

## **Domination in Gender Relations: Implications for Peace and Conflict in Bole Butake's *Lake God***

**Dora N. Mbu**

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria  
mbudora@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

This paper engages in the interpretation of questions of gender and domination as it relates to peace and conflict with particular reference to Bole Butake's play *Lake God*. Through content analysis, the paper focuses on how women construct power in the imaginary society of Butake's writing, by challenging the forces of oppression and domination in their society, and how in turn, power is constructed through them. Through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework (Feminism and New Historicism), this paper x-rays how Butake draws inspiration from historical events to create imaginary strong-willed and determined female characters in a male dominated society. In conclusion, the paper finds out that despite the women domination in various spheres (cultural, political, and economical), these women still brave the odds to chart better ways of surviving in a patriarchal society. The paper therefore suggests that the "woman question" should be given a prominent place in literary discourse. *Lake God* therefore seeks to promote an active, as opposed to a passive, brand of womanhood thus challenging the forces of gender oppression and domination in her society and the world at large.

**Keywords:** Domination; oppression; feminism; patriarchy; gender.

### **Introduction**

Gender is not given at birth; only the actual biological sex is. Traditionally, sex was conceived as a biological trait, as the anatomical, physiological, and hormonal characteristics that differentiated men and women. Gender, on the other hand, was perceived as a social construction, which resulted from complex socio-cultural processes that linked certain behaviors to a determinate gender. In recent years, the lines that divide the biological and the social have become obscure. Despite these difficulties, some gender scholars have formed clear conceptualizations that still extricate sex from gender. According to Candace and Zimmerman (1991), "doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'." Under this conception, gender is not only a condition through which individuals organize their life in order to reflect and express their gender, but also a shared set of beliefs that influence how they perceive each other's behavior (ibid,127). Therefore, while sex is a determination made through the appellation of socially agreed upon by biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males, gender is the activity of managing situated conduct in the light of normative conception of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex. For some feminists, Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), opines that, "gender is a system of meanings within cultures used to categorize male or female in hierarchical terms". Generally, gender studies centre on masculinities and femininities and how these relate to power. Gender has also been seen as a play of power relations that offers men's and women's activities as public or domestic respectively.

Domination and gender relations work hand in glove, and beneath this is the central idea of power. Individuals or groups may exercise power over others – domination – either by brute force or because that power is accepted as legitimate by those who are subject to it. The relationship between gender and power is one of interdependence because on the one hand gender constructs power, as gender divisions point to different power levels operating between men and women,

and on the other hand power operates through gender as it is through gendered divisions that power gains its position of dominance. Power in this case, can either be public or private, and whoever wields power has the ability to impose his will on those without power. Thus, it provides grounds for the exercise of control and/or authority and the performance of dominance. According to Michel Foucault (1980), power “functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth”. Though this definition is not as simple as it sounds, it is embedded with a set of conditions that point to complex relations between those who wield authority and those over whom that authority is wielded thus indicating some elements of domination.

Max (1968) gives a clearer definition of domination as “the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons”. Features associated with domination are obedience, interest, belief, and regularity. Weber notes that “every genuine form of domination implies minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an interest (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience” (ibid 132). Examples of dominance could include: child-parent relationships, employer-employee relationships, teacher-student, domination within the family, political rule that is generally accepted and obeyed, or the relation between a priest and a church member. When dominance continues for a considerable length of time, it becomes a structured phenomenon, and the forms of dominance become the social structures of society. He goes ahead to point out traditional authority as one of the domains where the traditional rights of a powerful and dominant individual or groups are accepted, or at least not challenged, by subordinate individuals. These could be: religious, cultural, and tribal (family, or clan structures). The dominant individual could be a priest, clan leader, family head, or dominant elite might govern. George (2013) notes that “traditional authority is based on a claim by the leaders and a belief on the part of the followers, that there is virtue in the sanctity of age-old rules and power”. Traditional authority is therefore a means by which inequality is created and preserved. Where no challenge of the authority of the traditional leader or group is made, then the leader is likely to remain dominant. This type of societal setting becomes more patriarchal. Thus it is as a result of this dominance that conflict arises as the dominant group or person wants to challenge the status quo that is so oppressing them thereby transforming the peaceful arenas of the society into conflict zones.

### **Methodology**

The methodology adopted for this paper is content analysis. Both primary and secondary material for this study has been collected mainly from libraries, archives and computerized databanks. Content analysis employed in this study aims at an understanding of the textual representation of domination and oppression of women in the *Lake God*. In *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (8<sup>th</sup> Edition), Leedy and Ormrod (2005), define content analysis as “a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases”. This paper is thus read from a purely text-based analysis and no formal empirical research or field work has been pursued in the collection of data.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach from an African Feminist point of view and New Historicism. Many definitions and ideological differences abound as far as feminism is concerned. Ogini (1996), sees feminism as a concept with two main axes. She says as a belief, “it emphasizes equality for men and woman in all areas, among which are legal, economic, political and social affairs”. As a social movement, it advocates equality of both sexes and is widely known as women liberation or women’s rights movement. Feminism seeks a change in women’s situation and it entails the sharing of power between men and women, mutual respect and social legitimation. Feminism as an emancipatory movement must interrogate and subvert male authority and the marginality of women. Davies and Graves in their introduction to *Ngambika* (1986) posit that “African feminism recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of

women's subjugations which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples". According to Nkealah (2006) feminism is as a movement and theoretical construct provides "a rallying point for women seeking the transformation of patriarchal cultures into egalitarian structures in which men and women work on terms of partnership rather than subordination". While different groups of women may use different approaches, depending on their cultural or religious backgrounds, the ultimate goal is change in gender power relations.

