

Cross-Continental Dialogues: Custodians of the Hearth - Abagusii Women as Knowers Who Produce, Transmit and Recycle Ancestral Knowledge

In conversation with Nyanchama Okemwa

The conversation below is the transcript of Nyanchama Okemwa's presentation for a panel at the Women World Conference 2022, held in Maputo. The conference's venue was Eduardo Mondlane University. The conference convened feminist academics, civil society and community-based activists. Someone called attention to the fact that the community-based activists kept to a tent outside, while the academics met in the classrooms inside. The activists were invited to participate in the debates inside. The majority of the audience in the session were activists who could not speak English, and for whom the presentations had to be translated into Portuguese. The text has been shortened and edited for clarity.

Among the *Abagusii*, the hearth is much more than a place of fire; it is the threshold of life, survival, fecundity, belonging, and ancestral memory. Mothers, as custodians of these sacred hearths, fan the embers of life — from womb to grave — emblazoning ancestral flames across generations. In reclaiming their silenced wisdom, mothers churn the fires of resilience that continue to shape our past, present, and future.

Abagusii women are centered at the threshold of the eternal hearths—womb, fire, conjugal dwelling, land, and grave — where life emerges, endures, and recycles.

“Wombs and Graves, Witches and Whores” (Nyanchama Okemwa 1999)

Nyanchama: So, my full name is Mary Antoinette Stellamaris Nyanchama Okemwa. I am a decolonial expert and human rights defender, but at the moment [2022], I have just restarted my PhD in philosophy at Radboud University, Nijmegen. I restarted it after a 27-year break from a PhD in anthropology. I stopped pursuing the PhD because, at the time, I was working

on women's issues, but sadly, I could not recognise the women in the manner in which anthropology expected me to articulate them. When I read literature about the *Abagusii* women of S.W. Kenya, where I did my research, I couldn't recognise them. The general assumption was that they had no personality unless it is in relationship to a man—whether it is their father, or their brother, or their husband, or their son. And besides that, they were thought to be only good for gossip, witchcraft and childlike, infantile kinds of behaviour. I am, of course, generalising.

This stereotype of women did not resonate with what I know an *Abagusii* woman is. From when I was very young, I had followed my grandmother around asking her all sorts of questions about what it is to be a woman, how to behave as a woman, what to know, say or do as a woman. What does it mean, this fire? What does it mean, this plant? What does it mean, this homestead? When I was about four years old, I begged my grandmother to allow me to be circumcised, and finally my request was granted. This experience was profoundly meaningful to me.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, I realised 27 years ago that anthropology was simply too impoverished to access the information about women as I knew it. It adopted a very masculine gaze that made it very difficult to pick out this kind of information. Now, so many years later, I have found out that through philosophy, I can question the violence of these anthropological and epistemic misconceptions about women. I can showcase women's knowledge resources, ways of knowing, and their status as knowers. Thereby, I can illustrate their role as producers of knowledge, as recyclers of knowledge and as transmitters of knowledge, in a completely different way. Philosophy allows me to abstract the various ways in which women perceive themselves—their personhood and belonging, their identity, their sense of being; in a sense, to explain why in traditional and local languages, gender in and of belonging is fluid. Women pass through various life phases, during which they can embrace what is typically associated with femininity and behavioural mores typically associated with a female way of being female, as identified by and with fellow women and men. And they can also in various phases and contexts and times embrace what is typically thought to be masculinity and behavioural mores associated with a male way of being male, as identified by and with fellow women and men.

Pause for translation

Nyanchama (cont.): Now, to a certain extent, women and men have a shared understanding of what it is to be female or male. However, the implications of that shared understanding are not necessarily the same. For instance, when one goes to the *Abagusii* and asks them—who is the owner of this house, or who is the person responsible for the house?—both men and women will say it is the man. If you ask them who has authority in the house, both men and women will say it is the man, and indeed it's true. This is because a woman leaves her own natal home and moves into the agnatic home where she is absorbed as a wife. These in-married women are called *ababisa*, meaning, “those who are strangers” or “those are enemies”, because traditionally they are married from strange clans that could possibly be enemies.

Similarly, when daughters are born, they are referred to as *abaisiko*, meaning, “those of the outside” because they are designated to leave the agnatic home and be married out. So the position of women, whether in-born or in-married, is very precarious and [they don't] seem to have a place where they belong—neither their natal home nor their agnatic one.

