2

Okot p'Bitek's Diagnostic Poetics and the Quest for an African Revolution in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*[6]

Danson Sylvester Kahyana

Introduction

In his introduction to Okot p'Bitek's collection of essays, *Africa's Cultural Revolution* (1973), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o refers to p'Bitek as one of "East Africa's foremost surgeons" who is concerned with "the psychological wound inflicted on a whole generation of us by colonialism and Christianity" (Ngũgĩ 1973: xiii). This medical metaphor that Ngũgĩ uses depicts p'Bitek as a medical practitioner whose work is aimed at healing a sick society. Before a surgeon can carry out a surgery, he/she needs to know what disease is ailing the patient, needs a clear diagnosis of the problem. Diagnosis, Brown observes, has two meanings – process and category. "Process is the set of interactions which leads to the definition of the category and to its imposition in particular cases," he explains, while "[c]ategory is the nosological location in medical knowledge where the diagnosis resides" (Brown 1995, p.39). For Iigen, Eva and Regehr, diagnosis refers to "a process of guiding one's thoughts by 'making meaning' from data that are intrinsically dynamic, experienced idiosyncratically, negotiated among team members, and rich with opportunities for exploitation" (2016, p.435). In other words, to diagnose a disease is to establish what it is that is

[6] This chapter is informed by a section of chapter two of my doctoral dissertation entitled "Negotiating (Trans)national Identities in Ugandan Literature (Stellenbosch University, 2014) where I read *Song of Lawino* as a nationalist text. However, the argument I am advancing here – that *Song of Lawino* is an example of a diagnostic poetics – is a new one that is not advanced in the thesis at all.

ailing a person, the cause of this ailment, the circumstances surrounding the ailment (for instance the relationship between current symptoms and previous ones), and classifying the disease in relation to similar ones.

In medical science, diagnosis serves several purposes. For patients, Brown explains,

> diagnosis can provide personal, emotional control by way of knowing what is wrong. For medical professionals, diagnosis also provides control by mastering the knowledge of the problem at the individual care level. As well, diagnosis frequently determines the course of treatment, though treatment is also determined by many other factors. For both patient and professional, diagnosis can lead to a prognosis. Physicians also employ diagnosis as a vehicle for building the whole body of medical knowledge (Brown 1995, p.39).

From this statement, there are three things to emphasise. First, that diagnosis points to what is wrong. To use Iigen, Eva and Regehr's words, "making a diagnosis can be a powerful aid to clinical reasoning, as it organizes one's thoughts [...] and helps to generate explanatory hypotheses for a patient's situation" (Iigen, Eva and Regehr 2016, p.435); second, that diagnosis "frequently determines the course of treatment", that is to say, once what is ailing the patient is known, it is much easier for that condition to be managed; and finally, that "diagnosis can lead to a prognosis", that is to say, the physician can use the results from the diagnosis to foretell the likely course of the illness – how it will develop in the future and the chances the patient has to recover from it. All these three things point to the fact that diagnosis guides prescription, that is, the list of medicines/medical instructions the patient should take/follow in order to recover from the ailment.

In this chapter, I develop the concept "diagnostic poetics" by which I mean the use of poetry to probe into post-independence realities with the aim of discovering the ailment of

Africa from achieving a cultural revolution. I have borrowed the term 'diagnosis' from medicine (as explained above), and the term 'poetics' from linguistics, to mean the methods and techniques the writer uses to discover what to him is the disease Africa is suffering from and what is preventing this continent from achieving a cultural revolution. The relevance of a diagnostic poetics lies in the fact that in *Song of Lawino*, p'Bitek is preoccupied with issues of unwellness, which is why in the text we hear – time and again – of characters who are said to be sick, or whose words hurt like a disease, or of situations where disease becomes a metaphor pointing to a particular reality. Yet, to my knowledge, nobody has established any link between Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and medicine. This is surprising as there is so much reference to diseases in this poem. Instead, most readings of the poem focus on the cultural clash between African traditions and Western lifestyles (George Heron, Bernth Lindfors and Adrian Roscoe), the indigenousness of the poem (Peter Nazareth, Charles Okumu and Chinweizu, Jemie Onwuchekwa and Ihechukwu Madubuike), the politics surrounding p'Bitek's depiction of Lawino as a woman character (Florence Stratton and Lynda Gichanda Spencer), p'Bitek's legal imagination (Peter Leman) and, among others, the poem as a hybrid text, that is to say, as combining both African traditional norms and customs as well as some Western/European characteristics (Jahan Ramazani). While these studies have given us illuminating perspectives on *Song of Lawino* (and sometimes on *Song of Ocol* which is seldom studied by scholars), none of them have explored the text as one that invests heavily in the field of medicine to explain Africa's post-independence socio-cultural and political life. It is this exploration that I undertake in this chapter.

I locate my discussion in the ambit of Postcolonial Studies which does not involve "a singular theoretical formation, but rather an interrelated set of critical and counterintuitive perspectives, a complex network of paronymous concepts and heterogeneous practices that have been developed out of traditions of resistance to a global historical trajectory of

imperialism and colonialism" (Young 2012, p.20). Associated with the work of a host of theorists like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this field of inquiry concerns itself with issues like;

> the study and analysis of various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre- and post-independence nations and communities (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998, p.187).[7]

This notion of colonial legacies is pertinent to this chapter because in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol,* p'Bitek attributes Africa's lack of a cultural revolution to the brainwashing power of colonial education which he sees as the continent's original disease, so to speak. I focus on colonial education and how, in the writer's view, it impacts on Africans' psyche and identity, to the detriment of cultural development since Western-educated people like Ocol who led African nations to independence had imbibed ideas that were hostile to the continent. This view is central to what happens in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* as I demonstrate below.

