

Portrayal of African Women in Folklore: A case Study of Proverbs among the Lunda in the Northwestern Part of Zambia

**Sylvester Mutunda (Ph.D.)
Lecturer and Researcher
Linguistic and Languages Department
The University of Zambia**

Abstract

This study looks into a number of Lunda proverbs to see whether any gender biases exist in the way women and their roles are portrayed in this literary genre. Data were gathered from one published source in Lunda language titled *Tuheka Twawalunda* by Kambita, E. & al. (1959), other proverbs were collected from interviews with three informants in Zambezi District of North-western Zambia namely Daimana Nkondi, Tony Samakayi, and Geoffrey Sambaulu, to whom I am so grateful. The data for this paper also included my knowledge, experience, and introspection, based on being a Lunda native. Furthermore, the theoretical apparatus has been drawn from a combination of approaches including patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and feminism.

The selected proverbs are grouped under six themes namely marriage and procreation; women's beauty and physical appearance; women's immorality; stubbornness and destructiveness of women; women being encouraged; and unreliability and unpredictability of women. The paper argues that in the selected Lunda proverbs, women are portrayed both in favourable and unfavourable light. However, there is lack of balance between the negative and positive attitudes towards women. Women are portrayed positively only in a few proverbs. Most proverbs indicated that women are evil, promiscuous, unreliable, not trustworthy, and above all, intellectually inferior. The paper concludes that, though in recent times the social roles of many Lunda women have changed; it is wise to note that these changes are sometimes hampered by entrenched societal views about women which result from traditional wisdom. Therefore, any change of attitude and expectations will require extensive education about the potential of women in order to counter the delimitations of these entrenched traditional views.

Key words: Lunda-Ndembu, Lunda proverbs, patriarchy and feminism, women in African folklore.

Introduction

The Lunda, in common with other Africans peoples, possess a rich folklore tradition comprising mostly tales, proverbs often referred to as maxims or folk wisdoms, riddles, and poetry. Of these verbal arts, proverbs are by far the most frequently employed, in a number of ways for different purposes. In their daily communication, the Lunda often resort to proverbs as one of the most important and most effective strategy they have devised to optimize the effectiveness of speech. Because proverbs are frequently used in normal, everyday speech situation, the Lunda, like any other African community, assign great importance to proverbs. Commenting on the importance of proverbs in African cultures Stewart (1997: ix) posits: “The ability to use proverbs effectively in speech and conversation is essential to attaining positions of leadership and respect in some African societies.” Several proverbs attest to the importance of this trait. For instance, one Shona proverb suggests, “one who applies proverbs gets what he wants. “The Yoruba of Nigeria claim, “A wise man who knows proverbs reconciles difficulties.” And in Serra Leone it is said that, “Proverbs are the daughters of experience” (Stewart, 1997: ix).

In this paper, I examine how women are represented in Lunda proverbs, with the aim of determining whether any gender biases exist in the way women and their roles are portrayed in this literary genre. I open the discussion by giving a brief background of the Lunda society, in order to shed some light on the people whose proverbs is the focus of this study. The second section revolves around the conceptual review of proverbs, some major definitions of the term “proverb”, its functions, characteristics and its uses. The last section highlights the theoretical framework, on which the study is anchored, and the findings from the study are presented, and the emerging themes are discussed. Finally, a concluding remark is provided.

The Lunda Society

Lunda is one of the major language groupings in Zambia (Kashoki, 1978). It is spoken by the people called Lunda, also known as Lunda-Ndembu. The Lunda are found in North-western Zambia, particularly in Zambezi, Mumbemba, Manyinga, Kabompo, and Mwinilunga Districts. The language is not only spoken in Zambia, but also in Eastern Angola, and in the Southern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, albeit with some linguistic variations such as tonality, palatalization, and morphological features (Mutunda, 2011: 15). According to historical records, the Lunda are descendants of seventeenth century emigrants from the Mwanta Yamva dynasty in the South-western part of the Democratic Republic of Congo

(McCulloch, 1951; Turner, 1963; Brelsford, 1965; Vansina, 1966; Pritchett, 2001). The Lunda are historically related to the Chokwe, Luvale and Luchazi.

As reported by Turner (1963), the Lunda practice matrilineal descent combined with virilocal marriage. They live in small, mobile villages mainly because of hunting and shifting cultivation. Their staple crop is cassava (*makamba*) and millet (*masañuor kachayi*) which is grown mostly for brewing. Other crops include maize, rice, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, castor oil plants and a variety of garden crops. Beside subsistence agriculture and hunting, the Lunda also keep some cattle, chicken and goats.

Like many African cultures, the gender roles among the Lunda is such that there is very little overlap in male and female activities. Pritchett (2001: 177) buttresses this when he observes: "Relations between male and females among the Lunda-Ndembu are heavily infused with the notion of *chaambu*, [that is] separation between males and females." This separation is manifested in different ways. For example, *chota* and *chinsambu* (palaver hut and kitchen) separate men and women. Each gender is autonomous in the way she or he discharges her/his duties. For example, as Pritchett (2001) further observes, "Any competent adult woman can grow and process more than sufficient food to feed herself and her children. Women also control the labour power of young boys until they reach the age of circumcision, and young girls until they marry" (2001: 178). As for a man, regardless of his relationship with his wife, "has nothing to say about how a woman organizes her time. She is an autonomous entity, going and coming as she pleases, raising cash and using it as she will" (Pritchett, 2001: 179). From these statements, one may be tempted to believe that the issue of male dominance as being a universal matter does not apply to the Lunda society. However, I will promptly say that this is not the case, as this study will reveal.

