**The Fire at Paa ya Paa**

[00:00:06] Driving in Ridgeways off of Kiambu Road in the outskirts of Nairobi, you might notice a small, colorful sign. It's the size of a two square foot roadside political poster with Paa ya Paa Cultural Center emblazoned on it. Half a mile down a rocky clay road past it is a compound littered with lichen-coated sculptures. It surrounds a walled, open-air gallery space full of decades of East African art history. If you came here in the 1990s, you might have found a trove of cultural archives in the adjoining home, traces of the major poets, novelists, and artists of decolonization-era East Africa who called the space home in the 1960s and 1970s.

[00:00:52] Now burn marks and heat cracks striate the walls. A fire burned it all decades ago.

[00:00:57] A fire also pushed one poet thousands of miles away to seek refuge at Paa ya Paa. In 1962, Okot p’Bitek was a young academic finishing up fieldwork for his Oxford thesis on Ugandan poetry. That happened to be when *uhuru*, freedom, finally reached his country.

[00:01:21] “And at midnight, Sergeant Major Sidney Small of Birmingham lowers the Union Jack that has flown in Uganda for nearly 70 years. At the same moment, the 4th Battalion King's African Rifles becomes the 1st Battalion Uganda rifles, and to replace the Union Jack, the black, gold, and red flag of the new young state. Uganda is born again, free and independent.”

[00:01:52] He stood by with tears in his eyes while pieces of the Union Jack were torched in his rural hometown. Uganda had announced its independence from British colonial rule. With the lighting of a match, a host of possible futures flared up for the young nation. And Okot seemed to embody all of them at once. He'd been a soccer star on Uganda's national team. He was a lawyer who’d practiced in London and was considering a career in politics. He was a scholar working on a radical new approach to religion in Uganda, one that resisted colonial British theories. And he was a poet and cultural organizer behind the first literary congress in East Africa.

[00:02:38] “I think that there is always time for anything you like to do. Anything you're interested in. I do not agree with people who say that you can only do one thing and you should be best at one thing only.”

[00:02:53] That's him in a 1967 interview. He's at the height of his career.

[00:03:01] Uganda was also coming into its own. A new president, Milton Obote, had just taken power. Even though his means were suspect, the country still liked the man. As a committed nationalist, Okot was personally excited by the new regime. He believed that art was an essential way to give the nation the unity and collective identity that Obote promised. He started a successful cultural festival that celebrated the indigenous traditions of Uganda. Thousands of people attended.

[00:03:29] “But as I said, he had that kind of ambivalence about him. I think there was, if you like, the nationalist in Okot p’Bitek.”

[00:03:47] That’s Henry Indangasi. He was a student of Okot’s at the University of Nairobi and still teaches there. Maybe it's no surprise that the young nation's new president appointed Okot director of the National Cultural Centre.

[00:04:03] The Centre had been established under British rule. It had been a space for the cultural elite in Kampala to watch Shakespeare performances and visiting classical ensembles. Okot was the first Ugandan to direct it. He publicly kicked the British Council out of the space and opened his doors to all artists—indigenous dancers, pop performers, and foreign poets. He wanted it to be a Ugandan space.

[00:04:29] “The major challenge, I think, is to find what might be Uganda's contribution to world culture. I think it's there. When we're thinking of drama, for instance, we should, I think, look into the village and see what the Ugandans, the proper Ugandans**,** not thepeople who have been to school, have read and what they do in the village and see if we cannot find some root there and build on this. And when we’re thinking of music, same thing, and poetry too.”

[00:05:01] To signify the Centre’s new orientation, its attention to international but also indigenous arts, he hung a drum at the entrance of the Centre. All this happened the same year Okot published the poem that would make him world famous, *Song of Lawino*. In it, a village girl named Lawino denounces her husband for loving the West more than his own culture.

[00:05:25] “It's a big laugh by this village girl called Lawino, laughing at modern man and modern woman in Uganda. She thinks that the educated folk are spoilt, in the sense that they don't belong, they don't enjoy fully the culture of the people of Uganda. And she thinks that if only these educated people could stop a little bit and look back into the village, they could find a much richer life altogether.”

[00:05:59] “Do not uproot the pumpkin in the old homestead,” she advises him. Which is to say, “don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

[00:06:12] The inside of the poem looks a lot like the inside of the Cultural Centre. It teems with things traditional and modern, local and international. It also seemed to support the direction of the new nation at the time. Lawino’s desire for reconciliation resembled Obote’s desire for national unity. Between his work at the National Cultural Centre and his poetry, Okot became a powerful cultural figure. Everything was going right for Okot p’Bitek.