Here, I undertake close reading of *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* in relation to how they depict Ocol as a sick man who needs help, and what needs to be done to rehabilitate him and bring him back to the community. I explore the prevalence of references to disease in the poems, particularly in the former, and the various uses to which these references are put. In doing this, I

---

[7]Additional concerns of postcolonial studies include a re-reading of Western canonical texts like Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* and Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*; a critique of the way Western discourses represented non-Western peoples; and an analysis of literary texts which questioned and challenged colonialist discourses (McLeod 2000, pp.17-29). These include earlier texts like Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin *Empire Writes Back* 2004, p.6; Lazarus 2011, p.16) and Nyabongo's *Africa Answers Back* (Sugirtharajah 2006, pp.12-14).

pay close attention to characterisation (that is to say, how p'Bitek develops the character of Lawino and that of Ocol in the two texts and how the character traits of each enhances the author's message), figurative language (particularly the symbols of the pumpkin and the spear, and what they signify in *Song of Lawino*), satire (and its effectiveness in the work, that is to say, how this technique's devices – irony, hyperbole, sarcasm and humour – help in understanding the subject matter of the poems and to appreciate the issues p'Bitek raises in these texts), and diction (particularly how the choice of words each character uses suits his/her attitude to the subject at hand). The novelty and significance of the chapter lie in generating new insights and perspectives to studies on p'Bitek's first two long poems from the vantage point of medicine, by establishing a link between a medical personnel's act of diagnosing a disease and a writer's perceptive examination of the ills ailing his/her society.

Before I delve into discussing the diagnostic poetics of *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, I would like to briefly outline the subject matter of the two poems. The first poem contains thirteen sections each about a particular issue: Ocol's insults to his unschooled wife and to all African people (section 1), a description and dismissal of Lawino's co-wife Clementine (section 2), a comparison of Acoli and Western dances (section 3), a self-portrait of Lawino as a cultured young girl steeped in indigenous beauty and leisure (section 4), a comparison of Acoli and Western perceptions of beauty and hygiene (section 5), a comparison of Acoli and Western foods and kitchens (section 6), a comparison of Acoli and Western perceptions of time (section 7), a comparison of Acoli and Christian religious concepts and practices (section 8), a questioning of some aspects of Christian teaching (section 9), an elaboration of the Acoli worldview on health and diseases (section 10), a description of party politics and its pitfalls (section 11), a description of Ocol's home library and the effect of book learning on his manhood (section 12), and Lawino's proposal of ritual cleansing for Ocol so as to re-instate him to his former selfhood

(section 13).[8] This summary makes it clear that the poem depicts a dialogic tension between two belief systems/worldviews, one, Acoli/Ugandan, the other, Western/European.

In both poems (*Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*), Ocol is portrayed as thoroughly brainwashed by Western education to the extent that he wants to destroy everything African as symbolized by his plan to "Make compost of the Pumpkins / And other Native vegetables" (1989, p.124). In other words, he will not heed to Lawino's plea, "The pumpkin in the old homestead / Must not be uprooted!" (1989, p.41). This statement, as many analysyts have observed, is central to the message that p'Bitek wants to convey in *Song of Lawino*. As a proverb, it locates the poem within the cultural milieu of the Acoli people of Northern Uganda, the way Chinua Achebe's proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* locate this novel within the cultural milieu of the Igbo people of Nigeria (Obiechina 1992,pp. 204-207; Alimi 2012, pp.121-127). As a refrain, the proverb also serves as the framing argument of the poem. In his introduction to *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, George Heron explains this point thus:

> Pumpkins are a luxury food. They grow wild throughout Acoliland. To uproot pumpkins, even when you are moving to a new homestead, is simple wanton destruction. In this proverb, then, Lawino is not asking Ocol to cling to everything in his past, but rather not to destroy things for the sake of destroying them (Heron 1989, p.7).

Rubadiri interprets the refrain as a symbol. He observes that through the refrain, Lawino is

> stating a profound, philosophical truth not only of our survival, but also of that which identifies us. If you uproot where you come from, then you have got nothing else – no pumpkin – you live like the

[8]This neat summary of the poem is provided by Wangusa (2008, pp.146-147).

> people who live in the towns, from one flat to another because there is nothing to uproot except your valuable pictures. So that the pumpkin here becomes highly symbolic (1971, p.155).

In other words, the rootedness of the pumpkin stands for characters' celebration of their African culture, while uprooting the pumpkin stands for destroying African culture. While Lawino stands for the former group, Ocol stands for the latter.

Diagnosing the Ailment(s) Afflicting Africa: Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol as Diagnostic Texts

In *Song of Lawino*, there are two categories of references to disease: it is either as a figure of speech aimed at helping us to understand something better, or it is as a depiction of Ocol as somebody who is sick, somebody who needs a medical remedy so that he recovers from his illness. In the first category of references, we have a number of examples. Lawino describes the two rivaling parties – the Congress Party and the Democratic Party – as being

> tightly locked in bloody feuds,
> Eating each other's liver
> As if the D.P. was leprosy
> And the Congress yaws (1989, p.111).

The use of this simile is central to the reader's understanding of Lawino's attitude to rivalry-inflected, non-issue directed multi-party politics, as I will show later; to Lawino, the parties are one of the diseases (moreover infectious ones) afflicting Uganda – not a remedy.

In order to describe the appearance of her modern co-wife, Clementine, Lawino uses some similes drawn from the world of medicine:

> Her lips are red-hot

Like glowing charcoal,
She resembles the wild cat
That has dipped its mouth in blood,
Her mouth is like raw yaws
It looks like an open ulcer,
Like the mouth of a field! (1989, p.37)

The disease that Tina's mouth is compared to here (yaws) is a bacterial infection caused by treponema pertenue, which produces lesions in the skin, bone and cartilage (Perine *et al.* 1984, p.8). Through these similes, Lawino manages to dismiss Tina's attempts at beautifying herself as ridiculous, since they make her look pitiable, not attractive.

