



**AFRICAN ORAL TRADITIONS IN POETRY: A STUDY OF SONG
OF LAWINO AND SONG OF OCOL**

Emeka Jonathan Okorie

Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-
Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Abstract: This study is interested in the use of winged expressions in Bitek's creative work—Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol to achieve and influence audience participation, sustenance, and easy analysis of a text written in a combination of two different literary genres. The literature exposes the zeal to capture and clout language through the principles of simplicity, correctness, originality, clarity of tone, naturalness, dynamism, articulateness, and aptness of expression. The cultural-historical activity theory of Yrjo (1990) was adopted to show that community is central to the process of creating and implementing meaning in every society. The descriptive technique of data collection was used and findings show that winged expressions make language apt, stimulating, exciting, and appreciative. It also opens a work to inventive and innovative suggestions that can possibly recast an old work into a new one with artistic prowess. The researchers therefore recommend that writers should apply variety in their work so as to spice and sustain the interest of the audience. Again, variety in speech and writing dispels boredom and creates suspense in the audience.

Key words: winged, expression, language, beauty, creative.

1. INTRODUCTION.

Bitek's Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol is regarded by many critics as a form of poetic drama while some regard it as a dramatic monologue. The temptation to group it as a work in poetic genre is high. Bitek is distinct in his use of language and this is what sets him apart from other writers. His ability to translate from his indigenous Acoli language into the English language is outstanding. This organised transformation of language in writing determines the proficiency and endowment of any writer or author. The various techniques Bitek adopted made his work credible, adequate, and acceptable to the literary world with ease. In consideration of the roles and language of the major characters—Lawino, Ocol, Clementine, it may not be incongruous to classify this text as a drama piece. However, to create a balance between poetry and drama, this work shall be perceived and treated as a poetic drama. The author employed the use of winged expressions to make his piece vivid, apt, exciting, and inspiring etc. This technique made the work gain aptness of plot, arresting narrative, aesthetic, graphic, explicit, and incisive sustenance and an apprehensive conclusion. These winged expressions, for the purpose of this work,

may include: neologisms, proverbs, figures of speech, phraseology, allusive or aesthetic, expressions, imageries, and analysis of some sociocultural issues in Acoli, among others. This work is communally based in a typical village in Uganda, East Africa. It shows off the author's aggressiveness when African culture was challenged by foreign cultures. The work therefore mirrors the society as well as reflects her history, values, beliefs, and compares them with the Western ways. As a guide to social reality the author uses consciously organised words, phrases, sentences, to express the people's world view, history, experience, etc. Kuzmanovska (2022) in a related view explains that through language individuals internalize cultural artefacts, such as symbols, norms, and values which mediate their understanding of the world. And that language is a major tool in the hands of humans to shape opinions, change attitudes and motivate action. To buttress this further, Obisike et al (2019) explain that language is the hallmark of creation...a vital instrument in cultural transmission and preservation of a social group. This notion gives credence to the opinion of Sadikovna (2021, p.106) that: language is a world with its own structure, system of values, problems and experiences. Proverbs and sayings, phraseology, neologisms, winged expressions, and other means make speech more vivid. ...They contain common sense and humour, emotional expressiveness and the ability to express feelings and moods, national originality and the depth of culture of the people—the speakers of the language. Bitek adopted the use of these expressions to give an excellent and favourable opportunity to get acquainted with the life and culture of the people of Uganda and by extension Africa. In furtherance of this dogged determination to make the work engaging, glamorous, and of course, a deviation from literary norm, the author also applied the use of 'Africanised' English for the dialogue of his characters and rhetoric devices. This is in line with Garrett (2016) who believes that rhetoric, as part of winged expression, is an intangible power that has the ability to motivate and manipulate in order to move the audience toward the author's expected goal. And that it enables effective communication and hence weighs a major influence on the audience. In support of this Onwuchekwa (1980, p.247), holds that:

Language or image that is not vivid, precise, or apt compels the listener to puzzle it out, interrupts his intention, and makes him lose part of the story...These qualities which are mandatory in the auditory medium, should be insisted upon in the written. For even abundant leisure cannot be blamed if it gets impatient with unnecessary puzzles that keep it from the experience it wants to share...These qualities must be insisted upon out of sheer courtesy to the reader. Above all the interpretation and analysis of the text, Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol, would have been a herculean task if not for the adoption and creative use of these winged expressions.

