

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW, ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I review related literature and locate my study within existing scholarship, endeavouring to show the specific contribution it makes to an identifiable corpus of scholarly literature. I also describe the theoretical and analytical framework that guided the research study, and the methodology used in data collection and data analysis.

2.2. Literature Review

2.2.1. Theorising Gender

Within traditional gender theorisation there seemed to have been a well-understood divide between sex and gender; and there has been an assumed social and cultural determinism of gender. Some scholars have also assumed a universal ontological specificity for ‘women’, which has since come under contestation. To date there has been no agreed position on the gender concept of ‘power’ among theorists. However, the most radical entry into gender theorisation has been that of Judith Butler who interrogates the traditionally held positions by casting sexuality and gender as performative, thereby challenging the foundational normative notion of a pre-discursive identity and subject.

Going back to the earlier stages of gender theorisation, we must need take cognisance of Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1953), in which she posits that there is no feminine nature, but only a feminine situation that has been developed and sustained over the years. According to her, the notion of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’, it would seem, has been kept alive in many a society through the process of gender socialisation. Emphasising the social

constructedness of gender identity, de Beauvoir states that “[O]ne is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (1953:273). This would also seem to imply that one is not born a man, but rather becomes a man. Furthermore, she draws a distinction between biological sex and gender which she argues is culturally determined. Since the publication of de Beauvoir’s work, sex – taken as the natural, physical and biological differences between men and women – has been considered by many feminists as distinct from gender, which was taken as the socially and culturally constructed notion of masculinity and femininity.

In the same vein, Stephanie Garret (1987) observes that gender identities as witnessed in most societies are basically not a result of biological sex differences between the males and females, but are products of socialisation on the basis of the sex differences. She states that “gender refers to the socially-determined personal and psychological characteristics associated with being male or female, namely masculinity and femininity” (Garret 1987: viii).

A cursory survey of gender theories would seem to suggest that there is a direct relationship between gender identity construction and gender power relations, and that one cannot be fully understood without a study of the other. However, the major problem that has dogged gender theorisation for years has been the inability to develop a comprehensive and adequate gender conception of power in the gender relation matrix that can enable us to fully understand the nature of male dominance and female subordination. Gender theorists are still not agreed on what constitutes ‘power’, neither has any offered irreproachable and convincing conception of power. Hence the need to undertake this study in order to attempt to derive a tenable, situated gender concept of ‘power’ based on concrete research evidence.

Anna Yeatman (1997) and Amy Allen (1998) both identify two schools of thought that seem to have dominated the theorisation of the conception of power in gender relations. One conceptualises ‘power’ as equal to ‘domination’. This

equation of power with domination assumes that power is something that the dominating category (men) exercise and *the other* (women) don't. Theorists who ascribe to this school of thought, such as Catherine Mackinnon (1987), Andrea Dworkin (1987) and Carole Pateman (1988), view women as helpless 'victims' in the gender power relations. They fail to account for women's attempts to resist and subvert male domination in the gender power relations.

The second school of thought rejects the equation of power with domination, and its accompanying sweeping portrayal of women as hapless victims in the power relations. It contends that power can be affirmative, empowering, and transformative. Although they acknowledge male dominance in most societies, proponents of the empowerment theory such as Sarah Lucia Hoagland (1988), Sara Ruddick (1989) and Virginia Held (1993) assert that women can have enabling power in society by the very fact that they happened to be born women; that is, through sets of traits and practices that are unique to them – such as caring and mothering.

However, both the domination and the empowerment theories of power have come under criticism. Nancy Fraser (1993), for instance, has criticised the domination theorists for ignoring the complex nature of the societal structures that give women opportunities to challenge and subvert male dominance. Susan Moller Okin (1989) and Linda Alcoff (1988) have also criticised the empowerment theorists of adopting the very traits and practices that have traditionally been used to oppress and subordinate women as the premises of enabling power.

I tend to concur with Allen's (1998:458) argument that critics of the domination and empowerment theories have not succeeded in problematising the most crucial issue – the one-sidedness of both theories. Allen argues that focusing only on either male domination or female empowerment neglects the fact that some women are also engaged in the subordination of fellow women. She further

contends that the one-sided approach to the conception of power also fails to take into consideration the complex nature of power relations in contemporary societies, whereby individuals can be both dominated and empowered at the same time.

The second major issue in gender theorisation is the attempt by a number of feminists and gender theorists to establish a theoretical framework that presents some kind of a universal ontological specificity for women. However, Judith Butler (1992) questions this position of gender theory grounded on foundations of universality as regards the female's identity and situation, especially in the light that these very foundations are being exposed for their highly ethnocentric biases characterised by a culturally imperialist notion of the 'universal.' In her view, within feminism the urge to speak as and for women assumes there is an ontological specificity to women – but again there is resistance and factionalisation as to what is the common element suppose to identify and unify all women. She points out that the identity categories are not merely descriptive but also normative and thereby exclusionary. In this regard, I am inclined to agree with Butler that the signification of who is a woman and what it means to be a woman is more ethnocentric than universal. Hence, there is need to investigate the gender situation in each community or society on its own terms.

