Acholi Love

Author(s): Okot p'Bitek

Source: *Transition*, 1997, No. 75/76, The Anniversary Issue: Selections from Transition, 1961-1976 (1997), pp. 182-190

Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2935404

ACHOLI LOVE

From *Transition* 17 (1964)

Okot p'Bitek

"*Amiti*, I want you," is the first thing an Acholi youth tells the young woman who may later become his wife. The girl may be alone or in the company of others, on her way to the spring to draw water, or coming from the garden; she may be in the woods collecting dry firewood or wild mushrooms. The young man may be herding in the wild pastures or returning home from the fields, perhaps after a swim in the rocky stream.

If the girl is in a line of others and the young man not alone, each of the boys "shoots" the girl who has struck his eye. "*Rip-kipi!*" he shouts, emulating the blast of a gun, and he indicates the girl of his choice by describing her position in the line: "Mine is the second from the rear," "The leader is mine." At the hunt the first person to shoot or spear an animal is called the "owner" of the flesh. Usually there is much quarrel over who was the first man. But when youths "shoot" girls, they do not contest much over which girl was "shot" by whom.

The boys now rush up to the line of girls, and seize hold of the arm of the one claimed. You declare your interest: "I want you strongly, I want you to be my wife." In other cultures the proposal comes at the end of a certain period during which the two young people are supposed to get to discover one another's interests and "regards," whether in the color of petals or the songs of birds, or Shakespeare, or collecting sea shells. "The lovers delight in endearments, in comparison of their regards," wrote Emerson, adding, "From exchanging glances, they advance to acts of courtesy, of gallantry, then to fiery passions, to plighting troth, and marriage."[1] The Acholi proposal comes at the very beginning, before the two young people know anything about each other, before one even knows the name of the other.

When the youth declares to the girl that he wants her to be his wife, she declines. She must decline. You do not say "Yes" so soon. It is not done. If you accept the proposal there and then, it

is taken as a simple joke, as for instance when the girl happens to know that she is related to the foolish young man.

The girl may remain disdainfully silent, as if you were not speaking to her. You ask her whether there is some oil in her mouth that she fears may flow out should she open her mouth to speak to you. She replies, curtly, that she does not like to hear stupid words. You ask her whether her father shared a similar stupidity when he said foolish things to her mother, many years ago. She will try to force herself free from your grip, and if you do not stand your ground manfully enough she will push you away, to the amusement of the others. The Acholi girl was not weak: at the wrestling matches that took place among the youths, girls and boys wrestled together; often, she floored a young man!

If she fails to unhand herself, she will tell you that she does not want you, that she does not accept your proposal. You ask, "*Pino?* Why not?" She gives the first reason that comes into her head, and you rebut it. If she says, "Because I do not like your mother, I hear that her tongue is too sharp," you reply, "But it is not my mother who is going to be your husband."

The love-debate has begun, and continues for several weeks, even months. The first encounter ends with the young woman indicating the top of her mother's hut to the boy, or somehow letting the young man know where or how to find her. You visit her in her homestead and call her to "show you the way." You may go there any time of the day, but the usual time is in the evening, soon after supper. You waylay her on her way to the spring, or to the woods, or the garden. At the *orak* dance,[2] she dances before you, and you whisper things into her ear.

If she proves too tough a debater for you, you call in a friend or two to help. She too may bring assistants, her intimate friends. But whatever you do or say, her answer is always the same: "No." The young man may use love charms. The most effective one is *tung gwok*, "dog's horn." Normally, dogs do not grow horns; but if you are lucky, and you find a bitch giving birth to puppies, you look out for the last one, which sometimes has a horn. The bitch always eats up its last puppy with the horn, and becomes very fierce when it is about to deliver it. You have to fight the bitch and take the horned puppy. The horn is then removed and cut into tiny luck bits. The bits are then worked into an armband, or you wear it on your loin. At the hunt you cannot miss an animal; and no girl or married woman can resist you. In battle the enemy's spear or arrow whines past your ear and the man beside or behind you gets hit.

When the youth declares to the girl that he wants her to be his wife, she declines. She must decline. You do not say "Yes" so soon.

If the "dog's horn" charm is not available, you use a certain climber plant called *lok omero*. You pluck its leaf and rub it in your hands as you go to meet her, or you take out its root and chew it. It has a strong taste and aroma. Women also use this charm to capture the favor of a man they desire, and in a polygamous home, co-wives use it a great deal. When a man is seen to be very fond

of one of his wives, people say she has got the love charm.

