



## Acholi Funeral Diriges

### Okot p'Bitek

The diriges of Acoli form an important part of the conventionalised and dramatised outburst of grief and wailing, with which the people face the supreme crisis of life, death. When a man is critically ill his father or elder brother or son is called to his death bed, to hear his last wishes. Soon after death has occurred the women begin wailing. The men begin to dig the grave, while some of them, in tears, blow their horns, and stage the uc, mock fight. Messages are sent out to relatives, and soon, a crowd is assembled at the homestead where death has struck.

When the grave is ready, a brief ceremony, kwer, takes place inside the house where the corpse is lying. It is attended only by a few elderly people. The ritual differs in detail from area to area. The following is what happens among the Payira. The widow lies over the dead man, and she embraces him. The father of the dead man, or his eldest son, covers the couple with a duiker skin, and taps their heads with olutu kwon, (a wooden spoon used for making millet bread) and ogwer, (a wooden spoon used for making gravy). Then the head of the dead man is shaved, and smeared with pala (red ochre) and oil. A piece of string is tied around the chest of the widow, and another round her head, and the leaves of the olwedo tree hung on the strings. This is called tweyo cola, tying sorrows on the body. Her head is then covered with the duiker skin, and she is led off into the wilderness, where she stays until the burial is over. In the same way, a husband does not attend the actual burial of his wife.

The corpse is laid in the grave on its side, with the head resting on a head-rest.<sup>1</sup> All present gather around and throw handfuls of soil into the grave. The pit is then filled in, and a mound made. A goat is slaughtered and roasted on an open fire, distributed, and eaten mostly by the people who buried the dead man.

Three or four days later, the second stage of the mourning is marked by a ceremony called puyu lyel, smearing the grave. The immediate area of the grave is tidied up and smeared with a black clayey soil. This is usually a local affair, attended only by the

people of the homestead.

The final ceremony, called guru lyel, takes place at a carefully chosen time to ensure maximum attendance. Many months usually elapse between death and this feast. Its size depends on the socio-economic status of the dead person. It is not held for children and youths. And, as Shakespeare put it, "When beggars die there are no comets seen, the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes". In July 1962, the guru lyel of Obada Adwany, widow of Okelo, took place in Gulu. She died at a ripe old age, and, because of this it would be expected that many people would come to the occasion; but there were only eighteen people. A dirge that was repeated several times was a fitting commentary to this particular situation:

My brother fights  
With barbed-headed arrows,  
He fights alone,  
There is no brother beside him;  
Today he has left the homestead  
And it is awful,  
The youth fights alone;  
Today, men live alone,  
No brother beside him,  
My brother fights with the grave.

Compare this with the guru lyel of Rwot Awic of Payira in 1946. All the clan heads of the Payira chiefdom were there, and all the chiefs of Acoliland went. The Mukama of Bunyoro was represented by his own brother and the Keeper of the Palace. Hundreds of goats and cattle were slaughtered, and the feast lasted many weeks.<sup>2</sup>

On the morning of the appointed day the widow is led off into the wilderness once more, and her head is shaved. The strings of sorrow around her head and chest are untied; hence the name of the ceremony, gonyo cola, untying sorrows from the body. Everybody in the homestead is shaved, and this marks the end of mourning. Later, during the day, groups of relatives and their wives begin to arrive, bringing cattle and goats and materials for making beer.

About fifty or so yards from the homestead, the mourners, who up to now were in a single file, form up in battle formation, and storm the homestead in a mock attack. The women running behind them, armed with battle axes, make ululations and shout the praise name of the clan. On regrouping, the soloist leaps up and stamps the ground rhythmically, and sings the first line of the dirge, and the rest take up the chorus, as follows:

Soloist: Oh, fire rages at Layima, oh,  
Fire rages in the valley of river Cumu.

Chorus Everything is utterly utterly destroyed;  
If I could reach the homestead of death's  
mother

Soloist: My daughter, I would make a long grass torch;

Chorus        If I could reach the homestead of death's  
   mother,  
   I would destroy everything utterly utterly  
   Like the fire that rages in the valley of  
   river Cumu, oh...

