

Chapter Five

GENDER IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ACOLI SONG PERFORMANCE

5.1. Introduction

As Okello Ogwang and Berverly Stoeltje rightly point out, “folklore texts encode and legitimate gender ideologies” (Ogwang & Stoeltje 2004: 144). Oftentimes scholars of folklore have analysed oral folklore texts to decode gender ideologies. However, as my study of Acoli song performance reveals, oral folklore does not only encode gender identity concepts but it is actively involved in the very process of identity construction.

There are varying degrees of how gender identity is perceived and presented in song performances, but some aspects are dominant and stand out as representative of the general consensus; and my discussion in this chapter focuses mostly on these outstanding aspects of gender identity construction in Acoli song performance. Being an egalitarian society, and highly decentralised in political terms, the family unit tends to be the focal site for defining one’s manhood or womanhood among the Acoli. Although some concepts of gender identity affect both males and females equally, most are gender specific in terms of defining a man or a woman from the Acoli cultural perspective. The gender specific identity determinants tend to be set in oppositional positioning for the males and the females, apparently for the sake of complementarity in family co-existence.

5.2. Childbirth as a Pivotal Site for Gender Identity Construction

Among the Acoli one cardinal pivotal criterion for determining one’s maleness or manhood and one’s femaleness or womanhood is the ability to procreate – so

biology becomes one of the elements of gender identity construction (See Pido 2000: 105-135). In fact, as pointed out earlier, the very concept of personhood is linked to the onset of puberty and the ability to procreate. To be defined as belonging to the category ‘men’ one should be sexually active and be able to make a woman pregnant; and to be defined as belonging to the category ‘women’ one should be capable of getting pregnant and bringing forth life. This way of thinking runs through several songs, whereby a male incapable of taking an active role in sexual intercourse is teased as a ‘fellow woman’ by women; and a barren woman is often referred to as ‘no woman’. The centrality of childbirth in gender identity construction is depicted in various song performances; take for example the song below rendered in a simulated performance by Santo Watber:

*Lubanga bola mo acel
anen ki wang lukaka, nyee!
Cwer-cwiny man genga nino*

God, throw for me one
so that I face with it the clan!
This heartache prevents me from
sleeping.
What have I done wrong to the clan?

Abalo ngo ki tung kaka, maa?

*Lubanga bola mo acel
anen ki wang lukaka, ba!
Cwer-cwiny man genga nino.*

God, throw for me one
so that I face the clan with it!
This heartache prevents me from
sleeping.
What have I done to the clan?

Atimo ngo ki lukaka, maa?

*Lukaka bolo iwiya
pi kop kum nywal
kun lacoo peke,
butu litany.
Anywal ki tunga ce?*

The clan disparages me
because of not giving birth
moreover there is no man,
he just sleeps hopelessly.
Do I produce with my horn?

*Lukaka bolo iwiya
pi kop kum nywal
kun lacoo mer,
butu litude.
Anywal ki tunga ce?*

The clan disparages me
because of not giving birth
moreover the man gets so drunk,
he sleeps uselessly.
Do I produce with my horn?

The woman in the song is disparaged (as not a complete woman) and looked down upon because with the passage of time she has still failed to get pregnant.

Immediately after marriage the Acoli would want to see results – pregnancy – so that they know the cattle paid as bride-price was not wasted. Usually the woman is blamed for failure to become pregnant, but in this case the persona blames her husband who is ‘no man.’ She remarks:

The clan disparages me
because of not giving birth
moreover there is no man,
he just sleeps hopelessly.
Do I produce with my horn?

Here, in the eyes of the woman, the husband loses his maleness (his identity as a man) because he is incapable of fulfilling the cardinal feat of a man – being able to actively engage in sex and get the female pregnant. The question “Do I produce with my horn?” can be variously understood. The woman definitely does not have a horn; and she therefore, metaphorically, cannot be expected to make use of what she does not have – a real man. Secondly, among the Acoli the horn is symbolic of extra-human powers, usually associated with witchcraft. To get pregnant when you have ‘no man’ for a husband may require extra-human powers. Hence, the woman asks: “Do I produce with my horn?”

The fact that the woman says “The clan disparages me/ because of not giving birth,” and pleads “God, throw for me one/ so that I face the clan with it,” shows how central childbirth is among the Acoli. Lack of childbirth brings one’s gender identity into question, so to speak. One is either referred to as ‘not a woman’ or ‘not a man’ depending on what the designated gender is supposed to be. Sometimes in an attempt to slight the intended target, the gender label or identity can be pejoratively reversed for the male, or negated for both male and female. Take for instance the *orak* (or *larakaraka*) song below:

Icamo ber?
Icamo ber?
Cam ber,
yang ber wa con do!

Do you eat beauty?
Do you eat beauty?
[Alright] eat beauty,
she has been beautiful for a long time!

Ento, dako pari peke.

But, you have no woman.

*Omera, ikelo dako
ma kwac omato iye
Dako pari nywal ko...
Dako pari peke.*

Brother, you have brought a wife
whose womb was sucked by a leopard
Your wife can't give birth...
You have no woman.

*Omera, ikelo dul okejo
Dako pari peke.
Cam ber,
yang ber wa con do!
Ento, dako pari peke.*

Brother, you have brought an *okeco* log
You have no woman.
[Alright] eat beauty,
she has been beautiful for a long time!
But, you have no woman.

Staying beautiful for too long is not a positive thing for a woman among the Acoli. They believe that when a woman begins to produce children she loses some of her earlier girlish beauty – which is what is expected – and giving birth crowns her womanhood. The question “Do you eat beauty?” infers that beauty in itself for a woman amounts to nothing in the eyes of society unless she can be a ‘real’ woman. When a woman’s womb is metaphorically ‘sucked by a leopard’ she cannot hold any pregnancy and give birth; thereby she ends up as ‘no woman’ because a ‘real’ woman is one who can bring forth children. Such a woman is referred to as a hard ‘*okeco* log’ that cannot be split even by the most able man to get a child. The *okeco* wood is known to defy the exertion of the local axe blade.¹

In the song we see the projection of the Acoli belief in spirit possession. Some *jok* (spirits) are believed to possess females and prevent them from getting pregnant and become proper women. Okot p’ Bitek comments that:

The other *jok* connected with childbirth was *Jok Ngu* (*ngu* being the generic term for dangerous man-eating beasts such as leopard, lion and cheetah), to which was attributed *oyesis* or phantom pregnancy. It is known that when a woman has abnormal desire to conceive, she may develop signs of pregnancy, such as cessation of menses, enlargement of the abdomen, morning sickness, etc., except for the foetus. Among the Central Luo, when the “pregnancy” of such a woman disappeared, it was interpreted in term of *Jok Ngu* having sucked up the foetus. (p’Bitek 1980: 112)

¹ Okot p’Bitek describes the *okeco* wood as “very hard wood, it ruined the blade of the traditional axe” (p’Bitek 1980: 113).

In the song the female concerned is portrayed as being possibly possessed by *Jok Ngu*. Thus the singing voice remarks:

Brother, you have brought a wife
whose womb was sucked by a leopard
Your wife can't give birth...
You have no woman.

There are many songs that tend to challenge the gender identity of women who cannot give birth. At the same time, there are also various songs that highlight the predicament of men who cannot make a woman pregnant, thereby bringing their manhood into question. Infused by the dominant Acoli cultural gender identity perceptions, such men often think their lives are worthless if they cannot be 'complete' men. Below is one such songs performed by Jago p'Lu-A of Amuru.

