

## The Aesthetic of ACOLI Oral Songs

Charles Nelson Okumu

Associate Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies  
Department of Languages and Literature  
Faculty of Education and Humanities  
Gulu University  
Gulu, Uganda

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### Abstract

The Acoli people are found in northern Uganda. Acoli culture is dynamic and it is this culture that the great Ugandan-Acoli poet, Okot p'Bitek (1931-1982) was born. This paper discusses the aesthetic of Acoli poetry some of which form the intertext of Okot's *Song of Lawino* (1966), *Wer pa Lawino* (1969), *Song of Ocol* (1971) *Song of Prisoner and Song of Malaya* (1971). *Horn of My Love* (1974) contains Okot's collection of Acoli oral songs, 37 of which were composed by Okot's mother (Lawino), a great composer-singer in whose footsteps Okot followed. In one of the essays in *Artist the Ruler* (1986), he discusses Acoli aesthetics as the center of Acoli culture based on the concepts of: *ber*/good/beautiful or *rac*/bad/ugly. A song or any other material object or human being is either good/beautiful (*ber*) or bad/not pleasing to the audience (*rac*). My focus is on the poetics of Acoli oral poetry, its classification and the role of the oral poet. The aesthetic of the oral poetics of Acoli oral poetry is determined by a number of factors which include but not limited to: composition of the songs, the mating of the wordings to music played on a particular musical instrument which the composer-singer is a master and the performance to a responsive audience which judges the song/poem as either *ber* or *rac* but which can be improved upon and performed again.

**Key words:** Acoli, Okot, aesthetic and oral poetry

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Date of Submission: 20-11-2021

Date of Acceptance: 05-12-2021

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### I. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL READING OF THE AESTHETICS (ORAL POETICS) OF ORAL POETRY

Okot's biography indicates that his education had its foundation in the cultural tradition of the Acoli. His childhood education was mostly in the hands of his mother who was a gifted composer-singer and was a leader of the girls of the Palaro-Rajab clan. Through her, Okot was introduced to the intricate styles of singing Acoli songs which his mother taught him or he heard his cousins and other children from the village singing. When he started formal education at the Church Mission School where his father was a catchiest, he was taught Anglican Church songs by Mrs. Moore. However, he did not abandon the Acoli songs as most new converts would have done. Instead, he even learnt the various dances which were performed in the villages away from the mission station. Okot's participation in the tradition dances was at the risk of his expulsion from the Mission School especially since he was a mission boy who was also a solo singer in the church choir. Through his mother's protection, his father turned a blind eye and Okot's nocturnal weekend visits to Patiko was never openly discussed in the family. Thus from an early age, Okot was fortunate to combine informal and formal education. This was later to pay dividend when he became a composer-singer in his own right. His compositions as Choir Master at Sir Samuel Baker in Gulu included the first thirty pages of the Acoli version of *Song of Lawino* which he carried with him to England as a player for Uganda National Team, the Cranes in 1956.

What attracted Okot to Acoli traditional songs was the aesthetic of the songs. In general, African aesthetic:

...embraces a rich variety of creative forms and styles peculiar to people of African origin that incorporate a combination of practical, physical, material, temporal, and spiritual aspects. It includes African artistic expressions— visual and performative images, verbal arts (poetry, oratory performance), rhythm, music (song and dance), dress, hairstyles, cosmetics, designs (African architecture and decorative patterns), and crafts in and from Africa. It can be decorative and ceremonial as well as serve a functional purpose<sup>1</sup>

In "African Aesthetics –The Acholi Example", Okot agrees with the definition of African aesthetic in the introduction when he contends that, "Most central to the understanding of Acoli culture, to the philosophy of

life embedded in the social institutions and acted out and celebrated by man, is the rather complex concept **BER** –Good”<sup>ii</sup> The **BER**/Good is applied to all the ‘creative forms and styles peculiar to the people of African origin’. In the essay, he explores the concept of **BER**/Good in relation to social affairs, songs, dances, beauty of the human body and nature, physical materials, etc of the Acoli society. The opposite of **BER**/Good is **RAC**/bad and here he again applies it to the whole range of creative forms and styles of the Acoli. Man himself is a complex creature whose whole life style is held in the binary of **BER**/Good and **RAC**/Bad. Interestingly, what is **BER**/Good for one person or society could also be **RAC**/Bad for another person or society. This seemingly confusing statement is sometime heard in the description of a beautiful human being or object when the speaker says, “*Ber ma rac/Leng ma rac*” which in literal translation is, “beautifully bad” but in reality, the speaker is lost in admiration of the person or object. This is best summed up in the English proverb: ‘One man’s meat is another man’s poison’ or ‘beauty is in the eyes of the beholder’. A slang version of this is, ‘beauty is in the eyes of the beer holder’. Both statements are aesthetically correct. When you are drunk, what you would normally see as ugly becomes beautiful because you are looking through the drunken eyes. I have often asked people why they look at an ugly person or object twice. The answer is that there is something aesthetically beautiful even in the ugly that attract our attention. In Okot’s Essay, he discusses the ‘poetic chaos’ of praise/love songs at the **Orak**/courtship where lovers sing about their loved ones during the same song-dance session with none of the singers paying attention to the others.

However, despite the poetic chaos (in the song and dance), Okot points out that the drums and the half-gourds provide order. ‘It is within this general orderly background that each participant creates his or her own talent to the festival... And this is the general state of affairs in all other creative activities of the of the Acoli people’. (p.35). Okot concludes the Essay in agreement with the definition of African aesthetic:

It is only the participants in a culture who can pass judgment on it. It is only they who can evaluate how effective the song or dance is; how the decoration, the architecture, the plan of the village has contributed to the feast of life; how these have made life meaningful! (p. 37).

In this paper my focus is on the aesthetic of the songs although this is not confined to the sheer beauty of the songs in terms of the texts and performances but a whole range of other factors. These include: the context, historical, economic and power structures which are familiar to the composer-singers and therefore form part of the subjects (themes) they sing about. I therefore will discuss the aesthetic and social context of Acoli songs and Okot seduction to this genre of Acoli orality.

Alan Dundes (1980:36) uses the following terms **textual** which he defines as ‘verbal elements of the texts’: **textural** elements which are the non-verbal features of performance (facial expressions, voice, body movement and costumes); and **contextual** element which is the performance situation (s).<sup>iii</sup> These three elements that Dundes has proposed can be summed up as the poetics of oral poetry. However, we have to look further than the culture of the Acoli people to understand the dynamic and complexities of oral songs as a discourse. The whole life cycle needs to be taken into account as Karin Barber (1991:4) does in her study of the **Oriki** verbal art form of the Okuku people in Nigeria. She points out that:

Oriki commemorate personalities, events and actions that people consider important. They provide a way of thinking about social relationships within and between families, and a way of promoting and expressing the rivalry of ambitious individuals. They are the living link through which relationships with the *orisa*, the ‘gods’ are conducted. And it is in **Oriki** that the past is encapsulated and brought into the present, where it exercises a continual pull. **Oriki** then are one of the principal discursive mediums through which people apprehend history, society and the spiritual world.<sup>iv</sup>

What Barber says of **Oriki** is a truism for the Acoli songs through which the Acoli are known as a people including their orality, history, religious and philosophical beliefs, political and economic systems. In this context, the true aesthetic appreciation depends on the interpreter’s total understanding of the songs’ context and the world in which they are actualized or in the words of Caraveli (1982 ‘the world outside the song’. To understand the aesthetic of Acoli songs, we need to take into account what Dundes, Barber and Caraveli, among other scholars, have said and about the song as a genre of orality or the verbal art forms.