The dancing is accompanied by drumming and the scrubbing of large half-gourds on planks of wood. The dancers may dance three to five songs, before another group replaces them. Later on in the night there are joint sessions. As in all other Acoli dances there is much competition, not only between individuals, but also between the various groups taking part in the guru lyel. There is ample scope for self-display in the costumes, singing, drumming, performing the mock fight, and so on. There is room for both individual exhibition and group performance.

The system of inheritance allows the widow considerable freedom in the choice of the inheritor, lalaku. The ceremony of yokko pala, also called ciddo pala, removing the mourning ochre, takes place three or four months after the guru lyel. At this ceremony, the widow is introduced to her new husband in the presence of the elders. During the interim period between the death of the husband and this ceremony, the widow indicates who among the dead man's brothers should be the guardian of her children. Apart from other economic considerations, to be thus chosen is a vote of confidence; it is also a big step up the social order. It is mutual competitiveness among clansmen that produces the dirges which are an attack on the living.

The following love song is sung during the night joint sessions, and is aimed at the young widow(s):

Beloved of my mother-in-law,  
The only one of her mother;  
Lapaka Olwa seeks her lover, oh.  
The beautiful one, how can I get her?  
She has rejected all other men;  
She seeks only her lover;  
Beloved of my mother in-law,  
Is like a leopard;  
The young woman seeks her lover.

The general atmosphere during the dance is determined by the age of the dead person. It is restrained and sad if it is the funeral dance of a man struck down at the peak of his manhood, say, about thirty to fifty years of age. You may hear occasional wailing of the women mingling with the drumming, the singing and the scrubbing of the half-gourds. The nearest relatives dance with tears on their cheeks. It may be said that the dirges have their fullest meaning and significance when sung for such a person.

At the funeral of an old person, the situation is very different. Before the death of such a person ma nyime cok, whose end is near, women in the homestead joke with him or her, and ask, "Granny, when will you die so that we may enjoy a dance?" and some of them even make preparations publicly for the occasion. Small children play with him or her like a doll. They give him earth instead of bread, and laugh as the old one

puts the earthen lump in his toothless mouth. On announcing the death of such a person, women pretend to weep, but complain that it is difficult to shed tears. So that although the same dirges are sung at the funeral dance of the very old, they do not seem to carry the same significance and meaning. There is no tragedy in the death of such fellows; and at night there is much sexual activity. It is said the dead must be born again; and children conceived at such funerals are named after the grand old man or woman.

#### Themes in Acoli dirges

The Acoli dirges fall into six movements or themes, according to subject matter. These embody the six different ways in which the Acoli react to the crisis of death.

##### (a) Songs of the pathway

These poems are characterised by a kind of ambivalence as to whether the dead one is really gone for ever: as in the love songs, the lover refuses to believe that the one he or she loved so much is no more; and she sings:

I hear the horn of my love,  
Oto Cura will soon come;  
His horn sounded early in the morning;  
But I search for him in vain  
Along the pathway, oh;  
Ah, Oto will soon come,  
His horn sounded early in the morning.

The mourner scans the crowd in search of her dead lover:

There is a big dance yonder,  
Who can spot the ostrich headgear of my love?

A mother of a dead woman tells that she is not dead, but

Anok has gone to her man  
In the hills...

Gerald Moore has suggested that this ambivalence helps to adjust the shock and grief of the living, since it puts off the moment when the finality of personal death must be recognised.<sup>3</sup> But, as we have seen, the funeral dance is held many months after death has occurred. These poems, instead of postponing the moment when the finality of death must be faced, actually rake up the bitter memory of the tragedy. And, in fact, each one of them contains the recognition that the dead one has gone for ever.

My daughter's buttocks danced as she walked away;  
My sorrows oh;  
Sorrow has sunk deep in my flesh.  
Daughter of the grave  
Dig her out of the grave, oh;

Anok has gone to her man  
In the hills;  
My daughter's buttocks danced as she walked away.

