

6

Striking the Snake with its own Fangs: Uganda Acoli Song, Performance and Gender Dynamics¹

Benge Okot

Introduction

This chapter, based on a field study among the Acoli of northern Uganda, 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 the females, in particular, 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).

As presented in the gender performativity theory, gender performance goes on every day and every time in almost every sphere and every aspect of human existence. The contribution I am attempting to make to the gender debate is to re-focus attention on the genre-based performance of gender in the living art forms. Although my 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.

In Acoli song performances, the binary dichotomy of gender identity is projected as not necessarily always negative; it can be productively harnessed for the social organization 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.

Gender is built into the very structure of the organization of the family unit (and, thereby, the community) with complementarity as the guiding principle. 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.

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 mobilize 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'. Through song performance Acoli women 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. From the vantage point of their gender positioning, the females have used song performance to bring women's issues to the forefront of the gender social debate. Furthermore, Acoli women have used 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 argument, therefore, is that although gender differential 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 differential notions to attain their goals and aspirations as 'women'.

Gender as Performative

One aspect of performativity theory I found particularly useful and insightful in my study of Acoli song is the casting of gender as performative. Judith Butler argues that:

... gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results (Butler 1990:25).

However, because of the cyclic nature of the process, I would argue that it is difficult to definitely say which comes first (gender identity or the performance of it), but the argument that gender is performative is quite plausible. Sometimes identity is constituted in performance drawing from tradition. Generally, human beings tend to assimilate/learn gender positioning by repeated acts right from childhood.

As Melissa D’Agostino (2003) would put it, personhood, and by implication gender identity, ‘draws on the embodied traits and physical manifestations acquired by individuals as they develop an understanding of their place within a group’ (290). She adds that in this way, ‘individuals are able to embody the characteristics favoured by the group with whom they identify’ (290). As members of the Acoli cultural group, males and females are conditioned through upbringing to perform specific gender traits, and these gender identities find expression and re-enactment in song performance. A brief demonstrative analysis of the song below shows how song performance can be an occasion for a re-enactment or re-signification of gender identity construction.

<i>Latin kayo ka maa, aii!</i>	My mother’s first born, oh!
<i>Twon got ma yam ageno</i>	The bull rock I once hoped in
<i>Iweko ot odong malik</i>	You left the homestead desolate
<i>Iweko ot odong ki aculibe.</i>	You left the homestead for <i>aculibe</i> [rats].
<i>Latin kayo ka maa, yai!</i>	My mother’s first born, dear!
<i>Oteka ma yam ageno</i>	The hero I once had hope in
<i>Iweko paco oling</i>	You have terminated the lineage
<i>Iweko cvinya cwer kuman!</i>	You have left my heart dripping [with pain],
<i>Latin kayo ka maa, wee!</i>	My mother’s first born, oh dear!
<i>Iweko gang odong ki turu obiya</i>	You left the homestead for <i>obiya</i> flowers
<i>Twon weko paco ling</i>	The bull has terminated the lineage
<i>Ot odong malik ada!</i>	The homestead has truly turned desolate!
<i>Latin kayo ka maa, yai!</i>	My mother’s first born, dear!
<i>Okutu lango ma yam ageno</i>	The <i>lango</i> thorn I once hoped in
<i>Iweko gang ki mon</i>	You left the homestead for women
<i>Iweko gang odong obur.</i>	You left the homestead dead.

The above dirge was performed by female relatives of a deceased male at a funeral at Okeyomero village, Acoyo parish, in Gulu district. The Acoli believe that tears do not lie – so, from a meta-communicative point of view, the import of the dirge ought to be taken seriously, as coming from deep down the hearts of the mourners.

Through use of language, there is a re-creation of specific gender identity construction in the song performance. For example, note the symbolic reference to the deceased male as ‘The *lango* thorn’. Traditionally, the thorny branches of the *lango* tree (*zizyphus mauritana*) were used as a protective hedge around the homestead. The thorns secured the occupants, and obviously constituted an aggressive defence towards intruders. Although the *lango* is no longer used to secure the homestead in many Acoli homes, it has continued to be used in speech as a symbol of protection and security. Here, the male is construed as the metaphorical *lango* thorn – the protector and defender of the homestead (and society). He is also looked at as ‘The bull rock’, thereby associating masculinity with might. A ‘rock’ is, among other things, considered a cultural symbol of indefatigability and constancy; and a ‘bull’ is a panegyric metaphor among the Acoli.