The Acoli, like the Okuku in Yoruba land, or the Greek whose songs Caraveli studied, are mindful of the songs as repository of their world system which are divided into two: the world of Man and the supernatural world where **Jok** (and the assistant clan **jogi**/gods) rules supreme. Thus the song genre is classified as: free songs and chants/ritual/spiritual (esoteric) songs.

Within these categories, there are sub-classifications into; praise, love, satirical, lament, historical, war, spiritual, dirges and children’s songs. The composer-singer, like the narrator of the narratives, will not announce in advance what song s/he is going to sing as this is determined by a number of factors which include Dundes’ three elements (textual, textural and contextual). The context may be a funeral but the textual will be a praise song in praise of the dead person; for example for his valour as a war leader or a great hunter. The text, as

Barber points out in respect of the Oriki, links the dead man to the worlds of the dead and the living but at the same time, indicates his social status or power relations to the members of his society.

Although this is a sad occasion, there is also joy which is expressed through the song lauding the great deeds of the dead man and the gaiety of the dancers. At the ancestral shrine were clans members gather at the annual feast or to ask their clan *Jok* for blessing or rain, the songs chanted or sung will reflect the relationship between the people and their clan *Jok* and it could be praise or lament or even a love song. The aesthetic and social contexts of the songs are inseparable. However, to interpret any particular song meaningfully, we must also take into consideration 'the world outside the song' or as Barber (1991:8) makes the same point in her discussion of *Oriki* when she says:

To begin to grasp how they work, the only way is to see them as they exist in society. The society that produces them is not 'social background' but the very condition of their capacity to have meaning.

In this study, I will call Dundes' **textual** and **textural** [Yai's **oral poetics**] the **internal factors** and Caraveli's the 'world outside the song'. Dundes' **contextual** and Barber's **in society**, the **external factors**.

Among the Acoli composer-singers, the contest is not only about the composition of the wording of the texts but also how well this text is performed before a responsive audience. For example, in the case of a praise song, the composer-singer carefully selects the subject of his praise, composes the wordings of the text based on his creative ability and the wealth of poetic features he has mastered in his career since his reputation will be at stake. Secondly, he must now find the right tune/melody and the music to mate with. The textual connotation here is an expression of the reality of the stiff nature of competition among composer-singers. If his tune and music do not mate and produce the right text and music to be presented to the responsive audience, his/her whole career is ruined. For the composer-singer and his fellow oral artists in general, the end product is what the responsive audience waits for rather than the previous achievement or social status. Jack Mapanje and Landeg White (1993:4) make a similar point in their introduction to *Oral Poetry from Africa: An Anthology*:

When a song was well sung, everybody admired it. When it was badly sung, everybody knew it. If the language was fresh, the singer was praised for his creative imagination. If the song was simply repeated without new insight, it was rejected.<sup>v</sup>

The evaluation from the audience is a vital aspect of the oral poetics criticism which is supposed to lead to perfection of the song before it passes into the public domain. The Acoli composer-singer is only too aware of that and even the master of the *Song School (Okot)* acknowledged the critical contribution of the audience, including fellow oral poets, to the success of *Song of Lawino*.<sup>vi</sup> In a very informative contribution to the on-going debate on oral poetics in the criticism of oral poetry, Olabiyi (1989:65) emphatically states:

Unlike the criticism of wittiness which is in essence mediation, oral poetics is indivisible with its poetry, it is self-productive. It is also generative as long as it aims at arousing creative impulses in the audience. It is also expansive when considered from the point of view of mode whose corpus helps proliferate. Oral poetics is also metamimetic and ameliorative. Its object and function are not only to make poets do better and to arouse poetic vocations, but more important to make each poet excel his predecessors and his contemporaries or to give self-transcending performances at every occasion. It is, in several respects, participatory. From the point of view of oral poetics', oral poetry strictly speaking, should not even be described. We know it by practicing it and by written poetry, T.S. Eliot (Eliot 1975) had already remarked 'The poetic critic is criticizing poetry in order to create poetry'<sup>vii</sup>

Yai, in search of a more appropriate critical theory, turned to the development of 'pragmatics and semiotics' which place emphasis on 'the context of situation' which Dundes calls 'contextual' and Caraveli, calls 'the world outside the text'. However, a close reading of Yai (1989:62-4), shows that he elaborates on Dundes' 'contextual' since he regards 'pre', 'in' and 'post' performance contexts as all-inclusive in the criticism of oral poetry. He states that:

Oral criticism of oral poetry that follows performance is likewise multidimensional. The majority of the audience, who generally (at least in the villages) has an adequate poetic competence, often gives brief evaluations in the first hours or days following a performance. There are also more thorough-going and insightful criticisms... to society..., there is a group of individuals whose duty it is to collect carefully the critical reactions of the village chiefs and elders whose knowledge, wisdom and sense of taste are made much of. The aim of such an exercise is to reinvest those critical responses into the main stream of elaboration of Efe songs so that future performances may be improved. (64-5)

The critical evaluation process Yai describes is applicable to Acoli composer-singers who have been subjected to the same process. Okot himself was aware of the aesthetic of Acoli oral poetry since he had, at the time of composing *Wer pa Lawino* in the late forties, fifties and early sixties, had composed many songs in the

Acoli language. One of the best known of the songs is an opera called '*Acan*' when he was a student in King's College, Budo in 1948.

In the discussion of Acoli oral songs, I take cognizant of the theoretical positions taken by scholars of oral poetics (aesthetics) of oral poetry and the questions raised by Ruth Finnegan (1992:131-134) under the sub-heading 'Local Aesthetics and Thought'. These are only tentative questions that a researcher should bear in mind when examining the local aesthetics. In my Paper, the following questions are relevant:

1. What are the artistic canons of composition and performance, and what is the vocabulary and practice for evaluating these (different for different genres perhaps), and for conceptualizing the underlying processes?

2. How is the role of memory conceived – or of transmission, accuracy, composition, style, or indeed any or all of the topics discussed in '**Production, functions and ideas**,' '**Genres and boundaries**' and '**Analyzing and comparing texts: style, structure and content**' (1992:133).

