Introduction: On the Enduring Allure of Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*

Danson Sylvester Kahyana

Makerere University, Uganda; Stellenbosch University, South Africa

To celebrate the golden jubilee of a book is to acknowledge its high quality as fifty years is quite a long period in a world where more than one million books are published every year. This special issue on *Song of Lawino*'s 50th anniversary is therefore an occasion to celebrate the book and its contribution to East Africa and Africa's cultural renaissance. It is also an occasion for us to celebrate the poet who authored it and the various individuals and institutions that have made it circulate far and wide—publishers, translators, librarians, critics, lecturers, and students, to mention but a few.

Discussions of *Song of Lawino* are usually adulatory, with Okot p'Bitek receiving several praises, perhaps one of which was given by the Nigerian troika—Chinweizu Ibekwe (usually referred to mononymously as Chinweizu), Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike—calling it "possibly the best-rounded single work of African poetry in English today [which uses] authentic African imagery, proverbs, laments, invocations and curses, thereby successfully rooting the modern in the traditional" (195). This view of the poem's greatness is shared by other critics. Bernth Lindfors calls it "a thoroughly indigenous poem in form, content, style, message and aesthetic philosophy" and "the first poem in English to achieve a totally African identity" (146, 144). Peter Nazareth calls it "the first 'poem' in English to break free from the stranglehold of British writing … It owed little to any English or Western model: in one bold movement, it swept away the ghosts of T. S. Eliot, Wordsworth and others … Prior to that, the best poets had walked in the shadows of the English 'Greats'" (10).

It is little wonder, then, that Taban lo Liyong revisited his critical stance on the poem. In 1969, he considered it "frivolous" in some respects (149), his major issue being p'Bitek's choice of an uneducated persona, Lawino, to mount criticism on colonial institutions like the Western school, the Church, and the disco hall. For lo Liyong, the choice of a peasant woman as the protagonist through whom the poet launches his sarcastic attack on the West's assault on African traditions is akin to the Western writers' choice of a houseboy "as the African representative" (141). But later on, he re-engaged with *Song of Lawino* to the extent of working on his own English translation of the original

Acoli version, *Wer pa Lawino*, which two of the contributors to this special issue, Simon Gikandi and Abasi Kiyimba, consider a useful addition to the textual history of p'Bitek's magnum opus.[1] That lo Liyong took at least 19 years to complete the translation, having started it in March 1971 (lo Liyong "On Translating" 89), shows how serious he considers p'Bitek's ground-breaking poetic achievement.

More or less all the topics that p'Bitek is concerned with in the poem continue to be relevant, for instance mental brainwashing that came with colonial education, political mismanagement of post-independence African societies, the marginalization of women in both private and public spaces, and the betrayal of the masses by the educated class(es), to mention but a few. The scholars in this special issue continue the noble task of mining the poem for further insights that are pertinent to contemporary realities, fifty years after the poem was published.

Simon Gikandi's article gives us a textual history of *Song of Lawino* in its different editions and translations, in a move that will remind the reader of Isabel Hofmeyr's *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of the Pilgrim's Progress* (2004), a study in which the author's major task is to, according to one reviewer, "chart the vectors in which Bunyan's moralistic fable became enmeshed in different colonial and postcolonial projects" (Landau 340). Gikandi examines the work that *Song of Lawino* has done in postcolonial settings and studies, for instance providing a vocabulary with which to discuss certain anxieties that come with colonial domination, one of which being what p'Bitek calls 'apemenship'; the other being—among several others—the self-serving tendencies of post-independence leaders whose plunder of the nation's resources "inevitably gives rise to discontent among the mass of the people" (Fanon 174).

Gikandi's article demonstrates his intimate relationship with *Song of Lawino* to the extent that he writes from the vantage point of the different editions and translations of the poem that he has owned over the years, including *Omulanga Gwa Lawino*, Abasi Kiyimba's translation of the masterpiece into Uganda's mostly spoken language, Luganda. It also opens up debate on the impossibility of total translatability as Gikandi reflects on how the pumpkin leitmotif—"The pumpkin in the old homestead / Must not be uprooted!" (p'Bitek 41)—somewhat fails, in translation into other languages like German and Spanish, to reflect the power and force of the proverb on which it is based in the European translations of the poem.[2] Taban lo Liyong had predicted this difficulty as early as 1969 when he observed that p'Bitek ought to have foot-noted names like Ocol ("Son of Ocol or Col: Son of Black, Blackman, African" and the refrain 'who has ever uprooted the pumpkin?' because in the absence of this, "the non-Lwo speakers will not get the full significance of things since there is no other way to do

so" to the extent that they could consider the pumpkin a mere "variety of weed" (*Last Word* 142).

