"Here, I Am His Mother": Unqueering Gender Relations and Identities through African Kinship Etymologies

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss gender with a focus on kinship, language and relationality. Based on fieldwork conducted in Zambezia, Mozambique, I argue that concepts such as gender fluidity and performativity, which were developed by Judith Butler and which remain hegemonic in feminist and queer theory, are inadequate for making sense of non-sexual, non-queer, heteronormative socialities. Building on the work of Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, this article critiques the continued marginalisation of the frameworks these authors have advanced, which help make better sense of gender relations beyond sex and sexuality.

Drawing on archival and ethnographic data on the cases of male 'wives' of Karanga kings and a female *mwene* (ruler) who inherited a putative male position, the paper showcases apparently gendered naming that is not tied to sex or identity but to relational roles within kinship structures, elucidated through the terminology used to name the social roles. These examples illustrate gender fluidity understood differently, allowing for the coexistence of social and biological genders that shift according to social, political and kinship relations.

Rather than queering gender, these cases showcase how gender can exist through a multitude of interactions, attributions and understandings other than binary opposition or sexual identity. This critique upsets hegemonic feminist theoretical frames and underscores the emancipatory possibilities that a deeper engagement with African kinship and relational terminologies can provide for understanding and theorising about gender relations on the continent.

Keywords: Gender, kinship, identities, relationality, (un)queering

Male mother – issues of language and relationality

A few years ago, I was invited to attend one of my father's younger brothers' daughter's 'presentation' ceremony. This was a ceremony to officially present her live-in boyfriend to the family. The event was only a formality, because the couple had already been living together and were known to each other's siblings and parents. Our family represents a good example of the coexistence of multiple kinship regimes. The impending union added to that multiplicity.

Whereas in the boyfriend's family *lovolo* (bride wealth) was practiced, in ours it is not. My father, as the eldest male, stood in for my sister-cousin's father. Her status as my sister derives from the fact that her father is socially my father too, and his children, my siblings. Her boyfriend's family was represented by an uncle and his sister. As my father's eldest child and daughter, I stood in as my cousin's eldest sister. My paternal grandmother and the wife of another of my paternal uncles, who understood the tradition and rituals of *lovolo*, were also present but sitting on the margins. My cousin, her boyfriend, her parents and siblings were not allowed in the "negotiations/introductions" room at this point.

Early in the conversation, my father enquired what the tradition was in the other family, given that the two families had different traditions. My cousin's boyfriend's uncle began his response by presenting those in his party, so that we would no longer be strangers to one another. Of himself, he said: "Here, I am his mother."

I was immediately struck by this declaration. The conversation was held in Portuguese, in which he was fluent. This was not a slip of the tongue. The uncle could have said that, as the mother's brother, he was standing in for her, but instead he referred to himself as 'the mother'. This example remains, in my mind, one of the best examples of relational gender identities, and one which I have learnt pertains to other regions in Africa. In this sense, both men and women can and do assume gender roles that are situational and relational. In the interaction/relation, other factors besides gender coexist and are equally

important. In this case, he was a man (by sex), and he was also his sister (the relationship with another gender).

A kinship relationality whereby individuals of the same generation are ascribed the same title, as with my father's brothers being my 'fathers,' and their children my siblings in the same manner as those born of my parents, has long been known and theorised in Anthropology (e.g., Malinowski 1930; Peletz 1995). What has been less theorised is how they depart from strict gender lines, where male kinship relations apply solely to other males and vice versa.

Relational gender, where a kinship title is attributed irrespective of the person's sex, occurs in many African contexts. Within the Sesotho kinship system, a mother's brother is called *malome*, which literally means 'male mother'. Ma- is the prefix, meaning 'mother,' to which is added the suffix -dúme, which denotes masculinity. A father's sister, on the other hand, is called *rakgadi*, literally 'female father', made up of the prefix ra-, meaning 'father', and the suffix -kádí, which indicates femininity. However, a female father can be given the denomination of a paternal uncle, i.e., *rangwane*, in order to perform specific relational duties, where a male *rangwane* is not available. There are also distinguishing terms for other relations, such as the spouses of a *malome* and a *rakgadi*. *Mmamalome* is the term used for the wife of the 'male mother.' It should be noted that mma- is the prefix for mother (Molalapata 2004).