2. Theoretical Framework

Some Russian psychologists Vygotsky, L.S and Aleksei, N. L in the 1990s introduced the cultural-historical activity theory to study how people think, feel and what they do. The theory was primarily concerned with the comparison of man's thoughts and feelings with actual activities. The theorists believe that the history of an individual's social and cultural experiences are greatly influenced by the changes that take place within the environment. This theory was initially coined by Michael Cole and recently made popular by Yrjo Engestrom (1990). The theory from then studies how humans deliberately transform natural and social realities including themselves. In sum, the overriding objectives of this theory are to show: a) how humans act collectively, learn by doing and communicate by their actions.

b) how humans make, employ and adopt tools of all kinds to learn and communicate,

c) That community is central to the process of making and interpreting meaning to all forms of learning communication and acting.

The relevance of this theory to this study is that it shows that Ugandan community was central to the cultural confusion between Lawino and Ocol. Each of the personae reacted to situations they feel are contrary to their expectations. This is because the Lawinos were at liberty and total control of the gender roles in the society before the coming of Ocol and the Western ways.

3. A brief biography of Okot's Bitek.

Okot was born in 1931 in Gulu, northern Uganda. Not much was said about his years of study, but he attended Gulu High School, and King's College, Budo as well as Government Training College, Mbarara. Okot obtained the first degree in Oxford University.

As part of his contribution to national development in Uganda, Okot engaged as a teacher and taught English and Religious Knowledge at Sir Samuel Baker's School near Gulu. He later proceeded to teach at different universities among which are: University of Makerere, University of Nairobi, University of Texas and University of Iowa, USA. He was promoted to the rank of a Professor of Creative writing before his untimely death in 1982. Okot wrote some of the following works to his credit and contribution to the cry and yearning for cultural revival in Africa:

- i) Lak Tar (1953) -- a novel in Acoli language.
- ii) The Horn of my love (1974)—a collection of Acoli songs (AWS, 147).
- iii) Africa's Cultural Revolution. ---a collection of Essays.
- iv) Hare and Hornbill (1978)—(AWS, 193).
- v) Songs of Malay and Prisoner (EAPH).
- vi) Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol. (AWS, 266).

Okot's contributions helped African writers to realise that poetry can be dramatised without recourse to the interpretation. He successfully translated the Acoli songs into English with the theme still intact. His works questioned the idea of social anthropology which justifies colonialism to the detriment of African cultural heritage. It is noteworthy that his works also glorified African cultures, ethics, traditions, beliefs and norms.

4. Synopsis of Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol.

The major or central idea of this poetic drama piece is hinged on the psychocultural quandary of the African; symbolised by Lawino and Ocol. The work constituted a heated debate over the future of African culture, religion, politics etc. The author used Lawino to represent the African past and at the same time present it as the sine qua non on which the future of Africa can be modelled. Lawino, who represents the African culture, explicitly shows us that Ocol, the alienated African, lost his 'head' when he acquired the Western education and life style. This means that the new civilization not only destroyed the culture of Uganda, but also turned Ocol into 'nothing' by all African standards. The work further reveals that even though Ocol acquired the white man's wisdom and knowledge, he did not succeed in becoming a white man. Lawino in her native wisdom explains to Ocol: "You may not know this... but you behave like a dog of the white man.... The dogs of the white men are well trained, and they understand English" (p.115). The implication here is seen also in Lo Liyong's (1971) negated behaviour of the African. He explains that the African cannot be British no matter how much they try to please the white man and worship their culture. Again, Ocol symbolises the alienated African, who Fanon (1968),

