

Chapter Three

TEXT AND TEXTUALITY IN ORAL PERFORMANCE

Literary texts tell us things about society and culture that we could learn in no other way.¹

3.1. Introduction

Since oral literary text is central to my study, in this chapter I examine the nature of textuality of oral forms that is rather different from the textuality of written literary text. Many theories of textuality in mainstream traditional literary criticism seem not to have taken into consideration the textuality of oral forms, and instead seemed to have concerned themselves with the written literary texts. The question of organic unity where the text is the sum total of the parts that constitute the whole, and each part having a specific position in relation to the others, does not seem to arise in oral literary text, as shown in the examination of the Acoli songs studied. How the parts are positioned and the relations between the parts to a greater extent do not determine the significance of the text (cf. Barber 1991: 22-25).

In the chapter I also endeavour to explain how oral texts work in performance to generate meanings that give us an insight into the nature of the society in which they are produced. Oral texts, apart from being vehicles of communication and creative expressiveness, are also socio-cultural products that reflect and often mediate social realities. The examination of the nature of oral text and how it works in a performing phenomenon to generate meaning undertaken in this chapter, I hope, will enhance our understanding of the oral texts analysed in the subsequent chapters examining the relation between Acoli song performances and identity construction, power relations and gender performativity.

¹ Karin Barber (1991), *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and Past in a Yoruba Town*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 1

3.2. The Nature of Oral Texts

As a student of African Literature researching gender issues in Acoli song performance, the text of the performance is situated right at the centre of my investigation. The question to pose at this stage is: what is text and what is the nature of text in song performance? As W. F. Hanks defines it “text can be taken (heuristically) to designate any configuration of signs that is coherently interpretable by some community” (Hanks 1989: 95). This definition elevates text from a mere artefact to a communicative phenomenon, and locates it within a social matrix “within which the discourse is produced and understood.”² So, to properly understand and interpret the meanings of a particular text we must place it within the context of a particular community and the circumstance under which the text is rendered.

On the other hand, W. F. Hanks defines textuality as “the quality of coherence or connectivity that characterizes text” (Hanks 1989: 96). However, even Hanks himself acknowledges the inadequacy of such a definition when considering oral performance. He writes that:

... connectivity may be dependent upon the inherent properties of the textual artifact, the interpretive activities of a community of readers/viewers, or a combination of the two. It raises the further problem however ... of whether all texts are necessarily unified by textuality, or whether some kinds of texts may not contain within them significant anti-textual elements. That is, they may fail to have thematic, stylistic, or other kinds of unity, but still constitute a “text” (Hanks 1989: 96).

In a number of Acoli songs studied there seems to be some kind of *assumed audience knowledge* of the issues at hand by the performers, thereby making some portions of the songs seem incoherent or inundated by gaps to an outsider. Yet the ‘initiated’ audience are able to appreciate and understand the performance. To

² For a more detailed analysis see: W. F. Hanks (1989), “Text and Textuality,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 18, p. 96.

discuss this further let us consider the *aguma* song below by a group of performers who call themselves Awach Boys:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Can wiye rac</i> | Deprivation is big-headed |
| <i>Omiyo guneko Oboyi woko</i> | It made them kill Oboyi |
| <i>Wiye tin okato ya</i> | Its head has today passed |
| <i>Omiyo guneko Oboyi woko</i> | It made them killed Oboyi |
| <i>Wiye tin okato ya</i> | Its head has today passed. |
| <i>Can wiye rac</i> | Deprivation is big-headed |
| <i>Omiyo guneko Oboyi woko</i> | It made them kill Oboyi |
| <i>Wiye tin okato ya</i> | Its head has today passed |
| | |
| <i>Can wiye rac</i> | Deprivation is big-headed |
| <i>Min-nyako oboyo wiye</i> | The girl's mother has wrapped her head |
| <i>Mito lukwan ya</i> | She wants the educated |
| <i>Oloko ki leb munu</i> | She speaks in English |
| <i>Min-nyako loko leb munu</i> | The girl's mother speaks English |
| <i>Oloko leb munu</i> | She speaks English |
| <i>Can wiye rac</i> | Deprivation is big-headed |
| <i>Min-nyako oboyo wiye</i> | The girl's mother has wrapped her head |
| | |
| <i>Ali wee!</i> | Ali oh! |
| <i>Ali woto "mobile"</i> | Ali is mobile |
| <i>Ali wee!</i> | Ali oh! |
| <i>Ali woto "mobile"</i> | Ali is mobile |
| <i>Ali wee!</i> | Ali oh! |
| <i>Ali woto "mobile"</i> | Ali is mobile |
| | |
| <i>Gumoko Alany woko</i> | They abducted Alany |
| <i>Cilil mako Alany woko</i> | The rebels abducted Alany |
| <i>Gumako Alany woko</i> | They have abducted Alany |
| <i>Cilil mako Alany woko</i> | The rebels abducted Alany |
| <i>Gumoko Alany woko</i> | They abducted Alany |
| <i>Cilil mako Alany woko</i> | The rebels abducted Alany |

Aguma is a dance performance that was popularize during the last few years of the insurgency. It is performed mostly by youth using the thumb piano known as *lukeme* as the main musical instrument. Six to seven *lukeme* of various sizes may be played in a performance that includes singing and dancing.

A reading of the above transcript from a traditional literary vantage point would

show glaring incoherence and lack of textual unity. There would seem to be thematic disjuncture between the stanzas, with seeming gaps in poetic continuity and redundant repetition. However, the nature of text in a performative piece is quite different from that of written literature. As Dell Hymes notes, a piece of folklore needs to be appreciated from the point of view of a communicative performance phenomenon that involves social interaction in the generation of meaning (Hymes 1981: 79). This view is reinforced by Tania Kaiser's comment on the song production among the Acoli:

The development of the song is simultaneously directed by several people, in a form that mirrors Acholi emphasis on collaboration and consensus. While it is not uncommon for competing soloists to face each other off in an attempt to take control of the song, ultimately the overall effect is more important than any individual's contribution and conflict is squashed by the other singers. (Kaiser 2006: 191).

The above performance opens with the utterance "*Can wiye rac*" translated as "Deprivation is big-headed". From Acoli linguistic point of view the word "*Can*" may mean "Deprivation", but at a deeper cultural level it may refer to "Death in the homestead." Being 'big-headed' connotes doing things that are out of the normal, which are an aberration, and not following the authoritative set of cultural values that guide the Acoli society. We notice the personification of 'Deprivation'. The performers are displaced from their normal dwellings as a result of the twenty-year-old war of insurgency in Acoliland, and performing to an audience acquainted with the throes of displacement. The existing state of deprivation is blamed for the death of Oboyi:

Deprivation is big-headed
It made them kill Oboyi
Its head has today passed

The 'big-head' of deprivation "...has today passed" by, leaving calamity behind. Oboyi, the male provider, is no more. Furthermore, the aberration caused by the 'big-headed' deprivation is seen in "The girl's mother", who instead of grooming herself for the respectable status of mother-in-law, wraps her head (possibly to

hide grey hair), and sells herself using English language as a marker of modernity:

The girl's mother has wrapped her head
She wants the educated
She speaks in English

Speaking in English is associated with the modern and young, so “The girl's mother” is being touted as trying to appear young to market herself. This is the shame (and moral degeneration) that comes with deprivation.

“Ali is mobile,” he has no permanent abode, as a result of displacement. Although Ali is a person's name, the pun is quite revealing. “Ali” in Acoli means “trouble”. Thus, the inference ‘trouble is mobile’ – it finds you wherever you move (even in the so-called ‘protected camps’). Hence, the last stanza of the performance:

They abducted Alany
The rebels abducted Alany

Deprivation is a curse – even after seeking refuge, there is no solace, because trouble is mobile. The girl, Alany, still gets abducted by the rebels.

For the intended audience, the performance possesses an organic unity and a focused thematic message in a way that only oral texts in performance can have. As one interviewee, Philomena Atoo,³ says “*Man wer kum alany pa mon,*” meaning “This song is about the humiliation of women”; that is, the erosion of women's dignity. The depriving situation robs the family of the male breadwinner, forces the prospective mother-in-law into a humiliating lifestyle of selling herself to survive, and the young female is abducted to become a sex-slave instead of having a dignified marriage.