It is against this attempt to universalise women's nature and situation that Sabine Jell-Bahlsen (1998) posits that the facets of womanhood and empowerment in Africa are complex, esoteric, subtle and multi-dimensional. She argues that in Africa the gender power balance differs from the often-mooted one-dimensional paradigm. And to understand the power distribution at all levels and sectors of community life one has first to grasp the basic African concepts of power. She points out that, for example, understanding the divine aspect of womanhood would help to illuminate the powers of women who are priestesses of African deities. Jell-Bahlsen further argues that power in many African societies was multi-dimensional, and great emphasis was placed on the balancing of multiple

powers and not on any vertical hierarchical structure. According to her, there was always a female component of power.

On the other hand, Marie Pauline Eboh's (2000) position is in sharp contrast with that espoused by Jell-Bahlsen. She argues that gender inequality is the same everywhere, and that the problem arising from subjugation of women is a universal one, perpetuated by similar androcentric philosophies, gendered ontologies and concepts. I would argue that although certain characteristics may appear to be 'universal', most are ethnocentric. This is a point my study attempts to examine.

Perhaps what Eboh was reaping in her attempt to prove the universality of the women's circumstances had been sowed by colonialism and was not entirely indigenous to Africa. Zulu Sofala (1998) contends that the African woman assailed by Arab and Western cultures, "has been stripped bare of all that made her central and relevant in the traditional Africa socio-political domain" (52). She argues that the African worldview took the human society as organic, in which all the members were considered relevant and effective for the survival of the society. This was further enhanced by the etymologies of man/woman and male/female in many African languages that underscores the fact that both genders were exalted, although each had a distinctive role to play in the life of the community. Just like Ama Ata Aidoo (1998), Sofala blames the entrenchment of male hegemony and the 'de-womanisation' and degradation of the African woman on colonialism and 'Westernisation' that systematically dispossessed the African woman of her rights, dignity and power.

Nonetheless, I would argue that it is more important to analyse and attempt to understand the gender situation in contemporary African communities than try to delve into the past to find out where the rain started beating us, apportion blame, or mourn past 'feminine glory'.

Given the differing views surrounding the universality of women's identity and situations, I am inclined to agree with Christina Crosby (1992) that feminists need to theorise 'difference' if they are to escape from the recognition of pre-conceived 'women identity.' Crosby argues that feminism is no longer one, but marked by differences of nation, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. She contends that feminism has since the 1970s stressed identity, and yet 'identity' is inseparable from 'difference' (Crosby 1992:135). Additionally, I would add, there is need to study and theorise 'difference' among the females (and the males) themselves, even within a single ethnic group like the Acoli.

Chinweizu in his book *Anatomy of Female Power* (1990) advances a cogent argument, wrought with ample illustrations, that female power still exists and dominates the life of every man like a ubiquitous shadow. He states that "the life cycle of man, from cradle to grave, may be divided into three phases, each of which is defined by the form of female power which dominates him: motherpower, bridepower, or wifepower" (14). He presents five pillars of female power over men: the control of the womb; the control of the kitchen; the control of the cradle; the psychological immaturity of the male as compared to the female; and the male tendency to be deranged by his excited genital. He argues that women use these characteristics to 'enslave' the males. He posits that patriarchy is just a façade of 'authority' while behind the scenes power lies with the women who wield it covertly, subtly and effectively to control men's lives, and adds that the five pillars of female power "are decisive for its dominance over male power" (15).

Chinweizu's theory of gender power relations seems to fly in the face of what he calls 'feminist propaganda,' and attempts to turn the table on existing gender theories. In my opinion, instead of dismissing Chinweizu's theory as a masculinist cry of 'wolf', we need to ascertain the extent of its validity or falsehood through objective empirical research.

Perhaps the most radical contribution on the question of gender identity construction and power relations is Judith Butler's (1990; 1993; 1997) formulation of the gender theory of performativity, which provides critical insight into how hegemonic heterosexist discourses work to constitute 'the subject' – although she also jettisons the foundational notion of critical agency without presenting a viable alternative.

First, Butler challenges the sex/gender distinction (between material/biological bodies and gender ideology) that had dominated gender theorisation since the publication of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. She contends that "gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'pre-discursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (1990:7). According to Butler, sex is not natural but culturally produced and falsely made to appear as natural. So, both sex and gender are cultural products in every way, and both should be interrogated equally. She postulates that both sexuality and gender or any form of 'identity' are performative – that is, they are produced through processes of re-signification and repeated performance of identities prescribed by hegemonic gendered discourses.

By presenting 'the subject' as constituted through matrices of power discourse, Butler argues that gender identity has no ontological status but is just performative. She contends that "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990:25). In this sense masculinity and femininity are ideologically permeated 'acts' that are continually and repetitively being performed in society. Butler points out that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender identity itself – as well as its contingency" (1990:137).

Butler's performativity theory attempts to resolve the domination/empowerment impasse on the conception of 'power' in gender theorisation. She argues that everything, power relations inclusive, depend on how we perform our gender. According to her, since gender is a repetitive enactment and performance, it is possible for the individuals to change their performance so as to subvert the social norms that produce and enhance heterosexist gender identities and relations. However, it is worth pointing out that in *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler rejects determinism or the notion of a pre-discursive fixed identity, and with it the notion of a critically conscious subject and autonomous agency.

