Song of Lawino: Translation, Textuality, and the Making of an African Reading Public

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The invitation to celebrate *Song of Lawino* at fifty has sent me back down memory lane. It has reminded me of my long relationship with the text, which I discovered in junior high school in Central Kenya. Rediscovering this old friend has also brought back memories of the few years that I came to know Okot p'Bitek at the University of Nairobi in the late 1970s. I have found myself recalling the cultural debates and arguments that were taking place in East Africa then and the towering figure of Okot as the unofficial poet laureate of our region. My memories of *Song of Lawino* now take the form of the different editions of the poem that I have owned over the years, all of them telling a cumulative story about the text's genealogy and the cultural work it came to perform in the East African public sphere. As I was preparing this article, I pulled out these editions and was astonished by the complex textual history that they reflect.[1]

But my reflections are on something more distinctive than what these texts embody in their materiality; I am interested in the role Okot's book came to play in the emergence of modern African literature, of its capacity to engage a generation of African readers who, in the decades when the book first appeared in different languages and translations (from the 1950s and 1970s), met in the text as it were to debate what it meant to be African. In the following discussion, I use *Song of Lawino* as an example of an African text of decolonization, one written in the cusp between what Frantz Fanon described as the death of a colonialism that had assumed "a continuous rooting in time" and the dynamism of the anticolonial revolution, "fundamental, irreversible, ever more far-reaching" (180).

The essential context for Okot's political and poetic project—and for African literary history as a whole—is the condition described by Fanon as one in which the great systems that had governed the world in the modern period were dying or "living in a state of crisis" (1). This condition—a dying colonialism and the crisis it generated—enabled the foundation of what Fredric Jameson, writing in a different context, has called "the new institution of the literary" (xiii). My essay starts with a discussion of the genealogy of Okot's text in this context and then moves on to explore the relation between his poetics and the emergence of a new African public sphere; I conclude with an extended discussion of how *Song of Lawino* travelled in translation and what this meant for the poem as one of the seminal texts of World Literature (see Gikandi).

I- The Genealogy of a Text

The different editions of *Song of Lawino* (in English) provide an intriguing history of where the text came from and its real and imagined reading public. The first edition of the poem, with illustrations from a then unnamed Frank Horley, was published by East African Publishing House in 1966. After the subsequent publication of *Song of Ocol* in 1967, East African Publishing House issued a combined edition in 1972, with an introduction by G. A. Heron. What this meant is that, in a period of six years, *Song of Lawino* had moved from being a curious translation of an Acholi long poem to a canonical text in African literature, a set book in what was then an integrated East African secondary school and examination system. As a set book, it was required reading for students taking the examination in literature in English. On the surface, the entry of Okot's text into the secondary school curriculum was not unprecedented; after all, by the 1970s, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's first novels *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* were established examination texts for the East African Certificate of Education. What made *Song of Lawino* unique is the way in which it quickly claimed a distinctly East African identity, how it was able to transcend the metaphysics of its locality—Acholi and Northern Uganda—to be read as a text on African and black identity, and how it came to shape public debates about blackness and, by extension, Pan-Africanism. Here, then, was a text about an Acholi woman from Northern Uganda, published by a Ugandan poet who would consolidate his reputation as an exiled Kenyan, widely read in translation across the whole region.

When it came to communities of reading, *Song of Lawino* was not just a school textbook, but also a communal event. I remember seeing school boys and girls in uniform carrying the school edition in small towns in Central Kenya; I also remember school teachers and book sellers reading the poem and arguing over Lawino's case against Ocol, or the other way around. But perhaps the most vivid mark of the book's moment of arrival was not its effect on actual readers, but its impact on its presumed readers, people who had not read the poem but had heard of it and could hence adopt its vocabularies for everyday conversations. In its time, Okot's poem provided a vocabulary for debates on such topics as cultural nationalism, cultural mimicry, marriage, and politics. In fact, I first learned about politics in Uganda, especially the struggle for power between the Democratic and Congress parties, from some memorable passages in *Song of Lawino*:

> And when the Party leaders
> Come from Kampala,
> My husband jumps,
> He is like a newly eloped girl,

He is all over the place
He is quick to win a good name,
And when he talks,
He explodes like the dry pods of cooro!
He is like a woman
Who has just buried
The other woman
With whom she shares a husband (108).[2]