Amwonyo-laa has won her bangles,
Amwonyo-laa has won the love charm,
That's why her husband is fond of her,
She has got lok omero.
Husbands of today are won by feeding them on fish;
Let me try it on mine:
Behold, one wife sleeps in the chicken house, in the valley;
The other one sleeps in the tin-roofed house, on the hill.
Husbands of today are treated with lok omero*;*
Let me try it on mine.

Magic, as is known today, is partly the acting out of a situation, the expression of deeply felt desires in symbolic terms. When the Acholi young man plucks the leaf of *lok omero* and rubs it in his hands, or when he puts on his armband containing the dog's horn luck bits, he is acting out his deep desire to possess the girl.[3] He is saying, "Oh, how I wish you were mine now! Please say yes when we meet tonight!"

At night when they meet, the young lady will again say, "No!" As will be seen later, the word "yes" does not exist in the vocabulary of an Acholi young lady. She never says, "Yes." The young man is not unduly disturbed by her negative answers. He is far from disappointed; for he knows, as Rousseau did, that women are really endowed with skill, not duplicity; that they are not false even when they tell a lie. "Why do you consult their words when it is not their mouths that speak? Consult their eyes, their color, their breathing, their timid manner, their slight resistance: that is the language nature gave them for your answer. *The lips always say 'No,' and rightly so, but the tone is not always the same, and that cannot lie*" (my italics).[4]

From the day of your first encounter, you begin to ñote that the young lady removes all her adornments: her ring, her earrings, her giraffe-tail bangles, and necklaces, when she comes to "show you the way," or when she expects to run into you. But one night when you have called, she puts on a ring, or bangle. You walk her a good distance from her homestead; then you grab hold of the arm on which the ring is worn and use all your skill and force to remove the article. She will employ all her tact, cleverness, and energy to appear most unwilling to part with the ring. She will tell you that it does not belong to her, that her mother will beat her if the ring is lost. She will scratch and bite you and hit you with her fist; she will shed pints of tears to wash you off her.

The young man does not listen to her protestations; he pays no attention to the "flea's bites" and harmless scratches and blows. The ring that she has worn that night is the token that she has seriously considered the proposal you made three, perhaps five, months ago; and that as far as she is concerned the answer is "Yes." But she will plead with you that the ring is stuck on her finger, that you should allow her to remove it herself. If you do, she tries to run away and escape from you. The young man does all he can, and this terrific game ends with the boy walking homeward with the "article" in his hand, feeling elated and victorious. You note also that, amid her tears, there is a smile and a giggle. Hers are

not crocodile tears, but tears of real joy.

In traditional times, there was no place for bachelors and spinsters. An unmarried man was called *la-bot*; they referred to such a person as *la-bot ma mwa*, a mere bachelor. It did not matter how old, or how huge you were, your contributions to the clan mattered little; however brilliant you were in the battlefront, however much food you produced, you had no social standing. They never invited you to the clan meetings, nor were you consulted when marriages were being arranged.

Anywar wrote that only those men who were married were counted as men.[5] The *la-bot* was taunted by his mother, who always insisted that he carry food from the kitchen to waiting groups—a job for little boys and girls. At *orak* dances they would sing stinging songs such as:

Whenever I hear this call
To go and carry food;
Oh, oh, it pains my heart!
Am I the Brigadier for carrying dishes?

A spinster's position was equally painful. Your companions, the girls you grew up with, left the village with their respective husbands; life became lonely and sad. You could not play among the smaller girls who came after you: you did not speak the same language with them; they had their jokes about their boyfriends which you did not follow. So you were forced to spend much of the time with your brothers' wives. You never really belonged; you could no longer sleep in your mother's hut, because your father also sleeps there; nor could you stay with your brother too long. Everywhere you appeared to be interfering, because the division of labor in the traditional Acholi homestead did not take into account what unmarried daughters should do. It was based on the assumption that when girls grow up, they get married and leave the homestead.

The result of this most powerful social force was that there was a great urge to marry, to find a wife, to get a husband. This, too, acted as a potent social control factor, because the parents of both parties insisted that their child should marry a well-behaved, promising partner. This, too, provides a clue to the strictness with which fathers and brothers treated the girls, and the cruelty meted out to a young man caught sleeping with a girl.

