

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

Despite several decades of theorisation, gender debates are as controversial as ever; and there is a need for further empirical investigation and research to understand the complex nature of the gender situations in various societies. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the relationship between song¹ performance and gender perceptions and practices among the Acoli² of northern Uganda.

Songs constitute part of a people's oral poetry, which is a sub-genre of oral literature. Oral literature is not only a purveyor of culture, but also a means through which social perceptions and relations are expressed, reproduced or redressed within their material and historical frameworks and contexts (See Ngugi 1986:10-13; and Ogwang 1994). As a living art form, oral literature is always adjusting to changing realities and social imperatives (Mapanje and White 1983:1). Thus, one could argue that contemporary realities and concerns are often captured and articulated through oral literature performance.

Therefore, an investigation of the Acoli oral literature forms, such as songs, is bound to reveal their dominant gender perceptions and practices. Songs do not

¹ A song is a sung poetical composition, which, as *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1961) puts it, is "made up of mutually dependent words and music which together produce a unique aesthetic response." The elevated musical attributes of the verbalisation of the singing voice distinguish 'song' from other forms of oral poetry such as recitation.

² The word "Acoli" is used in the thesis to refer to the ethnic group. Whether it is in reference to one person or many people the Acoli people use the same word, "Acoli." The language spoken by the speech community is also called "Acoli". Note that in some literature, especially by expatriates, "Acoli" is spelt as "Acholi" – this is the label the European missionaries and colonizers used. However, the Acoli language lacks the aspirated "h", and to be true to context I have use "Acoli" instead of "Acholi" as many Acoli scholars such as Okot p'Bitek, Okumu p'Lukobo, Lacito Okech, Charles N. Okumu, etc., have done in their writings.

only portray the dominant gender ideologies and relations in society, but are in turn involved in their reproduction and/or contestation. Hence, the song form can be viewed as a powerful gender ideological tool that is often employed in the gender socialisation process. It also mediates and intervenes in gender struggles. As Karin Barber points out, oral art makes use of “all available contemporary materials to speak of contemporary struggles” (Barber 1997:2).

Alan Dundes (1965: 308) posits that one of the most important functions of oral art is its service as a tool for social protest. He argues that whenever there is injustice and oppression in society people always find solace in oral performance to vent their concerns. In the same vein, Isabel Hofmeyr (1993) in her work recognises the role of oral performance in gender struggles. She argues that “the limitations that circumscribed women’s lives were nowhere more apparent than in the area of speech and performance”; and yet, she also adds that oral literature performance probably contributed much to the informal power of women (1993: 27-28). Hence, song performance can be both a literary and ideological arena and means for gender struggles. As Graham Furniss points out, songs “contain a strongly purposive element, a desire to instruct, to inform and, ultimately, to convince” (Furniss 1996: 129).

However, to clearly understand the relationship between songs and the gender perceptions and practices, we must understand the context of their performance. Ruth Finnegan (1992a, 1992b) acknowledges the fact that, unlike written literature, oral literature depends on performance within a specific context in order to communicate. Isidore Okpewho (1985:7) stresses further that “we cannot properly understand the songs... unless we can direct our minds towards the actual performance of them.” And Henrieta Moore (1986:3) for her part contends that meanings of symbols can only be correctly obtained from their operationalisation in specific contexts. This is in agreement with Henry Glassie’s statement that: “Context is the source of interpretation, the environment of significance. Outside context there is no understanding” (Glassie 1995:17).

My study focuses on song performance to investigate gender issues among the Acoli because of its dynamic nature in capturing and reflecting contemporary concerns, social change and prevalent realities.

1.2. Statement of the Study Problem

The study attempts to explore the intricate relationship between Acoli song performance, gender identity construction and gender power relations. The investigation is guided by the understanding that gender identity construction does not only influence gender power relations but it is also part and parcel of the contextual performance of power relations. The study also examines how expressive forms (such as song performance) are used in gender performance and debates, and as such, how art is employed in the gender power discourse in Acoli society. In so doing, I take into account the prevailing political, social and economic realities in the society and examine whether (and if so, how) they have impacted on gender identity construction and power relations. The study involves a contextual socio-cultural discussion of the gender situation in Acoli society, and with it the role of the performing arts in the gender identity construction and power relations.

