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Theory in Praxis: Matrifocal Feminism and *The Lianja Epic*

IN HER influential work, *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses the divergent feminisms of Western and Third World origin. Mohanty describes U.S.-based feminism as class-centric and academic, located within a protocapitalist norm which avoids or ignores the need for collectivity. This feminism lacks the solidarity that Mohanty seeks, the “mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities” (7). Mohanty’s political solidarity and theory in praxis proposes that women pursue a collective empowerment based on understanding and appreciation rather than difference and pity. Similarly, there are preexistent alternatives to Western patriarchy and cultural imperialism being discussed by African scholars such as the contributors to the online journal, *JENDA*; these contributions demonstrate Mohanty’s transnational feminist theory in praxis. Scholars in fields of study such as sociology and anthropology develop and utilize their perspective to increase understanding of African communities. Essentially, this recent movement reclaims feminism in a mother-centered African context, and so we may refer to this emergent school of thought as matrifocal¹ feminism. The sociological foundation of matrifocal feminism offers a

theoretical method for considering female characterization in African classical literature. This paper applies theories of matrifocal feminism to an analysis of *The Lianja Epic*, an African oral text.² This application of theory is used as a means of investigating the characterization and political power of female figures in the narrative, and determining the cultural and literary contribution of the text to the discussion of transnational feminist community.

Matrifocal feminism and its “co-mothering” community offer a possible alternative and means for political solidarity. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí rejects the globalization of the term sisterhood as a post-colonial form of Western imperialism (“Introduction,” *African Women and Feminism*). She points out that the term does not carry the same political or social meanings in an African context. In the place of this “sisterhood,” she prefers co-mothering:

To an African reader...the model of motherhood is absolutely natural, because if anything binds women together in collective experience, it is *child-bearing* and the *mothering* of children, and consequently the *nurturing of community*. [emphasis added] (5)

Oyěwùmí proposes a non-Western alternative for a global ideal of feminist community as developed in co-mothering communities. In the above passage, she articulates specific aspects of matrifocality that can extend to all members of a community. Child-bearing and mothering imply separate but cohesive acts; child-bearing as a biological privilege, and mothering as acts of nurturing that a mother bestows on her child,

and which all members of the community might put into practice, regardless of gender, age, or identity differences.

Matrifocal feminism articulates a sense of self-determination and agency grounded in the respect given to the role of women in motherhood and through acts of mothering. According to Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí and Mojúbàolú Olúfúnke Okome, in a Yoruba community the mother assumes political, economic, and communal power as the central figure of the family. The respect afforded to this familial position means that,

In this family system...motherhood is the most important source and model of solidarity, and being a mother is perceived as an attractive and desirable goal to achieve. (Oyěwùmí, "Introduction" 13)

Motherhood's central importance to the family and the community suggests a matriarchal society. Oyěwùmí establishes the importance of all relationships grounded in [African] women's identification with motherhood and mothering. The Yoruba society places mothers at the center around which family and community are structured. Relationships within the family are delineated by that role: the term for sibling, "omo-iyá," has no gender implication and means "my mother's child," indicating a shared experience of the same womb. Beyond this societal or familial construct, "omo-iyá" also "emblemizes unconditional love, togetherness, unity, solidarity, and loyalty" (Oyěwùmí 9-10). Oyěwùmí's goal is to establish the transcendent quality of motherhood while still acknowledging the communal value of

mothering, or nurturing acts, that can be practiced by men and women.

In her discussion of female roles in Yoruba society, Mojúbàolú Olúfúnke Okome includes the Yoruba saying: "There is no deity like the mother, mothers are the ones that we ought to worship" (15). If mothers are to be respected as deities, then they implicitly possess the power to both create and punish. When a society confers this type of respect on mothers, all women within the community possess the same potential of power and self-definition.

