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Introduction: Rethinking Time and Gender in African History

Jonna Katto
University of Helsinki
jonna.katto@helsinki.fi

Heike Becker
University of the Western Cape
hbecker@uwc.ac.za

Abstract

This special issue seeks to problematize the way that time and gender – and their relationship to each other – is conceptualized in prevailing historical narratives about African pasts. Often we take these notions for granted in our practices of research and writing. Even today, histories about gender in Africa often continue to be framed by Eurocentric teleological narratives of modernity. In this special issue – that brings together scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, focusing on different time periods, and using different methodological approaches – we ask what would happen if we brought the notions of time and gender into a more critical focus. How would this reshape the gendered histories we write?

Keywords: gender; African history; time and temporality; interdisciplinary; queer African studies

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About the editors

Jonna Katto is an Academy Research Fellow at the University of Helsinki. She was a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow in African Studies at Ghent University, 2019–2021. Author of *Women's Lived Landscapes of War and Liberation in Mozambique: Bodily Memory and the Gendered Aesthetics of Belonging* (Routledge, 2019), she has also written on emotions in history telling and the sensory aesthetics of food memories. Her current research focuses on time and change in African gendered histories, and especially on the ways that the deeper past echoes and is reworked in oral history encounters in the present.

Heike Becker is Chair and Professor of Anthropology at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. She is the author of *Namibian Women's Movement 1980 to 1992: From Anticolonial Struggle to Reconstruction*, and has published widely on the intersection of culture and postcolonial politics, memory cultures, popular culture, gender, and social and decolonial movements, with a focus on Namibia and South Africa.

What are the gender categories and temporal logics that underpin and shape the histories we write about African pasts? Despite existing critiques of post-colonial and feminist scholarship (see, e.g., Said 1978; Scott 1986; Brown 1992; Oyěwùmí 1997; Chakrabarty 2000; Mbembe 2001; Fabian 2002; Boydston 2009), these notions seldom receive serious attention in our practice of research and writing. Even today, gendered histories about Africa often continue to be framed by Eurocentric teleological narratives of modernity. As feminist historians of gender argue (see, e.g., Kelly-Gadol 1984; Jordanova 2006; Shepard and Walker 2008; Browne 2014), such traditional schemas of periodization tie people's historical experiences to linear narratives of change. Many historians of Africa have critically written against this progressive chronology (e.g., Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe 1993; Cooper 2000; Ellis 2002; Ogundiran 2020), yet it still implicitly underlies much of the literature on gender in African history.

This special issue asks what would happen if we brought the notions of time and gender into a more critical focus. How would this reshape the gendered histories we write? The aim of this curated collection of articles – that draws together scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds – is to problematize the way that time (and time's relationship to gender) is conceptualized in prevailing historical narratives. Together we invite our readers to join us in thinking critically about whose histories the time and gender concepts we use in our writing are rooted (see Schoenbrun, this issue). Yet this invitation goes beyond mere critical self-reflection to call for conceptual openness: an openness to the possibility of surprise (Sedgwick 2003), but also challenge (Oyěwùmí 2004). This involves a sensitivity to histories outside the established 'normal' (Abrahams 1996) and dominant arrangements of time (Freeman 2010) – an openness to new, gendered, historical imagination.

Beyond gender historians, queer theorists and African feminist scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds offer us further crucial insights into understanding the temporal logics and gender constructs that underpin many of the prevailing historical narratives of social change in Africa. The underlying temporal models of these narratives, queer theorists argue, depend not only on teleology (a notion of 'liberation' in the case of women), but also on heteronormativity (see, e.g., Dinshaw et al. 2007; Liljeström 2019; Fiereck et al. 2020; Mbasalaki 2020) and the assumption of a female/male gender binary. African gender scholars have greatly criticized these gender models for building on Western gender conceptualizations (see, e.g., Amadiume 1987; Oyěwùmí 1997, 2016; Maseko 2018; Tamale 2020; Matebeni 2021; Bam and Muthien 2021). As Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (2004; see also Amadiume 1997) claims, the male/female gender dichotomy and its accompanying 'male privileging' does not exist in many African conceptualizations of gender. Oyěwùmí (2004, 2) also rightfully criticizes feminist researchers for using "gender as the model for explaining women's subordination and oppression worldwide". As she argues, "gender is first and foremost a socio-cultural construct. We cannot take as given what indeed we need to investigate".

