

SYMBOLISING ORATURE, HEROISM AND GENDER RELATIONS IN OKOITI OMTATAH'S *LWANDA MAGERE*

Pepetual Mforbe Chiangong

Humboldt University, Berlin

Abstract

Folklore in most African contexts conveys age-old traditions, societal values, and the history of communities. It also communicates the state of social interactions, particularly those associated with formations of gender. Besides its historical content, legends for instance hold community together. Orature in drama, therefore, employs symbolic codes and sign systems, through which processes of signification and communication contribute to the dramatic logic. This paper will first of all explore a Luo legend that captures the heroic achievements of Lwanda Magere in Okoiti Omatatah's eponymous play. Focusing on the character of Lwanda Magere, perceived as ambiguous, the paper investigates the notion of duality in order to portray how traditional systems contest heroism and disparages womanhood. Equally projecting masculinity as nuanced, the paper interrogates how Lwanda Magere mediates cultural norms and societal expectation. Embedded in the said codes and systems, my analysis will help clarify how the materiality of folklore, character, and linguistic units could possibly affect the functioning of, supposedly, grounded traditional institutions. Finally, discussing how relevant Omatatah's drama is to postcolonial African drama as a whole, the semiotisation processes will offer new meanings to what Isaiah U. Ilo calls a "post indiginist" (2013) understanding of modern African drama in a postcolonial context.

Introduction

The dual formation conferred on non-linguistic and linguistic units creates meanings from how these elements are employed in specific cultural environments. Meaning-making in dramatic arts is partly embedded in symbols, explored here to lend an understanding to the social, political and cultural life of characters in a play. Anna Maria Lorusso's book on cultural semiotics offers an exploration of space in which symbols, an important element of semiotics, could potentially offer multiple layers of meaning to specific actions and material objects embodied in a performance text. When one considers how a belief system operates in a specific cultural environment, the susceptibility associated with societal transformation is imagined, particularly when such change is dependent on specific actions taken by community members. This study reflects on symbolic elements embodied in storytelling and ritual to explore the role and identity of important

characters in a play as they are centralized in the gender and masculinity debate. Focusing on *Lwanda Magere*, a contemporary play by Okoiti Omtatah, that is based on a well-known legend of the Luo people of Western Kenya, the discussion in this paper concentrates on the symbolic elements as the analysis benefits from an enlivening dramatic piece to explore important codes associated with the predominant characters of the play vis; Lwanda Magere, his first wife Mikayi, the elderly Story-Teller, and the Lang'o Princess.

Observing the cultural environment in which these characters operate, one reverts to Lorusso's take on culture and symbolism when she states that:

I rather think that culture is a profoundly malleable and relative entity, whose meaning changes depending on the subject that observes and inter-defines it; it is something that is differential. Semiosis, in fact, lives through relationships and differences, and the specificity of the semiotic point of view lies in its capacity to capture and analyze the network of relationships and differences in which meaning is given (p.6).

In embedding symbols in a critical social and political content like in *Lwanda Magere*, Lorusso's study of semiotics of culture further allows us to examine "“meaning in action”" (2015: 2) that enables an engagement with what she "... calls first-order analysis: [which is] the analysis of codes and structures that lie at the root of all meaningful exchanges" (4) and which submits to the power of interpreting specific contents.

The symbolic meaning of folklore, ancestral worship and the relevance of symbols embedded in *Lwanda Magere* has equally been a subject of debate in African theatre and performance studies for a long time now. As well as being a relevant subject in critical discourses, it is significant for the restoration of society's history (see Okpewho 2009). In this light, Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo writes that the performance of orature enables the invisible to become visible, signaling here the mimetic bond between nature, the supernatural, nurture and the human (2007: 4 & 6). Employing them to underscore the functionality of orature as a core component of community life and history in the play, we equally gain crucial knowledge of key elements embedded in Kenyan national culture.

Lwanda Magere provides the readers with a play that is captured in complex poetic and proverbial language that Omtatah employs to valorize and uphold the importance of ritual as religion, but also as a unifying factor capable of illuminating the resilience of a people in the face of an adversary. Through an exploration of specific symbols, a critique of the dominant political

class in the play is underscored. In what follows, the debate considers ritual performance as a portal to history and to the political class, justifying why the component of culture and ritual performance in the play unravels subordinate categories visible in gender relations and which deserve a critical analysis.

Orature and the Construction of Heroism

Kenyans just like other communities across Africa still relate to their age-old traditions, rendered through varied forms of verbal art and visual culture resonated in Omtatah's play by the epic narrative of Story-Teller who recounts the legendary life of Lwanda Magere to an audience whom he designates as his grandchildren. Genres of orature are generally passed on from one generation to another, mainly orally, but also through different forms of media today (see also Omanga 2016), as a way of archiving the community's past. Such art forms serve to recollect important historical events and experiences of individuals (see also Mugo 1991). Characterized by creative forms of verbal arts, ingenuity in speech orature that include the use of metaphors and idiomatic expressions, oral narratives are "traditions (oral, customary, or material) expressed in the form of an artistic communication used as operational culture by a group within the large society (primarily to provide group identity and homogeneity" (Peek & Yankah 2004: xi). With regards to the art of speech or "verbal art" and its purpose in African cultural life, Peek and Yankah further note that "African life starts with naming traditions and prayers and continues through greetings and songs, libations and lullabies, praise names and insults and funeral orations and spirit possession. Informal gossip and formal oratory, individual speech and epics of empires—the scope of artful speech is endless" (xii). These emblematic uses of language are associated with specific symbols of identity that enable us to conceive *Lwanda Magere* as a cultural document embodying not only the life of Lwanda Magere and his legendary activities, but also the cultural texture of indigenous life of Luo community before colonial invasion.