In his work, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and of Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity*, Cheikh Anta Diop provided a seminal study of the matriarchal system of African communities. He anchored his efforts to establish a historical unity for Black Africa by demonstrating the sense of purpose and self-determination understood to belong to women/mothers in their communities, and applied the power of matriarchal politics to the whole of Black Africa communities. His study proposes that the historical unity of pre-colonial Africa can be established by examining the role of the mother in African history. It is important to note Diop's argument that matriarchy is not an inversion of patriarchy. Unlike patriarchy's history of blatant subjugation of females, Diop posits:

Matriarchy is not an absolute or cynical triumph of women over man; it is a harmonious dualism, an association accepted by both sexes, the better [system] to build a sedentary society where each and everyone could fully develop by following the activity best suited to his physiological nature. A matriarchal régime, far from being

imposed on man by circumstances independent of his will, is accepted and defended by him. (108)

In effect, the privileging of females in a matriarchal society actually affords an equal status and partnership with men. It empowers and respects both sexes in relation to each other rather than existing as an inversion of patriarchal power.

In accordance with the visions of solidarity by feminists such as Chandra Mohanty and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, and the research of Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Lianja Epic*, as a 14th-century text, offers a preexistent literary portrayal of a feminist and matrifocal community in praxis based on the tenets of matriarchal society. Within this text, mothers are central and supportive in a setting that fosters beauty in relationships between all peoples. Motherhood's primary role in *The Lianja Epic* underscores the relevance of Oyěwùmí and Okome's advocacy for the reconsideration of American feminism's presumptions about the global existence of patriarchy. Matrifocal feminism offers an efficient theoretical tool for the purposes of the proposed textual analysis; it encourages the critical pursuit of demonstrating the mothering qualities of major characters, male and female, within an epic such as *The Lianja Epic*. An analysis of these characters will determine the degree of matrifocality in the text and how the text provides an example of an ideal feminist community.

*The Lianja Epic*³ traces the events, lineage, and advent of a hero of the Mongo culture from an unspecified era in its history. The character of Lianja symbolizes the prophetic fulfillment of unity and deliverance to a promised land for the Mongo people. He is depicted as a part of the

future for the community within the narrative. For the current audience of the narrative, he is part of an exulted remembrance of the past. In both capacities, his character resonates as a denotative figure of hope and unity. *The Lianja Epic* originated within the Mongo cultures of the current Democratic Republic of Congo and has been disseminated through generations from around the fourteenth century (Maneniang' "Introduction"). It explores themes of peace, unity, wisdom, worship, and reconciliation. The Mongo believe in one Creator, *Ngiambe*,⁴ and the division of the seen and unseen world into four cosmos. Evil spirits populate the underworld marked by darkness and suffering, humans inhabit the earth, ancestors and spirits exist in the third cosmos but interact with humans and intercede with *Ngiambe* on their behalf, and *Ngiambe* exists in the fourth cosmos with his select servant spirits. Temporal existence in the Mongo culture is "combined in a dialectical unit which is difficult [for Western people] to comprehend but which is symbolic in Mongo culture and religion" (Maneniang' "Introduction"). There is a holistic temporal uniformity where past, present and future are deeply intertwined.

Relationships between male and female characters of *The Lianja Epic* are imperative to understanding the individuals of both sexes within their Congolese and African communities. This analysis illustrates how *The Lianja Epic* provides an example of community that could be embraced by all advocates of feminist and egalitarian communities. Female characters such as Bolombu, Ilankaka, and Mbombe mother their own children. They mother each other, as in the case of Mbombe's support and correction by other women in the community. Women of the epic mother the community; Bolombu and Mbombe accomplish this

through wise counseling and action that attempts to maintain communal integrity. They co-mother as well, as witnessed in the respective roles of Mbombe and Nsongo as mother and daughter and co-mothers to Lianja. In addition, mothers are present in all generations, as seen in the women that mother the lineage of the hero. An examination of these women foregrounds the mothering conscience of their own society and suggests a cultural value specific to maternal roles.

