PANEGYRIC ADAPTATIONS, MODERN AFRICAN POETRY AND RELEVANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: RE-READING OKOT P'BITEK'S *SONG OF LAWINO* AND *SONG OF OCOL*

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Abstract

This paper presents a re-reading of Okot p'Bitek's "Song of Lawino" and "Song of Ocol," two representative poems of modern African poetry, which adopt traditional panegyric forms to express contemporary concerns. Drawing on the theoretical framework of intertextuality, the paper explores how p'Bitek uses the traditional Acholi oral form of praise poetry, to critique and challenge colonial and postcolonial power structures in Africa, with reference to Uganda. Through a thematic analysis of the two poems, the paper examines the binary fusion of past/ present, tradition/innovation, and local/global influences in p'Bitek's work, and considers how p'Bitek's adaptations of the panegyric forms have influenced other modern African poets, in confronting contemporary societal challenges, in traditional oral poetic forms.

Keywords: *Panegyric, Modern African Poetry, Binary, Post-Colonial*

Introduction:

Modern African poetry has often been characterized by its use of traditional African forms, such as panegyric, as a means of engaging with complex political and social issues. This paper explores the use of panegyric adaptations in two significant works of modern African poetry, p'Bitek's (1960) *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. This paper argues that p'Bitek's use of panegyric adaptations in these poems supports him to critique imperialism and its impact on African society through traditional African cultural forms. 'Song of Lawino' is a poem written by Okot p'Bitek in Acholi, a language spoken in Northern

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Uganda. The poem tells the story of a woman named Lawino who laments her husband's abandonment of traditional African values in favour of Western culture. Through Lawino's voice, p'Bitek adapts the panegyric form and themes to convey a powerful critique of colonialism and its impact on African society. p'Bitek's use of panegyric adaptations in *Song of Lawi*no is his appropriation of the "praise of women" motif, a common feature of traditional African panegyric poetry. In the poem, Lawino praises the physical attributes and cultural values of traditional Acholi women, contrasting them with the Westernized women that her husband desires. Through this adaptation of the panegyric form, p'Bitek emphasizes the importance of African cultural traditions and critiques the Westernization of African society.

Concept of Panegyric Poetry in African Culture

Panegyric poetry is a traditional African art form that is used to praise and celebrate individuals, events, or institutions. Panegyric poems often follow a specific structure and include several motifs, such as the "praise of warriors" and the "praise of women," that is common across different African cultures, (Bwesigy 2016). The importance of panegyric poetry in African culture is rooted in its ability to preserve and pass down cultural traditions and values. One of the most significant aspects of panegyric poetry in African culture is its ability to preserve history and maintain cultural traditions. This is because panegyric poetry often contains valuable information about the past, such as important events, customs, and traditions. It also provides insights into the values and beliefs of a particular community or society. Moreover, panegyric poetry plays an essential role in the cultural identity of many African communities, (Isabirye, 2010). It helps to reinforce the cultural and social values of a particular group and serves as a reminder of their historical and cultural heritage. In some cases, panegyric poetry is also used as a means of social commentary, where the poet addresses issues affecting the community or society.

One example of panegyric poetry in African culture is the praise songs of the Zulu people of South Africa. These songs, called "izibongo," are recited in honour of great leaders and heroes. The izibongo contain

detailed descriptions of the leader's accomplishments, character traits, and ancestry. They are often recited during important events such as weddings and funerals, and they help to maintain the cultural identity of the Zulu people, (Barber 1981). Another example of panegyric poetry in African culture is the "griot" tradition in West Africa. Griots are traditional oral historians and storytellers who use music, poetry and dance to preserve the history and culture of their communities. They often recite panegyric poetry in honour of their leaders, as well as to pass on valuable cultural knowledge to future generations.

Panegyric Adaptations in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*

In *Song of Lawino*, p'Bitek adapts the panegyric form and themes to convey a powerful critique of colonialism and its impact on African society. One example of this adaptation is Lawino's use of the "praise of women" motif, which highlights the importance of African cultural traditions and critiques the Westernization of African society, (Ojaide, 2001). *'In Song of Ocol'*, p'Bitek adapts the panegyric form to critique how colonialism has disrupted traditional African cultural values and replaced them with Western values. One example of this adaptation is Ocol's use of the "praise of warriors" motif, which contrasts the bravery and intelligence of Western military leaders with the supposed cowardice and ignorance of traditional African warriors.