Malume also signifies male mother among the Ndebele, and it is the only kinship term derived from feminine forms. However, the terms for daughter (*ndoda-kazi* or man-female), paternal aunt (*baba-kazi* or father-female), grandaunt (*baba-mkhulu-kazi* or father-big-female) and the maternal uncle's wife (*ma-lume-kazi* or mother-male-female) are derived from masculine forms (Ndlovu 2023). The same terms also apply to equivalent siblings and so-called parallel and cross cousins.

In Swahili, there are examples of the same terminology being used by people of different genders. *Shemeji* (sibling-in-law) is used when referring to a relation of the opposite sex through marriage. For example, a woman's husband's brother is her *shemeji*, because she is a woman, and the sibling-in-law relation is of the opposite sex. Likewise, a man's wife's sister is his *shemeji*, because he is a man and his wife's sister is of the opposite sex (Kraska-Szlenk

2018). In this case, it is the relationship rather than the gender that prevails in the denomination, while still indicating opposing gender relations.

My cousin's boyfriend's presentation ritual was one of the interactions during which I understood more deeply that the dominant ideas about gender and gender relations to which I had been exposed in scholarship did not match my experience with my immediate kinship relations. My trial lecture, part of my PhD defense, focused on epistemic injustices, specifically the failure of dominant feminist and anthropological scholarship to incorporate groundbreaking contributions by African feminists Ifi Amaiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí. In my presentation at the World Women's Conference, held in Maputo, from which this paper evolved, I focused specifically on the resistance of dominant feminist scholarship to learning from African conceptualisations of gender.

In that presentation, I argued that this resistance was due in part to authors such as Judith Butler and their influence in challenging the binarity of gender and the persistent coupling of sex and gender. Butler's ideas influenced queer studies, but gained some traction also among African feminist scholars, on issues regarding power, sexuality, bodily autonomy, and resistance. Nevertheless, I argue, Butler's popular contribution regarding gender fluidity and performativity, while groundbreaking, has shown limitations in respect of non-sexual, non-queer, heteronormative relationships in African contexts, such as the ones described above. While Sylvia Tamale (2011) has called for the domestication of Butler's key conceptual contributions due to their limited applicability, I believe that there should be a complete overhaul and introduction of altogether new concepts that fit the mold.

To be fair, Butler has been criticised for undermining "concepts of selfhood, agency, and autonomy" and challenged on whether the theory of performativity could properly "explain not only the constitution of the self but also the resistance that this very self is capable of in the face of power/discourse regimes" (Benhabib et al. in Vasterling 1999, 17). Discourse in Butler, as with other poststructuralists, is where power expresses itself and thereby concretises hierarchical reality. Butler does claim, however, that this is not to imply linguistic determinism (Vasterling 1999). Ironically, Bakare-Yusuf also levels a similar critique against Oyěwùmí, in what she says was an overreliance on

language to illustrate social dynamics. While linguistic determinism should be avoided, I align myself with Oyěwùmí's reliance on language to challenge narratives of gendered power. The difference is that while Butler focuses on discourse, Oyěwùmí concentrates on social categories and the politics of translation.

Conventional feminist genealogies place Butler at the forefront of opening possibilities for understanding gender decoupled from sex, through the idea of fluid gender (Butler 1990), while normalising queer gender expressions and identities by introducing the concept of gender performativity (Butler 1990; 2004). However, Nigerian feminists Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997) offered, about the same time as Butler (1988; 1990; 1993), alternatives that challenge biological determinism without being subversive to the heteronorm. In fact, one critique of Amadiume's work has been that it is politically limited, in that it does not open any possibilities beyond heteronormativity. Furthermore, while "the idea of the female husband [bewildered] biological determinism," it did so within a patriarchal framework and hierarchical gendered institutions (Hoppe 2016, 499).

