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Thinking gender differently, with inspiration from Africa

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Feminist Africa produces three issues per annum, in accordance with themes specified in the calls for contributions.

The editorial and production team can be contacted at contact@feministafrica.net and general enquiries sent to info@feministafrica.net

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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.

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Reconceptualizing Gender: Critical Investigations into Assumptions of 'Modernity'

Signe Arnfred

Abstract

This article discusses different ways of conceptualising gender including a critique of dominant Western/European gender concepts in terms of male dominance/female subordination. It takes off from the author's experience in northern Mozambique in the early 1980s, where local women refused to acknowledge proclaimed advantages of the newly independent Mozambican state's move from 'tradition' to 'modernity'. Key points of contestation were the traditional rituals of initiation, denounced by Frelimo and the National Women's Organisation (OMM) as women-oppressive, but passionately defended by local women. In attempts to understand this apparent contradiction, the article subsequently presents decolonial perspectives on gender and power, questioning usual valorisations of 'tradition' and 'modernity'. Doing so, it draws on African and Latin American feminist conceptualisations. In the final sections – in a move to historicise and de-universalise dominant gender conceptualisations – the article traces the very specific European/Western roots of presumed universally valid 'modern' gender concepts, also showing how these lines of thought are reflected in the work of Simone de Beauvoir and embedded in international development discourse. The resulting model of 'gender equality feminism' is denounced as 'colonial feminism'. The conclusion sums up limitations of presumed 'modernity' while pointing to potentials for women in re-interpretations of so-called 'tradition'.

Keywords: Tradition/modernity, rituals of initiation, decolonial theory, enlightenment thinking, the international development regime

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that conceptualisations are important. How are things conceptualised? By whom? In which contexts? With what implications? Concepts are not innocent; often, reconceptualisations are needed. According to Sylvia Tamale in her editorial for a recent issue of *Feminist Africa*, "we need to reconceptualize normalized concepts, such as gender and sexuality, patriarchy, rights, equality and development that are essentialist and binaried. These fundamental ontological and epistemological transformations constitute the prelude to inventing new stories of African feminist activism" (Tamale 2024, 2–3). In this article I take up this challenge in a double sense: first by offering an 'ontological and epistemological critique' of existing 'normalized concepts' of gender, and second by taking as a point of departure 'African feminist activism' as enacted forty years ago by rural women in northern Mozambique. Feminist activism here should be understood as acts of disobedience against prevailing powers (in this case the post-independence ruling party: Frelimo), in defence of women's spaces and perceived rights. The women in question were peasants in Cabo Delgado, northern Mozambique. These women had been active in the recent war of liberation against Portuguese colonialism; they supported Frelimo guerilla soldiers by carrying war material over long distances, and by providing food and shelter for the guerillas. After independence, they were confronted with campaigns by Frelimo and Organização da Mulher Moçambicana (OMM, the post-independence national women's organisation) against traditional rituals of female initiation. And they refused to comply, not by direct action, but by 'civil disobedience'. When party cadres visited their villages, organising meetings and shouting party slogans, such as "abaixo ritos de iniciação" (down with initiation rituals), the women shouted along; but after the party people had left the village, the women continued with their rituals.

At the time, in the early 1980s, I worked in the OMM as a *cooperante*. *Cooperantes* were solidarity workers employed on a local salary directly by Mozambican authorities. After eleven years of war of liberation from Portuguese colonialism, Mozambique had finally gained independence in 1975. Post independence, the country was run by a socialist-inspired government in the hands of the liberation movement, Frelimo, which in 1977

had turned itself into a political party. No Western diplomatic representations or development organisations were in place. This was the era of the Cold War East/West divide, and as a declared socialist country, Mozambique belonged to the Eastern side. However, since most Portuguese had left the country in the turmoil of independence, all kinds of civil servants with higher education were in short supply. This was where, as a sociologist/anthropologist and incipient gender scholar, I fitted in, as did my partner, who was an architect/urban planner. After a crash course in Portuguese, we arrived in Maputo in October 1980 with our two young daughters: one three years old, the other only eight months.

Having arrived directly from the vibrant New Women's Movement in Denmark (and from a junior position at Roskilde University), my aim was to work in the OMM. I had studied the speeches of Frelimo President Samora Machel; in one speech, which I found particularly impressive, Samora Machel declared: "The liberation of women is a necessity for the revolution, a guarantee for its continuity and a condition for its success" (Machel 1973). After independence, Machel became president of Mozambique. Imagine working in a country where the President could speak in such terms about women!

Everything worked out as intended; I got a job in the OMM. Initially I conducted sociological investigations in the south of Mozambique, not too far from Maputo, where we lived and where the OMM (and the Frelimo) headquarters were located. In 1982, however, I was sent by the OMM to Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique, bordering Tanzania, where the liberation war had been most intense. The OMM wanted to know how the struggle for liberation had impacted on the women, their lives and their visions for the future. Transformation of the society from 'tradition' to 'modernity' was the overall aim of Frelimo politics in post-independence Mozambique. OMM and Frelimo expected the war veteran women of northern Mozambique to be a vanguard in this regard: because of their experience of active participation in the war of liberation, they were expected to have left 'tradition' behind and to be all set for 'modernity'. Nevertheless, against Frelimo's and the OMM's, and also against my own expectations, the women in Cabo Delgado that I interviewed, passionately defended traditional initiation rituals, which were understood by Frelimo and the OMM as quintessentially woman-oppressive. I was incredulous and very surprised; what was this all

about? These were by far the most articulate and politically aware peasant women I had ever met. I had by then worked in the OMM for more than a year, interviewing urban and rural women in southern Mozambique, but this was something different. How could it be that that these clever war veteran women defended allegedly oppressive rituals? Maybe the rituals were not oppressive after all? Maybe they were even the opposite: empowering to women? Maybe this was the background for the women's defence of their rituals? But if so, what about the tradition/modernity divide?

Frelimo's and OMM's preconceived assumptions regarding women, gender relations and tradition/modernity corresponded fairly well to the ideas regarding women and gender which I had carried along from the New Women's Movement in Denmark, namely that 'traditional society' was oppressive to women, whereas 'modernity' brought promises and possibilities for gender equality and women's emancipation. The decisive divide was between these ideas and the gender conceptions of the Cabo Delgado women, which obviously were different, but how and why? I also started wondering about the historical background of the tradition/modernity ideas, thoughts which I shared with Frelimo and the OMM. This conception clearly had European roots, in so far as Frelimo's and OMM's ideas came from international socialism, and despite proclaimed internationalism were implicitly Eurocentric. But more precisely, through which historical twists and turns had these conceptions of gender come into being? I felt that I had to look closer into this tradition/modernity issue; what actually counted as 'tradition' and what as 'modernity', and why? I had to struggle to un-learn my own preconceived ideas and to be as open as possible to what I saw and what I was told by the Cabo Delgado women, in order to understand how they conceived their world regarding issues of gender. The valorisation of the tradition/modernity divide seemed to come out very differently from these women's points of view.

All of this took place in 1982, more than 40 years ago. Nevertheless, much of what I have been doing as an academic since then relates back to this Cabo Delgado experience in one way or another. My confrontation with the Cabo Delgado women forced me to search for other ways beyond the conventional for conceptualising women and gender.

A triple agenda: the lay-out of this paper

I realised that in order to determine what this was all about, I had to work on a triple agenda. First: female initiation rituals did take place in Cabo Delgado, in spite of the Frelimo ban, and the rituals were cherished by the women – as was the case (as it became clear later) also in other parts of matrilineal northern Mozambique. As a consequence of my experience in Cabo Delgado, I was keen to find out what the initiation rituals were all about, and why they were so important to the women. Thus after my return in 1984 to Danish academic life, I applied for funding for further research in northern Mozambique. Because of the Frelimo/Renamo war, it was only from 1998–1999 and later in 2003 and 2005 that I managed to go back to northern Mozambique, this time for research in Nampula Province, populated almost entirely by Makhuwa people. The Makhuwa have more clear-cut matrilineal systems, compared to the Makonde I had met in Cabo Delgado. Results of this research have been published in my 2011 book, *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique*, subtitled *Rethinking Gender in Africa*. They are summarised in section one below.

Second, I needed to develop a conceptual approach with which it would be possible to grasp the meaning and importance of the rituals, seen from the positions of local women. This part of the agenda was decisively enhanced when at some point in the 1990s I discovered the groundbreaking work by Nigerian gender scholars Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997). Their critique of Western thinking and their innovative ways of conceptualising African gendered realities were very helpful indeed in terms of breaking down my pre-conceived ideas of gender, and in putting together conceptual frameworks for different understandings. Aspects of this new understanding are captured in some of the chapters of the 2011 book; in this article they are taken further, supported by Latin American decolonial gender theorising.

A third issue on the agenda would be the task of historicising and de-universalising the European/Western conceptions of gender, which had been my own point of departure; conceptions shared not only by the Western Women's Movements and by Frelimo/the OMM, but also by the global development regime. The overriding question in this part of the investigation is the following: why do we in Europe/the Western world think about issues of

gender the way we do? Which are the roots of European/Western gender thinking? These questions are not explored in the 2011 book, but some of them are taken up in Arnfred 2022. My experience in Cabo Delgado, as well as my reading of the works of Amadiume and Oyěwùmí, showed that 'the universal subordination of women', which in the New Women's Movement we had taken as a basic fact of life, was not universal at all. People in other places conceptualised gender in very different ways.

Over the years, I have become increasingly critical of the global development regime and the gender conceptions embedded in it. Ideas of gender with specific roots in European history have been globalised based on a conviction that these ideas are universally valid – but I have gathered evidence enough to be convinced that such is not the case. Like an increasing number of scholars from Europe and the US, such as de Sousa Santos (2014), and others from the previously colonised world, I have come to see so-called development work as a neo-colonial enterprise that imposes certain lines of thinking and ways of life on other peoples; in short as a continuation of colonial dominance. As noted by some of these scholars, colonialism was "not only economic and political, but fundamentally epistemic" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 137). The proliferation of development thinking regarding gender is an example of such epistemic colonialisation. For this reason, I have divided part three of the triple agenda into section (a) which deals with the historical background of European conceptions of gender, and section (b) which focuses on contemporary conceptions of gender in the international development regime.

Section One: Re-interpretations of northern Mozambican female rituals of initiation

During the time I worked in the OMM (1981–1984), the documents from the 1976 second OMM conference served as basic political guidelines. In these documents, rituals of initiation were listed as number one among 'women's social problems'—the most ominous and repulsive aspect of rural life, perceived to privilege men and subordinate women. The rituals were described as "imposing in women a feeling of total submission and dependence in relation to men" (OMM 1977, 90). "The point of these rituals," the document added, "is to prepare the woman just in order to serve the man —as a means of

pleasure, as a force of labour, and as a source of even more forces of labour" (OMM 1977, 90). According to these texts, the rituals "violated and traumatized" women, turning them into "passive beings without capacity for initiative" (OMM 1977, 91). Seen from my present position, this description is entirely out of touch with women's lived realities. *First*, men have nothing to do with women's initiation. If men appear at all, they will be under the command of the *nacimbusa* or *namalaka* (different names depending on location) – a specially trained and gifted older woman master of the rituals. *Second*, indeed the young initiates are supposed to be submissive, and they are bossed around, but this a submission to seniority, to older women, not to men. Not at all. The *third* important aspect of the rituals is the *reinforcement of the community of women*, the unity and solidarity of women vis-à-vis men, across possible hierarchies (e.g., in terms of age). Participants in the celebration of the rituals of initiation are not just the young initiates, but potentially all adult (i.e., already initiated) women of the community. The female rituals of initiation may be seen as *women's rallies* – where women get together in order to confirm and reinforce their unity and their collective strength and power as women, vis-à-vis men. Such women's solidarity and mutual support seemed increasingly important in the situation of the 1980s to 2000s – the period of my field research into these matters – when rural life in northern Mozambique was threatened by 'modernity'. 'Threatened by modernity' because modernity implied male takeover, including in areas where previously women had been in charge.

Contrary to the impression given by Frelimo and the OMM, I came to see the female rituals of initiation as a key institution for protection and continuation of women's positions of power in these matrilineal communities, where such traditional positions were now threatened by modernity – and by male power. All 'modern' positions of power, institutionalised by Frelimo, in terms of provincial governors, district secretaries, secretaries of urban neighbourhoods etc., were taken up by men. The whole system of institutions signalling modernity, was (and is) male dominated. In terms of practical politics and guiding ideas, Samora Machel's early praise (1973) of women's participation in the revolution stood alone. Or rather, women had been welcomed as guerilla soldiers, but otherwise Frelimo's politics implied a male takeover. Seen through women's eyes, all previous aspects of women's power

now came to be placed in the realm of 'tradition' and social structures to be left behind. 'Modernity' was equal to male power, disregarding women.

Section Two: Decolonial understandings of issues of gender and gender power relations

The general European/Western understanding of gender conforms to the idea of male dominance/female subordination; in the New Women's Movement we took 'the universal subordination of women' as a given fact. We struggled to change this situation, but the perspective of our struggle was fatally limited by its conceptualisation. Perceived through Western gender concepts, women's 'traditional' power in a place like Mozambique becomes invisible. Ifi Amadiume writes against the conceptual limitations with which she was confronted when, in the late 1970s, she started out as a student of anthropology at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. In the preface to her book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), she voices her critique of 'classical' British social anthropology, of feminist anthropology, and of feminism as such. She writes: "The ethnography used in the university was that collected by old 'masters' of anthropology during the colonial period … justifying conquest and the subjection of indigenous peoples and their cultures to foreign rule" (Amadiume 1987, 1). Feminist anthropologists were no better than their male colleagues: "To them the universal social and cultural inferiority of women was a foregone conclusion: 'sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human life'. This kind of global presupposition is in itself ethnocentric," (Amadiume 1987, 4). Similarly, writing ten years later, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí is also very critical of Western gender conceptualisations. "I came to realize," she says in the preface to her book, *The Invention of Women* (1997), "that the fundamental category 'women' – which is foundational in Western gender discourses – simply did not exist in Yorubaland" (Oyěwùmí 1997, ix). People were not classified as 'men' or 'women'; they were distinguished in terms of social positions and relations such as linage, seniority and parenthood – but not as body-types. Man/woman was not a dichotomy, gender boundaries were changing and floating, and gender was not a dimension of power. Gender was perceived as situational, i.e., not dichotomised, not hierarchical – and often not important at all. But with colonialism, Western categories and lines of thinking

took over; "body-reasoning and the bio-logic that derives from the biological determinism inherent in Western thought have been imposed on African societies," Oyěwùmí says (1997, x).

Amadiume and Oyěwùmí are both Nigerian. Amadiume is from Igboland in the east, Oyěwùmí from Yorubaland in the west. They agree on many issues, such as the basic insight that gender is not determined by biology; it is socially created. Amadiume is an anthropologist, her writings particularly polemical vis-à-vis Western anthropological thinking; Oyěwùmí is a sociologist, her writings tuned more towards a critique of Western feminist theorising. Amadiume and Oyěwùmí complement each other, and they are both indispensable for decolonial understandings of gender in Africa. At an early point as a male African scholar, Jimi Adésinà (2010) acknowledged the groundbreaking contributions of Amadiume and Oyěwùmí.

Socio-cultural creation of gender is what the Mozambican rituals of initiation are all about; what takes place in the female rituals is the creation of women. Biological age alone will not turn a young girl into a grown-up woman, because adulthood is not a question of years of age. Rituals are needed; rituals through which specifically enabled older women create from the raw material of uninitiated girls, adult women of this particular culture – Makhuwa or Makonde, as the case may be. This also means that gender and adulthood are socially created. Male and female are not rooted in bodies, and male/female is not in itself a dimension of power. Power may be assigned to other differences, such as seniority – who is older, who is younger? – and lineage; some families are more powerful than others. But power is not located in 'gender' itself. Motherhood is, however, seen as a powerful social position, as noted by Amadiume as well as by Oyěwùmí. I shall return to issues of motherhood below. Spelling out decisive differences between African and Western gender thinking, Oyěwùmí (1997, xii) provides a list of Western taken-for-granted assumptions regarding gender; 'assumptions of modernity' in the context of this paper. Oyěwùmí sees these assumptions as specifically Western. To Western feminists, however, they are presumed to be universal.

- Gender categories are seen as universal and timeless.
- Gender is a fundamental organising principle in all societies.
- There is an essential, universal category: 'woman'.

- The subordination of women is universal.
- The category 'woman' is precultural, fixed in historical time and cultural space in antithesis to another fixed category: 'man'.

It is important to note that all of these assumptions still prevail in the language and the conceptions of the international development regime, as discussed in section three (b) of this article. Western misunderstandings regarding issues of gender are also reflected in mis-translations. As an example, the Yoruba distinction between *oko* and *iyawo* is usually translated as 'husband' and 'wife', where *iyawo* marks a subordinate position. Importantly, however, the reason for subordination has nothing to do with gender; it marks the difference between those who are birth members of a family/a lineage and those who enter by marriage. "This hierarchy is not a gender hierarchy, because even female *oko* are superior to the female *iyawo"* (Oyěwùmí 2004, 5); the category of *iyawo* includes both men and women. In a patrilineal society, those who enter by marriage will be women; in a matrilineal society those who enter by marriage will be men.

All of this was difficult to grasp for European minds; often they did not even try. Amadiume writes about how Europeans "kept looking for man as father or man as the axis around which all rotated … The invisible, transitory or distant role of man as father in African kinship was extremely difficult for the European mind to accept" (Amadiume 1997, 80). Similarly, "the very thought of women's power being based on the logic of motherhood has proved offensive to many Western feminists" (Amadiume 1997, 114). No wonder, Amadiume says, since in Western/European conceptualisations gender equality is understood as women's equality with men on male terms, turning tasks of motherhood into impediments to equality, whereas in the African system "motherhood was women's means of empowerment" (Amadiume 1997, 114). The focus on motherhood is shared by Amadiume and Oyěwùmí. Amadiume: "At no period in the history of the patriarchal cultures of Europe has motherhood been accorded the same status and reverence it has had in African cultures" (Amadiume 1987, 3). Oyěwùmí: "In all African family arrangements, the most important ties within the family flow from the mother … The idea that mothers are powerful is very much a defining characteristic of the institution and its place in society" (Oyěwùmí 2000, 1097). Amadiume conceptualises

motherhood by talking about 'a motherhood paradigm', thus also pointing critically to the often implicit patriarchal paradigm in social science: "The recognition of the motherhood paradigm means that we do not take patriarchy as given, or as a paradigm" (Amadiume 1997, 21). In Amadiume's 'motherhood paradigm', the focus is not on 'women' as such, but on the mother-child relationship. Importantly, by doing so she conceptualises not an individual social position, but a social relationship, the relationship between mother and child(ren).

In pre-colonial African societies, women as well as men could be rulers. With colonialism, however, all of this started to change.

> The very process by which [with colonialism] females were categorized and reduced to 'women' made them ineligible for leadership roles. ... [Thus] for females colonization was a twofold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination. ... The creation of 'women' as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state (Oyěwùmí 1997, 124).