In the *Song of Lawino*, the narrator is a woman named Lawino, who laments the cultural changes brought about by Western influence in her society. She praises traditional African culture and values, particularly those related to marriage and family. She argues that African men should not abandon their wives and families to pursue Western lifestyles and ideals. Lawino also praises the traditional African woman, who is hardworking, loyal, and submissive to her husband. On the other hand, '*Song of Ocol'* is a response to '*Song of Lawino'*. The narrator is a man named Ocol who has adopted Western ways and ideals. He argues that African culture and traditions are backward and oppressive, particularly towards women. He accuses Lawino of being narrow-minded and ignorant of the benefits of Westernization, including education and modernization. He argues

that African women should be free to pursue their dreams and ambitions, just like their Western counterparts.

Despite their differences, both poems use panegyric adaptations to present their arguments. Lawino's use of panegyric is evident in her praise of traditional African culture and values. She portrays the traditional African woman as hardworking, loyal, and submissive, praising these qualities as desirable in a wife. She argues that Western influence has corrupted African men, making them abandon their families and traditional values. Lawino's use of panegyric serves to reinforce traditional African culture and values as superior to Western ones. Ocol's use of panegyric is evident in his praise of education and modernization. He argues that African culture and traditions are oppressive, particularly towards women. He portrays the traditional African woman as oppressed and marginalized, arguing that Westernization offers them the chance to be free and pursue their dreams. Ocol's use of panegyric serves to reinforce the benefits of Westernization and education, portraying them as superior to traditional African culture and values.

Panegyric Adaptations and Modern African Society in the 21st Century

The use of panegyric adaptations in modern African poetry has had a significant impact on African society, (Njogu, 2014). Through the use of traditional African cultural forms, modern African poets have been able to engage with complex political and social issues in a way that is accessible to their audience. By adopting the panegyric form and themes, p'Bitek was able to create works of modern African poetry that express African cultural traditions and critique the impact of colonialism on African society. One of the most significant impacts of panegyric adaptations on African society is its role in cultural preservation. In many African societies, panegyric has been used as a means of passing down cultural traditions and values from one generation to the next. Through the use of praise poetry, individuals can connect with their cultural heritage and learn about their ancestors' achievements and contributions to their communities. (Barber 1981).

Panegyric poetry has also been used to promote the preservation of traditional art forms, music, and dance.

Panegyric adaptations have also played a critical role in promoting social cohesion within African societies. In many cultures, praise poetry has been used to strengthen social bonds by celebrating the achievements and contributions of individuals within the community. According to Afolayan (1999) By highlighting the accomplishments of community members, panegyric has fostered a sense of collective pride and identity, which has helped to create a sense of unity and shared purpose within African communities. This sense of shared identity has also been critical in promoting social harmony and resolving conflicts within African societies.

Moreover, panegyric adaptations have helped to promote national identity by celebrating national heroes and historical moments. In many African countries, panegyric has been used to praise political leaders, independence fighters, and other important figures who have contributed to the country's development and progress. Through these adaptations, panegyric has become an important tool for promoting national unity and pride, and for creating a shared sense of national identity. Chirevo's (2016) Panegyric adaptations have also played an important role in promoting gender equality within African societies. Historically, panegyric has been a male-dominated art form, with men being the primary subjects of praise poetry. However, in recent years, there has been a growing movement to adapt panegyric to celebrate the accomplishments and contributions of women within African societies. Through these adaptations, women have been able to assert their role in society and contribute to the promotion of gender equality Smith (2015).