With the publication of *Song of Ocol*, the sequel to *Song of Lawino*, Okot was able to provide the structure in which what were previously assumed to be private debates—on marriage, family, and sexuality, for example—could be conducted in public. In effect, Okot's poem had turned the whispers and murmurs of the cultural discourse of decolonization—its desires and anxieties—into a loud conversation about cultural values in a time of transition. After reading the poem for the first time, one came to appreciate the significance of cultural belonging and to have a proper measure of Lawino's plea to Ocol not to abandon his roots:

Let me dance before you,
My love,
Let me show you
The wealth in your house,
Ocol my husband,
Son of the Bull… (120)

Similarly, the reader could not escape the harshness of Ocol's dismissal of Lawino's plea at the opening of *Song of Ocol*:

Woman,
Shut up!
Pack your things
Go! (121)

In the combined edition, the two enunciations—the claimer and the disclaimer—faced each other on the page, and this called attention to the stark terms of debate and the Manichean allegory that was structuring cultural discourse in the 1960s, the first decade of decolonization in East Africa. But contrary to later readings of the poem, Okot did not mean these to be fixed positions. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o noted in his introduction to *Africa's Cultural Revolution*, "Okot is no traditionalist, nor an advocate of a mere retreat into yesterday" (xi-xii). In other words, Okot was not asking his readers to choose between Lawino, the advocate of tradition, or Ocol, the diehard modernizer; rather, he was demonstrating the cultural antinomy that defined African culture in the 1950s and 1960s when ideas about national belonging were in a state of flux. *Song of Lawino* was part of a larger cultural project in which, as Okot noted it in his preface to *Africa's Cultural Revolution*, Africa was being asked to "re-examine

herself critically" and to "discover her true self and rid herself of 'apemanship'" (vii). The popularity of *Song of Lawino* depended largely on p'Bitek's ability to find the right words for the moment, to give his audiences a vocabulary that would enable them to think through their everyday cultural dilemmas.

To some contemporary readers, *Song of Lawino* may be seen as a text that is too closely tied to an idea of African culture that has been transcended by global cultural transformations or even one associated with the tyranny of the school curriculum, but on its publication, it was a text of insurgency, part of a project whose goal was to undo what was proving to be a recalcitrant culture of colonialism now authorized by local elites. As a cultural worker in Kampala and later in Kisumu, p'Bitek had been horrified by what appeared to be the normalization of colonial values and habits even in decolonization. He was convinced that creativity could not emerge from what he called the "business of apemanship":

> There is no creativity in "aping." The poems that the youths of America and Europe sing are commentaries on situations in their own countries and protests against the social ills of their own system. Their protests are irrelevant in an African country. Let the youths of Uganda and Africa sing of the joys and sorrows of Uganda and Africa. Let them use their varied talents to enrich Uganda and Africa by singing meaningful songs, songs that are relevant to the Ugandan and the African predicament. How can our youths be proud of singing like some foreign poet—when they sing what, to us, is mostly irrelevant? Why don't our youths aspire to be better than other youths of the world? When will the youths of Africa influence the youths of the world? (*Africa's Cultural Revolution*, 3)

The publication of *Africa's Cultural Revolution* in 1973 put the question of cultural "apemanship" or mimicry at the center of African debates about the past and the future.

It was, however, in his poetry that Okot's critique of cultural mimicry was most effective. In its capacity to reroute the desires of audiences, *Song of Lawino*, like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* before it, created the compulsion for us to think more seriously what it meant to be African outside the colonial imaginary or discursive formation. Drawing on familiar devices in oral literature and performance, Okot was able to reach "many people who rarely show interest in written literature, while still winning praise from the elite for his poem" (Heron, "Introduction," 2). He used the power of songs, dances, and words to celebrate African culture and, in the process, to transform the desires of his audiences, to change the way they imagined their world and related to postcolonial institutions. The poem was asking Africans to use their own creativity and initiative to reconstruct their institutions in their "own style" (5). As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o put it aptly, *Song of Lawino* mapped a "new literary direction in East Africa" and belonged "to a new mood" ("Okot," 76). This mood—embodied as much by Okot's cultural politics as his poetics—

would create a new space for African readers emerging out of domination. In this context, it is significant that Okot considered *Song of Lawino* to be a song rather than a long poem. The notion of song, with its connotation of voice and sound, would become an important ingredient of what would later come to be known as the Okot school of poetry, a new genre in the poetry of decolonization (see Ramazani).

