

**Introduction to World Literature**  
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**“Song of Lawino” by Okot p' Bitek**

Good morning and welcome to today's session where I introduce to you the Ugandan epic poem, 'Song of Lawino' by the Ugandan poet, Okot Bitek.

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**Okot p'Bitek (1931-1982)**

- Ugandan poet
- Okot school of poetry or the East African Song school – ‘comic singing’ – dramatic verse monologue
- Borrowed many features from traditional songs
- Attempted to bring African forms – non-European traditions

The slide features a video inset in the bottom right corner showing Professor Dr. Merin Simi Raj, a woman with glasses and a patterned top, speaking.

Okot Bitek was an Ugandan poet. He lived from 1931 till 1982. After his poetry, after his style of writing, even an Okot School of poetry or the East African Song school emerged. It was also known as comic singing. They focused on dramatic verse monologue as you can see when you take a look at this poem. Bitek used to borrow many features from traditional songs and he attempted to bring African forms, later African forms in traditions into his writings and his highlight was not using European traditions, to move away from the European traditions which he thought had begun to dominate most of the traditional forms which were prevalent in Africa.

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## Major works

- “The Lost Spear” (poem)
- *Lak Tar* (novel, 1953)
- *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (critique of social anthropology)
- *Oral Literature and its Background among the Lacoli and Lang’o* (thesis, 1964)
- *Two Songs*, 1971
- *Africa’s Cultural Revolution* (collection of essays, 1975)
- *The Horn of My Love* (a collection of Acoli songs, 1974)
- *Hare and Hornbill* (a refreshing version of familiar tales)

The widely different books united by Okot’s concern that the nations of Africa should be built on African not European foundations

The major works of Achebe include “The Lost Spear”, a poem that was the first word that he had got published. He also wrote one long novel, *Lak Tar*, that was in 1953 and he worked on many issues related to social anthropology and one of his important critiques of social anthropology in the context of Africa is *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. His thesis which he completed in 1964 was titled *Oral Literature and its background among Lacoli and Lang’o*. And in 1971, he published a collection titled “Two Songs”. In 1975, he brought out a collection of essays titled “Africa’s Cultural Revolution”.

In 1974, he brought out another collection of Acoli songs, “The Of My Love” and in 1978, he also published this set of tales which was a refreshing take on some of the famous African tales which was titled “Hare and Hornbill”. And these widely different books as you can see, they are from different genres, they focus on different aspects of African life and these widely different books are however united by Achebe’s concern that the nations of Africa should be built on African and not on European foundations. So this is a very anticolonial and a different kind of postcolonial rhetorical altogether.

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## *Song of Lawino*

- An epic poem published in 1966 – *Wer pa Lawino* -Acoli Luo (tonal language)
- One of the most widely read works from Sub-Saharan Africa
- From the point of view of Lawino – first person
- Written during Okot's involvement with the Gulu festival
- Influenced by traditional songs – in composition, techniques and themes
- The poem – based on a real social problem in rural areas in East Africa – the educated African men's contempt for the ways of parents and wives – addresses the conflict of cultures
- An African woman's lament – her husband's abandonment in favour of western traditions

Song of Lawino, the epic poem that we are trying to take a look at today, this was published in 1966. The title in Acoli language was “Wer pa Lawino” and Acoli, Acoli lying with specially in the Lua province, that is a tonal language. And it is considered that Song of Lawino is one of the most widely read works from sub-Saharan Africa. This is narrated from the point of view of the woman who is named Lawino and it is a first person narrative. This epic poem, that is how it is structured, it was written during Okot's involvement with the Gulu Festival.