The above song highlights the sexual commodification of the female as a result of erosion of the cultural values due to the war situation. It points to the shift in the female identity from ‘the girl's mother’ to a common prostitute, and from ‘wife’

³ Philomena Atoo was interviewed on December 10, 2004, at Laroo in the outskirt of Gulu town.

to ‘sex-slave’. This meaning can only be derived from the oral text when interpreted from the vantage point of the social-cultural experiences of the community. It is by looking at the text of the song from a broader socio-cultural perspective (rather than just formalistic considerations) that one is able to appreciate its textuality and interpret its fuller meaning.

To interpret gender identity construction and power relations among the Acoli using the text of song performance one must need go beyond the formalistic examination and situate the text of the songs in a broader socio-cultural context. A number of scholars do recognise the fact that context is central in understanding an oral text in performance and defining it as a complete and interpretively coherent artefact (cf: Dundes 1980: 20-32; Bauman 1983: 363-367; Hanks 1989: 98; Glassie 1995: 17-24). A proper understanding of the meanings of a particular song performance can only be achieved through an interpretative analysis of both form and context. Henry Glassie even goes further and declares that “context is the source of interpretation, the environment of significance,” and that “outside context there is no understanding.”⁴ This is one of the important aspects that set aside oral text, which is actualised in performance, from written text.⁵

⁴ See: Henry Glassie (1995), *the Spirit of Folk Art*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., p.17.

⁵ Richard Bauman identifies two broad categories of context, the social and cultural context. He writes that the social context encompasses “matters of social structure and social interactions”, while cultural contexts refers to “systems of meaning and symbolic interrelationships” (Bauman 1983: 363). He further breaks down these two major categories into six sub-categories through which folklore can be analysed, as follows: “a) *context of meaning* (what does it mean?); b) *institutional context* (where does it fit within the culture?); c) *context of communicative systems* (how does it relate to other kinds of folklore?); d) *social base* (what kind of people does it belong to?); e) *individual context* (how does it fit into a person’s life?); f) *context of situation* (how is it useful in social situations?)” (Bauman 1983: 367).

Henry Glassie in his analysis divides context into five major categories: He writes: “There is the universal *context of our humanity*, of our bodies that want nourishment, our hearts that want play, our minds that want understanding, our souls that want faith. There is the *stylistic context* within which alien works become beautiful as part of a culture’s formal system. There is the *conceptual context of culture*, composed of values that drench art with power. There is the *physical context of experience*, the vital scenes within which culture is enacted. There is the *critical context of the observer*, within which our search begins” (Glassie 1995: 20).

Isidore Okpewho, on his part, identifies the personality of the performer(s) as also part of context (Okpewho 1992: 34 – 39). While Ruth Finnegan considers the nature of the audience to which a performance is directed as an important part of context (Finnegan 1992: 231 – 235). This is just to show how wide and varied the understanding of context is among scholars.

The textuality of Acoli oral creative forms (and particularly Acoli sung oral forms) – that is, how they work as texts to constitute meaning in an oral performance – is quite different from the textuality of written texts. The song below performed by Marcelino Opwonya of Anaka may appear incoherent or even contradictory and mixed-up in organisation from an outsider’s observation, yet consistent and meaningful to the indigene.

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Teki teda</i> <i>Jal, mon pol ata</i> <i>aparo ngo na.</i> <i>Kadi abedo i cugulung</i> <i>pe aparo, teki teda.</i> | As long as she cooks for me Comrade, there are many women but I don’t mind. Even if I sit on biting <i>cugulung</i> insect I don’t mind, as long as she cooks for me. |
| <i>Ceng iwaco ni Anna rac</i> <i>Kong dong inen!</i> <i>Labir bene ki poto</i> <i>mon ma kayo.</i> <i>Pe awuru</i> <i>Nya-pa-mara, an pe atamo</i> | Once you said Anna is bad Now you suffer! Sorghum in the field it is women who harvest. I don’t care The daughter of my mother-in-law, I don’t mind. |
| <i>Opwonya gi ceto i Vanguard</i> <i>ka dwaro cilim.</i> <i>Opwonya gi ceto i Alobo</i> <i>ka yeyo cilim.</i> <i>Pe aparo.</i> | Those of Opwonya go to Vanguard ⁶ to hunt for AIDS. Those of Opwonya go to Alobo ⁷ to carry AIDS. I don’t care. |
| <i>Butu kolo</i> <i>Aluu butu butu kolo</i> <i>labongo nika.</i> <i>Anyira Anaka ma yang acunu</i> <i>pongo Tata kulu.</i> <i>Anyira Anaka ma yang acunu –</i> <i>aparo ngo ci.</i> | Lying provocatively Aluu lies provocatively without knickers. Anaka girls whom I once wooed can fill a whole Tata lorry. Anaka girls whom I once wooed – so why should I care. |
| <i>Onang-nang ma i kuma ni</i> <i>pe aparo.</i> <i>Kadi iwaco ni dako rac</i> | The exploitation on me I don’t care. Even if you say the woman is bad |

⁶ Vanguard is a suburb of Gulu town with numerous one-room residences well known for the high number of cheap prostitutes who inhabit them. That is a place where some men go for cheap sex for cash.

⁷ Alobo is a renowned nightclub in Gulu town where high class prostitute can be procured.

teki teda.
Kongo bene ii abino
mon ma piko....

as long as she cooks for me.
Even beer in the pot
it is women who fill it....

To a casual outsider the song may lack coherence and meaningful flow – yet from the Acoli cultural aesthetic point of view it is a wholesome artistic performance. For instance, the performer sings that he does not mind his woman being seen as bad as long as she cooks for him, but says “Those of Opwonya go to Vanguard/ to hunt for AIDS.” The singer’s name is Opwonya, and to an uninitiated observer this may appear as a contradictory statement. Yet it is common practice for Acoli song performers to use their own names in a song when actually the audience knows quite well they are referring to somebody else. In this way they avoid acrimony yet drive the point home.

Furthermore, it may appear as if the performer jumps from one topic to the other in a single performance, but actually he is treating one central theme which unifies everything into a coherent whole. In summary, what he is saying is that he appreciates the woman he has as long as she feeds him despite there being many women around. He has seen them all, wooed many girls in the past that can fill a whole Tata lorry, but will stick with the one he has instead of going around risking getting AIDS. Not even the provocative posture of the seductive Aluu will sway him. He further argues that a woman (be it the one he has) cannot be all that bad to warrant a change, because “Sorghum in the field/ it is women who harvest” and “Even beer in the pot/ it is women who fill it....” So, the bottom line is: “as long as she cooks” for him, he will stick with her. Here we notice that organic unity in Acoli song performance is more contextual than formalistic – that is, there are gaps that only understanding the whole performance from a socio-cultural context would fill.

To further explain the nature of textuality in Acoli song performance, let us consider another song, a dirge performed at a funeral at Laroo in Gulu in December 2004:

*Jal, adong kena do
Neno gang obemo
Lwong min bebi dwog cen
Jal, wat-obeno pe!*

Comrade, I have been left alone
See the home is desolate
Call the baby's mother to come back
Comrade, the *obeno*⁸ relationship is no
more!

*Wat-obeno ogik matwal
Ineno wat-obeno ku*

The *obeno* relationship is stopped forever
You will never see the *obeno* relationship.

*Wat obeno orwenyo
Adong kena
Lwong min Tuku dwong cen do
Twon coo bako doge*

The *obeno* relationship is lost
I am left alone
Call the girl's mother to come back
The bull of a man pleads

*Ayoli yee!
Adong i laro do!*

*Ayoli yee!
I am left on the bare open rock!*

*Jal, adong kena do
Ineno gang obemo
Lwong min bebi dwog cen do
Adong i laro yai!*

Comrade, I have been left alone
See the home is desolate
Call the baby's mother to come back
I am left on the open rock, oh!

*Ka bedo odoko pe
Ka bedo odoko ding matwal*

I have no resting place
The resting place is indeed tight.