As for the second category of references to disease, Lawino depicts Ocol as somebody who is not well; he is sick and it is this sickness that drives him to behave in an odd way. When he abuses Lawino and her relatives, she asks:

What has become of my husband?
Is he suffering from boils?
Is it ripe now?
Should they open it
So that the puss may flow out? (1989, p.48)

Boils are a skin infection that is characterized by puss-filled, swollen sores that are terribly painful and discomforting. By asking whether the strange behavior of her husband is a result of a boil he may be suffering from, Lawino medicalises Ocol's odd conduct. She goes further to explain Ocol's verbal insults of her and her relatives in a similar way when she wonders:

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

You are hiding

> Under the blanket suit
> Your sick stomach
> That has swollen up
> Like that of a pregnant goat.
>
> And the dark glasses
> Shield the rotting skin around your eyes
> From the house-flies,
> And cover up
> The husks of the exploded eye balls. (1989, p.50)

Here, Lawino creates a link between one's verbal behavior and the distress/anxiety that comes with different kinds of diseases. But the use of the word "perhaps" alerts us to the fact that what Lawino is saying here is not borne from evidence; it is a mere supposition. In his introduction to *Song of Lawino*, George Heron thinks that Lawino's accusations here – that Ocol may be suffering from scabies, a swollen stomach and a rotting skin – "are a little unlikely" (1989,p.15). This is true if we take her words literally. But at a metaphorical level, what p'Bitek is trying to do through Lawino is to create a link between the emotional outbursts Ocol is so used to and the possibility that he is not well/healthy, because the things he says are quite 'unsayable' by a person of his stature (a Prince, a husband, a father, a son, and a son-in-law). This becomes clearer when we remember that her depiction of Ocol as a diseased man arises from his strange behaviour – denigrating customs he should be revering, and attempting to destroy traditions that he should be working towards preserving. It is for this reason that she describes his actions using a powerful simile that identifies him as an unnatural, destructive creature:

> He behaves like a hen
> That eats its own eggs
> A hen that should be imprisoned under a basket (1989, p.35).

A hen is expected to protect its brood from danger, usually kites and hawks. But when the hen becomes a danger to its young ones by eating them instead of protecting them, then something is seriously wrong with it, for it has deviated from the natural order. Through this metaphor, p'Bitek is saying that Ocol's actions of denigrating his culture and his people are contrary to what is expected of him. As an African (the name 'Ocol' means "Son of Ocol or Col: Son of Black, Blackman, African" [Lo Liyong 1969, p.142], he is expected to act in a manner respectful of his skin colour and his traditions. Instead, he behaves and acts to the contrary as I will explain in a moment.

Okot p'Bitek locates Ocol's deracination in colonial education. By 'colonial education' I refer to the entirety of the pedagogical machinery that was employed by the British colonial government to 'civilise' and/or subjugate Ugandans, for instance the accounts by explorers like Henry Morton Stanley which portrayed the country as being in dire need of Christianisation and civilisation; [9] the activities of missionaries like the Reverend Alexander Mackay which aimed at fighting what they called heathenism and paganism; and campaigns by colonial Governors and their teams which ensured that the British flag flies in the country in peace and order. In all these interventions, certain ideas of Uganda were created and presented to the colonised people as self-evident facts in the colonial church, school, library, office, and command post, to mention but a few, with each of these spaces serving as an imperium in miniature where the official word was to be obeyed without question. The colonial school and church were the most important spaces. As Louis Althusser has noted in a seminal essay entitled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" (1971), schools and churches not only teach students "techniques and knowledges" necessary for the doing of certain jobs and the performing of certain duties but also "the rules of good behaviour" established by the dominant class (1971, p.132) in forms that "ensure subjection to

[9] In *Through the Dark Continent*, for instance, Stanley described Buganda as a "benighted region" (1878, p.193).

the ruling ideology" (1971, p.133), in our case colonialism.[10] This education provided by schools and churches, among other institutions, was aimed at achieving a number of things, one of them being to make Ugandans look at Britain's presence in the country as an act of philanthropy, or to use Empire poet Rudyard Kipling's oft-quoted phrase, as a "white man's burden" (1977, p.128); and another, to make Ugandans subservient to colonial personnel whatever their station in the Protectorate entailed – missionaries, teachers, military and police officers and tax collectors, among others.

The nature of colonial pedagogy can be inferred from the kind of education Thomas Macaulay proposed in his infamous "Minute on Indian Education" which colonial educators, like Ocol's teachers, were most likely to have read since India, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o observes, "was the major English imperial centre from where many social experiments were exported to other British possessions" (2012, p.37).[11] In this Minute, Macaulay, who was a member of the Supreme Court of India from 1834 to 1838, calls upon colonial educators to use the English language as the medium of instruction in Indian schools since, to him, no Indian language is civilised enough to play this role. The colonial pedagogy Macaulay championed is captured in the ominous words:

> We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions

---

[10]He calls schools and churches "ideological state apparatuses" because the state – in our case the colonial state –uses them to subjugate people to its ideology and interests. Other ideological state apparatuses he identifies are: the family, the legal system, the political system including the different political parties, trade unions, communications institutions (for instance the press, radio and television), and cultural institutions (for instance literature, the arts and sports) (1971, p.143).

[11]Thomas R. Metcalf elaborates this point thus:

The practice of empire was, as well, shaped by structures of governance devised in British India. From Macaulay's law codes to the paired creation of the Collector in the district and the Resident at the princely court, from the classifying of ethnic groups to the working of 'divide and rule', the India of the Raj was the touchstone around which colonial administrative systems were put together. (2007, p.2)

> whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population[12] (2006, p.375).