II- *Song of Lawino* and Its Reading Public

What was the role of singing, rather than writing, in the cultural contract between addressers and addressees? This question can best be approached through a reflection on the character of Okot's implied and real audience. For, in spite of its success in reaching out to the broadest audience possible, it was also the case that *Song of Lawino* was a text more at home in institutional settings such as the university and the school, rather than in the hands of the peasants who were central to Okot's imagination. The actual readers of the poem were those who were literate, could afford to buy the book, and had the time to read it. Moreover, this was not a song to be sung in public but a poem to be read in private. In this context, it is ironic that one of the subjects under disputation in both *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* was the nature of the book in the corruption of African values and privatized reading as a mode of retreat from kinship and hospitality.

One of the reasons Ocol has abandoned Lawino is because she cannot read:

> You insult me
> You laugh at me
> You say I do not know the letter
> A
> Because I have never been to school
> And I have not been baptized (34)

By the same token, Lawino believes that Ocol's crisis of identity, which she compares to a disease, started with the dark forest of books in his house:

> My husband has read much,
> He has read extensively and
> Deeply,
> He has read among white men
> And he is clever like white men (113)

But this knowledge has only turned him into "A dog of the white men!" (115).

Enacted here was a familiar drama in the marriage economies of 1950s—the cultural gap between husbands who had had access to a colonial modernity and wives who had been denied access to modern life by an unequal educational system. Fueled by these gendered

inequalities, Okot's poem would circulate in the public sphere (defined by the school, the university and leading East African newspapers) by the two diametrical positions that it seemed to valorize—Ocol's modernity pitted against Lawino's traditionalism. Concealed beneath this binary structure, however, was the complex situation in which readers of the poem were likely to confront their lived experiences; even when they opposed Ocol's ideological position, these readers were by default locked in a similar cultural situation. In effect, for Lawino's argument to succeed, it was not enough for her to denounce the Ocols of the African world—"members of a native ruling class that was nurtured in colonial schools and universities" (Ngũgĩ, "Introduction," x). She needed to persuade this class (her readers) to recognize themselves as other, as the alienated subjects who were willing to be mocked as a first step in the task of cultural reconstruction.

How could Lawino as Okot's surrogate convince people surrounded by books that the sources of their power was a disease? The poet must have been thinking of this problem because hidden beneath Lawino's biting satire was her genuine sympathy for Ocol. Indeed, Lawino's bitter tongue is directed at Ocol's enemies and associates, and functions like a firewall around the protagonist. The harsh and uncompromising mockery directed at Clementine, to cite one of the famous examples, positions her as the figure of absurd mimicry and leaves Ocol open to reason or reasonableness (36-41). At the same time, the harsh critique of mimicry in the poem is mitigated by a constant appeal to cultural relativism.

A significant discursive or poetic strategy in *Song of Lawino* was Lawino's adoption of cultural relativism:

> I do not understand
> The Ways of foreigners
> But I do not despise their customs.
> Why should you despise yours? (41)

Lawino's position—which echoes that of Okot, the anthropologist—is that it is only when Ocol recognizes cultures as relative that he can secure the legitimacy of his own cultural position, understanding that the customs of the Acholi are "solid/And not hollow" (41):

> They cannot be blown away
> By the winds
> Because their roots reach deep
> into the soil (41)

Lawino's hope is that a relativist strategy will open up a space for Ocol to reconsider his new identity. At the same time, an appeal to relativism assumes that the subject is located in a particular position in time and space. Lawino's appeal to Ocol's essential Acholiness is

based on her failure to understand that a colonial education has not merely alienated her husband, but turned him into a new subject, the subject of modernity. *Song of Ocol* confirms what should have been apparent to Lawino if only she had been more attentive to the limits of her logic, namely that Ocol cannot return to a position that he has transcended both in terms of his psychology and class. The poet is undoubtedly sympathetic to Lawino's position, but the binary structure of *Song of Lawino* conceals a classic antinomy—two beliefs, positions, or conclusions that appear equally valid and hence immutable.

We can understand the nature of antinomic thinking in *Song of Lawino* if we remember that, when he wrote the poem, Okot occupied Ocol's cultural and class position. Although he was deeply involved with the culture of Acholi peasants and had intimate knowledge of the oral traditions of the Northern Lwo, Okot was a solid product of the colonial system. He was born in an Anglican parsonage; his family were prominent members of the Protestant establishment in Northern Uganda; he was educated in prestigious colonial schools (Gulu High School and King's College Budo) and universities (the University of Bristol, the University of Wales at Aberystwyth and Oxford), and his professional training (in education and law) had elevated him into what was then a very small African middle class. So, perhaps one important sign of his creativity was the ability to represent the rich life of a subject (Lawino) that he was not, and to impoverish the position and language of another (Ocol), whose background he shared. In this context, it seems to me futile to focus on the correctness or legitimacy of the cultural positions staked by either Lawino or Ocol. A more useful way of thinking about how the poem sought to influence its readers is to focus on its structure of address.