describes as one who holds up to ridicule the custom, myths, traditions of his people and indirectly expose their technological backwardness and practice barbarian acts. That such people present Africa as blackness, deep fathomless darkness, idle giant, poor, full of superstitions and vowed to smash the taboos, uproot every sacred tree, and demolish every ancestral homestead. Ocol's privilege to learn the white man's ways became a torn on the flesh of his people as he jettisoned his root. The author goes on to use the work to reveal societal problems that are inherent and common in Africa before and after independence. Many of the 'Ocols' are always contradictory to the traditions, values, norms, history, etc. of their people after acquiring the western education and culture. Lawino is a good example of a scorned woman, yet she holds her head and lashes out on Ocol and Clementina whom she shared her husband with. Lawino, in the work, stands out as one who upholds and defends the customs and traditions of her people. Lawino is familiar and at home with polygamy therefore the marriage of Clementina as second wife to her husband was not a problem to her. She had expected Ocol to marry a younger and more beautiful and vibrant woman than she is. Lawino was very vast with everything about traditional relationship and hence became the writer's tool of commentary on Acoli society where tradition and civilisation met on the altar of cultural conflict and contact.

3. Critical evaluation of Bitek's use of winged expressions in Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol.

As a cultural nationalist Bitek's writings are widely distinctive and contrasts with what is generally common in African works of art. He adopts this poetic drama form to expose the frustration of the alienated African in the web of tradition and modernity in a musical and subtle manner. To achieve readership and sustain the attention of the audience, the author applied the use of expressions that are apt, symbolic, figurative, catchy, aesthetic, Acoli neologisms, and most features of traditional African drama and theatre, etc. Some of these expressions are treated below.

5.1 The use of figures of speech, the use of figurative expressions abounds in the work. They constitute the artistic beauty in language. They possess the power to unify, blend, and stir the ability of the mind to invent images that are equivalent to the author's imagined realities, thoughts and experiences. Figures of speech stir emotion, give the user the ability to use words and expressions freely and beautifully in every context and environment. Figures of speech invoke awesome experiences, surprises, fear, pleasure, tension, and other forms of moodshift in the user.

5.1.1. The use of imagery: Images of barbarism, backwardness, etc. were prominently used to mirror the negligence Africa is subjected to in the midst of western civilisation. The use of ... darkness, blackness, deep, deep fathomless, darkness... milkless breasts, idle giant, snoring, diseased, chained to the rock of poverty, etc (Bitek, p.25 & 125) are images that portray Africa as retrogressive and barbaric among others. Ocol, then, is an image of those Africans who denounce their roots and traditions due to their new learning. They see tradition as taboos and hence declare that: "Taboos are chains Around the neck, chains of slavery; shatter that pot, shatter taboos, customs, Traditions" (Bitek, p.131). Other images to show how much the Ocols despise their cultures, values, nature etc. are reflected in these words "shrivelled breasts, folded dry skin the empty bags on her chest Are completely flattened, dried" (Bitek, p.39). These expressions can only be properly appreciated through the use of winged words or figurative expressions.

5.1.2. The use of repetitions: Repetition is most often used to lay emphasis on any issue whether cultural or scientific. Bitek adopted the use of repetitions to, possibly, establish suspense in the mind of the audience. These

repetitions give substance to ideas and hence life. Through the use of repetitions Bitek was able to give a fresh treatment of materials he draws from tradition and make them appealing to the audience. Another essence of the use of repetitions is to make the piece an exciting one. Lawino explains that:

When the drums are throbbing...

You dance with vigor and

Health

You dance naughtily with pride

You dance with spirit,

You compete, you insult, you

Provoke

You challenge all" (Bitek, p. 42).

The repetition of 'you' and 'dance' in these lines shows the commitment of the African to tradition and emphasizes its importance to communal existence.

5.1.3. Metaphor; the use of metaphorical expressions made the work symbolic and create a sense of exaggerated actions. According to Ducrot (1983, p.278) metaphor is "the use of a word to express a meaning resembling, yet differing from, its habitual meaning" In this work Bitek reveals that some Africans, exemplified by Ocol, uphold and exaggerate what they consider a ridiculous aspect of traditional values without similar regard to the valuable parts of them.

The teacher was an acoli

His nose was blocked and he tried

To force his words

Through his blocked nose.

Daughter of the Bull (Bitek, p.76 & 78).

Ocol goes ahead to use other metaphors to compare her husband and the new western life thus:

"My husband's house is a dark forest of books... I cry over my husband whose head is lost... in the forest of books" (Bitek, p. 113).

