

Chapter Six

SONG PERFORMANCE AND GENDER POWER RELATIONS

6.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the manifestation of gender power relations in song performance, and further discusses the nature of the power relation matrix among the Acoli. It also analyses the roles of songs in the mediation and/or subversion of gender power relations in Acoli society.

In song performances (often with dance as an integral part of the performance) the relationship between identity construction and gender relations is often quite manifest. Commenting on the Acoli dance-song performances in relation to gendered demeanour Tania Kaiser notes that:

As well as revealing a visual aesthetic, analysis of dancing also allows insights into an aesthetic of social roles and behaviour. Through this medium it is possible to learn about the demeanour, movement and appearance which are favoured by the community for women, as well as something of the activities and behaviours which are considered appropriate for them at each stage in their life cycles. (Kaiser 2006: 192).

In other words, Acoli gender identity constructs and gender social relations are enacted through dance-song performances. In song performance the gendered lives and experiences of the people are quite manifest and are artistically expressed and commented upon, thereby this art form becomes part and parcel of the very gender realities in society.

6.2. Depiction, Enhancement and Contestation of Power Relations

As noted earlier, song performances do portray existing gender power relations in Acoli society; and through songs certain gender power relations are enhanced while others are criticised or even contested. But all in all, the relation between song performance and gender power relations in the society is undeniable.

Below is a song that is not only used to reflect the general gender attitude that may influence gender relations, but that may also to enhance such attitude as the accepted norm in gender relations. It is performed by Gang Gang *adungu* group with Jeff Komakech:

Female: <i>Kitanda gwele gine diya ba</i>	The <i>gwele</i> bed this is too much for me.
Male: <i>Dire kany cok yo....</i>	Please move closer....
Female: <i>Ot bene ton kot goya ba.</i>	Even the house leaks rain beats me.
Male: <i>Dire kany cok yo....</i>	Please move closer....
Female: <i>Lok pa kitanda gwele gine diya ba.</i>	Because of the <i>gwele</i> bed this is too much for me.
Male: <i>Dire kany cok yo....</i>	Please move closer....
Female: <i>Cuburiya peke gine diya ba.</i>	There is no saucepan this is too much for me.
Male: <i>Dire kany cok yo....</i>	Please move closer....
Female: <i>Waa pala bene peke gine diya ba.</i>	Even there is no knife this is too much for me.
Male: <i>Dire kany cok yo....</i>	Please move closer....
Female: <i>An adok tuwa gine diya ba.</i>	I will go back to my natal home this is too much for me.
Male: <i>Dire kany cok yo....</i>	Please move closer....
Female: <i>Dogola peke obe cama ba.</i>	There is no door the mosquitoes bite me.
Male: <i>Dire kany cok yo....</i>	Please move closer....
Female: <i>Gium peke koyo neka ba.</i>	There is no blanket cold will kill me.

Male: <i>Dire kany cok yo....</i>	Please move closer....
Female: <i>Lok pa kitanda gwele an adok tuwa.</i>	Because of the <i>gwele</i> bed I will return to my natal home.
Male: <i>Dire kany cok yo....</i>	Please move closer....

The *gwele* bed is a crude kind of bed usually used by the poor in rural Acoli. It is made by sinking four forked tree trunks or branches into the floor of the hut. Upon two of the forks a pole is placed (and the same is done with the corresponding forks), and smaller woods are then lined up on the two poles and fastened with ropes to make a platform. To complete the bed a papyrus mat is put on top of the platform. Although traditionally this was the kind of bed used by the Acoli, with the passage of time, the *gwele* bed has become a mark of poverty – while beds made from proper timber by a carpenter is more acceptable (but it costs money).

The gender concept of the male as protector and provider is brought into the limelight in the above song. The male in the song fails to fulfil his traditionally assigned duty as the provider in the marital relationship, and consequently his authority as a male in the power relation is undermined. Thus, he becomes a subject of derision. The female points out his failures as a protector:

Even the house leaks
rain beats me....
There is no door
the mosquitoes bite me.....
There is no blanket
cold will kill me.

Unlike among the Karimojong of north-eastern Uganda where putting up a shelter is perceived to be culturally insignificant and is relegated to the females, the Acoli consider putting up a shelter as socially significant and it is a male's duty because it is linked to the image of the male as protector. Putting a roof over a female's head gives the male some kind of authority in the domicile. Yet this highly

symbolic act is downgraded (together with the authority of the male in the song) because of the shoddy job done. The house leaks, there is no door, and worse of all there is no blanket.

Because of the male's failure to live up to his image as the provider, the female cannot perform her culturally assigned role in the gender relation. She remarks that:

There is no saucepan
this is too much for me....
Even there is no knife
this is too much for me.

In the gender relation the female is expected to cook and serve, but the tools to perform this role such as a saucepan and knife are missing because the *provider* has failed in his duty.

Note that the male in the song does not respond with authority or criticise the female for her attitude or demand for her to contribute to cover the shortcomings. Instead he pleads/begs: "Please move closer." This is because his authority in the gender relation has been eroded as per the dictates of the Acoli gender ideology.

The *gwele* bed comes to symbolise the lack of provision, the shortcomings of the male in fulfilling his culturally assigned role in the gender relation (and with it his failure as a man in the eyes of society), that is why the female remarks:

The *gwele* bed
this is too much for me....
Because of the *gwele* bed
I will return to my natal home.

