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“The Father is also the Sister”: A Non-binary Gendered History of Matrilineal Bantu Communities

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Abstract

Gender, as broadly construed by Bantu-speaking peoples, is not fixed in the same way that it is in the West. This kind of gender flexibility is counter to binary gender concepts which classify gender into two separate, opposite, and rigid forms of masculine and feminine. This study proposes that in the Bantu Matrilineal Zone [BMZ], gender, though sometimes acknowledged, was not a major factor in determining authority or responsibility and was rarely conceptualized in binary terms by Bantu-speaking peoples over the three thousand years prior to colonialism. The lack of historical binary gender concepts within the BMZ is supported by ethnographic studies and oral traditions that represent social activity between 1450 and the present, as well as linguistic data which can date Bantu epistemologies and social history to earlier periods. To recapture Bantu social history over the longue durée, it is necessary to peel away layers of colonial and post-colonial impositions. During the late precolonial and colonial period, most of the writings of missionaries, anthropologists, and historians described Bantu-speaking people in Western-centric binary and deterministic gendered terms; non-Bantu concepts of gender were often imposed onto Bantu ideas of family and society in ways that overemphasized the significance of gender.

Keywords: Bantu social history; non-binary gender; linguistic historical analysis; Bantu life stages

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About the author

Christine Saidi is a Professor of African History at Kutztown University. Saidi is the recipient of three prestigious Fulbright Fellowships, a Social Science Research Council Grant, a Woodrow Wilson Women’s Studies grant and a U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship. She has published several articles and chapters, as well as two books, *Women’s Authority and Society in Early East Central Africa* and *Bantu Africa*. She is currently working on a book, *Family Before Gender*, which examines the non-gendered social history of Bantu matrilineal peoples.

"The father is also the sister" was a statement related to me by a Zambian colleague and represents a current version of the non-binary gender concepts still found as a part of post-colonial African epistemologies, especially in the Bantu Matrilineal Zone (BMZ), which stretches from Angola and Namibia in the west, through central Africa, to Tanzania and Mozambique in the east.[1] My colleague had recently lost her 21-year-old daughter and, to nurture the deceased daughter's spirit into the world of ancestors, a family member was required to take in her spirit. Her father, my colleague's husband, agreed to do this. The result is that my colleague's husband also becomes her daughter, as well as sister and father to the rest of their children. In social, religious, and political contexts, individuals who were anatomically of one identity could, through social actions or spiritual transitions, embody various roles, intersecting between one world, one life stage, or one social title and the next. Gender, as broadly construed by Bantu-speaking peoples, is not fixed in the same way that it is in the West.[2] This kind of gender flexibility is counter to binary gender concepts which classify gender into two separate, opposite, and rigid forms of masculine and feminine. This study proposes that in the BMZ, gender, though sometimes acknowledged, was not a major factor in determining authority or responsibility and was rarely conceptualized in binary terms by Bantu-speaking peoples over the three thousand years prior to colonialism. The lack of historical binary gender concepts within the BMZ is supported by ethnographic studies and oral traditions that represent social activity between 1450 and the present, as well as linguistic data which can date Bantu epistemologies and social history to earlier periods.

To write about peoples and societies who do not conceptualize gender and gender relations as they do in the West is a daunting task. To make the discussion of Bantu African concepts of gender clearer in this work, the terms bio-female and bio-male are employed to describe the categories of those who are biologically female or male, as opposed to those who assume the role of socially or spiritually generated gender categories.[3] There have been many local or regional histories published that allow scholars, for the first time, to have enough data to begin to compare, analyse, and make evidence-based assumptions about the social history of Bantu-speaking peoples (see, e.g., the White Father's Archives in Rome, Italy and Lusaka, Zambia; Richards 1939; Wilson 1957; Douglas 1964; Lancaster 1974; Sacks 1979; Richards 1982; Swantz 1986; Poewe 1981; Vansina 1990; Vuyk 1991; Roberts and Roberts 1996; Davison 1997; Sanders 1998; Longwe 2006; Smythe 2006; and Arnfred 2011). Additionally, for the last 20-plus years, I have researched dozens of Bantu-speaking

[1] The geographic focus of this history is a large transregional zone, comprising the area south of the equator running diagonally from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, crossing Angola, Namibia, DRC, Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique, which George Murdock and several other 20th century anthropologists recognized and described as a matrilineal belt. This article examines matrilineal institutions and historical practices in areas that extend beyond that belt. This research contends that the matrilineal zone is larger than originally proposed. It stretches from present day southern Nigeria east into the Central African Republic, south across the Congo into Namibia, and is comprised of people who primarily speak languages from the Savanna branch of Bantu. The majority of the families in this region were matrilineal. The name Bantu Matrilineal Zone (BMZ) is an alternative framing of what prior researchers recognized as an important range of matrilineal societies coined as the 'Bantu Matrilineal Belt'. See Gonzales et al. (2017).