Some of the questions that Finnegan expects the researcher to explore have been covered in my review of oral poetics of oral poetry or the aesthetics of oral poetry.

## II. COMPOSITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF ACOLI ORAL POETRY

I have so far used the terms song and oral poetry interchangeably where both terms denote an oral poetic composition performed to a responsive audience which may or may not critically evaluate the internal [textual, textural] and external [contextual/the world outside] factors during the performance. I define a song as 'a personal creation which springs from the innermost heart of a composer-singer who feels strongly about a particular subject within the social setting in which s/he resides.' In other words, the themes of songs are localized and the emotion which forced the composer/creator to put to words his thoughts may be positive or negative. The song therefore can be used as a pedagogical social tool for teaching and learning the positive cultural values or exposing the negative values that society wants its people to desist from. The audience, like the readers of the written texts, will react to the composition when it is presented to them as a product in transition and not an end in itself. The immediate reaction of the audience or even the presence of someone in the audience may subvert the performer who, through a rapid reaction, may change the text but retain the textural aspect and the context/situation over which he has no control. However, listening to a performance of oral songs requires the audience to actively engage in the content by using both their emotional intelligence and cognitive ability.

Watmon, one of the well-known contemporary composer-singers, contends that no composer-singer can create a song in his mind without first being 'infected' emotionally by the subject/object/theme of the song. For example, in his song: '*Lek Obwola: The Dream Deceived me*', the song was composed after a dream in which he dreamed of his beloved who was then living in Acoliland 300 kilometers away while he is in Kampala. When he woke up in the night, he felt such a strong emotional desire for his beloved that he could only release his emotional feeling through the song which he composed on the spur of the moment but perfected later before presenting it to a responsive audience which included some of his fellow composer-singers in his dance troupe. A casual listener to the song or reader of the written form in my collection would dismiss the song as a poetic utterances of a sexually starved lover who cannot wait for his beloved to come to him while others would say this is a weak man who should be ashamed of advertising his 'wet dreams'. Isidore Okpewho (1988:8) in a discussion on 'African Poetry: The Modern Writer and the Oral Tradition', adds another dimension which includes the audience. He argues that the power of the song transmitted through the performance 'infects' the audience too in two ways:

One is by touching us emotionally so that we feel pleasure or pain; the other is stirring our minds deeply so that we reflect on some aspects of life or some significant idea. To understand how oral poetry can achieve this power, however we would need to consider the situation or process within which it is created.

The fact that a song affects or 'infects' us emotionally is in itself an indication that we identify with the composer and his poetic performance. This identification is only possible because, as Okpewho puts it, 'the essence of true poem (*written and oral*) lies in its power to appeal strongly to our appreciation and, as it were, lift us up in the sense of forcing us to recognize the effect'. To fully appreciate the point Okpewho is making, we need to be like Okot's mother and insists on the textural as well the contextual aspects of the song. In other words, it is through the performance that the audience appreciates the 'the essence of true poetry, which, 'lift us up in the sense of forcing us to recognize its effect'.

In Acoli society, there is no school for anyone who wants to study to become a composer-singer. Here we define a composer-singer as someone who composes the lyric, mates this to music, gives a performance of the new song and accepts critical evaluation as a positive contribution to the perfecting of the song. There are two main options open to him/her: leaning through attachment to a well-known composer-singer (*lawer/lago nanga muywek*) in the clan or even outside the clan. For example, Okot's main mentor was his mother who was

a well-known composer-singer in her clan and even beyond. In addition, her attached himself to some the greatest composer-singer in Gulu whom he acknowledgement in the preface to *Song of Lawino*. The second form of learning is through self- teaching which involves first and foremost learning to play one of the many musical instruments found in Acoliland. The choice of the instrument depends on the learner but for men who want to specialize in the popular songs (praise, love, satirical, political, etc songs), the choice is the *nanga*– the trough zither which Okot (1974: 11-12) describes as:

...extremely versatile in that any song can be played on it...

The instrument can be turned in two keys: *ogodo* – major key for bright and gay songs (praise, love, satirical, lullabies etc., and *larumu* – minor key for grave and sad songs (dirges, sacred and some war songs). The first three strings are collectively called *anyira* [girls] on account of their high pitches. String number six is the octave of string number one; and string number seven is the octave of string number two. String number four is called *orok* [poker] the one that pokes deeply or *lakele*, the one that brings out. String number five is called *labwami*, the arrogant one. For certain songs, the *labwami* is not played on, and this is called *acura*. When all the strings are played on, this is called *agong*. It is these variations of the keys and styles of play that make the *nanga* so versatile.

*Nanga* players are loved and feared. Loved because of their ability to compose songs that touch the heart of the people, whether they are songs of joy or of sorrow. Feared because of their sharp tongues. They ‘kill’ people with their songs.

I have included a full description of the *nanga* because it is the single musical instrument which, as Okot points out, accompanies almost any Acoli oral song. Other common musical instruments are: *opuk*, a five-string bow harp; *lukeme* the hand-piano which is popular with those interested in western dance (*myel munu*) and *adungu*, a three stringed bow harp played only by women. The other instruments that Acoli oral composer-singers play during their performances are shown in the table provided below.

For the start, the apprentice does not have to compose any new songs. He sings other people’s compositions but with his own variation since there is no copyright on any song which has passed into the public domain of oral songs. Subsequent performances of the song whether by the original composer-singer or any other singer, in complete forms or only parts, are only variants of the original. The process of recreation is succinctly described by Gyula Ortulay (1959:188) as:

...a continuously changing course of alternate demolition and construction, with recurring intersections where new and transitional types, old and new themes are steadily interlaced, separated and reunited.

Okot (1974:3), a composer-singer in his own right, agrees with what Ortulay says but relates his observation to Acoli songs which are closely interwoven with the dances. He says:

In the Acoli context every song, every tune, had an individual and original composer. Of course, the song may be modified by another singer to suit his own particular mood or situation, singing and dancing are creative process, and no one ever sings exactly like another person. This however, does not remove the fact songs have their original composers.

The new variant is rendered to a responsive audience which will critically evaluate the performance and rate the performer and performance. The competition to find one’s niche in a society which gives reverence to *lago nanga muywek* (master composer –singers such as the loved and feared Watmon (contemporary) or Samson Too [one of Okot’s friend and mentor] is very stiff and recognition comes much later in life for a few but never for some. These famous masters have their own signature tunes (which are copyrighted) by which they are known throughout Acoliland.

