



Okotp'Bitek's "Song of Lawino": a Lasting Influence on East African Verse

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Abstract: In 2016, Okotp'Bitek's "Song of Lawino", marked 50 years since it was first published. The enigmatic and controversial publication by Okot is still relevant and influential today as it was 50 years ago. In the present paper, we consider "Song of Lawino" not just as demarcating the role of ideology in the manner poetry is composed and appreciated in East Africa but also as being an important model to successive poets from the region. We seek to examine how various East African poets have been influenced by Okot's legacy; how they have variously adapted the "song model" to their contexts and poetic visions. Thus, we examine Okot's influence at two main levels: ideological and aesthetic. Under these, we shall concern ourselves with two main questions: What is the interplay between Okot's original ideology and those of his poetic protégés? To what extent are the linguistic choices within the song spirit helping to grow unique aesthetics in East African poetry?

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Tasks and Masks* Lewis Nkosi identifies the two main categories under which African poets of the first generation fall. First, we have the poets that are influenced by the modernist movement with Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka and John P. Clark as the leading lights. Then there are those poets who, though still modern, have leaned more toward recovering the idiom of African oral poetry as represented by Kofi Awoonor, Mazisi Kunene, Okotp'Bitek, just to mention a few. A cursory look at contemporary African poetry reveals that, although the two models of composing poetry have existed on the continent for almost the same length of time, most of the poets have, to varying degrees, fallen under the influence of oral tradition models of composing poetry. The oral tradition trend is characterised by an array of salient features held and celebrated in common: the use of local imagery and idioms, use of simple and reasonably direct language and influence from the traditional techniques of poetry composition, such as repetition, parallelism, apostrophe and dialogue, rhythm, among other outstanding traditional techniques.

The East African region got their archetypal song poem with the publication of "Song of Lawino" (SoL) by Okotp'Bitek in 1966. Most works by p'Bitek carry an undeniable ethnographic characteristic. From "Horn of My Love" (1974) to "Song of Ocol" (1970) to "Song of Prisoner" and "Song of Malaya", (1971) Okot's message and envisaged addressees are unambiguous. According to Bamgbose Gabriel, Okot's poetic imagination has deep roots in Acholi oral traditions, history and cultural practices (2014, 5). Even so, there is hardly any other work that clarifies Okot's philosophy for modern African poetry in a more refined way than "Song of Lawino". 45 years since its publication, and in spite of a mixed reception, "Song of Lawino" has remained a hugely influential ideological model for latter-day East African poets both in terms of content and aesthetics. In the present work, we undertake to not only elucidate the salient features of the song model of composing poetry but also show the continued influence of "Song of Lawino" on subsequent poets in East Africa.

1966 (the year Song of Lawino was published), was when most former African colonies were either cementing their recently acquired independence or on the verge of official independence. By this time, the nationalist movements that had spearheaded the clamour for independence were not only still intact but also taking a new shape in the new frontier against neo-colonial forces in newly independent nation states. They were the new disgruntled and disillusioned voices heard over the din of building the so-called modern African economies. Fundamentally, therefore, Song of Lawino was conceived within not just a definite space, but also in a concrete historical and ideological milieu which was

postcolonial; a time after Africa had come into contact with the west. It is, therefore, vital that we understand the full context within which the text was conceived.

2. "SONG OF LAWINO'S" CONTEXT

The 1960s and 1970s were ideologically rich years both within and beyond Africa. Among the prominent ideological groupings that may have formed a formidable background to "Song of Lawino" include: The Negritude Movement, Black Consciousness Movement, Black Aesthetics Movement and Postcolonial Criticism. The above ideologies were at their peak in the periods stated above and sprung up as a response to forces of oppression and repression within the various environments and contexts that the proponents of the ideologies came from.