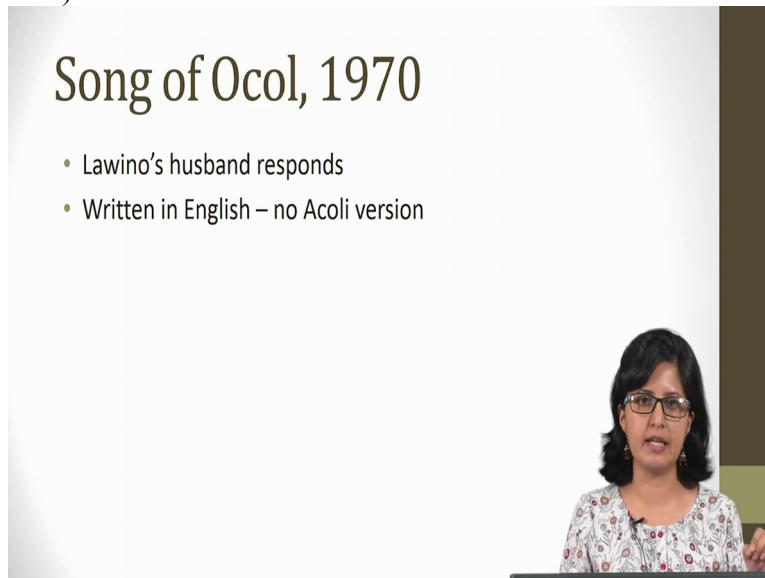
Gulu was the place where he was born and he was engaged actively in many of the traditional forms and the many festivals which used to showcase the traditional art forms and the traditional ways of (( ))(3:16). Okot was strongly influenced by the traditional songs in terms of composition, the techniques, the themes. So we find him almost replicating the entire tradition in this process of bringing out Lawino except that just like the African traditional way of composing songs go by, he also used to run his material, run his poem through his friends and across his friends, he used to accept the critiques and the suggestions given by them and the Song of Lawino, this epic poem has undergone a number of revisions in that sense.

So the process of writing the Colossus of composition itself has a traditional underlying rational to wait. The poem, Song of Lawino, it is based on a dual social problem in rural areas, especially in East Africa. And it is about the educated African men's contempt for the ways of their parents and their wives and it also addresses the conflict of cultures. It is narrated from the point of view

of Lawino who is a woman and also the wife of another character of Okot and we find her, Lawino emerging as not just an isolated case but almost like a spokesperson for Africa itself.

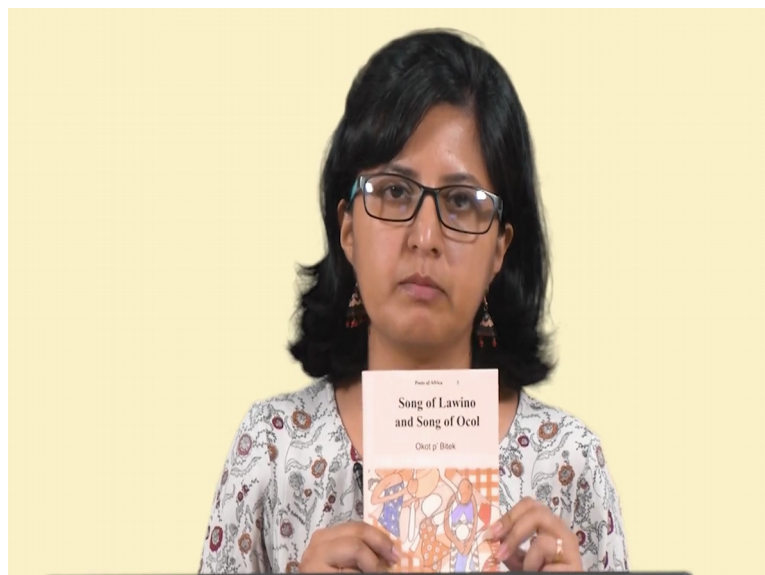
This could be described as an African woman's lament and she is lamenting the fact that her husband been abandoning the local traditions, the native African traditions in favour of the Western traditions.

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## Song of Ocol, 1970

- Lawino's husband responds
- Written in English – no Acoli version





There was a response to Song of Lawino which Okot himself had composed, this came out in 1970 and this in the form of Ocol, Lawino's husband responding to the charges levelled against him and unlike the Song of Lawino, Song of Ocol was written in English, there was no Acoli version. Due to the immense success and popularity of both of these works, Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol and in some of the editions, you can find both of these epic poems being united in one single book, Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol together.

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The slide features a title 'Ocols and Lawinos' in a large, dark serif font. Below the title is a single bullet point: '• Have become common nouns – the two characters have become prototypes of two opposing approaches to the cultural future of Africa'. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a patterned top, speaking. The background of the slide is light gray with a dark vertical bar on the right side.

