Okot p'Bitek and the Resources of Acoli Culture

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Abstract

Okot p'Bitek, born in 1931, midway through the British colonial rule in Uganda (1900-1962), is an internationally renowned poet, polemic writer and cultural activist. From an early age Okot imbibed Acoli culture from his parents who, though converts in the Protestant Church in Gulu, continued to practice their Acoli culture. This article explores the creative use of the structure and poetic features of orality as resources in his literary writing. My study of his creative writings is underpinned by an autoethnographic theoretical framework. The main research tool is document analysis focusing on the two texts: *Lak Tar Miyo Kinyero iwi Lobo* and *Wer pa Lawino and its English version, Song of Lawino*. My literary analyses of the texts confirm that they are embedded in the rich Acoli cultural resources. Okot's upbringing in a family that was culturally active provided him with resources including Acoli oral narratives and proverbs from his father and the song genre from his mother who was a great composer-singer. He harnessed these resources through his formal study in anthropology at Oxford University (1960-3).

Keywords: Acoli, Cultural Resources, Creativity, Autoethnography

> *The singer may be dead but if the song is good, it will live on*. (Professor Margaret Macpherson's Eulogy at Okot's funeral, 1982).

Introduction

Okot p'Bitek, born in 1931, midway through the British colonial rule in Uganda (1900-1962), is an internationally renowned poet, polemic writer and cultural activist. His formation is a blend of informal education under the guidance of his parents and formal schooling, which started in Gulu Primary (1938-1944) and continued in Gulu High School (1945-7) both run by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). He received 'European' education in King's College Budo in Buganda (1948-1950); Mbarara in Ankole (1951-3); Aberystwyth in Wales (October 1957-June 1960); Bristol (October 1956-June 1957) and Oxford (October 1960-June 1963) in England. Okot's Oxford education came at a time when he was more mature in Acoli cultural knowledge and this maturity was further enriched as a result of his social and cultural anthropological education at Oxford. The fieldwork for his B.Litt Thesis in Social Anthropology: '*Oral Literature and its Social Background among the Acholi and Lango*' (1963) exposed him more thoroughly to the rich oral literature (orature) resources of the Acoli people. His anthropological training allowed him to take

another perspective on his own culture, to appreciate more fully the value of his heritage and to draw on it as a resource.

In this article I explore the ways in which Okot drew on the resources of Acholi culture. He used the structure and poetic features of orality in his prose and poetry, especially the song genre and the narrative style of storytelling. He explicated the content of Acoli culture in his scholarly and polemic writings, drawing on his knowledge of Acoli life-worlds. But his creative writing is also deeply ethnographic, indeed autoethnographic. Strikingly, most of his literary productivity flowered after his academic fieldwork. It was as if that scholarly effort gave him broader knowledge and deeper appreciation of the rich cultural resources, he might otherwise have taken for granted. In his creative writings, his personal life experiences (biography) are blended and discernible, while the content of Acoli culture and the tensions engendered by colonialism are conveyed in sensitive detail. His academic work has garnered renewed interest in light of the decolonization discussion (Allen 2019), but his literary work is perhaps an even more powerful example of how cultural resources can be used by a gifted auto-ethnographer. It is to his novel *Lak Tar* and his songs that I turn attention here.

Acoli culture encompasses the language, customs, beliefs, rules, knowledge and collective identity of the Acoli people who also appear as characters in Okot's creative writing. Resources refer to the wealth of knowledge of Acoli culture which Okot draws from and uses in his creative writing. Okot's knowledge of Acoli social and cultural life is therefore the main resource in his creative and polemic writings. Okot the poet, like the Acoli oral poets, are feared as they use their cultural resources to either build or destroy those who do not uphold the social norms of the Acoli society.

Parental Influences

Okot's parents were steeped in Acoli culture and yet they were Anglican converts. He thus had deep familiarity with both worlds as is reflected in his writings and cultural activism. Prior to his anthropological education, they introduced him to two important aspects of Acoli orature: folk narratives and oral songs/poetry. In his response to Lee Nichols' question as to what elements in his family background may have had an influence in his becoming a writer and the kind of writer he became, Okot points to his informal education:

> Well, both my parents were fantastic performers. I think from my father I learnt a lot of stories and style of telling stories. But from my mother I learnt a great deal about poetry, song and dance. And she was always very naughty, you know and teasing me all the time. Whenever she produced a new song she would call me and say, 'Listen to this new.' And the next week the song would be known throughout the village and danced and performed (Okot 1981: 243).

His early interest in the resources of Acoli culture was encouraged by his parents and especially his mother. He was, from the outset, mother's boy especially since he was an only child and boy at that. She was both a cultural inspiration and resource for him. It is no wonder that his greatest work, published as *Song of Lawino* (1966) in English, and later in the Acholi original as *Wer pa Lawino* (1969), is dedicated to her. A further tribute to her was the inclusion of many of her songs among those that he collected during his fieldwork and published as *Horn of My Love*

(1974). From his father, he learnt the art of narration and 'lots of stories', many of which he published in *Hare and Hornbill* (1979). Among the Acoli, the proverb is a very rich cultural resource applied in ordinary conversation, teaching moral lessons in narratives and in oral songs/poetry especially by composer-singers as a rhetorical poetic device to express emotions. Okot published his collection of proverbs in *Acoli Proverbs* (1985).

