



Okot's Aesthetics Revisited: On Symbolic and Parabolic Expression in *Song of Lawino*

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ABSTRACT

Song of Lawino remains a majestic imprint in East African literary map. On its publication in 1968, Lindfors (1984) asserts that "Okot was immediately recognized as a classical African poet' (44). Initially written in Acoli language, the book received acclaims the world over as a new bearing for African literary artists. Since then, it continues to occupy its own niche in 21st century, which is affirmed in introduction to the 2014 impression of *Song of Lawino*: 'Okot's work will not cease to be relevant for a long time to come' (10). Okot was honoured posthumously in celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Song of Lawino* on 18th March 2016 at Makerere University and Kenyatta University, literature department in a colloquium held in December 2016. The immense interest in the work is shown in translations into Luganda and then *Sheng* by J.K.S.

Makokha, which has been appreciated by Wanambisi (1984), Mugambi (1992) and others as being African and unique art. This paper intends to add a voice in the appreciation of *Song of Lawino* Fifty years since its publication. The author contends that the book utilizes symbols and allegory in expressing its concerns. The paper contends that *Song of Lawino* utilizes symbols in communicating its concerns and at the same time the work can be read as a parable. The author identifies the various types of symbols and their relevance in expressing themes. In addition, the paper provides a parabolic reading of Okot's work, *Song of Lawino*. These two lenses of studying, is hoped, will allow an in-depth study of the work.

Key Words: Aesthetics, Okot, Parables, Song of Lawino, Symbols

Published: 15th January 2019

Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

To cite this article: Justus Makokha (2019) *Okot's Aesthetics Revisited: On Symbolic and Parabolic Expression in Song of Lawino*, Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 3:1, pp5-16, Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at www.royallitepublishers.com/nairobi-journal

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Introduction

Heffernan (1987) defines a symbol as 'something which stands for something else... and ...one thing, usually tangible- a shape, a flag, a colour- embodies a more abstract concept- a religion, a government, medical attention' (p. 170). *Song of Lawino* can be read as symbols of various abstract concepts. The various symbols will be identified and the abstract meaning of it will be explored in understanding the message of the referred symbol. Because the songs were initially written in Acoli and Lango languages following the tradition of their composition within the communities in question, it will be important to consider the context of the songs in elucidating the meaning. Symbols identified in this paper include family as a microcosm of a larger concept of Africa and Africanness; characterization as historical (or time frame) symbols, animal symbols, plant symbols; body symbols and technology symbols. In the last section the paper reads *Song of Lawino* as a parable of the prodigal son who is in wilderness.

Family as a Microcosm of a Larger Concept of Africa and Africanness

Lawino and Ocol are married. They have children and their marriage is experiencing a turmoil. Lawino as a wife who has been raised in the most responsible way by her parents is saddened by the mistreatment she receives from her educated husband. Not only has Ocol absconded his role in the family but has also deserted the ways of the clan. He claims that the ways of his people (black people, Africans) are backward. He is disinterested in his own family, this bias is hinged on newly acquired knowledge in his experience with new religion and education. Western influence has made Ocol baptize his children with foreign names and it has also made him fall in love with Clementine. A family is the departure point of the conflict that transcends the boundaries of the family, beyond the couple and this conflict can be read as a problem of the clan, state and African continent. African ways of life amidst the threat of western life is problematized.

Lawino is the voice of the poet. She embodies the ideas of Okot p'Bitek. Okot's ideas are informed by his own experience in western culture through his education. Nkosi L. (1985) opines that Africans huddled at the universities (at home and abroad), then, were faced with the constant need 'to redefine themselves and to project a new refurbished image of Africa' (111). Lawino's appeal to her husband Ocol and her invocation to the clan is symbolic, an awakening for African customs and traditions. African culture is in danger of being inhaled by the western influences. Hers (Lawino's) is a wake up call for appreciation of the customs and culture of Africans. She fails to understand the changes that have gone into Ocol's head that have led him to now disperse her. Before their marriage, Ocol fell in love with her. The wooing is symbolic of the beautiful culture of the black people during the precolonial time. Same traditions were revered for and they are the same that Ocol is using against her.