*An dako ni, lutuwa,
Man atim nining maa!
Akelo maber,
ayengo ki cinga
Eni ayeng nining maa!
Akelo maber,
ma nyima pe
Dako ni bedo nining?
Ceto woko.*

*Akelo maber,
ento abila ogengo yoo
Aida ogengo yoo!
To atim nining, maa?
Laber,
gira pe
Dako ni, to atim nining yo!
Jal,
Jago p'Lu-A dong kwo nining?
Dong atim nining yai!*

*Akelo maber
ento abongo ki cinga do
Eno, atim ninging maa?
An akelo maber*

Oh this woman, my people,
Now, what should I do, mother!
I brought her,
but I satisfy her with my hands
How should I satisfy her, mother!
I brought her,
when my front² is not there
This woman, how will she stay?
She will leave.

I brought her,
but the shrine blocked the way
The shrine has blocked the way!
What should I do, mother?
The beautiful one,
my thing is not there.
This woman, what should I do, oh!
Comrade,
how can Jago p'Lu-A live?
Now what should I do, oh!

I brought her.
but I just touch with my hands
There, what should I do, mother?
I brought her

² "My front" is an Acoli euphemism for "My penis".

ento abila ogengo yoo
Ginni owango an woko
Aida ogengo yoo
Ginni otwomo an woko....

but the shrine blocked the way
This thing has really burnt me
The shrine has blocked the way
This thing has really knocked me....

An kono nyima pe ba
Eno abedo nining?
An kono nyima pe ba
Dako ni, agwok nining do!
An kono nyima pe ba
Kadi akwan 'doctor'
Konya pe....

Me, my front is not there
How do I continue living?
Me, my front is not there
This woman, how do I keep her oh!
Me, my front is not there
Even if I read to be a doctor
I am useless....

The 'front', which is Acoli euphemism for either the penis or the vagina, is one of the biological features used in the gender identity construction. When the man states in the song that "my front is not there," it is a statement that infers his lack of manhood and therefore the questionability of his gender identity as a man.³ The word 'front' has multiple meanings. It may also mean one's future. When his 'front is not there' it means the man has no future as a man in the eyes of the society. That is why he concludes:

Me, my front is not there
Even if I read to be a doctor
I am useless....

Being a medical doctor is a great achievement, but being incapable of being a 'complete' man in the gendered-thinking society is a disaster. He blames *abila* (the ancestral shrine) for blocking his way, and this can be interpreted as laying the blame at the door of the ancestors to whom offertory is made at the shrine to ensure the well being of their descendants. As Okot p'Bitek puts it,

In the songs the word *abila* stands for the ancestors who "protect", "feed" and "reject". It was to *them* that sacrifices were made, and clansmen and women prayed. The shrine was the abode of the ancestors. (p'Bitek 1980: 94]

³ Even if the persona in the song has the genitals, it was not that symbolic phallus that would enhance his gender identity or manhood.

The male in the song is shattered because the ancestors have blocked his way to fully belong to the category of men as understood in the Acoli society.

There are numerous songs depicting males lamenting their inability to be recognised as real men in the Acoli cultural sense due to impotence. Another song in the same line of lamentation of lack of manhood due to inability to procreate is performed by Jahria Okwera:

*Ogom pa coo, apeke kwede
Awacci, kite ngaya.
Pi ngo mono abila lanyanya?
Wujone we,
 abila nywara
Lutuwa we,
 abila lanyanya....*

The hanging of men, I don't have
I tell you, I am defeated.
Why does the shrine humiliate me?
Oh people,
 the shrine makes a fool of me
My people,
 the shrine humiliates me....

*Wujone we, bedo piny yo
An omyero adwog atir
Akeng dako,
 wora iling pingo?
Meno lok ma dolo cwinya.*

Oh people, please have a meeting
So that I become straight
I am without a wife,
 father why keep quiet?
This is what squeezes my heart.

*Twon coo, luwulu yee
Awacci, ot otoo
Anyira nena ki wuru ba
Anen awobi nono.*

The bull of a man, lives alone oh
I tell you, the homestead is dead
Girls look at me and marvel [but]
I just resemble a man for nothing.

*Pi ngo mono abila lanyanya do?
Wujone we,
 abila nywara
Twon coo, we poko nono
Anyaka, gwok iyella....*

Why does the shrine humiliate me?
Oh people,
 the shrine makes a fool of me
The bull of a man, is an empty shell
Girl, don't provoke me....

*Wujone we, mama
 wukonya we, an laluu
Wujone we, baba
 Wukonya we, an laluu....*

Oh people, mother
 please help me, I am impotent
Oh people, father
 please help me, I am impotent....

Since virility is very important in defining a male as belonging to the category 'men' among the Acoli, an impotent male is made to consider himself as just a shadow of a man. That is why the persona in the song remarks that:

Girls look at me and marvel [but]
I just resemble a man for nothing....

The bull of a man, is an empty shell
Girl, don't provoke me....

The anguish that impotent males experience is testimony to the centrality the Acoli society gives to the ability to procreate in gender identity construction. In several songs the *abila* shrine (i.e. ancestors) is blamed for this misfortune because it is supposed to protect the lineage from evils and mishaps – and not being able to stand up and be counted as a 'real' man in society is a social disaster for any male in Acoli. The persona in the above song laments that "The hanging of men, I don't have," and appeals for help from his people to do something "So that I become straight." Being straight can be interpreted as gaining the ability to have an erection, but it can also be interpreted as being socially accepted in terms of gender identity recognition as a man. The young man wants a meeting to be held to decide on the ceremony to appease the *abila* which has humiliated him:

Oh people, please have a meeting
So that I become straight
I am without a wife,
father why keep quiet?
This is what squeezes my heart.

In differentiating between the misfortunes caused by the ancestral *jok* (spirit) and other free floating *jok*, Okot p'Bitek writes:

The striking difference between the diseases attributed to the free *jok*, and those caused by the ancestral spirits is that with the latter, guilt was a dominant factor. The ancestors were angry because they had been neglected, because somebody among the living had not done his or her duty. With free *jok*, on the other hand, there was no apparent cause for their attack. (p'Bitek 1980: 114).

In the song the young man believes somebody related to him has offended the ancestors, that is why the *abila* has inflicted the ultimate punishment on him of denying him the possibility of belonging to the category ‘men’. And, when properly appeased, the *abila* can ‘straighten’ him into a man.

The Acoli put a lot of premium on the continuity of the lineage through childbirth, and that is why the impotent persona declares:

The bull of a man, lives alone oh
I tell you, the homestead is dead

Without the man’s ability to procreate his patriarchal lineage is effectively terminated. A male’s masculinity is boosted by the ability to ensure the continuity of the lineage.

As Matthew R. Dudgeon and Marcia C. Inhorn point out, there is a profound impact of male infertility on masculinity. They argue that “Because men often deem paternity an important achievement and a major source of their masculine identity, male infertility may have significant emasculating effects” (Dudgeon & Inhorn 2003: 44). In the eyes of society infertile males are considered weak and ineffective – which goes against their very masculine identity.

Biology seems to be a crucial factor among the Acoli in determining one’s maleness or femaleness, as seen in the preceding discussion in this section. The ability to procreate is definitely the primary criteria for defining one’s gender identity – and this goes hand in hand with the notion of heterosexuality prevalent in the society.