The performers of the song introduced it as 'a story' about a young man who got married to a girl when he was not yet ready to take on the responsibilities. The Acoli have a saying "*Pe icere kabedo coo ka pe itwero*," meaning "Don't attempt to be a man when you are unable." Being a man gives one authority and power, but it also comes with responsibilities; just as assuming responsibility as provider

and protector gives one authority and power in the gender relation. Being socially constructed as providers in the society, the Acoli males use this to enhance their authority in the gender power relations. However, their authority in the domestic arena seems to have been somewhat eroded by the long term war in Acoliland. Referring to a research project carried out by the Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development (ACORD), Judy El-Bushra observes that “conflict has undoubtedly given women greater responsibilities, and with them the possibility of exerting greater leverage in decision-making processes....” (El-Bushra 2003: 252). More tellingly, she quotes the researchers analysis of the Acoli gender situation:

In the internally displaced camps, men lost the power to provide for and protect the family, or to exercise authority, leadership, or control over resources (including wives and children). The resultant frustration may be channelled into aggressivity [sic] in various highly destructive forms. (Quoted in El-Bushra 2003: 260).

The aggressive actions by some Acoli men are because they felt less of *a man* in the gender relations due to the traditionally constructed identity of a man as provider and protector in the Acoli cultural set-up. However, despite the changing gender realities, El-Bushra admits that “the ideological bases underpinning gender relations appear to have remained unchanged or even reinforced” (El-Bushra 2003: 258). Song performances have played a major role in reinforcing these ideological bases underpinning gender relations. Consider the text of the song below performed by Ogwang Kilippa playing the *nanga* and his wife as the lead singer.

<i>Lacen poto kili.</i>	The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle.
<i>Lacen poto ni kili!</i>	The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle!
<i>Ka ngat ma oketo cwinye</i>	She who devotes her heart
<i>ka yelo coo</i>	to giving men a hard time
<i>cengu binongo.</i>	will one day meet it.
<i>Lacen poto ni kili!</i>	The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle!
<i>Lacen poto kili.</i>	The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle.
<i>Lacen poto ni kili!</i>	The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle!

<i>Ka ngat ma oketo cwinye ka yeto cware cengu binongo. Lacen poto ni kili!</i>	She who devotes her heart to insulting her husband will one day meet it. The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle!
<i>Lacen poto kili. Lacen poto ni kili! Ka ngat ma oketo cwinye ka kunu gang cengu binongo. Lacen poto ni kili!</i>	The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle. The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle! She who devotes her heart to abandoning [her marital] home will one day meet it. The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle!
<i>Lacen poto kili. Lacen poto ni kili! Ka ngat ma oketo cwinye ka twono cware kwon cengu binongo. Lacen poto ni kili!</i>	The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle. The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle! She who devotes her heart to denying her husband food will one day meet it. The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle!
<i>Lacen poto kili. Lacen poto ni kili! Ka ngat ma oketo cwinye ka yeto kwaaro cengu binongo. Lacen poto ni kili!</i>	The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle. The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle! She who devotes her heart to insulting her father-in-law will one day meet it. The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle!
<i>Lacen poto kili. Lacen poto ni kili! Ka ngat ma oketo cwinye ka yeto dayo cengu binongo. Lacen poto ni kili!</i>	The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle. The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle! She who devotes her heart to insulting her mother-in-law will one day meet it. The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle!

The above song is just one example of how song performance can be used to reinforce traditional gender ideologies and to cow the ‘wayward’ female(s) into the acceptable fold of gender power relation. As a consequence of her behaviour which is culturally unacceptable the female is threatened with the evil spirit which “drops like a knife without a handle.”¹ A knife without a handle when unleashed there is no way of grabbing or stopping it without hurting oneself.

¹ There are certain actions among the Acoli termed *kir* or abominations. These include denying a husband food, closing a wife out at night, throwing out the fire in the hearth in anger, etc. Such actions portend evil and the homestead has to be cleansed through ritual to keep misfortune at bay so that no harm comes to members of the homestead.

Among the Acoli, what may be construed as an insult (especially where a father-in-law or a mother-in-law is concerned) may not be the use of directly abusive words. It may be a challenge to one's culturally overstretched authority – thereby an insult to one's authority. Even refusing to respond to one's question or request may be construed as an insult. A female's father-in-law or mother-in-law commands a lot of power over her. The woman in question is accused of “insulting her father-in-law” and “insulting her mother-in-law” – and in so doing upsetting the power balance.

In the gender power relation a female is expected to be subservient to the husband. Because of her attempt to upset the status quo the woman targeted in the song is warned:

The evil spirit drops like a knife without a handle!
She who devotes her heart
to giving men a hard time
will one day meet it.

Giving men a hard time can be interpreted as challenging his authority or power in the gender relation. As a means of getting her way in the power relation the woman being sung about is depicted as committing one of the abominations in the Acoli culture – “denying her husband food.” Food here can be taken to mean daily sustenance like millet bread and beans, or it can also be interpreted to mean turning her back on him and denying him sex.

As noted earlier, song performances are usually accompanied by dancing which is highly entertaining; and there is no better way to educate or indoctrinate than through entertainment. Thus, through this performing art form, the young of Acoli are socialised into accepted gender values and appropriate gender relations in society. This is reiterated by Tania Kaiser in her study of Acoli dance-songs:

Another feature of these dances, though, is that they fulfil the function of teaching the children about Acholi life and art. Through watching, learning, participating and observing the

attitudes of their parents and elders in the context of dancing, children are socialised into forms of acceptable behaviour in addition to becoming proficient dancers. This process is recognised and valued by parents. (Kaiser 2006: 197)

Therefore, Acoli song performance can be taken not only as an expressive art form but also an important ideological tool in society.

Even in songs that criticise abusive relationship, one still notices that dominant traditional gender ideologies and specific gender power relations are still upheld by the performance. A case in point is the song below performed by Amone Watmon playing the *nanga*, with a female companion as the lead singer.