*Jal, wat orweny wacon
Ineno abako doge ba
Lwong min bebi dwog cen
A dong kena do!*

Comrade, blood relationship got lost
long ago
See, I plead indeed
Call the baby's mother to come back
I am left alone indeed!

*Ayoli yee!
Adong i laro do!*

*Ayoli yee!
I am left on the bare open rock!*

*Ineno adong kena
Ineno gang obemo
Wulong min bebi dwong cen
Adong ilaro!*

See, I have been left alone
See the home is desolate
Call the baby's mother to come back
I am left on the open rock!

*Wat obeno ogik matwal
Ineno aling kena*

The *obeno* relationship is stopped forever
See, I am alone and silent.

Adong kena

I have been left alone

⁸ *Obeno* is a piece of garment used to strap a baby to the mother's back as she goes about her daily chores. Among the Acoli it is a symbol of blood relationship, or relationship by birth.

Twon coo woto gom
Woto bako doge
Kabedo dong pe ba

The bull of a man walks bent over
He walks pleading
There is no place indeed.

Wat obeno ocot matwal
Yoo pa neyo pe do.

The *obeno* relationship is severed forever
The road to a mother's relatives is no more.

Note that there seems to be a lot of repetition and not every part of the text is tightly positioned in relation to others such that a removal (or change of position) of one part would change the significance of the oral text. This is what makes the oral literary text, which is actualized in performance, different from the written literary text. In the above song, just like in much of the Acoli oral poetry, it is very difficult to mark out a definite poetic progression culminating into a definite poetic conclusion (such as the traditional literary criticism is used to). Most Acoli songs often go on and on in a repetitive manner, and the end of a particular song performance is often arbitrary or influenced by external factors. In reference to Acoli songs Tania Kaiser rightly points out that:

These songs have no formal beginning or end, rather they consist of a range of musical and lyrical possibilities around a theme which can be taken up or not by the singers in question (Kaiser 2006: 190).

In the text of the above dirge one also notices some “linguistic gaps,” which is characteristic of Acoli oral literary texts that could make them rather incomprehensible to the uninitiated outsider. Consider this:

I have been left alone
The bull of a man walks bent over
He walks pleading
There is no place indeed.

Instead of singing “There is no [resting] place [to take refuge from the world's problems] indeed”, the performers state “There is no place indeed” leaving glaring linguistic gaps that can only be filled by an initiated audience. Notice also that there is a fluid shift from the first person singular to the third person singular

when the persona is referring to himself. After stating “I have been left alone” the persona says “The bull of a man walks bent over/ He walks pleading.” This apparent linguistic anomaly is common in Acoli song performance, where a person refers to himself in the third person.

The use of linguistic gaps is just one of the numerous aspects of oral textuality which set aside oral literary texts from written literary texts. An examination of the above dirge would give credence to the assertion by Liz Gunner and Mafika Gwala regarding oral texts that:

Information which in normal discourse would be presented in leisurely, expansive form is compressed, often paratactic.... Expression is often cryptic and aphoristic. (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 4).

Furthermore, there is the use of ideophones which is common in oral literary texts because they are meant for the ears (not purely the eyes like in written texts). In the dirge above the performer sings:

Ayoli-yee!
I am left on the open rock!

The expression “*Ayoli-yee!*” cannot be narrowly defined as a word, and therefore it is untranslatable into English, yet it is an audio-expression loaded with meaning depicting utter anguish. As Isidore Okpewho (1992: 92) puts it, an ideophone refers to “sounds used in conveying a vivid impression” and Ruth Finnegan (1992a) simply describes it as ideas in sound. Ideophones often have meanings rooted in specific cultures. In the performance of the dirge, the mourner uses the Acoli ideophone *Ayoli-yee* to vividly convey his state of mind in a more powerful way than any conventional word would do.

In addition, tonality is very important in deciphering meaning in Acoli oral literary texts (more than in written texts). This is particularly significant because Acoli language is partially tonal. A change in tone can drastically lead to a change in meaning, even when a well know oral piece is being performed. Let us look at

this extract from a song sang purportedly in praise of a treasurer of a women's group in Pece division, in Gulu:

Lutuwa, Ajok twon dako ada
Eno ba, gwok kwo pa Ajok.

My people, Ajok is a bull of a woman
There, take care of Ajok's life.

During the same performance, a section of the performers in the same breath gave an amusing tonal twist to the same refrain leading to the meaning below:

Lutuwa, Ajok twon dako ada
Eno ba, gwok kwo pa Ajok.

My people, Ajok is a bull of a woman
There, beware of Ajok's thieving.

Note that the spellings of the words rendered in written Acoli has not changed; but the change was in the tonal rendering in performance. In the Acoli language the word *gwok* can either mean 'take care of' or 'beware of' depending on the tonal twist one gives to it. In the same vein, the word *kwo* can mean 'life' or 'thieving' depending on the tone given. I agree with Okpewho in his assertion that "because the text of African oral literature is performed by the human voice, it benefits greatly from the flexibility of the voice" (Okpewho 1992: 88). This flexibility of the voice cannot be easily represented on the written page.

In the above dirge, death is not directly referred to because the mourner is partially in denial; instead he says "Call the baby's mother to come back." This accentuates the level of shock, whereby he cannot really believe death has occurred. The circumstance under which the utterance is made loads it with signification. The same song sang under a different circumstance, say for entertainment, will not exude the same meaning. To appreciate the textuality of literary texts in oral performance, we have to look at the literary texts as utterance which attain meaning "only in and through the concrete contexts of real social existence," as Barber rightly argues (1991: 25).

Unlike in a written literary text, the context of the performance is quite important in the interpretation of meaning of an oral literary text. As Gunner and Gwala have noted, oral literary texts cannot be categorised as fixed genres with fixed boundaries in the sense of conventional written literary genres (Gunner & Gwala 1991:1). They are very fluid, and also “very responsive to social and historical pressures,” and “open to ideological manipulation” (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 2). The performer, the audience and the situation of performance are essential components in understanding how oral texts work to generate meaning.

3.3. Cultural Basis of Artistic Criticism

Trying to understand Acoli song performance as accurately as possible, one must try to interpret it through the eyes and/or ears of the indigenous critics and audience. First, we have to take cognizance of the fact that language is a cultural product; hence, one way of keying a song performance is the use of culture-specific figures of speech. Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from the song reproduced on page 48:

Call the baby’s mother to come back
I am left on the open rock!....

I have been left alone
The bull of a man walks bent over
He walks pleading....

The *obeno* relationship is severed forever
The road to a mother’s relatives is no more.

To paint a vivid picture of the state of desolation and hopelessness caused by the death of the female spouse the persona states, “I am left on the open rock”. To the Acoli the open rock is a symbol of ‘hardness/hardship’ and ‘nothingness’. Saying he is ‘left on the open rock’ actually means that death has left him exposed to all the ills of life. This shows the crucial role the dead female partner played in his life. Thus, “The bull of a man walks bent over.” A ‘bull’ is a panegyric

reference in Acoli language; and here it is used to depict how low the man's self-esteem and pride has dropped with the death of his female partner. To further accentuate the important social position of the female, the persona emphasizes, "The *obeno* relationship is severed forever." The *obeno*, the strap that a mother uses to carrying her baby on her back, is symbolic of the social relations (and thereby social capital) she bestows upon that child. Blood relation is symbolised by the *obeno*.⁹ Brothers and sisters are considered as social wealth by the Acoli as exemplified in the saying "wat *obeno lonyo*" meaning "*obeno* relationship is wealth." The death of the man's wife, therefore, has deprived his child of that social wealth. A married woman brings with her a whole set of new social relationships (her own relatives), which is bestowed on her new family; and her demise weakens or diminishes these relationships – "The road to a mother's relatives is no more," says the persona.