Kiyimba's article details the choices that he made as he translated the poem and the factors that guided him as he worked, in a bid to stay as close as possible to the meaning that p'Bitek aimed at communicating in the text as he (Kiyimba) understands it. The article is therefore invested in the classical debate in translation studies on what is lost or gained as one text is translated from one language to another. Kiyimba benefits from three versions of *Song of Lawino*: p'Bitek's English translation, Paul Sozigwa's Kiswahili translation (*Wimbo wa Lawino*) and lo Liyong's English translation (*The Defence of Lawino*). The article highlights the fact that the act of translation is a creative process that involves a number of negotiations as the translator tries as much as he or she can to capture the meaning and spirit of the source text. This is why Kiyimba uses different versions of *Song of Lawino* to ensure that what he eventually comes up with, *Omulanga Gwa Lawino*, benefits from all of them. From his experience, it is clear that translation is "a commitment to openness and continuous reinterpretation" (Farquhar and Fitzsimons 653) in the sense that the text being translated is open to several meanings depending on the translator's reading of it and his or her sociocultural context or baggage. Like Gikandi's essay, Kiyimba's reflections arise from an intimate relationship with *Song of Lawino*—a fact that is evident in the extreme care he takes in making different decisions on how best to translate each line or idea into Luganda.

Fred Mbogo begins his essay by locating *Song of Lawino* in a campaign in Kenya hash tagged My Dress My Choice, in which some women protest the stripping of a young woman by young men, on account of her being considered scantily dressed. Mbogo identifies the victim of the men's sartorial policing with Clementine, who in the poem is ridiculed for aspiring to look like a white woman because of her decision to bleach her skin and to douse herself in make-up, be it face powder or lipstick. He is troubled by Lawino's stance against Western modernity, arguing that hybridity is always already in place however much we may claim to stick to tradition. This view echoes Kwame Anthony Appiah's oft-quoted observation that "[c]ultural purity is an oxymoron" since people's lives are "enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more" (113). This itself reiterates lo Liyong's vision of African culture, articulated as early as 1969, as "a synthesis and a metamorphosis—the order of the things to come" that "assimilates and it dissimilates [and] does everything designated by the words active, changing and progress" (206).

Mbogo then goes ahead to reflect on how a modern-day director of plays would produce *Song of Lawino* for the theater: how he or she

would design the stage, the costumes and so forth, and the kind of interpretations the director would work with, giving motivations for the choices he or she makes. His is an engaging paper that greatly benefits from the author's experience as a theater director, critic, and teacher, to show that the act of directing a literary piece is one of interpreting and re-interpreting as the director translates the words on the page into action. This interpretation and reinterpretation inevitably depends on the tradition or convention he or she is working with, say literal, metaphorical, or Brechtian, to mention but a few, each of which comes with its own demands, limitations, opportunities, and rewards.

In his article, Paul Mukundi takes on a lo Liyongian stance, so to speak, to argue against Lawino's disdain of Western science, for instance her preference of Acoli cooking utensils to electric stoves. For the reader to benefit from *Song of Lawino*, Mukundi suggests, there is need to fault both Lawino and Ocol—the former for her grievous inflexibility in the face of new ideas and technologies that could improve her lot, and the latter for his disastrous sycophancy that makes him self-denigrating and self-hating—a dog of the white man—as Lawino aptly puts its (p'Bitek 116). Mukundi is asking the readers of the poem to approach it with a critical consciousness that makes it possible to get whatever they see good in each perspective, without having to succumb to a Manichean view of the world. The readers should eschew Lawino's hardline ethnic stance that Bernth Lindfors calls her "dogmatic Acolitude" (149); at the same time, they should also be weary of lo Liyong's more or less uncritical identification with Ocol as a promoter of post-independence progress. For with his (Ocol's) desire to destroy African traditions and culture, it is only doom that it will lead to if he wields political power. Mukundi's reading supports Bernth Lindfors' observation that in *Song of Lawino*, Okot p'Bitek "advocated neither an atavistic return to Acoli customs and traditions nor a total abandonment of Western ways" but a creative synthesis of the two (153).

