

Introduction  
Colonial Encounters in Acholiland and  
Oxford: The Anthropology of Frank  
Girling and Okot p'Bitek

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The work of Frank Girling on the Acholi of Uganda and the prose works of Okot p'Bitek about Acholi customs should be recognised as seminal. Written at the time when the classic texts were being published about other Ugandan groups, such as the Alur and the Lugbara, they are the most significant publications on Acholi ways of life from the late Protectorate and early independence era. Both scholars wrote their Doctorate of Philosophy theses as students at Oxford, and were both taught by Professor E.E. Evans-Pritchard (one of the founding figures of British Social Anthropology). Yet their ethnographic publications are commonly ignored. The problem is not that they are lacking in perception or are hard to read – on the contrary.

In the case of Frank Girling, it is obvious why his work is neglected. Although he managed to secure his D.Phil in 1952, he had fallen foul of the Protectorate authorities in Uganda, failed to find an academic job in an anthropology department, and to date there has never been a widely available version of *The Acholi of Uganda* (1960). Moreover, Girling himself became disillusioned with the kind of anthropological approach his African work represented, and openly disparaged it as a neo-colonial product. Some international researchers focussing on the Acholi region appear not to have read it, and it is largely unknown to Acholi people themselves. Scholars based at Gulu University, located in the largest town in the Acholi region, have told me that they have never heard of his book. One lecturer of anthropology was astonished when I told her about it.

In contrast, the overlooking of Okot p'Bitek's anthropological contributions is harder to understand. He is a world-famous figure. One of the most celebrated of all African creative writers. There is a painting of him on the wall of the cultural centre in Gulu (Figure 1, 'The painting of Okot p'Bitek on the wall of the TAKS Cultural Centre in Gulu', a building that was once the golf course clubhouse, a preserve of Europeans), where he is celebrated as an Acholi hero, next to Matthew Lukwiya, the selfless medical doctor who saved so many lives in the ebola outbreak of 2000 before becoming a victim himself. Yet, p'Bitek's non-fictional works on the Acholi people have never been given the status they deserve. To a large extent they have been lost in the enthusiasm for his extraordinary poems, and copies of his academic books have been hard to find in Kampala bookshops, let alone elsewhere. However, there is another factor.

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.<sup>1</sup> The authors in Asad's book argued that British anthropology had been drawn into providing access to cultural and

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<sup>1</sup> T. Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Humanity Books, University of Virginia, 1973.



Figure 1: The painting of Okot p'Bitek by Ivan Okot on the wall of the TAKS Cultural Centre in Gulu

historical information about the societies Europeans had progressively dominated. This had generated a certain kind of universal understanding, thereby reinforcing the inequalities in capacity between the European and the non-European worlds, including between Europeanised elites and the 'traditional' masses in colonial territories. These were views that had been robustly espoused by p'Bitek for many years. By the late 1960s he was angry and defiant, even if his submitted D.Phil thesis itself is moderate in tone. Its rejection by the Oxford establishment underlines things that Asad and his colleagues were soon to highlight. It was even more of a casualty of British anthropology's colonial encounter than Girling's book, which, in the end, was published, bizarrely, by Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

The present volume brings together Girling's *Acholi of Uganda* (this is the text of his 1952 Oxford D.Phil, minus edits that were demanded by the Colonial Office – which are included as an Appendix), with the book that is, in fact, the text of Okot p'Bitek's 1970 D.Phil, *Religion of the Central Luo* (Figure 2, 'Okot p'Bitek and Girling's theses, taken at Oxford, December 2017'), as well as the short book p'Bitek wrote at around the same time, in which he makes his critical views of British anthropology very clear, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. In addition, two of p'Bitek's essays are included: 'Acholi Love', which was first published in 1964, and 'African Aesthetics – The Acholi Example', which was published posthumously in 1986. It is hoped that republishing these works

together provides some useful insights into representations of the Acholi people at the time the British Empire was disintegrating, and will reveal how important the descriptions and interpretations of Girling and p'Bitek are for anyone who wants to understand what is happening today in this very troubled region of Africa.

The choice of title, *Lawino's People*, adopts the name of Okot p'Bitek's most popular fictional character, an Acholi woman called Lawino. In his long poem, *Song of Lawino*, p'Bitek uses her to express dismay about the changes occurring in Acholi ways of life. Originally written in Luo (the Acholi language) during the last years of British rule, *Song of Lawino* is a denunciation of what p'Bitek saw as the destructive cultural effects of colonialism. The whole work is a lament by a proud Acholi woman, who denounces the behaviour of her husband, Ocol. His education and attempts to copy European ways have made him become 'A stump'. He has learned to despise the customs of his own people:

A certain man/Has no millet field, He lives on borrowed foods./He borrows the clothes he wears/And the ideas in his head/And his actions and behaviour/Are to please somebody else...<sup>2</sup>

In a companion poem, *Song of Ocol*, p'Bitek responds as her husband, dismisses her complaints and insults her. Their argument evokes the world in which Okot p'Bitek grew up, the world described by Frank Girling at the end of the 1940s.

It is not my intention to suggest that the arguments that p'Bitek puts forward so passionately through Lawino set out a model to emulate. His female protagonist is a more appealing personality than Ocol, but her vision of how Acholi people should ideally behave is not shared by many dynamic Acholi women I know. They are perhaps more likely to sympathise with some of Ocol's aspirations, particularly with respect to education. Also, Okot p'Bitek could be vulgar, and arguably, both offensive and salacious. His views and modes of expression have always been controversial. He was a provocateur in his poems and in his prose writings too. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Laruni observes in her recent historical account of Acholiland from 1950–85, the two characters of Lawino and Ocol 'poignantly depicted the effect of colonialism on the Acholi cultural and political landscape' at the eve of Uganda's independence.<sup>3</sup>

As far as I know, Okot p'Bitek and Frank Girling never met, although p'Bitek did consult Girling's book when he was studying in Oxford. I did not meet either of them myself, however I spoke to Girling once on the phone in 1985. By that time, his interest in the research he had carried out in Uganda had waned, and maybe some aspects of it were things he did not want to revisit. Sadly, p'Bitek died three years before, the same year I travelled to Uganda and visited Makerere University in the half-hope of meeting him. I suspect they would have rather en-

<sup>2</sup> O. p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> E. Laruni, *From the Village to Entebbe: The Acholi of Northern Uganda and the Politics of Identity, 1950–1985*, PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2014: 32.





*Figure 2: Okot p'Bitek and Girling's theses, photograph taken at Oxford, December 2017*

joyed each other's company. They wrote in very different styles, and would have had arguments, but they had much in common – not least an antipathy for European attitudes to Africans, very mixed views about the teaching of anthropology

at Oxford, and the experience of being forced out of their positions in Uganda. Okot p'Bitek lived for years in exile, while his country went through the horrors of Idi Amin's rule, and the Uganda he returned to for a short period before he died was hardly peaceful. Girling only passed away in 2004, aged 86, so would have been aware of the terrible things that have happened in Acholiland since the mid-1980s.

### *The Acholi*

Efforts have been made to outline an oral history of some kind of pre-Acholi identity dating back to the early eighteenth century, but a challenge with doing so is that there was so much chaos in this region of the Upper Nile from the 1860s.<sup>4</sup> First, there were slave and ivory traders and marauding private armies. Then came European and American mercenaries and adventurers leading Turco-Egyptian forces to conquer the territory for a greater Egypt, and install Nubi Muslim soldiers in forts. They include Sir Samuel Baker, who joined slavers to the region in the 1860s, accompanied by Florence, the slave-girl he had rescued from a harem auction in Transylvania and whom he later married and became Lady Baker when Queen Victoria knighted her husband. In the 1870s, Baker returned, again with Florence, now in the pay of the Khedive of Egypt, ostensibly to end slavery and establish Egyptian rule of the Upper Nile. However, Baker's own position on slavery was, to say the least, compromised. He observed that:

the results of emancipation have proved that the negro does not appreciate the blessings of freedom, nor does he show the slightest feeling of gratitude to the hand that broke the rivets of his fetters . . . he only regards the anti-slavery movement as a proof of his own importance.<sup>5</sup>

Although Baker subsequently made grand claims about his achievements, his second expedition turned into a fiercely contested occupation, based at fortified settlements, such as the one at Patiko, not far from present-day Gulu. After he and his wife left, his Nubi troops were left under the command of Isaak Eduard Schnitzer, known as Emin Pasha, a German convert to Islam, and were cut off by the Mahdist uprising in Sudan. In 1886, Emin was rescued by a relief expedition, led by Henry Stanley, which reached the Nile from the Congo, and was characterised by extraordinary cruelty. One of Stanley's officers, James Sligo Jameson (who was heir

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<sup>4</sup> R. Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi Before 1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); J.P. Crazzolara, *The Lwoo* (Verona: Missionari Comboniani, 1950/51&54); Onyango-ku-Odongo and J.B. Webster, eds, *The Central Lwo during the Aconya*, Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1967; T. Allen, 'Histories and Contexts: using pasts in the present on the Sudan/Uganda border', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library University Library of Manchester* 73 (3) (1991).

<sup>5</sup> S. Baker, *The Albert N'yanza: Great Basin of the Nile*, London: Macmillan, 1866: ii, 350.

to the Irish whisky manufacturer), reportedly purchased a 10-year-old girl with six handkerchiefs, because he wanted to record the way in which she was hacked to death. He later complained that it all happened so quickly that he had no time to sketch the incident.

These various invasions of what was to become Acholiland had devastating effects. Large numbers of people were abducted as porters and concubines, population displacement was on a huge scale and new diseases were introduced, including infections that severely affected livestock. By the end of the century, at the time that the administrations of the Protectorate of Uganda and the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of the Sudan were being established, groups of migrants were clustered around various warlords for relative protection, and they were not just armed with spears. Guns had become widely available. Over 5,000 were forcibly collected from what was being established as the Acholi District of the Protectorate in 1913.<sup>6</sup>

Given the scale of the chaos and violence in the late nineteenth century, making assessments of what political organisation, social life and ethnic identity were like before then is a matter of speculation. Both Girling and Okot p'Bitek recognise that the notion of 'the Acholi' itself (or as Okot p'Bitek preferred: 'the Acoli') is a new concept, linked to the establishing of European administrations. They acknowledge the value of oral history, but more as ways of interpreting the present with reference to ideas from the past than as a way of constructing an accurate chronological account. Girling was aware of the oral historical work on Luo-speaking groups by Crazzolaro in the 1940s and 1950s, and collected many clan genealogies himself, but was sceptical of ascribing estimated dates to generations.<sup>7</sup> Okot p'Bitek goes further, arguing that several of Crazzolaro's ethnographic interpretations were wrong. He was also critical of the publications of subsequent oral historians, rejecting some of the findings of Bethwell Ogot, while his later essays are overtly dismissive.<sup>8</sup> In 'Time and History' he writes:

The African of tradition is not much bothered about the distant past. History to him is strictly a functional business. He remembers the past which is meaningful: that is, those events and personalities that explain, make meaningful and justify the present...<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> V. Pellegrini, *Lok pa Acoli Macon* (A history of the Acholi), Gulu Catholic Mission, Gulu 1949: 196.