On the other hand, the females are cast as ‘*aculibe* [rats]’ to whom the homestead has been left by the demise of the only heir apparent. From the Acoli cultural conceptual point of view, a rat is an insignificant creature, and yet very destructive (cf. Okot 1994:144). The *aculibe* species of rats is one that turns on and ‘cannibalizes’ other rats – just as the females are assumed to turn on each other in moments of jealousy. The females are also referred to as ‘*obiya* flowers’. The *obiya* grass (*imperata cylindrica*) abounds in Acoliland. At the onset of the first rains in January or February, the burnt *obiya* regenerate and soon cover the scenery with beautiful white flowers. For the Acoli, a flower depicts not so much beauty as temporality. Given the patrilocality of the marital abode among the Acoli, females born in a homestead are considered temporary – like flowers, they are eventually ‘picked’ and go to ‘beautify’ other people’s homesteads. Hence, as the dirge states, the demise of the only male-child in the homestead has ‘terminated the lineage’ and ‘left the homestead dead’. Although the above cited song does not explicitly bring out the gender power relations, it points out the patriarchal practice in Acoli society, where descent (and by inference inheritance) is patrilineal.

Through the performance of the above dirge, binary gender social construction is also performed and re-enacted – a continual repetitive act of what goes on in every day real life. In the song, the women perform and reinforce their own ‘apparent’ social ‘insignificance’ in the domestic gender power relation. I say ‘apparent’ because the mourners are not directly referring to themselves as the relatives of the dead, but to ‘other’ women (the so-called foreigners) who are married into the homestead – although by inference they cast themselves too in

the same light. Both the female relatives and the women married in the home are *obiya* grass flowers with the potential to change their abode and marry or re-marry into another clan. The very social structure of the Acoli society occasions and reinforces the gender practices and perceptions highlighted in the dirge, which, in essence, is the gender performance engrained in the society.

The fact that the performers of the above dirge are females raises an issue worth further investigation: do they actually consciously believe in the character traits portrayed in the song, or are they sub-consciously ‘compelled’ by the heterosexist identity construction occasioned by hegemonic discourses in Acoli society?

Apart from the verbal element, other components of Acoli song performance used to generate meaning are music (and other sound devices) and kinesics, which includes facial expressions, gestures and dance. In the case of the above-cited performance, there was a marked absence of dancing and the use of musical instruments such as drums. This was to emphasise the sad occasion since the young man died in his prime without a male child. If he were an elderly person, he would be mourned with drumming and dancing to celebrate his life – for in death the Acoli not only mourn the dead but also celebrate his/her life. In this case the facial expressions and gestures of the performers expressed ultimate sadness and utter loss, and this went to complement the verbal element in accentuating meaning. Note that body language and gestures are to a great extent gendered among the Acoli. Public display of emotion is considered feminine; so is the act of showing a sense of loss by striking the chest and rolling in the dust that marked the performance of the above dirge.

As Judith Butler points out, ‘the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence’ (1990:24). The gender attributes expressed, performed and enhanced through Acoli songs are continuations of the compelling gender socialization through repeated performance that goes on day-in-day-out. Song performance among the Acoli is part and parcel of their everyday existence. Songs welcome a child at birth, see him or her through life, inculcate into him or her the cultural worldviews and values of the Acoli, give expression to his or her aspirations and frustrations, and accompany him or her to the grave. Therefore, song performance is an integral part of Acoli social life; and an important component of Acoli gender performativity.

Songs also perform cultural functions; they are a form of social action and, hence, act as a compelling cultural agent for gender performativity. An example of songs performing cultural functions is illustrated in the following wedding ceremony songs I recorded at a wedding I attended. Among the Acoli it is considered uncultured and crude for the groom’s party to tease or ridicule their

in-laws in everyday ordinary speech. Such an act would be construed as an insult to the mother-in-law, and a hefty fine would be levied. However, it is acceptable for them to tease, ridicule or even insult the in-laws in songs; and their counterparts are expected to respond likewise in songs. This sets off a communicative dialogue in songs. In this case, it was the bride's side that set off the ridicule after they had formally acknowledged the union. In the song below, they ridiculed the groom for bringing in a meagre bride-wealth:

<i>In, ikwanyo waa tyen woru dong odoko lacul luk.</i>	You, you took away your father's footwear and turned it into a payment for elopement fine.
<i>In, icato waa tyen meni ka inyomo ki dako, eno!</i>	You, you sold your mother's footwear and married with it a woman, oh!
<i>In, iwoto pang pang man watimo nining...?</i>	You, you are a loafer now, what can we do with you...?