What are you talking?
 You saw me when I was young.
 In my mother's house
 This man crawled on the floor!
 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. (48)

Ocol's view of Acoli culture changes once he acquires university education from Makerere. All that which was beautiful turns out to be negative and unfit for him. It is obvious that modernity, christianity and (western) education has influenced him. Even though he is beaten by Lawino's brothers, Ocol remains steadfast in his quest for her (Lawino). Worthiness in the customs is equated to Lawino's beauty both in character and in 'the customs' of her people (Acoli) taught to her by the mother (68). It is this worthiness that Ocol crawls on floor in house of Lawino's father and he even endures beatings, then, from his would-be brothers-in-law. Even though the experiences that African customs have undergone may be bitter, they can still be salvaged. The experiences of colonialism and 'mimicking of non-African customs, traditions, fashions and styles' require a bold and courageous soul to overcome. There is need for persistence in reclaiming back the beautiful African customs and traditions. Ocol is described as the son of the Bull.

The misunderstanding in the family drags in the clan and generally, the entire black African race. Lawino calls on her clansmen's attention, she invites them in the monologue and she invokes them to share in her family sorrows. Given that Ocol cannot address the abstract entity of black race, Ocol uses Lawino as a veil on his attacks against the ways of Acoli (by extension the Black people). Lindfors notes of Lawino as 'a tribal chauvinist' (149) and inflexible. Lindfors observation, partly true, seems one sided unlike Lawino's world view. Although Lawino's onslaught on western influence might appear tribal, her treatment of the Acoli and the western is objective, she does not banish foreign influence; '... I am proud of the hair with which I was born/ And so no white woman wishes to do her hair like mine' (p. 56). She considers the physical setting (and context) in which she advocates for Acoli customs. Lawino's main problem is the black man (Ocol) dressing 'like white men/ As if they are in whiteman's country' (p. 45). Ocol, therefore, being an African (Acoli) has to consider the ways of Black people (Acoli).

She, in fact, at one time admired Ocol 'speaking in English' (p. 36). This fact justifies Lawino as an objective voice in her approach to the two kinds of culture, her limited exposure to foreign culture notwithstanding,

The turmoil in African hate towards the self is expressed in Ocol's abuse and insults to his wife (Lawino), his mother and his brother. In spite of having been brought up (by the mother) according to Acoli ways, consequently receiving whiteman's education and religion, Ocol still has no respect for his mother. Ocol's mother symbolizes source of Acoli customs. She is the custodian of the Acoli customs in her family given that she is a widow. Contrary to Lawino's expectations of Ocol welcoming his old mother, he sends his mother away and insults the way her mother brings up children; the ways that bring 'ignorance, poverty and disease' (p 92). Ocol's assertion contests the being of himself. It is through her mother that he grows into what he is. Acoli customs, and by extension Africa's traditions, have served Africans well even if they overlook them now.

Ocol as a Symbol of Africa's History.

Since the initial discussion has majored in Lawino as a mouthpiece for the Acoli traditions and by inference Ocol becomes the mouthpiece of the alienated and 'modern' or 'civilised', then it will be prudent for the paper to proceed on using different lens in which Ocol is still symbolic.

Ocol is a template through which one can read Africa's history and African traditions. Though Ocol's character can only be deciphered, as it is through Lawino vantage eye that his actions can be read, his character is microcosm of Africa's history. In other words, he is an absent character who influences the songs. Were it not of his unjust treatment towards Lawino, Lawino would not have presented her appeals to the community. He is at the centre of the conflict in S.O.L. His actions are symbolic of the historical journey that any African country (and/or traditions) have undergone. Three epochs that influenced African countries can be placed in three broad categories as; precolonial, colonial and postcolonial and all the three epochs can be read in Ocol's character. As it might have been observed in the above discussion; the initial character that Lawino interacts with is unadulterated, pure and true to the self in reference to Acoli traditions. As he makes initial adventures into foreign ways, Lawino admires him. Lawino's admiration for Ocol speaking foreign language can be a gesture by Lawino of the inevitability of foreign ways. Lawino refers to him as Bull, a positive attribute meant to portray the positive image of Ocol. Ocol's transformation in life is similar to transformation witnessed when African culture came in contact with foreign (western) culture. He grows up as an Acoli with his mother and late father raise him up in Acoli way.