There are two most important rites that every Lunda man or woman experiences in his or her life, these are *mukanda*, the boys' circumcision ritual and *nkaña*, the girls' puberty ritual. The objective of these ceremonies is to turn boys into men and girls into women. The basic framework of *mukanda* is composed of separation (circumcision), transition (seclusion while the boys heal and receive cultural training from adult men), and reincorporation of the initiates *atundanji* (sing. *kandanji*), into the village community, where they are received joyously as newly born and real men (Mutunda, 2008; Turner, 1987).

The girls' initiation ritual differs in many respects from that of the boys. As documented by Pritchett (2001) and Turner (1987), while boys are initiated in groups in the bush, girls are initiated individually in the village. Whereas boys are subjected to hard labour

and harsh discipline, girls are pampered, sung to, and relieved from doing most daily chores. Boys are circumcised, but girls do not undergo clitoridectomy like other ethnic groups in West Africa. The determining factor to hold *nkaña* (the girls' puberty ritual) is the first reported menstrual period by the girl to her grandmother or a close elderly female relative. The purpose of the ritual is not to enact any physical change in the girl but, in most part, to give her a period of time in seclusion to reflect on her newly acquired capacity to reproduce. Commenting on the importance of girls' initiation rite, Turner (1987) says: "[*Nkaña*] prepares a girl for her future as a sexually mature woman. It takes her through a stage at which all her feelings are strange; it lifts her, so to speak, across the gap between childhood and womanhood" (1987: 58). Just as *mukanda* for boys, *nkaña* goes through three distinct stages. There is a ceremony of removal from secular life known *askwiñija*; seclusion *orkukunka*; and a ceremony of reintegration called *kwidisha*. The reintegration marks the end of the rite when the now "mature woman" leaves the seclusion area to re-join the community in her newly acquired role.

Conceptual Review of Proverbs

Proverbs are considered the most common genre of folklore, found among all cultures of the world. They are simple and often short statements with deep meaning, guidelines for individual, family and village behaviours. Proverbs are not built from a vacuum, rather on repeated real life experiences and observations. Like any form of language, "proverbs are mirrors through which people look at themselves – a stage for experiencing themselves to others" (Malunga & Banda, 2004: 2). Similarly, Jackie Lee (2015) notes that "proverbs are the mirror of culture in that they "can reflect the customs, traditions, values, opinions and beliefs of a particular society" (2015: 561). Indeed, by looking at peoples proverbs, we can understand how they think and look at the world, their culture, values, behaviours, aspirations, and preoccupation.

In her book titled *Source of All Evil: African Proverbs and Sayings on Women*, Mineke Schipper (1991: 3) notes that besides being part of peoples' cultural heritage, "proverbs are embedded in the context in which they function. By their nature, proverbs confirm societal norms and value. "Indeed proverbs are windows to see deeper in culture. This is because they carry with them knowledge and are transmitted from one generation to another. Through proverbs, an individual is taught how to live with other people in a given society. When children are growing up for instance, they get to learn, through proverbs, the accepted norms of their society and those that are seen as taboos. Through the use of

proverbs, an individual gets a better insight on the way of life of a particular people. What is a proverb then?

Towards the Definition of Proverbs

Over the centuries, several attempts have been made by different scholars towards providing an accurate definition of proverbs. However, still there is no agreement on the definition of the term. This is because proverbs vary considerably depending on the culture of a given society. Nevertheless, the rudimentary belief is that a proverb is an adage, “assaying in more or less fixed form marked by ‘shortness, sense, and salt’ and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth expressed in it” (Finnegan, 2012: 383). Similarly, Okpewho (1992: 226) suggests that, proverb is “a piece of folk wisdom expressed with terseness and charm. “In the same breath, Ahmed (2005), as quoted in Zakariyah (2013: 22), defines proverbs as “short pithy sayings which have gained credence through widespread or frequent use.” As to Kerschen(2012: 13), proverb is regarded as “short statement that teaches a lesson or gives practical advice”. In the words of Akinmande (2005) as cited in Akinmande (2012: 129), “a proverb is a metaphorical horse in popular and approved saying which carries one beyond the surface meaning of a saying, to discover the truth of ideas; it is an in-depth, carefully selected provocative thought which either commands, advises, rebukes or warns a person or thing to which it is applied. “Proverbs can further be defined as “shorts wise sayings which are often based on observable facts and heavily linked with the culture of the people” (Zakariyah, 2013: 22). Based on the above definitions, proverbs could be conceptualised as any wise saying or epigram that converts the central idea in a given context, objectively and truthfully.