This passage from Oyěwùmí was later taken as one of the points of departure for Latin American feminist philosopher Maria Lugones' coining of the concept, 'the coloniality of gender' (Lugones 2007, 197). According to Lugones, the very idea of women as a coherent category, and as a category subordinated to men, is a *colonial imposition*. Applying this European conception of gender in African settings changes realities and distorts what might remain of pre-colonial social structures. Male power is everywhere presumed; female power remains unseen. It was my experience in the process of making sense of my data from northern Mozambique that seen through Amadiume's and Oyěwùmí's conceptualisations, it all fell into place. I could now see the rituals as sessions of reinforcement and celebration of the community of women, in addition to being educational sessions that introduced the initiates to this community; I now understood very well the women's reluctance towards the male-dominated 'modernity' of Frelimo.

Latin American feminist thinking

Much later – in the 2020s – I discovered Latin American decolonial feminist thinking beyond Maria Lugones. I was particularly impressed by the thinking of Lorena Cabnal. Unlike university-based Amadiume, Oyěwùmí and

Lugones, Cabnal is an activist whose thinking and activism are closely interconnected. A Maya-Xinka woman from Guatemala, Cabnal has co-founded a number of feminist associations and networks in Latin America – or *Abya Yala*, which is the name she and others use for this part of the world. She calls herself a communitarian feminist, defining communitarian feminism as an epistemic proposal, which has emerged from daily life, not from academia. Two innovative concepts are centrally positioned in her thinking: *territorio cuerpo-tierra* and *senti-pensar*. Cabnal understands the body as intimately related to the land; land is not an object to be possessed or appropriated, land is connected with human life in a mutual relationship, including ancestors and coming generations. This resonates well with the African contexts with which I am familiar. In the conceptualisation *territorio cuerpo-tierra*, land and bodies are connected, implying that land is not just land and certainly not a commodity. Food comes from the land. Land is related to ancestors and to who you are as a person. Even after moving to the city, you still belong to your ancestral land, and given the opportunity, this is where you go when you grow old, to be buried with those who went before you, and where you belong.

Another important Cabnal concept is *senti-pensar*: feeling-thinking. Here she goes up against the very foundation of European Enlightenment thinking with its dichotomies and hierarchies: minds distinct from bodies, and rationality from feeling, with minds and rationality in command. Cabnal insists on thinking including feelings, and since she is not a writing person, she often communicates to an audience through video talks, many of them available on YouTube. In most of these YouTube videos you see Cabnal in front of some greenery or sitting on a mat on the grass while speaking. Very rarely does she sit at a conference table; never at a podium. Significantly, in some of her talks she involves the audience as active participants in her performance, turning her lecture into a kind of ceremony. Often she talks about her recuperation of historical memories from her mother and grandmothers back in time, in order to put togeher what she calls a *cosmogonia*, a coherent vision of the world and of human lives.

Section Three (a): Which are the historical roots of European/Western gender thinking?

To return to the discussion of European/Western conceptions of gender: Why do the gender concepts look the way they do? From where the patriarchal dominance? From where the downgrading of motherhood and women's power? From where the body-focused male/female dichotomy? To answer these questions, I have drawn particularly on two works by Marx-inspired European/Western gender scholars: Maria Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986) and Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), both groundbreaking books with profound critiques of mainstream conceptions of gender.

Marx has nothing to say on gender, and his major work, *Capital*, was published more than 150 years ago (1867) – so why Marx? The answer is that Marx's analysis of the inner mechanisms of capitalism is still valid, with the bottom-line insight that in capitalist economy human beings act as the means for the goal of economic profit, not the other way round. And capitalism is still with us, more global and more powerful than ever before. Thus, beyond all shortcomings and blind spots (such as regarding gender), critical scholarship still draws inspiration from Marx. Federici particularly draws on one chapter in *Capital*, the chapter on 'So-called Primitive Accumulation'. Here Marx describes the beginnings of capitalism in Europe in the last part of the 15th and in the 16th century, with the 'enclosure of the commons', when peasants were forcefully removed from access to the land on which they had grown the crops and kept the animals that gave them subsistence. These peasants were "robbed of all their own means of production … The history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire" (Marx 1867/1990, 621).

Previous peasants were turned into wage workers for emerging industrial production. Federici, who spent some years in Nigeria during the World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP), has written about what took place under SAP, which she sees as very parallel to 'Primitive Accumulation': through violent means subsistence production is turned into capitalist production, and previous peasants into wage workers – even when

there was no wage work to get (Federici 2012). Marx is aware that a precondition for the establishment of capitalism as such, was:

> the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting for black skins ... These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation (Marx 1867/1990, 651).

But Marx does not go into details; colonialism is not his subject. Marx is concerned with the development of capitalism in Europe and his focus in this chapter is how previous peasants were turned into wage workers—proletarians. Mies and Federici look into the aspects of gender, not included in Marx's analysis. According to Mies, "the process of proletarianization of the men was accompanied by the process of housewifization of women" (Mies 1986, 69).

In the pre-capitalist peasant household – in England as elsewhere in Europe – there had been a complementarity of gender tasks: men were responsible for a particular range of tasks, women for another. Neither a man nor a woman could run a farm alone; a man as well as a woman were needed for making things work according to expectations. Similarly, for craftsmen in town: "The ideal economic and social unit in the guild was the family workshop … the wife would be responsible for purchase of raw material, for sale of the products of the workshop and for catering for and taking care of workmen, apprentices, maids and children" (Jacobsen 1986, 121). Historian Grethe Jacobsen highlights the equal value of the work of man and woman respectively: "There are no indications that the work of one sex was more highly valued than the work of the other. The work of either was equally important and necessary for optimal function of family and society" (Jacobsen 1986, 109).

However, with industrialisation the worlds of men and women were torn apart; men as wageworkers, women as housewives. With wage work and factory production, types of male and female work, which previously in the farm as well as in the urban workshop had taken place in the same unit, were now divided. The industrial 'public' sphere was seen as male, the private sphere as female. This public/private division turned out to be decisive for conceptions of gender in the Western world, and an important background for Enlightenment philosophers' conceptualisations of gender.

Maria Mies: Motherwork – a feminist conceptual strategy

Marx's analysis in *Capital* focuses on industrial production, where wage workers (generally male) produce surplus value for capital. Marx's definition of productive work is work that produces surplus value. Maria Mies takes this concept – 'productive work' – and applies it controversially to women's act of giving birth to new human beings – a phenomenon Marx takes for granted as a fact of nature. Mies insists on expanding the idea of 'productive work' to include the act of giving birth. Giving birth is work, she says, exceptionally productive work:

> Out of their body [women] produce new children, as well as the first food for these children. It is of crucial importance … that women's activity in producing children and milk is understood as truly human, that is conscious, social activity.… The activity of women in bearing and rearing children has to be understood as *work* (Mies 1986, 53, italics in original).

Similar to the difference Marx (in another chapter of *Capital*) describes in the distinction between the architect and the bee – "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality," (Marx 1867/1990, 154) – mothers have ideas regarding their children; human hopes and aspirations, human culture, consciousness and imagination contribute extensively to the project and the product.

In the processes of giving birth, breastfeeding, care and maintenance, nature and culture are intertwined in unique and important ways – particularly so since the process of producing new human beings is a protracted affair, seven years a minimum. The concept of 'motherwork' – covering Mies' description above but coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1994) – is an important contribution to feminist theorising. The theoretical implications of the concept of 'motherwork' are comparable to those of Amadiume's 'motherhood paradigm'; by revealing the implicit male focus of social science, these conceptualisations point to the potential for more gender-inclusive lines of thinking.

Witch-hunts and Enlightenment thinking

Maria Mies' line of thinking regarding 'motherwork' highlights the damage done by the witch-hunts, which took place in the early centuries of capital accumulation, as a "war against women" (Federici 2004, 88). Women targeted for prosecution as witches often had particular knowledge of motherwork; they were birth helpers and midwives, the 'wise women' of medieval society. Mies shows how the European witch-hunts in the 16th and 17th centuries, backed by Enlightenment thinking, were instrumental in creating the image of subordinate women. "Only after centuries of most brutal attacks against their sexual and productive autonomy, European women became the dependent domesticated housewives that we are in principle today" (Mies 1986, 69). These processes paved the way for seeing women's contribution to society in terms of producing children as well as the first food for these children "as purely physiological functions, comparable to other mammals, and lying outside the sphere of conscious human influence" (Mies 1986, 54); as plainly and simply 'fertility'. Even today, this is how this immensely important contribution is perceived the world over by demographers and population planners. For feminists, it must be imperative to combat this simplified and distorted view.

The 16th and 17th centuries were times of turmoil in Europe, with emerging capitalism, peasant uprisings and protracted wars. In pre-capitalist times, according to Carolyn Merchant in her book, *The Death of Nature* (Merchant 1980), 'nature' had been perceived as a living organism with inherent creative power. In the 16th and 17th centuries, however, the dominant metaphor binding together cosmos, nature and society changed from the organism to the machine. Previously, "the image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings. One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body" (Merchant 1980, 3). But commercial mining would soon require exactly that. An entire worldview was under transformation – a transformation with explicitly gendered overtones. New lines of thinking were needed; these were provided by philosophers such as Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650).

British philosopher Francis Bacon was close to King James I, who was a keen witch-hunter; he had even written a book *Daemonologie* (James I 1597) on the topic. A few years later, the King's protégé, Francis Bacon, drafted a manuscript titled *The Masculine Birth of Time* (Bacon 1603), with a programme for investigation of nature, inspired by methods of torture and trial of presumed witches (Merchant 1980, 168–170; Hammil 2020). According to Merchant, in Bacon's thinking, nature is transformed from a creative and life-giving power, to be treated with reverence and respect, into a resource to be mastered and controlled. At the same time, male dominance is emphasised. Men are the ones to enact the mastering and control of nature – including women, who are categorised as close to/part of nature.

With French philosopher René Descartes, a man/woman gender hierarchy, reinforced through witch-hunts and housewifisation, is built into the very concepts of his thinking. Descartes' emphasis on rational thought, expressed in his *Cogito ergo sum* ("I think, thus I exist") is spoken from the position of a male ego, the Man of Reason (European, white). Descartes' world is organised in terms of hierarchical dichotomies: mind/body, reason/feeling, human/nature, man/woman. Mind is rational, human, masculine; body is nature, feeling, feminine. Man is master of nature and of women.

At that time, patriarchy as such was not a new phenomenon, but in the thinking of people like Bacon and Descartes it was cemented and reinforced. The idea that 'nature' should be mastered by Man had been around for a long time. Indeed, this is what God says to Adam in *Genesis*, chapter 1 of *The Holy Bible*. Likewise, in classical Greece, patriarchal ideas were afoot, as expressed by Aristotle, who attributed gestation to men, while women, by giving birth, only supplied raw matter. Thus, patriarchy as such was nothing new; what is at issue is its form and shape, and to what extent it is socially dominant. Even under conditions of patriarchy, in the pre-capitalist, pre-industrial era in Europe, there was a parallel line of women's knowledge, particularly connected to healing, procreation, midwifery, and birth-control. Knowledge about sexuality, giving birth and how to prevent pregnancy was a female domain – precisely the kind of knowledge which became eradicated with the witch-hunts.

Section Three (b): Conceptions of gender in the international development regime

The situation now in the 2020s is that, in spite of consistent critique from scholars and activists from the Global South, these European/Western conceptions of gender with roots in witch-hunts and male-focused Enlightenment thinking continue to be guiding ideas and paradigms for gender aspects of Western-funded development programmes and institutions. Development work on gender promotes European/Western conceptions, as shown, for example, by the series of UN World Conferences on Women (1975–1995). Through this string of conferences, running over two decades, a globally uniform vocabulary of gender was established – a vocabulary rooted in Western understandings of gender in terms of male dominance/female subordination. This was also the conceptual framework for the *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (World Bank 2012). Power is perceived as male, subordination as female; 'gender equality' is perceived as women being enabled for entering male domains of power, politics and knowledge. A closer look reveals that in development contexts so-called 'women's empowerment' is frequently about money: women's involvement in 'income generation' and/or 'micro credit schemes'. Whatever power women might have had in so-called 'traditional society' is invisible.

Western feminist thinking was greatly revitalised when the New Women's Movement, the so-called 'Second Wave' emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the US and in Europe. This Movement was connected to the 'New Left', i.e., to Marxist/socialist thinking and to movements disconnecting Marxism/socialism from what took place in the Soviet Union. The so-called 'First Wave' of feminism had been the movements for women's voting rights in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; women's suffrage in Scandinavian countries was achieved around the time of World War I. The suffrage movements were women's movements for equal rights with men within the existing system; no critique of capitalism was involved. In the New Women's Movement in Denmark, we struggled with developing a Marxist feminist thinking, albeit without much success – mainly (as I see it now) because we looked for answers to our questions regarding women and gender in Marx's *Capital*, where such answers are not to be found. Meanwhile American

feminists had pointed to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) as the foundational text of the 'Second Wave' women's movement (Nicholson 1997). We in the socialist-inclined part of the Danish New Women's Movement felt this was a step backwards into the 'First Wave' feminist movement, but we did not have the conceptual tools to argue convincingly against it.

In hindsight, de Beauvoir as a feminist still thought in terms of Descartes' hierarchical dichotomies of mind/body, human/nature and man/woman. In de Beauvoir's project of women's emancipation, Man is the model. The conceptual pair she took over from Jean-Paul Sartre, transcendence/immanence, fits perfectly into the Cartesian hierarchical dichotomies: transcendence stands for creativity and all interesting and worthwhile activities; immanence for the body, nature, domestic work, menstruation, and giving birth. De Beauvoir wanted to get rid of it all, in order to join the men in their exciting transcending activities. Substantial parts of de Beauvoir's writing in *The Second Sex* move along these lines, her language rich in phallic metaphors:

> Homo faber has from the beginning of time been an inventor: the stick and the club with which he armed himself to knock down fruits and to slaughter animals became forthwith instruments for enlarging his grasp upon the world ... he set up goals and opened up roads toward them … he burst out of the present, he opened the future (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 95).

This movement of bursting out of the present, and of opening the future is always a movement forwards, upwards "given that the basic image of the project remains male erection and ejaculation" as acknowledged by de Beauvoir's otherwise very loyal interpreter, feminist philosopher Toril Moi (1994, 152). In contrast to this creative activity of the archetypical hero, 'immanence' is described as passivity and repetition, the drudgery of domestic work, in which giving birth, breastfeeding, and motherhood are included.

> The woman who gave birth ... did not know the pride of creation; she felt herself a plaything of obscure forces, and the painful ordeal of childbirth seemed a useless and even troublesome accident. But in any case, giving birth and suckling are not activities, they are natural functions; no project is involved; and that is why woman found in them no reason for a lofty affirmation of her existence – she submitted passively to her biological fate (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 94).

This value hierarchy – along the lines set out by Descartes – leads de Beauvoir to proclaim that "it is not in giving birth but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills" (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 95–96).

A welcome feminist counter-voice to de Beauvoir is Ursula le Guin, in her short and spot-on 'male hero'-critical essay: *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (le Guin 1986). "So long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing, I never thought I had, or wanted, any particular share in it" (le Guin 1986, 153). Le Guin's alternative to the sticking, bashing, killing 'hero story' is the one about the carrier bag, the container for collecting and gathering food to share; not heroic, but good for life. Anyhow, she says, "it is the story that makes the difference" (le Guin 1986, 153). "The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story," we have to get into "the other story, the untold one, the life story" (le Guin 1986, 154).

De Beauvoir, however, tells the killer story. To her the female body is a handicap, turning woman into "the victim of the species" (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 52). Never ever is the female body with its capacity for pregnancy, childbirth and lactation seen as a positive potential. To de Beauvoir the female body is always and only a curse, a drag and a burden: "Parturition in cows and mares is much more painful and dangerous than it is in mice and rabbits …. From puberty to menopause the woman is the theatre of a play that unfolds within her and in which she is not personally concerned" (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 60). De Beauvoir continues over many pages her descriptions of the horrors of the female body, all connected to the ordeal of childbirth and woman's enslavement to the species (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 55–65). With her story enclosed in the Cartesian narrative of hierarchical dichotomies, de Beauvoir lacks le Guin's insight that "it is the story that makes the difference."

Storytelling is what theorising is all about: how issues are perceived, described, conceptualised. Most of the horrors of womanhood described by de Beauvoir are conditioned by post-witch hunts capitalist society and the resulting female subordination. Mies' and Hill Collins' concept of motherwork makes room for different stories; stories of motherhood connected to pleasure

and pride. These kinds of stories also emerge from African feminist thinking as developed by Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí.

However, in the contemporary political scene of most Western countries, it is de Beauvoir's approach that leads the way for stories and conceptions of gender equality: women's equality with men on male terms; an equality which can only be acquired by disavowing the female body – and handing over some of its functions and tasks to lower class women, as it has happened since the days of the early capitalist bourgeoisie, with working class wetnurses and maids. Nowadays in the Western world these women often are racialised others, women migrants from the Global South.

The World Bank's approach to gender equality as articulated in the World Development Report 2012: *Gender Equality and Development*, as well as in strategy documents and action plans, such as the 2007-10 action plan: *Gender Equality as smart Economics* (2007), is based on de Beauvoir's 'Man the model' idea. The same applies to the notion of gender embedded in the UN *Sustainable Development Goals*. In these contexts, 'women's empowerment' is about integrating women into capitalist economic circulations. Seen from the positions of decolonial Latin American feminists, this Western dominated international feminism is colonial feminism:

> This feminism wears heels, suits and uses bankcards. They look at themselves in the mirror as 'actresses' of a society and not as subjects of collective political change. It is a feminism, which has disposed the spontaneous organizing of women, and neutralized it in nongovernment organizations, foundations, academies and political parties. … It is a feminism that does not construct autonomy but asks for equality, assimilating the feminine world into the masculine (Gargallo 2014, cited in Rodrigues Castro 2021, 4).

'Colonial feminism' is an extended version of the 'corporate feminism' denounced by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser in their *Feminism for the 99% – A Manifesto* (Arruza et al. 2019, 1).

Sylvia Tamale is precise and eloquent in her critique of 'gender equality feminism', juxtaposing it with ideas of complementarity and gender justice: "The concept of 'equality' is predicated upon fundamental but flawed notions of liberal individualism and universalism," she says. "Values such as equity, social justice and *Ubuntu* resonate much more with the traditional

understandings of most African people" (Tamale 2020, 132). *Ubuntu* means something like "I am because you are", pointing to reciprocity and interconnectedness, very different from the individuality and rationality of the Cartesian "I think, thus I exist". "Interdependence and compassion are the bedrock on which communities are built," Tamale says (2020, 140). It is important "to unwed our conceptual thinking from Western social ideas, particularly the emphasis on individualism, and begin viewing our indigenous cultures as legitimate analytical frameworks … Our tradition equips us with useful tools that we can use to achieve gender justice; *Ubuntu* is simply one of them" (Tamale 2020, 142).

Conclusion

By looking into different conceptions of gender, first conceptions embedded in traditional female rituals of initiation, and second conceptions of gender as developed and espoused by decolonial African and Latin American gender scholars, a platform has been established from where to look critically into the development of 'modern' ideas of gender in the context of early capitalism and industrialisation. The analysis reveals a close connection between early capitalism, industrialisation, witch-hunts and Enlightenment thinking, all of which paved the way for ideas of gender in terms of hierarchical dichotomies of male dominance/female subordination. In this context, women's equality is understood as women's access to male domains, while pregnancy and childbirth block the road to equality. This conception of gender has come to be seen as a basic ingredient in European modernity, first imposed by colonialism and later appropriated by the international development regime, including the UN and the World Bank. The point of the paper has been to encourage, through critical investigations of 'modernity', re-interpretations of so-called 'tradition' from women's points of view.

