



**REMARKS BY THE VICE CHANCELLOR,  
PROFESSOR JOHN DDUMBA-SSENTAMU**

**ON THE OCASSION CELEBRATING OKOT  
P'BITEK'S *SONG OF LAWINO* @ 50**

**FRIDAY, MARCH 18, 2016, AT MAKERERE  
UNIVERSITY'S MAIN HALL**

- **Government Officials present**
- **Representatives of Foreign Missions**
- **Cultural Leaders**
- **The Keynote Speaker, Professor Simon Gikandi**
- **Discussants; Professors Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Dominica Dipio**
- **Distinguished Panellists, Readers and Performers**
- **The Family of Okot P'bitek**
- **Members of University Management, Principals, Deans and Directors**
- **Members of Staff present**
- **The Media**
- **All Invited Guests in Your Various Capacities**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen: Warm greetings and welcome to Makerere University.**

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Today is an important day for Makerere University and particularly the Department of Literature, in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. We have gathered here this morning in honour of the late Okot p'Bitek, who is perhaps Makerere University's greatest poet, thinker and cultural icon.

We are extremely proud to have produced an alumnus and eminent writer and scholar of his calibre and kind. We are therefore grateful to you all, our distinguished guests, for joining us to celebrate a true literary icon.

In a special way, I welcome our Keynote Speaker, Professor Simon Gikandi. Thank you very much for accepting to give the main talk during this event. We are truly honoured by your presence and look forward to your talk.

As a poet, novelist and performer, Okot p'Bitek demonstrated that literature, and poetry in particular, articulates our deepest values and aspirations as a people and as a nation. We remember Okot p'Bitek not only for his poetic skill and scholarly expertise, but also as a champion of local and national culture. In his life and works, Okot p'Bitek extensively documented Acoli tradition and oral art, celebrating it as a valuable heritage not only of the Acoli but also of Uganda as a whole.

Ladies and Gentlemen, *Song of Lawino* is Okot p'Bitek's landmark work, which continues to receive wide commendation, engaging critical responses right from its publication in 1966. Before its publication, East Africa had little visible written poetry, leaving the poetic arena in Africa to be dominated by West African and South African poets.

The publication of Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* changed this significantly and influenced the African literary imagination. It brought more focus and attention to the literary scene in Uganda and East Africa.

The significance of *Song of Lawino* on the East African and African literary scene cannot be overstated. Through this work, Okot p'Bitek carried the torch of African cultural rebirth, which would shine even brighter in his later non-fictional works such as *Africa's Cultural Revolution* and *Artist, the Ruler*.

Okot p'Bitek launched a poetic form that is now dubbed the 'song school'. This poetic form has been variously adopted by later poets such as Joseph Buruga (*The Abandoned Hut*), Okello Oculi (*Orphan*), and more recently p'Bitek's daughter, Jane Okot p'Bitek Langoya (*Song of Farewell*).

*Song of Lawino* passionately articulates affirmative aspects of our cultural identity in the face of attacks from imperial modernity. *Song of Lawino* advocates that while we must, as a nation, aspire towards economic, scientific and technological advancement; the hallmark of a great nation and an enduring civilisation depends on its achievements in the field of culture. These are its values and aspirations; its art, poetry and philosophy. This was Okot p'Bitek's conviction.

At a time of political turmoil in our nation's history, Okot p'Bitek demonstrated that writers should put together the practices and values that define their culture and be possessed with the courage to speak truth to power. This is the unifying theme in all Okot p'Bitek's literary and scholarly works.

Since 1966, *Song of Lawino* has been translated into more than thirty (30) languages. Fittingly, part of today's symposium is the launch of *Omulanga gwa Lawino*, a Luganda translation of *Song of Lawino*, by Prof. Abasi Kiyimba from the Department of Literature, Makerere University. *Omulanga gwa Lawino* is a thoughtful and thorough interpretation of the famous poem in terms of what Lawino, the village woman, was saying to Ocol, her husband, and to the rest of us, her "relatives".

Today's symposium will also feature Prof. Taban lo Liyong, who like Okot p'Bitek is an Acoli speaker and who has himself published an English "translation" of the *Song of Lawino*, titled, *The Defence of Lawino*. Prof. Lo Liyong, an eminent professor at Juba University, will participate in the symposium as part of the panel on Okot's *The man and His works*.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as I conclude, allow me to point out that Okot p'Bitek, along with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Henry Owuor-Anyumba, and Taban lo Liyong (here present) made history by championing the move to transform the then English Departments across the University of East Africa into Literature Departments. The goal of the revolution was to decolonise literary study across the University of East Africa and usher in, as Taban has appropriately put it, "*the study of the universal academic discipline of Literature in an East African setting, both Oral and Written, albeit still taught in and through the English language*".

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my pleasure to announce that one of the first fruits of that revolution is our keynote speaker for this Symposium, Professor Simon Gikandi. It is indeed a deserving honour to have him present the keynote address today as we celebrate Okot P'bitek's *Song of Lawino* at 50.

As Makerere University, we are very fortunate to spearhead such an important initiative. I therefore wish to thank all the individuals and partners that have been behind the successful organisation of this event.

I thank the Department of Literature headed by Dr. Suzan Kiguli for making an idea a reality. Your efforts are geared in the right direction towards achieving our vision "To be the leading institution for academic excellence and innovations in Africa".

In the same vein, I thank the leadership of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Director of Makerere Institute of Social Research for supporting this event. I further thank all our sponsors including Fountain Publishers, FEMRITE (Uganda Women Writers' Association) and Ethiopian Airlines.

I thank our eminent Keynote Speaker, Professor Simon Gikandi and all distinguished discussants, panellists, readers and performers. Your roles form the gist of today's event. In a special way, I would like to thank Prof. Abasi Kiyimba, for giving us a Luganda version of Song of Lawino.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us to celebrate 50 years of *Song of Lawino*.

***We Build for the Future.***

Thank you.