Poetic Devices and Socio-cultural Vision in Okot p'Bitek's Poetry: a Reading of Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol

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Abstract

This study examines the social function of poetic devices in Okot p'Bitek's poems: Song of Lawino (1966) and Song of Ocol (1972). In these two long poems, Okot p'Bitek explores the culture clash that occurred in Africa resulting from the contact between Africa and Europe through colonization. The poet depicts two types of Africans : on the one hand, Lawino who shuts herself off completely within her Acoli culture, rejecting any ideas from elsewhere, and on the other hand, Ocol, who, having been alienated by Western culture, denigrates and rejects the culture of his own people. Through these two characters, Okot p'Bitek succeeds in illustrating the cultural turmoil in which Africans find themselves today. He achieves this through the use of Acoli traditional modes of expression and local imagery, thereby creating remarkable poems in English. Drawing on semiotics and social criticism, this article seeks to analyse some of the poetic devices used by Okot p'Bitek to effectively convey his message. More specifically, this study examines how some figures of speech used by the poet express themes and emotions that reflect African identity and culture.

Key words: poetry, poetic devices, culture, identity, society.

Résume

Cette étude examine la fonction sociale des figures de style dans les poèmes d'Okot p'Bitek : Song of Lawino et Song of Ocol. Dans ces deux longs poèmes, Okot p'Bitek explore le choc culturel qui s'est produit en Afrique à la suite du contact entre l'Afrique et l'Europe dans le cadre de la colonisation. Le poète dépeint deux types d'Africains : d'une part, Lawino, qui s'enferme complètement dans sa culture acoli, rejetant toute idée venue d'ailleurs, et d'autre part, Ocol, qui, ayant été aliéné par la culture occidentale, dénigre et rejette la culture de son propre peuple. À travers ces deux personnages, Okot p'Bitek parvient à illustrer le bouleversement culturel que vivent aujourd'hui les Africains. Il y parvient en recourant à des modes d'expression traditionnels et à une imagerie locale, créant ainsi de remarquables poèmes en

anglais. S'appuyant sur la sémiotique et la critique sociale, cet article vise à analyser certains des procédés poétiques utilisés par Okot p'Bitek pour transmettre efficacement son message. Plus précisément, cette étude examine la manière dont certaines figures de style utilisées par le poète expriment des thèmes et des émotions qui reflètent l'identité et la culture africaine.

Mots-clés : poésie, figures de style, culture, identité, société.

Introduction

In the sixth edition of *Sound and Sense*: *An Introduction to poetry*, Perrine (1982: 3-4) defines poetry as "a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than those ordinary languages […] Poetry is the most condensed and contracted form of literature, saying most in the fewest number of words." Amaechi (2005: 41) on his side thinks that: "A poem can be described as a literary composition characterized by the presence of imagination, emotion, truth, sense of impression and concrete language expressed rhythmically and with an orderly arrangement of parts and possessing within itself a unity." As suggested by these two definitions, poetry is language-focused, as it is through the manipulation of the language that poets use poetic devices not only to play with words but also, and above all, to convey a message, as pinned by Chinweizu (1980: 166), a "poem cannot just be, it must also mean". It is also important to point out that poetry, like all other literary genres, draws its inspiration and takes shape within the society from which it emerges. Thus, poetry is a powerful means by which societies express their values, preserve their cultural heritage and challenge social realities. Beyond its aesthetic aspect, poetry employs various poetic devices that enrich meaning, evoke emotions and convey ideas in a way that has a profound resonance with readers. In the field of contemporary African poetry, Okot p'Bitek holds a prominent place amongst the continent's most influential poets and cultural critics. In his poems, he highlights the tensions between African traditions and Western modernity, criticises the legacy of colonialism, denounces social and political injustices, and affirms the dignity of indigenous African cultures. In *Song of Lawino* (*SOL*) and *Song of Ocol* (*SOO*), Okot p'Bitek draws heavily on the oral tradition