As demonstrated above, the knowledge of the culture-specific figures of speech is very important in interpreting the song performance, and thereby understanding the discourse being presented. In addition to figures of speech, there are some expressions employed in Acoli song performance treating local issues which may have meanings different from the obvious literal meanings, that are better understood by the people in a particular locale of Acoliland (cf. p'Bitek 1974: 10). There is danger of the meanings of these expressions being taken literally by a non-initiated casual observer. Consider, for example, the excerpt below taken from the song reproduced on page 42:

Deprivation is big-headed
It made them kill Oboyi
Its head has today passed

Although being a born Acoli and relatively well-acquainted with my people's culture, I was a bit surprised when I asked one of the spectators to interpret for me

⁹ *Obeno*, the baby carrying strap, is sometimes also used among the Acoli to symbolize comfort and protection. Hence, the expression "*Obeno pa mine ngayo*" meaning "His mother's *obeno* is weak" when referring to those who die in war.

the meaning of the above verse. He interpreted the expression “*Wiye tin okato ya*” (which literally means “Its head has today passed”) as meaning “This is too much.” The others listening to us concurred with him. This serves to show that words in song performance sometimes do not always mean what they literally stand for; and their contextual meaning may actually vary from song to song, from locale to locale, and from time to time.

Another culture-specific device used to key song performance are paralinguistic features. Take for example the song below performed by Gracia Acan, a thirteen-year-old baby-sitter:

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>Tuk-tuk do! Cwinya mito lemma.</i> | Tuk-tuk oh! I feel nauseated. |
| <i>Tuk-tuk do! Maa, wiya yo!</i> | Tuk-tuk oh! Mother, my head oh! |
| <i>Tuk-tuk do! Cwinya mito lemma.</i> | Tuk-tuk oh! I feel nauseated. |
| <i>Tuk-tuk do! Maa, wiya yo!</i> | Tuk-tuk oh! Mother, my head oh! |
| | |
| <i>Ojok ma latin-ni oceto ka kwan.</i> | Even the younger Ojok has gone to study. |
| <i>Tuk-tuk do! Maa, wiya yo!</i> | Tuk-tuk oh! Mother, my head oh! |
| <i>Okello ma latin-ni oceto oweka.</i> | Even the younger Okello has gone [to school] and left me. |
| <i>Tuk-tuk do! Maa, wiya yo!</i> | Tuk-tuk oh! Mother, my head oh! |

The performer had a baby strapped to her back, and performed the lullaby with a rocking motion of the upper part of her body. The sad look on her face shows her rocking motion is possibly more than to soothe the crying baby – the content of the song implies she could also be rocking to soothe herself. There are many factors that force the girl-child to drop out of school to perform domestic chores and take care of her siblings.

The performer holds her chin with her open palm. Among the Acoli this is a sign of sadness, stress and worries. This complements the ideophone she uses “Tuk-tuk,” expressing a throbbing headache as in the line “Tuk-tuk oh! Mother, my head oh!” At the end of each stanza she shrugs her shoulders – among the Acoli this is not a sign of resignation as in some cultures but a powerful expression of

resentment. She probably resents the fact that while she is forced to be at home “Even the younger Ojok has gone to study.” In rhythm with the singing she keeps on tapping her chest with an open hand; this is not a sign of repentance as imposed upon the Acoli by the Italian Catholic missionaries during prayers of contrition, but a sign of feeling nausea among the Acoli – hence the line “Tuk-tuk oh! I feel nauseated.”

As Bauman insightfully notes, “Paralinguistic features, by their very nature, tend not to be captured in the transcribed or published version of the texts”; hence, a reader of a graphic representation of song performance “is consequently forced to rely on incidental comments of the occasional sensitive observer who does note paralinguistic features of delivery style” (Bauman 1977: 19). What he should have added is that it is impossible to capture most of these culture-specific paralinguistic features on paper – they have to be interpreted and explained in a study like this. Therefore, the words of the text alone cannot be the ultimate basis of interpreting and understanding the meanings imbedded in a song performance. As Ruth Finnegan points out in her discussion of oral performance, “the bare words can *not* be left to speak for themselves.”¹⁰ For a fuller understanding of the text in oral performance, other aspects of performance have to be taken into consideration (as demonstrated in the interpretation of the song cited above).

The paralinguistic or paratextual resources at the disposal of the performer(s) include facial expressions, gestures, body movement (especially when dance is an integral part of the performance), etc. (cf. Okpewho 1992: 46-57). These paratextual features, even without the words, may be used to convey meanings of their own; but they are most commonly used to complement the meanings of the words.

¹⁰ Quoted in: Isidore Okpewho (1992), *African Oral Literature*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University press, p. 46.

The constellations of Acoli paralinguistic features used in song performance are a set of culture-specific signs that have to be interpreted. As Thomas A. Sebeok points out, “in [the] *mind* is a system of signs (i.e. tokens), that is, a representative (i.e. typical) model of what is commonly called ‘the world’.” (Sebeok 1986: 80-81). So, in analysing Acoli song performance it is more fruitful to view it through the prism of the worldview of the indigenes for the communicative signs (both audio and visual) to be meaningfully interpreted. According to Charles S. Peirce, a sign is “something that stands for something to someone in some respect or capacity.”¹¹ In his analysis of Peirce’s notion of semiotics, Merrell Floyd states that:

... nothing is a sign merely of and by itself. In the first place, to be a sign in the context of human understanding it needs an *interpretant* in addition in the *representamen* and the *object* of which it is a sign. But all signs are interpreted only in terms of others.... (Floyd 1992: 5).

Hence, the oral texts and the paratextual resources employed in their performance can be taken as communicative signs that have to be interpreted from a culture-specific vantage point.

Looking at Acoli song performance I am bound to agree with Barber that not only are they made to be interpreted but “are also accompanied by well developed indigenous methods and techniques by which the interpretation is carried out” (Barber 1991: 14). The different sub-genres of Acoli song performance sometimes call for different indigenous methods and techniques of interpretation. The major sub-genres include *Orak* love dang-songs, *Otole* war dance-songs, *Bwola* historical dance-songs, *Lyel* funeral dance-songs, *Jok* ritual dance-songs, *Apiti* women’s dance-songs, *Dingi-dingi* girls’ dance-songs, and *Nanga* general dance-songs (cf. p’Bitek 1974: 1-24). Of recent, a few new sub-genre have emerged – for example, *Aguma* dance-songs.

¹¹ See: Merrell Floyd, 1992, *Sign, Textuality, World*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, p.5

One cannot use the same interpretative method and techniques for discussing an *Aguma* song performance (which is usually meant for entertainment) as that for *Lyel* funeral dance-song (that is meant for mourning the dead) or *Jok* ritual dance-song (meant for exorcising evil spirits). To further elaborate this let us consider the *Jok* ritual song below:

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Ocung i wii Ayago</i> <i>ngat ma bayo peke .</i> | It stands on Ayago [river bridge] there is none to spear it. |
| <i>Ee-ee!</i> | Ee-ee! |
| <i>Ocung i dye lagang</i> <i>ngat ma twero peke.</i> | It stands in the <i>lagang</i> grass ¹² there is none to challenge it. |
| <i>Luba-tong gudwongo</i> <i>nga ka ma tin bayo ba?</i> | The spear throwers have come back who will spear it today? |
| <i>Ee-ee!</i> | Ee-ee! |
| <i>Luba-tong gudwongo</i> <i>nga ka ma tin twero ba?</i> | The spear throwers have come back who will challenge it today? |

By the very nature of the context of performance, the audience is expected to interpret the above song as an address to *Jok Ngu* (the spirit of the beast) being exorcised by the female diviner.¹³ This is where the oral text is construed as performing ritual action. The diviner leads the congregation in singing to *Jok Ngu*. It is an aggressive spirit and its puffed ego has to be rubbed the right way to mellow it and put it off guard. Its fierce nature is acknowledged: “It stands on Ayago [river bridge]/ there is none to spear it.” It is depicted as indomitable: “The spear throwers have come back/ who will challenge it today?” The ideophone “Ee-ee!” is used to express open fearful admiration. After the spirit of the beast has been charmed through song and spiritual intervention, it is then exorcised from the patient by the diviner.

The text of the above song is interpreted from the point of view of words that are meant to do things – charm the spirit of the beast, making it less fierce and easier

¹² The *lagang* grass is a very tall tropical grass found in Acoliland.