As Lise Nelson (1999) rightly points out, the assumptions presented in Butler's theory of performativity regarding subjectivity and agency "foreclose inquiry into why and how particular identities emerge, their effects in time and space, and the role of subjects in accommodating or resisting dominant, fixed subject position" (1999:339). Butler's theory treats any notion of agency as implying an autonomous, masterful subject – which she rejects. According to her, change occurs through unintentional, accidental displacement or 'slippage' within the re-signification process, and not through a critically conscious agency from a 'masterful' subject. In her work *Bodies that Matters* (1993) Butler comes up against the limitations of her own performativity theory when she fails to escape from the notion of a critically conscious 'subject' which she had earlier debunked in *Gender Trouble*.

So, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler recasts the performativity of gender as citationality in an attempt to account for the complex dialectical interplay between norms of male domination and the individual's attempt to subvert these norms. She argues that the cultural notions that govern the production of sexuality are incapable of reproducing and sustaining themselves – they must be cited by individuals to do so. She contends that "performativity cannot be understood outside the process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms" (1993:95). She presents citation not as a single act or event, but as a

reiterated ritualised production that constructs individuals as sexed and gendered. She further argues that a citation can be an interpretation of norms as well as an occasion to expose them as privileged interpretations (108). Thus, performance can subvert heterosexist dominance when “it reflects on the imitative structures by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness” (125).

In spite of the useful insights the theory of performativity gives us into the relationship between gender identity construction and hegemonic discourses, it conjures the notion of a non-reflexive, uncontextualised and abstracted subject within performativity is rather problematic. I agree with Nelson (1999:342) in her argument that this “leads to a static description of identities without inquiry into contextual causes and effects of various performances.” There is need to treat the subjects performing identities as concrete human subjects within specific spatial/temporal contexts, without ignoring the socio-historical embeddedness of the performances themselves. Only then can we be able to adequately theorise agency, change and resistance that involve multiply-positioned concrete subjects that are historically and geographically located; and understand better why and how the speaking human subject performs multiple identities, gender inclusive.(See Katz 1994; Nast 1994; and Staeheli & Lawson 1994). It is in this regard that I find quite convincing Paul Smith’s (1988) criticism of post-structural thought for producing abstracted ‘subject’, which cannot explain how and why human subjects negotiate multiple discourses at specific moments in real life situations.

Therefore, in my study of Acoli song performance, while I draw on the useful insights that performativity theory offers, I also re-theorise it to take into account the prevailing political, economic and socio-cultural realities in Acoli society and attempt to interrogate whether (and how) these realities impact on the performance of gender identities and power relations in everyday life.

2.2.2. Gender Related Studies of Oral Literature

A number of studies have so far been done in the field of African oral literature, and some on African oral poetry in particular, but many of these studies do not squarely address the relationship between gender dynamics, oral literature and societal realities in great depth. However, a few studies have endeavoured to broach the gender question in relation to the position of oral performance in society.

Ciarunji Chesaina (1994), for example, examines the images of women in Kalenjin and Maasai oral narratives. She contends that women are to a great extent portrayed negatively in the studied narratives. She further posits that the image of women as insignificant beings is reflected in the way they are denied individual identities – they are often referred to as the wife of somebody or the mother of somebody. Like many other well-intended gender studies, Chesiana's study focuses on only one side of the coin – women. Gender issues are better understood by an analysis of both the male and the female so as to get a more nuanced interpretation of gender complexity in society.

Although Chesaina's work illuminates the low social position of women in Kalenjin and Maasai societies, and the role of the oral narratives in perpetuating patriarchal ideology, her study is limited to the confines of the actual verbal 'texts' of the oral narratives; yet the interpretation of meaning in oral performance goes beyond the verbal component for a comprehensive understanding. Another question which is not tackled, that would have shed light on the complexity of gender relations in the two communities, is whether women as the chief performers of the oral narratives that undermine their position in society, have in any subtle way used the same artistic forum to mitigate their image in society. Nonetheless, her study gives us one important tool of 'reading' for gender in oral performance – that is the sociolinguistic tool of analysing similes, metaphors, symbolism and other imageries as pointers to gender identity construction.

In contrast to Chesiana's 'text' based analysis, Karin Barber's (1991) study of females' oral poetry, known as *oriki*, in a Yoruba town of Okuku, brings into focus the role of oral art in every-day life, as a social act and not merely as a social object. Although she is concerned with the link of *oriki* to social history – how the past is experienced to constitute present relations – she acknowledges the potency of oral texts in shaping contemporary relations and ideological viewpoints. Barber argues that *oriki* is dialogic, addressed by one person to another and involves “the joint ‘purview’ of speaker and hearer” (Barber 1991:36). She demonstrates how *oriki* is used to mediate social relations by drawing on the historical past, thereby enhancing cultural and lineage identities, especially in the performance of *oriki orile*.

The point that Barber's work underscores – which is of great relevance to my study – is the importance of the knowledge of the cultural anthropology of the people in understanding oral art as not only meaningful texts but also important social actions. In other words, oral 'texts' only acquire the relevant signification in social life when examined in the light of a specific anthropological context. Barber's study highlights the fact that oral performance does not only capture and exude the moment (present) but is embedded in the people's history (past experience) and their very cultural existence; and this ought to frame our investigation of the relationship between oral performance and gender identity construction. That is why I cast my analysis of the song performance within a socio-cultural context.