## Ocols and Lawinos

- Have become common nouns – the two characters have become prototypes of two opposing approaches to the cultural future of Africa

And Ocol and Lawino have become common nouns, it is almost like have become common nouns in the many references to Africa and they have also become two characters who are now seen as prototypes of two opposing cultures and two opposing approaches to the cultural future of Africa.

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## The character of Lawino

- First five chapters – a perfect portrait of a woman scorned, lashes out at Ocol and Clementine
- Chapters 6 to 11 – less concerned with her personal plight, defends the customs of her ancestors, comparisons between western and Acoli ways
- Last 2 chapters – tie both concerns together
- Lawino's desire to win back Ocol's admiration + a commentary on the whole Acoli community, an appeal for the renewal of traditional ways

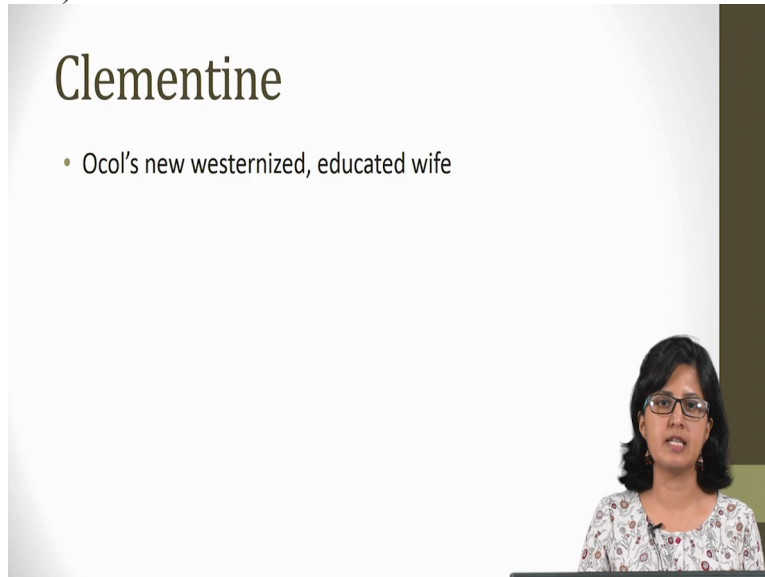
The character of Lawino is what the Song of Lawino mostly focuses on. We find the character undergoing a transformation throughout these different segments and different chapters of this poem and through her own character, through her own agitations, we also get to follow her line of argument and how she presents this problem which is rather imminent and immediate in the context of Africa. In the first 5 chapters, we get a almost perfect portrait of a woman scorned, she is lashing out at Ocol and the woman that right now Ocol is favouring, Clementine. She is a westernised woman.

After these first 5 chapters, we do not find any reference to Tina or Clementine, the other woman. And from chapters 6 to 11, Lawino is less concerned with her own personal plight. On the other hand, she defends the customs of her ancestors, she attempts comparisons between Western and Acoli ways, it goes to address more social issues than her own personal concerns. The last 2 chapters 12 and 13, they try to tie both these concerns together, the personal aspect as well as the social aspect.

And on the whole, what gets highlighted here is Lawino's desire to win back Ocol's admiration, her husband's admiration and it also offers a commentary on the whole of Acoli community, there is an appealed for the renewal of traditional ways. One here also needs to keep in mind that Lawino seems to be okay with polygamic practices and that is seen as something which is traditionally built into the most of the African community. So her problem with the other woman,

Clementine is not necessarily the polygamous relationship but it is mostly focused on the westernised ways that Clementine represents and how Ocol, her husband prefers to choose the westernised ways over the traditional ways.

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Clementine is Ocol's new westernised educated wife and she is presented in stark contrast with that of Lawino. And one may have different opinions about the the approach that Lawino has towards Clementine about the different ways (( ))(7:46) operates over here. We shall not be going into too many details of this, I will perhaps this introduce this poem to you, just introduce this entire body of writing to you for you to read and analyse and make your own judgement.