¹³ Most diviners in Acoli society are women. This is because of the divine aspect of female identity among the Acoli.

to deal with. Although the performance of the above song is accompanied by drumming and dancing, it is not interpreted as entertainment but a serious ritual performance meant to draw out the evil spirit.

As Tania Kaiser observes in her study of Acoli song performances, there are different categories of songs and “each has its own aesthetic norms” (Kaiser 2006: 188). Each song performance carries with it some clues on how it is to be interpreted. These clues are what Richard Bauman refers to as “culture-specific constellations of communicative means that serve to key performance in particular communities” (Bauman 1977: 22). This act of keying performance is sometimes called ‘framing’¹⁴ – i.e. providing a frame through which a particular song performance can be interpreted (cf. Ruesch & Bateson 1968: 209; Bateson 1972: 188).¹⁵ Bauman further contends that:

All framing... is accomplished through the employment of culturally conventionalized metacommunication. In empirical terms, this means that each speech community will make use of a structured set of distinctive communicative means from among its resources in culturally conventionalized and culture-specific ways to key the performance frame.... (Bauman 1977: 16).

When interpreted from a culture-specific vantage point the oral text of song performance is bound to reveal a lot about the social world, the socio-cultural attitudes and philosophy of the community of its production.

3.4. Oral texts, the social world and ideological reproduction

In studying oral performance, a critical examination of the texts of the oral art forms is bound to reveal a lot about the people who produces it, their thoughts and

¹⁴ See: Erving Goffman, (1974), *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, New York: Harper Colophon.

¹⁵ Gregory Bateson popularized the use of the term ‘metacommunication’, which literally means communication about communication. He writes that, “a frame is metacommunicative. Any message, which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame, *ipso facto* gives the receiver the instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the message included within the frame” (Bateson 1972: 188).

feelings about themselves and others, and how their society is constituted. Their perceptions, aspirations and experiences often find concentrated expression in the texts of the oral art forms they perform. As Karin Barber rightly puts it, in analysing oral texts “we find the possibility of entering into people’s own discourse about their social world” (Barber 1991: 2). To explain this let us briefly examine the text of a song performed by Mallan from Agago in Pader:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Maa, nyee!</i> | Oh mother! |
| <i>Piny man oling atika-tika.</i> | This land is really quiet. |
| <i>Okoya yang lawii joo...</i> | Okoya who used to be people’s leader... |
| <i>Piny man otyeko wan.</i> | This situation has finished us. |
| | |
| <i>Maa!</i> | Mother! |
| <i>Aneno paco odong ki cwer-cwiny</i> | I see homes are left with dripping hearts |
| <i>Piny man oling.</i> | This land is quiet. |
| <i>Bajilo yang lawii awobe</i> | Basilio who used to lead the young men... |
| <i>Piny man otyeko Acoli.</i> | This situation has finished the Acoli. |
| <i>Too ngo ma oloro paco wa?</i> | What death is this that has closed our home? |
| | |
| <i>Maa!</i> | Mother! |
| <i>Aneno paco odong ma lic ada</i> | I see homes are left really desolate |
| <i>Piny man oling.</i> | This land is quiet. |
| <i>Okello yang lawii coo...</i> | Okello who used to lead men... |
| <i>Piny man otyeko Acoli.</i> | This situation has finished the Acoli. |
| <i>Too ngo ma otyeko oteka lweny.</i> | This death has finished the war heroes. |

The performer opens each stanza with the supplication “Mother!” He is appealing to “Mother” who is the ultimate source of comfort and relief among the Acoli. This serves to show the dire nature of the situation in Acoliland which makes one ultimately seek motherly comfort and reassurance. The performer enumerates the historical war heroes: “Okoya who used to be people’s leader..., Basilio who used to lead the young men..., Okello who used to lead men...”¹⁶ In a situation of war

¹⁶ [Piano Piero] Okoya who hailed from Gulu was the head of the Uganda Army who was alleged to have been assassinated by Idi Amin before the January 25, 1971 military coup. Basilio [Okello] who hailed from Kitgum was a senior army office who led the 1985 coup that toppled Milton Obote’s regime, alleging mistreatment of the Acoli service men – he died in Khartoum (Sudan) of malaria. [Tito] Okello who hailed from Kitgum was head of the Ugandan army during Obote’s second regime and later became head of state in 1985 before being toppled by Yoweri Museveni – he died soon after returning to Uganda from exile in 1996.

in Acoliland, its war heroes are dead and cannot defend the land and protect the people. Many “homes are left with dripping hearts,” mourning the many deaths in the land as a result of the war of insurgency. “[H]omes are left really desolate,” because they have become uninhabitable because of the raging insecurity. “This land is quiet,” because “[t]his situation has finished the Acoli.”

Using the texts of the song Mallan tries to paint the bleak picture of the pain and the desperation of the Acoli – once a warrior people, whose war heroes are but dead leaving them defenceless. The performer seems to insinuate that the dire situation is because of lack of proper [military] leadership by referring to the dead military commanders. He does not blame the rebels, but mourns the absence of competent leadership – and as a result “This situation has finished us.” Through song performance text he gives us a window to peep into the prevailing state of affairs in Acoliland, and the common attitude towards the situation. The song portrays the warrior mentality of the Acoli (which was recognised by the British colonisers who recruited them massively into the armed forces) – even in defeat they still invoke their ‘glorious’ military past.

Although this particular oral performance included instrumental music and dance, with ample gestures and facial expressions, no other communicative media of performance would have given us an interpretative window into the psyche and nature of the society as the oral literary text does. In this case the text is primary; and other communicative media secondary – enhancing the import of the oral literary text.

To further illustrate the above argument let us consider another song performance, an *aguma* song performed by a group of young men who call themselves Rafiki Boys from Anaka:

Wan ma i caro ni

For us in rural areas

| | |
|--|--|
| <p><i>Ka maro mini katala abic</i> <i>ci pe miyo cam</i> <i>Itimo ango?</i></p> | <p>If a mother-in-law gives five <i>katala</i>¹⁷ but gives no food What do you do?</p> |
| <p><i>Omyero ilwii woko.</i></p> | <p>You should just escape.</p> |
| <p><i>Ka oo cawa aboro</i> <i>Onongo katala abic in ityeko weng</i> <i>idwogo gang dong ibedo piny</i> <i>Maro wacci , “Kur dek.”</i></p> | <p>When it is two o’clock Having finished the five <i>katala</i> and you come and sit at home The mother-in-law says, “Wait for food.”</p> |
| <p><i>Ka oo cawa abungwen</i> <i>maro wacci “Kur dek.”</i></p> | <p>When it is three o’clock the mother-law says, “Wait for food.”</p> |
| <p><i>Ka oo cawa apar</i> <i>maro wacci “Kur dek.”</i></p> | <p>When it is four o’clock the mother-law says, “Wait for food.”</p> |
| <p><i>Ci an ma naka adong</i> <i>pe ya anongo maro</i> <i>ma lwongo cwar-nyare</i> <i>pe gwoko.</i> <i>Tin dong anongo!</i></p> | <p>During all my growing up I have not found a mother-in-law who calls her daughter’s husband and does not take care of him. But today I have found one!</p> |
| <p><i>Maro mukene car</i> <i>pe gwoko wello.</i></p> | <p>Some mothers-in-law are hopeless, they don’t take care of visitors.</p> |

From the text of the above song one may surmise that this is generally an agrarian community. One may also deduce that it is common practice in this rural community for a son-in-law to be assigned challenging tasks by a mother-in-law – for example, “a mother-in-law gives five *katala*” to be dug. In the Acoli society sons-in-law are expected to do some manual labour such as tilling land for their mothers-in-law when they pay a visit to the in-laws; and naturally mothers-in-law are expected to take good care of their sons-in-law by providing ample and quick food/refreshment when the son-in-law completes the assigned task. This can be seen in the way the persona in the song states it:

¹⁷ *Katala* is the measurement used to apportion a field for digging among the Acoli; usually for a group hoeing so that all have equal measure of work, or when the digging is for some form of payment. A *katala* is about 1.5 metres in width of the portion to be dug – the length is the full length of a particular field.