The outstanding element of the epic, and one that illustrates the egalitarianism of matrifocal feminism, is that women as mothers require and create the presence and cooperation of men. The relationships of men and women in this epic demand inter-character analysis: one cannot be discussed without the other. In their intimate relationships with men, the female characters of Mbombe and Nsongo cultivate aspects of their individual selves. Their roles as wives, mothers, and/or sisters prevent them from acting separately from their relationships with significant male figures in their lives. They share with these men gender-transcending qualities that seem to emerge from the multitude of roles they fill beyond their individuality.

The union of Ilele and Mbombe does not diminish either character in any way. Instead, the text suggests that they are individually strengthened and increased by their marriage, for it meets the approval of their communities, makes Mongoland “radiate with new life” (2.269), and will culminate in the birth of the hero himself. The initial introduction to Mbombe comes from the perspective of a failed suitor that Ilele meets in his wife-searching journey; the individual who could not win her consent to marriage describes her as beautiful, intelligent, and hard working. She adheres to the tradition of her community, which stipulates

that her husband can only be a man that defeats her in a wrestling match. Such a competition requires the display of physical and mental attributes and the outwitting of opponents that ultimately results in their respect for each other's strength, courage, and intelligence. It is these qualities that cause an instant attraction for these two characters; they recognize in each other what they value about themselves. Ilele defeats Mbombe in this contest, but she demonstrates self-determination in the fact that she defeated all of her prior suitors and already expressed a desire to marry Ilele.

The perpetuation of this epic by present-day communities within the Democratic Republic of Congo and the value it places on women indicates the shared admiration of the Mongo communities of the past and present culture for all African women as well as the Mongo.⁵ This admiration seems associated with such qualities as described of Mbombe from her husband Ilele's perspective.

Ilele knew that his father, mother and relatives
Were waiting to see the girl he had chosen for himself
A girl of plentifulness, selflessness and greatness
A girl of bravery, courage and without self-praise
A girl of kindness, power and sense of humour
A great girl whose fame was celebrated
Among the living and the dead. (2.360-366)

Ilele recognizes that Mbombe's qualities are valued by his community and ensure her place within it. Humility, courage, caring, generosity, kindness, power, and humor are traits encouraged and admired by both the living community and the Ancestors. These qualities

are not self-deprecating. They indicate a self-aware, self-confident nature considerate of others. Witnessing the celebrations in the various cosmos over their union, even *Ngiambe* utters a blessing on *Ilele* and *Mbombe*:

'By my power and will
The evil spirits
Will never conquer those among humankind
Who remain faithful to me
And plant the seeds of love and unity' (2.320-325)

Mbombe and *Ilele*'s faithfulness and encouragement of love and unity make them the rightful parents of the miraculous hero, one who will unite the *Mongo* and their enemies. These characters' actions henceforth in the events of the text delineate these qualities that the Creator appreciates in them.

Mbombe's pregnancy is proof of *Ngiambe*'s blessing and promise to the *Mongo* people. In this sense, one can assume that the biological functions of women translate into a tremendous social value, for women nurture the community's future, first within their bodies, and then within their homes and communities. Rather than being specific to their physicality, motherhood implies women's role in shaping the future through teaching and nurturing their children. *Mbombe*'s pregnancy affords us a closer look at her fallible human nature beyond her legendary status as the wise mother of the hero, for her physical suffering causes her mental weakness. During its seemingly interminable length (2.523-525), she suffers a great deal and

demonstrates human weakness.⁶ When she becomes ill from eating and must abstain from food, a bird of mysterious origin delivers the nsafu fruit that she is able to eat. Instead of consulting the advice of elders, Ancestors, or her husband, Mbombe eats the fruit, for, “Spending days and nights without food / Had been a terrible experience for [her] / Her mind and soul now opened and her body leaped for joy” (2.640-643). She sings a song of praise to the calao bird that delivered the fruit, creating enmity between herself and the community, for they and her husband share a suspicion of this mysterious bird and Mbombe's obsession with it. When llele, moved by her longing for this fruit, goes in search of it, the Sau-Sau and their cohorts murder him. Despite the mental weakness brought on by her physical suffering, Mbombe's motherhood inspires her husband's protectiveness and nurturing to the extent that he risks his life for her. The fact that the community respects them and depicts them as wise indicates the esteem for both motherhood and those who dedicate themselves to nurturing the mother regardless of her demands.

