

Language and Group-based Power: Myths, Proverbs and Metaphors as Depositories of Gendered and Ethnic Identities in Perpetua Nkamanyang Lola's Revised Edition of "*The Lock on my Lips* (2023)"

Nforbin, Gerald Niba

Department of English and Foreign Languages,
University of Douala-Cameroon

ABSTRACT

Gender and Ethnicity are two types of group distinctions with which group-based power is associated and, in most postcolonial African urban contexts, gender and ethnicity intersect to shape our identities, opportunities and the challenges we face. Drawing from postcolonial, queer and feminist theories, this study examines the role of language in the construction of group-based power structures. The study examines the gender and ethnic specific function of Language (specifically myths, proverbs, metaphors, idioms and witty sayings) in the revised edition of Lola's *The Lock on My Lips* with the view of demonstrating that the budding dramatist employs these linguistic devices to invest her work with a truly African sensibility and flavour, but mainly to show the role language plays in the social construction of gender and ethnic otherness.

Keywords: Language, Gender, ethnicity, Identity, Power, Lola.

INTRODUCTION: GENDER AND ETHNICITY

The point of intersection between gender and ethnicity is the minority status of women and marginalized ethnic groups. Some critics will object to women as a minority group and indeed, it seems contradictory to term a people who make up the majority of the human population a minority. But minority group must not be numerically inferior.¹ Any group within a state that is in a non-dominant position; one that, because of the physical (racial) characteristics of its members, their sexual orientation, ethnicity, language or cultural characteristics are singled out for differential and unequal treatment and who regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination is a minority. Although numerically in the majority, women are marginalized worldwide. Discrimination exists when rights and opportunities open to one group are denied another group. According to a United Nations Report, women constitute half the world's population; perform almost two-third of its work hours; receive only one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property. Discriminated against on the basis of their sex, women share a lot with ethnic minority groups. Discrimination manifest itself through prejudices. Gender and ethnic prejudices operate mainly through stereotypes. This paper focuses on the role of specific linguistic devices— myths, proverbs and metaphors— to

¹ A group can constitute a numerical majority and be in a non-dominant position and thus be similarly entitled to the application of minority standards in order to ensure their rights to non-discrimination and to protection of their identity which form the foundations of minority rights.

demonstrate that Language creates gender and ethnic stereotypes as well as group power hierarchies by establishing rigid images of what it means to be a woman and not a man or to be treated a stranger or a sojourner and not a citizen. But what literary approaches exist for research on group-based power and discrimination?

SYNTHESIZING GROUP-BASED POWER THEORIES: POSTCOLONIAL, FEMINIST AND QUEER THEORIES

Language, Identity and power are key concerns in gender, feminist, queer and postcolonial studies which all focus on group power relations. In Feminist/gender, gay and Postcolonial studies where there is a power play between hegemonic and minority groups, identities are constructed through discourse. Postcolonialism argues that colonial discourses are structures of power in which identity and difference (Otherness) are produced and used as the basis by which social groups define themselves in relation to others. A theoretical position that cuts across postcolonialism, gender, feminist and queer theories is how discourses of power relations construct through linguistic structures of difference and discrimination, the identity of the minority groups. Issues of gender, sexuality and ethnicity have continued to influence the way group-based power relations (and discrimination) constructs the collective identity of women, ethnic groups and the gay or queer in general.

This study seeks to show the way group-based identities associated with gender, ethnicity and sexuality are constructed in Lola's play. It argues that, it is through language (discourse, specifically myths, proverbs and metaphors) that dominant groups create social exclusion, discrimination and marginalization. The study thus identifies the intersections of postcolonial, gender/feminist and queer theories in language and explores the way hegemonic groups (men, heterosexuals and ethnic majorities) use language as strategy to construct the collective identities of minority groups. The paper seeks to answer a key question: how does linguistic interaction between social groups create superior and inferior identities? The argument is that, in the patriarchal and multicultural settings of Lola's play, men, heterosexuals and ethnic majority groups represents the world from exclusively their point of view and in accordance with stereotypical notions that cast them as the superior or dominant 'centre' and women, homosexuals and ethnic minorities as inferior; the negative object; the 'Other' or simply, the periphery.² The key instrument in the construction of inferior identities for women, gays and ethnic minorities is language. Feminist critics agree that language is inherently sexist in representing the world mainly from a masculinist perspective, using stereotypical notions of men and women. Men use language to perpetuate their authority, power, and to protect their interests in ways that deny women power. The same can be said of ethnic majority groups and heterosexuals. Such language use in African literature is evident in myths, proverbs and metaphors. These linguistic structures serve as the basis by which group-based power and identities are constructed, shaped and defined. Like women, ambiguous humans, transgenders and homosexuals can be considered minority groups because they also experience systemic

² The question of who is the center and who is the periphery in Queer studies needs to be addressed. In terms of sexuality (sexual orientation), heterogenous sexual people (male and female relations) are considered the center and the Queer, the periphery. Queer here refers to any other sexual orientation that is not aimed at family or procreation. From the point of view of heterosexuals, the Queer would be the marginal (the periphery) since they are often referred to negatively in the same way the colonizer perceived the colonized in negative depictions. Seen as such, Queer people constitute the minority.

marginalization and discrimination which are tied to their collective identities. In this study, linguistic devices like myths, proverbs and metaphors serve as analytical tools for constructing gender and ethnic identities.