During all my growing up
I have not found a mother-in-law
who calls her daughter's husband
and does not take care of him.
But today I have found one!

This shows that it is socially expected for a mother-in-law to summon her daughter's husband whenever she has some field that requires digging. And it is traditionally expected that after working refreshment/food will be immediately provided to the exhausted digger(s). We also garner that in the event of some tardiness on the part of the mother-in-law, one cannot just confront her and say it is time he left. (This is culturally unacceptable, because one has to treat his mother-in-law with utmost respect and not gainsay her.) So the persona of the song asks: "What do you do?" And the only possible cause of action that is less offensive is: "You should just escape."

The text of the above song gives us an insight into the nature of the society and also the nature of the gender power relation between a son-in-law and a mother-in-law. In it we are presented with societal attitudes and expectations. Through it we can decode some cultural values of the Acoli.

It is important to note that the ideas and perceptions expressed by individual oral artists in the texts of their performance cannot be regarded as simply the brain-work of these individuals, because these worldviews often have a social basis in the material and social activities and relations prevailing in society at a particular time (cf. Cornforth 1977: 8). This is corroborated in an interview by Amone Watmon, one of the Acoli oral performers whose songs are studied in this thesis.¹⁸ However, we have to bear in mind that although reality itself exists objectively outside our consciousness and independently of any particular individual, the way one perceives and interprets it partly depends on his or her ideological stand point

¹⁸ For the interview see: Otim Lucima. (1996). "The Acholi Oral Poet as the Singing Consciousness of Society." B.A. dissertation. Kampala: Makerere University, p. 25.

(cf. Chung & Ngara 1985: 25). People's ideologies to a great extent determine the way they construct reality. Here the effect of cultural socialisation comes into play.

In line with the views expressed by Rory Turner and Phillip MacArthur, songs as forms of cultural performance in Acoli society are reference points of identity where what it means to be an Acoli, a male or a female in the society, privileged or unprivileged is comprehended by individuals and social groups. Turner and MacArthur candidly point out that “[i]n cultural performances, the values, beliefs and identities of a people are put on display for themselves and others in some sort of bounded frame”(Turner & McArthur 1990: 83). Hence, to study gender identity construction and existing power relations in Acoli society, song performance offers a useful reference point.¹⁹

Furthermore, to understand the societal psyche, or the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the social pulse of a community, the literary texts of oral performances offer an important investigation point. The cultural and social ideologies of a society often find loud expression in the literary texts of oral performances. Let us examine the following song performed by Ogwang Kilipa, a *nanga*²⁰ player, assisted by a female singer:

Nyodo ka Angom iye yom
Latin dako mwol ada
Kadi iyeto minne,
ling-alinga.
Pako ni kop peke.

Angom's offspring is good-natured
The young wife is meek, oh
Even if you insult her mother,
she just keeps quiet
Maintaining there is no problem.

Nyodo pa dako iye yom

The woman's offspring is
good-natured

¹⁹ The point that folklore forms such as songs act as mirrors of culture is underscored by Bascom. (See: William R. Bascom (1965 [1954]), “Four Functions of Folklore,” in Alan Dundes (ed.), *The Study of Folklore*, Englewood, N.J: Prentice-Hall, p. 284.)

²⁰ *Nanga* is a popular musical instrument among the Acoli. It is shape like a miniature boat with harp-like strings. Normally it is an instrument played by males, and a variety of songs for various social functions and occasions can be played on it. Sometimes the *nanga* player is not the main singer – he could just play the instrument while others do the singing.

Latin dako iye ngic ada
Kadi inyono tyene
ling-litik
Wacco ni bal peke.

The young wife's heart is cool, oh
Even if you step on her foot,
she keeps completely quiet
Saying no fault has been committed.

Nyodo ka Angom iye yom
Latin dako gire mwol ada
Kadi iyeto minne
ling-alinga
Gamo ni kop peke

Angom's offspring is good-natured
The young wife is indeed meek, oh
Even if you insult her mother,
she just keeps quiet
Responding there is no problem.

The above song is purportedly meant to be a praise song for a young wife. Some of the culturally accepted feminine qualities cherished among the Acoli are meekness, endurance and tolerance. Apart from expressing the gender ideological leaning of the people, the above song also acts as a tool of ideological reproduction. Motherhood is revered among the Acoli almost with a religious zeal. The worse insult one can level against any person is to insult his or her mother. One's limits of meekness, endurance and tolerance can be tested by insulting the mother. Hence, the performers sing:

Angom's offspring is good-natured
The young wife is meek, oh
Even if you insult her mother
she just keeps quiet
Maintaining there is no problem.

For an outsider, the literary text offers an opportunity to examine the thinking prevalent among the Acoli that explains the gender social relation whereby the female is expected to be meek (and this quality is presented here as a praiseworthy quality and she who possesses it is labelled "good-natured"). We also notice the matriarchal tendency within the Acoli patriarchal system. Although descent is patrilineal, in the above song the off-spring is referred to as belonging to Angom the mother. Socially, nurturing is a woman's responsibility and a good-natured off-spring is a credit to the mother for a proper up-bringing (and usually not the father who is often associated with control and authority). Therefore, through use of songs a specific ideological orientation is enhanced and

encouraged in society; and a study of these songs can reveal the ideological leaning favoured.

To illustrate further the relation between ideological reproduction and songs, let us consider another song performance in which a female is the lead-singer, singing with a male performer, and Ogwang Kilipa playing the *nanga* instrument:

| | |
|---|---|
| Woman: <i>Mitta wan kwedi</i> <i>cengo dong doko peko!</i> | My love with you will turn into problem! |
| Man: <i>Mar-wa wan kedi</i> <i>cengo dong kelo can!</i> | Our love with you will bring disaster! |
| Woman: <i>Mitta wan kwedi</i> <i>wakoko can lim!</i> | My love with you we moan lack of bride-wealth! |
| Man: <i>Mar-wa wan kwedi</i> <i>waparo can dyang ada!</i> | Our love with you we despair over lack of cows, true! |
| Woman: <i>Ineno ber kuma</i> <i>kumi ni kwel-kwel.</i> | You see the beauty of my body you are overwhelmed. |
| Man: <i>Aneno ber kumi</i> <i>oweko cwinya mitti.</i> | I saw the beauty of your body that is why my heart wants you. |
| Woman: <i>Ineno wota</i> <i>kumi ni te-te.</i> | You see my walk your body just trembles. |
| Man: <i>Aneno woti</i> <i>oweko cwinya mari.</i> | I saw your walk that is why my heart loves you. |
| Woman: <i>Ineno kere lakka</i> <i>kumi ni kwel-kwel.</i> | You see the <i>kere</i> ²¹ in my teeth you are overwhelmed. |
| Man: <i>Aneno kere lakki</i> <i>omiyo cwinya mari ada</i> | I saw the <i>kere</i> in your teeth that is why my heart loves you, true. |
| Woman: <i>Ineno yer wiya</i> <i>kumi ni kwel-kwel.</i> | You see my hair you are overwhelmed. |
| Man: <i>Aneno yer wiyi</i> <i>omiyo cwinya mari.</i> | I saw your hair that is why my heart loves you. |
| Woman: <i>Ineno dul kuma</i> <i>kumi ni te-te.</i> | You see parts of my body your body trembles. |
| Man: <i>Aneno dul kumi</i> <i>oweko cwinya miti ada</i> | I saw parts of your body that is why my heart wants you, true. |
| Woman: <i>Watta wan kwedi</i> <i>mito wat nyom.</i> | My relationship with you requires a marriage relationship. |

²¹ *Kere* is a gap between the two upper front teeth. It is considered a symbol of beauty by the Acoli.

Man: *Ayenyo lim kwe*
oweko cwinya cwer ada!

I look for bride-wealth in vain
that is why my heart pains, true!

