Reading Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* in the Era of Postcolonial Technoscience

Dr. Paul M. Mukundi

Morgan State University, Maryland, USA

Introduction

In his article, "Postcolonial Technoscience," Warwick Anderson argues that some of the earlier methods of analysis in Science "do not seem adapted to explaining the co-production of identities, technologies and cultural formations characteristic of an emerging global order" (643). He argues, therefore, that postcolonial theory can be employed to discuss emerging scientific concerns. Explaining that the concept of technoscience is broad and ambivalent, Anderson aims at employing postcolonialism to help understand some of the changes that have taken place in recent times, especially in the intersection of both Science and Technology. As Anderson observes, postcolonial theory is largely obscure and has constantly needed change such as through the addition of 'Technoscience' because, among other things, it fails to address such neo-postcolonial issues as "the patterns of local transactions that give rise to global, or universalist, claims" (643). These facts notwithstanding, it is apparent that technological and scientific advancements continue to be made, and that postcolonial theory has not altogether lost relevance—for its weaknesses continue to be studied and adjustments continue to be made. It is with this background in mind that an interrogation must be made as to the relevance of some of the arguments advanced by the doyen of East African Literature and celebrated Ugandan writer, Okot p'Bitek, in his groundbreaking poem, *Song of Lawino*, which centers on the lamentations of Lawino about her educated husband, Ocol, who has neglected his Acoli traditional culture and fully adopted the ways of his colonizers. Specifically, this article interrogates—with reference to today's reader's perspective—the place of the English language, attitudes towards formal education and foreign religion, and perceptions of beauty as reflected in *Song of Lawino*.

Contextualizing Postcoloniality and Postcolonial Technoscience

It is now irrefutable that the term "postcolonialism" is fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity, and that numerous attempts to define the term have made murkier and more controversial such efforts. Anour Majid argues that "postcolonial theory has also been somewhat disabling because what it reveals is not too much of a revelation" (134). Nonetheless, postcolonial theory continues to be employed in literary scholarship, and attempts have been made by such scholars as Jane Hiddleston to incorporate in its definition its haziness, thereby expanding its frontiers. It is against this background that Hiddleston writes that "[t]he term 'postcolonial' can generally be understood as the multiple political, economic, cultural and philosophical responses to colonialism from its inauguration to the present day, and is somewhat broad and sprawling in scope" (1). Undoubtedly, part of the problem with the term emanates from the diversity of both the colonizers and the colonized—the fact that the different groups of colonizers did not always employ the same hegemonic strategies and that the colonized, being of different cultural, geographical and historical backgrounds, neither reacted in the same manner nor had homogenous postcolonial experiences. Thus, the understanding of what is "postcolonial" has been as incongruent as have been its proponents and their disparate backgrounds.

Of importance to this article, however, is the tendency to shift postcolonialism from the resistance it has always connoted in its characterization. Bill Ashcroft writes that "resistance has become a much-used word in post-colonial discourses, and indeed in all discussions of 'Third World' politics" (19). Tracing the history of this opposition-based approach to issues, Ashcroft asserts that resistance was central to the former colonies' struggle for independence and later for self-definition in the postindependent period. Nevertheless, he wonders whether "this armed or ideological rebellion is the only possible meaning of resistance and, more importantly, whether such a history leaves in its wake a rhetoric of opposition emptied of any capacity for social change" (20). Ashcroft here is not belittling the struggle of the many millions of formerly colonized peoples who had to resist racial subjugation and assert their humanity. Neither does he mean that the war against domination ended with the attainment of independence by the colonies, for that would ignore the deleterious impacts of both colonialism and neocolonialism. Instead, Ashcroft is opposed to an intransigent opposition that fails to admit that social

change, at times influenced by erstwhile colonial powers, is always possible and so is cultural change.

It is this aspect of including within postcolonialism the prospects of change that will steer the arguments in this article. No culture can remain inflexible in its mendacious sense of unique piety, and the possibility of accepting or at least appreciating certain elements of other cultures must be entertained. Indeed, as Michael Chapman argues, "what we now refer to as the postcolonial is, spatially and temporally, an entanglement of the colony with modernity in which […] no cultures are pure and in which the philosophical home may not be the nation but the world" (12). It must also be observed that Frantz Fanon, while castigating Black people's imitation of Whites in *Black Skin, White Masks* admits unenthusiastically that it is impossible for the people of the former colonies to define themselves in the postcolonial epoch as independent of colonial influence. He writes: "For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the White man" (110). Fanon's idea must not be misconstrued to mean that Black people should perceive themselves as the Whites perceive them. Indeed, Blacks must fight to regain and assert their identity outside the one foisted on them by colonizers, who deemed them as an inferior race in dire need of civilization. Instead, Fanon contends that this assertion of Black identity must reflect the reality of the postcolonial condition, where elements of foreign culture and order still linger. It is this reality that Lawino, who remains stuck in the glory of precolonial cultural practices, is unable to accommodate.