Further, when wooing Lawino, Ocol follows the procedure of the Acoli. He is hooked by Lawino's beauty, beauty that he marvelled at. Tattoos on her breast, belly, and gap in Lawino's teeth made Ocol fond of Lawino. This attraction of Ocol

to Lawino symbolises Ocol's admiration of the cultural values of Acoli, a time before his learning of new (foreign) ways. This period can be read as precolonial Africa, and as a time when Africans appreciated their customs and traditions. Upon entry of the whiteman in the African continent, there was introduction of foreign ways in education, religion, among other practices. Some Africans soaked themselves in the foreign ways despising their own African traditions. When he acquires whiteman's education and religion Ocol apes the foreign ways without giving any opportunity to expression and appreciation of Acoli traditions. He has lost respect for his old mother (a widow) and treats her casually; his mother is unwelcome to his home and despises her way of bringing up children (her grandchildren). The path of Ocol's mother and Acoli traditions is blocked. This is a pointer on how corrosive the foreign ways are to Acoli traditions. That the future (in the grandchildren) is also barred from accessing the age old traditions (by Ocol closing the door to his mother and criticizing negatively his mother's way of raising children engenders the children's access) is worrying. This bleakness in the future of the Acoli traditions justifies Lawino's pleas 'That you remove the road block/From my path' (p. 120). This is informed by the enthusiasm by which Africans received foreign ways. These road blocks can be interpreted as the impediments that foreign ways have contributed in annihilating the once celebrated Acoli traditions. It is also true that Ocol has been blinded by foreign ways and that it is by similar means that he tries to block Lawino's expression of traditions. The aping of foreign ways is experienced by those who learn new ways and in the end they abhor their own ways. This implies that Africans are their own enemies in that they fight from both the fronts; they fight the self and fight other Africans. Fighting the self is encompassed in Ocol's alienation, in his denying the same hands that brought him up is denying what he is composed of. This informs the political scenario that faced the postcolonial states. Ocol fights his brother because of leadership. He is more preoccupied with fighting his brother than fighting Africa's enemy. In this context, the real enemy is foreign ways that pose a threat to Acoli ways. These foreign ways have broken Lawino's family.

It is ironical for Ocol to refer to Acoli ways as backward, primitive and the ways being not up to any good, yet it is by these same Acoli ways that he was raised.

Ocol says
 The way his mother
 Brings up children
 Only leads
 To ignorance, poverty and
 Disease.
 He swears
 He has no confidence

In the wisdom of the Acoli (p. 92)

Body Parts as Symbols of Self Expression

What one does with the body may express underlying meanings that can be understood within a particular setting. The body thus becomes a template of reading multiple meanings from it. Clementine (also referred as Tina) is a testimony of western influence. Her presence in Lawino's family threatens the peace and love that Lawino enjoyed before her entry. As Lawino's co-wife she wins Ocol's favour since she embraces the changes, earning herself a tag as the modern one from Lawino. All the body parts form the single entity of a person. Clementine speaks English and she does various things with her body which in the end communicates the concerns in *Song of Lawino*. Apart from her use of a foreign language, she imbibes herself completely in the new ways. As much as she is described derisively, Clementine's actions are evidence of western influence. She aspires to be like a white woman when she applies her lips with lipsticks, when she applies powder on her skin and when she folds her breasts. Clementine can be said to be alienated and as a result she does not own her body, losing her African identity. Definition of beauty in this context becomes contested. Clementine might be living by the whims of Ocol who has desire for the foreign things against his own. This is explicable in the way he derides Lawino and Lawino's clan. Lawino's utterances are against physical appearance in definition of beauty. Alternatively, she seems to front that Ocol could be in love with both of them (Lawino and Clementine) based on other parameters other than physical appearances.