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## The imagery in Song of Lawino

- Completely avoided the stock of common images of English literature
- The English version gives a feeling of freshness for every reader, a sense of Africanness for African readers
- Okot succeeded in using English as a tool to reach a wider audience – without borrowing foreign elements that distort his message
- BUT, takes the idea of individual authorship, of spoken verse, of rhyme, of division into chapters, of the printed word – from western tradition

The imagery in Song of Lawino is something that we shall briefly focus in today's lecture. We find that in Song of Lawino as well as in the Song of Ocol later on, we find Okot Bitek completely avoiding the stock of common images of English literature. So when we are reading the English version, we get a feeling of freshness and except that it gives a feeling of freshness for every reader and a sense of Africanness for African readers. So that is how the imagery, the translated imagery rather is placed.

And Okot has also succeeded in using English as a tool to reach a wider audience. And this he manages to do by staying away from the non-European traditions and images and also by not borrowing foreign elements that would perhaps distort his message. So he sticks to traditional elements as far as possible but at the same time, the form of this work, this epic poem, it needs some kind of an appropriation as well because Okot is forced to take the ideas of individual authorship, of spoken verse, of rhyme, of division into chapters, of the printed word, these are the things that he borrows from the Western tradition the biggest.

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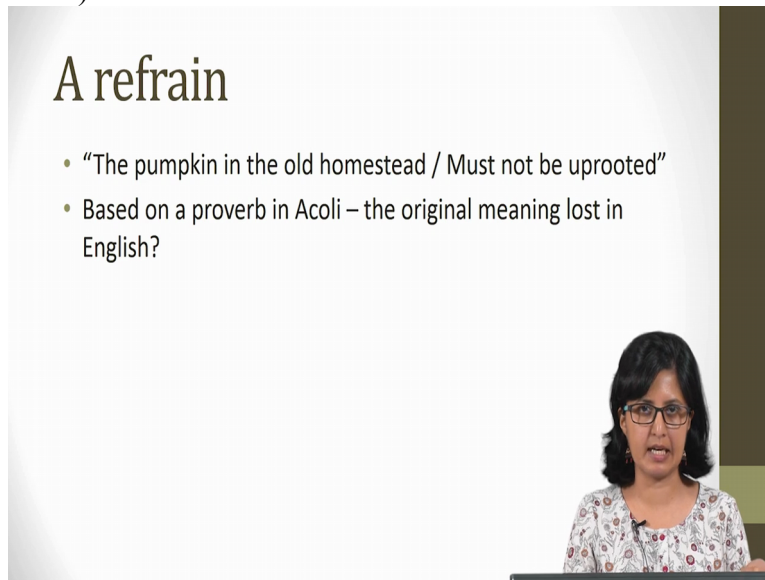
## Acoli songs

- Just one or two verses with musical accompaniment
- Not written down under one person's authorship
- Sung and adapted by singer after singer – each free to create in his own way, or change the song
- No rhyme or regular rhythm
- Song of Lawino – not really a written version of Acoli song – adaptation of a tradition to new conditions of performance – rather, a new form itself

In Acoli language, in Acoli Song tradition, there is no idea of a long poem authored by a single person. Acoli songs, though this work, Song of Lawino is written in the traditional African Song culture, the Acoli songs themselves, they are just about 1 or 2 verses with musical accompaniment. There is no culture of writing, you know tradition of producing a long poem or a long song. And the Acoli songs were also not written down under one person's authorship. They are part of oral tradition, they continue adapt themselves in various ways and it is sung and adapted by singer after singer and each singer is free to create in his own way or even change the song according to the setting, according to the context.

So there is no single authorship which is attribute it to the Acoli songs. We find Bitek for obvious reasons moving away from this tradition, appropriating the Western ideas of authorship, of rhyme, of Long poems, of rhyme, et cetera because in Acoli songs, there is no rhyme scheme, there is no regular rhythm either and Song of Lawino in that sense cannot be seen as a written version of an Acoli song. On the other hand, Okot Bitek has aspired to do something bigger than that, not just to translation but an adaptation of a tradition to new conditions of performance and rather coming up with a new form itself. That is what Song of Lawino does in terms of looking at it in the context of a world literature.

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The slide features a title 'A refrain' in a large, dark serif font. Below the title are two bullet points in a smaller, dark sans-serif font. The first bullet point reads: "The pumpkin in the old homestead / Must not be uprooted". The second bullet point reads: "Based on a proverb in Acoli – the original meaning lost in English?". In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a patterned top, speaking.

