

Chapter Eight

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE STUDY

8.1 Introduction

My study revisits the idea of gender and genre, arguing that in order to understand Acoli gender one needs to pay attention to the genres through which it is expressed. Song performance is one of the popular cultural forms through which gender is performed in Acoli society. Song performance gives particularly the females some kind of informal power, to influence minds and put their view across (cf. Hofmeyr 1993: 35). It is an artistic forum through which females make their presence felt and feelings known (cf. Kratz 1994: 230-240).

Song performance does not only portray or reflect performance of gender in the Acoli society. It is also directly and actively involved in the very performance of gender attributes and the mediation of gender power relations. In performing songs, both males and females re-enact, produce and re-signify specific gender ideological notions and gender positioning. In songs traditional gender attitudes are actualised, re-valued and commented upon.

As presented in the gender performativity theory, gender performance goes on everyday and every time in almost every sphere and every aspect of human existence. The contribution my study makes to the gender debate is to re-focus attention on the genre-based performance of gender in the living art forms. Although the study re-affirms some of the well known gender facts presented in many studies of different societies and cultures over the years, it also reveals interesting peculiarities concerning the gender situation in the Acoli society. So, in this last part of the thesis I attempt to highlight some of the lessons learned from my investigation of gender dynamics in Acoli song performance.

8.2. Procreation and Gender Identity Construction

Procreation is the cardinal or primary criterion in gender identity construction in Acoli society. This is because in the cultural philosophy of the Acoli emphasis is put on the family unit for the survival of the community and the continuity of the lineage – since they believe that if a person dies he continues to live on through his offspring. That is why it is considered a very sad end for a human being to die without leaving behind a child. Of such a person they say “*Oto ki wiye kulu*” (“He died with his whole head”). Childbirth is considered a big blessing – it is what seals the essence of a person as a man or a woman and carves for him or her a space in society as an adult. A childless person is considered *lam* (insignificant) as an adult male or female.

In many gender studies of identity construction it is often projected as if there is one set of criteria for women and a totally different one for men, and nothing in between. For the Acoli childbirth affects both males and females equally in gender identity construction; and when one fails to fulfil this condition for being recognised as a real/full man or woman, all the other conditionalities are rendered inconsequential because one then becomes a *nobody* (since the very notion of personhood is linked to the ability to procreate). Among the criteria for being recognised as a person is the onset of puberty (i.e. ability to procreate) and the ability to assume social responsibilities as a man or a woman.

The thesis presented in my work is that in gender identity construction among the Acoli there are criteria that affect both males and females equally, in spite of many others which are gender specific. Sometimes the Acoli collapse both genders into a single position – even in the language (unlike in English) there are no differentiating words for “He” or “She,” it is just one word “*En*” for both genders. Cumuni Okene maintains that, traditionally, the Acoli viewed both

genders as complementary to one another in the existence and the survival of the family and the community.¹

8.3. The Complex Gender Power Relations Matrix

In the complex gender power relations matrix the Acoli women are not all that powerless. They have some leverage of power which they can exercise over the males and other females in society. Sometimes female power is much more subtle than overtly obvious.

As mentioned earlier, gender theorists are still not agreed on what constitutes power, neither has any offered irreproachable and convincing conception of power. This study attempts to derive a tenable, situated gender concept of ‘power’ based on concrete research evidence. As Heike Behrend (1999) acknowledges, among the Acoli political relations were based on collaboration and negotiation, and not dominance and subjugation. Perhaps this defines the Acoli concept of power, even in the domestic relations, where leadership and complementarities were prioritised over ‘rulership’

One of the questions my research set out to investigate is: What are the major sites of power in Acoli society presented in song performance, and what are the positions of the two genders vis-à-vis these sites of power? One important site of power is the family location, which is usually patrilocal. This greatly impacts on the gender power relations because it gives authority to the person (i.e. the male) in whose clan/ancestral land the family is situated. The person who relocates at marriage (i.e. the female) loses out because in the new domicile that person becomes a kind of second class citizen surrounded by *foreigners* or people not related to her by birth; while her partner has the advantage of being on home ground. In the family setting, the female belongs to a ‘foreign’ clan, while her

¹ Cumuni Okene, aged about 100, was interviewed at his home at Pageya village, Gulu, on January 10, 2006.

children and husband belong to the 'home' clan. This somewhat negatively affects the exercising of authority/power in the gender relations by the person who relocates to a social environ originally not her own. This social situating and its ramifications are expressed and commented upon in song performances.

Another site of power is ownership, which is closely linked to the above site of family location. Being uprooted from her natal home and socially (and, of course, economically) transplanted into a 'foreign' setting, the female owns nothing. Anything she acquires, including children, ideally speaking culturally belongs to the male partner. The husband and/or his clansmen own the family land (which is a major source of family sustenance) and the family property and wealth; even the children and, most interestingly, the woman belong to him. Because of ownership the male is cast as 'protector' and 'provider' – and this apparently gives him the upper hand in the gender power relations.

The third site of power that stands out in my study is that of service or labour. In a gendered society like the Acoli, social and domestic roles are assigned along gender lines; and this makes the female the major service provider for the continual existence and survival of the family and the community. The family and the community come to greatly depend on her for the hospitality services which include nurturing, nursing, caring and catering, among others. Oftentimes, as depicted in song performances studied, Acoli females have used their service/labour as a bargaining chip in the gender power relations to exert influence.