If she proves too tough a debater for you, you call in a friend or two to help. She too may bring assistants, her intimate friends. But whatever you do or say, her answer is always the same: "No." The young man may use love charms.

Up to now there has been no mention of sexual congress. But soon after the young lady has given the token to her boyfriend, he begins to invite her to *oo*—to reach, to come to his bachelor hut, called *otogo*. And true to form, she will say, "No." She will, of course, have told her mother that she has accepted a young man's proposal. Her mother now begins to bring much pressure on her, and to urge her to go to the young man's hut, and find out if, as the Acholi say, he is alive. The desire for childbirth was so strong, and the implications of inability to produce so grave, that it was

absolutely essential to know, right from the start, who might be the sterile party.

Commenting on the problems of childless marriage, Havelock Ellis wrote, "The situation ought indeed seldom to arise. If there is strong desire for children, it is highly desirable that both parties should submit themselves to medical investigation before marriage, if only to ascertain that there is a fair probability of successful conception and parturition."[6] Acholi consultants, diviners, and medicine men left the problem of medical investigations to the parties concerned. They did not, rightly or wrongly, think it all that difficult. Girl visits boy in his hut; boy sleeps with her normally, therefore boy is sexually fit. If for some reason boy cannot or does not sleep with girl, then boy is not sexually fit. When this is the case, the girl reports to her mother, and that is the end of the affair between the two.

As they approach the hut, the girl's steps slacken, and they stop. Now the boy has to drag her inside; and this is not an easy job. She coils herself tightly around the post by the door, like a python around a lamb. After a long struggle, she is removed and forced into the hut. She again coils herself tightly, now round the central post.

As for the woman, they waited to see if she could get pregnant. If after a long time she did not have a "stomach," the conclusion was unanimous and inescapable. Hers was an unenviable life; and when she died, her father was bound to procure another girl to replace her.

The young man has brought home
A girl whose womb has been swallowed by a leopard
O the young man he shakes his head gear for nothing
The young man that shakes his head gear
The one shaking his head gear
He has no wife
The young man has brought home a woman
Whose womb has been swallowed by a leopard
She can produce no child.

The story is told of the sad circumstances of the death in 1923 of the great chief of Atyak, Rwot Olya. In his old age the chief married a young woman by the name of Anek. For fifteen years they were without issue. Anek's mother paid a visit to her daughter, and one night, behind closed doors, she was heard telling Anek, "My child, for a long time I have urged you to have secret congress with some other man who might give you a child. Olya is an old man, he is useless." During the next days, whenever the chief asked his wife to do something for him, she retorted, "Don't bother me; will doing this bring me a child?" Chief Olya locked his wife and himself in a house, killed her, and then stabbed himself to death.[7]

One night the girl and her companion (called *lalwoko*, one who accompanies, or *ea caden*, the witness) slip out secretly from the mother's hut, making sure that no one has seen them. They are met by the young man, who is also accompanied by a friend. As they ap-

proach the hut, the girl's steps slacken, and they stop. Now the boy has to drag her inside; and this is not an easy job. She coils herself tightly around the post by the door, like a python around a lamb. After a long struggle, she is removed and forced into the hut. She again coils herself tightly, now round the central post. On some occasions this central post may break down, on account of the vigorous struggle and the earlier activity of termites. At long last she is uncoiled and thrown onto the bed.

She is violent and struggles wildly, undoing your grip, throwing powerful limbs here and there, tears flowing in plenty. Sometimes she pushes you right off the bed, and you hear a little giggle. You must never allow her to escape, for you will become a laughingstock. They will call you all sorts of names, and may even suspect you of not being *whole, alive.* They will liken you to that useless youth who was sent to finish off a pig that had been speared almost fatally by his father, but who let the pig escape. Someone will sing the following song in your face:

You let the pig escape,
You let my father's pig escape!
You let it get away from you,
Behold the youth who let my father's pig go!

She locks up her big toes, her knees and thighs, tightly, tightly. You get a hold of her arm with one hand, and grip the hand, and bend hard at the wrist. (This is very painful.) You twist one of her fingers. You apply pressure at certain vital and painful points at the joints. She shrieks, her tears streaming. You shut your ears to her cries, because you know that all this is bluff; nay, encouragement. She is encouraging you. At long last, when she has made you feel convinced that she was really unwilling and that your strength has overpowered her, she gives in. Other times you may have to call in a helpmate, who will hold her legs apart.