## A refrain

- “The pumpkin in the old homestead / Must not be uprooted”
- Based on a proverb in Acoli – the original meaning lost in English?

There are certain instances which would also tell us about some difficulties in translation and even certain kinds of impossibility of translation. There is a refrain which keeps getting repeated in this poem. It is loosely translated as “The pumpkin in the old Homestead must not be uprooted”. And this has, this is an adaptation of a proverb in Acoli but when this is targeted into English, some commentators argue that the original meaning is entirely lost, the original context is entirely lost.

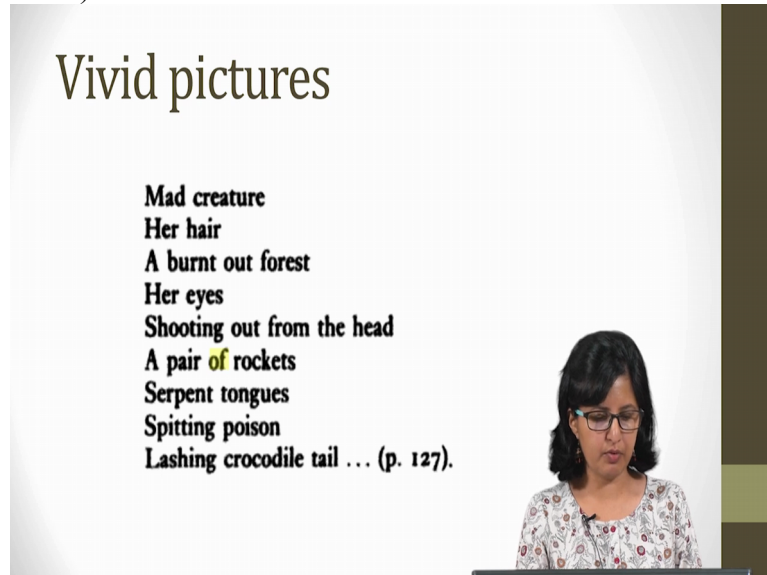
One of the commentators who has also written an introduction to Song of Lawino and the Song of Ocol, GA Heaven, he points this out and this is how he tries to address a problem and try and interpret this poem for the non-African, non-Acoli speaking audience. Pumpkins are a luxury food. They grow wild throughout Acoli land. To uproot pumpkins even when you are moving to a new Homestead is simple wanton destruction. In this proverb, then Lawino is not asking Ocol to cling to everything in his past but rather not to destroy things for the sake of destroying them.

Again the refrain is used to emphasize an important idea, the writer is putting across in the whole poem given that this is a refrain which appears almost throughout the poem. The pumpkin in the old Homestead must not be uprooted and the intention here is to directly engage with the African person, the African reader who is familiar with the proverb and who is familiar with the context within which the proverb gets used and it also serves a dual purpose of trying to engage with the English reader but while trying to make him or her familiar with the many contexts within which



Proverbs or usages are placed and also inviting the non-African reader to participate in this exchange of traditions, in this dialogue across traditions.

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There are certain sections throughout this poem where the vivid imagery is visible. For instance, look at this excerpt and this is a very non-European, a non-Western kind of description that Okot attempts to provide in Lawino's words.