The groom's party shot back with the following song:

<i>Won-kom kong ingol ba Ka ngolo yot Wabineno nyari ka ogwoko gang Won nyako kong ilok ba Ka loko yot Wabineno nyari ka ogwoko welo Min nyako kong iker ba Ka lilo yot Wabineno nyari ka odoyo doo...</i>	Chairman, you just set the bride-price Setting is easy But we shall see whether your daughter will take care of the home. Girl's father, you just talk on Talking is easy But we shall see whether your daughter will take care of guests. Girl's mother, you just brag on Bragging is easy But we shall see whether your daughter will take care of weeds in the fields...
--	--

This demonstrates one of the important cultural functions that songs perform. It is common cultural practice for the two parties to ridicule one another during cultural wedding ceremonies, but only in songs. One may twist the wording of a known wedding song to befit the appropriate response and what one wants to put across. It is like a teasing and ridiculing duel, and an integral part of the culture.

An examination of several Acoli wedding songs (the above inclusive) would attest to the fact that song performances do not only reflect or portray the existing 'compulsory' heterosexuality and binary gender attributes reinforced by hegemonic discourse in society, but act as a site for the performance and enhancement of those gender conceptions. This is in agreement with Butler's theorization. She argues that:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this accomplished through the practice of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire (Butler 1990:22-23).

In many Acoli song performances (like the two cited above) sex, gender and desire are collapsed together; and gender is presented as a binary relation, masculine as opposed to feminine. The masculine attributes are projected in the first song. The male is culturally designated as a provider, and to impress upon the groom's people his duty to provide for his wife, the song indicates that the groom should have given an ample amount for the bride-price. Instead, he turns up with a meagre amount and, hence, he is teased: 'You, you sold your mother's footwear/ and married with it a woman, oh!' To rub it in they sing to him: 'You, you are a loafer/ now, what can we do with you...?' A male is not only expected to be a provider for his household, but also provide for his parents. That is why a male child is referred to as the '*okutu lang*' (*lango* thorn) that ensures the protection of members of his household and homestead (socially and economically). To be told that he sold the footwear of his mother (instead of providing for her) to marry a woman is to project his failure as a man; and it is an insult to his culturally designated manhood. No man wants to be laughed at through songs for not being man enough, and throughout his life, he will strain to perform the gender attributes assigned by hegemonic discourse to the masculine term.

The feminine attributes are projected in the second song, which is a rebuttal to the first. Having borne the insult about the gender performance of their son by their in-laws in the making, the groom's people challenge the bride's people, saying that they will audit the gender performance of the wife-to-be. They sing: '...we shall see whether your daughter/ will take care of the home.... will take care of guests.... will take care of weeds in the fields....' Sticking with the heterosexual notion, domestic roles are assigned along designated gender lines among the Acoli. The female is expected to be welcoming and hospitable, so she is supposed to take care of guests. Her identity is circumscribed by the domestic setting, so she is expected to take care of the home. The male, attributed with strength, is expected to open up fields and till the soil in preparation for planting; while the female, attributed with diligence, (but less strength) is expected to weed and tend the crops. The song challenges the wife-to-be to perform these culturally assigned gender attributes.

By assigning roles that are essential for the survival and continued existence of the family (and ultimately society) along male/female sex/gender lines, heterosexuality is reinforced and performed in songs and everyday life practices.

This, in a way, ‘regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term’ (Butler 1990:22). Acoli songs help mediate gender performance, both directly and indirectly, since they are part and parcel of the Acoli people’s everyday life – as theatrical, aesthetic renditions and social actions.

Judith Butler’s notion of performativity has to do with the ‘small’, seemingly insignificant acts of everyday life – how we sit, how we carry our bodies, etc. On the other hand (although still borrowing heavily from Butler’s notion) my ideas of performativity focus much on the visible and prominent popular cultural form of song performance, which is an important social tool in mediating gender performance in the Acoli society. My argument is that artistic oral performances among the Acoli do constitute an overt form of gender performativity, an aesthetic arena where everyday gender performance is re-enacted and re-affirmed.

The Notion of the Category ‘Women’

Acoli women, through song performance, express a sense of collective identity as ‘women’, by virtue of their common situation. As John Mbiti candidly puts it: ‘In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately’ (Mbiti 1990:108). Mbiti’s assessment is true of individuals within the Acoli community as a whole (who ascribe to a collective clan and ethnic identity), and also true of the category Acoli ‘women’ conceived as a collective identity.