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Gender as a Development Tool: Depoliticisation, Crisis Discourse, and Academic Constraints

Sandra Manuel

Abstract

In this paper, I critically examine the use of gender as a development tool within the international development system, highlighting its depoliticisation, instrumentalisation, and disconnection from local epistemologies, especially in Africa. Although gender has been part of development discourse since the 1995 Beijing Conference, in its practical application it is often reduced to a technical framework, sidelining its transformative potential. Drawing on African feminist critiques, particularly the foundational works of Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, as well as contemporary analysis, the paper challenges the universalisation of Western gender constructs and emphasises alternative organising principles such as matrifocality and seniority. It also critiques the concept of "girling development" and the portrayal of women's empowerment as a means to achieve economic growth rather than a pursuit of structural change. Focusing on a case study of Mozambique, I analyse how donor-driven agendas shape gender and sexuality research at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, limiting theoretical engagement in favour of policy-oriented work. Ultimately, I advocate for a gender research approach grounded in local realities and knowledge systems, which would encourage epistemic contributions from the Global South that can reshape global gender discourses.

Keywords: gender, development, Mozambique, epistemology, knowledge production, donor agendas, academia

Introduction

The concept of gender has long been fundamental to academic discussions as a framework for analysing societal structures, roles, and identities. In Western feminist theory, gender is frequently viewed as a binary system closely connected to power dynamics and patriarchy. This perspective emphasises how societal norms and institutions uphold gender inequalities, often within a male-female dichotomy. Nevertheless, some scholars challenge this binary view, arguing that it may not universally apply and could misrepresent the social realities of different cultures.

Various feminist scholars have challenged the conceptualisation of gender. Several feminist authors from the Global South (Amadiume 1987; Oyěwùmí 1997; Lugones 2007; de Lima Costa 2016) have supported Mohanty's (1988) critique of the marginalised and stereotyped portrayals of Third World Women in which she emphasised that the concept of gender was rooted in Euro-North American cultural experiences, and that it either did not exist in precolonial societies or manifested in very different forms (Newman and Aoun 2024, 14–15). Crenshaw (1989) introduced race and intersectionality as central frameworks for gender analysis while Butler (1993; 1999) deployed performativity to reflect on the concept of gender.

Notably, Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí have critiqued the imposition of Western gender constructs on Nnobi and Yoruba, respectively, in Nigeria, demonstrating why such cultural constructs cannot be universally applied. Their arguments regarding seniority, motherhood and matrifocality reshape hegemonic understandings of gender as well as social and family organisation. Such insights have yet to be incorporated into the international development regime which, in programmes and initiatives in the Global South, has somewhat uncritically adopted the binary concept of gender.

Since the 1995 Beijing Conference, the integration of gender into international development discussions has significantly transformed policy and programme initiatives. Gender has become a widely adopted framework among civil society groups, policymakers, and development organisations, shaping various interventions and funding priorities. However, despite its

increased prominence, the way gender is operationalised within international development often depoliticises and instrumentalises the concept, undermining its transformative potential.

This paper examines the counterproductive ways gender is used within the international development system. It highlights how gender mainstreaming, although intended to promote equality, often reduces gender to a technical tool that fails to challenge existing power structures. Furthermore, integrating gender into development projects has turned feminist issues into professional concerns, shifting focus from political activism to bureaucratic efficiency. This shift has allowed international institutions to use gender in ways that often depart from feminist epistemologies and critical gender studies.

This analysis highlights a significant issue: how crisis discussions about gender in the Global South perpetuate colonial and racialised views of non-Western women and girls. The increasing focus on the "girling of development" (Khoja-Moolji 2020)—where young girls become the central figures of development initiatives—demonstrates the problematic depiction of gender issues through a Western neo-liberal lens that favours economic and social investment over fostering structural change. Additionally, the paper critiques how women's empowerment is often presented as a means to an end while gender equality is equated with the achievement of capitalist objectives or other developmental targets.

The paper further examines how these global dynamics are reflected in Mozambique's higher education sector, with a primary focus on gender and sexuality research at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane. It explores how international donor agendas shape academic research, often restricting critical and theoretical investigations of gender and sexuality in favour of a version of applied, policy-driven research that focuses on deliverables, log-frames and indicators that respond to predefined donor agendas and measurable outputs. The paper argues that this pattern results in the instrumentalisation of knowledge production, in which research is guided by external funding priorities rather than intellectual curiosity and the advancement of disciplines.

Ultimately, this analysis aims to illuminate the contradictions in the use of gender in international development and higher education. In the paper, I deconstruct these counterproductive practices and advocate for a gender

research approach in Mozambique that aligns with local realities, lived experiences and local knowledge systems, offering distinct epistemic contributions. Thus, it demonstrates how knowledge production from the Global South – here understood as encompassing people with heterogeneous experiences but analytically a zone of belonging elsewhere (Khoja-Moolji 2020) – can expand, challenge, and debate concepts and perspectives within the global social sphere rather than being narrowed and provincialised to the South.

Theoretical frames of gender in international development

The incorporation of gender into international development has historically been influenced by various feminist genealogies and global political moments. Women in Development (WID) arose from the first two waves of feminism – though one must acknowledge that "wave" is not an unproblematic metaphor. The first wave – the women's suffrage movement – saw women in North America campaigning for equal voting rights and political participation. The second wave addressed ongoing social and cultural inequalities faced by women (Khoja-Moolji 2020), such as reproductive rights, sexual violence, sexual discrimination, and the glass ceiling. The lived experiences of white middle-class women heavily shaped these Western feminist perspectives.

Feminist scholars, including African and postcolonial voices, critiqued universalising assumption feminist genealogies informed by the West and how it rendered invisible the impact of other forms of discrimination such as race and class (Crenshaw 1989). Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) notes how the focus on 'coital and conjugal' sites marginalised broader questions of economic and cultural autonomy, especially in African contexts where kinship and reproduction are socially organised through collective rather than nuclear family structures.

Women and Development (WAD) emerged as a response to critiques of WID's failure to address structural inequalities. Influenced by Marxist and socialist feminism, WAD emphasised the exploitation of women under capitalism, highlighting women's labour in both productive and reproductive spheres. However, WAD also carried assumptions shaped by Western economic

models and often generalised women's conditions in the Global South without considering their specific and diverse histories and epistemologies.

A more radical shift occurred with Gender and Development (GAD), which introduced gender as a relational and power-laden concept. Instead of merely adding women to development, GAD promoted analysis of gender roles and expectations focused on material aspects of women's subordination and viewed gender relations as power relations. This shift was important but also had its limitations. Early GAD approaches often reinforced binary oppositions between women and men, neglecting intra-gender dynamics, queer and non-binary identities, and power relations among women themselves. Furthermore, the household, a key unit of analysis in GAD, reflected Eurocentric assumptions about nuclear families and did not represent the diversity of family structures in other regions, including Africa.

What followed in the 1990s was the formal integration of gender within development agendas, particularly after the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. Mainstreaming Gender Equality became a policy tool for ensuring that gender issues were incorporated into all programmes and policies. However, in practice, mainstreaming often involved merely ticking boxes, generating gender indicators, and reducing gender to a managerial concern. The feminist call for transformation was replaced by a discourse of inclusion and efficiency. Feminists from the Global South introduced the language of women's empowerment to challenge women's exclusion from economic and political life (Cornwall 2014). Yet, by the 2000s, the concept of empowerment itself had been co-opted.

Empowerment came to signify investing in women and girls not for their own emancipation but to achieve broader development goals. This shift—from fostering critical consciousness to a focus on investment—reflected the increasing alignment between international development efforts and corporate interests. As Batliwala (cited in Cornwall 2014, 130) notes, the feminist foundations of empowerment were gradually replaced by a market-driven discourse. Stripped of its political significance, gender was seen as a means to improve health, alleviate poverty, and promote economic growth (Cornwall 2014).

Thus, from early gender-blind models, development discourse shifted towards including women and girls in economic and social agendas. Today, gender is often seen as a means for efficiency rather than as a basis for the pursuit of equity. This shift is evident in frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, which frequently neglect issues of power and justice. Such frameworks reflect an instrumentalist logic in which gender equality is viewed as a way to promote economic growth or stability rather than as an end in itself.

Instrumentalism in development operates under the assumption that investing in women produces measurable benefits: more productive economies, healthier families, and lower fertility rates, for example. As Naila Kabeer (2015) notes, this reflects a conflation of gender relations with poverty, which legitimises policy relevance over political struggle. The appeal of instrumentalist logic lies in its compatibility with donor demands for quantifiable outcomes and its alignment with neoliberal forms of governance that prioritise efficiency over transformation.

What has been lost in this instrumentalist turn is precisely the political imagination that shaped earlier feminist critiques. By focusing on equity, justice, and epistemic plurality, feminist scholarship from the Global South—particularly in Africa—offers pathways for rethinking development beyond managerialism. The following sections examine how these critiques are articulated, both in scholarship and in development practice, and how they reveal the limits of dominant approaches to gender in the Global South.

Is gender a universally valuable concept?

In contemporary African thought, an increasing number of scholars of gender and feminist studies are engaging with the concepts of seniority and matrifocality. These concepts have developed from ethnographic descriptions into strong analytical and epistemological tools. Rather than simply portraying static traditions or family structures, these frameworks reveal complex dynamics of power, social reproduction and resistance, especially in ways that gender-based analyses alone might miss. As the analysis will show, various contemporary African scholars have demonstrated how these concepts allow

for a rethinking of authority and kinship beyond colonial and Western paradigms.

The early theoretical foundations of this shift were laid by African postcolonial feminists such as Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí. Amadiume (1987), in her study of the matricentric society of Nnobi in southeastern Nigeria, introduced the concepts of "female husbands" and "male daughters" to illustrate a social system organised around not binary gender roles but seniority and lineage. Women in positions of economic or genealogical power could marry wives and control land, with kinship and political authority defined through matrilineal lines. This practice is not exclusive to matricentric societies as it is also common in patrilineal societies, where wealthy and childless women play the role of the husband in every sense except engaging in sexual intercourse with the wife (though she chooses/approves a sexual partner for her wife). In patrilineal societies, children from such a marriage trace their lineage through their (female) father, not their mother, as among the Nandi in Kenya (Oboler 1980, Kendall 1995). Oyěwùmí (1997), analysing Yoruba society, argued that kinship categories encoded seniority rather than gender, challenging the assumption that gender is a universal organising principle. She criticised the Western "biologic" that naturalises gender hierarchies and showed how Yoruba social organisation revolves around age and seniority, not sex-based classification.

These early critiques paved the way for a broader epistemic rupture with the universalist application of gender in feminist and development discourse. They drew attention to the cultural specificity of gendered categories and laid the groundwork for a new wave of scholarship that reframes matrifocality and seniority as dynamic, historically contingent, and politically generative.

Building on this foundation, recent scholarship has deepened and expanded the analytical scope of these concepts. Graness and Kopf (2024) argue that seniority functions as a counter-epistemology to Western individualist models of authority, allowing for forms of leadership grounded in relational accountability and intergenerational responsibility. Magoqwana and Göçek (2024) similarly emphasise the epistemic authority of senior women, reframing them as agents of cultural continuity and political influence.

Matrifocality, too, is increasingly theorised as a lens through which to analyze social organisation in ways that subvert patriarchal norms. Madhavan et al. (2018) and Yacob-Haliso (2025) document how matrifocal households respond adaptively to conditions such as male labour migration and the weakening of state institutions. These households centre women not merely as caregivers but as decision-makers, economic providers, and community leaders. The matrifocal family thus becomes a site of both resistance and innovation, reconfiguring social reproduction in ways that challenge conventional gender binaries.

This re-theorisation also confronts colonial historiography, which frequently depicted matrifocal and seniority-based systems as anarchic or regressive. Colonial ethnographers and administrators often viewed African societies through patriarchal lenses, interpreting female authority or non-gendered hierarchies as deviations from normative progress. Contemporary scholars, such as Grillo (2018), reclaim these systems as coherent, moral and politically intentional. Grillo's analysis of female genital power —women's use of their genitals to demonstrate spiritual and moral power that influences the affairs of their societies —underscores the centrality of these frameworks to ethical and political life.

The intersection of seniority and matrifocality provides a particularly rich avenue for exploring a path of African feminist epistemologies. Instead of relying solely on gender as the primary axis of analysis, these concepts emphasise how authority, belonging, and agency are negotiated through age, relationality, and embeddedness within kinship networks. Studies by Frehiwot (2022) demonstrate how matrifocal structures, especially when led by senior women, create alternative modes of governance, care, and resistance that escape both colonial and liberal feminist frameworks.

These developments have not occurred without internal contestation. Oyěwùmí's critique of gender as irrelevant in Yoruba society, for example, sparked debate within African feminist circles. Bakare-Yusuf cautioned against generalising about the continent based on Yoruba practices and stressed the need to examine how power, age, and gender interact in historically dynamic ways (2004). Charmaine Pereira reframed the issue, asking how specific conceptualisations of gender may either enable or restrict agency depending

on context (2004). Such exchanges exemplify the ongoing evolution and reflection within African feminist theorisation.

Importantly, these theoretical advances are not about romanticising precolonial institutions or reclaiming authenticity. Rather, they are part of a broader decolonial project that seeks to develop concepts rooted in lived realities and capable of responding to contemporary challenges. Frehiwot (2022), for example, demonstrates how matrifocality informs the Made in Africa Evaluation framework, which privileges community-defined wellbeing over external metrics. This framework embodies a shift away from imported categories and toward locally grounded, theoretically rich approaches to development and knowledge production.

In sum, the concepts of seniority and matrifocality have evolved from early critiques of Western gender epistemologies into sophisticated tools for rethinking power, resistance, and social reproduction. From the foundational works of Amadiume and Oyěwùmí to the more recent contributions of Frehiwot, Magoqwana, and Yacob-Haliso, scholars have demonstrated the theoretical depth and political relevance of these frameworks. Their ongoing refinement challenges the dominance of Eurocentric models in feminist theory and development practice, affirming the intellectual sovereignty of these lines of feminist thought from the African continent and expanding the horizon of decolonial knowledge production.

Counterproductive uses of gender in the context of development

Gender fragmentation, depoliticisation and professionalisation

Following the Beijing Conference, the international development regime saw gender become a common discursive tool among civil society groups, donors and policymakers at multiple levels of government globally. Gender owed its globalisation to GAD, especially through its integration into aid conditionalities. This has had major effects in the Global South, including shaping national policies, generating new ministries and departments, and boosting the number of NGOs focused on these issues (Newman and Aoun 2024).

Since the 2000s, United Nations agencies have played a pivotal role in redefining feminist ideas surrounding bodily integrity, sexual and reproductive rights, as well as concepts of sexuality, girlhood, and peace. Such an approach has taken the form of "one-size-fits-all" in many development initiatives, which often fail to consider the local contexts and cultural dynamics that shape women's lives. Feminists have been vocal in highlighting the setbacks of mainstreaming gender equality. Among other challenges, one issue centres on the way gender is utilised by various institutions within international development, which often fragments and depoliticises the concept itself (McFadden and Twasiima 2018; Cornwall 2014; Baden and Goetz 1997) and professionalises it (Nyambura 2018). Baden and Goetz articulate the problem:

> The variety of ways in which gender has come to be institutionalised and operationalised in the development arena encompasses a disjuncture between the feminist intent behind the term and the ways in which it is employed such as to minimise the political and contested character of relations between women and men (…) the concept of gender in development tends to be used in a descriptive manner in which the question of power is easily removed (Baden and Goetz 1997, 10).

Thus, the depoliticisation of gender signifies the neutralisation of its transformative potential, while its professionalisation involves transforming it into a technical term that satisfies bureaucratic demands. The redefinition of feminist ideas in international development, which has led to the fragmentation and depoliticisation of gender, is evident in several related patterns. The technocratisation of gender through gender mainstreaming has turned a once-political call for structural change into a bureaucratic process. New participants have entered the field: statisticians, economists, and econometricians are engaging in gender research to meet the rising demand from development bureaucracies for studies, analyses, and new gender-sensitive policies. Unfortunately, these newcomers often lack a commitment to feminist research and may be unfamiliar with core concepts, methodologies, and literature. As a result, development actors now emphasise measurable indicators, audits, and compliance mechanisms, often without critical engagement with issues of power and inequality. Consequently, gender is increasingly regarded as merely a statistical variable—reduced to a simple dichotomy of woman and man—

while ignoring relational dynamics, power structures, the structural roots of inequality, ideologies, and the ways privilege and disadvantage are perpetuated through a focus on procedural compliance rather than political transformation (Baden and Goetz 1997; Kanmodi et al. 2023; Newman and Aoun 2024).

Development institutions commodify feminist discourse and reshape feminism from a political identity into a more fashionable and socially acceptable idea. Mainstreaming gender positions it within a liberal philosophical framework that fails to adequately reveal or confront existing systems of power and privilege, and therefore undermines feminism's transformative potential. Consequently, international development has stripped gender of its critical, radical analytical capacity and has depoliticised women's interactions with patriarchy. As Bennett (2024) notes, feminist ideals are appropriated as branding strategies in development programmes and corporate social responsibility campaigns. This not only dilutes feminism's political edge but also reinforces the very structures of inequality it aims to dismantle. To cite an additional example, the term gender based violence refers to patriarchal violations and sexual impunity. However, this technocratic phrase holds little conceptual or theoretical significance in empowering women against patriarchal abuse and supremacist behaviour (McFadden and Twasiima 2018).

The development discourse often depends on technological optimism that ignores political engagement. Achiba (2019) shows how emphasis on ambitious, depoliticised technical solutions overlooks local power dynamics and indigenous knowledge systems. Women's rights and gender justice are often subordinated to wider economic narratives, leading to fragmented and decontextualised approaches to gender.

These patterns of fragmentation, depoliticisation, and gender professionalisation reveal a profound shift in the role of gender within the international development regime — from a framework rooted in struggle, solidarity, and structural critique to one aligned with technocratic governance and market rationality. Gender is no longer mobilised to expose or confront power, but is instead instrumentalised to deliver measurable outputs, appease donor requirements, and sustain depoliticised interventions. The transformation of feminist concepts into neutralised development jargon obscures the historical and political struggles from which they emerged.

Without a deliberate re-politicisation of gender — anchored in local contexts, collective action, and epistemic diversity — development risks perpetuating the very inequalities it claims to address.

Girling of development

A second concern emerged due to the dynamics of the last two decades. The international development regime has applied a discourse of crisis to gender dynamics in the Global South. On the one hand, the discourse was inspired by the continued understanding of gender relations as an oppositional system in which women and men are presumed to have no interests in common. On the other hand, the discourse is anchored in the shift in the meaning of women's empowerment from a pursuit of critical consciousness and collective action to an interest in investing in women and girls, which coincided with the growing appeal of international development to the corporate sector.