[2] The term 'Bantu' in this article refers to the linguistic grouping of over five hundred languages and dialects, which are a sub-subset of the Niger Congo language family. The origins of the Bantu-speaking peoples are in West Africa, but they migrated out of their homeland and eventually populated large portions of southwest, central, southern, and eastern Africa over the last five thousand-plus years.

[3] It also forces the reader to deal with a different way of conceptualizing gender, since Western gender concepts tend to conflate biological gender and social gender.

communities and collected linguistic data as well as oral traditions among peoples of the BMZ.[4] One result is the creation of a large database of over 2,500 words in English that were translated into over 70 Bantu languages.[5] The words collected were those of social institutions, family and relatives, religion and religious ceremonies, life stages, and political and philosophical ideas. This is the first macro-research project to cover the early social history of matrilineal Bantu-speaking peoples (Saidi et al. forthcoming). Finally, enough evidence has been compiled to enable scholars to sketch the broad strokes of early Bantu social history.

This research owes a great deal of gratitude to various scholars, both African and non-African, who have challenged academics to look beyond the narrow confines of Western gender categories. Nigerian scholars have led the research that has contested how scholars in the West and on the African continent analyse gender and gender roles in African history (see e.g. Amadiume 1987; Ogbomo 1997).[6] Part of the significance of their research to Bantu history is that these scholars have primarily researched ethno-linguistic groups which are classified as part of the Benue-Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo language family. It is estimated that 5,500 years ago, the first Bantu speakers branched out from the Benue-Kwa languages to begin the many migrations that eventually populated two-thirds of Africa below the Sahara Desert, so there is a deep historical connection between Bantu speakers (Ehret 2002; Klieman 2003; Saidi 2010; Fourshey et al. 2017). The other implications of their research are that they have forced scholars studying and researching gender in Africa to reevaluate their fundamental assumptions. The work of Nigerian sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi has especially challenged the Western categories used to study gender in Africa. In her book *The Invention of Women*, she dared to say that there was no gender in pre-colonial Yoruba societies and that even today there are no words or categories for 'man' or 'woman' in the language (Oyewumi 1997, 124). Some have agreed with her analysis of Yoruba languages and social institutions and others have not (see Bakare-Yusuf 2003; Olajubu 2004; Pearce 2014), but the significance of her work was to compel scholars to attempt to put African concepts of gender at the forefront of African research.[7]

Some historians and anthropologists who have researched matrilineal Bantu-speaking people realized that biological body-based binary gender categories have been imposed on Bantu peoples and used as a prism for analysing their social history or culture (Davison 1997; Arnfred 2011; Gonzales et al. 2017). This is especially true among Bantu communities within the BMZ. The mounting historical evidence collected from almost 70 Bantu languages, representing peoples living in geographically different regions of the BMZ, together with oral traditions and comparative ethnographic studies, suggests that seniority, life stage, and cosmic family

[4] In 2016 Rhonda Gonzales, Cymone Fourshey and I received a collaborative grant from the United States National Endowment for the Humanities to research family and gender in the Bantu Matrilineal Zone.

[5] The database was compiled by Gonzales, Fourshey, and myself. It is still in process and will be housed at Bucknell University. See Fourshey et al. (2021). It is referred to as the 'Bantu Ancestral Roots Database' (BARD).

[6] Philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu (2006), for example, argues that this was true of Igbo concepts of gender and documents the creation of fictional 'native customs' for Igbo in which patriarchy suddenly became traditional. While most of the research done by these African scholars was about Nigerian history, this article supports their conclusions, but instead among the Bantu-speaking peoples of central and east Africa.

