

Research

OKOT PBITEK'S *SONG OF LAWINO AND OCOL*¹: A BATTLE OF COSMOS AND ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

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Abstract. Okot pBitek's *Song of Lawino and Ocol* manifests a conflict caused by Cosmos and Ontological differences between African and western culture. The main character, Lawino in the *Song of Lawino*, laments of the cultural death of her western educated husband Ocol. Examining the book through the lens of African Philosophy, it is shown that Lawino has no sufficient knowledge about western cosmos and its ontology. Thus her argument is centered upon the protest and defense of Okoli's tradition and customs. Two perspectives seem to conflict within *Song of Lawino and Ocol*. First is the way Ocol views African tradition and customs and second is the way Lawino regards her religion and the foreign religion into which her husband has been converted. Ocol in *Song of Ocol*, seems to attack the center of African ontology. He sees that Lawino's beliefs in African tradition and customs is superstition. In the side of argument, Ocol appears to be stronger because he knows the weakness of his society. Being the advocate and prophesying western civilization, he understands what he advocates through the knowledge he acquires from reading.

(Song of Ocol), Ocol shifts from attacking Ocol's culture and his attack is extended to African culture in its totality. He attacks the Gikuyu,, the Ankole women of Rwanda and Burundi, the Swahili women with their buibui attires, the Luo, the Karamajong the Kalenjin and the Maasai warriors. The fact that Ocol shifts his attack to cover the large area of African tradition and customs shows that the two characters are used symbolically to represent traditional Africans (Lawino) and educated Africans who who are represented by the character Ocol. However, despite the fact that Ocol is educated, he retains his roots just as Ocol tribe retains his name.

Keywords: African poetry, cosmos, literature, ontology, *Song of Lawino and Ocol*

Introduction

Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino and Ocol* is hinged upon the conflict caused by Cosmos and Ontological differences between African and western culture. A close reading in the voice of Lawino reveals the protest against the attempt of Ocol to make contempt of his own culture by regarding it as primitive and favoring western ways of life. The Cosmos,²⁾ that universe which is thought in Lawino's mind is the product of her history and culture. Thus, it becomes difficulty for her to correlate it with western cosmos. The order of the Western cosmos, described through Okol's behavior, interferes with her cosmos and her ontology. Two cosmos in this poetry seem to clash each other. The clashes of cosmos appear to create an ontological conflict as we shall see in the analysis.

Ontology as a Concept

The term ontology³⁾ has its derivation from Greek word, whereas "onto" stands for "being", and "logos" can be described as study of or simply as science. Thus, ontology, as conventionally known, is the science or study of being.

Lawson (2004) identifies two categories in which ontology can be applied namely: *scientific ontology* and *philosophical ontology*. The former “is easily extended to include significant objects of extra-scientific thinking” while the latter is “the study of what it is to be or to exist, with all the things they have in common”.

Song of Lawino and Ocol

Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* was originally composed in Ocol language as *Wer Pa Lawino*. The main character, Lawino, is the woman who laments of the cultural death of her western educated husband Ocol. She describes him “as a man who obtains western education that makes him return with nothing but contempt for the ways of his parents and his wife” (*Song of Lawino and Ocol*, p.12). Ocol, being educated, forsakes his wife and chooses another woman (Clementine) who appropriates Lawino’s place. Throughout the song, whenever the voice of Lawino is heard, Lawino seems to defend the customs of her ancestors by pointing to the errors of Ocol who departs from them. Lawino compares the customs to ‘a pumpkin of homestead’ and she insists that ‘it should not be uprooted’. By Ocol’s marriage to Clementine, Lawino blames Ocol for his adherence to Western culture while he clings to polygamy, the common practice among the traditional Ocols. Nevertheless, Lawino is astonished with Ocol’s decision to marry Clementine, a woman who is described by Lawino to be ‘no younger than her and one who cannot match her in none of her womanly accomplishment’.

Song of Lawino and Ocol can be viewed as dramatic in which the two parts allow a reader to hear two voices: that of Lawino and that of Ocol. Heron (1989) thinks that “a great deal of the appeal of Song of Lawino can be well seen in Lawino’s rivalry with Clementine”. This study examines the conflict within the text. It tries to emulate the truth which can be brought by the following vital questions: does Lawino comprehend the cosmos of Westerners? Is it inadequacy of knowledge which prompts her to criticize what she doesn’t

know? Has Ocol and Clementine forsaken totally Ocol's customs or have they been trapped into dual cosmos and ontology? Are the two characters symbolic and what do they represent? This study approaches the text through close reading and explains the meaning thereof through African philosophy.