Motherhood affords Mbombe a unique form of power. As the mother of the hero who will unite the coming generations, Mbombe exercises her power to have considerable effect on the community's consideration of revenge for llele's death. Her respected status in the community allows her to challenge the elders' advocacy of violent retribution, and she manages to convince them of its folly. She couches her argument in an identification with her husband's people and community, laying claim to it as her own because “It will belong to [her] children and the children of [her] children” and even going so far as to admonish the elders by saying, “...The Mongo people's mind should not

be so warped / That they become unable to tell right from wrong” (2.979-1015). While the elders eventually agree with her, they question her lack of concurrence with their own anger about the murder of Ilele. Instead of giving in to grief, Mbombe remains steadfast and coolheaded, and appeals to them in what might be their own language of knowledge, “...through bloodshed, a whole generation may change its destiny / Power finds its strings in dialogue, love, peace and reconciliation” (2.1051-1052). She gives voice to a unique suggestion of the use of power separate from force. In effect, one manifestation of the power she describes is that of motherhood. Ideally, a mother's power does not originate with her physical use of force. Instead, it comes from her role as teacher, as nurturer, and counselor to her children and the larger family or community in which she lives. These roles by definition require the 'dialogue, love, peace and reconciliation' that Mbombe exemplifies in her capacity as a mother.

The unity predicted in the prophecy about Lianja becomes evident in the relationship of humans and nature displayed in Mongoland during Mbombe's labor, even before the advent of the hero. Mbombe utilizes her faith, first to counteract the human desire for vengeance, and later to overcome her own fear at the unnatural progress of her pregnancy, for “Sometimes she lost hope and thought she was carrying a monster” (3.176). She continues to give praise to *Ngiambe*, thanking him in particular for using her to “perpetuate creation” and finally begins the birthing process. Her labor produces various forms of life: ants, birds, and a new race of human beings. These last forms praise her as a Mother Earth figure, singing:

We are issued from a lady Spirit
Who is the mother of the whole of mankind
She is our mother too
She was chosen by *Ngiambe* to perpetuate his creation'
(3.254-257)

In the process of her labor, Mbombe both creates and attracts all kinds of creatures, and “human beings of all social classes” who “converged in Nkuma /And mingled freely with each other / In the village of great miracles” (3.270-274). Mbombe's motherhood unites and creates community in an apparently unprecedented manner.

In this community, a mother must teach truth, and resist selfish and self-doubting impulses in order to combat the influence of evil. After the birth of Lianja and Nsongo, Mbombe lies about the cause of Ilele's death because of guilt over her own role in it. Her lies incur the confusion and rage of the community, and in doing so reveal its respect for the essential nature of truth. Although Lianja is born fully grown, he still looks to his mother as a source of wisdom and knowledge. She is the one who fills the role of teacher of truth as well as nurturer despite being from a community different from his father's. It is in this capacity that Mbombe commits a significant error in judgment when she lies to Lianja about the nature of his father's death:

Nobody knew why she continued to lie to her child
Such behavior is uncommon among the Mongo
For whom the punishment for lying is beating and hanging
Some women shouted:
'This woman, this Mbombe should be beaten to death...'

(3.724-726)

Lying is a crime for the Mongo community, one that demands harsh punishment. As a mother, it seems a particularly egregious violation of that respected role since it is her peers in motherhood who hold her accountable. The circumstances surrounding Mbombe's lies suggest a mother-child relationship akin to a human-spirit one --not in the sense of the mother as a lesser being, but as one accountable to her child for her deception. The human-spirit relationship requires accountability for actions and a respect for the higher cosmos.

