

Life & Arts



She almost did not audition. How 23-year-old Gibril Igale found her place on screen. **P.28**



In *Song of Lacica*, Jane Okot p'Bitek Langoya steps boldly into her father's literary shadow and emerges with a resonant voice of her own. This stirring modern epic blends oral tradition, political commentary, cultural memory, and moral instruction into a deeply moving reflection on loss, identity, and the urgent need to preserve heritage in a rapidly changing world.

Song of Lacica: Ode to culture, grief and renewal

BY PHILIP MATOGO

An epic poem is a long, formal narrative poem detailing the extraordinary adventures of a hero, often shaping cultural or national identity. On a global level, examples such as Homer's *Iliad* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* best describe an epic poem.

Locally, *Song of Lawino* (1966) by Okot p'Bitek is widely recognised as a major modern African epic poem or a long, dramatic monologue in verse. P'Bitek's daughter, Jane Okot P'Bitek Langoya follows in this tradition with her own literary masterpiece, *Song of Lacica*. Inevitably, there are contrasts between hers and her father's work.

Where her father's *Song of Lawino* was originally written in Acholi/Luo and translated by the author, Ms Langoya's epic poem was originally written in English and will be translated into Acholi/Luo.

However, similar to her late father's poetry, it functions as a modern epic by capturing the cultural identity and struggles of the Acholi people against Westernisation, rather than focusing on mythical heroes as epics such as the *Iliad* have done. To do so, the author cleaves to the song school tradition of poetry, which is a peculiar departure from the classical epic poem canon, while ironically staying true to her father's epic poetry origins.

The song school tradition was created by Okot p'Bitek. It is a literary movement officially known as the East African Song School or the Okot School of poetry. Established with the 1966 publication of his masterpiece, *Song of Lawino*, it revolutionised African literature by moving away from European styles toward indigenous forms. It continues to do so with p'Bitek's daughter.

Based on a true story, *Song of Lacica* is a powerful, soul-stirring poem that reach-

es deep into memory, grief, and hope. Throughout this page-turner, the author brings to life the voice of Lacica, a wise grandmother who recalls an ancient betrayal, the killing of Rwot Oringamoi, which shook her people and continues to haunt generations. From this story of pain and loss comes a wider reflection on family, leadership, unity, and the traditions that once held communities together.

This poem cannot just be read quietly. It is to be heard, felt, and remembered. Its lines echo the rhyme of song and oral storytelling, carrying proverbs, prayers, and chants that speak, nay, sing across time.

With each verse, *Langoya* calls us to look honestly at the ways culture is being eroded, when children are neglected, ancestral land is sold, or the wisdom of the elders is ignored. Yet the lament, in this epic, also carries a yearning for renewal, for healing, and for the rediscovery of values that give life meaning.

What makes this work so compelling is the way it bridges the old and new. It does so ever so eloquently and singularly while honouring the poetic tradition by her father. In so doing, *Langoya*'s voice makes its own unique contribution to poetry with velvety tenderness and lyrical Oomph.

Why it is unique

It also carries life-enhancing lessons which are distinctly hers. This is why *Song of Lacica* is also a didactic poem, specifically designed to instruct, teaching moral, philosophical, religious, or practical lessons. It uses clear language, structured narratives, and sometimes allegory to convey a direct message or purpose to the reader. It may also be classified as instructional poetry, moral verse, educational poetry, or preceptive poetry.

It is also political poetry, inviting us to remember who we are and to choose a future rooted in dignity and unity, regardless of where one comes from or was born.

Its universal message will strike a hopeful note everywhere. Its sufferings, however, are its own. Through the cultural resistance it promotes, we are reminded of the Acholi proverb popularised by her father in the poem *Song of Lawino*: Do not uproot the pumpkin in the old homestead.

Sadly, this proverb is ignored and thus: "We are in a period of mourning. Death has fallen upon our homestead. We used to live as one people; we had generations in one homestead: Great grandparents, grandparents and parents. Children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, all living together in one homestead in harmony," writes the author. The slaying of the Rwot is the uprooting of the pumpkin in the old homestead, something that wreaks havoc in the Lukaka, people of the affected clan. It is indeed an epic tale, one that renders the book "unputdownable".

As renowned Ugandan poet Beverley Nambazo Nsengiyunva put it: "*Song of Lacica* is a reminder that monologues retain their richness and that imagery drawn from historical reference and cultural anecdotes are a necessity in appreciating various forms of literature."



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Jane Okot P'Bitek Langoya follows in her father's footsteps.