Locked out of Western Cosmos and Ontologism

A close reading of the text shows that Lawino is void of knowledge about western cosmos and its ontology. She laments that her husband is looking her with contempt and he considers her ignorant because she has not been to school. She is also viewed by her husband as the one who has no any religion because she has not been initiated in western religion through baptism. In defense, Lawino does not, however, reject all the allegations presented by her husband as the following verses reveal:

You say I do not know the letter
A
Because I have not been to school
And I have not been baptized (34; ch.1)
.....
I do not understand
The ways of foreigners
But I do not despise their
Customs.
Why should you despise yours? (41; ch.2)

The text above indicates that Lawino comes from a society where literacy is not known and where superstitions are used as the means of dictating judgments. This, distances her from the thorough comprehension of western way of living. In her cosmos she heaps blames upon literacy as the source of Ocol's loss as the following verses indicate:

My husband has read much,
He has read extensively and
Deeply
He has read among white men
And he is clever like white men
And reading
Has killed my man,
In the ways of his people
He has become
A stump. (113; ch.12)

In the text above Lawino agrees that western education has helped her husband to resemble the white men in wisdom. However, she argues that, such knowledge has made him to be like a dead person because instead of appreciating customs of his people, Ocol has thrown them away. On the surface, the destruction of African culture is manifested in the life of Ocol. However, underneath it, Lawino seems to express how literacy has corrupted Ocol's mind. This can be seen how Lawino describes books from whence Ocol sips the nectar of his wisdom. Lawino compares books to "a dark forest from which different trees and deadly animals and people exist as the following text shows:

My husband's house
Is dark forest of books.
Some stand there
Tall and huge
Like the *tido* tree

Some are old
Their barks are peeling off

And they smell strongly.
Some are thin and soft.
The backs of some books
Are hard like the rocky stem of
the *poi* tree,
Some are green
Others red as blood
Some books are black and oily,
Their backs shine like
The dangerous *ororo* snake
Coiled on a tree top.

Some have pictures on their backs,
Dead faces of witch-looking men
and women,
Unshaven, bold, fat-stomached
Bony-cheeked, angry revengeful-
looking people,
Pictures of men and women
Who died long ago. (113,114; ch.12)

The voice in Lawino indicates that she lacks proper understanding of that cosmos from which the understanding of Ocol is planted. She views Ocol's behavior through the lens of what she knows. The diction employed by Lawino to describe Ocol's books reveal how she understands the world. Note that to her understanding, the world is the one where humanity is viewed without separating it from its flora and fauna. Lawino, therefore, describes Ocol's books as 'dark forest' whose habitation comprises of trees and deadly poisonous snakes. The word 'darkness' as it is compared to the forest in the text above, can be

viewed as a symbol, representing the impact brought by Ocol's reading to his personality. Books, as the text implies, has turned Ocol's mind into darkness.

Whenever he starts reading, Ocol' is lost in a forest where only huge trees, poisonous snakes, witch and dead people live. The portrayal of pictures on the top of the books is a vindication of her ontology brought by her cosmos. The books are described to have pictures of "witch-looking men and women unshaven, bold, fat-stomached bony-cheeked, angry revengeful-looking people, the portrayal that comes from her cosmos and the prior knowledge of her environment.

Lawino also accepts that she does not know the behavior of the white men including their culture and customs. This shows that her attempt to pinpoint the errors in their way of living is shattered by lack of knowledge. Lawino does not know how European eat, dance and how they adorn themselves. Lacking this knowledge, she tends to think that the proper, say, dancing should be done in an open arena where men and women dance separately exposing all parts of their bodies as the following text reveals:

It is a dance in broad daylight
In the open
You cannot hide anything
.....
All parts of the body
Are shown in the arena!
Health and liveliness
Are shown in the arena! (43 ch.3)

The text shows that Lawino favors her tradition way of dancing in which all dancing process is conducted in day time and in an open space. The text suggests openness and transparency as the characterization of African dancing. In contrast, Lawino considers western dancing as shameful where everything is

characterized by obscurity. Apart from that, she considers western dances as it is explained in the bellow text, as something that lowers the dignity of humanity as perceived by Lawino for the dancers hold tightly cheek against cheek hand of men upon the waists of women even if the two dancers are not tied with marital ties.