The crisis, often described as 'the girling of development' or a 'turn to the girl' (Hayhurst 2011; Switzer 2013; cited in Khoja-Moolji 2020) because of its concentration on girls, reflects both a continuation and a transformation of gender instrumentalism. While early feminist critiques rejected the image of passive Third World women in need of rescue, donor discourses increasingly depict girls—particularly in the Global South—as subjects in transition, whose value lies in their potential contributions to development. This point is borne out by the multitude of development campaigns targeting girls' education, menstrual hygiene, child marriage, breast ironing, and female genital cutting, and by concerns around girls' sexual activity and sexual violence.

This crisis discourse frames the body of the girl from the Global South – the non-white girl – as other. The development gaze homogenises girls, cast as passive beneficiaries or entrepreneurial agents, without acknowledging their embeddedness in families, communities, and contested power relations. Girls' bodies are treated as sites for technical intervention—whether to delay childbirth, increase contraceptive uptake, or deliver sanitary pads. Such treatment reproduces colonial tropes of non-Western girlhood as inherently backward and in need of saving, which are repackaged through neoliberal aspirations of investment and productivity. This crisis discourse, as argued by

Khoja-Moolji, "legitimise[s] narratives and logics that can become the new norm, occasioning multiple forms of exclusions and marginalisations (…) participating in bringing third world/Global South girls under the purview of biopolitical and necropolitical renderings of different human lives as having differential value" (Khoja-Moolji 2020, 66).

Critics have pointed out the gap between programme objectives and local realities, the lack of intersectional perspectives, and the limited space for adolescent girls' own political agency. They have demonstrated that redefining empowerment as merely training or cash assistance, without addressing the material and symbolic structures that influence girls' lives, risks reinforcing the very inequalities it aims to dismantle (Boyd 2016).

The 'girling' of development becomes another form of gender instrumentalism that emphasises donor interests, directs resources and creates success stories, often at the expense of feminist politics and social justice. Without tackling the underlying power structures, such programmes risk offering visibility instead of genuine change. This approach has wide-ranging consequences. By depicting girls as vulnerable victims and untapped resources, development efforts oversimplify complex socio-political issues into technical solutions. This shifts the focus away from collective action and feminist organising, instead placing the onus for change solely on girls. It marginalises boys, overlooks the role of adult men and elders in upholding gender norms, and excludes systemic actors such as the state and traditional institutions from accountability. Additionally, it risks reinforcing racialised and colonial stereotypes of the girl from the Global South as passive and dependent on external salvation. These narratives undermine girls' political agency and support a donor-driven development agenda that prioritises short-term results over enduring justice.

Global South women as a neoliberal asset

The third problematic use of gender relates to the women's empowerment approach adopted by the international development regime, which utilises women for capitalist gains and to achieve other development objectives. This approach reinforces stereotypical gender traits that development initially aims

to challenge. Investing in women is presented to policymakers not merely as a means to fulfil their obligations to gender equality and women's rights but also as a strategy to stimulate economic growth and attain other development goals, such as investing in women's education to support population control, child welfare, and nutrition. This approach has successfully convinced international development banks, bilateral agencies, and corporate donors that paying attention to women produces tangible benefits (Cornwall 2014).

The World Bank's policy document for Beijing essentially justified its focus on gender through efficiency, aligning women's interests with the promotion of economic liberalisation: "Sound economic policies and well-functioning markets are essential for growth, employment and the creation of an environment in which the returns to investing in women and girls can be fully realised" (World Bank cited in Baden and Goetz 1997, 9)

Framed within the logic of "smart economics," women are depicted as untapped assets whose economic inclusion will generate gains in productivity, health, and social stability—thus aligning feminist objectives with donor efficiency metrics. The Girl Effect by the Nike Foundation is an example. It was labelled as the "highest return investment strategy" to alleviate poverty, portraying girls as key economic actors. However, as Boyd (2016) argues, beneath the facade of promoting gender equality and empowerment, financialised language, expressed in phrases such as "credit markets," "untapped resources for cheap labour," and "debtors," reveals how girls are reconceptualised as economic assets rather than rights-holding individuals. Boyd further asserts that such programmes deepen inequality on multiple levels. Personally, girls are shaped into market-ready subjects tasked with addressing development challenges. Systemically, their labour and consumption are exploited to sustain debt-driven economies and low-wage markets, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging neoliberal structures.

The smart economics narrative is particularly evident in microfinance initiatives and entrepreneurship programmes that focus on women's self-reliance through access to credit or business training. As Boeri (2018) observes, such programmes often reinforce neoliberal ideals by shaping women into entrepreneurial subjects while the state withdraws from broader responsibilities for ensuring economic justice. The logic of self-sufficiency masks the structural

barriers—such as informal labour markets, unequal care burdens, and discriminatory inheritance laws—that limit women's agency. Wilson (2015) critiques this form of neoliberal feminism which conflates market participation with empowerment and overlooks systemic change.

In summary, framing women in the Global South as neoliberal assets undermines the potential for feminist change. It encourages a form of economic citizenship that is conditional, instrumental, and often exploitative. Without addressing the intersecting inequalities that influence women's lives—such as class, race, geography, age, and sexuality—development risks merely reproducing the very systems of exclusion it aims to dismantle. This approach also overlooks the inherently gendered nature of institutions themselves.

After analysing the problematic uses of gender within the international development regime and reflecting on the widespread consequences for women, men and society in the Global South, the paper will now turn to the specific case of Mozambique.

Navigating donor agendas: Gender research in Mozambique's higher education

This section will analyse gender research production at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (UEM) in Mozambique, where I am a lecturer and researcher. Most scholarly research on gender and sexuality in Mozambique takes place at universities, particularly at UEM, the country's flagship institution. Since the 1980s, UEM has maintained a strong tradition of research on women and gender through the Centre of African Studies (Casimiro and Andrade 2005) as well as the departments of Anthropology, History, and Sociology. A notable exception is the feminist non-governmental organisation Women and Law in Southern Africa Research and Education Trust (WLSA – Mozambique), which separated from UEM's Centre of African Studies in 2003 to establish itself as an independent entity (Casimiro and Andrade 2010). While WLSA — which operated independently from 2003 until its closure in 2023—has been highly regarded as a feminist research institution in Mozambique, I am interested in gender and/or feminist research that has contributed to theory rather than through action-research and activism, as was the case with WLSA.

The dynamics of research production at UEM reflect a complex interplay of structural, institutional, and external factors.

Human capital continues to be a key constraint on research production at UEM. Although the proportion of academic staff with postgraduate training has risen, most faculty still do not hold doctoral degrees. The university offers a limited number of PhD courses, with doctoral students making up only one per cent of the total university's student population (Gabinete do Reitor UEM 2024). This creates a bottleneck in local postgraduate training and leads to dependence on external institutions, especially in Sweden, Belgium—through major training partnership programmes—as well as Portugal, Brazil, and South Africa. Such reliance often results in the reproduction of foreign theoretical frameworks, further restricting the development of indigenous research agendas, since donors usually have their own thematic priorities, which often differ from those of individual academics (Cloete et al. 2015, 121). This capacity gap affects not only the volume, but also the scope and depth of research outputs.

Chronic underfunding of research remains a crucial issue. The government's allocation to higher education has traditionally been very limited. Only a small portion of UEM's operational budget is assigned to research activities, as reported annually by the Rector (Gabinete do Reitor UEM 2024).Most research thus depends heavily on external funds and grants from development agencies, international organisations, and partnerships with foreign universities, a situation which leads to challenges related to sustainability and alignment with local priorities. Internal funding sources, such as the university's research fund (*Fundo de Investigação Científica*), remain inadequate and highly competitive. The absence of institutional support for fieldwork, data analysis tools, and publication costs significantly restricts the potential for sustained, independent research. Moreover, access to international journals, databases, and conference travel remains limited and uneven across faculties, which exacerbates inequalities in research output.

The internal governance and academic culture at UEM also influence research practices. Institutional incentives for publishing remain weak and inconsistent. The UEM's strategic plan articulates ambitions to become a research-led university, yet the mechanisms to implement this vision remain limited. The

Informes Anuais do Reitor (Vice-Chancellor's Annual Reports), published yearly since 2012, frequently identify the fragmentation of research efforts as a barrier to building a coherent institutional research profile.

The focus on research that directly promotes economic growth is widespread in the discourse surrounding funding in Mozambique. Research agendas are increasingly designed to produce results that support national development goals—particularly in sectors likely to yield economic benefits, such as agriculture, health, and technology. Therefore, perhaps the most noticeable influence on research at UEM comes from international donors. Thematic areas such as gender, health, the environment, and governance dominate due to the priorities of donor agencies and international NGOs (Cloete et al. 2015). These agendas are often part of externally funded projects, which have predefined methods, output formats, and deadlines. Donor-led research usually concentrates on results and aims at policy advice, leaving little room for theoretical innovation or long-term investigation. For example, the rise in baseline studies and evaluations commissioned by development partners has increased research activity but has also made it more short-term and applied. In many cases, academic staff are employed as consultants, further blurring the line between scholarly work and service provision.

Comparison with other universities in Africa indicates that the impact of donor influence depends on the specific context. At Makerere University, a large share of research funding comes from external donors, which restricts institutional independence and impels research to align with donor priorities (Kaweesi 2020). Academic staff have reported limited internal incentives for theoretical research and weak institutional management of research (Namuwonge 2024). In contrast, the University of Botswana benefits from substantial public investment and is less dependent on international aid, especially concerning the allocation of research and development funds (Cloete et al. 2015).

The evidence from UEM indicates a multi-causal explanation for research patterns. Capacity and resource limitations restrict the scope of potential research, while weak institutional incentives impede efforts to develop a coherent research agenda. Donor agendas, although they provide funding,

often impose thematic and methodological constraints that sideline critical, locally grounded scholarship.

UEM has invested in transforming itself into a research-led university, with a 2018–2028 strategic plan outlining the steps to expand and enhance research and research output. However, it still maintains a bookish teaching system that is centred on the teacher, favours the method of vertical transmission (top to bottom, teacher to student), and is structured around the classroom. Research remains a subsidiary activity, conducted when time permits after the primary activity of teaching (Wangenge-Ouma et al. 2015). Consequently, the country, and the university as well, continues to lack a strong research culture, which is reflected in low research outputs and limited postgraduate enrolments. At UEM, the largest university in Mozambique by enrolment, more than 95% of students are undergraduates (Monteiro 2010 and Bunting 2014 cited in Wangenge-Ouma et al. 2015).

In response to changes in higher education policies that mandated all university staff to begin their careers with at least a Master's degree, the university formed partnerships with bilateral collaborators to train its personnel. Many UEM staff travelled abroad to pursue Master's and PhD degrees. Those receiving training for their academic qualifications were the main contributors to research on gender and sexuality at UEM. The training programmes with bilateral partners often focused on themes that aligned with the country's development agenda, addressing areas in which collaborating countries were investing within Mozambique. For example, Belgium, through the Flemish-funded training programme titled *Development in Sexual and Reproductive Health, HIV/AIDS and Family Affairs through Interuniversity Multidisciplinary Research,* concentrated on these topics. The products of this 10-year programme (2008 to 2018) included 19 PhD and 29 Master's graduates, most of them staff at UEM, trained in Belgium in the fields of Anthropology, Sociology, Law, Statistics and Medicine, including Public Health. The research topics included: the country's response to the human rights obligation to protect children from sexual abuse; women's sexual and reproductive rights at work; social protection law in respect of people living with HIV and AIDS; reproductive inability in diverse medical systems in the country; pregnancy practices among HIV mothers; lesbian, bisexual, and transgender activism rights; communication and sexual and reproductive

health challenges for adolescents; maternal mortality at health units; induced abortion under the new abortion legislation; intimate partner violence and implications for medical curricula; factors associated with sero-discordance among couples in Mozambique; and men's representation of family planning.

Internally, both undergraduate and postgraduate students form an additional group that generates research through their end-of-course theses. Collectively, as lecturers and supervisors in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, one of the main challenges we identify during term meetings is students' inability to elaborate on anthropological questions that could guide their research. Students formulate questions aimed at addressing social issues rather than rendering social reality comprehensible.

Other sources of research funding include NGOs that set themes based on their agendas and allocate funds for students or lecturers to carry out research. Both the university and the country generally lack competitive research grants. Researchers rarely compete for or secure international competitive funding. It is common for professionals to undertake consultancy projects for donors, development agencies, as well as national and international NGOs operating within the country, as discussed in depth by Gonçalves (2019). As a result, much of the knowledge produced at the UEM on gender and sexuality is instrumentalist. Most of the research addresses programme-related questions from international development actors and bilateral partners. It does not prioritise theoretical, methodological, conceptual, or epistemological questions. Consequently, academic output tends to respond to societal demands rather than pose questions that promote reflection.

The impact of such a scenario on knowledge production concerning gender and sexuality is that international development influences shape the research agenda at universities. There is little or no critique of this situation. An example is the Master's in Gender and Development, which started in 2020 with an average of 20 students per year, and which is often utilised by students (frequently professionals in the field of international development) to gain capital as consultants or development workers and advantages outside academia rather than focused on understanding social and cultural dynamics of gender for theoretical, epistemological or methodological inquiry.

The scenario underscores a missed opportunity to incorporate everyday experiences and ordinary lived realities into our engagements in studies about Africa. As a result, only a few scholars specialising in gender and sexuality at the UEM participate in the global scientific community, and they are the exception. Their work presents intriguing gender analyses that deserve further investigation.

Specifically at the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, some colleagues conducted research in the early 2000s, most of which was part of their thesis development and provides us with interesting insights. The works fall into two different categories: critical approaches to mainstream gender and sexuality themes and poorly explored or unexplored themes.

Carla Braga explored, in her (2001) article, the *cicigale*, a conjugal residence system among the matrilineal Ayao in Niassa. The *cicigale* governs marriage and residence within the framework of matrilineal norms and local notions of authority, kinship, and legitimacy. In Braga's words, "the *cicigale* arrangement reflects female-centred domestic spaces, where senior women exercise authority over household land and decision-making, particularly in agricultural production and social reproduction". The epistemic significance of *cicigale* lies in how it redefines gendered power—not as a reflection of male domination over women, but as a negotiation of relational positions within a matrilineal social structure. Additionally, it influences how authority is defined and enacted by revealing how women's seniority and status within the lineage structure determine their influence over land, labour, and domestic resources.

Emidio Gune (2008) raised key questions regarding the social meanings of sexual and reproductive technologies, particularly the condom, in Mozambique under the HIV pandemic. He challenges us to recognise that while the condom itself is a new technology, the concept and use of similar devices are not, including in Mozambique. This prompts him to be critical of the assumption that a lack of education or ignorance explains the non-use of condoms. He highlights how the social and cultural meanings of personhood — which include the notion of the fractal person (Taylor 1990), social interaction, and sexual significance — are often ignored in such discussions. Gune's perspective encourages a better understanding of the meanings and values of sexual intercourse.

Esmeralda Mariano (2009) reflects on the social status and role of the *Sungukati*, a woman who has reached menopause, a matron and a woman of authority. A woman in this category plays a vital role in maintaining peace and harmony within the community by offering advice and guidance to younger women and couples, and is regarded as a resourceful person at both family and community levels. As a result, she is highly esteemed. By understanding *Sugukati*, one can reframe gender hierarchies beyond biological or sex differences to include gerontocracy and stages of life.

My own work takes intersectionality seriously by demonstrating how class serves to level gendered relations among cosmopolitans in urban Maputo (Manuel 2023). Young adult cosmopolitans' non-heteronormative sexual practices and the politics of managing emotional and intimate attachments in sexual relationships prompt timid transformations in gender praxis, thus indicating greater equity, more autonomous sexual lives for women, and the emergence of discourses around the control of the masculine body. Class serves as a marker here, as it levels gendered relations that, in the context of Southern Africa, have been widely examined under the discourse of inequality, particularly in relation to poverty and unequal access to resources.

These hints—emerging from research that has not yet been consistently explored due to the challenges of resources, time, and the pressure for uniformity in the understanding of gender advanced by the development regime—are revealing. They enable an expansion of understanding into how people organise their lives beyond the constraints of restrictive concepts.

The imposition of external knowledge systems through globalised knowledge production can weaken local epistemologies that offer more contextually appropriate solutions (Newman and Aoun, 2024). Similar power dynamics that impose foreign agendas and understandings of GAD disempower local communities. Furthermore, Kanmodi et al. (2023) highlight the global inequities in research production, where English-language dominance marginalises Global South voices and skews policy relevance towards reinforcing rather than challenging existing power structures. These dynamics result in missed opportunities for systemic change that addresses poverty and gender inequality. Addressing these inequalities requires cultivating a locally rooted research culture that confronts global power

imbalances and truly reflects the lived experiences of Mozambican communities.

In a complex way, the limited display and description of my colleagues' unfinished work in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology show the recognised risk that such rich and epistemologically challenging research questions will be taken up by other scholars with more time and resources from outside the continent. My colleagues and I grappled with how this subsection should be written to highlight the potential of anthropological research rooted in lived experiences without denying them the chance to advance their scholarship. The data presented here offers ways to understand gender anchored kinship roles, emerging social status, social organisation, and stages of life. Such perspectives constitute a departure from a conceptualisation of gender as rooted solely in hierarchised biological sex differences. These insights highlight the need for partnerships, joint research, and research funding to further explore gender in sites such as the ones mentioned in various texts in this issue.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how the international development regime has co-opted and depoliticised the concept of gender, removing its critical, transformative potential. By presenting gender as a technical solution to developmental issues, international institutions have turned it into a managerial instrument—measurable, depersonalised, and easily aligned with donor priorities. The result has been the widespread instrumentalisation of women and girls in the Global South, the erasure of feminist political struggles, and the silencing of alternative epistemologies rooted in local contexts.

The case of Mozambique—specifically, the dynamics of gender and sexuality research at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane—reveals how international donor agendas shape academic inquiry and restrict the development of critical gender thought. The dominance of policy-driven, externally funded research has pushed aside theoretical innovation, limited intellectual independence, and overlooked local knowledge systems. While fragments of critical and epistemologically rich research do exist, they remain

underexplored, unsupported, and not visible or impactful in a Global North-dominated academic context.

A closer engagement with alternative organising principles—such as local notions of personhood, diverse social organising systems, and ways to foster well-being for individuals and families; the different criteria that confer status on individuals (age, kinship position, social role within the community); and the meanings that different people attach to practices and social categories—can broaden the analytical scope of gender studies beyond imported and universalised categories. Recognising the historical, cultural, and institutional forces that shape knowledge production is therefore essential to understanding both the limitations and potential of gender as a conceptual and analytical tool in the Global South.

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Expanding Gender Analysis: The Rise of Breadwinner Femininity in Urban Northern Tanzania

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Abstract

This paper explores the lived experiences of breadwinning women in urban Northern Tanzania, challenging the pervasive masculinity bias that frames economic provision as an inherently masculine role. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, it examines how women—often single, separated, or in long-distance partnerships—elude patriarchal control, not through overt resistance but by cultivating alternative forms of authority grounded in motherhood, relational embeddedness, and economic contribution. Many do so by remaining (ostensibly) single, strategically distancing themselves from a patriarchal framework that associates femininity with submissiveness. Instead, they embody a socially valued femininity centred on provision and communal care—a model this paper terms *breadwinner femininity*. In a context where motherhood often takes precedence over marriage as a marker of social adulthood, these women assert a respected womanhood rooted in leadership, responsibility and care. Their economic strength is frequently invested in their children's well-being and education, enhancing their moral authority and garnering communal respect. Drawing on African feminist perspectives, the paper critiques rigid gender binaries and advocates for more plural, relational and female-affirming models of power. Ultimately, it argues for an expanded gender analysis of the intersection of seniority, economic strength, and caregiving as key to understanding feminine power and social legitimacy in African contexts and beyond.