Lak Tar: Acoli Oral Narrative and Cultural Critique

From his father Okot learnt the art of storytelling and Acoli wisdom (philosophy) which he applied creatively in his only novel published in the Acoli language: *Lak Tar Miyo ki Nyero i wi Lobo*, shortened to *Lak Tar* (1953/ latest edition 2021) and translated into English as *White Teeth* (1989). The novel is a critique of the Acoli traditional marriage custom which was being exploited by colonially enlightened Acoli parents whose value systems were being monetized. The genesis of the novel is based on what happened to Okot when he tried the Acoli courtship practice on an educated Acoli girl from a royal family when both were students in King's College, Budo (1948-50). Okot fell passionately in love with the girl who unfortunately knew him as coming from a poor family and therefore not fit to court her even by Acoli customary standards. She was royal (*nyaker)* and he was non-royal (*labong)*. Okot's pride was wounded but instead of sulking, he sat in his dormitory and composed an opera called *Acan*. The content of the opera spoke of the poor boy who is rejected but who hopes to grow into someone important in future. She should wait and see. It was a very touching composition coming from deep within Okot's heart. The Budo Nightingales Choir, of which Okot was a founder member, practiced and blended it with a Mozartian tune from the *Magic Flute.* At the concert, which was attended by the Governor of Uganda, Okot's opera won the first prize for original composition. This brought fame to Okot as an individual and Budo as a school and it wiped out Okot's shame over unrequited love (*The Budonian* 1996).

Okot developed the opera into a novel whose title he drew from a proverb: *Lak tar miyo Kinyero i wi lobo*: people laugh because they want to show the whiteness of their teeth rather than expressing joy. The laughter is in defiance of poverty or misfortune which one can neither change nor succumb to. From the success of the opera, Okot had the last laugh at the girl who rejected his love because he was from a poor family, the son of a mere catechist who sold sugar cane and fruits to supplement his meager income.

The structure of the novel is based on some of the Acoli quest narratives where the poor hero goes on a quest and, depending on his behaviour or circumstances, comes back either rich or poorer than when he set out. Okot knew those narratives which he learnt from his father or from the *wang-oo*, the traditional evening fireside school. In *Lak Tar*, Okeca's quest is for money (bridewealth) to enable him to marry his beautiful Cicilia. Like Okot, Okeca is from a poor family. His father died when he was young leaving him with thirty goats, which were later inherited together with Okeca's mother and her two children by his father's brother. This left Okeca without any inheritance and hence a challenge in finding bridewealth to marry his Cicilia. In Acoli culture, when a young man failed to raise bridewealth, his paternal and maternal uncles were responsible for providing it. In Okeca's case, both uncles refused. Traditionally, the option was for a young man to use a sister's bridewealth for his own marriage. Unfortunately, Okeca's only sister was young and sickly so he could not wait for her bridewealth.

The amount of cash demanded by girls' parents in the 1940s was one thousand shillings, which was difficult to get for many of the young men from poor families. Some young men who

failed to raise the high bridewealth committed suicide but Okeca chose to go to the source of wealth in Buganda, the seat of the colonial government, where there were many opportunities to get paid employment. Many Acoli youth like him had gone to Kampala; some had made quick money and come back to marry while others ended up as gang members who were more in jail than out of jail. However, these failures were never talked about back home since only the successful ones came back to tell their stories. Okeca had only heard of those who made money but later when he came to Kampala, he found out some of his clansmen were living from hand to mouth with no permanent abode and some were jailbirds.

Okeca went out with thirty shillings saved by his mother from her peasant cultivation. He travelled on the bus from Gulu to Masindi Port, where he met some of his financially successful clansmen returning home. One of them gave him a knife for self-protection and indeed it became very useful in Kampala when he had to defend himself against the police and a crowd of onlookers who accused him of being a thief trying to rob an Indian Singh of thirty shillings. When he was taken to court, he pleaded not guilty and here Okot's legal training came into play. Okeca was not shaken by the black-robed judge. He maintained his innocence and pleaded fear of the speeding motorcars. To avoid being knocked dead, he ran fast across the road and inadvertently collided violently with the Indian and knocked him down. The thirty shillings found on him were not stolen; it was the money he had come with from home. The judge admired the clarity of his statements and found him not guilty. In this episode Okot wrote his own personal life story into the novel. Okeca's fear of the fast-moving motorcars was Okot's own experience when his former Headmaster, Erisa Lakor, his clansman from Patiko, brought him to Kampala to join King's College Budo in 1948 as a 'bush-boy' from Gulu. He was overwhelmed by the fast motorcars and the big crowd (including hawkers and thieves) moving on Kampala Road.

The Acoli concept of *wan acel,* which I translate as 'we are one/oneness' holds the Acoli people together wherever they are. When Okeca arrived in Kampala, he stayed with his clansman Corporal Okello, but then, since he could not get a job in Kampala and the traditional extended family hospitality is not applicable in Kampala, he had to move out of Okello's home. Fortunately, through the network based on *wan acel*, he got a fixed term contract job in Jinja at Kakira Sugar Factory as a cane cutter. Because he was hard working, he was soon promoted to the rank of headman though he was not educated. He became one of the leaders of the Acoli community at the factory. Many of the young Acoli men looked to him for guidance and support. One of the boys got tired and wanted to return home before completing his contract. This could be done if one got a letter from home informing him of death or sickness of a close relative which required his presence. The young man approached Okeca for such a letter. The trick was to have the letter written from the workplace but using the home address in Acoliland. Since Okeca could neither read nor write, he asked a Langi fellow headman called Ogwang to write the letter. Whatever grudge Ogwang had against Okeca, he used Okeca's physical address at the Sugar Factory and this of course exposed Okeca as being part of the fraud to get Acoli boys' home without completing their contracts. The Langi man admitted to having written the letter and Okeca was demoted to a casual labourer with reduction in his wage. This incident is creatively contrived by Okot to illustrate his indigenous knowledge of the old rivalry between the Acoli and Langi dating back to the migration period from Bar-el-Ghazal in South Sudan in the 1600s and the many wars the two tribes fought over territorial rights (Crazzolara 1960). Here, Okot used the historical context of the Acoli–Langi conflict as a resource.

