

# A Glimpse of African Thought

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*Oral Traditions as Philosophy:*

*Okot p'Bitek's legacy for African philosophy* Samuel Oluoch Imbo  
Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield,  
2002, pp. xxi + 181. ISBN: 084769772X (hb)

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*reviewed by Trevor Curnow*

**W**hile the thought of Okot p'Bitek (1931-1982) is a recurrent theme running through this book, it is not its primary concern. While there is an interesting discussion of whether or not philosophy requires the written word, that is not its primary concern either. Its primary concern is African philosophy, and all else falls into place in one way or another around that.

The problem is, what is it? Out of eight chapters, the word 'African' occurs in the titles of six of them, yet it is not at all clear what it means. For example, p'Bitek apparently regarded Islam as 'alien' to Africa even after 1300 years, and believed that it was 'older than Christianity on the continent' (p.104), which will come as a surprise to the Copts and the Ethiopians. It is perhaps understandable that Afrikaans is not mentioned as an 'African' language, but there are no references to Arabic either, despite its long-standing predominance north of the Sahara. Imbo is critical of 'the inadequacy of p'Bitek's vision' (p.7) in this regard and argues for 'an inclusivist account of African belonging' (p.24), but I'm not convinced that he consistently articulates it.

Fortunately, many of the topics discussed in the book have implications far beyond Africa so that this central problem can often be bracketed out in practice. The ability of members of one culture to understand another, for example, is an issue that confronts many more people than just social anthropologists in Africa. And although translating the Bible into Luo (an East African language) might have presented some special difficulties, translation is never straightforward.

The nature of philosophy itself also comes up for consideration. 'For p'Bitek, philosophy resides in the oral traditions and is lived out in the meaningful activities people engage in daily' (p. 28). Here Imbo is clearly right to argue that simply having beliefs is not enough and that 'only in reflection does philosophy get its form' (p. 64). On the other hand, there is no obvious reason why the results of this reflection should not be transmitted orally. However, for p'Bitek the issue seems to have been one of genre more than one of medium. He believed in the ability of stories and songs to act as vehicles for the transmission of philosophical ideas, and these were genres in which he himself worked. But it is difficult

to see how anyone could plausibly argue that stories and songs are either intrinsically philosophical or intrinsically not philosophical. It is surely what they actually say that decides the matter.

Part of the problem, as Imbo makes clear, is that in his eagerness to advance the case for African philosophy, p'Bitek often fails to be sufficiently critical, with the result that he gives too many hostages to fortune. The idea that different cultures can have their own distinctive philosophies is scarcely new. However, the problem with African as opposed to, say, Chinese philosophy is that the latter has a coherence (expressed, amongst other things, in a single written language) that the former seems to lack. What p'Bitek clearly wants to identify is a philosophy that is not only geographically African but culturally so as well, a far more complicated and elusive ambition. While he offers fascinating glimpses of African thought, I think he fails to achieve his goal.

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