# Performance elements that keep Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* alive on paper, the stage, and in the mind

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## Introduction

Written in 1966, *Song of Lawino* has made Okot p'Bitek more famous than for any other works he has since produced. The poem combines dramatic and performance elements ingeniously employed to critique colonialism and its impact on the African continent, a topic that engages scholars and post-independence leaders alike.

Dramatic elements constitute a work's extraordinary, spectacular, theatrical or stageable aspects that make it memorable, relished, and engaging overtime. In theater, that engagement occurs at four levels: physically, emotionally, psychologically, and morally (Cohen, *Theatre* 443-444). Although *Song of Lawino* is not a play or theater show in the strict sense, Okot p'Bitek borrows freely from the two realms. As a result, reading the poem is like watching a performance on stage. The performative quality keeps *Song of Lawino* effervescent and defiantly fresh.

Edwin Wilson lists six elements of performance: the performer (or Artist), the art of performance (style or technique), the place or venue of performance (space, context or environment, including visual and non-visual aspects), the audience (its nature, background, and contribution), the makers of the performance (playwrights, directors, and, if in popular arts, audiences), and the 'text' or performed art (*The Theatre Experience* 11-12). The text, the technique, and the performer tend to dominate the other elements to deliver the show and create the theater.

In this article, I discuss Okot p'Bitek's employment of performance elements in *Song of Lawino* and the benefit(s) of this approach to the work. Performers benefit from performances materially or through real-time personal engagement, public recognition and fame, the knowledge gained, and enlightenment in life. Audiences mostly benefit by experiencing the work first-hand. In Cohen's words, "something is seen; something is done; an action is witnessed" (7). Richard Schechner notes that "[f]or each performance there is a new audience on whom an impression is to be made. The actor makes a journey that ends where it began, while the audience is "moved to a new place" (193). In each section of the article, I examine the elements that sustain interest in *Song of Lawino* among its various

audiences. I begin with an overview of theatrical traditions that inform my analysis of this work.

## Theories of the theater

The theater includes the whole enterprise of drama and theater.[1] There are two theories of the theater relevant to my analysis: dramatic, understood in this article to include drama and tragedy, and performance, which embraces feminism and sociological criticism. A performance must speak to its social and historical environments, including audiences, possess aesthetic quality, entertainment value, and bear a relationship to its theatrical time (Cohen 439-444).

## Drama

Drama refers to dramatic texts, like *Song of Lawino*, written and performed plays (Cohen 7-19). At its most fundamental state, drama is action. The approach to that action can be presentational, as in popular performances, or representational, for example, an imitation of life-like situations. Cohen asserts that "*[r]epresentational* performance … is the more fundamental mode of drama and is certainly the mode that makes drama 'dramatic' as opposed to simply 'theatrical'" (15). Lawino's performance is unpretentious, while the situation, characterization, and speech *represent* what was before colonialism, what is, and what it should be in post-colonial Africa.

## Tragedy

Tragedy or serious drama began in 5th-century BCE Greek theatre. The form evolved into four types: classical referring strictly to the Greek tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus; Elizabethan tragedy, mostly by William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe; modern tragedy of 16th-century England and 17th-century France; and domestic tragedies, described by John Orr as the "tragic drama of modern civilization" popular from around "1880 [up to] 1966" (xi). *Song of Lawino*, as a pitiful domestic situation with a protagonist who suffers unjustifiably at the hands of others foremost her husband, is a domestic tragedy. Lawino says: "My husband … behaves like a hen/ That eats its own eggs" (38). Postcolonial Africa's tragedy is akin to Lawino's marriage, with Africans like Ocol at the forefront of self-destruction and mortification.

Brian Crow contends that the words 'tragedy' and 'tragic' can "describe 'private' events of no great significance for the outside world [like] the breakdown of a marriage, or … 'public' occurrences with wide and unpleasant implications" (120). Lawino's concerns are part of such events. Additionally, tragedy "describes a bold, aggressive, heroic attack against huge, perhaps insurmountable, odds. Tragic protagonists … are always flawed in some way; indeed, Aristotelian tragic theory insists that they must be flawed or at least acting in ignorance" (Cohen, 24). Lawino's goal to reclaim the 'dead' Ocol is bold and noble hence heroic, her actions self-sacrificing. Lawino, too, is not flawless, and is ignorant about some of the Western systems like formal education and multi-party politics which she criticizes. Her dissolving marriage, dejection, and psychological trauma are common among women, irrespective of location, parentage, or lifestyle. Okot p'Bitek clearly upholds the two rules of tragic theory, and uses Lawino's 'flaws' to confound Ocol's presumed good civilization and public profile.

## Feminism

Feminism asserts that women have full rights as human beings and, without social constraints, can realize their life potential. Kenneth M. Cameron and Patti B. Gillispie (2000) cite feminism among postmodern theories of drama, and describe it as an

> amalgamation of film theory and a branch of psychoanalytic theory (Lacanism), with various goals: e.g, to study a historically male theatre vis-à-vis women, to examine gender in performance, to define a feminist aesthetic. (211)

In performance arts, male or female constitutes more than their biology to resonate societal views and expectations. As Simone de Beauvoir observes, "it is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life" (69). In *Song of Lawino*, Okot p'Bitek applies the feminism for gender performance and feminist aesthetics but also calls upon Africans to regain their independence of being and authenticity, as explained in the discussion.