In many Acoli song performances, the voice speaking as and for women as a collective category is quite prominent, even in individualized circumstances of gender relations. It is only through such that a sort of collective subversion and resistance to certain dominant heterosexual notions seem to be attained through song performance – without necessarily running away from their culturally prescribed gender identity. The category ‘women’ is used as a rallying point for Acoli women; and for them, this category is not a fiction, but a fact they have to live with and often use to achieve their aspirations. To examine this, let us look at the text of one song performance transcribed below:

<i>Kong ilok itam ba</i>	First think when talking
<i>cvara!</i>	my husband!
<i>Lok onyo kibale ku</i>	Matters shouldn't reach
<i>ki goyo mon.</i>	the point of wife-beating.
<i>Cvara!</i>	My husband!
<i>cvara kara pe!</i>	what a hopeless husband!

*Kong imany ngeyi ba
cvara!*

*Coo dong twenyo do
ki leko mon.*

*Cwara iumu kumi
ki nyimi kwe.*

Now compare the present with the past
my husband!

Now you have to suffer
because of over-controlling women.

In vain will you try to cover yourself
with your penis.

*Ceng iwaci mon rac
kong dong ideno.*

*Coo tye ka yengo olang
i ot pa minne ba.*

You always said women are no good
now you have to endure it.

The man is now swinging his bell
in his mother's hut.

*Ceng iwaci mon rac
kong dong idoyo kwe
Iumu kumi ki nyimi kwe
Kong dong irego wai.*

*Ceng iwaci mon rac
kong dong iregi.*

*Twon ka yengo olang
gwok kumi
ki kidi.*

You always said women are no good
now suffer with the weeding.
Now your penis won't protect you
now you have to grind by all means.

You always said women are no good
now you have to do the grinding.

When the bull swings his bell
he should take care
lest the grinding stone crushes
his private parts.

*Ceng iwaci mon rac
Do mon ma rego
Mon ma tedo
Mon ma doyo dor.
Twon coo ka doyo dor
gwok kumi
ki obiya.*

You always said women are no good
Yet it is women who do the grinding
It is women who do the cooking
And it is women who do the weeding.
When the bull of a man is weeding
let him take care

lest the *obiya* grass cuts
his penis.

The above song celebrates the category 'women' and, like many other Acoli song performances, acknowledges the existence of this category as a social and cultural fact. The woman in the song does not refer to herself as an individual but as part of a corporate identity. She remarks: 'You always said women are no good...?' Instead of referring to her own good deeds, as part of a collective identity in the society, she gives the credit to the category 'women'. She says: '...it is women who do the grinding/ It is women who do the cooking/ And it is women who do the weeding.' Thinking as part of the corporate entity is branded through socialization into the Acoli psyche.

It is important to note that the woman does not try to subvert the existing gender situation by changing the way she performs her gender, but by celebrating the performance of her gender – and her corporate gender identity of the category ‘women’. In a society where domestic responsibilities, social roles and economic tasks are performed along the binary sex/gender lines, it is hard to ignore the existence of the category ‘women’ in the survival of the community.

It is true that gender differentiation is sometimes used to discriminate against females. This is acknowledged in the above song by the singing voice’s repeated remark: ‘You always said women are no good.’ Instead of attempting to subvert the gender differentiation through song performance. However, the singing voice appropriates this very notion of differentiation and endeavours to project the social and economic significance of the category ‘women’. She paints the idea of male social and economic premium and male superiority as a myth when she says, ‘In vain will you try to cover yourself/ with your penis.’ Without the females, the males are depicted as helpless:

When the bull swings his bell
 he should take care
 lest the grinding stone crushes
 his private parts.

And

When the bull of a man is weeding
 let him take care
 lest the *objya* grass cuts
 his penis.

The phallic symbol of the ‘penis’ is constantly referred to in the song as in danger of harm when the female withdraws her complementary roles in the domestic existence. A man is never a man without the woman. In other words, it is the females who prop up the male ego; and without the females the males’ masculinity is in danger. In such cases, the males are reminded, ‘Now your penis won’t protect you...’ It is also interesting to note the double-edged metaphor of the *objya* grass, which is projected as less significant when associated with the feminine in the first song in this chapter, but now presented as posing a danger to the male’s manhood.

Note that the persona in the song ascribes to the idea of an existing category ‘women’. Although her husband is individualized as a person in the song, the persona submerges herself within the collective identity of ‘women’. From that vantage point (using the category ‘women’ as a site of resistance) the performance attempts to subvert the heterosexual negative image ascribed to her as part of the category ‘women’ in society.