of his Acoli people to both address an important subject—that of cultural clash in Africa—and, at the same time, showcase the identity and cultural beauty of his community. He uses the Acoli languages-processes such as imagery, speech-pattern and other figurative languages to convey his cultural ideology. In this perspective, Senanu and Theo (1999: 152) point out that: "p'Bitek's poetry represents one of the best examples of African poetry to successfully express African ideas in European forms, retaining the lyric freshness and simplicity of the songs of his own tribe, the Acoli, and using personal imagery. This study aims to analyse how the poetic devices employed by Okot p'Bitek fulfil a social function in the construction of the poet's cultural ideology. This work draws on two literary theories namely: semiotics and social criticism. Semiotics, defined as "a theory of signs" (Eco, 2006: 68) provides the first analytical framework. For Olurotimi (2022: 118), "Semiotics is the study of signs. In a way, it can be said to be a form of applied linguistics concerned with the study of all signs and symbols that facilitate communication among people (…) any image, object, sound, action, concept, or word capable of representing something else is understood to be a sign." In this work, semiotics helps analyse how signs and symbols generate meaning within the poems. Through this theory, the work analyses similes, personifications and symbols as systems of signs and as cultural and social signifiers. Thus, semiotics will help to reveal the "linguistic makeup" (Griffith, 2002: 119) of the poems through the study of the poet's choice and use of poetic devices. The second literary theory used to assess this work is the social criticism. Social criticism in literature can be understood as the examination and questioning of problems in society through plays, novels and poems. Blanchard (2022: 1) defines social criticism as "a form of academic or journalistic criticism that focuses on the social issues of modern society, (…). Social criticism analyses community structures that are perceived as flawed and focuses on practical solutions through specific steps, radical change or even revolutionary change." In this work, The social-critical dimension complements the semiotic analysis by situating the meanings generated by these poetic signs within the socio-historical context of colonialism and postcolonial African transformation. The study will investigate how p'Bitek uses poetic devices to articulate or challenge issues of cultural alienation, colonial

influence, Christianity, education, class formation, gender relations and the crisis of African identity. In this regard, poetic devices will not be regarded as mere formal or aesthetic elements but as strategies through which the poet constructs social criticism and expresses particular positions concerning African cultural life.

1- Similes as Vehicles of Cultural Identity and Social Critique

Simile is defined as "a direct comparison between two things of different natures or class but with a striking similarity in a particular aspect by the use of such words like "'as' and 'like'" (Amaechi, 2005: 6). *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* are full of similes. It is important to note that in *Song of Lawino*, Lawino complains and criticises the fact that her husband, after a long period of study abroad, has returned a completely transformed man who can no longer tolerate anything associated with his own culture. Consequently, he decides to leave Lawino, choosing instead to be with Clementina, a woman he considers more modern and sophisticated. This situation places Lawino on the defensive vis-à-vis her husband, her rival and the whole set of imported values. She therefore launches into a defending-accusing monologue, using similes to compare human beings to animals and plants, thus creating vivid local imagery in the minds of readers. For instance, she deplores the fact that her husband despises her because she is unable to dress and behave like a European woman. Then, she tells the reader that when she walks pass her husband, "he hisses like a wounded Ororo snake (*SOL*: 85). Comparing her husband to a wounded snake help readers capture a mental image of an angered Ocol who expresses his alienation through his quick temper. With this then, readers easily understand how much Ocol dislikes Lawino. He does not want to mingle with illiterates, and even his wife does not deserve any conversation with him at home. His children could neither come close to him nor play in the surroundings if Ocol is around, for, as Lawino recalls, if a "child cries/ or has a cough/ Ocol storms like a buffalo" (*SOL:* 67). Readers then imagine Ocol actually roaring at his children because he does not want to be disturbed when reading the "Big newspaper" (*SOL*: 67). Lawino accuses her husband of having no consideration for her any longer. Ocol treats her with no respect

because she is illiterate, unable to have coherent and reliable reasoning. He abuses her in English and says she is "silly/ "Like the Ojuu insects that sit on the beer pot" (*SOL*: 86), to mean that his wife is stupid. Lawino in her turn, in judging the behaviour of her husband, gives a string of similes comparing him to things and animals. She says for instance:

My husband's tongue
Is bitter like the roots of the
Lyonno 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.
It is ferocious
Like the poison of a barren
Woman
And corrosive like the juice of
The gourd
…He behave like a hen
That eats its own eggs
A hen that should be imprisoned
Under a basket. (*SOL* :35)

In this extract, simile is used to reinforce the depiction of Ocol's cultural alienation and to show the effect of acquired European ways on his personality. "He behaves like the hen that eats its own eggs" shows that Ocol is a renegade who rejects his own people. Comparing Ocol's words to "the arrow of the scorpion", Lawino shows just how sharp and hurtful her husband's words can be to her. She also compares his words to "the poison of a barren woman" to demonstrate that Ocol has become a bitter man who has lost all joy in life and makes the world around him unbearable. With these similes, readers understand the scorn with which Ocol treats his wife and the impact of cultural alienation on him.