Some African scholars continue to praise the opportunities that arise "when African scholars centre local histories, languages, and kinship ties to provide contextualised understandings of sex and gender", including challenging "conservative attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ communities" (Magadla et al. 2021, 517). Such praises are offset by the fact that Amadiume's desexualised view of these same sex marriages, which shows them reproducing heteronormative social obligations and devoid of sexual acts and desire, obscures gendered subjectivities or even (dis)misses queer subjectivities (Lindsay 2017). Oyěwùmí, on the other hand, has been criticised, among other things, for attempting to extricate European influence from African contemporary reality (Bakare-Yusuf 2003). Nevertheless, both Amaidume and Oyěwùmí are considered, within African feminist and decolonial scholarship, as pioneers in challenging Eurocentric understandings of gender.

Bearing all this in mind, in this paper I attempt to bridge persistent understandings of gender in African contexts, drawing on my archival and ethnographic work in Zambezia, Mozambique. By persistence I mean the stability of ideas of gendered relations taken from historical and current

examples of individuals occupying what may present as dissonant social gender roles within currently hegemonic gender frameworks. For this task I use two examples: Pabiou-Duchamp's description of male wives of the Karanga King, and a female Mwene from my own field research. The first example relates to Portuguese men who were considered wives of the king, in early interactions between the African Maravi polity and Portuguese settlers. In the second example I present the case of a female who inherited her father's rulership, which is terminologically male. In both cases, the individuals' gender identities are not dissonant from their attributed sex. However, there is an apparent dissonance in attributed social gender, without it contradicting their identity. In this sense, there is coexistence of the individual's sex, personal gender and socially attributed gender. The apparent dissonance arises only if conceptualised within a Eurocentric framework of understanding gender. Therefore, I bring these cases into discussions around kinship, language and translation, by virtue of which social categories have been rendered gendered when understood within the Eurocentric logic but not necessarily so in the original African context.

The two cases above find meaning in kinship relations and how gender is constituted within them. In many African societies, males perform the duties or take the place of females to whom they are related, and vice versa. In doing so, the sociality of their gender is relational to the individual members of their kin and changes according to the relations with whom they interact. In this case, gender interchangeability relates not to identity, but to these relationships. At the same time, performativity is not expressed in acting according to the norms attributed to the female or male genders, but rather to those expected of specific roles in relationships. Hence, both men and women can and do transition relationally from putative male to female roles at any given time in their lives. These roles are not necessarily related to sexual relations or reproduction. Understanding what makes them gendered and what people understand their roles to be, is what can help explain what is expected of males and females in that society and the eventual hierarchies that ensue. This understanding can provide the bridge between social roles and individual subjectivities that is missing in Amadiume's work. It can also reframe and extend the understanding of Butler's perspective on fluidity and performativity beyond the individual and identity.

A persistence of epistemological injustice?

Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987) was published one year prior to Butler's *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988) and three years before *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990). It gained traction and became influential in African(ist) Gender and Feminist Studies, particularly for its critique of Eurocentric conceptions of gender. However, some of the issues that *Gender Trouble* also discusses have not become associated with Amadiume's influence. Female husbands, as described by Amadiume, were wealthy women in pre-colonial Igbo tradition who took wives and set up their own lineage. Many of them were women who had inherited their father's wealth and enjoyed the prestige usually passed on to male heirs. As such, women could be both husbands and sons, meaning that those social functions were not dependent on the gender of their holder. While Amadiume purposefully averts the discussion of same sex relationships within these marital unions, Serena Dankwa showcases how gender emerges in same sex desires in her book *Knowing Women* (2021). In it, she exemplifies how, among women in southern Ghana who engage in same-sex relations, gender relates to age, seniority and even wealth, but not sex (the biology or the act).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler questions the category 'woman', 'the masculine' and 'the feminine'. Butler argues that gender is a reinforced and repeated social performance rather than the expression of a prior reality, and that it is the very act of performing gender that constitutes who we are. Identity itself is an illusion retroactively created by our performances. Performativity is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality. Therefore, Butler's thought is from the onset a critique of heteronormativity. Dankwa addresses the category of 'woman' in her book, as well as the issue of masculine and feminine when discussing women identified as *ɔbaa barima* or "manly women" (2021, 45, 131). She also acknowledges that both Butler and Oyěwùmí denounce the acritical use of "woman" as a "heteropatriarchal construction" (Butler) and "an essentializing 'western' invention" (Oyěwùmí) (Dankwa 2021, 43).