<sup>7</sup> F. Girling, *The Acholi of Uganda*, HMSO, 1960: 211–12; J.P. Crazzolaro, *The Lwoo*, Parts 1–3, Verona: Museum Combonianum, 1950–53.

<sup>8</sup> B. Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967. Okot p'Bitek must also have also been familiar with publications such as Onyango-ku-Odongo and J.B. Webster, eds, *The Central Lwo During the Aconya*, Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1967 – but he does not cite them in *Religion of the Central Luo*, 1971. However, he criticises Crazzolaro and Ogot towards the end of the Introduction and at various other points.

<sup>9</sup> O. p'Bitek, 'Time and History', in *Artist, the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*, Heinemann Kenya, 1986: 42.



While in 'The African Historian' he asserts:

the history of the books exists only in the graveyard called the library ... this type of history is not lived by men in society. It has no impact, influence or importance for the living of life here and now ...<sup>10</sup>

Like Girling, p'Bitek accepts that in the past there were numerous chiefdoms and clan groups, some of which could trace patrilineal descent over several generations, but it was the settling of the population, and the gazetting of languages that established what became viewed as 'tribes'. With respect to the languages, this involved some amalgamating of closely related dialects, and sometimes rather arbitrary classifications. The language spoken by the Acholi, Alur, Langi and other groups in Uganda might be classified as Luo (or Lwo), a language, or group of languages, that is also spoken by groups in South Sudan, such as the Shilluk and Anuak, and by groups in Kenya and Tanzania, many of whom are actually called Luo. However, British officials decided to separate all the languages of these populations, and give them distinct 'tribal' names, even when their customs were similar, as is the case with the Acholi and Alur. Although he is inconsistent on the matter, p'Bitek wanted to resist this labelling, viewing it as a colonial device invented for purposes of control.

At the start of *Religion of the Central Luo*, p'Bitek suggests that the name Jo-pa-Luo (the Luo people) is really a more appropriate way to refer to all the various Luo-speaking groups, and he makes connections between their terms and customs. However, he nevertheless uses the labels of Alur, Chope, Lango and Shilluk in the book, and most of his actual examples are drawn from the Acholi. Thus, he acknowledges that he too cannot escape the colonial imprint on African identities, even if he leaves aside the notion of 'tribe' itself. He makes this clear in *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, where he vigorously objects to the use of the 'tribe' concept in 'colonial orientated' anthropology, but cannot avoid the Acholi/Acoli designation:

In British anthropology, the term "tribe" has acquired a restricted technical meaning, that is, the widest territorially defined politically independent unit. At the turn of the century Acholiland was divided into thirty politically independent units. But those were not called "tribes". They were known as "chiefdoms". It was the new political unit set up by the British colonial administration which was labelled Acoli District, which became known as the Acoli tribe.<sup>11</sup>

Girling concurs, including about the setting aside of 'tribe' as a category. One of the strengths of his book is that he makes excellent use of the historical materials

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<sup>10</sup> O. p'Bitek, 'The African Historian', in *Artist, the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*, Heinemann Kenya, 1986: 46.

<sup>11</sup> O. p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1970: 12, 13.

available to him, and comments on them perceptively and thoughtfully. On the term 'Acholi' he writes:

The name by which they are now known has come into use only within the last thirty years or so, and its derivation is uncertain. Previously they were known either as the 'Gang' or the 'Shuli'. The former term was used by Europeans approaching the area from the South, and is probably related to word for village (or home). The latter was used by slave and ivory traders coming from the north, and was used by, among others, Samuel Baker, the Victorian explorer. It may have been derived from the name from the linguistically-related Shilluk.

At the time of his research, Girling found that some Acholi called themselves 'Lwo', but seemed to have generally accepted their new name. He also made his own guess about its origin:

it seems possible that 'Acholi', like names of very many other people, is derived from the local word meaning 'man': '*an lacoo-li*' means 'I am a man' . . .<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps he was right, but maybe there is an even simpler explanation. In 1899 Matyr, one of the first British officers to survey the area wrote a detailed report in which he referred to a tribe called 'the Choli'.<sup>13</sup> Given that he was traveling with light skinned African assistants from the South, it is possible that this term was derived from *col*, the Luo word for 'black' (which is pronounced 'chol').

In any case, the name Acholi was relatively well established by the second decade of the twentieth century. So much so that H. H. Kelly, the Sudanese government's representative who surveyed the boundary with Uganda to the East of the Nile in 1913, could use an expression like 'true Acholi'. That is what he called the chiefdoms of Obbo and Pajok. He knew the border should have been drawn to the north of their lands, but was unhappy about it. Kelly explained his reasoning in his diary:

It will be a pity for the Sudan not to get the progressive people of Farajok and Obbo who with their fondness for clothes and such marks of civilization as brass bands would be worth having, but I fail to see at present how we can cut them off from the remaining Acholi . . .<sup>14</sup>

In the event, the Ugandan Protectorate officer who joined him on the expedition had no interest in the task allotted to them, and so Kelly placed the border to the South, and a substantial Acholi population was incorporated into what is now South Sudan.

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<sup>12</sup> F. K. Girling, *The Acholi of Uganda*, HMSO, 1960: 1–2.

<sup>13</sup> Foreign Office Correspondence, 7 August 1899, section 2, Entebbe Secretariat Archive, Uganda.

<sup>14</sup> H. H. Kelly, Treck Diary, quoted in T. Allen, 'Histories and Contexts: using pasts in the present on the Sudan/Uganda border', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library University Library of Manchester*, 73 (3) (1991): 83–84.

In 1950, soon after Okot p'Bitek graduated from the High School in Gulu, Girling describes the 'Acholi' as:

a nation of agriculturalist and stock breeders numbering approximately a quarter of a million. Their territory extends over about fifteen thousand square miles to the East of the Nile . . . . The greater part of this territory – some eleven thousand square miles in fact – lies within the present borders of Uganda. The remainder lies over the border in the Sudan.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Girling estimated that about 215,000 Acholis lived in Uganda, and about 35,000 in Sudan. Currently, the number of Ugandan Acholis is estimated at 1.2 million, and the number of South Sudanese Acholis is estimated at about 45,000.<sup>16</sup> Exact figures are hard to estimate, because there remains ambiguity about ethnic boundaries, especially as other socially similar populations speak Luo languages and there has been a great deal of migration both into and out of the area. Occasionally, there is talk of people being classified as 'Acholi A' and 'Acholi B', reflecting these matters, but that kind of designation is impossible to sustain in practice.

Population displacements north and south over the border have been frequent especially since the 1960s. Initially, this was for paid work. Acholi labourers worked in the fields of Buganda, and helped construct Kampala. Other Acholis joined the police or army. Later, the migrations were more the consequence of the wars waging north and south of the border. There is, unsurprisingly, a large Acholi diaspora, the descendants of waves of refugees. In the past thirty years, the scale of upheaval has been extreme. There was intense fighting between government and rebel forces from the mid-1980s, and much of the population was forced into internal displacement camps or into urban locations in the 1990s and 2000s, ostensibly to provide security from the Lord's Resistance Army. Since 2006, thousands of Acholi families have been on the move again, as the camps were dismantled, and not all have returned to their former farms. At the time of writing in 2017, thousands of South Sudanese Acholis have fled across the border into Uganda following attacks by South Sudan government forces.

In this context, returning to the years at the end of the Uganda Protectorate can seem like a lost era of tranquillity. The Acholi past is sometimes made to seem like that in competing claims about how social life today should be enhanced with reference to cultural heritage and customary forms of dispute resolution. A rather romantic conception of what life was like imbues many statements and reports by religious leaders, aid workers, traditional authorities and researchers. The crowning of an Acholi Paramount chief in 2005 and creation of a council of chiefs is one example, and the emphasis on local rituals as part of reconciliation processes

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<sup>15</sup> F. Girling, *The Acholi of Uganda*, HMSO, 1960: 1.

<sup>16</sup> These estimates come from the latest Uganda and South Sudan census data. They do not take into account the recent movement of thousands of Acholi refugees from South Sudan to Uganda.

is another. There has been a great deal of, what Hobsbawm and Ranger termed, ‘the invention of tradition’, with support from external agencies.<sup>17</sup> Some of this may have positive social qualities, but the work of Girling and p’Bitek remind us that things were by no means so stable and predictable in the past, and that life at the end of the Protectorate and in the early years of independence was full of contradictions and tensions. Indeed, arguments about colonial pasts and post-colonial futures that p’Bitek rehearsed with himself at that time, in the guises of Lawino and Ocol, have contemporary relevance. Meanwhile, his neglected anthropological studies and those of Frank Girling provide a revealing perspective on a crucial period of transition. It was a period fraught with dilemmas and challenges, but also full of hope and expectations.

### *Frank Girling 1917–2004*

When Frank Girling arrived to live among the Acholi in Uganda at the end of the 1940s he stood out from other anthropologists of that period. He had joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1935, aged 18, and had fought against fascism in Spain in the 1930s. That is where he met his wife, Elizabeth, a fellow volunteer, while taking refuge from bombing by Mussolini’s air force. They kept the shard of the bomb which nearly killed them.<sup>18</sup> In 1937, Elizabeth inherited Ashintully Castle, near Glenshee from distant cousins, and initially tried to sell it to raise funds for medical aid in Spain.<sup>19</sup> In the end, she was prevented from doing so, and shared the inheritance with her sisters. During the Second World War the castle was made available for refugees from eastern Europe, evacuees from the Blitz in London, and soldiers on leave.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Frank was stationed in India, for most of the time with the Indian Army. Then he had studied anthropology at the University of Cambridge.