Although Butler asserts that ‘it would be wrong to assume in advance that there is a category of "women" that simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete’ (Butler 1990:15), I would argue that this category of ‘women’ has been created in the minds of people at the community level through gender socialization, and it is a social reality. I agree with Butler, though, that we cannot have the same uniform characteristics that describe the category ‘women’ across race, class, age and ethnicity. However, at an ethnic level, like in the Acoli society, the notion of the category ‘women’ is concretized through real-life experiences.

Acoli women seem to have appropriated the gender categorization as a rallying point for solidarity, and this is projected in the various dance formations in song-performances. As Tania Kaiser puts it, ‘the feeling of unity that is generated is reinforced by the fact that the women who are dancing together on special occasions also work together in the course of their day-to-day lives’ (Kaiser 2006:193). This is much more evident in the performance of women-only sub-genres such as *apiti* and *dingidingi* song-dances. For example, as I noted in the field research, Aero Nyero Women’s Group performing *dingidingi* and ABC BASH Women’s Group performing *apiti* are actually women’s co-operative groups. Thus, I agree with Kaiser when she concludes that, ‘this is an example of how the social environment of dancing is revealing of entirely other aspects of life’ (Kaiser 2006:193). Oftentimes, song-dance performances are used to force women’s issues into the public arena.

The situation of dance-song performance as a tool for female empowerment among the Acoli compares well with Deborah James’ study of the *kiba* dance-song performance in Johannesburg, South Africa. She comments:

...for the women of *kiba*, singing and dancing were more than simply a source of amusement. Performance provided the initial context within which they were to meet, a model on which to base their association, and an opportunity for "showing off" to others the *diaparo tsa setso* (traditional clothing) which many were beginning to wear (James 1999:61).

Just like the women of *kiba* in Johannesburg, Acoli women have often used dance-song performance as a means to call attention to themselves as *women* – armed ‘with the power of knowledge of their own attractiveness’ (Kaiser 2006:196). Through performance, they celebrate and display their femininity. Consider the song below in praise of feminine beauty, performed by a group of young women, with Susan Akello as the lead singer:

<p><i>Leng wange, ka aneno abolo gwon piny. Aii, lamin apwai we Leng wang meya.</i></p>	<p>The beauty of her face, when I see I throw away the food in my hand. Oh, the sister of the young man, dear The beauty of the face of my love.</p>
<p><i>Otono gute, ka aneno anino ku kwak Aii, lamin apwai we Leng kum meya.</i></p>	<p>Her graceful neck, when I see sleep won't catch my eyes at all. Oh, the sister of the young man, dear The beauty of the body of my love.</p>
<p><i>Yom pyere ka abongo ato woko. Aii, lamin apwai we</i></p>	<p>The suppleness of her waist, when I touch I just die. Oh, the sister of the young man, dear</p>
<p><i>Yom pyer meya!</i></p>	<p>The suppleness of my love's waist!</p>
<p><i>Taa lake, ka aneno anino ku kwak Aii, lamin apwai we Meya obolo adyeny!</i></p>	<p>The whiteness of her teeth, when I see sleep won't catch my eyes at all. Oh, the sister of the young man, dear My love has ample buttocks!</p>
<p><i>Leng kume, ka aneno abolo kwon piny. Aii, lamin apwai we Nyapa tvon balo wiya.</i></p>	<p>The beauty of her body, when I see I throw away the food in my hand. Oh, the sister of the young man, dear The daughter of the bull confuses my head.</p>

The above song portrays how mesmerised the male can be when confronted with feminine beauty. The singing voice shows the male as admitting, 'The daughter of the bull confuses my head.' A supple waist is associated with femininity among the Acoli, and in performing the dance-songs the females often display how supple their waists are (especially in *dingidingi* and *larakaraka* which are the dances for the youth and the not-so-old). The song highlights how the male is knocked senseless by this display of femininity: 'The suppleness of her waist, when I touch/ I just die.' This could be an artistic exaggeration, but it serves to highlight the pride the Acoli females have in their femininity. In her study of Acoli dances Kaiser notes that:

Young Acoli girls are used to being relegated to the periphery of social activity, functioning as cooks and servers at parties and family or clan occasions; the opportunity to participate in a public realm in a situation where self-publicity is acceptable is very much a departure from the norm for them (Kaiser 2006:196).

In song-dance performance, the women not only display their significant selves as females, but also carve for themselves a space in the public realm through which women's issues are forced into the public arena. They appropriate the existing binary gender notions and use them to their advantage.

To further illustrate the use of gender in song performance to achieve desired goals by the female, let us consider the text of the song below performed by Josephine Adong and some women from her small co-operative group:

*Coo mogo lam ada , maa
Coo mukene gwoko mon gi
mega duru mero.*

Lim ma ayenyo-ayenya

Lacoo mayo woko

laro te kongo.