After carefully ensuring that he got all his savings from the Indian managers, Okeca escaped from the sugarcane factory through the plantation to Jinja railway station. His argument

for breaking his contract was that he voluntarily came to work in the sugarcane factory, and he could also voluntarily leave the job. His moral conscience was clear: he was only exercising his free will based on the Acoli philosophy of '*an kena atiyo ki tamma*...I alone can exercise my free will.'

Passing through Kampala, his hard-earned cash was stolen from him at the bus station by a clever thief who cut the money out of the pocket where he had sewn it. He didn't realize the theft until he reached Masindi Port and had no money for the last leg of the journey to Gulu. All the Acoli men he asked for help refused and he walked the last 15 miles back to Gulu arriving poorer than he left home. The narrative cycle is complete: no bridewealth and no marriage.

Okot combined the Acoli narrative technique as a resource with his personal knowledge of the story of the young man and recreated it into a novel, also writing himself into it. Okeca's first encounter with the fast-moving vehicles in the big city, Kampala, is dramatic and could only be narrated by Okot who had a similar experience when he was taken to Budo by his former Headmaster, Erisa Lakor. Okeca's suffering in the course of looking for the bridewealth is Okot's criticism of enlightened Acoli parents who were 'selling' their daughters to enrich themselves. This criticism is also found in Reuben Anywar's *Acoli Ki Ker Megi* (1954*)* which documents the history and culture of the Acoli culture under different chiefdoms. The Acoli Local Government and the traditional leaders had by-laws regulating the amount (*akumu*) to be paid, but many parents, including the administrators of the by-laws, ignored them. (Currently, there are new by-laws recently passed by the Acoli traditional leaders to curb the current high bridewealth [Kalokwera 2021].)

When the marriage breaks down, the girl's parents were required to return the bridewealth but many failed as they had used the money to marry wives for their sons or spent on other social amenities. Okot illustrates this scenario when his own marriage to Mary Anek broke down in 1966. He asked her family to return the bridewealth he paid for her. Since her father could not pay back, Anek wrote him a cheque and this is beautifully captured in the poem, 'Return the Bridewealth' (Cook and Rubadiri 1971: 130-131):

> I tell the woman I cannot trace her father.
> I say to her I want back the bridewealth that my father paid
> When we wedded some years ago…
> The woman reaches out for her hand bag
> […]
> She takes out a new purse,
> She takes out a cheque
> […]
> She screams,
> Here, take it! Go marry your bloody woman!
> I open the cheque
> It reads,
> Shillings One thousand four hundred only.

Okot said he happily cashed the cheque and spent the money. Many other people are not as lucky as Okot in getting their bridewealth back. Where there are children in the marriage, the man does not push too hard for his bridewealth since he takes custody of the children if the woman decides to remarry.

An unmarried man has no respect in Acoli society; therefore the orphaned Okeca embarked on the quest for bridewealth to marry his beloved Cicilia. Okot writes himself into the novel through the expansion of the theme of unrequited love because he is from a poor family. Using personal biographical information and incorporating familiar cultural knowledge makes him both an ethnographer and autoethnographer of Acoli people.

Okot the Ethnographer and Autoethnographer of Acoli Indigenous Knowledge

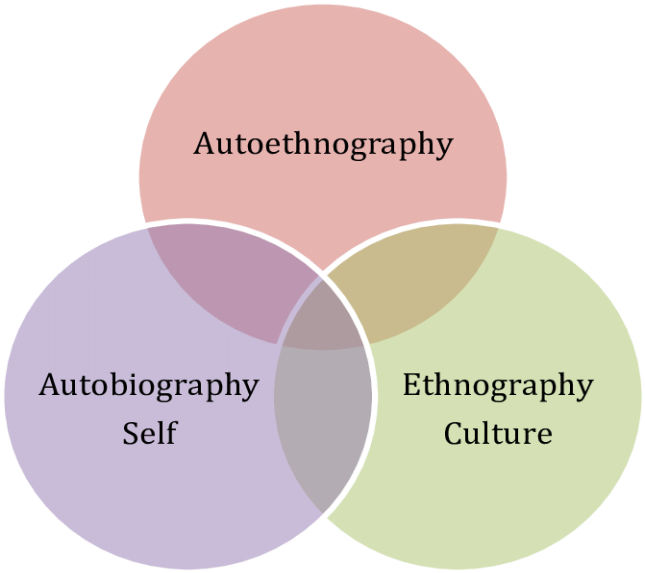
Okot was a Nilotic and there was no better place for him to study his Nilotic people than with renowned Africanists such as Evans-Pritchard and the Lienhardt brothers, who were authorities on the Nilotic peoples of the Sudan, and John Beattie who was an authority on the Banyoro, who are culturally closely related to the Payira clan in Acoliland (Anywar 1954).