Note that in the above song, the reason for the attraction to and appreciation of the female seems to be primarily her body. The lead singer refers to “the beauty of my body”, “my walk”, “the *kere* in my teeth”, “my hair”, and “parts of my body”. The text of the song points to one cultural belief/idea, commonly expressed among the Acoli, the ability of the female to use her body to overwhelm the male and make him helpless. The question of a woman being viewed as a sex-object seems not to arise. What seems to be brought to the forefront in the literary text is the ability of a female to use her body to achieve her goal – in this case, marriage. As indicated earlier, this is one of the sources of female power identified by Chinweizu. He writes:

There are five conditions which enable women to get what they want from men: women’s control of the womb; women’s control of the kitchen; women’s control of the cradle; the psychological immaturity of man relative to woman; and man’s tendency to be deranged by his own excited penis. (Chinweizu 1990:14).

One cultural perspective which is brought into the limelight in the song is for the woman to be physically desirable. So much emphasis seems to be put on the woman’s looks – which is presented as her vital asset of control. The woman in the song remarks: “You see parts of my body/ your body trembles.” And the man responds: “I saw parts of your body/ that is why my heart wants you, true.” The man’s main attraction to the woman is physical; while the woman’s attraction is social security through marriage – and she will definitely exploit the man’s physical attraction to achieve her social ends (using her body as the means).

From the cultural ideological perspective of the Acoli the union between a man and a woman is recognised as culturally binding (and considered a marriage) when cattle have been taken by the man’s family to the woman’s family to seal the relationship. The woman in the song remarks: “My relationship with you/ requires a marriage relationship.” And the man responds: “I look for bride-wealth

in vain/ that is why my heart pains, true!” The man suffers from heartache because although he is dazed and completely taken in by the woman’s beauty, she can never culturally be considered his until he has taken the bride-wealth to her family.

Another important point of ideological reproduction we notice in the above song is that regarding female beautification focusing on the body. From the Acoli gender ideological viewpoint, female beautification is a means of female empowerment, and not as some feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft (1983) and Susan Bordo (1993) would consider “a crucial and oppressive moment in an overall patriarchal structure” (Cahill 2003: 42). Unlike in the past when Acoli women would go through an elaborate beautification process known as *kedo-kum* (i.e. lacerating the skin to create a beautiful pattern on the body) and filing a gap between the front teeth to force a *kere*, the present Acoli woman still goes through a less elaborate process of beautifying her body. In the song the woman refers to her hair, the gap in her front teeth and her body in general as a tool of attraction and therefore a means of being noticed in society. Beautification here, as per the Acoli gender ideology, gives the woman power to captivate the male and make him do her bidding.²²

As regards the semiotic and ideological nature of the text, the renowned language theorist V. N. Volosinov made a succinct statement that I would like to quote at length. He wrote:

It is owing to [the] exclusive role of the word as the medium of consciousness that *the word functions as an essential ingredient accompanying all ideological creativity whatsoever*. The word accompanies and comments on each and every ideological act. The process of understanding any ideological phenomenon at all (be it a picture, a piece of music, a ritual, or an act of human conduct) cannot operate without the participation of inner speech. All manifestations of ideological creativity – all other nonverbal signs

²² I will return to discuss the issue of female beautification as a means of female empowerment in detail in chapter four.

– are bathed by, suspended in, and cannot be entirely segregated or divorced from the element of speech (Volosinov 1973: 15).

Volosinov, however, hastened to add that this does not mean the word can totally supplant or replaced other ideological signs like music, pictorial image or religious ritual – each has its peculiar semiotic uniqueness. Picking up the thread of argument from Volosinov’s assertion, Barber (1991: 2) postulates that it is often through literary texts that “exegetical commentary is directed towards these other systems of signification”; and she adds that:

The literary utterance is at once action in society and reflection upon society. That is, it talks about social process from within because it is part of it. (Barber 1991: 2).

We may consider the literary text of oral performance as a system of semiotic signs. Volosinov maintains that:

Every sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation. The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Wherever a sign is present, ideology is present, too. Everything ideological possesses semiotic value.²³

The literary text acts as a kind of condenser of social values and also as a means of social evaluation. As Barber points out, the text does not just reflect already-constructed ideology, but it is also in the literary text that “a viewpoint is constructed, in the process revealing more about the ideology implicit in daily discourse” (Barber 1991: 3).

3.5. Texts as launching points for verbal exegesis

Texts of song performances are often the starting point for discussion and analysis of various issues in society. Most songs generate analyses, explanations and arguments that go beyond the initial performance. Karin Barber puts this quite well when she comments that “literary texts are revealing because they are

²³ The source of this statement is a website featuring ‘famous’ quotes from V.N. Volosinov. See: <http://www.borntomotivate.com/VNVolosinov.html>

inherently discursive,” and “are intended and expected to be talked about, to be explained, expounded, and opened up so that the multiple meanings enclosed and compressed within them are revealed”(Barber 1991: 3). This fact was brought home to me one day in a practical sense during a fieldwork trip to Kitgum in the course of my research.

I had just cancelled a recording session in the outskirts of Kitgum town because of a rumour about rebels being sighted a few kilometres away. Wondering what to do with the rest of my day, I stood next to a kiosk playing a tape of the song below performed by a group of young men popularly known as Rafiki Boys from Anaka, with Charles Oturkene as the lead singer:

Wun joo Anaka
kong awaci wun ya:
Apoli onya i lobo.

You people of Anaka
 let me tell you, oh:
 Waterbuck²⁴ are many in the land.

Omera,
kong awaci ya:
Apoli onya i lobo.

Brother,
 let me tell you, oh:
 Waterbuck are many in the land.

Lamera,
kong awaci ya:
Apoli onya i lobo.

Sister,
 let me tell you, oh:
 Waterbuck are many in the land.

Bedo i kem
obalo lotino;
Oweko anyira
odoko apoli.

Living in the camps
 has ruined children;
 It has made girls
 turn into waterbuck.

Kit bedo i kem
obalo lotino;
Oweko anyira
odoko apoli.

The life in the camps
 has ruined children;
 It has made girls
 turn into waterbuck.

Wun lu-Gulu
kong awaci wun ya:
Apoli onya i lobo.

You people of Gulu
 let me tell you, oh:
 Waterbuck are many in the land.

²⁴ *Apoli*, waterbuck, has become a euphemism for ‘a wild, cunning and sexually loose girl’ among the Acoli in the last few years.

The above song playing over a radio-cassette player from the kiosk triggered a discussion among a group of four men standing by. One said the continuing war was eroding Acoli traditional culture making family control almost impossible leading to youths growing up wild without proper guidance. Then the conversation trailed on to examining the meaning conjured by the imagery of the waterbuck, starting with the origin of the application of the word ‘waterbuck’ to human beings. One of the men pointed out that the waterbuck was considered an unclean animal by many chiefdom *jok* (deities), and people who used to go to the traditional ceremony of Jok Baka (the chiefdom deity of the Patiko clan) were forbidden to eat the meat of the waterbuck or dress in its skin (cf. p’Bitek 1980: 67). He added that the skin of the waterbuck symbolised fighting and war and the image of the waterbuck was used to denote the wild character of the girls.²⁵ Thereafter an argument over meanings ensued. At that moment I picked up interest in the talk and approached them introducing myself as a researcher who would like to ask them a few questions. This killed the discussion as they became cagey then excused themselves and moved on.²⁶

The above encounter, and other discussions and commentaries generated by song performances that I experienced during the course of the field research, makes me agree with Barber when she asserts that:

Verbal forms lend themselves to verbal exegesis. There is continuity between the object of discussion and the discussion itself which is conducive to detailed, active, conscious commentary by the people involved in its production and transmission.... It is in literary texts that commentary on all spheres of experience is inscribed and from the starting point of literary texts that second-order discussion is instigated (Barber 1991: 3).

²⁵ This compares well with Okot p’Bitek’s submission that: “When wounded the waterbuck fights most fiercely, using not only its horns but also biting with its teeth” (p’Bitek 1980: 87).

²⁶ Because of government spies trying to ferret for information under some guise from unsuspecting individuals, people are always suspicious of strangers. My major task during the research was confidence building so that I am accepted as a genuine research with no ulterior motives.