Iyare ki cente pa mon

Te coo ni lam.

Coo mogo lam ada , maa

Coo mukene gwoko mon gi

mega duru lweny in kuma

dako ma mwa.

Lela ma awilo ki lim aleya

Lacoo mayo woko

lak kwede ba.

Iyare ki lela pa mon

Te coo ni lam.

Some men are cheap, mother

Other men look after their wives

mine just keeps getting drunk.

The wealth I struggled to look for

The man just grabs

and hurries with it to drink.

You swell around

with a woman's money.

Your manhood is negligible.

Some men are cheap, mother

Other men look after their wives

mine just keeps fighting me

a mere woman.

The bicycle I bought

with co-operative money

The man just grabs

and uses it to roam aimlessly.

You swell around

with a woman's bicycle

Your manhood is negligible.

In the above song, the female does not attempt to subvert the binary heterosexist notion of gender. Instead, she embraces it and from that vantage point uses song performance to present her disquiet in the public arena. She appeals to the culturally designated traits of the male identity as a provider and protector, and paints her husband as a failure, therefore declaring: 'Some men are cheap, mother.'

Her major bone of contention is the husband's behaviour of grabbing whatever she works for, money or bicycle, and using them not for the benefit of the family but for his own selfish interests. Added to that, he physically abuses her. She uses the very cultural sense of masculinity to show how despicable her husband is. She comments:

You swell around
with a woman's money...

You swell around
with a woman's bicycle
Your manhood is negligible.

In the song performance, the female does not change the way she performs her gender to protest or contest the abusive relationship. In fact, she ascribes to the gendered category 'women', and even refers to herself as 'a mere woman' against whom the husband should be ashamed to pit his manly strength. We note that she works the hegemonic gender ideology of the Acoli to her advantage by ascribing to the category 'women'. The Acoli have a saying, '*Goro okoko apil*', meaning 'The weak always have their weakness appeal for them.' If you pit yourself against the weak you lose in the moral court of public opinion.

Thus, one could say that, to a certain extent, the Acoli women do invest in the ideological gender differentiation as a rallying point to weave solidarity among the womenfolk to achieve their goals, and also to attain visibility through song performance, in addition to using the same gender differentiation in song performance to push women's issues into the public arena.

Contesting the Naturalized Unnatural through Performance

As noted earlier in this chapter, Acoli song performances enhance the performative nature of gender. Through re-enactment in songs, specific gender traits are passed on as natural and acceptable. As Butler puts it, 'the power regime of heterosexism and phallogocentrism seek to augment themselves through a constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized ontologies' (Butler 1990:32). Butler argues that repeated performance of specific gender traits serves to make what is unnatural appear natural and legitimate.

Butler points out that since gender/sex is performative it is possible to change the way we perform our gender – which offers a possibility for re-signification of some of the normative heterosexual notions of gender. She argues that, 'If the regulatory fictions of sex and gender are themselves multiply contested sites of meaning, then the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption of their univocal posturing' (Butler 1990:32). She further adds that: 'As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification' (Butler 1990:33).

Some feminists who ascribe to the performativity theory, like Monique Wittig (1981), have called for the subversion of the normative notion of gender. However, Amy Allen raises some fundamental questions regarding subverting all the normative notions of gender just because they are unnatural (and are made to appear natural) which I find quite plausible from the Acoli gender perspective. She asks:

But why should we resignify these norms? Why expose them as unnatural? Why denaturalize sex? The answer has to be that unnatural constructs that parade as natural are, in some sense, bad and deserve to be subverted (Allen 1998:466).

She wonders what is so bad about the unnatural that all unnatural constructs have to be subverted in the performance of our gender. She argues that some of the constructs are not that bad. A critical study of Acoli song performance would seem to agree with her in some measures. Apart from entertainment, song performance is also didactic. It is especially used to inculcate into the young citizenry of society the cultural values that it upholds – gender perceptions inclusive. It is also used to correct members of society who violate the accepted social norms of the people.

Song performance can partly be viewed as a form of social intervention, especially in gender-related disputes. Consider the song below:

Woman: <i>Alany pa coo</i>	The aggressiveness of [some] men
<i>dwoko i kum mon.</i>	they take it out on women.
<i>Mon ma kikelo-akela</i>	[Mere] women brought
<i>ki dyang.</i>	with cattle.

Men & Women: *Nen kong kit tic ci!* Look at this kind of behaviour!