Gender relations are an intricate part of a woman's life, in particular, when a woman is married. The role of "wife" constitutes a performance around the centers of power and authority in everyday lives. Women perform to fit, to please, to negotiate, even to be or live for another hour or day. The individual circumstances and occasion dictate the manner of performance and its reception.

As a wife and performer, Lawino's views on gender are bold and strong, reflecting her own person and representation of Acoli women. Charles Okumu writes that Acoli women are typically proud (61). Likewise, Okot p'Bitek's portrayal of Lawino is purposeful and promotes feminist aesthetics in her choice of subject matter, speech, and conduct. Her resilience is memorable, even when, sometimes, social constructs and current realities demean and almost disempower her.

## Performance theory

A performer performs based on societal and cultural expectations but mostly to delight the audience. Schechner believes theatricality is part of life, and humans perform always, to please or conform. However, he recognizes that "the performance as distinct from the drama is social, and it is at the level of performance that aesthetic and social drama converge" (192). Okot p'Bitek aims for the same result in his employment of Bertolt Brecht's alienation techniques: to "re-awaken the audience's sense of social responsibility" (Cohen 201). Brecht promoted the alienation theory after World War II, which affected Europe's social and economic systems adversely similar to the disempowering effects of colonialism in Africa or the embitterment of a strained marriage. Okot p'Bitek further borrows from Schechner's environmental theater where one adapts to one's performance space. Lawino fits in these scenarios, first, as a woman and wife in Acholi, then as a non-conventional performer, acclaimed singer, and now as a cultural revolutionary in her community. She performs to be but also to show what should be. Hers is a didactic, redemptive, almost therapeutic performance.

Folk performance is a communal experience, and often has mass appeal. This discussion considers performance as theatrical representation, and the ostentatious performances resulting from socialization. The poem's most memorable incidents are the characters, in particular Lawino and Clementine, their characterization, perspectives on tradition and modernity, and their love complex.

## Sociological criticism

Wilbur S. Scott argues that sociological criticism "places the work of art in the social atmosphere, and defines that relationship" so the art and its community inform each other (125-126). Scott also believes that "[a]rt is not created in a vacuum; it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important part, because articulate

part" (123). This corroborates Okot p'Bitek's strong belief stated in *Artist the Ruler* that when "the philosophy of life of the people are sung and danced … [their] world-view is celebrated and confirmed (21-22). Accordingly, in his book *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o urges that "[t]rue African literature must be written in African languages" because "it has implications for the development of a truly African sensibility" (24). Ngũgĩ assigns African languages "the agency for the coming inevitable revolutionary break with neo-colonialism" thus certifying Lawino's cause (27).

Significantly, Okot p'Bitek's method stems from his folk inheritance and understanding of his role as a critic. Wilson believes that "audiences can learn from the critics not only because critics impart information and judgement but also because a critic shares with an audience the point of view of the spectator" (67). Therefore, Okot p'Bitek rightly believes that "only the participants in a culture … can pass judgment on it. It is only they who can evaluate how effective the song or dance is; … how these have made life meaningful!" (37) Relatedly, the statement 'No one should uproot the pumpkin from the old homestead' populates *Song of Lawino.* It serves as a proverb at the beginning, a campaign through it, and a warning at its end. The discussion below underscores these arguments, and draws a number of parallels, foregrounding the key performance elements of text, character, and technique. Text includes the dramatic situations of an estranged marriage, cultural clashes, and imbalanced gender relations; characterization, character portraits and performed identities and religions; and technique, and performed language, the structure and imagery. The remaining elements of venue, director, and audience will be discussed as these pertain to my analysis.

*Song of Lawino* presents its situation at the levels of the personal, the family and clan, and the community, which embraces society in general. The scope defines Okot p'Bitek's concerns for a modern Africa that has discarded its traditions and values and now lacks the essentials for meaningful transition into modernity and robust survival thereafter. Okot p'Bitek is also concerned about the diminishing role of the traditional artist, as the community's voice and performer, in modern society, in particular in post-independence Africa. Each one of these disorders generates complications for those directly involved and others in the larger society.

As Cohen observes, "conflict and confrontation are the mechanisms by which a situation becomes dramatic" (34). The more intense and complex the conflict, the stronger the action hence drama. Like Louis E. Catron states in his book *Playwriting*, "force must be opposed by force, person (group) against person (group), desire against desire" (47). The playwright's power and Lawino's performance, measure how they introduce and resolve conflicts. Understandably, too, Lawino determines to remedy things because this 'drama' affects

her personally. Her determination alone generates interest to see what she will do or the extent to which she will go.

