

## Hybridity and Post Colonial Poetic Realities in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on p'Bitek's embrace of forms of African oral traditions in *Song of Lawino* through a blend of African and non-African linguistic expressions underscoring his hybridity as a postcolonial subject. The efforts of p'Bitek in locating the critical interface between orality and literacy in the poetic DNA composition of postcolonial African poetry is recognised and foregrounded. A postcolonial interpretative approach is favoured in this essay because of the theory's anti-imperialism position especially with regards to its advocacy for a return to indigenous literary traditions, and also on the strength of its concerns with the overall socio-cultural and psychological effects of imperialism on postcolonial being/identity. Content analysis method is employed in the examination of p'Bitek's inconspicuous portrayal of poetic expressions rich in African lore, oral forms and phraseology in *Song of Lawino*. The essay concludes that by promoting orality through literacy in his poetry, p'Bitek succeeds in showing a clear understanding that despite the overbearing influence of western imperialism which manifests in linguistic domination, African cultural expressions would only survive when African writers make conscious efforts to preserve them regardless of the linguistic vehicle of conveyance. In this regard, p'Bitek holds a special place in African literature for his insistence that African cultural identities and poetic expressions must not be swept away by the vagaries of imperialism which manifest in formalised foreign poetic forms and linguistic expressions.

**Key Words:** Hybridity, orality, literacy, imperialism, nationalism, postcolonialism.

### Introduction

Postcolonial African Poetry is a term relatively used to cover poetry produced by Africans under the influence of western education. The history of written African poetry is relatively short when compared to the existence of oral poetic traditions in African societies before the advent of colonialism. Thus, postcolonial poetry also known as modern African poetry refers to African poetry written in the languages of the colonisers, that is, English, French and Portuguese as the nuances permit. In Africa, poetry as a genre did not come with colonial education and with the training of some Africans in colonial languages because, poetry has always been an important part of the peoples' lives in the areas of education, entertainment and other oral artistic expressions, which manifests in different ways through songs, praise poems, abuse poetry, Ifa oral poetry of the Yoruba, traditional dirges of the Akan and the performance-driven poetry of the Ewe of Ghana, Zulu communal poetry and the religious chants of many African pre-literate societies.

### A Tale of Two Tongues

The colonial factor and the realities of a multilingual society have made it inevitable that postcolonial African writers write in languages (colonial and foreign) of which they are not native speakers. Foregrounding the issue of language as it concerns African writers, Lindfors (2007:23) avers:

One of the ironies of multilingualism in Africa is that the extraordinary number and variety of languages in most sub-Saharan nations make communication across ethnic and international boundaries difficult in anything but a colonial tongue. The writer who chooses to express himself in an African language will be

addressing his message to a relatively small audience, merely a fraction of the total literate population in his country.

Lindfors (2007) helps to put the issue in context, that is, postcolonial African writers have been compelled to employ any of the colonial languages by existential linguistic realities, in order to be able to successfully navigate the minefield of multilingualism in their societies, and of course, so that they can be able get access to a larger audience. The influence of colonialism is no doubt pervasive in Africa, but the aftermath of colonialism is more visible in its destructive influence on the culture of Africa.

One of the greatest signifiers of cultural expression on which colonialism launched its biggest assault is language. Language as a repository of culture and tradition suffered the most under the colonial invasion. Gifted with a new tongue – the language of the colonisers - the African is stripped of his culture which was almost destroyed in the historic head-on-collision of African peoples with colonialism. Thus, the issue of language in African literature remains a topical and controversial issue which has been addressed by many celebrated African scholars including but not limited to: Wali (1963), Achebe (1975), Ngugi (1986), Djébar (2007), and Kunene (2007). But despite the cacophony of voices on the language question, there is no definite position on it, so the matter has refused to die as it remains relevant today.

However, it is worth saying that despite the unpleasant experience of Africans with linguistic colonisation, postcolonial African writers emerge from the colonial experience luckier than Shakespearean 'Caliban' or even worse, J.M Coetzee's 'Friday', whose tongue is cut off as a testament to the brutality of colonialism. Much better than Caliban and Friday, for the amputated tongue, the postcolonial African writer got a new one stuck to the stump of the severed tongue; a testimony to the hybridity of postcolonial African writers who are poster children of western education. Even though the language issue is not the main focus of this paper, it is imperative to acknowledge that the issue of African artistic expressions in foreign tongues remains a burden on contemporary African writers.