On the other hand, Leroy Vail's and Landeg White's (1991) study of the *vimbuza* (spirit possession) songs among the Tumbuka speakers of Malawi and Zambia examine how oral poetry performance can be a tool of social and political empowerment. Just like the *oriki* among the Yoruba, the *vimbuza* is largely a female genre. The study demonstrates that in a situation of deprivation and domination the expressive arts can be appropriated to give voice to the more

voiceless, using the power of poetic licence to state their case and demand redress. The Tumbuka women ally with the spiritual world through the *vimbuza* ceremony songs to confront political, economic and social domination from a protected rostrum that made those in power unable to silence them. It is significant to note that *vimbuza* poetry performance was common among the underprivileged, who, under the guise of spirit possession, presented their complaints and views in the authoritative voice of the “spirit.”

The work of the two researchers underscores the fact that a subjugated and suffering people can employ expressive art to interpret their historical situation from their own perspective – irrespective or in spite of the ideological perspectives fronted by the dominating force, be it state or male. Hence, oral art becomes an important resource in mediating power relations in society. Oral performance mediates and intervenes in the political and social contradictions in society, including male-female relations.

Although the Acoli social, economic, political and historical circumstances may not be exactly the same as that of Tumbuka-speaking people, Vail and White’s analysis provides perspectives that are useful in my study. Just like the Tumbuka women who had to adjust to extraneous conditions, as a result of male labour migration, the Acoli women have had to cope with changing economic and social circumstances as a result of war and male migration due to fear of abduction by the rebels to boost their ranks or arrest by government troops on suspicion of being rebels. All these have led to a redefining of the gender identities, roles and power relations.

Perhaps most revealing is Corinne Kratz’s (1994) analysis of how songs are used in ritual efficacy among the Okiek of Kenya during the initiation ceremonies for both boys and girls. She points out that “while biological maturity develops simply with nurturance and the passage of time, social maturity is created” (14). Through metacommunicative enactments, the performances during initiation

ceremonies attempt a redefining of the cultural understanding of the world, thus leading to a transformation of personhood in a forum agreed to have the authority and ability to effect such a gendered cultural transformation in which ‘children’ become adult members of society. As Kratz acknowledges, the initiation ceremonies also function to re-create “aspects of daily life, social relations, and cultural assumptions and values” (17).

As Kratz’s study reveals, song performance is not only a catalyst in the ritual efficacy, but an integral and indispensable part of it. Songs are the means through which cultural progressions of semiotic movement are defined during the initiation ceremonies. The song patterns are based on and re-create notions of age and gender. Through song performance gender identity construction is re-created and gender specific power relations enhanced. Kratz writes that: “Call lines and song themes are based on and help recreate cultural assumptions about gender, age, authority, social relations, and the stages of initiation” (279).

Most interesting in Kratz’s study is how the Okiek connect song with emotion, implicitly linking communication mode with gender. The males are seen to be associated with speech, which is represented as reasoned, and moving people through logic and knowledge. Women are associated with song which is taken as having the ability to sway people through emotion, and as Kratz puts it, “a link that extends to incorporate parallel notions about women” (238). Notions about speech and song as communicative modes thus reveal Okiek ideas regarding gender.

What we garner from Kratz’s study is that the attitude of the performers towards the performance (or what they believe to be doing through the ritual efficacy) is very important. Secondly, who performs what, when and at what function is also significant from a gender perspective. Additionally, it is worth noting that not only is it the content (message) of communication that can be gendered, but also the communicative modes. One also needs to pay attention to the

metacommunicative nature of performance to derive meaning and appropriate interpretation. So, in 'reading' for gender in song performance one has to take into consideration the multi-media channels of communication.

At this juncture, I would like to draw a parallel between women's song performance in Kratz's study and women's storytelling in Hofmeyr's (1993) study of historical narrative in a South African chiefdom. Both seem to suggest the apparently 'superior' media or modes of communicative performance tend to be male-dominated, relegating the culturally 'inferior' genre to the female. In Hofmeyr's study, *nonwane/ ntsomi*, dismissed as imaginary stories, were the women's staple genre, while 'factual' historical narratives were considered a male domain. The highly gendered nature and imports of oral narrative performance is well stated by one of Hofmeyr's informant when she says: "... stories go hand in glove with building a man and a woman ... stories cannot be separated from men and women" (1993: 30). Oral narratives were employed in gendered character formation and identity construction.

As Hofmeyr observes, *dinonwane* performance gives the females some kind of informal power, to influence minds and put their views across, despite the belittling attitude towards women's storytelling as a slightly risible pastime. She points out that women "saw storytelling as an important and potentially powerful cultural resource from which status could be wrung" (35). She further states that some critics do view stories as a source of subtle subversion, through which women could articulate their viewpoints and comments. This compares with Kratz's analysis of song performance as a means through which females make their presence felt and feelings known – countering looming male dominance in the initiation ritual efficacy (1994: 230-240).

So, drawing from the above brief examination of a few gender-related studies of oral literature, one would be right to argue that a gendered analysis of oral performance should involve a critical examination of the language and content of

the ‘text’ of performance, the attitude of performer(s) and audience, the communicative and metacommunicative modes of performance, and the cultural signification of the occasion of performance. This analysis has to be cast within the socio-cultural context of the community whose song performance is being examined.