STAGING GENDER OTHERNESS IN MYTHS, PROVERBS AND METAPHORS

The Archetypal Myth of Woman as the Source of Evil

The bone of contention in *The Lock on my Lips* is land ownership for women. In Kibaaka where the play the set, land ownership is reserved for men and a masculinist and mythical explanation is provided for this denial of land ownership for women. Recounted through the authoritative voice of the Fon, the myth reworks the endemic myth that constructs Eve as the source of temptation and fall for man. The myth lays the blame for the colonization and the environmental destruction (deforestation) that went with it on women:

Your Highness:

It was through a woman that trouble came to Kibaaka and turned things upside down.... Tantan Ngonso... was the Princess of Kibaaka and the first child in her family. Unfortunately, she was a woman and naturally disqualified for the throne.... the first male child from her womb was to be the heir to the throne of Kibaaka.... The brothers of Tantan Ngonso became jealous and planned to eliminate her son to inherit the throne.... Fada Goodluck took pity on Tantan Ngonso and.... sent them to the land of the rising sun.... After serving the brother of Fada Goodluck for many seasons.... he compensated her by marrying her.

While in the land where the sun never set, Tantan Ngonso told the father of her children many stories about Kibaaka: how we had large forests with big trees; how we did not know God and did not know book.... The white-skinned man... decided to come and help the people of Kibaaka and to also tame us..... When he had built the church and a school.... invaders began to flow in from the land of the rising sun like bees.... like locusts.... They cut down all the trees in Hunting Forest and carried all the big timber to their land..... Our forests and raffia trees soon disappeared. Rivers and streams dried off.... Roasting heat visited our land, killing people, fowls, plants, and crops. Rains came late and women planted late. Crops did not do well.... An alarm was raised blaming Ngonso for bringing strangers to Kibaaka.

The Fon and *Nwerong*.... immediately declared that women and strangers would never own land in Kibaaka.... It was believed that trouble came to Kibaaka through a woman and that is the reason a woman cannot buy land in Kibaaka (29-32)

This myth encodes only a male perspective, and is meant to defend male privileges while disregarding women's genuine need for land on account of their sex. The myth also encodes the stereotype that women are agents of moral corruption.: 'It was believed that trouble came to Kibaaka through a woman' (32). It thus affirms the cultural perception of woman as the all-time source of evil for men, a view reiterated in Ability's references to the protesting women as 'The white-haired daughters of Eve' (8); 'the accursed daughters of Eve' (23). The myth reaffirms that women are and have always been 'evil beings' who subvert men's 'ideal' plans; a view also reiterated by the Fon to his wife: 'Do not forget that it was disobedience brought by debased womanhood that debased mankind in God's sight... Is that what you want to repeat?' (108). Similarly, when the Fon confesses that his wife had betrayed his trust by secretly procuring land, Ability advises the men as follow:

I will warn every man never to repose trust in a woman, lest she controls him and wrecks his destiny. The experience of the first man teaches us that women are evil beings who disrupt men's plans to satisfy their greed. The worst thing that can happen to a man is to allow himself to be controlled by a woman.... to be carried away by her shifting looks, what stupid and blind men call beauty. The logical end is always that he loses control to her and allows himself to be governed by her. When such a fool tends to desecrate manhood by taking orders from a woman, he calls this madness love. Such a man is like one under the influence of palm wine. Such a man will share his own secrets with the woman and a man who shares secrets with a woman will soon take orders from her. Such a man is only a fool and a blind bat, a toy in the hands of the manipulative and frivolous creature. He is not worthy to be a village elder and should never even be admitted into the presence of men. If by some chance he finds himself among men, he should remain as silent as his fellow women when men speak (160)

This discourse encodes a stereotype commonly used to discredit women: that women are the archetypal source of evil or tragedy for men. The Fon's wife is thus only a late comer in the long list of such traitorous wives in the bible: Eve, Delilah, Salome, queen Jezebel, Herodias, Potiphar's wife, etc. Owing to the tendency in women to betray their men, Ability advises men never to share secrets with, trust love or lose control over their women.

Proverbs and Metaphors of Gender

A wide range of proverbs and metaphors in the play assault female sexual power as fatal to men, warn men never to trust a woman or exhort men to rule over their women. As Ability asserts, 'our people say that women are many, but friends are few' (75). That is, trust is too great a virtue to be bestowed on, or to be found in a woman.

One stereotype about women is that they are inherently jealous. Thus, Ability advises the Fon to take a second wife arguing that, a second wife will stir up the first wife's jealousy:

The thing you carry between your legs is a disciplinarian. A woman is another woman's medicine. The most stubborn woman becomes humble and submissive.... when her husband marries another woman (150). When a woman feels threatened by the presence of another woman around her husband, she stops nagging and listens to her husband.... As our people say, a woman would not be a woman if she were not jealous (150- 51).

As Ability denigrates women's sexual power, he simultaneously elevates men's sexual prowess through phallic metaphors of power that attribute to the penis the role of a disciplinarian.

