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**Negotiating Tradition and Modernity: A Discourse-Historical Study of Okot P’Bitek’s  
*Song of Lawino***

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**Abstract**

This study examines the negotiation of tradition and modernity in Okot P’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* using Ruth Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) within Critical Discourse Analysis. The poem, a significant postcolonial African literary text, reflects the ideological conflict between indigenous African cultural traditions and Western modernity shaped by colonial history. The research adopts a qualitative textual analysis focusing on discursive strategies such as nomination, predication, argumentation, intensification, metaphor, satire, and intertextual references to Acholi oral traditions. The analysis demonstrates how Lawino represents African cultural identity and resistance, while Ocol symbolizes Westernized modernity influenced by colonial education, religion, and social norms. Findings indicate that the poem does not simply reject modernity but critically negotiates it by highlighting cultural alienation, identity conflict, and the persistence of indigenous traditions. The study concludes that *Song of Lawino* functions as a discursive site where postcolonial identity, cultural resistance, and historical memory are constructed through language.

**Keywords:** Discourse-Historical Approach, Postcolonial Discourse, African Literature, Tradition and Modernity, Okot P’Bitek, Cultural Identity

**Introduction**

Okot P’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* (1966) is widely regarded as a landmark work in African postcolonial literature that critically engages with the tension between African cultural traditions and Western modernity. The poem foregrounds the voice of Lawino, an Acholi woman who resists the Westernized attitudes of her husband Ocol and defends indigenous African cultural practices. Scholars have frequently interpreted the poem as a critique of colonial cultural domination and identity crisis in postcolonial Africa. Ramazani (2001), for example, describes *Song of Lawino* as an important assertion of “authentic African identity” expressed through indigenous imagery and rhetorical forms.

The poem emerged during a period when many African societies were negotiating the aftermath of colonial rule, particularly the influence of Western education, religion, and socio-political structures. According to Ntangaare (2021), the continuing relevance of *Song of Lawino* (1966) lies in its preservation of African traditions and performance elements that reflect communal cultural identity and historical memory. This historical context makes the poem particularly suitable for analysis through the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which emphasizes the relationship between discourse, historical context, ideology, and power.

The Discourse-Historical Approach, developed by Wodak integrates linguistic analysis with historical, social, and political contexts. Wodak and Meyer (2009) argue that discourse cannot be fully understood without examining the socio-historical conditions in which it is produced and interpreted. Similarly, Reisigl and Wodak (2009) stress that DHA seeks to uncover how discourse constructs identity, power relations, and ideological positions within specific historical contexts. These principles make DHA an effective framework for studying literary texts that engage with colonial history and cultural identity.

From a postcolonial perspective, *Song of Lawino* reflects the ideological conflict between indigenous African values and Western modernity. Ikapi (2023) observes that the poem portrays Western education and cultural assimilation as forces that contribute to the marginalization of African traditions and identities. This conflict is symbolized through the contrasting attitudes of Lawino and Ocol, representing traditional African culture and Westernized modern identity respectively.

Narrative scholarship has also emphasized the hybrid nature of the poem. Ofuani (1985) notes that although *Song of Lawino* draws on traditional Acholi oral forms, its contemporary themes and English language medium situate it within modern African literary discourse. This duality between tradition and modernity reinforces the need for historically grounded discourse analysis.

Furthermore, Okumu (2021) highlights the intertextual relationship between *Song of Lawino* and Acholi oral songs, demonstrating how indigenous oral traditions inform the poem's stylistic and thematic structure. This intertextual dimension reflects the historical continuity of African oral culture within written postcolonial literature.

Studies have also explored ideological aspects such as religion and satire in the poem. Adetuyi and Alex (2019) argue that satire in *Song of Lawino* functions as a critique of religious and cultural imposition, revealing tensions between African belief systems and imported Western practices. Such ideological tensions are central to DHA, which examines how discourse reproduces or challenges power relations.

From a broader theoretical standpoint, Critical Discourse Analysis scholars emphasize that discourse both reflects and shapes social realities. Wodak (2015) notes that discourse studies aim to understand how language constructs social identities, political ideologies, and cultural practices. Applying this perspective to *Song of Lawino* allows researchers to examine how cultural identity and resistance are discursively constructed within a historically specific postcolonial context.

Despite extensive literary criticism on *Song of Lawino*, relatively few studies have explicitly applied the Discourse-Historical Approach to the poem. Most scholarship has focused on postcolonial themes, cultural identity, or stylistic analysis rather than integrating historical discourse analysis with literary interpretation. This gap highlights the need for a DHA-based study that systematically explores how historical context, ideology, and discourse interact in the negotiation of tradition and modernity within the poem.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine how *Song of Lawino* constructs cultural identity, resistance, and ideological conflict through discourse shaped by colonial history and postcolonial realities. By applying the Discourse-Historical Approach, the study seeks to contribute to both African literary criticism and Critical Discourse Analysis by demonstrating how literary texts function as sites of historical and ideological negotiation.