Female: <i>Aii, kong inen lonyo pa wora!</i>	Oh, look at my father's wealth!
Male: <i>Jal, kong inen dyang ki i gang ba!</i> <i>Won lim mono,</i> <i>ka caya ba!</i>	Look at the cattle in the homestead! The wealth's owner is mediocre yet he despises me!
Female: <i>Won lim mono,</i> <i>ka cayo abaa!</i> <i>Iwaco, cwinya ton.</i>	The wealth's owner is mediocre yet he despises my dad! You say it, and my heart drips.
Male: <i>Aii ye! Lamoo tino!</i> <i>Gicwalo nyara</i> <i>ka balo yee.</i>	Oh dear! The young beauty! They take my daughter to ruin her, oh.
Female: <i>Aii! Kong inen lonyo.</i> <i>ma tuwa!</i>	Oh! Look at the wealth in my natal home!
Male: <i>Kong inen lonyo i gang ba</i> <i>Won lim mono,</i> <i>ka caya ba!</i>	Look at the wealth in the homestead The wealth's owner is mediocre yet he despises me!
Female: <i>Won lim mono,</i> <i>ka cayo wora.</i> <i>Kun waco, cwinya wang.</i>	The wealth's owner is mediocre yet he despises my father. He says it, and my heart burns.
Male: <i>Aii ye! Lamoo tino!</i> <i>Jal, inyomo nyara</i> <i>ki lok anywar.</i>	Oh dear! The young beauty! You marry my daughter to fool about with her.

Female: <i>Aii, kong inen lonyo pa wora!</i>	Oh, look at my father's wealth!
Male: <i>Kong inen bati ma opoto piny!</i> <i>Won lim mono,</i> <i>ka caya ba!</i>	Look at the abundant iron roofing! The wealth's owner is mediocre yet he despises me!
Female: <i>Won lim mono,</i> <i>ka cayo wora.</i> <i>Iwaco, cwinya cwer.</i>	The wealth's owner is mediocre yet he despises my father. You say it, and my heart drips.
Male: <i>Aii ye! Lamoo tino!</i> Jal, ikelo nyara ka leyo wiye.	Oh dear! The young beauty! You bring my daughter to be ashamed.
Female: <i>Kong inen dero keken!</i>	Just look at the granaries!
Male: <i>Kong inen dyangi i gang ba!</i> <i>Won lim mono,</i> <i>ka caya ba!</i>	Look at the cattle in the homestead! The wealth's owner is mediocre yet he despises me!
Female: <i>Won lim mono,</i> <i>ka cayo abaa!</i> <i>Iwaco, cwinya cwer.</i>	The wealth's owner is mediocre yet he despises my dad! You say it, and my heart drips.

There are two voices in the song: that of a married female and her father. *Won lim* (the wealth's owner) is a phrase usually used to refer to the male who has paid the bride-wealth to marry a wife. In this case he is the owner of the wealth taken to the female's natal home at marriage. The song criticises him for despising or looking down upon his father-in-law, yet his wealth cannot match that of the father-in-law. The female points out: "The wealth's owner is mediocre/ yet he despises my dad!"

The phrase "The wealth's owner" may also allude to the fact that in the society wealth is own by the male. The female in the relation is not directly entitled to the ownership of wealth, although she contributes to its accumulation. In this regard, one issue that is brought out in the song as far as gender power relation is concerned is that of ownership. Note that the word for 'owner' in the Acoli language is *won*, which can literally be translated as 'father of' (as, say, in the case of a child *won Okot* [the father of Okot] as contrasted with *min Okot* [the

mother of Okot]). This is quite telling about the Acoli gender attitude to ownership, which in this case has a masculine connotation. For example, a female who acquires and owns a bicycle becomes *won lela* (the father of the bicycle) and never *min lela* (the mother of the bicycle), because ownership is masculine and not feminine. This shows that traditionally the females were never expected to own anything and always depend on the magnanimity of the males (owners of wealth and properties including women and children), which tilts the power equation in favour of the males in the gender power relations.

In the above song the 'wealth's owner' cannot boast about his wealth to his wife or put her down for lack of riches, because culturally she cannot own wealth or property. So to hurt her he goes for the nearest best alternative, her father. That is why the father-in-law remarks: "The wealth's owner is mediocre/ yet he despises me!" We note that to stand up to her husband's bragging the female does not refer to any wealth or property she owns (because culturally all that she owns belong to the husband), but she proudly points to the magnitude of her father's property and wealth. She says: "Oh, look at my father's wealth!... Oh! Look at the wealth/ in my natal home!" In other words, a female can be considered wealthy by virtue of the wealth her father or husband owns; and these two are culturally duty bound to dispense their wealth towards her well-being and thereby having some power/authority over her in the gender relations.

The power/authority occasioned by ownership in the gender relation can either be benign or repressive. In the case of the man projected in the above song it is repressive. That is why the female's father remarks:

Oh dear! The young beauty!
They take my daughter
to ruin her, oh....

Oh dear! The young beauty!
You marry my daughter
to fool about with her.

Generally, the power or authority of the male occasioned by ownership is usually expected to be benign and productive; and when it is abused it is always criticised in song performances as something unacceptable in society.

Song performances also mediate gender power relations by providing a neutral platform from which grievances and protests can be aired and brought to public notice for redress. So, songs are not only used to portray the prevalent gender power relations, or to enhance specific gender ideologies and practices in society, but also to intervene in the gender power relations. We notice that women have not always silently accepted to play second fiddle in the gender power relation, or take an abusive relationship lying down. Through song performances they have always registered their protest and grievances. Song performances have become some sort of ideological and aesthetic arena for gender reconfigurations. Let us consider the text of the song below:

<i>Ganga pa joo ni,</i> <i>ka abedo</i> <i>wun ka wuneno</i> <i>giwaco ni ber.</i> <i>Magu gang anywar</i> <i>Meno gang cac nono.</i>	This people's home, when I continue living in and you see you say all is well. But it is a home of foolery And a home of putting people down.
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<i>Aling-alinga</i> <i>We aling litii.</i>	I just keep quiet I keep completely quiet.
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<i>Gang pa joo ni,</i> <i>ka aling</i> <i>wun mono wutamo</i> <i>ni ber mono?</i> <i>Meno gang cac</i> <i>Gang ayela nyee.</i>	These people's home. when I keep quiet you assume that all is well indeed? It is a home of putting people down And a home of trouble indeed.
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<i>Aling-alinga</i> <i>We aling litii.</i>	I just keep quiet I keep completely quiet.
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<i>Gang pa joo ni,</i> <i>ka aling</i> <i>wun ka wuneni</i> <i>wutamo ni ber.</i>	These people's home. when I keep quiet and you see it you assume all is well.
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Meno gang atwom
Magu gang cac.