Partitioned into six scenes, Omtatah's drama, which falls within the category of what Isidore Okpewho calls an "oral epic" (2009: 113) introduces and ends the play with "Sowing" and "Reaping," respectively. Analogous to the prologue and the epilogue in classical drama, "Sowing" narrates the life of servitude of the Luo people under the Lang'o and also introduces the birth of a warrior who will lead the Luo to freedom. The epilogue summarizes the life of the warrior, but underscores the consequences of a flaw in his character that result in his death and eventual transformation into a rock. Before they launch a successful crippling battle on the Luo, the Lang'o trick him into revealing the secret of his power, strength, and invisibility. In

“Sowing,” we are introduced to Story-Teller, “a stooping old man” (1991:1), who narrates the legend of Lwanda Magere to his “grandchildren,” sharing with them the tribulations that are plaguing the Luo community. Story-Teller makes important references to the mysterious circumstances surrounding the birth of Lwanda Magere through the performance of storytelling:

Dear grandchildren,
Before you retire to your beds tonight,
Am going to narrate to you
The Legend of the Great Lwanda Magere...
In the legendary times of legends
In the land of the Luo
People’s heart sorrowed,
The Lang’o, the victors at the time
Ruled the vanquished Luo with
An iron hand.
They killed many and enslaved many more...
Hope in prayer to
Their ever-mindful ancestors,
For salvation.

(Enter the Luo led by the tall balding priest. They solemnly approach the totem, bow to it and proceed to offer sacrifices in silence.)

They sacrificed,
Praying to their ancestors for salvation.
Day in, day out, they prayed...
Then one day, it was the day
The Infallible Oracle of the ancestors spoke
Out of the heavens rung the Mighty Voice....
Voice: My people the great sons of the lake,
Oracle of your ancestors says:
Seen your sufferings,

Heard your prayers...
Tonight ...
A woman
Truly barren will conceive
Nine months and your savior
Lwanda, son of Magere,
Will be born among you...your liberator,
Pure rock his body,
A rock, yet mortal (1991: 1, 2, & 3)

The character of the elderly storyteller underscores the cultural, political and social relevance of recounting the legend of Lwanda Magere in the preceding sequence. Endearing his audience, by calling them his grandchildren, draws attention to the importance attached to the role that elders play in the preservation of culture and history in the society (Chiangong 2021a and 2021b). He is the competent authority trained in bequeathing ancestral knowledge to the younger generation whom he addresses as his grandchildren. The children are not categorized in a specific age or gender group, thereby embracing every member of the community. Moreover the non-specification of membership also implies the grandchildren do not share any filial relations with Story-Teller, informing on the value of respect accorded storytellers across time and importantly the principal duty of listening to them; a motif that Omtatah seems to convey through his drama. The Luo child is taught "... how to listen, how to pay attention, and how to receive, retain, and later on recount, in the equal detail as that in which we had received" (Masolo 1976: 60). In a modelled storytelling tradition where the participation of the audience and "call and response" mark many storytelling events, Omtatah does not provide a platform on which the voice of the grandchildren could be heard during this event, underscoring its sacredness, the reverence accorded Lwanda Magere's memory as a spiritual figure and also the importance of listening to his legendary and heroic activities, coordinated by an overall uninterrupted religious presence.

Echoing Ngugi above, the sacredness of this epic narrative event is underscored by an immediate live performance of a ritual offered to the Oracle led by "*the tall balding priest*" who leads the Luo people in sacrifice to the gods and ancestors requesting the birth of a liberator. Positing that ritual and performance have the potential for peacebuilding across communities in Kenya,

Magak et al reiterate that ritual embedded in Kenyan orature "... plays one of the most important roles in the social organization of indigenous societies." They consider "ritual as symbol- in- action," to be endowed with a "transformative power ... which is inherent in its occurrence in special social settings away from everyday life, its transcendental symbolic communication, and its power to confirm and change worldviews, identities, and relationships..." (2015: 20). Following Magak et al, one imagines that the audience, the grandchildren, on stage is entranced by the epic narrative that describes the mystical strength of Magere. They simultaneously undertake an analeptic journey to the past to encounter the priest and the Luo people in their moment of distress. And they listen to the voice of the Oracle prophesying the hope that "A woman Truly barren will conceive," Lwanda Magere after nine months. Through a play-within-a play technique, the performance of the ritual, materializes this journey to the past as a moment of witnessing history and it significantly registers the rise and fall of Lwanda Magere, which begins with his mysterious birth. This symbolic journey furnishes storytelling time and ritual performance with a vigor that enables encoding, remembering and preserving the collective identity of the Luo community. Further, a parallelism associated with the identity of Story-Teller and that of the balding priest is noted as an important symbolic continuity captured through both their personalities and role in the society. Overall, how the performance space of storytelling and ritual space of sacrifice both function in defining the relationship between the storyteller and his audience and the priest and the Luo people are important to the religion and history of present-day contribution to peacebuilding in Kenya as demonstrated below. The utterances of Story-Teller above link the current generation, the grandchildren, to their historical and ancestral past, positioning memory as a space for recollecting individual and the community's account of history.

