



The Empire Strikes Back at Lawino: How Oxford Failed Okot p'Bitek

By A. K. Kaiza



The weight of the book in my hands registered as alarm, perhaps signalling the symbolism of its intellectual heft, a book the likes of which I had never reviewed in my quarter century in the business.

I had never reacted to a book the way I did to *Lawino's People* on that day in a suburb of Kampala when it was handed to me by Kara Blackmore, one of the people at the London School of Economics who fought to ensure that Okot p'Bitek's Ph.D dissertation, deliberately failed by Oxford university in 1970 and since then hidden from view, would be pulled out and published.

In his introduction, Tim Allen, LSE Director of the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa, puts the matter bluntly:

Okot p'Bitek's D.Phil was actually failed by the University of Oxford in 1970. This was just three years before Talal Asad, another former student of Evans-Pritchard, published his well-known collection of articles by anthropologists, analysing and documenting ways in which anthropological thinking and practice had been affected by colonialism.

Before you have done any substantial reading, a disabling blow has already been delivered. What more can there be?

My own reaction had come before I had even read these words, and what that reaction was, perhaps holds some explanation:

I was instantly reminded of my time as a journalist at the turn of the new millennium, when I came across the most horrifying experience I remember. It was September 2004, and I had gone in a World Food Programme convoy delivering aid to Pajule camp for the internally displaced in northern Uganda. When I asked why five graves had been freshly dug side by side, I was told that no one had died yet, but that the daily death rate in that camp was roughly five.

Killing northerners had become a sort of sport. You tried to explain to all you came across that the *modus operandi* of the Museveni government was tribalistic, orgiastic murder and they jeered and said you northerners deserve it. You further explained that these same methods will later be turned against you and they said they were all Bantu people after all, the same people. To then watch the rising groundswell of southern activism against the regime after the end of the northern war and the disillusionment with the regime, when some of the dark methods the army learned in the north began to be applied in the south, is to feel sad at the failure to properly understand in time, who and what it was they were dealing with. It was a very dangerous time, and as a journalist, you knew that once you stuck your neck out to write about that war, it was the end of your career, and within only a year after writing the story, I learnt I would soon lose my job as journalist at the paper I worked at back then.

I had moved on from the dangerous years of the war, and now here was a book whipping my attention back directly to the war.

As for the northern war, there was always much talk about it being “a complex war”, but like all such talk, you suspected that those who made such statements really meant to say that very powerful governments, too powerful to name directly in small regional newspapers, had a hand in the conflict. Going to northern Uganda, even understanding the direct culpability of the Museveni power agenda, had felt like half-understanding the causes, with the result that a refulgent, odious, and inexplicable air of conspiracy hung over the topic.

Was this tome, weighing in at over 600 pages, going to reveal something?

All of the above may not be important, but the very existence of the book was already a statement. By publishing it, the London School of Economics academics were directly accusing Oxford University of censorship, and of deliberately destroying the academic career of one of the most pre-eminent African writers.

I understood that my reaction to the book stemmed from my own interest as a writer. But outside of that, very few people would understand why its publication mattered. Sure, the matter of two important scholar silenced by the British government, and by Oxford University, grabs attention. Otherwise, it is a matter that hacks back to a bygone era, a time when Britain mattered and which time is receding beyond living memory. So why were this group of scholars bringing back to life matters of academic pedigree that, despite the scandalous story, still belonged in the heady days of decolonisation? One big answer is that Okot is a household name. But Frank Girling? You would have had to have scholarly interest in northern Uganda, even as an academic, for the name to mean something.

Was this not breaking some sort of gentleman’s agreement by so public an execution of a fellow British university? There you have the story before you—the liberal/progressive scholars of a liberal/progressive university having a go at the mother of all conservative institutions.

The connection to our own times is perhaps the direct link in the publication of these materials to the zeitgeist, and it follows on from the Rhodes-Must-Fall campaign that has seen statues of odiously racist, right-wing heroes toppled, exposing how deeply rooted in slavery and imperialism many otherwise august western institutions are. In this connection, which is a very direct link to Oxford's less than stellar history, this book is hence not just about colonialism and imperialism; it is about the attempt to cover up the crimes of colonialism and imperialism.

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The more pedantic explanation is that the copyright to Girling's materials, which belonged to Her Majesty's government, had expired after 50 years, and therefore it could be reprinted.