Mad creature

Her hair

A burnt out forest

Her eyes

Shooting out from the head

A pair of rockets

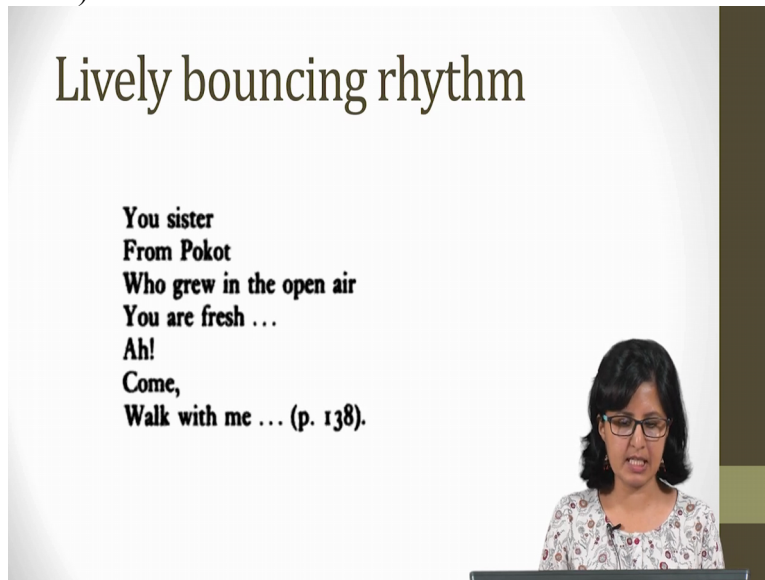
Serpent tongues

Spitting poison

Lashing crocodile tail...

If you look at the imagery, those are taken from the native traditions, there are illusions that one could find as well and for the African reader, this is essentially very very native and something more familiar. The pictures, the imagery is more familiar than it is perhaps to a Western audience.

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## Lively bouncing rhythm

You sister  
From Pokot  
Who grew in the open air  
You are fresh ...  
Ah!  
Come,  
Walk with me ... (p. 138).

It also has a different kind of rhythm which is not really a part of the Western or European poetical scheme. It is a very lively bouncing rhythm, keeping in tune with the African languages and also with the traditional forms of art and culture that they have. And in this excerpt,

You sister  
From Pokot  
Who grew in the open air  
You are fresh...  
Ah!  
Come,  
Walk with me...

So there is a rhythm but it is not in the conventional way. It is more like a bouncing lively rhythm.

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**African dance**

**When the drums are throbbing  
And the black youths  
Have raised much dust  
You dance with vigour and health  
You dance naughtily with pride  
You dance with spirit,  
You compete, you insult, you provoke  
You challenge all! (p. 42)**

A reasoned and balanced  
defence of dancing naked

Immorality of nakedness –  
the 'dirty gossip  
of the colonialists

The slide features a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a patterned top, positioned in the bottom right corner as if presenting the slide.

Lawino comes across as someone who represents the African traditions and she also comes across as someone who is not given to hypocritical ways of thinking and she chooses this instance of the colonialists often talking about the dance culture in Africa and how they are looked down upon some of the dance forms especially where there is a lot of nakedness involved and she talks about how the colonialists gossip about the immorality of nakedness and she attempts, Lawino attempts a reasoned and balanced defence of dancing naked which is an inherent part of some of the traditional African dance cultures and this is how she talks about it.

When the drums are throbbing  
And the black youths  
Have raised much dust  
You dance with vigour and health  
You dance naughtily with pride  
You dance with spirit,  
You complete, you insult, you provoke  
You challenge all!

And this is the kind of liberation that she attributes to that dance form which is seen as immoral, which is seen as something to be despised by the Westerners.

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And she also continues to attack the Western form of dance which is seen as more sophisticated compared to the traditional dance culture, dance forms of Africa and this is what she writes.

Each man has a woman  
Although she is not his wife,  
They dance inside a house  
And there is no light.  
Shamelessly, they hold each other  
Tightly, tightly,  
They cannot breathe.

And it may seem as, this may come across as an aberration that Lawino's character is using the same kind of language to talk back against the colonial, she is also here trying to look down upon the forms of Western dance but one can also say that perhaps she is using this kind of language to talk back to the colonialists, to the Western audience who typically tries to look down upon the African traditions and she is exposing, she is trying to expose the hypocrisy which is inherent over here by drawing your attention to the skewed ideas of morality that are prevalent mostly in the west.

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## The hypocrisy of the West