While much has been written on what a proverb is, it is more important to understand what a proverb does. According to the Yoruba of Nigeria, “Proverbs are the horses of speech” meaning that in the event where communication gets lost, proverbs are used to retrieve it (Schipper, 1991: 1). Schipper’s idea is succinctly apparent in the following Igbo proverb which says, “Proverbs are the palm –oil with which words are eaten” (Oha, 1999: 87), meaning that proverb help to accelerate the smooth sail of words through the throat. If proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten, it is logical then for words that portray gender to be embraced in proverbs. Therefore, by examining the usage of proverbs by the Lunda people, I will demonstrate the ways in which gender stereotype is constructed and reinforced within traditional Lunda society and the broader Zambian society.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on a combination of theoretical approaches including patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and feminism. Through the lens of these theories, I will try to find out to which extent proverbs have been used among the Lunda to maintain the male/female status quo if at all. The study therefore attempts to identify and analyse the images of women as portrayed in the Lunda proverbs.

In a society where patriarchal practices and beliefs are prevalent, the relationship between men and women is based on gender inequality. Patriarchy, as defined by social scientists such as Weber (1947), is “a system of government in which men rule society through their position as head of households” (quoted in Walby, 1990: 19). However, the meaning of the term has evolved since Weber, especially in the writing by radical feminists, who developed the elements of the domination of women by men. For example, Walby (1990) defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (1990: 20). In the same vein, Kirk and Okazawa (2004) observe that patriarchy encompasses male-domination, male-identification, and male-centeredness. It includes, the authors add, “ideas about the nature of things, including men, women and humanity with manhood mostly closely associated with being human and womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of Other” (quoted in Ncube and Moyo, 2011: 127). Patriarchy therefore is about the arrangement of life in the eyes of the dominant group, i.e. men. This particular culture privileges the exercise of men’s power over women. Commenting on the meaning of patriarchy and its effects on women, Mutunda (2015) observes:

Patriarchy is a gender system in which men dominate women. The ascribed superior status of men is encouraged and sustained by social institutions that are considered unquestionable and natural. In addition, this system of social stratification based on sex provides men with power and material advantages while depriving women of both those benefits. (2015: 52)

Deeply entrenched in the concept of patriarchy is the notion of hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell (2005), hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (2005: 77). Hegemonic masculinity, when embodied by at least some men over time and space, legitimates men's domination over women as a group. In

essence, hegemonic masculinity, as Mutunda (2015) suggests, refers to that view of masculinity which has established dominance in society. In addition, this form of masculinity is mostly supported by social institutions namely schools, religion, and law, just to cite a few.

Furthermore, Mimi Schippers (2007) has defined hegemonic masculinity as “the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity and that by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (2007: 94). As shown in the definitions above, hegemonic masculinity legitimates the domination of men over women.

Feminists have also focused on this gender inequality which stresses women’s inferiority to men. Three feminist approaches namely the liberal, radical, and socialist, try to provide different explanations for the roots of gender inequality. Liberal feminism holds that “women and men are identical by their essential nature but women are deprived of the opportunities to realise their potentials on account of their gender” (Ndungu, 1998: 47). Another liberal feminist, Betty Friedman (cited in Belfatmi, 2013: 16) explains gender inequality in terms of culture and social subordination. She maintains that “lack of equal rights in different fields including education is the root of women’s oppression.” In fact, the liberal feminists believe there is no such thing as male/female nature but human nature. They envisage a society inhabited by human beings who will be the same in their essential nature.

When some feminists began to perceive the inequality between women and men, they used the term “radical” to signify their commitment to seek the origin of the root cause of this inequality. One such theorist is Shulamith Firestone (1970) who is believed to be the first radical feminist. Throughout her work titled *the dialectic of sex* (1970), Firestone stresses that the root cause of women’s subordination is their biology. She argues that women’s biology, which includes menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, makes them to be dependent on men. This dependence inevitably produces unequal power relationships (Firestone, quoted in Belfatmi, 2013: 16).

Other radical feminists argue that patriarchy is the origin of inequality existing between males and females. They focus on patriarchal oppression in every sphere of women’s lives from the most private to the most public. They stress the need to revalue the creative and nurturing aspects of femininity which have become devalued and distorted in patriarchal society. For instance, in her *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett (1970) maintains that patriarchy is perpetuated by the family, being the primary source of socialization which

provides men with dominant temperament. She believes that patriarchy is the source of many social problems faced by women. She also argues that gender inequality is not related to social class but to male domination over women. In the same breath, Hartman (1997) argues that patriarchy creates the conditions for women to be systematically dominated, exploited and oppressed. The very difference between men and women, which allow men to exploit the situation to dominate women and rule the world, is the very difference that concern radical feminists on a political level. Radical feminism sees that men have benefited of inequality; women, on the other hand, carry out unpaid work in higher jobs positions. Consequently, “unlike liberal feminism which claims that gender inequality should be reformed, radical feminism believes that it should be eradicated [altogether]” (Belfatmi,2013: 17).

Radical feminism promotes womanhood rather than aspiring to integrate and assimilate into male-dominated social arena. It is focused upon sexual oppression as a manifestation of women’s oppression and social order. Radical feminism is premised on the solidarity of women that transcends class, race, and ethnicity. This sisterhood of women is expected to enjoy bonds that are stronger than other existing bonds among men and women.

