Editorial

Thinking Gender Differently, with Inspiration from Africa

by Carmeliza Rosário

Abstract

This *Feminist Africa* issue challenges dominant gender epistemologies through grounded African perspectives. The outcome of a panel convened at the 2022 World Women's Conference in Maputo, the issue interrogates the coloniality embedded in global gender discourse and offers decolonial, relational alternatives rooted in local linguistic contexts, kinship structures, and socio-historical specificities. The contributions, which range from the ethnographic to the conceptual and the political, reject universalised readings of gender and highlight instead the diverse ways in which African feminist scholars and communities understand and live gendered realities. We centre African epistemologies both as critique and as propositions for rethinking what gender means, what it conceals, and what it could become. In doing so, we offer a reflexive framing while calling for an expansion of the feminist spaces that listen to, and learn from, the pluralities of African knowledge.

Keywords: African feminist epistemologies, African gender queering, colonial decentring, relationality, seniority

The question of gender

The question of gender is central to feminism. It is an important concept that is both emancipatory and contested: emancipatory for its disconnection from

biological determinism, but contested for its stubborn attachment to Eurocentric notions and preoccupations that fall short of reflecting the lived experiences and understanding of the rest of humanity. As early as 1987, Nigerian scholar Ifi Amadiume showcased how gender was lived and performed in culture differently from the way it was understood in feminist theory. Another Nigerian, 'Oyèrónkẹ́' 'Oyěwùmí', articulated the point with more clarity by contesting the very idea of woman. "There were no 'women' in Yorubaland prior to colonization … I came to realize that the fundamental category, 'woman' – which is foundational in Western gender discourse – simply did not exist in Yorubaland prior to its sustained contact with the West" (1997, ix). 'Oyěwùmí's critique offered an avenue by which sex determinism could finally be defeated.

European colonialism from the 16th century disrupted humanity on a large scale, imposing understandings of what it means to be human and how humanity is subdivided into hierarchies of gender and race, among others. Colonialism was launched as a civilisational project, the repercussions of which persist in the continued erasures of imaginations of who we are as a species. The civilisational project has transmuted into the modernity lines of thinking taken up by most postcolonial African states. The most consequential notion to have emerged from European colonial expansionism is race. As averred by Kopano Ratele: "There are no black men before white society, the discourse of whiteness and the rule of white people" (1998, 63).

Despite these violent disruptions and erasures, other forms of understanding humanity persist. One of the most acknowledged, *Ubuntu*: "I am because we are", relates to interdependent social relationships, which imply both responsibilities and empathy (Ramose 1999). Another important difference is the way in which many Africans understand reality is the perceived interrelation between the natural and the supernatural, whereby the living and the dead coexist, thus challenging important notions of temporality (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata 2014).

The limitations of mainstream conceptions of gender, when applied to African realities, as identified by Amadiume (1987, 1997, 2000) and Oyěwùmí (1997, 2002, 2015), run parallel to Judith Butler's critique of the idea that an inherent link exists between gender and the sex of particular bodies. Butler

critiqued what she called "the heterosexual matrix" and insisted on the performativity of gender constructions, with the aim of opening up a space for "gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (1990, 180).

Butler's work is mostly focused on individual sexual identities, which is the main limitation for transposing it to the African context, where people's existence is profoundly relational. The point of Amadiume's and Oyěwùmí's critique is to see performativity in gender within social contexts, for instance in the shapes of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*—the title of Amadiume's first book (1987), published three years before Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Both Amadiume and Oyěwùmí have been subjected to some criticism. Lindsay (2023) revisits Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, questioning the generalisability of its ethnographic claims drawn from a single Igbo community, as well as its resistance to the queer nature of some of these practices. Achebe (2013) similarly notes contradictions in claiming genderlessness while describing gendered roles such as "male daughters." Oyěwùmí's argument that Yoruba society lacks gender hierarchy due to the absence of gendered pronouns has notably been challenged by Bakare-Yusuf (2003), who cautions against equating linguistic structure with social reality. However, both Amadiume and Oyěwùmí's works remain pivotal in the unsettlement of long sustained gender categories, particularly in Africa.

In this issue, we follow in their footsteps and enrich, with further examples from elsewhere in Africa (Ghana, Mozambique, Kenya, South Africa and Tanzania), forms of perceiving and living that upset Western ideas of gender. We intend to give exposure to different ways of understanding gender that better reflect African cosmologies and knowledge systems. This should allow us to more appropriately engage with the power imbalances that we hope to correct as feminists.