Peter Worsley, who had also been recently demobilised and studied with Girling at Cambridge, told me that Frank seemed more mature than the rest of his cohort – partly because he was married. He was certainly quite a bit older than

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<sup>17</sup> E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; T. Allen, ‘The International Criminal Court and the Invention of Traditional Justice in Northern Uganda’, *Politique Africaine*, 2007 (3) (107): 147–66.

<sup>18</sup> J.R. Maclean, ‘Dr Frank Girling: distinguished social anthropologist and free spirit’, *The Herald*, 25 March 2004. According his International Brigade personnel file, he had to formally leave the Communist Party after 11 months, because he had a job in the British civil service; see <https://redthirties.wordpress.com/2016/12/07/franks-international-brigade-personnel-file-in-the-comintern-archives-2/>.

<sup>19</sup> A. Girling, “‘I am interested in my own integrity’: selling the castle for Spain”, Red Thirties, Wordpress, 2016, available at: <https://redthirties.wordpress.com/2016/08/11/i-am-interested-in-my-own-integrity-selling-the-castle-for-spain/>, accessed 7 February 2018.

<sup>20</sup> J.R. Maclean, ‘Elizabeth Girling’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 2005, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/may/05/guardianobituaries>, accessed 27 January 2018.

the others, but he may not have been all that mature. Worsley recalls a course on Material Culture that was ‘so antiquated that it was simply an occasion for farcical fun and games’.<sup>21</sup> Apparently, Girling enthusiastically joined in, and was adept at using native fire lighting tools in class. One of the games was to hurl Australian aboriginal spears over the quadrangle building such that they fell among the cyclists outside. Luckily, it seems, no one was actually impaled. Amongst the other students that Girling met at Cambridge was an Indian, who was two years younger and also married. This was Ramkrishna Mukherjee, who had been a member of the Communist Part of India, and was to become an eminent Marxist sociologist. He was then working on his doctorate. He and Girling became good friends.<sup>22</sup>

According to Worsley, the teaching offered to undergraduates at the time was appalling. He describes dreadful lectures they endured from J.H. Hutton, who had been a colonial official and was prone to mainly telling stories about the Nagas of Assam and their practice of collecting severed heads. On one occasion, he apparently dismissed the work of Sigmund Freud on the grounds that Freud believed sex drives human behaviour. This was a ridiculous notion, Hutton pronounced, because: ‘Who’s ever heard of people making love when they were seasick?’<sup>23</sup> The one lecturer who stood out was a visitor from Oxford, E.E. Evans-Pritchard. He was brought in to teach a ‘brilliant course, in which the distinction between state and stateless systems was developed’. It was meant for Colonial Cadets, but social anthropology undergraduates were allowed to attend.

Once Girling graduated, he moved to Oxford’s Institute of Social Anthropology to start a doctorate. He was one of the first twelve postgraduate students to be funded by the Colonial Social Science Research Council. These were awarded in 1947 and provided six to twelve months’ research training, following which students were required to undertake a specific priority research project for about two-years duration on one of the Colonial territories. It is fair to say that Evans-Pritchard’s attitude to colonial administration was broadly supportive. His own research in Sudan had been facilitated by British officials, and he dedicated his most famous book, *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, to Major Larken, the District Commissioner for Yambio District between 1911 and 1932.<sup>24</sup> In his view, the appropriate role for an anthropologist was to strive for indirect

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<sup>21</sup> P. Worsley, *An Academic Skating on Thin Ice*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008: 53. See also, ‘Peter Worsley: A Life’, 1989, available at [http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/DO/filmshow/worsley1\\_fast.htm](http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/DO/filmshow/worsley1_fast.htm), accessed 2 August 2017.

<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Frank Girling’s granddaughter, Anna Girling, for her assistance with this section. Anna Girling has also published on Frank Girling’s friendship with Ramkrishna Mukherjee. See A. Girling, ‘Marxist Anthropology and McCarthyism in the 1950s’, *Journal of The Asiatic Society*, Volume LIX (1), 2017: 13–30.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Peter Worsley: A Life’, 1989, available at [http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/DO/filmshow/worsley1\\_fast.htm](http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/DO/filmshow/worsley1_fast.htm), accessed 2 August 2017.

<sup>24</sup> E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937.



Figure 3: Frank and Elizabeth Girling

influence on officials, to help ‘humanize policy and administration and to make change less unpleasant to natives than it would otherwise have been’.<sup>25</sup> It was also, he recognised, a way in which anthropologists might earn some money.

During the Second World War, Evans-Pritchard had for a period been given command over a group of Anuak irregular soldiers as part of the Sudan Defence Force, and later was a Tribal Affairs Officer with the British Military Administration in Cyrenaica. In the course he taught to Colonial Cadets and social anthropology students after the war, he endeavoured to pass on his experiences, and

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<sup>25</sup> D.H. Johnson, ‘Evans-Pritchard, the Nuer, and the Sudan Political Service’, *African Affairs*, Vol. 81 (323) (1982): 231–46, 242.



by all accounts was very good at doing so. It is worth noting that at the time he taught Girling, both men had been demobilised for just a few years, and both had spent the Second World War in interesting places. They had plenty to talk about, and initially Girling learned a great deal from his mentor. That probably included advice on learning Luo, because Evans-Pritchard must have known some himself, given that he lived for a time with the Luo-speaking Shilluk and Kenyan Luo, as well as the Anuak. At that point, Girling's political opinions did not seem to be an impediment to their relationship, and under Evans-Pritchard's guidance, Girling set out for Acholiland at the end of the decade.

Girling's perceptions of what he observed in the Ugandan Protectorate were manifestly different from other anthropologists working there. He was a person of considerable experience, who was able to view social relationships from the perspectives of India on the eve of its independence, and from solidarity with those fighting for socialism and freedom in Spain. He made little effort to hide the fact that he was a passionate idealist, and he was very interested in the hierarchical and patronising attitudes of British officials and Indian traders. He was also, as a Marxist, concerned to explore how things were changing and unlike many of his contemporaries set what he observed in a historical and political context.

In his D.Phil he refers to 'a centralized and all-powerful British administration under the District Commissioner', and describes the houses of the officials clustered around a nine-hole golf course in Gulu town, with a nearby clubhouse, cricket fields, tennis courts and swimming bath where the members of the group spent their leisure hours.<sup>26</sup> The clubhouse is now the cultural centre, mentioned above – with Okot p'Bitek's portrait painted on the outside wall. When Girling was in Gulu, however, Africans and Indians were barred from membership. As one member explained to him: 'We need to have somewhere where we can get away for a time from our coloured brothers.' Girling goes on to observe that: 'All the Europeans are subject to a greater or less degree to the current myths about the Acholi, which serve to maintain the unity and cohesiveness of the European group.' One particularly absurd notion he highlights was that the minds of Nilotes (a term for the Acholi and other Africans speaking Nilotic languages, such as Luo) could be contrasted with the Bantu mind (i.e. the mind of Bantu-speaking Africans, such as those living in Kampala and southern Uganda). It was suggested that the former work in the same way as Europeans, while the latter 'twists and turns in to all sorts of queer channels'. Girling suggests this view may have been linked to 'a strongly expressed affection for the illiterate pagan Acholi', and openly stated antipathy towards the 'half-educated native'. Some Europeans, he also tells us were 'indifferent to the condition of the people', while others regarded themselves as 'the bearers of a civilising mission'. Overall, Girling is

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<sup>26</sup> F.K. Girling, *The Traditional Social and Political Order of the Acholi of Uganda*, D.Phil thesis, Exeter College, 1952: 324–32.

rather scathing about the majority of the British officials he observed, although he expresses respect for a few whom he felt seriously and thoughtfully engaged with Acholi ways of life.

He used the anthropological present in places, as was then the norm, but elsewhere demonstrated that any structural functionalism was an ideal model. The social transitions going on in the Protectorate fascinated him, and he was not content to do participant observation in one place. He travelled considerable distances in a car he purchased, and carried out pilot surveys in an effort to ensure the statistical significance of his findings. He then embarked on the first stage of a larger statistical study, and he expected his field research to be spread over two or more years, in order to assess the pace and trajectories of political and economic change. Also striking is the respect he had for the Acholi people he came to know. These were not fashionable attitudes among Protectorate officials, few of whom imagined that independence would occur any time soon.

To compound matters, Girling asked Ramkrishna Mukherjee, his Indian friend from Cambridge, who was trained in statistical methods, to come to visit him, and advise him on sampling and data collection. They were also collaborating on articles based on research they had been doing previously in rural France.<sup>27</sup> Two energetic Marxists, making logistical demands and possibly stirring up trouble, were not viewed altogether positively by the authorities, and was probably brought to the attention of MI5 (and possibly MI6/SIS). Furthermore, the presence of an Indian academic in Gulu would have awkwardly underlined the racism associated with the European clubhouse, because Mukherjee would not normally have been allowed in. Another complicating factor was the arrival in mid-1950 of Girling's family in Gulu, an arrangement that, it seems, had not been previously agreed with Evans-Pritchard. After ten months in Uganda, at a point when Girling was planning to return to Oxford to write up what he thought of as preliminary findings, he was told that he and his family would have to leave by September, and it soon became apparent that he would not receive any further fieldwork funding, nor compensation for some of the expenses he had already incurred. Girling was devastated.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> R. Mukherjee and F. Girling, 'Breton Family and Economic Structure', *Rural Sociology* 15 (1) (1950): 49–62; 'Economic Structure in Two Breton Villages' *Rural Sociology* 14 (14) (1949): 295–305.