The Dama sing:

You, full-breasted one, have died,  
Arise and grasp your stick  
Let us go out together to dig out the field-mouse.  
Are you truly dead?  
Do you live, and yet lie there?  
Arise, cut a stick and let us look for field-mice.

Commenting on this poem, Bowra stated, "They (the primitives) often exploit the pathetic fancy that the dead person must arise and return to his usual tasks...."<sup>4</sup>. But this theme of ambivalence is also found in western literature.. One example is Walt Whitman's poem:<sup>5</sup>

#### O Captain My Captain

The port is near, the bells I hear, the people  
all exulting.....  
But o heart heart heart  
O the bleeding drops of red  
Where on the deck my captain lies  
Fallen cold and dead

O Captain my Captain rise up and hear the bells...  
My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still.

The poems in this category capture that moment of disbelief which is displayed when the news of the death of a loved one hits one like a meteorite. The first reaction is not so much of shock and frustration, but of disbelief. How can a person so young, so beautiful, so vigorous, so loving, actually die? It is inconceivable. It must be a joke. Indeed, the news is often met with a laugh, a giggle. Shock and despair follow soon afterwards.

Paul Valéry said the following at the burial of his bosom friend Pierre Louys, "Yesterday, under the great impact of a few words, it seemed as though a huge fragment of life had fallen away from me, uncovering some great gaping, smarting wound, where hundreds of memories appeared suddenly exposed, and as though maddened by the sudden light of death, rushing in unimaginable disorder, as if trying to repair the loss suffered by my heart and grasping desperately at the past. In the place of the unthinkable event, there came this swarm of memories which would not accept the fact of death"<sup>6</sup>.

During the funeral dance, the Acoli re-live this terrible moment of hopeless and pathetic disbelief, as captured in these songs of the pathway. The Acoli do not make statues of their heroes or lovers; and the grave mounds soon disappear. The memory of the beloved is locked in such dirges.

(b) Songs of the battle with death

In these dirges we see the dying man locked in a fierce battle with Death, watched, as it were, by his loved ones, who are utterly helpless, and cannot do anything to save him. During illness, of course, the relatives do all they can to fight the causes of ill health. A diviner is consulted, and her prescriptions administered swiftly and as accurately as possible. A hostile spirit is exorcised and driven away or pacified; the patient is nursed with loving care. But at death there is nothing else that the living can do.

The Russian poet Yevgeny Tevtushenko has expressed the same hopeless situation in his poem "Don't die, Ivan Stepanych":

Don't die, Stepanych  
Don't die, don't die  
It is wrong to act like this  
Forsaking your paternal land.

You lie there in Bratsk city hospital...  
and all around you are nurses, syringes, and  
whiteness...  
You are surrounded with kindness and attention  
but you are departing...  
Doctors, I beg you, help him  
do try to rouse him again...  
Conqueror of Berlin  
Can't you conquer death?

Acoli poets and mourners tease each other about the whole pathetic predicament:

The warrior fights alone,  
Behold, the bull dies alone oh  
Abong, why, help your brother;  
The only one, he is dying, oh...

But, at long last, when they cannot contain themselves, the mourners burst out with a terrible cry:

If I could reach the homestead of Death's mother,  
I would destroy everything utterly utterly...

The Acoli mourner desires to visit the homestead of Death's mother, and wreak vengeance. They do not appeal to a god or some other power to intervene in their sorrows. They do not believe that the death of a brother or sister or father or mother is the wish or will of some creator, to be accepted without question. This irreligiousness of the Acoli contrasts vividly with the outlook of the Nuer who call themselves mere ants before their deity Kwoth. When a child dies, the Nuer say that Kwoth has taken what is his own, and human beings should not complain. "If you grieve overmuch God will be angry that you should resent his taking what is his own".<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, in Christian belief, the departed, hopefully, go to heaven. A funeral ceremony is seen as a farewell party for the ghost of

the dead. As Backman put it, "...one should not sorrow at the departure of a human being but rather celebrate the day as one of joy and as a real birthday - of everlasting life in heavenly bliss"<sup>9</sup>. This comforting approach to the crisis of death has produced a comforting type of death poetry. Herman's Dirge goes:<sup>10</sup>

Calm on the bosom of God  
Fair spirit, rest thee now...  
Dust to its narrow house beneath  
Soul, to its place on high...