3. THE BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS/BLACK AESTHETICS MOVEMENT

The Black Consciousness Movement (B.C.M) and the Black Aesthetics Movements (BAM) had a lot in common. Both of them were fronted by black communities that were both dominated and felt threatened by white/western supremacist communities: blacks in Apartheid South Africa and African Americans in Harlem, New York, USA. In South Africa, B.C.M, as spearheaded by the likes of Steve Biko and Ezekiel Mphahlele, was based on 'a well-conceived Afro-centric philosophy' that made use of traditional modes of thinking and expression (Ngara, 1990, 26). The works of art that are the product of this movement show an Afro-centred consciousness based on a profound understanding of the culture and cosmology of an African nation. The use of traditional material involved a careful study of the traditional literary traditions, forms and thought (77). Nevertheless, the use of the traditional modes did not necessarily imply a return to the past or even an attempted glorification of it in the same style that Senghorian Negritudism did. Rather, it is more of what we see in SoL where the past, especially its aesthetics, is craftily appropriated to a contemporary situation.

BAM was preceded by the Harlem Renaissance which saw renewed interest in black art and culture in Harlem New York. The Harlem renaissance was a remarkable time when African American artists and intellectuals created memorable standards in all the arts. They challenged white supremacy and paternalism, snubbed mere imitation of western artistic models preferring, instead, black pride and creativity. They declared their freedom of expression, explored their identities as black Americans, and celebrated their black culture that had emerged out of slavery and their cultural ties to Africa. According to Ezekiel Mphahlele (1967, 69) the fact of oppression, black man's rejection by the white man coupled with 'rootlessness' formed the main concerns of Negro protest poetry of this era. Similarly, the BAM spawned writers who encouraged social revolution, even by violent means. Unlike before when the likes of Ralph Ellison wrote to surpass western artistic models that already existed, artists of BAM wanted an original aesthetic that emphasised black personhood as different from the white personhood with Africa serving as the source of inspiration. According to Arthenia Bates (1972), James Weldon Johnson named the source of inspiration to as "Afrocentric tradition" which embraced three main areas: "The use of "dialect" to accommodate the richness and the musical quality of black expression, the use of The Black Experience for black fiction, and the use of Soul in black poetry" (xvii). SoL, published in 1966, a time when BAM was gearing up to its peak, may have, indeed, fallen under the ideological influence of both BAM and the Harlem renaissance. In an article, Godwin Siundu (Saturday Nation, February 6, 2016p19) states that SoL 'pioneered an East African variant of a larger ideological impulse of a black aesthetic that influenced thought and creativity in an Africa alive to race and as a lens of perceiving and appreciating human creativity and industry'.

4. THE NEGRITUDE MOVEMENT

The Negritude movement came into being as a form of protest to what was perceived as discriminatory and suppressive tendencies that underlay the assimilation colonial policy, as designed and practiced by two main colonial powers in Africa: France and Portugal. According to Romanus Egudu (1978, 31) "negritude as a philosophy or concept is ontological since it foregrounds the cultural being and existence of the "Negro" or black (quoted in Bamgbose 2014, 6). The proponents asserted traditional African values, albeit in a romantic and overstated manner, in order to counter the alienation and identity crises originating from assimilation policies that were, in their view, designed to make them dependent on the western civilization. According to Ngara (1990, 22)

'an extremist response to an extremist situation, a reaction to the distortions of European cultural imperialism, pushed Negritudism to probable romantic idealism made most evident in the poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor' (23). Senghor 'praised the virtues of the African race in the most magnificent and lavish terms, just as he levels criticism at Europeans for their inhuman treatment of Africans' (24). Senghor (Quoted in Arthenia Bates, 1972) explains the circumstances that led to the birth of Negritudism:

The European experts, artists and writers...taught us to have a better knowledge, not of African life in its living flavour, but in its irreplaceable values of civilization. The role of the Afro Americans was different. They taught us not exactly to rebel morally but rather to organize ourselves socially if not politically, and above all create. (xix)

Senghor is then quoted as having said thus about the influence of the Negro renaissance on them:

The poets of the Negro Renaissance that influenced us most were Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown and Franck Marshall Davis. They revealed the movement to us while on the move: the possibility in creating first some works of art, of having the African civilization reborn and respected. (xix)

In a way therefore, Negritudism was firmly founded on a conscious, albeit political, rejection of western civilisation with a view of turning tables on European supremacist crusaders, much the same way "Song of Lawino" portrays mimicry of colonialist tendencies by Africans as anathema and a hindrance to future development prospects in Africa. "Song of Lawino" is, however, idiosyncratic in the manner African oral traditions model the poet's choice of both substance and form. Above all, it is evident that what had happened in America among African Americans had a lasting impact on, particularly in terms of ideology, African poets of the 50's, 60's and beyond.

5. POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

Postcolonial criticism is yet another ideological movement that may have formed an important precursor to SoL. According to Linda Yohannes (2012), although Postcolonial criticism emerged in the form that it exists today only in the late 1970s, the condition it studies (postcoloniality or marginality) began in BC times (10). Similarly, Leela Gandhi (1998, quoted in Linda Yohannes 2012, 13), holds that postcoloniality is a situation that occurs due to the collective suppression of the colonial experience in the minds of formerly colonized peoples. In a nutshell, the postcolonial theory is about rejecting all forms of domination and colonialism that are otherwise portrayed as better forms of culture or knowledge; it is a process of emancipation and decolonization. Frantz Fanon (1963) explains that decolonization is 'the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self contempt resignation'. It is, especially among native writers and intellectuals, about 'renewing contact with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people because colonialism is not just about holding people...it turns to their past (colonial) and distorts, disfigures and destroys it' (210). Although anticolonial artistic works in Africa may be traced back to 1920s the first widely acclaimed anticolonial literary work was Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart (1958). Even those that came later, in the late 1960s and 1970s, SoL included, are still regarded as part of postcolonial literature because they are perceived as fighting some form of domination/marginalization or the other, whether coming from within or outside of the independent states. Fanon, while tracing the three phases of the growth in the consciousness of 'native' anti-colonial nationalist writers, sums up the role of a committed postcolonial writer thus:

Finally, in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence come a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature. (222/3)

It is hoped that based on the above review of both the historical factors and ideological landscape that existed in the run up to the publication of SoL, there exists sufficient justification to not only regard the text as a product of a rich mass of ideology but as a form of ideology in itself, hence its lasting influence. We now turn our attention to the authorial ideology that underlay SoL, and its levels of influence on its latter-day poetic progeny, in terms of both content and form.

6. TRADITIONAL WORLD-VIEW IN "SONG OF LAWINO"

As already indicated above, Song of Lawino was unmistakably dovetailed with the African oral traditions and, in particular, the Acholi oral traditions. It is therefore true that part of the legacy of "Song of Lawino" lies in the manner in which tradition is allowed to influence the poet's message in the text. Mazisi Kunene, quoted in Ngala (1990), while explaining some of the salient features of traditional Zulu literature, identifies its communal nature as its most outstanding feature. He says:

Zulu literature, like most African literatures, is communal. This has fundamental stylistic and philosophical implications. The communal organisation in Africa is not just a matter of individuals clinging together to eke out an existence, as some have claimed, nor is it comparable (except very superficially) to the rural communities in Europe. It is a communal organisation which has evolved its own ethic, its own philosophical system, its own forms of projecting and interpreting its realities and experiences. (78)

It may then be construed from Kunene's definition above that African oral traditions were not only functional but also developed with the society; they drew principally from the realities of the communities and helped those communities to interpret, make sense of and hence survive in those changing realities. By nature, therefore, the traditional songs were public in both the manner they were conceived or composed as well as how they were delivered and appreciated. First, the oral artist picks the contents for his/her songs from pertinent issues that the target audience members can identify with. The contents were then delivered in a pleasant rhythmic manner so appealing to the listeners as to provoke a concordant response. On his part, Steve Biko (1978), spells out the role of the traditional oral poet thus:

Nothing dramatises the eagerness of the African to communicate with each other more than their love for song and rhythm. Music in the African culture features in all emotional states. When we go to work, we share the burdens and pleasures of the work we are doing through music.... Battle songs were a feature of the long march to war in the olden days. Girls and boys never played any games without using music and rhythm as its basis. In other words, with Africans, music and rhythm were not luxuries but part and parcel of our way of communication...the major thing to note about our songs is that they never were songs for individuals. All the songs were group songs. Tunes were adapted to suit the occasion and had the wonderful effect of making everybody read the same things from the common experience. (42-3)