Marxist and socialist feminism, nevertheless considers the entire system of capitalism as the root of women oppression. This theory highlights the provision of cheap labour to enhance capitalism. The theory finds significance in class relation in that one class is more advantaged than the other. Social feminists believe that the exploitative economic relations, where the worker is exploited by the dominant capitalist class, could serve as an understanding of gender relations. They further argue that “women are second class citizen in patriarchal capitalism which demands for its survival on exploitation of working people and on the social exploitation of women” (Humm, cited in Belfatmi 2013: 17). Social feminists hold that one way to get rid of gender inequality is the establishment of a communist society in which the production of wealth is commonly owned. They, therefore, relate gender inequality to economic differences.

Analysis of the Selected Proverbs

As mentioned earlier, the discussions in this paper are based on data collected from both printed and non-printed sources, mainly from a book of Lunda proverbs and interviews with three Lunda native informants. The proverbs were then put into six (6) categories according to various themes that were found relevant to shade light on the ways women are perceived in the Lunda community. These include: proverbs related to marriage and procreation, proverbs related to women’s beauty and physical appearance, proverbs relating

to women's immorality, proverbs that portray women as stubborn and destructive, proverbs that encourage men to subdue women, and proverbs that portray women as unreliable and unpredictable.

1. Proverbs related to marriage and procreation

Like in most African communities, there exist among the Lunda people of North-western Zambia, proverbs that give images of the woman that translate the way she is perceived and how she should be. In the first instance, we find that the woman is portrayed in her matrimonial and social role.

Motherhood is an important aspect in many cultures and Africa, and the Lunda society is not an exception. Indeed, the traditional Lunda society encourages both men and women to get married. Marriage is an absolute social must, a sign of maturity and responsibility; it is a fulfilment of the wishes and aspirations of one's parents, extended kin members and society at large. More importantly for women, once in marriage, they are expected by parents and in-laws to bear a child as soon as possible after marriage. Procreation is part of marriage and a woman has no control over the number of children to have. To uphold this important woman's role, the Lunda say: *Niyalawubinda, namumbandalusemu* ("For the man huntsman ship, for the woman, procreation"). As the hunter fulfils his duties of hunting down animals to feed his family, the woman should fulfil her procreative obligation.

Procreation is so crucial that if a woman appears to be barren, the husband is justified in marrying a second wife who will be able to bear him children. To uphold this attitude, the Lunda say: *mutondukufukamawudinamafu* ("For a tree to bend it needs to have leaves that will make it heavy") implying that the value of a woman lies on her ability to bear children; the more children she bears, the more respected she becomes. Once a man gets married, he expects his wife to have as many children as she can, for the more children a man has, the more masculine and virile he is considered by the community. Here the woman is not consulted, her opinion does not matter, she is just a mere sexual object that man uses at will because, as the 'head' of the family, he is justified to control not only his wife's mind but her womb as well, the womb which Gayatri Spivak (1987) maintains is "a workshop," a place that can be managed and controlled in terms of use value and surplus value. The woman is seen as the trophy that enhances the status of the man.

However, as mentioned earlier, if his wife fails to bear any children, the man will marry a second wife; this is one of the reasons why polygamy occurs among the Lunda people. It is interesting to note that in this community, when a couple experiences infertility,

the blame is put squarely on the woman. Mineke Shipper (1991) is right when she observes that “the polygamous inclination of men is presented as quite natural even normal, whereas women’s interest in other men becomes unfaithfulness” (1991: 13). If we compare the social consequences of this male-female relationship, it can be concluded that men are more advantaged than women.

It is also believed that having many children spins out the fear that not all children turn out to be successful and the hope that at least one out of many will. Furthermore, it is believed that the more children one has, the greater one’s chances of living comfortably later in life, because then, the roles will be reversed and the children will be able to take care of their parents. The following proverb illustrates this traditional belief which is upheld by men and women alike: *mama ñelekininaminakakwelekikumadiki* (“Mother, carry me on your back today and I will do the same to you tomorrow, i.e. in your old age”).

As exemplified in the proverbs above, “the mother is considered as giver or the source of life; she is the central figure in the family around whom life revolves” (Diabah & Amfo, 2015: 11). A Gikuyu proverb entrenches this idea when it says: “The man is the head of the home but the wife is the heart” (Cited in Kiiru, 1999: 5).

Among the Lunda, though marriage is a social must for both men and women, it is the later that carry the heaviest burden. Beside procreation, a woman is expected to be good and responsible wife to her husband. She is supposed to take care of first and foremost, her husband, attending to all his needs and desires and then the rest of the household roles. In this sense, she is considered a wife and a mother, a carer or nurturer, the one who provides for the nutritional needs of her family. According to Diabah and Amfo (2015), “This stereotypically feminine role encompasses taking care of all kinds of domestic work such as cleaning, washing, cooking, etc., as well as bringing up children and making sure the family is supported” (2015: 12). Additionally, as a homemaker, a woman is expected to be obedient to her husband, sharing his likes and dislikes, and respecting his relatives. The following proverb conceptualizes this belief: *nyachimonamumbandawelukilikudishachisaka, wapompeshelimawumbaawantu* (“Nyachimona, a woman who knew how to feed her family; she gathered multitude of people”). Another Lunda proverb which emphasizes women’s role as homemakers or caretakers is: *Nyamuzalawakuminadakwendanakadibañu* (“Nyamuzala, a woman who is always seen carrying her food basket”). This implies that she always searches for food to ensure that her children, husband, and all her dependants do not starve. One might conclude that this description of women’s role is stereotypical. On the contrary, I do believe

that such description emphasizes the importance of a woman; it lauds her capacity for holding the family together. In other words, the proverb “endorses the woman’s unassailable position in marriage” (Kiiru, 1999: 4).

