

Song of Lawino: An African Lament (excerpts)

By Okot p'Biteck – Uganda

Husband, now you despise me
Now you treat me with spite
And say I have inherited the stupidity of my aunt;
Son of the Chief,
Now you compare me
With the rubbish in the rubbish pit,
You say you no longer want me
Because I am like the things left behind
In the deserted homestead.
You insult me
You laugh at me
You say I do not know the letter "A"
Because I have not been to school
And I have not been baptized

You compare me with a little dog
A puppy.

...My husband pours scorn
On Black people...

He says Black people are primitive
And their ways are utterly harmful,
Their dances are mortal sins
They are ignorant, poor and diseased!

Ocol says he is a modern man,
A progressive and civilized man,
He says he has read extensively and widely
And he can no longer live with a thing like me
Who cannot distinguish between good and bad,
He says I am just a village woman,
I am of the old type,
And no longer attractive.

He says I am blocking his progress.
My head, he says,
Is as big as that of an elephant
But it is only bones,
There is no brain in it,
He says I am only wasting his time.

...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

I do not understand
The ways of foreigners
But I do not despise their customs.
Why should you despise yours?

It is true, Ocol,
I cannot dance the ballroom dance.
Being held so tightly
I feel ashamed,
Being held so tightly in public
I cannot do it,
It looks shameful to me!

If someone tries
To force me to dance this dance
I feel like hanging myself
Feet first!

It is true
I cannot do my hair
As white women do.

My mother taught me
Acholi hair fashions;
Which fit the kind
Of hair of the Acholi
And the occasion.

Listen,
Ostrich plumes differ
From chicken feathers,
A monkey's tail
Is different from that of a giraffe.

A white woman's hair
Is soft like silk;

It is light
And brownish, like
That of the brown monkey,
And is very different from mine.
A black woman's hair
Is thick and curly...

Some black women cook their hair
With hot iron
And pull it hard
So that it may grow long.

They fry their hair
In boiling oil
As if it were locusts,
And the hair sizzles,
It cries aloud in sharp pain
As it is pulled and stretched.
And the vigorous and healthy hair,
Curly, springy and thick,
That glistens in the sunshine
Is left listless and dead
Like the elephant grass
Scorched brown by the fierce
February sun.
It lies lifeless
Like the sad and dying banana leaves
On a hot and windless afternoon.

I am proud of the hair with which I was born
And as no white woman
Wishes to do her hair like mine,
Because she is proud
Of the hair with which she was born,
I have no wish to look like a white woman.

My husband says he rejects me because I do not
appreciate
White men's foods,
And that I do not know
How to hold
The spoon and fork.
He is angry with me
Because I do not know how to cook
As white women do...

He complains endlessly.
He says
Had I been to school
I would have learnt
How to use
White men's cooking stoves.

I really hate
The charcoal stove!
Your hand is always
Charcoal-dirty
And anything you touch
Is blackened;
And your fingernails
Resemble those of the poison woman.

The white man's stoves
Are good for cooking
White men's food:
For cooking the tasteless,
Bloodless meat of cows
That were killed many years ago
And left in the ice
To rot!
For frying an egg
Which when ready
Is slimy like mucus.

The white man's stoves
Are for boiling cabbages
And for baking the light spongy thing
They call bread.
They are for warming up
Tinned beef, tinned fish,
Tinned frogs, tinned snakes,
Tinned peas, tinned beans.

I do not know how to cook
Like white women;
I do not enjoy white men's foods;
And how they eat –
How could I know?
And why should I know it?

... Ocol has brought home
A large clock.
It goes tock-tock-tock-tock
And it rings a bell.
He winds it first
And then it goes!
But I have never touched it,
I am afraid of winding it!

I wonder what causes
The noise inside it!
And what makes it go!

I do not know
How to tell the time
Because I cannot read
The figures.

And Ocol has strange ways
Of saying what the time is.
In the morning
When the sun is sweet to bask in
He says
"It is Eight o'clock!"
When the cock crows
For the first time
He says
"It is Five!"

If my husband insists
What exact time
He should have morning tea
And breakfast,
When exactly to have coffee
Lunchtime, teatime,
And supper time – I must first look at the sun,
The cock must crow
To remind me.

Time has become
My husband's master,
It is my husband's husband.
My husband runs from place to place
Like a small boy,
He rushes without dignity.

I do not know
How to keep the white man's time.
My mother taught me
The way of the Acholi
And nobody should
Shout at me
Because I know
The customs of our people!

Listen, my husband,
In the wisdom of the Acholi
Time is not stupidly split up
Into seconds and minutes...

My husband says
My head is numb and empty
Because, he says,
I cannot tell
When our children were born.

I know that Okang,
My first-born,
Was born at the beginning of the dry season.

A person's age
Is shown by what he or she does
It depends on what he or she is,
And on what kind of person
He or she is...