When mothers are afforded the power given to deities, as in the Yoruba societies studied by Mojúbàolú Olúfúnke Okome and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, then the community also realizes the danger that females can also bring as possessors of great power. A mother, human or spirit, must relate truth to her children; she must be accountable to them as their provider of physical and emotional needs, as well as respecting the future of the community. Lianja confronts Mbombe about her lies, threatening her with physical retribution and spiritual punishment: "I shall cut off your head and make a cup of your skull / I shall cast your shadow from the cosmos of the Mongo Ancestors" (3.819-820). While this might seem extraordinarily harsh, it points again to the expectations of the community toward mothers as teachers, as nurturers, women responsible for the trustworthy care of their children and implicitly, the future of the community itself. In addition to the grave accountability of motherhood, there must also be consideration of the role of Lianja as a higher being, a Spirit, which gives him authority even over his human mother. Despite this threat, it is ultimately the spirit of truth (in the form of

a flame) invoked by Lianja that moves Mbombe to tell the truth of Ilele's death: "The light opened Mbombe's thoughts and soul / It cleansed and purified her soul / She wept and confessed her sin to her child (3.843-845). Mbombe apologizes to her son, and it is the spirit of truth that induces her to do so. The community within the epic struggles at times with weaknesses and evils perpetuated in human beings by evil spirits (1.560), and so the possibility of Mbombe's guilt opening her to evil influence is a relevant concern. Her powerful role as Lianja's mother and appointed teacher and counselor requires her to resist that evil influence and embrace her responsibility as a mother, which explains the harsh reaction of the community and Lianja himself. It is in her capacity as a mother that Mbombe apologizes to her son, for her sin is an inexcusable corruption of motherhood within the community.

Mothers are the embodiment of art in this text: they have aesthetic, didactic, and provocative purpose for their children, the community, and the reader. As depicted by the character of Mbombe, within this community, motherhood means having wisdom, power without physical force, and the ability to unify people. Mbombe accepts motherhood as a natural part of her marriage to Ilele and as a blessing from the creator, *Ngiambe*, and demonstrates unquestioning faith in both her husband and her creator as she faces the future of being the mother of the hero, Lianja. The quality of her character reveals her worth as an individual and as a female figure appreciated by the community. Her qualities as a woman -generosity, humility, courage and kindness- enhance her wisdom and power as a mother figure. The community also demands accountability from mothers as teachers of truth, as nurturers of the future, and as figures of strength and integrity for their children.

In the character of Nsongo, close analysis reveals the mothering qualities underlying her sibling relationship to Lianja. Beyond this biological connection, beyond her continued companionship and advisor status, she fulfills the duties of a mother in the absence of Mbombe throughout the remainder of the narrative. She shares the qualities demonstrated by mothers within the text: wisdom, nurturing, insight, courage and an unassuming power without use of force. As Lianja's sibling, she shares a special unity with him. Siblings of the womb, Lianja and Nsongo are born in full adult form, with Nsongo emerging directly after Lianja. He then takes her by the hand and they fly away to "inspect their father's country" (3.458-464). Although Nsongo was not mentioned as part of the prophecy, Mbombe, their mother, and the Mongo community accept her presence without question.

While his Spirit nature might elevate Lianja above identification with human suffering and loss, Nsongo forges a connection with aspects of corporeal and spiritual existence. Although she exhibits strength and bravery fighting alongside Lianja in the battle with the Sau-Sau, she is also moved by the experience of witnessing death. After Lianja kills the Chief Sau-Sau, "Nsongo, the hero's sister wept / Not with sadness at Chief Sau-Sau's murder / But with the shock she felt in her heart as a girl" (3.1156-1158). The text describes hers as an explicitly female reaction. What meaning does this have for a female consciousness in this text? Nsongo demonstrates sensitivity and heartache about death that Lianja either does not or cannot, perhaps because of his Spirit nature. It is not clear from the text what exactly prevents him from sharing this emotion with his sister, but he is moved by her own reaction, retreating "to a quiet place" where they are both addressed by a voice speaking from the

skies. When this voice commends Lianja's actions and requests his next move be that of resurrecting the dead, Nsongo immediately urges him to do the voice's bidding:

'Lianja my brother
Why have you killed your brothers?
... We must love the Sau-Sau and the Fete-Fete
Lianja my brother,
please do what the voice has commanded you'
(3.1186-1191)

Nsongo echoes the sentiments of both her parents' convictions and teachings in her exhortation to her brother for this act of redemptive resurrection. Her influence on him affords him the possibilities of a human connection and continuity that he might not have accomplished as a lone male hero. The impact of her concerns and emotions on Lianja are reminiscent of the role of their mother. In essence, Nsongo co-mothers Lianja in the absence of Mbombe.