5.3. Heterosexuality and Gender Identity Construction

As far as gender identity construction is concerned, heterosexuality is normative among the Acoli. Homosexuality is considered largely as a gender identity disorder, a serious disorientation that has to be rectified by exorcism through

traditional spiritual rituals (even in this era of Christianity and Islam). This is because homosexuality is taken to be beyond human understanding when viewed from the precinct of Acoli cultural gender identity ideology. Homosexuality is not considered a crime (as it is designated by the law the British left Uganda with at political independence in 1962, which is still upheld to date by the state), but as a sickness – and as such, the homosexual is considered ‘lost’ and has to be ‘saved’ through spiritual intervention. This is the line of thinking that comes out in the song below performed by Sisto Odong and a group of performers known as Odokonyero from Amuru.

<i>Oboma in imako lacao lawoti,</i>	Oboma you had sex with a fellow man,
<i>pingo?</i>	why?
<i>Oboma omako lacao lawote!</i>	Oboma had sex with a fellow man!
<i>Oboma, in imako lacao lawoti,</i>	Oboma, you had sex with a fellow man,
<i>pingo?</i>	why?
<i>Oboma omako lacao lawote!</i>	Oboma had sex with a fellow man!
<i>Lukaka yaa, lar Oboma ya.</i>	Clansmen dear, save Oboma.
<i>Lukaka lar Oboma ya.</i>	Clansmen save Oboma.
<i>Lukaka yaa, lar Oboma ya.</i>	Clansmen dear, save Oboma.
<i>Lukaka lar Oboma ya.</i>	Clansmen save Oboma.
<i>Oboma lal woko ya!</i>	Oboma is really lost, oh!
<i>Oboma lal woko ya!</i>	Oboma is really lost, oh!
<i>Oboma lal woko ya!</i>	Oboma is really lost, oh!
<i>Oboma lal woko ya!</i>	Oboma is really lost, oh!

In the Acoli society homosexuality is still largely considered an aberration, and it is not catered for in the cultural gender identity construction. It does not fit the socio-biological construction of the category women or men – it is a grey zone – and therefore a homosexual is described to be ‘lost’ as a woman or a man. In the above quoted song, clansmen are called upon to save Oboma from being lost.

Sometimes the manifestation of homosexual tendencies in a male is associated with femininity, because it is considered incompatible with the culturally ascribed masculine identity; and this is reinforced by the general gender perception that

only a ‘woman’ would have sex with a man. Just like in many other societies, there seems to be a construction of compulsory heterosexuality among the Acoli which is linked to gender identity, and ‘normal’ masculinity is asserted through heterosexuality.⁴

Among the Acoli, both female and male identity construction seem to hinge so much on family life. One’s maleness or femaleness is more often than not defined in terms of the Acoli family setting; and there is every attempt to encourage both males and females to find realisation of their existence and identity within the family fold. That is why bachelors and spinsters are often vilified in songs. Below is one such song performed by a group of *orak* dancers:⁵

<i>Maa, cam pa labot rac</i>	Oh, a bachelor’s feeding is terrible
<i>Cam pa labot rac ada</i>	A bachelor’s feeding is indeed terrible
<i>Ka ongwinyo kwon kal pa wegi</i>	When he partakes of other people’s bread
<i>ngwinyo koko.</i>	he grabs with tearful eagerness.
<i>Jal, cam pa labot rac.</i>	Comrade, a bachelor’s feeding is terrible.

<i>Cam pa labot rac</i>	A bachelor’s feeding is terrible
<i>Cam pa labot rac ada</i>	A bachelor’s feeding is indeed terrible
<i>Ka oneno kwon kal pa wegi</i>	When he sees other people’s millet bread
<i>nenoko.</i>	he desires it with tearful lust.
<i>Jal, cam pa labot rac.</i>	Comrade, a bachelor’s feeding is terrible.

Two of the male identity traits, restraint and self-control, are portrayed as lacking in a bachelor; thereby bringing his manhood into ridicule. A man (as an adult male) should show restraint and self-control especially where food is concerned – that is why culturally they keep away from food preparation. In a typical Acoli village setting, a grown up man continuing to feed daily from his parents’ house is considered not a full man and socially looked down upon. A man setting up his own cooking hearth (and taking up one of the roles of women like food

⁴ For a similar analysis regarding the British society see: Stephen Frosh, Ann Phoenix and Rob Pattman, (2003), “Taking a stand: Using psychoanalysis to explore the positioning of subjects in discourse,” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, (2003), Vol.42, pp. 51–52.

⁵ *Orak*, sometimes also referred to as *Laraka-raka*, is a courtship dance.

preparation) is also frowned upon. Manhood flowers within the family fold and bachelors are pressurised to marry.

Just like the males, the females are also conditioned to think their womanhood can only flower within a heterosexual relation. That is why Acoli public opinion forces every Acoli female to seek full recognition as a woman in marriage. This is expressed in many songs, such as that reproduced on page 96. Here is an excerpt:

<i>Laming-ming, ilak ata.</i>	You are a fool, moving aimlessly.
<i>Ceng itimo ngo?</i>	What have you been doing?
<i>Ceng itimo ngo,</i>	What have you been doing,
<i>wa kit u?</i>	right from your parent's home?
<i>Labangcata, ilak ata.</i>	You are an imbecile, moving aimlessly.
<i>Ceng itimo ngo?</i>	What have you been doing?
<i>Ceng itimo ngo,</i>	What have you been doing,
<i>wa kit u?</i>	right from your parent's home?

A female who does not settle down in marriage is often considered 'a fool' and 'an imbecile,' because her womanhood (in the eyes of society) can only come to fruition through a heterosexual marriage relation. The identity of the female is often defined from the point of view of a wife and a mother – and this is the exegesis of her existence as a female in the Acoli cultural setup.

As shown in the majority of songs discussed in this thesis, in the social construction of the category 'women' and the category 'men' heterosexuality is the norm; the female and the male gender identities are defined in the Acoli society from a heterosexual point of view. Although there are general criteria for defining both genders, such as the ability to procreate, there are also male and female specific gender identity constructions.

5.4. Male Specific Gender Identity Constructions

One of the male specific traits that are constructed through, and portrayed in, song performances in relation to male gender identity construction among the Acoli is

being in control. A man is he who is in control and dominant in all situations – otherwise he risks being labelled as weak, a ‘woman,’ and not a real man. Let us consider the song below performed by a group from Paibona, Awach Division, in Gulu District.

<i>Lok pa kwele!</i> <i>Wuneno, lok pa kwele</i> <i>Ayugi oyac ki gang.</i>	Being loose! You have seen, being loose Ayugi has conceived at home. ⁶
<i>Oloya, kong ipwony nyani</i> <i>Pi lok pa kwele</i> <i>Ayugi yac ki gang.</i>	Oloya, first teach this girl Because of being loose Ayugi conceives at home.
<i>Oloya, kong ipwony nyani</i> <i>Ineno, lok pa kwele</i> <i>Ayugi oyac ki gang.</i>	Oloya, first teach your daughter You see, being loose Ayugi has conceived at home.
<i>Aa! Latina!</i> <i>Ayugi wee!</i> <i>Ayugi oyac ki gang.</i> <i>Aii! Wac ki Oroko</i> <i>Ayugi wee!</i> <i>Ayugi oyac ki Oroko</i>	Aa! My child! Ayugi, oh! Ayugi has conceived at home. Aii! Tell Oroko Ayugi, oh! Ayugi has conceived with Oroko.
<i>Oloya, kong ipwony nyani</i> <i>Ineno, pi lok pa kwele</i> <i>Ayugi oyac ki gang.</i>	Oloya, first teach your daughter You see, because of being loose Ayugi has conceived at home.
<i>Oloya, kong ipwony nyani</i> <i>Pi lok pa kwele, ineno,</i> <i>Nyako yac ki gang.</i>	Oloya, first teach your daughter Because of being loose, you see The girl conceives at home.