## An Estranged Marriage

The deterioration of marriages and relationships generate universal interest in the same way as agitation for self-rule by African countries around the time *Song of Lawino* came out gained traction. Lawino could choose to ignore Ocol and his new delights, including Clementine. In any case, polygamy is tolerated in the Acoli and larger African community. However, as a woman, Lawino is conditioned to see her worth and find completeness in marriage and motherhood. *Song of Lawino* relishes these ideals throughout. In De Beauvoir's words, the wife is "habituated to seeing in him [the husband] a superb being whom she cannot possibly equal" or live without (653). Symbolically, post-independent Africa and the African are incapable of dissociating completely from Western values, relishing in education and religion. Even Lawino, an impassioned defender of Acoli values, sometimes admires Ocol speaking in English and is jealous of his mistress, Clementine. Thus, Africans in Africa are doomed to live an insecure and double life: independent of yet dependent on their colonizers.

Nonetheless, Lawino is still hopeful of a passable resolution where the 'new' African may live but under unfettered guidance by the 'old', as suggested in her refrain, "Do not uproot the Pumpkin in the old homestead." Pumpkins grow quickly and take up space. If only Ocol rejects his traditional values but does not "uproot" them, Africans may become whole again sometime. Hence Lawino's call to Africans to be most audacious, like the pumpkin, especially where the Ocols, the "African neo-colonial bourgeoisie" as described by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, do not seem or want to see the dangers of losing self (2).

Comparable to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's idea of "resistance tradition," Lawino puts her life and public regard on the line, like a tragic hero, using her marriage estrangement like a buffer to wage the big battle to see that African nations are informed by and built on African, not foreign traditions. Lawino's tragic vision echoes Kofi Agovi's idea of "an indelible legacy of man in society, of his worth and his dignity in defeat" (57). Lawino's stoic fight for traditional values in a modern environment is her and Okot p'Bitek's legacy in life. Agovi argues that such struggles "are conditioned by a deep-seated respect for life, its continuity and survival" (59). Accordingly, Okot p'Bitek affirms Aristotle's belief that tragic heroes can possess idiosyncratic traits and "at the same time" remain "decent people" (52).

Lawino's quarrel is centrifugal, broadening in scope intentionally to include everything else she thinks has contributed to the dissolution

of her marriage. People come in and out of her story, akin to characters entering and exiting the stage. To gain a nobler and wider appeal, Lawino mobilizes others to mourn with her.

> 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 […] the Prince/ The heir to the Stool is lost!/ And all the young men/ Have perished in the wilderness!/ And the fame of this homestead/ That once blazed like a wild fire/ In a moonless night/ Is now like the last breaths/ Of a dying old man/ There is not one single true son left (*Song of Lawino* 120)

It is not just Ocol, his marriage, or generation that are benumbed but an entire village and future generations. Africans attach great importance to manhood, marriage, and children, abhorring the unmarried and criminalizing the childless as witches or wizards (Mbiti, 104-105). Death is also a very serious matter that must be interrogated and pacified through intricate rituals to restore health and natural order (Mbiti, 117-122). Community members must participate with dirges as the diviner or traditional healer, a role played by Lawino, establishes the cause of death and prescribes the cure. The role solidifies Lawino's position as a leader and guardian of culture. In traditional Africa, every death is "mystical" and requires explanation (Mbiti, 118). Accordingly, Lawino declares that "[t]he entire village has fallen into the hands/ Of war captives/ And slaves! […] all our young men/ Were finished in the forest/ Their manhood was finished in the classrooms,/ Their testicles/ Were smashed/ With large books!" (*Song of Lawino* 120). However, death is not the end, only a transitory state that does not invalidate Lawino's efforts to reclaim Ocol and Africa. In any case, war captives and slaves have already been defeated.

## Imbalanced Gender Relations

Marriage is often both dramatic and theatrical. It has a tragic quality *(serio*) when conflict or violence deepens, a comic quality in hilarious situations, and serio-comic hence tragi-comic or melodramatic when it manifests fortunes and misfortunes. Multi-award-winning New Zealander playwright and filmmaker, Roger Hall, advises: "if you can generate sexual tension between two characters, the audience is going to want to know what will happen" (63).

In addressing herself to Ocol, Lawino pleads her case to a man, as it happens in real life. She seeks to involve the public court, gets no redress, and turns back to her tormentor, and pleads: "But oh! Ocol!/ You are my master and my husband,/ You are the father of these children/ You are a man/ You are you! […]/ My husband, Ocol/ You are a Prince/ Of an ancient chiefdom"(118-9). Lawino's hope to oblige Ocol to resume his family's leadership is a typical case of gender gaps.

Usually, men fight off their rivals but women persevere through discreet means. Likewise, men compete publicly for power and authority; women privately for attention and influence in the home. Sadly, the more Lawino pleads with Ocol to come back, the farther away he moves from the 'old' homestead and its obligations. She reminisces: "But only recently/ We would sit together, touching each other!/ Only recently I would play on my bow-harp/ Singing praises to my beloved./ Only recently he promised/ That he trusted me completely" (39). And now, "My husband treats me/ As if I am suffering from/ The "Don't touch me' disease!" (56), as if she was a leper.[2]

Polygamy affects the 'first' and subsequent wives alike, whether in a traditional or modern setting. Clementine does not say so but is certainly insecure, hence she employs different tactics to impress and keep Ocol to herself (40-1). As a man, born and raised in a patriarchal society, Ocol acts indifferent but he, too, must feel like a prisoner of both and, maybe, more women. Sometimes, Lawino wants to give up on Ocol but realizes the futile attempt. In Africa, marriages are intricately cultural, even sacred and do not just end.[3] Besides, like De Beauvoir notes, "marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women" (445). Lawino accepts the situation, and expects from her audience similar a stoicism to save homes and humanity:

> I am not unfair to my husband,/ I do not complain/ Because he wants another woman/ Whether she is young or aged!/ Who has ever prevented men/ From wanting women?/ Who has discovered the medicine for thirst?/ The medicines for hunger/ … Who has discovered them?/ … Women hunt for men/ And men want women! (*Song of Lawino* 43)

A Kinyankore saying carries the same message: "Omukazi taiha iba ihwa" meaning women should not initiate sex and no wife can ever satisfy her husband sexually. The urge disturbs and nudges him like the prick of a thorn. Lawino adds: "Turning your back/ To your husband/ Is serious taboo" (73). Wives soldier on, stoically and unconditionally. As a performer of gender, Lawino's decision to hold on to her long-distorted marriage ennobles her social cause and status. She even portrays herself as one who is not possessive and describes Clementine as "the woman with whom I share my husband" to demonstrate her moral superiority. Often women use sarcasm to stay above repressive situations they have no power to change. Her case contributes to the worldwide debate on women's rights, securing Okot p'Bitek place among the first male feminists in Uganda.

As a compromise, Lawino suggests, "If he likes, let him build for her/ An iron roofed house on the hill!/ … My grass thatched house is enough for me/. … The pumpkin in the old homestead/ Must not be uprooted!" (44) Lawino will not budge. She underscores her resolve by ending her song thus: "Let no one uproot the Pumpkin" (129). De

Beauvoir attributes such behavior to the woman's own character and fear to leap into the unknown, as "she is aware it will take more than some expedient to deliver her from it" (618). Metaphorically, the ping-pong game typifies neo-colonial states, competing respectively to win favor even basic provisions from former colonial masters, humiliation and ridicule notwithstanding.

## Clashes Between Tradition and Modernity

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes that Africa contends with severe challenges that pit "African against African, modern against traditional" (2). In *Song of Lawino*, these include elitist education, sectarian politics, Western religion, and modern culture. Western time is central to the conflict. It fixes one's life pattern along timelines around food consummation: "lunch-time, tea time/ And suppertime" (67) and has turned Ocol into its servant; he has no time to waste (70) because "Time is money"(70). Lawino espouses that "[i]n the wisdom of the Acoli,/ Time is not stupidly split up/ Into seconds and minutes/ … It does not get finished/ Like vegetables in a dish" (72). It is flexible and a function of life, with its own names and identities performed according to seasons (74-5). One's actions and progress convey his age not numbers (75): "You may be a giant/ Of a man,/ You may begin/ To grow grey hair/ You may be bald/ And toothless with age,/ But if you are unmarried/ You are nothing" (75). "Periodically each woman/ Sees the moon,/ And when a young girl has seen it/ For the first time/ It is a sign/ That the garden is ready/ For sowing/ […] During the *Ager* period/ Millet is sown"(73). Culturally, too, every life situation has norms and customs to govern it and, sometimes, rituals to ensure one's survival and progress. "When misfortune hits the homestead/ The clansmen gather/ And offer sacrifices/ To the ancestors:/ When the rains/ Refuse to come/ The rain-Cock prepares a feast./ A goat is speared/ In the wilderness/ And the elders offer prayers/ To *Jok*" (72-3).

In Chapters 2 to 10 Lawino evaluates traditional and modern systems respective to the basics of life: food, shelter, clothing, belongingness, and health. To these she adds three more needs listed for modern times by Kotler and Keller in their book, *Marketing Management*; that is, education, recreation, and entertainment (24). Lawino presents the systems as competitors like boxers in the ring or sale items displayed on a market stall. Everyone can see and judge for themselves which system suits Africa best in its transformational journey towards complete self-governance, propagation, and sustainability.

Okot p'Bitek advocates continuous learning by mythology, customary lore like rites and rituals, songs and dances as well as

formulaic forms, especially proverbs, sayings, and similes. Purposely, he emphasizes the items most impactful during their performance where they ensure collective benefit and engagement, hence societal integration and cohesion essential for one's and social progress and development.

Significantly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o maintains that the "neo-colonial situation […] has meant the European bourgeoisie once again stealing our talents and geniuses as they stole our economies' (xii). This justifies Lawino's continuous advocacy and search for her freedom of being and expression and for all those affected by colonialism as she settles for domestic (home or family) dramas that touch everybody and generate massive appeal. It is the same trend in Uganda's modern theater and entertainment world in general, throughout the history of world theater.[4]

Okot p'Bitek experiments ingeniously with a blend of two worlds. From traditional performance, he borrows the oral song and dance motifs, images and metaphors, and other formulaic forms in Acoli folklore like proverbs, sayings, and similes (Okumu, 55). From contemporary literature, he borrows the English language, scholarship, and aspects of formal drama and performance, especially the techniques (Heron, 3-5).