For Macaulay, the colonial school had a clear ideological role to play: it was to present western traditions as the norm that colonised countries must conform to if they were to be cured of what he considered nonsensical practices like teaching history which abounds "with kings thirty feet high, and reigns thirty thousand years long, and Geography, made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter" (2006, p.374). This privileging of Western epistemes at the expense of colonised people's knowledge systems as illustrated in Ssentongo and Draru in Chapter 3 of this book brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's observation on how monological systems which claim to possess the 'truth' operate when they come into contact with other cultures. To Bakhtin, the aim of these systems is "the supplanting of languages [world views or ideologies], their enslavement . . . the incorporation of barbarians and lower social strata into a unitary language of culture and truth, the canonisation of ideological systems . . . directed away from language plurality to a single proto-language" (1981, p.271).

Ocol is a typical example of a product from a Macaulayean pedagogy of colonial education for he is completely bewitched by the idea of whiteness and Englishness. He has been to Makerere University where he learnt that

---

[12]In chapter 10 of *Artist, the Ruler* entitled "Messy Mushroom Soup", p'Bitek makes this statement that brings to mind Macaulay's words above: "The curriculum [in colonial schools] was based on the aim of producing loyal, grateful, but inferior graduates, rootless, nay, self-hating Africans who would always look to Europe for each and everything" (1986,p.74).

> Black People are primitive
> And their ways are utterly harmful,
> Their dances are mortal sins
> They are ignorant, poor and diseased! (1989, p.36)[13]

Because of this lesson, he does not want to stay with his wife, Lawino, who is not Western-educated and whose head, according to him, "[i]s as big as that of an elephant / But it is only bones, /There is no brain in it" (1989, p.36). Instead, he chooses an educated woman, Clementine, who "aspires / To look like a white woman" by using a lot of make-up, bleaching her skin (particularly the face) and straightening her hair (1989,p.37).[14] The tragedy is that the education Ocol has received misrepresents things: it takes Africa as the antithesis of Europe, and it assumes that whoever has not attended a Western school does not have a brain. But it does something worse than this – it inflicts a wound in Ocol's soul[15] for he comes to believe that his culture is primitive and inferior to that of the white people and that Africa is nothing but an idle giant which is

---

[13]This kind of lesson was in fact possible in a colonial school as Murray Carlin, whom Carol Sicherman calls a "much-admired member of the English Department [at Makerere University]" (1995,p.23), testifies. Moved by sympathy for students, Carlin wrote in the late 1950s:

> What we are practicing at Makerere, day in and out . . . is the subversion . . . of the African mind; the breaking down of mental tissues; their reconstruction in the Western mode; the reordering of thoughts, feelings, habits, responses, of every aspect of the mind and personality. This is what we are doing, and cannot avoid doing – this is the core of our activity. (Cited in Sicherman 1995, p.11).

Okot portrays Ocol as a product of this kind of colonial mental engineering.

[14]In *A Man of Two Faces*, Henry Owino depicts a similar situation. Like Ocol, Okure abandons his village wife when he returns from Europe where he has been studying for a doctoral degree. To underline the fact that education has made Okure different from other Ugandans, especially thosewho have not been to Western schools, the narrator of the novel, Jamor, calls him "[a] black European" (1978,p.52).

[15]I borrow this phrase – a wound in the soul – from Chinua Achebe (1989, p.44).

Diseased with a chronic illness,
Choking with black ignorance,
Chained to the rock
Of poverty,

And yet laughing,
Always laughing and dancing,
The chains on his legs
Jangling;

Displaying his white teeth
In bright pink gum,
Loose white teeth
That cannot bite,
Joking, giggling, dancing ... (1989, p.125)

He wishes he were a white man, hence his anguished cry:

Mother, mother,
Why,
Why was I born
Black? (1989,p.126).[16]

---

[16]Fanon gives many examples of people who behave like Ocol in one way or another, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, first published in French in 1952, with the first English translation coming out in 1967, a year after the publication of *Song of Lawino*. There is a case of "[t]he black schoolboy in the Antilles, who in his lessons is forever talking about "our ancestors, the Gauls [thereby] identifying himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilisation, the white man who carries truth to savages – an all-white truth" (2008,p.114). Another case – one of many involving black women – is recorded by a one Etiemble whom Fanon quotes thus:

I was stupefied, as an adolescent, when a girl who knew me quite well jumped up in anger because I had said to her, in a situation where the word was not only appropriate but the one word that suited the occasion: 'You, as a Negress—.' 'Me? a Negress? Can't you see I'm practically white? I despise Negroes. Niggers stink. They're dirty and lazy. Don't ever mention niggers to me.' (2008,p.35)

A similar incident is given in Ousmane Sembene's great novel, *God's Bits of Wood* (1962), in his portrait of the Western-educated N'Deye Touti who is at first ashamed of her African roots, but who is later rehabilitated to the point of burning her books which she correctly identities as the source (and evidence) of her alienation.

By regretting having been born black, Ocol confirms what Lawino has said all along – he is a brainwashed man who is ashamed of his race and of his culture, and who would rather he were white. In the memorable words of Frantz Fanon – who writes from a diagnostic point of view as a psychiatrist – he has a "black skin" but a "white mask". If Fanon's observation that "the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values" (2004,p.43) is accurate, then Ocol and his concubine Clementine, whom Ali A. Mazrui aptly describes as "a powdered and lip-sticked piece of female modernity" (1973,p.84), testify to the efficacy of colonial education in destroying self-pride in the colonised. But Okot's point is not that colonial education is inherently destructive. In my view, he uses the portrait of Ocol to underline the dangers pertaining to slavish imitation of what is learnt at school. To him, students must take it upon themselves to be critical learners so that they are able to distinguish between truth and racist propaganda. He also aims to portray the self-terminating proclivities of some of the leaders who take on positions of responsibility in independent Uganda; leaders who are not in a position to foster national consciousness and national pride because they are not proud of their race and of their culture or because they prioritise other interests of theirs. Instead of using his education for nationalist ends like forging unity through dialogue which Lawino calls for, Ocol shuts her up and orders her to pack her things and leave 'his' house.