Keywords: Relationality, female power, provision, seniority, ethnography

Introduction

"Women from the North are fierce fighters when it comes to money. . . so that they don't get controlled by any man, they've automatically adapted their way of life."[i]

This response from an online discussion (Jamiiforums 2016) about women from Northern Tanzania reflects a broader societal perception that Chagga women defy traditional gender roles. The forum post, by a man from the Lake Zone, opened with a description of women of Kilimanjaro as *majike dume*—a term that roughly translates to "male females", followed by an appeal to the men and women of Kilimanjaro to reconsider this behaviour because he thought it was destructive for African values. In the forum discussion, women were both celebrated and criticised for their industriousness, autonomy, and economic leadership. For some, they symbolise progress and strength; for others, they embody a perceived threat to the patriarchal order.

These debates highlight a central tension in dominant gender discourses: the persistent binary that associates femininity with submission, dependence, and nurturing while equating masculinity with authority, autonomy, and economic provision. These assumptions, reinforced by colonial framings of African gender systems, have long obscured the complexities and pluralities inherent in local structures. Such narrow interpretations marginalise women's contributions and frame their actions—such as breadwinning, leadership, and community provision—as anomalies, often masculinising them. This bias effectively excludes economic power and agency from the realm of femininity, perpetuating the perception that women are inherently disempowered. African feminist scholars have long challenged such reductive framings, calling for more nuanced approaches that foreground dynamism, relationality, and sociocultural embeddedness of their experiences (Amadiume 1997; Oyěwùmí 1997; Arnfred 2004; Nzegwu 2020; Sudarkasa 1986). Normative gender relations often position men as providers and decision-makers, relegating women to caretaking roles and subordinate positions within household and community structures (Aidoo 1985; Asante 2000). While this portrayal persists in societal narratives, it is increasingly challenged by women's lived realities, particularly in regions such as Northern Tanzania.

Over the last several decades, political and economic shifts in Tanzania have transformed gendered labour dynamics. While women have long contributed to household economies, the economic crisis of the 1980s and the liberalisation policies of the early 1990s led to their increased engagement in income-generating activities beyond the household, often in the informal sector. Over time, some women have come to occupy the role of primary breadwinner—pursuing economic provision both out of necessity and to achieve ambition. For these women, breadwinning is not a rejection of femininity but a central component of their gendered sense of self. Economic provision, far from being a marker of masculinity, becomes a celebrated aspect of their sense of self as women. Meanwhile, motherhood often replaces marital status as the defining marker of adulthood, and women navigate patriarchal constraints by choosing separation, singlehood, or long-distance relationships. Their roles as breadwinners are interwoven with their positions as caregivers, enabling them to claim socioeconomic independence while remaining deeply embedded in familial and community life.

This paper examines these transformative roles through the concept of "breadwinner femininity". Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Tanzania, it highlights the way women's breadwinning practices reconfigure dominant gender frameworks. These women's lives challenge stereotypes of femininity as inherently passive or dependent. By embracing breadwinning, they redefine what it means to be a woman in their communities. Their contributions extend beyond their households to neighbourhood groups and community leadership roles, where they are recognised as influential figures. Breadwinning, often viewed as a hallmark of masculinity, is reimagined here as a socially valued and integral aspect of femininity.

This paper portrays the experiences of Mama Randa[ii] as exemplary of the experiences of many women in Northern Tanzania. Women like Mama Randa take great pride in their ability to be breadwinners, which gives them a sense of being good mothers and strong women. Importantly, their pursuits and successes are also applauded by their social environment. This pride and recognition compel me to reconsider notions of gender hegemonies. Mama Randa, through her breadwinning, achieved a respected social status and held positions of authority—achievements that historically have often been integral

to the conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinities, that is, masculinities that all men aspire to and/or are positioned in relation to.

Connell (1995) introduced the seminal notion of hegemonic masculinity to describe socially valued masculinities. However, this paper demonstrates that breadwinning women do not aspire to such masculinities. Instead, their positions and pursuits reflect a plurality of ways to be respected as a woman. The current literature on gender hegemonies largely neglects women like Mama Randa. It either portrays femininity (or womanhood) as the subordinate other to men through notions of "emphasized femininity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Jakobsen 2014), or it labels those who refuse to be subordinate, like Mama Randa, as "pariah femininity" (Kitetu and Kioko 2013; Levine 2019; Schippers 2007). Yet, such implied rigid gender dualisms do not align with the lived realities of the women in this research, as they leave little room for non-subordinate differences. The conceptualisation of hegemonic femininities proposed here follows Nzegwu's (2020) call for "female-affirming models of power" that centre relational authority and communal care, rather than reproducing masculinist frameworks. Therefore, this paper argues for a plurality of womanhood through the concept of hegemonic femininities that shows a plurality of socially dominant and desired ideals of female behaviour and attributes.

Methods and Field

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in urban neighbourhoods and surrounding villages in Northern Tanzania, a region shaped by early supraregional trade, missionary activity in the late nineteenth century, and a growing tourism industry near Mount Kilimanjaro. My engagement with this region spans more than a decade, beginning with volunteer work in local NGOs. This longstanding involvement laid the foundation for my doctoral research in 2019/2020 and continues to inform my postdoctoral work. As a white researcher from Germany in my 30s, I was visibly an outsider, but long-term engagement and daily interactions enabled me to build relationships and participate in everyday spaces. Over the years, my familiarity with the region developed through shared daily experiences such as

cooking or farming with community members, attending weddings and funerals, and working locally to support children's education.

Ethnographic methods that can provide qualitative insights into the lived experiences of women were at the core of this study; these included participant observation, informal conversations, and unstructured interviews conducted in Kiswahili. Key sites of interaction included small neighbourhood bars, family homes, community gatherings, savings group meetings, and markets, where I could observe not only what women said about economic autonomy but also how they practised it. My unmarried status also influenced research interactions, particularly in discussions about marriage, financial independence, and male control. Many of my interlocutors were single, separated, or in long-distance relationships. Being unmarried, like many of them, created common ground for these conversations. This may also have influenced which aspects of lives and relationships were emphasised, as women who saw me to be aligned with their experiences might have been more forthcoming about financial hardships and stories of dysfunctional partnerships. Ironically, these stories reinforce types of narratives deployed by broader developmentalist discourses. Yet, inspired by African(ist) feminist scholarship, my aim was not to reproduce "the tired polemics of violence, disease, and reproduction" (Tamale 2011, 30) that have long dominated research on African women's lives. Instead, I sought to attend to the more ambiguous, creative, and relational aspects of the ways women position themselves economically and socially. These included moments of pride, care, humour, and negotiation—dimensions often overlooked when research focuses primarily on constraint or lack. This approach also underscored the importance of moving beyond formal interviews and looking at how women relate to one another in their wider social surroundings. Observing women's daily interactions in their communal networks revealed not just what they said about financial autonomy, but also how they positioned themselves and were positioned as breadwinners. These everyday engagements allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between self-reliance, social expectations, and economic interdependence, factors often missed in structured conversations alone.

A defining feature of this study is the cohort of women whose lives I have been following since my first arrival in Tanzania. The women who are

central to this research have been actively involved in interpreting ethnographic data and shaping how emic concepts are understood, ensuring that local perspectives and meanings remain central. The research focuses on a cohort of women aged 35 to 65, who are mostly of Christian faith and from the Chagga ethnic group predominant in the Kilimanjaro region. Many are single, separated, or in long-distance relationships. These women are often the primary breadwinners in their households. Their entrepreneurial activities span diverse, mostly informal economic sectors, including subsistence farming, broiler meat production, and trading in second-hand clothing. Almost all women also partake in neighbourhood savings groups such as Vikoba (pl.). Women's savings groups emerged as a vital resource in the lives of my interlocutors. They not only provide financial support but also foster social cohesion and mutual aid, and this makes them integral to the fabric of community life (Ott 2022; Kesanta and Andre 2015). Neighbourhood group meetings often serve as spaces for exchanging personal experiences, offering advice, and organising collective responses to life events such as weddings and funerals. Beyond their economic functions, the groups provide leadership opportunities for women, enabling them to gain visibility and influence within their communities.

The women in this study challenge entrenched binaries of dependence and autonomy. While they may project an image of self-reliance, their economic ambitions are deeply intertwined with networks of mutual support and social obligations. Such networks are built on reputation, respectability, and reciprocity, forming the foundation for their breadwinning activities and their position within their communities. While neighbourhood groups often exclude the very poor due to income thresholds, they offer participating women a socioeconomic safety net and pathways to upward mobility. This relational framework enriches our understanding of breadwinning not merely as an individual economic role but also as a socially embedded practice that transforms dominant notions of femininity and gendered power.

Socioeconomic Shifts and Women's Breadwinning

Women-led households are not a recent development in Tanzania. During colonial times, the rise of cash crop production and labour migration led many men to leave their villages—and their families—in search of work, leaving their wives to manage households independently (Tungaraza 1995). Labour migration remains predominantly male-driven today (Duda, Fasse, and Grote 2018). After independence, under President Nyerere, Tanzania adopted a socialist agenda in 1968. Part of this agenda prioritised formal education for women, political inclusion, and the establishment of women's groups, encouraging their participation in the workforce. These efforts became even more critical in the 1980s, as the global economic recession and challenges of the socialist period placed a significant strain on the country's economy. Labour migration from villages to urban areas from colonial times to the early 1970s declined significantly in the 1980s. Although linked to Nyerere's villagisation efforts, the shift was driven largely by the country's growing economic crisis. Those with formal jobs, which were taxed and monitored by the government, often did not receive their full monthly salaries. Such formal or salaried jobs were a male domain. As urban wage-earners' incomes and living standards plummeted, women, compelled to seek alternative income sources, engaged more in entrepreneurship and in the informal sector from the 1980s (Kiondo 1990). Some women assumed the role of primary breadwinners in their families; they fulfilled their responsibilities by engaging in businesses primarily centred on food production, processing, services, and retail selling (Rutashobya 1995).

Under Nyerere, restrictive licensing policies and regulations—part of a socialist economic framework that aimed to centralise control and reduce income inequalities—hindered small entrepreneurs from operating legally. Those restrictive policies made it difficult to obtain a business license, limited where businesses were allowed to operate and in what kinds of goods and services, and imposed often unpredictable and unfair taxation. Driven by necessity, people ran their businesses without registration, thereby challenging state policies and creating alternatives to the state's failing systems. The expanding informal economy pressured the state to liberalise policies and ease control over entrepreneurship. In 1985, Nyerere stepped down from the

presidency amid growing criticism of his Ujamaa socialism, and his successor, President Mwinyi, introduced a new paradigm of economic liberalisation.

The emergence of women's urban associations has been a pivotal force in the socioeconomic and political evolution of the country. The formalisation of women's groups evolved in the 1940s and 1950s from different programmes that focused on religious duties and instruction, and domestic education (Swai 2010). In the post-independence era, women's groups were supported by the state to promote development and gender equality, with an emphasis on women's education, political rights and economic inclusion. During the economic downturns of the 1970s and 1980s, these groups developed into autonomous networks. They became crucial for women's entrepreneurial ventures and for providing savings and credit services, especially as the state's extensive role diminished with the onset of liberalisation and structural adjustments from the mid-1980s. These collectives gradually broadened their reach: they addressed diverse issues from health and education to legal rights, thereby transitioning from a concentration on welfare to an added focus on empowerment and advocacy. Aili Mari Tripp's (1997) research emphasises how these groups served as catalysts for women's political participation and resistance to restrictive policies. Structural changes, including improved access to loans and credit, enabled women to participate in entrepreneurial ventures. However, many women remained reliant on men, as male moneylenders often controlled such financial resources (Koda 1995). Beginning in the mid-1990s, women's savings groups such as Vikundi were increasingly formalised, and others such as Vikoba were established[iii]. These changes stemmed from reforms to the Tanzanian financial sector in 1991 (Randhawa and Gallardo 2003), which provided women with greater autonomy to save money, access resources, and create financial support networks.

Navigating Patriarchy

The story of Mama Randa illustrates how women in Northern Tanzania navigate economic and social challenges to assert their sense of self as breadwinners (Häbel 2024). At 60 years old, Mama Randa has lived without a male partner for over two decades, during which time she has built a life grounded in economic pursuits and community leadership. Her work has

spanned farming (which entailed managing men who worked for and with her on the fields), running a chicken-breeding business, chairing a neighbourhood savings group (Kikoba), and serving up advice—or offering small loans—to people in need. She has held down all these responsibilities while supporting her two youngest children's education up to university level, a notable achievement given her somewhat lower-class background. Her decision to separate from her husband arose from his repeated acts to sabotage her economic efforts: he burnt her goods, took her earnings, and undermined her aspirations. He perceived her income generation as a threat to his status as the sole breadwinner. Reflecting on those times, she remarked, "If I had stayed with my husband, my children would have no future." She felt that his sabotage curtailed her aspirations to what she considered to be a good life for herself and her children, especially her desire to provide her children with the best education.

Mama Randa's story underscores the ways in which women confront patriarchal systems that restrict their potential. Separation from her spouse was not merely a rejection of a dysfunctional relationship but a deliberate strategy to achieve greater socioeconomic mobility for herself and her family. Through her entrepreneurial efforts, she achieved financial stability and social recognition as a community leader and family elder. Through her growing business ventures, she provided job opportunities to people in the neighbourhood, developed the capacity to lend money, and was financially stable enough to participate in savings groups.

Her story challenges simplistic portrayals of female-headed households. While media and international human rights discourses often present a "feminisation of poverty", such reductive depictions have also been effectively challenged. Sylvia Chant (2008) points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of intra-household dynamics and cautions against viewing all female-headed households as economically disadvantaged. Research from Tanzania supports this point. Sakamoto (2014), for instance, found no substantial difference in poverty rates between female- and male-headed households. In fact, many women have created supportive environments for themselves and others. In southeast Tanzania, Sakamoto documented the way female-headed households employed diverse livelihood strategies and occupied

important roles in community support systems, as providers as much as recipients.

At the same time, such strategies were rarely built in isolation, as women usually relied heavily on their kin. Most of my interlocutors belong to the patrilocally organised Chagga ethnic group, where a woman traditionally moves to her husband's family compound provided for him by his father. However, patrilocality is not a rigid system and is also subject to change (Moore 1991; Odgaard 2022). In and around Kilimanjaro, for instance, land has been subdivided to such an extent that young men often cannot inherit their own plot. More importantly, the Land Act of 1999 has enabled Tanzanian women to own land. Consequently, some women, such as Mama Randa, returned to their maternal homes, where they received initial support after separation and a portion of the clan's land to establish their own households. This was almost always after they had given birth and it had become clear that they would not move to a new permanent partner's home.

Some women felt that marriage or cohabitation—and its entanglement with the *mfumo dume* (lit: male system, fig: patriarchy)—hindered women's economic aspirations. This became visible when one of my interlocutors told me as we passed by three women she knew on the street that "none of those three women ever got married/cohabited [...] because they wanted to be economically successful."[vi] Economic success in this case does not necessarily mean the pursuit of wealth; it refers to financial independence from male control over earnings and decision-making. Additionally, women such as Mama Randa often saw separation as the only way to guarantee their children's access to higher education, and they complained that Tanzania did not have sufficient laws that obligate fathers to provide child support, leaving women as the main providers. The pursuit of economic aspirations allowed women to reject the patriarchal structures that marriage/cohabitation entails. This notwithstanding, women used their economic power and position of authority to help the community; indeed, some of them gained authority precisely because they were not married/cohabiting. This does not suggest that there is a renunciation of relationships with men, nor that all husbands subvert their wives' economic aspirations; rather, it is to highlight the diverse paths women carve out to navigate patriarchy.

Such paths are often modelled intergenerationally. Women such as Mama Randa have shaped notions of womanhood that extend to their daughters—often single mothers—who are not expected to marry and may remain on the family compound well into adulthood; they will also likely inherit their mother's property. For example, Mama Randa's daughter Cecilia, who was in her mid-thirties, remained on the family compound after a slow separation from her partner, but during my 2024 visit, I learned she had recently moved to another neighbourhood to avoid neighbourly and family control. Like several other women her age, she was outspoken about her preference for boyfriends in big cities such as Mwanza or Dar es Salaam. In her estimation, it allowed her both to have an emotional and physical connection with a somewhat stable partner and, given the distance from the city, to elude patriarchal control that could limit her own socioeconomic mobility. In this context, singlehood emerges not as a sign of marginalisation but as a deliberate strategy. Women who avoid marriage or cohabitation often do so to pursue economic goals without the constraints of patriarchal oversight, enabling them to aspire towards a socioeconomic position such as Mama Randa's.

Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of nego-feminism—a feminism of negotiation and give-and-take—offers a powerful ethical frame for viewing women's strategies. Rather than prioritising overt resistance, nego-feminism foregrounds how women navigate patriarchal systems through careful manoeuvre and strategic compromise. For women such as Mama Randa and her daughter, breadwinning is not a rebellion against patriarchy but a quiet reordering of authority. It is enacted through everyday acts of provision, care, and discretion. Choosing not to marry or cohabit, in this context, is not an outright rejection of social norms, but a way of bending them—of securing a position from which to care for others while retaining autonomy. Elusion becomes one of the most subtle and effective forms of negotiation.

The primacy of motherhood

Acts of negotiation are not only about resisting male control, but also about affirming an alternative form of authority, one that is deeply tied to motherhood. Choosing single motherhood and providing for the family

contradict narratives of women's oppression due to societal pressure to marry a man. Marriage has long been seen as an unquestioned, fundamental social building block. But marriage aspirations have changed and become a more flexible terrain (Pike, Mojola, and Kabiru 2018), and research has criticised the notion of nearly universal marriage as an overgeneralisation (Pauli 2019). Official and formalised marriages (through marriage registration, religious wedding, or payment of bride wealth) play an essential role in paving people's way into social adulthood and are seen as an important source of respectability (see Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe 2014; Kiereri 2023). Yet, marriage rates are declining, even though marriage is still highly valued, and weddings have increasingly become a source of class distinction (Pauli 2019). For example, most people from less affluent families who partook in this research could not afford expensive weddings.

As a result, more couples cohabited without marrying. Steady relationships of three months or longer were referred to as marriage, and the partners were consequently referred to as husband and wife. Such a tendency to engage in unformalised cohabitation opens opportunities for women to separate from their partners. Flexible on and off relationships, singlehood, and often polyandrous motherhood (Guyer 1994) were the norm among my interlocutors. Consequently, motherhood played a greater role than marriage in a woman's transition into social adulthood.