The time at which Story-Teller narrates the epic of Lwanda Magere is symbolically revealing. One may argue that the elderly Story-Teller and the audience are living through a rite of passage enabled by the performance space and the epic narrative. The time of the performance, the evening, is important as it not only substantively and symbolically demarcates the transition to a new day, but also metaphorically transforms the grandchildren into knowledgeable beings. Retiring to bed after the storytelling session could be perceived as a period of reflection about the life of Lwanda Magere that could possibly engender thoughts about a reconstruction of the epic to reflect the culture and politics of contemporary society at a time we might call dawn.

Dawn here could be associated with the unceasing visitation of the Lwanda Magere legend in contemporary Western Kenya during peace building events organized, for instance, by the “Kipsigis [Kalenjin subgroup] and Luo elders. The meeting was held to resolve the clashes that erupted out of cross-border cattle rustling” (24) and “one of the Kipsigis elders told of the story of Lwanda Magere” (25). Returning to Lorusso who at the beginning intimated that the meanings acquired through symbols function to underscore the malleability of culture but also to capture complex human relations, in many ways relate to Omtatah’s retelling of the legend in the 20th century through a drama piece and importantly the presentation of women in the epic that one might assume has shaped gender discourses in the Luo community today when it comes to how women are perceived.

Therefore the role of storytelling in rendering and performing legends enables us to concur with Okpewho who states that “[t]he tales often have a basis of social or political history to them and may represent a crucial point of transition in a society's life” (2009: 113). This proposition is particularly important based on where Isidore Okpewho locates the storyteller in African communities more generally when he underscores that their composition necessitates “intricate artistry that required years of focused and carefully guided training” (111). This artistic value is alive in Story-Teller’s age, his use of specific paradigms of expressions such as “legendary times of legends,” “Day in, day out, they prayed,” and “An iron hand,” to illustrate the hopelessness of the Luo people vis-à-vis the Lang’o warriors, but also the expressions he employs to capture the valour and status of Lwanda Magere as a valiant, yet imprudent warrior in the society.

Other specific symbols from the excerpt above that are relevant to our discussion are voice, silence, and totem. Symbols are associated with the construction of meaning in performances and dramatic texts. Often, symbolic meanings are culturally-determined and drawn from our understanding of specific utterances, gestures and objects. According to Elam Keir (1990), (see also Umberto Eco 1986), theatre and drama as whole offer a plethora of semiotic spaces in which utterances, gestures and objects signify and communicate different meanings to the spectators. The element of communality that marks the storytelling and performance event speaks to the composition and function of indigenous community, allowing our judgement of the use of specific objects to be equally important. The totem of the Luo people conveys the importance that the Luo accord their religion, cultural values and cultural practices that are materialized through the Voice of the oracle. There is a complex organic relationship between the people, their totem and the oracle that is mediated by the elderly priest. The pain and suffering of the

people are externalized in prayer, dedication and belief in ancestral powers that demand their connection with these ritual objects to ensure peace and stability. The totem of the people is the foundation of their livelihood, which means that a separation of a community from its totem erases continuity as the community is believed to fall apart. The totem therefore becomes the point of contact between the people and Oracle. The voice of the Oracle is a response to the silence of the people enslaved by the Lang'o people for many years. Further, the silence of the people when they offer sacrifices to the community's totem speaks to the solemnity of the event and also communicates a nuanced uncertainty as they hope for an affirmative response from the supernatural world. Eventually, the prophecy of the Oracle results in the birth of Lwanda Magere. Alluding to the spiritual and historical importance of epic narratives, Okpewho reveals that "the origins of a people's religious, cultural, or cosmological traditions; or wars between peoples led by men of unusual qualities and powers" (111) are indeed serious accounts that offer undisputed knowledge about a community. Story-Teller's use of "An iron hand" to illustrate the brutality with which the Lang'o ruled the Luo after a battle, also allows him to acknowledge the resilience of the Luo as they were persistently "Praying to their ancestors for salvation. Day in, day out, they prayed... (1991: 2). The binarity here is to emphasize that the Luo were determined, steadfast, and dedicated to their gods and ancestors as "one day, it was the day The Infallible Oracle of the ancestors spoke Out of the heavens rung the Mighty Voice ..." (2) revealing that their constant prayers led by the elderly Chiefs and Priests of the land resulted in the birth of a hero whose supernatural powers and competence in battle reinstate, albeit momentarily, the pride of the Luo.

