed nearly the familiarity with North African, West African, or Southern African traditions that the declared scope of his study required. Consequently, he repeatedly appears to have been out of his depth, making generalisations that extend far beyond his evidence. Fifthly, Okot did not evince any familiarity with most of the extensive anthropological literature about African religions that existed by 1971 in languages other than English. Sixthly, and perhaps most significantly, Okot repeatedly allowed his cultural defensiveness to determine the shape of his argumentation by selecting material, often quite archaic, which supported his case while ignoring countervailing evidence. The overall tone of *African Religions in Western Scholarship* is consequently more blatantly polemical than scholarly.

Revealing his penchant for making unsubstantiated generalisations, Okot began his preface with an explanation of how his stint at Oxford in the early 1960s had sensitised him to condescending attitudes towards African peoples in Western scholarship, particularly in the corridors of British *academe*. "During the very first lecture in the Institute of Social Anthropology," he declared, "the teacher kept referring to Africans or non-Western peoples as barbarians, savages, primitives, tribes, etc." His protests were fruitless; "all the professors and lectures in the Institute, and those who came from outside to read papers, spoke the same insulting language."

Further injuring his sensitivities, Okot found in the Institute's library volumes and journal articles bearing such titles as "*Primitive Culture, Primitive Religion, The Savage Mind, Primitive Government, The Position of Women in Savage Societies, Institutions of Primitive Societies, Primitive Song, Sex and Repression in Savage Societies, Primitive Mentality*, and so on". These observations had led this post-graduate Ugandan to conclude that social anthropologists "all share the same view that the population of the world is divisible into two: one, their own, *civilized*, and the rest, *primitive*" (1971: vii-viii). Okot did not substantiate his case, however, by providing any details about these publications or the Oxonians who allegedly showered constant verbal abuse on him and his fellow Africans.

Instead, he asserted that social anthropology had been born in the nineteenth century to serve the interests of Western imperialism. His argument is a familiar one: this social science, "the handmaiden of colonialism", was created "to ensure efficient and effective control and exploitation" of colonised peoples and to provide an intellectually legitimate defence of imperialism by conceiving "the myth of the 'primitive' which justified the colonial enterprise." Moreover, the study, especially in the United Kingdom, of pre-industrial peoples was to complement the administrative skills of young Britons who were preparing to serve as colonial officials. Such organisations as the Société d'Ethnologie de Paris, founded in 1839, and the Ethnological Society, launched in London four years later, are presented as evidence in support of this contention. With specific regard to his topic, Okot contended that "the study of African religions was part and parcel of this exercise." The official religion of most European countries during the late nineteenth-century "Scramble for Africa" also collaborated with imperialism through missionary endeavours which had begun a few centuries earlier: "The spiritual force was provided by the Christian Faith which saw humanity as born under a curse, enslaved by the dark powers of cosmic evil and sinking even deeper under the burden of its own guilt" (1971: 1-4). Okot never explained such historical phenomena which did not fit his hypothetical framework, such as the proliferation of anthropology departments at universities in countries which did not participate directly in imperialism, anthropological studies of domestic topics, and the engagement of Oriental scholars in research in Africa.

The Underlying Issue of African Theism

Central to Okot's dispute with Mbiti are contrasting positions on the issue of theism in African religions. In *Concepts of God in Africa*, the Kenyan Anglican theologian surveyed literally hundreds of African belief systems from virtually every corner of the continent and concluded *inter alia* that however polytheistic many were, all included some notion of the divine as a "Supreme Being". Imposing the vocabulary of Christian theological categories, presumably for the benefit of his

readers in the United Kingdom and other countries which had Christian heritages, he found the "intrinsic attributes of God" in African religions to be, in very broad categories, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, transcendence, and immanence (Mbiti 1970: 3-18).