New Historicism involves a parallel reading or juxtaposition of literary and the non-literary texts of the same historical period. Both are given equal importance and allowed to work as sources of information or interrogation with each other. This way, the non-literary text becomes not a context but a co-text, along with the literary work. The literary text is placed within the framework of the non-literary text which is closely read. This is what Butake speaks about in his analysis of the play *Lake God* which points to the post colonialist policy of continuous exploitation and political maneuvers of the leaders at the detriment of the masses due to the emission of a toxic gas in Lake Nyos community of the North West region of Cameroon. New historicism renders a political reading of the text by giving venue to the culturally and psychologically oppressed and marginalized women in the Cameroonian society. Judith (1989) contends that, New Women's history is about the gap between the prescription of roles and women's actual behavior. She argues that women's activities and struggles are seen as having a causative relation to the areas hitherto associated with men. New Historicism, in her opinion, "juxtaposes the voices of men and women on the same topics and movements".

#### **A Synopsis and Historical background of *Lake God***

*Lake God* dramatizes the anger unleashed by a supernatural force on the residents of a village whose leader abandons the traditional ways of worship, converts to a new religion and marries a woman from another clan. There are indications of an impending calamity right at the beginning of the play when a voice, later revealed to be the voice of the priest of the lake god, is heard warning the Fon (the leader) of the dangers he faces as a result of his continued association with the catholic priest, Father Leo. Another sign of future unrest is the sudden resurgence of the Fibuen, the women's secret society, which is heard making its way to the Fon's palace after a long period of inactivity. The women of the Fibuen arrive at the palace carrying the bound body of Dewa, a Mbororo cattle rearer.

They accuse Dewa of poor management of his cattle, resulting in cattle straying into Ngangba, their farming area, and destroying their crops. The Fon listens sympathetically to the women's complaints but refuses to acquiesce to their request that the cattle breeders be sent out of the village. Instead, he offers them 20,000CFA francs as compensation for their loss. The women, however, refuse his offer and leave the palace in dissatisfaction. Back in the enclaves of their secret cult, they decide to starve their husbands, physically and sexually, so as to incite them to compel the Fon to send away the cattle breeders and to perform the traditional rites of worship due to the god of the lake on whom they rely for a bountiful harvest.

The plan works and after a few days the Kwifon, the men's secret society which had been banned for its activities, is re-established as a group of men decide to seek Shey Bo-Nyo's advice on what should be done to appease the lake god and to reverse the impending catastrophe on their land. Shey Bo-Nyo, the priest of the lake god, apprises the men of the intensity of the lake god's anger, evident in the boiling of the lake, and advises that prompt action is needed. Under the leadership of Shey Tanto, the Kwifon enters the palace and demands that the Fon set a date for performing the required sacrifices to the lake god. The Fon rejects this request on the basis of his new religious beliefs which forbid him from participating in what he perceives as heathen sacrifice. Provoked by the Fon's obstinacy and moved by the persistent boiling of the lake, the Kwifon returns to the palace the following day and takes the Fon away. Angela, the Fon's Christian wife, seeks help from Father Leo, but before the priest can summon the police to their aid there is a loud bang and both he and Angela are seen coughing wildly and collapsing on the floor. It is on this note of

mystery and speculation on what the bang means that the play ends. The epilogue (referred to in the play as the passage) dispels some of the speculations when it reveals a ruined landscape peopled by five survivors of a disaster.

*Lake God* is built around a historical event, what has come to be known in Cameroon history books as the Lake Nyos disaster of 1986. According to Ambe (2007), when the play was first produced in 1986 by the Yaounde University Theatre, it was understood by many to be “a literary representation and/or interpretation that Butake attempted to give to the yet scientifically inexplicable Lake Nyos toxic gas explosion of August 1986”, which killed at least two thousand people and several herds of cattle in Wum and the neighbouring villages in Menchum Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. From the various insinuations and lack of satisfactory scientific explanations of the cause of the explosion, Tangwa (1993) concluded that, “the Lake had been used as a testing ground for a new atomic bomb by certain Western powers”. Significantly, the play does not just attempt to offer a hypothetical input to the catastrophe but it also explores other components that hamper on the continuous growth and evolution of a people.

Eyoh (1993) describes *Lake God* as Butake’s dramatic re-invention of the Lake Nyos disaster from a metaphysical point of view to explain how the demise comes about tracing it to the abnegation of a people’s mores. *Lake God* thus becomes a metaphorical statement on how a society has changed its value systems through a certain spiritualism which could provide for societal renewal and/or regeneration. Eyoh goes on to draw our attention to a metaphysical questioning about what has become of Cameroonians’ collective essence. Beyond the metaphysical, Butake seems to propose an effective system of accountability in political leadership in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular.

The political debacles preceding British Southern Cameroons’ attainment of independence in 1961 brought in a women’s secret group known popularly as the *Anlu*. It became a political tool in 1958 and it influenced the outcome of the 1959 party elections in Kom in favour of the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) as well as changed the whole course of history as far as the British Southern Cameroons was concerned. According to Jua (1993), “the *Anlu* had grievances against the colonial government, which the KNDP led by Augustine Ngom Jua and John Ngu Foncha exploited to its advantage”. The KNDP was an off-shoot of the Kamerun National Congress (KNC), the ruling party at the time led by Endeley. Ngoh (1987) reports that the Jua/Foncha faction had broken away from the KNC because of “differences in ideology”; for while the KNC wanted autonomy for Southern Cameroons within Nigeria, the KNDP advocated secession from Nigeria and reunification with French Cameroon.