<sup>28</sup> Details on these issues and others that are cited below come from two Colonial Office files. Colonial Office, Research: Social Sciences, Mr F.K.Girling: Study of the Acholi (Uganda), CO/927/28209/158/4, 1950. Colonial Office, Research: Social Sciences, Anthropology and Sociology, Study of the Acholi People – Uganda. Mr F.K.Girling. CO/927/28242/85/162/2. The cover of the first file refers to a 'Top Secret Annex -1950', which possibly relates to an MI5 assessment of Girling's political activities. I am grateful to Dr Michael Lambert of Liverpool University for drawing my attention to these documents, and for generously sharing his copies with me. Peter Worsley was similarly blocked from doing fieldwork by MI5 in Africa in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Girling had raised financial and other practical worries with Evans-Pritchard by letter and in a long report written in March, but his supervisor had taken the view that these were not his concern, and in April had asked his contact at the Colonial Office to advise Girling. He had also proposed that it might be better for Girling to report to Audrey Richards, who had become the first director of the East African Institute of Social Research (Makerere College, Kampala, Uganda). Evans-Pritchard's communications about Girling suggest that he found his student exasperating, and he explicitly states that, while he recognises that Girling was making progress, he wanted to relinquish his responsibility to supervise the research from Oxford. It is worth noting that the 25-page single spaced report that Girling wrote in March allocated considerable space to statistical sampling that, implicitly, set aside the approaches to research associated with Evans-Pritchard's ethnographic methods. The report additionally allocated five pages to elaborating 'difficulties facing the investigator'. These mainly relate to Girling's expenses, including claims for 800 miles a month of travelling allowance, which was apparently supported by the Gulu District Commissioner, but rejected by the Secretariat. He openly acknowledges that he was being viewed as a nuisance.

Evans-Pritchard's suggestion that Audrey Richards took on supervision in Uganda was accepted, and when Girling was suddenly told that he and his family had to leave Gulu at the end of September, he immediately went to see her in Kampala. He spent an evening with her and Elizabeth Colson. Following this meeting, Richards wrote to the Colonial Office. She had questioned Girling closely, and he explained that the District Commissioner had always been extremely friendly and had not given him to understand that he objected to Girling's conduct in any way, 'with the exception of one incident when he took part in a feast at which illegal liquor was consumed . . . .' Richards then goes on to give her own assessment:

I can see that Girling is probably a fellow who gives trouble. He has an intense and almost obsessional drive in one direction – i.e. in the collection of clan statistics in this instance, and he lets nothing stand in the way of that . . . . Dr Colson and I spent the evening with Girling and got him to describe his work to us. We came to the conclusion that although we should not ourselves have tackled the work in this way, yet it was an experiment that had never been tried and that it was a thousand pities that he should not be allowed to complete it . . . . I thought it right to let you know that both Dr Colson and I were more favourably impressed than we had expected to be.

Richards also wrote separately to Evans-Pritchard, noting that:

Girling is entirely unaware that he is not persona grata with all concerned here and I think it rather unfair of the Government not to tell him frankly if they have quite decided that he is not to come back . . . . It is possible that the Government has some serious grounds for not wanting Girling back again and in fact I have had hints to this effect; but it is also possible Girling is being treated unfairly because he did not make himself socially popular for a variety of reasons, and a considerable body of myth has now been built up around him . . . .

Back in Gulu, Girling wrote a further detailed report, explaining the rationale and statistical methods, and responding to what he describes as ‘disagreement or scepticism’ about the way he had carried out the work in Acholi. However, his efforts and the intervention by Richards were to no avail. He was given no option other than to return home with his family, and set about trying to persuade the Colonial Office to reverse its decision, and secure unpaid salary that he was still owed. At this point in his life, and for the next decade, financial difficulties were a persistent problem. His efforts to find out exactly why he had effectively been expelled were fruitless. In January 1951, he made a case for his family to return to Uganda with him but the Treasury refused to provide the funds. Then at the end of February, he was informed that the Governor of Uganda had decided that it would be inexpedient for him to continue the study of the Acholi people, and that his contract with the Colonial Office was terminated.<sup>29</sup> Girling thought it must be a mistake, but it was not. A cryptic follow-up letter told him that the decision had been taken after ‘very careful examination of all considerations’, was no reflection on his ‘diligence or professional capacity’, and that it was regretted that no further information could be given at that point.<sup>30</sup> Other documents in the same Colonial Office file make reference to additional correspondence and conversations providing information that was not shared with Girling, and it is reasonable to assume that these were connected with Girling’s political views. It was, nevertheless, agreed that Girling could be paid until August to write up his material.

In a letter to Ramkrishna Mukherjee in May 1951, Girling wrote:

My own position is not very good, the C.O. (Colonial Office) has refused to pay me for writing up my material beyond the end of August. I am going to try to get as much as possible done by then. It will not be finished however, and unless it is finished there is no hope of a D. Phil. degree. After what has happened, and what I am writing it is doubtful in any case whether I would be awarded a D. Phil. at Oxford; the research is not complete and Radcliffe-Brown is one of the examiners. Still I am trying. After August, I do not know what I shall do: I want to do another piece of “field work”, but the money for that does not seem to be forthcoming. Gluckman, Fortes, etc. all say that they may be able to help me after the thesis is finished!! Also, it is not very likely that I shall be able to get a job in any place where I might want to go. Do you think I might try to come to India?<sup>31</sup>

Girling’s relationship with Evans-Pritchard had deteriorated as a result of events in Uganda. In the same letter, Girling refers to his ‘campaign against E.P and the

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<sup>29</sup> Letter dated 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1951 from J.G. Hibbert, Colonial Office, 28242/85/51.

<sup>30</sup> Letter dated 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1951 from J.G. Hibbert, Colonial Office, 28242/85/51.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Frank Girling to Ramkrishna Mukherjee in May 1951, quoted in A. Girling, Ramkrishna Mukherjee and Frank Girling: ‘Marxist Anthropology and McCarthyism in the 1950s’, *Journal of The Asiatic Society* LIX (1) (2017). By this time, Mukherjee had started to write up his own material from Uganda published as R. Mukherjee, ‘Communal Tension in Uganda: A Sociological Analysis’, *Man in India* 30 (2–3) (1950).

C.O', presumably about being inadequately supported to complete his D.Phil – although he eventually managed to submit it and pass it in 1952 – with the title being: *The Traditional Social and Political Order of the Acholi of Uganda*. It might be supposed Evans-Pritchard felt that, whatever the actual facts, the expulsion incident had brought anthropology into disrepute with the Colonial Office, and did not reflect well on his own choice of candidates for the Colonial Social Science Research Council grants. It is also the case that Evans-Pritchard remained committed to improving British administration in Africa during the 1950s, rather than replacing it. He was most concerned about the professional status of social anthropology as a discipline, and was generally unsupportive of scholars with more politically critical inclinations.

Frank Girling was not the only British anthropologist who found that tolerance of Marxist thinking in the immediate post-Second World War years turned into antipathy once Cold War concerns became prevalent. Ronald Frankenberg, Peter Worsley and others faced similar problems. The latter was blocked from doing fieldwork in Africa by MI5 at around the same time as Girling. McCarthyism was not confined solely to the United States. However, it is worth noting that several eminent anthropologists were not unsympathetic to Girling. Audrey Richards, Elizabeth Colson, and Max Gluckman were impressed by his determination and by how he presented his findings. Also, while Evans-Pritchard may have found Girling annoying, he continued to supervise him to the completion of his thesis, and subsequently stated in a communication with the Colonial Office that he was 'entirely satisfied with it'.<sup>32</sup> Girling never fully appreciated the recognition of his achievement by such a formidable array of leading figures in his discipline.

Meanwhile, Girling's friend, Ramkrishna Mukherjee, had his own problems. He wrote up his Ugandan material into a book, but struggled to find a publisher. He later reflected on his efforts to do so:

I met several reputable anthropologists in this context, who were very friendly to me in the 1940s when I was in Cambridge, first, and then in London as a Chief Research Officer in the British Civil Service. But now my erstwhile colleagues were reserved and not at all helpful. Later, with the publication of the book by Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, in 1956, I became a nonperson to the British academia.

An Indian professor, who held the Chair in anthropology of Calcutta University, told me several years later that once he had asked his colleagues at Oxford about their attitudes to me. He was answered: "We don't want Reds amongst us; we have enough to deal with them from outside."

However, while I was demoted to zero position with reference to the British academia, my friend who had invited me to Uganda was not so lucky; in his case, the position was negative. He received his PhD, but not any academic job.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> E.E. Evans-Pritchard to Mrs Chilver, Colonial Social Science Research Council, 21 May 1952.

<sup>33</sup> R. Mukherjee, from the new introduction to a republication of *The Problem of Uganda: A Study*

This was surely Girling. Ramkrishna Mukherjee acknowledged Girling's contribution in his 1956 book, *The Problem of Uganda: A Study in Acculturation*, and observed that the 'very interesting work of Dr Girling, which would throw considerable light on the life of the Acholi both in the pre-British as well as in the British period of Acholi history, has not yet been published'.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, Audrey Richards had been keen to publish Girling's D.Phil through her institute at Makerere, and the Colonial Office offered to contribute towards the cost of publication. At the end of 1952, having read the manuscript, she wrote the following to her contact at the Secretariat of the Uganda Protectorate in Entebbe:

The book is worth publishing to my mind, even though in a sense it is a first year's work and would have been much improved by more detailed investigations on a second trip. It is also quite easily written and does convey a picture of Acholi life. It is also commendably free of jargon... What I would like to do if there is no objection is to publish it in the same format as Southall's book on the Alur and... Fallers book on the Basoga.<sup>35</sup>

Others reading the manuscript included one of the Provincial Commissioners who 'has had a very long experience of the tribe', and 'considers it a very good effort... and well worth publication'.<sup>36</sup> This was presumably R.M. Bere, who was an acknowledged authority on the Acholi, for whom Girling had considerable respect, and who sent detailed comments to Girling on the D.Phil manuscript. Unfortunately, there was then a gap of several years before the D.Phil was eventually published, and it was not made available in the same format as the books by Southall and Fallers in the way Richards had wanted. Instead, it was produced as a kind of report by Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Part of the reason was that, in addition to the difficulties Girling faced in finishing his doctorate thesis and securing an income, his approach to research and his view of the role of universities had shifted. Disillusioned by what he viewed as conventional social anthropology, he had moved towards sociology, analysis of modes of production, and socialist politics. He held temporary academic posts in Leeds and Edinburgh before being given a permanent position in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. This was against the best wishes of the Vice Chancellor, but with the support of the open-minded Head of Department, R. Keith Kelsall, who wanted to move the department away from one linked with introductory courses in social welfare. Girling shifted his fieldwork focus to Scotland, and, Elizabeth, who had accompanied Girling with their children

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*in Acculturation* (xi-xii), quoted in Anna Girling, 'Marxist Anthropology and McCarthyism in the 1950s', *Journal of The Asiatic Society*, Volume LIX (1) (2017): 19.