In Acoli society, there is a close inter-relationship between traditional songs and dances which causes problems in the classification of the songs for many researchers. There are two forms of classification that we have merged to overcome this difficult stylistic classification where the emphasis is on the form and content (aesthetic) leading to thematic classification, and on the other hand, is situational/sociological classification where the emphasis is on the occasion of the performance. I have summarized the inter-relationship in the table below:

Sub-genre	Dance(s)	Musical Instrument
Praise song	Orak, Nanga, Lukeme, Keny	Nanga, Lukeme, Awal (Calabash) Opuk, Adungu etc
Love (Aije)	Same as above	Same as above
Satirical	Same as above plus Bwola, Otole, Apiti	Same as above plus drums
Historical/war song	Bwola, Otole, Apiti & Funeral	Drums, horns, trumpets etc
Communal/Work/Political Songs	Not specific since it depends	Not specific as it depends on

on the occasion the composer-singer and his/her choice of instrument

Dirges Myel lyel/Funeral dance depends on the age and social status of the dead  
Spirit possession Myel jok- Spirit possession  
Dance Calabash (used in place of drums) plus rattles

Chants at ancestral shrine No dance but sometimes stumping No instruments but clapping of hands

Recitation No dance No instrument

The board classification system I have used here is basically for academic and analytical purposes only as the Acoli do not necessarily have this table fixed in their dynamic culture.

The selection of a song depends on a number of factors and even in the course of performance, the singer can rapidly swoop stanzas from other songs. Acoli songs are inter-related to the dances but are flexible. For example, it is appropriate to sing a praise or war dance song in praise of the dead during the funeral of an elder. In contemporary Acoli society, some of the dances I have listed are no longer performed. New ones such as: Dingingi, Aginya, Ajere and Aguma which have become more prominent among the youth especially those who were born or brought up in the Internally Displaced People's camps (IDPs) during the twenty-year insurgency in Acoliland.

#### THE AESTHETICS OF ACOLI ORAL POETRY: TOWARDS ANALYSIS OF ACOLI ORAL POETRY/SONGS

Acoli is a tonal language and when a composer-singer combines words with the right tone and these words are sung to a particular tune on a musical instrument, the ear cannot fail to pick out the melody which, depending on the song, touches the heart of the listener joyfully or sorrowfully. Individual words within the song are significant but it is in their collective and harmonious relationships that they produce the song which touches the heart of the listener. The meanings bring to memory a vivid picture of the persona of the song or the event being alluded to. The melody and the musical instruments fill in the background while the dance provides the channel for the physical expression of the joy or sorrow in the heart. In Acoli oral songs, some words may sound beautiful but are meaningless outside the context of the song to which they have made the aesthetic contribution. For example in the children's song: **Lililili Lango obino/ Lililili the Lango are coming:**

Lililili Lango obino,	Lililili the Lango are coming,
Lili ye,	Lili oh
Lililili Lango obino,	Lililili the Lango are coming,
Lili ye,	Lili oh
Tum pa nera kok kuca	The trumpet of my uncle sounds that way
Lili ye,	Lili oh,
Bila pa wora kok kuca,	The trumpet of my father sounds that way
Lili ye,	Lili oh,
Tum pa omera kok kuca,	The trumpet of my brother sounds that way
Lili ye,	Lili oh,
Lililili Lango obino,	Lililili the Lango are coming,
Lili ye,	Lili oh,
Lililili	Lililili

(Okot, 1974: 33)

'Lililili ye' are used for their quality of alliteration which convey sound rather than meanings. 'Lililili' conveys the high pitch-sound made by the scouts to warn the clan warriors that the Langi warriors are about to attack. In its present context, the song is sung by children during their play-time. In the historical period of warfare between the Acoli and the Langi, the song taught the children lessons relating to war preparedness when they hear such calls especially when the elders are not at home and the enemy attack is imminent. What reassures the children are the horn and the trumpet sounded by the "uncle and brother" who warn them but also give them the knowledge that these elders care and will protect them. Thus the sheer beauty of the melody rather than the **textual** and **contextual** make the song easy for children to learn, memorize and adopt it to their game. The external factors of the song also prepare the younger generation for real life situation which includes warfare of many types that they may face in the future. This may seem a generalized conclusion based on one

children song only but a close study of the children's songs in my own collection (CN Okumu Song Collections) and Okot's **Horn of my Love** (1974: 25-38) support my conclusion. The questions that need to be answered include that which is raised by Finnegan (1992: 131-4) "What is the position of children's songs in relation to such song canons as the praise and love songs? We can also add: "What aesthetic values do the Acoli put on children's songs?"

There are no short cut answers to these questions. The Acoli child is part of the nucleus of the family which is the foundation of Acoli society and culture. A family that does not have a child or children is despised and husband and wife are not respected or accorded social or political positions in their clan. On the other hand, children create their own make-believe world which resembles that of the adult. During their play times, they create their own families. The songs they sing reflect their norms which adults find amusing but take seriously since they themselves sung such songs when they were young. For example in the song below the children are attracted by the aesthetic quality of the song but not really the external factor which is an indictment on the **labot** (bachelor) *who thinks that he can forever live on the fringe of real love by secretly being in love with his sister-in-law.*

**Awiyo Tola**

Awiyo tola do  
Awiyo tola do  
Awiyo tola do  
Wi laro  
Tol ma kiwiyo ma kititino  
Bwole kwede, bwole kwede,  
Ogwal goyo bul  
An agoyo kiling  
Kiling, kiling ki loka ca  
Jo Labongo ogoyo odur!  
Kiling eno ba!  
Naka ceng abin ki tua kuca,  
Keto cwinya kom cii omera  
Kom cii omera  
Kom gin pa jii.

**I make my own Strings**

I make my own strings do  
I make my own strings do  
I make my own strings do  
On the flat ground  
The strings I make are small  
I play with them, I play with them  
Ogwal plays the drum  
I also play the drum kiling  
Kiling, killing across the river  
The Labongo have raised an alarm!  
Kiling! You can hear the drum!  
Since I came from our home,  
I pinned my heart on my sister-in-law  
I am in love with my sister-in-law  
I love other people's property (wife).  
(Okot, 1974: 36)

The drum has interrupted the play of the children who were in their make-believe world making strings and counting the legs of those present. In contextualized performance, the children do not care about the meaning or implied meaning behind the song but regard this song, as Okot (1974:2) points out, as a counting game. The song teaches the children how to count but at the same time, teaches them the importance of memory, an issue raised by Finnegan as to the importance of memory in oral poetry. In this particular song, the lead singer/counter has the task of remembering what number s/he stopped at when the last leg was folded up. The counting continues until all the legs are counted and this in itself is a daunting task even for an adult. The task however is made easier if there are many children as the lead-counter would reach the magic figure seventy-one quickly but if there are few participants, there would be recounting of stretched legs many times. In addition to this song, there are other children's songs and riddles to help children develop sharp memory which will help them in the future even if they do not go to formal schools later in life. For those who will go to school, they already know how to count and this could make them have accelerated schooling. The other part of the song refers to 'making small string which I play with'. In the world of the adult, the men make strings for tying goats, cattle as well as for making, mats (*kolo*), net (*obwo*), etc. Strings are also used in making musical instruments from drums to the various harps. In the oral song, the children's strings are just for playing (*bwole kwede, bwole kwede*) in their make-believe world. An interrogation of the aesthetics of the children's songs, reveals a multi-interpretation as in any adult song. The song '*Awiyo tola*' will suffice as a second example to demonstrate the multi- interpretation nature of children's song.