The *Anlu* got involved in the struggles for dominance in Kom between the KNDP and the KNC when the government introduced a new agricultural law that prohibited Kom women from continuing with traditional farming techniques that were seen to cause soil erosion. The women were used to farming vertically on the hill slopes. Thus, the government’s injunction that ridges should be made horizontally did not go down well with Kom women. They could not understand this and interpreted it as a way of government interfering and changing their way of life. Their lack of understanding of these new agricultural policies, coupled with the fact that the government had failed to mete out sanctions on the Fulani cattle owners whose cattle had been destroying their crops, made them suspicious that the KNC government had designs to take over their land. Jua (1993) again reiterated that the women’s suspicions were further fueled by rumours that Kom land was to be sold to the then Premier, Endeley of the KNC, and to the Igbos, and the fact that the new laws on cross-contour farming were being enforced by a non-Kom agricultural officer was enough to make the women convinced that the rumours were true. This led to a state of hostility as the women became totally against the KNC government and all it represented. As a result of this, the women unanimously mobilized and chased KNC members out of their village. When Endeley visited Njinikom on July 11, 1958, he came across several roadblocks and was later greeted by a cold reception from the

few supporters of his party who were left in the village. The *Anlu* to Jua, “performed mock-burials of KNC leaders” (ibid:181) and to this day, it is believed that the KNC leader at the time Mr. Ndong who passed on to glory at the end of that year was killed by the *Anlu*.

The women became a force to be reckoned with and their actions became glaring in the 1959 elections in which the KNC lost in Kom and the political landscape changed in favour of the KNDP. Political issues of the day were decided upon by the women who had effectively taken over power in the land. Their traditional ruler, the Fon, and the Administrator, the Divisional Officer (D.O), were rendered powerless. The *Anlu* reigned uninterruptedly for three years in Kom history. The featuring of the women’s secret group and its activities in Butake’s play *Lake God* are reminiscent of the *Anlu* in the political scene of Cameroon in 1959.

### Literature Review

The female gender in most African societies, happens to be a victim of traditional authority where patriarchal norms are upheld and positions inherited. Okpe (2005) submits that “patriarchy is a broad network or system of hierarchical organization that cuts across political, economic, social, religion, cultural, industrial and financial spheres, under which the overwhelming number of upper positions in society are either occupied or controlled and dominated by men”. Thus, any system that operationalizes an order that accords men undue advantage over women is considered patriarchal. A patriarch is considered the head of the household and within the family he controls productive resources, labour force, and reproductive capacities based on the notions of superiority and inferiority and legitimized by differences in gender and generation. Patriarchy therefore is a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men and solidarity among them which enable them in turn to dominate women. The material base of patriarchy is men’s control over women’s labour powers. That control is maintained by excluding women from access to necessary economically productive resources and by restricting women’s sexuality.

Men have for a very long time delighted in showing up the weaknesses of women. They have always enjoyed ordering the woman back to the home because they consider her emancipation as a real menace. The saying “give them an inch, they take a mile” is used to subjugate the woman. In trying to keep the woman permanently at the background, man draws from philosophy, religion, theology and even science just because he dreads feminine competition. Philosophers, writers, priests, politicians and scientists have all tried to show that the subordinate position of the woman is willed in heaven and advantageous to men. In the Biblical myth, the woman is seen as a second and weaker vessel who in her weakness could not resist her tempter – the devil. Due to this, she is believed to have caused the fall of man. According to Kate Millet (1969) this biblical myth made man “the radical type, whereas Eve is a mere sexual type and according to tradition either expandable or replaceable”. Various forms of domination which could be mentally, physically, economically, socially or even politically, of one person or a group of persons by another remains the basis where power is derived. This is so in view of the fact that this tool can be used to subdue one and when this is done, one becomes helpless and very easy to rule. The woman therefore falls into this class of people because right from creation, she has been oppressed and dominated by her man and the society. Man has tirelessly sought to prove that the woman is inferior. He deems himself superior because he was created first (Adam) by God and this is one of the things the woman has to contend with in society today.

In her most influential book, *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have been defined by men and that if they attempt to break with this, they risk alienating themselves. She maintains that “otherness is a fundamental category of human thought” (xvii). Women are defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute; she is the “Other” De Beauvoir links woman’s identity as “Other” and her fundamental alienation to her body - especially her reproductive capacity. Childbearing, childbirth, and menstruation are draining physical events that tie women to their bodies and to immanence. The male, however,

is not tied down by such inherently physical events. De Beauvoir urged women “to decline to be the “Other”, to refuse to be a party to the deal” (ibid: xx). The acceptance of the woman of her subordinate place has not helped the woman much as she is kept in bondage which Karenga (1975) defines as a “systematic restriction of growth and freedom of choice”. He says that bondage does not necessarily mean physical chains and shackles but when one’s freedom is denied, one is definitely in bondage. By denying the woman a chance to grow, freedom of expression and movement, she is in bondage. By not allowing the woman meaningful participation and social advancement, she is still in bondage. The questions that arise here are; what is the woman doing to free herself from bondage? How will she escape the iron grasp of the warrior (the man) and his values? What can the woman do to change her situation in society? This therefore indicates that, the more silent the woman becomes, the more voice the man acquires.