It is important to note that the gender motif raised through the Voice of the Oracle is, in many ways, crucial to the gender debate discussed in this study. Initially associating the identity of Lwanda Magere's mother to "barrenness" or infertility is quite remarkable. Across Africa, women without children have often paid the price of childlessness in most families and within the broader community. In East Africa for instance, Woodall and Kramer (2018: 1137) note that infertility "... has serious social consequences for women, including divorce, stigma, socioeconomic burden, and pre-sumption of infidelity/sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as the cause" (see also Boerma and Mgalla 1999). Since a woman's body as opposed to that of a man is central to the visibility of conception, childbirth, and motherhood, it is noteworthy that it is through such a conceptualisation of the stigmatised body that the liberator of a suppressed people is born. Considering that Omtatah exonerates the female body from the status of

“barrenness” and anchors it with spiritual strength, fertility, childbirth and motherhood, on the contrary, affirms the continuity of a patriarchal order rather than recognition of women’s resilience, status and contribution to nationhood. In this circumstance, therefore, the body of Lwanda Magere’s mother is employed in the context of the epic narrative to reproduce male power, dominance, and other masculine possibilities. Interestingly, in the context of feminisms in Africa, the reproductive female body is explored as an important component of femininity and women’s self-assertion, yet in the context of the play, it promotes and reproduces stereotypes of the nurturing female body relevant for the construction of and nostalgia for the nation and its territorial borders, particularly so because the mother of Lwanda Magere is mentioned only through the prophecy of the Oracle and not formulated as a dialogical character in the rest of the epic and the play. Although, he is born under such mysterious circumstances, the nature of Lwanda Magere’s upbringing and his military exploits on the battle field are therefore not associated with his mother. Instead we are confronted with an emergence of a dominant masculine character that alienates, denigrates and suppresses women and the political structure of his society. This enables us to propose that perhaps the role of the mother in raising the hero would have served as a foundation of discipline to keep in check the flaw in his character, which the Lang’o exploited to, once again, subjugate the Luo Kingdom.

Who is Omtatah’s Lwanda Magere?

In her study of masculinities across the African continent, Egodi Uchendu explores the peculiarities of Ancient Egyptian masculinity during the Pharaonic era stating that when it came to boys and men, the state laid emphasis on rigorous learning and education as “[s]chools and training centres for boys existed to train achievers to become high government officials. The aim of learning was to acquire wisdom and therefore perfection” (2008: 12). Acquiring education, she maintains, served as a blueprint to moral, spiritual, intellectual and scientific strength, that eventually provided Ancient Egyptian men with wealth and political power. Therefore, Ancient Egyptian masculinity was constructed more on discipline and intellectual aptitude than on martial power which marked Zulu masculinity before British colonial invasion in the 19th century. While respect formed part of the training of Zulu boys, Uchendu states that “Zulu masculine subjects were praised for their ‘unremitting discipline’ manifested in honesty, wisdom, bravery and respect for authority. These qualities were not intrinsic but learned. In other words, the Zulu society during its pre-colonial period had articulated its ideas on masculinity and

set in motion informal and formal structures, the most important being the family, to transfer, through learning and practice, these qualities to every male child”(14).

In paying a critical attention to the structure of political power in *Lwanda Magere*, and particularly the principles surrounding the narration of the birth and life of its eponymous hero, one instantly discerns that the Luo community was not dissimilar from Ancient Egypt and precolonial Natal in South Africa. According to Chimaraoke Izugbara et al (2013), central to Luo masculinity, as for most communities across Africa, is men’s control over land, recognition of their role as the head of the family and most especially, expectations to obey traditional customs, otherwise it is believed that disobedience might invite ill luck on the individual. In their joint research on “ethnic self- identity” and the health of men of Luo ethnicity based in two Nairobi Slums, Izugbara et al provide critical responses from their respondents who accentuate the worth of tradition to their masculinity. The respondents, the authors underscored, noted that disregard of Luo customs and traditional practices may have devastating consequences including death on Luo men or on members of their family (2013: 489).

Lwanda Magere’s masculinity is constructed along the lines of troubled relations with the authorities of the land, with women, and with his masculine identity. His character as delineated by the Oracle (un)consciously enforces peculiar traits of manliness which are at par with Luo’s norms of masculinity. This puts him at odds with the patriarchal institutions that led prayers and sacrifices for his birth. Therefore the Oracle underlines that Lwanda Magere’s mission:

... is to obey the ancestors always

And his people he will free

And his greatness will last.

Lwanda Magere will live

Not for himself but

For the tribe

His people to free

Take note:

Alcohol is forbidden him.

He should never take alcohol

The humbler of men

Take note:

The great secret of Lwanda Magere...

Will reside in his obedience.

His life will be in a riddle

That will make him a rock...

Nurture him into the secret of his life.

When he falls ill you will

In secret doctor him, with Tribal marks you will, in secret,

With your own hands tattoo him ... (pp. 9 &10).