<sup>34</sup> R. Mukherjee, *The Problem of Uganda: A Study in Acculturation*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1956.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from A.I. Richards to R.W. Gill, The Secretariate, Entebbe, 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1952.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from R.W. Gill, Chief Secretary's Office, Uganda Protectorate, Entebbe, to Mrs Chilver, Colonial Office, 10 December 1952, AE 2318.



to Uganda in 1950, opened a political coffee house, called the Partisan, in Edinburgh's Victoria Street in 1959. It became a well-known haunt of students, radical thinkers, poets and folk singers. Frank remained at the department in Sheffield for 22 years, until taking early retirement in 1980.

It was only after his appointment that Girling had the time and incentive to re-engage with his Acholi work. However, by that time, Audrey Richards had left her position at Makerere. Also, he had become highly critical of the kind of social anthropology he had been taught at Cambridge and Oxford, regarding it as misleadingly apolitical and theoretically inadequate. In 1960, the same year he eventually published *The Acholi of Uganda*, he also published 'Alienation and the Working Class'.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the Colonial Office had funded the fieldwork in Uganda, and had to approve the final text. It meant that Girling was required to leave out passages that were deemed too contentious. Those were sections dealing with Europeans, Indians and non-Acholi Africans in modern Acholiland. According to Peter Worsley, Girling was additionally told to remove an appendix discussing the theories of Friedrich Engels. However, it is not in the D.Phil manuscript available in Oxford, so perhaps it was never actually submitted.

How frustrating the enforced edits must have been to Girling is barely disguised in the disclaimers he makes at the start of the book. In the Preface, he explains that it is out of date, because the world had been changing 'at break-neck speed', and events had taken place which have 'profoundly affected the lives of the Acholi'.<sup>38</sup> He regrets that he had not had the opportunity of studying these developments in Acholiland, and he goes so far as to state that some of the anthropological theories contained in the work he now regards as untrue or irrelevant. He is tactfully vague about why he had to terminate his fieldwork a year earlier than planned, but notes that, if he had the chance to do further research, it would be different and (he would hope) a better book. It is almost as though he hopes not too many people will read it.

After such self-effacing comments, what follows comes as quite a surprise. The amount of information Girling managed to gather in just ten months is astonishing, and – perhaps because he felt compelled to look for all other material he could find to supplement his field research – he produces something quite original for the time. John Middleton's *Lugbara Religion* was published in the same year, and Aidan Southall's *Alur Society*, a book promoted by Richards, a few years before.<sup>39</sup> They deservedly have classic status, but is Girling's a lesser book? Richards

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<sup>37</sup> F. Girling, 'Alienation and the Working Class', *Labour Review* 5 (2) (1960): 70–80, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/lr/vol05/v05n02-jun-jul-1960-lr.pdf>, accessed 7 February 2018.

<sup>38</sup> F. Girling, *The Acholi of Uganda*, HMSO 1960: xi.

<sup>39</sup> J. Middleton, *Lugbara Religion: Ritual and Authority Among and East African People*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960; A. Southall, *Alur Society: A Study in Processes and Types of Domination*, W.Heffer, Cambridge, 1956.

did not think so. Perhaps Girling would have wanted to revise sections that may appear now to be overly functionalist, but, as noted above, he goes a long way in locating his more conventional social anthropology within a discussion of social transition. Reflecting his Marxist perspective, he sees processes of change as primarily economic, and unlike most other anthropologists, he uses statistical data and random survey methods. Overall, there is humility in his prose that engages the reader and he is both respectful and sympathetic to the people and the ways of life he describes. He even manages to keep in the text some swipes at the discriminatory policies of the Protectorate government (which presumably the Colonial Office overlooked). It is a book that can actually be read from beginning to end without an enormous effort – something that cannot be said for several of the better-known ethnographies from the period. Given the international interest in the Lord's Resistance Army and the humanitarian situation in recent years, there has been a surge in writings on the Acholi people and the Acholi region. However, few authors of these later works come close to matching what Girling achieved almost 70 years ago, and those who have made the effort to find his book, tucked away in a university library or as a scruffy photocopy, have much enhanced their publications by doing so.

Neither Ramkrishna Mukherjee nor Frank Girling were ever appointed to a permanent post in anthropology in the UK. The former secured a post at Humboldt University in Berlin before being appointed to the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta, while Girling spent most of his career teaching his conception of politically engaged anthropology within the Department of Sociological Studies at Sheffield. He visited Uganda after independence in the 1960s, but, as he later explained, was unable to carry out further research in Acholi area in the 1970s, when Idi Amin's 'neo-colonial dictatorship' was murdering the people among whom he had worked.<sup>40</sup> As far as I know, he never published anything else on Africa and made no serious effort to promote his book. Indeed, he became highly critical of what he had written. It is reasonable to speculate that the experience with the Colonial Office, combined with what felt like the lack of support from his mentor, Evans-Pritchard, made it all too painful. In any case, he had a family he needed to support and socialist projects closer to home. Those socialist projects included activism within academia. The following extracts from a long memorandum on teaching, which he wrote to colleagues in the sociology department in Sheffield in 1973, well illustrate his political views at that time.<sup>41</sup>

The memorandum relates to debates about his proposed new course on comparative social structures. He states that, in his view, 'there are two main ideologies contending for dominance in universities – and in other areas of social life.' One

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<sup>40</sup> Girling makes this point in a memorandum written in 1973, when he was teaching in Sheffield.

<sup>41</sup> I am grateful to Anna Girling and Michael Lambert for sharing this document with me, reproduced with permission by the University of Sheffield Archivist Matthew Zawadzki. University of Sheffield Archives: US/VC/2/S/35.

of these contends that universities are concerned with the disinterested discovery and dissemination of knowledge:

The universities train a 'non-political elite', which, in turn, transforms knowledge into a saleable commodity, and process intellectual labour power into conventional packages for exploitation by private employers and the state.

The other ideology, which he upholds, and which he claims was winning at the time in Vietnam and other theatres of war:

takes the position that there can be no freedom in the universities or anywhere else, while class privilege and exploitation exist. It produces and makes use of knowledge unashamedly in order to end oppression of all kinds . . .

With respect to criticisms of his course syllabus, he notes that he has been told he should address studies in social anthropology in 'the functionalist tradition' and other recent research which is taught at other universities. He then explains why he rejects that approach. He used to be a structural functionalist himself, but – like some other anthropologists – had freed himself from that trap:

Those of us who escaped are proud to acknowledge the help we received from the peasants and workers among whom we lived, and who taught us what we know. One reason why so many Social Anthropologists have gone over to the revolutionary standpoint is, I believe, because of their comrades – some of whom have died and others are still fighting in revolutionary struggles in Africa, and Asia. Social Anthropologists have lived through the revolutionary ferments taking place in those continents.

About his book on the Acholi, he contends that:

It transformed the 'practical knowledge' of Uganda peasants about their struggles against Imperialism, into its opposite: an Oxford D.Phil. Thesis which contained in distilled form the ideology of the oppression which they endured at the hands of British Colonialism . . . . I was unhappy about its publication . . . because the Colonial Office refused to allow me to publish certain sections of the original manuscript, as they were legally entitled to do under the terms of the contract which I had signed with them. However, it was my own theoretical inadequacies at the time, not censorship by the Colonial Office, which determined that the book should be in essence a Structuralist/Functional study.

He goes on to mention that he was expelled from Uganda for alleged 'political activities' during the colonial period. He also reflects on how the work of scholars such as Althusser, Lévi-Strauss, Meillassoux and others had helped him rethink his approach to historical materialism. They had made it possible for him to combine political activity in support of national liberation struggles in Africa and elsewhere with conceptual analysis of the transition from capitalism to socialism. It was this approach that he wanted to teach his students.

Such political activity in the UK and abroad characterised his later life. He was never a conventional academic, and had little interest in conventional academic ac-

colades. He managed to live a full life on his own terms, travelling widely and vocally supporting the political and social causes he adopted. Like his former Cambridge classmate, Peter Worsley, who similarly moved from anthropology towards sociology, Girling lost sympathy with the Communist Party, following the revelations about the mass killings and deportations of Stalin's rule and the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. He was never convinced by the idea of 'socialism in one country'. He remained a true internationalist – although he opposed New Left positions advocated by Worsley, E.P. Thompson, Ralph Miliband and others, which he considered to debase working-class consciousness. In Sheffield and Edinburgh, he started or joined anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigns, and was active in local workers' struggles. He spent time in a wide variety of places, from the USSR to Yemen and Japan. In 1980, he was in Tehran, joining mass demonstrations in the streets. Then he was in Valencia, staying with an ecological community, and in Namibia engaging with the activities of SWAPO and the ANC. At the end, he had to spend time in an Edinburgh hospital, but his spirit never wavered. During a visit from his daughter, he struck up a chorus of The Red Flag, which was taken up by virtually the whole ward.<sup>42</sup>

### *Okot p'Bitek 1931–82*

Introducing Frank Girling has required some explanation of who he was and why his work on the Acholi is important. No such introduction should be needed for Okot p'Bitek. In March 2016, Uganda's Makerere University in Kampala celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the English language publication of *Song of Lawino* with a one-day symposium. At the event, the university's Vice Chancellor hailed Okot p'Bitek as 'perhaps Makerere's greatest poet, thinker and cultural icon'. As the event's organisers explained:

The significance of *Song of Lawino* on the East African and African literary scene cannot be overstated. The text played a pivotal role in shaping critical and cultural debates across Africa, especially during the transition from colonialism to independence.<sup>43</sup>

This is undoubtedly the case. Okot p'Bitek's famous long poem remains one of the most widely read pieces of African literature.

P'Bitek probably modelled Lawino after his mother, a great dancer and singer of songs, who sometimes went by that name.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, Lawino's husband,

<sup>42</sup> 'Frank Girling', Obituaries, *The Scotsman*, 2004, available at <http://www.scotsman.com/news/obituaries/frank-girling-1-520129>.

<sup>43</sup> 'Makerere pays tribute to Okot p'Bitek, launches Omulanga gwa Lawino', College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University, Kampala, 2016, available at <https://chuss.mak.ac.ug/news/makerere-pays-tribute-okot-p%E2%80%99bitek-launches-omulanga-gwa-lawino>.