But it is a home of problems
And a home of putting people down.

Aling-alinga
We aling litii.

I just keep quiet
I keep completely quiet.

As regards her alleged mistreatment at her marital home, the female says “I just keep quiet/ I keep completely quiet.” This is rather ironic because through song performance she makes a very loud protest. A possible alternative interpretation is that the singer may be a composite figure, representing women in general rather than herself only.

Note that the accusation is levied against “These people’s home” and not her husband. This brings into play the complexity of the gender relation – it is not simply a husband and a wife relationship. Marriage is a communal affair among the Acoli; a woman does not just get married to a man but into a family (with some members not very happy to lose the influence they once exercised over their son or brother to the new woman). This is where even women in a particular homestead would try to lord it over the ‘foreign’ married woman. That is why the accusing finger is pointed at the home: “it is a home of problems/ and a home of putting people down.”

The complexity of gender power relations portrayed in the song above is that it is not a man or men accused of domination but a whole home (consisting of both genders). The only gender equation in this scenario is that a married female is the target of discrimination, because by relocating from her natal home to her marital home she becomes some sort of second class citizen in her new abode. And, interestingly, in such cases the females always tend to absolve their husbands of responsibility and accuse his people as is the case in the above song.

As shown above, song performance gives the females a forum to vent their dissatisfaction, and sometimes contest the gender power relations. One other example of such contestation is the *orak* (or *larakaraka*) dance-song below:

In omera in icere
ni imito keny pa Odur
Won lim ite okwero mola.

Brother, you insist
 that Odur should marry me
 Yet the wealth owner's ears
 are incompatible with brass ornaments.²

In wora icere
ni imito keny pa Odur
Won dyang ite okwero wiye.

Father, you insist
 that Odur should marry me
 Yet the cattle owner's ears
 are incompatible with his head.

In omera in icere
ni imito keny pa Odur
Won lim ite okwero mola.

Brother, you insist
 that Odur should marry me
 Yet the wealth owner's ears
 are incompatible with brass ornaments.

Orak is a courtship dance, and a fitting arena to make comments on love and courtship. In the song the female rejects the choice of a partner made for her by the father and the brother. Among the Acoli, even in an arranged marriage, the female has the final say – and she has to verbally recognize the suitor before the marriage arrangement can go ahead. When the suitor and his entourage go to the female's parent's home to ask her hand in marriage, before any further discussion can take place, the female is called and asked: "Do you know these people?" (This is done as a formality even if the people are known to everybody around.) If her answer is "Yes," she is then asked: "Which one among them?" She then points out her prospective husband from among his people as an indication that she has formally accepted the proposal of marriage.

By referring to the suitor as "the wealth owner" and "the cattle owner," the female in the song shows that the only qualification of the suitor is his wealth (which

² In the past Acoli men, as a show of wealth, would adorn their ears with brass ornaments. This is no longer the case in contemporary Acoli. However, the expression "his ears are incompatible with brass ornaments" is still used as a figure of speech to mean he is not presentable.

seems to be the attraction for her father and brother). To show that she is not interested in the suitor, the female goes ahead to depict him as not presentable and physically repulsive: “the wealth owner’s ears/ are incompatible with brass ornaments” and “the cattle owner’s ears/ are incompatible with his head.” To say that his ears are incompatible with his head also shows that the suitor lacks understanding; otherwise his ears would have got the message to his head that he is not wanted.

The song definitely shows that the female cannot just follow every whim of the male without question, and song performance gives females one forum to make their views ‘politely’ known. This is a song contesting the gender power relation whereby the female is told who to marry by the male members of her family. In song she protests the choice of partner and expresses her disapproval.

From the discussion of Acoli songs in this section in particular, and the thesis in general, we can conclude that song performances reflect the gender ideologies and practices in society and are also engaged in enhancing some of the gender concepts and practices by their very contents and the way they present the gender concepts and realities. Thus, song performances mediate and intervene in gender power relations either through ideological reproduction or contestation.

6.3. Female Leverage in the Power Relations Matrix

At this juncture it is important to point out once again that in Acoli society, as portrayed in song performances, power in the gender relations is not always exercised exclusively by the males. An examination of a wide range of song performances shows how complex the gender power relation matrix is among the Acoli. The males cannot be said to be completely dominating in the relations, and the females cannot be said to be totally subjugated and hapless in the gender relations either. The texts of the dance-songs discussed in this section serve to

demonstrate that the females are not completely docile, following all the decisions made by the males.

The females tend to acquire more power with seniority as their offspring grow into adults; and that is when the females become more socially secure in their marital homes. Of particular interest is the power exercised by a mother-in-law in the gender relations. A mother-in-law by virtue of her special status in society has an enormous power over her son-in-law (that is, the male who is married to her daughter). The male has to give his mother-in-law maximum respect, and try not to rub her up the wrong way. Traditionally, a mother-in-law can walk into her in-laws' compound and verbally roughen up her son-in-law when she feels her daughter is being mistreated; and culturally, the son-in-law is not entitled to answer her back. One explanation given is that she suffered the birth-pangs in bringing forth her daughter and is entitled to such outburst on her behalf. This special position of the mother-in-law in society is portrayed in the song below performed by Ojwiya p'Latong:

<i>Ikwanyo gweno pa maro calo wangi oto. Kong ibed ki woro ba Obija, bed ki woro. Nen, ikwanyo gweno pa maro.</i>	You took the mother-in-law's hen as if you are blind. Please have some respect Obija, have some respect. Look, you took the mother-in-law's hen.
<i>Iyeto maro bene ki kongo calo wii obal. Kong ibed ki woro ba Obija, bed ki woro. Nen, iyeto maro.</i>	You insulted the mother-in-law when drunk as if you are mad. Please have some respect Obija, have some respect. Look, you insulted the mother-in-law.
<i>Irii i gang pa maro calo menni oto. Kong ibed ki woro ba Obija, bed ki woro. Nen, irii i gang pa maro.</i>	You over-stay at the mother-in-law's place as if your own mother is dead. Please have some respect Obija, have some respect. Look, you over-stay at the mother-in-law's place.