[00:06:49] Then the nation of many possible futures and many traditions contracted. Okot’s Centre—diverse, free, exploratory—began to rival, not compliment, Obote’s nation. Obote’s rhetoric grew more and more authoritarian.

[00:07:07] “We must do more than we have done before in the consolidation of our sovereign status. While I admit that government must be controlled by the people. I must also ask the people of Uganda that for their own good, it would be wrong to allow other institutions not to be controlled by the people.”

[00:07:47] Leading up to this speech, there were growing whispers of violence and disappearances. The mutual relationship between a cultural leader and the president became antagonistic. Obote wanted uniformity. Okot wanted diversity. And his commitment to a diverse, democratic nation turned him into a kind of threat to Obote. A New Years newspaper even printed them as opponents: Okot as the head of culture on one page faced Obote, head of politics, on the opposite.

[00:08:26] “They saw him as a rival, I think, because he was commanding a lot of attention with his poetry and freedom of speech.”

[00:08:36] This Elimo Njau. He's an artist who would work with Okot years later at Paa ya Paa.

[00:08:44] “And wherever he was, he attracted crowds. And he was so natural, you know. And when he sang his poetry, he would dance. Yes, and**,** he was very real.”

[00:08:58] As the relationship between the president and the poet worsened, Okot and the Cultural Centre were pointedly not invited to the official Independence Day celebrations.

[00:09:13] The opposition between the Centre and the Nation, Okot and Obote, had become a public feud. So just months after he took up his position, the local newspaper announced Okot had been sacked for mismanagement. It became clear that Okot couldn't stay in Uganda. He went to his friend Elimo for help.

[00:09:35] “He told me, I'm afraid I can't go to Uganda. I am your guest. So he stayed with me.”

[00:09:45] Fleeing to Kenya meant safety, but he was exiled from his family, many of whom would be killed by Obote’s successor, Idi Amin. He could no longer participate in the arts in Uganda as a cultural organizer and leading poet. To add to the list of injuries, he couldn't complete his fieldwork for his Oxford dissertation on indigenous religion.

[00:10:06] A dissertation that was then rejected, twice. But he didn't stop working.

[00:10:21] And when he walked through the doors of the gallery and cultural center, Paa ya Paa, in 1967, he saw the same type of cultural space he’d tried to create in Uganda. Elimo describes the gallery as radically democratic. “Paa ya Paa was generally for all people a kind of place where people crossed into each other.”

[00:10:45] Many of its members were political refugees fleeing Uganda, South Africa, and other countries.

[00:10:53] They performed with major black American and British performers: “Dick Gregory”; Nina Simone; “Sidney Poitier”; Lauryn Hill. “So many people.”

[00:11:03] Walking into the space, you would have smelled coffee and heard indigenous storytelling, free jazz, or debates on African culture. Paa ya Paa welcomed the whole spectrum of lives you encounter when you walk down Moi Avenue in Nairobi. Okot fit right in. Elimo says he likes to call what Okot stood for “real life.” What he seems to mean by that is, life in excess of the totalitarian state. Freedom.

[00:11:44] “He was not abusive. He didn’t have a chance to do that. Because it was Idi Amin. They could have killed him. So that element of fear for one's life made one take care. He was a person of the time. A change-over from politics to life, you know, to real life, because his poetry was about life.”

[00:12:15] Politicians like Obote constrained life to a single idea, a unified Uganda as a uniform Uganda. What was outside that idea?

[00:12:25] “You know, his poetry was tangible and dealt with life, social life, and sung about life in a friendly way. And then he himself played in it and was very pleasant, you know. He projected. He sings very, very well. To people he was a really well liked, you know, across I think all boundaries.”

[00:12:55] Until I began speaking with people who knew Okot, I didn't even know he was a performer. But his performances are mostly what they remember.

[00:13:10] Hanging up that Paa ya Paa, there's a picture of Okot dressed in a leopard-skin skirt, playing the female character from his poem, with Elimo as her husband. “Let me confess, he was more of a performer.” Henry Indangasi took Okot’s oral poetry class at the University of Nairobi.

[00:13:29] “As far as oral poetry is concerned, what we liked, in a sense, was the fact that he could perform. He’s given a class. He has a whole hour. And that entire hour he's performing. He’s singing songs and traditional songs and so on. And nothing analytical. You know, he wouldn’t just tellyou about a story and analyze and say, okay these are the different constituents of a narrative or a folktale. I know of teachers, lecturers who don't perform. They do, they tell you about a story, but they don't perform that story. So that there was a strong aspect of his teaching.”