Otherwise, there is little doubt that this affair deeply damages the standing of Oxford; it more than deserves this bloody goring from Tim et al. Oxford, the recipient of endowments from more slave ships that sailed under the Union Jack, than any other university you can think of, and one that educated nearly every colonial governor, remains so deeply invested in its alternative reality that it refuses to take down the statue of Rhodes from Oriel College.

Girling

He was an anthropologist. I first came across his name a long time ago whilst foraging for scholarly material on northern Uganda. Within the small, northern Uganda intellectual circles in which he is known, I have often heard it said that it was he that solidified the name "Acholi" to the group that had not commonly called itself that prior to British creation of tribes. But this claim had always rung hollow. The British delimited communities geographically and put an end to the fluidity that had previously seen clans absorbed and dispersed into different language groups. Local historians dismiss the social reality of tribes, and speak instead of language groups. They say the British froze social fluidity because constant migration was not good for cotton and coffee production and made forced taxation a headache. All these had happened long before Girling was even born.

What I was not prepared for was the extent to which the British government and the powerful universities of that country went to ensure that Girling's career was destroyed. Given the self-declared righteousness of Britain on the international stage, so Stalinist an act, practiced with abandon but never reported by the BBC for whom tyranny only happened abroad, is still shocking.

Okot

It was not new to me that Oxford had failed Okot's dissertation. The late Professor Akiiki Mujaju, whom I became close to at Makerere, and who was a contemporary of Okot's, had told me about the matter. But it was unclear. It seemed that no one saw the offending dissertation. Okot himself had died tragically and young. It was speculated within academic and literary circles that what Oxford had done to him had so demoralised him that it also disorganised his literary output. Might he have published other works as powerful as *Song of Lawino* had the university treated him better?

The beginnings

Like all sagas, this one had a long and surprising, highly connected beginning. The story of Girling's sordid treatment starts with colonial Britain moving to directly incorporate social research as a legislatively created and government-funded undertaking. Like all good sagas, there is an unpleasant ideology at play to this one; there is a cabal of dangerous men with criminal

backgrounds, and to top it, an evil empire hiding dark secrets. You might almost be describing an HBO television series, rather than how such bodies as the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) came into existence.

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The story begins in the late 1930s, at the very dawn of the war, and is not disconnected from it. This was a repositioning of the place of anthropology in colonial affairs. Much as the discipline has been closely associated with colonialism, it was not as central as it might seem. Within the colonial British government, anthropology had never had the prestige of say Biology, or Botany or Geology. Colonial officials in general held anthropologists at a distance, regarding them as difficult individuals with their own “personal axe to grind”, as British Secretary of State in the late 1930s, Malcolm McDonald, put it.

They had a tendency to go native.

A paradox hence; maligned by anti-colonialists, held in suspicion by colonial officials, can one say that anthropologists made colonialism worse than it already was? It would be far-fetched to assume that fascists and racists first consulted anthropology texts before making up their minds. Rather, the monies for anthropology research had come, curiously, from American philanthropists—chiefly the Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Corporation. As various scholars suggest, the decision by the British colonial office to consider direct support to social science research may have been from a natural progress in colonial affairs. The empire had by the 1930s been consolidated and reached its fullest extent. Natives were now not seen as just dark-skinned hostiles, but a part of the state. The lobbying impact of the American social research council in creating the New Deal had been immense. They had had data to influence Congress. The British drive to create a welfare system lacked reliable data.

Various sources describe the fascinating meeting at which the foundations for the proposed council were discussed. For the empire, and Africa in particular, the nascent council considered Makerere and Achimota.

Who else but Lord Frederick Lugard himself to be present at the first meeting? The other imperial figure at the meeting, whose own reputation is not fondly remembered in India, was William Hailey, also Lord Hailey, Governor of Punjab in the 1920s. It was as if Darth Sidious and Darth Vader were in one room: It is 1939, and the skies are already darkened with heralds of a war that those present understood would shake their empire so there was some urgency in the agenda. If as a statement that social science was colonial conquest by other means, you could not make up such a meeting. Although it would not be until the 1960s that the council would eventually receive the government funding it demanded, its ideas were put to work straight away.

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The council came late to the game, for by then, anthropology had already made its fortunes. After all, by this time, Bronislaw Malinowski, a leading figure in the development of Anthropology, was at the dusk of his career and would die a couple of years after this meeting.

In Uganda itself, pioneering work had already been done a generation earlier, with such works as *The Baganda: An Account of their Native Customs and Beliefs* (1911) by Rev. John Roscoe, and *The Lango: A Nilotic Tribe of Uganda* (1923) by J.H. Driberg.