Still with the character Lawino, and considering her rivalry with Clementina, it is striking to see just how effectively she conveys her dislike of Clementina to the reader with similes. For instance, the description Lawino gives of her rival is utterly damning when she says: "Clementina looks as if she has dysentery./Some medicine has eaten up Tina's face; /The skin on her face is gone/ the face of the beautiful one / Is tender like the skin of a newly/ born baby" (*SOL*: 37). Here, Lawino is deploring her rival's use of cosmetics, which are normally used to beautify modern women. Comparing Clementina's face to that of a baby in the above extract is a way of showing how grazed the skin of the latter's face has become. In fact, Lawino is referring and denouncing the phenomenon of skin bleaching which many African women practice today. In the mind of readers, Clementina, as depicted by Lawino, is disgusting to look at. Lawino uses similes to reduce to nothing all the efforts made by Clementina to appear beautiful. She further describes Clementina as follows:

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!...
She resembles the wizard
Getting ready for the midnight
dance
She looks like a witch,
Like someone who has lost her
head (*SOL*: 37-38)

This grotesque depiction of Clementina, through simile, deliberately intends to downplay the modern standard of beauty. Lawino's intention here is to show that the Acoli made beauty is the best. "The glowing charcoal" here is used to designate the lipstick used by women to make up their beauty. Reading these verses with an African background, it is easy to picture two women fighting over a

man. They hurl insults at each other, comparing one other to animals and things. Thus, p'Bitek's use of similes plunges the reader in a pure African environment.

Lawino's criticism of the whole pattern of imported values goes beyond her argument with her husband about Clementina. She also attacks the Western religion brought by colonisation and some of its practices. She deplores the fact that enough explanation is not given about the rationale behind some practices of the Christian religion for example. Instead, people and especially the youth are led to believe and swallow whatever they are taught in schools and churches without questioning the relevance of these teachings to their African contexts. Okot p'Bitek gives the authority to Lawino to criticise a Catholic teacher in *Song of Lawino*. Thus, Lawino uses simile laced with humour and sarcasm to achieve her aim. She describes the teacher of the Catholic Evening Speakers Class as follows:

> The teacher was very drunk
> His eyes were like rotting
> tomatoes […]
> He shouted words at us
> And we shouted back at him
> Agitated and Angry
> Like the Okwik birds
> Chasing away the kite
> From their nest […]
> We repeated the meaningless
> phrases
> Like the yellow birds
> In the Lajanawara grass (*SOL*: 76)

Through the use of simile, Lawino communicates her dislike of the Catholic Evening Speakers Class. She complains that the students repeat meaningless phrases "like the yellow birds" to mean that they act just like parrots, which is p'Bitek's own way of denouncing the indoctrination of the Acoli people by the white people's ideas. She uses simile to give an awful depiction of the teacher with the purpose of proving that the Acoli people do not need teachers of Western religion. Their own religion is good for them. It

can be noticed, from the above extract, that Lawino is against the whole system as she also criticises the boarding school system whereby: "The time when the youth should/meet youth/ Is wasted in shouting things/ […] And the young men/ Sleep alone/ Cold, like knives/ Without handles."(*SOL*: 80) Lawino finds here that an important African value is being abandoned. This refers to gatherings at which young ones are taught their people's ways and values.

Thus, as shown in the foregoing analyses, simile is an important figure of speech that is used by Okot p'Bitek in his poems. It is however important to underline the fact that he makes use of similes chiefly in *Song of Lawino*. In *Song of Ocol*, similes are rather used scarcely; and this is explained by the fact that *Song of Lawino* was translated from the poet's native language by himself. It inevitably implies that the speech patterns of that language are likely to be traced in this poem. Thus, local imagery then becomes a natural process, and there lies the contribution of p'Bitek to the growth of what is referred to as modern African poetry. This poetry speaks not in a too sophisticated language addressed to a category of people, but could be easily deciphered by Africans themselves because it takes root and form in their own immediate environment and realities. Through his use of simile, p'Bitek is able to convey African identity by touching the African sensibility. In this perspective, Ojaide (1996: 55) finds that "The ecstatic rhythm imbues the poetic viewpoint with romantic qualities and suggests the poet's personal nostalgic approval of Lawino's position as a defender of African culture and an opponent of indiscriminate copying of Western culture by Africans".

