

# **African Poetry: Part 2**

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- "Telephone Conversation" is a 1963 poem by the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka that satires racism. The poem describes a phone call between a landlady and the speaker, who is black, about renting an apartment. The landlady is pleasant until she learns that the speaker is "African," at which point she demands to know how "light" or "dark" the speaker's skin is. In response, the speaker cleverly mocks the landlady's ignorance and prejudice, demonstrating that characterizing people by their skin color diminishes their humanity.

## **Wole Soyinka**

### **"Telephone Conversation"**

- Anglophone poetry in East Africa reflects the same mythic patterns and the same generational development as poetry in West Africa, but its flowering came later and has been less abundant.

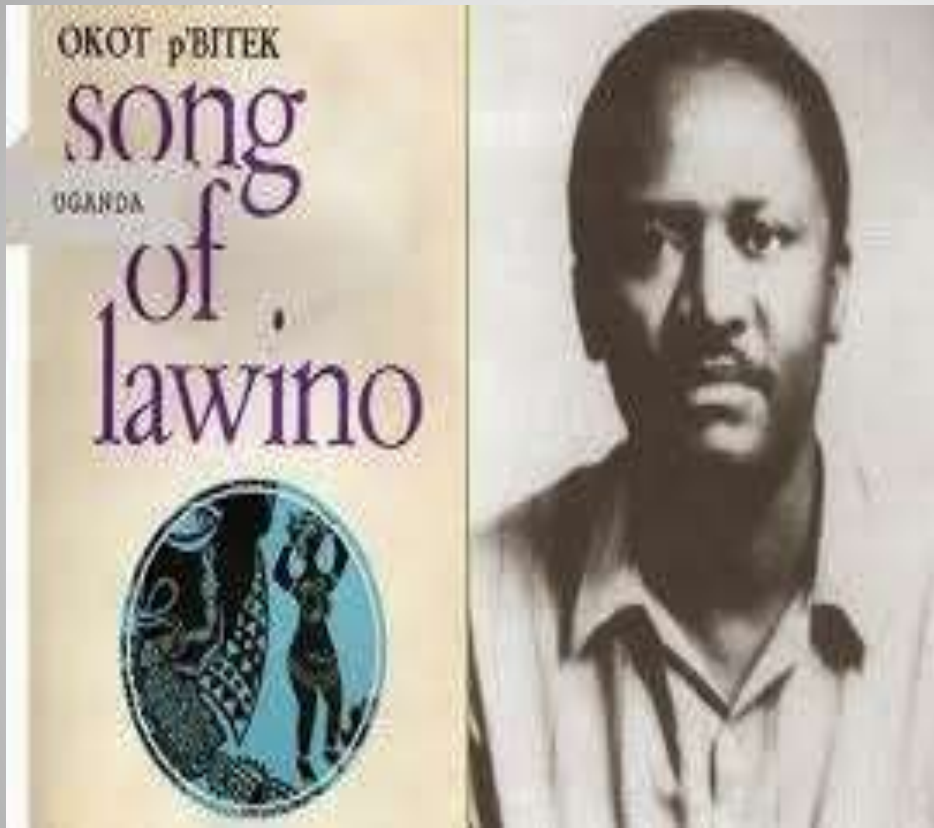
**East Africa**

# Causes of the rate of development

- .the character of the indigenous cultures
- . the smaller populations in East Africa
- . the vitality of Swahili literature
- . the characteristics of colonial rule

- Makerere University, where undergraduate literary activity has been encouraged since the 1950s .
- The East African Publishing House in Nairobi, which, in the 1960s, published much important East African literature, including Okot p'Bitek's masterpiece *Song of Lawino* ( 1966).

**Two factors that motivated the growth of Anglophone East African poetry**



## Okot p'Bitek

*The most important East African poet in English is the late Okot p'Bitek of Uganda, author of three remarkable volumes: Song of Lawino, Song of Ocol ( 1970), and Song of a Prisoner ( 1971).*

- They all deal with the relationship of the past to the present in Africa.
- The dilemma of the modern African progressing from the comic through a kind of self-reflexive satire to rage.
- p'Bitek's habit of composing first in Acholi.

**Charateristics of these volumes**

- It is possibly the most successful comic work in modern African literature. It is the lament of Lawino, the naive, abandoned traditional wife of Ocol, a westernized Acholi. Lawino tells her husband:

*Song of Lawino*



- «Ocol says
- Black people's foods are primitive,
- But what is backward about them?
- He says
- Black people's foods are dirty:
- He means,
- Some clumsy and dirty black women
- Prepare food clumsily
- And put them
- In dirty containers.» (SOL, P.62).
- Lawino again argues that the food that is native to her people is best for them:

- Is the central pole
- That shiny stool...
- At the foot of the pole
- Is my father's revered stool.
- Further on
- The rows of pots
- Placed one on top of other
- Are stores
- And cupboards.
- Millet flour, dried carcasses
- Of various animals,
- Beans, peas
- Fish, dried cucumber...» (SOL, P.59)

**The text of the poem**

- «When sleep comes
- Into their head
- They sleep,
- When sleep leaves their head
- They wake up.»(SOL, P. 69)
- If visitors come when you are doing something, you stop and enjoy their visit. But Ocol has no time to enjoy anything:
- «He never jokes
- With anybody
- He says
- He has no time
- To sit around the evening fire.» (SOL, P. 67)

- «He says
- He does not want
- To hear noise,
- Those children's cries
- And coughs disturb him!» (SOL, P. 67).
- «Time has become
- My husband`s master» (SOL, P. 68).
- «...Runs from place to place
- Like a small boy,
- He rushes without dignity» (SOL, P. 68).

- There is a mixture of the traditional Africa practice of polygamy that is prevalent of the author's Acholi's culture however, instead the husband has chosen to favour the 'new' wife instead of treating both wives equally as culture would dictate.
- Song of Lawino was initially written in Acholi, one of the Luo dialects in northern Uganda in 1971 but later given an English translation by its author who according to his own words clipped a bit of the eagle's wings of the original Acholi poem "and rendered the sharp edges of the warrior's sword rusty and blunt, and also murdered rhythm and rhyme".

## Analysis

- The poem “Song of Lawino” uses the literary device of a female character to address issues that were facing Africa at the time. When Okot p’Bitek wrote this poem, Africa had recently been liberated and there was a question whether or not it should keep its African values or look to the West for new ideals.

## Conclusion