Nsongo is the female and human counterpart to the male and Spirit form of Lianja, the other central figure in this epic. As a mother figure, she never considers abandoning him. Although he did not come from her womb in the biological sense of motherhood, they came from the same womb and are defined by that shared experience. The community accepts her presence without question, and the text itself documents her as his helpmate and counselor, as well as someone who offers a human connection that he cannot always cultivate on his own. When an artist creates a text about a male hero in a culture that upholds mothers as

important and powerful political and spiritual figures, that male hero requires an intimate female influence that tempers his ego as a male and connects his Spirit nature with humanity. Nsongo wholly accepts her role as Lianja's sibling, co-mother, and companion without thought or question because they are a part of each other.

Exactly the same qualities valued in the women depicted within the narrative are also evident in Ilele's character; in fact, these shared female qualities seem to contribute to others' admiration of him. Ilele is the child of a human and Spirit union, and is wholly accepted by the community as such. His insights make him a philosopher, teacher, historian, and minister to his people, who also elevate him because he fathers their hero. The text depicts Ilele as a sensitive, wise, and loving man who ponders human epistemology, relationships, and the debt of mankind to *Ngiambe*. The text uses his character to inform the reader (audience) about complexities of language and experience in this culture:

Ilele was not afraid of the realities of the world
 For he knew that all people become mature through experience
 When old and matured by various experiences,
 The Ancestors and the Spirits shall infuse them with wisdom
 From which is created the language of knowledge
 That shall be the means of communication between the living,
 Their Ancestors, the Spirits and *Ngiambe* (1.1590-1596)

Ilele faithfully accepts the reality of his people's shortcomings and idiosyncrasies, and the way their world works in conjunction with the cosmos of the Ancestors, Spirits and *Ngiambe*. His acknowledgement of

this special “language of knowledge” that results from divine infusion of wisdom indicates both the value the culture places on age-wisdom, as well as the wisdom of such a young person capable of recognizing this truth inherent within his culture. He displays further insight by considering the dangers of this language in the possession of people who are not divinely inspired or taught through experience, “This language, if acquired without knowledge and wisdom, / Is no longer a symbol of communication / It causes death without mercy” (1.1597-1602). Knowledge qualifies the use of language to influence and teach people. Ilele recognizes this and despite the admiration repeatedly given to Ilele by his community, he retains humility and wisdom in the presence of his elders and the Spirits. The qualities equating Ilele with formerly discussed female figures also make him a considerate and loving partner. Again, the community does not view this as a sign of weakness. When Mbombe obsesses over the nsafu fruit that eased her physical suffering, Ilele admonishes her (2.680-682) but, moved by her distress, he still goes in search of the fruit. His devotion suggests the worth of their relationship to the community in which it exists and is nurtured by.

Forgiveness, empathy, unity, and rebirth are themes of Ilele's vision as well as the vision shared by mother figures in the text. This suggests the promise of that vision for the past and present communities, not only of Mongo people, but, in the words of Ilele himself, for the entire human race. During his journey into this enemy territory, Ilele contemplates the united future of these enemy communities in terms that might be eerily familiar:

'We Mongo and the other tribes

...Must all forgive them
For they do not know what they are doing
 ...By our action and love, we shall create peace in this cosmos
 One day, all mankind shall be united
...The whole human race shall be reborn in a better form'
 [emphasis added] (2.727-736)

Ilele's vision of unification for all of humanity coheres with the prophecy regarding the arrival of his son. His exhortations of forgiveness, understanding of the enemy, activism, love, peace, and unity reflect directly back on the female figures that are part of his past, present, and future. Mbombe and Nsongo contribute to this shared vision of unity as they prepare for and act in conjunction with the intents and purposes of the hero, Lianja.