Oloya falls short of fulfilling his role as the man in the homestead – he is not in full control. Because of his lack of control, his daughter Ayugi conceives out of wedlock. The blame is not laid at the feet of his wife because social control is not part of a woman’s gender identity construction, but for a man it is an integral part. In a family setup, authority is associated with the father (i.e. male/paternal authority) and emotion with the mother (i.e. female/maternal love and caring);

⁶ Among the Acoli it is considered a disgrace for a female to conceive while still at her parents’ home. It brought shame on her family because the community considered it a sign of sexual loose living as a result of poor upbringing.

and these notions are integrated as part and parcel of male and female gender identities (cf. Arnot 2002: 586; Bernstein 2000: 50). This kind of identity construction definitely has a bearing on the gender power relationship in the domestic arena.

In the song we discern at least two major voices: the voice of public opinion and the voice of Oloya lamenting that Ayugi conceived with Oroko. To further downgrade his identity as a man, Oloya is depicted as lamenting like a woman (letting his emotion get the better of him instead of being in full control of himself). He wails:

Aa! My child!
Ayugi, oh!
Ayugi has conceived at home.
Aii! Tell Oroko....

Such lamentation does not befit a man in the eyes of society. A man should be in control of himself and the situation around him – and exercise authority. Lack of control or authority is associated with femininity among the Acoli.

However, with the onset of insurgency in Acoliland social control as a male dominant trait seems to have been affected. The war has left many orphans and widows, with women headed households becoming not uncommon. This is reflected in the song below performed by young men and women from Pawidi.

Lagoro, waca!
Aboga bako doge kwe
Gang odong ki mon.

Rubanga otimo rac
Kono lar dano ya!
Rac piny man.

Lagoro,
winy kop ma i doge do!

Lagoro, tell me!
Aboga pleads in vain
The homestead is left for women.

God did bad
He should have rescued people!
This situation is bad.

Lagoro,
listen to my supplication!

Lagoro, waca!
Nena, abako dogo kwe
Ngom odong ki mon.

Lagoro, tell me!
Look at me, I plead in vain
The land is left for women.

In the above song the death of the homestead is mourned because “The homestead is left for women” who by the very nature of their socially constructed gender identity cannot be in charge of social control. In the same vein, ownership (especially land ownership) is a male thing. Those in the gender category ‘women’ are also assumed to belong to somebody (a man) who controls them, either as a daughter or a wife. Therefore, it is considered a sad happening that “The land is left for women.” That is why the persona in the song pleads with Lagoro, one of the clan deities, to listen to his/her supplication.⁷ The prevailing situation seems to throw the long standing gender identity perception into disarray. And the song emphasises “God did bad/ He should have rescued people/ This situation is bad.”

Control also goes hand in hand with the male identity projection as a protector. This is expressed in the dirge below performed by a group of women at a funeral at Palaro Rajab, Gulu District:

Wun wunena, wudwoka paco
Aii maa, atoo woko!
Gang pa wora oling ma orere

You look at me, take me back home
Oh mother, I should just die!
My father’s homestead has gone silent
like a joke

Gang pa wora oto woko
Anga ma kono dwoka paco?
Adong i wii laro do
Too ot ocoro ki bot Okello

My father’s homestead is indeed dead
Who will take me back home?
I have been left on the bare rock
The death of the homestead came through
Okello

Gang pa wora odong obur do.

My father’s homestead has turned desolate.

Wun wunena, wudwoka paco

You look at me, take me back home

⁷ Okot p’Bitek writes that “The shrine of Pajule chiefdom... comprised the grave of Lagoro, brother of Jule who founded the chiefdom” (p’Bitek 1980: 60). He further states that “the shrine in the dark forest called Yibi on Okaka hill was the grave of Lagoro, and the Jok was the ghost of this ancestor” (p’Bitek 1980: 85).

<i>Aii maa, atoo woko!</i>	Oh mother, I should just die!
<i>Gang pa wora oto ma orere</i>	My father's homestead has died like a joke
<i>Gang pa wora oling woko</i>	My father's homestead is indeed silent
<i>Omera ma kono cona waraga</i>	There is no brother to write me a letter
<i>Adong lacungu</i>	I have been left standing [with nowhere to rest]
<i>Too ot ocoro ki bot Ajiba</i>	The death of the homestead came through Ajiba
<i>Gang pa wora oling ada do.</i>	My father's homestead is indeed silent.

A home is often envisaged as worth its salt in terms of a male in control, and the demise of the male heir to the homestead's control system leads the persona to declare "My father's homestead is indeed dead." She remarks that "The death of the homestead came through Okello," who was to take over the rein of control/power but is now deceased. Of course the female members of the homestead are still in existence, but being in control of a homestead is designated as incompatible with their culturally designated female identity.

Secondly, the male identity is associated with the image of a protector. The male is expected to protect members of the homestead, especially the female members who are married out into other homesteads. In case they are in an abusive relationship, the male protector brings them back home to their homestead of birth; that is why the persona asks, "Who will take me back home?" As a result of the male's death the female member declares "I have been left on the bare rock," meaning without any kind of protection. A rock is symbolic of hardness and by inference hardship; and being on a bare rock is being exposed without any kind of protection from the elements. The feeling of insecurity as a result of the demise of the 'protector' is captured in the pronouncement of despair "Oh mother, I should just die!"

The male gender identity is also associated with strength and vigour. In the song below the agama agama lizard is used to symbolise these male identity traits.

Tokolong kara twon coo! Agama agama lizard is a bull of a man!

Lagwe gire twon coo!
Lagwe ka omako bul
dongo ki kwok kulu.

The lizard is indeed a bull of a man!
When the lizard takes on a drum
it beats it till sweat runs.

Tokolong kara twon coo!
Lagwe gire twon coo!
Lagwe ka onyono gara
nyono ki mit kum.

Agama agama lizard is a bull of a man!
The lizard is indeed a bull of a man!
When the lizard steps on the metal rattle
it steps on it with vigour.

Tokolong kara twon coo!
Lagwe gire twon coo!
Lagwe ka oleyo yat
mako ki tek kum.

Agama agama lizard is a bull of a man!
The lizard is indeed a bull of a man!
When the lizard grabs a tree [branch]
it grabs with strength.

The agama agama lizard is described as “a bull of a man” for exhibiting the traits associated with maleness. As a show of strength it is stated that “When the lizard grabs a tree [branch]/ it grabs with strength.” And to demonstrate vigour it is asserted that “When the lizard steps on the metal rattle/ it steps on it with vigour.” And it beats the drum with such strength and vigour “till sweat runs.” Through personification the lizard is endowed with culturally perceived male qualities, hence the declaration: “The lizard is indeed a bull of a man!” The song in all certainty is not about a mere lizard, but rather a celebration of the two male identity attributes.

Apart from strength and vigour, bravery and courage are also touted as male traits that go into constructing the male gender identity. Let us consider a popular song in Acoliland rendered in a simulated performance by Susan Akello:

Coo ming-ming
iweko kul oloyo
Cwar-latina!
Iweko kul pa aba
pi lworoni
Cwar-latina!