The main objectives of the study are:

- a) To examine the nature of gender identity construction and gender power relations as portrayed through Acoli song performance.
- b) To analyse the intricate roles of songs in the reproduction and/or subversion of specific gender identities and particular modes of gender power relations in the Acoli society.
- c) To revisit gender performativity theory in relation to Acoli song performance and the prevailing socio-economic realities in Acoli society.

Informing the study is the view that gender ideologies and practices vary from society to society, and that they are based on tradition and cumulative

experiences. What this means is that there is no universal gender pattern and power relations. Karen Sacks (1979: 71-73) and Ifi Amadiume (1987), both using tangible data, show that females are not universally oppressed and subordinated in all sectors of life. Gender identities and power relations are not biologically inherited but arise as a result of gender socialisation. The way the different sexes identify themselves in relation to others to a great extent determines the power relations between the males and females, and also among the males or the females themselves. Power can be wielded or even contested either overtly or covertly.

1.3. Rationale/Significance of the Study

Many scholars of gender manifestations in African oral literature (e.g Kabira 1994 and Chesaina 1994) have taken a feminist stance and focused mainly on the women at the expense of the men in their studies. These scholars seem to have been influenced by theorists who espouse that “to know women one must be a woman, to know *the other* one must be *the other*” (Crosby 1992:132). However, it is my considered opinion that to correctly understand the gender matrix in any given society, there is need for a balanced study of both genders (male and female), because a study of only one side of the coin cannot clearly reveal the complexity of the whole coin. Therefore, my study takes into account both the male and the female performances in the understanding of the Acoli gender puzzle – for no puzzle is complete until all the pieces are in place.

Secondly, in investigating the relation between gender and the performing arts, one should not only stop at examining the gender concepts and ideologies, but go a step farther in analysing the overall cultural concepts and ideologies which do influence and shape gender perceptions and practices in society. Only then will one be able to clearly understand the workings of the gender concepts in social life. Therefore, this study endeavours to examine the Acoli concepts of personhood, power and subordination as expressed through song performance, and how they shape the people’s gender perceptions and practices.

Furthermore, many of the available gender related studies of African oral literature have been conducted in relatively stable and peaceful societies. Hence, the presentation of the findings as if the gender situation has been trans-historical, transcending changes in political, social and economic realities. In this study I hypothesize that the more turbulent a society is, the more dynamic and transient the gender relations and thereby the re-signification of gender identities. Given the recent years of war in Acoliland, the study attempts to highlight the fact that gender perceptions and practices are to a greater extent dependent on the prevailing circumstances and realities.

Additionally, given the current controversy in gender theorisation, there is a need for fresh empirical investigation to make a valid and concrete entry into the gender debates, which in some instances have been rather speculative and dogmatic. In this regard, the study attempts an interrogation of the performativity theory in light of the research evidence. Oftentimes, in the academe, theories are used to frame and shape research projects. I think it is important that research evidence is also used in part to interrogate existing theories. It is my hope that the study will make a significant contribution to the theorisation of gender.

1.4. Definition of Key Concepts

Ethnopoetics

By ethnopoetics I am referring to the oral poetry production of a specific ethnic group; and in my case the Acoli ethnic group. Song performance is part of the Acoli ethnopoetics.³ It is produced in the Acoli language by members of the Acoli society with all the Acoli socio-cultural ramifications.

³ I am aware that the term 'ethnopoetics' has been mainly used in oral discourse for studying the spoken forms, specifically highlighting the limitations of a dichotomy between oral poetry and prose; because tone, intonation, stress, meter/metrics characterize the spoken forms to such an extent that oral prose is often quite poetic. However, these culture-specific qualities that are described as ethnopoetics (especially when they occur in oral prose) are integral and indispensable characteristics of songs. It is in this light that I use the term to refer to Acoli song performance.

Personhood

Personhood refers to the state or quality of being a human person. Most African cultures have specific criteria for qualifying a human being as a human person; and personhood can either be acquired or lost depending on how a particular individual conducts himself or herself and the circumstance of existence to which that individual is subjected.

Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to the sense of one's maleness or femaleness. It is a social construct and ingrained in the individual as he or she grows up through the process of gender socialisation; and he or she then tends to adopt specific gender attributes that are considered appropriate and acceptable for his or her kind of gender. Gender identity is a social-psychological construction that impacts on how one defines himself or herself and his or her position in relation to the opposite gender.

Gender Identity Re-signification

This refers to the conscious process of re-defining one's gender identity and challenging some of the social constructs in relation to one's gender.

Gender Power Relation

This is the social organisation of relations between the male and the female sexes, especially in regards to authority, social control and economic dominance.

Dominance

This refers to being in a position of prominence where one can exercise authority, control and influence over others and situations.

Gender Ideology

Gender ideology is used in this thesis to refer to the cultural philosophy⁴ of the Acoli dealing with the definition of what constitutes a man or a woman in the society, their socially assigned characteristics, and the nature of the culturally acceptable relations between them. It refers to the ideas that govern gender attitudes and practices.

Song Performance

By song performance I mean the actualisation of songs in a performing situation. It comprises the use of words and all or most of the following: vocalised musicality, facial expressions, gestures, musical instruments and dance. The observation made by Graham Furniss in regards to Hausa song performance is also valid for the Acoli. He states that: “In public performance, song is usually instrumentally accompanied, often sung by a group with lead singer and chorus, and is performed without reference to anything written down” (Furniss 1996: 131). He adds that the song is often “re-performed from memory” (Furniss 1996: 131).

Performativity

This terminology is used to refer to the theory of performance and the practice of performance. It is used especially in reference to the gender performance, or how one performs his or her gender – be it in every day life or through an expressive genre like song form.

1.5. Limitations of the Study

Gender has many facets, and gender issues cover a broad spectrum from the private sphere to the public one. However, this study does not attempt to treat gender in all its manifestations, but rather limits itself to a narrower aspect. The study focuses primarily on the manifestation of gender concerns as portrayed

⁴ The term ‘cultural philosophy’ is used in the thesis to refer to the worldview of a specific cultural group – the Acoli.

within the family institution, and hardly does it touch the wider issues of political governance or religion. The reason why I chose the family relations is because this is the basic unit in the egalitarian Acoli society where the family is much more emphasized than any other larger social, religious, economic or political organisation.⁵

Although the gender ideologies and practices depicted and mediated by the song performances analysed in the study are ascribed to the Acoli people as a whole, it would be wrong to assume that the Acoli are a monolithic people with a monolithic gender ideology and practice. The Acoli are characterised by diversity in cultural practices and beliefs, with decentralised clan affiliation and various dialects of the common Acoli language. So, among the Acoli the affiliation to the clan is often stronger than that to the larger ethnic group. Okot p' Bitek remarks that "[t]wo important factors that foster this feeling of oneness were the clan totem and the clan shrine" (p'Bitek 1980: 89). However, certain beliefs and cultural practices cut across the various clan sub-groups of the Acoli, and these are what identify them as belonging to the same ethnic and cultural entity, in addition to having a common language. What my study attempts to do is to focus on the most common and dominant gender ideologies and practices that are mediated through song performances which a vast majority of the Acoli people identify with. In this sense, I cannot say the study is exhaustive enough; and yet at the same time it is an eye opener on how song performance is involved in the process of gender identity construction and the power relations matrix among the Acoli.

⁵ My reference to Acoli as an egalitarian society in this thesis is in regard to the highly decentralized political structure in terms of organization (and not in reference to the gender situation). Acoli traditional clan chiefs were not rulers but leaders (who could not take decisions single-handedly on behalf of the people). Decisions concerning the people were reached through negotiations and consensus by elders. The Acoli have a saying "*Arwot ki oda*," meaning "I am a chief in my own house." Generally, Acoli political life is by collaborations, negotiations and consensus; highly decentralized, with no centralized political structure (like the Baganda of southern Uganda) – and it is in this sense that I refer to Acoli as an egalitarian society.