Women have been perceived by society as not competent in certain tasks as their male counterparts except in those tasks traditionally designed for them. Even today where women have distinguished themselves in all spheres of human endeavour, they are still seen as inferior. Some feminists have argued that women should not be blamed for their failure because as Virginia Woolf (1954) puts it, women have not been allowed a “room of their own” (16). They have not been given the various atmosphere and the creative space as their male counterparts. This trend is much more pronounced in Africa where women are relegated to the background. From Woolf’s position, the woman in Africa according to Remi (2004) is the “inner lamp” while the man is “the outer lamp”. The African woman therefore has no access to a voice, she cannot express herself, and she cannot put her ideas forward. All these societal restraints on the female gender have created avenues for conflict in many ways which could be among others socio-economic, political, and cultural. Instances of female subordination as a result of tradition and culture feature prominently in the most African societies. Omolara (1994) identified traditional structures as “one of the mountains on the back of an African woman”. It is fostered through the gender socialization process which connects macho strength and heroism to males and associates the traditional roles of wife and mother to females.

Economically, in Nigeria as elsewhere, women’s poverty level and their comparative lack of leadership and participation in decision-making and lack of control over assets are often attributed to a number of personal factors. These factors include low literacy, skills, self-esteem, financial security and ignorance of their rights. However, women in Nigeria live in a predominately patriarchal society in which their economic dependency on men is determined by discriminatory customary practices, laws and policies in public institutions. To properly fight poverty and promote women’s economy, there is need for women to be physically present and participate actively, in the elaboration of policies, projects and programmes to fight poverty.

### **The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution in *Lake God***

In *Lake God*, the Fibuen’s (women’s’ secret group in the Grass field region of the North West region) quest to reinstate order in society stems from two main factors: the occupation of its farmlands by Mbororo cattle and the Fon’s refusal to lead his people (as their traditional and spiritual representative) in a yearly sacrifice to the god of the lake. The evident fear of the women as a result of their Fon’s refusal to partake in such rituals and the presence of the cattle will be disastrous since this would mean no food to feed their children. This indicates the main conflict that sets the pace in the play.

When the play opens, a group of angry women are seen carrying Dewa, the cattle grazer with his hands and legs bound to the palace to report a case of cattle encroachment into their farmlands. The women associate the cattle business with capitalist exploitation and imperialist domination, since it benefits only a handful of people – the Fon and his collaborators. It is in the ensuing dialogue between the Fon and Dewa, in the presence of the women, that it becomes clear to the women that most of the cattle that destroy the crops of the village farmers belong to the Fon. This underscores the rising tensions between what can be termed the ruling class and the proletariat:

**Fon:** Na weti happen?

**Dewa:** Cow dong go drinki water fo Ngangba sai wey na kontri fo Bororo.

**Fon:** Fo sika sey me tell you fo go shiddon dere da wan mean sey na wuna kontri?

**Dewa:** No be na gomna don talk sey na place fo cow?

**Fon:** What gomna, you bloody fool? You look the palaver wey you don bringam fo my head?

**Dewa:** Allah! Me no bringam no troubou fo Mbe (16)

This conversation highlights the problem of land ownership in that while Dewa attributes ownership of the land to the government, the Fon sees the land as his property, and this is significant because in Cameroon “land is a factor of power and strength” (Logo and Bikie, 2003). Although the Fon is clearly unhappy with Dewa for allowing the cattle to trespass into Ngangba and to destroy the women’s crops, he does not totally agree with the women’s view that Dewa and other cattle rearers should leave. To him, land is not just a heritage but a resource that could be exploited for his economic enrichment through the provision of more grazing land to the Mbororos, for as he states “progress here is tied with cattle” (18).

The Fon further victimizes and exploits Dewa and the women as Dewa is made to pay for the crops destroyed by the cattle despite Dewa’s protests that it is the Fon’s cattle and not his that destroyed the crops of the women. He again collects the money meant as compensation for the women’s crops from Dewa under the pretext that he will later on give it to the women. But this is never done. Dewa’s open cry “kai, wusai Allah don go?” (18) simply indicates the extent of his exasperation, frustration and helplessness in the face of the Fon’s dubious tactics. Despite the women’s demands for the expulsion of the cattle and its owners, the Fon refuses to adhere to this because this would mean his own expulsion thus he cannot accept such a request. He rather puts it the other way round claiming that the community’s progress is closely tied up with the cattle. Even Fr. Leo his Prelate re-echoes this in his morning doctrine for women in an attempt to convince them to allow the cattle and its owners in the land. He tells the women:

*But let me tell you now that when I receive a little money from my country, I give it to your Fon who invests it in the purchase of cattle. That is how we have been able to move mountains. If the cattle leave, we will not be able to continue to give you the services which you now have. A school for your children, a health centre for the young and old, sparkling pipe-borne water and a big motor road... (32).*

From the above dialogue between Dewa, Yensi and the Fon, the women through Yensi as their mouthpiece challenge patriarchy as she out-rightly rejects the Fon’s offer of compensation of two thousand (2,000) francs each to the women. As a spokesperson for the women and the community at large, she insists that “the cattle and their owners must go” (18). The women do not see how the society’s progress according to their monarch and Fr. Leo is tied down to the presence of the cattle when this lucrative business profits just a handful of people to the detriment of the larger community. The women’s fight is for the common good of the entire populace. This indicated their fear of imminent hunger and famine that could in due course plague the land if the cattle remain in the land. This defiant attitude of Yensi in solidarity with the women indicates their firm stands against patriarchal forces of oppression and domination .

