

Reviews Section

SAMUEL OLUOCH IMBO, *ORAL TRADITIONS AS PHILOSOPHY:
OKOT p'BITEK'S LEGACY FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY*

Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002, xxi + 181 pp. (ISBN 0-8476-9772-X)

A Review by Frederick Ochieng'-Odhiambo

Okot p'Bitek is amongst Africa's best known authors, although as Samuel Oluoch Imbo laments,

“the full influence of his legacy has not been appreciated, ...his views on important philosophical issues remain unexplored” (xviii-xix).

Yet p'Bitek's efforts of linking poetry and everyday living to philosophy could benefit contemporary discussions in African philosophy. In his aim of revamping and generating more interest in p'Bitek's views, Imbo has no doubt used his efforts resourcefully. The text not only locates p'Bitek's views very well within African philosophy, but will also provoke and stimulate African philosophers to search for African philosophy in oral traditions as well. Though the author heavily relies on p'Bitek's *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, *Africa's Cultural Revolution*, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, his other essays are representatively discussed. Therefore, in reading *Oral Traditions as Philosophy* one gets a holistic purview of p'Bitek's views.

In the debate regarding the nature of African philosophy, the so-called professional school would *prima facie* find the title of Imbo's text somewhat inappropriate. On the other hand, upon reading the text, ethnophilosophers would be very uncomfortable with it because of its emphasis on logos. However, the novelty of the text lies within this enigmatic stance. The ethnophilosophers are discredited for having imposed visions of what Africa is, whereas the professional philosophers are castigated for being myopic and

restrictive in their definition of philosophy (18). Imbo adapts a middle way in the antagonism.

In Chapter two, Imbo ably supports p'Bitek's controversial position that Western assumptions about what constitutes the philosophical, the religious and the spiritual is inappropriate in African contexts. Using Luo tales, Imbo argues that the narratives are best apprehended by a holistic approach that sees the spirits, the living, and the unborn as members of the same extended family. The reader is cautioned that the experiences of African life are impossible to meaningfully parcel out into these disparate pigeon holes (44).

Chapter three discusses the Western assumption of privileging the written over the spoken, of denying that the spoken word can sustain analytical and rigorous philosophical dialogue. Imbo in supporting p'Bitek's view *mutatis mutandis*, postulates that the spoken word plays an important role within philosophy and as a result

“the discipline of philosophy must become porous enough to let in wordsmiths such as poets, novelists and storytellers” (49).

The question of “What is a Text?” is also addressed. Here, Imbo explicates the weakness of the logocentric view that cordoned off the realm of text to exclude everything except writing. According to Imbo the realm of texts includes the oral as well as material culture, such as textiles, sculptures and masks (51). At any rate, as p'Bitek asserts,

“a song is a song whether it is sung, spoken or written down” (47).

Imbo is emphatic that

“Western prejudices prevent a rose by any other name from smelling just as sweet” (60).

He therefore advises,

“it is more fruitful to realize that the oral stories are just a means of transmitting the culture's rigorous intellectual traditions. Philosophy is the extraction of meaning from the accounts of the oral traditions. That extraction is made richer by the admission of oral traditions as texts” (68).

The chapter on “Roles for Women in African Oral Traditions” is refreshingly novel and would confound most so-called African feminists. The ques-

tion that Imbo grapples with is:

“Are oral traditions inherently misogynistic. Or do they merely lend themselves invariably to misogynistic interpretations?” (72).

A perusal of the chapter reveals that Imbo thinks that it is the latter. Though the role of women is ambivalent, he cautions that one should not lose sight of the fact that the central role of African traditional culture is the promotion of social harmony and the provision of a framework for interpreting real biological differences as making men and women different and equal. Therefore, any theorizing on any issue in traditional Africa ought to begin with a firm planting of both feet in African traditions (89). This, according to Imbo, is the mistake of the feminist movement and it is for this reason that African women are reluctant to describe themselves as feminists.

Chapter five is based on one of p’Bitek’s favorite themes: “Western Scholarship and African Religions”. According to Imbo, p’Bitek’s position is that philosophy and religion are inseparable in traditional Africa, and anyone who wants to understand traditional African ways should observe the ordinary person in the village. The folly of anthropologists and missionaries was that they looked for African metaphysicians and theologians for answers (93). The reader is also told that p’Bitek’s other quarrel with Christianity is the manner in which it was introduced in Africa. Its introduction ruled out dialogue, yet dialogue presupposes the ability and a willingness of all involved to listen to each other. This scenario resulted into intellectual smuggling even amongst African nationalists and intelligentsia –

“they surreptitiously imported alien themes and concepts into African context and then claimed these...as indigenous to Africa” (100).

The problem involved in translating Western concepts into African languages is discussed in Chapter six. Imbo explicates some of the problems that p’Bitek encountered in translating his works. Imbo then offers some principles that would lead to a good and fairly representative translation. In Chapter seven, Imbo agrees with p’Bitek that Westerners have distorted the authentic African selfhood. The views of Frantz Fanon, Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye on African selfhood are also explored. Imbo then presents what he thinks is the only meaningful interpretation of the idea of an African personality (149-150). In the last chapter, Imbo poses the question: “What

do we do now?" Borrowing from Ngugi wa Thiong'o, he believes that

“the Devil, who would lead us into the blindness of the heart and into the deafness of the mind, should be crucified, and care should be taken that his acolytes do not lift him down from the cross to pursue the task of building Hell for the people on Earth” (153).

In this endeavor, Imbo singles out the African philosopher. Since philosophy has been ably employed in the African continent as the handmaiden of ideology, the African philosopher has a special political responsibility of addressing the imbalance created by the past (and the present) practice of philosophy.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter of the text, its potential readership is indeed wide. The book is meant not only for African and Africanist scholars, but it would interest African political leaders both in Africa and the diaspora. Western scholars who have the interest of Africa at heart will find the book to be an indispensable companion. The manner in which the ideas are presented and the book written is refreshing, even to those who may be familiar with the ideas.