*Song of Lawino*'s packaging as 'a song' promises readers enjoyment and relaxation, thus attracting audiences within and outside the academia (Heron 2). Okot p'Bitek reportedly picked interest in the song format and the opera while at Kings College, Budo (Ofuani, footnote 5; Lubwa p'Chong, 2-3). However, around the same time arose Negritude and writers writing in their mother tongues. In Ugandan theater, Okot p'Bitek's other passion and where he was National Theater Director (1964-1967) and producer of the national dance troupe, The Heartbeat of Africa, playwrights explored with opera and musical forms. Like, Byron Kawadwa and Wassanyi Serukenya's *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* (1967) and produced in 1977 for FESTAC in Nigeria, Cosmas Warugaba's *Omuhigo* (The Hunt) (1968), and Solomon Mbabi-Katana's *Song of Nyakake* (1968). *Omuhigo* is both a song and dance. Kawadwa wrote in Luganda and Warugaba Runyankore-Rukiga. *Song of Lawino* bears a relationship with these works in their historical, literary, and performed contexts. Okot p'Bitek wrote other 'songs' and also influenced writers like Joseph Buruga and Okello Oculi to promote the form (Heron, 2). Mukotani Rugyendo's *The Contest* (1977) adapts Banyankore's epic poetry (Ekyevugo or heroic recitation) structure, and Robert Serumaga's plays *A Play* (1967), *Majangwa* (1971), "Renga Moi" (1972), and "Amayirikiti" (1974) borrow heavily from oral performance traditions. Like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, all these writers, "endeavoured […] to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expressions" (8).

Heron (5), Lubwa p'Chong (8) and Okumu (56) all testify that *Song of Lawino* developed through a collaborative process, akin to what usually happens in community theater, devised drama, or workshop theatre. Heron states that Okot p'Bitek "co-operated very closely with a large group of friends … and their comments were taken into account if the chapter needed rewriting (5-6). Okot p'Bitek also read the draft of his poem to his mother (Okumu, 56), herself "an accomplished composer, singer, dancer and leader of the girls in Palaro chiefdom."[5] He consulted deliberately; involving all he thought would add value to his creative process and product. Lubwa p'Chong recalls that when Okot p'Bitek was a resident tutor in Gulu, the people were asking: "What kind of lecturer is this, who lives in a good house in the senior quarters, but allows all these people to live in his house and share everything?" (11)

Through such a fundamental approach to life, community scholarship, and criticism, Okot p'Bitek proposes a truly African philosophy of interdependence as a viable alternative to modern creative processes founded on individualism and Western concepts. Lubwa p'Chong says that Okot p'Bitek lived simply but pro-actively. He "continually provoked as he advised, lamented, challenged, questioned and criticized with his scorpion-tail tongue and razor-sharp pen throughout his fifty-one years of life" (12). He believed strongly that "an artist should tease people, should prick needles into everybody so that they do not go to sleep and think everything is fine" (Okumu, 62). Correspondingly, *The Charter of Artists Responsibilities* rallies artists to "save the dream and re-enchant the world" (43). Okot p'Bitek's portrait emphasizes his watchfulness about the kind of product he wanted, one reason *Song of Lawino* speaks universally, withstands modern pressures, and generates massive interest for study and performance. Viable art is that which has strong roots in its socio-cultural medium and speaks directly to the people. As part of change agents in modern Africa, the artist in particular the performer must believe and immerse in the process of making and delivering the art. In his play, *Majangwa*, Ugandan playwright Robert Serumaga advises artists to see it their own way first in order to reach "a destination: there, beyond the reaches of small minds" (10).

## Character Portraits, Performed Identities and Religions

Aristotle advises writers to present characters "either as better than we are, or worse, or as the same kind of people as ourselves" (33). By choosing a woman as his protagonist, confidant, and reasoner, Okot p'Bitek affirms women's potential as equal to, even better than, men's in exceptional circumstances like these. In De Beauvoir's feminist view, Okot p'Bitek upholds the mother-son Freudian principle

(531-532). He respects and loves his mother as his mentor and source of his natural life. Theirs is a bond forcefully severed so he could live as "an individual, [but] who through *upbringing* is prepared to play his full role as a member of society" (Okot p'Bitek, *Artists the Ruler* 19). He therefore gives Lawino a versatile voice with revolutionary qualities and license to speak to the world. In rejecting Ocol's shifting personality, Okot p'Bitek also defines his moral stand as an independent-minded and honest individual, who like the age-old ways of his people, typified in the pumpkin, will not be carried away by the times.

Dramatic characters often have strong motivations. Lawino's big objective is to reclaim Ocol, who has put himself, the whole clan, and community in trouble. Lawino laments: "Ocol has lost his head/ In the forest of books./ […] My husband has read much./ […] And the reading has killed my man,/ In the ways of his people/ He has become a stump" (116), "a walking corpse"(118).

Correspondingly, Ocol paints a ridiculous scene of his decimated self, "behaving like another man's dog" before his wife and children and "like a woman trying to please her husband" (119) Clementine aspires "To look like a white woman" (40) by making herself over, from head to toe, to disguise her age. Consequently, she "resembles the wild cat/ That has dipped its mouth in blood … [or] the wizard/ Getting ready for the midnight dance./ Her mouth is like raw yaws,/ It looks like an open ulcer" (40).