And John Donne scorns death as follows:<sup>11</sup>

Death, do not be proud though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so:  
For those whom thou thinkest thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death; nor canst thou kill me...  
Why swell'st thou then?  
Only short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And Death shall be no more: Death, thou shalt die.

(c) Songs of Surrender

In this movement, the clashes of battle in the songs above give way to quiet surrender. There is no fury, no accusation or teasing; only acceptance of the naked fact of death. The physical pain suffered by the dead person at the last moments of his life, as well as the hopelessness of the case at the deathbed, are recalled and celebrated:

Leopard of my mother,  
My own, he pleaded with death,  
He blew his horn in the pastures.  
They have read the entrails of a goat.  
It is bad.  
My own, he cries with pain in his chest,  
His body is painful.  
He shouted his praise-name at the foot of Larumu hill.  
Death burns the body of the woman  
Like fire;  
The woman cries with pain in her chest;  
Beloved of my mother oh;  
Death burns your body;  
At last, today, it has taken you.

The Chinese poet Su Tung P'o cried:<sup>12</sup>

I was warned of it in a dream  
No medicine would have helped,  
Even if it was heaped mountain high

The same hopelessness is found in the Dhammapada.<sup>13</sup>

Sons are no help, nor a father, nor relation;  
There is no help from kinsfolk for one whom death  
has seized.

In these dirges the Acoli poets study the delicate nature of human life and compare man to plucked vegetable leaves that soon wither and dry up, or the dew that vanishes at sunrise:

Beloved of my mother  
Is like plucked vegetable leaves;  
His large eyes are wide open;  
His teeth are like dry-season simsim.  
Death has destroyed a prince.  
Today, he is lost,  
The son of a chief,  
Beloved of my mother  
Is like plucked vegetable leaves.

The only son of my mother has melted away oh  
My brother used to blow his gourd flute;  
Our bull of men is no more;  
Yes, he blew his horn atop the buffalo that  
he had killed.  
My brother used to blow his horn from the hill top, oh.  
The only son of my mother has melted away.

We find some of these imageries in the poems of one of the Goliard poets, possibly Peter Abelard<sup>14</sup>

Mourn then the flower  
Plucked, faded, festering;  
Bright but an hour  
Like a star a-westering.....

These poems take us back to the side of the death-bed, where the relatives are sitting, watching in silence. We hear the groans of the dying man, and occasionally cast our minds back and see the man in the prime of his life, in full battle-dress, or in the dancing arena; we hear his horn in the hunt or in the pastures. The fact of death is accepted calmly, as they watch the candle of life being blown out.

(d) Songs of cruel fate<sup>15</sup>

The words woko, wi-lobo and ru-piny which I have translated here as fate, actually mean the human predicament; they represent the problems, risks, sufferings and challenges that the individual faces during his or her lifetime. Against woko, wi-lobo or ru-piny man is impotent. They kneel on their victims and crush them.

I am squatting on a tree  
Like a bird,  
I am like a monkey squatting on the branch of a tree;  
Look, fate has knelt on me,  
It has crushed me,  
What can I say?

'Kneeling and crushing' are hunting imageries. When a buffalo is critically wounded, so that it has no more strength to charge with its horns, it tries to fall on its adversary, and kill it with its massive weight.



There is nothing man can do to prevent fate carrying out its cruel schemes. Cruel as they are, woko, wi-lobo and ru-piny are deaf, blind and senseless. No sacrifices are offered to them, because they are not reasonable; a prayer to them, or any argument batters against a stone wall. These are mere names of the total sum of human sufferings and the misfortunes of man.