A fake man
you left the warthog to escape
Oh my child’s husband!
You left the father’s warthog [to escape]
because of your cowardice
Oh my child’s husband!

Coo mak-ayang
iweko kul oloyo
Cwar-latina!
Iweko kul pa aba

A ‘hold-and-I-skin’ man
you left the warthog to escape
Oh my child’s husband!
You left the father’s warthog [to escape]

pi lwo ro ni
Cwar-latina!

because of your cowardice
Oh my child's husband!

A story is told of a young man who went to visit his in-laws. While at the in-laws' homestead, a warthog happened to stray into an unfinished building. His father-in-law barricaded the entrance, thus trapping the animal inside. He then called for the young man to help him kill the animal. When the barricade was removed, and the warthog squealed and charged to get out, the young man dropped his spear and ran for dear life, leaving the animal to escape. The above song was thus composed to taunt him for his cowardice which was considered a shame to his male identity.

The young man is called "[a] fake man," because a true Acoli man is expected to exhibit courage and bravery. From the cultural point of view lack of courage and bravery befits a woman, but not a man who is supposed to be the protector. He is further taunted as a 'hold-and-I-skin' man. This is the kind of a person who cannot have the courage to kill an animal during a hunt, but always rushed to skin the game killed by other men so that he can be given a share of the carcass for his effort, to take home to his family. Such a person is considered less of a man in the eyes of society.

In the song the reference "Oh my child's husband!" is uttered with a mixture of pity and sarcasm in the tonal rendering, suggesting that the man is unfit to be a husband because of his shortcomings. During the performance of this particular portion of the song the performer shakes her head as if in disbelief at the lack of show of manhood by the cowardly character.

In the portrayal and construction of male gender identity, most Acoli songs depict authority and social control, ownership and control of property, strength and vigour, bravery and courage among others as some of the socially acceptable male attributes; and as such the male is expected by society to play the role of protector. These attributes are more often presented as not part of the culturally

constructed traits of the female gender. In such social construction the females are usually endowed with different (and often opposite) traits.

5.5. Female Specific Gender Identity Constructions

Just as the male is expected to be dominating and in control, the female as part of her identity construction and performance is expected to be meek and respectful. There are many songs that castigate women who fail to fit this stereotype, and below is one such songs performed by Ogwang Kilippa playing the *nanga* and his wife as the lead singer.

*Oyeto min coo,
calo mine okwano.
Kong ibed ki woro ba
Dako ni, bed ki woro.*

She abused the mother of men
as if her mother is educated.
Please have some respect
You woman, have some respect

*Nyani oyeto min cware,
calo mine ryek ada.
Dako ni, bed ki woro ba.
Nyan man, yeto min coo.*

The woman abused her husband's mother
as if her mother is truly wise.
You woman, please have some respect.
This woman, abuses the mother of men.

*Aii, iyeto min awobe,
calo menni ber.
Kong ibed ki mwolo ba.
Dako ni, bed ki mwolo.*

Oh, you abuse the mother of boys
as if your mother is better.
Please try to be meek
You woman, try to be meek.

*Iyeto min awobe,
calo menni ryek ada.
Dako ni, bed ki woro ba.
Dako man, yeto min coo.*

You abuse the mother of boys
as if your mother is truly wise.
You woman, please have some respect.
This woman abuses the mother of men.

Becoming a mother seals the female's identity as a 'woman' and raises her status in society; and being the mother of boys gives her more mileage in societal recognition. Motherhood and a woman's identity tend to be intertwined from the Acoli cultural perspective, as we have noted earlier. Usually a 'mother of men' deserves respect, especially from other women. The character depicted in the song runs the risk of losing her personhood: first, because she is not meek and

	husband.
<i>Anyaka wee</i>	Oh girl
<i>Gwok otti, bed ki mwolo.</i>	Take care of your household, be meek.
<i>Anyaka wee</i>	Oh girl
<i>Winy cwari, mar cwari.</i>	Obeys your husband, love your husband.
<i>Latin dako, winy cwari</i>	Young woman, obey your husband
<i>Nen, en mukeli gangi</i>	Look, he brought you into your house
<i>Nen, en oyabi yoo kwo</i>	Look, he opened for you the door of life
<i>Nen, en oyubi lonyo ni</i>	Look, he prepared for you your wealth
<i>Nen, en okeli gang-gi....</i>	Look, he brought you into their home....
<i>Make ma calo tong-gweno</i>	Handle him like a [delicate] egg
<i>Latin dako,</i>	Young woman,
<i>Make macalo tong-gweno</i>	Handle him like a [delicate] egg
<i>Anyaka wee,</i>	Oh girl,
<i>Make macalo tong-gweno.</i>	Handle him like a [delicate] egg.

In the above song young women are given vital caution on how to exist harmoniously as a female within the Acoli patriarchal cultural set-up. As part of a woman's identity construction they are told "obey your husband... respect your husband, take care of your husband.... Take care of your household, be meek." This kind of female identity construction definitely gives the male the dominant position in the gender relation. Through song performance the culturally constructed image of the woman as respectful, obedient and meek is being reproduced and enhanced.

There is an attempt in the song to give some rationale for the 'required' female obedience to her male counter-part. She is nothing without him and her very existence hinges on his magnanimity. The female is reminded: "Look, he brought you into your house... he opened for you the door of life... he prepared for you your wealth... [and] he brought you into their home...." Her total acquiescence to him is therefore allegedly justifiable.⁸ And because of all these, she is

⁸ Refer to the patrilocal family setting and its effect on the position of the relocating partner discussed in Chapter Four, pages 113-117.

encouraged to “[h]andle him like a [delicate] egg.” In other words, to take him as something very precious in her life.

Obedience is often accentuated as a worthy female character trait in a number of Acoli songs; but not so for the male who in most cases has to make others obey him. Consider the excerpt below of another song performed by some young men, with Grace Atim giving vocal support:

<i>Kadi tidi, ka mara</i>	Even if she is tiny, if she loves me
<i>Laber mon</i>	The good natured woman
<i>Laber mon ka mara</i>	The good natured woman, if she loves me
<i>Aparo ku.</i>	I have no worries.
<i>Kadi tidi, ka winya</i>	Even if she is tiny, if she obeys me
<i>Awobi!</i>	Oh boy!
<i>Laber mon, teki winya</i>	The good natured woman, if she obeys me
<i>Aparo ku.</i>	I have no worries.
<i>Kadi tidi, ka wora</i>	Even if she is tiny, if she respects me
<i>Laber mon</i>	The good natured woman
<i>Laber mon, teki wora</i>	The good natured woman, if she respects me
<i>Aparo ku.</i>	I have no worries.

By the very nature of her social location with the patriarchal Acoli cultural set-up, to gain acceptability the female is expected to be obedient and respectful to the male. The singing voice reiterates: “Even if she is tiny, if she obeys me... if she respects me/ I have no worries.” These are some of the cardinal qualities associated with “[t]he good natured woman.” Looks are secondary – so, her being tiny is more than well compensated for by the important female character traits.

In addition to the above attributes, another gender identity attribute deemed praiseworthy in a female is servitude. As per the Acoli gender ideological conception, a female is by nature meant to serve; and a woman worth her salt serves diligently. In the following song, performed by Ogwang Kilippa, the action of one female in pleasing the male through assiduous servitude is commended.