5.1.4. The use of rhetorical questions; Bitek condemns the actions of priests and pastors in both Catholic and Protestant churches. These priests and pastors change Acoli names that are meaningful, in preference to the new names forced on them by the new religion. These religious influences have far reaching effects on the Acoli people:

"My husband rejects me

Because, he says

I have no Christian name

My husband rejects Acoli names

...Names I can pronounce He says

They are Jok names" (Bitek, p.81).

Again, Acoli people were forced to give offerings, pay tithes, and perform other religious rituals. These actions call for questions that the Lawinos of Acoli cannot respond to:

"Do they buy the places?

In skyland with money?

The stools

On the right hand of the

Hunchback,

Are these reserved?

For moneyed fellows, (Bitek, p. 85).

Lawino further asks rhetorically:

“Those who will surround the Hunchback, will they be

The three chinned ones? Who understands the meaning of the Christian names?

The proper responses to these questions would have shown the Ocols that no tradition is superior to the other.

5.1.5. Simile; Bitek was denunciatory in his condemnation of the alienated African who does not see anything good in African traditions because of their new education and association with the western cultures. These alienated Africans are bitter, very disparaging and disdainful. Lawino was clear when she condemns Ocol thus:

“My husband’s tongue

Is bitter like the roots of the lyonnolily, It is hot like the

Penis of the bee,

Ocol’s tongue is fierce like the arrow of the scorpion, Deadly like the spear of the buffalo-hornet (Bitek, p. 35).

This bitter comparison is replete with most actions of Ocol in the work. It is explicit about the real situation in Uganda and of course, Africa. The Ocols see everything about Africa as bad and evil. He prefers: The wife who jokes freely

Who eats in the open?

Not in the bed room

One who is not dull?

Like stale beer, (Bitek, p.41).

It is important to point out that these figures of speech stirred the interest of the reader to the understanding of the evils of colonialism in Africa.

5.1.6: the use of irony; It is very ironical that Ocol who was born and bred in Acoli village, enjoyed all her natural benefits and protections could turn around to black mail and condemn all her traditions. Lawino reveals the turnout of events in her household:

“My husband quarrels bitterly

He says

I do not know hygiene

And I do not know

How to look after the sick...

My man is ashamed of me (Bitek, p.91).

On the contrary, the Acoli have hygienic practices, herbal treatments, and every other form of care to the sick. The author adopted this literary technique to mildly mock the wrong perceptions of the alienated Africans who thought that only the western curative measures are effective. Even when Ocol “condemns diviner-priests and herbalists”

he still goes around to agree “that sometimes by accident, some of the herbs are effective” He also admits that not all who enter the white man’s hospital walk home on their own feet (Bitek, p.93). This is indeed ironical.

5.2: The use of allusive or aesthetic expressions; this work is highly sustained by indirect references to situations in Acoli and by extension Africa in a manner that is beautiful and allusive. The use of artistic and stunning forms of expression in this work is one major thing the author has achieved in a bid to making the work persuasive and credible to the audience. Hear Lawino in this artistry:

“Among our people when a girl has accepted a man’s proposal she gives a token,

And then she visits him

In his bachelor’s hut to try his manhood.

Before the bridewealth is paid the man puts his cheeks on the girl’s bosom and if the girl is lucky

She gets a stomach

And when they teach

That the mother of Christ

Did not know a man

I cannot understand it (Bitek, p.90).

5.3: The use of proverbs; Ashipu (2013) believes that for effective understanding of language use in traditional societies, proverbs should be incorporated into the study. He also explains that proverbs enable the speaker to create a picture of his idea since proverbial language is woven around vegetation, animals and natural objects that can be seen, felt and touched. The purpose of Bitek’s work on his immediate phenomena and cultural experiences may be to capture the attention of the audience since proverbs explain universal truth and the common beliefs of the community. To fully accomplish this, Bitek made light of the rendition of Acoli proverbs to enable more audience participation. Consider some of these examples:

i) The pumpkin in the old homestead must not be uprooted. (P. 41)

ii) Ostrich plums differ from chicken feathers. (p.51).

iii) A monkey’s tail is different from that of the giraff (p. 51).

iv) The hair of the Acoli is different from that of the Arabs. (p. 51). v) Foxes make holes in the pathway. (82).