If politics, as Harry Boyte postulates, is the way people with different values and from different backgrounds can "work together to solve problems and create common things of value" and the "process by which citizens with varied interests and opinions negotiate differences and clarify places where values conflict" (cited in Westheimer 2006,p.616), then Ocol's refusal to listen to Lawino (and his own brother who belongs to a different political party) is unfortunate because it robs the nation of her valuable contribution since the issues she raises are topical and

worth listening to.[17] Besides, p'Bitek suggests that leaders like Ocol lead their countries on the grim road of neo-colonialism.[18] Nothing demonstrates this better than his intention to erect monuments in memory of European architects of colonialism – Otto Von Bismarck of Germany who presided over the parceling away of Africa to different European powers, and King Leopold II of Belgium (1989, p.151) whose colonial reign in the Congo is universally considered to have been a terrible humanitarian disaster from which that country (now called the Democratic Republic of Congo) is still struggling to recover.

Clearly, it is the oddness of Ocol's behaviour that forces Lawino to describe him in the language of disease. To her, colonial education has destroyed Ocol for it has turned him into an impotent man in the ways of his people; a man who has allowed himself to become a dog of the white man in the sense that he uncritically imitates his Western masters. She asks:

> Has the Fire produced Ash?
> Has the Bull died without a Head?
> 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!

---

[17] In *Africa's Cultural Revolution*, p'Bitek makes it clear that he is not against Western education. His concern is that Western-educated people should use their knowledge to serve their communities. "This educated member of the elite cannot and will not entertain his own people, the taxpayers who pay for his education," he observes. "He cannot, he does not want to play his piano or act his Shakespeare before a village audience. He will not even try to teach his brothers and sisters to dance the Scottish dance during his vacation" (1973, p.13).

[18] With Europhilic characters like Ocol in power, independent countries like Uganda become fertile ground where corrupt and corrupting Western characters like Alexander Loote in Grace Ibingira's *Bitter Harvest: A Political Novel* (1980) thrive. The name 'Loote' is meant to point to his looting proclivities by use of personification allegory.

My husband has become a woman!

Then why do you wear a shirt?
Why do you not tie
A sheet round your waist
As other women do?
Put on the string skirt
And some beads on your loins! (1989, p.116)

The use of rhetorical questions as well as symbolism is significant. The questions emphasize Lawino's point for what she asks is in fact what she believes. As for the symbolism, Ocol is expected to be as powerful as his father, the Bull, was, that is to say, to be a man among men, not mere ash. And because he has become impotent (culturally speaking, that is, since he can no longer defend the old homestead i.e. Acoli traditions), he is as good as a woman, for in a patriarchal society like the one where Lawino comes from, an impotent man is called a woman hence the line "My husband has become a woman"[19]. The fact that Lawino accepts the premise that an impotent man is the equivalent of a woman has made some feminist critics like Florence Stratton dismiss her as a mere stereotype, that is, as a figure of 'mother Africa' (1989,pp.43-44), despite the fact that she is given the authority of being the only speaking voice in the poem. To Lynda Gichanda Spencer, the ambiguity of Lawino's legacy as a speaking woman character is that "p'Bitek, the nationalist writer, is ventriloquising through her voice to articulate his concerns about the tensions between tradition and modernity, effectively reiterating the classical nationalist patriarchal trope of women as carriers and custodians of culture" (2012,p.93).

---

[19]Perhaps the best illustration of this practice in Ugandan literature is given by Timothy Wangusa in his novel, *Upon this Mountain*, where a young man who cries out to his mother during his circumcision ceremony has his name changed from the masculine form, Wabwire, to its feminine version, Nabwire, and is required to wear women's clothes and sit "crouched female-fashion" (1989, p.85), as a way of punishing him for being a coward.

Lawino attributes this impotence to the colonial education that Ocol and other young men have received:

> all our young men
> Were finished in the forest,
> Their manhood was finished
> In the classrooms,
> Their testicles
> Were smashed
> With large books! (1989, p.117)

How did this happen? One may ask. To Lawino, because the men were taken away from their communities as they studied in Western schools (be it Makerere University or Universities in Europe), they inevitably lost touch with their traditions so much that some of them, like Ocol, can no longer participate fully in the culture of their people, as she explains:

> And you cannot sing one song
> You cannot sing a solo
> In the arena.
> You cannot beat rhythm on the half-gourd
> Or shake the rattle-gourd
> To the rhythm of the *orak* dance!
> And there is not a single *bwola* song
> That you can dance,
> You do not play the drum
> Or do the mock-fight;
> At the funeral dance
> Or at the war dance
> You cannot wield the shield! (1989, p.50)

It is implied that before Ocol went to Western schools, he was able to do all the above (sing, dance, etc.), otherwise he would not have stood any chance of winning Lawino, since in Acoli society of the

time the ability to sing and dance in the open arena was central to courtship and marriage, as p'Bitek (1986,pp.25-37) explains. But now, he can no longer do any of these; he has been emasculated for he has been made to believe that everything African is negative.