<i>An atoo pi Latoo</i>	I will die for Latoo
<i>We Latoo won coo</i>	Latoo is the owner of the man
<i>Latoo okelo dek</i>	Latoo brought food
<i>tedo pa Latoo kite yo.</i>	Latoo's cooking is up to date.
<i>Latoo kelo yengo.</i>	Latoo has brought satisfaction.
<i>Latoo kume gum.</i>	Latoo is lucky.
<i>Nyodo pa dako kite yo.</i>	The offspring of this woman is well bred.
<i>Tin otedo lapena</i>	Today she cooked pigeon peas
<i>ci oonyo moo iwiye.</i>	and she laced it with oil.
<i>Ni Latoo guji</i>	They say Latoo is a slave
<i>Latoo kume gum.</i>	but Latoo is lucky.
<i>Tin otedo malakwang</i>	Today she cooked <i>malakwang</i> vegetable
<i>tye ma nyim oromo iye.</i>	and ensured enough simsim paste in it.
<i>Ni Latoo guji</i>	They say Latoo is a slave
<i>wai Latoo won coo.</i>	but Latoo is the owner of the man.
<i>Ka omuro pii lwok</i>	When she warms bathing water
<i>Tero ki amoo i iye</i>	she takes it with a sponge
<i>Latoo kite eno.</i>	That is the nature of Latoo.
<i>Latoo oloyo pyem.</i>	Latoo has won the challenge.
<i>En oloyo pyem</i>	She has won the challenge
<i>wai Latoo kite.</i>	because Latoo is well bred.
<i>Ka oo yutu piny</i>	When it reaches evening
<i>kijengo lela i ode.</i>	the bicycle is placed in her hut.
<i>Ni Latoo guji</i>	They say Latoo is a slave
<i>wai Latoo won coo.</i>	but Latoo is the owner of the man.
<i>Latoo rwot-mon</i>	Latoo is the queen of women
<i>Latoo kume gum.</i>	Latoo is lucky.
<i>Nyani omayo cwar-nyeke</i>	She has taken over her rival's husband
<i>bedo likiny-kiny.</i>	and is full of laughter.
<i>Latoo oloyo pyem ada</i>	Latoo has won the challenge indeed
<i>Latoo won coo.</i>	Latoo is the owner of the man.

In the above song female servitude to the male counter-part is presented as a challenge, or competition, where the female who serves best wins the male's appreciation as a prize. Latoo is said to be "well bred" because she fulfils societal expectations as per her gender identity – a good devoted service provider. She is out to please the man through conscientious service:

When she warms bathing water
she takes it with a sponge
That is the nature of Latoo.

She also ensures that the food served to the man is well prepared, “laced with oil” and with a generous serving of simsim paste. Because of her devoted service, “When it reaches evening/ the bicycle is placed in her hut.” In other words, the owner of the bicycle (the man) spends most nights in her hut instead of that of the co-wife who is not so devoted in service. And it is said “Latoo is lucky,” because through service she has become “the owner of the man.”

It is worth noting that the singing voice in the song is aware of changing gender realities and attempts at the re-signification of gender identity construction. It admits, “They say Latoo is a slave/ but Latoo is the owner of the man.” Here we see an effort to use song performance to enhance traditional gender identity stereotype – servitude as an attribute of female gender identity. It is implied that a female’s happiness comes through diligent servitude; Latoo, we are told, is “full of laughter.” As a result, the singing voice declares: “Latoo is the queen of women.”

The linking of the female identity to domestic responsibilities, and of course servitude, seems to pervade many Acoli song performances. This compares very well with Elaine Salo’s analysis of the South African Manenberg community. She writes:

Young women ... were judged in terms of the local ideology of domesticity. Motherhood and women’s domestic responsibilities were regarded as the feminine ideals. Consequently, young women were expected to confine themselves to the domestic arena, where they spent their time completing household chores or caring for younger household members (Salo 2003: 352).

A ‘respected’ and praiseworthy woman like Latoo is judged as such by the meticulous fulfilment of her domestic responsibilities like ensuring warm water is taken for bathing and food is prepared in the best way possible.

Furthermore, loving and caring is often conflated with the female image as a mother. Such emotional attributes like maternal love and caring is inevitably associated with the female and fondly constructed as part of her gender identity. Let us consider a song performed by Gang Gang *adungu*⁹ group with Jeff Komakech:

<i>Ajulina do</i> <i>kop cero wanga nino.</i>	Ajulina oh this matter prevents my eyes from sleep.
<i>Ajulina we</i> <i>kop cero wanga nino.</i>	Ajulina oh this matter prevents my eyes from sleep.
<i>An ka maa otoo</i> <i>anga ma ngeyo an?</i>	If my mother dies who will know me?
<i>Ajulina do</i> <i>kop cero wanga nino.</i>	Ajulina oh this matter prevents my eyes from sleep.
<i>An ka maa peke</i> <i>anga ma pito an?</i>	If my mother is no longer there who will feed me?
<i>Ajulina do</i> <i>kop cero wanga nino.</i>	Ajulina oh this matter prevents my eyes from sleep.
<i>Acii we</i> <i>kop cero wanga nino.</i>	Acii oh this matter prevents my eyes from sleep.
<i>Laber mon</i> <i>kop cero wanga nino.</i>	The beautiful one among women this matter prevents my eyes from sleep.

This song was originally composed in praise of the beauty of a woman known as Ajulina who made her male admirer or lover sleepless with desire for her. This is expressed in the statement “Ajulina oh/ this matter prevents my eyes from sleep.” This is considered a courtship song; and for the married, a re-affirmation of love. The song has over the years been modified to add statements highlighting the importance of a mother in one’s life through her unrivalled love and care. The Acoli have a saying: “*Megu lonyo!*” meaning “Mother is wealth!” The singing voice remarks that:

⁹ *Adungu* is a harp like instrument. The Gang Gang performers use several of this instrument in various sizes in their dance-song performance, with one large *adungu* usually referred to as *Min-adungu* (the mother of *adungu*).

If my mother dies
 who will know me?
If my mother is no longer there
 who will feed me?

Ngeyo (knowing) in the Acoli language can also mean minding and caring about somebody's welfare. It is insinuated in the song that nobody minds about someone like a mother. In singing about maternal love and care in the same breath as praising the beauty of a lover or wife (actual or just potential) the song tells a lot about Acoli mentality of considering a wife as a kind of surrogate mother. The questions "If my mother dies, who will know me?" and "If my mother is no longer there, who will feed me?" implicitly suggest the lover or wife has to take on this motherly role. So in the social construction of the female identity, motherhood and its attendant attributes are often projected. It is as if being a female and being a mother (in the literal or metaphorical sense) is one and the same thing.

What I find rather paradoxical is that while a female is expected to submit to the male's authority in marriage, she is also supposed to be a kind of a surrogate mother to him (loving and caring for him as his mother does or did). In other words, a wife is expected to be a kind of a mother to her husband, but without the moral authority of a mother.

It is interesting to note that song performance does not only portray what a *true* Acoli woman should be, but also what women are by nature. This is where one notices some negativity in female gender identity construction (which is not on even keel with the generally positive male gender identity construction). Women are sometimes constructed in song performances as troublesome and difficult to deal with by nature. This is often cast against the contextual background of a society where polygamy is acceptable (and in the past a common practice). Take for instance the song below performed by Amone Watmon:

*Coko mon mapol
weko idaa jwii.
In iyee peko pa mon
Peko pa mon
yang nga mutyeko?
Wun wuyee peko pa mon
Peko pa mon
yang nga mutwero?
Wun wuyee peko pa mon
Tem ba.*

*Cida pa mon
yang nga mutyeko?
Kong ingii ba, kong item ba.
In iyee cida pa mon
ma ongayo wa kwaaro.*

Kong icii ba, kong ikany ba.