The women of this community depend solely on farming for sustainability, and the seemingly growth of the cattle business threatens the very foundations of their economic stability. It is not the first time their crops have been ruined by cattle as Yensi out-rightly tells the Fon “this is not the first time that the women have brought Dewa and other cattle breeders before the Fon”

(14). This is an indication of the fact that the women “have borne the suffering long enough” (17) because this malpractice has been going on for some time yet the Fon did not take any action against the perpetrators of this act. Dewa has the guts to even challenge the women “to take him to the highest court in the land” (15). He equally challenges the men “to make fences around their wives farmlands or the cattle breeders will take no responsibility for their laziness and poverty” (15). The women see this as the highest level of insult and disrespect. They find the relationship between the Fon, Father Leo and Dewa as a dangerous political force that spells disaster for their community. Therefore, in an attempt to avert the disaster, they decide to bring back the Fibuen to the scene of active politics. According to Kimaa, the women cannot bear this any longer so they decided to put their heads together and said “If Dewa says the Fon has... the Kwifon (male secret group), the Fibuen which has been asleep all these years must come to our rescue”(15). Their solidarity action spurs the men to wake up from their slumber as they realized the need to resurrect the disbanded Kwifon that had often intervened in saving the land in times of crisis. Tanto tells Shey Bo-Nyo:

**Tanto:** The Kwifon must do something. Even at the risk of being arrested again. We cannot allow an irresponsible man to destroy the land.

**Shey Bo-Nyo:** How will the Kwifon act? The Fon is unrepentant over the detention of the Kwifon.

**Tanto:** This is an emergency, and there are still men in the land. Kwifon will forget the crimes of the Fon in order to save the land. I will get the seven pillars of Kwifon and they will put their heads together. They will meet here since they can no longer gain access to the sanctuary in the palace (23).

To the above, Shey Bo-Nyo replies in the affirmative: “There are still men in the land. It might still be saved” (23). The above exchange between the two men points to two very cardinal issues: traditionally, the men have always had a very essential role or even the primary role to play in resolving crises; secondly, however, the men have been bereft of their sacred power by being barred “access to their sanctuary in the palace” (23). It is however, thanks to the women’s solidarity move that spurs the men to resurrect the disbanded Kwifon which is the highest disciplinary body in the land that resolves most problems especially in cases of emergency. The Fibuen and the Kwifon are seen as the major forces of redemption in the land in the hands of the oppressive monarch and his cohorts.

It appears that the advent of colonialism and its accomplices, Christianity and modernization in the lake community, has resulted in the forceful erosion of the powers of the men folk under traditional systems. According to Odhiambo Christopher (2009b), ‘the very act of outlawing the male institution of authority can figuratively be interpreted as an act of “de-masculinizing” the men in this society, rendering them impotent and irrelevant’. The Kwifon has become impotent figuratively, because its members are incapable of functioning as a productive political unit. They have been emasculated of the powers that be. Their impotence is evident in the fact that all they can do is sit and groan over the “detestable” state of things in the village. In this desperate situation, Lagham transfers the aggression to his innocent wife and even beats her up for failing to cook his food as tradition demands. Like Achebe’s Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Lagham is the prototype of the powerless husband who deals with frustrations by resorting to physical violence. The women’s response to the problem stands in contrast to the men’s in that rather than look on helplessly they embark on a plan that, if successful, could save their land from total devastation by the new religion. From the stage directions, the action of the women is discernible.

*At moonlit night. There is a crowd of women in the village square. After the abortive encounter with the Fon, and because of the fever of the Fibuen, they display a spirit of*

*defiance that would shock the men folk. Something like mob action in which the women have no inhibitions... (24).*

This shows the solidarity move by the women to resolve the problems plaguing the land. Failing to get any encouraging reaction from their monarch, and because the men folk are doing nothing in relation to the destruction of the crops, the women take a decision to withhold their bodies and food from their men. First of all they take an oath of sealed lips not to disclose their actions and decisions to the men folk as reiterated by Kimbong “We must take an oath of sealed lips” (24). This oath is performed with broomsticks cooked in the most potent medicines and herbs in the land and it is administered by holding the sticks in the right hand between the thumb and finger, then cross the lips vertically with the stick, break it in the middle and throw both ends behind while repeating the following: “If my mouth discloses what my ears have heard in this gathering, may my tongue well and fill my mouth with dumbness” (25). This major step of oath-taking is to ensure the success of their plans. Stage directions in “Dead-End” clearly illustrate the implementation of this decision by the women.

*... A man complains of hunger to his wife. For three days, she has not given him food. Does she want him to die? Does she want to kill him? The woman replies that he should continue to sit around with other men, drinking palm-wine, while she is fighting with cattle grazers and their cattle in the farm. The cattle have destroyed all the crops and there is no way she can place a bowl of foo-foo in front of him.... As they exit, another woman comes in and sits. Her husband shows his face and beckons on her. He wants then to go to bed. It is bed time. She ignores him. He repeats the movements while advancing towards the woman. She turns her back on him indicating she is sick and so cannot share the same bed with him. After coaxing and threatening to no avail he exits, a defeated man. The woman jumps up, does a victory dance, and exits (24).*

Here, we find the women breaking loose of their traditional status of sexual condescension and household chores of cooking for and feeding their husbands. In fact, they turn their “supposed” weaknesses into strength.