On the powerful influence which western linguistic power structure wields on African literature, Gikandi (2007:55) writes:

Modern African literature was produced in the crucible of colonialism. What this means among other things, is that the men and women who founded the tradition of what we now call modern African writing, both in European and indigenous languages, were, without exception, products of the institutions that colonialism introduced and developed in the continent, especially in the period beginning with the Berlin Conference of 1884-5 and decolonization in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Due to the continent's colonial history and the powerful influence of colonial languages on African literary production, two prominent trends have emerged and are noticeable on the canvas of postcolonial African poetry, that is, the presence of two categories of contemporary African poets. It is noticeable that poets like Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark Bekederemo and Christopher Okigbo have their poetic lines heavily influenced by Western style and poets like Elliot, Pound and Hopkins. But latter poets including Okot p'Bitek, Kofi Anyidoho, Niyi Osundare and Kofi Awoonor have detached their poems from the stranglehold of Western poetic style and influences, to rely heavily on traditional African poetic traditions whose properties they have proudly appropriated. The second group of African poets has received much praise from within and without for producing poetry whose properties and core values emanate from the societies in which their creative imaginations are forged.

The dichotomy of style between the first and second group of postcolonial African poets has “led to a reexamination of the relationship of Africa's newly written literature to the traditions of the West” (Bishop, 2007:415). p'Bitek, Awoonor, Osundare and Anyidoho to mention a few, in the mode of African oral artists, have become the cultural signposts of their people and the watchdogs of the society; elevating their art to engage in socio-cultural, economic and political commentaries. With the obvious influence of Chinweizu's et al bitter criticism, these poets have invested more in African culture by setting to decolonise African poetry as the Chinweizu group charged. For these poets, their rich African root is the supplier of the muse and the poetic raw materials in the production of a unique poetry which blends orality and literacy in a beautiful symphony.

By rejecting the Western poetic conventions, the second group of poets seems to say “they should not be expected to be the literary clone of an earlier generation” (Olafoye, 2000:9), as they set out to not only find their own style, but to also sing in it. The importance of these poets' poetic achievement, according to Nwoga (1979:44) is that, today, “most African writers have said that in the process of finding their own voice they have had to go back to their roots to the point where the external influences have become mere catalysts to self discovery.” Hence, this paper will attempt to situate and locate the tripartite issues of orality, literacy and postcoloniality in the poetry of Okot p'Bitek, who is one of the first contemporary African writers to marry orality and literacy, finding a way around the problem of bilingualism which confronts all postcolonial writers.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

One of the ideas central to postcolonial studies is the idea of “the empire writes back”, which embodies African writers' attempt at retelling the African story in a way that is dissimilar to European writings on the same subject. Postcolonialism is a theory of literary criticism “rooted in the history of imperialism” (Habib, 2008:158). Equally, the theory especially as it concerns Africa is a springboard for what Barry (1995:192) calls “cultural resistance” which ultimately is “the first step for colonized people in finding a voice and an identity to reclaim their own past.” Also subsumed within postcolonial criticism is the imperativeness which postcolonial African writers attach to their criticism of a prevailing new order of postcolonial disillusionment which manifestly hangs over Africa and its people after the momentum of *uhuru* was lost within a few years of independence. This crucial plank of postcolonial criticism is responsible for African writers suddenly making “a turn towards explorations of themselves and their society” (Barry, 1995:196); a position taken by p'Bitek in *Song of Lawino*, which promotes African culture and values while excoriating western imperialism and incursion into Africa. As a postcolonial subject, p'Bitek's fecund imagination becomes the production site for literary works which “stressed the need to develop or return to indigenous literary traditions so as to exorcize *African* cultural heritage of the specters of imperial domination” (Habib, 2008:161, not in original).

For this paper, content analysis method is employed in the examination of p'Bitek's inconspicuous portrayal of poetic expressions in *Song of Lawino*, which signpost a unique blend of orality and literacy, rich in African lore, oral forms and phraseology. The hybridised personality of p'Bitek and the nationalistic favour of the poet-personae, Lawino are subjected to descriptive and detailed analyses in order to reveal their postcolonial attributes.