Portraying Lwanda Magere as a supernatural hero reveals a contradiction as the Oracle employs an oxymoronic twist to prophesy that; "...your liberator, Pure rock his body, A rock, yet mortal" (3). Equating his body to a rock informs us on the supernatural qualities bestowed on him by the ancestors, which will make him invincible in all the battles against the Lang'o people. The Oracle's repetition of "Take note" reinforces the laws that Lwanda Magere must be adhered to, in order to maintain his invincibility. One of the laws is to abstain from the consumption of alcohol, which is perceived as "The Humbler of men." While the Oracle seeks to secure Luo borders through the spiritual strength of Lwanda Magere, which must not be tainted with human follies, Lwanda Magere, instead, vies to dominate everyone around him. Besides, the tattoos that will be inscribed on his body should he fall sick will serve as a reminder of his duty to his people and are also markers of identification and belonging to his land. In guarding the riddle that keeps the secret of his power, Lwanda Magere is fully aware of the magnitude of his strength. If preserved, he would be respecting the regulations outlined by the Oracle but importantly, he will be embodying discipline that is associated with African masculinity in general and with the Luo male, in particular.

Embodied with ancestral power, Lwanda Magere unites his people and together they lead successful battles against the Lang'o. However, the ambiguity that marks his character as designed by the Oracle conveys the need for him to not only depend on his supernatural strength, but also to strive for human virtues. Should the restrictions enforced by the Oracle be judged as a test of Lwanda Magere's masculinity? What presumably can he as a Luo male offer his people, without the intervention of the Oracle? Strictly cautioned by the Oracle to adhere to specific

behavioral norms that will not lure him into losing his supernatural powers and consequently put his community at the risk of invasion and enslavement by the Lang'o, Lwanda Magere instead breaches the rules by engaging in frivolity, disrespect, consumption of alcohol, and disobedience of the Oracle. For instance, Lwanda Magere marries 25 women; a record which the Priest, alarmed, admits had never been broken by any Luo elder:

At his tender age
He already has twenty-five wives,
A thing even great elders here
Have not been able to do (68).

Lwanda Magere's excess love for women is echoed in one of the battles against the Lang'o warriors when in celebrating their victory, he encourages his fellow warriors to implement the following orders:

Let's go and crown
The son of our lace king.
Let's go and restore order
Into our society so that with ease,
The tortoise may carry his own shell.
For the unmarried
Like Lwanda Magere,
It's time to take up wives
And register our manhood.
The home of Lwanda Magere
Must choke with wives. To mark my success
As a man with an inner will. (*Raises a war song and they dance off.*) (15)

While he encourages his co-warriors to marry, he simultaneously projects women as the prize for their military achievements, upholding virility as a masculine trophy. Claiming that marrying many wives is the "inner will" of a Luo warrior, one may add that it is a masculine performance that risks engendering toxic arrogance, particularly as seen in the relationship with Mikayi, his first wife.

Obedience is a fundamental value involved in parenting in most communities across Africa and Kenya is no exception. In the context of human development, children and other younger members of the communities are expected to follow the rules and behavioral guidelines put in place by parents and elderly members of the community. Contrary to Luo guidelines established by the King, the Elders and the Priest, Lwanda Magere, without consulting the latter, marries a Lang'o Princess, a woman who hails from the enemy kingdom. Considering that integrating a Lang'o kinswoman in their kingdom is bait proffered by the Lang'o to lure Lwanda Magere into revealing the secret of his strength, the Luo Elders express their shock and disgust at his behavior in the following manner:

Priest: ...those who obey live,
Those who disobey, die!
Man must make the choice in freedom
King: How can Lwanda Magere, groping
Decide on his own accord.
Without consulting us elders,
The custodians of traditional values
In this land? He should have
Consulted the elders for advice (p.36)

Lwanda Magere rejects the Elders' advice against marrying the princess by, superciliously, retorting that:

A river does not
Flow higher than
Its source! I value not
Your bald [heads] and grey hairs.
Trusting the infallible Oracle
I will go ahead and
Marry this woman.
I will take her
And anything else

The Lang'o offer (66 &67)

Tricking Lwanda Magere into consuming alcohol, which has been forbidden by the gods, he, in this state, discloses the secret of his strength to the Lang'o Princess. He informs her that his strength is concealed in his shadow, which explains why he engages all his battles at night in order to protect his shadow from being attacked. The Lang'o Princess subsequently informs her people about the source of Lwanda Magere's strength. Consequently, the Lang'o attack the Luo in the day and Lwanda Magere's shadow is shot with an arrow. Magere dies and transforms into a rock, which the Luo people believe is still sitting in their land, serving as a testimony to their history.

One may argue that the presence of the rock reminds the Luo people not only of their hero who fought for their freedom, but it probably symbolizes the importance of respect for elderhood and customs of the land, thereby cautioning that disobedience, as said earlier, comes with grave consequences. The priest who had strictly warned Lwanda Magere about his behavior is seemingly not astounded by the aftermath of his disobedience:

Priest: When a greedy hyena
Comes across a chunk of poisoned meat.
Left in its way by the hunter,
He doesn't go looking for
The owl that may have watched
In secret as the trap was laid.
Lwanda Magere's lust for women
Like a curse from birth
Gives no place to prudence (p. 36).

Omtatah's presentation of the contribution of the women to the life and eventually the tragedy that befalls Lwanda Magere, as seen above, allows us to investigate gender concerns in the play.