Let us recall here, then, the role of address in poetic discourse. Poetic address is, as Jonathan Culler argued in *Theory of the Lyric*, always "a triangulated address," a message sent to the reader by means of address to something or someone else" (186). In p'Bitek's poem the effectiveness of Lawino's address depends not so much on Lawino's direct appeal to Ocol, but his speaking to him or about him through others or by poetic echo:

> Husband, now you despise me
> Now you treat me with spite
> And say I have inherited the stupidity of my aunt;
> Son of the Chief,
> Now you compare me
> With the rubbish in the rubbish pit,
> You say you no longer want me
> Because I am like the things left behind
> In the deserted homestead (34)

Although Lawino is speaking directly to Ocol, the poet works with the common assumption that his actual readers can only be addressed indirectly (we are ostensibly asked to overhear what is being said

between wife and husband). Okot goes on to complicate the triangle of address by adding another set of addressees to the poem—Lawino's clansmen:

> My clansmen, I cry
> Listen to my voice:
> The insults of my man
> Are painful beyond bearing (35)

Here, Lawino has shifted her address from Ocol to her clan, but the readers are still being addressed indirectly (they overhear this conversation); the addressee and reader are effectively put in the same position and, more significantly, are marked out as outsiders.

What makes address in *Song of Lawino* even more complicated is that the poem's stated intentions—the work of cultural restoration—is directed at an audience that might be intellectually attuned to its mission but may not be willing to give up the modernity that is its condition of possibility. While Lawino's cry against her mistreatment by Ocol might win the sympathy of her kin, and while many readers might identify with her emotive appeal for roots, her discourse will probably not reverse the mimicry that she decries. This, of course, is the point made in *Song of Ocol*, where Ocol makes it very clear that he will not be moved from the position he has occupied and even forecloses any sensible dialogue, dismissing Lawino's song as a "strange melody/ Impossible to orchestrate" (121). A simpler way of putting all this is to argue that Okot understands clearly that his readers, whose position is closer to Ocol, are not going to be convinced to give up their newly acquired colonial mansions to return to the village.

Song of Lawino does not present a real argument, one that is intended to be won, but what J-F Lyotard calls a *différend*, a conflict between two parties "that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments" (xi). For the same reason, Okot did not intend either Lawino or Ocol to win their arguments in relation to the real readers. He did not want us, his readers, to give up their Ocol lifestyles and behaviors to return to the old world that Lawino was promoting. The power of the poem and its effectiveness were to be found in its performative nature, its capacity to demonstrate in words that African cultures were informed by deep meaning and were hence not sources of shame, and to show that the real scandal was the blind mimicry of European values by the elites. In *Song of Lawino*, then, Okot invested poetic energies not to relive the past, as critics as diverse as Taban Lo Liyong and Ali Mazrui argued, but to make it an important part of the ongoing debate on Africa's presents and futures.[3]

The key to the argument I advance here is the poem's self-proclaimed identity as a lament. There was no doubt that Okot

considered lamentation—in the form of Lawino's cry or plea—as central to the meaning of his poem. Indeed, the first English edition of *Song of Lawino* is subtitled a lamentation, signaling the poet's desire to present the poem as a work of loss, of mourning for the dead or for a world that had passed. This subtitle, removed in later editions for unexplained reasons, was to function as an important generic marker, signaling both the poet's attention to the structure of loss and his understanding that Lawino was not celebrating Acholi ways but mourning their death. Above all, what she was mourning was Ocol's social death.[4]

From the very beginning Ocol's social death is what generates the work of mourning in *Song of Lawino*:

> O, my clansmen,
> Let us all cry together!
> Come,
> Let us mourn the death of my
> husband,
> The death of a Prince
> The Ash that was produced
> By a great Fire!
> O, this homestead is utterly dead,
> Close the gates
> With *lacari* thorns,
> For the Prince
> The heir to the Stool is lost! (116)

For Lawino, the death of Ocol signifies the end of the true sons of the Acholi. However, Lawino cannot accept the fact that the man she has admired and loved is dead, so the poem ends with the possibility that he might be revived, be cured, and perhaps be restored to his proper standing in the culture:

> All I ask
> Is that you give me one chance,
> Let me praise you
> Son of the chief!
> Tie ankle bells on my legs
> Bring lacucuku rattles
> And tie them on my legs,
> Call the nanga players
> And let them play
> And let them sing,
> Let me dance before you,
> My love,
> Let me show you
>
> The wealth in your house,
> Ocol my husband,
> Son of the Bull,
> Let no one uproot the Pumpkin. (120)

Lawino's powerful plea— "Let no one uproot the Pumpkin"—will go unheeded. As a result, lamentation becomes a form of mourning

which, unlike elegy, provides no consolation. In this situation, however, lamentation is made impossible by the fact that, although Ocol may be culturally dead, he is only dead to Lawino and her kin; within the elite circles in which he moves, he retains a powerful voice, one which, in its immediate response, marshals all its crude power and authority to undo Lawino's poetic address:

> Song of the woman
> Is the confused noise
> Made by the ram
> After the butcher's knife
> Has sunk past
> The wind pipe…
> It is a song all alone
> A solo fragment
> With no chorus
> No accompaniment,
> A strange melody
> Impossible to orchestrate (121)

Ocol goes even one step further and consigns Lawino's lamentation to a belated history:

> As if in echo
> Of women's wailing
> At yesterday's funeral,
> Song of the dead
> Out of an old tomb,
> Stealthy cracking
> Of dry bones (121)

What is previously experienced as a powerful expression of grief for an absent one is now rewritten as an echo, a wailing out of an old tomb, a speech act that cannot be enforced because its moment has passed. The work of *Song of Ocol* is to undo the structure of lamentation that was promoted by *Song of Lawino*. Working together, the two poems would become the most important works of thinking about culture in East Africa and catalysts for creating a new reading public.

III. On Cultural Translation

But where did this text come from and how did it become, first, East African and then Pan-African? How did it come to create new reading publics? Behind these questions is my fundamental belief that one of the most neglected aspects of the criticism of African literature is literary or textual history, a systematic understanding and explanation of not only how works of literature come into being but how they also came to create new readers within a new bourgeois public sphere (see Karin Barber, 137-75). For at its moment of inauguration, modern

African literature was driven by the imperative to account for the place of the African in the modern world—a world defined by new forms of economic exchange, middle-class values and, most significantly, cultural aspirations. Literature, or more specifically a culture of reading, was instrumental in creating or recreating in Africa what Jürgen Habermas called the bourgeois public (1-26). It was in the new literature emerging in the twentieth century that African elites from diverse backgrounds first imagined themselves as modern and African. In literary texts such as *Song of Lawino*, new African readers could see the public enactment of issues that they had previously assumed were confined to the realm of the family and private, domestic spaces.

It is not accidental, then, that the major political and cultural debates in *Song of Lawino* would take the form of a family or domestic dispute. This dispute was, of course, public—it was being played out in East African newspapers and literary journals in the 1960s. But in staging this debate as a private matter, the poet would enact a drama that many of his readers would recognize. The conflicts that colonial culture had generated in the public sphere over matters such as custom and acculturation were also affecting the nature of private relations. In effect, the staging of a public debate as a domestic conflict would enable African readers from different cultural and political traditions to meet in the text as it were.[5] Furthermore, the textual history of *Song of Lawino* and its impact on its readers is a clear indicator of how African writers understood the terminologies—modernity, subjectivity and culture—that were to denote the key role played by the literary institution in the age of decolonization.

Here, it is important to locate Okot's text in one of the most unique interregnums in modern African history, that moment, in the period after World War II when, if I may borrow Antonio Gramsci's words, the old was dying but the new could not be born.[6] In his preface to *The Defence of Lawino*, Taban Lo Liyong states that the genesis of the poem dates back to the early 1950s and that he remembers Okot reading versions of the original Acholi version (*Wer pa Lawino*) to his students (including Taban) at the Sir Samuel Baker School in 1956 (x). This early version was rejected by the publisher's agents in Gulu probably because, according to Heron, "of its forthrightness on sexual matters" (*The Poetry* 3). The first English edition and the second Acholi version of the poem were published in 1966 and 1969, respectively. The combined edition of *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, intended for use in secondary schools and universities, was published by the East African Publishing House in 1972. And we can definitively conclude that Okot's poem entered global circulation with the publication of the combined edition by Heinemann in the African Writers Series in 1984.