According to Taban lo Liyong, 'If the Quaker and Catholic Professors at Bristol's Education Department (1956-7) blew Okot's religious (Anglican) mind and he dropped his Anglican name Jekeri, the Oxford Africanists in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology brought to fruition Okot the cultural nationalist' (Interview with Taban lo Liyong in Gulu on 20th August, 2011). His interest in Acoli culture was sharpened through his theoretical study of Cultural and Social Anthropology. This sharpening was 'quickened' through his fieldwork among the Acoli people whom he now saw differently as people who had a rich authentic culture and not primitive as the colonialists (Africanists and colonial administrators) made them (Acoli/African) feel. Thus, had Okot not been subjected to the negative attitudes of the colonialists about the Acoli (African) people, he would not have opted to study and research in the orality and social content of the Acoli people in depth. He became both an ethnographer and autoethnographer of Acoli culture unearthing its resources which he later used in his creative and academic writings.

My discussion of Okot's extensive use of Acoli culture as resources in his writings is underpinned by the theory and practices of autoethnography, which Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997:1) defines as:

> …the ethnography of one's own group [*for example the Acoli*] but also to the use of personal narrative in ethnographic writing [*Okot's creative writing*]…it is a genre that places the self of the researcher and/or narrator/poet within a social context. Autoethnography, broadly conceived, stands at the intersection of three genres of narration and critical reflection that may overlap in any particular work. These include: portraits of a social group the author-anthropologist is affiliated with; the life writing or other anthropological acts that incorporate ethnographic description of their social group; and anthropological writing that includes reflexive descriptions of research experiences during ethnographic fieldwork.

The illustration below clarifies diagrammatically the intersections (Patterson 2014).



Bunde-Birouste and colleagues (2018) place autoethnography within the theory and methods of 'critical ethnography' and 'ethnographic method'. Citing Liamputtong, they clarify that ethnographic research '…enables a detailed, often termed, 'thick' in-depth description of the culture under study' (2018:3). This is only possible because the researcher is situated within the community under study. They argue that 'Automethodologies are formed by the intersection of three components: "auto" the self, "graphy," the research process, and the epistemological frame, for example, "ethno," knowledge of culture, community and social world' (2018:4). From Reed-Danahay's definition and that of Bunde-Birouste and colleagues, Okot emerges as the ethnographer of the Acoli people as a social group in his B.Lit field work. The use of his own experience combines with his ethnographic study of the Acoli to make him an autoethnographer. In turn, this knowledge feeds into his stories and poems. What is striking about Okot's work as a whole is the relation between his (auto) ethnography and his creative writing. He drew upon his ethnographic knowledge of Acoli culture as well as narrative and poetic features of Acoli oral traditions as resources for his creative writings. His most famous literary works are packed full of details about Acoli material culture, social relations and worldview.

Ethnography and Creative Writing: Acoli Indigenous Knowledge as Resource in *Song of Lawino*

Throughout this section, I will draw examples from the 1989 Fountain Publishers combined school edition of *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* with an introduction by George Heron. This edition is commonly available rather than the original single texts by East African Publishing House (EAPH) that published the 1966 and 1970 editions of *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* respectively. I will refer to *Song of Lawino* as *SoL* and the page references are to the combined 1989 Fountain Publishers edition. In what follows, I present examples of Okot's poetic use of resources from Acoli culture, taking them in the order in which they appear in Song of Lawino.

A word about pumpkins

SoL has 13 sections (some scholars refer to the sections as chapters) whereas *Wer pa Lawino* has 14 sections. Okot did not translate section 14 in *Wer pa Lawino* and when I asked him, he claims that he was tired. But my argument is that the 14th section may not have added much value to *SoL* because here Lawino re-emphasizes the importance of the pumpkin as a symbol of Acoli culture, but equally its importance as an all-season food crop not only in Acoliland but in many nations. This indigenous knowledge would not add much value to English readers but instead minimize the dramatic ending of *SoL* where Lawino's final appeal to the culturally semi-recovered Ocol is that he should remove 'the roadblock' and 'give me a chance to dance and praise him' (p. 123). The long explanation of the food value of the pumpkin would have also lessened the dramatic ending with the final warning, 'Let no one uproot the pumpkin.' It is no longer Lawino warning the Ocols but the poet himself: 'do not abandon your rich cultural heritage with its indigenous knowledge and wisdom which are the natural resources that sustain and maintain the cultural norms of the Acoli people. The "recently" acquired colonial knowledge and culture are not deeply rooted in you.' Lawino satirically laughs at Ocol 'who can neither perform the Acoli nor the colonial dances' and yet he shamelessly wanted to 'uproot the pumpkin and cut the ancestral shrine'. This would leave him rootless and easily tossed around finding peace neither in the royal family he belongs to nor the sectarian-individualized colonial society he hungers for.

Describing character

Right from the beginning of the poem, Okot draws on the indigenous knowledge of the social status of royalty in the Acoli social world. Chiefs are respected and songs about them are songs of praise not insults. Lawino thus chides Ocol, son of the Chief:

> Listen Ocol, you are the son of a Chief,
> Leave foolish
> Behaviour to little children
> It is not right that you should be laughed at in a song!
> Songs about you should be songs of praise!
>
> Stop despising people
> As if you were a little foolish man,
> Stop treating me like salt-less ash
> Become barren of insults and stupidity;
> Who has ever uprooted the Pumpkin? (*SoL*, 37-8)

Among the Acoli, salt was made from decocting the ash of certain dried plants. The remaining wet waste was either used as manure or thrown on the rubbish heap and treaded upon. Okot poetically uses this indigenous knowledge to describe Ocol's arrogance in the way he treats not only Lawino but black people in general. Hence Lawino's complaint that Ocol should stop treating them 'likes salt-less ash'. In Section 14 of *Wer pa Lawino* which is not included in *SoL,* Lawino advises Ocol to use the salt-less ash as manure to grow the pumpkin instead of uprooting it. With Okot's extensive indigenous knowledge, the different plants, animals and insects with peculiar characteristics become cultural resources he poetically used in *SoL.* For example, in the stanza below, there is a concentration of similes drawn from plants, animals and insects with peculiarity comparable to Ocol's insulting tongue:

My husband's tongue
Is bitter like the roots of the *lyonno*[1] lily,
It is hot like the penis of the bee,
Like the sting of the penis of the bee
Like the sting of the *kalang*[2]
Ocol's tongue is fierce like the arrow of the scorpion,
Deadly like the spear of the buffalo-hornet
It is ferocious
Like the poison of the barren woman
And corrosive like the juice of the gourd. (*SoL,* 38)

The bitterness of the tongue is not only directed at Lawino but to her relatives and blacks in general. Okot again draws on Acoli similes as cultural resource in conveying Ocol's arrogant behaviour:

He behaves like a hen
That eats its own eggs
A hen that should be imprisoned under a basket.
His eyes grow large
Deep black eyes
Ocol's eyes resemble those of the Nile Perch!
He becomes fierce
Like a lioness with cubs,
He begins to behave like a mad hyena. (*SoL*, 39)

The similes are used satirically to undercut Ocol's pride and present him as a non-conformist to Acoli culture.

Kinship and marriage

The comparison with 'a hen /That eats its own eggs' is symbolic when we learn from Lawino that Ocol hates noise from his own children. He may be wishing that he never had those children like the hen that will never see its chicks since she has eaten them at the egg stage. It is therefore out of shame that he wants to 'uproot the pumpkin' thus cutting himself from the culture that values children, family and relatives. In the Acoli social world, the centre of anyone is the family and Okot elaborates this philosophy in an essay, 'Man the Unfree' (Okot 2011:20):

> Man cannot and must not be free. 'Son', 'mother', 'daughter', 'father', 'uncle', 'grandfather', 'wife', 'clansmen', 'mother-in-law',… and many such other terms, are the stamps of man's unfreedom. It is by such complex terms that a person is defined and

[1] The *lyonno* is a climbing plant which belongs to the lily plant type but has very bitter roots which are sometimes harvested, washed and boiled and the juice mixed with other herbs as medicine.

[2] *Kalang* is a small black insect that moves in groups in a military formation but once the head is killed, the rest scatter in disarray. The *kalang* stings mostly the bare buttocks of people who sit on bare earth or those walking barefooted either in the compound, along the footpaths or in the garden where there is competition for space or way. It is a very painful sting.

> identified. … The central question, 'Who am I?' cannot be answered in any meaningful way, unless the relationship in question is known. Because 'I' is not only one relationship but numerous relationships.

Thus, Ocol cannot run away from Lawino or divorce her as his traditional wife. He can cohabit with Clementine or marry her as his second wife. Lawino would welcome her as a co-wife because, in Acoli society:

> When I have another woman
> With whom I share my husband,
> I am glad
> A woman who is jealous
> Of another, with whom she shares a man.
> Is jealous because she is slow,
> Lazy and slow,
> Because she is cold, weak, clumsy!
> The competition for a man's love
> Is fought at the cooking place
> When he returns from the field
> Or from the hunt,
> You win with a hot bath
> And sour porridge.
> …
> The wife who jokes freely,
> Who eats in the open
> Not in the bed room,
> One who is not dull
> Like stale beer
> Such is the woman who becomes
> The headdress keeper. (*SoL*, 43-44)

Lawino's words of wisdom express cardinal rules that govern the homes of polygamous families. She would therefore rather have Ocol marry Clementine (Tina) as a second wife and not cohabit with her as his concubine. Lawino is not afraid of competing with her as she is confident she will be the winner in the traditional social context. She is 'The headdress keeper', the senior wife in whose house/hut, the husband keeps his dancing gear including the 'headdress.' Her sustained satirical criticism of Tina in Section Two is not because she is jealous, although she cannot deny being 'a little jealous' but because Tina is a concubine who has diverted Ocol from his husbandly duties: a husband to her and father of their children.

Courtship

In Section Four of *Song*, Okot returns to traditional courtship. In *Lak Tar*, Okeca and his friends had three possible places of meeting girls: on the way to the well, to collect firewood or to the market. In *Song,* the focus is on Ocol's courtship at Lawino's home:

> Ocol my husband,
> My friend,
> What are you talking?
> You saw me when I was young.
> In my mother's house
> This man crawled on the floor![i]
> The son of the Bull wept
> For me with tears,
> …
>
> Every night he came
> To my father's homestead,
> He never missed one night
> Even after he had been beaten
> By my brothers.
> …
>
> You trembled
> When you saw the tattoos
> On my breasts
> And the tattoos below my belly button;
> And you were very fond
> Of the gap in my teeth! (*SoL*, 51)

Traditionally, a young man who has met a girl outside her home and proposed love comes to her home to show his seriousness. She introduces him to her family members, but he does not frequent her home like Ocol who came to Lawino's home '… every night'/ Even after he had been beaten/By my brothers' (*Song*, p 51). The beating is not to maim you but just to let you know that the boys care about their sister whom they hope will bring them bridewealth when she becomes your wife. After the marriage, there is a new bond of relationship between the 'beaten suitor' and the protective brothers of the girl. Ocol does not have this bond with Tina's brother(s) because she is his concubine not second wife. Lawino displays her physical beauty, which is a total contrast to Tina's emaciated body, a perfect modern ideal, as her type 'aspires/ To look like a white woman' (*SoL,* 40). Lawino's tattooed body and the gap in her teeth (*kere*) are two marks of beauty that made Ocol 'tremble' and 'cry with tears for her' (*SoL*, p51).