The fourth major site of power revealed by my study is motherhood. Although apparently disadvantaged at the onset of a marriage relation, the female tends to acquire social security and some influence through motherhood and seniority. As a mother-in-law the female exerts influence over the marriage partners of her sons and daughters (more than the male partner [father of the married offspring] who tends to recede into oblivion); and in society a mother of a grown-up is accorded

much more respect than that accorded to the father – she becomes a mother to the society (and her blessing is much sought after).² In times of distress, as shown in some of the songs studied, the Acoli appeal to ‘mother’ for comfort and solace. Most tellingly, the female can invoke her motherhood to *twacco kir* (throw a curse) if she is subjected to an extremely abusive relationship. This spells calamity for her marital homestead, and clansmen have to congregate to resolve the domestic dispute and perform a ceremony known as *goyo ayoo* (scattering peace). The knowledge of her ability to *twacco kir* in extreme conditions, often expressed in song performances, looms high on most Acoli males’ minds and gives the female some leverage in the gender power relations.

The thesis garnered from this study is that the gender power relations among the Acoli is complex and variegated, and cannot be reduced to an over-simplified male-domination and female-subjugation paradigm. The nature of the power exercised by the males is very different from that exercised by the females, which gives a possibility of check and balance that cater for curbing excesses from both genders (especially the males).

8.4. Gender as an Organising Factor in Society

In Acoli song performance the binary dichotomy of gender identity is projected as not necessarily always negative; it can be productively harnessed for the social organisation of society. Traditionally, the African worldview took the human society as organic, in which all the members were considered relevant and effective for the survival of the society (Sofala 1998). Social and economic roles in the Acoli society, as revealed from the field research, are assigned along gender lines with the accompanying corresponding gender identity constructions for the fulfilment of those specific gender roles.

² Okot p’Bitek points out that in traditional Acoli the blessing of the clan chief’s mother (*Min-Rwot*) was sought before the warriors go out to battle (p’Bitek 1980: 151). In an interview conducted in an earlier research, Cyril Obol maintains that the war in Acoliland went wrong because the young never sought the blessing of the elders and especially the mothers of society before they embarked on insurgency.

Gender is built into the very structure of the organisation of the family unit (and, thereby, the community) with complementarity as the guiding principle. As fathers the males are attributed with authority and assigned the role of protecting and providing for the family. As mothers the females cater for the emotional needs of the family; and their attributes include loving, caring and nurturing. One could say the males apparently take care of the bigger picture of family survival, while the females sort out the details and the nitty-gritty.

In some of the songs studied the females do not see their roles as degrading or humiliating, but rather as a significant contribution for the continued existence of the family and the society. In songs the males are castigated for not fulfilling their culturally assigned duties as ‘men,’ or for abusing their authority; the demand for gender equality in identity construction or social roles is glaringly missing in the songs studied, produced and performed by both genders.

8.5. Investment in Gender to Achieve Goals

Women have used the gender differentiation as a means for positive agency. In my study of song performances we see gender as an important resource. Using traditional ideas of gender the Acoli females have found a way of entering certain demands into the public arena. My field research shows that expressive forms, such as song performance, are harnessed to project these claims into the public arena.

Acoli gender ideology, like that of most African ethnic communities, delineates different positions and roles for males and females in society. Although it would seem the gender positioning tends to favour the males over the females, Acoli women generally have not attempted to change the performance of their gender to achieve ‘equality’ and ‘democracy’ as we would understand from the point of view of *Western* political ideology. Instead, it would seem, they have invested in gender as understood from the Acoli cultural perspective to achieve their aspirations within

the patriarchal social system. Song performance plays a key role, not only as a catalyst but an integral part of this investment in gender.

Acoli women have used the performance of the women-only dance-song sub-genres such as *dingidingi* and *apiti* to mobilise themselves into self-help groups or co-operatives through which they promote themselves and bring to the limelight issues affecting them as the gender category 'women'. As Tania Kaiser rightly points out:

Dingidingi dancers are understood to be young, inexperienced girls who are in the process of becoming adult. The activity surrounding the dance teaches them discipline, how to work as part of a team and how to gain approval by submission to a recognised social system. (Kasier 2006: 195).

Dingidingi (for younger females) and *apiti* (for older females) help women organise around their culturally designated identity and learn teamwork for their own good. As noted earlier, women groups who perform the female specific genres at special or social occasions also work together in real life to promote their interests, and ensure their well-being.

Through song performance Acoli women do not only call attention to themselves as 'women' and celebrate their femininity, but also comment on social issues and critique male excesses in gender power relations.³ From the vantage point of the gender positioning, the females have used song performance to bring women's issues to the forefront of the gender social debate. Even in ordinary everyday life women are known to sing a lot; they sing when grinding millet, they sing when soothing babies, and are incorporated into the dance-song performance of the mixed gender sub-genres because of their singing ability. Interestingly, there are no dance-song performances among the Acoli designated as male-only. The females are part of most song performances and they often participate in shaping the contents of the songs.

³ Occasionally, in addition to criticizing male excesses in the gender power relations, the females also condemn some female excesses that disrupt social harmony (especially when it is not justifiable).

My thesis, therefore, is that although gender deferential notions and practices have often been painted as 'bad' and needing subversion in most feminist scholarship, the Acoli females through song performance have invested in gender deferential notions to attain their goals and aspirations as 'women.'

8.6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would say there is need for more balanced gender researches and studies that take into account both genders, instead of adopting an activist's stance that view the gender situation from a specific position of only one gender at the expense of the other. It is worth noting that the gender situations in most societies are rather complex and the obvious manifestations may belie some underlying currents. Gender conceptions and practices are not static or pre-given, but can be dynamic – re-evaluating their worth and acquiring new relevance with changing realities. Hence, there is need for more historically minded studies that trace the changing gender positioning over years and account for the changes or lack of. In all these, folklore studies have a lot to offer especially in understanding the gender situations in societies with strong and vibrant oral cultures.