But yet, at the same time, the *Abagusii* refer to themselves as *Mwanyagetinge*, meaning, “those of the anklet”. Paradoxically, the anklet bearer is exclusively a woman. So it was necessary for me to find another way of explaining this paradox. The highest status that both men and women aspire to is marriage and this is predicated upon the exchange of bridewealth. Ideally, the traditional pre-colonial marriage also included the ritual of the anklets. By the way, the transfer of bridewealth and the ritual of the anklets are two separate but linked functions. Many people presume that bridewealth, which is performed between two fathers, the father-in-law and the father of the groom, has negative implications for women. It's almost like a commercial transfer. But this is not what I discovered. The bridewealth cattle is like a commitment forged in milk. The paternal uncles have certain responsibilities depending on the cow they get; whoever receives part of this cattle has certain responsibilities, primarily to the child and secondarily to the mother of the child.

So, it is not a commercial exchange but a pact to shared responsibility. Today, it has become a commercial exchange as a consequence of colonisation, and modernisation, which have transformed it into a monetary transaction. Why do

I say that it is now a problem? When a divorce becomes necessary, the wife's family must return exactly the same cattle that they received as bridewealth. The cattle may have died, but if it has any offspring, then those must be returned to the husband's family. It becomes a problem because a divorce could mean the marriage breakdown of anyone else who used any part of such cattle as bridewealth.

Pause for translation

Nyanchama (cont.): So, anyway, that's just an example I was giving. Let's go back to the woman. So, indeed, women have got nothing to say. Whether they are daughters or married women, they are referred to as those of the outside, those who are strangers or enemies, which means that they are very vulnerable to marginalisation, to servitude, to being excluded. And they are compelled to be subdued and demure. Their personhood and belonging are kind of structured around a decorum that entails showing respect, avoiding shame, being demure and humble. They have to be very careful what they say or don't say, how they say it or don't say it, to whom they say it or not say it, and so on. And if they do not live up to these ascribed mores of female decorum, then they are condemned as being gossips and witches, because they are not conforming to the rules about how to relate with people.

I can understand, then, how maybe the earlier anthropologists presumed that this was all that women could be. Since this is not the typical attributes of women as I witnessed and understood, I had to investigate and find out how women perceived themselves from their own perspectives. How could they express themselves if there was so much that they could not say or so much that was not articulatable? What were the times and spaces that women were allowed to be in a position to articulate themselves without reproach? I identified five places: the womb, the hearth, the dwelling, the land, and the grave.

When it came to matters to do with their womb, their hearth and cooking, their conjugal dwelling—where children are born and bred—it belonged to the woman, not to the man. And when it came to the ancestral land that their sons would inherit. So, when brideswealth has been paid, the groom, in his capacity as the homestead head, has exclusive ownership of the ancestral land that he inherited from his father. However, he is obliged to divide it into parcels, split

it equally amongst his wives and grant each of them exclusive custody over the portion of land that is intended as the inheritance of their sons.

As homestead head, the man is obliged to construct his wife a conjugal dwelling and to allocate her exclusive custody over the portion of the ancestral land that his sons would inherit. This is where his children are birthed, where he feeds from, and then, finally, when he dies, it is this conjugal dwelling that determines where his grave is demarcated.

So, the womb, the hearth, the dwelling, the land, and the grave— I refer to all of these as hearths, because they are places where cooking or fecundity occurs. These are also the places that are singularly under the custody of the in-married woman, in general, and in particular, a woman who is wearing an anklet. A woman who has already been circumcised and gone through the processes of becoming a domesticated woman, has been married under the transfer of milk relationship, and adheres to the proper decorum of being. These women have exclusive purview over these five hearths, but these are also the spaces and times in which they can actually speak like a man: they can wear the pants, they can transform the trajectory of the discourse.

Pause for translation

Nyanchama (cont.): It might then be assumed that any woman who has a womb, who can be a mother, can have access to at least one of these thresholds of life. But that's not true, because just bearing a child does not necessarily make you a mother, according to this way of reasoning. In my article, "Wombs and Graves, Witches and Whores" (Nyanchama Okemwa 1999), I outline the differences, as well as what qualifies a woman to be accorded this custodial authority over her hearths [*wombs and graves*] and what prevents her from accessing such influence. It's the latter that puts her on the level of being attributed behaviours akin to witches and whores.

There are two elements which I will explain quickly, and these are circumcision and the ritual of the anklets in bridewealth. Because, of course, by birth a woman has a womb, but then it is circumcision that makes the woman a social being—one capable of being acknowledged as being on the path to getting her other hearths. There are many things that happen in circumcision that attest to this. Let us just take one symbolism, and that is fire. When you get into circumcision, it's a period of seclusion that lasts from six weeks to three months.