### **Research Objective**

- To analyze how tradition and modernity are constructed and negotiated in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* using the Discourse-Historical Approach by examining historical context, ideology, and discursive strategies in the text.

## Research Question

1. How does Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* discursively negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity from a Discourse-Historical Approach perspective?

## Literature Review

Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966) has attracted considerable scholarly attention due to its critique of colonial modernity, cultural alienation, and the tension between African tradition and Western influence. Scholars have examined the poem through postcolonial, anthropological, linguistic, and discourse-analytical frameworks. However, relatively few studies explicitly adopt a discourse-historical perspective to analyse how historical context, ideology, and cultural identity are constructed through discourse in the text.

Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike (1980) interpret *Song of Lawino* as a significant example of African cultural nationalism, arguing that p'Bitek challenges Western literary dominance by foregrounding African oral tradition and indigenous worldview. Their study highlights how Lawino's voice resists colonial cultural hegemony, yet it focuses more on ideological affirmation than on systematic discourse analysis.

Similarly, Killam (1979) situates p'Bitek's work within East African literary development, emphasizing the socio-political context of postcolonial Africa. Killam notes that the poem reflects anxieties about modernization and cultural loss following independence. While his historical contextualization is valuable, the study does not analyze discursive strategies or linguistic construction of identity in detail.

Gikandi (2001) offers a broader postcolonial interpretation, arguing that African literature frequently negotiates modernity by reinterpreting tradition rather than simply opposing Western influence. In his discussion of African cultural texts, including p'Bitek's poetry, Gikandi suggests that the tension between tradition and modernity is complex and dialogic. However, his approach remains largely theoretical rather than textually discursive.

Nazareth (1974) provides one of the earliest critical readings of *Song of Lawino*, emphasizing its satirical critique of Westernized African elites. He argues that Lawino's lament exposes cultural mimicry and identity fragmentation caused by colonial education. Although Nazareth highlights ideological discourse, he does not employ contemporary discourse-historical methodologies that connect textual features with socio-historical processes.

More recently, Wodak (2001) developed the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which stresses the importance of linking discourse analysis with historical context, intertextuality, and socio-political power relations. While DHA has been widely applied in political discourse studies, its application to African literary texts such as *Song of Lawino* remains limited. This methodological gap suggests potential for deeper interdisciplinary analysis combining literary criticism with critical discourse studies.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), to examine how tradition and modernity are discursively negotiated in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966). A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting language, ideology, cultural identity, and historical context within a literary text rather than numerical measurement. The primary data consist of the poem *Song of Lawino*, while secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, and historical studies related to postcolonial African literature, discourse analysis, and cultural identity. DHA provides an appropriate theoretical framework because it connects discourse analysis with historical, social, and political contexts,

enabling an understanding of how colonial experience and cultural transformation shape literary discourse.

Data collection involves close textual reading of the poem, with attention to passages reflecting cultural identity, colonial influence, tradition, modernity, and ideological conflict. The analysis focuses on discursive strategies such as nomination, predication, argumentation, and intensification or mitigation, along with rhetorical devices including metaphor, repetition, satire, and symbolism. Historical contextualization and intertextual connections with African oral traditions and postcolonial discourse remain central to interpretation. Credibility is maintained through reliance on textual evidence and established scholarly literature, while proper citation ensures academic integrity. The study remains delimited to *Song of Lawino* and examines it specifically through the Discourse-Historical Approach to understand how discourse constructs cultural identity and resistance in a postcolonial context.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in the **Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)** within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), developed by Ruth Wodak and colleagues. DHA emphasizes the inseparable relationship between language, ideology, and historical context, arguing that discourse both reflects and constructs social, political, and cultural realities (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The approach integrates historical, socio-political, and cultural perspectives to analyze how texts produce meaning, represent identities, and convey power relations (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Within DHA, discursive strategies such as nomination, predication, argumentation, and intensification or mitigation are analyzed to uncover the ways in which speakers or writers construct social actors, events, and ideological positions (Wodak, 2001).