<sup>44</sup> Details about the life of Okot p'Bitek come from G. Heron, 'Introduction' in Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1966; L. p'Chong, 'Biographical Sketch' in

Ocol, has not much to do with his father, who may have been a Christian, but supported traditional values and took part in an inter-clan battle in 1937. In the 1940s, p'Bitek attended school in Gulu and King's College, Budo, in Kampala. Then he was trained as a teacher in Mbarara in 1951–52. During these years, he was involved in a wide range of cultural activities, including singing and writing his first poems. A year after leaving teacher-training college, he published a novel in Acholi (Luo), called *Lak Tar*, which addressed ways in which the custom of bridewealth had become commoditised, such that young men could not afford to pay for an educated woman. It describes the exploitative working conditions in Kampala and Jinja, and is critical of, for example, Acholi mercenaries, who went to fight in the squabbles of white people. Also, in 1953 p'Bitek was employed to teach at the newly established Sir Samuel Baker School in Gulu. He was appointed to teach English and Religious Education, but Taban Lo Liyong recalls being read drafts of *Song of Lawino* in its original Acholi version in biology classes in 1955.

In addition to his other activities, Okot p'Bitek was an accomplished footballer and also thought very seriously about a political career. He was a founding member of the Gulu branch of the Uganda National Congress (UNC). It was, however, football that offered him the opportunity to travel. In 1956, he was a member of the Ugandan team that went to play in England. They are remembered as the 'barefoot cranes', because they only wore boots in wet conditions. The tour did not start well, with a 10 - 1 defeat to Wycombe Wanderers, but on the 26 September they caused a stir when they beat the Great Britain Olympic team (which went on to reach the Olympic games quarterfinals in Melbourne, where they were beaten 6 - 1 by Bulgaria).<sup>45</sup> However, p'Bitek's name does not appear in the team sheet for that famous match. By that point in the tour he was exploring other options.

When his team-mates went home, he remained behind, having secured a place at Bristol University, where, amongst other things, he studied Christianity and is said to have started questioning his own faith. Between 1957 and 1960, he was at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, where he took a degree in law, with the intention of being a lawyer. During this period, he spent three months in The Hague at the International Court of Justice. Then, having been awarded a first-class degree, and after spending a short time with a law firm, he decided to study social anthropology. He may have imagined that anthropology would be a way of amalgamating his many scholarly interests. He was wrong – or at least that is what he later claimed.

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Okot p'Bitek, *Artist, the Ruler*, Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1986; and Taban Lo Liyong, 'Preface' in Okot p'Bitek, *The Defence of Lawino*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2001. Also, various people who knew Okot p'Bitek have provided details, notably Professor Charles Okumu, Gulu University, who gave a fascinating talk on Okot p'Bitek's life at the 'Lawino's People' workshop, TAKS Cultural Centre, Gulu, 4 August 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Uganda FA tour of England 1956, <http://www.rssf.com/tableso/oeg-engtour56.html>.

In 1960, a decade after Girling, Okot p'Bitek arrived in Oxford to study with Evans-Pritchard and his colleagues, such as Godfrey and Peter Lienhardt. If Girling came to find the acceptance of colonial administration by the anthropologists who taught him galling, p'Bitek recalled that he found the attitudes of the staff offensive from the start. He strongly objected to use of terms like 'primitive' and 'savage', and rejected misleading categorisations of Africans in terms of 'tribes'. *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1971) contains many passages in which he expresses his disdain for the approach and theories he was taught. At various points, he attacks particular scholars by name and asserts that the whole discipline of social anthropology is little more than a colonial instrument to ensure effective control and exploitation. He asks:

Is there a place for social anthropology in an African university? In my opinion the answer is, no. The departments of social anthropology in African universities were campaigning grounds for Western anthropologists. African universities can ill-afford to maintain these bases. Africans have no interests in, and cannot indulge in perpetuating the myth of the "primitive".<sup>46</sup>

However, elsewhere in the same book, p'Bitek cites publications by anthropologists in ways that suggest he agrees with their insights, and he does seem to have actually learned quite a bit from them. He thanks Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt for their personal friendship, and for the 'challenge' they threw at him. Also, accounts of his life in Oxford by those who were there at the time suggest that he was much liked, especially by Evans-Pritchard and the Lienhardt brothers. They were regularly seen together, drinking and having fun in local pubs. The idea was that he would write a doctoral thesis, but he seems not to have been as studious as he was when studying law in Aberystwyth, and, at least initially, settled for a B.Litt.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, the B.Litt thesis is the one place where he engages with Girling's book published in 1960. P'Bitek is keen to demonstrate that the *bakoma* ('kings') of Bunyoro-Kitara did not in the past have suzerainty over the Acholi, and allocates several pages to criticising Girling for suggesting that this might have been the case.<sup>48</sup>

As for p'Bitek's subsequent prose writings on Acholi culture, they are certainly unconventional for their time. They do not dwell much on social structures and kinship, but his ethnography is rather less different to that of Evans-Pritchard and other social anthropologists than his occasionally dismissive language would suggest. He does not go down the path that Girling chose, focusing on economic

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<sup>46</sup> O. p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, East African Publishing House, 1971: 12.

<sup>47</sup> This was a postgraduate qualification at Oxford. The name of the degree was subsequently changed to M.Litt.

<sup>48</sup> O. p'Bitek, *Oral Literature and its Social Background Among the Acholi and Lango*, B.Litt. St. Peter's College Oxford, Trinity Term, 1963: 21–34, available at <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:6de17478-2152-4fdc-9ae5-878b376e5a5a>.



transition. His main interests were in the Acholi spirit world and its relation to Christian thinking, in Acholi sexual practices and social morality, and in Acholi oral culture and modes of expression. *The Religion of the Central Luo* (1971) surely owes an unacknowledged debt to *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic* (1937) and is pitched as a critique of both Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion* (1956) and Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience* (1961).<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, the latter two books were written after their authors had converted to Catholicism – in contrast to Okot p'Bitek, who was in revolt against Christianity (with particular ire focused on Catholicism) as a colonial and missionary imposition, which fundamentally misinterpreted and undermined African values. Significantly, Godfrey Lienhardt was Okot p'Bitek's D.Phil supervisor.

Moreover, if it is the case that writings by social anthropologists were, in fact, a significant influence on Okot p'Bitek, the reverse was probably the case too. In p'Bitek's late essay, 'African Aesthetics – The Acholi Example', he is, in retrospect, rather more affectionate about Evans-Pritchard, and suggests that the two of them had frank discussions about African customs in regard to lovemaking. In a section describing the sexually charged songs sung by couples in 'love dances' and 'get-stuck' dances, he mentions that:

My old teacher, Professor E. E. Evans-Pritchard, used to attend these youthful dances at night among the Shilluk. In the spirit of the social anthropologist he had to be naked, as everybody else was. But he always carried a torch. When two lovers left the arena for the nearest private spot, he would follow them, his torch blazing. The Welsh fellow got a thorough beating one night; it left large scars on his legs. (Okot p'Bitek 1986: 33)

Perhaps significantly, Evans-Pritchard's articles on Azande sex practices, written towards the end of his life,<sup>50</sup> suggest a reassessment of this kind of research. They are remarkably explicit:

Nothing is so disappointing to a Zande as to lie with a woman who has what they call a large watery vagina so that in the backwards and forwards and rotary movements of the sex act the penis keeps on slipping out. They like a vagina which is what they call sticky and small, which is difficult to enter, and which grips the penis firmly when entrance has been effected...<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, Oxford University Press, 1937; *Nuer Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956; G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961: 21–34.

<sup>50</sup> E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Sexual Inversion among the Azande', *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 72, No. 6 (Dec., 1970), pp. 1428–34; 'Some Notes on Zande Sex Habits', *American Anthropologist*, 75 (1) (1973): 171–75.

<sup>51</sup> E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Some Notes on Zande Sex Habits', *American Anthropologist*, 75 (1) (1973): 171–75. See also, 'Sexual Inversion among the Azande', *American Anthropologist* 72 (6) (1970): 1428–34.

Is it unreasonable to suppose the Evans-Pritchard had been reading Okot p'Bitek's *Acholi Love* (1964) and other publications, including *Song of Lawino*? However, if he had, neither he, nor Godfrey Lienhardt, were willing, or able, to ensure that p'Bitek was awarded a D.Phil.

Okot p'Bitek's D.Phil has been a point of controversy. It has sometimes been suggested that he had been awarded one. It is, for example, reported that he told an interviewer he had travelled to Oxford in 1967 to present a D.Phil thesis on African religion.<sup>52</sup> However, p'Bitek's long-time friend and fellow poet, Taban Lo Liyong, who published his own translation of p'Bitek's original Acholi language version of *Song of Lawino* in 2001, bluntly asserted in the introduction: 'Okot read anthropology at Oxford. They denied him the D.Phil'.<sup>53</sup> Records held at p'Bitek's Oxford College, St Peter's, and in the Oxford archives confirm that Lo Liyong is correct, and also that p'Bitek did attend a viva in 1967.<sup>54</sup> He submitted his D.Phil thesis twice. The first time was in Michaelmas Term of that year, but the examiners deemed it needed further work, so referred it back.

Those examiners were Evans-Pritchard and the linguist, A.N. Tucker. In their examiners' report, they gave four reasons for not passing the thesis: it had too many typing, spelling, grammatical and other errors; it was not clear what p'Bitek had seen himself, and what had been told to him; it was impossible to know from the thesis what are now beliefs and practices and what they were in the past; and that the thesis was not on the approved topic. The last point relates to the fact that the subject that had been approved by the board of the faculty was 'Religious ideas of the Jopalwo of Northern Bunyoro'. That was not what p'Bitek had written about. Nevertheless, the examiners emphasised the important ethnographic information in the thesis, and recommended that p'Bitek be allowed to resubmit, and be excused from a second oral examination.

According to documents in his college file, p'Bitek's whereabouts then became uncertain. It was reported that he had left his native Uganda in 1968, and his supervisor in the Institute of Social Anthropology (i.e. Godfrey Lienhardt) had lost contact with him. This was the time when p'Bitek was effectively forced into exile for reasons explained below. In July 1969, a letter was sent to his new address in Kisumu, Kenya, informing him that he had a final three terms in which to resubmit his revised thesis. He subsequently made this deadline, and his thesis was re-submitted in May 1970. Two different examiners, W.H. Whiteley and Jean Buxton, assessed it in October of that year. It was at this moment that Evans-Pritchard retired from his position in the Institute, which may have had an effect on the decision to refer it for a second time. The examiners took the view that

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<sup>52</sup> U. Berner and C. Boehinger, eds, *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa*, Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Taban Lo Liyong (and Okot p'Bitek), *The Defence of Lawino*, Kampala: Fountain, 2001: xv.