### **Hyridity, Cultural Intersections and Nationalism in the Poetry of Okot p'Bitek**

In contemporary African literature, in the words of Nwankwo (1990:315), “... no serious critic of African literature can *afford to relegate oral tradition to the background in understanding the text*, since all have now come to recognize the facts of oral and written poetry as a synchronic rather than a diachronic reality” (emphasis not in original). Arguably, more than any other African writer,



p'Bitek stands as an outstanding reference to the beautiful literary productions which postcolonial African literature has birthed from crucible of oral traditions. Though oral traditions have become ubiquitous in contemporary African writings, it did not become a reality by fortuitous accident; it is the product of the painstaking determination of writers like p'Bitek who choose to promote African culture and oral traditions in the age of literacy. Hence, this paper's focus on the iconic *Song of Lawino* rises from a desire to celebrate p'Bitek's hybridised poetry for striking a marriage between orality and literacy, and to also signposts Bitek's ability to use the marriage to spread African aesthetic and didactic effects across the world of literacy.

Bitek's *Song of Lawino* is a study in cultural nationalism and, a stinging attack on European cultural imperialism. Singing the praise of p'Bitek, Okpewho (2007:85) writes: "Here, truly, is an African writer who has a feeling for the peculiar lyricism of his people's poetic traditions, and I do not think the lucidity of the English compromises the poetic intensity of the original." Though *Song of Lawino* is not a total rejection of Western culture, it attempts to undermine that culture by itemising its corrosive influence on African peoples and cultures. p'Bitek's rejection of Western literary forms raises the stake for the employment of African traditional poetic forms in postcolonial literature, and his success lies in the number of African poets who have followed his footsteps since *Song of Lawino* was published in 1966. Okunoye (2008:90) asserts that: "The recovery of indigenous poetic traditions almost always derives impetus from the invalidation of the epistemological bases for the appropriation of European literary forms", in validation of the importance of Bitek's contributions to the bid by postcolonial writers to formalise oral traditions through the gains of Western education as p'Bitek's poem is a dialogue between two cultures: African and Western.

The voice of cultural nationalism in *Song of Lawino* is the poet-personae, Lawino, who the poet imbues with the virtues of originality, humility, dignity and respect. p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* which he started writing in 1954 (Ojaide, 1996) was originally written in his Acoli language of Uganda as *Wer pa Lawino*, before being translated into English language as *Song of Lawino*. The lines of the poem are musical and rhythmic; two attributes of African traditional songs, which are meant to be lively and charged since they are usually performed. By including these features of African traditional songs, p'Bitek has been able to reach many and also win admirers for himself across spaces and times. The originality of *Song of Lawino* can be located in the fact that it does not fit in form with any Western model of the long poem, whether epic or narrative poem. The originality of p'Bitek's poetry also lies in it being a derivative from Acoli songs and, also in the poet's ability to employ a contemporary issue of importance like culture contact to produce the prototypes of a 'Lawino' or an 'Ocol', which are imageries and symbolisms for the perils of cultural imperialism.

*Song of Lawino* can be divided into three sections. The first five chapters portray a rejected woman who is spiteful of her rival, Clementine and her husband, Ocol. From chapter six to eleven, Lawino the poet-persona focuses less on her personal problems and becomes an unrepentant advocate of her people's custom and tradition, which are being threatened by Western cultural imperialism and neocolonialism. The poem's last two chapters seem to be a marriage of the first two, and a last-ditch attempt by Lawino to win back her husband. However, the poem foregrounds an uneducated woman's efforts at fighting off cultural imperialism represented by her own husband. Lawino's husband, Ocol is an educated African, who sees himself as the epitome of progressive ideas and modernity. Quite typical of Africans of his status, Ocol sees almost everything African or traditional as backward and primitive; only Western language, beliefs, ideas and way of life are progressive in his estimation. Ocol is the archetypal African who basks in the euphoria of being the

owner of a new language; one which Ngugi (1986:11) identifies as “the language ... all the others had to bow before it in deference.”

On the other hand, the poet-personae, Lawino cuts the image of a rejected African woman with a caustic tongue, who deploys philippics at both Clementine and Ocol. What underscores Lawino's verbal attacks against her perceived enemies is the prevalence of abuse poetry in traditional societies. The poetry of abuse is a prominent feature of traditional African societies where it is deployed in exposing misconduct by making the victim of the abuse an object of ridicule, butt of jokes and lampoon. In p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, this traditional poetic form is realised and its influence noticed in a bid to correct the ills of postcolonial African states. As a tradition of verbal combat which relies on obscenity and the portrayal of physical oddities, abuse poetry becomes a lethal weapon in the hands of Lawino and by extension, p'Bitek to lampoon cultural imperialism. In the “The Woman With Whom I Share My Husband”, Lawino hurls virulent abuses at Clementine, her rival by prioritising the latter physical ills:

Her breasts are completely  
shriveled up,  
They are all folded dry skins,  
They have made nests of cotton  
wool  
And she folds the bits of  
cow-hide  
In the nests  
And call them breasts! (39)

At the height of the abuse, Lawino resorts to speculation in continuation of the onslaught against her rival:

Perhaps she has aborted many!  
Perhaps she has thrown her twins  
In the pit latrine! (39)

Even Ocol her husband is not spared from her abusive attack because he has sunk in her eyes from the height of marital glory and respect, to the pit of marital disrespect:

Perhaps you are covering up  
Your bony hips and chest  
And the large scar on your thigh  
And the scabies on your buttocks (50)

The use of the word 'perhaps' in the extracts above, implies that Lawino's statements are not founded on truth or empirical evidences; they are overstatements which represent the rantings of an out-of-favour and embittered wife who is fighting back with every weapon in her arsenal. However, Lawino's action rests well within the ambits of traditional poetry of abuse, which allows parties to resort to spreading dirty gossips against their enemies in a bid to exert a pound of flesh and gain emotional respite. In the “Introduction” to *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol*, Heron (1967:15) submits that Lawino's use of overstatement in lampooning her enemies is an expression of p'Bitek success in taking “African poetry from defence to attack”.

p'Bitek's poem uses Lawino as a signifier of the resistance put up by a segment of postcolonial African populace to western cultural imperialism which manifestes in how some educated

Africans often casts a look of shame at their own cultures. Recognising *Song of Lawino* as a literary canon fired at westernisation, Lindfors (2007:27) identifies the role of the poet-persona in the realisation of this goal:

In registering her complaints against her husband and his “modern woman”, Lawino strikes out at the nasty habits and illogical practices of Westernized Africans, contrasting them with the natural dignity of traditional ways”.

Furthermore, Lindfors (2007-27) opines that Lawino's “song is a hilarious put-down of African “apemanship” ... and a defense of the integrity of indigenous culture.” Lawino has no apology for her hostile attitude towards Western culture and ideas. She takes pride in the beauty of Africanness and her sexuality.

An African heroine, she promotes the traditional dance of the Acoli which the white colonialists condemn as immoral because it exposes human nakedness in a way that offends their sense of Christian self-righteousness, morality and propriety. With the pride of ownership, Lawino stands to defend and celebrate Acholi culture which finds expression in their dressing, songs and dances:

It is true  
I am ignorant of the dances of  
foreigners  
And how they dress  
I do not know  
Their games  
I cannot play,  
I only know the dances of our  
People.

I cannot dance the rumba,  
My mother taught me  
The beautiful dances of Acoli.  
I do not know the dances of  
White people.  
I will not deceive you,  
I cannot dance the samba!  
You once saw me at the dance  
The dance for youths  
The dance of our People.

When the drums are throbbing  
And the black youths  
Have raised much dust  
You dance with vigour and  
health  
You dance naughtily with pride  
You dance with spirit,

You compete, you insult, you  
provoke  
You challenge all! (42)

The dance of the Acoli people is romanticised and promoted as the healthy dance of a healthy people, not a dance contrived to savagery and the god of immorality as the Whites and Ocol want the world to believe.

Lawino then attacks Western ball dance for being a dance of shame and immorality. Unable to understand the concept on which the ball rests, Lawino describes the white man's dance in a way that it is pigeonholed as a lazy dance of immoral people:

Each man has a woman  
Although she is not his wife,  
They dance inside a house  
And there is no light.  
Shamelessly, they hold each  
other  
Tightly, tightly,  
They cannot breathe! (44)

Through Lawino's clever comparison, p'Bitek positions himself as a cultural nationalist who by placing the dances of Africa and Europe side-by-side attempts to show discerning minds which between both dances has the predilection for corruption and immorality.

Though Lawino champions the cause of African culture, she is not however, against white people following their own ways:

I do not understand  
The ways of foreigners  
But I do not despise their  
customs (41).

Like Ngugi in *Moving the Centre* (1993), Lawino believes that the idea of cultural superiority is both offensive and racist; that cultures must reach out to another and interact on the plank of equality and respect.

Lawino's anger is also kindled towards Africans like her husband, Ocol who love to follow the ways of the white man at the detriment of their culture. To her, this category of people has left substance to chase shadow:

Listen Ocol, my old friend,  
The ways of your ancestors  
Are good,  
Their customs are solid  
And not hollow  
They are not thin, not easily  
breakable  
They cannot be blown away  
By the winds  
Because their roots reach deep

into the soil (41).