[7] I am not an expert on Yoruba social history and cannot comment on the criticisms. But her work, much like Cheikh Anta Diop's research on Ancient Egypt, which forced scholars to study Egyptian history in the context of African history, has challenged a paradigm and has compelled gender scholars to question how gender in Africa is researched.

relations, rather than binary gender concepts, were what determined who had authority and defined one’s status and responsibility.[8] This was not only true in ancient times, but also in the more well-researched 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, even if these conceptions of social organization were not always overtly apparent (see Fourshey et al. 2017, chapter 2).[9]

Historical evidence indicates that when gender was acknowledged at all among Bantu-speaking peoples, it was usually non-binary, and an anatomical female would rarely be identified strictly based on anatomy in Bantu matrilineal communities, but rather recognized as a mother, grandmother, daughter, elder, ancestor, and even, at times, as a father or brother. Linguistic evidence shows, as I will demonstrate in this article, that Bantu-speaking peoples did not conceptualize a category of ‘woman’ or ‘man’ as separate biological or social beings, and this has probably been true for at least the last 5,000 years.[10]

Early Bantu social history

To recapture Bantu social history over the longue durée, it is first necessary to peel away layers of colonial and post-colonial impositions. During the late precolonial and colonial period most of the writings of missionaries, anthropologists, and historians described Bantu-speaking people in Western-centric binary and deterministic gendered terms. In scholarship on pre-1900 eras, gender was often imposed onto Bantu ideas of family and society in ways that overemphasized the significance of gender. Many researchers assumed that the ways of categorizing people from their own societies should be applied universally, especially in terms of gender. As well as imposing Western gender concepts onto Africans there is a tendency for scholars to examine the late pre-colonial or colonial periods and make assumptions that social institutions from those eras represented the deeper historical past. While social concepts remained from the past, historians now understand that these were times of substantial change based on varying outside factors, including the arrival of Europeans. Though theoretically scholars may have recognized that this was a unique period in history and did not necessarily represent gender concepts or social relations from even a hundred years previously, they assumed that Bantu social history from earlier periods was impossible to recapture.

Researching early Bantu social history is possible, but to do so involves combining the use of different sources and methodological tools from fields such as oral tradition, art history, archaeology, comparative ethnography, and historical linguistics. Combining archaeology and historical linguistics allow historians to approximate time depth as well as historical connections and contact among various ethno-linguistic groups (Ehret and Posnansky 1982).[11] Historical linguistics is a very useful tool for revealing ideas and concepts, as well as documenting how they

[8] ‘Cosmic family’ is a term coined by Rhonda Gonzales and represents the typical Bantu family, which includes those alive currently, those who have passed, and those yet to be born (see Saidi et al. 2021).

[9] A current example found in modern Zambia: When Zambians are speaking in English they use the formal ‘sir’ and ‘madam’, but in their minds they are saying ‘father’ and ‘mother’ (Victoria Phiri, Director of Research at Choma Museum, Zambia, personal communication, January 2022).

[10] Based on geographical distribution, it appears that having no terms for either ‘woman’ or ‘man’ dates back at least to the Savanna Bantu Era (1000 BCE). While the majority of the research by African scholars is based on Nigerian languages, some similarities to Bantu families are expected, since Bantu languages are a subset of the Benue-Kwa, which is part of the Niger-Congo language family. To understand language relationships see Fourshey et al. (2017, chapter 1).

[11] For examples of histories based on historical linguistics, see Vansina (1990); Schoenbrun (1998); Ehret (1998); Gonzales (2009); Saidi (2010); Stephens (2013); and Schoenbrun (2021).

have changed over time. For example, an early Bantu word root such as *-*bánjà*, which probably originally meant 'an area of land outside a home or a veranda', by 2,000 years ago in the BMZ, among some ethnolinguistic groups, meant the basic economic unit of each matrifamily or family itself.[12] By 1,000 years ago among the patrilineal centralized states of Bunyoro and Buganda, the meaning of *-*bánjà* shifted from being a term for helping one's neighbours build a house to a social relationship, without family ties, between those who controlled land and those who worked on it (Schoenbrun 1998, 177). 5,000 years ago, *-*bánjà* was a common root meaning 'land in front of a house' for Bantu-speaking peoples, but as they migrated into new areas, adapted to new environments, and created their own communities, the meaning changed to reflect new conditions and ways of understanding their world. Tracing the root and its meanings in modern Bantu languages can reveal how, in different Bantu ethno-linguistic communities, worldviews changed or, in some cases, were retained. In the *-*bánjà* example, peoples of the eastern part of the BMZ changed the meaning from a piece of land in front of the house to mean the family members who gathered on the veranda and probably worked together. For the centralized patrilineal states of the Great Lakes, it took on a hierarchical meaning and identified a non-familial relationship between those who controlled the land and those who worked it.