The Positionality of Mikayi and the Lang'o Princess

Evidently, women in some communities in Kenya hold decision making power; nevertheless, patriarchy remains a dominant factor in gender relations, a phenomenon that in many ways objectifies women. Actively involved in precolonial and anti-colonial resistances in Kenya, women, according to Lennox Odiemo-Munara, “from early on in East African history, engaged in various forms of resistance through the written and spoken word to seek to collapse the ‘the triple custodial role’ that ensures the woman’s limited participation in the public space” (2010: 3; see also Njambi and O’Brien 2005). In the context of postcolonial feminism, Mikhail Gromov posits that “Kenyan females are faced with on routine level ... by a violent (physically, sexually, and/or psychologically) domination of males over their women counterparts – relatives, colleagues, etc. – rooted in patriarchal notion of a woman as inferior and ever-subordinate ‘human commodity’ of her male commandants” (2016: 66 & 67). Positioning the female body in an African feminist context more generally, corporeality is underscored, which is at the centre of dominant discourses associated with gender and class. Arguing that the positionality of the female body particularly in Western culture offers it a rationality of its own, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí critiques the materiality of the body as a metonymy of “... a person’s beliefs and social position or lack of thereof.” (2005:3). Gendering the female body in the context in which Oyèwùmí speaks, that body emerges as a paramount discourse in a social construct that “is always *in* view and *on* view. As such, it [the female body] invites a *gaze*, a gaze of difference, a gaze of differentiation—the most historically constant being the gendered gaze” (4; emphasis in the original). While the body contributes to the formation of othering in a racially-defined social reality, it becomes a symbol of difference in a patriarchal setting of a homogenous ethnic composition.

The establishment of gender roles that are determined by hierarchy with the men at the apex of the social order and political power means that the women’s body in its material and symbolic form is espoused as a site of play, ultimately framed as an attendant negotiating object to assuage and stabilize conflicting dominant masculinities. Although Oyèwùmí speaks to specific Yoruba and Africa Diaspora contexts, one concurs with her, by looking at the Kenyan reality, about the biological specificities that subject the female body to scrutiny, inviting gendered gazes that eschews conviviality, self-determination and participation.

In the 1990s African feminist theorists engaged in vigorous debates about the status of African women, vis-à-vis patriarchal alienation, racism, and empowerment. Reflecting on the rudiments

of these debates, particularly as they hint on gender dynamics in *Lwanda Magere*, interesting views emerged on the subject of polygamy in Africa, which speaks to how the family unit in the play is structured. Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian novelist and critic, made it clear in her famous article, “Feminism with a small ‘f’,” in which she calls herself a feminist with a small “f” that she actually advocates for a polygamous marriage perceiving it as an enabling environment for women to achieve their career objectives. She states that:

In many cases polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her, especially if she is educated. The husband has no reason for stopping her from attending international conferences like this one, from going back to University and updating her career or even getting another degree. Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside her family for friends. It gives her freedom from having to worry about her husband most of the time and each time he comes to her, he has to be sure that he is in a good mood and that he is washed, and clean and ready for the wife, because the wife has now become so sophisticated herself that she has no time for a dirty, moody husband. And this in a strange way, makes them enjoy each other (1988: 178 &179).

Given that African feminists like Emecheta have challenged androcentric normativity that have opened hegemonic cracks for women to fall through, these feminists underscored that gender equality on the continent is a collaborative project with the men (Ogunyemi 1996, Makuchi 1997, Naemeka 2003, Nkealah 2006, Jacobs 2011). On that note Emecheta states “... I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like the capital “F” (Feminism) woman who says women should live together and all that, I say NO! Personally I’d like to see the ideal, happy marriage. But if it doesn’t work, for goodness sake, call it off (qtd in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997:7). Although women’s integrity and worth in the society are recognized in an androcentric space, full appreciation is yet to be a spin-off. Omtatah raises the thematic of polygamy in a traditional setting to emphasize its place in Kenyan culture. Its existence in the play informs us on the responsibilities of the women involved in it. The first wife is usually perceived as the mother of the home, a space which could create liberating and empowering corridors as the one described by Emecheta above. In *Lwanda Magere*, Mikayi together with her 25 co-wives are in a polygamous arrangement in which each wife has a responsibility towards the family and the man. However, there is an overbearing patriarchal presence deeply entrenched in the status and character of *Lwanda Magere* who is their joint husband.