Ellis has discussed the importance of *touch* in sex. This, he wrote, is the primary and most primitive form of contrectation; of all the great sensory fields,

Despite all the energy spent, the tears, the wailing, the biting and beating, despite all the twistings of limbs and scratchings, at the end of it all there are no bones broken, no dislocations or sprains, no bruises or cuts, no blood spilled. Neither one aims at hurting the other, and neither becomes really annoyed or angry.

he says, "the field of touch is at once the least intellectual and the most massively emotional. These qualities, as well as its intimate and primitive association with the apparatus of tumescence and detumescence, make touch the readiest and most powerful channel by which the sexual pleasure may be reached."[8] He quotes from an erotic eighteenth-century novel: "With all her straining, her wrestling and striving to break from the clasp of the arms, it was visible she aimed at nothing more than multiplying points of touch with him."[9] The woman poet Renée Vivien compared

touch with perfumes and music: "The strange and complex art of touch equals the dream of perfumes and the miracle of sound."[10] The celebrated French philosopher, Rousseau, pleaded: "Has not the woman the same needs as a man? Her fate would be too cruel if she had no language in which to express her legitimate desires except in the words she dares not utter. . . . It is of vital importance that she should learn to touch his heart without showing that she cares for him."[11] Tagore sang:

I dreamt that she sat by my head
Tenderly ruffling my hair with her finger
Playing the melody of her touch.

The Acholi lover is violent, turbulent. She does not sit there tenderly ruffling your hair with her finger. An Acholi beauty was not soft, tender, and delicate. She bubbled with life, with vitality; when she passed by you could hear her footsteps. She walked as she danced, with vigor; she did not go on tiptoe, softly, softly like a cat, like a sick person. Naughty and quick to fight, she challenged all comers at the mixed wrestling matches; and her lover, knowing this, treated her accordingly. The slow, heavy, inactive girls were rebuked, the tender-looking ones were regarded as sickly; both categories were likened to beer that does not sell, because it is flat, dead.

Acholi love is certainly not a kind of pond into which the lovers fall together. The kind of love which the poets and troubadours sang about was unknown among the Acholi.

The Acholi did not recognize the institution of kissing, or the tender and passionate embrace, or the hug. But during the love fight, in which the young lady played the part of "the unwilling one" and the boy "the aggressor," the importance of touch was thoroughly realized and exploited, and its needs satisfied. It is revealing to note that despite all the energy spent, the tears, the wailing, the biting and beating, despite all the twistings of limbs and scratchings, at the end of it all there are no bones broken, no dislocations or sprains, no bruises or cuts, no blood spilled. Neither one aims at hurting the other, and neither becomes really annoyed or angry.

Not every Acholi male who desired a polygamous second wife could have one. Indeed, in old days, only the chief and other notables, great generals and heads of clans, could afford to marry more than one wife. But this did not prevent a youth or a married person from having more than one lover. The young men had a number of girlfriends. At any dance they proudly displayed the rings, bangles, necklaces, etc., that they had taken from their girls. With most of these he had physical union: hence the expression used of a naughty youth, *wiye deg ten*, his head rejects the pillow, preferring the arm of a young woman. And this meant that every night he had to find a girl whose arm would provide the pillow; a risky and costly business, as will be seen.

But not only men had this freedom, if it can be called freedom; young women, too, were polyerotic and enjoyed sex relations with more than one man. "Husband" in Acholi is *cwar*, the

other lover is *mec*. Listen to the song below:

O lightning strike my husband, strike my husband,
Leave my lover, O leave my lover.
Behold him walking, I like the way he walks;
Behold him dancing, I like the way he dances;
Listen to him singing; I like the way he sings;
I like his talk . . . etc.
O lightning strike my husband, strike my husband,
Leave my lover, O leave my lover.

Brothers, husbands, and parents were all very strict, on the lookout to see that their sister, wife, or daughter was not taken out by boys or other men to sleep with. If she was spotted slipping out, her brothers followed her secretly and stealthily, until the two of them had shut themselves into the hut. The building was then surrounded and the couple caught red-handed. The young lady was subjected to severe beatings; but the youth's lot was more awful. According to Anywar, they pricked your feet with thorns and then broke them so that you had the heads embedded in your flesh and found it impossible to walk; they flogged you with thorny twigs, so that you bled all over the body; and sometimes they even hit your penis several times with a club.