In summary, one gets the feeling that the discussion above could be reduced to the opinion that is expressed in one English proverb: “A good wife is a perfect lady in the living room, a good cook in the kitchen, and a harlot in the bedroom” (Kerschen, 2012: 28-29). In other words, as Kerschen (2012) further observes, a wife exists to be of service to her husband as a hostess, cook and lover. Anything else, she is a troublesome shrew who brings her man only misery.

2. Proverbs related to women’s beauty and physical appearance

Women are generally judged by their appearance. Beautiful women, as Belfatmi (2013:18) suggests, “are generally believed to be more open-minded, more intelligent and are better accepted by society. “The physical attractiveness is presumed to be the most important criterion to qualify for marriage. Regardless of whether a woman is intelligent or not, she should be beautiful. This stereotype is reproduced in proverbs, which use symbolism to depict women’s physical beauty where women are likened to irresistible fruits such as *asikondi* (banana) pl. *makondi* and *ntamba* (sweet potatoes). This is clearly evidenced in the following proverb which says: *ikondikutenkuma* (“A ripe banana is seen by its appearance”). According to this proverb, the only criterion a woman is chosen by, as a wife, lays in her beauty. A similar proverb reads: *Ntambanikumoli* (“Good/delicious sweet potatoes are seen by the runners”) that is, a good woman suitable for marriage is the one who is good-looking, well-dressed, and attractive. This belief is also captured in another proverb that reads: *kamweñuwatelamatombi* (“Kamweñu requires neatly plaited hair”) which can be interpreted as: “a woman who has neatly plaited hair is the one that a man should get married to.” Beauty, as described in the proverbs above is derogative and belittling in that it portrays women implicitly or explicitly as objects of men’s sexual desire.

Stressing the beauty of a woman, another proverb reads: *Kuwahakwamuheleyikwakukisa, kuwahakwatelamusonyinamuntu* (“The beauty of your sister does not matter at all, the beauty of your female cousin is what matters most”), in other words, no matter how pretty your sister may be, you cannot marry her, rather the only woman you can marry is your cousin. This refers to one Lunda custom which I need to shed some light on. Traditionally among the Lunda and related people such as the Luvale and Chokwe, cross-cousin marriage was encouraged and even preferred. This form of marriage occurred

between the core sibling siblings of the opposite sex. In a more general sense “cross-cousin marriage was said to help solve the matrilineal puzzle –the divided loyalties experienced by males in matrilineal societies between their own children and those of their sisters” (Pritchett, 2001: 98). As summarized by Kathleen Gough (1961: 620),

Matrilineal cross-cousin marriage ensures that mother’s brother and sister’s son have harmonious instead of conflicting marital interests. In particular it gives the wife’s father assurance that his daughter and her children will continue to be linked to his own matrilineal group, and so to himself. Patrilineal cross-cousin marriage provides the husband’s father with a similar assurance with regards to his son, and in addition ensures that the former’s grandchildren will be members of his own matrilineal group.

As much as some proverbs stress the woman’s beauty as essential criterion for marriage, there are others that warn men not to be deceived by women’s outward appearance as seen in following proverb: *mumbandamuwahihabulikaaku*, translated as (“A beautiful woman doesn’t lack bad behaviour”). This proverb is in line with the English expression: “All that glitters is not gold”. Meaning that a beautiful woman is not always perfect, she could be lazy, ill-tempered or wicked. In other words, beauty is deceitful. This proverb serves as a warning to men that they should not be deceived by the outward appearance of a woman, implying that beautiful women make men suffer. It is evident from these proverbs that beauty in women has negative connotations, and that men should not be seduced by it.

3. Proverbs relating to women’s immorality

Having asserted that though a woman’s beauty matters when it comes to choosing a wife, it should not be the only criterion because, as the English say: “Not everything that glitters is gold”; Lunda proverbs take a step further to allege that beautiful women are promiscuous and dangerous: *mukwenuwukudyandinokahelainokawukumutalilakukuwa* (“The best friend you share food with is a snake, watch the way she behaves”), in other words, (“the wife you love and care for is a snake in disguise”). The philosophy communicated here is seen in another proverb which states: “*Lela mbomakumadikiakuminyi*” literally translated as (“If you bring up or care for a python, some day it will bite or swallow you”) meaning that a woman is like a snake, no matter how well a man cares for her, some day she will leave him for another man. In this proverb, a woman is compared to a snake that is poisonous and causes excruciating pain when it bites. Also in this proverb, a woman is depicted as a trouble-maker and very dangerous. The implication of the proverb is that a woman by nature is unreliable,

and by virtue of this, she can “hook up” with any man she chooses to have sexual relationship with. The proverb thus exclusively ascribes a psychological trait to women without compelling evidence for it. This emanates from the belief that “men are the normative model of humanity and women are the afterthought” (Hagos, 2015: 186).