Moreover, Homi K. Bhabha argues that national culture can only "be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities—modern, colonial, postcolonial, 'native' […]" (302). Bhabha's assertion implies that the identity of a people or nation must accommodate not only the people's precolonial and colonial pasts but also their contemporary reality. Thus, the consideration of any cultural values as permanently African or Western is a perilous venture because, as Edward W. Said states, any assessment of the "identity, history, tradition, uniqueness" of any society must remember that such notions mostly exist within a continuum of interactions with other cultures with which "they have always overlapped one another through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and, of course, conflict" (330-31). Thus, what was deemed an aspect of African or Western culture in one era may become accepted as a valuable cultural norm of a different culture in a different age.

Hybridity as postulated by Said and Bhabha has been remarkably boosted by the development and vast usage of technology. Indeed, contemporary technological advancements have forced change in every sphere, including in oral literature to which canon *Song of Lawino* may be justifiably placed. In "Imbongi to Slam: The Emergence of a Technologised Auriture," Russell H. Kaschula argues that oral literature cannot escape today's digital reality. He therefore advocates for a paradigm shift in orature through the recognition of what he calls "technauriture," a term that accommodates the notions of orality, writing and digital technology. In "From oral literature to technauriture: What's in a name?" Kaschula and Andre Mostert further argue that "[t]echnauriture allows researchers to assess the potential of harnessing technology to reverse the demise of oral traditions and the knowledge systems embodied in such spoken contexts" (4). Kaschula and Mostert are concerned with the waning interest in and preservation of oral literature which, admittedly, would be much worse had oral materials not been preserved through the written word.

While Kaschula and Mostert aim at "firmly plac[ing] the debate regarding orality and oral traditions in a 21st-century discourse" (3), this article aims at addressing neither the idea of the preservation of oral literature nor the placement of oral literature materials in today's literary canons. Instead, this article assesses the African cultural notions emphasized in *Song of Lawino* and interrogates whether today's reader of the oral poem would agree with their idealization. Nonetheless, this assessment cannot entirely be detached from the postulations of Kaschula and Mostert, because Kaschula's coining of the term "technauriture" is a response to the changes that are ubiquitously evident in this era of postcolonial technoscience. Indeed, Kaschula and Mostert assert that "[…] contemporary culture is dynamic and more aware of the implications of technological advances" (4). Thus, one might question today cultural nuances that s/he would not have questioned in the period within which *Song of Lawino* is set.

Indeed, today's notion of transmodernism—with its mantras of "choice" and belief that nothing is absolute—has enhanced the prospects of challenging the rationale of one's own beliefs and accepting the influence of other cultures. In "Localizing Global Technoscience," Geoffrey Bowker writes that "[i]t is a terrible hubris to say that one has access to the only way of knowing. We ourselves—whoever that may be—have several, contradictory, very powerful ways of knowing. Attention beyond reason to a single way of knowing is attaching to a fetish demanding obsession, not treading the one, true,

right and only path" (258). Moreover, the many technological and scientific innovations that have taken place in the last few decades have changed, worldwide, how people perceive themselves and others and how they interact with people, places, and information. As Anderson argues in "Introduction: Postcolonial Technoscience," "scientific and technological endeavours [have] become sites for fabricating and linking local and global identities, as well as sites for disrupting and challenging the distinctions between global and local" (644). A reading of *Song of Lawino* within this technoscientific environment that is rife with disruptions is thus an interrogation of some of the stances held by both Lawino and Ocol and will, perhaps, require the "song" to change tune.

The Place of the Colonial Language and Indigenous Languages

The idea of the place and use of English has attracted opposing viewpoints from postcolonial scholars, and debate on the subject is far from over. By claiming that Ocol "abuses [her] in English" (35) while at the same time informing her listeners that "[she] used to admire him speaking in English" (36) whenever she played her bow harp in his praise, Lawino opens herself up for criticism for both liking and disliking the colonial language. Indeed, one wonders how Lawino—who concurrently admits that she does not understand English—both admires it when spoken by Ocol and hates it when it is employed as a medium of conveying offensive messages. It is instructive that it is only when English is used for the latter purpose that it becomes, in Lawino's insinuation, a colonial language; it is, to her, a language to be proud of when it is used to praise.

The intimation that English only adopts a colonial plinth when used abusively is not only a reminiscence of the abuses meted on Africans in the language during the colonial enterprise but also an indication that it is possible for Africans to use the language conventionally. This view of English as capable of conveying constructive ideas for the formerly colonized, such as Ocol's praise of Lawino, echoes the stance of Chinua Achebe who posits that there is nothing wrong with employing English as a means of communication so long as the message is entirely indigenous. He defends the use of English: "What I do see is a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language" ("The African Writer" 433). He argues that it is "neither necessary nor

desirable" ("The African Writer" 433) for the colonized to use the language as a native speaker would. However, other postcolonial theorists such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argue that the use of a colonial language in the former colonies is objectionable, because it is tantamount to abandoning one's own mother tongue in order to undertake a mission of "enriching other tongues" ("The Language" 435). Nonetheless, wa Thiong'o ensures that his works—which are first written in his native Gĩkũyũ language—are translated into English, which is tantamount to acknowledging the importance of the foreign language when one aims at reaching an audience that is broader than his/her local community. The use of the English language is unavoidable, for it is the official language in Kenya—wa Thiongo's home country—as well as in Uganda where the Lawino and her Acoli community reside.