Women are 'evil beings' who subvert men's plans. As queen, Manka should assist her husband, the Fon in his function as custodian of tradition, not lead a group of riotous women against traditions. The men express this treachery in various proverbs. Gheeh asserts, 'Our people say that the weevil that lives in the trunk of the raffia tree is the thing that will destroy the raffia tree' (19) adding, 'The weevil that eats the palm tree lives inside the palm' (209). For Ba Kimfoi, 'The insect that eats the leaf, lives within it. The beetle that destroys the raffia tree lives in the

heart of the raffia tree' (25). For Ability such women are '... the ticks that eat the hide in which its sleeps' and '...must be boiled in hot water with the hide.' (53). To Shufai Laika, it is a situation where 'the mouth bite[s] the finger that feeds it?' (211). That is, in rising against patriarchy, the women of Kibaaka have deeply hurt the men on whom they are dependent for their survival.

Faced with a women's insurgence, the men resort to intimidating tactics. Ability warns the queen of the danger of failure in this proverb: 'Our people say that the man who wants to start a war should gather enough bullets so that he will not be killed in his own war when his own weapons are finished (213). Similarly, the Fon has a proverbial warning for his wife, 'Manka... you have decided to test the depth of the river with your feet.' (112). To test the depth of the water using the feet is risky because one can easily get drown. These proverbial threats are intended to instill fear in the queen who has mobilized the women against the men, and to force her to change her mind. In a further threat, Your Highness asserts, 'Manka...Keep stirring up trouble for this land.... It is only a foolish woman who goes under the rain having only one wrapper' (168). By implication, fighting patriarchy is as risky as undertaking an outing in a rainy or stormy weather with only a wrapper as clothing. The wrapper is a loose fabric worn by woman with a blouse on top. Without the blouse, the wrapper is usually meant to be worn (by tying it above the breasts [see picture on the cover page of the play]) indoors. Worn thus, the wrapper is not an outdoor attire. The risk (especially for a married woman) of taking it outdoors is that in the event of a scuffle or storm, it may fall off, exposing its bearer's nakedness and putting her to shame. The proverb cautions the queen against overzealousness in her protest as she may be put to shame at the end.

A further risk in going outdoors with only a wrapper is that, in case its bearer is surprised by rain, the wrapper sticks to the body, showing all the contours of the woman's body and thus creating such sexually desirable shapes on her that in patriarchal culture, only her husband, supposedly 'the owner of [...her] thighs' (23) is entitled to seeing that much of her body. Even without rain, the wrapper when worn alone connotes nakedness for it exposes the woman's shape/body to public view. Dressed thus, the protesting women are considered naked and, Your Highness bemoans the exposure of his sexual entitlement to public view in the following metaphor: 'How could mother of children expose what is mine to public eyes? How could she? Did our fathers not say only the landowner knows the boundaries of the land?... I must put an end to this madness' (6).

The metaphor of woman as 'land' does not only objectify women by perceiving them as their husbands' properties, but also connotes colonization. Clearly, 'if we transpose the descriptions of colonized and colonizer to women and men, they fit in every point' (Donaldson, 1992:5). Marriage transforms the home into a domestic empire in which the man colonizes and owns his wife's body in the same way colonizers colonized and owned foreign lands/territories. As Your Highness affirms, 'The woman is like land and the man the owner.' (44). Evidence of men policing women's bodies litter the play. On hearing that Wirkitum is having an affair with his wife, Your Highness expresses this rivalry metaphorically: 'Two rams drinking, from one pot at the same time, it cannot be!' (147) adding, 'Ability, do you mean to say Wirkitum has dared to climb the tree that the home leopard has climbed?' (147). The ram is a potent symbol of male virility and procreative power. Contrarily, the woman over whom the men struggle is represented in the image of a passive tree or a drinking pot whose function is to quench the rams' thirst. This shows how women's agency is negated in the language structures of

patriarchy.

The objectification/commodification of women is fostered by the payment of 'bride price on a woman. 'Bride price' has serious commercial implications as the Fon explains,

A woman belongs to her father when she is young and unmarried. She belongs to her husband and his family when her bride-price is paid. She belongs to any surviving male member of her husband's family after her husband's death (44).

Through the marriage culture of 'bride price' payment, a man buys his wife or sells his daughter, and, as 'buyer', her husband exercises all rights of ownership over her. On marriage, a daughter ceases to be her father's property and becomes her husband's family property for, she is inherited by any surviving male member of her husband's family after her husband's death. Being their men's property then, women cannot own property. Shufai Laika explains this,

Manka, you just confirmed that the family of the Fon, your husband, paid your pride price. You belong to him with everything you have. That is the meaning of bride price. 'Property does not own property. Give the land to the Fon' (220).

'Bride Price' provides enabling grounds for treating women as objects/property. Challenged by his wife, the Fon re-asserts himself on the basis of bride price payment:

I want to remind you of one fact that you cannot reverse: I paid bride price on your head and not the other way round. Once you have sold your fish at the Kibaaka market you cannot expect to have them back and keep the money... (112).

Elsewhere he asks, 'Between the two of us, who married who? Who paid whose bride price? Who owns who?' (107). Like bought smoked fish, his wife belongs to him and must obey her buyer.