2- Personification: Giving Voice to Culture, Society, and Identity

Personification is another important figure of speech used by Okot p'Bitek in his poems. Personification is defined as "the idea of representing an object or an idea with a person or an action only capable of being done by a human being. It thus means the endowment of a non-living thing with human attributes" (Amaechi, 2005: 6). In application to the poems under study, it is noticed here again that Okot p'Bitek draws a lot from his Acoli's cultural heritage and calls upon the sensitivity of readers and especially African readers. It is important

to note at this point that both poems are monologues in which each character defends their position in a kind of cultural conflict that pits them against one another. In *Song of Lawino*, Lawino defends Acoli culture by completely rejecting anything imported. For example, she pretends to be ignorant when her husband gives her an electric stove for the kitchen. She claims to be afraid of using the White man's electric stove, because, as she says: "It has many eyes/ and she doesn't know which one to prick/ So that the stove/ May vomit fire." (*SOL*: 58). The aim of this personification is to belittle this kitchen utensil, which should normally be regarded as an asset.

Whilst Lawino uses personification to downplay anything foreign, she uses it even more effectively to highlight aspects of Acoli culture. Thus, she extols the virtues of Acoli-made cooking utensils in order to display the beauty and function of each of these items. She evokes, for instance: "The beautiful long-necked jar/…full of honey/The grinding stones/The big one/ […] And her daughter." (*SOL*: 89) Lawino continues her descriptions, ascribing human qualities to inanimate objects. She describes the grinding stone as follows:

> The mother stone
> Has a hollow stomach
> A strange woman
> She never gets pregnant
> And her daughter
> Never gets fatter
> She gets smaller and smaller
> Until she is finished (*SOL*: 59)

For the purpose of showing the beauty of the Acoli utensils, the grinding stone in this instance, is given human characteristics. She is a woman who never gets pregnant and her daughter never gets fatter. This description, which makes use of personification, enables readers to visualise the traditional millstone, a very common utensil in African kitchens. In the same register of promoting the Acoli-made utensils, Lawino compares and contrasts the plates and bowls of Europeans and those of Africans. And she achieves this through a string of

personifications. According to her, the European plates could not keep the Acoli dishes hot for a long time whereas the Acoli earthen gourds help keep the food hot for long.

> The White man's plates
> Look beautiful
> But you put millet bread in it
> And cover it up
> For a few minutes
> The plate is sweating
> And soon the bottom
> Of the bread is wet
> And the whole bread cold (*SOL*: 61)

Lawino therefore, downplays the white man's utensils and crockery in this context to show that they are irrelevant to the Acoli tradition. Placing the millet bread on a white man's plate will not yield a good result because the plate, to which a human trait is ascribed, will sweat. Through this binary comparison made by means of personification, she firstly gives a certain value to her people's kitchen utensils, but she also discourages those who unquestioningly copy everything that comes from white people. Hence Lawino stands as the spokesperson of Okot p'Bitek as underlined by Ojaide (1996: 4) "Okot p'Bitek of Uganda in Song of Lawino imbues Lawino, the symbol of African cultural independence, with dignity, humility, respect, and authenticity. She is opposed to Clementine and Ocol who indiscriminately copy alien Western ways of life and so look absurd".

Okot p'Bitek's use of personification in *Song of Lawino* epitomises in how Lawino evokes the concept of death. She personifies death, referring to it as a mother, and human beings, as its little children. In section ten of *Song of Lawino*, Lawino is evoking the powerlessness of human beings before death. She achieves this by using a very subtle language which directly addresses the reader. Whether an Acoli or a non-Acoli reader, one may easily find the half-serious, half-hilarious diction used by the poet through Lawino very

entertaining. She describes the power of death over Men in the following words:

When death comes
To fetch you
She comes unannounced,
She comes suddenly...
When Mother Death comes
She whispers
Come,
And you stand up
And follow
You get up immediately,
And you start walking
Without brushing the dust
On your buttocks. (*SOL*: 102)