These critical questions about gender and temporality have been taken further by several Africa-based scholars. The late feminist anthropologist Elaine Salo (2010) called attention to temporality to contest assumptions of a cohesive, undifferentiated Africanity, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality. June Bam has challenged pre-colonial historiographies. In a recent monograph, *Ausi told me: Why Cape Herstoriographies Matter*, Bam (2021) takes on a decidedly decolonial approach and sets out to trouble mainstream interpretations of deep pasts. Embarking on a speculative ancient history of the Cape Flats, she investigates what women's interpretations and knowledge of plants, rituals, and cosmologies can tell us about the ongoing link between a precolonial past and indigenous identities in the South African present.

Some of the most inspiring conceptual innovations have come out of the relatively new field of queer African studies, beginning to explore beyond the field's basic goal of resisting the historic obliteration of the queer in African studies. Stella Nyanzi queers the argument made earlier by Salo (2010), arguing that "one must simultaneously reclaim Africa in its bold diversities and reinsert queerness" (Nyanzi 2014, 61). Queer African studies reclaims non-normative genders and sexualities for African pasts, presents, and futures.

Temporality is central to the intellectual and activist politics of queer African studies to unravel the common argument by politicians and others that non-normative sexualities were "un-African",[1] as well as to decentre the dominant Western framing in mainstream queer studies. Kirk Fiereck, Neville Hoad, and Danai Mupotsa (2020, 364) propose a focus on the 'African queer customary'. They point out that the idea of the customary infers a complex, improvisatory notion of time, thus "finding a usable past for both the lived experience and the study of African sexual objects, and how queer theory elaborated from Africa can inform queer theory's Euro-American silent ethnocentrisms" (Fiereck et al. 2020, 363).

Decolonial, feminist, and queer scholarship by Africans on the continent have made important suggestions on how to rethink and broaden approaches to methodology regarding gender and time. Keguro Macharia (2015) has theorized archive and method in queer African studies, analysing the relationship between archive production and archive use attentive to African histories, lives, and embodiment. Salo and Bam both put forward propositions for fieldwork, with Salo (2010) calling for fine-grained ethnographies from a feminist positionality, and Bam (2021) for a decolonized approach of deep listening with the aim of accessing and validating indigenous knowledge, particularly of women knowledge keepers.

The idea for this special issue came out of the International Workshop on "Rethinking Time and Gender in African History", which was held at Ghent University in March 2022.[2] This hybrid workshop brought together 19 speakers from Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Austria, and the US to challenge and destabilize taken-for-granted ideas about gender and time in African history – and to interrogate the conceptual categories of our research.

The aim of this workshop was to engage in conversation researchers working on different time periods and drawing on different sources and methodological approaches. Much of African gender research still tends to focus more on the contemporary than on history pre-1900 and earlier. One reason for this is methodological challenges: how to access the 'deep archive' (Mbembe 2022; see also, e.g., Ochonu 2015; Abrahams 1996; Meneses 2019; Mbah 2019; Ogundiran 2020; Muthien and Bam 2021) of African history beyond the colonial archive of written documents? The

[1] The virulent homophobic discourse and legislated persecution in countries such as Uganda and Kenya is well-known. Currently legal battles also continue in Namibia, where the South African Immorality Act of 1957 is still in force, prohibiting "unlawful carnal intercourse" and the sexual act of sodomy between men. Whilst these laws have rarely been enforced in recent years, there have been repeated homophobic attacks, including those fuelled by former President Sam Nujoma in 1996 when he claimed, in an address to the SWAPO Women's Council Congress, that homosexuality was a negative foreign influence. This is in contrast to conclusive historical ethnographic evidence and common knowledge of (male) homosexual practices in some regions of Namibia.