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) further argues that theories of gender need to return to the most material dimension of sex and sexuality: the body. Butler offers a brilliant reworking of the body, examining how the power of heterosexual hegemony forms the "matter" of bodies, sex, and gender. Butler

argues that power operates to constrain sex from the onset, delimiting what counts as a viable sex. The very conception of reality is determined by language, so it is ultimately impossible to think or articulate sex without imposing linguistic norms. Oyěwùmí (1997) is a pioneer in critiquing the commingling logic focused on the body, by which sex, conflated with gender, functioned as the main source of hierarchy and oppression. Using the example of precolonial Yorùbá society in southwestern Nigeria, she argued that the main organisational principle was seniority relative to age. She argued this point by demonstrating that social categories lacked gender distinction. Conversely, age was marked relationally in terms of a person's position in relation to siblings, marital status, parenthood or other social status that would confer enhanced social standing, none of which was dependent on maleness. Dankwa goes further in her critique of the conflation of the triad body, sex and gender. In the context of women's same sex desires that she researched, "the antagonism between sex and gender – specifically between the female body and masculine gender presentations – which so potently constitutes notions of female masculinity in the Euro-American context, loses some of its conceptual power" (Dankwa 2021, 168). She contends that, while *ɔbaa barima* does not in itself do away with gender, it does present an idea of masculinity unrelated to a specific body. More importantly, "gender appears as derived from but not predicated on sex" (Dankwa 2021, 168).

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler (2004) follows up with a reflection on the norms that govern gender and sexuality and how they relate to constrain the subjectivity of a person. This book reconsiders Butler's earlier view on gender performativity from *Gender Trouble* and provides a critique of gender norms as situated within the framework of human persistence and survival. This means that to "do" one's gender in certain ways sometimes implies "undoing" dominant notions of personhood. In the context of African relational personhood, at least in the cases that Amadiume, Oyěwùmí and Dankwa showcase, doing gender does not seem to require undoing one's personhood.

What all Butler's works have in common is a focus on the discursive formation of subjectivation, subject positions, and hence identity. Butler, as with Amadiume and Oyěwùmí, is interested in social categories, structures and relations. Unlike her African feminist counterparts, who focus more on historical and social processes, Butler focuses on discursive formations. In *Male*

Daughters, Female Husbands, Amadiume offers examples of how, in precolonial Igbo society, sex and gender did not necessarily coincide. Examining the structures that enabled women to achieve power, she shows that roles were neither rigidly masculine nor feminine. Economic changes in colonial times undermined women's status and reduced their political role. Furthermore, the patriarchal tendencies that stubbornly conflate notions of womanhood with wifehood and motherhood create particular notions of and limits to female autonomy. These notions and limits were introduced by colonialism and persist, to the detriment of women. Amadiume was particularly critical of feminists (mostly Western) who, when relating to African women, projected gender as had been imagined/created by colonialism and have endured in post-colonial settings in essentialised and universalising ways.

Oyěwùmí specifically critiques the equation of motherhood to wifehood, and the heteronormative linking of womanhood to the patriarchal and gendered nuclear family. In *What Gender is Motherhood*?, Oyěwùmí (2016) argues that in most cultures, motherhood is defined in its relationship to progeny, not as a sexual relationship to a man. Within the feminist literature, motherhood, which in many societies constitutes the dominant identity of women, is subsumed under wifehood. Because woman is a synonym for wife, procreation and lactation are usually presented in the literature as part of the sexual division of labour. Marital coupling is thus constituted as the base of societal division of labour. When considering fluid gender social categories, such as female husbands, and non-heteronormative marital arrangements, motherhood is de-linked from the marital union and as such, from the union to a man. Moreover, the person who gives birth is not always socially female. Likewise, as with the example shown above, persons who are socially mothers need neither to have given birth to their children nor to be biologically female.