<sup>54</sup> I am grateful to Tilly Burn (Oxford University Archives), Richard Allen (St Peter's College, Oxford), and Professor Wendy James for this information about Okot p'Bitek's D.Phil thesis.

p'Bitek had insufficiently addressed the points raised in the first viva, and they did not like the map he had included or his treatment of vernacular terms. They also again pointed out that the thesis did not focus on the approved title ('unless North Bunyoro is defined in very elastic terms indeed'). In the event, their recommendation was not accepted, and p'Bitek's leave to supplicate was refused outright by the Anthropology and Geography Faculty Board on 30 November 1970. No explanation is given as to why this was the case.

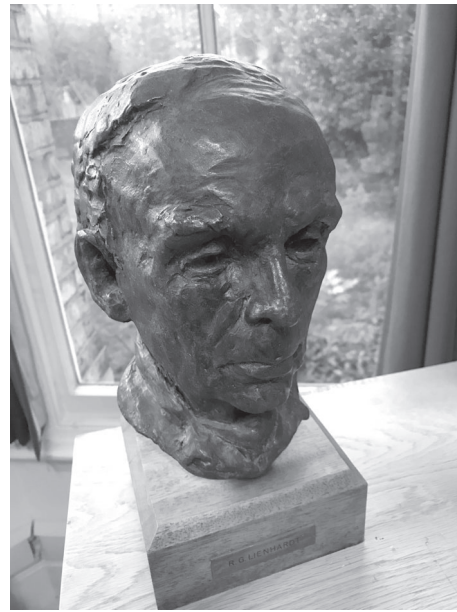
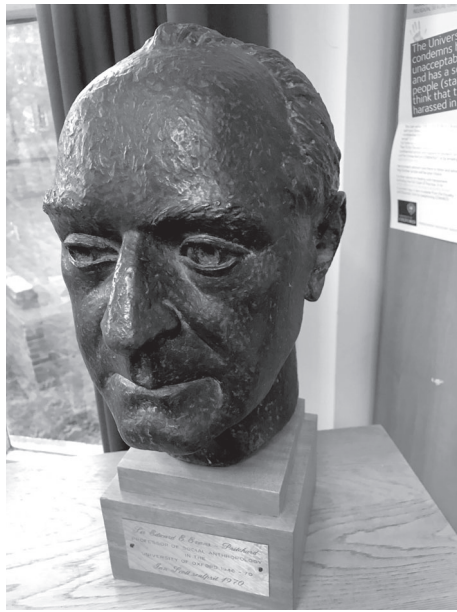


Figure 4a: Bust of E.E. Evans-Pritchard      Figure 4b: Bust of Godfrey Lienhardt  
Photographs taken in 2017 at the Tylor Anthropology Library, Oxford.

P'Bitek's failed D.Phil is on a shelf in Oxford's Tylor Anthropology Library, smartly bound, with the approved title embossed in gold: *Religious Ideas of the Jopa-Luo of Northern Uganda*. P'Bitek was not required to be present at the second examination, and the manuscript had been sent by air mail from the United States, where p'Bitek was based in 1969 and 1970 at the State University of Iowa. It has faults, but it is a fascinating, and very readable, discussion of the spiritual ideas of the Luo-speaking groups of Uganda, with most of the material dealing with the Acholi. P'Bitek repeats his criticisms of Girling for suggesting that the Bunyoro kings exercised authority over some Acholi chiefdoms in the past, and makes clear that the text is not about Bunyoro in any significant way. It seems bizarre that he was not allowed to change the title accordingly, and it would be fair to say that refusing to pass the thesis largely for that reason was not the finest moment for anthropology at Oxford!

By this time, p'Bitek was being viewed in East Africa and in the United States as an important figure. The whole experience in Oxford fed into his view that particular British-based anthropologists, and British social anthropology as a discipline, was inherently disrespectful to Africans and imbued with colonial values that he despised. He went on to publish the text of the Oxford D.Phil thesis in 1971 as *The Religion of the Central Luo*. The changes are minimal. Spelling mistakes and punctuation are corrected, words in African languages put in italics, the unhelpful map is omitted, and two tables of Nilotic religious concepts are added. In his introduction, Aidan Southall (author of *Alur Society*), who was by then based at the University of Wisconsin, hailed it as a landmark:

Here is the beginning of that presentation of African culture by Africans, for Africans, as well as for the world of foreign scholarship, without apology or dissimulation, for which we have been waiting so long.

The book was published alongside *African Religions in Western Scholarship* in 1971, with its blistering assessment of p'Bitek's Oxford education. As Ali Mazrui notes in the Epilogue: 'Here surely is Africa's indignation at its most eloquent.'

A further aspect of Okot p'Bitek's response to his experiences in Oxford related to matters back home: his anti-colonial views were linked to political ambitions. Girling referred to events that had taken place which had 'profoundly affected the lives of the Acholi' since he had been doing research in 1950. Those included the establishing of political parties, the rise of Acholi ethnic nationalism, bitter divisions between Catholics and Protestants, and efforts by chiefs who had been incorporated into Protectorate rule to establish institutions comparable to those in Buganda. It was a time of fierce debate, but as independence became a reality in the early 1960s, it was also a moment of pride and great expectations.<sup>55</sup> Okot p'Bitek left Oxford to become part of it all in 1962, intending to become a Member of Parliament for the Uganda Peoples' Congress (UPC), representing Gulu. However, in Acholiland, the UPC had become strongly linked to the Anglican Church, and was opposed by the Democratic Party, which was associated with Catholicism. Activists also had a propensity to compete by promoting 'tribal' values in a manner that p'Bitek rejected. Perhaps this was not the kind of politics that p'Bitek had in mind. In the event, he lost in the primary contest to select the UPC candidate for Gulu and decided to step back from the fray. He focused on

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<sup>55</sup> This period of Acholi history has been described in detail by, among others, C. Gertzel, *Party and locality in Northern Uganda, 1945–1962* Athlone Press, University of London, 1974; C. Leys, *Politicians and Policies: An Essay on Politics in Acholi, Uganda 1962–65*, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967, and more recently, E. Laruni, *From the Village to Entebbe: The Acholi of Northern Uganda and the Politics of Identity, 1950–1985*, PhD thesis. University of Exeter 2014, and 'Regional and ethnic identities: the Acholi of Northern Uganda, 1950–1968', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9 (2) (2015).

collecting material for his thesis, and returned to Oxford, where, as noted above, he was awarded his B. Litt Degree in 1964.

Back in Uganda again in the mid-1960s, he initially worked in Gulu for the extramural department of Makerere University, where he helped create a festival in which he performed as a singer and dancer. While he was there he revised the Acholi language version of *Song of Lawino* and published his article 'Acholi Love'. In 1966, he moved to Kampala, published the English version of *Song of Lawino*, and put on festivals incorporating traditional performances at the Uganda National Cultural Centre of which he became the director. He was also appointed to Makerere University's department of Sociology, based at the Kampala campus, by Raymond Apthorpe, but it was not a decision that went down at all well with two other members of the department, both of whom were international staff. According to Apthorpe (personal communication), they did not think p'Bitek was a serious academic and did not think his other activities were appropriate priorities for a scholarly institution.

The publication of *Song of Lawino* had made p'Bitek a controversial figure. The poem was an immediate success, but was intended to be provocative, especially to those promoting Western education, Christianity, and European ways of life. One Catholic priest, who was in training at the time, told me that he was expelled from the seminary when caught reading a copy, and had to beg forgiveness to be allowed to return. While ostensibly directed at Lawino's fictional husband, p'Bitek left no doubt that he was intending to expose and ridicule those setting aside what he thought were essential African values, especially African elites competing for power and accumulating resources in contemporary Uganda. His anger was visceral:

Bile burns my inside!/I feel like vomiting!/For all our young men/Were finished in the forest,/Their manhood was finished/In the class-rooms,/Their testicles/Were smashed/With large books!<sup>56</sup>

Both the main political parties, the Democratic Party and the Uganda People's Congress, were explicitly vilified. Through his female protagonist, p'Bitek asked why independence from British rule had caused so much bitterness, cruelty, cowardice and fear. Lawino castigated the 'moneyed fellows' who were given prominent positions at church services: 'Fat bellied men/The back of whose necks/Resemble the buttocks of the/hippo . . .'<sup>57</sup> Then, towards the end, the lament takes on apocalyptic qualities, presenting a vision of chaotic violence and oppression in Uganda as a whole:

'Independence falls like a bull/buffalo/And the hunters/Rush to it with drawn knives./Sharp shining knives/For carving the carcass./And if your chest/Is small, bony and

<sup>56</sup> Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol*, Heinemann, Oxford, 1984: 117.

<sup>57</sup> Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol*, Heinemann, Oxford, 1984: 85.



weak/They push you off,/And if your knife is blunt/You get the dung on your/elbow,/You come home empty-handed/And the dogs bark at you!... And while the pythons of/ sickness/Swallow the children/And the buffaloes of poverty/Knock the people down/ And ignorance stands there/Like an elephant,/The war leaders/ Are tightly locked in bloody/feuds,/Eating each other's liver ...<sup>58</sup>

It was a vision which was to prove all too prophetic, and it is not surprising that *Song of Lawino* antagonised individuals p'Bitek had targeted. Nevertheless, despite his concerns about Uganda's future, and his frustrations in Oxford at his viva in 1967, this was a period of confidence and optimism for him. In 1968, he succinctly outlined his views and aspirations in a short piece, published in the United States. After describing the multiple activities of the National Cultural Centre, he concluded as follows:

'The cultural renaissance that is being witnessed in Uganda is part of a powerful movement sweeping the entire continent of Africa and Asia: a reaction against foreign-imposed culture, a deep search into the soul of men. The question "Who am I?" is being answered in a dynamic style in Uganda through a cultural revolution.'<sup>59</sup>

Sadly, by the time this statement was published he had already been removed from his post. In October 1967, he had organised an eight-day festival to coincide with the anniversary of Ugandan independence, with a strong emphasis on African creativity. However, not everyone was happy with his Africa-orientated approach, and when returning from a visit to Zambia in November, he was informed that he had been dismissed. An article in the *Uganda Argus* reported that 'Dr Okot p'Bitek' had been sacked by the chairman of the board of trustees, Narendra Patel.<sup>60</sup> The reason given was that he had been absent in Zambia without leave. The article also mentioned various National Theatre unpaid bills. In addition to his role as board chairman, Patel was Speaker of Uganda's National Assembly, and it later became apparent that p'Bitek's criticisms of pretentious and self-serving politicians in *Song of Lawino* had infuriated influential figures. There had also been some personal clashes. Apthorpe recalls that one of those was between p'Bitek and the dangerous army commander, Idi Amin. It is reported that an attempt was made to arrest p'Bitek, but that he escaped. Whether or not that is the case, he had become *persona non grata* in his own country.