Furthermore, there are many expressive popular cultural forms, such as the oral narratives, poetic forms and the short formulaic forms among others, through which gender concerns are portrayed and mediated. However, this study focuses solely on song performance (a sub-genre of oral poetry) at the expense of many other oral forms. This is basically for three reasons. First, it would need a much broader study and immense resources to cover all the oral forms and I had to choose the most viable form for the limited time span of my research. Secondly, songs are much more easily accessible because they occur abundantly in everyday lives of the Acoli and at numerous social occasions. Thirdly, songs are much more malleable and easily adapt to changing gender realities than the other forms.⁶

I am aware that song performance comprises many communicative media such as verbalisation, music, facial expression, body movements and costumes. All these media (both audio and visual) are very crucial in the generation of meaning and they complement each other for a fuller understanding of the message being conveyed. However, in the study I have privileged the oral texts in my discussion and given lesser prominence to the other media – not that they are of lesser importance. This is because as a scholar of literature by training I am better versed with textual analysis, and less equipped to make a thorough analysis of musical features. Yet, it is my belief, that this in no way makes my discussion of the role of songs in gender performativity any less valid, because where those other media are crucial in the elucidation of the textual meaning I have endeavoured to bring them in.

⁶ Oral narratives like myths, legends, folktales and fables are more-or-less stable forms that rarely change their contents and characters to adjust to different performing situations; however, the creative delivery or rendition may vary, and they are often interpreted and understood in light of the prevailing circumstances. Proverbs remain stable in form once composed, only changing in their application to different situations and realities; while riddles and puzzles usually never change after composition. Meanwhile, songs often easily change their contents (and even characters in them) to fit the different performing situations and the concerns of the day. Sometimes songs are composed in performance, taking in the prevailing realities. Songs are always readily adjusting to changing realities in society. This is not to say other oral literature forms do not reflect social realities – they do.

1.6. Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Introduction and Background to the Study

This is the introductory chapter that gives a general background to the study and presents the aim of the study and the specific objectives. It also discusses the justification for the study and the limitations of the research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review, Analytical Framework and Methodology

This chapter contains a critical review of related literature dealing with gender theorisation, gender related studies of oral literature, specific works on Acoli oral literature and the historical background of the Acoli people. The theoretical framework guiding the inquiry and methodology of the study are also presented in the chapter.

Chapter Three: Text and Textuality in Oral Performance

The nature of oral text and how it works in performance to generate meaning is discussed in the chapter. The importance of indigenous cultural artistic critical methods in interpreting the texts of song performance and the relation between oral texts and gender ideological reproduction are also examined. The chapter further examines the viability of oral texts as the launching points of verbal exegesis and explores the mnemonic and organising role of literary texts in society.

Chapter Four: Gender Concepts and the Acoli Society

The basic gender concepts that influence gender performativity in song performance in the Acoli society are analysed in the chapter. I examined the concepts of personhood, individualism and communality and how they relate to the concepts of gender identity and power relations. Additionally, the chapter discusses the thinking shaping the gender power relation matrix in the Acoli society, and how individuals negotiate multiple identities in real life situations.

Chapter Five: Gender Identity Construction in Acoli Song Performance

The chapter looks at how song performance relates to the social construction of gender identity. It examines the general criteria of gender identity construction that affect both the males and the females and those specific to either gender as manifested in song performance. It also explores the role of songs in gender identity re-signification.

Chapter Six: Song Performance and Gender Power Relations

Here, I endeavour to examine the depiction, enhancement and contestation of gender power relations in song performance. I also look at how the females exert leverage in the gender power relations despite their assumed disadvantaged position in society, and the reconfiguration of power relations in song performance.

Chapter Seven: Acoli Song Performance and the Performativity Theory

This chapter revisits the gender performativity theory in relation to the Acoli song performances. It examines how through song performance the females have used some patriarchal hegemonic notions of gender and invested in them to achieve their aspirations as women. It also looks at how gender performance is used as an organising factor in society.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions Drawn from the Study

This is the concluding chapter where the salient findings of the study are presented in a concise form, and areas of possible further investigation suggested.