Another proverb that captures this negative perception of women in Lunda culture is: *mumbandambañala* (“A woman is like a guinea fowl”). This proverb portrays women as unreliable with regard to sexual and marital matters. According to the proverb, women are promiscuous, ready to “hook up” with whoever they choose. The proverb highlights the unreliability and selfishness of women, especially wives who are only interested in what they get from men, and can anytime and for flimsy excuses live their husbands for other men. The proverb contains a warning and advice to men on what they should expect in marriage.

Like many others, these proverbs are stereotypical; they consider all women as immoral and evil. Women are regarded as the same – because of their gender, they automatically lose their individuality and uniqueness. At this juncture, one may ask whether fidelity is only expected of the wife, but not the husband. This is a double standard that should not let belittle women.

4. Proverbs that portray women as stubborn and destructive

Like in most African societies, a woman among the Lunda is generally portrayed as a stubborn person who can be very destructive, dangerous, and unreasonable. This image of a woman is captured in the following proverb: “*Dihonankoñu*” (“A stubborn woman whose instructress failed to counsel”). As mentioned earlier, in Lunda tradition, immediately after puberty, the teenage girl lives in a small grass hut (*nkunka*) in seclusion for two or three months. Throughout this period, the initiate (*nkaña*) is only accompanied by an attendant (*nkoñu*) – usually an older woman – who “instructs [her] in matters concerning sex and childbirth” (Pritchett, 2001: 150). In the above proverb the implication is that, a girl who failed to heed to her attendant’s instructions while in seclusion, will never listen to her husband the moment she gets married. This proverb reminds men not to be surprised by the stubbornness of women.

Another proverb that emphasises the image of a woman as stubborn, destructive, and dangerous is the one that states: *Ditemidikotokeli, disumbwilidimweshimalwa* (“Cut down a tree it will fall on you and you will get hurt; marry a woman by yourself, she will bring you misery”). The implication of this proverb is that, by nature women are dangerous and ready to harm men; therefore men are warned to be careful and not to get married without

seeking advice from elders or involving parents as doing so might cause their own downfall. Mutunda (2015: 21) is right when he observes that “The involvement of the family in the marriage process is consistent with the African belief that marriage is an alliance between families rather than between individuals, as is the case in the Western world.” It is also true that arranged marriages often happen for valid reasons and can be construed as “a way of protecting young people from making bad choices” (Mutunda, 2015: 22). The involvement of family also serves to insure that the future couples are compatible in values, expectations, and lifestyle.

5. Proverbs that encourage men to subdue women

Another ideal feminine characteristic expected of a woman, particularly in a conjugal sphere, is an unconditional submission to man. For most feminists, however, the submission of women also translates into subordination. In other words, when women submit to men, men end up taking advantage of them and dominating them.

However, in Lunda culture submission of a woman is a requirement which she should abide by without fail and any lapses on her part is likely to attract punishments from the ‘head’ of the family. The following proverb describes this belief: *zhinakuhilayikambunjimatukakahaeyineyitalakuowumuvumbuwuchinana* (“What annoys the red mongoose most are insults, but you still insult it mentioning how red his slips are”). Here a wife is being ridiculed after being beaten by her husband. The underlying assumption of this proverb is that a woman is regarded as a child to be disciplined anytime she errs and that a man has the right to beat his wife. The import of this proverb is that physical punishment of women is considered as normal; it is a natural tool for forcing wives into submissive behaviour. However, in my view, I feel that this proverb allows for blatant brainwashing of women, with a view to getting them view themselves as inferior to men.

Another proverb that urges a husband to treat his wife with a heavy hand is: *chanunantunũ* (“A roof remover”). This proverb refers to a woman who often provokes the husband so that she can be beaten. Such a proverb encourages the husband to use physical force as a way of subduing his wife. In consonance with this notion, one proverb in West Africa suggests, “Beat your wife regularly; if you don’t know why, she will”, and the Tarika of Ethiopia claim, “If you really love your wife, you have to beat her” (Cited in Kiiru, 1999: 4). Physical and emotional violence are seen here as the norm for women; it is one tool that a man uses to assert his masculine power and superiority over his wife. As a man, he believes that society expects him to exert power, control, and authority over a woman. The philosophy

communicated here is that “marriage is sometimes a rehabilitation centre for provocative, stubborn, and outspoken women; where they are brought to their right place. This is a place of submission and in the process women become ‘good’ wives who are subservient to male authority and male domination” (Ncube&Moyo, 2011: 132).

In general, the above proverbs directly degrade women and emphasize the worth of men in the Lunda society where patriarchal ideology -that is to control women - is practice despite the fact that the society is supposed to be matrilineal, inclined to female protection.

6. Proverbs that portray women as unreliable and unpredictable

One could not discuss the nature of women without touching upon the subject of intelligence. There are several proverbs that portray a woman as unreliable and unpredictable in her actions and behaviour. This image is illustrated using the following proverb: “*Mumbandaiyamulejañakuyumayejimaunakwila*” (“Do not tell a woman everything you do”).The import of this proverb is that a woman is a person you cannot afford to trust at all. Naturally, a woman has the tendency to divulge secrets. In the words of Ncube and Moyo (2011), a woman is “unpredictable, weak-brained and too easily overcome by emotion so that she acts irrationally even in the way that can be dangerous to the well-being of the home” (2011: 137). This justifies the man, as the ‘head’ of the family, to arrive at certain crucial decisions that affect the whole family without the input of the wife.