At a different level, the song castigates the bachelor who is in love with his sister-in-law (could be the wife of a cousin-brother). The last stanza clearly indicates that he came from another village but since his arrival, he has made no effort to find a local girl for a lover. The single line before the last stanza [The Labongo have raised an alarm] indicates that there is trouble between the Labongo and their neighbours across the river. Even though we do not know the cause of this alarm, it clearly spells confrontation with those who have wronged them. The alarm follows the drum which was sounded from one side of the river by Ogwal and then

responded to by the persona of the poem whom I assume to be the bachelor (*labot*), an adult male who is not married. The reason for his bachelorhood could be that her is impotent or as Lawino, in *Song of Lawino* says, 'his spear cannot penetrate the granite rock' (1989:122).

The repetition of poetic sounding words which are meaningless outside the context of the song are not only confined to children's songs but also prevalent in other songs as exemplified in the praise song below:

**Tidi pa liwota**

Tidi pa liwota  
Tidi ma myero, ada;  
Tidi  
Liwota yo,  
Tidi  
Liwota dong mot,  
Layaa na.

**My beloved is small**

My beloved is small  
She is small and truly beautiful;  
She is small,  
My love, oh  
She is small,  
Grow up slowly my love, there is no hurry  
Oh my love.

(Okot, 1974:44)

The word *tidi* is repeated four times and Okot has translated it as '*small*' but it could also be translated as '*young*' as in the sentence. '*Latini pud tidi*' – this child [boy/girl] is still young'. In the song, Okot's translation is literal to fit the poetic mode in which the word is used in the description of the beautiful girl whose youthfulness is brought out in the words '*tidi/dong mot/young/ but grow up slowly, my love...*' The composer-singer is not really saying 'grow up slowly, there is no hurry' as Okot's translation implies. The lover is saying, 'I'm not in a hurry to 'elope' with you now. I'm prepared to wait for you' and this sentiment fits with my translation of the word *tidi* as 'young', beautiful and not plump. The repeated use of the word '*tidi*' is for its aesthetic value and poetic sound, double meaning and strategic positioning in the song which gives it the refrain status. In a performance situation, there could be two singers with the soloist singing lines 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7 while lines 3 and 5 are chorused by the second singer or the audience at the *nanga* party where the love/praise song is performed. Caraveli's 'the world outside the song' comes into play here for a more liberal interpretation of the song. In the past, marriage took place sometimes without the consent of the boys and girls. An elder may visit his friend from a different clan and if he finds young beautiful girls in the family, he might 'book' one of them for his own son or even nephew. In this case, if there is no objection from the family, he places *Ogul mola*/ a brass ring on the arm of the girl (the equivalent of an engagement ring). The date for the marriage ceremony is not set as the girl is given time to mature into a young woman under the care of her mother. The elder would inform his son/nephew that he has found a wife for him. The boy then begins to mentally prepare himself for his pending marriage. To satisfy his curiosity about his future wife, he will accompany his father/uncle on the next visit where the two will be formally introduced. The date of the marriage is decided by the parents of the boy and girl.

The song, *Tidi pa Liwota*, is open to multi-interpretation depending on the chosen voice who sings the song. This statement is applicable to many of the **popular songs** while **sacred/esoteric songs** do not have many multiple interpretations. One more example, from the love song sub-genre will be analyzed to illustrate the concept of many voices [ploy voice] in a song.

**Lalam Lwongo Coo ki Lwiyo**

Anyaka mito coo mukwano  
Lalam lwongo coo ki lwiyo,  
Lalam mito coo mukwano  
Nino ducu kuru awobe ki lwiyo  
  
Lalam juko coo ki lwiyo  
Coo ni ducu mito anyira mukwano,  
Lok kom coo, balo wiya nono

**Lalam calls men by whistling**

The girl wants only educated men  
Lalam calls men by whistling  
Lalam wants only educated men  
She waylays the men and draws their  
Attention by whistling.  
She stops men through whistling  
All the men want only educated girls.  
Men only waste my time

Lok kom coo, gibalo wiwu nono  
Laber maa, man atimo ngo?

The love affairs with men, only waste your time  
The beloved of my mother, what shall I do?

Jal Lalam man atimo ning?

My friend Lalam, what can I do?  
(CN Okumu, Song Collections No 1)

This song is as complex as the previous one. Textually it can be read and analyzed as a love or satirical song. The girl in the song is called Lalam. She is young and beautiful but unfortunately uneducated and hence cannot compete for the love of the educated men, whom the singer claims, are also only interested in educated girls. At the same time he deploys satire to expose Lalam's strong desire for the love of educated men. We are made to laugh at Lalam who resorts to, among other things, vocalizing her desire for the men through whistling to attract them. This is a subversion of the normal courtship process where it is the men who whistle to attract the attention of girls or make their presence known. Lalam further, 'waylays' and 'stops' the educated men so she proposes love to them in her desperation to find an educated lover. Lalam, like Watmon in the love song '**A Dream Deceived Me**' (p 8), is lovesick. We are told that the educated men 'only waste your time' because they cannot marry you.

Towards the end of the song, there is a change of voice. Lalam seems to have come to the realization that she has no chance of being loved/married by one of the educated men, and she, as if in answer to the singer, says, '**The men (educated men) only waste my time**'. The third voice comes in the last stanza and this is either Lalam's brother, sister or a close relative/friend. It seems Lalam has not only been wasting her time trying to get a lover from among the educated men but actually got into trouble/problem which is now known to the family. This could be pregnancy as the third singer now asks '**The beloved of my mother, what can I do? /My friend Lalam, what can I do?**' The satirical voice of the singer is now replaced by a lamenting voice of an aggrieved singer who is more concerned with the pending problem than with the originator of the problem. We have to look 'outside the world' of the song as Caraveli suggests to understand the plight of Lalam and her uneducated sisters who 'chase' educated men but who regard them as 'cheap girls for sexual pleasure but not marriage'. If their behaviour is like that of Lalam, then they are regarded as prostitutes [*wangi tar/lukwel*] who are satirized in songs, frowned upon by the elders and rejected by the married women who must jealously guard their husbands from them. In the case of Lalam, even this space is now being denied her if she is pregnant as the text and tone of the third singer suggests. Thus, the moral issue outweighs the beauty of the victim of love. The song may not be as gloomy as my analysis indicates if we take the third voice as that of one of Lalam's lovers who is now asking her what he can do after she has confessed to him that she is pregnant. If this so, then all that Lalam has to do is continue with her subversion of the normal courtship process and propose marriage to the lover. If he says 'yes' then she informs her family while the man too does the same and all will end well. However, the man will still have to pay extra for their 'pre-marital act of procreation'.