Lawino frantically tries to show the beauty and strength of Acholi culture which is 'solid/And not hollow' to Ocol. The poet-persona avers that Africans should not abandon a culture which personifies their inner strength and beauty for an intruding culture which marks them as the 'Other'.

p'Bitek as a postcolonial poet uses *Song of Lawino* to condemn African politicians and political leaders for perpetuating disunity, disillusionment and poverty on the continent. Politicians, like Ocol, are always fond of making promises they do not keep. According to Lawino, Ocol epitomizes postcolonial African politics where shameless lies are the hallmark of politicians:

He says  
They want to unite the Acoli  
and Lango  
And the Madi and the Lugbara  
should live in peace (103).

Unsparring in her criticism of divisive politicians, Lawino accuses Ocol of fanning the ember of disunity by spreading falsehood about his political foes for selfish political reasons typical of politics in Africa:

He says  
The Congress Party  
Will remove all Catholics  
From their jobs  
And they will take away  
All the lands and schools  
And will take people's wives  
And goats, and chickens and  
bicycles,  
And will become the property  
Of the Congress people (105-6).

This is an acknowledgement African leaders' predilection for falsehood and political propaganda to cause division among the people to their own benefits. Therefore it does not surprise that politics, politicians and independence have hardly been beneficial to the ordinary people in African countries. The people have been left holding the short end of the stick and are unable to compete with the well-fed politicians at the dinner table of *Uhuru* because "...if your chest/Is small, bony and weak/They push you off," (107). Still pushing the argument, p'Bitek vividly describes the postcolonial disparity between the ruling elites and the voters in Africa:

And those who have  
Fallen into things  
Throw themselves into soft beds,  
But the hip bones of the voters  
Grow painful  
Sleeping on the same earth  
They slept  
Before Uhuru (110).

As a postcolonial writer who prefers internal criticism to the harsh words of external critics, p'Bitek



uses Lawino to warn Africans about the dangers of neocolonialism and overdependence on foreign products. Many years after the physical colonial Empire had crumbled on the continent, the old Empire is reinventing itself in different mutants of neocolonialism. The means of productive economic power remain inside the metropole to the almost total exclusion of Africans, who rely rather heavily on foreign goods, products and ideas for survival. Ocol, as a representative image of this reality in postcolonial Africa, presents a pathetic and frightening spectacle:

Aaa! A certain man  
Has no millet field,  
He lives on borrowed foods.  
He borrows the clothes he wears  
And the ideas in his head  
And his actions and behaviour  
Are to please somebody else.  
Like a woman trying to please  
her husband! (116)

p'Bitek lampoons Africans for being over dependent on outsiders for their survival. Adumbratively, it is both sad and worrisome that more than fifty years after the publication of *Song of Lawino*, Africa peoples are more dependent on the West and China for almost everything that represents modernity and daily survival. Actually, the continent's condition of dependence is worse today than it was five decades ago. Of course, p'Bitek must be turning in his grave.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is quite gratifying that the poet has not left Africa stranded without option(s) in confronting her myriad of problems. p'Bitek, through Lawino, leaves Africa(ns) with an action plan and hope. The poet submits that Africa and her peoples must deliberately and consciously look towards the continent's glorious past and her rejected culture, for them to be able to stand on their feet to earn respect and regain dignity. In this regard, Ocol and other Africans at home and in diaspora who have rejected their ancestors must deliberately go back to them in humility, and:

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 for a spear that you  
trust  
One that does not bend easily  
Like the earth-worm  
Ask them to restore your  
manhood! (119).

Instructively, the success of p'Bitek in *Song of Lawino* does not lie only in how strong his views on nationalism and imperialism are, but they are encapsulated more in the richness of his language which stands as the strong plank on which his poetic expressions, messages and prophetic musings rest. On a final note, one of Bitek's great achievements is located in how his commitment to the

employment of oral traditional forms in postcolonial African poetry has produced a large followership of brilliant and celebrated writers like Okello Oculi, Anyidoho and Osundare, among several others. By promoting orality through literacy in his poetry, p'Bitek succeeds in showing a clear understanding that despite the overbearing influence of western imperialism, African cultural expressions would only survive when African writers make conscious efforts to preserve them in their literary productions. p'Bitek holds a special position in African literature for his insistence that African cultural identities and poetic expressions must not be swept away by the vagaries of imperialism which manifest in rigidly formalised poetic forms and linguistic expressions.

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