The proverb above highlights the Lunda belief that a woman can never be trusted and if she knows your secrets, you will leave in fear for the whole of your life. This explains why the Lunda people lay down the expectations of the various sexes. As Pritchett (2001) rightly points out, “Relations between males and female among the matrilineal Lunda-Ndembu are heavily infused with the notion of *chaambu*, separation” (2001: 177). While women spend most of their time in the *chinsambu* (village kitchen) where they cook and chat among themselves, men gather in the *chotaor nzañu*(palaver hut) to discuss men’s issues or matters concerning the community.

As a result of his view about women, society tends to ignore them completely. They are neither consulted nor trusted even with issues which concern them such as control of their fertility and the number of children to have in the family. Women are expected to be passive consumers of male policies and decisions. Nevertheless, events in our world today, particularly in Zambia, show that the patriarchal view that women are a weaker, untrustworthy, and worthless beings is changing. We currently have women occupying important positions both in government as well as private sectors. For instance, we have a

Zambian female vice-president, several female ministers and company managers. Even in Lunda traditional settings, we find women in decision making positions. We have for example, female Chiefs such as Nyakaseya in Mwiniluña District and Nyakuleña in Zambezi District respectively.

It is also important to point out that, pushed by the rise of women into professional positions, which has made it difficult for the traditional sexual division of labour to be maintained, some young men are embracing a new kind of relationship with their wives. These men are illustrations of what Morrell (2001) terms the “New Men”. According to this scholar, ‘New Men’ “do not subscribe to the stereotype that all women are nags, that women should look nice and say little” (Morrell, 2001:4). New men accept changing gender roles and strive to be “non-sexist, non-autocratic, more involved in domestic responsibilities, emotionally more responsive and more willing to criticize their own position and practices” (Morrell, 2001:164). Some men are supportive of their partners; they participate – sometimes without coercion and despite societal criticism - in housework, such as looking after the children, doing the dishes or running domestic errands.

Additionally, studies on gender and work in Africa have shown that prior to the systematic imposition of the European social and political orders, African women had a more important role in decision-making than they did under colonialism or than they have had since independence. There used to be women who exercised political and religious power. For instance, a female chief, Luweji, ruled over the Lunda Kingdom which latter spread from south-western Congo, through the eastern part of Angola, to the north-western province of Zambia. In West African societies, there were priestesses who presided over religious ceremonies. As Keller and Bay (1977) note, “African women often had voices in kinship groups that made and enforced policy decisions. Within lineages in some societies, women sat on councils of elders. In some areas they were free to participate in public debates” (1977:222). Women also exercised relatively high levels of economic independence and contributed substantially to household expenses, along with men. For example, as Molar Ogundipe-Leslie (1984) points out, “in pre-colonial Nigeria, women were engaged in economic activities such as farming, fishing, herding, trading, pottery-making, cloth-making, and craftwork alongside their husbands. These varied economic activities made women self-supporting and financially independent” (cited in Mutunda, 2015: 73).

Conclusion

The present study sought to investigate Lunda proverbs and female stereotypes. The study attempted to explore how Lunda women are portrayed in proverbs and to see whether proverbs discriminate against them or not. To attain the objectives set out in this study, I collected a number of proverbs from one written source in Lunda and several books that tackle women issues; other sources include interviews from three Lunda native respondents.

The findings of this study illustrate both negative and positive attitudes of Lunda people towards women. Despite this fact, the proverbs of the Lunda are unbalanced in that women are portrayed positively and in complementary role only in a few proverbs. Most proverbs indicated that women are evil, dangerous, unfaithful or morally loose, unreliable, untrustworthy; thus, intellectually inferior. The implication is that men usually use these stereotypes as grounds to legitimize their authority over women. The proverbs further showed the senselessness of women's thought and actions. This simply showed the society's misconception about women.

In other instances, though very few, women are represented positively and in complementary terms such as carers/ nurturers, homemakers/caretakers, etc. But these proverbs tend to serve the interests of men as they sustain or reinforce the traditional gender stereotype. For instance, representing a woman as "a hard- working" because she is multi-task and able to feed her family, or as "heart of the house" because she has borne children, is not a complement but one way of "luring" women to continue the "good" work – which means men should continue to enjoy such "patriarchal dividends" as being the boss of the home who cannot consult the wife on important conjugal matters (e.g. child spacing or the number of children to have) and abstaining from domestic chores.

It is, however, true that in recent times, the social roles of many Lunda women have changed (e.g. we have women playing leading roles in public and private sectors alike; some are ministers or chief executive officers of thriving organizations) and continue to change; but as Diabah and Amfo (2014) argue, "the changing trends are sometimes hampered by [the] entrenched [societal]views that result from 'traditional wisdom' – which proverbs are noted for" (2014: 22-23). Nevertheless, it is wise to note that any change of attitude and expectations will require extensive education about the potential of women in order to counter the delimitations of such entrenched societal views.