Heron observes rightly that "a great deal of the appeal of *Song of Lawino* comes from Okot's exploration of dramatic possibilities of Lawino's rivalry with Clementine" (14). Lawino presents herself and Clementine, respectively, as if they appeared in a simultaneous theater setting or were paintings by a sketch artist exhibited side-by-side or contestants on the catwalk. Hers is vivacious.

> I was made chief of girls/ Because I was lively,/ I was bright,/ I was not clumsy or untidy/ I was not dull/ I was not heavy and slow,/ I did not grow up a fool/ I am not cold/ I am not shy/ My skin is smooth/ It still shines smoothly in the moonlight. … And I played on my bow harp/ And praised my love. ... (*Song of Lawino* 50-1)

Additionally, she is the "Daughter of Lenga-Moi" (79), the "Daughter of the Bull" (81) and goes by "the Bull name, Eliya Alyeker (85). Lawino says "Bull names are given/ To Chiefs of girls/ … They are names/ Of great chiefs/ And great men of war" (85). Notably, by her bull name she negotiates public space and gender and now regards herself extraordinarily, as a man and warrior, the same roles Okot p'Bitek assigns her. Thus, she feels superior, and compares herself to wild but well-endowed animals like the giraffe, birds like the *ogilo*, and corrosive plants like the *lynno* lily that confirm her beauty, aptitude, vigilance, and sensitivity.[6] Earlier, she had declared: "My

father comes from Payira,/ My mother is a woman of Koc!/ I am a true Acoli/ I am not a half-caste/ I am not a slave girl;/ My father was not brought home/ By the spear/ My mother was not exchanged/ For a basket of millet" (54).

Payira is the largest Acoli clan and provides chiefs (Rwodi). Rwot Awich, her ancestor, stoically fought colonialism in Acholi. Lenga Moi is a cultural warrior in Luo mythology who, as a tragic hero, valued community over himself and family. Ugandan playwright Robert Serumaga molds his play, "Renga Moi," after the same hero to discuss the artist and performer's call to leadership and social contract. Leaders, like artists, must sacrifice individual privilege and comfort for the well-being and sustenance of their communities. Okumu mentions the "bull" among the four important images in *Song of Lawino* the other three being the pumpkin, the spear, and the cave (56). The bull signifies outstanding power and leadership. He explains that once Lawino becomes more successful than Ocol he gets infuriated because typically "the man is supposed to be the 'won gang-owner of the home'" (60).

The moment Okot p'Bitek constructed and put the two characters together in marriage, conflict was inevitable unless, as expected of a wife, Lawino conceded her freewill and power to the husband. The new complication in Clementine disturbs but motivates her, like a pastime:

> The woman with whom/ I share my husband walks as if her shadow/ Has been captured/ You can never hear/ Her footsteps;/ She looks as if/ She has been ill for a long time!/ Actually she is starving/ She does not eat/ She says she fears getting fat,/ That the doctor has prevented her/ From eating,/ She says a beautiful woman/ Must be slim like a white woman./ And when she walks/ You hear her bones rattling/ Her waist resembles that of the hornet./ The beautiful one is dead dry/ Like a stump,/ She is meatless like a shell/ On a dry river bed. (*Song of Lawino* 43)

Lawino likens both Ocol and Clementine to 'a stump' and concludes they lack food because they have no gardens. Food sustains life and is essential in ritual performance. Relatedly, Clementine's make-up makes her look "like the guinea fowl!" (40). In Bugandan mythology, as a pet, Nambi's hen brings evil, disease, and death on Earth. Byron Kawadwa uses the cockerel symbol in *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* to demonstrate the deep anger and disdain the Baganda have for Milton Obote following the deposition of Kabaka Muteesa II in 1966.[7] The play agitates audiences whenever performed.

In the end Lawino, Ocol, and Clementine are type characters crafted to fit the poet's vision. Lawino is the 'traditional' African woman and Clementine the modern one. Heron summarizes Ocol and Lawino as "prototypes of two opposing approaches to the cultural future of Africa" (2). Okot p'Bitek strongly believes that in spite of

colonial domination through political, economic, religious, and educational systems, Africans can still be themselves. For, as he states, "we could not become true Europeans culturally; at best we might become 'apes', grafted to other men's ways of life" (8).

Away from type characterization, Okot p'Bitek exploits the performances of personal names. In traditional Africa, personal names are spoken biographies and embody fundamental values of being or character by which others know or judge one. Personal attributes, values, and aspirations are handed down generations through names, which must be chosen and given with serious consideration (Mbiti, 92-96). Character formation begins in one's identity, either the personal but mostly family and clan names. Hence Lawino's concern about the new names Ocol imports into an Acoli family: "What is the meaning of 'Marta'?, Gulyelimo, Iriko, Jeckon, Are these names of ancestors?'" (85)

Names can benefit or disempower one, their influence coming through the literal meaning, pronunciation, symbolic attributes, contextual history and associations. In Luo, Lawino is a girl's name whose mother had complications during childbirth. *Wïno* means birth, Ocol black or dark, and Acoli human, African, or black.[8] Africa is humane but its birth as a continent and subsequent subjugation begot painful neo-colonial experiences. Lawino hopes in the next generation: "Perhaps one of the boys/ Escaped with his life!/ Perhaps he is hiding in the bush waiting for the sun to set!" (120)