5.4: The use of African literary traditions; African literature is full of creativity. According to Onuekwusi (2016) it is the ability of the artist to render tradition in apt circumstances, the degree of stylistic twists. The artist is not a mere reciter of a tradition; he therefore strives to introduce something new to the tradition. This is exactly what Bitek has done in these songs. He translated English words into Acoli expressions with the aim of reaching a wider audience. In doing this he was careful not to borrow foreign words or any other foreign grammatical expression that could probably distort his theme. It is customary that in traditional societies women exaggerate some ridiculous aspects of their culture. They use ‘dirty gossips’, cajole, jealousy, against their perceived enemies. Lawino was outstanding thus: Forgive me, brother, do not think I’m insulting the woman with whom I share my husband. Do not think my tongue is being sharpened by jealousy....Her breasts are completely shrivelled up...How aged modern women pretend to be young girls... the empty bags on her chest are completely flattened... Perhaps she has aborted many (Bitek, p. 39).

5.5. The use of Acoli imageries; Bitek tried not to infiltrate elements of English literature into the Acoli literary concepts. These adaptations added freshness, richness, Africanness and the natural feelings of the Acoli into the work:

“A man listens

To the the roar of his own bull And shouts praises to it.

But no one praises another’s

Bull

Not even the bull of his brother” (Bitek, p.66).

The use of Acoli imageries makes it easier for a non-Acoli to understand the message. Hear Lawino:

“We repeated the meaningless

Phrases

Like the lajanawara grass

...let the fool

Continue to deceive himself!

Who has ever prevented

The cattle from the salt lick?” (Bitek, p. 76& 79).

Other iageries that are traditionally Acoli expressions may include some of the following statements:

“When your uncle caurses you You **piss** in your **bed**!

And you go on pissing in your

Bed

Until you have taken him

A **white cock**!” (Bitek, p.98).

Bitek also uses images of the **teacher, okwik birds, yellow birds,drum, barking, old man’s pipe, etc. to portray rottenness,deceit,** and destructive tendencies of the western new ways on Africa. Again, the image of the mother’s curse represents the perception of the Ocols after they had acquired the western education. The image of the **snake, the spear, lightening, buffalo horn,** represent destruction that is predominant in Africa according to Ocol:

“All misfortunes have a root, the snake bite, the spear of the enemy,

Lightening and the blunt buffalo horn,

These are the bitter fruits

Grown on the tree of Fate. (Bitek, p.98).

a. **The use of neologisms;** Allen (1986) believes that through the centuries, the refinement of language has become one of the prime achievements of the human mind. This agrees with Matthew (2007) that a new word can be introduced into a language by any means. In this syudy Bitek introduced Acoli words in place of English words for the sustanaibility of the audience. These neologisms ameliorate issues of culture contact. It is obvious that ‘Acoli English’ carries deeper meanings and messages that reveal the true heartbeat of the Acoli people—their culture, norms, values, ethics and cosmology, etc. Lawino laments this situation in their religious worship:

“Iam ignorant of the good world

In the Clean Book”

...Maria the Clean Woman
 Mother of the Hunchback
 Pray for us who spoil things
 Full of graciya" (p. 75)...
 Ocol wanted me to be baptised
 "Benedicta,
 He has christened,
 ...Maria the Clean Woman
 Mother of the Hunchback" (p. 81).

From these few neologisms—‘**clean woman**’, ‘**Clean Book**’, ‘**Benedicta**’, ‘**Hunchback**’, one can appreciate the beautiful use of language to recreate ideas and hence make a work apt and lively. The words may represent Mary, the holy one and mother of Jesus, the clean book is the Holy Bible, Hunchback is Jesus Christ/God, etc. Lawino further questions the creation story that is contrary to Acoli notion about the creation of the heavens and the earth in neologisms and figurative expressions that generate new ideas and words. This use of old words in new ways makes the narration appreciative, simple, and easy to interpret and at the same time demystify obscure scenes that would have been difficult for non-Acoli residents. Where did the Hunchback dig the clay for moulding things the clay for moulding Skyland.

The clay for moulding Earth.

The clay for Moon.

The clay for moulding Stars?

Where it was dug,

On the mouth of which River? (Bitek, P.87).