Crucial to an understanding of Mbiti's study is an awareness of the secondary importance he placed on concepts of divine *immanence* in African belief systems. The Lugbara tribe of north-western Uganda, he thought, had "the fullest written account" thereof, one which encompassed both the immanence and transcendence of God, the former of which was considered evil and dangerous. Mbiti also cited *inter alia* the religion of the Lango people of northern Uganda and the Turu of Tanzania as examples. "The commonest acknowledgment of God's immanence comes out in the various acts of worship, such as sacrifices, offerings, prayers, and invocations," Mbiti (1970: 16-18) summarised. "In this way, people affirm their belief that the transcendence of God who is above all, is also the immanent God who is close to all and to whom they can turn through these acts of worship." Mbiti carefully qualified his assessment of general categories of African percepts of the divine:

> For most of their life, many African peoples place God in the transcendental plane, making him seem remote from their daily affairs. But they know that he is immanent, being manifest in natural objects and phenomena, and they turn to him in acts of worship at any place and any time. Thus for them, God is in theory transcendent, but in practice immanent. (Mbiti 1970: 18)

Downplaying this relatively briefly stated but essential component of Mbiti's observations, Okot disagreed emphatically with what he believed was the Kenyan's overgeneralised finding, regarding it as not merely empirically untenable but also a lamentable terminal moraine of a long process of transmogrifying the supposedly down-to-earth, anthropomorphic Yahweh of Hebrew Scripture into a Hellenised abstraction characterised by attributes of infinity. Yet here, too, Okot clearly ventured far out of his depth. He was vaguely aware of an evolution in Biblical perceptions of God and found a vital step towards monotheism occurring only with the Babylonian captivity. "Jeremiah and Ezekiel seem to have invented the idea that all other deities except *JHVR* [*sic*] were false, and that he punishes idolatry," he asserted. Okot then painted in broad strokes the proliferation of Hellenistic thinking in the classical world and its impact on Judaism, declaring that before this foreign influence made itself known, "the Jewish religion was very simple, involving nothing metaphysical". In this context of ideational transformation, Christianity was born and immediately became enmeshed. To Okot, the "Essenne [*sic*]" Jesus was self-evidently an exponent of Hebraic and not Hellenistic culture, but his followers

insisted on distorting the simple faith of the Master in order to make it conform to the broader Hellenistic world. "The synthesis of Greek philosophy and Hebrew scripture was carried out by so-called Christian apologists, who, on the whole were non-Jewish Christian converts trained to think in Hellenic terms," declared Okot:

> The professional philosopher Justin Martyr 100-167 A.D.; Theophilus, who, writing about 190 A.D., was the first to use the concept of God as Trinity in Christian literature; the Anti-Gnostic fathers: Irenaeus b. 130 A.D. and Tertullian b. 160 A.D., Clement 150-213 A.D. and Origen d. 254 of the Alexandrian School, and St. Augustine 354-430 A.D. and others, were the men, who hellenized the conception of the Jewish deity *JHVR* into the Supreme Being, a Person or Trinity of Persons whose attributes were Omnipotence, Omnipresence, Eternity, etc.

It was in this intellectual environment, Okot (1971: 80-87) contended, that "Hellenization introduced into Christianity the ideas of immutability, stability, and impassibility as the central perfections of God. The Christian God was therefore described as the Supreme Being, because no other *being* could be greater than Him [*sic*]."

There is no need to refute Okot's entire argument; his perception smacks of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century patristic and New Testament scholarship which many studies by serious scholars had superseded long before the publication of *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. Not surprisingly, his brief bibliography evinces very little reading in more recent studies of the origins and early formation of the Christian faith. Emblematic of Okot's level of comprehension of the unfolding of pertinent scholarship, he could even assert–though again without adducing adequate evidence to cover his allegations–that "the killing of Jesus Christ is usually blamed on the Jews" (1971: 32 n. 3). It is nearly inconceivable that any reputable European or North American publishing company with a theologically astute editorial staff would have issued this part of Okot's book without excising that kind of statement.

Criticism of the Apostle Paul

Perhaps nowhere did Okot's hostility to Christianity and the deficiencies in his knowledge of that religion manifest themselves more transparently than in his sketchy consideration of the apostle Paul. Okot immediately tipped his hand by resorting to an *ad hominem* slur in introducing this pivotal first-century Christian missionary and theologian. The brief consideration of Paul occurs in a discussion

of the supposed contrast of Christian and African sexual mores. Okot identified him as "this ex-Pharisee who has been described as the 'ugly little Jew', [who] was a small man barely five feet tall, bow-legged, a chronic malarial patient with serious eye trouble." What Okot's source for these bizarre assertions was he did not disclose; centuries of New Testament scholarship have not yielded as much confirmed information about the great apostle as Okot claimed to know. Extending his calumny, Okot (1971: 115) declared that "we learn from *Acts*, chapter IX that he became a mental case for a short time, and on recovery, he joined the Christians whom he had formerly persecuted." This is either an unabashed instance of eisegesis or an attempt to discredit Paul by means of innuendo, for nowhere in Acts 9 (the chapter describing the conversion of Paul) is there any reference to his mental health.