The coloniality of Butler's gender frame

Maria Lugones (2007) argues, as have other feminists writing against the grain of Eurocentric feminism--including Oyěwùmí, that current binary constructs of gender are the result of European hierarchies imposed by the colonial regime on the colonised, disrupting indigenous people's own understandings of social relations. Lugones calls this "the modern/colonial gender system" (Lugones

2007, 190), which speaks to the intertwined nature of modernity and coloniality, and the stubborn continuity of coloniality in postcolonial realities. Lugones is particularly interested in the continuity of epistemological injustice and the resistance of dominant frameworks to being undone. While her critique is situated in the Latin American context, it helps frame the problem faced by African feminist thinkers and their inability to shape core assumptions about gender, sex, and sexuality.

At the same time, several African gender and feminist scholars have made reference to Butler's work (e.g., Tamale 2011; Dankwa 2021; Bennett 2010; Akurugu 2021; Parkes et al. 2013; Osório and Macuácua 2013; Osório and Cruz e Silva 2008), though few have managed to engage meaningfully with its concepts and framework. Butler's work has appealed to African feminists because of what they see as parallels between its ideas and their own, particularly concerning performativity, the fluidity of gender and the need to decouple gender from sex. Attempts to use Butler's conceptual framework have however shown a need to domesticate it to the African reality, as proposed by Sylvia Tamale. Such domestication has proved inadequate, especially when applied to non-queer realities as they relate to power, violence, discourse, body, sex and gender. Even when studying queer realities, as Serena Dankwa does, Butler's framework remains undetachable from its Eurocentric frame. While the parallels of performativity and fluidity are useful for Dankwa to make sense of and navigate non-normative behaviour, she finds that Butler, and what she calls the North Atlantic frame, is still too centred on individuals and sexual/gender identities.

While not naming Butler specifically, Oyěwùmí criticises Western feminism's inability to detach sex from gender. This is the case even for Butler, despite their own critical contribution. Amadiume, Oyěwùmí and Dankwa's works exemplify more clearly how gender and sex are detached, and even more significantly how seniority takes precedence over gender in Western Africa, including in same-sex desires. More importantly, relationality plays a central role in African sociality, whether gendered or otherwise. The focus on individual identities, even when acknowledging fluidity, ignores relationality.

On the issue of discourse and language, criticism directed at Butler focused on linguistic determinism which precludes agency. According to

Vasterling, Butler provides a defense by drawing attention to the conception, in *Gender Trouble* and *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), "of language as a process of reiteration carried forward by the (re)citations of subjects" (1999, 27). Reiteration, Vasterling contends, is where Butler argues that agency is made possible and where discourse and meaning can be stabilised but also destabilised. The issue with language and discourse in the African context is that the translated reiterations have perturbed the intended meaning in relation to the linguistic structure and social reality within which social terms and categories arose. In the process, the stabilising, and more importantly destabilising (i.e., emancipatory) possibilities are iterated outside the sociolinguistic logic of the individuals' utterances. This creates an unrecognised disconnect between discourse and sociality, on the one hand, and an undue influence of distorted discourse over sociality, on the other. Depending on the tongue/language (and the discourse therein) the practices and norms that emerge and can be seen are not reconcilable.

More importantly, this irreconcilability evinces existing conceptual limitations; even those seemingly groundbreaking. It also speaks to conceptual non-universality. Butler's statement that "no one approach to defining, or understanding, gender reigns" (2024, 5) fails to acknowledge the persistent influence of Western feminist epistemologies in non-analogous contexts, even when more appropriate theoretical and conceptual alternatives exist from which to build. Oyěwùmí makes this clear in her 2024 lecture entitled, "Who Is Not Afraid of Gender?", a critique of Butler's 2022 keynote, "Who's Afraid of Gender?". In it, she particularly takes exception to Butler's conflation of African feminists' criticism of Western conceptualisations of gender with conservative, religious, and political anti-gender backlash. For Oyěwùmí, Butler shows a continued blindness to the nefarious effects of dominant gender concepts circulating in feminist spaces, despite decades of criticism levelled by postcolonial scholarship. In her words, "Butler appears to underestimate the significance of the postcolonial critique of gender and feminism" (Oyěwùmí 2024 min. 5:30).