5.7. The use of phonological devices; Bitek used some sound devices in the work to possibly create a poetic drama piece in the narration. The devices aim to persuade, provoke, and induce a unique writing style. It also brought to bear on context-dependent aspects of meaning; making the songs to have easy rendition. There are rhymes, assonance, alliteration, repetitions, enjambment, quatrain, quintet, sestet, septet, octave, etc.

You may be the fastest runner,

A long distance runner,

But when Death comes,

To fetch you You do not resist,

You must not resist.

You cannot resist! (Bitek, p. 102)

These according to Agava, (2024) in Ngulube (2024), shows that African cultural nationalists mostly glorify the African culture and abhor westernization which they believe militates against the African culture. These motives are sang as songs for easier understanding of the masses.

When the drums are throbbing...

You dance with vigour and

Health

You dance naughty with pride

...You adorn yourself in Acoli
Costumes. (Bitek, p.42-43)

5.8.; Analysing socio-cultural problems and values in Acoli (Africa)

The dominant moods in these songs are mostly of anger, despair, desolation, melancholy and sadness, etc. These make the work to be considered as a critic of a hypocritical society overwhelmed with so many defects. Lawino was not bothered that Ocol got married to a second wife. Her agitation and lamentation is that Ocol preferred the ways of Catherina to her African natural ways. She also laments over the devastation and relegation of everything Africa by Ocol; including medicines, superstitions, mysteries, education, etc.:

My husband has threatened

To beat me

If I visit the diviner-priest again.

...Ocol condemns diviner-priests

And Acoli herbalists (Bitek, p.93)

...My mother showed me many

...Medicines for leprosy and yaws,

For difficult childbirth and Barrenness

For men whose spears Refuse to stand up...? (Bitek, p.97).

On the contrary, Ocol was in total denunciation of his root and hence says that they are all liars, deceivers, and robbers of the innocent Acoli populace.

Conclusion; Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol dramatizes the dilemma of a typical African who practically denounced the realities of African traditional system due to the acquisition of the western ways of life. The consequences of so doing made him an outcast among his people. Bitek reinstates and exalts the awesomeness and amazing nature of African tradition and its beauty through the use of winged expressions. The use of poetic drama is a point of departure from the normal dramatic acts and scenes or stanzas in which the playwright or poet unfolds his message. The combination of the two makes the work not only swift, but also divinely plausible for the audience. In all the work celebrates the uniqueness of African belief system. Bitek robustly contends that it is credible and operational as its Western equivalent or rival.

REFERENCES

Allen, S (1986). How to make a speech. Gospel Press and Literature Int.

Ashipu, K.B.C. & Amende, C (2013). Proverbs as circumstantial speech acts. Research on Humanities and Social Sciences, 3(7), 10-15.

Ducrot, O, Todorov, T. (1983). Encyclopedic Dictionary of the sciences of language. John Hopkins University Press.

Fanon, F (1965). The wretched of the Earth. New York.

Kuzmanovska, D, Koceva, V, Vitanva-Ringaceva, Kirova, S, Ivanova, B (2022). Perception of women in the society given through proverbs and sayings. IATED Academy.

Lo Liyong, T (1971). Frantz Fanon's Uneven Ribs. Heinemann.

Matthew, P.H (2007). Oxford University Press.

Ngulube, I.E. et al (2024) (end). Elechi Amadi, Literature and the Nigerian Socio-political environment. Sharex Global services, Port Harcourt.

Obisike, O.I, Nwala, M.A, & Etaruwak, M.J. (2019). Impact of pidgin on the effective learning of English Language among junior secondary Students in Port Harcourt. International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 9(6) 78-84.

Onuekwusi, J.A. (2016). Fundamentals of African Oral Literature (Revised ed) Alphabet Nigeria Publishers, Owerri. (2003). The Prose in literature. Alphabet Nigeria Publishers, Owerri.

Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa, J, & Madubuike, I (1980). Toward the decolonization of African Literature, vol.1. Fourth Dimension Publishers, Nigeria.

P' Bitek, O (1984). Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol. Heinemann.

Sadikovna, M .M (2021). The origin of proverbs and sayings: Academicia Globe.

Zhao, W (2013). An analysis of social proverbs from the perspective of cultural Semiotics. Theory & Practice in language studies, 2(10).