Related to impotence as a disease, is mental illness; to Lawino, Ocol's insults of her, his people and their cultures make him "behave like a mad hyena" and seem "half-crazy" (41). To Charles Okumu, Ocol suffers from "cultural insanity" (1992, p.60). If we define a mental disorder as "[a]ny clinically significant behavioural or psychological syndrome characterized by the presence of distressing symptoms, impairment of functioning, or significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or loss of freedom" (Ssanyu 2007, p.4), then Ocol's attempt to cut down the Okango tree is a mental disorder in the sense that it is an act of spiritual suicide, so to speak, which would lead to his suffering, as Lawino explains:

> You were threatening
> To cut yourself loose,
> To be tossed by the winds
> This way and that way
> Like the dead dry leaves
> Of the *olam* tree
> In the dry season. (1989, pp.119-120)

In his reply to Lawino, Ocol reiterates that he will not spare the Okango, sacred tree though it is, for he and his colleagues have decided to "uproot / Every sacred tree / And demolish every ancestral shrine" (1989, p.126). That is to say, they are bent on cutting down the sacred trees thereby harming himself spiritually.

But even when we look at Ocol's conduct from the perspective of the World Health Organization which defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to

his or her community" (cited in Mary Amuyunzu-Nyamongo 2013,p.59), it can be concluded that Ocol can be considered mentally unhealthy, particularly because he is not able to make any meaningful contribution to his society, since all he does is to insult his people, and to prevent them from entering his house lest they make it dirty. In *Song of Ocol*, he goes ahead and threatens the very existence of the community with so many threats that he will effect now that he is in power. Consider this threat, for instance:

> We will uproot granaries
> Break up the cooking pots
> To powder;
> We'll grind
> The grinding stones
> And water pots. (p.126)

This is a shocking statement for at least two reasons. First, uprooting granaries will expose the people to famine, since the purpose of this facility is to ensure that there is constant supply of food. In the same vein, destroying grinding stones, cooking pots and water pots means that people are to die of hunger since they can neither prepare millet for cooking (with the grinding stone smashed) nor cook any meal (there are no pots with which to fetch water and to cook). In other words, Ocol is akin to a wizard and murderer here for he threatens the survival of his own community. Secondly, he does not give any reason as to why he will destroy granaries, grinding stones and cooking and water pots, meaning that the act will be done out of wantonness, which in itself is a sign of his senselessness.[20]

---

[20] Perhaps nothing confirms Ocol's mental unstableness more than this statement about what he and his fellow leaders intend to do:

> We will uproot
> Each tree
> From the Ituri forest
> And blow up
> Mount Kilimanjaro,
> The rubble from Ruwenzori

Clearly, Ocol is a patient who needs help. In "Colonial War and Mental Disorders" – the last chapter of the influential *The Wretched of the Earth* – Fanon establishes a link between colonialism and mental disorders. Although his focus is on those disorders that result from an anti-colonial war situation, his discussion is relevant to our understanding of Ocol as a character suffering from a mental illness arising from the colonial education he has received. Some of the cases Fanon discusses fall under a category he calls 'brainwashing' where intellectuals are co-opted to tell the Algerian people harmful things meant to negate the cause and meaning of the struggle for independence, like "Algeria is not a nation, has never been a nation, and never will be"; "There is no such thing as the 'Algerian people'"; and "Algerian patriotism is devoid of meaning" (2004, p.214). Fanon relates how some medical students from the Faculty of Algiers were brainwashed to believe what they had been taught in class. The stereotypes inculcated into these students – for instance "The Algerian is an habitual killer"; "The Algerian is a savage killer"; and "The Algerian is a senseless killer" (2004, p.222) – made some of them believe the lies they had been told about Algerian people. This shows how toxic colonial education was. This is similar to what happens to Ocol. Notice, for example, the similarity between his colonial school-learnt lessons that the "Black People are primitive / And their ways are utterly harmful, / Their dances are mortal sins / They are ignorant, poor and diseased!" (1989, p.36) and that taught to North African students during the anti-colonial war of liberation:

Will fill the Valleys
Of the Rift,
We will divert
The mighty waters
Of the Nile
Into the Indian Ocean. (1989, p.146)

Again, he does not explain why it will be necessary to do the above things, meaning that once again it is a wanton act. Besides, one wonders why he and his friends will undertake these ventures which are bound to cost colossal sums of money, yet the people they are leading are languishing under poverty, disease and want for schools.

> The North African is a criminal, his predatory instinct a known fact and his unwieldy aggressiveness visible to the naked eye. The North African loves extremes so you can never entirely trust him. Today, your best friend, tomorrow your worst enemy. He is immune to nuances, Cartesianism is fundamentally foreign to him and moderation, a sense of proportion and level-headedness, are contrary to his inner nature. The North African is violent, hereditarily violent. He finds it impossible to discipline himself and channel his instincts. Yes, the Algerian is congenitally impulsive (2004, p.223).

But if Ocol is suffering from a mental illness, as Lawino charges, there are a series of questions this raises, for instance: is he responsible for the insults he hurls at her and his community, and the life-threatening ventures he plans to implement? In other words, if he is not in full control of his senses, how come we are so shocked every time we are told what he has said (in *Song of Lawino*) and every time we hear what he says (in *Song of Ocol*), yet we are aware that mental illnesses usually place the victim outside a community's moral regime as everything he says or does (ranting, walking about nude, scavenging for food, etc.) is attributed to such a condition – in Uganda at least? I think the easiest answer to this question is to remember what Lawino says: Ocol acts "half-crazy" (1989, p.41), meaning that part of him is still rational. It is because of this that we expect him to speak and act reasonably. And it is also because of this that Lawino sings a prescription to cure the diseases that are afflicting him.