[00:14:18] Real life doesn't stop for analysis. It isn't packaged. It's there singing with a friend. Where for a second at least, the country isn't locked down. You aren't exiled. Of course, Okot was not just a performer. He was also a scholar devoted to criticizing another oppressive force. He was just as notorious in Nairobi as an outspoken critic of Christianity as he was as a charismatic, poetic presence. Okot had a troubled relationship with Christianity because of its close ties to empire. He saw it as a prototype of authoritarianism.

[00:14:56] Henry recalled some of his radical ideas.

[00:15:00] “I remember he famously said, Jesus was the son of a Roman soldier. And the Jews did not want to reveal that, so they came up with the theory of the Virgin birth. Meaning, that mythology about the Virgin birth and whatever, he didn't believe in. That was Okot p’Bitek.”

[00:15:40] Okot didn't believe for the same reason he critiqued absolute rule. Everywhere he looked, he found Christianity erasing indigenous religions. In their place, it set up abstractions. The Christian missionaries and colonial anthropologists he'd met imposed metaphysical ideas onto local religious customs. But in his view, they devoted far too much attention to the next world, to questions about heaven or the nature of God. In the process, they neglected what is here. Indigenous religions aren't like that. They are what he called this worldly. They teach us to hold on to real life, to accept what exists here and now in all its diversity. There is no other world for them. Only earth.

[00:16:31] “All we're trying to say is that the African has his superstitions, and as far as we can see now, they are not based on some deity, the equivalent of Jehovah, who, at one point or another when there was nothing including himself, then made himself, then made the world, and made man. Most of African superstitions begin with the world already existing. You may have a hole in which the first man jumped out from the middle of the earth, but the earth is there. It is taken for granted.”

[00:17:10] For Okot, Christianity seemed to touch the same nerve as Obote’s vision of one nation. Approached from one side, Okot’s critique of it is a sublimated dissent. Religious laws that could not bend to life, a God too distant from the earth, right there: these were images of a religion, but also of a ruler ignorant of the spectrum of lives making up the state. One who saw the nation not as a bundle of experiences that couldn't be catalogued or controlled, but as a singularity.

[00:17:44] Living performances, the freedom to live happens there, Okot responds, right in front of us.

[00:17:54] As I made my way around the arcade holding Paa ya Paa’s permanent collection, I came across a series of religious paintings.

[00:18:02] Elimo’s wife Phillda explained that it was a version of Elimo’s masterpiece, the Murang’a Murals, a sequence depicting the life of Christ. The drafts owned by Paa ya Paa are on warped, peeling plywood. The real masterpieces are on the walls of a colonial church.

[00:18:22] Elimo did them for free. “He was painting there at the cathedral, and he said it was like an open place. So he can see people when they come from way over there. And he was very shy. He was only twenty-four. Because it was colonial times, he says, maybe, you know, they would despise him, because, I mean, who is he?”

[00:18:45] The murals’ landscape was not Galilee. It was the hill country of Kenya and Uganda, spangled with villages, black shepherds with spears, and war parties. Elimo brought missionary iconography, as Okot would have put, to the earth of Africa to test its ability to live, like the poetry performed at Paa ya Paa.

[00:19:09] Paa ya Paa means “the antelope rising.” It rose out of the collapsed futures of poets like Okot p’Bitek, in the crucible of independence and disillusionment. It survived a devastating fire. Even now, its future is precarious. Developers moved in a few months ago to claim and clear the forest that belongs to it. The roots of one of the forest’s oldest trees extended underneath the gallery. It sent a tear through one of Elimo’s sacred murals when they cut it down.

[00:19:46] There are so many instances of the gallery's curtain being torn in that way, it's difficult to appreciate them all. But even after the passing of Okot, the loss of a building, the loss of its property, it still seems to rise like its namesake, the antelope. Art is what made life survivable in the precarious national context of postcolonial Africa. That's the legacy of Paa ya Paa, Elimo, and Okot. As Elimo gave me a tour of the property, we came across countless emblems of collapse. A pile of papers and broken ceramics. A monolithic statue called the “Freedom Fighter” that was toppled by logging trucks. But the tour ended with a Mgungu tree that the developers had for some reason left standing. Elimo saw the tree as a trace of a tradition that he wanted to keep alive.

[00:20:41] “It’s a Mgungu tree. You see that? A Mgungu Tree. The big one! It’s a Mgungu tree. Around the tree, [you] tell stories of the past, you know, from our own elders, you know? And we want to revive that, because [of] the hunger that is there!”

[00:21:04] He was speaking to two students who drove up while we were wandering the property. But it was as if I was watching Elimo consoling Okot in 1967, when it was a career and a nation that had been cut down, not a forest.