*Mon mapol weko in ibutu kec.
In iyee cida pa mon mapol.
Nen kadi acel weko idaa jwi
In iyee peko pa mon.
Kadi acel weko ideno can
In iyee cida pa mon mapol.
Nen kadi acel weko ijony
In iyee cida pa mon.*

*Acel kong item ba
In iyee cida pa mon.*

Collecting many women
makes you quarrel daily.
You accept the problem of women
The problem of women
who has ever resolved?
You accept the problem of women
The problem of women
who has ever managed?
You accept the problem of women
Alright, try it.

The trouble by women
who has ever resolved?
You look around, you try it.
You accept the trouble of women
which has defeated even ancestors
to resolve.
You suffer it, you endure it.

Many women make you sleep hungry
Yet you accept the trouble of many women.
Look, even one makes you quarrel daily.
Yet you accept the trouble of women.
Even one makes you suffer
Yet you accept the trouble of many women.
Look, even one makes you emaciated
Yet you accept the trouble of women.

Even just one, you try
Yet you accept the trouble of women.

The theme of women as troublesome occurs in a number of song performances studied. During a group discussion to examine the import of the above song there emerged a consensus that where more than one woman is involved a man needs to exert his authority to bring order, otherwise intrigue and trouble is what will definitely ensue. This view was ascribed to by both the females and the males in the discussion group.

In the song women are depicted as troublesome by nature. It is reiterated that “even one makes you quarrel daily.... Even one makes you suffer.... Look, even one makes you emaciated.” The singing voice is incredulous that somebody has

decided to bring/marry more than one woman, when one is trouble enough. To show that the troublesome nature of the female is part of her gender identity which has held sway over generations, the singing voice remarks:

The trouble by women
 who has ever resolved?
 You look around, you try it.
 You accept the trouble of women
 which has defeated even ancestors
 to resolve.

As it emerged from the group discussion, it seems these alleged troublesome trait of the female identity is what has often been touted in the Acoli society as a reason for male dominance to bring order.

Another negative social construction of the category women associated with the female identity in the Acoli society is that of being gossipers (and by inference conflict causers). The depiction of women as gossipers by nature seems to pervade song performances, and a man who gossips is said to be gossiping like a woman. In the song below this character trait of women as gossipers is highlighted. The song is performed by Ogwang Kilippa playing the *nanga* and his wife as the lead singer.

Pang-pang ilak otyeno
Iyenyo ngo?
Iwoto ki wor,
Wai ladwala
balo ganga wa.

Pang-pang you roam in the evening
 What are you searching for?
 You move at night
 You are a conflict causer
 ruining our home.

Wot ango ma iwoto otyeno
Nongo iyenyo ngo?
Iwoto ki wor
Wai languna
balo gang wa.

What kind of walk you do in the evening
 What are you searching for?
 You move at night
 You are a liar
 ruining our home.

Otingo moo-tara lak kwede.
Nongo iyenyo ngo?
Iwoto ki wor
Wai ladwala

She carries paraffin and roams with it.
 What are you searching for?
 You move at night
 You are a conflict causer

<i>balo gang wa.</i>	ruining our home.
<i>Otingo moko-kwon lak kwede.</i>	She carries flour and roams with it.
<i>Nongo iyenyo ngo?</i>	What are you searching for?
<i>Iwoto ki wor</i>	You move at night
<i>Wai languna</i>	You are a liar
<i>balo gang wa.</i>	ruining our home.
<i>Otingo muranga lak kwede.</i>	She carries beans and roams with it
<i>Nongo iyenyo ngo?</i>	What are you searching for?
<i>Iwoto ki wor</i>	You move at night
<i>Wai ladwala</i>	You are a conflict causer
<i>balo gang wa.</i>	ruining our home.
<i>Twon laruba ma woto otyeno</i>	A conflict causer who moves in the evening.
<i>Nongo iyenyo ngo?</i>	What are you searching for?
<i>Lanek ping</i>	You are a killer of homesteads
<i>neko ganga wa.</i>	killing our home.

In the communal spirit, village women often share resources and help each other out with such things as paraffin, salt, millet flour and beans with the understanding that the person being assisted will also reciprocate in the near future. This kind of gesture does not only occur when one is in need, but also when the potential giver has a surplus. Take for instance when somebody has just had a good harvest of beans or any other produce, or when somebody receives a sizeable supply of say salt or paraffin from a relative in the urban area, it is natural for that person to share her fortune with others.

Evening is when most people are at home preparing or waiting for dinner, and it is such time that a woman is sure to find another at home. A person itching for gossip would always find a reason for a visit, and the most common is delivery of such things as paraffin or beans in the name of good will sharing. The singing voice remarks:

She carries paraffin and roams with it....
 She carries flour and roams with it....
 She carries beans and roams with it
 What are you searching for?

The woman in the song is portrayed as a “conflict causer who moves in the evening” allegedly carrying gossip around that ruins otherwise good domestic relations. She is told: “You are a killer of homesteads.” Gossiping as the unpleasant female character trait comes out in many songs – and hardly do you find any song depicting a male character as a gossip (and if so, it is to admonish him for his womanish tendency to gossip like a woman).

I asked George Komakech after a group song performance in which he participated as to why in one of the songs they performed it is the woman who is depicted as a gossip. This is what Komakech had to say:

*Gin ma wan wawero pe a pole
ki i wii-wa, ento ngo ma tye
ka time i kin dano ki ngo ma
pol kare dano waco. Ki bene
wer mukene tye wer Acoli ma
giwero i kabedo mapol ma rwede
ma atir peke. Wer tye calo pwony
ma ka iwero ci gudu kum ngati
moni weko tamo me weko kit marac
moni. Tim man me kobo onyo
kwoto lok ma tubu kin dano ni tye
tutwale bot mon. In ka ineno, coo
peke iye – meno pe kit coo. Man
omiyo giwero mon tutwale pi
kit man.*

What we sing doesn't just come from our heads, but it is what is happening among people and what usually people are saying. Also some of the songs are Acoli songs sung in many places with no individual owner. Songs are like education [advice] which when sung touches somebody so that he/she can think of leaving a particular bad habit. This nature of gossiping and causing conflict is with women. When you look, men are not involved – that is not men's nature. That is why in songs women are usually depicted with this trait.¹⁰

What Komakech was trying to put forward is that this rather negative character trait is part of the Acoli female identity construction – and he seems to justify it as a true to life gender identity construction. However, when pressed further, Komakech acknowledges that not all women are gossipers (although gossipers are usually woman). This brings us to a crucial realisation when deconstructing gender identity construction in society: You can never talk of a monolithic female or male identity, but rather an aggregate of ‘gender identities’ associated with

¹⁰ The interview with George Komakech was conducted on June 28, 2006, at Pece in Gulu.

males or females (with some being pointed out as the dominant traits for a particular gender).

Nonetheless, we have to admit that the line between what is culturally prescribed as acceptable female or male identity attributes and what really is (regardless of socio-cultural prescription) is not that easy to tell through the songs studied. This can be explained by the systematic process of gender socialisation and the coercive tendency of a communal society such as the Acoli, whereby the dominant ideologies always hold sway – and an individual has to appear to conform to the dominant cultural ideologies and practices in order to belong to this communal entity and not be a social outcast.