Historically, from the traditional and cultural milieus, the Fibuen constitutes a body of power in its own right. Koloss Hans-Joachim (2000) reiterates this assertion arguing that just like the male secret society (Kwifon), “the power of the Fibuen is exercised strictly within the female space”, that is, in matters relating primarily to women’s interests within the domestic space. For example, it intervenes in the mistreatment of women by their husbands and in extreme cases goes to the compound of the offender to demand justice. Beyond the domestic space, Nkealah (2011) opines that, “the Fibuen makes an appearance only at funerals and commemorative ceremonies for deceased members, at the admission of new members, and at communal work during which it is ordered by the Fon and Kwifon to coordinate and control the work of the women”.

Eunice Ngongkum (2008) argues that *Lake God* is revolutionary in vision because the women ‘go beyond demonstrating a heightened awareness of the issues at stake in their community to actually taking steps to addressing them’. To go about this, the women resurrect the Fibuen from its eight year slumber through which they administer the oath of sealed lips. This act in itself portrays evidence of female power which the playwright endorses. Stage directions and the ensuing dialogue show a crowd of women in the village square:

*A moonlit night. There is a crowd of women in the village square. After the abortive encounter with the Fon, and because of the fever of the Fibuen, they display a spirit of defiance that would shock their men folk. Something like mob action in which the women have no inhibitions. When action begins, there is the sound of the now familiar horn of the Fibuen followed by an exhilarating ululation. Then the women perform dance steps to such lyrical songs as “Kwessim kwe bo*

*lang e Banyu". When they have worked themselves to fever pitch the horn sounds again and, again, they ululate (24).*

**Yensi:** *(performing the Kinsheng)* E-chong E-chong E-chong E-chong o o! (a caller tune in local parlance by the women leader, for attentiveness and immediate action)

**Chorus:** Ho ya ho ya ho ya!

**Yensi:** I lack the words with which to express my joy. The happiness that is in my heart cannot be shown on my face. The happenings of today have shown that, in spite of what some people say, the ways of the land are alive. We must be one person to succeed in our present undertaking. We must be one woman. Some here have only recently been given into marriage. Their bellies are hot. There are others who cannot control their emotions of love and sympathy. There are still others who will easily succumb to threats and the fear of being beaten. You all know where we have built the sanctuary of the Fibuen . We have taken it away from that place which I don't want to call by name. The sanctuary is the refuge for those without a heart. Go there if you cannot look your man in the face and tell him to go and eat shit.

**Chorus:** *(laughter)* He he he! Haaa! Wus!

**Nkasai:** Listen, Yensi, this thing is not as easy as you want to make it look. There are women here who, as soon as we disperse, will start disclosing everything as if their mouths are leaking.

**Kimpong:** You speak the truth, Nkasai. Where is Ma Kusham? We must all take the oath of sealed lips.

*An old woman carrying a clay pot in both hands moves forward and places the pot on the floor.*

**Ma Kusham:** Thank you, my daughter. These are things of the land. Things of our gods and ancestors which the white man has fooled us to abandon. Things of the white man have brought suffering to the land. *(She dips her hand into the pot and takes out broom-sticks of equal length which she proceeds to distribute to all the women).* These broom-sticks have been cooked in the most potent medicines and herbs in the land. However, the most important ingredient as far as our oath is concerned comes from the sacred pot of the lake god which Shey Bo-Nyo guards jealously. The link is simple. There is no Queen in the palace and the Fon has refused to lead the people in sacrifice to the god of fertility. Now, listen. Hold the stick in your right hand between the thumb and forefinger like this. Cross your lips vertically with the stick like this. Break it in the middle and throw both ends behind you while repeating the following: if my mouth discloses what my ears have heard in this gathering, may my tongue swell and fill my mouth with dumbness.

*The rite is performed in strict silence after which Ma Kusham sprinkles the women with the liquid from the pot.*

**Yensi:** We are now going to disperse and go back to our homes. And if your man should ask you what is going on, ask him if women ever know what is happening in this land of men. May our enterprise succeed. E-chong e-chong e-chong e-chong o o!

**Chorus:** Hoo ya ho ya ho ya! (24-25)

From the above dialogue, it can be deduced that, the women in essence apply four major steps to solve the problems they and the community are encountering at large. First, they work themselves into a delirious mood designed to indicate the intensity of their frustration with the existing leadership. Secondly, they remind themselves of the importance of the undertaking they are about to embark on. It is implied that a resolution in relation to this has already been taken. Thirdly, acting on what seems to be logical reasoning on the part of Nkasai and Kimbong, the women decide to take an oath not to disclose to their men the outcome of their meeting. In a sense, they prefer to let their actions speak to the men. Finally, they disperse and retreat to their homes where their plan of action is to be enforced.