Other names in *Song of Lawino* include 'Benedeta' (Blessed), the name Ocol chose for Lawino, and those of their children Marta (the lady), Jekson (Jackson), Paraciko (Francis), Tomcon (Thompson), Gulyelmo Iriko (William Eric), and Maria (sea of bitterness or sorrows, "lady of the sea or rebellion").[9] Lawino says Ocol's Christian name "Medikijedeki Gilirigoloyo … sounds like 'Give the people more vegetables, Foxes make holes in the pathway', … like a praise name Uttered by a stammerer!"(85). She concludes, Christian names "all sound Like empty tins,/ Old rusty tins/ Thrown down/ From the roof top"(87). Clementine's name sounds melodious, like a praise name, but it belongs to an American miner's daughter who died by drowning.[10] Incidentally, too, a clementine is an exotic orange fruit. The playfulness when pronouncing the names enhances their performativity and renders them ephemeral in contrast to age-old Acoli names which Ocol rejects as pagan. The names also carry a tragic sense, like nothing good will come by them. Consequently, neither Ocol nor Clementine exhibit outstanding characters or promising destiny. This is another dilemma for postcolonial Africa, where individuals should embody ancestral or circumstantial qualities, yet they live in a 'new' environment. Okot p'Bitek suggests that their

redemption will come through 'active resistance' where, like the pumpkin, they refuse to die.

Another example is Bicenycio Lagucu, the evening class teacher. Okot p'Bitek corrupts the Roman Catholic name, Vincensio (Vincent) which means victorious. Bicenycio sounds like 'bicycle'. Neither endearing nor effectual a bicycle moves, but strenuously. Okot p'Bitek is concerned that Africa is doggedly stuck in its progress, as if it moves by bicycle. Lagucu comes from the Luo word *gucu* (to throw away). However, whatever the odds most parents keep their children. There is always hope that God or the gods will do something to restore their wholeness; hence such names as Ojok (Luo) or Byaruhanga (Runyankore-Rukiga and Runyoro-Rutooro) which mean 'of God' or 'for God to decide'. In Acoli, *Jok* means God thus all *Jok* names are spiritual and demand the performance of elaborate rituals to ensure stability and protection of lives. Lawino lists Jok names of many categories: birth, death, nature, mental, and emotional states (85-6). Lagucu possesses no spear, is coarse, and has thrown away his youth to the Church. Nevertheless, he dares to join Lawino's victorious party in the get-stuck dance, and even touches her breast (79-83). Metaphorically, he has better future prospects than Ocol. He could heal eventually since the youth do not chase him away from the arena.

Significantly, Lawino does not wish Ocol to die or to remain lost and rootless but begs him to accept to be nursed (120). Then, he will take remedies for his throat, tongue, knees, ears, face, eyes, teeth, and mouth (121). Thereafter he will make sacrifices to the gods (122-3), ask forgiveness of his mother and receive her blessings in his hands, chest, and forehead (123). After that he must remove the roadblock from Lawino's path, his "first wife (and) Mother of his first born, son and daughter" (123) to "sing greetings" to him and the song of her youth.

Situated between honour names and titles, praise names serve as endearments or pet names common in Uganda. They boost one's self-esteem while titles are conditional, prescribing obligations hence calling one into action. In the first chapter alone, Lawino addresses Ocol by six titles: Husband, Son of the Chief, Friend, age-mate of my brother, brother, then Ocol. As her lamentation progresses, she tones them down before replacing them with demeaning ones like "the son of Agik, The Woman from Okol" or simply "woman" (108). But at no time does Lawino deny him the title, husband. The other titles are her father's, Lenga-moi, and great father-in law, Lutany-moi. She says: "You earn moi/ With your spear/ Or gun or sword" (86). Likewise, one's birth order attracts corresponding titles, benefits, and obligations (86). Callous forces attract negative descriptions; like witchcraft, witches, and wizards (Evil eye), Poisoners, and death (chapter 10) as Mother Death. Lawino links Tina constantly to witchcraft while Ocol,

in turn, links her to it. Women are associated with witchery due to their centrality in traditional medicine and ritual performance.

Okot p'Bitek links individual progress directly to religious performance. He portrays Western religions as detractors of personal and national development. He is particularly very critical of Roman Catholicism perhaps because they are unquestioningly religious, dress distinctively, and always cross themselves. Ocol's baptismal names, Medikijedeki (King of Righteousness) and Gilirigoloyo (alertness), are a mockery of his socially entangled and morally degenerated life. In *Song of Lawino*, names kill personal identities and prayer kills critical thinking as demonstrated by Bicenycio Lagucu's evening class chants made out of duty not conviction: "Maria the Clean Woman Mother of the Hunchback Pray for us Who spoil things Full of graciya" (78). Okot p'Bitek intentionally corrupts the Prayer of The Virgin Mary into a sonorous chant that he uses numerously in the chapter, as in a Novena, to portray the inherently slow but deadly effects of Western religion and its public failure to empower its adherents. The hunchback deformity results from spinal tuberculosis believed to be caused by a ghost, Lubanga (97). Accordingly, Western systems put together subjugate Africans: physically, mentally, emotionally, even morally. For instance, Bicenycio Lagucu, like his class, struggles to commit fully to his vocation.