Male 'wives' – fluidity in history and the archives

While doing research for my PhD on the memory of women of authority in Zambezia, Mozambique, someone suggested that I read an article that discussed the male 'wives' of the Karanga. Although I was familiar with the Yoruba and Igbo cases that challenged hegemonic concepts of gender (and womanhood), I was ignorant about equivalent instances in my own country that so manifestly destabilised Eurocentric conceptions of gender. Indeed, there is a wealth of literature about this region of the country that is critical of the archive and the misinterpreted narratives that this repository has created about African social and political organisation, as well as gender relations (Mudenge 1988; Rodrigues 2017; 2013). Most of these, however, pertain to the lack of recognition of the prominent political roles women had.

The Karanga were rulers of the Shona Karanga kingdoms to the south of the Zambezi River in what is now Mozambique and Zimbabwe. According to Florence Pabiou-Duchamp (2005), certain influential Portuguese men, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, were considered wives of these rulers. Pabiou-Duchamp expresses doubts regarding whether the correct term for these Portuguese men should be 'wife' or 'woman.' In Portuguese, wife can distinctively be called "esposa" (female spouse) or "mulher" which means both woman and wife. This example reinforces Oyěwùmí's contention that in the Western imagination, the most important link between a man and a woman is spousal, and by extension sexual and/or reproductive. Or, as Pabiou-Duchamp put it, historians, "informed by their masculine vision of royalty where the queens are above all wives, they didn't understand the role of the women, and by extension of these Portuguese [men], 'wives of kings'"

In reality, "big women" (*grandes mulheres*), to whom these Portuguese men were equated, were a feature of these kingdoms. As African females, they were assumed, by the European chroniclers of the time, to be "mere" spouses and subordinate to the male king. It was unfathomable to imagine a European male under an equivalent subordination. In reality, these "big women," and by extension the Portuguese male "wives," played important political roles and were sovereigns of their own territories that surrounded the kingdom. They also took part in the naming and enthronement of new kings. The most important "big women" in the Mutapa court were Mazvarira and Nehanda who,

according to the origin myth of the kingdom, were the king's sisters (or female relatives) (Mudenge 1988; Pabiou-Duchamp 2005).

The case of the Karanga wives showcases examples beyond Nigeria and Ghana where gender and sex are unproblematically extricated from one another. It also reinforces the continued relevance of Amadiume's and Oyěwùmí's gender frames for African contexts. Moreover, it exemplifies the continued misunderstandings of the historical roles of women in African societies, as well as the constraints that such misunderstandings create for the conceptualisation of gender in contemporary Africa. Naturally, the role of colonisation in transforming social and gender relations, norms and regimes cannot be underestimated. However, as I show in my second example, precolonial logics coexist with colonial influenced postcolonial realities.

Female *mwene* – the genderlessness in male and female social categories

During the same PhD related fieldwork, I was introduced to a woman who holds the position of *mwene*, inherited from her father. I did not intend to have her as a participant in my study, as I was more interested in memories of historic female figures and not contemporary authoritative women. I mistakenly assumed that she was a product of postcolonial and developmental influences, where female leadership was making strides, even within customary roles. Her leadership position is part of the restructuring and harmonisation of traditional leaderships that the Portuguese colonial state introduced at the end of the nineteenth century. At the top of the hierarchy was the *Régulo* (chief/regent) or *Chefe de Circunscrição* (circumscription chief). Although implemented unevenly throughout the territory, the renamed positions aimed to mimic the indigenous structures that existed prior to the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, which demanded an effective occupation over the territories for the colonial powers to continue to lay claim to them (Rocha et al. 1983). After an initial period of rejection after independence, the indigenous leadership structures were largely replicated by the postcolonial state, albeit with new names.