One of the things that women initiates are supposed to do is make their own fire. You make your own fire and for the six weeks to three months, you must keep your fire alive.

In the period of seclusion, you are trained in the various ways to be a woman. They don't just use words; they use song, dance, wise sayings, examples, stories, narratives, and many other ways to show you what it is to be a woman. There are so many ways in which all this knowledge is instilled in the initiates. When you come out as a young woman, a potential bride, a potential custodian of a hearth, you will take your fire [hearth] and insert it into the fire [hearth] of your mother or your grandmother, or wherever the food you eat is cooked from, and you continue with your life. And then the day you are performing the ritual of the anklets, when you get married, the last day when you leave your home, you will go to that hearthfire, and you will symbolically take your fire [hearth] with you. By this time, bridewealth would have already been paid. You will take your symbolic hearth with you, and you will go to your marital home and your mother in law will snatch your fire and insert it in her fire [hearth]. And for as long as she does not consider you worthy of having custody of her son, you shall eat food cooked from her hearth, which means you will eat from your fire and have fire inserted with one another. Until she decides to give you back your fire, when you can cook in your own conjugal dwelling, you and your husband are children in your mother-in-law's house. This is because both of you are fed with food cooked at your mother-in-law's hearth and as such, you are children who are not recognised or accepted as being grown-up people. It doesn't matter if you have borne ten children.

Now, this fire, when it has been given back to you, must be kept burning until the day you die. You do not use a matchstick or anything else to rekindle it; you just keep it burning till the day you die. And indeed, people say it is actually the dying of the fire that signifies the symbolic death of homestead. Similarly, it is not physical death, but the disintegration of the conjugal home that will be the real death of the custodian of that conjugal home.

So, what I want to say is that a lot is vested in the woman in her capacity as the custodian of the hearth, of her birthing womb, of her cooking hearth, her fecund conjugal dwelling, her custody over her son's ancestral land that is the inheritance of her sons, and of course, the demarcation of the grave where the

occupants of the homestead will be buried. There's a lot that is vested in her. And this vestation is evaluated in the manner in which she demonstrates decorum in not speaking, in not articulating the inarticulateable, in not taking advantage of that incredible influence that has been placed upon her, as a woman.

Pause for translation

Nyanchama (cont.): I will tell you now why anklets are an important thing. Why do the *Abagusii*, who are very, very macho— they call themselves “Those of *Mogusi*”— still refer to themselves as “Those of *Mwanyagetinge*”, which means the one of the anklets? So when one receives anklets [*sing: egetinge; pl: ebitinge*], one is supposed to select one of four names: *mora*, *kerubo*, *kemunto*, *kwamboka*. These four names are a reflection of the trajectory that the *Abagusii* took to get to their current Gusiiland. These names tell the complete story of our trajectory of *Mogusi* and *Mwanyagetinge*, from whence we came to where we are now. In other words, women are imbued with our ancestrality in their body.

The anklet itself is a mixture of iron, which is the strongest form of our soil, and rinds or skin from bridewealth cattle. And it is wrapped up with a colour red from ochre, which represents the blood of the land. The anklet thus ritualistically links us to each other and to the ground. It is in itself a very significant part of the items that unite us, which are our blood, our hearthfire, our land, our milk relationships. And of course, we also have a fourth one, which is never mentioned, but it is very visible: our saliva and sweat relationship, which is a name that we give to our neighbours, because when we work, we sweat, and our saliva might mix up with theirs. So, these are what unite us. And it's the in-married woman, [the bearer of the anklet], who works on the land with these neighbours. She is charged with the responsibility of domesticating them, cooking for them, brewing for them, making sure that her husband gets a certain acknowledgement and recognition as the homestead head.

So, in certain spaces and times, the woman who's wearing an anklet can organically assume different genders. This gender fluidity is predicated upon on the five hearths where she can speak. She is also gender fluid when she decides, for example, after her husband dies, to marry another woman. And this woman whom she has married, she can enable to marry another man, so

that the children that the woman bears will be her children; and in this way she can have lineage continuity.