2.2.3. Works on Acoli Oral Literature

Studies on Acoli oral literature have been few and far between. The earlier works on the Acoli were by the European Christian missionaries and colonial administrators who were more interested in explaining the ‘primitive’ culture of the ‘natives’ to those back home than critically studying their oral literature.

The first major work on Acoli oral literature was by Rene M. Bere (1934) who makes a study of the Acoli dances and thereby the dance-songs. His analysis clearly shows that for one to correctly and adequately interpret the performance of expressive oral art, one has to be linguistically and culturally knowledgeable. Lack of understanding the inherent meaning of the oral performance was explained away and blamed on the primitive nature of the art form and the performance. Bere contends that there is more shouting than singing in the Acoli *otole* dance-songs. There is clear evidence that Bere did not understand the imagery, symbolism and ideophones used, nor the paralinguistic resources employed in the performance to generate meaning. In other words, he was culturally and linguistically ‘deaf’ to the wealth of meaning in the performance. This obviously led to a misrepresentation and distortion of the meaningful communicative dimensions of Acoli oral performance. The lesson drawn from Bere’s work is that cultural insight is very crucial in understanding oral performance.

Several decades later, Okot p’Bitek (1980 [1971]) made a study of Acoli oral literature – specifically myths, legends, proverbs and oral poetry – so as to

elucidate the role these art forms perform in sustaining and enhancing the religious beliefs and practices of the Acoli. His study is quite revealing as to the potency of oral performance in expressing cultural beliefs and practices, and maintaining cultural, ethnic, clan and individual identities. Although the major focus of his work is not on gender, he nevertheless makes comments on the role of oral literature in perpetuating specific gender relations and power balance. His analysis reveals that despite the degradation in social status, Acoli women maintained an exceptional control in the spiritual life of the community and oral poetry was employed to perpetuate this control. This serves to show that gender relations can be complex and deserve critical study of their manifestation in all the sectors or spheres of community life. My study specifically examines this complexity of gender power relations among the Acoli, and the position of songs in mediating these relations.

Later works by p'Bitek (1974) and Charles N. Okumu (1975) attempt to group and classify the corpus of Acoli oral literature. Okumu makes a study of the various manifestations of forms in Acoli oral literature performance and employs Acoli traditional taxonomy in categorising the forms. His work is a milestone in the scholarship of Acoli oral literature. He contends that there is no better way to group the various forms of oral literature than by using the people's own standards of either cultural or aesthetic classification, instead of adopting the quite often inapplicable Euro-centric mode of classification. Okumu's study enables us to clearly identify the various samples of oral literary forms among the Acoli. Classification is very important in any academic discipline as an organising factor.

Having clearly delineated the typology of Acoli oral literature, Okumu further examines the nature and characteristics of the different forms. His approach is much more formalistic, although he also discusses the social functions – this attest to the inseparability of cultural aesthetics from the social base.

I believe that the first identifiable major work that squarely focus on the gender concern in the study of Acoli oral literature was by M. B. Okot (1994). In his study of Acoli oral poetry, Okot demonstrates how the people's gender ideologies and gender material and social relations are reflected through oral performance. His main concern is with the Acoli concept of masculinity and femininity as portrayed through the oral art, and the relationship between this concept and the existing male-female relations as reflected in the oral performance. Although his study broke new grounds in the study of Acoli oral literature, where form, style, classification and general functions had been the main attention (see: Okumu 1973, 1975; Ocitti 1973; Lukobo 1971; p'Bitek 1974, 1980; and Bere 1934), it does not investigate in any critical way the nature of oral art as a double-edged tool, that cuts both ways – being shaped by and shaping societal concerns. Oral art is not just a purveyor of cultural notions, but is also actively involves in the construction of these notions.

Furthermore, Okot's study focuses much more on the text in performance and much less on the context of performance. To clearly and correctly understand the gender intimation in any oral literary text, the immediate and the larger contexts of the performance is crucial for interpretation. However, Okot's work notably takes the discourse on Acoli oral literature a step farther – it recognises the intricate relationship between oral art and contemporary societal ideologies and practices.

In a more recent study, Odoch Pido (2000) examines the concept of personhood among the Acoli as expressed in their songs. According to him, the Acoli consider being a person as behaving or doing according to the 'rules' of life in relating to other persons. In other words, personhood is defined in relation to conformity to cultural and social norms. Personhood is also defined in relation to the onset of puberty, the ability to produce children and assume social responsibilities. Pido points out that the loss of personhood among the Acoli is associated with deviance from acceptable cultural norms, and most importantly with being in a

state of subordination. This calls into play the Acoli understanding of subordination. Here, the concept of subordination is much more ethnocentric than universal.

However, Pido's analysis does not extend to critically examine the gendered nature of the concept of personhood among the Acoli, and how it impacts on gender identity construction and relations, which is very crucial in the overall landscape of Acoli cultural existence. This is one of the issues at the centre of my study – to investigate the gendered cultural transformation of personhood from a child into an adult, becoming a man or a woman in the Acoli cultural sense.

2.2.4. The Historical Context

This being a study of a people's popular cultural form (i.e. songs), which draws from a cultural anthropological approach, it would be wanting without a brief examination of the historical background of the Acoli.