Significantly, the prescription that Lawino sings is the concluding part of the poem. It is a list of liquids and herbs that Ocol should take to recover from his sicknesses, and religious rituals he should perform to reconcile himself with his people and with the ancestors whom he has treated irreverently. Some of the items that constitute the prescription are: simsim oil should be

dropped into the holes of his ears to help remove the gum and thick dust he "collected / From the altar / And the chaff / From the books / And from the useless things / From the magazines and newspapers" (1989, p.118); and he should clean his mouth with warm salty water in order to "Spit out the insults" that he learnt from his "white masters" (1989, p.119). After this, he should go to the shrine of his ancestors and sacrifice an animal to them so that they forgive him every wrong he has done. He should also ask them for "[a] new spear with a sharp and hard point" (1989, p.119).[21] When he has recovered fully, he should go to his mother

And ask forgiveness from her;
Let her spit blessing in your hands;
And rub the saliva
On your chest
And on your forehead! (p.120)

But where does Lawino get her authority/ability/expertise to diagnose diseases and prescribe medication, one is bound to ask. Is she not a medical quack whose diagnosis and prescription should not be taken seriously? Well, as an Acoli woman of tradition, she is steeped into the cultural life of her people as an active participant, including at one time being the leader of the girls. Because of this, she understands the meaning behind different cultural practices, including singing, dancing, preparing food, caring for children and so forth, and she is able to contrast African ways of doing things with Western ones. She does this to show that every culture has its own beliefs and practices that carry particular meanings, so it is wrong to abandon one's ways for another's without any reason. So, Lawino's deep knowledge of her tradition bestows her with authority to establish that Ocol's behaviour is not normal: by insulting his wife, relatives and clansmen, and by attempting to cut

[21] This will be a prayer for the restoration of manhood since, as Okumu observes, the symbol of the spear helps p'Bitek to create an image of "a socially and sexually powerful man and not the 'ash' (impotent) man that Ocol has become" (1992,p.58).

down the okango tree planted on his father's grave which symbolizes the connection between him and his ancestors, he shows himself as a sick man who needs help.

Lawino's authority as Ocol's diagnostician also comes from the long time she has lived with him as his wife. This gives her the ability to testify that Ocol has not always been what he is today. To the contrary, there was a time he was a loving husband whose English, for instance, made her proud:

> only recently
> We would sit close together, touching each other!
> Only recently I would play
> On my bow-harp
> Singing praises to my beloved.
> Only recently he promised
> That he trusted me completely.
> I used to admire him speaking in English (1989, p.36).

There was a time, in other words, when Ocol behaved as Princes like him do, a time when he enjoyed the songs, dances and foods of his people, and a time when he loved Lawino so much that he wooed and married her. Therefore, Lawino's knowledge of and witness to Ocol's transformation from a respectful and respected Prince of those days to the self-hating, foul-mouthed, irreverent man he is now gives her the authority to confirm that there is a sickness surely afflicting him. As for her authority to prescribe a cure for Ocol, Lawino demonstrates immense knowledge of traditional medicine: she knows which herb cures which disease, and the procedures that should be taken to manage a particular condition. For this reason, she is portrayed as someone who is well-placed to offer a good prescription, which Norul Badriah Hassan *et al.* define as "one that is rational, evidence-based, clear, complete, and able to improve the health outcomes of the patient treated" (2010, p.501).

Conclusion

Okot p'Bitek's diagnostic poetics, as I have called it, makes *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* texts one can locate in the field of medicine, as I have illustrated. The issues he raises in these poems using the framework of medicine to elaborate what he sees as post-independence Africa's disease – that is to say, the destructive effect colonial education had on Africans' psyche and sense of identity – are still relevant today as seen by a number of practices that are still prevalent to date; for instance, the bleaching of skins as a marker of beauty.

Although he went to Universities in Europe (in Wales and England), p'Bitek continued to value what he saw as beautiful in his culture. In other words, through his work he demonstrated that one can go through Western schools and avoid getting brainwashed. His decision to get inspiration from the literature of his people to write *Song of Lawino* instead of getting it from the Western world (T.S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats) as his contemporaries like David Rubadiri and Timothy Wangusa did,[22] is clear evidence of how much he believed in Africa as an unexploited or under-exploited well of creativity and innovation. It is also a clear demonstration of his commitment to African aesthetics – an important pillar in working towards an African cultural revolution. His poems challenge us to eschew Ocol's weaknesses, that is, his uncritical imitation or aping of Western culture and his "fatalistic desire to destroy all that is truly African" (Leman 2009, p.122). This is because these weaknesses are still with us to date, as he observes in many of his books. He argues, for instance, that like Ocol, the courts of judicature, the Universities and the national Parliaments – to mention just a few – continue to uncritically imitate what he sees as meaningless customs and dress codes even

[22]Rubadiri's widely anthologized poem "Stanley Meets Mutesa" (1965) is based on T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" (1927), while Wangusa's "A Taxi Driver On His Death" (1971) is based on W. B. Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" (1919).

after flag independence. Judges continue to dress in white wigs that make them look ridiculous, while Universities continue to look down upon village musicians, drummers and herbalists as people who have nothing to contribute to modern knowledge. As he put it in the preface to *Africa's Cultural Revolution*:

> Africa must re-examine herself critically. She must discover her true self, and rid herself of all 'apemanship'. For only then can she begin to develop a culture of her own. Africa must redefine all her cultural terms according to her own interests. As she has broken the political bondage of colonialism, she must continue the economic and cultural revolution until she refuses to be led by the nose by foreigners. We must also reject the erroneous attempts of foreign students to interpret and present her. We must interpret and present Africa in our own way, in our own interests. (vii)

References

Achebe, C. 1989. The Novelist as a Teacher. In *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, pp.40-46. New York: Doubleday.

Alimi, S. A. 2012. A Study of the Use of Proverbs as a Literary Device in Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* Vol. 2 (3): pp.121-127.

Althusser, L. 1971. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation). In *Lenin: Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books.