Ilele displays the qualities that he sought in his wife and mother of his child: generosity, wisdom, humility, and power (2.360-366). The community accepts and admires these qualities that he shares with the mother. In accordance with the concurrent portrayal of mothers as admirable figures, the artist of this text depicts a central male character as a sensitive and dual-natured man-spirit who has utmost regard for women as wives and mothers.

Like his father, Lianja possesses dual nature of spirit-human, but his sensitivity comes from external female influences. The inherent suggestion of the text is that Lianja's double nature resides in dual gender identification as well as his status as human and spirit. This aspect of his characterization might also suggest that Nsongo represents his female identification and acts as an intercessor between

Lianja's spirit nature and his ability to identify with humans. The majority of the epic's length devotes itself to anticipating the arrival of the male hero prophesied in the opening. The reader understands that this hero is a Spirit that will be born into human form. As his mother and the community prepare for Lianja's arrival, the text reminds the reader again of Lianja's "two natures" which we understand at this point to be Spirit and human. Lianja is a Spirit, which gives him the power to command his human mother's physicality and differentiate his entrance into the human cosmos. Mbombe greets them both: "Son Lianja and daughter Nsongo / This land of your father and forefathers welcomes you today," but acknowledges Lianja's mission as the savior of his people, "Lianja my son, the world has been awaiting your birth for many years..." (LI.3.476-478). While the Mongo community expresses respect and deference to Lianja and his supernatural powers, Nsongo and Lianja treat each other with equal respect befitting womb-siblings. In their respective roles as "omo-iyá⁷," or siblings of the same womb, Nsongo and Lianja demonstrate the qualities of "unconditional love, togetherness, unity, solidarity, and loyalty" ("Introduction" 9-10). Lianja's supernatural power exists separately from Nsongo, as evidenced by the evil spirits that fear only "the new-born boy" (3.699), and later when the text describes his complex combination of human and Spirit qualities:

Lianja was a different creature sent by *Ngiambe*
He was part human being, part spirit

...

He also possessed natural strength, boldness and intelligence
He was very generous, but could also get annoyed
(3.902-911)

Lianja has both supernatural and human strengths. His human impatience is quite pronounced, as demonstrated by his frustration towards the Sau-Sau treatment of his father and his people. Throughout the remainder of the text and Mbombe's absence from the narrative, Nsongo remains with Lianja. In the end, he defers again to both their influence and importance to his character by taking them with him in his ascension into the Spirit cosmos.

As a hero, Lianja's attitude toward motherhood, one of accountability, respect, and deference, reflects itself in his relationships with his mother and sister, and in the community that respects his role as a hero. He holds Mbombe accountable as a truthful teacher and nurturer to him in his capacity as her son and a spirit being. Nsongo provides him with a connection to humanity, his own, and the condition of the people for whom he is a unifier. This reverent attitude is finally displayed in his deference to these women, with whom he ascends into cosmos.

Mothers and siblings in *The Lianja Epic* exemplify the privileging and central role of motherhood within an African community. Matrifocal feminism emerges as theory in praxis within this epic, valuing and improving community considerations over individual autonomy. It places female value within the cultural constructs of motherhood and other familial and communal relationships. From exploring the depiction and context of female characters in this text, one discovers that the role of the mother is inseparable from other relationships within this family and community structure. Being a mother or practicing and possessing mothering qualities suggest a multitude of roles in both familial and societal spheres of conduct, roles that are not necessarily specific to

gender: wife, teacher, minister, philosopher, historian, and counselor.