Thus, death is considered as a mother and what is more impressive here is the promptitude with which humans respond to the death's call. With this, Lawino is showing that death never seeks permission from men before visiting them and whether ready or not when death comes by, it is always welcomed since men do not really have any choice. Any reader, conscious of this reality will appreciate the philosophy conveyed by Okot p'Bitek. The poet uses personification to explore an important aspect of Acoli—and indeed African—culture the view of death not as an inescapable fate but as an inevitable passage to the afterlife. In this way, personification helps to play down the drama of death and lends the poet's style a greater subtlety. As pinned by Egudu (1978: 34). "In Africa (…) the idea of death is not associated with horror. The living and the dead are in continuous contact and a large part of the religious life of the African is devoted to establishing a harmonious contact with the dead." Lawino even goes further in her reflexions about the power of death over human beings when she states:

You may be the fastest runner,
A long distance runner,
But when Death comes

To fetch you
You do not resist,
You must not resist.
You cannot resist
Mother Death
She says to her little ones,
Come
Her little ones are good children,
Obedient,
Loyal,
And when Mother Death calls
Her little ones jump,
They jump gladly […] (*SOL*:102)

The impotence of man before death is even more expressed in the above extract. The first line indicates that no one can run away from death; which is given a good connotation in this context because as a good mother, it pampers its children who follow gladly. Giving a motherly image to death in this context show how Acoli people cope with it easily as a culturally accepted concept. Lawino's personification of death in the above verses helps convey an imagery. Personification becomes graphical, considering how Lawino evokes death comparing it to a mother whose children are obedient to its voice. Thus, with this kind of language, Okot p'Bitek downplays the mystery that surrounds death. He uses a very simple language to talk about this important issue and this shows how the concept of death is perceived and understood among the Acoli people.

In *Song of Ocol*, Ocol also uses personification on many occasions in his monologue. Unlike 'simile' which, is rarely used in this poem, Okot p'Bitek has Ocol resort to personification either to mock the African civilisation or to detract the Acoli traditional values. In Section two of *Song of Ocol*, Ocol personifies the whole African continent as follows:

Africa
Idle giant
Basking in the sun,

Sleeping, snoring,
Twitching in dreams; (*SOO*: 125)

Okot p'Bitek, through Ocol, is raising an important point in the above extract. While ascribing human traits to the continent, he deplores the behaviours of some African people such as idleness and laziness, which appear as brakes to the development of the continent. In the above verses, Ocol reduces the whole African continent to the size of a human being and he attributes human characteristics to the continent. In further analyses, Ocol pleads the case of the African woman. According to him, the Acoli/African woman is bending under the yoke of patriarchal-made laws; and so Ocol advises and encourages the Acoli woman to emancipate herself in the following verses:

Sister
Woman of Acoliland
Throw down that pot of water,
Let it break into pieces
Let the water cool
The thirsty earth (*SOO*: 131)

In the last verse, earth is attributed human traits as Ocol talks about a thirsty earth. The fact is that earth cannot feel thirsty, and that only human beings can experience this feeling; this is because they are capable of expressing their needs in the hope that they will be met. Ocol thus highlights the need to reform certain traditional practices in Africa, as he believes the continent is thirsting for change. Throughout his monologue, Ocol criticises and rejects the attitude of Africans who resist change and modernity. Through this personification, Ocol expresses the continent's thirst for change and the dawn of a new era.

3- Reading Culture Through Imagery and Symbolism in the Poems

According to Abrams (2015: 186) "Imagery signifies all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, allusion, or in the

vehicles of its similes and metaphors." Perrine (1982: 22) defines a symbol as "something that means more than what it is. It has a literal meaning, but it also suggests or represents another level of meaning." In *Song of Lawino*, Okot p'Bitek uses imagery and symbols in a cumulative way. He combines Acoli traditional genres, and his imagination to infuse his poems with an African dimension. Even readers who do not share the poet's cultural background can easily relate to his ideas thanks to his use of symbols and the imagery that emerges from his style. For instance, in *Song of Lawino* where he is promoting Acoli traditional values, he makes Lawino use some symbols that evoke a special imagery in the minds of the readers. Lawino is lamenting over the cultural loss of her husband to foreign ways. In order to revitalise the manhood of her husband, which she thinks is emasculated by foreign influence, she makes some animal allusions such as the bull, the spear, and the horn which are symbols that create a vivid imagery in the mind of the readers. Lawino reminds Ocol of his lineage, comparing his grandfather to a bull:

My husband
You are a Prince
Of an ancient chiefdom,
Look,
There in the middle of the
homestead
Stands your grandfather's
Shrine,
Your grandfather was a Bull
among men
And although he died long ago
His name still blows like a horn,
His name is still heard
Throughout the land (*SOL*: 116)

The bull in the above extract symbolises virility and boldness; Lawino tries to persuade her husband not only to come back to her but also to rediscover his traditions and culture. For Lawino, her husband "has become a woman" (*SOL*: 113) so, she is reminding him of his

famous ancestry through the use of the bull. In the same perspective, Bodunde (2026: 32) argues that: "[…]Among the Acholi, the bull is a panegyric title used as a compliment and respect." Similarly, the following verses shed more light on the analysis:

My husband was still
A Black man
The son of the Bull
The son of Agik
The woman from Okol
Was still a man,
An Acoli. (*SOL*: 113)

Thus, through Lawino's use of the 'Bull' – which is also a title amongst the Acoli people – Okot p'Bitek conveys and highlights African identity. Throughout her song, Lawino repeatedly draws on animal imagery. In section eleven, which is considered as the most "elaborate section of the poem" (Heron, 1972: 99) she exposes the malfunctioning of politics in post-colonial Africa. Here again, she uses animal imagery to show the deplorable situation in which politicians put the people. She says:

And while the pythons of
sickness
Swallow the children
And the buffaloes of
poverty
And ignorance stands there
Like an elephant
The war leaders
Are tighthy locked in bloody
feuds,
Eating each other's liver
(*SOL*: 111)

The significance of these animal imagery lies in the fact that, through them, the poet expresses a sense of pride and his mastery of the associated cultural norms, thereby striking a chord with the reader.

Lawino describes the desperate situation in which the people of post-colonial Africa find themselves.Sickness is compared to the pythons, which swallow children; poverty is symbolised by buffaloes which knock people down and ignorance is compared to an elephant which is unable to move away quickly. Reading these verses creates an image of these animals in the reader's mind. The use of these giant animals—which are difficult to slay and symbolise strength and destruction—enables the poet to evoke certain ills that are undermining contemporary Africa. Beyond this understanding, it is important to agree with Ojaide (1996: 12) in emphasising that: "Plants and animals like the iroko tree, the spider, tortoise, hyena, bull, and giraffe, among others, have symbolic meaning which African folklore has given them." By using some of these symbols in his poems, Okot p'Bitek brings his people's folklore and cultural heritage to life through his writing. It is also important to note that Okot p'Bitek's use of these animals as symbols, is done sometimes metaphorically and other times with the use of similes. In the above extract, he uses metaphors while evoking 'pythons' and 'buffaloes' whereas he uses a simile while evoking 'elephant'. This significant technique employed by the poet is worth analysing. Through it, p'Bitek draws on traditional imagery as a source of inspiration. This is the reason why Ngara (1990: 70) writes, "Okot p'Bitek has the ability to make use of traditional tropes and modes of expressions in a manner which enriches his poetry and lends it a peculiar freshness."

In another instance of her song, Lawino reacts to her husband's denigration of the black woman's beauty. She achieves this through a kind of identity assertion. She is happy to be what she is and she does not wish to copy and be like White women as her rival Clementina does. She is convinced whatever she does, nothing will change about that facet of her identity, and she tries to convince her husband about this reality. Through the poem, Lawino is admonishing Ocol not to abandon his indigenous culture and here again Okot p'Bitek makes Lawino use symbols that allude to animals. The following verses explain Lawino's point, showing the irreversibility of some aspects of our identity:

Listen
Ostrich plumes differ

From chicken feathers,
A monkey's tail
Is different from that of the
giraffe,
The crocodile's skin
Is not like the guinea fowl's
And the hippo is naked, and
hairless. (*SOL*: 51)