A wise person always keeps a mother-in-law at an arm's length and tries only to be with her when he cannot avoid, minimizing the risk of offending her. But the

person in the song does “over-stay at the mother-in-laws place” – which is not wise. Furthermore, only a mad person would even entertain the thought of insulting his mother-in-law under the influence of alcohol. Even the worst of thieves would never take a mother-in-law’s hen, unless he was blind. There is a whole range of cultural taboos associated with the mother-in-law to safeguard her special position in society.

Through repetition one important message is emphasized in the song: “Please have some respect/ Obija, have some respect.” In the gender relations a mother-in-law is to be accorded utmost respect by the son-in-law and his extended family. The Acoli word *woro* (translated here as ‘respect’) connotes a number of things in the Acoli mind, including obeying and trying not to offend in any way.³ It also connotes treating the person in all respects as a senior, and trying not to over familiarise with that person on equal footing.

The leverage the female has over her son-in-law in the gender relations is also highlighted in the song reproduced on page 59. She can summon him to help with digging the fields, and it is incumbent upon him to comply with the request. He can mobilise a few friends or male relatives to help. In present day Acoliland, depending on his circumstance, he can give money for ploughing the field instead of physically digging it himself.

Culturally speaking, to maintain her respectability and dignity, a mother-in-law is expected not to be too free with her conversation especially in the presence of the son-in-law. There is some feeling of awe that comes with appearing to be distant. Some mothers-in-law take advantage of their special position to verbally harass the husbands of their daughters – because they know he is culturally helpless to defend himself before a mother-in-law. An attempt to answer back would be

³ One of my informant, Josephine Adong, 50, (interviewed on December 30, 2004) states that even in buying gifts or presents the males always prioritize their mothers-in-law over their own mothers.

construed as disrespect, and this would draw a fine as penalty. In the song below the persona complains of such a mother-in-law who is verbose.

Mara,
maro man loko tutwal
Maro ngo
maloko calo otel poto kot?

My mother-in-law
this mother-in-law talks too much.
What kind of a mother-in-law
who speaks like the *otel* bird
at the onset of the rains?

Akello
meni wai loko tutwal
Maro ngo
maloko calo otel poto kot?

Akello
your mother talks too much
What kind of a mother-in-law
who speaks like the *otel* bird
at the onset of the rains?

Mara,
maro man loko tutwal
Maro ngo
maloko calo otel poto kot?

My mother-in-law
this mother-in-law talks too much.
What kind of a mother-in-law
who speaks like the *otel* bird
at the onset of the rains?

“*Loko tutwal*,” given a literal translation here as “talks too much,” actually means a whole range of things when rendered in the Acoli language. In the context in which it is used in the above song, “talking too much” may mean being fastidious and always finding faults with everybody and everything. Note that in the song the mother-in-law is not addressed directly, because that would amount to an affront. Instead the persona addresses his wife: “Akello/ your mother talks too much.” And he makes a general address: “My mother-in-law/ this mother-in-law talks too much.”

The imagery of an *otel* bird is not a flattering one. This is a bird with a very annoying habit of making irritating persistent noise at odd hours. The singing voice asks: “What kind of a mother-in-law/ who speaks like the *otel* bird/ at the onset of the rains?” This is meant to depict the overbearing mother-in-law – and in this case a male is often at the receiving end in the gender power relation (and

song performance offers males socially acceptable forum for airing their frustration).

Furthermore, as depicted in a number of Acoli songs, the females are not totally dormant in the gender power relations but have an important part to play in the balance of power especially in the domestic arena. As Cyrilo Obol told me sometime back, it is women who make homes in Acoli society. He said: “You can have a house without a woman, but you can never have a home without a woman.”⁴ Women are very central in the domestic existence of an Acoli homestead as per the culturally assigned gender roles. This is highlighted in the dirge below performed at the funeral of Acii, the wife of Otim:

Welo owoto ki wor do
Tin anga ma gwoko welo?
“Acii gwok welo ira do,”
Otim bako doge.
Otim lakony kore peke
Ineno gang oling tin.

The visitors came by night
Today who will take care of the visitors?
“Acii take care of the visitors for me,”
Otim pleads.
Otim has got no helper
You see the home is desolate today.

An do!
Anga ma tin gwoko welo pa Otim?
Welo owoto ki wor do
“Acii gwok welo ira do,”
Otim bako doge.
Otim lakony kore peke
Ineno gang oto ada.

Poor me!
Who will today take care of Otim’s visitors?
The visitors came by night
“Acii take care of the visitors for me,”
Otim pleads.
Otim has got no helper
You see the home is indeed dead.

At any cultural or social occasion such as weddings, funerals, etc., it is women who provide the hospitality services. In the song above the mourners are referred to as visitors (needing care) – “The visitors came by night.” In normal circumstances, Acii would have taken care of the visitors; but she is the deceased. The desperation of the bereaved male is depicted in the song through this rendering: “Acii, take care of the visitors for me, Otim pleads.” The departure of

⁴ The interview with Cyrilo Obol was conducted in an earlier research on June 18, 1993 at Laroo in Gulu.

the female has left the male helpless and the home desolate. Without the female there is in fact no home to talk of; and this is pointed out in the dirge:

Otim has got no helper
You see the home is indeed dead.

