Putting Gender Where It Belongs: Reimagining Social Organisation and Categories from Mozambique

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Introduction

Reflecting on her experience in Yorubaland, Oyěwùmí (1998) makes the case that "Yorubas don't do gender." According to Oyěwùmí, seniority is the organising principle and category that Yorubas privilege in their everydayness, not gender. Bakare raises two problems regarding Oyěwùmí's claim: the first is "the problem of essentialism and authenticism," and the second, the need to "address African local knowledge in the plural" (Bakare-Yussuf 2004, 66 and 75).

Essentialism and authenticism fail to understand social organisation as a nuanced construction that can arise from traits of distinct walks of life and cultures. Therefore, it seems necessary to avoid oversimplification while addressing local knowledge in plural. One way to pursue this is by examining what occurred when seniority, as a privileged category, was approached by gender as a discourse, projected through discursive practices that emerged under the wave of colonialism.

Notwithstanding Bakare's critiques of seniority, it emerges as a productive concept to the extent that even gender might be theorised under seniority. Based on this understanding, gender can be addressed as belonging to contexts where seniority is accorded through sex and granted to males. Therefore, this is where it might be adopted in a meaningful manner while leaving room for other organising principles and categories. In the remaining sections of this piece, I resort to ethnographic and historical accounts to make the case for seniority through mastered experience as a social organising principle.

Relative seniority in everyday life in southern Mozambique

In their everyday lives, people navigate various social spheres, such as family and domestic matters, sex and reproduction, friendships, relationships with neighbours, and their workplaces or places of worship, among others, that vary based on individual paths. Each of these spaces demands specific social expertise, typically possessed by those who are experienced in each area. This situational structure means that seniority is never generic—it is always context-bound, shaped by the domain of expertise.

What qualifies someone as a senior in these spheres is not age alone but experience recognised by others. Social expertise is mastered by seniors who have been granted that position due to their accumulated experience and respectful behaviour. Seniors are responsible for introducing the neophytes in each social sphere while monitoring them to determine whether they qualify to become seniors themselves. This is a process similar to what Pina-Cabral labels the entry into personhood.

> The entry into personhood, however, is a staged process that requires us to be in sociality with other humans who have already been called into personhood (...) And in order to be a person, we have to be called into personhood by other persons; not only other but various others (Pina-Cabral 2017, 103–4).

This recognition parallels Pina-Cabral's concept of personhood as something socially conferred rather than individually possessed. One attains seniority through the approval of the existing seniors once one has demonstrated expertise in a particular social sphere. Throughout life, expertise may overlap across various social spheres, causing people to be senior in some spheres but not others, a concept we can refer to as relative seniority.

Seniority is not fixed to one domain—individuals may accumulate status across spheres, creating layered hierarchies. One reaches senior status in a particular matter and will maintain that quality as long as one continues to be an inspiring and respected person, so much so that even when one becomes elderly [*Madala*], one remains a resourceful individual in positions of seniority.

However, this status is not permanent. As people age, their ability to act as seniors may shift, depending on physical and social capacity. And they will

stop acting as seniors when they are no longer socially fit to make meaningful decisions, once they become too old [*Sswikoxana*].

Vavakulu and their juniors: Seniority through mastered experience

Mkulu (*vavakulu*, pl.) refers to someone who is senior to others and stands in contrast to *mtsongwana* (*vatsonguana*, pl.), which literally means smaller than, reminiscent of a junior position. This is a relevant category as it applies in various social situations in everyday life, including marriage and related processes.

Marriage is commonly practised through four main rituals: *lobola*, civil marriage, church ceremony, and *xiguiane*. Civil and church ceremonies, introduced during colonisation, were incorporated into traditional *lobola* and *xiguiane* practices. *Lobola* takes place at the bride's home, where the groom's family seeks permission for her to join their family. *Xiguiane* is held at the groom's home, where the bride's family formally integrates her into her new social space.