To conclude, a woman can only become a mother or an anklet-bearer when she allows, or enables, other women to be anklet-bearers in their turn. So, you cannot be a mother only because of bearing a child, because then you are just at the level of witches and whores. But to become the womb and the grave, you need to allow another woman to also be a bearer of the anklets. That is one. Two, when we rely on bridewealth, and in a commercialised or monetary way, we completely negate the valuation of the blood relationship. We completely negate all those [bonds] that are forged through marriage. When we deny women of their conjugal home in today's modern housing and so on, we, again, ignore the custom whereby the graves are demarcated according to the conjugal dwelling, the hearth itself, the fire that burns in perpetuity, and so on and so forth. So, in today's world, some of this inalienable authority, inalienable influence that is granted to the anklet-bearer has become invisible. And by becoming invisible, they have now cemented women into that very impoverished role of just being a female body [in the feminist perspective] that is impoverished, and has no voice, no power, no say, and can only be defined in terms of a man. We have now become that very woman that was described erroneously so many years ago. Today, this is true. But it was not true in the past. If we unravel all these areas in which women had that very strong power of being malleable in the gender that they embodied, depending on the time and space that they occupied, the speciality and the temporality of their being also defined the gender that they could be or behave or perform. And this is mediated through their anklets.

That is why the *Abagusii* refer to themselves as 'those of the anklets', *Mwanyagetinge*, even though publicly they refer to themselves as "those of *Mogusii*"—*Mwamogusii*. Today they identify themselves as *Mwamogusii*, whilst their identity as *Mwanyagetinge* is completely forgotten. And also today, the gender of women has been cemented into what we know of a woman as female and a man as male. The fluidity that organically existed in the past no longer finds its place in contemporary public discourse.

Question 1: So, the question is, you mentioned that in the issue of gender fluidity, that when a man dies, a woman can marry another woman, right? So, the question is, the woman that marries her has her own anklet?

Nyanchama: No, she doesn't have her own anklet. She doesn't necessarily have to have her own anklet. However, ideally, it is a woman who has undergone bridewealth process. If, let's say for some reason, the anklet bearer's husband dies and she has got no children, but she has got custody over her husband's property, that's inalienable from her conjugal home. She has exclusive custodial authority over her deceased husband's land which she has inherited, and subsequently, exclusive ownership of the conjugal dwelling upon which his grave can be demarcated. In this capacity, she has agnatic responsibility to transmit the lineage in her name according to her conjugal home. So, if she wants to have her blood, but her womb is not working, she is entitled to marry a woman, pay bridewealth and transmit the name through offspring borne of another womb. Woman-to-woman marriage is not a lesbian marriage. She is marrying another woman to bear children in her name, so she is wearing at that moment a masculine gender. She'll marry another woman who is allowed to bed another man and bear children, but those children will be her children, and they'll inherit her name like a man, and she can transmit land to them—the ancestral land, so that she can give continuity to her land.

I'll just say one more thing. [The land] to which she became custodian? Yes, to which she became [custodian], because it cannot end with her. She needs to give it, because land—just like all the hearths—molten fire when cooking, fecund flows when birthing, masticated foods when eating, corpse return to soil when burying others: your land, your hearth. These are all symbolically fluid. It doesn't seem like that, but land transmission is also fluid and it has to be transmitted so as to flow. In this sense, the anklet-bearer marries another woman so she can transmit her hearths to her progeny: her land; her blood; her name.

One more thing: although the man is the owner and has all the authority to speak, he defines himself in terms of five important fluids that are the exclusive purview of women: They'll define themselves by blood, by saying this is my own blood from my home. They'll define themselves in terms of the hearth, where their food is cooked or the space they are eating from. They'll define themselves

in terms of bridewealth cattle. They'll define themselves in terms of the saliva; who was tilling the land with my mother? These are non-related neighbours with whom the mother tills the land.

These five elements, these five fluids—they may seem rigid, but represent generative flows. And then the milk: I explained it, that bridewealth is more than just cattle; it is also milk links that have obligations. I explained about the hearth and how the transmission of the hearth also defines the status of the man. All this is in the hands of the woman, by the way. And finally, I explained about the land, which also has to be fluid and transmitted to the children. All this is in the custody of the woman. But in today's commercialised world, women have been alienated from their hearths. Hence, these flows become stagnant and rigid. This has created a lot of rupture and violence and conflicts regarding personhood and belonging. Even on gender identity, the fluidity has been ruptured; it's muddied—it's no longer flowing.

Question 2: How do you feel as a woman doing this wonderful work in your land and working on these issues? How do you feel? Because you have such a special power—you are a woman, a strong woman—so how do you feel with all this power?