In these poems the individual takes a keen look at his or her own predicament. Whatever might be the immediate causes of the misfortune, at this stage, the Acoli take it to mean the attack of fate on the living individual. The poems are not about the dead; they celebrate the sufferings of the living, resulting from the death of the beloved. So an old man who lost all his sons in war, tells us:

Fate has brought troubles,  
Beloved of my mother,  
Son of Labwor,  
Fate has thrown me the largest basket  
To fill with dead children.  
My sufferings began  
When I was only a child,  
The troubles of this world,  
It all began as a joke...

Su Tung P'o sang: 16

I will never be able to stop my tears  
And the day is far off when I will  
Forget this cruel day.  
Why could I not have died with him.

The Acoli mourner tells his dead brother:

Brother, why, he does not speak to me;  
Brother, why do you not answer me?  
Brother, if you are dead,  
Let them bury both of us.

The funeral dance provides the opportunity for self-contemplation; and the picture of Man's suffering is portrayed in these terrible songs of cruel fate.

(e) The attack on the dead

The body of a dead person is always treated with respect and fear, and the burial rites are conducted with dignity and restraint. But in this group of poems the Acoli turn upon the dead with a viciousness which is not easy to explain. A dead aunt is accused of being a harlot, and the poet wonders whether she has not been killed by syphilis. Another dead woman is accused of having ruined the homestead and is described as a "nobody". One dead man is called a sorcerer, and the mourners declare that it is good that he is dead

Ee, my aunt,  
The death of the poor is sudden,

My aunt, was she strangled?  
 What death has killed my aunt?  
 The poor woman died on the roadside...  
 O mother, I 'heard' her by her smell...  
 What has killed my aunt?  
 Ee, harlot  
 The death of the poor is sudden oh;  
 Ee, harlot,  
 The death of the poor is sudden oh;  
 Ee, harlot, somebody slept with her,  
 Perhaps a bull syphilis killed her?

The sorcerer is dead;  
 It is good that he is dead  
 You Ulula,  
 Touch his penis,  
 Ensure that it is cold and soft...

Gerald Moore commented on the first song as follows, "Here the singer curiously alternated expression of genuine compassion at the sad and anonymous nature of the poor woman's death with expression of scorn and anger at the disgrace she had brought to her relatives, both by the manner of her whore's life and her beggar woman's death".<sup>17</sup> He interpreted this song in what he called "the African traditional concept of 'praise'", which, according to him, "includes the enumeration of the dead man's faults and failures as well as his virtues. The poem gathers up all the complex of emotions aroused by the death of the woman. He does not reject any of them, whether it be sorrow at the friendlessness of her end, or the almost savage glee in speculating her case. In this way, the total significance of her death is adjusted and placed within the society".<sup>18</sup>

Whatever the African concept of 'praise' is, these poems are not meant to be praises; they are direct attacks on the dead, for the bad things they did while alive; even if one of these things was the act of dying. It is this anger or disgust against the dead which forms the core of the song of the Hungarian poet Attila Jozsef in which he attacked his dead mother:<sup>19</sup>

Mother, my fever is a hundred and six,  
 and you aren't here to take care of me.  
 Instead, like an easy woman, you just lay  
 by death's side as soon as he signalled you...  
 You are worthless You just want to be dead  
 You spoil everything You are a ghost  
 You are a greater cheat than any woman  
 Who deceived me and led me on...  
 O you Gypsy, you wheeled, you gave,  
 Only to steal it all back in the last hour.

In "Young Wind", Confucius compared a certain man with a rat, and in his opinion, the man was beneath the level of a rat:<sup>20</sup>

A rat has a skin at least  
 But a man who is a mere beast

May as well die,  
His death being an end of no decency.  
A rat has teeth  
But this fellow, for all his size, is beneath  
The rat's level,  
Why delay his demise?

It is the disappointment of the living that causes them to attack the dead. These poems are actually social condemnation of the dead person.

(f) The attack on the living

In these poems the mourners forget the dead, forget their own sorrows, and even forget the fact that they are related to each other, and hit out against each other. Instead of comforting a 'friend' who has lost a mother, the poet sings:

This death has killed the mother of my friend,  
Oh, now we have become equal;  
Ee, the man of good fortune,  
We shall celebrate it.  
With whom shall I speak now?  
She was the only one I trusted.  
Now we are equal;  
This death has killed my friend's mother,  
We are now equal.