Mikayi is the first wife of Lwanda Magere and The Lang’o Princess, as discussed earlier, is soon to be his 26th wife. Although the first wife, generally has more authority over the other wives, the Princess is Lwanda Magere’s favourite, a status bestowed on her by her youthful body. Although the Princess is favoured by Lwanda Magere, Mikayi still obeys her husband and addresses him as her master. She bows while talking to him and dutifully obeys his orders that include carrying his stool. Given her status as first wife, Lwanda Magere invites her to discuss the events in the land. Occupying the stool, Lwanda Magere orders her to “... take your place on the floor” (44). Obligated to that sitting position by gender norms, Lwanda Magere informs her of his intentions of marrying the Lang’o Princess and therefore requests her to advise him on his desire. The interaction of the male and female bodies in this scene informs on a dominant masculinity and therefore a seeming lack of conviviality between the two characters. Although Mikayi’s worth as a woman and first wife in the family circle is recognized, it is only lamely appreciated by her husband. Her perspective on Lwanda Magere’s marriage to a Lang’o Princess is crucial to her identity as the first wife, to his status as the head of his family and to his overall identity as an important Luo warrior. Mikayi’s sentiments resonate with that of the Elders of the land who, as discussed, are clearly scandalized by Magere’s decision to marry a Lang’o woman, perceived as an enemy who will eventually betray the Luo people and expose them to defeat and ridicule. While Lwanda Magere sees his decision as a symbol of greatness, arguing that the Lang’o are mainly placating him with a prize, Mikayi is clear in her stance as she stresses: “... my Lord, But I think there is a trap. This woman is on a mission. The Lang’o are out to kill you. My heart is gripped in fear... My lord... be careful and in wisdom Look before you leap. Do not court early death.!” (47). While Lwanda Magere sees Mikayi’s warning as vindictiveness and cowardice, the Lang’o Elders had indeed commissioned the Princess to use her body to entice Lwanda Magere, what Mikayi and the elders foresaw, into revealing the source of his unrivaled strength as a warrior. The Lang’o Chiefs had provided succinct guidelines on the quality of the woman eligible of alluring Lwanda Magere who is known in the kingdom and its environs as “the lover of women ...” (25). Therefore the Lang’o woman:

... Must be
A daughter of our land
Who stands gracefully,
Shoulders above others in charm (26).

Insisting on the perfection of her body, the Chiefs consider it a suitable bait to accomplish the mission that involves knowing the secret of Lwanda Magere's power. The Lango's woman in question is eventually described by the Lang'o political structure as "chunks of good meat" capable of enticing and entrapping a "hyena" (26) to its death. The Luo elders equally describe her as "a chunk of poisoned meat" which a greedy hyena comes across (36), a "cobra that is inside his precious gourd," and termites that destroy a home (36). These animal metaphors project her body and role as vile, yet they are necessary for the advancement of the Lang'o political game. One imagines that the Princess' political role and success in her task enables her body and identity as a woman to be viewed allegorically by the Kings, Priests and Chiefs of both kingdoms as a polluted site, necessary but redundant in any future male dominated politics. The female body assumes a shifting identity that is sporadically transformed to serve the needs of a patriarchal status quo and in that state, it is conceptualized as predatory. The "consumption" of the Princess' body metaphorically by state and through physical encounter with Lwanda Magere emerges as an important trope in gender discourses as it has contributed to contemporary theorization of feminisms in Africa in which the woman's body is central to the debates.

It is important to accentuate that the Lang'o Queen's contribution to the subjugation of women in her kingdom is worth noting. She initially orchestrated the plan to use a female body as a bait to defeat the Luo when she told the Lang'o authorities to

... give one of the land's worthy daughters
To wife Lwanda Magere – with a mission,
Her mission to get his secret (25)

Clearly, the Lang'o Queen is benefitting from a dominant male leadership. Her interest in participating in the politics of the state allows her to conceptualize the body of a less influential woman as a political pawn. Her strategy, one may argue, is not liberating to the woman, but instead it maintains her status as a queen that (in)directly consolidates the power of the men. However, her gesture uncovers masculine vulnerability as her Kingdom embraces her strategy to unmask the character flaw of a, presumably, powerful male opponent. In appreciation of her suggestion, the King employs the following stereotypical gender imagery to respond to her plan:

whoever said that women and children share the same brains
Did us much wrong! Why?
Why didn't any of my wise men,

The bald heads and grey beards, think that up? (25)

The Lang’o Queen employs her intelligence, equated with that of children, to submit to an androcentric culture, which accords her a space to bask in patriarchal privileges. Her argument that the involvement of women in battle, a historical reality in several kingdoms of Africa, is important. But the involvement of women in battle is initially judged by the Lang’o Elders as preposterous particularly if the reactions of the King and 2nd Chief are foregrounded; “[t]he dance we were dancing was an all-male dance” and “when we talk about war and about our well-being women have no place in it” (22 & 23). In a similar light, the victorious return of the Lang’o Princess to the Kingdom is acknowledged but not recognized as she is summarily dismissed from the gathering of male Elders to reoccupy her assigned gendered space:

King: ... You have done this land

A great service. The elders

Have heard your story

You may take leave now.

What follows is a dance for men only (92).

The contribution of the women to the formation of the Lang’o and Luo Kingdoms, eventually the nation in a postcolonial context, is quite interesting. Although the relations between the men and women are define along the lines of gender, we equally see that the same women are given very challenging and complex tasks to accomplish, which of course serves the interest of the male dominated kingdoms. But women in this play and other African plays— that include Bole Butake’s *The Rape of Michelle*, Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu*, and Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are not to Blame*—have been projected as the foundation of conflict, war, and pain in the society.