When you were caŭght sleeping with a married woman, you could be killed on the spot; or else they cut off your ears. This usually led to inter-clan feuds, in which a number of people might be killed on both sides.

On top of all this you paid the sex fine, *luk*, a bull and a cow. If you could not raise the beasts, then you paid with a girl.[12]

Why all this cruelty? It was not because the Acholi believed in chastity, in "purity from unlawful sexual intercourse."[13] We have already seen that a girl's mother would insist that her daughter visit her boyfriend and find out if he was *alive*. It would appear that the institution of pre-marriage congress lent itself to abuse; and, moreover, that in the absence of trustworthy contraceptives and other methods of birth control, this union could easily lead to pregnancy, with its attendant problems of having children born outside of wedlock. It has already been mentioned that traditionally there was no room for the bachelor and spinster in the clan system. Looseness in a girl was one of the reasons for her not being married. The most beautiful girls were suspected of looseness: hence the proverb, *laber ume nwee*, the nose of the beautiful one smells. The other reason was having an illegitimate child. The unmarried girl with a child was referred to as *oruta*, she is a pathetic figure.

The Acholi lover is violent, turbulent. She does not sit there tenderly ruffling your hair with her finger.

The young lady was punished for her own sake, for being so foolish as not to think of her future. The young man was severely punished because it was he who was the cause of the social downfall of the girl. When beating him, the brothers kept saying, "You want to abuse our sister, you want to spoil her,"

meaning the lover had no intention of marrying the girl. So that, while frankly polyerotic, Acholi youths of both sexes knew exactly what risks they were taking when indulging in the game of love.

Elspeth Huxley has observed that "the Acholi were once a highly moral people. In the old days adultery was a rare crime punishable by a beating, sometimes so severe as to cripple or kill. With the coming of British rule the penalty was reduced to one bull and one cow, commuted in practice to 70/- cash. This has not proved a deterrent." An old chief told her that most cases brought to his court are adultery cases.[14]

What is Acholi love? The emotional content of the relationship between the young man and the young lady is called *mit*, want, desire. The young man tells the girl he wants her, desires her to be his. But after marriage, the happy relationship between wife and husband is attributed to *mar*, fondness. The husband brings little things for her, buys her good clothes and beads, and is almost overjealous about her. It is said of such a man, *nadi maro dako-ne*, so-and-so is very fond of his wife. Others have interpreted the word *mar* as love, but it is obvious that its meaning and significance differ from that of the English word; *mar* is used to indicate the feeling that children have toward fruits and sweets and games.

The young man is not unduly disturbed by her negative answers. He is far from disappointed; for he knows, as Rousseau did, that women are really endowed with skill, not duplicity; that they are not false even when they tell a lie.

Acholi love is certainly not a kind of pond into which the lovers fall together. The idea of romantic love, which looks upon the love object as precious and exceedingly difficult to possess, and involves a devotion to it which is associated with a reverence so profound it almost necessarily excludes all desire for intimacy; this kind of love which the poets and troubadours sang about, was unknown among the Acholi.

Notes

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays* (Everyman's Library), p. 107.
2. *Orak* is youths' dance. See R. M. Bere, "Acholi Dances," *Uganda Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1.
3. See John Beattie, *Other Cultures* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 204–5.
4. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, translated by Barbara Foxley (Everyman's Library), p. 348.
5. R. S. Anywar, *Acholi ki Ker Megi* (Kampala, 1954), p. 64.
6. Havelock Ellis, *The Psychology of Sex* (Pan Books Ltd., 1963), p. 253.
7. R. S. Anywar, p. 152.
8. Havelock Ellis, pp. 44–45.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Rousseau. See also Kenneth Walker, *The Physiology of Sex* (Pelican, 1962), p. 102: "A clever wife . . . does not merely submit to his embraces, but collaborates with him towards the common aim of mutual satisfaction. And what is of importance is that she must do all this without ever letting him know that she is teaching him to become an expert lover."
12. Lacito Okech, p. 18.
13. See A. W. Southall, "On Chastity in Africa," *Uganda Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2.
14. E. Huxley, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (London, 1956), p. 244.