The poetry of okot p’bitek

Okot p’Bitek in his Song of Lawino, Song of Ocol, Song of Prisoner, and Song of Malaya, makes a definite impression on modern African poetry. In all these poems, (except Song of Ocol to some extent), he makes use of oral tradition as a basic foundation or launching pad. p’Bitek himself, justifies this approach which he says:

…the vast majority of our people in the countryside have a full-blooded literary culture so deep, so vivid and alive that for the moment the very little written stuff appears almost irrelevant (quotd in Roscoe, 10)

What are p’Bitek’s concerns in these “Songs”, especially Song of Lawino? It is to make Africans aware of the richness and diversity of their African heritage. By this self-imposed crusade, he hopes to make meaning out of African traditions to modern-day Africans hemmed in on all sides by the destabilizing effects of modern western-oriented lifestyles. Commenting on this perspective, Roscoe (32) says:

Okot’s whole career as poet,…singer…. has been concerned with the problem of making tradition meaningful to modernity and avoiding Western solutions to African problems.

From this preliminary survey of critical commentary we go into p’Bitek’s actual works, beginning with Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol.

Song of Lawino depicts a heroine who laments the rejection of African tradition for western ways by the educated elite. By using the song style, the poem is not just a lament, but a series of songs meant to celebrate African culture. Cook (231) implies this trend when he says that Lawino’s

Urge (is) to celebrate in (her) own right the positive qualities of a threatened tradition.

Celebration in poetry is an aspect of African traditional oral culture. Lewis Nkosi confirms this when he asserts

…In this community the poet or the artist in general is there to “celebrate” his own or his society’s sense of being …and not there to subvert its social values or moral order (quotd in Cook, 231).

What are the African values that Lawino celebrates? These are: African aesthetics (or beauty), African concepts of religion, death, education and medicine, among others. These are contrasted with their European counterparts, and the verdict is that the former are superior. For these reasons, the poet-persona keeps repeating the refrain: “Let no one uproot the pumpkin from the old homestead” – meaning that one’s traditional culture should not be destroyed or abandoned recklessly. The “pumpkin” and the “homestead” are symbolic of African traditional culture.

Lawino, who also symbolizes African tradition, adopts as the butt of her attacks, her husband Ocol. Ocol is symbolic of the modern educated African, who has adopted wholesale, European cultural and mental attitudes. Ocol is artistically presented as rejecting African tradition, when Lawino says in the opening lines:
Husband, now you despise me
Now you treat me with spite
And say I have inherited the stupidity of my aunt;
Son of the Chief
Now you compare me
With rubbish in the rubbish pit,
You say you no longer want me
Because I am like the thing left behind
In the deserted homestead. (p.34)

It is this rejection of the old for the modern that bestows Lawino’s song the quality of lament: “My clansmen, I cry” (p. 35).

She soon picks on her husband’s mistress, Clementine. In this instance, she portrays the European idea of aesthetics as it relates to women’s beauty. The satiric comments Lawino makes about Clementine are sharp and sultry:

Brother, when you see Clementine!
The beautiful one aspires
To look like a white woman;
………………………………
She dusts the ash-dirt over
her face
And when little sweat Begins to appear on
her body
She looks like the guinea fowl!
………………………………
And she believes
That this is beautiful (p. 37)

To this, she juxtaposes the African concept of beauty:

Ask me what beauty is
To the Acoli And I will tell you;
………………
Young girls
Whose breasts are just emerging
Smear shea butter on their bodies
The beautiful oil from Labworomor,
You adorn yourself for the dance
If your string-skirt Is ochre-red/you do your hair
With ochre ….. (pp. 51, 52).
She also picks up European religion and compares it with African traditional religions. Her verdict is that the latter is more real to the African than Christianity

Ocol laughs at me
Because I cannot
Cross myself properly
In the name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Clean Ghost (p.74)

The above is a reference to Christian catechism. Next, she picks up the church catechists for bashing. The catechist she says, makes only meaningless sounds:

The teacher was an Acoli
But he spoke the same language
As the white priests
His nose was blocked
And he tried
To force his words
Through his blocked nose,
……………………………..
Then you look at the teacher
Barking meaninglessly
Like the yellow monkey, (p.76)

Contrasted with this, is her traditional religion, which is partly symbolized by the traditional healer, whom Ocol condemns:

Ocol condemns diviner-priests
And Acoli herbalists…. (p.93)

Aside from the role of the traditional healer as a symbol of traditional religion, he also represents the African notion of medicine. Of course, Ocol as an educated man and a Christian would not allow African medicine or juju into his house. But Lawino goes on to give few examples of herbal medicines as illustrated by this traditional cough medicine.

The shoots of “lapena”
For coughs and sore throats – You put some salt in it And chew it!
The shoots “lapena” and “olim” Are chewed when they have Removed the blockage in the throat (p.96)

She contrasts this with Ocol’s predilection for Western medicine:

He says
I do not know/ the rules of health,
And I mix up/matters of health and superstitions….(p.101)

In spite of this, she affirms the potency of African traditional medicine:

   It is true
   White man’s medicines are
   Strong/ but Acoli medicines
   Are also strong (p. 101)

Western education also comes in for attack. And in this case, Western education is epitomized by her husband’s house which she describes as a “forest of books”. According to Lawino, the books have made Ocol to lose his head:

   Listen, my clansmen,
   I cry over my husband
   Whose head is lost
   Ocol has lost his head
   In the forest of books
   …………………..
   My husband’s house
   Is a dark forest of books (p.113)
Her lament here is strident because her woes arise from the fact of her husband’s education which results in his abandonment of “the old one” (Lawino)

Lawino also portrays the African conception of death as being a phenomenon that is all-powerful, and no earthly force could resist it:

   White diviner-priests
   Acoli herbalists,
   All medicine men and medicine women
   Are good, are brilliant
   When the day has not yet/dawned For
the great journey/the last safari
   To Pagak (p. 103).

Finally, she makes commentaries about the lot of the common man, and the mercenary activities of the political elite. She criticizes the political elite’s mercenary motives:

   The stomach seems to be
   A powerful force
   For joining political parties (p.108)

And against this mercenary motive, what is the lot of the common man? It is deplorable:

   And while the pythons of /sickness
Swallow the children
And the buffaloes of poverty
Knock the people down
And ignorance stands there
Like an elephant
The war leaders
Are tightly locked in bloody
Feuds/Eating each other’s liver (p.111)

To Lawino, therefore, modernity has not brought as much benefits as Ocol would want her to believe. She sums up by calling for Ocol’s purification and re-admittance into tribal norms:

The blindness that you got in the library Will be removed by the diviner!

..........................
Son of the Bull
Let no one uproot
The pumpkin (pp. 118-120)

This statement or refrain is a re-iteration of African values. Ocol’s reply in Song of Ocol lacks the cogency of Lawino’s arguments. He prefers to dwell on insults:

Woman
Your song
Is the rotting buffalo
Left behind by
Fleeing poachers
Its nose blocked (p.122)

Ocol who symbolically represents the modern, educated African enamoured of European tradition, presents himself by denigrating African culture:

I see an Old Homestead
In the valley below
Huts, granaries… All in ruins.

He is unapologetic and seems to be saying that old things must pass away so that Africa may move along with the times. Africa, to him is too backward:

Africa,
Idle giant
Basking in the sun
Sleeping, snoring
Twitching in dreams …… (p. 125)
He therefore calls for a reconstruction, through demolition:

We will uproot granaries
Break up the cooking pots
And water pots …. (p. 127)

We shall build
A new city on the hill

Techniques of presentation used by okot p’bitek

What are some of the techniques that Okot p’Bitek uses in realizing his message? Some of these are as follows:

The Use of Monologue: In this case, the monologue is a song: a solo. There is a built-in audience in almost all of his poems. For example, in Song of Lawino we find that Lawino is addressing not only Ocol, but also her clansmen:

Husband, now you despise me
Now you treat me with spite…. (p.34).