The origins of Western ideas of gender

Signe Arnfred, in line with Maria Mies (1986) and Silvia Federici (2004), reminds us that contemporary Western ideas of gender are rooted in early capitalism, which emerged in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries, along with

new lines of philosophical thinking, of which René Descartes (1596–1650) is a prime example. Descartes' maxim: *Cogito, ergo sum* – "I think, therefore I am" – talks about rationality and individuality. It is a thinking focused on individuals (not on social relationships) and on hierarchical dichotomies such as man/woman, mind/body, and reason/feeling (Arnfred 2022). Though organised mostly along patriarchal lines, the ideas put forward by Descartes and his contemporaries are recognised in Eurocentrist epistemologies as the thinking of Modernity and Enlightenment, which heralded the Scientific Revolution, including among Western feminists.

There are many indications that European pre-capitalist societies had complementary gender arrangements which were more balanced, and though, with clearly delineated male and female tasks, genders were mutually recognised and respected (Hennessy & Chrys 1997). However, with capitalism, reinforced by Christianity, patriarchy entered a new phase, uncontested by female power. Silvia Federici (2004) argues that the European witch hunts, which raged in the 16th and 17th centuries, were decisive for doing away with women's relative power along with women's specific knowledge as related to, for example, sexuality, procreation, and childbirth. In such a situation, power becomes exclusively male and, with European expansion, colonisation, and the slave trade, specifically white. These developments, in turn, were decisive for the emergence of capitalism as a world economic system that introduced the exploitation of nature, upsetting previous forms of co-existence with nature and beginning the contemporary crises of ecology and climate.

The "becoming feminist" Africa of the world

In his book *Brutalism*, Achille Mbembe (2024) claims that as a repercussion of this detached and extractive relationship with nature, the world has entered "the becoming Africa of the world." By this, he means that the exploration, erasure, and destitution brought upon Africa's peoples and nature by colonialism are being experienced worldwide. In this sense, African epistemologies are poised to offer relevant insights into how to tackle these new realities. This includes the project to pursue, with Oyěwùmí, the advancement of African epistemologies, and, as much as possible, autonomy from the Eurocentric foundations of current feminist concepts.

The contribution of African thinkers and others of African descent to epistemological debates has a long history, dating back to the anti-slavery abolitionist discourses, when the humanity of enslaved and freed people of African origin needed to be asserted. Often forgotten in the feminist canon, activists such as Sojourner Truth were contemporaries of the suffragettes. Their plight, as women and black, was relegated to the margins of white women's concerns, reinforcing a racial and epistemological hierarchy, even among feminists, epitomised by the apt quote, "Ain't I a Woman?", later immortalised in the title of a book by bell hooks (1987).

The condition of Black peoples was central to the reflections preceding liberation and post-independence struggles across Africa. These included debates on Blackness and belonging initiated by W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Their ideas inspired *Négritude*—a concept coined by Martinican Aimé Césaire (1947). It also inspired the pan-Africanist movement that permeated the liberation struggles.

This *Feminist Africa* issue rests in the belief that African feminist thinking provides the best framework for future making because it begins from a different conception of reality. In contrast to Western feminist thinking and even Mbembe's somewhat apocalyptic vision, African feminists are envisioning new radical emancipatory futures for the world.

Epistemological breaks

While some decolonial discussions have been intertwined with the Eurocentric epistemological canon, others have attempted a more radical break. Julius Nyerere (1968) developed a socialist doctrine based on the African principle of *Ujamaa* (familyhood), in which the self-reliance of the individual depends on collective engagement. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is recognised as the birth of a literary style that breaks away from the Eurocentric format, by embedding orality within the written word and breaking away with the 'proper' use of the English language. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) has called for decolonising literature and the sciences through African languages, arguing that language and knowledge are interconnected and that true mental decolonisation requires Africans to produce and consume knowledge in their

own tongues. So long as European languages remain hegemonic in academic production, their epistemic dominance will endure.

Academically, perhaps the most influential have been African historians who have advocated for the expansion of sources and diversification of methods for compiling the history of the African continent and its peoples, including pre-literate and pre-colonial periods. This has meant moving beyond European sources to include Arabic manuscripts, archaeological evidence, oral tradition, and linguistic data (Ki-Zerbo 1981).

Although women and their contributions have been part of this long journey toward defining African thought, they have not featured as much as they should in historical and academic discussion. In an important contribution, Sylvia Tamale (2020) discusses decolonising epistemologies and African feminism. She calls for unlearning the Eurocentric framework in which academia, politics, and activism are still entangled in Africa. To cite an example, she is critical of the idea of gender equality, which she sees as rooted in liberal individualism. Instead, she urges reconceptualising 'equality' through *Ubuntu* to foreground social justice, interdependence, and compassion.