In this study, the words that Bantu speakers have used to describe the world around them and the societies they have created suggest that the categories of belonging to a family, parenthood, ancestorhood, siblinghood, lifestage, and generational knowledge held primary social significance for them, but gender was relational, non-binary, and not a major source of authority or status. Most of the peoples in the BMZ lived and continue to live in societies which could be described as matrilineal. Matrilineality for some might imply gender, but an examination of the elements of a matrilineal family show that inheritance and identity were determined by one's mother, grandmother, and the original ancestral mother of the family. It is the life stage and role of mother that is central to matrilineal social institutions, and the gender of mother does not necessary mean bio-female, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

Both linguistic and genetic evidence suggests that matrilineality was probably the earliest form of family organization for Bantu families (see Ehret 2002; Klieman 2003; Fourshey et al. 2017, chapter 2); Bantu-speaking communities employed a matrilineal framework inclusive of spiritual concepts, social relations, and economic networks which they believed were essential for their survival and success. The geographic distribution of matrilineality throughout large areas of Bantu-speaking Africa suggests that this is indeed an ancient family form (Ehret 2002, 12; Fourshey et al. 2017, chapter 2).

Scholars have shown that reconstructed ancient kinship terminologies trace the presence of matrilineal descent back to the speakers of proto-Savanna Bantu, approximately 3,000 years ago (Ehret 1998; Fourshey et al. 2017).[13] Kairn Klieman, in *The Pygmies Were Our Compass* (2003, 70–72), used comparative ethnographic data, oral traditions, and linguistic evidence to support the conclusion that matrilineal descent reckoning may even be

[12] *-*bánjà,* Guthrie (1967–1971) (cs55), 'courtyard or clear area in front of the house'; Bastin and Schadeberg (2003, main 8592, der 97), 'dwelling-place; courtyard; family; meeting; affair; law-court; fault'. *-*bánjà*, according to personal communication with Christopher Ehret (August 28, 2020), originally meant 'open space in and around the house and homestead'. See Mandala (1990); White (1987); Schoffeleers (1980); Rangeley (1963); Mitchell (1952); and Davison (1993) for the use of *-*bànjá* to refer to family or parts of a family.

[13] 'Proto' refers to those that spoke Savanna-Bantu prior to the branching off of many daughter languages.

thousands of years older. Additional evidence is found in genetic studies of both fathers’ and mothers’ mtDNA among Bantu speakers (Marck and Bostoen 2011), which indicates that the fathers’ lines had a great deal of diversity, whereas the mothers’ lines showed much less differentiation. The significance of this evidence is that mothers’ mtDNA was less diverse because mothers remained with their families due to brideservice and processual marriage, while males moved away from their families to become parents (Saidi 2010, 75–80).

Linguistic evidence

Linguistic evidence, as I will show, supports the contention that most Bantu communities historically did not conceptualize the categories of ‘woman’ or ‘man’ as separate social entities.[14] Binary gender concepts of social organization view gender as classified into two rigid, distinct, and opposite forms of humanity, which are men/male and women/female. Most Bantu communities prior to 1800 did not divide or even conceptualize human categories into only men and women; instead, a person assumed to be a ‘woman’ in the Western sense would rarely be identified as such, but rather recognized by a life stage, family role, or specialized knowledge.

How Bantu-speaking people conceptualize themselves or their communities seems to be ignored in much of the research on gendered history. Thus, it is imperative that scholars both examine with a critical eye colonial and missionary writings and make use of historical methodological tools, such as historical linguistics, that can expand the historical narratives to earlier eras. Linguistic evidence like archaeology, unlike archival sources, is independent of the perspectives of outsiders or even the elites, since they are word artefacts found in modern languages spoken by everyone. But linguistics and the meanings of words can only be understood in the context of examining the history and societies of the people in which specific words are found. This means that linguistic historians must be familiar with the literature and oral traditions of the peoples using the words studied. Much like ethnoarchaeology, historical linguistics needs a social context to be understood. While linguistics on its own cannot specifically name historical actors or particular events of the past, linguistics combined with other methodologies can open windows into how Bantu-speaking peoples conceptualized and acted upon their world.

Scholars who are socialized to believe that binary gender is universal have a difficult time comprehending or appreciating societies where gender is conceptualized differently. For over 100 years, linguists of Bantu languages, missionaries, and anthropologists have gathered data based on the assumption that all peoples, in all regions of the world and all historical periods, are organized into binary gender categories and that every society has terms that represent strict binary gender categories. Those who studied and collected Bantu linguistics presupposed that they would find words in every language for categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’, and even when such words were absent, they interpreted the data through their own cultural lens. For example, Malcolm Guthrie’s *Comparative Bantu* (1967–1971) is probably the most recognized work on Bantu languages.[15] In his four-volume collection of Bantu word roots he reconstructed a Bantu root, **-kádi* and translated it as both ‘wife’ and ‘woman’, based on the premise that in Bantu communities woman and wife were the same. He added a commentary to his entry: “[*-*kádi*]

[14] The language evidence primarily comes from our database, BARD. See Fourshey et al. (2021).