Furthermore, a university student in any former colony today might wonder what the fuss about Ocol's use of English is all about. Indeed, most young people today were born in some sort of an urban setting, where the use of indigenous languages is not as venerated as it was several decades ago. The technological tools that the youth find at their disposal today—from Facebook to texting, from WhatsApp to Instagram as well as general access to and use of the Internet—are largely built on the English language. Possession of the language is, thus, advantageous because it permits entry to and utilization of contemporary technology.

Nevertheless, the embedment of the English language in technological tools and gadgets is not devoid of connotations of neocolonization. Indeed, as Bill Ashcroft argues, colonial values are conveyed even "[…] when colonized subjects occupy fractures in the discourses which frame those cultures" (116). While Ashcroft here refers to the use of the English language in such globally accepted discourses as philosophy, history, publishing, and postulations on such theories as postcolonialism, suffice it to state here that employing a language, any language, is tantamount to conveying information within the cultural dictates of its speakers. Indeed, as Bowker asserts, "[l]earning to use the Internet is integrally about learning to accept categories of Western knowledge, [for] there is no separation of science and infrastructure" (252). Thus, English is a jinx that the formerly colonized individual must live with: it is a necessity that is wrought with soft harm—soft harm because its users are often oblivious of the foreign cultural connotations that they involuntarily convey in their use of the language.

As Ashcroft implies, the use of English to express postcolonial theory has itself become contested. It is not surprising, then, that Chapman describes postcolonial literary studies as remaining largely "attached to the elite work in new Englishes by the émigré or multicultural metropolitan author" (11) and asserts that "postcolonialism as a spur to thought and activity predates Said, Bhabha and Spivak, 'the holy trinity' (sic) of the northern university" (12). Chapman's assertion implies that the employment of colonial languages in postcolonial theory undermines the same subjects of subjugation and subalternity that it seeks to study.

Parenthetically, *Song of Lawino* itself has not been spared from the debate about the use of English. P'Bitek first wrote the oral poem in his indigenous Acoli language as *Wer pa Lawino* before translating it into *Song of Lawino*. This translation has not escaped criticism, and Taban lo Liyong argues that the English translation is no match of its original version because "the depth and erudition of the Acoli original were passed over in favor of flowery and colorful English" (89). On the other hand, Charles Okumu perceives the oral poem to be authentically African because p'Bitek borrows heavily from Acoli oral songs, thereby "giv[ing] his written poetry its songlike quality and its originality" (56). To make matters worse, p'Bitek did not include in *Song of Lawino* the last chapter, Chapter 14, of *Wer pa Lawino* because as he informed lo Liyong "he was [too] tired" (qtd. in lo Liyong 88) to translate that last chapter. However, lo Liyong argues that "Okot did not translate *Wer pa Lawino* into *Song of Lawino*. He wrote two books" (88) because the English translation is not the same as the original Acoli version. Furthermore, lo Liyong explains that chapter 14 was left out because it had "no Clementine to laugh and no foibles of Ocol to hold up for [literary] criticism" (88). While this stance by lo Liyong questions the use of English to express purely African ideas while at the same time implying that creative writers subtly consider the impact of literary criticism on their works, one may never really decipher the exact reason for the omission of the last chapter in the English translation of *Wer pa Lawino*. Suffice it to say here, however, that there are certain African idioms, jokes, chapters or even stories that lose meaning when removed from the linguistic reservoir in which they are contained. This reservoir is the native language, with its attendant cultural nuances.

While one fears that Lawino will find it difficult to operate in the contemporary world, with its English-driven technology, this concern is exacerbated by the fact that she is similarly unenlightened about indigenous languages except her own. She reveals that she "cannot

tune the radio/ Because [she] do[es] not hear/Swahili or Luganda" (49). While one may excuse her for having no knowledge of Luganda—for her native Nilotic-language is linguistically dissimilar to the Bantu-language of Luganda, her failure to know Swahili—a lingua franca that is spoken at diverse levels not only by her Acoli people but by almost all East Africans—is defenseless. Failure to possess this language heralds a troubled existence because Swahili enables inter-ethnic communication, is a medium of important information—both local and global, and is the means by which a citizen participates in such arenas outside his/her immediate orbit as political expression. Thus, Lawino presents herself as one who is not only incapable of living in the current neopostcolonial world whose hallmarks are globalism and information technology, but also unable to communicate with most of her fellow Ugandans and East Africans. It is clear then, that she must rethink her own assertions of both the self and the culture that she purports to defend. Unable to communicate with anyone else except a fellow member of her Acoli ethnic community, Lawino will find it hard to operate in today's highly globalized society.