Each ceremony is conducted by senior family members—married, respected individuals experienced in marriage matters—known as *vavakulu*. Each delegation includes senior women (*ssungukati*) and men (*ndota*). During *lobola* and *xiguiane*, the hosting family observes who initiates the conversation. If a *ssungukati* greets them, a *ssungukati* from the host side responds and leads; the same applies if it is a *ndota*—he leads the dialogue and ensures the ceremony's success. Introductions follow a protocol whereby the visiting family present themselves using the groom's surname, prompting questions about their origins (e.g., "Vilanculos from where?"), reinforcing ties to specific social spaces.

Once *lobola* is successfully concluded, those representing each family become *vamasseve* (*masseve*, sing.) [*Compadre*, m, or *comadre*, f. in Portuguese]. *Vamasseve* serve as the formal resource people for the particular marriage and are highly regarded by the other family members. The parents of the bride and groom, along with their siblings and cousins, join them in that category of *vamasseve*. *Masseve* captures a position of seniority far beyond sex, whereas

comadre and *compadre* not only captures a position of seniority but does so in a sexed way.

Not only is seniority constructed far from sex, but also sharing sex does not automatically put people in the same category (e.g., female or male). Being a male does not translate into being a man, nor does being a female translate into being a woman, as has emerged from everyday life encounters. People sometimes find out about it the hard way, as it happened with one of my students, Tina, who was interested in researching care for children under five in Maputo.

As she would later inform me, she became frustrated and offended by one of the participants who refused to share her experiences of childcare with her because she was a child too and the participant had no time to waste talking to a child about matters she did not understand. Eventually, Tina became interested in exploring what it meant to be a woman, concluding that being a woman was a status one acquired through motherhood and by being a respected person.

She soon found out that having children is one of the ways through which being a woman is socially constructed in southern Mozambique. This makes it inappropriate to share insights on childcare with someone who has no children, since despite being female, the lack of firsthand motherhood experience leaves her stuck in the children category. Under these premises, Tina, being a child, would not have succeeded as a *ssungukati,* let alone throughout a *lobola* or *xiguiane* ceremony, since a child and a junior do not enter social spaces reserved for *ssungukati*, who ought to be women in the first place.

Being a woman positions one in a higher regard compared to other females. However, a person who has become a woman can find herself stripped of that position if she repeatedly fails to behave in a respectable manner, both as a person and as a mother. Motherhood as a door to seniority seems to be found elsewhere. Mothers are those respectable figures that Salo (2018) characterises in her research in Manenberg when she explains the role that becoming mothers plays in producing persons. Mothers emerge as senior figures in their own right, solely because they are mothers. And, although sex might be implicated in the process of procreation, it is respectable motherhood that lends them that position of seniority (Oyěwùmí 2004).

Single adults are expected to get married in order to gain access to roles reserved for seniors, respected married people, to be recognised as *ndota* or as *ssungukati*. Failure to meet that requirement leaves the person filling duties reserved for juniors, as happened to Amiro, a friend of mine. At a marriage ceremony, Amiro, though the eldest sibling, was excluded from participating in the main *lobola* ritual because he was single, while his younger, married siblings were included. This exclusion highlighted how marital status—not age or sex—in that case determined seniority and eligibility for ritual roles. His aunt even warned that prolonged singleness could result in being labeled a *ngwendza*, a derogatory term for those stuck in singlehood. Even men who begin marriage negotiations but fail to finalise them risk being marginalised as *mukwaxi*, reinforcing their disqualified status in ritual contexts and everyday familial interactions. As single men, neither Amiro nor a *mukwaxi* could serve as *ndota* in marriage ceremonies since singlehood makes them juniors, unfit to assume formal authority in marriage matters.

Mkulu ka vatsongwana: Seniority through precedence

As mentioned above, *mkulu* stands for senior whereas *mtsongwana* (*vatsongwana* pl.) stands for little children. The relationship between *mkulu* and *vatsongwana* is also based on precedence, besides being based on mastered experience. One day, while I was sitting close to a church, I saw around 20 women gathered. As a group of three women approached, one shouted to the group, "Mothers [*vamamana*] keep quiet and stand up, pastors are entering the room" [*Miyelane, misekeleka vanguena vafundisse*]. Meanwhile, she told one of them, "Papaito's mum, please make your child stop crying before you go inside [*Mamane wa papaito, miyetissa ntsongwana, uta gama unguena*]. I could not help but find it inspirational to reflect on social organisation and categories as they are performed in everyday life situations. Calling her "Papaito's mum" highlights the relevance of motherhood; she was not referred to by her own name, and it resonates with similar situations in everyday life around the southern region of Mozambique and beyond. Once one becomes a mother, one is widely known and treated as the child's mother.