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

Rhetorical question elicits the various views on foreign influences. Clementine's understanding of the white man's ways makes her win Ocol's love. She is entrenched in foreign ways and since she embodies what Ocol admires (new ways) she perfects her presentation by adorning her body with foreign cosmetics. Lawino's obstinancy and slow ability at learning new ways makes her a victim of Ocol's onslaught. She neither appeals to the husband nor can she comprehend the new ways. The reverse is true for Ocol, he understands both Acoli customs and whiteman's customs but fails to appreciate Lawino's beauty which, ironically, endeared him to her when he was wooing her. Superiority of the two seemingly competing cultures (from Ocol's perspective) ought not have happened as they are realized and consumed in different settings (contexts) . Lawino the embodiment of unadulterated Acoli customs admits her shortfall in the foreign ways. Though she may sound as a defeatist she calls on the husband to allow them (Lawino and

Clementine) compete fairly in their roles. The Acoli customs that Ocol looks down on 'are good, solid' (41) and unbreakable. Shortcomings of Lawino can be as result of Ocol's failure in explaining to her the positive side of foreign ways, may be he lacks the explanation or he is equally naïve and as a result he blindly follows that which he least understands.

He has put up a road block
But has not told me why. (p. 49)

Plant, Cure and Permanence

Plant symbols have been drawn from the Acoli environment making their relevance to be understood in the context of Acoli. Pumpkin has been repeated in *Song of Lawino* and going by Heffernan (1987) 's assertion that symbols can 'gain meaning by repetition' (p. 172), pumpkin can be considered as a symbol. Wanambisi Monica observes that repetition of 'let no one uproot the Pumpkin' should be understood as a warning to those who abandon their African customs. This assertion (Wanambisi's) reflects on the purpose and role pumpkins play among the Acoli. Wanambisi discusses the significance of the pumpkin as a plant that grows 'wildly or cultivated and whose leaves and fruits are consumed'. Partly, Acoli traditions have existed effortlessly hence 'wild' and same traditions can be 'cultivated'. Apart from pumpkin, there are other plant symbols. The paper explores on other plant symbols that act as prescription to cure malady of western influence on African traditions. The customs cannot be annihilated because their roots reach deep into the soil (p. 41). The traditions have been personified to refer to their permanence by nature. No matter the destruction, Acoli (and so the African) traditions will withstand the storm. Reference is made to the various plant products in the house of Lawino's mother. In addition to curative role, plants have a spiritual meaning. For instance Ocol threatens to cut the Okango tree a tree that serves as a shrine:

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
... he threw down the axe
And went to the church. (p. 95).

Ocol's threats are similar to the ones he endears Lawino. Okango tree is symbolic of Acoli traditions. It has served as a shrine making it sacred. The customs are sacred just like Okango tree is. Because Ocol's mother is wise in the ways of the Acoli, she would rather be killed first before Okango is cut. Her defence for the tree is the stance that Africans are advocated to take against any threat to the traditions. Even though defending customs might be a risky venture, there is optimism in overcoming the threats; Ocol stops and he instead goes to church. Being passive observers to destructors is castigated. Defending the customs can be problematic. Ocol's mother is a martyr figure. Axe as a tool of destruction portrays Ocol as persecutor of African traditions.