[15] The other important source for Bantu words stems is Bastin and Schadeberg’s (2003) database, *Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 3*.

indicates in the *absence* of any other C.S.[16] with wide distribution meaning only 'woman', it is probable that the proto-item meant both 'woman' and 'wife'" (Guthrie, 1967–1971, 261). Guthrie hypothesized that there were such words and categories as 'woman' and 'man', but since he could not find many terms for 'woman', he assumed that 'woman' could be conflated with the role of wife. In both patrilineal and matrilineal societies, the life stage of mother and the familial relationship of sister are much more significant roles than that of wife; therefore, if there were a term and category for woman, it was much more likely to be combined with the role or life stage of mother or sister (for examples, see Sacks 1979; Poewe 1981; Oyewumi 2016). While Bantu languages, in most dictionaries, have terms for 'woman' and 'man', those terms consistently also mean 'wife' and 'husband', which again reflects the worldview of the collector of the language data. There are no terms for 'woman' or 'man' in the majority of Bantu languages and that is why Guthrie and other Western scholars could not find any. The term *-*kádi* probably meant only 'wife', not 'woman', and *-*dúmè*, recorded by Guthrie as both 'man' and 'husband', only meant 'husband'. European linguists' views makes sense in terms of gender relations in their non-African homelands, but not for Bantu communities. The significant point here is that if there were no specific categories for 'woman' or 'man' then these societies did not have binary gendered institutions, nor did they conceptualize humans in binary-gendered classifications. While the incorrect conflation of 'wife' and 'woman' into a single term does not substantially change how linguists use research tools such as 100-word lists, it does impact how historians research and write early Bantu social history.[17]

Bantu grammar facilitates non-binary concepts and terms, since there are no gendered pronouns for 'he' and 'she'. The third person singular pronoun is a non-gendered human being, and this is true of all Bantu languages. It is not argued here that this reflects Bantu worldviews, but it is a grammatical element of Bantu languages.[18] Yet in cultures that do not linguistically mark gender in pronouns, people speak easily in a non-binary manner, in contrast to the current revising of English pronouns to accommodate non-binary gender categories (Tobia 2016).

Linguistic evidence shows that gender was not an important category in most situations, but within the BMZ during reproductive years the terms used for life stages were often described in words specific to a person's reproductive abilities. Bantu families certainly understood anatomical differences, but these differences were only of major significance during the reproductive years. Thus infants, children, the young before initiation, and elders, old people, and ancestors were in life stages not usually marked with social or anatomical gender. This does not mean that there are no terms indicating the anatomy of young children or the elderly; instead, what appears to be consistent is that descriptive words that were used related to the anatomical body predominated when describing life stages for a person in which a major focus was parenthood or potential parenthood. For example, in recent history, among Luvale speakers, who are matrilineal and reside in southeastern Angola and northwestern Zambia, a general word for 'child' is *nyike*, 'to be a young person' is *-tuta*, 'elders and ancestors' is *kákà*, and 'chief and chieftainess' is *angàna*, all of which are life

[16] C.S. is an abbreviation for constructed nominal stems and verbal radicals, which are often proto-Bantu roots and word stems.

[17] In previous works such as my book (Saidi 2010), I too assumed that binary gender was universal and read it into Bantu social history.

[18] For linguists, nominal classes in Bantu are frequently referred to as 'gender' in a grammatical sense, and not in any social meaning, i.e. in the same way that there is nothing feminine about a table in Spanish or masculine about a beach in German.

stages or positions designated by the use of one non-gendered word. Additionally, in the Luvale language ‘an uncircumcised boy’ and an ‘uninitiated girl’ are referred to by one term, *lima*; and the same verb, *-àli* can be translated as both ‘to place a person in circumcision camp’ or ‘to put a person into female initiation ceremonies’. Yet the verb used to describe bringing a bio-female person out of initiation and the person who has just completed initiation is *mwàli*. ‘A bio-male who has been recently circumcised’ is referred to by gender-specific terms, *ndàndji* or *ndànda* (*A Dictionary of Luvale* 1953). Among Luvale families, the gendered terms are used once the person has completed initiation ceremonies. They enter as a non-gendered being and leave as an anatomically-designated person and ready to become a parent.