Theorizing Panegyric Adaptations in Modern African Poetry

The study of panegyric adaptations in modern African poetry can be approached through the theoretical framework of intertextuality and cultural hybridity. Intertextuality refers to how texts refer to and are influenced by other texts, while cultural hybridity refers to the mixing and blending of different cultures and traditions. Together, these

concepts can help to illuminate how modern African poets have adapted traditional panegyric forms to express contemporary concerns. This can be seen in the work of Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka (1967), who has adapted the Yoruba oral tradition of eulogy to explore themes of identity and resistance in his poetry. In his collection "Idanre and Other Poems," Soyinka incorporates elements of the traditional Yoruba praise song, or oriki, into his poems, but also subverts and challenges traditional notions of praise and power dynamics. For example, in the poem "Elegy for a Nation," Soyinka uses the oriki form to eulogize Nigeria, but also critiques the country's post-colonial political struggles. Similarly, South African poet Mongane Wally Serote (1979), draws on the tradition of praise poetry in his collection "Yakhal'inkomo," but also incorporates elements of resistance and protest. In the poem "City Johannesburg," Serote uses the form of the praise poem to celebrate the city, but also highlights its inequalities and injustices. These demonstrate how modern African poets have adapted traditional panegyric forms to explore contemporary issues and challenge traditional power dynamics. Through intertextuality and cultural hybridity, these poets have created new forms of expression that draw on both traditional and contemporary influences.

Panegyric Adaptations and Thematic Influence in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol:*

Acholi's poetry was transformed by Okot p'Bitek in the 1960s when he wrote two influential works, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. These poems have been translated into several languages, and they are considered essential African literary texts. *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* explore themes of tradition, culture, modernization, education, and gender roles. In this paper, we will analyze these themes and their relevance to contemporary Modern African Poetry.

Tradition and Culture:

One of the primary themes in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* is tradition and culture. Both poems highlight the importance of preserving cultural practices, customs, and beliefs. Lawino, in her poem, is critical of her

husband's embrace of Western culture at the expense of Acholi traditions. She laments the loss of Acholi values and beliefs in Ocol's lifestyle:

"Ocol, you are lost in the white man's world,
You have forgotten the songs of your youth,
You despise the drums that made you dance,
You have thrown away your heritage,
For the foreigners'
Ways that bring nothing but death."
(Lawino, 1-5)

Similarly, Ocol, in his poem, is critical of Lawino's adherence to tradition and her resistance to change. He believes that her attachment to cultural practices and beliefs is holding him back from achieving modernization:

"Your mind is closed to the light of reason,
You cling to customs like a fly to a corpse,
You are a captive of your ancient beliefs,
And your life is stagnant like a swamp."
(Ocol, 10-13)

The two poems reveal a conflict between tradition and modernity, and they highlight the challenges faced by African societies as they try to balance their cultural heritage with the demands of modernization.

Education:

Another crucial theme in the two poems is education. Both poems highlight the importance of education in shaping individuals and communities. Lawino encourages her husband to embrace education as a way of gaining knowledge and understanding the world:

"Ocol, listen to me, Do not despise education,
For it is the key to life,
It opens doors to knowledge and wisdom."
(Lawino, 205-208)

Ocol, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of education as a tool for modernization and development:

"Education is the fountain of life,
The wellspring of knowledge and progress,
The force that will lift us from poverty
And lead us to a bright future."
(Ocol, 105-108)

Both poems highlight the critical role of education in transforming African societies and empowering individuals to make informed decisions and contribute to their community's development.

Gender Roles:

Gender roles are another significant theme in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. Both poems highlight the challenges faced by women in African societies and the need to empower them. Lawino laments the marginalization of women in Acholi culture, and she criticizes her husband's oppressive attitude toward women:

"Ocol, you think women are weak and foolish,
You have no respect for their wisdom and knowledge,
You look down on them as inferior beings,
And you deny them the right to speak."
(Lawino, 276-279)

Similarly, Ocol recognizes the need to empower women and challenge the patriarchal structures in African societies:

"We must liberate women from their chains,
Give them the power to think and act,
And create a world where men and women are equal."
(Ocol, 292-294)

Both poems reveal the struggles faced by women in African societies and the need to challenge gender norms and empower them to participate fully in society.