SoL is communal in the sense that it deals with real issues that are in public domain as opposed to private or introspective matters. The poet has chosen to address issues that are controversial but instead of providing answers arrived at meditatively; he chooses to leave it to the public (his audience) to pass a judgment from where they stand. NgugiwaThiong'o, as quoted in the introduction to SoL, acknowledges what he regards as Okot's ground-breaking genius:

He (Okot) has also a gift, too rare in most writers, of creating characters who live, exist, breathe, independently of the author; characters moreover, who are at the centre of pressing moral debate. (9)

It is also revealed in the same preface that SoL 'is modelled on a traditional marriage tribunal that was set up by family members to arbitrate when a couple had marital problems' (5). In a way, this strategy not only indicates that answers are not with the poet or even the litigant, Lawino, but with the listeners and the audience. It also infuses SoL with a sense of traditional democracy. This is important because it allows the 'audience' to identify both the weaknesses and strengths of the case being built before arriving at a well considered ruling. Much as this may indeed be a source of disappointment to those who expect all the answers to all the concerns of the poet's time—be they political, gender-based, social or economic--It, however is the whole mark traditional democracy; no one had a monopoly to knowledge, there was no room for premeditated answers. Everything was decided within its own context. Perhaps, without belabouring the point, one could conclude that Okot, like a good traditional bard, knows that, in the words of Maya Angelou, a bird does not sing because it has all the answers but simply because it has a song, a unique experience.

Another strategy that Okot employs may be witnessed in the manner he handles information. He tries to be as candid to situations as is possible within the circumstances. Artistic truth in "Song of

Lawino”is not necessarily irrational. Okot, clearly, has chosen not to explore the limits of his poetic licence. This is particularly consistent with, as pointed out above, his attempt to be impartial or democratic in the manner he presents Lawino’s concerns. The truth of the matter is that in the wake of independence, there existed a class of ‘native bourgeois’ who were eager to not only feel the vacancy left by former colonial masters but also desired to be treated as more equal than the commoners. Among the new native bourgeois, acting like and speaking the colonial lingo fluently became desirable. They could take pride in their inability to take part in the dances of the ‘natives’; they could ‘understand’ but not communicate using the tribal lingo. They detested the traditional cuisine and preferred French fries and pizza instead. In short they could not allow themselves to like or do the same things the natives liked or did; they did everything to either look like the white man or at least look different. This is, of course, a betrayal of the sacrifices made by the now illiterate and forgotten native freedom fighter as represented in SoL by Lawino.

In ‘My Husband’s Tongue is Bitter’, Lawino decries her husband’s alienation and cruelty in a manner that is convincing and believable. She goes:

Ocol treats me
As if I am no longer a person,
He says I am silly
Like the ojuu insects that sit on
 The beer pot.
...
My husband treats me roughly’
The insults!
Words cut out more painfully than
 sticks
He says my mother is a witch,
That my clansmen are fools
Because they eat rats,
He says we are all Kaffirs.
We do not know the ways of
 God,
...
My husband pours scorn
On Black people,
He behaves like a hen
That eats its own eggs
A hen that should be imprisoned
 under a basket.

In her submission, Lawino speaks plainly and truthfully. She is tired of her husband’s unreasonable acts and does not seem to have any reason to either exaggerate or hide the truth.

Lawino, in a continuing streak of honesty and openness bordering on naivety, puts clear all the facets of the traditional life that she is used to and understands impeccably well. She is not in any way afraid of looking ignorant:

I confess,
I do not deny!
I do not know
How to cook like a white
 woman.
I cannot use the primus stove
I do not know

How to light it,
And when it gets blocked
How can I prick it?
The thing roars
Like a male lion,
It frightens me!

As it is clear above, Lawino's tone is not guarded or pretentious; her admission to ignorance is almost involuntary. Hence, the audience would be more disposed to accept not only her side of the story but also the virtues of the worldview she represents.