Woman: <i>Eno ba!</i>	There you are!
<i>Cwara, wek lworo.</i>	My husband, stop being a coward
<i>Ma coo wadi wu</i>	When fellow men
<i>goyi woko</i>	beat you up
<i>Idwoko among i kuma.</i>	You take out your frustration on me.
<i>Koni atwacci kir</i>	I will throw for you the <i>kir</i> curse.

Men & Women: *Wek lworo obedi.* Stop being a coward.

<i>Coo ngo ma idwoko</i>	What kind of manly strength
<i>i kum mon?</i>	is demonstrated on women?
<i>Te coo ni peke.</i>	Your manhood is despicable.

Woman: <i>Anywar pa coo</i>	[Some] men are bullies
<i>dwoko i kum mon</i>	and they take it out on women
<i>Mon ma kinyomo-anyoma</i>	[Mere] women just married
<i>ki lim.</i>	with wealth.

Men & Women: *Nen kong kit tic ci!* Look at this kind of behaviour!

Woman: <i>Eno ba!</i>	There you are!
<i>Cwara, wek lworo.</i>	My husband, stop being a coward
<i>Ka coo wadi wu</i>	When fellow men
<i>loyi woko</i>	triumph over you

<i>Idwoko ayella i kuma.</i>	You turn your trouble on me.
<i>Koni atwacci kir</i>	I will throw for you the <i>kir</i> curse.
Men & Women: <i>Wek lworo obedi.</i>	Stop being a coward.
<i>Tek ngo ma idwoko</i>	What kind of strength is let loose
<i>i kum mon?</i>	on [mere] women?
<i>Te coo ni peke.</i>	Your manhood is despicable.

In the song, we see the female appropriating the ‘unnatural’ but naturalized gender notion of male strength and female weakness, and using this very notion for her own protection. A man worth his manhood is expected to demonstrate his manly strength on fellow men who are his supposed equals, and not let it loose on a woman who is cast as *naturally* weak. Such conduct is considered a cowardly act, and that is why the men and women in the performance representing public opinion remark:

Stop being a coward.
What kind of strength is let loose
on [mere] women?
Your manhood is despicable.

The females are projected in the song as not equal to the males. This is because, among other things, they are ‘[Mere] women brought/ with cattle’ into the homestead. The very fact that a male has to part with some wealth in the form of cattle to marry a female puts him in a different social rank from her. So to apparently lower himself to her level by pitting his strength against hers is considered despicable.

Because of the Acoli hegemonic discourse that attributes the male gender with physical strength, men are made to perform this gender attribute in daily life and take on roles and tasks that require physical strength. Because the female gender is projected as physically less strong, they too perform this gender attribute in real life and take on roles and tasks that require more tenacity and diligence instead of brute strength. Now, if this ‘unnatural’ notion of male strength, which has been naturalized through ‘repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame’ (Butler 1990:23), is pitted against an equally ‘unnatural’ notion of female physical weakness and used to deter domestic violence against women, should we subvert this gender performance?

Furthermore, the female in the song threatens to use the *kir* (a wife’s curse) if her husband continues to trouble her. She sings:

My husband, stop being a coward
When fellow men
triumph over you

You turn your trouble on me.
I will throw for you the *kir* curse.

The heterosexual gender ideology of the Acoli gives a female, who has been abused into bitterness and frustration by her husband, the power to put a curse on him and the homestead. She would take a cooking pot or a feeding dish or the ash from the cooking stove and throw it out in an act known as *twacco kir* (throwing the curse). As she did this, she would utter the words ‘*Uyaa! An mono pe adano?* (Please! Am I [also] not a human person?)’ Okot p’Bitek notes that:

By this act the, woman brought an already highly strained relationship to a point of total rupture. In the act of throwing the pot or dish or ash, she symbolically broke off all the duties and obligations of a wife and mother. The pot which was used for cooking and the dish for feeding her husband and children were broken up, and the ash from the kitchen stove thrown out. At that point, she ceased being a wife and mother, and worse, she became a dangerous person to the family and the lineage group. And what was a matter within the household now assumed lineage or even clan importance (p’Bitek 1980:147).

Through song performance the females often remind the males of their ability and gendered power to curse the homestead and bring misfortune; and this usually acts as a check on male excesses. As p’Bitek puts it:

The wife’s curse posed a permanent threat for husbands with a tendency to trouble their wives. Everyone knew that if a man persisted in troubling his wife, she might commit *kir*. It operated as a brake in situations when relationships between husband and wife steadily deteriorated, mainly due to the man’s fault. But it also offered an opportunity for a settlement of serious problems by a solemn ceremony (p’Bitek 1980:148).