Equality, as conceived and promoted through the development industry, has been equated to a continuity of colonialism (Rodríguez Castro 2021, Tamale 2020). It conceives reality on male terms, disregarding, downgrading, or making invisible all aspects of life which cannot be accounted for economically, including motherhood, but particularly carework. These aspects, as well as kinship, are essential in African relations and should be taken seriously when imagining new and better feminist futures. While some Western feminists, such as Mies (1986) and Federici (2004), have advanced important ideas about the invisibility of carework and the interconnectedness of production and reproduction in social and economic life, their perspectives continue to function within the dichotomic frame of male opposing female.

Taking concepts seriously

Taking concepts seriously means engaging critically with them. Just as there has been a call for the use of *Ubuntu*, there has also been a call for understanding its limitations. As Pumla Dineo Gqola's (2015) work on rape demonstrates, even in societies where *Ubuntu* is part of the ethos, public spaces and families can be deadly, marked by perverse silences devoid of empathy. As such, the concept should be properly contextualised within its lived and structural realities if its potential for transformation is to be realised (Hassim 2022).

Given the above, we understand African epistemologies to mean both forms of knowing and knowledge production prior to the encounter with European thought and interference, as well as current forms of contesting existing paradigms; that is, ways of imagining and aspiring Africa and its people and their relationship with current notions of gender. We understand that erasing the history the Eurocentric foundations of dominant notions of gender is impossible, but we aim to de-centre colonialism and its postcolonial continuity in the "development" project as the drivers of the narrative, and to privilege instead the discussions within and among Africans and people of African descent on the subject.

Trajectory for compiling the issue

The origins of this issue can be traced to the 2022 World Women's Congress held in Maputo. It was there that Signe Arnfred and I convened a panel to explore how to contextualise gender differently, from African perspectives. The panel convened contributions that focused on diverse African and diasporic geographies, including Angola, Mozambique, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Brazil. All panel participants were invited to contribute to a special issue on the theme. When the search for the ideal publication outlet took time and some original contributors became unavailable, the invitation was extended more broadly to other congress participants. It was through this extended engagement that Sandra Manuel joined the project. Through her, we also identified the right home for this collection: *Feminist Africa*. We feel this is the

space where our contributions most meaningfully belong, and where the questions we raise can be critically engaged.

The result is an issue that converges on the critical interrogation of gender as both a conceptual and a lived category in African contexts. While all but one of the features draw examples from Mozambique, this apparent bias may be excused because there is a dearth of feminist scholarship on Portuguese-speaking Africa. Moreover, this imbalance is offset by not only Janine Häbel's feature, based on fieldwork conducted in Tanzania; but also Serena Dankwa's standpoint, located in Ghana; and Nyanchama Okemwa's conversation, grounded in Kenya.

Signe Arnfred's contribution revisits long-standing tensions between so-called traditional practices and "modern" gender discourses, drawing from her early ethnographic experience in Mozambique. Her decolonial critique exposes how dominant Western gender paradigms are culturally partial and frequently blind to other forms (chiefly non-European) and ways of understanding gendered life and power. Sandra Manuel questions the depoliticisation of gender within the development industry, critiquing donor-driven frameworks and the academic constraints they produce. Her case study of Mozambique challenges the reduction of gender to a bureaucratic category and calls for theory rooted in African epistemologies, such as *Ubuntu*, motherism, seniority, or agency through sexuality and food (Arnfred 2007), and rituals and bodily practices (Nzegwu 2012).

Janine Häbel conducts a grounded analysis of breadwinner femininity among women in Northern Tanzania. Her work reveals how care, responsibility, and economic provision, usually coded masculine, are being redefined by women who navigate social adulthood on their own terms. Rather than resisting patriarchy through confrontation, these women recalibrate feminine respectability by inhabiting roles shaped by kinship and embeddedness.

My essay offers a critical reading of sustained Eurocentric gender theories, specifically Judith Butler's, and their limitations for explaining sustained gender roles and self-understanding in Africa. Using examples from Zambezia, in Mozambique, I argue for a relational understanding of gendered roles, one in which kinship and context – not sexuality, shape socially and personally "discordant" gender performativity. A similar point regarding

relationality is made by Emídio Gune, whose standpoint explores seniority as a social organising principle that precedes and sometimes displaces gender. Serena Dankwa's piece invites us to consider touch and intimacy as methodological provocations for queer, afro-feminist research. In both Dankwa's and Gune's expositions, the question is not only what gender is, but what else it might obscure.