At the end of 1967, p'Bitek moved to Kenya, and took up a post as senior research fellow and lecturer at the University of Nairobi, initially based in the Luo-speaking region of the country at Kisumu, and later in Nairobi. *African Re-*

<sup>58</sup> Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol*, Heinemann, Oxford, 1984: 107, 111.

<sup>59</sup> Okot p'Bitek, 'Theatre Education in Uganda', *Educational Theatre Journal*, Washington, Vol. 20, 20: 308, August, 1968.

<sup>60</sup> 'National Theatre chief sacked', *Uganda Argus*, 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 1967: 9. I am very grateful to Jordan Burke for showing me this article, and alerting me to the point that the date of his dismissal given in most biographies is incorrect.



*ligions in Western Scholarship, Religion of the Central Luo* and most of his other later works were published while he was there. The choice of title for the latter (i.e. his failed Oxford D.Phil), and his choice of publisher for both books, was likely to have been influenced by where he was living at the time, and also by the recent publication by the East African Publishing House of Bethwell Ogot's highly influential *History of the Southern Luo*.<sup>61</sup>

In 1971, Idi Amin seized power from Obote in Uganda, and p'Bitek would have heard about the slaughter of Acholi and Langi soldiers after they had been ordered to report to barracks. He briefly visited his parental home in northern Uganda in 1976, but was openly threatened by Amin at a public event in Gulu, and he had to escape back to Kenya overland by cover of night.<sup>62</sup>

By that time, he was an internationally acclaimed author, and he was receiving invitations to give lectures and spend time as a writer in residence at several universities, including the University of Iowa and the University of Texas at Austin in the United States. From 1978 to 1982 he was teaching at Ife University in Nigeria.

Following the Tanzanian invasion of Uganda and overthrow of Amin in 1979, Milton Obote returned to power in 1980, and efforts were made to tempt p'Bitek back to a post in Uganda. After quite a bit of negotiation, in 1982 he was appointed Professor of Creative Writing at Makerere University. This was at last recognition of his achievements in his own country, but he remained a divisive figure among his colleagues (some of whom he castigated as 'academic dwarfs'), and there must have been pain in seeing how Kampala had become a shadow of its former self, following the chaos of preceding years. P'Bitek would have been aware, too, of the guerrilla war being waged against Obote's new government by Yuwari Museveni's forces in the Luwero area immediately to the north of the city. Insecurity affected locations in and around Kampala itself. In July, 1982, a few months after taking up the new position, p'Bitek had a stroke at night. His home was located in a place that was considered too dangerous to move around in the dark, so he could not be taken to hospital. In the morning, Radio Uganda announced the sad news that: 'The cruel hand of death has early this morning forever silenced the voice of the bard from Acholi.'<sup>63</sup> Ironically, given how critical he had become of Christianity, he is buried outside Gulu's Anglican Cathedral. His early death was perhaps indirectly linked to Uganda's armed conflicts, but it mercifully spared him knowledge of the appalling events that subsequently unfolded in Acholiland.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Bethwell A. Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo* East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1967.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Horn, 'Uganda's Theatre – the exiled and the dead', *Sage Journals*, 1979: 15, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03064227908532966>.

<sup>63</sup> Keguro Muhindi, 'In Memoriam: Okot p'Bitek', *Présence Africaine* 1983/1 (N° 125), p. 379–81.

<sup>64</sup> The literature on the period includes: T. Allen, 'Understanding Alice, Uganda's Holy Spirit Movement in Context', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 16 (3) (1991), 370–99; T. Allen, *War and Justice in Northern Uganda: an assessment of the International*

### *Anniversaries and new beginnings*

In his remarks at the 2016 symposium at Makerere University, Kampala, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the English language publication of *Song of Lawino*, the Vice Chancellor noted that the poem had been translated into over 30 languages, and that the day marked the launch of another one: the first translation into Luganda, the most widely spoken language in central and southern Uganda. That in itself was a significant moment. Ugandan history has been marred by deep divisions between the north and south, and this very public recognition of Okot p'Bitek hopefully marked a kind of turning point. In that context, it is worth noting that 2016 was the year of two other anniversaries.

It was the thirtieth anniversary of Yuweri Museveni seizing power in 1986, marking the start of armed conflict and anti-insurgency operations in Acholiland that has caused remarkable levels of suffering. From the end of the 1980s, the most significant rebel force was the Lord's Resistance Army, led by the notorious Joseph Kony, whose tactics were designed to instil terror into the minds of his own people, and who claimed to be creating a new and pure kind of Acholi.

The scale of the violence has been staggering. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to leave their homes, with the majority concentrated in internal displacement camps, in which conditions were appalling. Living in cramped conditions, without adequate sanitation, they came to depend on food aid from humanitarian agencies, and were continuously at risk from attacks. More than 30,000 children were abducted from their homes and compelled to join the Lord's Resistance Army. Atrocious acts by the rebels were met with brutal anti-insurgency strategies, with the mass of the population caught in between. When Jan Egeland, who was the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emer-

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*Criminal Court's intervention, Save the Children in Uganda and the Crisis States Research Centre Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics, February 2005; T. Allen, Trial Justice. The International Criminal Court and the Lord's Resistance Army, Zed Books, 2006; T. Allen and M. Schomerus, A Hard Homecoming: Lessons Learned from the Reception Center Process on Effective Interventions for Former 'Abductees' in Northern Uganda, USAID/UNICEF, 2006; T. Allen and K. Vlassenroot, eds, The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality, Zed Books, 2010; T. Allen, 'Life Beyond the Bubbles: cognitive dissonance and humanitarian impunity in northern Uganda', in S. Abramowitz and C. Panther-Brick, eds, Medical Humanitarianism: Ethnographies of Practice, Penn Press, 2015; H. Behrend, Alice and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1985–97, James Currey, 1999; C. Dolan, Social Torture: The Case of Northern Uganda, 1986–2006, Berghahn Books, 2009; S. Finnström, Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda, Duke University Press, 2008; A. Branch, Displacing Human Rights: War and Intervention in Northern Uganda, Oxford University Press, 2011; C. Lamwaka, The Raging Storm: A Reporter's Guide Inside Account of the Northern Uganda War 1986–2005, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2016; E. Baines, Buried in the Heart: Women, Complex Victimhood and the War in Northern Uganda, Cambridge University Press, 2016; H. Porter, After Rape: Violence, Justice and Social Harmony in Uganda, Cambridge University Press, 2016.*

gency Relief Coordinator visited Gulu and surrounding areas in November 2003, he described what he saw as ‘a moral outrage’.<sup>65</sup>

The situation subsequently became the first major case of the International Criminal Court, and warrants were issued for Kony and four of his commanders, all of them Acholis. Kony is still at large, and is said to be somewhere in the borderlands of South Sudan, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nevertheless, the attacks came to an end in Uganda’s Acholiland in 2006 when the Lord’s Resistance Army were drawn into negotiations. At the time, it was not certain that peace had really returned – particularly after the talks failed to result in an agreement – but by 2016 it had been ten years. Wittingly or not, the acknowledgement of Okot p’Bitek’s achievement in the Ugandan capital city in 2016 was a celebration of that too.

In northern Uganda, families have returned to former farms, but land conflicts have been intense.<sup>66</sup> With the breakdown in traditional patterns of marriage as a result of life in the internal displacement camps, enormous numbers of children have been born to mothers for whom no bridewealth had been transferred. That has made the lineage status of children, and their mothers’ access to land a matter of difficult negotiation. Some have had to take their children to their father’s land in the hope that their brothers will welcome them and give them access to plots to farm. Others who have sustained a relationship with the father of their children go to his father’s home, again with the hope that plots will be allocated to them. Often the negotiations are fraught, and can be insurmountable where a woman’s children have various biological fathers. The high numbers of rapes that have been recorded by researchers, the vast majority of which are never reported to any formal public authorities, is symptomatic of the deep social problems that persist.<sup>67</sup> So is the emergence of vigilante groups, which provide informal policing, sometimes with recourse to violent enforcement.<sup>68</sup>

With particular reference to locations affected by conflict, a recent UNDP report has observed that:

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<sup>65</sup> In the same statement, Egeland also called northern Uganda ‘the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world’. See <http://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/war-northern-uganda-worlds-worst-forgotten-crisis-un>.

<sup>66</sup> J. Hopwood, ‘Women’s Land Claims in the Acholi Region of Northern Uganda: what can be learned from what is contested’, *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 22 (3) (2015).

<sup>67</sup> H. Porter, *After Rape*, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> R. Tapscott, *The Government Has Long Hands: Community Security Groups and Arbitrary Governance in Uganda’s Acholiland*, LSE JSRP Paper 24, 2015, available at [www.lse.ac.uk/.../research/JSRP/downloads/JSRP24.Tapscott.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/.../research/JSRP/downloads/JSRP24.Tapscott.pdf); T. Allen, ‘Vigilantes, Witches and Vampires: how moral populism shapes social accountability in Northern Uganda’, *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 22 (3), 2015.

The economic and development plight of Northern Uganda cannot be overlooked... Long after the war, there are still unaddressed legacies of the conflict, in various dimensions of wellbeing. Among them the growing youth population who have missed their early education, and have limited opportunities for decent and gainful employment.<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, the current situation is a moment of renewed hope and possible new beginnings. In that respect, there are parallels that can be drawn with the period at the end of colonial rule. Engaging with the studies of Acholi life that Girling and p'Bitek provided from that time may contribute positively to framing the ways in which current debates draw from those of the past. By doing so, their significance as scholars will surely become apparent. A full appreciation of their contributions is long overdue.

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