Regular realizes that women's agency, freedom, creativity and sexual desires are smothered by social conventions regulating female sexuality. Women are conditioned to repress their sexual desires and to behave according to patriarchal expectations regarding sex. The vibrant sexualities and desires of women have been suppressed due to feelings of guilt, fear and shame instilled by the male-dominated system to prevent women from 'mak[ing] trouble' (Cixous, 1976: 876). Patriarchy has ingrained a 'stupid sexual modesty' (Cixous, 1976: 885) in women to prevent them from establishing an identity that is free from societal regulations. Regular establishes her sexual identity by defying longstanding norms regarding female sexuality. Her refusal to be 'conditioned' by societal norms regulating female sexuality make her a 'monster' of a woman in the eyes of the men who stigmatize her as 'a tigress in bed... [because she] refuses to lie below' (8). The men believe that a man's authoritative position is sex is to lie on his woman, the reverse — the woman lying on the man — is an aberration; an attempt on the woman's part to emasculate the man. Regular's act of lying on her husband during sex is interpreted as a mark of dominance; a sign that she has taken over control and now runs the affairs of the man; an unacceptable reversal of gender roles. Hence, the Fon warns,

If Regular has been lying on VerdzeKov instead of beneath him and thinks she can also lie on us, it will not work! (The Elders nod). It will not work! She must learn

that this is Kibaaka and a woman's position is below, not above! Husbands must be husbands; and wives must be wives. If she has been running Verdzekov's affairs in bed and thinks she can together with other women dictate to us how to run the affairs of Kibaaka, then she will soon know that we are not Verdzekov or Fola... [9].

Lying on a woman during sex signifies power and indicates that the man is in control. By reversing roles, Regular uses sex as a means of taking some of the power she as a woman never had in her deeply misogynistic society. The men's expressions of shock and disgust at Regular's breach of sexual decorum is symbolic of how patriarchy chastises women who venture beyond their gender roles.

Beside their bodies, the woman's mind is policed by her man. Allowing women to think and take decisions implies ceding public space reserved for men. Thus, Your Highness reacts angrily to his wife's attempt to make him see reason why women must own land:

So, it is true you want to put on a thinking cap. Did you come to my house to reason with me? You are not here to reason, woman! I didn't pay all that huge bride price on your head for you to come here and reason for me! I do all the reasoning for you...! No more of that rubbish in my palace! (Storms out of the sitting room murmuring to himself). She really wants to share the leadership role with me in this palace (115).

For Your Highness, women's ability to reason and to rule is naturally limited by their sex: 'Human potentials can never go beyond that of the sex to which he or she belongs. You are a woman' (112). His refusal to allow his wife put on a 'thinking cap' encodes the stereotype of women as intellectually weak. When his wife expresses the need for political change, Your Highness explodes, 'what do you want to change? Your bare chin or your full chest? (112). The anatomical features of 'a bare chin' and 'a full chest' become metaphors for the limitations of womanhood.

In the public/private space binary, the private sphere of the home is for women and the public sphere of leadership is for men. Manka's attempt to dismantle this spatial dichotomy is ridiculed by Your Highness: 'Women want to put on thinking caps because they have been misled into thinking that taking care of the affairs of this land is the same as haggling at Kibaaka market' (128). Here is also encoded a particular stereotype about women's profession. If the African women most venture outdoor, it is to do petit trading, a profession associated with women, especially as evident in the commonly used 'market women' or 'buyam sellam'. On the other hand, we never hear of 'market men' or of men as 'buyam sellam' even though many are also petit traders. The men have been socialized in to thinking that public affairs/leadership is a male prerogative. In this vein, Your Highness considers the women uprising an attempt at 'take over': 'Women truly want to take over the world. They want to put on the thinking cap too. Well, they will all grow bald-headed too' (51). The men perceive the women's strike as a doomed attempt to overthrow patriarchy. And because they see bald-headedness as a consequence of managing public affairs, they compare the improbability of women assuming political power to the impossibility of women growing baldheads.

Land is a metaphor for power and represents public space where women are excluded. The Fon reiterates this thus, 'Land belongs to the man.... Land is power. If you give land to a woman, you have given her power' (44). Denying women land is therefore synonymous to shutting them out of power and locking them in the private sphere. Land ownership will provide women with economic power; enhances their ability to address their vulnerability and enable them to break out of the private space. Such women are perceived as 'Kitchen rebels and cultural rebels' (15).

Because Land is power, Land is also a metaphor for manhood. When his wife refuses to cede ownership of the land to the Fon, he mournfully asks, 'Do you want to become a man?' (109) and, pleading, asserts, '...that land is my manhood.' (106, 145). A woman should not own land if not, she becomes a man and, a 'real' man must own land if not, he becomes a woman. His wife's retention of ownership of the land becomes for the Fon an act of castration: 'Manka, why are you so bent on castrating the men in my land?' (113).

Opposed to land as a metaphor for power is 'silence' or 'voicelessness' as a metaphor for powerlessness. The cover page of the play bears the graphic image of a women with a padlock clipped over both lips. The metaphorical significance of the lock becomes clear:

the titular 'lock on my lips' is a visual metaphor: the graphic image on the cover page of the play-text of an African woman with a padlock clipped over both lips to indicate that women in the African culture are traditionally positioned as silent and passive in contrast to men who wield the rod of authority and knowledge. Such an image implicitly reinforces the cultural notion that women are to be seen but never to be heard. Silence is a common trope in patriarchal ideology. Generally, a good woman is not expected to express her ordeals, not even when she is raped. It is for this reason that women's voicelessness has become a topical issue in feminist discourse, especially as expressed in Spivak's concept of the subaltern who cannot speak and thus cannot voice her resistance (Nforbin, 2023: 356-7).