The same approach is evident in 'The Mother Stone Has a Hollow Stomach':

The white man has trapped / And caught the Rain-Cock
And imprisoned it in a heavy steel house.
The wonders of the white men/ Are many! They leave me speechless!
They say/ when the Rain-Cock/ opens its wings/ The blinding light
And the deadly fire/ Flow through the wires/ And lighten the streets
And the houses;/ And the fire Goes into the electric stove. (35)

In 'There is No Fixed Time for Breast Feeding', Lawino continues:

And Ocol has strange ways/ Of saying what time is.
In the morning/ When the sun is sweet to bask in/ He says
'It is Eight o'clock!'/ When the cock crows/ For the first time/ he says
'It is Eleven!'
...
My heads gets puzzled,/ Things look upside down/ As if I have been
Turning round and round/ And I am dizzy. (42)

Yet again, Lawino's unusual degree of honesty endears her to the audience. This strategy, which has its roots in the traditional set up, is quite effective because it affords the audience a feeling of participating in deciding which of Lawino's beliefs and practices they may have room for in their modern setting and which ones they may not. This, in a way, advocates for the restoration of valuable traditional values without seeming to do so and in a rather democratic way. With the trust of the audience won, Lawino then moves to make a case for practical traditional practices that should not be sacrificed simply because times have changed. Lawino proceeds with a most diplomatic tone:

And when I have/ Been in the garden the whole day
Weeding or harvesting in the
hot sun ,
On my return home/ Give me water/ In a large half-gourd
Water from the glass/ Is no use./ It reaches nowhere. (39)

Lawino wastes no time in drawing attention to ways that she considers alien and mistaken. In the same poem cited above, Lawino says:

If a child cries/ Or has a cough/ Ocol storms like a buffalo,
He throws things/ At the child;/ He says/ He does not want
To hear noises,/ that children's cries/ And coughs disturb him!
Is this not the talk/ Of a witch? What music is sweeter/
Than the cries of children? (45)

In 'The Buffalos of Poverty Knock the People Down' post independence selfish politics that discriminates against the majority and only benefits a few:

I do not understand/ The meaning of Uhuru!/I do not understand
Why all bitterness/ And the cruelty/ And the cowardice,
The fear,/The deadly fear that/ Eats the hearts
Of the political leaders!/Is it the money?
Is it the competition for position? (85)

Poems Modelled on "Song of Lawino"

Elsewhere, within East Africa, there are many contemporary poets who have written poems that parallel SoL in a number of ways. For instance, some poets have created characters that are not only independent of the poet but also true to their situation. One such poet is Francis Imbuga in his poem 'The Forgotten Clay', which goes:

Husband, yesterday you spat at me,
Called my mother names
And swore to replace my watery eyes
With fresh glow-worm torches
That would light the path of your manhood forever
...
Oh, how I wish I had a spare head
To put between these burning sheets
Of a womb so deprived! (*Boundless Voices*,39)

Of noteworthy, the persona above, like Lawino in SoL, expresses willingness to change if only to meet her husband's new taste. The resulting unpretentious tone makes a strong appeal of sympathy to the audience, who in return react with disapproval for the husband's estranged values. Similarly, in J.K. Mungai's 'Black Woman' a man is perturbed by his woman's penchant for meaningless Western standards of beauty:

Black woman/ You embarrass me/ your nails blood-red/
Your hair ochre-red/ Your skin white-tanned/ Your figure skeleton-thin
All this chemically done/ Oh black woman
How long will you abuse yourself/
With values base and vile...
I love your black skin/ Shining like mahogany/ I love your big bottoms
Titillating as you walk in majesty
And your thick thighs give me untold warmth
...
So, why debase yourself/ with values vane and base/ Others don't aspire
To be like you/ so why die/ to be like them. (*Boundless Voices*, 86)

A common feature running through the above examples is the audience's invitation by the poet/persona to join in a debate on an issue with clear public implications. The audience is then expected to give a well thought out response upon carefully considering the persona's submissions.