Cosmetics

In Section Five, Okot's indigenous knowledge of the Acoli beautician's body shop with its variety of oils, creams and hair colouring substances is poetically used as a cultural resource. Lawino adds the oils and creams to her already beautiful body and indeed, even educated men like Ocol could not resist her:

When you go to dance
You adorn yourself for the dance,
If your string-skirt
Is ochre-red
You do your hair
With ochre,
And you smear your body
With red oil
And you are beautifully red all over!
If you put on a black string-skirt
You do your hair with *akuku*[3]
Your body shines with simsim oil
And the tattoos on your chest
And on your back
Glitter in the evening sun.
And the healthy sweat
On your bosom
Is like the glassy fruits of *acuga*[4]. (*SoL,* 55)

This stanza is one of the best poetic uses of indigenous knowledge by Okot. As readers we can visualize and even smell the traditional perfumes on the girls.

And as the fragrance
Of the ripe wild berries
Hooks insects and little birds,
As the fishermen hook the fish
And pull them out mercilessly,

The young men
From the surrounding villages
And from across many streams,
They come from beyond the hills
And the wide plains
They surround you
And bite off their ears
Like jackals. (*SoL*, 56)

The irresistible 'fragrance' of the body perfumes draws 'young men' from near and far just like the insects and birds cannot resist the fragrance from flowers which contain the nectar they are after. Lawino and the Acoli girls' beautification with traditional fragrances is contrasted with Tina's excessive use of synthetic foreign cosmetics in her quest to look 'like a white woman'. The slimming chemicals have caused her anorexia and hence her thinness making her walk noiselessly like a ghost (*SoL,* pp.39-44).

[3] Odonga in *Lwo –English Dictionary (2012 ed.)* defines *Akuku* as, 'a black sand (iron ore with mica) used for smearing the head and female loin dresses (*cip ki ceno*)**.**

[4] *Acuga* are small black wild fruits/berries that grow on shrubs. They are sweet and edible.

The house

In Section Six, 'The Mother Stone Has a Hollow Stomach', Okot, through Lawino, displays his indigenous knowledge of Acoli domestic aesthetics, when he describes in detail Lawino's mother's house built by her father. Lawino takes Ocol on a guided tour of the house and its beautifully arranged contents:

> Come brother,
> Come into my mother's house!
> Pause a bit by the door,
> Let me show you
> My mother's house.
>
> Look,
> Straight before you
> Is the central pole
> At the foot of the pole
> Is my father's revered stool.
>
> Further on
> The rows of pots
> Placed one on top of the other
> Are the stores
> And cupboards.
> Millet flour, dried carcasses
> Of various animals
> Beans, peas,
> Fish, dried cucumber…
> …
> Here on your left
> Are the grinding stones:
> The big one
> Ashen and dusty
> And her daughter
> Sitting in her belly
> Are the destroyers of millet
> Mixed with cassava
> And sorghum.
> …
>
> Do you know
> Why the knees
> Of millet –eaters
> Are tough?
> Tougher than the knees
> Of the people who drink bananas!

Where do you think
The stone powder
From the grinding stones goes? (*SoL*, 62-3)

Firewood

Lawino takes Ocol to the fire where her mother has different types of firewood and here, she scientifically identifies and discusses the properties of each firewood. She confidently and with humble pride says:

If you ask me
About firewood
I can describe them to you in detail
I know their names
And leaves
And seeds and barks.

For example, *Labwori*:

...is alright
If it is perfectly dry.
But if it is still green
The smoke it produces
Is like spear!
It is useful for
Chasing men from the hut
Men who sit close
To the cooking pot!
Their eyes fixed into the pot!
Odure[5] who does not
Listen when others sing
Odure, *come out*
From the kitchen
Fire from the stove (cooking stones)
Will burn your penis! (*SoL*, 63)

The good firewood includes: *Opok* which 'is easy/To split with the axe'; '*Yaa* [shea nut tree] burns gently/It burns like oil'; but '*Poi* is no use for firewood/It is rock;/It is useful only/As walking staff/For the aged (pp. 63-4). Lawino cannot be faulted in her knowledge of firewood properties. Okot's creative use of indigenous knowledge is poetically enhanced by use of Acoli similes. For example, '*Yaa* burns like oil' and the smoke produced by green *Labwori* is 'Like spear! /It is useful for /Chasing men from the hut (cooking hut)…' In normal life, a man who is angry with another man would use a spear to chase him. In both examples, the similes are appropriately used based on Okot's indigenous knowledge.

[5] *Odure* is the name of a small boy who was fond of sitting by the fireside in the 'cooking hut' of his mother. One day a spark of fire burnt his testicles. This incident became known throughout the village and a composer-singer turned it into a song. The song warns those who frequent the cooking hut that they might suffer the same fate like *Odure*.

Seasons

Okot's creative use of the resources of Acoli culture extends to two main seasons: wet and dry seasons in Acoli social and agricultural calendars.