Nyanchama: So, like I said, I think from the moment I could open my mouth, I was following my grandmother, first and foremost, but also all the women in my life whom I regarded as being my grandmothers—asking all sorts of questions. I discovered from a very young age, because I even slept with them and joined them when we would come out in the night to go and pee. And I discovered from a very young age, the knowledge of the night and the knowledge of the day are not the same. I learned so much. I even call it *pee-losophy*, because you learn to philosophise while you are peeing. Anyway, the thing is, I am writing this because I feel like I am obligated to transmit this knowledge. I'm writing this for my grandmother. In my PhD, I want my grandmother to be Dr. Valencia Obutu, because she is the one who inspired me to write this. She and my other grandmothers like her inspired me. I became a grandmother two years ago, and I decided to re-embrace my own traditional name, which is Nyanchama. And Nyanchama means the one with the charms—the one with the calling, the one with a calling like clairvoyance, healing, divination, and so on. Because I feel it is my calling to transmit this

knowledge to others. My grandmother's last words to me were, "when are you going to tell our story? It is not ours to keep; it is for us to tell others, so they can also give to others after them."

Question 3: Congratulations for your presentation. I have a few comments, but I will speak in Portuguese, if you don't mind, and Carmeliza will help us to do the translation. (The following text was translated from Portuguese): I had a comment before about this topic, about the traditional practices that we have in Africa. I come from Angola. But I've been living here in Maputo and we have many similarities with what happens in Angola. There is no transmission of knowledge from the older to the younger. I see this in my mother, in my grandmother. "How was it in that time? How did you solve the problems [then]?" They say that that is backward. I say no, this is who we are. But because so many years ago, the colonialist said, "Your culture is backward; you are backward," we grew up with this mentality that the white man, the Portuguese brought to Angola, that you are backward; your family is backward. So, today, for her to talk about her tradition, it is difficult. You who studied, you are the one with the authority to speak [out] there. So, what I learned with Nyanchama is, deep down, that the problem of transmission of ancestral knowledge, it seems that it's almost the whole African continent.

Question 4: (Translated from Portuguese) I grew up with my parents and grandparents. We socialised a lot with Portuguese people, because we lived in the world of the Portuguese. But I didn't lose my tradition. And at some point I said to my daughters, "Sis, we can speak Portuguese, but don't forget where we come from". So much so that my daughters have learnt to speak "dialect" [maternal African language] only now. My mum taught them when she was with them. The traditions she's sharing from Kenya, the difference isn't so great. That bead you are saying you put on your ankle—here in Mozambique too, in the area where my mum grew up—we have it, because we are all of Bantu origin. A girl would put a bracelet on when she was dating, to show that she was engaged. She'd wear a bracelet round her ankles. When she went out on the street, every boy would say that she's engaged. This vaccination (tattooing) is more about the beauty of the woman. Our traditions are [similar]. It's the way of transmitting them that's a little complex. We are here, we are in Maputo; if we go to the north [within Mozambique], we are going to get another meaning. It means that we are Africans, and our cultures are very similar.

Carmeliza: I'm not sure if everyone could hear the wonderful dialogue coming out of your talk, Nyanchama. I will summarise a little of what went on. We started with the comment from Florita [from Angola] who said that, based on your talk, she reflects on the problem that we have had in our modernised societies, post-colonial societies, in transmitting our traditions. Because during colonial times, it was instilled into our mothers' and foremothers' conscience that our traditions were lower, they were backward, they were not worth transmitting. And then the general conversation was about how these things that you are talking about—there are similarities across Africa. Florita is from Angola; we have people from different parts of Mozambique who have different traditions or ways of transmitting, but very similar cultures. And what they are saying is that they are very happy about the way you show your Africanity. They have been talking about the *Maasai*, of how proud they are to live their Africanity and show it. And they feel that this should be done more because we have a lot of similarities, even if the modes of transmission are different. So this is the gist of the conversation. And as conveners of the panel, we are very happy that, despite these differences in language, there is this excellent debate and curiosity about what is being said.

Nyanchama: Now, obviously, we need to organise this again, even if it's just about this—the transmissions and all those epistemic injustices that have been formed, the misunderstandings, and what the new modernity and the time has done to disrupt this. We are actually privileged as Africans, because the interruption to our culture is only [100-150] years old. So we should feel very privileged that we have the urgency to find out more, to kind of recapture what was interrupted and know it, so that we can then transmit it to future generations. Let's have these conversations. We need them so we can learn from one another, with one another.

Carmeliza: Thank you. I will translate.

Dedication:

For my grandmother, Valencia Obutu — Custodian of my being, becoming, and belonging.

Reference

Okemwa, Stella Nyanchama. 1999. "Wombs and Graves, Witches and Whores: Gusii Paradoxes in a Context of Land Commodification." In *Changements au féminin en Afrique noire*, edited by Danielle De Lame and Chantal Zabus, 129–146. Paris: L'Harmattan.