Whatever interpretation the analyst gives, the performance situation of the song can either be an *orak, nanga or Aije* dance where the correct musical instrument gives the background music (see Table on p.12). The composer-singer can recreate the song as the performance is in process depending on his audience. A mother could also sing this song in the hearing of her daughters (including her step-daughters and their friends) if she feels that the girls are showing any of the negative antics exhibited by Lalam. On this occasion, the song will act as a warning to the girls. Okot has recorded many songs with encoded moral lessons and warning in *Horn of My Love* under love and satirical songs sub-genres (1974:39-57). The position of the composer-singer as the society's 'watchdog/moral guardian' has its positive and negative attributes. Okot testifies to a physical assault by a westernized Acoli woman who saw herself as the 'blood and flesh' Clementine satirized in *Song of Lawino* (*Song of Lawino*, (1989:39-44; 57-9).

'History is a much safer subject to compose and sing about because the events have already happened and if some of the people are still alive, there is a change that if they had been hurt, they would have most probably, been healed'. This was an opinion expressed by Ogwang Clipper, one of the greatest contemporary composer-singers in Acoliland. Omal Lakana, nick-named Adok Too, was one of the few Acoli men to challenge the British colonial rule in Acoli after the initial rebellion of the Lamogi people which was only subdued by the superior fire power of the British maximum guns in 1910. Omal's rebellion this time was against the policy of 'forced labour'. Okot records the case of this individual act of defiance in *Horn of My Love* (1974:12).

The Chief (Rwot) of Lamogi, acting under the orders of the District Commissioner, had collected all able-bodied men from the area and taken them to Gulu to work there under what was called forced labour (*panyakor*) system. Adok Too responded to this challenge with the following song:

Cuna mito telo,  
An anong min Jago,  
Agero bene bene.  
Ee, cuna mito telo,

My penis wants to get erect,  
When I find the sub-chief's mother,  
I will fuck her all night long.  
Ee my penis want to get erect,

An anyenyo min Rwot Agero idye yo;	When I find the Chief's mother I will fuck her in the middle of the pathway;
Ee gira mito telo, An aito wi lela Alaro Gulu Ee cuna mito telo, An anongo min Dici, Agero i bar Pece Ee cuna mito telo, An abedo inge kwateng, Watuk bene bene Ee, cuna mito telo An anongo min king Jal, agero wi got	Ee my thing (penis) wants to get erect, I am mounting the bicycle I am hurrying to Gulu Ee, my penis wants to get erect, When I find the District Commissioner's mother, I will fuck her in the football arena at Pece. Ee my penis wants to get erect, I will sit on the back of a kite, We shall fly all night Ee my thing (penis) wants to get erect, When I find the king's mother Man, I will fuck her on top of a hill

An explanation of Omal's song brings out the following aspects which make it an unacceptable insult to anyone including the colonialists and their native agents. In stanza one the poet refers to the mothers of the colonial agents: the **Jago** (the sub-county chief) and **Rwot** (the county chief) through whom orders from the District Commissioner (DC who is the King's representative in the District) are transmitted to the natives. These two agents understand the cultural import of the song: they have accepted that the singer has power over them by having power over their mothers. In Acoli society, you can only 'fuck' a female over whom you have power through marriage or consent. In the song the singer is saying that he has that authority over the mothers of the two agents. This is where they took offence and colluded with and influenced the DC in Gulu to imprison the blind singer who is, in any case, incapable of carrying out his threat. It is a desire and it is unthinkable that you can be imprisoned for expressing your desire unless that desire is obscene as is the case in this song. In the next two stanzas, the prospect of carrying out his desire is even more remote for many reasons: he is blind and cannot ride a bicycle from Lamogi to Gulu, a twenty-mile distance where the DC lives. Even if he could, the DC's mother may not be living with him in Gulu. He cannot therefore drag/take her to the football stadium at Pece and 'fuck her' there. In the third stanza, he dreams/hopes to fly on the back of a kite to England and kidnap the mother of the King, take her to the top of a hill and 'fuck her' there.

The song itself was an insult to the colonial government directed at its servants. Read as a text, the impact of the song is lessened but in performance, the song is a terrible insult and would lead the offended parties to an immediate fight with the composer-singer. Culturally, the Acoli do not joke about sex or sexual organs. The only time when this is permitted within a specified timeframe is during the 'myel rut', the twin ceremony-dance when young men and women who are not related sing sexually provocative songs and try to white-wash each other's sexual organs with the ash from the fire-place used to cook the food for the ceremony.

While in prison serving his two year jail term, Omal composed a three line song from which he created a new name for himself, 'Adok Too':

Adok Too	If I could become Death
Adok Too	If I could become Death
Kono apoto i wii munu	I would fall on the head of the white man.

The challenge to the colonial authority was not that the blind poet refused to do 'forced labour' as he was not 'able-bodied' but the provocative song with its open sexual implications. In the song above, she is now threatening with the prospect of becoming Death and 'falling upon and killing the white man' that has brought the forced labour system and other suffering upon the Acoli people. The poet used his poetic license to condemn the arrogant British expansionist policy especially its policy of forced labour.

In the contemporary Acoli society the ritualistic role of sacred/esoteric oral songs have declined since most of the rituals during which they were performed have been overtaken by many events including modernity and the twenty-year insurgency in Acoliland. What has not changed is the form of the songs: contemporary composer-singers have replaced the old words of the songs with new words which convey more meaningfully their social, political, economic and religious aspirations. In Acoli traditional culture, there was no official position of a religious leader whereas there were offices for political and war leaders. In times of religious rituals at the clan shrine (*abila*), it was the elders who officiated. Thus in *Song of Lawino*, Lawino pleads with Ocol to submit himself to the elders so they officiate at the clan shrine in order that the clan **jok** will restore his manhood (Okot, 1984:119):

Go to the shrine of your fathers,  
Prepare a feast,  
Give blood to your ancestors,  
Give them beer, meat and millet bread  
Let the elders spit blessing on you  
And pray to the ancestors who sleep in their tombs  
Face upwards

Beg forgiveness from them  
Ask them to give you  
A new spear  
A spear with a sharp hard point  
A spear that will crack the rock.

In *Song of Prisoner*, (Okot: 1971: 76-77) the prisoner wants to be released from jail so that he can go home to perform the killer-mark ceremony after the assassination of the Head of State:

I want to go to the village  
To perform  
The cleansing ceremony,  
To deaden the sharp spear  
Of the vengeful ghost,  
Let the elders gather  
At the clan shrine,  
Let them spear  
A black billy goat  
And pour its blood  
On the village pathway,  
I will step on the blood  
And smear it on my feet  
As I enter the homestead

The women will wail  
Their welcome,  
My mother will spit blessing  
On my forehead,  
And the elder  
Will cut the killer mark  
On my back...!

I have quoted these two extracts from the two *Songs* to demonstrate the important position that the elders occupy in Acoli society. The elders' religious, judiciary and political roles merge into one when they represent the whole clan at the clan shrine as seen in the extracts above.