The rich conversation with Nyanchama Okemwa honours Abagusii women from Southwestern Kenya as knowledge custodians, meaning epistemic anchors of hearth, womb, and land. In our collective book review, the issue editors engage critically with Minna Salami's *Sensuous Knowledge*, reflecting on the politics of feminist critique, epistemic responsibility, and knowledge authority. Sihle Mazibu's review of Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's *The Sex Lives of African Women* offers a personal journey that contemplates queerness from an African perspective; the focus is not on who one has sex with, but rather on not belonging and being at odds with social expectations. Mazibu's perspective on self-discovery, sensuality, resistance, and healing is very insightful.

Though coincidental, it is very telling that the two books reviewed were authored by two African feminist bloggers, one based in Africa and the other in the diaspora. This shows the multiple and creative ways African feminists produce impactful knowledge and challenge the epistemological status quo. Such creativity is visible also in forms of organising, where feminists are shunning the conventional institutional forms of producing knowledge for more unconventional and mindful forms of organising, like collectives which share and build knowledge together.

Beyond this issue

The issue has generated interest from various fronts within African feminist and gender studies milieux. Reviewers have contacted us about the possibility of submitting for this issue their own or their students' papers which interrogated several elements that resonated with our aim of (re)conceptualising gender in African contexts. Others asked whether we would cover the topic of gender backlash. This interest has prompted us to

consider the possibility of a second issue to address other layers of reconceptualising gender. These include a reflection on the backlash of feminism and its intersection with the resistance of white/Western feminists to integrating the contributions of other feminisms. This extended interest highlights the timeliness of a theme that has sparked important conversations about socio-cultural institutions and the status they accord to individuals, the clashes with universalising readings, and the role of gender as an organising principle and in feminist thought. The rich grounded work invites us all to re-imagine gender paradigms by expanding research and knowledge on locally rooted perspectives across more geographies in Africa.

References

Achebe, Chinua. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.

Achebe, Nwando. 2013. Twenty-Five Years of African Women Writing: African Women's and Gendered Worlds. *Journal of Women's History*. 25 (4): 275–287. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2013.0050

Amadiume, Ifi. 1987. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books.

Amadiume, Ifi. 1997. *Re-Inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*. London: Zed Books.

Amadiume, Ifi. 2000. *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism: African Women, Culture, Power and Democracy*. London: Zed Books.

Arnfred, Signe. 2007. "Sex, Food and Female Power: Discussion of Data Material from Northern Mozambique." *Sexualities* 10 (2): 141–58.

Arnfred, Signe. 2022. "Rethinking Feminism: From Critique of Capital to Decolonial Analysis." *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* 31 (1): 9–26.

Bakare-Yusuf, Bibi. 2003. "'Yoruba's Don't Do Gender': A Critical Review of Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses"*. African Identities, 1(1), 119–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/1472584032000127914

Baloyi, Lesiba and Molebogeng Makobe-Rabothata. 2014. "The African Conception of Death: A Cultural Implication." In *Toward Sustainable Development through Nurturing Diversity*, edited by L. T. B. Jackson, D. Meiring, F. J. R. Van de Vijver, E. S. Idemoudia, and W. K. Gabrenya Jr.: Proceedings from the 21st International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology. https://doi.org/10.4087/FRDW2511.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge.

Césaire, Aimé. 1947. *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*. Paris: Bordas.

Federici, Silvia. 2004. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia.

Gqola, Pumla. 2015. *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. Johannesburg: M. F. Books.

Hassim, Shireen. 2022. *Genealogies of Feminism in Africa*. Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivrI1N3oYVw

Hennessy, Rosemary, and Chrys Ingraham, eds. 1997. *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

hooks, bell. 1987. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto Press.

Ki-Zerbo, Joseph. 1981. *UNESCO General History of Africa, Vol. 1: Methodology and African Prehistory*. Paris: UNESCO.

Mbembe, Achille. 2024. *Brutalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mies, Maria. 1986. *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. London: Zed Books.

Nyerere, Julius. 1968. *Ujamaa – Essays on Socialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nzegwu, Nkiru Uwechia. 2012. *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*. State University of New York Press.

Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ́. 1997. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ́. 2002. "Conceptualising Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies." *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 2 (1).

Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ́. 2015. *What Gender Is Motherhood? Changing Yoruba Ideals of Power, Procreation and Identity in the Age of Modernity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ramose, Mogobe B. 1999. "The Philosophy of Ubuntu and Ubuntu as a Philosophy." In *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, edited by Mogobe B. Ramose, 1–18. Harare: Mond Books.

Ratele Kopano. 1998. "The End of the Black Man." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, *37*, 60–64. https://doi.org/10.2307/4066175

Rodríguez Castro, Laura. 2021. *Decolonial Feminisms, Power and Place: Sentipensando with Rural Women in Colombia*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59440-4.

Tamale, Sylvia. 2020. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Ottawa: Daraja Press.

wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Woodbridge: James Currey.