Luvale life stage terms reveal that the end of puberty ceremonies are understood as beginning the advent of potential parenthood, but they are just one example. Among the Yao of Malawi, during initiation both male and female are referred to as *mwali*, and females remain *mwali* until the first pregnancy celebration (Sanderson 1954). Thus it appears that among the Yao, the first successful pregnancy ushers in the life stage of potential parenthood. A person became a potential parent among Chokwe speakers, who reside in Angola, DRC, and Zambia, once they had attended puberty initiation, since prior to initiation both boys and girls are both referred to by the non-gendered term, *songela*, ‘novices about to be initiated’, but the terms for male and female initiations are gendered – ‘bio-male initiation’, *mugonge*, and ‘bio-female initiate’, *kafundeji* (MacJannet 1949). While the exact moment a person changed from being a non-gendered being varied from community to community in the BMZ, placing importance on the years crucial for reproduction was logical, since for most Bantu communities, their wealth lay in the number of people a family could attract, and having many members gave the family stability and continuation. Additionally, only through the birth of new family members could ancestors be reborn.[19] The non-contiguous distribution of this pattern of employing non-biologically specific terms for older people and for children prior to the life stage of being a potential parent, and identifying the anatomical role of a person during child-bearing years, most probably dates at least to the Savanna Bantu era, around 1000 BCE.[20]

Another significant linguistic trait of Bantu nouns is that they are non-gendered, but sometimes these nouns were marked for a role that represents a form of gender by adding prefixes or creating compound words. For example, in Zela, a language related to Luba,

[19] Among Bemba and Bemba-related people in Zambia, prior to the use of Christian names, names were non-gendered because during a pregnancy the mother would dream of a specific ancestor who would be reborn in the infant (Christine Saidi, fieldnotes, Illondola, Zambia, 1998). This linguistic pattern of using anatomical words to describe people’s reproductive abilities is also found in ethnographic studies, which show that people who were mature would often rise to important positions of authority. As Jean Davison (1997, 60) describes this process among the matrilineal peoples of southern Malawi in the 1980s: “being older carries both prestige and responsibilities. Achieving elder status means that socially constructed gender differences began to fade.”

[20] This date can be determined by examining the linguistic reconstructions of languages, coupled with archaeological evidence that shows approximate periods for the separations of various languages from their mother languages. Thus, when linguist historians find a term with similar meanings, in relic distribution, in diverse regions where people’s ancestors were last part of a common linguistic group over 3,000 years ago, they can surmise that this is a term and concept that dated from that time period. This term and similar meanings were retained by some, but not all. The only other explanation would be the borrowing of the term and the main way people could borrow each other’s words was through actual contact in the precolonial period. Thus, if there does not appear to be contact through migration or trade historically, then most probably it is a term from the earlier period when the ancestors of these speakers were in close contact. See Schoenbrun (1998); Ehret (1998); Klieman (2003); Gonzales (2009); Saidi (2010); Fourshey et al. (2017).

‘a girl with breasts’ is called *songwakaji*. The root for this word is *-*song*, which can be reconstructed to the Savanna Bantu era around 3,000 years ago and means ‘young mature person’; *kaji* means ‘wife’.[21] The actual translation is ‘young mature person who is a potential wife’; *songwalume* is a ‘young mature person who is a potential husband’.

In the BMZ, starting at least 3,000 years ago, Bantu-speaking people innovated new aspects of identity for a noun by using the prefix **na-* from the Proto-Bantu root word *-*nyìna* meaning ‘a person’s mother’, to mark or emphasize motherhood.[22] To emphasize fatherhood Bantu speakers use the prefix *-*si-*, derived from the Proto-Bantu root word for ‘a person’s father’,*-*se* (Saidi 2010, 80–85).[23] In my earlier work, I assumed that these were markers for gender since I thought that mothers were always women (Saidi 2010, 80). In the Zela example, the compound noun is a mature person who will be potentially a parent, a life stage. The *na-* and *si-* (*shi-*) prefixes address parenthood as a life stage, suggesting that this was a primary aspect of people’s identities (Saidi 2010, 81, 82).[24]

People in several regions marked their identities based on the myriad relationships they had to particular individuals within their families and communities, knowledge they possessed, and the age or life stage they had reached. Often the use of **na-* and **se-* reveals the complexity of social identity. An example collected during the early colonial period among Tonga speakers in Southern Zambia, and continuing into contemporary times, is the use of the word *shakamwale*. (Smith and Dale 1920, 20). The term *shakamwale* identifies an assumed bio-male child who is part of a future mother’s initiation ceremonies. The prefix *sha-* is derived by speakers combining the prefix **se-* with a second marker *-*a-*; the prefix *-ka-* is added to represent agency; and *mwale* is a term used for a young person ready