Matrifocal feminism in a textual study reconsiders women's anatomy as a means for the unique opportunity of motherhood. Men do not have the privilege of unique experience and power simply because of genitalia differences. Matrifocal feminism proposes a means for rethinking anatomy, gender and social constructs in culture and text. Motherhood is an art form in this text: mothers have aesthetic appeal, didactic purpose, and provocative engagement. I proposed earlier that an artist creating this text must envision mothers as the ultimate source of truth and goodness within the range of human relationships and roles. Motherhood implies the possession of wisdom, power through a language of knowledge, and the ability to unite people and communities. It is accepted as a natural part of female experience and community, not just central to a familial unit. The community demands and receives accountability from mothers as teachers of truth, as nurturers of the future, and as figures of strength and integrity for their children. The role of mother is not limited to a biological condition or privilege; it is extended within the family and community to men and women in the form of co-mothering.

The relationships between husbands and wives, mothers and children, and finally, siblings, demonstrate the transcendence of human love when it is grounded in an unselfish love for all of humanity. All of the characters discussed delineate the responsibility and gift of motherhood and co-mothering, as well as a supportive attitude toward the central role of motherhood, and the fostering beauty in relationships, since all relationships are matrifocal. Thus, this matrifocal, ideal feminist community has high expectations of its members, and in turn provides

them with a nurturing, accepting society of members regardless of gender, race, and identity.

According to Chandra Mohanty, theory allows us to “understand race, class, gender, nation, sexuality, and colonialism...in terms of histories and experiences that tie us together;” (191) theory encourages the individual to engage in *praxis* of solidarity. Matrifocal feminism provides a viable intersection of theory and *praxis* shared across diverse communities. Its sociological basis allows for consideration of histories and experience. When used as a lens for reading *The Lianja Epic*, it allows the reader to discover a community centered on fostering solidarity within its members, where power lies not in force or violence, but, to quote the epic's quintessential figure of motherhood, in “dialogue, love, peace and reconciliation” (2.1052). Matrifocal feminism, emergent from African consciousness, contributes a culturally relevant method for understanding African community, politics, and literature.

NOTES

¹In the discourse placing mothers at the center of discussion and consideration, it is important to elucidate the meanings of the following terms: matriarchy, matrilineal, matrifocal, co-mothering, and mothering. Matriarchy implies a societal construction based on the political and ideological impact of the mother within the family and surrounding community. Matrilineal is a term used to describe lineage descendent through the mother. Matrifocal or matrifocality indicates that the mother is the focus or center of the discourse involved. These terms -matriarchy, matrilineal, and matrifocal- establish

themselves within the biological privilege of motherhood through the act of child-birth. Acts of mothering, or co-mothering, then, do not necessary indicate motherhood, but indicate an expansion of self through nurturing others. They can be practiced by all peoples in a community, regardless of age or gender, and are characterized by an egalitarian sense of responsibility and accountability.

²In “Introduction” to *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain*, Mazisi Kunene discusses the importance of history, continuity, culture, and community to preserving the African classics found within the oral traditions. Kunene uses the term African classical literature to accommodate the oral and written forms of literary African texts.

³*The Lianja Epic* is a text rich with centralized cultural value for the Congo region of central Africa (Maneniang', “Introduction”). This epic exists in several forms: as a communal performance in oral literature, as a dramatic performance produced for theater (Nkanga, “Interview”), and as a written form of what Mazisi Kunene (see second endnote above) would classify as African classical literature. The study by Mubima Maneniang' serves as the primary source examined in this paper. This written version chosen for the textual analysis is, according to the author, an amalgamation of various performances viewed, transcribed and translated by Mubima Maneniang'.

⁴I have chosen to italicize the Mongo term for God with respect for Maneniang's textual references.

⁵In his introduction, Maneniang' states: “With the themes of peace, unity and reconciliation at its centre, the epic has been passed down orally from generation to generation since around the 14th century, and is still popular today in the DRC where it is performed in both the city and country, and on radio and television. The Mobutu Sese-Seko National Theatre has also toured all over the world with their adaptation of *The Lianja Epic*.”

⁶As Maneniang' points out, the duration of her pregnancy indicates its

importance and not necessarily an actual amount of time.

⁷See Oyewumi's remarks on omo-ija, page 3.

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