Coming so late in the empire's lifespan, what would have been the purpose? Had enough not been written already? Adjusting for the fact that by 1939, no part of the empire had broken off yet, was this perhaps an attempt to respond to what were seen as the more progressive models of the USSR and the USA, which were not based on imperial colonialism but a kind of social and economic "scientificism"? A project of consolidation? Even back then, there was much talk of "development", in the same manner that the World Bank and IMF speak of it today, a would-be positive term that in reality often means promoting land grabbing, breaking up of communities, punitive labour laws and growing inequalities in favour of settlers. The development of a colony is not good news for natives, then or now.

John Bull Sucks up to Uncle Sam

An old line trotted out to explain British attempts to clean up its colony act was the other matter of the British government's relationship with the USA. At the advent of the Second World War, the British were skittish about getting their American cousins into the war (favourably on their side). They were not going to beat the Germans by themselves (even with the Americans in, it still remained for the Red Army to bring down the Wehrmacht), but the optics did not look good that, with an empire as vast as the British one, you could not do it yourselves. The USA had not taken the path of overseas colonialism, and opinion in Washington sneered at this European predilection for colonies. Colonialism was looking outdated, no more than a matter of beating up natives. The British were anxious to prove to the Americans that their edition of colonialism was meant for the good of the natives, but the files contained no data to create a coherent development plan. Was this turn in attitude a PR exercise in getting American help against the Nazis? At the time, it pays to remember, Soviet socialism, which was militantly anti-colonial, was visibly more progressive with its "five-year" plan models and it was Western Europe that looked antiquated.

A good man in Africa

It is how Frank Girling arrived in Gulu, as part of the army of government-funded anthropologists fanning out into the continent. At roughly the same time, Okot was getting out of Gulu, going out into the empire.

Girling got down to work with great vigour, a conscientious man out to deliver on his commission and his profession. The discipline, to the extent that anthropology could be so called, had developed a fairly structured approach and presentation. There were the requisite spatial establishing to make, of the geography, the cultural and linguistic locations. Some description of the arts, the industry, political structures, birth, youth, marriage and death rituals of the natives. Where did these natives come from, how did they describe themselves to others and who were their neighbours, what larger groupings did their culture and language belong in? Girling, like all anthropologists, had to answer these questions in his study.

He has arrived in Acholi 50 years after the start of the colonial era. He has come, as he quickly realises, not to carry out an ethnographic study, but a forensic examination. He has come to study, not the Acholi, but the impact of British colonisation of the Acholi. He realizes that he has been drafted as a co-conspirator in crime.

He is a very highly educated man. His intellectual orientation is keener than the lazy, racially self-satisfied fair of the Roscoe of half a century before him. He is a materialist whose understanding of

history demands he draw his conclusions from the economic, the interactions between men, and their movement of value across class segments to make an explanation of what is happening.

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Girling's conclusion is that the policies adopted since the inception of British rule in Acholi have greatly destabilised the society. He sets the beginning of this phase from the days of the first colonial administrator, John Rutherford Parkin Postlethwaite, accounts of whose actions make him a veritable Mr Kurtz, who decided to uproot a significant portion of Acholi society from their ancestral lands and resettle them in patterns deemed conducive to the production of cotton for the mills of Manchester. Girling examines how this, along with what he euphemistically calls "half-free labour", and forced taxation, have upturned the social and political structures of the land. To boot, succession lines have been stopped and "commoners" are now in charge. The coming of the East African Railway, the industrial town of Jinja in the south, the coffee and sugar plantations of the south, the preference by the British for northerners to serve in the army, prisons and police, have torn the men away from their wives and children. The able-bodied have been taken away to work for Europeans and Asians and little left for Acholi.

This sort of treatment was very common throughout the European empires, but in the case of Uganda, Acholi seems to have been set out for unique dismemberment in ways that say, the Baganda were not. The Acholi Girling runs into question why the British destroyed their political systems but left intact those of the south. There is a racial hierarchy in operation in Acholi, as in all of the colony, with the untouchable whites, the economically favoured Asians. Black people are fair game, as one Gujarati trader openly admits; "we cheat Africans", but goes on to say white people are not different. They have to bribe British officials from time to time.

An unflattering image of British colonialism arises. Girling has walked into a Graham Greene novel, with its tight, gossipful world of colonial masters, with their African "boys", their mosquito boots and legal privileges. Colonial hierarchies are in full force. The rulers don't notice black people, who throughout remain faceless.

The Empire Strikes back

The report is scandalous. If this is what the Colonial Social Science Research Council had bargained for, they had not taken seriously enough the view of the Secretary of State, Malcolm MacDonald, that some anthropologists had "a personal axe to grind".