The inheritor, that is, one of the brothers who is chosen to take over the family and property of the dead man, comes in for very heavy punishment. In the next song he is discriminated against and called a slave:

Odur, hide the donkeys somewhere;  
The donkeys will be inherited by slaves,  
Slaves have taken over Kao's homestead,  
The home now belongs to war-captives;  
E, Odur, listen,  
Odur, hide the donkeys somewhere,  
The wealth will be inherited by slaves.

The inheritor in the next poem is told not to boast, because all the wealth he has he got from the dead man:

He has left all his wealth for the inheritor,  
Now the inheritor boasts with it,  
He left all his wealth, I am so sad...  
Behold, what a lucky man  
The inheritor boasts for nothing,  
He got all this wealth from others.

Blinded by jealousy, brothers sting one another with mean poems, and ask the inheritor, "If death was not there, where would you get things?":

Ee, when death will not be there,  
Where will inheritors get things?

The cattle have been left to the inheritor  
 Ee, how will inheritors acquire things?  
 The iron-roofed house has been left for the  
 inheritor;  
 Ee, if death were no longer there,  
 How will inheritors get rich?  
 This inheritor is most lucky.  
 Listen, you inheritor,  
 If death had not been there,  
 Ugly man, whose daughter would have married you?

As stated above, these attacks on 'brothers' by brothers arise out of jealousies, the result of fierce competition among the eligible young men for the favour of the widow, and the property of the dead man. Some of them also embody social commentaries, and point out the weakness of the lucky inheritors. Like the satirical attacks in the short stories exchanged around the evening fire, and the songs of bitter laughter, these poems do not cause social strife among the clansmen. On the contrary, they provide a channel through which members of this close-knit group pour out their grievances and jealousies against one another, in public. These attacks with all the abuse, ridicule and insults act as a cleansing activity. The clan group that emerges from the funeral dance, which is the last of the ceremonies by which the crisis of death is faced, is a more strongly united and healthy social group.

#### Notes

1. When elders bless a young man they say, "Kwaru ma obutu i ngom ataro, ogwoki". "Your ancestor who is sleeping in the earth facing upwards, protect you". This might give the impression that the corpse is laid to rest on its back which is incorrect. The implication here is that the ancestors somehow see what happens in this world, and have some power of protecting the living.
2. See Anywar, R.S. Acoli ki ker meggi, Nairobi, 1954, pp. 46-48.
3. 'The Imagery of death in African Poetry', Africa, Vol. 68, 1968, p. 68.
4. C.M. Bowra, Primitive Song, A Mentor Book, 1963, p. 96.
5. In Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, editor, Oxford Book of English Verse, New edition, 1955, p. 899.
6. Masters and Friends, trans. Martin Turnell, N.Y. 1968, p. 284.
7. Bratsk Station and other poems, trans. Tina Tupikina-Glaessner, Godfrey Dutton and Igor Mezhakoff-Korjakin, N.Y. 1967, pp. 125-7.
8. See Evans-Pritchard, E.E. Nuer Religion, Oxford, 1965, p. 13.
9. E. Louis Backman, Religious dances in the Christian Church and popular medicine, trans. E. Classen, London, 1952, p. 140.

10. Felicita Dorothea Herman, in Oxford Book of English Verse, p. 735.
11. Oxford Book of English Verse, p. 238.
12. A hundred poems of the Chinese, trans. Kenneth Rexroth, N.Y. 1965, p. 22.
13. Dhammapada, trans. Irving Babbitt, N.Y. 1936, p. 44.
14. The Goliard Poems: Medieval Latin songs and satires, trans. G.F. Whicher, N.Y. 1949, pp. 69-71.
15. For a detailed study see Okot p'Bitek, Religion of the Central Luo, Nairobi, 1971.
16. A hundred poems of the Chinese, p. 69.
17. Op. art. p. 67.
18. Ibid.
19. Trans. John Batki, mimeo.
20. Ezra Pound, Marcella Spann eds. NY, 1964 edition, p.6.