Some of the gender metaphors are drawn from the theatre and affirm Butler's concept of gender as a performance. In the traditional court, the elders stage the manjong dance as a demonstration of the social harmony that Manka wants to disrupt. The rhythmic dance is intended to make Manka see reason in respecting her gender role, but the heroine only perceives analogies between the stage dance and society's coercive gender norms:

I don't know whether what I have just watched is a stage performance or life.... Is a woman different from an actor on stage? Is the woman's life not scripted and programmed the same way the stake is planted in the farm to direct the growth of a creeping pumpkin stem? Can a woman compose her own song and choose her dance steps? Can she beat her own drum...? Haven't I been programmed to live my life on stage and be guided like a creeping stem, given a nod or frowned at by my carvers the same way the stake is planted in the farm to direct the growth of a stem? Is everybody not masking? Are we really who we are when the mask is on? Can I write my own script and choose my own role? Is life not just a performance? Can the actor step out of the programmed role? Can the actor disobey the stage director? Are we really who we are when we are on stage, acting the cultural script? (219).

Gender performativity (Butler, 2006) is evident in the heroine's argument that Women are 'conditioned', 'socialized or 'programmed' or moulded through their gender performances into 'being'/'becoming women. While the man is represented in metaphors of power—'script writer', or 'stage director', composer, drummer, etc.—the woman is cast in the roles of an 'actor' and dancer. The man as farmer/cultivator gives directions to the woman, imaged as a creeping plant or 'pumpkin stem that must helplessly follow the cultivator's direction. As Manka argues, 'women are like actors on stage, acting the script written by men' (105); they are forced to suppress their 'true' characters in order to identify with socially constructed images of a woman. Shufai and the Fon respectively, sum up this gender performance in two metaphors: 'Roles are assigned [by men] and not assumed [by women]' (211) and, 'This is Kibaaka! Nobody sings out of tune.' (111). Singing in the proper tone implies performing in the proper gender. Thus, Manka's questions: 'Are we really who we are when the mask is on?' Can the actor step out of the programmed role? Can the actor disobey the stage director?

Kibaaka men are united in their determination to crush the women's insurgence, but are faced with a dilemma: how can they do so '...without attracting legal instruments that protect the rights of women and the minority?' (61) Ba Kimfoi describes this dilemma in the metaphor of 'a fish bone... stuck in the throat of Kibaaka' (25), while Shufai advocates diplomacy in the proverb, 'Our people say if you must catch a fowl, throw grains of corn on the ground' (115). Shufai calls his strategy, 'pillow diplomacy' (42), which implies cajoling a woman into doing a man's will.

Throughout the play, the men demean and belittle the women's political efforts by describing them as 'a gathering of stubborn hens' (3), 'a hatchery of hens' (128) or 'fowls', an animal with a very limited mind, 'Throwing corn to catch a fowl' encodes the tradition stereotype of women as a foolish lot who can easily be deceived with petit things in to giving up great things. When Your Highness finally fails to flatter Manka into ceding ownership of the land, he stages a return to violence with this demeaning proverb: 'When a pig refuses to eat from a dish, cast its food on the floor' (169).

Cautioning Ability against the use of brute force on the women Shufai elaborates his 'pillow diplomacy using Manka's metaphor of the man as cultivator: 'Ability, calm down. The farmer directs the growth of a plant or stem by bending or pruning until it starts to grow better. If you use force, you will break the plant.' (212). To Ability's request that Manka be exiled, Shufai responds, 'When we wash a baby who has messed up its buttocks with shit, we do not throw away the baby with the bathwater' (63). A pacifist, Shufai believes in purging women of their transgressive attitudes and bringing them back into the fold rather than outright expulsion.

The unexpectedness of the women's daring protest is expressed by the men in the metaphors of 'rats... dancing in the presence of cats' (3) and 'hens... fighting the ways of the land right in the presence of cocks (23). These metaphors of the man as cock or cat, and the woman as hen or rat, spell doom for the women's effort. Hens, the weaker species of fowls/chickens are the opposite of cocks and are known for egg laying and for expending energy, scratching the ground to feed their off-springs. Like women, their role is that of reproduction and nurturing the species, not public affairs. Hence, Manka is often addressed by her reproductive function as 'mother of children'.

Surprised by the women's strike action, the men find explanations for this boldness in external influence. As Gheeh ponders, the women '...were not like this before. Where are they taking their power from?' (19). For him, the women cannot possibly be acting on their own: 'Our people say that a squirrel dances on the road in bright daylight because its drummers are in the nearby bush' (52). Accusing the government, he adds, 'Government has put teeth in the mouth of hens,' (7). Putting teeth in the mouth of a hen implies empowering or emboldening a weak person who thus emboldened, acts differently from his/her habitual cowardly character. For Ability, the Beijing conference (1995) is the intoxicating influence: 'Beijing has clad women in strange garments. The taproots of Beijing are deeply planted in the soils of Kibaaka land (52). To clad women in strange garments implies acting on strange ideas about gender. The 'taproots' clearly signify the deep rootedness of the Beijing influence. Contrarily, the women embrace the Beijing influence as liberating: 'Beijing has freed us from chains. The lock on our lips is removed. The rope with which the woman was tied to the kitchen is now untethered' (53). 'The lock', 'chains', 'rope', 'tethered' are metaphors for the restrictive gender roles from which Beijing has liberated women.

