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Indigenous Ills

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# INDIGENOUS ILLS

From *Transition* 32 (1967)

## Okot p'Bitek

There is a growing tendency in Africa for people to believe that most of their ills are imported, that the real sources of our problems come from outside. We blame colonialists and imperialists and neocolonialists; we blame communists from both Moscow and Peking, and send their representatives packing. We blame the Americans and the CIA. We blame white settlers and so-called Indian bloodsuckers, and deport them even if they carry citizenship cards. We throw white missionaries out of the country and demand that the churches must be Africanized.

Another, but contradictory phenomenon is the belief that the solutions to our social ills can be imported. Foreign “experts” and peace corps swarm the country like white ants. Economic “advisors,” military “advisors,” and security “advisors” surround our leaders. English or West Indian women are invariably the secretaries of all key men in Government.

David Rubadiri has written, “How

government hoped to keep security whilst on the top hovered these ex-colonial dames and majors had remained a wonder to most people.”<sup>1</sup>

Every week planes leave Entebbe, Nairobi, or Dar-es-Salaam with returning “experts” and foreign ministers to negotiate foreign aid and more “experts,” and because we believe in “positive neutrality,” we seek aid from both East and West.

East is still East and West is West, but the twain meet in Africa. Capitalists and communists rub shoulders in our schools and hospitals. In certain hospitals, doctors use sign language because they do not speak English or any of the vernacular languages.

I believe that most of our social ills are indigenous, that the primary sources of our problems are native, rooted in the social setup. The most effective solutions cannot be imported: they must be the result of deliberate reorganization of the resources available for tackling specific issues.



There is much truth in the saying that people get what they deserve. And just as a man gets the wife he deserves, and a congregation the priest it deserves, a nation gets the leaders and the constitution it deserves.

The most striking and frightening characteristic of all African governments is this: that without exception, all of them are dictatorships, and practice such ruthless discriminations as to make the South African apartheid look tame. African socialism can be defined as the government of the people, by the educated, for the educated. You cannot be-

come a member of *their* parliament unless you can speak English or French or Kiswahili. You may be the greatest oral historian, but they will never allow you anywhere near *their* university.

This is not discrimination by white settlers against Africans, but discrimination against Africans by Africans, discrimination by the “black-suit” town tribesmen, discrimination by the educated men in power against their fellow men—their brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, against their own folk left in the villages. I feel like shouting a revolutionary slogan:

Beryl Goldberg

*The uneducated of Uganda unite!  
You have nothing to lose but your chains.*

The students in our university are not revolutionary. They are committed and conservative. They have vested interests. They look forward to graduation, the circumcision ceremony before joining

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the “big car” tribesmen. Our university and schools are nests in which black exploiters are hatched and bred, at the expense of the taxpayers, or perhaps heartpayers.

*And when they have fallen into things  
They eat the meat from the chest of bulls  
And their wives grow larger buttocks  
And their skins shine with health,  
They throw themselves into soft beds  
But the hip bones of the voters  
Grow painful sleeping on the same earth  
They slept before Uhuru<sup>2</sup>*

I leave it to political scientists to explore and analyze this strange situation, whereby independence means the replacement of foreign rule by native dictatorship. What does *equality* mean in newly independent African states?

*Notes*

1. From *No Bride of Peace*, p. 118.

2. From p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino*, chap. 11.