What I found was that despite the changes imposed by the colonial and postcolonial regimes, the logic of indigenous tenets, including the relevance of people of certain sexes occupying certain social and political positions, seemed unchanged. The *mwene* in the area where I conducted my work was the leadership category immediately below the *Régulo*. In this area, there had been five *mwene* to one Régulo. The people of the area are Chuabo speakers and are linguistically affinate with the Makhuwa peoples to the north. Among the Makhuwa, the *mwene* is the clan leader. There is a female co-leader, the *piya-mwene* (woman leader). While etymologically the two terms may have a similar origin, with colonial population resettlements and social reorganising, the Zambezian *mwene* has become more of a village leader who rules over families not necessarily related to each other. The role is traditionally male, especially after the Portuguese interference with customary leadership structures, and the female counterpart seemed to have disappeared.

While in Portuguese she is called queen (*rainha*), which is a gendered term, in her mother tongue she is called *mwene*. I had assumed that this was also a gendered term, based on my knowledge of the Makhuwa etymology. The person who introduced her to me, a man and also a customary leader below her rank, showed due deference. This deference related to lineage and not age, as he was older than she. He was the one who told me: "in Portuguese she is *rainha*, but in reality, she is my *mwene*". *Rainha* is a generic (and gendered) term that does not specify where she is placed in the hierarchy of rulership. The term *mwene*, specified her rank, and it seemed to be applicable irrespective of the sex of the bearer. In time I learned that even, and especially, at the level of what the Portuguese called *Régulo*, women had been rulers. The colonial regime masculinised all customary positions, because they needed literate leaders to collect taxes. Women were systematically sidelined. The *régulo* under whom this *mwene's* father served was the son of a man who had taken over (to some, usurped) the rulership of his mother-in-law.

Similar to the case of the male-wives of the Karanga, the social gender (*mwene*, which can be presumed male in the absence of the feminising *piya*) is independent from both sex and individual gender identity. A female occupies a position that terminologically is understood to be male (whereas above, males occupied positions terminologically understood as female). Elsewhere, in Zambia, the Nyoka people claim to descend from a female *mwene*. Over time

this position was usurped by men, and the term for the position came to be understood as male (Binsbergen 1992). The attribution of gender over time to previously ungendered social categories has been discussed at length, including by Oyěwùmí. She gives as an example the erroneous English translation from Yoruba of the terms husband and wife: "Yoruba names are not gender-specific; neither are *oko* and *aya* - two categories translated as the English husband and wife" (Oyěwùmí 1997, 28). From this, it is fundamental that issues of translation bias and historical change in meaning be taken seriously, in order to understand the possibilities of realities that present in practice but are contradicted by language and discourse.

Gender and Queer(less)ness in Africa: Fluidity, performativity, and identity

My argument does not presume that extricating (biological) sex when conceptualising gender in the African context is unrelated to sexuality. Rather, it intends to exemplify how understanding gender can go beyond its relation to sex and sexuality. Murray and Roscoe's "Boy Wives, Female Husbands" (1998) are an early mapping of the gender non-conforming expressions in different African societies. As with Ifi Amadiume's critic, Lisa Lindsay, Murray and Roscoe think that women-to-women marriages among the Igbo included a sexual component. They even accuse Amadiume of being homophobic for dismissing the possibility. It is important to stress that Amadiume's focus was women's social, economic and political role and positioning. After all, the women of whom she wrote were wealthy people who took wives and created their own lineages. Their wives' children—from men who were not their husbands and therefore had no "claim" over them—became the female husband's children and heirs. Additionally, there has been an excess in fetichisation of African (and black) women's bodies and sexualities (Seck 2013; Collins 2004; Musingafi and Mokhothu 2023; Arnfred 2004). More fundamentally, the insistence that Amadiume should have acknowledged the possibility of a sexual component in her social analysis suggests an inability to decouple sex, gender and sexuality, a fundamental limitation of the Eurocentric frame.