If we pay close attention to the timeliness, we will notice that what was most important about *Song of Lawino* was its attentiveness to

its changing contexts and its responsiveness to the desires of an evolving audience. Simply put, each edition of the poem was translated, or retranslated, to respond to the demands of an evolving reading formation. Okot conceived the poem and wrote the first Acholi version in the 1950s, the age of a dying colonialism, a period that Hannah Arendt would have called "afterness"—the "empty space" that marked "the no longer and not yet" (158). The afterness of colonialism had opened a space for promoting what V.Y. Mudimbe described as "another center" for African history and its ideological activity (176), but writers educated in colonial schools were struggling to figure out their audiences or reading public.

In retrospect, Okot's turn to poetry and poetics can be read as part of his attempt to respond to a series of questions raised by his teacher, the Oxford anthropologist Godfrey Lienhardt, on the possibility or impossibility of cultural translation. Lienhardt's interest in the problem of cultural translation, as Talal Asad reminds us, was an attempt to describe to Europeans the mental functioning of peoples from cultures that were assumed to be radically different from our own; it was an invitation to imagine "how members of a remote tribe think" and to make "the coherence primitive thought has in the languages it really lives in, as clear as possible in our own" (143). Within this context, Okot sought to master the disciplines that had become central to the European imagination of Africa—anthropology, law, and religion. As I noted earlier, he studied these disciplines at the University of Bristol, the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and Oxford University. Temporarily consigning his poetry and his 1953 Lwo novel, *Lak Tar*, to the margins of the dominant "colonial" discourses, Okot seemed to have once believed that the colonial disciplines held the key to understanding Africa. Though published after *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, Okot considered his research from Oxford important enough to be presented in two treatises—*African Religions in Western Scholarship* and *Religion of the Central Luo*, both published in 1971.

But Okot was never truly at home in these colonial disciplines and his interest in poetry was perhaps a concerted attempt to deconstruct the older disciplinary formation, to create new spaces for thinking about Africa within an imminent postcoloniality. The first version of *Song of Lawino*, written about the same time as Lienhardt's work on cultural translation, was struggling with the same set of issues, most notably the question of how African writing could simultaneously speak back to a world shaped by colonial discourses and conscript African readers as agents outside the colonial formation that had created them as subjects. But if, in these early versions, *Song of Lawino* was conceived as an African text over-determined by late colonialism, its later iterations in the 1960s were driven by an acute awareness that decolonization represented an unprecedented moment in African history—a new space of experience and horizon of

expectations (see Koselleck, 267-88). It is hence significant that the second Acholi version was written when the author was no longer a colonial subject but the citizen of a new, independent country.

The changing context of the poem can perhaps be best understood through an examination of the changes Okot introduced into his poetic register and modes of address as his text moved from the colonial to the postcolonial public sphere. Heron informs us that the poet introduced at least three major changes into the second Acholi version of *Song of Lawino*. First, the length of the poem was expanded from 30 typed pages to 140 printed pages. In expanding the poem, it seems Okot was not trying to create an epic, but a lyrical sequence that would expand the range of reference and reimagine his audience. One consequence of this was the sequential meditation on *kit Achol* (the ways of the Acholi), one of the major themes in the book.

Second, the second Acholi version contained what Heron aptly describes as an increase in the "satiric impact" (36). Heron reminds us that Clementine, the major object of satire in the poem, was introduced in the second version. It is significant that in the 1960s, when the modes of behavior being satirized were becoming common, satire could function as an effective mode of social address because, as Okot clearly understood, his audience was now confident enough to handle mockery:

> Ocol is no longer in love with
> The old type;
> He is in love with a modern girl.
> The name of the beautiful one is Clementine.
>
> Brother, when you see
> Clementine!
> The beautiful one aspires
> To look like a white woman (37)

Third, the expanded poem enabled the poet to develop the characters of Lawino and Ocol as social types rather than mere allegorical figures. In effect, Ocol and Lawino had become embodied. They were no longer signs or signifiers of contrasting cultural positions, but subjects whom we recognized among us. Cultural conversations in East Africa for most of the 1970s were essentially debates between the Lawinos and the Ocols (see Ngũgĩ , "Introduction," x).

Now, from Heron's careful analysis, it is clear that many of the changes introduced in the second Acholi version of *Song of Lawino* were carried into the English edition, and that the two texts are almost identical except, of course, for the missing final chapter. Some of the minor changes do, however, have significant consequences. One such change was the poet's significant retreat from the discourse of custom and the rhetoric of Acholi culture or *kit Achol* (the ways of the Acholi) toward the concerns of a larger Pan-Africanist audience. Instead of the insistence of a metaphysics of locality, the poet went out of his way to

translate unfamiliar Acholi customs and to invoke a Pan-Africanist addressee. Omitted in the English translation, then, was the last chapter of the Acholi original, the one that recapped the singularity of Acholi culture and the need to preserve it.