Who are the Acoli? J.P. Crazzolaro (1937, 1961) in his works notes that the Acoli originated from an ethnic group known as Jo-Lwo, who migrated southward around 1600 from a place known as Anywaa (Bahr El Ghazal) in present day Sudan. He states that on reaching what is today northern Uganda, the Jo-Lwo split into two groups – one headed westward into present day Alurland and the other moved eastward into present day Acoliland. Although the Acoli are currently mostly settled in northern Uganda, a small contingent of the ethnic group is also found in southern Sudan. (See Santandrea 1968, Gersony 1997:6, and Pido 2000:105.) In Uganda the Acoli are mainly settled in the northern districts of Gulu, Amuru, Kitgum and Pader which constitute what is usually referred to as 'Acoliland' – comprising an area of 28,000 km², about the size of Rwanda or Belgium, with a population of about 700,000 by 1997 (Gersony 1997:6).

Heike Behrend (1999) maintains that the Acoli owe the emergence of their ethnic identity not to any kind of internal consistence, but to concrete historical experiences. In other words, it is the common historical experiences that make the Acoli culturally what they are today. By the time the British arrived to establish colonial rule in Acoliland between 1896 and 1913, they found the Acoli organised under several clan chiefs in an egalitarian society with a common cultural identity (See Bere 1947 and Girling 1960). Like most non-Bantu ethnic groups in Uganda, the Acoli were loosely organised with no central political structure of authority at the apex; yet they had a common language, common social structures and customary practices, and identified themselves as belonging to one cultural entity (See Okumu 1975, p'Bitek 1980 and Okot 1994). As Behrend acknowledges, political relations were based on collaboration and negotiation, and not dominance and subjugation. Perhaps this defines the Acoli concept of power and political relations – where leadership was prioritised over ‘rulership’.

However, the recent history of the Acoli has been a history of war, displacement and deprivation. A number of scholars have written on the genesis, nature, trends and effects of the recent war in Acoliland – prominent among them are Robert Gersony (1997), Ondoga ori Amaza (1998) and Behrend (1999). All these scholars recount the start of the rebel insurgency in August 1986 and the resultant insecurity and suffering hitherto unknown in that part of the country. Cruel atrocities were committed against the civilian population by both government troops and rebels.¹ It is against this background that Alice Auma (Lakwena),² a

¹ I have used the term “rebels” to refer to the groups fighting the army of the regime in power in Kampala (the National Resistance Movement). The government in power describes them as “rebels” but they refer to themselves as an army, and more specifically as *Mony Lum* (guerilla army). There have been four phases of insurgency in Acoliland. The first phase (1986 - 1987) was by the Uganda People’s Democratic Army (UPDA) composed of remnants of the army dislodged from power by Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army in January 1986. The second phase (1987) was by the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) led by Alice Auma Lakwena. The third phase (1988 – 1989) was by a group of survivors of the defeated HSM led by Severino Lukoya, Alice Lakwena’s father. The fourth phase (1989 – to present day) by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony. Apart from the UPDA, the rebel armies drew their recruits from the general population by persuasion (and in the case of LRA sometimes by forceful abduction).

² The word *Lakwena* in Acoli language means ‘prophet’ or ‘messenger,’ and this was a title with which Alice Auma was generally referred to as a messenger of God.

peasant woman, emerged as an enigmatic rebel leader in November 1986 to 'purify' the land of 'sins' against the Acoli by both the indigene sons and external forces.

Behrend (1999) makes an in-depth study of Alice Auma and her Holy Spirit Movement. The entry of Auma into the war changed the gender dimension of the conflict. She was able to garner support of the local population by her appeal to Christian theology, Acoli cultural values and traditional belief system. She cut the figure of a mother come to cleanse the land of evil perpetrated by male offenders, and to lead her children to salvation and peace. Many girls and women joined her as combatants.

According to Behrend, the men willingly submitted to Auma's leadership and she scored several successes against the government troops. It was only when she moved out of Acoliland and attempted to capture state power in Kampala that she was defeated in October 1986. As Behrend, Amaza and Gersony variously point out, this did not mark the end of the war in Acoliland. Severino Lukoya (Auma's father) continued with the war against government forces till his capitulation in 1989, and thereafter Joseph Kony took up the fight with his Lord's Resistance Army to the present day.

The Parliament of Uganda released its findings on the war in northern Uganda and its effects in a document titled *Report of the Committee on Defence and Internal Affairs on the War in Northern Uganda* (1997). The report details the catastrophic effects of the continuing war on the very cultural and social fabric of the Acoli society, especially with the forced displacement of a whole population into camps by government forces in the name of security measures. This forced displacement and the war in general have had far reaching consequences on the social and economic structures of the Acoli; and thereby could have led to a redefining of gender perceptions and relations.