> Wet season means
> Hard work in the field
> Sowing, weeding, harvesting
> It means waking up early before dawn
> It means mud
> And the thick dew.
> Herdboys dislike it.
> Lazy people hate it.
>
> Dry season means pleasure,
> It means dancing,
> It means hunting
> In freshly burnt plains.
> …
> Dry season means wooing
> And eloping with girls.
> It means the *moko* dance
> When youths and girls
> Get stuck to one another. (*SoL*, 74-5)

Age and names

The Acoli women remember the births of their children not by dates but by the particular season or events that took place at the time of birth. Ocol abuses Lawino that she does not know when their children were born but remembers by recalling the season/events when she gave birth. Some children's names too depend on the season or events at the time of their birth. A combination of birth and naming of children is therefore based on indigenous knowledge and Okot poetically presents them in *Song of Lawino* to counteract Ocol's accusation of Lawino having a head which is 'numb and empty' (p 75). In addition to the seasons and naming, an important distinction which Okot makes is between the indigenous knowledge of a person's age and numerical age:

> A person's age
> Is seen by looking at him or her
> A girl is grown up
> When her breasts have come;
> A young man's voice breaks
> And hair appears
> On his face
> And below his belly button.
> …
>
> A person's age

Is shown by what he or she does
It depends on what he or she is,
And what kind of person
He or she is.

You may be a giant
Of a man
…
But if you are unmarried
You are nothing. (*SoL*, 75)

The Acoli social system has names for the unmarried and they are social outcasts to the community but not their respective families. The male is called *labot* while the female is known by various names but the common one is *carama*. They are not respected in the community and some people secretly believe the reason for not being married is because of impotency or barrenness. Whatever the reason for being unmarried, the Acoli society has negative attitude to such people. The suffering is worse for the male who is disrespected by the sisters-in-law who order him to carry food from the cooking hut to the outdoor fireplace (*wang-oo*). If he refuses, he will forgo his share of the food. The females often blend with the female members of the family but other neighbouring women who are not related to her keep her at a distance especially from their husbands. Some people regard her as a potential prostitute, *wange tar/malaya.*

In Section Eight, Okot introduces Christianity but with a twist: he is critical of the missionaries who teach rote learning and worse, do not want to answer questions from the intelligent potential converts like Lawino. Ignoring the missionaries and the Christian names for which the converts labour, he focuses on Acoli names which are more meaningful and have cultural identities;

My husband rejects Acoli names,
Meaningful names,
Names that I can pronounce.
He says
They are *Jok* names
…
My Bull name is Eliya Alyker
I ate the name
Of the Chief of Payira
Eliya Aliker
Son of Awic

Bull names are given
To Chiefs of girls
Because like bulls
They lead their age-mates.

Like the full moon at night
They dominate the stars

Apiyo and Acen
Are *Jok* names
Twins are *joks*
Akelo is the one
Who comes after twins
Ajok and Ajara
Grow extra fingers or toes
Adoc comes out
Of the belly feet first.
Akot (*Okot)* does not mean
"Born in the rain,'
But 'afterbirth
Contained bubbles of water'
And this is a sign of rain.
…
The first born
May have a name
But he is always called Okang.
He is the first
To listen to the songs
Of birds;
He is proof
That the woman is not barren;
He is the owner of the shrine
That shall be built
In honour of his father.
He is respected. (*SoL*, 84-6)

Lawino's expertise in explaining Acoli names is a reflection of her creator's deep indigenous knowledge that he used as a resource and crafted in his poetry. It is important to note that Lawino is here gender insensitive as she mostly explains female names. Among the Acoli, female names mostly begin with 'A' while that of the male begins with 'O'. Okot cleverly explains the meaning of his name but using the female name 'Akot', thus writing himself into his poetry.

The lines mostly contain two or three words but where an explanation is needed, the numbers of words increase, losing the staccato structure. The focus is on the meaning rather than the poetic structures. Each Acoli name has a meaning unlike the 'borrowed Christian names' that Lawino rejects because to her, they are meaningless just like Ocol says Acoli names are 'Jok names/And he wants nothing/To do with Jok' (p 84). Lawino's final verdict on the Christian names is that:

To me
They all sound
Like empty tins,
Old rusty tins
Thrown down
From the roof top. (*SoL*, 87)

The Acoli attach cultural values to the names they give their children. Naming ceremonies are part of the rites of passage in a child's life. On the third day a male child is named according to the names (*nying pen*) either predetermined by the circumstance of the birth or conception or names selected for him by the parents or relatives. Some of the predetermined names include those related to Jok as Okot explains or those due to circumstances of conception such as Okumu/Akumu where the mother conceived immediately after menstruation when conception is least expected (safe period). This makes Okumu/Akumu a child of *Jok* just like Opiyo/Apiyo/Ocen/Acen (twins) and Okello/Akello, the child who follows twins. The name(s) given that day is called *nying pen* because that is the day when the umbilical cord is cut and buried as part of the ceremony. That home becomes the home of the child who will in future claim partial ownership since his *pen* is buried in the compound. The explanation I have given here applies to the female child who is named on the fourth day after her birth. Twins have a more elaborate naming ceremony as they are *special children of Jok*. Their burial too is different from the other non-children of *Jok*, a subject Okot discusses in detail in *Religion of Central Lwo* (1973).