Charles Okumu examines the different ways in which *Song of Lawino* intertexts with Acoli songs, particularly the satirical ones, and how these give the poem its beauty and energy. His article lucidly explains how p'Bitek borrowed from Acoli culture to make a reasonable plea against wanton destruction of Acoli (and by implication African) traditions and culture, since there is a lot of sense in them if their meanings are sought and understood. As an Acoli speaker and a researcher into Acoli folklore, Okumu's discussion is done from the vantage point of the local authority who is intimately familiar with the subject he is discussing.

The final article in this special issue is Mercy Ntangaare's in which she discusses the performance elements that keep *Song of Lawino* alive both on the page and in the mind. She approaches her

subject as both a theater practitioner (like Fred Mbogo) and as a woman and feminist scholar, in order to delineate those aspects of the poem in which she sees dramatic potential if it is produced on stage. She argues that one way of approaching such a project is to look at the poem as a domestic drama, and think carefully how to maximally exploit the tension between Lawino and Clementine to speak to women's experiences in polygamous settings.

I would like to thank the staff of *Postcolonial Text* for their patience and guidance during this project. It has taken some time to put it together, because of a number of disruptions, including the Covid-19 pandemic that wreaked havoc all over the world. The authors of the articles remained steadfast in their faith that the project would come to fruition, even when some months passed without them hearing from me. I thank them for their perseverance and fortitude. Finally, but not the least, I thank Dr Susan Nalugwa Kiguli of Makerere University and Dr Justus Kizito Makokha of Kenyatta University for convening two panels at their respective campuses to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Song of Lawino*. The articles in this special issue are revised versions of some of the papers that were presented at these celebrations.

It is my hope that this special issue will reignite renewed interest in *Song of Lawino* as we continue to engage with it as researchers, teachers, and general readers.

Notes

1. In his review of lo Liyong's translation of *Wer pa Lawino*, Mark L. Lilleleht notes that there are parts and passages, where his "presentation outstrips p'Bitek's own English rendering" (157).

2. In his introduction to *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, G. A. Heron observes thus on the meaning of this leitmotif: Pumpkins are a luxury food. They grow wild throughout Acoliland. To uproot pumpkins, even when you are moving to a new homestead, is simple wanton destruction. In this proverb, then, Lawino is not asking Ocol to cling to everything in his past, but rather not to destroy things for the sake of destroying them (7). For David Rubadiri, the leitmotif is a symbol. He observes that through it, Lawino is stating a profound, philosophical truth not only of our survival, but also of that which identifies us. If you uproot where you come from, then you have got nothing else—no pumpkin—you live like the people who live in the towns, from one flat to another because there is nothing to uproot

except your valuable pictures. So the pumpkin here becomes highly symbolic. (155)

Works Cited

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Penguin Books, 2006.

Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980.

Fanon, Frantz. "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness." *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Constance Farrington. Grove Press, 1968, pp. 148-205.

Farquhar, Sandy and Peter Fitzsimons. "Lost in Translation: The Power of Language." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 43, no.6, 2011, pp. 652-662.

Heron, G. A. "Introduction." *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, by Okot p'Bitek, Heinemann Educational Books, 1984, pp. 1-33.

Landau, Paul. "Review of *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of the Pilgrim's Progress* by Isabel Hofmeyr." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2005, pp. 340-342.

Lilleleht, Mark L. "Review of *The Defence of Lawino* (*Wer pa Lawino*) by Okot p'Bitek and Taban lo Liyong." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2008, pp. 156-158.

Lindfors, Bernth. "The Songs of Okot p'Bitek." *The Writing of East and Central Africa*. Edited by G. D. Killam. Heinemann, 1984, pp. 144-158.

Lo Liyong, Taban. "Lawino is Unedu." *The Last Word: Cultural Synthesism*. East African Publishing House, 1969, pp. 135-156.

___. "On Translating the 'Untranslated': Chapter 14 of 'Wer pa Lawino' by Okot p'Bitek." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1993, pp. 87-92.

Moyo,Thamsanqa and Jairos Gonye. "Apemanship: A Critique of the Modernisation Theory in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Selected Works

and Clement Chihota's 'Shipwreck' in *No More Plastic Balls*." *NAWA: Journal of Language & Communication*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2010, pp. 211-224.

Nazareth, Peter. "Waiting for Amin: Two Decades of Ugandan Literature." *The Writing of East and Central Africa*. Ed. G. D. Killam. Heinemann, 1984, pp. 7-35.

p'Bitek, Okot. *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*. Heinemann Educational Books, 1984.

Rubadiri, David. "The Development of Writing in East Africa." In *Perspectives on African Literature*, edited by Christopher Heywood. Heinemann Educational Books, 1971, pp. 148-156.