I cannot dance ball room
Dance
Being held so tightly
I feel ashamed
Being held so tightly in public
.....
Women throw their arms
Around the necks of their
Partners
And put their cheeks
On the cheeks of their men.
Men hold the waists of the
Women
Tightly, tightly...

Two things appear to be obvious from the above texts. One is the question of cultural comprehension that can occur between two cultures: western and African, and two is the question of morality among the two cultures. Of the former it is likely that Lawino is likely to pass judgment on the way European dance because her traditional dancing is due to her culture and not European culture. Whenever it comes to the issue of morality, two cultures are likely to point to each other of moral decadence. The dancing of the Ocol, where all parts are shown is likely to be taken by European as sign of immorality just as Lawino sees the dancing of two partners where the two hold each other tightly.

Lawino sees Clementine in western makeup in which she resembles a guinea fowl. The imagery which Lawino uses when to describe Clementine is anthropomorphic. This is because animism constitutes her cosmos. The guinea fowl is here important memory because she cannot describe anything separate from its flora and fauna as we have described above.

Brother when you see
Clementine!
The beautiful one aspires
To look like a white woman
.....
Tina dusts powder on her face
And looks so pale;
She resembles the wizard
Getting ready for the midnight
dance.
She dusts the ash-dirt all over
her face
And when little sweat
Begins to appear on her body
She looks like the guinea fowl! (36; ch.2)

The Conflict of Religious Ontology

Two systems of beliefs seem to conflict within *Song of Lawino*. First is in the way Ocol views tradition Ocol's religion after he has embraced western religion. Second is how Lawino regards her religion and the foreign religion in which her husband has been converted into. The following text shows how Ocol views his wife and her people:

He says we are all kaffirs

We do not know the ways of
God
We sit in deep darkness
And do not know the Gospel, (35; ch1)

My husband rejects me
Because he says
That I am a mere pagan
And I believe in the devil. (101; ch.10)

The fact that Lawino and her people cling to tradition religion makes them to be considered *kaffir* and pagans as they are viewed by Ocol. This implies that in his new faith, Ocol believes that any person who “does not know the way of God and who comprehends not the essence of the Gospel is a lost person. However, Lawino seems to draw a similar picture of Ocol’s new religion and she seems to question whether Ocol’s religion does not contain elements of superstitions as the following text reveals:

Ocol does not go
To the shrine of the ancestors.
He says it is foolish to do so,
.....
He says when we suffer misfortune
We should say:
look Mariya
Mother of Hunchback...
We should pray to Joseph
And Peter and Luka
And the ancestors of
white men.

My husband wears
A small crucifix
On his neck,
And all his daughters
Wear rosaries. (92,93; ch.10)

Lawino contrasts between what is considered paganism and true religion. She sees no differences between the two religions because they all are grounded upon the worship of ancestors. In fact, she seems to pity Ocol because being black he rejects worshipping in the way of his ancestors because he considers it to be paganism and rather he chooses to worship ancestors of the white men.

When fevers trouble my child
Frequently
When all the diseases
Have fallen in love with him,
And all youthful diseases
Run after him
As if he was a beautiful girl,
So that he has coughs and
Dysentery
And throat trouble and eye
Sickness,
And his ears have pus
And his legs have ulcers
And he is bony, skinny
And his loin-string is loose,
I know that this is not for

Nothing!

I know that someone is behind

It. (96,97 ch 10)

The text above reveals once again a prominent issue which manifest Lawino's understanding on the cause of calamities. In the previous lines (not quoted), Lawino has blamed Ocol on associating malady with lack of hygienic observation. In her cosmological understanding, Lawino does not agree with Ocol. Neither does she agree that treatment could be ministered after diagnoses. She rather relies on a logical observation of the sick person and the trial of different traditional medicines to the sick person. Whenever the disease seems to be persistent and incurable as the text reveals, Lawino sees that there should be a cause which is beyond ordinary human comprehension. The text reveals that, the persistence of disease can be associated by external forces applied to the sick person. These forces can either be caused by someone who might have 'hidden the child's excreta in a tree fork' or the hair of the sick person might be buried by someone in a river bed. Lawino believes that the doer of that action might be either a jealous woman or even a close relative. In traditional African perspective, whenever a phenomenon involves external forces which one understands them not occurs; counter external forces are sought for regulating the situation. The following text reveals how the solution to the problem is obtained.

A diviner priest must be called.