Applying DHA to Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* allows for a systematic examination of how the poem negotiates **tradition and modernity** in postcolonial African society. Lawino's discourse serves as a site of ideological struggle, highlighting the tension between African cultural heritage and Western influences imposed during and after colonialism. Through DHA, the poem can be analyzed for its linguistic and rhetorical strategies, such as repetition, metaphor, satire, and intertextual references to oral tradition, which construct cultural identity and articulate resistance against cultural assimilation. By situating the text within its historical and socio-cultural context, DHA enables a nuanced understanding of how literature functions as a medium for both reflecting and shaping postcolonial realities, ideology, and identity (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

### **Analysis: Negotiation of Tradition and Modernity in Song of Lawino**

From the perspective of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), *Song of Lawino* constructs an ideological conflict between African tradition and Western modernity through specific discursive strategies. One important strategy is **nomination**, where social actors are named and categorized. Lawino frequently refers to herself as a "village woman" and representative of traditional Acholi culture, while Ocol identifies himself as "a modern man, a progressive and civilised man." This contrast establishes two competing identities: one rooted in indigenous culture and the other shaped by colonial modernity. The naming strategy reflects historical postcolonial tensions in African societies where Western education and Christianity were often associated with progress while traditional practices were marginalized.

Another prominent DHA strategy in the poem is **predication**, where attributes are assigned to social actors. Ocol describes African traditions as "primitive," ignorant, and backward, while Lawino attributes negative qualities to Westernized Africans by portraying Clementine as artificial and culturally alienated. For example, Lawino criticizes Clementine's use of cosmetics and

Western fashion, suggesting that imitation of European beauty standards leads to loss of authentic identity. This predication strategy reveals ideological struggle: modernity is portrayed by Ocol as progress, but by Lawino as cultural betrayal.

The poem also uses **argumentation strategies** to justify positions regarding tradition and modernity. Lawino repeatedly defends African customs by appealing to cultural continuity, communal values, and historical experience. Her rhetorical question, “Who has ever uprooted the pumpkin?” symbolically argues that African culture is deeply rooted and cannot easily be replaced. This argument reflects broader postcolonial resistance to cultural imperialism and emphasizes the persistence of indigenous identity despite colonial influence.

Another important feature is **intensification and metaphorical language**, which strengthen ideological positions. Lawino describes Ocol’s insults through powerful metaphors such as his tongue being “bitter” and “fierce,” suggesting emotional violence associated with colonial mentality. These metaphors intensify the conflict and reflect the psychological effects of cultural alienation. The historical context of colonial education and missionary influence helps explain why Westernized Africans sometimes rejected indigenous traditions, creating internal cultural divisions.

Interdiscursively, the poem draws heavily on **Acholi oral tradition**, including repetition, communal address, and natural imagery. These elements reinforce African cultural identity and function as resistance against Western literary dominance. From a DHA perspective, this intertextual connection to oral tradition situates the poem within historical African cultural practices, demonstrating continuity despite modernization pressures.

Overall, the analysis shows that *Song of Lawino* negotiates tradition and modernity through discursive construction of identity, ideological labeling, metaphorical intensification, and historical contextualization. The poem does not simply reject modernity but critiques uncritical Westernization while affirming the value of indigenous culture. Through DHA, the text emerges as a site where postcolonial African identity, historical memory, and cultural resistance are actively constructed through discourse.

### **Findings and Conclusion**

The discourse-historical analysis of Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* demonstrates that the poem constructs a strong ideological tension between African tradition and Western modernity through specific discursive strategies. The analysis shows that nomination strategies categorize Lawino as a representative of indigenous African culture, while Ocol symbolizes Westernized modern identity shaped by colonial education and Christianity. These contrasting identities reflect the historical postcolonial experience in Africa, where Western influence often created internal cultural divisions. The poem consistently positions African traditions as culturally meaningful and historically rooted, whereas uncritical Westernization appears associated with alienation and cultural displacement.

The study also finds that predication and argumentation strategies play a crucial role in shaping ideological meanings. African customs are negatively labeled by Ocol as primitive and backward, while Lawino counters this discourse by presenting indigenous practices as authentic, communal, and historically grounded. Metaphorical intensification, satire, and references to Acholi oral traditions further strengthen this resistance discourse. The use of English language insults and references to Western education highlight how colonial language functions as a symbol of power and cultural hierarchy. Overall, the findings indicate that the poem does not simply oppose modernity but critically negotiates it, emphasizing cultural continuity while questioning cultural mimicry and identity loss.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that *Song of Lawino* functions as a significant postcolonial literary text in which tradition and modernity are negotiated through historically situated discourse. Using the Discourse-Historical Approach, the analysis shows that language in the poem constructs cultural identity, ideological resistance, and historical memory. Lawino's voice emerges as a symbolic defense of African cultural heritage, while Ocol represents the complexities and contradictions of colonial modernity. The poem thus reflects broader postcolonial struggles over identity, cultural authenticity, and social transformation. The study also highlights the usefulness of the Discourse-Historical Approach for literary analysis, as it connects textual features with historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. By situating the poem within colonial and postcolonial realities, the research demonstrates how discourse serves as a site of cultural negotiation rather than simple opposition between tradition and modernity.

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