Similarly, Henry Barrow's 'Building the Nation', which reflects East Africa's post-independence economy and politics, fits in the category of poems that endeavour to remain true and realistic to the contexts they seek to depict:

Today I did my share/ of building the nation.
I drove a permanent secretary/ to an important urgent function
In fact a luncheon at the Vic.
The menu reflected its importance/ cold Bell beer with small talk,

Then fried chicken with niceties
Wine to fill the hollowness of the laughters
...
I drove the permanent secretary back.
He yawned many times in the back of the car
Then to keep awake, he suddenly asked,
Did you have any lunch friend?
I replied looking straight ahead
And secretly smiling at the belated concern,
That I had not, but was slimming!
Upon which he said with a seriousness
That amused more than annoyed me,
Mwananchi, I too had none!
...
So two nation builders/ Arrived home this evening
With terrible stomach pains
The result of building the nation—
Different ways. (Poems From East Africa, 14-15)

The persona in the above poem, captures the spirit of 'politics-of-the-stomach' that is prevalent among modern African politicians. In lyrical uncomplicated language, the poet converses matters that East Africans are familiar with: politics riddled with corruption and self-centredness. Likewise, Marjorie OludheMacgoye's 'A Freedom Song', depicts the hypocrisy of the post-independence middle class that have adapted a selfish and inconsiderate moral code:

Atieno washes dishes,/Atieno plucks the chicken,/ Atieno gets up early,
Beds her sacks in the kitchen,/Atieno eight years old,/ Atienoyo.
...
Since she is my sister's child/ Atieno needs no pay,
While she works, my wife can sit/ Sewing every sunny day.
With her earnings I support/ Atienoyo.
Now my wife has gone to study
Atieno is less free.
Don't I keep her, school my own ones,
Pay the party, union fee,
All for progress: Aren't you grateful/ Atienoyo?

(Poems From East Africa, 134-5)

Evident in the above examples is the poets' democratic stance in the presentation of ideas. The readers are presented with true to life scenarios and then left to pass judgement on them. Below, we turn our attention to the lasting impact of Okot's experimental aesthetic choices.

7. AESTHETIC EXPERIMENTS IN "SONG OF LAWINO"

One of the more outstanding features of language use in "Song of Lawino" is the bold diction. In her paper, Monica Mweseli (1992) attributes Okot's stylistic ingenuity to his 'success in experimentation with oral literature, and, in general, his creative imaginations' (165). The said experimentation is particularly evident in his successful use of images that are traditionally considered offensive, even as

they are modelled on the philosophy of unpretentious expression. In 'I Do Not Know the Dances of White People' Lawino goes:

And when a girl knocks you/ You strike back,
A man's manliness is seen in
the arena,
No one touches another's
testicles. (21)

The use of unadorned metaphors is entwined in both traditional and contemporary contexts:

Women lie on the chests of their men/ they prick the chests of their
men/ With their breasts/ They prick the chests of their
men
with the cotton nests
On their chests. (22)

She then continues in the same section:

You meet a big woman/ She staggers towards you/ And leans on the wall
And before she has untied her
Dress
She is already pissing;/ She forces out the urine/ As if she has syphilis.

(24)

It may be noted that Okot's bold choice of imagery is not necessarily rude but, rather, an attempt to suit language to purpose. He uses language as a traditional elder could, devoid of unnecessary superfluous and clear to the point. Such use of language is also a sign of maturity and faith in the reader's sense of judgement. In traditional contexts, such use of language carries a liberating effect. It signals the audience not to expect glamorous and colourful expressions at the expense of the weighty matters at hand. This approach is upheld when the poet uses vocabulary from the Acolidialect and leaves the reader to infer their meaning from their context.