[21] The Mongo term *bɔsɔngi* ‘person who negotiates brideswealth’ may indicate that *-*song* is a root from the intermediate stage of Bantu history, after Proto-Bantu and before Proto-Savanna-Bantu, possibly 4,500 years ago. Other reflexes of *-*song-* found among Luba, Yao, and Luguru of the BMZ suggest that it had a second meaning, expressing the condition of being of the age of marriageability or of crossing the threshold into that stage of one’s life; it probably dates, based on geographic distributions, to the Savanna Bantu Era, 3,000 years ago. In Zela, *-*kádi* becomes *kaji*. *Songwakaji* means ‘girl with breasts’, *song-* ‘young mature person’, and *wakaji*, ‘wife’. The actual translation is a young mature person who is a potential wife. *Songwalume* means ‘young mature person who is a potential husband’ (interview with Doris Ilunga Ndalamba, Lubumbashi, May 18, 2017).

[22] These prefixes date to at least 3,000 years ago, given their non-contiguous geographical distribution in branches of Mashariki, Sabi, and Botatwe, and maybe even earlier, since the **na-* prefix is found in languages outside of the Savanna group. Both Kongo and Lunda of the Western Savanna branch use the **na-* prefix. These could be separate innovations or borrowings. Western Lunda could have borrowed these prefixes from Luba, except that the Luba use *ina-* as a prefix, not *na-*.

[23] The prefix **na-* derives from the old Bantu root **na-* *-*ina* ‘the person’s mother’, reduced in shape to a single syllable, as commonly happens in affixes. *-*si* derives from the old Bantu root **si-* *-*se* ‘a person’s father’. Guthrie (1967–1971) reconstructs *-*yice*, ‘his father’ (cs2027). The use of the **na-* prefix is found in the Botatwe alternative word for God, *namulenga*. *Mulenga* is a term used by many eastern African Bantu speakers for God, who was conceptualized as the Creator, but distant from humans. Botatwe- and Sabi-speaking peoples innovated a new term, Leza, to conceptualize God as one who is nurturing. Around 1,200 years ago, through contact with eastern Bantu speakers, they adopted *Mulenga* as an alternative word for God, but with the addition of the **na-* prefix to add the mothering aspect to an older concept of God. The widespread use of both the **na-* and **se-* prefixes to show ‘mothering’ and ‘fathering’ to designate attributes of parenting aids in understanding how central concepts of parenting were to the cosmic family. The **na-* prefix is used more often than *-*si* (*shi*). (Saidi 2010, 80–85)

[24] In the Bemba language of Zambia, *nakashiwa* (‘a mother whose child has died’) derived from *kashiwa* (‘a person whose child died’); *nakatutu* (‘a mother who had just had a child’) from *katutu* (‘a person who has just given birth’). A full-grown female duiker is *nalububula* and a full-grown male duiker is *shilububula*. Thus, even with animals the prefix does not determine gender, but instead the potential parenting of these duikers.

for or already participating in initiation ceremonies.[25] Thus, *shakamwale* is a child who is a potential father and who has an agentive social role of participating in the processes of puberty life stage transitions. This example shows how creative, descriptive, and complex identity was for members of the BMZ, though for them it was easy because of the non-binary lens through which they viewed social relationships.[26]

When binary gender is absent, family relationships are organized differently. How long a person has been part of the cosmic family and their life stage are crucial factors in understanding a person’s place within the family and the community as a whole. This was applied across generations as well as within generations. Siblings were and still are conceptualized through a continuum of birth order that represents seniority, status, obligations of respect, and one’s relationship within a family and lineage, and this was probably true 5,000 years ago when Bantu-speaking peoples were just beginning to move out of West Africa (Yates 1932). Most Benue-Kwa languages, such as Igbo and Yoruba, also categorize siblings by birth order, not gender, which means it may be an even earlier concept.

Older siblings were often distinguished with the use of the root **-kʊ́dʊ́*, ‘big person’ (Bastin and Schadeberg 2003) (*kulu* in most Savanna Bantu languages), and younger siblings were referred to with a general term used to identify a younger person or child, **-yáná*.[27] The root **-kʊ́dʊ́* can identify an ancestor, elderly people, and grandparents, and is used to form an adjective for old, but it can also be used situationally as a marker for those in a more senior position. Seniority is never an absolute guarantee of authority, but the age of a person is a major factor in determining status and responsibility in the family and community. A person’s actual age is hierarchical, but the status one holds is mediated by additional factors such as life stage and specific knowledge or skills. Siblings are organized linguistically in terms of birth order, because each needs to know where they fit into the social fabric of family and community.