Which Way on Religion and Education

The areas of contest between Lawino and Ocol also include the subjects of religion and education. Lawino advocates for both indigenous religion and education, while Ocol subscribes to their Western equivalents. Ocol's christening of his people as "kaffirs [… who/] do not know the ways of God" (35) demonstrates his blind acceptance of hegemonic beliefs that are embedded with imperialism. There is nothing wrong with practicing Christianity, because, as I assert in *Preventing Things from Falling Further Apart*, all religions have "inherent value" (59) and, therefore, no religion is superior or inferior to another. Nonetheless, religion—any religion—is a way of life and is not the sort of thing that an individual can whimsically substitute with another. Nonetheless, a reader of *Song of Lawino* in this era of transmodernism and post-truth—with its philosophy that there is no singularly right belief—would urge Ocol to keep his chosen, borrowed religion and let be Lawino and her fellow followers of indigenous religion and education.

Lawino, however, demonstrates ignorance of the Western religion that she criticizes, for she terms the Christian sacrament of Eucharist cannibalism. She argues that inviting people "To come and eat/ Human flesh!" (75) and giving people "human blood/ In the cup" (75) turns Christians into "wizards/ [...who] exhume corpses/ For dinner" (75). A

more recent similar claim by Dan Brown in his thriller novel *The Da Vinci Code* notwithstanding, this criticism by Lawino of a religion whose symbols she does not fully understand is reminiscent of the colonizers' similar criticism of African traditional beliefs without first investigating their value to Africans. One may argue, however, that Lawino shows interest in such affairs as religion but that, like any stranger to any belief, she has many questions that "[...] flow endlessly/ Like the Nile waters" but cannot find a person to guide her, because "the teachers of [this new] religion/ Hate questions" (90). She also imputes her hatred, especially of Catholicism, to the use of a strange language during worship. She reveals that when she once joins "The Catholic Speakers'/ Class" (75), she cannot stay because "[t]he Padre shouts words,/ You cannot understand,/ And he does not seem/ To care in the least/ Whether his hearers/ Understand him or not" (75). The latter is a genuine denunciation of many Christian evangelists of the colonial period, whose interest was merely to indoctrinate Africans without making much effort to explain the core concepts of the foreign religion. It is this approach that, as Achebe argues, left Africans who converted to Christianity "at the crossroads of cultures" (*Morning Yet* 119) because they were forbidden from practicing their traditional African religious beliefs, yet they were not provided with a thorough understanding of the foreign religion to which they were supposed to subscribe.

While baptism, about which Lawino is concerned when she reveals her lack of education, perhaps does not mean much today as it might have done in both the colonial period and in the ensuing postindependent mini-period, Lawino's "not know[ing] the letter A [because she] ha[s] not been to school" (34) is disconcerting. A person without any formal education today would be utterly lost, because almost all basic devices and appliances that are in use today require basic literacy. Indeed, no illiterate individual—and illiterate here means, sadly, lacking the Western formal education that p'Bitek criticizes—would be able to fully operate such technological devices as a cellphone, except perhaps for basic communication. Indeed, illiterate and semi-literate individuals have been found to experience serious challenges in the use of such devices as cellphones. In a 2014 study that examined the challenges that semi-literate cellphone users in India face while using media player, Shashank Ahire *et al* concluded that "[f]or many of the semi-illiterate users, English was the primary barrier to get familiar with the device and to learn new things. This forced the users to take help from someone who can understand and explain it to them" (177). Thus, a person like Lawino who "cannot

hear a single foreign word" (p'Bitek 35) would have to depend on others not only to use today's technological tools but also to, say, even read road signs most of which are written in the languages of erstwhile colonizers. While the use of foreign languages for road signs in African states is, on the one hand, an unfortunate inheritance from the colonial era, it is, on the other hand, emblematic of globalism that requires people of one country to interact with those of others. Unfortunately, too, African countries have rarely devoted resources to the adaptation of foreign technologies to local environments. Purged of their name-calling baggage, Ocol's concerns are, therefore, apropos as long as they point out Lawino's inability to possess the tools necessary to live in such a globalized postcolonial epoch as today's.

It is important to mention, nonetheless, that p'Bitek is not ignorant of the need for and benefits of formal education. Indeed, he himself was formally educated and was a university teacher; his capability to write his oral poems was itself pegged on formal education. What would concern today's reader, however, would be why an educated person like Ocol—who "has read extensively and widely" (36), and "extensively and/ deeply" (113) and whose house is "the forest of books" (113)—could still be so ignorant. Indeed, one questions why an educated person like Ocol totally rejects his own people—including his wife, mother, and siblings—because of his new preference for a Western lifestyle. Ocol's stance may, thus, be p'Bitek's means of bringing the colonizers' irritating manners, beliefs and *modus operandi* close to the Acoli community in order to elicit from the latter a rejection of foreign values. This suggestion is not improbable given Chapman's assertion that "[i]f the subaltern, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak maintains, cannot speak, she or he can at least mimic the coloniser, ridicule and thus undermine the authoritarian substance and manner" (10). Without Ocol and his vitriol, there is no case for Lawino to present, and there is, therefore, no *Song of Lawino*.