The mothers were the seniors on that occasion, surpassed only by the pastors, who were the most senior in that context. Papaito, which means that

the child is a namesake of their father, became relevant only because he was crying. Even when he was mentioned, it was as a little child [*Ntsongwana*]; being male added nothing to his significance in that particular setting. It is not that people do not know about sexual distinction, but at that point it is socially irrelevant.

As children grow, they move from being "little children" to simply "children," defined by limited autonomy in hygiene, eating, and domestic tasks. Sexual distinction becomes relevant with puberty, when males become *mfana* (pl. *vafana*) and later *madjaha* as their voices deepen, bodies mature, and they take on more responsibility. Females become *nwanhana* (pl. *vanwanhana*) as they gain autonomy, and later *mtombi* (pl. *timtombi*) as they develop physically and begin menstruating.

However, sexual distinction does not translate into seniority. Seniority is shaped by autonomy, experience, and precedence. The terms *mkulu (*in Xangana*)* and *mkoma* (in Chope) capture seniority better than their Portuguese equivalents (*mana* for females, *mano* for males), which emphasise gender. While *mkulu* or *mkoma* are senior categories that do not relate to gender, *mana* and *mano* specifically intersect both gender and seniority.

Children growing up in Inhambane, Mozambique, often visited beaches like "Prancha" and "Pescom" against their parents' warnings about dangerous waves. My elder sister, acting as *mkoma*, enforced the rules, retrieving me whenever I ventured to the beach. Her seniority gave her the authority to do so. Years later, when planning my wedding, she again exercised that authority by barring my ex-girlfriends from attending—regardless of my objections. As *mkoma*, her decision stood. My sister acted—and continues to act—as my senior simply because she is *mkulu* or *mkoma* to me. At some point, I am junior to all who precede me by birth.

The concept of *vavakulu* or *vakoma* as a senior position aligns with Oyěwùmí's (2004) observations on seniority by precedence among the Yoruba and may resonate beyond Yorubaland. For instance, a friend in his sixties, living in Lisbon, recently shared on his blog how his elder sister instructed her niece who is his daughter—not him—about what he could write, asserting her seniority even across generations.

Conclusion

Seniority is earned through experience and recognised mastery in specific areas. This recognition may occur informally in everyday life, as acknowledged by other seniors, or it may be formally granted through rites of passage, such as marriage. In contexts where such rites are practised, those who have successfully completed them become senior to those who have not. Individuals who have gone through the rituals gain access to social roles and spaces that remain inaccessible to those who did not, who are regarded as lacking the necessary seniority.

Gender in hegemonic conceptions, by contrast, is often treated as a fixed organising principle centered on sex and where seniority is accorded to males. Its global spread as both discourse and practice owes much to colonialism and its enduring legacies. Despite this, the colonial and postcolonial state has not succeeded in fully embedding gender as a fixed hierarchy based on sex. As a result, gender as a discourse of male seniority circulates alongside, rather than above, other locally grounded principles of social organisation (Arnfred 2023). Therefore, the idea of gender as a universal hierarchy that assigns seniority to men is far from universal in Mozambique where, in everyday life, references to it often reflect strategic compliance with dominant discourses, function as a synonym for women, or serve as parody.

Restoring gender to its appropriate context means recognising it as one among several social frameworks used to assign seniority—relevant only where it is meaningful. This approach allows space to "address African local knowledge in the plural" without reducing it to a universal organising principle (Bakare-Yussuf 2004, 75). Giving attention to forms of social organisation and categories creates room to understand diverse forms through which seniority is deployed in everyday situations—whether through mastery or experience, precedence or gender.

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