With these allusions to animals, the poet aims at touching the nerve of the African sensitivity. For him, the crocodile's skin cannot be compared to that of the hippo because they are not the same, hence, the Acoli, with their black skin should not compare themselves to white people; they should rather be proud of what they are. With these imageries, the message of the poet appears evident to the readers. After evoking these animal imageries, Lawino further explains to her husband that the differences that exist between races are not changeable; so she is an Acoli woman and so will she remain forever. She explains these things to Ocol because he despises her for not being and behaving like a White woman. She lays emphasis on her ideas with the image of other animals as follows:

No Leopard
Would change into a hyena,
And the crested crane
Would hate to be changed
Into the bold-headed,
Dung-eating vulture
The long-necked and graceful
Giraffe
Cannot become a monkey. (*SOL*: 56)

Here again, Lawino is seen at wit in her mastery of comparisons, and animal allusions. The images of these different animals readily strike the mind of the readers. To back up her claims, Lawino explains to Ocol, still using animal imagery, that:

The hair of the Acoli

Is different from that of the Arabs
The Indians hair
Resembles the tail of the horse;
[…]A white woman's hair
Is soft like silk;
It is light
And brownish like
That of the brown monkey (*SOL*: 51)

Animal allusions in the poems play important roles in creating mental pictures in the readers' mind, thus contributing to the understanding of the poems. Symbolically, the poet refers to these animal traits for the purpose of reaching his readership more efficiently. Thus in the above extract, he points out the difference between the Acoli woman's hair, that of the Indian's and the white woman's. Here the poet seeks to instil a sense of pride in the Acoli; and he succeeds fully in doing so.

In many other instances in the poem, p'Bitek uses symbolism to convey his message. For instance, his evocation of sex and libido in the poems is revealing in this respect. When he addresses the subject of sex, he does not do so directly; rather, he uses indirect language, rich in symbols and imagery. The following extract from the poem supports this analysis. Lawino says:

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 (*SOL*: 70)

The language used by the poet in this extract is full of meanings, which need to be decoded. In line seven he expresses the maturity of the girl after her first menstruation which means that she is ready to become a mother. “Sowing” (*SOL*: 70) in line eight indicates the act of getting a woman pregnant. “The gardener” (*SOL*: 70), who is the man or the husband then comes carrying the seeds with a good and strong hoe which represents a man’s ability to impregnate a woman. It goes without saying that the diction of the poet in these verses shows that he is using the Acoli patterns of language. Seeing the moon, for women, means having their menstruation. Instead of using the expression “menstruation”, p’Bitek prefers doing a direct translation from his native language. This applies to many African languages at least in Togo where many local languages refer to menstruations as the fact of seeing the moon for women. This means that p’Bitek makes a faithful translation from Acoli to English so as to “recapture all the original local flavour” of his mother tongue (Chukwukere, 1972: 85). A closer analysis of the lines above leads to the following interpretations: the gardener referred to in these lines is a phallic symbol used by p’Bitek to allude to men. Thus, Okot p’Bitek uses his local language to brilliantly convey traditional imagery to the English-speaking reader. Readers can easily recognise the characteristic features of the Acoli style of expression in p’Bitek’s use of language. Okot p’Bitek’s ability to communicate with his audience lies in his mastery of language.

Conclusion

This study has examined the use of poetic devices and their

contribution to the socio-cultural vision in Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. The analysis has demonstrated that Okot p’Bitek skillfully combines his Acoli cultural heritage with the English language to communicate his social, cultural, and ideological concerns. Through his creative manipulation of language and poetic techniques, the poet develops his ideas and arguments in ways that engage readers while making complex social issues accessible and meaningful. The use of similes is particularly significant in the two

poems. Through vivid and culturally familiar comparisons, Okot p'Bitek enriches his poetry and makes his ideas more vivid, comprehensible, and accessible readers. Personification also plays an important role in communicating the cultural identity of the Acoli people and highlighting the social problems affecting their society. Furthermore, the semiotic analysis of symbols and imagery has revealed how Okot p'Bitek draws extensively on elements of Acoli culture to construct and communicate his socio-cultural vision. Cultural symbols, images, traditional practices, and indigenous modes of expression are woven into the poems to reinforce the poet's critique of cultural disorder and the uncritical adoption of Western values. This blending of traditional Acoli cultural elements with modern literary expression gives Okot p'Bitek's poetry its singular character and enables him to address important questions of identity, culture, modernity, and social change. Overall, the study concludes that the poetic devices in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* are not merely aesthetic features; they serve important social and cultural functions.

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