However, there were people who were known as *ajwaki* (diviners classified by the colonial administrators and missionaries as witch-doctors) who were consulted by individuals whenever they had problems or suspected that someone had cast a bad/evil spell on them through another diviner. There was also the medicine specialist who was knowledgeable in traditional medicine. These two sometimes complemented each other but the diviner could also be a medicine specialist who dispensed his/her own medicine.

The Acoli diviner has power over the spiritual and health of the community. This arises from a common belief that there is no misfortune or death without a cause. The role of the diviner is to find out the cause and if it is spiritual, he exorcises the evil spirit through song and dance in what I classified as 'spirit-possession songs and dance (see table on page 11).

The exorcising ceremony depends on the type of evil spirit identified by the diviner. This ceremony could take place anytime of the day at the home of the diviner or the 'patient' if the diviner has been 'hired' to come for this specific purpose. The more stubborn the evil spirit, the more difficult the exorcising process and this could take place over a period of time. The common evil spirit which creates problems for the diviners are those connected with the river and causes barrenness in women. Okot has recorded one of these songs in *Horn of My Love* (1974:80):

Ogengo nyara nywal Ogengo nyara nywal ye, Kop pa Kulu Ya we, ya we	It made my daughter barren It made my daughter barren, oh, Spirit of the Stream is responsible, Oh yes, oh yes
Nyondo ber ki obeno Kop pa Kulu Ya ye, ya we	Childbirth is good; strap the baby on my back Spirit of the Stream is responsible, Oh yes, oh yes,
Kulu, gwok iloona iya Maa kulu Ya we, ya we	Spirit of the Stream, do not destroy my pregnancy Mother, spirit of the stream, Oh yes, oh yes

The song is composed of three stanzas made up of uneven number of lines. In the song, it is clear that the 'Spirit of the Stream' is responsible for making the girl barren, denying the mother the joy of strapping her grandchild on her back and thirdly, destroying the pregnancy. In the first stanza of the song, the girl's mother and her family have not yet accepted the fate of their daughter and hence the hiring of the diviner to drive out the Spirit of the Stream so that she can have children. The wording of the composition is based on the concept that if you petition whole heartedly, (*ibakodogi ci jok winyo*) the *jok* will hear you and answer your petition. At the chieftom level, the gathering and petition of the chieftom *jok* takes place once a year.<sup>viii</sup> In the second stanza, there is a new voice: that of the girl herself and here she appeals directly to the Spirit of the Stream not to cause her to have a miscarriage. She, like the mother, begs for mercy so that she can bring forth a child. Since her appeal seems to have gone unheeded, she cries out to her mother in the last stanza. Here she hopes that her mother might be able to access the secret code that will unlock the heart of the Spirit of the Stream. However, we already know that the mother's cry had also gone unheeded and the family's only hope lies in the diviner who *might* be able to dispossess the evil spirit of its power and the girl will produce her child. The song may be repeated several times in the course of the struggle between the forces of evil and good. If here is no breakthrough, other similar songs are sung while the drumming on the 'calabash' continues. Once the spirit of the Stream enters into body of the possessed, she runs towards the stream and might even drown in the water if she is not restrained. The Spirit drains life out of the possessed as freed girl is carried back home. But this freedom can only be confirmed after she gives birth to a healthy baby and the grandmother cheerfully 'straps her grandchild on her back'. To understand the pessimism of the girl's mother, we have to look beyond the song to the cultural tradition of the Acoli. It is imperative that a couple should have children otherwise the man's family tree will 'die' since Acoli is a patrilineal society. If it is the wife who is barren as is the case in this song, the man has the option of taking another wife without necessarily divorcing the barren woman if she is willing to stem off the criticisms of her in-laws and live without bitterness towards the co-wives' children. Such women often accept their fate and become the pillar of the home especially if she is the first wife.

If the hired diviner fails, the family might be tempted to try a more 'reputable' diviner but her to the family will accept that the woman's barrenness is irreversible.

It ought to be point out that it is not only 'Spirit of the Stream' which is responsible for barrenness in Acoli women. In some cases, the 'Spirit of the Leopard' is blamed as in the song: '*Laber Ma Kwac Omato Iye – The Beautiful One Whose Womb Has Been Sucked by the Leopard.*' CN Okumu. Song Collection No 10). There are many other evil spirits that the diviner has to deal with and for each type of spirit, there are songs which are sung to induce to possess the patients so that they can be exorcised. In *Horn of My Love*, Okot has a collection of some of the songs (1974: 79-91).

While 'spirit possession' songs mostly appeal to the spirit to release the patient or grant the patient her/his wish, dirges vary in themes ranging from praise to the condemnation of Death and but there are also songs which the dead to the living'(see p3 on *Oriki songs*). In this respect, dirges are aesthetically richer in imagery and symbolism than 'spirit possession' songs. The composer-singer of dirges works more or less like the composer-singer of popular/secular songs. He has to know his subject well and this knowledge includes the dead person's social, political, moral and economic standing in the clan. Thus, children are not the subjects for dirges since tradition forbids any singing or dancing at their funerals. It is the elders and young people who had not reached their full potential in life who become subjects of the dirge composer-singers. The oral poetics of this sub-genre of poetry requires in-depth knowledge of culture and history of the clan of the dead and participation of the audience as the critic often look at the external factors to evaluate dirges. As Yai has pointed out (p.4-5), the audience and fellow composer-singers' participation in the 'pre' 'in' and 'post' performance critical evaluation is to 'make each poet excel his predecessors and his contemporaries or to give self-transcending performances at every occasion'. The dirge composer-singer is aware of the emotional responses

of the audience since it is the death of someone's loved one that he has made the subject of his song. His composition must therefore reflect the character, social status and inter-personal relations between the dead and the living. In an epithet to the Section on dirges in *Horn of My Love* [1974: 118], Okot quotes a stanza from Henry Longfellow's poem 'Divina Commedia' which aptly captures the dilemma of the dirge composer-singer who has to convey through his composition the complexity of reaction to death:

Ah from what agonies of heart and brain  
What exaltations trampling on despair  
What tenderness, what tears, what hope of wrong,  
What passionate outcry of a soul in pain  
Up rose this poem of earth and air.

In Part Three of *Horn of My Love* (1974: 144-167), Okot discusses in detail six themes of Acoli dirges 'which embody the six ways in which the Acoli people react to the crisis of death'. The six themes are: (a) Songs of pathway, (b) Songs of the battle with Death, (c) Songs of surrender, (d) Song of cruel fate, (e) The attack on the dead, and (f) The attack on the living (p.144). The more complex of these themes is 'Songs of pathways' because of the dilemma that the living is in: whether or not to accept that the loved one is really dead. One example will serve to illustrate this dilemma which is both positive and negative or what Longfellow calls 'what hope of wrong'. The living hopes that the loved one is not really dead but at the same time they know that s/he is dead and will never come back to life again.