Undeterred, Okot insisted that "Paul was a great woman hater," but the only bits of evidence he offered in support of this bizarre allegation are the injunction in I Corinthians 5:1 against committing sexual immorality and the Pauline advice that while Christians would ideally remain celibate as they await the Parousia, they could marry as a means of obviating fornication and that spouses then satisfy each other's sexual desires. Both of these texts he identified incorrectly (Okot 1971: 120 n. 19-20). Furthermore, Okot quoted selectively, choosing to ignore the segments of even these passages which counter his assertion that "Paul was a great woman hater," such as the Pauline exhortation that "a husband is not the master of his own body, but his wife is" (I Corinthians 7:4b). Instead, Okot conveniently cited only I Corinthians 7:1-2 and 8-9 and inserted an ellipsis in lieu of the arguably pro-female and pro-marriage advice. His argument is thus an unvarnished case of rhetorical and textual manipulation. Okot nevertheless juxtaposed "the Pauline sex hatred" with "Christ's more humane attitude to women" and lamented that the former became "the basis of Christian morality". He referred to the forgiving of the foot-anointing prostitute in Luke 7 and Jesus' words to Martha in Luke 10 as evidence of this acceptance of females, and he further pointed out that if Jesus had opposed the institution of marriage, he would hardly have attended the wedding at Cana in John 2. Okot's (1971: 116) conclusion about this comparison is succinct and presumptuous: "The women-hatred of Paul does not occur in the utterances of Jesus Christ." Okot did not attempt to deal with such passages as John 8:1-11 in which Jesus condemns sexual immorality.

If only the church had been more tolerant and less hostile to women, he argued, and not followed Paul in categorically condemning fornication, Christianity would be more appealing to Africans. "In most African societies, having sexual intercourse with married women by persons other than their husbands is strictly forbidden," he argued in another act of semantic legerdemain, "but unmarried women enjoy both unmarried and married men." In other words, according to Okot, in Africa that which is condemned as adultery in the Christian tradition is allowed for men

but not for women. His evidence for these generalisations is extremely thin and again typifies the weakness of his inductive method. Okot's evidence is limited to his own region: "In northern Uganda mothers encourage their daughters to sleep with their boy friends [*sic*] and test their manhood before marriage." Other African societies, including those which emphatically condemn and indeed punish fornication, did not have a part in Okot's argumentation. He nevertheless offered advice to the continent's moral guardians: "It is important for African leaders to consider whether sexual ethics in their countries should be based on St. Paul's prejudices against women and sex, or built on the African view-point which takes sex as a good thing" (Okot 1971: 117). Okot's words of counsel were published approximately a decade before the scourge of AIDS began to sweep across the continent, but long after high rates of teenage pregnancy and rampant population growth had begun to further shredded the already torn fabric of African societies. Nowhere did he evince the slightest comprehension of the relationships between sexual mores and social and medical woes.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, despite Okot's numerous errors of fact and interpretation, his reasoned critique is a noteworthy document which merits attention as evidence of a fairly well-educated African's hostility to what he perceived as the ancient perversion of Christianity in a way which made that faith less palatable than it was to fellow inhabitants of the continent. The difficulty of inculturating the Gospel can be traced to the origins of Christianity as a religion born in an evolving Hebraic milieu and almost immediately taken into the Hellenistic world. As the apostle Paul wrote in I Corinthians 1:23, the proclamation of Christ crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews, who demanded signs, and foolishness to Gentiles, who desired wisdom. What Okot obviously failed to account for more than 1,900 years later was the numerically impressive propagation of Christianity in Uganda and dozens of other African countries. On the other hand, it should be noted that not all of his compatriots accepted his sincerity. In a critique of Okot's *Song of Lawino* published two years before *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, Taban li Liyong opined that "Okot with a political temper is better than Okot the sceptic posing as a champion for the dying and dead customs he doesn't believe in." This fellow *littérateur* also bluntly questioned Okot's spiritual convictions: "Religion went with the throwing away of his former Christian name Jekeri" (Liyong 1969: 139, 155). For understanding the historical context of rapidly proliferating Christianity in Uganda, not only the voices of faithful converts but also those of indigenes who resisted and criticised the introduction of this faith need to be heard.

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