While Lawino argues that Ocol's inanity emanates from the fact that "[h]e was read among white men/ And he is clever like white men" (113), one must find that the problem is with Ocol himself and not the education that he receives. While, obviously, the colonizers would aim at brainwashing the colonized—as illustrated by wa Thiong'o who argues that, by introducing foreign language and education to Africans, colonizers aimed at alienating them "further and further from [themselves] to other selves, from [their] world to other worlds" (*Decolonising* 12), the colonized individual has the intellectual choice to reject indoctrination and use the education given to him to help in the emancipation of his ilk. Indeed, most of Africa's

liberation heroes such as Nigeria's Nnamdi Azikiwe, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, and Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, among others, were recipients of Western education but they did not turn against their own people. Thus, a reader might conclude that Ocol is an abusive, maladjusted bigot whose eccentricity is merely brought to the fore by Western education.

To continue, even though one would not describe those who subscribe to the African traditional way of life as "ignorant, poor and diseased" (36) as Ocol does, perhaps these adjectives would require further probing today. For instance, it has already been argued that the indigenous brand of education would not, alone, enable a present-day individual to function fully. At the same time, elements of that traditional education such as proverbs and certain cultural beliefs are the hallmark of an indigenous identity and cannot be obliterated by Western education or today's technological innovation. Likewise, one doubts whether traditional medicine can singlehandedly solve all of today's medical puzzles. Obviously, whereas the Western way of living —and in most cases irrespective of whether an individual lives in the city or in the rural village—has brought with it many lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, it is also true that technoscience has made possible advancement in medical knowledge. To be fair, herbal medicine remains a crucial segment of the healthcare field, both in Africa and globally. Although the names of such programs differ—for such names as pharmacognosy, herbal medicine, alternative medicine, integrative medicine, and complementary medicine have been used to refer to the discipline—many universities across the globe offer degrees in this field. These universities include, among many others, Makerere University (Uganda), the University of Johannesburg (South Africa), the American College of Healthcare Sciences (USA), and University of East London (UK). At the core of these programs is the understanding that traditional medical practice aims at reconnecting the social and emotional equilibrium of patients, based on community rules and relationships, as opposed to Western medical practice whose aim remains only the treatment of diseases in patients (Abdullahi 115). Thus, while it is undeniable that "a number of traditional medicines are important and effective therapeutic regimens in the management of a wide spectrum of diseases some of which may not be effectively managed using Western medicines" (Abdullahi 117), the latter, with their attendant technological innovations, are equally effective in addressing some of the medical dilemmas that traditional medicine cannot solve.

Thus, while it may not have been the case in the colonial and early postcolonial periods, such facts as the importance of formal education, the use of proper sanitation, the advancement in medical technology, among many others, have become universally uncontestable. This stance is not illogical considering Pheng Cheah's argument that "[t]he heightened interaction between nation-states and cultures in contemporary globalization has generated a discontinuous field of overlapping and contested universal areas" (65). Cheah's argument, which he acknowledges as an extension of the notions of universality and particularity beyond Jacques Derrida's view of universality as that which is "linked to the value of exemplarity that inscribes the universal in the proper body of singularity" (65), implies that constant encounters between nations, peoples and cultures have forced a renegotiation of what have been deemed universally held beliefs. Consequently, while Lawino is not obligated and does not need to overrate Western equipment as Ocol does, one is dismayed by her admission that she "do[es] not know/ How to hold/ The spoon and the fork" (56), or how to "use the primus stove" (57), or how to tell time; one wonders how she will survive in the postcolonial era. Indeed, her use of traditional means of telling time through reference to the sun, and her further reference to agrarian activities such as keeping poultry —where cock-crowing helps to tell time—belongs to the precolonial era when there were no schools, offices, and alarm clocks, all of which have become universally uncontestable as hallmarks of today's civilization.

Traditional Versus Modern Perception of Beauty

Lawino's assertion that Ocol is "no longer in love with the old type;/ He is in love with a modern girl […who] aspire[s] to look like a white woman" (37) is arguably indicative of Ocol's rejection of African aesthetics. However, one may argue that, while it is distasteful to ape the culture of one's erstwhile colonizers along with its undertones of race-based superiority, there will always be traditional and modern ways of life—and modern here is not to be interpreted as being synonymous with Western, because the African way of life, like all others, is never static. The modern sense of beauty, nonetheless, unfortunately tends to be influenced by the West while the rest of the world often must either play along—and not without protests—or be left out altogether. This modern consciousness of beauty is not without its share of ethical and other difficulties. Indeed, there are no doubts