Conclusion

The timelessness of legends makes it particularly helpful for the consideration of postcolonial nation building. The contribution of women to the process of national building has been represented in drama and in many ways revealing the rate at which armed conflicts and ethnic divisions have continued to put the African continent in political and social disarray; the contribution of the Takumbeng women to contemporary politics in Cameroon in the 1990s is well-known. Besides, the political narrative of safeguarding borders is an important act in the

formation of the nation, as seen in the legend of Lwanda Magere. At the turn of the 20th century, a return to extant forms of African orature, most especially in the context of (post)colonialism has been employed as a strategy to dismantle colonially-imposed cultures and gain insight into the wealth of indigenous cultures. Although Omtatah's play is based on an orally transmitted epic narrative that is today conveyed in a drama format in order to archive and communicate the Luo legend across the globe, the context and modes of expression in the play are traditional and are entrenched, interestingly, not in expressions of common people, but in that of the elite class which includes Kings, Priests and Elders, informing on the political environment that nurtured the masculine identity of Lwanda Magere as a Luo male and warrior. In addition, the life of Lwanda Magere has been unraveled to enable an investigation of the status of African women in history. Underscoring their contribution to African feminist discourses, our attention is, also, drawn to important masculinity debates. How all of these associations entangle with one another inform us on the complexity of power and social constructions of gender as they are conveyed through relevant symbols.

Works Cited

- Boerma, J. Ties and Zaida Mgalla. 1999. "Women and infertility in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Reproductive Health Matters* 7:13, 183-18.
- Chiangong, Pepetual Mforbe (ed). 2021a. *Old Age in African Literary and Cultural Contexts*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Chiangong, Pepetual Mforbe. 2021b. "'Transgressing' Wisdom and Elderhood in Times of War? The Shifting Identity of the Elderly Queen in the Performance of Women of Owu." In *Under Construction: Performing Critical Identity*. Marie-Anne Kohl (ed), Basel: MDPI. 85-106.
- Eco, Umberto. 1986. *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Emecheta, Buchi. 1988. "Feminism with a small 'f'." In *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference*. Kirsten Holst Petersen (ed). Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies. 173-185.

Gromov, D. Mikhail. 2016. "Kenyan Women's Literature from Postcolonial Feminist Perspective: Six Stories by Storymoja Writers," *Journal of Language, Technology & Entrepreneurship in Africa*, 7: 7, 63-71.

Izugbara, Chimaraoke et al. 2013. "Ethnicity, Livelihoods, Masculinity, and Health among Luo Men in the Slums of Nairobi, Kenya," *Ethnicity & Health*, 18:5, 483-498.

Jacobs, L. Becky. 2011. "Unbound by Theory and Naming: Survival Feminism and the Women of the South African Victoria Mxenge Housing and Development Association," *26 Berkeley J. Gender L. & Just* 19, 19-77.

Keir, Elam. 1990. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. Routledge: London.

Lorusso, Anna Maria. 2015. *Cultural Semiotics: For a Cultural Perspective in Semiotics*. Hampshire Palgrave Macmillan.

Magak, Kitche et al. 2015. "The Place and Prospects of Indigenous Theatrical Performances in Peacebuilding in Kenya," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 5:1, 18-40.

Masolo, A. Dismas. 1976. "Towards Authentic African Literature: Luo Oral Literature," *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 31 :1, 57-72.

Mugo, G. Micere. *African Orature and Human Rights*. Lesotho: Institute of South African Studies. 1991.

Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. 1997. "Introduction." *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 1-15.

Ngũgĩ, Wa Thiong'o. 2007. "Notes towards a Performance Theory of Orature," *Performance Research*, 12:3, 4-7.

Nkealah, N. Naomi. 2006. "Conceptualizing Feminism(s) in Africa: The challenges Facing African Women Writers and Critics," *English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies*, 23:1, 133-141.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. 2003. "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way", *29 SIGNS: J. WOMEN IN CULTURE & Soc'Y*, 357, 378 (2003).

Odiemo-Munara, Lennox. 2010. "Women Engagement with Power and Authority in Re-writing East Africa," *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*, 35:4,1-18.

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. 1996. *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Okpewho, Isidore. 2009. "Storytelling in the African World," *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 3:2, 110-122.

Omanga, Duncan. 2016. "Akokhan Returns': Kenyan Newspaper Comics and the Making of an 'African' Superhero," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28: 3, 262-274.

Omtatah, Okoiti. 1991. *Lwanda Magere: A Play*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd.

Oyèwùmí, Oyèrónké. 2005. "Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects." In *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 3-22.

Peek, M. Philip and Kwesi Yankah. 2004. "Introduction: The Continent of Africa." *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. Peek, M. Philip and Kwesi Yankah (eds). New York: Routledge. viii-xvii.

Uchendu, Egodi. 2008. "Introduction: Are African Males Men: Sketching African Masculinities in Contemporary Africa?" In *Masculinities in Contemporary Africa*. Egodi Uchendu (ed). Senegal: CODESRIA. 1-17.

Woodall, A. Patricia and Michael R. Kramer. 2018. "Schistosomiasis and Infertility in East Africa," *Am J Trop Med Hyg*, 98:4, 1137–1144.