The men express their fear of the women strike in proverbs and metaphors. Gheeh's advises that the women's protest be treated with seriousness: 'Our people say if you play with a puppy it shows your nakedness to the world' (149). That is, if the men do not treat the uprising seriously, they may end up disgraced. Gheeh reiterates this: 'Our people say that the disgrace and the shame of the madman's nakedness does not go to the madman; it goes to his family. People will laugh at us and at our Fon and call us women when they hear that a woman has bought land in her name' (214). Ability, agrees, 'if we [the men] allow them[women] to get away with this shame that they have brought upon the land, people will call us women' (37). That is, should the women successfully disrupt normative gender roles, the disgrace will fall on their husbands who, as men/leaders should control their wives for, in Kibaaka, a man is not really a man if he cannot rule his wife/wives. Thus, as Ability asserts in a man's worst disgrace is to be controlled by a woman/wife: 'When a man ceases to be a man, he develops hunch back' (33). In another proverb he adds, 'Our people say that when a man ceases to be a man, he pays homage to a woman' (34). To develop hunch back is to become 'disabled' or emasculated.

The men are determined to stop the women's insurgence from spreading. As Gheeh put it, 'Our people say that until the rotten potato is pulled out of the bag, the disease will spread to the rest.' (15). Ability adds, 'Our people say the ticks that eat the cow hide in which it sleeps must be boiled in hot water with the hide.' (53). To the men the protesting women are as ungrateful as the destructive ticks that eat up the hide they live in, and thus deserve serious punishment. Will the men succeed to bring the women under control? The Fon's response is affirmative: 'Our people say that no matter how strong a log of wood is, it gives way to the axe.' (7). In other words, no matter how self-assertive she is, a woman can always be subdued and made to submit to a man's authority. The men fear to be called, 'women'. 'Woman', is a metaphor for weakness and cowardice. Thus, perceiving Shufai as weak, Ability calls him '...a woman with balls between his legs (94).

A particular African stereotype represents women as quarrelsome and talkative. Separating a fight between his two daughters, Your Highness rebukes them thus:

...so, you have decided to join your mothers in transforming my palace into a battleground? Huh? If it is not your mothers quarrelling, bickering, and refusing to greet each other, it is you, the children, when will there ever be peace in this palace?... You are as stubborn as your mother... Like mother, like daughter. The baby cobra is never free of venom (46).

The men put women on the same level with children as a childish trouble-making lot. This implies that, like ignorant children, women need constant guidance, correction and trashing if need be. With this mindset, Ability advises Your Highness to thrash his insubordinate wife: 'Your Highness, there are many things you can do to clip her wings. She needs serious beatings immediately she returns. Do it to regain your bedroom dignity. A man must be a man' (149). The Fon agrees: 'Our people say, it is no bravery to beat a woman, but it is sometimes a necessity' (150).

The gender crisis in Kibaaka is a double-edge problem. It is a 'man-turn-woman and woman-turn-man' situation. Succinctly stated, 'women want to be men. Men have become women' (15). The 'Men [who] have become women' are the transexual men and homosexuals. Kibaaka is more shocked by the revolt against normative sex than by the women's uprising. Metaphorically, they refer to homosexuals as 'cross-dressers' 'human climbers', 'human riders', 'man marry man' and as 'men who sheathe their swords in the wrong place' (15). For the men, to be a man is a blessing thus, Your Highness asserts, 'It is a blessing to be born a man. You cannot dangle a tuber of power between your legs and choose to ride your kind like a horse rider!' (224) The penis is perceived as a symbol of authority: 'a tuber of power'. For Ability, being a man is a privilege one cannot afford to lose. The transexual men are 'Full-blooded men who should shout, bark, thunder and watch their wives shiver like jackets of leaves [but who have] shamelessly thrown away their pride and authority for crumbs. Who does that?' (121)

What the heterosexual men find puzzling about homosexuals is the question of who among these same sex partners functions as a man and who as a woman during sex. As Ability puts it,

How can a man enter the house through the backdoor like a thief? How can a man ride his fellow man? Who is the man and who is the woman? Tell me, who lies beneath whom? Who among them climbs his fellow man through the back door? Hei! How does it feel to be trapped to your fellow man...' (120)

For Your highness, homosexuality, transgender and transexuality constitute a '...desease [that] is spreading across the land and infecting our children' (224) and that must be stopped. For him, gender demarcations must be respected: 'Men must be men! Women must be women!' (16). On the whole, homosexuality, transsexuality and women's demand for land are perceived as an attempt to reverse the natural order of things, and according to Ability. this must be swiftly eradicated: 'My father used to say that when the pricking grass begins to grow in the farm and you do not remove it immediately, it will spread its roots, overgrow and choke out the good plants', adding, 'if we must stop cancer from spreading to other parts of the body, we must weed it from the root.' (16)

Besides women and the LGBTs, the 'come no gos' are also victims of group-based power

discrimination.