In Song of Ocol, Ocol addresses Lawino:

Woman,
Shut up!
Pack your things
Go! (p.121)

In Song of Malaya, the persona is a prostitute. She addresses an in-built audience comprising fellow prostitutes, sailors, workers, and even wives of men who patronize her: And you

My married sister
You whose husband
I also love dearly
(quotd in Moore, 189)

Similarly, the prisoner in Song of Prisoner addresses himself to his captors:

Open the door,
Man
I want to dance…
(quotd in Moore, 186)

The Use of the Dirge Style: The poem Song of Lawino is a lamentation, and true to its type, it adopts the African dirge format:

My clansmen, I cry
Listen to my voice… (p.35)

Listen my clansmen
I cry over my husband ...(p. 113)

**The Song-style:** That Okot p’Bitek’s poems are songs, are proven by their titles: *Song of Ocol, Song of Malaya, Song of Prisoner,* among others. And within the poems themselves, there are references to song, as in *Song of Lawino:*

> And they sang silently: Song  
> Father prepare the kraal  
> The cattle are coming (p.48)

**Use of Praise Names:** In *Song of Lawino,* for example, Lawino makes use of praise names in addressing Ocol. This is partly to demonstrate the deep love and respect she still has for her husband. But at a deeper level, it is symptomatic of an African heroic tradition normally present in panegyrics. Some of the praise names she uses are:

(a) Son of the Bull (p.119)  
(b) Son of a Chief (p.34)

Heron remarks that  
Lawino’s use of oblique respectful titles reflects the fact that she is  
…living within a peasant community in which the titles and praise names  
are still meaningful.(quotd in Moore,183).

**The Use of Exaggeration:** Okot p’Bitek frequently uses exaggeration to make his points, in most of his poems. In *Song of Lawino,* Lawino exaggerates the ugliness of Clementine, with particular attention to the breasts:

> They have made nests of cotton/wool  
> And she folds the bits of cow-hide  
> In the nests/And calls them  
> breasts!

Describing the charade that was political independence, Ocol in *Song of Ocol* says:

> The lamb  
> Uhuru/Dead as stone,  
> The shimmering flies  
> Giving false life  
> To its open eyes! (p.143)

Similarly, in *Song of Prisoner,* the prisoner in an attempt to describe the vigorousness of the dance he would like to take part in, uses exaggeration as follows:

> I want to join/the funeral dances  
> I want to tread the earth  
> With a vengeance/ and shake in bones of my father in his grave:  
> (quotd in Moore,186).
The Use of Language: Okot p’Bitek makes use of language in a unique way. Since his poems are derived from the traditional oral folklore of the Acoli people, his imagery is Acoli, and at once African. His diction is also simple, transliterating the diction and nuances of popular rendition in the African Oral arts. Commenting on this phenomenon, Roscoe (44) says:

Just as Okot’s lines are largely free of inert language, so his actual choice of diction shows a preference for the plain and common core… we must see it within the realms of “orature”.

He uses the language of local imagery. To underscore the use of local imagery, Lawino characterizes Clementine as a guinea-fowl; her husband’s library is likened to “a forest”. She brings in other images drawn from the locale, like monkey, giraffe, bee, scorpion; and even typically Acoli words like “Pollok, Jok, Malakwang, Oju, lajanawara bird, Lapena and Olim, among others.

Ocol also makes references to “moran, shuka, olam, shenzi, etc.

Aside from these, Ocol, in Song of Ocol uses a much more sophisticated and dense language, thus:

A large arc
Of semi desert land
Strewn with human skeletons …(p.136)

The reason for such sophisticated language is to reflect correctly, Ocol’s substantial Western education. These are just few of the techniques used by Okot p’Bitek. His intention, as earlier stated, was to make tradition real to the modern African. In this regard, we can see him as holding a vision similar to that held by the Negritude writers - to re-establish the respect and pride of Africa and the Black world.