This study therefore particularly examines gender identities and power relations among a traumatised and dispossessed people – where traditional values and practices have been shaken to the very roots, and appreciation of certain important values necessary for the sustenance and survival of society could have become distorted and warped. Yet, I must add, many traditional cultural values seem to have survived the turbulent times; just as some new and useful values seem to have also emerged from the same furnace.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

At the level of gender theorisation I draw on Butler's performativity theory to frame my study, casting gender identity and relations as repetitive performance compelled by hegemonic heterosexist discourses within the Acoli society, and investigating how this is manifest in song performance. However, I move beyond the limits of the performativity theory regarding a situated 'subject' in time and space, adopting a gender theorisation that takes into account the historical and spatial embeddedness of the performances themselves, thereby not ignoring the possible socio-cultural premising of the gendered performances. On the question of agency in the subversion of the dominant gender power relations, the study is informed by both the performativity theory and other gender theories that prescribed to a critically conscious subject – thereby, not foreclosing any avenue in understanding the complex nature of gender power relations and agency in song performance among the Acoli.

Also informing the study is a body of oral literature theory that considers oral performance as a living art form, therefore part and parcel of the people's very existence – the exegesis of their cultural life. Coupled with this is the perspective that projects art as a form through which humankind reflect on and perceive reality; in other words, to paraphrase Georg Lukacs, in art the relationship between phenomenon and essence is often quite manifest (cited in Vazquez 1979:

37). Therefore, oral performance reflects and represents the worldview and contradictions in society; and is often used as a tool for ideological reproduction (Ngugi 1986:10-13; and Ogwang 1994). Framing the study is also the oral literature theory that views oral performance as social action – a means of ritual efficacy, re-creation of cultural values and/or subversion of the status quo. In analysing Acoli song performance, I take into account the theoretical perspective that acknowledges the multi-media communicative channels in performance and the meta-communicative nature of oral performance. (See: Baumann 1977; Finnegan 1992b; and Kratz 1994.)

In interpreting the song performance I employ a semiotic approach – a theoretical perspective concerned with signs and sign systems, and their combination into symbolic codes that generate meaning (see Hervey 1982). In this respect, I analyse language in all its manifestation – verbal language, para-language, action/body language, and object language.

2.4. Methodology

2.4.1. Scope of the study

My study focuses on Acoli songs. Acoli songs fall under six major categories: *wer myel-kwaaro* (traditional dance-songs), *wer pa lutino* (children's play songs and lullabies), *wer keny* (wedding songs) *wer nanga* (topical lyrics), *wer lyel* (funeral dirges) and *wer jok* (ritual songs). Traditional dance-songs are further broken down into five sub-categories depending on the dance type and major song themes – these are *orak*, *otole*, *dingi-dingi*, *bwola* and *apiti* – and because of their elaborate dance-patterns, and the large number of people required to perform them, they are occasionally performed. Furthermore, due to biting poverty and the massive loss of cattle, used for paying bride-price, cultural wedding ceremonies are presently rare. However, all the song categories continue to be performed by individuals or groups without waiting for the specific traditional occasions when such songs are generally performed.

Most of the songs studied were recorded as and when they were performed. As mentioned earlier, the rationale for choosing the song form and not any other oral literature form such as the short formulaic forms (puzzles, riddles, proverbs and sayings) and oral narratives forms (myths, legends, folktales and fables) is that songs permeate everyday lives of the Acoli people and are readily accessible; and secondly, songs are highly malleable and adjust more readily to changing realities, reflecting and mediating them. The study scales the period between 2004 and 2006 during which the field investigation was conducted.

Apart from making a study of the songs in live performance, I also examined the songs on tapes (sold in shops or in personal archives) and in recordings being played over electronic media such as the radio. As Mamadou Diawara (1997) puts it, radio is authority itself and it lends some degree of authenticity or truth to what is being broadcast. He argues that the oral performance being aired “is no longer valued for its content alone, but also for the approval it receives from the man or woman on the radio, from the Radio itself” (41). He further points out that radio broadcasts exert a determining influence on the public, whether performers or audience.

In spite of the many facets of gender manifestation in Acoli song performance, the study focuses squarely on gender identity construction and power relations. The primary focus is on the ‘text’ of the song performance, and the analysis of the context of performance and other communicative modes like music or body language is in relation to the examination of the ‘texts’ of the songs.

2.4.2. Field Research

After clearance was obtained from Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (the body that approves and monitors research in Uganda), the field research was conducted in two districts (Gulu and Kitgum) of the four districts of Acoli. This was because the third district (Pader) was too insecure for research,

and the fourth district (Amuru) was carved out of Gulu District in 2006 when the follow-up research was being done. A multi-stage random sampling technique was used to arrive at one parish in each of the two chosen districts (Gulu and Kitgum).³ Within these two parishes (Unyama in Gulu and Labuje in Kitgum) we set out to collect the primary data (i.e. songs) and secondary data that consisted of discussions and interviews with selected categories of performers, informants and culturally knowledgeable individuals.

The rationale for carrying out the field research in only two parishes was that although all parishes in Acoliland are unique in themselves, the sample will also, in my view, be representative of the other parishes. This is because the residents of any given parish constantly interact with other members of the Acoli society residing in the other parishes and identify with them as belonging to one cultural entity. Secondly, the time-span within which the field study was to be conducted, and the financial resources at hand, could not allow for the coverage of a much bigger area.

However, due to security consideration because of the ongoing war situation, most of the field research was done in and around Gulu and Kitgum towns. The change in the locations of the field research was inevitable. For example, in the first week of field research in Kitgum District I was cautioned against going to Labuje Parish by the district security officials because of insecurity. This in itself was not a major set back because many people had left the out-lying areas to seek safety near or within the two urban centres of Gulu and Kitgum. There was a rich mix of people from all over Acoliland, which would have been impossible to encounter during a more peaceful era – and this enriched my study.