Staging Ethnic Otherness in Proverbs and Metaphors

In answer to his son's question, 'Why... people like Anti Lawyer, Honourable Wirkitum, Uncle Savage, and others are called Come-no-Gos?' (47), the Fon posits three factors that created the 'Come no go' minority community in Kibaaka: Western missionary services; the recent attempts by Afro-Americans to identify and reconnect with their ancestral homelands and, the migration of other ethnic groups through inter-ethnic marriages, or in search of jobs:

Come-no-Go means stranger. Their skin is different and some have only a bit of our blood. They came here to teach our people the language and the ways of the white man and never returned to their land after their work. Some came here to look for jobs in the plantations. A long time ago, people used to leave distant lands to travel to Kibaaka in search of jobs. We have many of such people working in the palm oil, banana, cocoa, and rubber plantations. The White Missionaries were not alone (47)

In multicultural postcolonial African urban contexts where people from the different ethnic groups come in contact with each other for academic, economic, social, civil service or just national integration purposes, ethnic discrimination is common, and it is often common to hear people identifying other ethnic groups in derogatory terms like 'come no go' that connote exclusion or 'otherness'. To Your Highness, the 'come no gos' are 'outsiders' or 'guests in the house' (8). As he tells his wife, a 'come no go', she cannot own land in Kibaaka because 'A caterpillar can never become a bird simply because it transformed into a butterfly and started flying in the sky (111). In other words, Manka should not think that by marrying the Fon, she has become a citizen and can now enjoys privileges reserved for Kibaakans.

As an ethnic metaphor, the term, 'Come no go' denotes a settler or settler population that has no intention of ever returning to his/her/its original homeland. It is a derogative appellation that implicitly excludes its bearer from the community s/he lives in. 'Come no go' is a politically motivated term propagated in the 1990s in Cameroon politics by former South West governor, Peter Oben Ashu, and which gave rise to a phenomenon of hate and exclusion aimed at the mostly North West settler population of the South West region. The term, which eventually stuck in the cultural memory of Cameroonians is today used as a metaphor for any settler population that has no intention of ever returning to its area of origin. 'Come no go' with its parasitic undertones has its real origin in a disease that manifests itself in itching scabies and rashes that often left its victims with eligible scars long after the malaise has disappeared. As a derogative metaphor for settlers, the term connotes 'homelessness' and confers 'refugee' status on settlers. 'Come no go', is today a phenomenon or a process of exclusion of settler population that takes place from time to time in cities and regions of Cameroon. Whenever elections are around the corner, origins and citizenship are evoked and used to scrutinized candidates. In Like manner, wherever and whenever jobs, facilities like medical care, education and fertile land for instance, are scarce, demands are often made by the so-called 'autochthons' or 'sons of the soil' that entry be restricted to 'outsiders', 'strangers' or 'come no goes (Nforbin,2023: 346).

Semantically opposed to 'Come no go' is the soothing phrase, 'son of the soil' by which xenophobic characters like Ability justify their hostility towards ethnic minorities while

claiming to belong. 'Come no go' is a metaphor for strangers', outsider or sojourner as opposed to a full citizen' or 'son of the soil'.

The ethnic tension in the play evolves around Ability and Wirkitum. Ability perceives Wirkitum as a second-class citizen who usurps privileges reserved for 'sons of the soil'. Their encounters often degenerate almost immediately into xenophobic insults along lines of identity, ethnicity and 'belonging', a situation that elucidates the fragile relationship between the two ethnic communities of Kibaaka. Against Wirkitum's claim to belong, Ability retorts, 'Isn't it obvious that the bird calls itself Head of House because the house owner allowed it to build its nest in his roof? (71). For him, the 'come no gos' are a people without a homeland, a view shared by Gheeh in the proverb, 'Our fathers say, a bird claims to have a home and to belong when you allow it to build its nest on the rooftop of your house' (36). The 'Come no gos' are strangers' who, like birds that temporarily find sustenance under someone's roof, mistake their temporary habitation for home. Thus, Ability tells Wirkitum, 'An uprooted forest tree that begins a new life in the farmland where it is deposited by flood waters will never become a plant' in that farmland' (238). That is, Kibaaka can never be home for Wirkitum and his likes. In this vein he adds, 'The crocodile lives in the water, but it is not a fish' (239). Ability's argument is that, like the crocodile, the 'come no gos' feel at home in Kibaaka because they have received a warm welcome from the natives. Regretting this hospitality Ability asserts, 'Truly, when you give a lepper a handshake, he or she asks for an embrace the next time' (79). In other words, the 'come no gos' have been rendered so comfortable in Kibaaka that they have not only forgotten their true origins, but now feel they too deserve the full rights of citizens. Ridiculing Wirkitum supposed transformation from a 'come no go' to an elder in Kibaaka, Ability adds, 'A butterfly can shed off its skin, develop wings, and even fly (*moving his stretched-out hands sideways and forwards*) in the air like a bird; its true origin is still the creeping caterpillar (239). That is, having metamorphosed like a butterfly from a 'come no go' to a member of mwerong, Wirkitum feels like a 'son of the soil' rather than the 'plaited ropes' (240) that he is. He uses 'Plaited ropes' to denote someone of dual/ multiple or dubious origins. This is reinforced in his further references to Wirkitum's 'hybrid' identity as 'blood pollution' (81), 'half-blood, and to his chieftaincy titles as 'borrowed feathers' (79, 239) to indicate that he does not deserve them. When it is finally revealed that Wirkitum is the one who sold land to Manka, Ability, in a celebratory proverb reaffirms Wirkitum's outsider status:

What did I tell you? What did I tell you? No matter how long a crocodile lives in the water, it will never be a fish. No one listened to me. Look now what it means to peddle citizenship. Until we get all the Wirkitums out of Kibaaka, we shall never know peace! (265)

Wirkitum (whose name coincidentally means 'stranger' in Lamso) becomes a metaphor for the destructive force of outsiders toward indigenous culture. On the whole, the 'come no go' minority is perceived as a destructive force and represented as 'locust'. As Gheeh puts it, 'We allowed locusts to settle on our farmlands and now they are preying on our crops' (52). Locusts are grasshopper-like insects thought of in the bible and in the African culture as an instrument of destruction because of the damage they cause to crops/plants wherever they settle. Owing to its power of destruction, locust is used in the bible as an instrument of god's punishment.

However, while the male cult unanimously opposes all forms of gender transgression, they are

divided over the 'come no gos'/minority issue. Ability, is an extremist who considers the 'come no gos' as 'outsiders', 'strangers', 'refugees', 'Guests', 'Sojourners', 'blood pollution', 'half-blood', 'hybrid forms', 'ticks' and 'Rats', and stresses the 'need to weed them out' (78), but Shufai Laika, a moderate and a unionist is a pacifist who considers the 'come no gos', not as strangers but as part of the Kibaaka family lineage. Shufai opposes Ability's separatist stance and his images reflect his stance for an all-inclusive Kibaaka. As he warns his fellow elders, 'We should not pull down the building that provides shelter and a roof over many households. The family will be exposed to rain.... We still need Bongkisheri and strangers' (44). Elsewhere he advises, 'Elders of our land, the shit that is sticking to our finger is from our anus. Our people say that when a stubborn child is beaten and thrown out of the house, the door should be locked with bamboo stem and not a padlock' (222). For him, every offender should be given the chance to repent and return to the fold. Distancing himself from Ability's xenophobic insults on Wirkitum he explains: 'Ability spoke for himself. We cannot tear the family apart' (241) and, stressing Wirkitum's ancestral background to Kibaaka, Shufai employs this unifying metaphor:

When a river is flowing, it gives birth to streams. The streams may flow back into the same river and it continues its journey as one body of water. We cannot separate the streams flowing in one river. We cannot cut off a stream from the river. What am I saying? Shufai Wirkitum is a child of two worlds. He is one of the branches of the Kibaaka family tree. He has our blood in his veins. He is three bloods in one body. He is the bridge between two worlds (242).

Throughout the play, Shufai conceives of the 'come no gos' in the unifying metaphors of 'in-laws', 'grafted plants', 'a branch on the family tree' and as 'plaited ropes':

Ability,.... Nobody wins a war against his own people. Nobody fights his in-laws. The people we call Come-no-gos are not total strangers. That breed has our blood flowing in their veins. They are like 'grafted-skin plants' Their ancestral lands are known by all of us. The stumps of their ancestral trees and compounds are in Kibaaka. The fact that some of them were born in other lands does not mean that they do not have our blood flowing in their veins.... That is why our fathers called them plaited ropes. Nobody has the right to deny them their origin. Some of the Come-no-Gos are our in-laws. They are marrying and having children with our daughters. Our children have their blood in their veins.... Marriage is a cobweb of relations.... Our Queen is part of us by marriage. Alhaji Musa is one. Honourable Wirkitum... is a branch on the family tree. He has our blood in his veins. (Wirkitum nods and smiles). He belongs here (76).

While Ability's pejorative metaphors attributes to the 'come no gos' a parasitic sense of otherness, Shufai's metaphors- 'plaited ropes' and 'grafted plants', 'a branch on our family tree'-connote a genuine sense of (biological and ancestral) entanglement and unity.

CONCLUSION

Through the use of myths, proverbs and metaphors in the play, women are objectified, denied autonomy, and like the LGBT community and the ethnic minority 'come no gos', silenced. The linguistic devices used conceive of the men, heterosexuals and the ethnic majority as the 'centre' while women, homosexuals, transgenders and ethnic 'come no gos' are cast in the

margins. Lola demonstrates that gender/sexist and ethnic discriminations are portrayed, propagated and transmitted through linguistic devices like myths, proverbs, metaphors and idioms. These devices accurately convey sexist and ethnic discriminations by valorising one group while devaluing by stereotyping the other. Through these devices, Lola truly provokes a poignant reflection on the othered status of women, gays and ethnic minorities by showing how language functions to exclude these minorities from decision-making processes in society.

References

Butler J (1990) *Gender Trouble*. Reprint 2006. New York: Routledge Classics.

Cixous H (1976) The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs* 1(4): 875-893

Donaldson L E (1992) *Decolonizing Feminism: Race, Gender, and Empire-building*. Chapel Hill & London: The University of Carolina Press.

Lola PN (2023) *The Lock on My Lips*. Revised Edition. Denver Colorado: Spears Books.

Niba NG (2023) Gender, Ethnicity and the Politics of Belonging in Postcolonial Africa/Cameroon: A Reading of Lola Perpetua Nkamanyang's *The Lock on My Lips*. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 10(4):337-369.