The curative part of plant symbols is in 'The Last Safari to Pagak'. Lawino is seen as knowledgeable in curative role of tree. She names different types of trees; *bomo*, *omwombye*, *lapena*, *olim*, *ogali* and *pobo*, she further describes the various forms and parts that serve as medicine. For example roots of *bomo* and *omwombye* are used, for *lapena* and *olim* trees shoots are used while skins (barks) are used in *ogali* and *pobo* trees. Implied meaning is that Ocol's negative view of African traditions can be cured. However, when prescriptions fail, it should not be taken that they are inferior. It is destined to be so because western prescriptions would not be any better; 'White diviner priests/Acoli herbalists/All medicine men and medicine women/Are good, are brilliant/When the day has not yet/dawned/For the great journey/The last safari/To Pagak' (p. 103). It seems that Ocol is destined to 'die' and no matter the efforts Lawino makes in telling him otherwise, he will not be 'saved'. Lawino's objectivity in criticizing both traditions; Acoli and western, is evident in the way the two will always take pride in their successes. This is only possible, if one's journey to Pagak, a place of no return, a place of destruction and death has matured. Pagak can be read as one's destiny that one has no control. Because western influence had taken root in supplanting Acoli traditions, it should not be taken to mean that they are more superior than Acoli traditions, in any case the same would have happened for any other traditions as Nyairo (2016) opines that "Kenyan white culture is not immune to infiltration from indigenous ethnic practices" (p. 31).

Lawino's final plea reveals plants as symbolic of curing and healing processes. In 'Let Them Prepare the Malakwang Dish' the reference of the dish can be construed of as a plant. It is in the dish that Ocol can resurrect. This redemption, must begin with the dish so that Ocol's sensory organs are reactivated. Even before he asks for forgiveness, his senses should be functioning well. The sickness of looking down on Acoli traditions has made him insensitive and he is a walking corpse. To Lawino, Ocol is 'dead' and it is the reason that the clan is invited to join her in mourning Ocol's death. This symbolises black consciousness that African communities went through. The African (black) consciousness had to be reawakened and appreciated. There is need to look at the past and 'cure' the cause that has blocked appreciation of black race. The

medicinal trees highlighted in Lawino's knowledge in 'Safari to Pagak' are repeated. This repetition meets the strand of symbolism as observed by Heffernan W., A. (1987) that Ocol should be cleansed. In addition to *lapena* and *olim* shoots, Ocol needs *labikka* seeds, *lurono* roots, and *lukut* roots in order to resurrect in Acoli traditions. The sensory organs being cleansed are responsible for Ocol's alienation. Ocol has been made blind from library, prayer and he has also eaten foreign foods. Towards this end, it can be concluded that plants are symbolic in communicating the concerns of the song, an observation buttressed in the last line, which is a repetition, a caution to Ocol, 'Let no one uproot the Pumpkin' (S.O.L, 120). As much as modernity and/or foreign influences are inevitable, African traditions provide the anchor for a fulfilling life in African setting.

Parabolic Expression in Song of Lawino

Origin in use of parables can be traced back to new testament. Moran (1978) avers that "Jesus, spoke to the ordinary people in a way that they were accustomed to hear" (5). The paper shall avoid definition of the words "ordinary people" because of the mutiple meanings (and politics) the terms may arouse. Since the purpose of the paper is to look at the *Song of Lawino* and its communication using parables, the word 'way' is of interest in this discussion. In Africa's Cultural Revolution' Okot p'Bitek contends that his interest in African literature is as a result of the 'mother's songs and the stories that my (his) father performed around the evening fire' (p. 21). This in part, informs the choice of the genre which is embedded in the title *Song of Lawino*. Similarly, Ngugi S. (1973) observes the centre position that songs played in African traditional society thus;

The African society before the coming of the western civilization was mainly an oral society ... It was therefore more natural for the people to come out with songs as early as they did- expressing themselves, their problems, conflicts, failures and victories, attitudes and beliefs' (p. 44).

This implies that the song genre is not a novel genre, it is a genre that any African community is accustomed to. Hence, *Song of Lawino* must have been intended to be a parable that was meant to express Acoli 'problems, failures and victories, attitudes and beliefs' through Lawino and Ocol.

Moran adds that Jesus' parables were outstanding 'because of their simplicity and the challenge they posed to the listeners' (p. 5). *Song of Lawino* meets this parameter in that it presents a wider spectrum of Acoli (African) society using a basic unit of family. Then the family concept is simple but the audience and/or readers are tempted to take either sides: Ocol's or Lawino's.