## Performed Language Structures

Like an actor on stage, Lawino tells her story from "a single point of view" (Cohen, 43). The biographical style makes hers akin to a live show or performance and enables her to connect directly with her audiences, including Ocol, while the present tense gives prevalence and urgency to her concerns. Hyperboles deliver her distaste and criticism more profoundly. When Ocol went to destroy his father's shrine, Lawino writes: "My husband took an axe/ And threatened to cut the *Okango/* That grew on his father's shrine./ His mother fell down under the tree,/ She said/ Cut me first/ Then cut the sacred tree!" (98). In like manner, Lawino says Clementine "Shamelessly … dances/ … The hair of a dead woman/ On her head/ … One night/ The ghost of the dead woman/ Pulled away her hair/ … And the beautiful one/ Fell down/ And shook/ As if the angry ghost/ Of the white woman/ Had entered her head" (58). The scenarios at the Protestants' Holy Communion (78) and The Evening Speakers' Class are severely theatrical (78-87) so is the ever-widening conceptual and emotional gap between Lawino and Ocol (90-91). As Heron notes, "in a song, the singer is free to use mockery to criticize the conduct of other members of the community, and especially to deflate the self-important. Such a singer is always likely to overstate his case" (17).

*Song of Lawino* also uses many cultural images found across Uganda and Africa: like the pumpkin, millet, and vegetables. Like women, these plants are organic, selfless, inexhaustible, forbearing, ingenuous, and lavish to ensure society's continued health and life. The answer to the Bugandan riddle, "Nina omukazi wange, aluka emikeeka mingi naye tagitulako" (I have my wife, she weaves many mats but she does not sit on them) is "Ensujju" (The Pumpkin). In Teso, eastern Uganda, a mat is used to decide the family into which a man should marry. The prospective mother-in law visits the girl's home unannounced. The good wife brings a mat for the visitor to sit on, if a man, then a stool.

Thus, Okot p'Bitek made *Song of Lawino* a communal people's performance to be enjoyed widely, within and outside the academia. The rich 'African language in English' makes the work a feast of all ages, cultural pluralism, and social class (Heron 2). Lubwa p'Chong recalls that, "happy, smiling faces around gave [Okot p'Bitek] delight … [as] no one can lock himself up in his house and laugh alone, unless of course he is a wizard or a mad man" (Okot p'Bitek, *Artist the Ruler* 11). In many ways, *Song of Lawino* truthfully reflects and represents Okot p'Bitek's own, the Acoli and, largely, African way of life. He believed that "culture is philosophy as lived and celebrated in a society" (Okot p'Bitek, *Artist the Ruler* 13).

## Conclusion

Lawino ultimately appears to concede her physical position but certainly not the emotional, psychological, and moral battle. She remains the ever-determined, proud, self-preserving woman fitting her traditional brand, as she declares, "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" (123).

*Song of Lawino* is a treatise of Okot p'Bitek's life philosophy and literary theories immortalized in *Artist the Ruler.* He seeks to add, in Lubwa p'Chong's words, "ammunition for that big battle he waged throughout his lifetime to decide 'where we here in Africa are going, and what kind of society we are building'" (viii). There was, therefore, no better way than to invoke his people's oral literatures with performative qualities.

Woman in African literature is a dual character: married to tradition regardless of abandoned homesteads while aspiring for or promoting modern lifestyles. Thus, written literature and oral performances will always exploit her sensual attributes and pathetic situations for their intrinsic appeal. Accordingly, for social stability, viability, and future sustenance, the Ocols and cultural stalwarts will never free women however strenuous the marriages. Woman remains central in and to life and its processes.

## Notes

1. That is, the art, performance venues, and the professions and professionals in theater.

2. Leprosy hit parts of East Africa persistently in the 19th century.

3. See Okot p'Bitek*, Artist the Ruler*, 19-20 and Mbiti 104, 115.

4. Brockett and Hildy, *History of the Theatre,* Eighth Edition, Allyn and Bacon, 1999, Chapter 17 and Cohen, *Theatre*, Chapter 11.

5. See Lubwa p'Chong, "A Biographical Sketch," 2; Ofuani, "The traditional and Modern in Okot p'Bitek's Poetry," 87.

6. Besides their beauty and towering frame, giraffes are always alert, reportedly sleeping while standing, and only for about 29 minutes a day. Figuratively, Lawino performs Ocol's Christian name, Giligoliyo (alertness) and Ocol Lawino's (difficult birth) affirming their reversed personal identities and gender constructs.

7. See Phares Mutiibwa, *The Buganda factor in Uganda Politics* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2008), 85-119.

8. Interview with Ugandan writer, Beatrice Lamwaka, in May 2020.

9. See "Our Lady of sorrows and of Mercy," Contemplating Sisters of the Indwelling Trinity (Fostoria, OH): September, 2010 Online.

10. https://genius.com/Traditional-oh-my-darling-clementine-lyrics accessed on 16 July 2020.

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