He will divine

And tell the killer,

The jealous one will be found

Out! (97, ch.10)

Why should a diviner priest must be called? Among the Africans, vital forces are believed to dominate over circumstances. God is perceived to be the

highest person and the highest force. Under him, there are spirits that control human affairs. The diviner is the mediator between humanity and other higher forces. Thus, it is the diviner who is expected to reveal everything revealed to him/her by the highest forces as the text above shows.

Although death in African perception is viewed as a creation of God prepared for the function of removing human being from the world when their time is finished, it appears to be Njoku's observation on the concept of life, that God is the source of life (Njoku, 2002). Nevertheless, death is the only force which Lawino expresses that it is beyond human control and which no any power can control it. In the text quoted below, Lawino personifies death by giving it women's attributes. The tendency of personifying it agrees with the argument of Opoku (1978) who argues that ancestors take part in in the communal life and they cannot be separated from the life and hereafter of the traditional Africans. Before we discuss, here is once again a text which show the power of death as seen by Lawino.

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

White diviner priests
Acol 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 Pagak⁴).

Death in this text is referred to the last safari to Pagak, the journey in which none returns. This text shows that Lawino perceives death as the force which no any other force can prevent when it comes.

Ocol seems to attack the center of Okoli's ontology. He sees that Lawino's belief in tradition Okoli's religion is superstition. In the side of argument, Ocol seems to be stronger because being a member of the tribe he knows the weakness of his society. The knowledge of his society allows him to assess the strength and the weakness and hence he centers on the weakness as part of his criticism as it can be viewed in the following text.

To hell
With your pumpkins
And your old homesteads
To hell
The husks
Of old traditions
And meaningless customs.

We will smash
The taboo
One by one.
Explode the basis
Of every superstition.
We will uproot

Every sacred tree
And demolish every ancestral
Shrine.

The above text reveals how Ocol understands the ontology of his society and its weakness. In reaction to what has been said by Lawino when convincing Ocol to consider his ancestor's tradition and customs, Ocol regards tradition and customs as meaningless. He sees that superstitions should all be gotten rid of including the ancestors' worship as practiced by his tribes' members. This text suggests that unlike Lawino who has a limited knowledge about western cosmos, Ocol attacks something he knows and his attack is systematic. Nevertheless, being the advocate and prophesying western civilization, he understands what he advocates through the knowledge he acquired from reading. In the subsequent verses of the poem (Song of Lawino), Ocol shifts from attacking Ocol's culture and his attack this time is centered to African culture in its totality. He attacks the Gikuyu, (p.131), the Ankole women of Rwanda and Burundi (p.133), the Swahili women with their *buibui* attires, the Luo, the Karamajong the Kalenjin and the Maasai warriors. (p. 134, p. 135). The fact that Ocol shifts his attack to cover the large area of African tradition and customs shows that the two characters are used symbolically to represent traditional Africans (represented by Lawino) and educated Africans who are represented by the character Ocol. However, despite the fact that Ocol is educated, he retains his roots just as he retains his name.

Conclusion

Okot pBitek's *Song of Lawino and Ocol* depicts the conflict caused by Cosmos and Ontological differences between African culture and western culture. A close reading of the text revealed that Lawino is void of knowledge about western cosmos and its ontology. Lawino seems to contrast between what is considered paganism and true religion. She sees no differences between the two

religions because they all are grounded upon the worship of ancestors. Ocol seems to attack the center of African ontology. He sees that believing in African tradition and custom is to believe in superstitions. In the side of argument, Ocol seems to be stronger than Lawino because being a member of the tribe he knows the weakness of his society.

NOTES

1. The name Ocol represents the tribe of the Acholi/Ocol of Uganda the Acholi (also Acoli) is a Luo Nilotic ethnic group from Northern Uganda (an area commonly referred to as Acoliland), including the districts of Agago, Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, Nwoya, Lamwo, and Pader; and Magwe County in South Sudan. The Acoli migrated south to northern Uganda from the area now known as Bahr el Ghazal in South Sudan by about 1,000 CE.

2. The universe, especially when it is thought of as an ordered system.

3. A branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of existence.

4. Pagak is the place in South Sudan on the boarder of Ethiopia. The mentioning of this place provides historical assumption on the place of their origin. It appears probably that the Ocol migrated from southern Sudan. The text suggests that probably the reason for their migration was due to prevalence of ethnic war and that is why returning to Pagak is compared to journey which is associated with death.

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