that today's sense of beauty is an intricate affair that is fraught with countless encumbrances. Meeta Jha writes that today's "Eurocentric beauty ideals, valorized in beauty pageants and Disney films, exercise social control over female bodies generating fantasies, inspiration, injury and inequality. Women can attain or approximate this beauty ideal only if they can mold, sculpt, manipulate and reshape their bod[ies] according to culturally validated norms" (1). The desire of many women—including White women—to attain the ideal body type created by this Eurocentric notion has fueled the creation of a lucrative beauty industry. It is worthwhile to note, however, that this view of beauty has not been left unchallenged, especially by feminism. Nonetheless, while feminist stances of the 1960s and 1970s abhorred what was considered as patriarchal perceptions of beauty, that cannot be said to be the case today because, as Sheila Jeffreys explains,

> [i]n the last two decades, the brutality of the beauty practices that women carry out upon their bodies has become much more severe. Today's practices require the breaking of the skin, spilling of blood, and the rearrangement or amputation of body parts. Foreign bodies, in the form of breast implants, are placed under the flesh and next to the heart, women's labia are cut to shape, fat is liposuctioned out of the thighs and buttocks, and sometimes injected into other sites such as cheeks and chins. (1)

The practices described by Jeffreys notwithstanding, many individuals continue to reject the Eurocentric conception of beauty. Indeed, as Courtney J. Patterson argues, some women, especially those of African descent, enjoy their fat bodies and reject thinness as a measure of good health and beauty (33). Nevertheless, as Jha argues, the fantasy to create such bodies as those presented in beauty pageants and films continue to be shown as "[…] achievable through consumer practices of grooming, hygiene, fashion, fitness, hair and skin care, and surgical modification, simultaneously producing racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism in everyday media practices" (1). Admitting that beauty is a multifaceted arena, for it can help shape identities in personal, national, and global levels, Jha admits, regrettably, that "[t]he civilizational status of a country is ranked as developing, developed, backward, or progressive, depending on its levels of Westernization" (2). Thus, today's African may not wholly ignore the fashion, hair and skin care products that are prevalent in today's globalized market.

This is not to say that Africa is devoid of beauty products, for the continent is, in fact, replete with raw materials that are crucial to the beauty industry. Unfortunately, however, these materials often have to undergo processing—technoscience—before use. It is no exaggeration

to state, for instance, that shea butter is the oil and base of some of the most popular beauty products today, and that, unfortunately, it comes back to Africa at exorbitant prices after processing in the West. Thus, while Lawino is proud to see "Young girls/ Whose breasts are just emerging/ Smear[ing] shea butter on their bodies" (52), today's beautician will assert that shea butter in its unprocessed form is repulsive. The answer, then, lies in expanding the local processing of shea butter and other beauty products at lower costs. This local production—a sort of local technoscience—also helps to build local economies.

Given this background, the reader finds logical Lawino's lament about Tina's "wear[ing]/ The hair of some dead woman/ Of some white woman/ who died long ago" (55). Lawino's protests here are that the hair belongs to a dead person—the possession of which she terms "witchcraft" (55)—and that the hair belongs to a White woman. One wonders what Lawino would say today when the human hair used in adornment in many African societies may be obtained from other formerly colonized peoples in such places as Asia. Perhaps she would plainly ask why an African woman needs the hair of any other person, and why the African woman is not contented with her own hair.

Moreover, the accusation that Tina's "lips are red hot/ Like glowing charcoal" (37) because of her use of lipstick may not be offensive to women today, as they may argue that the use of make-up is Tina's own preference as is the preference of many women in African today. Lawino's further declaration that, as a consequence, "[Tina] resembles the wild cat/ That has dipped its mouth in blood" may arguably be said to be an amplification of the former's hatred of anything she deems foreign to the precolonial sense of beauty to which she clings like an exclusive gift. Indeed, one wonders whether there is any lipstick, however mildly applied, that Tina would use and not attract a scathing description by Lawino.

Similarly, Lawino's having to "fetch a goat/ From [her] mother's brother" (37) in order to appease the "ghosts in [her] head" which are provoked by the "smell of carbolic soap" is hyperbolic. While one may argue that the use of Western bathing or beauty products at the expense of their African equivalents is tantamount to self-denigration—and by extension the decimation of local economies and sense of beauty—having to sacrifice a goat at the smell of such products will kill the same economic empowerment that Lawino might be trying to support, for it will be a matter of time before her uncle's goats are depleted. Besides, in this technoscientific period—punctuated by such scary

environmental degradational phenomena as deforestation and climatic change—traditional cleansers may no longer be in existence. This, of course, is not to purge contemporary cleansers and even make-ups of their many adverse effects on some of their users.