While Western feminist traditions have often critiqued motherhood as a source of women's subordination, African feminists have insisted on its structuring role in public life (Oyěwùmí1997; Amadiume 1987, 1997; Nzegwu 2004; Nnaemeka 1997; Arnfred 2004; Sudarkasa 1986). Amadiume (1987) documented how senior mothers in Igbo society held ritual and political authority, often surpassing their husbands or brothers in influence. Nkiru Nzegwu (2004) advances this analysis further, emphasising that motherhood in many African societies is not just reproductive but communal, encompassing intergenerational care, material provision and normative guidance. Importantly, these thinkers show that maternal power is not individualistic: it is embedded in reciprocal obligation and public accountability. This line of thinking is not premised on a romantic idealisation of motherhood but on a recognition of its relational and institutional force. It shows that maternal authority is cumulative—acquired not only through childbirth, but also

through one's ability to nurture, provide, and lead across relational fields. It is precisely this dimension of care enacted through responsibility and visibility that renders maternal roles socially and morally consequential. Even critics of the gender category itself, such as Oyěwùmí(1997), do not dismiss motherhood as irrelevant. Rather, they underscore how colonial and Western feminist frameworks misread it by assuming biologically determined, gendered logics whereas African social status was historically conferred through seniority, embeddedness, and the practice of care.

When motherhood is approached as an ethical and political practice rather than a private or sentimentalised identity, it becomes clear why economic provision is not seen as contradicting femininity but as constitutive of it. Within this framing, breadwinning is not a rupture with feminine norms but a rearticulation of maternal responsibility, enacted through acts such as paying school fees, supporting dependents, and organising collective life. For the women in this research, being a good provider was an essential part of being a good mother. Breadwinner femininity, then, is not a masculinised deviation from womanhood, but an assertion of gendered strength within culturally legible forms of power, grounded in care, provision, and moral visibility. While this paper focuses on women who have given birth, breadwinner femininity does not rely on biological motherhood. What matters is not reproduction, but the capacity to nurture others—whether kin, neighbours, or the broader community—and to redistribute care and resources in socially legible ways. Consequently, women aspiring toward breadwinner femininity do not necessarily have to give birth to enact it, as long as they do not see their socioeconomic aspirations as an individual pursuit but as the ability to invest in others as much as in oneself.

Gendered labels

As shown through the online discussion in the introduction to this paper, women from Northern Tanzania, and especially from the Chagga ethnic group, have garnered a reputation for being industrious, politically engaged, educated, and owning land. I have heard and read of men outside of Northern Tanzania, particularly in Dar es Salaam and in online forums, who describe Chagga women as *majike dume*—literally translating to "male females". This term points

to how they defy common gender expectations by assuming roles often associated with masculinity, such as breadwinning and leadership (Häbel 2024). The phrase carries pejorative connotations, as both *jike* and *dume* are usually used to describe the sex of an animal, and *dume* in particular evokes the image of a bull. Furthermore, men in online forums have criticised Chagga women, labelling them as overly masculine in behaviour and appearance and suggesting that this undermines African culture. Yet, in Northern Tanzania I have never heard this term used to describe women, whether by men or women.

The women in particular reject this framing. Instead, they embrace self-descriptions like *jembe*, which refers to an agricultural tool commonly known as a hoe. While it can technically apply to both genders, I have encountered its use primarily to describe women. While this may have been influenced by my focus on women's lives, it more likely reflects societal attitudes towards men, of whom physically demanding labour is expected and thus celebrated. While industrious men may be described using terms such as *mpambanaji* (fighter) or *mchapa kazi* (hard worker), the notion of *jembe* seems to be particularly reserved for women. This designation conveys a sense of pride not only in women's capacity to undertake a wide range of work but also in their ability to perform physically strenuous labour.

In a previous paper (Häbel 2024), I argued that a gendered lens in ethnographic writing does not always work. I claimed that women are de-gendering their breadwinning by using the term *jembe* and that they portrayed breadwinning as a genderless realm in an attempt to untangle it from its masculine connotation. However, I subsequently recognised how the notion of *jembe* and women's breadwinning in general became gendered through everyday practice. Similarly, when Oyěwùmí(1997) affirmed that ungendered terminology showed how gender was not a fundamental category among the Yoruba, she was criticised for overlooking how things become gendered in everyday practice (Boris 2007; Bakare-Yusuf 2004).

At the same time, I found myself reflecting on my own difficulty—influenced by my upbringing within European feminist thought—in letting go of gender as a primary analytical category. As Nzegwu (2020) rightfully argues, gender is not a neutral framework but a colonial imposition that eroded existing female-affirming and relational systems of power. She urges us to work with

emic concepts such as *omumu*—a power enacted through motherhood—to theorise from within African contexts. In this light, the term *jembe* might be understood not simply as a label, but as an emic expression of a female-affirming mode of power. Yet, I also recognise the limits of grounding a conceptual framework solely in an emic notion such as *jembe*, particularly in a fluid and ever-evolving linguistic context. What is understood as *jembe* today may not carry the same connotation tomorrow. My shift in thinking—about whether women reject gendered labels—reflects my own struggle with the concept of gender, possibly aligned with Nzegwu's proposition to abandon it altogether in favour of endogenous systems of meaning. There is thus an unresolved tension: how can I reject the conceptual framework of gender, as Nzegwu (2020) advocates, when it has become such a globally dominant analytic, yet simultaneously recognise that the people I worked with in Tanzania themselves invoke gendered labels?

In this paper, I navigate this tension by analysing both what lies beneath such gendered naming practices and how they can inform broader understandings of gendered hierarchies without reinscribing the very binaries that my interlocutors—consciously or not—often subvert. These complexities become particularly visible when comparing how labels such as *majike dume* and *jembe* circulate and are received within and beyond the community. This distinction is important: the label *majike dume* was used primarily by outsiders, especially those who were not from the region. Within the region, however, women such as Mama Randa are celebrated as *jembe*. This term not only highlights their industriousness and hard-working attitude but also underlines their femininity. Unlike *majike dume*, which carries pejorative connotations of masculinisation, *jembe* reflects a sense of pride and respect for women's contributions, framing their labour and leadership as integral to womanhood rather than a deviation from it. Mama Randa herself happily embraced the label *jembe* and would occasionally use it to describe herself, reinforcing her sense of self as a strong and capable woman whose work and leadership were deeply valued by her community.

Expanding Gender Analysis

Much research has highlighted the notion that breadwinning is a defining aspect of masculinity and integral to many men's sense of self (Mfecane 2018; Silberschmidt 2001; Izugbara 2015). However, the concept of breadwinning is intertwined with the enduring influences of colonial histories, which have significantly shaped political, economic and social dynamics (Lindsay 2007; Ratele 2008). For men, particularly those with limited economic means, the societal expectation to fulfil breadwinning and head-of-household roles often challenges their sense of self in their pursuit of socially valued masculinities (Richter and Morrell 2006). Connell (1995) described such socially valued masculinity as "hegemonic masculinity". Connell and Messerschmidt conceptualised hegemonic masculinity as a product of social practices that establish gendered hierarchies, representing "the currently most honoured way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 830). They understood that such hierarchies result in the subordination of women as well as some men in relation to other men. While only a few men might enact hegemonic masculinity, all men position themselves in relation to it. As the initial concept of a singular masculinity had been widely criticised, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) expanded it into a pluralistic view of multiple hegemonic masculinities. This concept has subsequently been adopted by a wide range of researchers, who show how "masculinities are relationally adopted, contested, transformed, reconfigured, and intersectional with diverse identities", such as age, place of living, or sexual orientation (Ammann and Staudacher 2021, 2).

While the relationships between men and plural masculinities have been widely discussed, gender hegemonies directed toward plural femininities still remain under-conceptualised (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Paechter 2018). The interplay between womanhood and breadwinning, in particular, merits further analysis. As notions of masculinities and breadwinning appear to be so inevitably and inextricably connected, breadwinning women challenge this "instituted normative gender order" (Akanle and Nwaobiala 2020). Importantly, women such as Mama Randa do not understand their breadwinning as a masculine trait. This provides analytical insight into how breadwinning shapes their gendered sense of self.

Moving beyond female masculinity

As women increasingly enter the workforce and commonly male-dominated domains, Halberstam's concept of female masculinity may offer a valuable lens for analysis (Dankwa 2009, 2021; Halberstam 1998; Paechter 2006). Halberstam (1998) explores "masculinities without men", emphasising that masculinity is not confined to male bodies. He critiques the systematic denial of masculinities to people with female bodies, arguing that masculinity and maleness are not inherently connected. Thus, female masculinity transcends binary notions of masculinity and femininity. However, Halberstam notes that female masculinity is often most contentious when coupled with lesbian desire, as seen in representations of butch women. While this framework is significant, its application to breadwinning women requires further consideration, particularly as most women in my research were presumed heterosexual.

Building on Halberstam's work, Serena Dankwa (2009) introduced the concept of "situational masculinity". This approach shifts the focus from visible markers of masculinity, such as clothing or body styling, to masculinity expressed through status or authority. This relational and situational production of masculinity has been observed across the African continent, including among women in anticolonial uprisings (Broqua and Doquet 2013; Obeng 2003). In Ghana, situational masculinity manifests through seniority or socioeconomic power, with interlocutors adopting titles such as "husband" or "king" to reflect their roles and authority (Dankwa 2009, 164, 176). In contrast, my interlocutors, breadwinning mothers, did not adopt masculine titles for themselves, raising the question of how broadly the concept of female masculinity can be applied to women who perform leadership and economic roles without claiming the associated gendered labels.

Mama Randa has developed a somewhat assertive character and has created a wide network of supportive people. She was also the person to turn to for help, whether in her family or her neighbourhood. She therefore created a position of authority through her ability to provide financial support and/or employment, and to give fruitful advice. Her rejection of complementary gender relations was not merely tolerated but regarded as essential to her ability to provide for her family and lead within the community. A woman who complied with the hegemonic notions of femininity associated with passivity or

modesty would not be able to become such a driving force in her community. Mama Randa's social environment therefore benefited from her assertiveness and authority. Her social environment appreciated her gendered sense of self as a (strong) woman and applauded her as a *jembe* rather than denouncing her through notions such as *majike dume* or other terms connected to masculinities. This shows that the plurality of hegemonic expectations of womanhood allows for women to refuse to be the subordinate other to men without falling out of line.

Gender hegemonies

The respected social status of breadwinning women, who also take on positions of authority, shows that there is no singular practised way of being a woman. In that sense, there is no singular femininity of modest women, submissive to husbands or male authority. While much research has worked toward a pluralistic view of hegemonic masculinities (Ammann and Staudacher 2021; Izugbara and Egesa 2020; Musariri and Moyer 2021; Shio and Moyer 2021), femininity has often been construed as a counterpart that cannot be conceptualised without masculinities (Dahl 2012; Paechter 2018). What is more, when Connell conceptualised hegemonic masculinity, she effectively excluded women from her notions of gender hegemony as "there is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men" (Connell 1987 as cited in Paechter 2018, 122). Instead of hegemonic femininity, she suggested an "emphasised femininity" as the subordinate other to hegemonic masculinity that is focused on compliance to patriarchy. While Connell and Messerschmidt recognised the plurality of masculinities and the possibility of local variations in subsequent work, they stuck to the notion of emphasised femininity. Although they recognised "new configurations of women's identity and practice [...] which are increasingly acknowledged by younger men" (2005, 848), femininities remained a by-product of masculinities in their writing.

Some research has acknowledged hegemonic femininities. Yet, the conceptualisation of economically powerful and/or assertive women has remained in a fairly negative light, such as Schippers' notion of pariah femininity that refuses to "conform to the complementary relation of male

dominance and female subordination" (Paechter 2018, 122). Schippers (2007) argues that women who do not comply with female subordination are indeed not masculine—an argument that is at the centre of this paper—but she does not recognise the possibility of multiple gender hegemonies. This also reveals that the concept of hegemony itself remains undertheorised or inconsistently defined. For Connell, hegemony meant positions of power expressed through markers such as assertiveness and physical strength. These, she argued, could only be inhabited by masculinities. Schippers, meanwhile, construed hegemony as the dominant and expected norm for a gender. In that sense, Schippers understood hegemonic femininity as that which "guarantee[s] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Schippers 2007, 94). Both approaches require reconsideration if we are to move beyond rigid gender dualisms misaligned with women's lived realities. I understand female hegemonies as socially valued femininities, as Schippers argues, but I also argue for several hegemonic forms of femininity. Women such as Mama Randa exemplify multiple hegemonic femininities. They were not pariahs in their communities because of their rejection of complementary gender relations; instead they gained positions of authority.

Mama Randa's case shows the elasticity of gender hegemony and stresses the importance of intersectional approaches. As a woman in her sixties whose parents died a few years ago, Mama Randa became not only a family elder but also an elder in her neighbourhood. As "old age blurred the lines of gender politics" (Ratele 2008, 524), Mama Randa would not be expected to cohabit/get married or submit to patriarchal ideas of female subordination. Furthermore, through her income generation, she had established enough economic power to partake in female-dominated neighbourhood groups, financially support her brothers, and provide employment for men and women. Her ability to provide and her position of authority, therefore, show an interesting interplay between gender, age, and economic power, which compels us to put her position as a female breadwinner in a more contextualised light.

An interplay of seniority, economic power, and care

While the notion of hegemonic femininities offers important insights into how gendered power circulates, it cannot be fully understood without attention to the role of seniority, the moral economies of care, and the distribution of economic power within social networks. To better understand the dynamics at play in the case of Mama Randa, it is helpful to situate her within a generational cohort of her neighbourhood to examine how factors such as seniority, caregiving roles, and economic success intersect in practice.

Although seniority has often been cited as the key organising principle in some African societies (Oyěwùmí1997; Sudarkasa 1986), it is not an isolated force. It is entangled in what Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2004, 5) called a "mode of power [that] is like a thread that creates a pattern of significance only when woven together with all the other threads that combine in a specific situation." Seniority is thus one strand in a broader web of relational power, entangled with gender, kinship, and class (Bakare-Yusuf 2004; Boyce Davies 2015). In the neighbourhoods of this research, seniority did not automatically confer authority or moral standing. Instead, the interplay of age, provision, and social contribution shaped women's capacity to embody breadwinner femininity in ways that were publicly recognised and valued. In this sense, breadwinner femininity is not a static, given role tied to age or financial status alone, but a position actively earned and sustained through relational labour.

Mama Randa's brother, Baba Julius, was the eldest among their siblings. By age and gender, he would typically be regarded as the head of the extended family, and indeed, formally he held this position. He and his wife, Mama Julius, lived on the same clan compound as Mama Randa, and were for all practical purposes her neighbours. Yet within the neighbourhood, Baba Julius was not perceived as a figure of moral or practical authority. As one of their sisters explained to me, "Formally, Baba Julius is the head of our family. But he does not have the ability (*uwezo*) to lead the community, nor our family. […] Any person that has a problem goes to Mama Randa."[v] *Uwezo*, here, primarily refers to financial capacity, but it also hints at a broader ability to contribute meaningfully to both family and community life.

This perceived lack of *uwezo* reflected the broader household situation. Despite their seniority, Baba and Mama Julius lived in persistent economic

hardship. Baba Julius raised some pigs, chickens, and ducks next to their house for his own use and to sell, and farming jobs that were at times provided by Mama Randa. Mama Julius' modest food stand generated little income as she sold low-quality vegetables. Their household often struggled to maintain basic standards of cleanliness and upkeep. Mama Julius also did not have the financial means to participate in the local savings group (Kikoba), which required a minimum weekly contribution of 3,000 Tanzanian shillings. Nor were they involved in organising neighbourhood festivities, as they lacked both the financial and social capital to contribute meaningfully. The family's concrete house was considered very modest, with two small rooms shared with up to four (grand)children whom Baba and Mama Julius struggled to care for. Their failure to enrol their grandchildren in school ultimately had to be reported to the local government—a serious moral lapse in a community where education is viewed as the main pathway out of poverty, and where breadwinning women often make great sacrifices to ensure their children's schooling. The couple's declining status was further compounded by earlier efforts to assert respectability. Baba Julius arranged early marriages for two of their daughters—an act meant to uphold social norms but one that instead led to community backlash and ongoing family conflict. Taken together, these events illustrate how seniority and formal authority can be hollowed out when not backed by moral credibility and the capacity to provide. While Baba Julius was the head of the family in name, it was Mama Randa, his younger sister, who came to embody the role of moral leader in the eyes of the community.

Mama Richard presents a different kind of dissonance. She held both economic power and seniority, yet she too struggled to gain lasting respect. Mama Richard was one of the most affluent and socially visible women in the neighbourhood. She was a few years older than Mama Randa, and by both seniority and economic standing, she would be expected to hold a position of respect and moral authority. A former midwife, she went on to co-manage her husband's electronics business. She was active in multiple neighbourhood groups and frequently served on planning committees for weddings, send-offs, and other festivities, as she was recognised for her ability to mobilise resources.

Yet, despite her seniority and material wealth, Mama Richard was not regarded as a "strong woman"[vi] by some. One of my interlocutors drew a comparison between a much younger, married, female neighbour and Mama

Richard and dismissed the latter outright: "Mama Richard is not a strong woman. She is totally under [her husband]!"[vii] Her economic power was widely seen as stemming from her husband's success, and she lacked the autonomy and caregiving labour that many others saw as central to being a truly strong woman. Her household relied on domestic help, and her behaviour in public—especially when summoned by her husband—was perceived as submissive and dependent. Meanwhile she was also known to criticise neighbours and publicly shame other women, which conflicted with local expectations regarding discretion, respect, and care. But she was somehow forgiven because she was still contributing to the neighbourhood by participating in the Kikoba, sitting on planning committees, and paying for beers at the local bar. After her husband's death, however, she increasingly withdrew from community life; she stopped contributing to neighbourhood events, possibly because she also had to take care of her late husband's shops that she now managed with her children, and was eventually accused of having *roho mbaya* (a bad spirit), an allusion to what was perceived as selfishness on her part for not contributing to the community anymore and for continuing to denigrate her neighbours. The combination of wealth without humility, seniority without care, and persistent moral transgressions led to her social exclusion.

These contrasting trajectories reveal that breadwinner femininity is not a fixed position or identity conferred by seniority, marital status, or economic achievement alone, but a relational status that must be continually earned and reaffirmed through care, provision, hard work, and social embeddedness. The women who come to embody this form of femininity in ways that are publicly recognised and respected are those who invest in others—materially, emotionally and morally. In this context, authority is not simply about age or affluence but about being seen to support others, contribute to collective goals, and uphold shared norms of discretion and respect. Breadwinner femininity, then, emerges not from what one has, but from what one does, and how one's actions resonate within the interdependent fabric of a community.

Conclusion: Female-affirming models of power

Exploring the limitations of applying concepts such as female masculinity to the lives of breadwinning women in Northern Tanzania offers a more expansive view of hegemonic femininities. What emerges is a need for a conceptual framework that captures how these women occupy positions of authority without imitating masculinity or conforming to subordination. This paper thus challenges dominant assumptions about gender hegemony as inherently tied to male power.

How can scholarship recognise female-affirming models of power—such as those theorised by Nzegwu (2020) through the concept of *omumu*—if such power is so often misread through the lens of masculinity, or dismissed for not conforming to dominant masculinist understandings of power? This question is not merely theoretical; it points to an epistemic tension at the heart of gender analysis: the inability—or perhaps unwillingness—of dominant frameworks to take seriously forms of feminine authority that are assertive, directive, and respected, yet remain firmly within the bounds of womanhood. Breadwinner femininity offers a conceptual response to this tension. It embodies what Paechter (2018, 123) has called a "non-subordinate difference" that neither overlooks gendered differences nor plays into the common trope of female subordination. Instead, it captures a form of womanhood that is assertive, respected and morally grounded—without being defined in opposition to men or dependent on male legitimation. This paper proposes breadwinner femininity as an Africanist feminist alternative to common frameworks of gender hegemonies. Rather than understanding hegemony solely as a tool for sustaining patriarchy, it can also be seen as a form of culturally situated legitimacy that may be grounded in maternal authority, economic contribution, and community embeddedness. In this framing, hegemonic femininities do not always serve male dominance but may also articulate locally powerful and aspirational ideals of womanhood.