Here we see that the female is more than just an appendage to the male. She occupies a space of her own in the gender power relation, which society acknowledges through song performances. Her services are not taken as servitude in the above song, but as an important role for the continued existence of the homestead. This is emphasized through the tone of the song and such remarks as: “Poor me!/ Who will today take care of Otim’s visitors?”

Sometimes the female gender identity attribute of servitude is invoked to show how important she is in the gender power relation. Her service is held as a bargaining chip in the gender relation. Consider the song below which has gained popularity in many parts of Acoliland:

<i>Dek bene ki ii agulu mon ma tedo. Ceng iwaci mon rac Kong dong inen ba.</i>	Even food in the pot it is women who cook it. You once said women are bad Now see for yourself.
<i>Pii bene ki ii agulu mon ma twomo. Ceng iwaci mon rac Kong dong inen ba.</i>	Even water in the pot it is women who fetch it. You once said women are bad Now see for yourself.
<i>Doo bene ki ii poto mon ma doyo. Ceng iwaci mon rac Kong dong inen ba.</i>	Even weeds in the gardens it is women who remove them. You once said women are bad Now see for yourself.
<i>Kongo bene mero dano ni mon ma yubo. Ceng iwaci mon rac Kong dong inen ba.</i>	Even beer that makes people drunk it is women who prepare it. You once said women are bad Now see for yourself.

<p><i>Welo bene ki ii gang ducu mon ma gwoko. Ceng iwaci mon rac Kong dong inen ba.</i></p>	<p>Even visitors in a home it is women who take care of them. You once said women are bad Now see for yourself.</p>
<p><i>Anongo twon coo tye ka rengo bel Kun bako doge ba: “Cet dyel tye kwene wek amwon ki odero!”</i></p>	<p>I got the bull of a man grinding millet With his mouth pleading: “Where is the goat’s droppings to block the holes in the winnowing tray!”</p>
<p><i>Anongo twon coo tye ka yenyo cam i ot pa mine Kun bako doge ba: “Lim anongo kwene wek anyom ki dako!”</i></p>	<p>I got the bull of a man looking for food in his mother’s house With his mouth pleading: “Where do I get bride-wealth so that I marry a woman!”</p>

In the power relation women have leverage over men by the mere fact that men depend on them so much for a number of things. The services rendered by women as per their gender roles include cooking “food in the pot,” fetching “water in the pot,” removing “weeds in the gardens,” preparing “beer that makes people drunk,” and taking care of “visitors in the home.” This highlights their crucial role in the continued existence of society, and withdrawal of services can leave the male counter-parts helpless. Without the services of a woman, a man is knocked off his high horse. In other words, it is women who make men what they are in society. That is why in the song it is stated:

I got the bull of a man
looking for food
in his mother’s house
With his mouth pleading:
“Where do I get bride-wealth
so that I marry a woman!”

For a fully grown up man to be looking for food in his mother’s house (instead of being served in his own house) is a humiliation among the Acoli. The point being underscored in the song is that sometimes in the gender relation women are considered to be bad, and the song reiterates: “You once said women are bad.”

But when a woman withdraws and leaves a man to his own devices, he is helpless because he depends too much on her for a lot. This is indicative of the pivotal role women play in the gender power equilibrium among the Acoli – and this makes them sometimes be described as willing ‘victims’ or covert power brokers.

There are songs that recognise the rather disadvantaged positioning of women in overt gender power relations, yet at the same time acknowledge that they are not completely powerless in social relations. Take for example the song below popularised by Amone Watmon and here performed by a group of men and women during Women’s Day celebration on March 8, 2004, at Unyama in Gulu:

Lagut tini, ci moo
Lagut pyem kwedi ba.
Tidi pa lagut,
pe genge moo
Lagut poto kwedi ba.

Lagut bird is small, but fatty
Lagut bird challenges you.
The smallness of lagut bird
doesn’t hinder it from being oily
Lagut bird can throw you down.

Lagut tini, ci moo
Lagut pyem kwedi ba.
Tidi pa lagut,
pe genge moo
Lagut leyo wii ba.

Lagut bird is small, but fatty
Lagut bird challenges you.
The smallness of lagut bird
doesn’t hinder it from being oily
Lagut bird can put you to shame.

The apparent weakness of women does not mean they are powerless. The Acoli have a saying: “*Tidi pa lagut pe genge moo,*” meaning “The smallness of *lagut* bird does not hinder it from being oily.” This cultural philosophy is applied to the females in the above song. Through the use of the allegory of the small bird, the song makes a critique of the position of the females in the gender power relation despite their alleged weakness. Disadvantaged as they seem to be, does not mean the females can be written off in the gender power relation as the inferior partner. In the song it is stated:

Lagut bird challenges you...
Lagut bird can throw you down....
Lagut bird can put you to shame.

This demonstrates that the females are a force to be reckoned with in society. Just like the *lagut* bird, the female is metaphorically small but fatty. In other words, the overt appearance in gender power relations can be deceptive.

6.4. The Reconfiguration of Gender Power Relations

Gender power relations in society are not static but often tend to be dynamic. Nonetheless, despite the fact that gender practices often take into account new realities, most ideological bases of these gender relations seem to be trans-historical, defying changing social and economic imperatives by simply adopting new relevance. In a limited sense the changes in the social and economic life in society have led to a reconfiguration of the gender power relations in the Acoli society.