Girling was a Marxist theorist who did not hide his communist party membership. The report extravagantly affirms the sneering words of the Soviet Union and the USA against European colonialism.

If, as an ideological axe-grind, the prescience of Girling's warning that British policy in Acholi would be disastrous, would need stronger imageries to counteract what was to follow a generation later, long after the British have left Uganda. We may infer, but it takes special obduracy to deny that the emergence of Joseph Kony, and the turmoil that would grip Acholi society for a generation, had its roots in the policies of Postlethwaite.

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Her Majesty's government would have none of it. Girling was forced to cut out the damaging chapters of his conclusion. He was forced to edit his work to weed out evidence of British culpability in the destruction of Acholi social systems. What was eventually published was a greatly watered down report, putting emphasis on the ways in which "development" could be achieved.

The ensuing mistreatment of Girling, which ensured his substantial intellect would not have an impact, and his career not go far, did not change his beliefs. To the end of his life, he remained a Marxist, displaying the steadfast courage of the communists without whom the war against Nazism would not have been won. He had in his younger years, volunteered to fight against fascism in Spain after all.

A Black man in Cecil Rhodes backyard

Okot was not a Marxist. But for the system, he was something worse; he was a black man, a native. His presence and his choice to study anthropology at an advanced level were replete with contradictions. On the one hand, the foundation of the exploitative system on which Oxford drew its stipend depended upon the unpaid labour of men like himself. But Oxford was a centre of civilisation, an idea that did not theoretically gel with slavery as its endowments. If anthropology had thrived on a racist assumption about the darker races, how was a black man going to become an anthropologist? The result might have been seen from a mile away; it was a foregone conclusion that a clash was brewing. Okot's work on the thesis was always going to be a repudiation of the very field he was studying, and so it emerges thus. He had the gall to call out the entire heritage of white scholarship on Acholi/Luo, for getting it wrong.

The work he does is staggeringly exhaustive. He is studying northern Bunyoro-Kitara. But he cannot delimit himself geographically, for he quickly discovers that the ethnic boundaries as spelt out by colonial policy don't make sense. There is barely any such boundary between the Luo of his cohort and Bunyoro-Kitara. This becomes a source of friction between himself and his supervisors. This is where the two scholars converge. Both were supervised by the same man, Evans-Pritchard, albeit in different decades, but whose role in the ostracism of the two men would be interesting to know in detail.

Okot's dissertation is positively dripping with disdain for all the big anthropology names that have come before him. He calls out an important source on Luo studies, Joseph Pasquale Crazzolaro, for laziness. He refuses to acknowledge the preponderance of "tribe", dismissing the idea of "Acholi", and insisting on seeing the continuum of these concatenated societies with the same language and political ties. He is generally affirming the African version of Africa, which is a political statement in itself.

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For himself, the irony wreathing Okot and his Ph.D attempt brims with drama he himself might have smiled at. He already carried degrees. He had studied law at Aberystwyth University. He was a big name in world literature. He had been a footballer; now he wants to become Dr Okot. But of anthropology? For one of the lesser beings to self-gaze is comical enough in itself. As has been said of the legions of black anthropologists (an oxymoronic enough construct), Okot was studying himself, observing his own peculiarity, his own beastliness, self-othering himself, like being your own dentist, like auto-erotica or self-disembowelment.

Okot's work vigorously repudiated the double-faced act of imperial colonialism. But he is subtle, and capable enough that he does not glorify Africanness. You cannot accuse him of something as crude as that. He places his people's experiences in a realistic dialectic, pointing out ironies, discontinuities and historical contradictions inherent in his own people's polity. It is a first class work of scholarliness. By and of itself, Ph.D theses have not often been so well written.

Deconstructionist

His timing was wrong. Decolonisation was in full swing. Losing an empire was humiliating enough. But the 1960s is seeing an ever-increasing number of natives acquiring doctorates, writing books and making films directly challenging centuries of the western canon. Deconstruction and structuralism are questioning the foundations of such universities as Oxford. We can only imagine how the colleges of Oxford felt besieged by the likes of Okot.

But you would have to be close enough to both Acholi and Bunyoro colonial experiences to glean something darker in both the British government and Oxford's hands in the proscription of Okot and Girling. Okot's study of Bunyoro-Kitara and Acholi was coming too close to a scene of crime; the British had committed a horrendous genocide in the very locale that Okot was studying and had his dissertation been approved, how long would it take before others began to ask what the British had done in Bunyoro?

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