In all, while some of the core precolonial cultural elements must be retained, today's reader will find fault with Lawino's tendency to overvalue the past definitions of beauty in total disregard of any changes that have taken place in her society. Changes are inevitable, and one who voluntarily adopts aspects of another culture may not necessarily be brainwashed. With reference to such changes and in regards to postcolonial theory's tendency to deem every fluctuation from what is indigenous as betrayal, Anour Majid argues that shifts between different peoples and cultures are perpetual:

> We all know that life is more complex than it appears in any age or circumstance (absolutes are more often fiction than not), that some sort of exchange happens whenever and wherever paths cross, that power is always contextual and negotiable; yet knowing this does not preclude one from asserting that global power relations and national divisions can be quantified with a better degree of certainty, and it is this assessment that leads me to conclude that postcolonialism, both semantically and theoretically, has, in aggregate, made it more difficult for people to take stock of the colonial project and its aftermath. (134)

Incidentally, Lawino appears to, rather duplicitously, highlight this inevitability of change through her constant use of "I" and "me." Indeed, the use of the first-person singular in such phrases as "The smell of carbolic soap makes me sick" and "I do not like dusting myself with powder" defeats her defense of the African culture—that of "we" instead of "I"—that she purports to champion, for the use of these pronouns implies an advancement of her own choices and preferences. Such phrases in this era—with its penchant for respect of other people's choices—earns Lawino some respect for expressing her choice. Likewise, she stands criticized for lambasting Tina's choice merely because it is different from her own.

Lawino the Inflexible and Ocol the Sycophant

Thus, in all, Lawino's rejection by Ocol may be attributed to an inflexibility—a failure to accept postcolonial reality with its adjustments in cultural, educational, and religious systems—and she is lucky not to suffer the fate that is suffered by such culturally intransigent Africans as Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Indeed, what leads Okonkwo to commit suicide is his over-idealization

of the Igbo culture with its obdurate machismo, which has been severely altered by colonization. Colonization, with its lingering effects, has forced changes to the African way of life and Okonkwo realizes rather too late that the center can no longer hold.

This view of Lawino as oblivious of how to live in a changing world is not whimsical because, as Taban lo liyong posits, she lacks "the intellectual background to discourse on some of the issues that Okot [p'Bitek] wanted to debate"—such as Christian theology and development (87). *Song of Ocol,* which presents Ocol's rejoinder to Lawino's accusations was written, according to lo Liyong, in response to this dismissal of Lawino. While lo Liyong provides no proof of his assertion that "[p'Bitek's] heart was for Lawino and what Lawino stood for" (87), his argument about Lawino's inability to engage in intellectual discussion is not farfetched. To be fair, however, Lawino implicitly points out some of the flaws in the traditions that she devotedly promotes. Traditional African culture, for instance, promotes polygamy, which is shown to lead to jealousy and unhealthy competition in a family. She asserts that in a polygamous marriage like hers, wives have to engage in constant strategies to attract the husband's attention:

> You win him with a hot bath
> And sour porridge
> The wife who brings her meal
> First
> Whose food is good to eat
> Whose dish is hot
> Whose face is bright
> [….] such is the woman who becomes
> The headdress keeper (41).

As she does with the English language, Lawino demonstrates a love-hate attitude towards polygamy—by both affirming it while at the same time indirectly revealing its effects on women. Likewise, she contradicts herself with regards to the envy among the wives in a polygamous union. On the one hand she claims that her fury against Tina is not driven by her marriage to Ocol, because "A woman who is jealous/ Of another, with whom she/ shares a man,/ Is jealous because she is slow,/ lazy and shy" (40). On the other hand, the reader notices her admission of jealousy: "I do not deny/ I am a little jealous/it is no good lying/ we all suffer from a little jealousy" (39). It is this cultural belief that Ocol exploits when he marries Tina as a second wife, and it is, in turn, because of Tina that Lawino is jilted—leading to her

indignation with Ocol. The controversial practice of polygamy thus stands at the center of the *Song of Lawino*.

To her credit, nevertheless, Lawino embodies the new postcolonial woman who refuses to be sacrificed at the altar of absolute patriarchy. Unlike the regular precolonial and perhaps early postindependent African woman who accepted any position, role and predicament thrown her way by patriarchy, Lawino fights for her space. She admits that there is nothing she can do against the mammoth monster that is polygamy, asking rhetorically "who has ever prevented men/ From wanting women?" (40). She also justifies, and today's reader might argue that she does so quite reasonably, Tina's accepting to marry Ocol by stating that "Women hunt for men/ And men want women!" (40). She however knows that while she may lose out on the competition for the husband, she can petition for her shared husband "to stop the insults … [and] refrain/ From heaping abuses on [her … and her] mother" (41).

Conversely, while Tina's sense of modernity is not to be hailed and while she obviously appears to over-mimic the ways of the colonizer, she stands, culturally speaking, on Lawino's opposite side. Tina chooses to adopt the Western style of life perhaps to win Ocol to her side, while Lawino clings to the false hope that the precolonial means of attracting a shared husband will continue to have a bearing in a postcolonial setting. While it is rational to argue, as Amilcar Cabral does, that "all people have a culture [… and that] in an effort to perpetuate [during the colonial era] the domination of people, culture was considered an attribute of privileged peoples or nations, and when out of either ignorance of malice, culture was confused with technical power, if not with skin colour or the shape of one's eyes" (56), it is also important to point out that any culture—culture being dynamic rather than static—is constantly changing and creating new expressions while concurrently accepting within its body foreign concepts. Tina stands accused of unquestioningly accepting wholly a foreign culture rather than cherry-picking from it what could enrich her own.