As the song below demonstrates, married females are not always the victim of gender power relation abuse. Sometimes they are the perpetrators. In the song a male expresses his frustration:

<p><i>Nyan man ikelo lok anywar</i> <i>Ka inywaro joo ma tuu</i></p>	<p>This woman has brought foolery If you are used to fooling those at your natal home Don't bring it to a foreign clan.</p>
<p><i>Ci ikelo wa i rok</i> <i>Nyan man loko calo keya ada</i> <i>Kono munu peke</i> <i>kono igamo lok anywar?</i></p>	<p>This woman talks like a soldier truly If the white man was not here would you have answered with foolery?</p>
<p><i>Nyan man ka ingayo joo ma tuu</i></p> <p><i>Ikelo wa i rok</i> <i>In iloko ma calo ipor ada</i> <i>Nyan man, kono munu peke</i> <i>Kono aroyo ki mac ada.</i></p>	<p>This woman, if you have defeated those at your natal home You want to bring it to a foreign clan. You talk as if you are mad indeed. This woman, if the white man wasn't here I would have singed you with fire truly.</p>
<p><i>Nyan man loko calo keya ada</i> <i>Ka iloyo joo ma tuu</i></p> <p><i>Ci kelo wa i rok</i> <i>Nyan man, kono munu peke</i></p>	<p>This woman talks like a soldier indeed If you are used to dominating those at your natal home You want to bring it to a foreign clan. This woman, if the white man was not here</p>

kono ikelo lok aconya?

would you have talked with arrogance?

In the above song the frustrated male acknowledges the change in the gender power relation where the old traditional rules no longer apply. He remarks: “This woman, if the white man was not here/ would you have talked with arrogance?” Here “the white man” is a by-word for modernity and the laws in the statute books (associated with the British colonial rule even to date), which prevents the man from treating the woman like his private property and he has to account for any aggressive action he takes in a court of law. Otherwise, as he puts it, “I would have singed you with fire, truly.” Recent laws have been enacted which give the females rights hitherto unknown in the society.

The female is described as talking “like a soldier.” Soldiers are used to orders, and not negotiation or polite request. Talking like a soldier means issuing orders. That is why the male accuses the woman of being domineering. This characteristic is blamed on her upbringing (which should have made her maintain her culturally circumscribed position in the gender power relation regardless of changing realities). The singing voice states: “If you are used to dominating/ those at your natal home/ You want to bring it to a foreign clan.”

What the above song highlights is the changing gender power relation in the society. This change is definitely being resisted in some quarters with an attempt to cling to the traditional order in gender relations. Judy El-Bushra makes a very insightful analysis of the changing gender realities in Acholiland which I would like to quote at length:

The war has led not only to the material impoverishment of Acholiland but also to the breakdown of previously well-regulated relationships both between men and women and between generations. Elements of Acholi cultural practice that have proved beneficial in promoting improved relations and resolving conflicts have been eroded through state-formation processes. There is widespread resentment amongst adults of ‘modern’ influences, including the current favourable economic position of women and

moves towards guaranteeing the rights of women and children. Testimonies show how frustrations and tensions caused by people's inability to fulfil their expected roles generate further sources of conflict, gripping Acholiland in a vicious circle of violence. (El-Bushra 2003: 255).

The male voice in the song does not seem to accept the challenge to his traditional authority, and he would have expressed his frustration in a violent manner like burning his female partner with fire if it were not for the laws that protect her. He cannot accept being ordered by his wife, despite the fact that he/she who possesses the economic resources often has the upper hand in the gender power relation – and the economic resources are no longer exclusively controlled by the males.

The re-configuration of gender power relations in society tends to be expressed and documented more in songs performed by the younger generation. The older generation tends to castigate it as 'loss of culture.' The young are more acceptable of the changes, and this shows in the way they sometimes present the new realities in song performance. Take for example the song below performed by Jahria Okwera:

*Nino caa, atimo bal
Ento tin, alegi.*

The other day, I committed a fault
But today, I beg you.

*Nyako, akoko in do!
Winya do! Alegi idwog cen.
Cwinya cwer,
Kabuto lac tutwal labongo in
Kong iwinya,
Koyo ngic, kabuto lac tutwal
Oyee, aloke kwe
Koyo ngic, labongo in latoo
Oyee, akoki do!*

Girl, I cry for you dear!
Please listen! I beg come back.
My heart is dripping,
The bed is too large without you
Please listen to me,
It is cold, the bed is too large
Oh, I turn in vain
It is cold, without you my sweetheart
Oh, I cry for you dear!

*Anyaka we! Apari ya!
An ayee mingu na
Lawic pe yee, aporo ya
Cwinya cwer! Apari ya!*

Oh girl! I yearn for you!
I have accepted my stupidity
It is shame that made me pretend
My heart drips! I yearn for you!

Mingu na do, oweko itenya
Winya do, akwayo kica.

My stupidity, made you leave me.
Please listen, I beg for forgiveness.

Peko tye...
Dwog cen do
Ibin ikonya....
Anyaka, cwinya cwer
Dwog cen, ka imara
Anyaka, peko tye
Balla gira, balla gira
Balla, cwinya cwer
Dwog cen bota
Dwog cen bota
Dwong cen, peko tye.

I am in problems....
Please come back
Come and help me....
Girl, my heart is dripping
Come back, if you love me
Girl, I am in problems
It is all my fault, it is all my fault
My fault, [and] my heart is dripping
Come back to me
Come back to me
Come back, I am in problems.

Anyaka, aye balla
Dok arumu wa i ngom
Tima kica
Obedo minga na
ki goba pa dano
oweke itenya
Ento tin aniang ada
ni kara onongo igene ada
Dwog cen aneni....

Girl, I have accepted my fault
And I kneel on the ground
Forgive me
It was my stupidity
and other people's lies
that is why you left me
But today I understand the truth
that you are trustworthy
Come back so that I see you....

In the past the idea of a male pleading with or begging a female on his knees would have been considered a sign of weakness and a complete lack of masculinity. Yet in the song the male humbles himself and pleads:

Girl, I have accepted my fault
And I kneel on the ground
Forgive me.

The male in the song also openly declares his dependency on the female. He says: "I am in problems/ Please come back/ Come and help me." This is clearly indicative of some shift in the gender power relation. He also states that: "Girl, I cry for you dear!" This shows his helplessness without the female. Crying among the Acoli is often considered unmanly, and therefore relegated as a feminine act in which women and children indulge. Publicly displaying emotion is considered a feminine attribute, yet the male in the song is not embarrassed to show his

emotion. In this case, a male showing his need for the female by crying for her indicates he no longer has the upper hand in the gender power relation.