Five major techniques of data collection was employed in the field research:

³ The administrative structure of Uganda is that the country is divided into districts. Each district is then divided into counties; and each county is further sub-divided into sub-counties. A sub-county is made up of several parishes; and a parish is further sub-divided into villages.

- (a) *Participant-Observation*. This involved a critical observation of the song performance, noting various aspects of the performance that are vital in generating meaning and aiding interpretation, and yet which cannot be captured through audio-recording, such as kinesic and proxemic. Participant-observation also yielded contextual information that was useful for later data analysis. During observation we particularly noted the following: who performs what in gender terms, the body language of both the performers and the participant-audience whether they exude specific gender notions, use of symbolic objects that stress gender identity in the performance, and the setting of the performance.
- (b) *Photography*. This captured the setting and visual properties of the song performance, and other details such as facial expression, gestures, and audience participation. (See Finnegan 1992b:68.) Although this technique may not provide us with the actual sequential action, it still gave us a valuable visual for interpretation.
- (c) *Audio-recording*. This enabled us not only to capture the actual verbal production, but also the accompanying sounds and music, thus bringing in a dimension that is often missed out in ‘pen-and-paper’ recording. It also enabled us to have a more profound understanding of the performance, especially at the data analysis stage.
- (d) *Interviewing*. In-depth interviews were conducted singly and in group with the performers and critics about the performances to seek clarifications and explanations on the content in relation to the contexts of the performance. Interviews were also conducted with elderly people of both genders conversant with the history and culture of the Acoli to get information about activities that cannot be directly observed, and to clarify inferences made during observation of performance. (See Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:125-6.) During the interviews some questions were directed at finding out what the performers see themselves as doing through the performance, and whether they were aware of the gendered content of the performance. In other words, we attempted to find out

whether there was some level of intentionality on the part of the performing ‘subjects’, or whether they were just compelled by the heterosexist discourses as theorised by the performativity perspective.

- (e) *Focused group discussion*. Discussions were held with selected groups of individuals (male, female, young and elderly) to get their perspective on issues raised during interviews, or on specific performances and their interpretations. This was important because what people say is not only evidence of their perspectives, but often also that of the larger ethnic community to which they belong (cf. Atkinson 1988). The discussions were also geared towards finding out whether the gender notions and practices re-enacted in the song performance have been trans-historical or whether some have been occasioned by the recent disruptive developments in Acoliland. In other words, we attempted to establish possible link between gender identity construction and power relations and the prevailing realities in Acoli society. The discussions enabled us to place the gender situation within the larger cultural or ethnographic context.

2.4.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis was done in two stages. The first stage was the transcription of data from audio tapes and translation of the transcribed data from the source language (Acoli) to the target language (English). It is important to note that certain specific performance features like tonality, mood, atmosphere, body language and musical attributes could not be captured in writing (Scheub 1971:31). Where these features were crucial to the interpretation of meanings, a commentary on them was made to accompany the transcript.

Furthermore, being aware of both translation problems and strategies, I adopt the translation model that considers language as representing a form of expressiveness and a form of social action and experience; and not merely as a direct correspondence with ‘reality’ or meanings and thoughts in people’s minds

(Finnegan 1992b: 187). Hence, in taking language as expressiveness or social action, I paid attention to context and the non-verbal accompaniments in the process of translation.

The second stage of data analysis employed a qualitative approach – involving content, linguistic and contextual analyses – to determine the manifestation of gender identity construction and power relations in song performance. Other communicative modes like body language and music were also taken into consideration in analysing the ‘texts’ of songs.

Below are questions that guided the data analysis, and also constituted the basic units of analysis.

Gender Identity construction

1. What are the outstanding characteristics of the gender identities portrayed in Acoli songs; and how do the females and males project their gender identity through song performance?
2. In the impersonation of the opposite gender by either the males or females, what are the dominant identity traits of the opposite gender highlighted in the song performance?
3. How has language and other communicative means been employed in bringing out gender identity construction in the song performance?
4. What role does song performance play in enhancing specific gender identity construction, or in the re-signification and contestation of particular identity traits in society; and how does it do this?
5. What is the Acoli concept of personhood as reflected in the song performance; and how does this impact on the gender identity construction?
6. What is the relationship between song performance, identity construction and the realities in Acoli society; and to what extent have the realities in society impacted on the gender identity construction in song performance?

Gender Power Relations

1. What are the Acoli conceptions of what constitutes 'power' and 'subordination' as portrayed in the song performance?
2. What are the major sites of power in Acoli society presented in song performance, and what are the positions of the two genders vis-à-vis these sites of power?
3. What is the nature of the gender power relations in Acoli society as reflected in the songs; and how does the song performance mediate and intervene in the power relations?
4. How has song performance been appropriated (if at all) as a tool of critical agency to subvert existing gender power relations, or to enhance specific modes of power relations in society?
5. What do the performers see themselves as doing through song performance?
6. What is the relationship between song performance, gender power relations and the realities in Acoli society; and to what extent have the realities in society impacted on the gender power relations portrayed in song performance?