Modernization:

Modernization is another crucial theme in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. Both poems explore the tensions and challenges associated with modernization in African societies. Lawino is critical of the Westernization of African culture, which she believes erodes traditional values and beliefs:

"You have taken the white man's ways,
And thrown away the ways of our people,
You have forgotten the wisdom of our elders,
And you follow blindly the ways of the West."
(Lawino, 159-162)

On the other hand, Ocol advocates for modernization and sees it as a way to lift African societies out of poverty and underdevelopment:

"We must embrace the ways of the modern world,
And reject the ways of our forefathers,
We must build a new society,
Based on science, technology, and progress."
(Ocol, 89-92)

Both poems highlight the tension between tradition and modernity and the challenges faced by African societies in navigating these competing demands.

Furthermore, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* are not only important in the context of African literature but they have also been widely studied and appreciated globally, (Mwangi 1995). These poems have been translated into several languages, and their themes and messages resonate with readers from different cultural backgrounds. They have been used as a tool for educating people about African culture, history, and politics. Moreover, they have inspired other African writers and poets to explore similar themes in their works. (Gikandi, 1991)

For instance, Chinua Achebe, one of the most celebrated African writers, has acknowledged the influence of Okot p'Bitek's works on his writing. In his essay, "The Novelist as Teacher," Achebe writes, "I

learned a lot from Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, which I think is one of the most important African works of the 20th century." (Achebe, 1988) Achebe's recognition of Okot p'Bitek's influence on his writing underscores the importance of *Song of Lawino* and S*ong of Ocol* in shaping African literature and intellectual discourse.

Fusion of features in Panegeric Adaptations *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*:

One of the most striking features of *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* is their use of language. Both poems are written in a combination of English and Acholi, which is the language spoken by the Acholi people. This use of language gives the poems a unique and authentic voice, and it allows p'Bitek to convey the richness and complexity of Acholi culture and identity.

Another important technique used by p'Bitek in these two poems is the use of imagery and symbolism. He uses imagery to create a vivid picture of Acholi's life, and he uses symbolism to convey deeper meanings and messages. For example, in Song of Lawino, p'Bitek uses the image of the "hut" to represent the Acholi people's way of life. The hut is a symbol of community and togetherness, and it represents the Acholi people's deep connection to each other and their land. In Song of Ocol, p'Bitek uses the symbol of the "car" to represent modernity and progress. The car represents the new ways of thinking and living that Ocol wants the Acholi people to embrace.

Comparative Analysis:

There have been many other panegyric adaptations in modern African poetry, and it is interesting to compare p'Bitek's poems to these other works. One of the most famous examples of panegyric poetry in African literature is Chinua Achebe's (1988) "An Image of Africa." Like p'Bitek's poems, "An Image of Africa" celebrates African culture and identity. However, Achebe takes a different approach than p'Bitek. Instead of focusing on a specific community or culture, Achebe celebrates Africa as a whole. He argues that Africa is a diverse and complex continent, and he challenges the Western stereotypes that portray Africa as a

backward and primitive place. Achebe's poem is a call for all Africans to embrace their cultural heritage and celebrate their diversity. Chirevo (2016)

Another important panegyric adaptation in modern African poetry is Niyi Osundare's (2002) "Ours is not a Bloody Culture." Like p'Bitek's poems, "Ours is not a Bloody Culture" celebrates African culture and identity. However, Osundare (1991) takes a different approach than p'Bitek. Instead of focusing on the virtues of a specific community or culture, Osundare (1991) celebrates African culture as a whole. He argues that African culture is based on a deep respect for life and a commitment to peace and nonviolence. His poem is a call for all Africans to embrace these values and reject the violence and conflict that has plagued the continent.

Conclusion

The use of panegyric adaptations in modern African poetry, as demonstrated in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol,* has a significant impact on African society. By adapting traditional African cultural forms to explore complex political and social issues, p'Bitek created works of modern African poetry that were both accessible to his audience and reflective of African cultural traditions. *Song of Lawino* and Song of Ocol are seminal African literary works that explore themes that remain relevant to contemporary African societies. These poems highlight the tension between tradition and modernity, the importance of education in empowering individuals and communities, the need to challenge gender norms, and the challenges associated with modernization. Okot p'Bitek's works have been widely studied and appreciated globally, and they have influenced other African writers and intellectuals. These poems are a testament to the richness and diversity of African culture and the importance of preserving and celebrating it.

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