A few studied songs seem to suggest a changing trend in the gender power relations (limited as this may seem). The song below performed by Otim Bosnick laments the changing trend:

*“Ee, cwara mara
Ee, cwara mara...”*

*Kodi anyira me kare ni
gimoni yelo wii gi.
Kodi anyira me kare ni
megi-wa, joni woru ku.
Joo man yelo daa-gi
Joo man yeto megi-wa
labongo woro.*

*Nen tin dayo ooro:
“Ci-woda, kong ikonya ba!
Ci-woda bin imura cai
Awinyo koyo neka
Awinyo wiya bara
Awinyo conga mwoda
Awinyo kuma remma
Dok tena kec neka.”*

*Nongo gamo ni:
“Wek yella.
An abino kany pi Okecha
An atye kany pi Okecha.
In we, te ming cen.
An gira cwara mara
An gira cwara wora....”*

*Ka dayo oloko
megu yuku gwoke
Ka dayo openyo
megu ojudu doge ba.
Ka cware odwogo
dako okato ka lila:
“Okecha, menni dega!
Okecha we, menni dega!*

“Oh, my husband loves me
Oh, my husband loves me....”

Today’s girls
have something disturbing their heads.
Today’s girls
don’t respect our mothers any more.
They give the mother-in-law a hard time
They insult our mothers
without any respect.

Today the mother-in-law requested her:
“Wife of my son, please help me!
Wife of my son, come boil for me some tea
I feel feverish
I feel headache
I feel pain in my knees
I feel pain in my body
Moreover, I feel hungry.”

She responds that:
“Don’t disturb me.
I came here for Okecha
I am here for Okecha
You, take your stupidity far.
As for me, my husband loves me
As for me, my husband respects me....”

When the mother-in-law speaks
the woman shrugs her shoulders.
When the mother-in-law makes a request
the woman elongates her mouth.
When the husband comes back
the woman dashes to complain:
“Okecha, your mother hates me!
Okecha oh, your mother hates me!

An gira twara adok tuwa.”

As for me, it is better I return to my natal
home.”

*Nyeri okato ka daa
Nyeri opwodo minne
Nyeri onyono mine.*

The man gets out to quarrel
The man beats up his mother
The man steps on his mother.

*Lutuwa, dayo deno can
I lok man ni “Cwara mara”
I lok man ni “Cwara gena”
I lok man ni “Cwara wora.”
Nen tin dayo deno can
Megi-wa dong neno can....*

My people, mothers-in-law suffer
Because of “My husband loves me”
Because of “My husband trusts me”
Because of “My husband respects me.”
Today the mother-in-law suffers
Our mothers today have to suffer....

As mentioned earlier, among the Acoli marriage is considered a communal affair and a female gets married into a family and not simply to her male partner. That is why the mother-in-law expects the female married to her son to be at her beck and call whenever she needs her. In the song the mother-in-law says: “Wife of my son, come boil for me some tea.”

However, more and more, the younger females tend to resist being encumbered by the whole family of their husbands and prefer to cater mainly for their male partners’ needs. The song states that: “When the mother-in-law speaks/ the woman shrugs her shoulders.” Shrugging the shoulders is taken as a sign of resentment among the Acoli (and not resignation as in other cultures). The female depicted in the song does not feel like toeing the traditional line of expectation as far as her duty is concerned. She responds to her mother-in-law thus: “Don’t disturb me. I came here for Okecha/ I am here for Okecha.” She feels her primary duty is to cater for the husband, and not the whole family; and she is ready to openly state this without being cowed.

Most Acoli females would labour to gain the acceptance of not only their husbands but the whole family. With the changing gender realities, this is no longer viewed by some young females as important. What seem to be taken as

more important are the love, trust and *respect* of the husband. That is why the singing voice laments:

My people, mothers-in-law suffer
Because of “My husband loves me”
Because of “My husband trusts me”
Because of “My husband respects me.”

In the song the mother seems to lose the traditional influence and moral authority a mother always had over her son to the wife who seems to exercise more power over her husband. At her behest “The man gets out to quarrel/ The man beats up his mother/ The man steps on his mother.” In this case, the old Acoli maxim that “to be at peace with your husband you have to cultivate his mother’s liking” seems not to apply. At the group discussion of the import of the above song it was put forward that instead some mothers have discovered that to be at peace with their sons they have to cultivate their wives’ liking. This is evidence of the changing pattern of gender power relation, limited as it may seem at the moment.

6.5. Conclusion

An analysis of Acoli songs reveals the chequered terrain of gender power relations in the society. Although most gender relation attitudes, practices and tendencies have persisted from the traditional past and have remained largely unchanged, there is some evidence of changing gender power relation occasioned by the changing realities in the Acoli society. We also notice that gender identity construction and gender power relations tend to go hand in hand; and song performances do mediate and intervene in gender power relation among the Acoli.

As noticed from the song texts examined in this chapter, the assumed constant male dominance in gender power relations needs to be interrogated, as evidence of female power within the Acoli patriarchal cultural system demonstrates. My analysis seems to agree with Sara Ruddick (1989) and Virginia Held (1993) that

women can have enabling power in society by the very fact that they happened to be born women; that is, through sets of traits and practices that are unique to them as 'women'. This calls into question the concept of 'power,' especially when seen from the point of view of the capacity to influence situations rather than that of the often mooted master-subject relation. Furthermore, there are many layers of gender power relations – for example, that between the female and her mother-in-law, or the male and his mother-in-law. This gives credence to S. Jell-Bahlsen's (1998) argument that power in many African societies was multi-dimensional, and great emphasis was placed on the balancing of multiple powers and not on any vertical hierarchical structure. According to her, there was always a female component of power.