The translation of the poem from Acholi to English seems to mark an expansion of its referential range and, by implication, its audience. Taban Lo Liyong's complaint against Okot's translation of *Wer pa Lawino* is instructive here. In his preface to his own translation of the poem, Lo Liyong complained that *Song of Lawino* (the English version) was "not strictly a faithful translation of *Wer pa Lawino*," but a rendering of the poem in which "whatever was topical, striking, graphic and easily renderable into English received due prominence" at the expense of *kit Achol* (Preface xi). But this is precisely what Okot intended—the production of a text that could be easily rendered into other languages and, in the process, conscript audiences outside the immediate geography of the poem. As a translator, p' Bitek preferred commensurability to incommensurability, a point that he hinted at in a note to the first edition of the poem: "Translated from the Acoli by the author who has thus clipped a bit of the eagle's wings and rendered the sharp edges of the warrior's sword rusty and blunt, and has also murdered rhythm and rhyme."[7] Undoubtedly, Okot's translation of the poem may have lost some of its cultural and linguistic nuances in the process, but this was the compromise that enabled the poem to travel outside the Acholi world.

In translation, *Song of Lawino* was able to travel from what we might label its Northern Uganda, moving beyond its original Acholi linguistic sources and recruiting new readers along the way. It first travelled in East Africa through its English and Swahili translation (*Wimbo wa Lawino*), published in 1966 and 1975 respectively; with the publication of the poem in Heinemann's African Writers Series in 1984, Okot's masterpiece effectively entered the domain of what we now call postcolonial literature. By this time, the text had been translated into other European languages too. A German edition (*Lawino's Lied*) was published by Horst Erdmann Verlag in Tübingen and Basel in 1982; an authorized UNESCO version (*La Chanson de Lawino*) was published by Présence Africaine in Paris in 1973. A Spanish translation (*La Canción de Lawino*) was published in Malaga in 2011 in a bilingual English/Spanish edition. And the highlight of the fiftieth anniversary of the poem was the publication of *Omulanga gwa Lawino*, the Luganda translation by Abasi Kiyimba.

As it travelled, *Song of Lawino* produced new interpretations of African worlds and conscripted new readers while still maintaining its crucial connection to the Acholi language and culture that had enabled it in the first place. And as it travelled around the world on the back of a commensurable translation, one which seemed to be based on a

linguistic compromise, *Song of Lawino* always signaled its Acholi origins by holding on to an untranslatable leitmotif:

> Ento yat madit pwoyo ocwal lyake i ng'omn,
> Ma tut, ka wek ocir lapiru.
> Ma onyong'o anyong'a ka ng'omn yomn
> Ka yamo kot obino, bong kuru
>
> TE OKONO OBUR BONG' LUPUTU.
> OKONO WI OBUR BONG' LUPUTU
> OKONO, BONG' LUPUTU! (*Wer pa Lawino*, 120)

Lo Liyong's translation in *The Defence of Lawino* is closest to the original:

> But the big tree should sink its roots down
> Deep into the ground, to withstand the buffeting winds.
> A plant that squats without roots when the soil is soft
> Should the thunderstorm come, it won't wait.
>
> Pumpkin boles in abandoned homesteads are never uprooted.
> Pumpkins in homesteads are never uprooted.
> Pumpkins are not for uprooting! That's all!

In his translation, Okot cut out the whole chapter in which the pumpkin leitmotif was contextualized within Acholi culture and its complex ontology, ending the poem with a considerably weakened version, which I quoted earlier: "Ocol my husband,/ Son of the Bull/ Let no one uproot the/ Pumpkin" (210).

This weakened version is the one that would travel in translation in other languages. Here is the ending of the poem in *Lawino's Lied*, the German edition translated by Marianne Welter with Inge Uffelmann:

> Laß midi vor dir tanzen,
> Geliebter,
> laß mich dir
> den Reichtum unseres Hauses zeigen!
> Otschol, mein Gatte,
> Sohn des Stieres,
> wer wird schon
> die Kürbispflanze entwurzeln ...

And in *La chanson de Lawino*, the French translation by Frank and Henriette Gauduchon:

> Je veux danser pour toi,
> Mon amour,
> Je veux te montrer
> La richesse de ta maison !
> Okol, mon mari,
> Le Fils du Taureau,
> Tu le sais,
> Personne ne doit arracher la citrouille !