This perspective also complicates the supposed divide between hegemonic masculinities and femininities. While some research argues that hegemonic femininities are only hegemonic in relation to other women, and not in relation to masculinities (Schnurr, Zayts, and Hopkins 2016), breadwinning women's experiences in Northern Tanzania compel us to think otherwise. Their

authority often exceeds intra-gender comparison and is judged instead through moral contribution and social embeddedness. Recognising this non-subordinate difference allows us to account for breadwinning women's authority as something firmly rooted in femininity yet capable of navigating patriarchal expectations. Their strength lies not in mimicking masculinity, but in redefining what it means to be a woman as someone who provides, leads, and cares. These women do not reject femininity; rather, they expand its meaning through assertiveness, provision, and social embeddedness.

Ultimately, breadwinner femininity reveals gender to be both contextual and malleable. While people outside of Northern Tanzania may perceive women's breadwinning as masculine, labelling them *majike dume*, the women themselves reject this gendered perception. Instead, they ground their sense of self in womanhood, shaped by their lived experiences. The phenomenon of breadwinner womanhood highlights the interplay of economic power, relational care, and moral authority. These women embody socially valued—hegemonic—femininities, with breadwinning emerging as a significant marker for women's sense of self as female beings. This framing not only sharpens our conceptual understanding of gendered power but also resonates with the ethnographic realities of women such as Mama Randa, Mama Julius, and Mama Richard, whose trajectories illustrate both the potential and the fragility of gendered authority in everyday life.

Notes

[i] "Wanawake wa kaskazini ni fighters sana kwenye hela. . . sasa ili wasionewe na mwanaume yeyote wanajikuta automatic wamebadilika kimaisha." Comment by a presumably Chagga man named "Mangi flani hivi" (pseudonym), Jamiiforums.com, 5 November 2016.

[ii] All names have been anonymised.

[iii] Both Vikundi and Vikoba (plural; singular: K*ikundi* and K*ikoba*, respectively) are neighbourhood groups established on the principle of collective saving and credit provision. Vikundi tend to be smaller and more intimate, mostly including older female neighbours and family members. Vikoba, as introduced

by CARE international, often involve larger groups and may include younger members and men, with more structured contributions.

[iv] "Kati ya hawa wanawake watatu, hakuna aliyewahi kuolewa [...] kwa sababu wametafuta hela." Grace, informal conversation with the author, January 2020.

[v] "Rasmi, Baba Julius ndio ni kichwa cha familia yetu. Lakini hana uwezo wa kuiongoza jamii wala familia yetu. […] Mtu yeyote akiwa na shida, anamtafuta Mama Randa." Mama Anna, informal conversation with the author, February 2020.

[vi] In different variations, such as "wanawake wenye uwezo" (able/powerful women) or "wanawake wa shoka" (women of the axe, of hard material).

[vii] "Mama Richard sio mwanamke mwenye nguvu. [...] Yuko under kabisa." Regina, informal conversation with the author, September 2019.

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

Carmeliza Rosário

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

Emidio Gune

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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Horizons of Touch

Serena Owusua Dankwa

"Can I give you a peck?" Janet asks, as I am switching off the recording device. We are sitting in the dim hall of Janet's friend, Vida. It is a hot afternoon and the blue walls of the narrow hall do not help to reduce the heat crawling in through the entrance next to me. The door needs to stay half open, even as we are talking about the intimate and the erotic – no need to perform secrecy by shutting doors. Facing me is another curtained opening that leads to a small kitchen stuffed with buckets, charcoal pots, metal tubs and piles of mortars and pestles of all sizes. A rectangle of light falls on the heavy boots that Janet removed after returning from the military campus. Janet, her yellow shirt unbuttoned, fixes me with her eyes, her compact, groomed hands resting on Vida's armchair that is still wrapped in plastic, possibly never to be unwrapped.

She had arranged that I interview her at Sister Vida's place. It promised more privacy than the bustling compound Janet herself lived in, where she shared rooms with her mother and brother. Sister Vida's compound was located in an airier corner of their busy working-class neighbourhood of central Accra. She and Janet were more than friends. Not long after the two became lovers, she had decided to sponsor Janet for an unpaid internship with Ghana's military vehicle repair services. I was eager to interview Janet that day. She was the first woman I had met in Ghana who was articulate about her same-sex desires and about 'knowing women' intimately – from an awareness of women's capacity for same-sex love (Dankwa 2021, 122), to the knowledge of how to transform passionate friendships into kinship. When we met, however, I was still unsure whether I was ready to deal with a topic that I barely dared to address when talking to friends, let alone family, in Ghana. I hoped to gain clarity by listening to Janet, telling her about my research interest and getting to know more about her life – with and without women.

A few weeks earlier, when asked whether I could interview her, Janet had remarked to Josephine, my friend and research associate, that she too took her

time to "interview" the women she liked before proposing love to them. Unimpressed by my status as a doctoral candidate, she had made her own sense of my desire to know about her and her life. Had she interpreted my interest in studying female same-sex culture as a subtle way of indicating sexual interest? Later, I conjectured 'that Janet chose to sexualize my intentions as a way of articulating her own interest in say, having a well-to-do 'half-caste' girlfriend, somewhat 'exotic', yet accessible – or in setting the romantic foundations for a lasting overseas connection" (Dankwa 2021, 9).

Whatever inspired Janet to agree to my interviewing her in the sticky intimacy of Vida's hall, during our conversation something happened that felt clarifying. For almost two hours we had worked to put to words our diverging desires – starting with my desire to learn about female same-sex intimacies that were not articulated in LGBT terms and Janet's eagerness to reconstruct how she began to desire women. In a language she had learnt at school, she explained to me, and perhaps to herself, why she chose to "do supi". *Supi* is a polyvalent Ghanaian term for an intimate friend or a girlfriendship that may include erotic intimacies and has been associated with boarding school girls. Janet's expression that she was doing *supi*, rather than being *supi*, suggests an erotic belonging to herself based on *doing* things, rather than *being* a certain type of person. While talking and listening, our desires seemed to align in a quest to understand why one would, against all odds, choose to do *supi*, and how Janet, without ever having attended boarding school, had found ways of knowing women.

I hesitated when she offered "the peck". With my limited English, I was not sure what a peck was, but felt that Janet was suggesting a meaningful way to seal our conversation. And indeed, the peck that turned out to be a light kiss placed on my cheek did not feel like a sexual promise. The intimate gesture summed up the proximity of the interview moment. It seemed to embody the touch we had already allowed to happen through our conversation. This touch has become the basis for connecting and weathering the troubling inequalities between us for almost two decades. This (staying in) touch has not always been as gentle as the peck; sometimes it is more like the rubbing described by Keguro Macharia in *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora* (2019). Understood as a relation of proximity, frottage is premised not only on shared struggles or identifications (in our case, not necessarily race, gender and

sexuality, though we both identified as women, black and same-sex desiring, but by parents who hail from neighbouring villages and share a preference for gender differentiation within same-sex intimacies), but also on the constant friction and "the difficult work of working through differences" (Macharia 2019, 8).

"Can we allow ourselves to be touched or do we alone do the touching?" asks Anima Adjepong who advocates for an "erotic ethnography" (2022, 397). We have learned that touch and attachment jeopardise objectivity and are to be avoided in scientific research. The erotic in particular is associated with sex and thus with the risk of harassment and abuse. Framed as a source of danger and unethical behavior between researcher and researched, the erotic remains invisible, and bodily presence is barely analysed in the process of ethnographic knowledge production. In the 1990s, lesbian feminists began to explore "the erotic equation in fieldwork" (Newton 1993) and the productivity of allowing for touch and intimate attachment in the field (Wekker 2006), though they highlighted that sex must not be the ultimate expression of the erotic.

More recently, black queer anthropologists of the Afro-Atlantic have conceptualised the erotic beyond sex and sexuality (Allen 2011; Gill 2018). They take their cues from Audre Lorde's famous speech, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1984), where she emphasised the erotic as a self-connecting, transformative force. "[T]hat deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible and does not need to be called marriage" (Lorde 1984, 57). To Lorde, the erotic is a powerful site of knowledge production that transpires sensual, spiritual and political energies, especially for those whose bodies and desires have been exoticised, hypersexualised and marginalised from power. It is this erotic that Adjepong summons when asking us to lean "into the erotic as a necessary modality for knowledge production" and permit "ourselves to be touched even as we touch our interlocutors, these people who let us into their lives and share some of their most intimate selves with us" (2022, 397-8). This holds particularly true when we research intimacies that could be subsumed under the LGBT+ label in its many extensions and the rainbow flag that seems to unite unconnected people, including diasporans, across the globe.

African activists have pragmatically adopted LGBT+ and other acronyms framed by international sexual rights policies, along with the backlash against them. Aware that these terminologies may not reflect everyday realities and concepts of African queers, activists deploy them to be legible and eligible for international funding. Queer African artists are at the forefront of (consciously) mispronouncing, respelling and playfully challenging these anglophone categories of identity. Queer African scholars are thus concerned not so much with LGBT's inability to include African terms, as they are with postcolonial modes of queering that ought not to be captured in labels. In *Vocabularies of the Non-Normative* (2015), zethu Matebeni and Thabo Msibi hint at ways in which Binyavanga Wainaina and other artists and activist-scholars neither reject nor fully embrace Euro-American designations, but playfully bend and queer them into African grammars.

In the German-speaking world, queer philosopher Antke Engel understands queer as an "art of disturbance" that is not so much about outrightly opposing hetero-norms or gender binaries, as it is about playfully interrupting them and making ambiguous forms of being imaginable. Rather than striking against normative binaries, thereby hastening into new closures, the process refrains from either multiplying or dissolving gender and sexual categories (Engel 2015, 194). Aware of the proximity of LGBT and neoliberal politics and the ways in which individual desires for sexual liberation have been usurped by late capitalist logics, Engel avers that queer strategies do not strive for unambiguousness. Instead, they reside in collective practices of negotiating care and redistribution (2015, 196–201). Despite such complex anti-capitalist articulations of collective queering, queer theory tends to be equated with North Atlantic politics and its analyses of anglophone contexts.

Thus, the ways in which queer—"in academic parlance"—seems to denote "anti-normativity" has prompted scholars of Africa to doubt the usefulness of queer theory (see Hendriks 2021, 398). Thus, Rachel Spronk and S.N. Nyeck "suggest twisting the term 'queer' by combining it with the verb 'to query': querying" (2021, 392). In African contexts with their deep entanglements between the normative and the non-normative, querying aims at accommodating "the queer affordances of everyday life" (Spronk and Nyeck 2021, 395). However, by disidentifying with queer *theories* made in the US, Africanists may overlook how lesbian-feminist and queer scholars have already

queried queer by documenting how the non-normative articulates itself through norms and vice versa – and without declaring their research participants as necessarily 'queer' (Gaudio 2009; Wekker 2006).

When I embarked on doctoral research, there were no publications on women who love women in West Africa. Had I believed my Ghanaian fathers in the diaspora that "homosexuals" did not exist back home, had I listened to the British anthropology professor who indicated that the topic was "weird" and had no relevance, or the Africanist historian who suggested it was simply too difficult to raise material on such a tabooed subject, I would not have found Janet. Inspired by early queer-feminist theories, it was the lived encounter and the mutual touch that opened up for me the possibility of unlearning (homo)sexuality. Once the infamous imperative to "come out of the closet" is dethroned and considered to be but one metaphor among many, some queer theories made in the US do offer routes into studying intimacies in Africa and elsewhere. Through them, I read the relational same-sex dynamics against *butch/femme* theories (Martin 1994), heard Janet's styles echo notions of *female masculinity* (Halberstam 1998) and was reminded, through her insistence on the knowledge and "enjoyment" of "doing *supi*", of the power that Audre Lorde – the 'black queer theorist' avant la lettre (Gill 2018) – afforded to the erotic and the "joy which we know ourselves to be capable of", especially if our desires do not seem to matter (Lorde 1984, 57). Queer interrogations of gender and sexual categorisations and visibility politics made me appreciate Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's critique of the universal significance assigned to gender among white feminists (1997).

During the research process, however, my questions regarding Janet's erotic life became blurry. Increasingly, preoccupied with southern Ghanaian concepts of personhood, property, mothering, and trading that pertained to self-understandings not restricted to women who love women, I worried about circling too far away from my original object of inquiry and ending up elsewhere. Margot Weiss considers the push and pull of inquiring supposedly "queer" intimacies and the longings for an *elsewhere* as constitutive of a new queer anthropology that seeks to overcome its colonial history of categorising sexuality (2022). "[Q]ueer indexes that desire to reach beyond theoretical or conceptual closure to an *elsewhere*, the frustration when one's desires are thwarted and then the return and reopening of new horizons" (2022, 2). In this

understanding, queer anthropology takes shape as a "political-intellectual desire" that lingers between a focus on same-sex or gender-transgressive realities and queer as a much broader horizon. By allowing for disturbances and bearing with the frustration of our object of study slipping away, this horizon queries and perhaps transforms normative processes of knowledge production.

To me, this horizon of touch first opened while I was reading Patricia McFadden, Charmaine Pereira and Sylvia Tamale's contributions to the issue on "Changing Cultures" in *Feminist Africa* (2003). They insisted that we focus on feeling and on pleasure beyond marriage and reproduction, but also beyond 'western' concepts of sexuality (McFadden 2003, Pereira 2003, Tamale 2003). My investment in queering was inspired not so much by the aspirational vagueness queer holds, but more importantly by the ways in which queer has been appropriated by African gender activists (Ekine and Abbas 2013; Sika and Okech 2019). Here, too, frustrations are being expressed – frustrations not necessarily with queer's slipperiness, but with generalisations about African homophobia that do not account for the extractivism and necropolitics endangering queer as much as other African lives. In *On Being Area Studied* (2016), Macharia points at the coloniality in the growing field of Queer African Studies. His "complaint" addresses US-centred African Studies that are absorbing queer African voices as "data" or "evidence" while remaining indifferent to African conceptual frames (Macharia 2016, 185).

Against the background of nationalist Ghanaian anti-LGBT+ politics, it is not farfetched to consider Janet's cherishing of her erotic self-connection, secrecies and knowledge around female friendship and same-sex passion, as a way of tacitly queering the laws and moralities once introduced under colonial rule. But is the insistence that colonialism brought homophobia to Africa enough to decolonise queer anthropology? Is it enough to assert that (African) languages that use non-gendered pronouns are quintessentially queer? Both queer-feminist and decolonial approaches aim at transforming modes of knowledge production towards making them accountable to the lives we study – the lives we inevitably touch and that touch us. This process goes far beyond authorising indigenous terms as the new queer.

Researcher and researched study and desire each other's knowledge, my encounters with Janet and other knowing women taught me. And more than that, we touch and are touched by each other with or without sexual desires involved. Understanding touch through the transformative energies the erotic harbours implies that "we attend to the political and spiritual alongside sensuality" (Gill 2018, 9). That which moves between the bodies of researchers and researched, including the erotic, is political in as much as it is framed by the workings of power. Moments of intimacy and proximities nurtured by prolonged touch go with friction and frottage (Macharia 2019). If touch is to stretch our scholarly horizons, we need to interrogate more than our situatedness as (feminist) scholars who desire new modes of knowledge production. Queering as an afro-feminist practice implies that we allow for touch and work through the frottage – the simultaneity of difference and identification – in all its materiality.

Notes

[1] An extended earlier version of this text is published under the title "Queering" in *Basel Anthropology Papers* 2025.

[2] LGBT has been ridiculed and attacked by conservative politicians across the world. In Ghana, where the acronym has been mediatised as an expression of western deviance and neocolonialism, nationalists conjure the specter of 'LGBTTTIQQAAP+++'. Animated by American 'pro-family' evangelists, the moralising runs: What will be the next letter in this never-ending alphabet of perversion and aberrations? (Adomako 2002, 83).

[3] Medical policy terms such as MSM (men having sex with men) have made it into everyday parlance and the same may happen with UN abbreviations such as SOGI (Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities).

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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 feminity 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*: e*getinge; pl: ebitinge*], one is supposed to select one of four names: *moraa*, *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 *Mogusii* 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.

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The Discomfort with Knowledge Authority – Multiple Feminist Readings of Minna Salami's *Sensuous Knowledge*

By Signe Arnfred, Sandra Manuel, and Carmeliza Rosario

Abstract

This collective review offers a layered feminist engagement with Minna Salami's *Sensuous Knowledge* (2020), a text that ambitiously attempts to reframe epistemological authority from a diasporic African feminist standpoint. Prompted by the discomfort of a young African feminist scholar who declined to author a conventional review due to multiple concerns, the editors of this *Feminist Africa* issue decided to write a joint reflection piece. Drawing from contrasting positions—continental, diasporic, and European—the authors interrogate the book's conceptual contributions, including its poetic method, its critique of "Europatriarchal Knowledge," and its centring of Yoruba (and other African) knowledge systems. The review explores the friction between Salami's call for epistemic liberation and her frequent returns to Western philosophical frameworks and raises questions about the limits of epistemic liberation using "the master's tools." While acknowledging the book's shortcomings, the reviewers ultimately acknowledge its value as a provocatively accessible text that contributes to ongoing conversations within African feminist discourse. The review also reflects on the need for a critical space where emerging scholars feel empowered to engage with influential work, even—and especially—when they remain unconvinced by such scholarship.

Keywords: Europatriarchal knowledge, Sensuous knowledge, African knowledge systems, African feminism, Epistemic authority

Introduction

Minna Salami's *Sensuous Knowledge* (2020) has been widely discussed in Black and diasporic literary circles since its publication. Its academic reception, however, particularly within African (feminist) scholarly communities, has been limited. To date, the only formal academic review appears to be Janice Lazarus' (2021) contribution in *The Sociological Review*, a UK-based journal and therefore not situated within African feminist scholarship.

In response to this absence, we as Feminist Africa issue editors sought the perspective of a young African feminist scholar, a member of the demographic to which Salami's work is presumed to speak. Our assumption was based on the fact that the book was rooted in Minna Salami's influential blog 'MsAfropolitan' (https://msafropolitan.com) – a feminist blog focused on African feminist thought, which has been running since 2010. However, the young scholar's reply to our invitation was marked with hesitation and critical unease.

Given her reluctance, the editors of this issue decided instead to engage in a collective conversation about the book, offering differing perspectives from:

- a senior European feminist (Signe Arnfred),
- an African feminist based on the continent (Sandra Manuel), and
- an African feminist based in Europe (Carmeliza Rosario).

The book emanates from a metaphor about two explorers encountering the same mountain from different sides who give contrasting reports of what they saw. It is structured into nine core chapters: Knowledge, Liberation, Decolonisation, Identity, Blackness, Womanhood, Sisterhood, Power, and Beauty.

From a European feminist perspective

While Arnfred acknowledges limitations in the book, particularly the minimal engagement with African feminist thinkers and the lack of proper referencing – which makes for an easier follow up on interesting ideas – she appreciates the broader conception of knowledge Salami attempts to explore, beyond

Europatriarchal Knowledge with its roots in Enlightenment thinking. For example, when describing 'sensuous knowledge', Salami talks about intellectual and emotional intelligence – inspired by Yoruba language and myths – also describing 'sensuous knowledge' as "a poetic approach" (2020, 15).