[2] The workshop was convened by Jonna Katto in collaboration with African Studies colleagues at Ghent University, especially Inge Brinkman. The workshop took place within the framework of the research project "Rethinking African Gender Histories: Time, Change, and the Deeper Past in Northern Mozambique (GENHIS-AFRICA)", which was funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions under Horizon 2020, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. After the workshop, Jonna Katto and Heike Becker joined forces to curate this special issue. They further circulated the CFPs, especially inviting contributions from Africa-based gender scholars.

keynote lectures of two historians of early Africa, Christine Saidi and David Schoenbrun (who draw on historical linguistics, oral traditions, archaeology, and various other fields of study in their research), further facilitated this conversation between different temporal fields of study, allowing us to learn from and engage with each other's research.

The articles in this special issue approach the task of rethinking time and gender from different angles. They draw on a variety of sources, including interviews, colonial archives, oral history, oral traditions, comparative historical linguistics, songs and music, colonial newspapers, epic poems and sound archives, and rock art. Together the articles think, experiment with, and interrogate different understandings and concepts of time and temporality: non-linear and linear time; hetero- and multitemporality; everyday temporality; the events and moments of time and the 'now' moment; distant time and deep time; embodied, lived time; being out of time, or time as stasis or timelessness; temporal (dis)rupture and interruption; time as unruly and unstable; and queer time. The individual articles draw on different theoretical traditions and understandings of these concepts, and develop them further. The articles focus on how people themselves define time and gender, how they experience themselves in time as gendered historical subjects. At the same time, they explore the ways in which our research narratives produce temporality, as well as understandings of the relationship between time and gender. Moreover, together the articles seek in different ways to rethink the relationship between time and gender in African history.

The articles contest histories of masculinized power and authority (and the idea of women's marginality in historical time). Many articles also question the heteronormativity of dominant histories. Authors build on an understanding of gender as a temporal category: a category that mattered differently (or perhaps less) in earlier times (and maybe not at all in a very distant past). Some articles explore gender as a colonial construct. Others explore how, in very recent times, the category of gender has been further shaped, for instance, through nationalist and decolonial discourses. Moreover, the analysis in many articles focuses on how gender identities are continuously shaped and negotiated through space and time. All articles build on the premise that there are no pre-existing static models, which also means that there is no static precolonial past, but even early African pasts can be studied as involving these continuous negotiations.

Presentation of the special issue

The issue opens with *David Schoenbrun's* keynote address. Schoenbrun centres African conceptualizations of time and gender. Taking the reader on a time journey from a distant past to the present, his analysis moves from a focus on language vocabulary and ancient pasts, to oral texts and the relationship between past and present, and finally to the timework of social practice. He explores how meanings of time have been construed by Bantu speakers from the last millennium BCE into the recent past; how the vernacular chronologies of oral texts order and gender time; and, finally, how the blending of time and gender is done in the specific historical context of the Island shrine on the Inland Sea (in present times known as Lake Victoria) through the social practice of tying lunar time to fertility. Schoenbrun's analysis brings to the forefront 'traditions of invention', showing how people have, through different times, creatively and inventively blended time and gender.

The two articles that follow look deeper still into the performativity of gender. Turning to the visceral politics of the body, they explore queer temporalities and histories. Through their respective studies, the authors analyse how bodies make and bend gender and time and how they thus disrupt normative temporal and gender regimes.