My husband's tongue/ Is bitter like the roots of the
lyono lily,
It is hot like the penis of the bee,/ Like the sting of the kalang!
Ocol's tongue is fierce like the/ Arrow of the scorpion,
Deadly like the spear of the/ buffalo-hornet. (13)

"Song of Lawino" is full of similes that make use of unfamiliar local imagery but in a refreshingly shocking manner. Another feature of Okot's experimental expression is evident in his heavy use of description that is aimed at drawing a clear contrast of the situations he seeks to depict. Some of these descriptions are exceptionally allegorical. In 'There is No Fixed Time for Breast Feeding' Lawino goes:

We all know the moon—/It elopes,/ climbs the hill/ And falls down;
It lights up the night,/ Youths like it,/ Wizards hate it,/ And hyenas howl
When the moon/ Shines into their eyes.
Periodically each woman/ Sees the moon,/ and when a young girl
Has seen it/ For the first time/ It is a sign/ that the garden is ready
For sowing,/ and when the gardener comes

Carrying two bags of live seeds/ And a good strong hoe/ The rich red soil
Swells with a new life.

Turning your back/ To your husband/ is a serious taboo,
But when the baby/ Is still toothless froth,/ when you see the moon
You turn your back/ To your husband.

If you do not resist/ The great appetite/ Then your child becomes
Sickly and thin/ His knees become/ Soft like porridge
He will become pregnant/ And the weight of his diseased/ stomach
Will prevent him/ from standing up. (48)

When talking about Christian names, in 'I Am Ignorant of the Good Word in the Clean Book', Lawino has this to say:

My husband rejects me/ Because, he says/ I have no Christian name.

...

Ocol wanted me/ To be baptized 'Benedeta', / He has christened
One daughter 'Marta'./ The other took the name of the/ Huncback!
My husband rejects Acoli names, Meaningful names
Names that I can pronounce

...

But my husband's name is so difficult to pronounce;
It sounds something like/ MedikijedekiGiligoloyo/ It sounds like
'Give the people more vegetables,/ Foxes make holes in the pathway'(60)

In such clever use of language, the persona comes through not as trying to keep the new ways at arm's length by all means but as inviting those who have adopted the new culture to help her understand the reasons behind their actions. Such use of language not only results in a conciliatory tone but also leads to the hybrid character that defines SoL. To a great extent, Okot's 'well-timed' use of imagery is replicated by many contemporary poets. J. K. Agunda, in 'Turned Away', is one such poet:

He was refused entry,/this man/ who broke and hauled rock
that built the foundation/ to this skyscraper.
he was refused entry,/ this young man/without toes/
who fell off the ladder/ hoisting blocks.
a pin-striped three-piece suit/ sauntered in/ and reaped a perfect salute
despite indifference. (Boundless Voices, 7)

The contrasted images help bring out the irony of public resources being disproportionately put at the disposal of those who have made the least contribution in their creation. In a similar manner, MurayaGakunga, in 'Yes Sir, I'm Fine', uses description, contrast and irony to present corruption as the disease that ails the fledgling post-independence economies. It goes:

My shirt, Gikomba/ Yours Yves St. Laurent—but/ I'm fine,
My trouser; Crimplene-on-khaki
Yours English wool—but sir/ I'm fine.
My transport; Weary legs/ Yours 3.5 litre 2 m.p.g.—but sir
I'm fine/ Yes Sir, I am fine

I see in you my sweat absorbed/ To water the seeds of development,
Your development/ In you and yours I see my/ Taxes and my
Harambee contributions/ But need I complain? Did I not/ cast my vote
In the true spirit of democracy/ To afford you your one way ticket
To affluence?/ My daughter--your maid--tells me/ You are doing fine
Do me a favour,/ Sack my relatives/ And get someone else's, for we
Have taken our share/ and more (Boundless Voices, 27/29)

The two poems above are closely modelled on SoL despite coming from a much contemporary context. They both address issues of public concern and their modes of communication are simplified. 'Yes Sir, I'm Fine', by MurayaGakunga, is a typical song poem. The extensive use of repetition, rhythm and the 'Western tradition of long poem' set the poem, and many others of like features, in the same league as SoL.

In view of the going, we may conclude that the song trend, as a model of writing poetry ushered in by "Song of Lawino" in East Africa, is not only relevant but would remain as significant yardstick for poets and critics of many generations to come yet. Its strength, as already demonstrated above, lies in its adaptability and resilience. The unpretentious realistic tone in "Song of Lawino" will indeed continue to be an inspiring model to upcoming poets who are committed to capturing the realities of their time.

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