Healing and cleansing

In Section 13, 'Let Them Prepare the Malakwang Dish', Okot displays his knowledge of Acoli traditional medicines with their various healing properties as resource. Here Lawino, having painstakingly identified Ocol's illness as due to his wholesale acceptance of colonialism, proposes the healing process including the restoration of his manhood. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, as cited by Sylvester Danson Kahyana (2017) refers to Okot as one of East African's foremost surgeons concerned with 'the psychological wound inflicted on a whole generation by colonialism and Christianity' (Ngugi 1973: xiii). Okot the surgeon empowered Lawino, his mouthpiece and medicine woman, to prescribe Acoli traditional medicines to heal his patient Ocol and his fellow middle class educated Acoli. Lawino begins by ensuring that the patient is not:

> ...utterly dead
> And fit only for the stomach of the earth,
> If your heart string
> Is not completely cut,
> …
> If some blood is still flowing
> However faintly
> Take courage
> Take a small amount of porridge,
> Let them prop you up
> Drink some fish soup
> Slowly, slowly
> You will recover. (*SoL*, 120)

It is only after this initial diagnosis and feeding treatment which revives the patient that the actual ceremonial healing process begins. Okot, drawing on the medical resources of Acoli culture, sets in motion a full treatment process followed by a ritual sacrifice of a bull at the ancestral shrine performed by elders; begging forgiveness from his mother for insulting her and her generation of relatives; removing the selfish road block he had imposed on Lawino and finally a request from Lawino to Ocol to let her dance before him. I will only present a few examples of the traditional

medicine and what it cures in Ocol's 'psychological wound' inflicted by colonialism and Christianity:

> Chew the roots of *omwombye* [6]
> It is very bitter
> But it will clear your throat.
>
> Let them prepare the *malakwang*[7] dish
> Eat the roots of *lurono*[6]
> And the roots of your tongue
> Will be loosened.
> …
>
> Let them drop simsim oil
> Into the holes of your ears
> Let them scoop out the gum
> That has filled your ear for so long,
> The thick dust you collected
> From the altar
> And chaff
> From the books
> And the useless things
> From the magazines and newspapers
> And the radio and television!
> …
>
> Bring the ripe seeds of *labikka*[8]
> And scratch Ocol's eyeballs
> And remove the blood
> That has clotted there,
> Put the rhino-horn powder
> In his eyes,
> Let it stab away
> The pus that blocks his eyes!
> The blindness that you got in the library
> Will be removed by the diviner!
> …
> Brush your tongue
> So thickly coated with insults;
> Here is warm water

---

[6] *Omwombye* --- a creeping plant on an ant hill, the bark of its roots taste a bit like pepper, it is used as medicine for many conditions, such as stomach and eye diseases, etc. It is similar to *lurono* plant which has a root but mint like in taste (Odonga 2012).

7 malakwang--- sour-tasty green vegetables cooked and enjoyed by the Acoli people.

8 labikka---spike plants that grow wild and produce thorn-like seeds used to open up wounds or remove scales from the eye-balls.

There is salt in it,
Gargle it.
Clean your mouth
Spit out the insults with the water!
The abuses you learnt
From your white masters
…

And son of the Bull
When you are completely cured
…
Go to the shrine of your fathers
Prepare a feast,
Give blood to your ancestors
…
Let the elders
Spit blessing on you
Let them intercede for you
…

Beg forgiveness from them
And ask them to give you
A new spear
A new spear with a sharp and hard point
A spear that will crack the rock
…
Ask them to restore your manhood
For I am sick
Of sharing a bed with a woman!

Ask them to forgive
Your past stupidity,
…
May they take away all your shyness
Deceit, childish pride, and sharp tongue!

For when you insulted me,
…
You were insulting your grandfather
And your grandmothers, your father and mother!
…
You were abusing your entire people [*blacks*]
…

When you have recovered properly
Go to your old mother

And ask for forgiveness from her
Let her spit blessings in your hands.
…

As your first wife,
…
I have only one request
…
Buy clothes for the woman
With whom I share you
…

When you gained your full strength
I have only one request,
And all I ask is
That you remove the road block
From my path.

Here is my bow-harp
Let me sing greetings to you,
…
Let me praise you
…
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. (*SoL*, 123)

That is Lawino at her best as a medical practitioner, ritual advisor, intercessor on behalf of her relatives, of Ocol and the entire black peoples, kind hearted woman who cares for her husband's concubine whom she partially acknowledged as 'the woman with whom I share you' after totally discrediting her in Section Two of her *Song*. She has humbled herself by politely requesting Ocol to let her sing one praise song and dance for him as this might bring a change of heart partly because the cleansing ritual will restore Ocol's manhood and she will have a fully functional husband. However, the last words in *Song* are the proverbial warning: 'Let no one uproot the pumpkin.'

Conclusion

In his polemic writings and essays (which I have not dealt with here), Okot discusses Acoli aesthetics and religion, and presents detailed treaties on Man and his place in the world. The best collections of his essays are in one collection: *Artist the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values* (1988). Here Okot argues, with examples, that the Artist is the ruler through his poetic and artistic

creations. Among the Acoli, the artist, especially oral poets were and still are feared as they can build or destroy through their songs, folk narrative or creative art (paintings and drawings). Okot is an exemplary Acoli artist who evokes wonder if not fear. He is able to build up a person and a perspective, and equally capable of cutting down with sharp criticism. In doing so, he provides material that is read and reflected upon to a far greater extent than his strictly ethnographic publications. His creative writing moves people and makes them reflect on the challenges and dilemmas of encounters with colonization, schooling, urbanization, monetization and changing systems of value. Indeed, his literary work has itself become a resource.

Okot's creative (poetic) use of the resources of Acoli culture and the literary borrowings from Acoli oral poetry give his poetry a freshness that made him the founder of a new poetic school, 'the song school'. Two of his immediate 'imitators' were Joseph Buruga in *Abandoned Hut* (1972) and Okello Oculi in *Orphan* (1968). In her eulogy of Okot p'Bitek, Professor Margret McPherson made an important statement: 'The singer may be dead but if the song is good, it will live on' (Okumu 2020). Okot's *Songs* have indeed outlived him, and many scholars will continue to research and write about them. I hope my article is a beacon lighting the way for further research into Okot's use of the resources of Acoli culture.

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