5.6. Song Performance and Gender Identity Re-signification

Not only do song performances serve to portray the nature of the gender identities in the Acoli society, or engage in the production and reproduction of specific identity construction, but the performances are also employed in gender identity re-signification. Changing realities in Acoliland, especially in recent years, has led to some redefining of gender roles and with this a revisiting of gender identities (although in a limited sense). We also note that song performances have also been actively used to resist changing the status quo.

Leadership and being a warrior or a fighter has traditionally been associated with male identity among the Acoli. This is in line with the culturally assigned male attributes of bravery and courage. However, when Alice Auma took over the leadership of the rebel outfit, Holy Spirit Movement, and became its supreme commander (with men accepting her leadership and taking orders from her) this social construction of the male as leaders and fighters in exclusion of the females was challenged. Songs were composed in acknowledgement of “Mother” Alice’s

leadership. Songs like the two below also acknowledged women's role as fighters (a role hitherto associated with masculinity).

In the following song, the death of both male and female fighters in the battle of Kona Kilak is mourned:

<i>Wac ki Okello odwog cen</i>	Tell Okello to come back
<i>Wat obeno tin anongo kwene?</i>	The <i>obeno</i> relationship, where do I get it?
<i>Adong kena</i>	I am left all alone
<i>Nen abako dogo do</i>	Look, my mouth does plead
<i>Owobe pa jii otum i Kona Kilak.</i>	People's sons met their demise at Kona Kilak. ¹¹

<i>Lwong nyako odwog cen</i>	Call the girl to come back
<i>Wat obeno tin anongo kwene?</i>	The <i>obeno</i> relationship, where do I get it?
<i>Adong nono</i>	I am left with nothing
<i>Nen atango cinga do</i>	Look, I spread out my hands
<i>Anyira pa jii otum i Kona Kilak.</i>	People's daughters met their demise at Kona Kilak.

In the above song both male and females are put at the same level in identity positioning. The singing voice points out: "People's sons met their demise/ at Kona Kilak.... People's daughters met their demise/ at Kona Kilak." Unlike in the old songs related to wars where the emphasis would be on "men" when referring to the war dead, thereby invoking masculine valour and heroism, the above song brings into focus a re-signification of identity. The emphasis is on "people," a sense of communality – they are not "men" or "women" but "people's sons" and "people's daughters." This could have been to highlight the shared grief and pain. The persona remarks: "Look, I spread out my hands." The cultural gesture of spreading out one's hands denotes helplessness. And in this helplessness, both male and female are on even plane.

The above song acknowledges the new positioning of the females. They were not at Kona Kilak to pick up the bodies of their dead men and mourn as they would

¹¹ In 1987 there was a fierce battle between Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement rebels and the Uganda government's National Resistance Army at Kona Kilak in Kitgum District in which many rebel fighters died.

have traditionally done. They were there to fight, toe-to-toe with the men and died bravely. In the song below, both male and female are mourned without putting more premium on the male as would have been done traditionally. This shows a subtle but definite shift in the social gender construction as a result of the prevailing situation. Let us consider the next song:

<i>Eno ba!</i>	Consider this!
<i>Aii baba, kec kuma</i>	Oh father, my unlucky self
<i>Calo kwac munywal lanyuru</i>	Like a leopardess that has just given birth
<i>Awobe pa jii odwogo</i>	People's sons came back [alive]
<i>Mega odong i tim.</i>	Mine was left in the wilderness.
<i>Eno ba!</i>	Consider this!
<i>Aii maa, kec kuma</i>	Oh mother, my unlucky self
<i>Calo kwac munywal lanyuru</i>	Like a leopardess that has just given birth
<i>Anyira pa jii oloyo too</i>	People's daughters escaped death
<i>Mega odoko lwala.</i>	Mine turned into dust.

During the performance of the above song there were other symbolic gestures that accompanied the rendition to draw attention to the re-signification of gender identity. For example, as shown in Photo K (Appendix II), a woman from Atek ki Lwak women's group performs the symbolic mock fight (*uc*) usually performed by men only. Many years back this could have caused uproar with the woman being denigrated, but because of the changing gender reality she instead gets a big applause. It is in this regard that Tania Kaiser in her recent analysis of the performance of *otole* dance-songs among the Acoli remarks:

One interesting feature of this dance [*otole*] is that it is not unusual to see a woman seize a stick and charge into the *mêlée* as a man might have done in battle. Such crossing of gender boundaries is met with amusement and appreciation and is not considered an inappropriate claim for glory. (Kaiser 2006: 194).

Although in real life much may have not changed, with certain persistent traditional gender ideologies still prevailing, song performance offers both aesthetic and ideological arena for the contestation and re-configuration of gender identities. This is especially true in the performance of the courtship dance-songs

(*larakaraka*) performed by young people. Let us take a look at the *larakaraka* dance-song below, performed by students of Gulu Central High School at Eria Gaa:

Aii laber, gam doga do
Iling doga pi ngo?
Meya gam doga do.

Oh beautiful one, please answer me
Why do you refuse to respond to me?
My love, please answer me.

Aa laber mon,
gam doga do
Iling doga pi ngo?
Meya gam doga do.

The beautiful one among women,
please answer me
Why do you refuse to respond to me?
My love, please answer me.

Acaa laber,
can balo laber
Pe iling doga do
Meya winy doga ba.

Acaa the beautiful one,
poverty is wasting the beautiful one
Don't maintain silence against me
My love, please listen to me.

The above song is a plea by the male to the female, craving for acceptance. He asks: “Why do you refuse to respond to me?” And he begs: “Don't maintain silence against me/ My love, please listen to me.” Apart from the singing and the traditional dance pattern, there was a lot of drama going on in the form of body language and movement, denoting a re-negotiation of gender positioning and identity. Interestingly the females always came up top – either by design, compromise or sheer fun. As shown in Photo L (Appendix II), a male performer assumes a more subordinate position even kneeling before the female. There is an apparent reversal of traditional gender roles and identity. Traditionally, during the *moko* (a stage in the dance when a male pushes aside the female he fancies), a man would exude his exaggerated masculine dominance; while the woman would humble herself, submit to his authority, and sometimes kneel before him. Today, at least in the world of song performance, some of these stereotypic identity traits are being contested or even re-signified.

As Robert Lawy points out, gender “identity is neither a representation of something that is fixed nor a representation of deep and profound psychological

characteristics that reside within the person” (Lawy 2003: 332). Gender identity can be reconfigured depending on the prevailing conditions and the social structures. The turmoil in the Acoli society has led to a redefining of some of the gender positions before taken as a given. Lawy rightly suggests that “Meanings do not have a ‘life of their own’ nor exist outside of themselves. They are made within the practices in which they are located” (Lawy 2003: 341). And Acoli song performance, as a popular cultural form, is involved in the expression, creation and reproduction of gender identity signification and re-signification.

5.7. Conclusion

As we have noticed, song performance can be an important research entry point in examining gender identity construction among the Acoli. Songs do not only reflect the nature of the gender identity construction, but in a predominantly oral and largely non-literate society like the Acoli, song performances are engaged in gender ideological production, enhancement and re-signification of identities. Unlike other oral forms, song performances do quickly and easily reflect the changing realities and perceptions in society – and invariably do influence gender perceptions and social constructions.

Inevitably, song performance mediation of gender identity construction is not done in isolation of the resultant (or causal) gender power relations. As stated earlier, there is a close dialectical relationship between gender identity construction and gender power relation. In the next chapter, therefore, I discuss the role of song performance in mediating, or intervening in, gender power relations.