An important feminist exercise is the highlighting of gender regimes that perpetuate gender inequalities. Patriarchy and heteronormativity have been critical concepts in the hegemonic feminist exercise. Patriarchy understood here as a "male-centered, male-identified, male-dominated social structure" (Becker 1999, 24). And heteronormativity understood following Butler as the hetero-sexual matrix in which gender identities that "[do] not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender" (Butler 1990, 24) are deviant. However, these concepts seem inadequate to centre the issues of interest to feminists in non-male-centered contexts, such as matrilineal societies, as argued by Christine Saidi (2010) and Signe Arnfred (2011); generation-centered societies, as argued by Oyěwùmí (1997); or even masculinities without men, as showcased by Dankwa (2021). They are also insufficient to analyse the social, historical and political realities such as pertain to the "male wives" of the Karanga and the female *mwene* who exist without challenging presumed patriarchal and heteronormative matrices.

By centring women's universal subjugation, the anti-patriarchal framework has been unable to adequately acknowledge the instances in which gender regimes can be non-male-centered and still produce inequalities that are worth addressing. Indeed, it may even fail to adequately address the very real subjugation and discrimination that many women do face in African societies. For example, it has failed to acknowledge that the subjugation of certain women (usually younger) by other women (usually older) may relate to the hierarchy of seniority over that of gender.

In the same vein, the anti-heteronormative framework is presumed to be counter-hegemonic. It fails to recognise the instances in which non-heteronormativity has become hegemonic, because despite its conceptual strides it has failed to delink gender from sex, and more importantly from sexuality. The African experience and history offer ample opportunities to expand beyond the limitations of the dominant frameworks. While different gender regimes coexist, patriarchal and heteronormative regimes are informed and cross-pollinated by both male and non-male-centered, and non-heteronormative logics. It is within these spaces of crosspollination that opportunities for learning and disrupting inequities reside.

Conclusion

The cases presented in this article from my fieldwork, of male 'wives' in the Karanga royal court and a female *mwene* assuming a presumed traditionally male role, reveal social realities that dominant feminist and queer theoretical frameworks are limited to help understand. While these frameworks, particularly those developed by Judith Butler, have been considered groundbreaking for their contributions in destabilising the sex/gender binary, they remain anchored in a Eurocentric epistemic logic. This logic assumes gender as a site of personal identity and performative resistance, generally tied to sexuality. When confronted with African socialities, even in queer contexts and relations, it becomes evident how in this frame, the sex/gender binary continues to be entangled and undissociated from sexuality.

Authors such as Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí have long offered powerful conceptual alternatives, grounded in African kinship structures, linguistic epistemologies, and social organisation. Yet their work continues to be read as local material with limited ability to be expanded. Even when Butler herself gestures toward the lack of universality in conceptualising gender, the dominant feminist frameworks continue to be used as universal frames. Despite the vast work produced by non-hegemonic feminists, these dominant frames continuously fail to incorporate alternatives to gender as a central organisational factor, such as age, wealth, seniority or relationality. Butler's recent work, which has been criticised by Oyěwùmí, mischaracterises African feminist critiques as being aligned with conservative, anti-gender ideologies. This exemplifies the continued epistemic resistance of hegemonic feminism to engaging meaningfully with African feminist contributions.

By tracing gender through kinship and relationality I have attempted to unearth a concept of gender that is neither fixed nor transgressive. Moreover, the discussion of language and discourse in this article highlights both the limits and possibilities that they offer for conceptualising gender in African contexts. Discourse has been a central analytical category in poststructuralist theory, particularly in Butler's work. It has, however, been criticised for implied linguistic determinism and constrained agency. Oyěwùmí has been criticised similarly for relying excessively on language to the detriment of lived realities. I find that both language and discourse are relevant because they provide us

with important information about practices and norms. Nevertheless, they need to be filtered for translation bias in order to articulate the relevant norms and help bring out the transformative possibilities to current gender inequities.

Notes

[i] Butler published this keynote lecture in 2024.

[ii] Translated from the original French: Informés par leur vision masculine de la royauté où les reines sont avant tout des épouses, ils ne comprennent pas le rôle des femmes, et par extension, celui de ces Portugais, "femmes des rois".

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