As for Europatriarchal Knowledge, Salami points out that it has "resulted in significant achievements" (2020, 20) – but also that this kind of thinking is "not rooted in the rational thinking it promotes," but in a "biased narrative that brazenly centres whiteness and maleness" (2020, 20). Further, along the same lines, Salami discusses "Enlightenment-era philosophers who established the Europatriarchal Knowledge narrative by encoding their biases into the field of science" (2020, 31). Arnfred reads all these statements as being to the point and undermining any claimed 'neutrality' of a 'scientific' view. She also likes Salami's statement that "there is no other ideology – not socialism, not Marxism, not black radicalism, or white Western feminism – that at core has created liberation theories for addressing class, gender and racial discrimination combined" (2020, 25).

Arnfred, however, is critical of Salami for reproducing the common misunderstanding that African cultures are inherently patriarchal. This is not the case, Arnfred avers. Some African societies have patrilineal kinship systems, but matrilineal systems are widespread on the continent. As explained by Christine Saidi in her book, *Women's Authority and Society in East-Central Africa*, "much popular writing and many popular ideas about gender in Africa continue to rest on the belief that women in all societies in the entire world are oppressed, and that African women are particularly oppressed" (2010, 12). In actual fact, as Saidi contends, "the labor of young women, and young men for that matter, in many East-Central African societies … was historically controlled by the older female matrilineal kin of the young women, not by the men" (2010, 16). In many places this is still the case.

Overall, Arnfred appreciates the book's engagement with figures such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins; she emphasises Salami's critique of Europatriarchal Knowledge and her advocacy for emotional intelligence, poetic method, and creative expression.

From a continental perspective

Manuel's engagement with the thematic of *Sensuous Knowledge* was through Salami's blog. She tends to agree with Arnfred's assessment. Neither scholar had the expectation that the book would be an academic piece; both thought that its merit was to make complex thought accessible to a wider public, a point that Lazarus also makes. Indeed, Salami has stated that the role of "sensuous knowledge" is to challenge dominant epistemologies, not to establish itself as the dominant epistemology. Salami uses multiple sources to challenge and resist Eurocentric frameworks mainly by giving pride of place to African indigenous philosophies, especially Yoruba thought, with which she is most familiar. She shows profound knowledge of thinkers from across Africa, including Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Alamin Mazrui (Kenya), Wole Soyinka, Ifi Amadiume, Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Nwando Achebe (Nigeria), Pumla Dineo Gqola (South Africa), Yvonne Vera (Zimbabwe), and Kofi Awoonor (Ghana). However, she also uses scholarship from the diaspora, perhaps giving it more prominence than works from Africa, and positions herself as a diasporic African feminist. This is what shapes her central critique of Europatriarchy.

From a diasporic perspective

Rosario, reflecting on some of the points raised by the young scholar, finds merit in concerns about an undue substantial engagement with authors centred within Europatriarchy. Such engagement runs contrary to Salami's early statement that her primary motivation was not to battle with the Europatriarchal view. "That would place him, yet again, at the center of the narrative" (2020, 2). And yet, this is precisely what she ends up doing. It has been a common exercise, among decolonial African feminists to decentre dominant epistemologies by purposefully not starting with them. This is something that Salami fails to do.

Salami's most significant contribution is the concept of "sensuous knowledge," a mode of knowing that engages "mind, body, and soul" (2020, 14). The book misses the mark by invoking seventeenth century British poet, John Milton, to articulate a concept meant to challenge dominant epistemologies. In doing so,

Salami ends up using the master's tools to attempt to dismantle the master's house. Yet again, it is necessary to acknowledge that she does address the issue of the master's tools by stating that "there is so much emphasis on the word tools that we have missed the significance of the word house" (2020, 34). Ultimately, she proposes that we leave the master's house by removing the mantle that creates the illusion of its integrity.

Furthermore, her referencing Israeli-American psychologist Daniel Kahneman's two internal systems as equivalent to *ogbon* in Yoruba philosophy seems too aligned with Western binary obsession. She does present the differences. The *ogbon* (translated as knowledge) is considered by the Yoruba to be formed of two separate but equally important parts: *ogbon-inu*, or knowledge of the gut; and *ogbon-ori*, knowledge of the head, whereas Kahneman, while acknowledging the duality, still presents a hierarchy between the two. This is the starting point of Salami's argument against dominant epistemological preference for a knowledge system that favours the rational over the emotional; and which forms the basis of the structural bias of Europatriarchy. While one can appreciate the contribution and the parallels with arguments presented by a Nobel prize laureate (Kahneman), it seems that instead of decentring a dominant epistemology, Salami felt compelled to find parallels in one to give credence to the point she was making.

Troublingly, Salami states that we would not have "encyclopaedias, maps, trains, planes, modern universities", if it were not for the "scientific, industrial, and information revolutions" ushered by the Enlightenment (2020, 19). And while Salami does recognise that the Enlightenment is problematic, decolonial scholars are unlikely to affirm her assertion, which ignores the systematic destruction of knowledge systems that could have contributed to and enhanced such advancements. Additionally, maps and encyclopaedias have systematically been criticised as being part of a knowledge system logic that separates and classifies in profoundly biased ways.

Ironically, at the same time that Salami advocates a challenge to the way we think about knowledge, through a collective story, she refers to this resetting as a "tabula rasa"—a known proposition by British Enlightenment philosopher, John Locke. Setting aside the feasibility of cleaning the slate and starting anew, we are left with the same dilemma of returning to the master's tools

(terminologies) when attempting to tear down his house. This is not to say that her proposition to change perceptions of a dominant knowledge system by changing the narrative about that system is without merit. In fact, it echoes overall decolonial thought.

In addition, in commending efforts to counter Europatriarchy, Salami conflates black and African feminist contributions. There are commonalities, but also important differences between the oppression of Black women in settler societies and that experienced by African women elsewhere, not least because of the latter's heterogeneity. This is coupled with some essentialised ways of representing African culture and women. This proclivity is visible in the presentation of African philosophy as a "philosophy of interbeing" (Salami 2020, 36), suggesting a cohesive "essence" placing African and other "indigenous" knowledge systems in opposition to Europatriarchal knowledge.

The juxtaposition of Socrates and Orunmila, who represent Western and Yoruba philosophies, is very potent. Salami proposes that African myth and philosophy should be integrated into global knowledge in the same way Greek mythology and philosophy have been used to "apply insights to contemporary European life" (Salami 2020, 39). While we would not contradict Salami's proposition, it should be remembered that the seamless integration of Greek philosophy into everyday European life and beyond has been made possible by its continuous presence within education systems globally, facilitated by the colonial enterprise. Before pursuing global ambitions, we might need to consider how we integrate our mythologies and philosophies into our African education systems.

In conclusion

One of the young scholar's concerns was that in the current climate of polarised academic discourse, her review would "sidestep crucial problems or risk contributing to unproductive forms of critique." By engaging in this debate, prompted by this scholar's concerns, we wanted to revive the tradition of the academic debate that can carefully consider the role that critique should play in such conversations. We find that overall, and inspite of whatever critique we might offer, the book is well written and with compelling contributions to

African feminist discussions. Salami remains visible and influential. She has supplemented her contribution with a standpoint in the *Feminist Africa* – African Futurism (2021) edition and a recently published book entitled, *Can Feminism Be African?* (2025). Our hope is that, in the future, young scholars such as the one who generated this discussion amongst the editors of this *Feminist Africa* issue will feel safe to share their misgivings about these and other writings. The feminist space, and especially the highly critical African feminist space, should give them strong models of debate to be able to do so. Their perspectives can only enrich all of us.

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Feeling and Finding: An Exploration of the Self, Sensuality and Sexuality for African Women in Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's *The Sex Lives of African Women*

by Sihle Tshangela Mazibu

Abstract

This review explores the varying experiences of self-discovery, sensuality and sexuality for African women through a reading of Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's *The Sex Lives of African Women*. Drawing on the stories of African women in this book, along with my own lived experiences as a queer, polyamorous and pansexual African woman, I engage the ways that women navigate the constraints of patriarchy and societal expectations while claiming and moulding their own paths to sexual autonomy, pleasure and liberation.

Keywords: African women, sexuality, sensuality, queerness, resistance.

Introduction

Moments before attending Johannesburg Pride, I sat, wine glass in hand, incense burning and Lia Butler's *Imimangaliso* playing in the background. Beside me sat my partner's lover and in front of me, my lover crouched with their hands adorning our knees, basking in the spirituality and poetry of this connection. In this moment, I think about how revolutionary this love I have cultivated is. I ponder how it must look so unfamiliar to external eyes in a growingly conservative South Africa, despite its progressive constitution. I think about the politics and resistance of my own being— a gender queer, polyamorous and pansexual young African woman. I was never going to, nor meant to be orthodox. My existence and that of others like me always occupies a default deviance. This is a realisation strummed in my mind repeatedly in the pages of Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's powerful collection: *The Sex Lives of African Women*.

In this book, Sekyiamah, an award-winning Ghanaian blogger, feminist and queer writer, weaves together interviews conducted with African women from 31 countries, detailing their intimate and individual experiences of sex, sexuality and relationships. These stories powerfully depict the varying ways that African women navigate and negotiate parameters and norms that restrict and confine their sexual autonomy, pleasure and liberation. In this paper, to stay true to the spirit and feel of the text, I scatter glimpses of my own life along with some of the most resonant accounts of the African women captured in the book to provide a snapshot of the politics, resistance, poetry and nuance that Sekyiamah's book encapsulates. The book is divided into three segments titled "Self-discovery," "Freedom" and "Healing," with each segment consisting of several African women's experiences.

The queerness of self-discovery

I thought the first section of the book stayed true to its title by unveiling an incredibly powerful theme regarding the queerness of self-discovery. This book boldly demonstrates that despite the weight of a cisheterosexual and patriarchal world, there are African women who continue to defiantly resist confinement and carve out their own spaces, claiming or reclaiming their [queer] identities. Sekyiamah begins this segment by powerfully stating that:

> It is imperative to break out of the boxes circumscribed by society in order to discover one's self and the multitudes we hold within us. This requires practicing an audacious form of bravery, and often requires one to go against the grain of everything that has been presented as the norm (Sekyiamah 2021, 5).

Reflecting on my own queerness, I would say that I did not become queer because I have always been so. Although my first same-sex love was unearthed in high school, I always thought of myself as queer. When I realised that I had fallen in love with my best friend, the disorientation that I felt was not from the realisation of queerness but because of the possibility of complicating a cherished friendship. It would take the peering eyes and the subtle, yet weighty scrunts from other people, including my father, to propel me into the realisation that my queer identity was held in contempt in the larger society. My queerness never sat uncomfortably within me but always felt sacred and innately powerful. Despite the contempt, I always felt compelled to be authentically

queer— to love the women and queer folk I would come to love deeply and passionately regardless of the risk or the disapproval.

The stories in this book tell the tale of women's exploration and discovery of queerness, kink, and polyamory; experiences that are often deemed taboo. What was particularly powerful for me was the vigour and frankness with which these women could speak about their sexual and intimate lives— which is seldom a privilege afforded to African women. Patriarchy, white supremacy, anti-blackness, religious and cultural conservatism, among many other systems of power, often conspire to silence African women's agency and autonomy, particularly when it comes to openly claiming and expressing sexual experiences and desires. This book is a tender and formidable resistance against this. For instance, one of the women, Helen, steps into the world of BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission and Sadomasochism), polyamory and queerness after years of devoting herself to motherhood, while another, Keisha— who grew up influenced by Catholicism— gradually comes to explore her attraction to activist women and claim a pansexual identity (Sekyiamah 2021).

These and many other stories in the book draw a thread of queering of self-discovery. By queer, I do not mean sexual attraction or sexual orientation, but the forging of a path that goes against the grain of expectations imposed on African women. On this, I think of bell hooks' account of queerness, of which she says:

> I identify myself as queer past gay. I came up with this with one of my white colleagues, lesbian colleagues, where we were saying that all of our lives, we've experienced ourselves as queer, as not belonging as the essence of queer. … Queer not as being about who you are having sex with, that can be a dimension of it, but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live (hooks, 2014).

In this section, Sekyiamah includes the narratives of African women who resist and reject the confines imposed by society that are particularly stringent for African women on the continent and in the diaspora.

Sensuality, sexuality and spirituality

This was my favourite aspect that unfurled throughout the book. There is a particular memory that remains embedded in my mind. When I was younger— in one of the catechism classes I attended on an early Sunday morning— we were explicitly warned about the sinfulness of masturbation. "God is always watching," the catechism teacher emphasised. This rhetoric continued to mar my relationship with self-pleasure and sexuality generally. My own beautifully tumultuous spiritual journey of becoming *igqirha* or a healer according to isiXhosa cultural rites, as well as my forays into decolonial theory and African [spiritual] history, helped facilitate a necessary and wholesome healing from the religious conditioning that had triggered sexual trauma and anxiety within me. Through immersing myself in African spirituality, I learned to embrace sensuality and eroticism. I think about various African spiritual deities in various ethnic and cultural spaces— Mami Wata, Yemaya, Oshun and Hathor, among countless others— who, to me, embody sensuality and eroticism. I think that one of the many ruptures of colonialism and Christian conversion was the demonisation of the sensual and sexual connection that African women had, particularly in the realm of spirituality.

Sekyiamah's book also felt like a resistance to this colonial and patriarchal devaluation of African spiritual sensuality and sexuality. There are stories that reflect my own experience with Christian conditioning and purity culture which oftentimes affects women's ability to experience sexual/sensual pleasure and desire without shame. For instance, Bibi, a Nigerian woman who was a member of an evangelic church, says, "but there were always these voices in my head: this is a moment of no return. Once you have sex it is done. You can go to hell for this. You are now officially a scarlet woman. You have broken one of the laws of God and that's not okay" (Sekyiamah 2021, 51). This account speaks to the sexual anxiety that Christian conditioning injects into the psyches of African women specifically.

These stories show the ways coloniality, patriarchy and Christianity work to reinforce silencing, particularly of African women regarding claiming and expressing sexuality and sensuality. More importantly, they show the resilience of indigenous African spirituality as a framework that allows for the

reclamation and reinvigoration of the sexual and sensual essence of African women, especially in line with African spiritual cosmology.

Queer resistance: Claiming queerness in conservative settings

Several of my lovers have asked why it is that I struggle to comfortably walk hand in hand with them in public settings. The truth is that I live in a perpetual state of alertness, fearing that the simple act of holding my partner's hand risks making my queer lover and me hyper visible to possible queerphobic violation. Although the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution, celebrated as one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, explicitly protects the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals, I am haunted by the violence that continues to be visited upon queer individuals in the country. The stories of Zoliswa Nkonyane and Eudy Simelane— lesbian women murdered merely for daring to be openly queer— never leave my waking mind. Their memories resurface in my mind especially when I visibly claim queerness and hold my lover's hand as we navigate the busy streets of Johannesburg.

In Sekyiamah's book, Ebony's story reflects this fear embedded within me. She recounts,

> I've been engaged three times. The first time was to a woman. I was still very young at that time, and although we were in love, it was too hard to fight for our love. On paper, South Africa has one of the most progressive LGBTQI legislations. The reality is different. We were constantly told that we were unAfrican and evil. Lesbian women were being constantly killed and raped (Sekyiamah 2021, 58).

I frequently hold space and solidarity for queer individuals in other African countries, recognising that the fears I experience in a country with legal protection and same-sex marriage are likely magnified for queer folk in countries without such protections and legal frameworks. Despite the fear that persists, there is also bravery and resistance. What I am particularly appreciative of about Sekyiamah's book is its celebration of the boldness from African women who claim and embrace queerness even within conservative and often queerphobic settings. I think it is necessary for us to see glimpses of queer resistance around the continent rather than always strife, violence and

death. On this, I am reminded of Audre Lorde's poem, *A Litany for Survival*, in which she says:

> and when we speak we are afraid
> our words will not be heard
> nor welcomed
> but when we are silent
> we are still afraid
> So, it is better to speak
> remembering
> we were never meant to survive. (Lorde 2020, 407)

Sekyiamah aptly titles the segment that speaks most to queer resistance and courage to live authentically queer— *Freedom*, declaring,

> The women featured in this segment show that there are many ways to be free in sexual relationships. It's no accident that the vast majority of women featured are from the lesbian, bisexual and trans community; and/or practice polyamory. These are women who have resisted societal norms of compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy and have searched both within and without for other ways of practising love (Sekyiamah 2021, 121).

The healing capacity of sexuality and sensuality for African women

The final section of Sekyiamah's book is aptly titled "Healing." This was perhaps the most bittersweet aspect of the book—doing the work of confronting and healing from trauma. Different forms of trauma—parental trauma, sexual trauma, romantic trauma and grief—have compounded within my body, creating what I feel is a stiffness. One of the hardest lessons that I have had to learn is that trauma cannot be swiftly bypassed. It has come up in my most intimate moments in ways that have caused a disconnect between my body and mind. To begin confronting and healing these traumas that emerge in my own sexual and sensual experiences, I have had to immerse myself in various self-care practices that allow me to reconnect with my own body and help me move beyond the trauma-induced stiffness. Beyond self-care, I have had to be particularly selective about whom I trust enough to be vulnerable

with in intimate settings. This exercise of agency, which Sekyiamah captures beautifully, has been a healing mechanism in itself.

The book contains several stories that delve into the various traumas that African women experience, such as sexual, emotional and physical abuse. These accounts were often difficult to read, yet the ways that the women articulated overcoming them felt so beautifully poignant. One of the stories that moved me to tears was that of Mariam Gebre, an Ethiopian woman. She details how she was only able to reckon with being sexually abused as a child when she began working with migrant women in the USA. She says,

> The first time I began to acknowledge that I was molested as a child was at my first job working in a women's centre in the US. A lot of the women who came there were refugees, or students from other countries. They shared stories of molestation and rape. I used to sit there, listen and weep. I was crying for myself (Sekyiamah 2021, 219-220).

Through these stories, Sekyiamah captures the deeply layered journeys of African women in their bid to reclaim their bodies after traumatic experiences. From these narratives, I have gained the valuable insight that perhaps healing is not meant to be about completely erasing or ignoring the scars and afflictions of any kind of trauma or violence, nor is it about exacting revenge. Instead, a necessary part of healing requires the facilitation of ways to return to yourself and value and cherish your own body, mind and spirit. Healing is also about holding this self-worth as a standard when engaging others romantically, sexually and sensually. Healing, as Sekyiamah's book indicates, is a complex and ongoing journey towards reclaiming wholeness as African women.

Conclusion

Sekyiamah's *The Sex Lives of African Women* is not simply a collection of personal stories, but a powerful testament to the complexities in the experiences of black and African women across the continent and the globe. Various stories in the book speak to myriad aspects of these experiences. The most central aspects in my life that these accounts spoke to have been self-discovery, sensuality and spirituality, queerness, non-monogamy, resistance and healing from trauma. This book underscores the importance of allowing African women spaces to openly and honestly confront desire and distress in a

world that often marginalises and silences black and African women. I am incredibly grateful to have stumbled upon it in the tender whirlwind of navigating young adulthood.

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