Caio Simões de Araújo's article focuses on the cultural and social history of the carnival in late colonial Lourenço Marques (contemporary Maputo). Drawing on the archives of the local press as well as on oral history interviews, Araújo shows how the colonial carnival, while a space of state regulation, moral policing, and racial boundary making, was also a space in which people sought and found moments of freedom and pleasure, temporarily transgressing the gendered and racialized rules of colonial sociability, and also experiencing connectedness to a transnational southern queer culture. Historians of gender and sexuality in southern Africa have focused much on the temporal construction of dominant regimes. Yet Araújo, in his article, urges that we focus on the acts and events (such as carnivalesque events) that unsettle the established temporal orders. In an analysis that centres the body in motion (dancing, singing, or cross-dressing), he shows how, by exploring moments of transgression and gender-bending, we can find new histories of gender and sexuality and begin to imagine what he calls "carnivalesque histories of joy".

Lindy-Lee Prince's article also looks at the transformative power and subversive potential of queer joy. Focusing on femme drag performance in Cape Town, Prince looks into the temporality of queer futures within a historical context of trauma (a history of systemic violence perpetrated against Black and Brown Queer South Africans). Their article draws on their research frequenting drag performances and interviewing drag queen performers in De Waterkant/Greenpoint in Cape Town. Prince explores the queer femme aesthetic performance and presentation of drag as an emancipatory tool. Here, their analysis builds on José Esteban Muñoz' (2009) notion of the 'prison house' of 'the here and now' and on the idea of queerness as a way of looking beyond its constraints, to imagine that which does not yet exist in the present moment. As a queer expressive form, queer drag, as Prince shows, is "a freeing form of response, filled with potentiality". Challenging the heteronormativity of everyday aesthetics – and the moralistic productive framework of Protestant work ethics to which it is tied – Prince argues that queer femme performances, in transforming the bodies of the performers, demonstrate "the possibility of *becoming*" (and "potential new futures"), also allowing the viewers to see that another way of being in the world is possible.

The following two articles move *to queer* our understanding of deeper historical time. Here, *to queer* refers to questioning, challenging, and thus opening the categories of gender and sexuality that underlie many established histories of early African pasts to new historical imaginings.

Christine Saidi's article challenges us to rethink our understanding of gender in early Bantu social history. Much of what we think we know has been shaped by the texts of early missionaries, anthropologists, and other foreign travellers, who often imposed their own Western binary gender concepts onto Bantu ideas of family and society. Early linguists interpreted their data based on similar assumptions. In her article, Saidi, reading against these layers of colonial and post-colonial impositions, focuses her analysis on terms that Bantu-speaking people used to conceptualize themselves and their communities. Combining a historic-linguistic analysis with a comparative study of ethnographies and oral traditions, Saidi shows that in the Bantu Matrilineal Zone (BMZ) – an area that stretches from Angola and Namibia in the west, through central Africa to Tanzania and Mozambique in the east – there exists a long history of non-binary gender concepts spanning thousands of years. Her article argues that in the BMZ, prior to European colonialism, Bantu-speaking people conceptualized gender in flexible terms. For them, the categories of 'woman' and 'man' did not feature as separate social entities, nor was gender a major factor in determining authority or responsibility.

Catherine Namono also challenges taken-for-granted assumptions of female/

male gender dichotomies in her article focusing on initiation rites among the Northern Sotho in South Africa. Scholars have categorized Northern Sotho rock art sites associated with initiation as either male or female gendered spaces. Yet Namono argues that a close analysis of Northern Sotho rock art sites shows evidence of the co-occurrence of male/female initiation symbols, their arrangement in relation to each other varying from site to site, as well as evidence of shared symbols. According to Namono, it is probable that males and females used the same sites at different times. In her analysis – focusing especially on the shared symbol of *kôma* – she explores how male/female symbols resonated with each other and how similar and different meanings were created in the context of male and female initiation rituals. Namono argues that the blending of gender symbols in rock art shows that gender fluidity – the blurring (and sometimes blending) of male/female gender categories in a ritual context – has a deep history within Northern Sotho society.