Significantly, the oath of sealed lips taken by the women highlights the power relations that operate within traditional Grassfields societies. The oath is administered as a guarantee that no woman must disclose to her husband the resolution that has been taken. To Nkealah (2011), the oath itself “underscores a conscious mutation of voice”. This is indicative of the enforced silence to which the women have to subject themselves because of their relatively disadvantaged status in a society dominated by men. Because a previous attempt to voice their grievances had been heedlessly dismissed by the Fon, the women now resort to silence as a political weapon. Their choice of silence could be seen as a demonstration of subtlety wherein they express their dissatisfaction with the existing political order and successfully get their demands met without destabilizing the social order or status quo. Deborah Cameron (1990) sees this choice of silence from another level as that which is often imposed on women ‘either by social taboos and restrictions or by the more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice’. This is because in Grassfield cultures, speech is the monopoly of the men and women constitute the silent group. The women are the “silent listeners” who remain forever in the background (see Warnier, 1996). The women in *Lake God* are compelled to resort to this less revolutionary means of evoking change. Their actions are less revolutionary in comparison to those of Woman in Bate Besong’s *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* (1991) who seeks redress for the unjust practices of the corrupt government in power by not only enlightening students on the ills of that government but also by persuading the soldiers to see the futility of defending a government that is already doomed for destruction because of its excesses (see Nkealah, 2009a). Constrained by the shortcomings of this type of tradition, the Fibuen takes a more *silent*, but political, approach to change. Its members adopt what Wills Dorothy (1995) calls ‘noisy silence’ – a silence that is pregnant with protest though devoid of voice. This seems to be the only available avenue of political expression open to them.

Most women are known to be betrayers of one another especially when under pressure. This character of theirs influences the decision to take the oath of sealed lips. Worthy of note is the fact that the decision to starve the men physically and sexually is made before the oath of sealed lips is taken. What necessitates the administering of the oath is Nkasai’s claim that some of the women in their midst will not be able to keep their activities a secret and ‘will start disclosing everything as if their mouths are leaking’ (24). Implicit in this statement is women’s own proliferation of gendered notions of femininity that see women as incapable of respecting verbal terms of agreement. In many African societies women are stereotyped as “blabber mouths” or gossips, and it is this perception that seems to inform Butake’s construction of the plot of *Lake God* to include the oath of sealed lips. While the oath taking according to Nkealah (2011) seems to be a necessary guarantee that the women will stick to the plan of action, its ritualistic enforcement undermines the women’s potential for resilience and ascribes them feminine qualities that are innately sexist. The women’s solidarity in their revolt eventually propels the menfolk into action as they resurrect the Kwifon in an attempt to avert further deterioration of the crises. Stage directions at the beginning of “Dead-End” describe mime scenes which illustrate the women’s tactics:

*A man complains of hunger to his wife. For three days, she has not given him food. Does she want him to die? Does she want him to kill himself? The woman replies that he should continue to sit around with other men, drinking palm-wine, while she is*

*fighting with the cattle grazers and their cattle in the farm. The cattle have destroyed all the crops and there is no way she can place a bowl of foo-foo in front of him. As they exit, another woman comes in and sits. Her husband shows his face and beckons at her. He wants them to go to bed. It is bed time. She ignores him. He repeats the movements while advancing towards the woman. She turns her back on him indicating that she is sick and so cannot share the same bed with him. After coaxing and threatening to no avail he exits, a defeated man. The woman jumps up, does a victory dance, and exits (26).*

Unable to bear the effects of the women's food and sex starvation, it gradually dawns on the men folk represented by Fisiy, Forgwei, Lagham and Maimo that they have to do something to avert further crises. Forgwei and his friends finally agree to resurrect the Kwifon instead of going to see their monarch who might refuse to listen to them. This move by the men folk is thanks to the women who through their motif raised awareness in the men and urged them to rise up to fight against the forces of destruction in the land. This agreement to resurrect the Kwifon is tantamount to a subversion of the Fon's authority which could be interpreted as the logical consequence of the women's subversion of patriarchy.

### **Land as a Major Source of Conflict**

From pre-colonial to post-colonial times, land has been a major source of conflict between people of different families, tribes and nations. A brief glance at Cameroon history takes one back to the Douala land problem of 1902-1913, a situation provoked by the German attempt to expropriate Douala land and re-sell to whites at higher prices. The prominence of land as a motif in literary writing is reflected in many literatures of Africa. In East African literature, for example, the land theme is a major concern especially in the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o who, in *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood* and *I Will Marry When I Want*, not only addresses the complexities surrounding land ownership but also highlights the Kenyan's attachment to this natural resource. In Butake's *Lake God*, we see how women become protectors not just of cultivable land but of the motherland as a whole.

In *Lake God*, Butake shows that farmland constitutes the axis around which the rural woman's world rotates, particularly because her family depends largely on its produce for sustenance. It is no coincidence that the women in this play take extreme measures to protect their land from ruination. The Fulani cattle breeder, Dewa, poses a threat to these women not only because he owns a good deal of cultivable land but also because his cattle destroy their crops. The Fon sells land to Dewa and in return 'part of Dewa's herd belongs to the Fon' (28). Because Dewa represents capitalist exploitation, the women decide that he must leave the land. However, Fon Joseph cannot order Dewa's eviction because he is in partnership with him. Neither can the Kwifon take action against Dewa, having been banned by the Fon. Faced with a corrupt ruler and a group of powerless men, the women decide to act. Thus, there is a case of power struggle in which Dewa and the Fon are pitted against the women, while their husbands remain invisible at this stage of the conflict. The Fibuen becomes the decision-making body in the land and we see it in motion when the women embark on "sex and food starvation" (30). This is a strategic move to awaken the men to their plight. Maimo, for example, is denied his usual bowl of foo-foo, a meal made out of maize flour, the same maize (corn) that Dewa's cattle has destroyed in Ngangba. This deprivation makes him so angry that he slaps his wife. His report of the incidence to his friends provokes a discussion about what needs to be done to remedy the situation:

**Maimo:** ... My wife wiped the tears from her face, looked straight into mine and said in a cold voice that if I really wanted to eat foo-foo, I should go to Ngangba and make the cattle leave the land instead of beating up a defenseless woman who has been fighting all her life to feed her husband and the children. ...