Equally, in addition to his being viewed as an emblem of colonization—and thereby as deserving to be attacked on behalf of the powers that he represents, Ocol could also be understood as an embodiment of the colonizers' divide and rule tactic, where they created gaps between ethnic communities, clans, and families in order to advance the interests of their hegemonic enterprise. As Cabral asserts, "in the effort to perpetuate exploitation, the colonizer not only

creates a system to repress the cultural life of the colonized people; he also provokes and develops the cultural alienation of a part of the population [… by among other things] creating a gap between the indigenous elites and the popular masses" (57). The divide and rule hegemonic tactic might be responsible for the estrangement of Ocol from his own people and culture, because, as Okumu argues, "Ocol's exaggerated allegiance to the new culture leads him to dismiss traditional culture as irrelevant to modern society. But because he cannot gain full access to this modern society, he remains an alien to both cultures" (61). Okumu must be informed, however, that it is not just Ocol who remains an alien to both cultures: Lawino does too, for she refuses to budge in the face of change. Given the reality of colonization and the constant mutation of all cultures, she cannot fully practice, today, the untainted traditional Acoli culture that she so much cherishes.

Works Cited

Abdullahi, Ali Arazeem. "Trends and Challenges of Traditional Medicine in Africa." *African Journal of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicines*, vol. 8, no. 5, 2011, pp. 115-123.

Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Double Day, 1975.

---. "The African Writer and the English Language." *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman. Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 428-434.
---. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann, 1958.

Ahire, Shashank, *et al.* "Media player for Semi-illiterate users." *India HCI'14*, Dec. 2014, pp. 175-180.

Anderson, Warwick. "Introduction: Postcolonial Technoscience." *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 32, no. 5/6, Oct.- Dec. 2002, pp. 643-658.

Ashcroft, Bill. *On Post-colonial Futures*. Bloomsbury, 2001.

---. *Post-Colonial Transformation*. Routledge, 2001.

Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K. Bhabha, Routledge, 1990, pp. 291-322.

---. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Bowker, Geoffrey. "Localizing Global Technoscience." *The Postcolonial and the Global*, edited by Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley. U of Minnesota P, 2008, pp. 252-260.

Brown, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code*. Anchor Books, 2003.

Cabral, Amilcar. "National Liberation and Culture." *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman. Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 53-65.

Chapman, Michael. "Postcolonialism: A Literary Turn." *English in Africa*, vol. 33, no. 2, Oct. 2006, pp. 7-20.

Cheah, Pheng. "Universal Area: Asian Studies in a World in Motion." *The Postcolonial and the Global*, edited by Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley. U. of Minnesota P, 2008, pp. 54-68.

Derrida, Jaques. *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*. Indiana UP, 1992.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 1967.

Hiddleston, Jane. *Understanding Postcolonialism*. Acumen, 2009.

Jeffreys, Sheila. *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2015.

Jha, Meeta. *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism, and The National Body*. Routledge, 2016.

Kaschula, Russell H. "Imbongi to Slam: The Emergence of a Technologised Auriture*." Southern African Journal of Folklore Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2004, pp. 45–58.

---. and Andre Mostert. *From Oral Literature to Technauriture: What's in a Name*. World Oral Literature Project, Occasional Paper 4. Cambridge UP, 2011.

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

Majid, Anour. "The Postcolonial Bubble." *The Postcolonial and the Global*, edited by Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley. U of Minnesota P, 2008, pp. 134-156.

Mukundi, Paul M. *Preventing Things from Falling Further Apart: The Preservation of Cultural Identities in Postcolonial African, Indian, and Caribbean Literatures*. Adonis & Abbey, 2010.

Oguibe, Olu. “Connectivity and the Fate of the Unconnected.” *Relocating Postcolonialism*, edited by David Theo Goldberg & Ato Quayson. Blackwell, 2002, pp. 174-183.

Okumu, Charles. “The Form of Okot p'Bitek's Poetry: Literary Borrowing from Acoli Oral Traditions.” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 23, no. 3, Autumn 1992, pp. 53-66.

Patterson, Courtney J. “Is It Just Baby F(Ph)at?: Black Female Teenagers, Body Size and Sexuality.” *Black Female Sexualities*, edited by Trimiko Melancon and Joanne M. Braxton. Rutgers UP, 2015, pp. 27-40.

P’Bitek, Okot. *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol*. EAEP, 1972.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Knopf, 1993.

Wa Thiong’o, Ngũgĩ. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann, 1981.

---. “The Language of African Literature.” *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman. Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 435-456.