Colonial rewritings of history have done much to obscure our understanding of these deeper gendered pasts. The three articles that follow challenge the way colonial concepts of time and gender continue to limit our understandings of the past and especially of women's historical experiences. Engaging with women's words and oral accounts, and centring their perceptions and notions of time, the authors explore other gendered temporalities alongside colonial and postcolonial teleological narratives of modernity.

Kara Moskowitz engages with gendered temporal conceptualizations in historical scholarship on gender, decolonization, and temporality in modern Africa. Drawing on rich oral history and archival sources, she demonstrates that, in Kenya, as in many African settings, decolonization did not usher in the promised changes for women. Moskowitz questions the popular Kenyan representation of *uhuru* ('independence') in 1963 as a watershed. She shows that unlike the Kenyans – primarily men – who did consider *uhuru* a significant marker in their lives, as well as in the history of Kenya, many women considered the transition as having been of little tangible consequence. Women were excluded from state resources, social services, and full political enfranchisement. Continued landlessness, in particular, perpetuated structural gendered inequalities. Moskowitz concludes that post-independence Kenya did not deliver the decolonizing future women had envisioned. The article argues that gendered temporal imaginations of the period of African independence are of particular significance for a re-evaluation of decolonization as heterotemporal, a conceptual embrace of the colonial and postcolonial period within a single analytical frame.

Signe Arnfred continues to unravel the postcolonial moment as one that perpetuates the legacy of colonialism. She dissects early independent Mozambique's gendered policies of 'African tradition', finding that they continue to tell a story of progress and the long laborious walk from 'tradition' to 'modernity'. Drawing on the auto-ethnographic chronicle of her work as a *cooperante* (internationalist volunteer) with the official women's organization of FRELIMO (the liberation front which became the country's – then ostensibly socialist – ruling party) in the early 1980s, and decades of her later research in the country, Arnfred considers issues of temporality by re-visiting aspects of 'African tradition'. As she shows, these were, and still are, seen by the women themselves as sources of identity and power, while seen from positions of 'modernity' and 'development' these same rituals are condemned as backward and as oppressive of women. She argues that, thus, the assumed temporal progress from 'tradition' to 'modernity' is destabilized and disrupted.

Heike Becker's article on gender discourses and colonialism looks into historical sound archives as an innovative source for disrupting (post)colonial narratives of gendered modernity. Becker discusses how gender was constituted and mediated in relation to colonial

temporalities in northern Namibia. The article presents a historical ethnography of how both the Christian mission's cultural discourse and the South African colonial administration's efforts to masculinize the 'native' political authority produced a gendered perception of Owambo women. Centred on a recording of epic orature performed by a prominent woman in 1953, it also demonstrates the performer's powerful, creative reappropriation and 'flipping' of these discourses. Becker proposes a methodology of combining collaborative ethnography, 'close listening', and critical consideration of the historical context to open up to polyphonic voices, which will allow for different perspectives on gender, time and modernity.

Articles in this special issue have engaged in destabilizing linear notions of history in different ways. Many authors have also explored the 'ongoing link' between the past (including the deeper past) and the present. In the final article of this special issue, *Jonna Katto* focuses on the multitemporality of the present. Drawing on oral history research on Yaawo women of authority in northern Mozambique, she explores the ways in which the narrators (intentionally and unintentionally) pull different kinds of gendered temporalities into action in the present. Building on the idea that "temporality is gendered, and gendering is temporal" (Schèues et al. 2011), she explores how the relationship between gender and temporality is constructed in the 'now' moments of oral history-telling. Importantly, Katto's analysis shows the inherent instability of gendered temporality: time is continuously (re)categorized and (re)organized – and the relationship between gender and temporality is continuously (re)constructed. Her article argues that this kind of analytical engagement in accommodating a more complex understanding of historical time can allow for a fuller history of gender and power and the gendered processes of change in women's authority and leadership in northern Mozambique.

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