**OMEL**

Winyo ki wer  
Winyo ki wer ya,  
Pii oneko Omel ma lakwang,  
Omera ma yam ageno,  
Omel lakwang ye,  
Pii oneko Omel i wang Agora  
Pii cwalo Omel i wang pem.

Omel lapyem ye  
Omera yam ageno lakwang ada  
Pii oneko Omel ma lakwang.

Kong wuwiny wer joni woko  
Wuwinyo ki oduru  
Pii oneko Omel i wang Agora

Lawi awobe, pii ocwalo Omel ada,  
Omera ma yam ageno lakwang rwok  
Lakwang pii, pii oneko Omel

Omera ma yam ageno lakwang ada  
Pii oneko ki wang lek?  
Awinyo ki wang lek bo?  
Twon oluma wa,  
Pii otero Omel i wang Agora

**OMEL**

Hear the news through a song  
Hear the news through a song, oh yes  
The River killed Omel the great swimmer,  
The brother I always trusted,  
Omel the great swimmer, oh yes  
The River killed Omel at Agora ford  
The River took him to the bridge.

Omel the swimming contestant, oh yes  
The brother I trusted, the great swimmer  
The River killed Omel, the great swimmer.

People listen to the song  
Hear through the alarm  
The River killed Omel at Agora ford.

The leader of the youth has been taken by the River  
The brother I always trusted, the great swimmer  
The great swimmer is killed by the River.

The brother I always trusted, the great swimmer  
Was he dreaming when the River killed him?  
Am I hearing the news in a dream?  
The bull of my family,  
The River took him to Agora ford.  
CN Okumu: Song Collection no 10)

There is a solo singer here and from the song, we know it is the brother of the dead who was a great professional swimmer. The dilemma is in the nature of drowning: how can such a great swimmer and leader of the youth who knew the river like the back of his hand drown? In the last stanza the singer tries to answer his own question. 'Was he dreaming when he drowned? /or I am hearing the news in a dream? These are questions of doubt as to the reality of the news of the death of the 'The bull of my family'. Commenting on the general characteristics of 'song of pathways' Okot (1974: 144) says:

The poems in this category capture that movement of disbelief which is displayed when the news of the death of a beloved one hits one like a meteorite? The first reaction is not so much of shock or frustration, but of disbelief. How can a person so young, so beautiful, so vigorous and so wonderful, *such a great swimmer*

actually die? It is inconceivable. It must be a joke (*'Did I hear the news in a dream?'*). Indeed the news is often met with a laugh or a giggle. Shock and despair follow soon afterwards.

During the funeral dance, the Acoli relive this terrible moment of hopelessness and pathetic disbelief, as captured in these songs of the pathways. The Acoli do not make statues of their heroes and lovers, and the grave mound soon disappears. The memory of the beloved is locked in such dirges.

Indeed, the memory of Omel is locked in the singer's dirge, part of the Acoli oral poetry repertoire. The emotions of the singer, relatives and the young men who were under his leadership and context of performance cannot be captured in the written text and hence, Yai's rejection of critical analysis of oral poetry. The best we can do is to discuss the theme of the poem which Okot has adequately done in the quotation above.

### III. CONCLUSION

The aesthetic of the oral poetics of Acoli oral poetry is determined by a number of factors. These factors include the very act of composition of the songs, the mating of the wordings to music played on a particular musical instrument which the composer-singer is a master of. Both acts of composing and mastering musical instruments are critical in the success of the composer-singer in his/her society. The gradual process of reaching maturity can take years for the learner just like in any academic field. The composer-singer is ever mindful of the aesthetic value of his/her songs. The creation can only outlive him or her depending on its critical reception which in turn depends on the poetic creation which conveys memorable themes. Thus, the composer-singer must undergo either self-training or become attached to one of the great composer-singers in his clan or one from a different clan who is willing to mentor him/her in the art of composing, playing musical instrument and singing since not all composers are good singers. During the apprentice period, the master oversees the protégé who often accompanies him to various performances and also sings in chorus when the occasion permits. Once the master is satisfied, the apprentice is given his poetic license and he can now perform solo his own composition or a variant of someone else's song since there is no copyright on a song that has been performed in the public domain. Many of the composer-singers are gifted in their artistic creations and that is why society loves and also hates them. The sheer beauty (**ber**) of the song is what captures the heart of the listener positively or negatively. A bad (**rac**) song also captures the hearts of the listeners but negatively and yet there is something in the song that makes the audience/listener pay attention up to the end. The binary between **ber/rac/beautiful/ugly** applies to songs, art, design, and embodies the whole cultural philosophy of the Acoli and other or people. When the family house is constructed, the family gives its verdict on the work of the head of the family and his construction team. The beauty or ugliness of the house is determined by the user who looks at it aesthetically. The house, stool, song or drawing is judged by both the head and the heart.

The Acoli taxonomy for oral poetry/song is **wer** but this needs qualification which is best seen in the sub-genre of **wer**: praise, love, lament/dirge, work-song and the dances during which the **wer** is performed: **Bwola**/royal dance; **Otole**/war dance, etc. During the dances, the audience who might also be participants, judge the occasion, the performance and the songs sung. Okot was right when he urged that in the youth courtship dance, it is impossible to tell who is singing what song as all the singers would be singing about their 'beloved' (Okot: 1988: 33). In contemporary Acoli society, the place of Acoli oral poetry is gradually fading as life is much harder to sustain and hence there is no time to listen to **wer maber/marac/good/bad song**. Composer-singers have commercialized oral poetry and with it the beauty (aesthetic values) of the words and the musical instruments that blend with the voice of the singers. Traditional musical instruments have been in some cases, replaced with western instruments under the control of the producers and DJs. The older generation of Ogwang Clipper, Okidi Linto and Watmon still produce aesthetically good Acoli oral songs or as in the case of Ogwang Clipper, his conversion to Christianity has shifted his songs to praising God but using the old tunes.

<sup>i</sup> Shava, Soul, 2015. *The Sage Encyclopedia of African Heritage in North America*. (Chapter 3:3).

<sup>ii</sup> Okot, p'Bitek. 1986. *Artist the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*. (pp. 25-37)

<sup>iii</sup> Dundes, Alan 1980, *Interpreting Folklore*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press

<sup>iv</sup> Barber, Karin: 1991. *I could speak Until Tomorrow*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (p. 4).

<sup>v</sup> Mapanje, Jack and Landeg White 1983, *Oral Poetry from Africa: An Anthology*, Harlow: Longman Group Limited.( p.4)

<sup>vi</sup> Okot p'Bitek. 1966. *Song of Lawino and Wer pa Lawino* (1969). In the preface of both texts.

<sup>vii</sup> Yai, Olabiyi, 'Issues in oral poetry, criticism, teaching and Translation' in Karin Barber and P.F de Moraes Farias: 1989 *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts*. Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham. (p.65)

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