For the purposes of clarity, the paper reads the song as a parable of the prodigal son according to the gospel of ...The prodigal son is exposed to alien ways

and because of this he asks from his father to be given his share of wealth. He disappears from home and goes to far lands where he misuses the wealth. He suffers and becomes a servant and rethinks about his home, a place that he had abandoned, a place of abundance. After much thought, the prodigal son decides to go back home and he asks for forgiveness from his father. A feast is made to chagrin of his brother. He is warmly welcomed. This parable befits, in *Song of Lawino*, Lawino's (even other girls) character. Initially, they are introduced into christianity by the missionaries. However, they feel 'emptiness' and incomplete in christianity. As a result of comparing the two traditions, they identify shortfalls of new religion. Eventually they decide to go back to what they had deserted, Acoli dances to annoyance of missionaries.

Ocol lives in abundance of Acoli traditions. Using the journey motif that he undergoes in his life, he gets immersed completely in the whiteman's ways. He fails to give any credit to Acoli traditions (even where he realizes its worth) and again he fails to see the shortcoming of the whiteman's ways. Cultural wealth that Ocol had acquired is thrown into quantum and in its place is foreign (western) tradition. His insults to the community, and disparaging remarks of the Acoli traditions is a result of a disease that has blocked his ears, blinded his eyes and blocked his throat. Alienation of Ocol is in itself an affliction that should beckon him to return home. Ocol's journey back home to Acoli traditions will be procedural, similar to reception the prodigal son receives in the bible. The prodigal son has to renounce himself before he makes the journey back home. He confesses his missteps and he even offers himself to be a servant in his father's farm. He reflects on the abundance in his father's home. This abundance can be likened to Acoli customs that are fulfilling. All aspects of Acoli life can only be realized within Acoli context. Ocol is a slave to foreign ways. This amounts to another burden that should take him back (conscious of Black People) home. Lawino invites Ocol to see the beauty in her mother's house. The house is organized and everything in it is orderly. Ocol has to renounce his foreign ways, he has to undergo some cleansing to shake off 'bad' foreign ways he has clothed himself. His ears are blocked, his throat blocked, eyes blinded, all these have denied Ocol to come to his senses. Unless this is done Ocol's journey back home is bound to fail and prone to difficulties. Just like the biblical prodigal son, though differently, Ocol has to renounce foreign ways and ask for forgiveness from the mother, clan and entire Black people before being allowed back home. In biblical parable it is the father who slaughters 'the fattened calf in celebration of the son's return because the 'son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found' (NIV 788). The feast in the *Song of Lawino* may be taken to mean celebrating Acoli tradition after a long spell of its 'dryness', the son can be construed to refer to the lost Acoli traditions. The father asks the son to take his place in the family regardless of having squandered his own. In *Song of Lawino* it is

Ocol who has to initiate cleansing. The alien Ocol has to be shredded and Ocol adorn himself in new 'best robe' Acoli traditions.

Go to the shrine of your fathers,
Prepare a feast,
Give blood to your ancestors,
Give them beer, meat
and millet bread...
beg for forgiveness from them
and ask them to give you
a new spear. (p.119)

Conclusion.

This paper has investigated the reading of *Song of Lawino* at symbolic and allegorical levels that Okot p'Bitek exploited in his clarion call for Black Peoples' consciousness, a consciousness that elevates the African traditions.

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Notes

¹ The other form that is used to refer to the group is Acholi. Acoli is a variation of the same group. For the purposes of this paper Acoli will be used. This is based on the term used in the text.

² S.O.L is an abbreviated form of the title of *Song of Lawino*

³ Okot p'Bitek in 'Africa's Cultural Revolution' (1987) observes that S.O.L was 'originally a very local commentary' that was written in vernacular. He takes cognizance of the fact that most cultural activities in country side are in the

local languages, hence vernacular languages should be used for 'cultural purposes'.

⁴ .For biography of Okot p'Bitek, see, among others, Lindfors, Bernth 'The Songs of Okot p'Bitek' in *The Writing of East and Central Africa*.

⁵. Kabaka Mwanga massacred Protestants and Roman Catholic missionaries in Uganda in periods of 1885-1887. See "Uganda, Martyrs of." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010.