**Fisiy:** That is a heavy story. It shows that the women are determined.

**Forgwei:** What is to be done?

**Lagham:** Good question. What can we do to expel the cattle people and their cattle; especially as our Fon and our people are also cattle owners? It is clear that until the cattle leave the land, no adult male is going to eat properly or sleep with a woman. (30)

This discussion reveals that the men acknowledge the urgency of finding a solution to the problem at hand. It is clear that if the women are going to extremes to protect their farmland, it is because their families depend entirely on the products of the land for sustenance. Their choice of action is no doubt informed by the knowledge that the men cannot survive for long without physical food and sexual intimacy. This knowledge becomes a power tool in their hands as they use it to wield control over the menfolk. As Lagham confesses, unless they expel the cattle breeders from the land 'no adult male is going to eat properly or sleep with a woman' (30). The men are thus forced to meet the women's demands, and, in effect, gender power becomes a negotiable asset.

### **Political Domination**

By the end of the play *Lake God*, women are seen not to have a place in politics. There is not even a suggestion by the men that they could be considered in terms of decision making in the land. This situation however, goes unquestioned and unchallenged by the women even though the men are becoming agitated and see the influence of the women over the present state of affairs of the land as waging a war against the men folk. This same Fibuen that fought hard to wake the men from their slumber to take active measures against their Fon and other foreign intrigues has been completely effaced and the arena of active politics is now under the full control of the Kwifon. When Shey Tanto leads the seven most important members of Kwifon to the sacred grove of the lake god and begins to chant incantations, it is evident from his words that there is some attempt to keep the realms of power a male-dominated space. The following excerpt confirms this assertion:

**Shey Tanto:** ... Hiiii Wong! Hiiii Bo-Nyo! Hiiii Kwifon !

We are meeting in this sacred grove of the lake god because the land is no longer the land you illustrious ancestors handed over to us. Kwifon is in exile; and the women of this land are waging war against their men-folk because the Fon, our Fon, the Fon you gave us the Fon we thought you gave us, has sold the land. The Fon has banished Kwifon and given the land to strangers and rearers of cattle. And now the women starve their men! ... Show us the right path that we may bring peace again to this land which you gave us (39).

Though Kwifon acknowledges the activities of the Fibuen, it trivializes its mission to be merely a war against the men folk. It refuses to acknowledge that the call for political transformation declared by the women is directed not at the men *per se*, but at the ruling authority of the land (represented by the Fon), at the government which makes decisions at national level, and at the imperialist forces (represented by Father Leo) which continue to exert their influence on government decision-making bodies. Although the Kwifon and the society benefits from the intervention of the Fibuen, it prefers to see itself as the only custodian of the preserves of power; while the Fibuen remains a shadowy presence that only gets admission into the arena of power when the original actors cannot perform. Jua (1993) notes that the Cameroonian women of the grassfields areas are known to set the precedence in every political movement, yet, "they remain forever in the background, hazy characters who furtively appear and then disappear without any worthwhile mention". According to her, the Cameroonian woman who has boldly participated in the political life of the country from 'Independence' is yet to reap any rewards for any contribution she had made so far. The Fibuen in the play is faced with this similar situation that Jua expresses for, they team up together and make a clarion call to the men who oust their stubborn leader and restore peace in the land. But at the end of the day, the men do

not seem to recognize this; rather, they think the women want to take over power which has been the preserves of men.

The women's deployment of sexual deprivation in an attempt to restore order in their society resonates with events in Aristophanes's Greek play *Lysistrata* (*Lysistrata in Greek*) meaning dismitter of armies. Lysistrata had advised her female followers to use sexual deprivation as an effective weapon to bring the men to their knees which will make them to stop their senseless and futile war. In order to achieve this, Lysistrata leads the women of Athens and Sparta into an oath taking to resist their husbands' sexual demands in order to force them to end the twenty-one year war that had been going on between the two states. The oath is accompanied by a ritual in which all the women drink from a bowl of wine to cement their commitment to the cause for which they have come together. *Lake God* echoes many of the sentiments expressed in *Lysistrata*. Following Aristophanes' model, Butake implies in *Lake God* that sex cannot be completely dissociated from politics. For these women then, sex is a political asset because a withholding of it implies not only a defiance of but also a challenge to a husband's authority over his wife. When used collectively by women, the weapon of sexual denial is most effective because it establishes female power and forces men to comply with the wishes of women. In *Lake God*, personal pleasures have to be sacrificed for the communal good, for the play emphasizes that the women's strategy can only succeed if they stick to the plan and remain resolute, brave and strong-willed.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, history has a way of influencing the artist and that is why some artists opine that writers should not just write arts for art's sake, meaning the artist captures most of what happens in the society but pens it down in an imaginary way to project and correct the happenings in his/her society. To this effect, Butake through an analysis of *Lake God*, infuses historical events into his work in a metaphorical manner thereby passing a strong message to the leaders in both the traditional and political settings in his country and Africa at large. Power should not be in the hands of a few and women should be given a voice in decision making matters in the society.

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