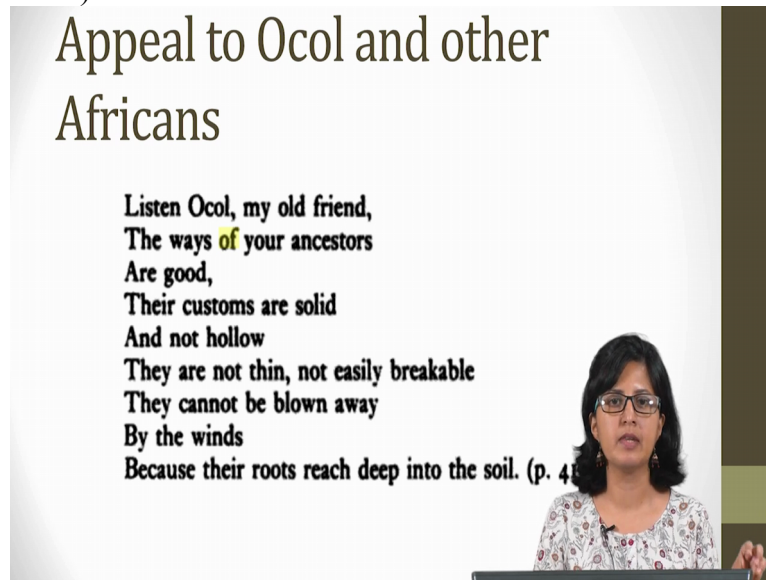
I do not understand  
The ways of foreigners  
But I do not despise their customs. (p. 41)

... no white woman  
Wishes to do her hair  
Like mine,  
Because she is proud  
Of the hair with which she was born ... (p. 42)

And she also very directly exposes the hypocrisy of the West where she talks about how her own likes, the ones like Lawino, they do not, they are not the ones who despise others but it is the West who always tries to look down upon the Africans and also their ways of being and in there character of Clementi, she finds this some kind of a personal provocation to begin talking about this entire tussle. In Lawino's word, "I do not understand the ways of foreigners but I do not despise their customs". And she goes on to say... No white woman wishes to do her hair like mine because she is proud of the hair with which she was born.

She talks about how it is the West who always has this hierarchical way of understanding traditions and cultures, how it is always the West which looks down upon Africa as something to be despised and it has never mocked this sort of a negative move is never made by the African woman. There are multiple ways in which one can read this and there are many debates that we can engage with, in this context. But as I mentioned, the intent of this lecture is mostly to introduce this poem to you and to show you that there are alternate traditions, there are multiple ways in which one can talk about literature even from non-European and non-Western vantage points.

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The slide is titled "Appeal to Ocol and other Africans" in a large, dark brown serif font. Below the title, a poem is displayed in a smaller, black sans-serif font. The poem reads: "Listen Ocol, my old friend, / The ways of your ancestors / Are good, / Their customs are solid / And not hollow / They are not thin, not easily breakable / They cannot be blown away / By the winds / Because their roots reach deep into the soil. (p. 48)". In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a patterned top, speaking. The background of the slide is white with a dark brown vertical bar on the right side.

And this is Lawino's appeal to Ocol and other Africans. As mentioned before, Lawino ceases to be just a woman who is scorned. She ceases to be this wife of Ocol, who is upset that Ocol is now going after Clementine, a westernised woman. And Lawino becomes the spokesperson who is appealing not just to Ocol but to other African men and women as well. And this is how she articulates her appeal.

"Listen Ocol, my old friend. The ways of her ancestors are good, their customs are solid and not hollow. They are not thin, not easily breakable. They cannot be blown away by the winds because their roots reach deep into the soil."

This is a statement which perhaps Bitek also is trying to make his fellow Africans and also to his Western audience. This assumes more significance when we try to see how from a possible appeal Lawino is able to move towards a wider cultural appeal to address a wider social and historical problem and the possibility of placing this entire poem within the discourse of anti-colonial and postcolonial writers. Just like the song of Lawino attempts to address the cultural death of Ocol as well as other Africans who were westernised, the response to the song of Ocol, it tries to justify the cultural apostasy.

When we read these 2 works together we also get a sense of the current forms of dialogues specially from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the kinds of dialogues which have been going on between the African voices and the non-African voices, predominantly the Western European



voices. And this poem is perhaps can be seen as one of those works which has given entry point to the ways in which a world literature can be read as a body of writing where different traditions and different traditions which perhaps do not see eye to eye in terms of history, in terms of culture, in terms of forms of writing, how they can also sit together to enable the emergence of a new way of looking at literature, interpreting literature and ultimately interpreting culture itself. I hope this introduction is interesting enough for you to go, take a look at different non-European traditions and cultural forms which are available and how the translations have also been made available to us to understand and appreciate and interpret and compare in today's context. Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.