Twacco kir is the ultimate weapon a female in an extremely abusive relationship would use, by virtue of her position as a mother and a wife. The females are discouraged by society to resort to this, but it is generally considered a better alternative than if she was driven to commit suicide because then, it is believed, her ghost would turn into *lacen* (an avenging spirit). The act of *kir* pushes a domestic situation into the public arena and a ceremony known as *goyo ayoo* (enacting peace) is performed to restore harmony. Songs, such as the one cited above, are often used to constantly remind the males of the gendered power of the females to *twacco kir*, and thereby caution them about pushing their wives to the limit. Here, we see songs being used to propagate an unnatural, naturalized gender notion, but for a good cause.

In some of the song performances encountered during my field research, being hospitable and caring is projected as a feminine attribute among the Acoli.

Should we endeavour to subvert this ‘unnatural’ phenomenon, ‘naturalized’ and culturally assigned to the female gender? Should Acoli men stop performing their ‘unnatural’ but ‘naturalized’ gender attributes of providing for and protecting their household? As social beings who have to co-exist in a social situation, do we have to subvert the culturally assigned gender attributes and roles for the sake of it?

Gender performance is one of the means through which the social order and organization in Acoli society is ensured. A human being is a social being (with emotional and spiritual needs) and more than just a biological substance. Song performance serves as one of the vital tools for ideological propagation and, by extension, a means for social organization.

Human beings are social beings that have to co-exist with others in a community; and to ensure harmony and order in this co-existence some regulatory frame is inevitable (be it philosophical or religious) – and often gender has been factored into the regulatory social framework (for better or for worse). Although some gender practices/performances are debilitating to the subject, others are essential for the harmonious and continued existence of society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to state that the performativity theory has many insightful benefits to help us understand the workings of the gender processes both in everyday life and in song performance. Much ‘Western’ gender study has focused on a critique of gender roles and the idea that these underlie differential ideas of power – and hence should be weakened or subverted in the interests of promoting greater democracy and equality. In these analyses, forms of gender differentiation are ‘bad’. One strand in this debate has been on the idea of performativity, which has been understood as focusing on small, everyday acts. Performativity is hence seen as the site of understanding how ideas of gender gain substance and are made ‘real’.

However, in the context of my study of Acoli song performance, gender is embraced as ‘good’ and is seen as a site in and through which power can be debated. Also, given the prevalence and importance of expressive genres generally in Acoli society, these debates are often ‘broadcast’ and amplified in songs. The discussion in this chapter, therefore, seeks to throw light on the prevailing debates on gender by examining how it is used as a resource and how people make powerful investment in it. Textual forms such as songs provide us with privileged insight into the nature of this investment; just as we have seen how the Acoli females have metaphorically used the very fangs of the hegemonic heterosexist gender snake to strike it and to reap the benefits.

Note

1. The field research from which this essay is drawn was conducted as part of the requirement for the award of a doctoral degree in African Literature of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

References

- Allen, A., 1998, 'Power Trouble: Performativity as Critical Theory', *Constellations*, Vol.5, No. 4, pp. 456-471.
- p' Bitek, O., 1980 [1971], *Religion of the Central Luo*, Kampala: Uganda Literature Bureau.
- Butler, J., 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Butler, J., 1993, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York and London: Routledge.
- D'Agostino, M., 2003, 'Muslim Personhood: Translation, Transnationalism and Islamic Religious Education among Muslims in New York City', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*. Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 285-294.
- Hofmeyr, I., 1993, *We spend Our Years As a Tale That Is Told": Oral Historical Narratives in a South African Chiefdom*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- James, D., 1999, *Songs of the Women Migrants: Performance and Identity in South Africa*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kaiser, T., 2006, 'Songs, Discos and Dancing in Kiryandongo, Uganda', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2, pp. 183-202.
- Kratz, C.A., 1994, *Affecting Performance: Meaning, Movement and Experience in Okiek Women's Initiation* Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Mbiti, J.S., 1990 [1969], *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann.
- Nelson, L., 1999, 'Bodies (and Spaces) do Matter: the Limits of Performativity', *Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 331-353.
- Okot, M.B., 1994, 'Gender Representation in Acoli Oral Poetry', Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Kampala: Makerere University.
- Sofola, Z., 1998, 'Feminism and African Womanhood', in O. Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood, Feminism and Power: from Africa to the Diaspora*, Trenton, NJ and Asmara: Africa World Press.
- Wittig, M., 1981, 'One is Not Born a Woman', *Feminist Issues*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 47-54.