Amuyunzu-Nyamongo, M. 2013. The social and cultural aspects of mental health in African societies. *Commonwealth Health Partnerships*, pp.59-63.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. 1998. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

_____ 2002. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures,* 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge.

Bakhtin, M. M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Brown, P. 1995. Naming and Framing: The Social Construction of Diagnosis and Illness. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*. Extra Issue, pp.34-52.

Brown, P., Lyson, M. and Jenkins, T. 2011. From Diagnosis to Social Diagnosis. *Social Science and Medicine* Vol. 73, pp.939-943.

Chinweizu, O. J. and Madubuike, I. 1980. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.

Fanon, F. 2008. *Black Skin, White Mask*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press.

_____ 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Hassan, N. B. 2010. Development and Validation of a New Prescription Quality Index. *British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology* Vol. 70 (4), pp.500-513.

Heron, G. A. 1976. *The Poetry of Okot p'Bitek*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

_____ 1989. Introduction. *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, by

Okot p'Bitek. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Ibingira, G. S. 1980. *Bitter Harvest: A Political Novel*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House.

Iigen, J. S., Eva, K. W. and Regehr, G. 2016. What's in a Label? Is Diagnosis the Start or the End of Clinical Reasoning? *JGIM*, pp.435-437.

Kahyana, D. S. 2013. *Negotiating (Trans)national Identities in Ugandan Literature*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University.

Kipling, R. 1977. *Selected Verse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Lazarus, N. 2011. *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leman, P. 2009. Singing the Law: Okot p'Bitek's Legal Imagination and the Poetics of Traditional Justice. *Research in African Literatures* Vol. 40 (4), pp.110-128.

Lindfors, B. 1984. The Songs of Okot p'Bitek. In G.D. Killam(ed.), *The Writing of East and Central Africa*, pp.144-158. London: Heinemann.

Lo Liyong, T. 1969. *The Last Word: Cultural Synthesism*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House.

Macaulay, T. 2006. Minute on Indian Education. In Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Grifiths, and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 2nd edn. pp.374-375. London and New York: Routledge.

Mazrui, A. A. 1973. The Patriot as an Artist. In G. D. Killam (ed.), *African Writers on African Writing*, pp.73-90. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

McLeod, J. 2000. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester and New

York: Manchester University Press.

Metcalf, T. R. 2007. *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Nazareth, P. 1984. Waiting for Amin: Two Decades of Ugandan Literature. In G. D. Killam (ed.), *The Writing of East and Central Africa*, pp.7-35. Nairobi: Heinemann.

Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o. 1973. *Introduction toAfrica's Cultural Revolution*. By Okot p'Bitek. Nairobi: Macmillan Books for Africa.

_____ 2012. *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Obiechina, E. 1992. Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel. *Oral Tradition* Vol. 7 (2): pp.197-230

Okumu, C. 1992. The Form of Okot p'Bitek's Poetry: Literary Borrowing from Acoli Oral Traditions. *Research in African Literatures* Vol. 23 (3), pp. 53-66.

Owino, H. 1978. *A Man of Two Faces*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.

Perine, P. L., Hopkins, D. R., Niemel, P. L. A., St John, R., Causse, G., Antal, G. M. and World Health Organisation 1984. *Handbook of Endemic Treponematoses: Yaws, Endemic Syphilis, and Pinta*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

p'Bitek, O. 1989. *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

_____ 1973. *Africa's Cultural Revolution*. Nairobi: Macmillan Books for Africa.

_____ 1986. *Artist, the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*. Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya.

Ramazani, J. 2009. *A Transnational Poetics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

_____ 2001. *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Roscoe, A. 1977. *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rubadiri, D. 1965. Stanley Meets Mutesa. In David Cook(ed.), *Origin East Africa: A Makerere Anthology*, pp.78-80. London and Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.

_____ 1971. The Development of Writing in East Africa. In Christopher Heywood (ed.), *Perspectives on African Literature*, pp.148-156. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Sembene, O. 1962. *God's Bits of Wood*. London: Heinemann.

Sicherman, C. 1995. Ngũgĩ's Education: 'The Subversion...of the African Mind'. *African Studies Review* Vol. 38 (3), pp.11-41.

Spencer, L. G. 2012. Heirs of Tradition or Veiled Anxieties? Romance, Sex, and Marriage in Contemporary Ugandan Women's Short Stories.In James Ogude, Grace A. Musila and Dina Ligaga (eds.), *Rethinking Eastern African Literary and Intellectual Landscapes*, pp. 91-111. Trenton: Africa World Press.

Ssanyu, R. 2007. Mental Illness and Exclusion: Putting Mental Health on the Development Agenda in Uganda. *Policy Brief* 2, pp. 1-4. Kampala: Chronic Poverty Research Centre and Development Research & Training.

Stanley, H. M. 1878. *Through the Dark Continent or the Sources of the*

Nile Around the Great Lakes of Equatorial Africa and Down the Livingstone River to the Atlantic Ocean. Vol. 1. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington.

Stratton, F. 1994. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. London and New York: Routledge.

Sugirtharajah, R. S. 2006. Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism.In R. S. Sugirtharajah(ed.), *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, pp.7-32. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Wangusa, T. 1989. *Upon this Mountain*. Oxford: Heinemann.

_____ 1971. A Taxi Driver on his Death. In David Cook and David Rubadiri(eds.), *Poems from East Africa*, p.186. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

_____ 2008. Developments in Ugandan Poetry. *Uganda Christian University Research Bulletin* Vol. 2, pp.144-159.

Westheimer, J. 2006. Politics and Patriotism in Education. *Phi Delta Kappan,* Vol. 87 (8), pp.608-620.

Young, R. J. C. 2012. Postcolonial Remains. *New Literary History* Vol. 43 (1), pp.19-42.