And, finally, in *La Canción de Lawino*, the Spanish translation by Eva Torre:

> déjame bailar ante ti,
> mi amor,
> déjame mostrarte
> la riqueza de tu casa,
> Ocol marido mío, Hijo del Toro,
> que nadie arranque la calabaza.

In the above examples, we can see how translatability and readability went hand in hand and how linguistic translation confronted the challenges of ontological or deep cultural claims. Working with the poem's "weakened" English version, rather than the original Acholi text, translators had no difficulties finding cultural or linguistic equivalents for the lexicon of love, adoration, the figure of the homestead, or even the metaphor of the bull. Yet, all the European language translators struggled with the pumpkin, not in its literary meaning (the German *Kürbispflanze*, the French *citrouille*, and the Spanish *calabaza* are all intelligible), but in its figurative or metaphorical sense. These translators rightly assumed that the centrality of the pumpkin as the mark of the homestead could not be intelligible to their immediate audiences and that glossaries were needed to explain that centrality of Okot's metaphor. The idea of a pumpkin as the organizing principle of a Northern Ugandan cultural formation was assumed to be as alien to European audiences as it was familiar within Acholi culture (see Okumu and Gauvin). The pumpkin metaphor would hence come to function as sign of the cultural incommensurability and of ontological difference.

Ironically, the translators of the poem in African languages did not need to explain the significance of the pumpkin metaphor nor provide it with a glossary that would call attention to its difference. Paul Sozigwa assumed that his Swahili reading audience already understood the cultural significance of the pumpkin (*mboga*) as the primal vegetable:

> Oone, nikuchezee ngoma,
> Mpenzi wangu,
> Nikuonyeshe mali
> Illiyomo katika nyumba yako,
> Ocol, mume wangu
> Mwana wa Dume
> Asije mtu
> Akaung'o Mboga. (186)

And although it came with a glossary of Acholi cultural terms, Abasi Kiyimba's Luganda translation, *Omulanga gwa Lawino*, assumed that its real and implied audience lived in a world where the pumpkin was the marker of identities and boundaries, the natural manifestation of belonging and being in the world. While Acholi and Luganda readers

might belong to different language classes, they inhabited a landscape in which vegetables represented roots:

> *Ocol mwami wange*
> *Omwana azaalibwa Abacholi*
> *Tasaana kutambula nga yeekaniikirira*
> *Mbu ayagala kukuula kiryo kya nsujju*
> *Bajjajjaabe kye baaleka basimbye.* (205)

Although it faced difficulties being admitted into the edifice of World Literature, *Song of Lawino* was secure in an African world where its lexicon was shared across boundaries. This is what makes it a foundational African text.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a lecture delivered at Makerere University College on March 18, 2016 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*. A shorter version of the paper was presented as part of a keynote address at the 2017 African Literature Association (*ALA*) Conference at Yale University. My revisions and corrections are indebted to conversations with many of my interlocutors at these events, including Professors Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Mahmood Mamdani, Susan Kiguli, Dominic Dipio and Drs. James Ossita, Okot Benge, and Danson Kahyana. I thank the family of Okot p'Bitek for their hospitality. I am indebted to Drs. Mahiri Mwita, Abdul Nanji, and Meg Arenberg for their help locating the Swahili translation of *Song of Lawino* and avoiding some errors in translation. I elaborate the arguments presented here in *Imagining Decolonization: African Literature and Its Public 1890-1980* (forthcoming), from which this chapter is excerpted.

2. Except where indicated otherwise, my references here are to the 1984 Heinemann African Writers Series edition of *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*.

3. In "Lawino is Unedu," Lo Liyong accused Okot of suffering from "the Negritudist impediment of rhythm above sense" (142); Mazrui described the poem as "a passionate soliloquy, an utterance of cultural nationalism" (85). Heron provides a good but brief discussion of how Lawino and Ocol became "common nouns" in African cultural debates: "The two characters have become prototypes of two opposing approaches to the cultural future of Africa" ("Introduction," 2)

4. My definition of social death comes from Orlando Patterson who, in *Slavery and Social Death*, argued that a slave was considered to be a socially dead person, alienated from all rights and "claims of

birth" and hence not belonging to "any legitimate social order" and socially excommunicated (5).

5. This is how Habermas represents the relationship between reading and the making of modern subjectivity in the public sphere: "The privatized individuals coming together to form a public also reflected critically on what they had read, thus contributing to the process of enlightenment which they together promoted" (50).

6. Here is Gramsci's complete quote: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (275-276).

7. The frontispiece note and the identity of the poem as "A Lamentation" were removed from most subsequent editions of *Song of Lawino*.

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