References:

- Akinmande, Arinola. "The Decline of Proverbs as a Creative Oral expression: A Case Study of Proverbs among the Ondo in the South Western Part of Nigeria". *An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies*, 1: 2, 127-148, (2012).
- Belfatmi, Meryem. "The representation of women in Moroccan proverbs" *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*.17: 1,15-21, (2013).
- Brelsford, W. V. *The Tribes of Zambia*. Lusaka: Government Printer. (1965).
- Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2005).
- Diabah, Grace and Nana Aba ApiahAmfo "Caring supporters? Representation of women in Akan Proverbs." *Discourse & Society*, 26: 1, 3-28, (2015).
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers,(2012).
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex*. New York: The Women Press, (1970).
- Gough, Kathleen. "Variation in Preferential Marriage." In *Matrilineal Kinship*. (Ed.) Schneider, D. and K. Gough. Berkeley, pp. 614-30, (1961).
- Hagos, S. B. "The Portrayal of Women in Tigrigna Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions: the Stereotypical Beliefs and Behavioral Tendencies." *International Journal of English Literature and Culture*,3: 6, 183- 189, (2015).
- Hartman, H. "An Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more Progressive Union." *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. (Ed.) Nicholson, L. New York: Rutledge, (1997).
- Kambita, E. et. al. *Tuheka Twawalunda*. Lusaka: Zambia Educational Publishing House, (1959).
- Kashoki, M. E. The Language situation in Zambia. In S. Ohannessian and M. E. Kashoki (Eds.), *Language in Zambia* (pp. 9-46). Lusaka: International African Institute, (1978).
- Keller, Bonnie and Edna G. Bay. "African Women and Problems of Modernization." In (eds.) Christopher C. Mojekwu, Victor C. Uchendu, and Leo F. Van Hoey, *African Society, Culture and Politics: An Introduction to African Studies*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, (1977).
- Kerschen, Lois. *American Proverbs about Women*. USA: BookLocker.com, Inc., Ebook. (2012).
- Kiiru, Muchuru. "You Cannot Catch Old Birds with Chaff: Woman's Multiple Images in Proverbs." *Wajibu - A journal of Social & Religious Concern*, 14: 1,1-7, (1999).

- Lee, F. K. Jackie. "Chinese Proverbs: how are Women and Men Represented?" *Géneros: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 559-585, (2015).
- Malunga, Chiku & Banda, Charles. *Understanding Organizational Sustainability Through African Proverbs*. Washington, DC: Impact Alliance Press. (2004).
- McCulloch, M. *The Southern Lunda and related peoples: Northern Rhodesia, Angola, Belgium Congo*. London: International African Institute, (1951).
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Doubleday & Company, (1970).
- Morrell, Robert (ed.) *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. London: Zed Books, (2001).
- Mutunda, S. "The Healing Narratives: Therapeutic Potential of Traditional Lunda Poetry." *The International Journal of Language, Society, and Culture*, 25:58-66, (2008).
- Mutunda, S. "Personal Names in Lunda Cultural Milieu." *International Journal of Innovative Interdisciplinary Research*, 1: 14-22, (2011).
- Mutunda, S. "Linguistic Innovations in Zambian Literary Text: The Example of Malama Katulwende's Bitterness". *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 3: 9, 122-27, (2015).
- Mutunda, S. *Descriptions of Masculinity in African Women Creative Writing: Mariama Bâ, Philomène Bassek, Delphine Zanga Tsogo, Calixthe Beyala, Aminata Sow Fall*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, (2015).
- Ncube, Bhekezakhe & Moyo, Thamsanqa. "Portraying Women as the Other: Ndebele Proverbs and Idioms in the Context of Gender Construction." *Africana*, 5: 3, 126-142, (2011).
- Ndungo, Catherine M. *Images of Women in African Oral Literature: A Case of Gikuyu and Swahili Proverbs*. Unpublished Dissertation: Kenyatta University, (1998).
- Ogundipe-Leslie, Molar. "Not Spinning on the Axis of Maleness." In (ed.) Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global*. New York: Anchor Press, (1984).
- Oha, O. "The semantics of female devaluation in Igbo proverbs". *African Study Monographs*, 19: 2, 87-102, (1999).
- Okpewho, Isidore. *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Community*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, (1992).
- Pritchett, James. *The Lunda- Ndembu: Style, Change, and Social Transformation in South Central Africa*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, (2001).
- Schippers, Mimi. (2007). "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony". *Theory and Practice*, 36: 1, 85-102, (2007).

- Schipper, Mineke. *Source of all Evil*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, (1991).
- Spivak, Gayatri C. In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Rutledge, (1987).
- Ssetuba, I. *The Hold of Patriarchy: An Appraisal of the Ganada Proverbs in the Light of the Modern Gender Relations*. A paper presented at the gender Symposium by CODESRA/ARC, Cairo 7th -10th April, (2002).
- Stewart, Julia. *African Proverbs and Wisdom*. Secaus, N.J.: Carol Publishing Group, (1997).
- Turner, Victor. *Lunda Medicine and Treatment of Disease*. Livingstone: The Rhodes-Livingstone Museum, (1963).
- Turner, E. *The Spirit and the Drum: A Memoir of Africa*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, pp. 32-49, (1987).
- Vansina, Jan. *Kingdoms of the Savannah*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, pp.160-165, (1966).
- Walby, Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, (1990).
- Zakariyah, Moshood. "Language and African Values: A Sociolinguistics Analysis of Selected Yoruba Proverbs." *Ilorin Journal of Linguistics & Culture*, 3, 20-37, (2013).