Sometimes the discussion and commentary on the text of the song performance may not occur during or immediately after the performance. It may be days, weeks or even months after. Take for instance, the impromptu commentary in a home in Pece, Gulu, which I recorded. Below is an excerpt:²⁷

Okema: *D.J. Languna ogoyo wer mo ma omako wii dano woko. Owero ni enongo laco ma ogom, otiyo tic ma ogom, ogedo ot ma ogom.... Wer ni ba, tere tut mada.*

D. J. Languna performed a song which caught people's heads. He sang that he got a bent man, who did a bent job, and built a bent house... This song, has a deep meaning.

Angom: *Awinyo ni gipenye i Radio Mega ci owaci meno en egoyo corruption. An ka awinyo wer ni aneno Ocora i wanga. Ki twon iye ma ogom, ki twom ode ma oyubu...*

I heard that he was interviewed on Radio Mega and he said that he performed about corruption. When I hear the song, in my eyes, I see Ocora. With his big bent belly, and his huge house which he built...

The above exchange attests to the fact that song performance often act as a launching pad for second-hand interpretations and analyses of society and social issues. The performances therefore provide an avenue for critical examination of social, political and economic imperatives. They become a tool to open up society and happenings for interpretation and discussion.

During the field research my study benefited a lot from interpretation and discussion of songs earlier recorded in performance, or played over the radio, or replayed from collections in personal archives for the purpose of generating discussion and critical interpretations. Oral texts on numerous occasions act as launching points for verbal exegesis – they get us talking about a whole range of issues in society. The text of song performance lingers on (in memory and in discussions), even after the actual performance is over.

²⁷ This exchange was recorded in Pece village, Gulu, on July 1, 2006.

3.6. The Mnemonic and Organising Role of Literary Texts

Acoli songs have a number of mnemonic features which make them ideal for capturing and recording gender ideological perceptions, critical commentaries and prevalent realities in society. There are numerous “mnemonic kernels that performers activate and from which they unfurl their oral texts” (Hofmeyr 2004: 320). The semantic density of oral art forms such as songs, coupled with the aesthetic acoustic qualities, and the dramatic rendering of the messages in performance, make such popular cultural forms a memorable conduit (and archive) of information and knowledge. They are easily memorised and propagated through subsequent performances over time and space.

To discuss some of the mnemonic features in Acoli song performance let us consider the song below performed by Mallan from Agago in Pader.

Maa, yee!
Can ton calo kado arii.
Can woto calo dano bo!
Maa, aloko pi can,
aneno can kawoto yo.
Bedo i wii lobo kara tek.

Mother, oh!
Disaster drips like soda ash salt.
Disaster walks like a person!
Mother, I used to talk of disaster
but I have seen disaster walking.
Living in this world is indeed hard.

Maa, yee!
Can ton calo kado arii.
Can woto calo dano bo!
Nen ba, yang pud aloko pi can,
man aneno can ka nyero.
Bedo i wii lobo kara [tek].

Mother, oh!
Disaster drips like soda ash salt.
Disaster walks like a person!
See, I used to talk about disaster,
now I have seen disaster laughing.
Living in this world is indeed [hard].

Maa, wee!
Can woto calo dano bo!
Can ling ki agulu.
Ceng pud aloko pi can,
anongo can ka woto yo.
Bedo i wii lobo ada [tek].

Mother, oh!
Disaster walks like a person!
Disaster is with a pot.
Once I used to talk of disaster,
but I have found it walking.
Living in this world is truly [hard].

Maa, yee!
Can ton calo kado arii.
Can woto calo dano bo!

Mother, oh!
Disaster drips like soda ash salt.
Disaster walks like a person!

*Ceng akok pi can,
anongo can ka woto yo.
Bedo i wii lobo kara [tek].*

*Maa, yee!
Can ton calo kado arii.
Can woto calo dano bo!
Yang pub anyero pi can,
anongo can ka rengo.
Bedo i wii lobo kara [tek].*

*Maa, yee!
Can ton calo kado arii.
Can woto calo dano.
Yang aloko pi can,
can nyero calo dano.
Bedo i wii lobo kara [tek].*

Once I used to cry over disaster,
but I have found it walking.
Living in this world is indeed [hard].

Mother, oh!
Disaster drips like soda ash salt.
Disaster walks like a person!
Once I laughed about disaster,
but I have found it grinding.
Living in this world is indeed [hard].

Mother, oh!
Disaster drips like soda ash salt.
Disaster walks like a person.
Once I talked about disaster,
but disaster laughs like a person.
Living in this world is indeed [hard].

The melodious nature of the song, the regular rhythm, the stressed and unstressed syllables that consecutively follow each other and other acoustic qualities make it easily memorable (cf. Furniss 1996: 137-138). Repetition is also used as one of the mnemonic features. There is repetition of “Mother, oh! / Disaster drips like soda ash salt” at the beginning of each stanza, and “Living in this world is indeed hard” at the end of every stanza. This is for the purpose of thematic emphasis which makes committing to memory simpler.

The song captures and organises in a memorable form one of the Acoli philosophical ideas: real disaster is not an act of God or nature, but a result of the action of human beings. Hence, it is stated in the song: “Disaster walks like a person.” Secondly, the Acoli believe real disaster is not what destroys you instantly but that which destroys you slowly drip by drip – thus, “Disaster drips like soda ash salt.” Salt on a naked wound gives excruciating pain; and the dripping effect gives continuous pain. Culturally, evil concoctions are buried in a pot by evil-hearted persons to harm others, and diviners are often summoned to search for, find and neutralise the pot and its evil content. The song remarks: “Disaster is with a pot.”

The use of powerful imagery like dripping soda ash salt and the pot makes the song easier to commit to memory for future transmission in performance. I have heard several versions of the same song, depending on the different circumstances of performance by different performers, but the core phrases and the central theme is always the same. For example, if one considers his wife (or another woman) is a walking disaster then he would include some activities particular to women in the song – such as in the above version: “Once I laughed about disaster, but I have found it grinding.”

Information, critiques and knowledge are captured and organised in song form (especially in a predominantly non-literate society like the Acoli) for easy and memorable transmission and ‘documentation.’ Many scholars over the years have acknowledged the important mnemonic and organising role of oral literature, especially in Africa.²⁸ Barber refers to oral literature as ‘an organising discourse,’ and asserts that:

If literary form is what makes knowledge memorable and therefore transmittable, then all of inherited knowledge in oral culture is ‘literature’. It is in poetry and narrative that history, philosophy and natural science are encoded and through their forms that knowledge is organized (Barber 1991: 4).

The mnemonic and organising role of song performance in Acoli society makes it a good entry point for scholarly research into gender identity construction and power relations among a people with a strong and vibrant oral culture. In a society relatively lacking in historical paper documentations and written research reports, the song form becomes a valuable record of the people’s philosophy and life experiences (cf. Furniss 1996: 126). In her study of Acoli songs Tania Kaiser notes that “significant events are recorded and remembered in songs” (Kaiser 2006: 189).

²⁸ See for example: Okot p’Bitek. (1974). *Horn of My Love*. Nairobi and Kampala: East African Educational Publishers, p. 156; and, Walter J. Ong. (1982). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen.

3.7. Conclusion

The literary texts of oral performance can be a very useful investigation point for interpreting society, because the texts are in essence semiotic and ideological signs. However, to be able to understand how texts work within oral performance to generate meaning we have to be aware of the textuality of oral literary text in performance.

Furthermore, the meanings of the literary text of Acoli song performance can best be interpreted from the vantage point of the Acoli cultural ideological and aesthetic criticism. There are certain cultural semiotic signs (both audio and visual) that are used in song performance whose meaning may not be easily accessible to the uninitiated outsider. In the decoding of meaning from a song performance one has to be aware of the indigenous aesthetics and cultural nuances. Only then can one be able to fully appreciate the meanings and ideological production and reproduction in song performance. Oral literary text plays a pivotal role in the conveyance of meanings in song performance. Additionally, the mnemonic features of Acoli songs make them ideal for storing in a memorable form the basic gender concepts that are passed on and enhanced in society through performance.

However, before discussing how oral texts in Acoli song performances portray and mediate gender identity construction and power relations, it is appropriate that I first examine some of the major gender concepts that shape gender attitudes and practices in society – and this is the topic of the next chapter.