Historical linguistic evidence indicates that there were no words or categories for woman or man, only life stages; and that bio-gender on its own did not give a person either status or responsibility within the BMZ. Siblings were recognized by their birth order, not their bio-gender; and only during reproductive years was a person’s biological body important. Words used to describe children, the elderly, and ancestors were not based on their biology. Linguistic evidence has revealed a great deal about non-binary gendered communities of the BMZ, but combining linguistic data, ethnographic studies, and evidence from oral traditions reveals more details about living in non-binary gendered communities.

Comparative ethnographic evidence

Comparative ethnography has been useful for studying Bantu social history. This also includes the study of myths, historical stories, and more recent events, originally related orally and later written down. These traditions often reveal important older worldviews of specific societies, such as how the world began and how they conceptualize their world. An example is an origin myth collected in the 1970s from Bemba elders, who said they learned it from their grandmothers. This particular myth represents how central to their concept of their own world was genderlessness.

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[25] An example of the agentive in English is *potter* for a person who makes a ceramic pot.

[26] In recent fieldwork Tonga people stated that the *shakamwale* is now a young girl, even though oral tradition, early missionary documents, and linguistic evidence show that it was originally a young boy. A hundred years of missionary work have clearly changed the tradition (Saidi, fieldwork, Chikuni, Southern Province, Zambia, June 2023).

[27] **-yánà*, Guthrie (1967–1971, (cs1922) and **-jánà* (Bastin and Schadeberg 2003, Main 3208).

> In the beginning there existed two genderless persons. One of them had been given two parcels, with the order not to open them before the two had reached mutual understanding and friendship.
>
> After some time one of the parcels began to smell badly, so the one who carried it threw it away and opened the other one. At once he was endowed with divine masculinity and he became man. His new masculinity caused him to desire the other person, but the latter could not respond. Realizing that it had something to do with the discarded parcel, the second person returned to Lesa (God, the Creator), who gave her the gift of femaleness. With it Lesa gave three further presents: the ownership of the seed, trusteeship of the sacred hearth and the knowledge of the bored stone. (Hinfelaar 1994, 9)[28]

The message in this origin story is that defying the Creator did not create original sin, pain in childbirth, or death, but rather it unleashed the biological differences between male and female before they were ready to accept them. Humanity, in this story, was non-gendered in the beginning, and Lesa wanted them to reach mutual respect and understanding before the parcels were opened.

Comparative ethnography involves critically reading as many ethnographies from the BMZ as are available. Where there are similar traditions, ceremonies, or beliefs, it is possible to plot these on a map to see the geographic distribution of various cultural elements. The results are then compared to the linguistic relationships of these languages to determine approximately how old a cultural tradition might be.

An example is found in the Savanna Bantu root for ‘cloth or materials for initiation dances’, *-*samba* (Saidi 2010, 127, fn. 63). The root *-*samba* means both ‘dances at initiation’ and ‘clothing used for these dances’ among diverse ethno-linguistic groups such as the Yao of Mozambique, Malawi, and southern Tanzania; the Lamba of Zambia; the Kaonde of Zambia and DRC; the Chewa of Zambia and Malawi; the Nyamwezi and Sukuma of Tanzania; and the Luba and Lega of DRC (Ehret 2002; Fourshey et al. 2017). The geographic distribution of this root extends from the central west to the eastern BMZ. The diversity of languages that use *-*samba* for initiation dances indicates that this must have been a concept among Savanna Bantu speakers starting at least 3,000 years ago. But it may even be more ancient, since the root *samba* is used in the language of Kongo to mean ‘menses’ (*ma-samba*); ‘dance’ (*samba*), ‘special dance’ (*ma-samba samba*), and ‘to worship spirits’ (*mu-samba*).[29] Without comparative ethnographic studies, scholars may have a difficult time understanding how significant dance was to puberty ceremonies and how the diverse meanings of the root in the Kongo language describe the ceremonies surrounding initiation. But comparative ethnographic records show that female initiation starts soon after the first menses; there are always special dances; and much of the ritual involves worshipping both spirits and ancestors. Since *-*samba*, meaning ‘dances of initiation’, is found as far west as Angola, this meaning is even older than 3,000 years.[30] The *samba* root found among Kongo speakers also reveals significant connections which contribute to scholars’ knowledge about African traditions found in the Americas. According to early Brazilian church records, dating to around

[28] Hinfelaar fieldnotes: Mubanga and Serenje, Zambia 1961 and 1967.

[29] See the BARD database.

[30] Kongo is part of a group of languages that split off before Proto-Savanna Bantu existed; thus, *-*samba* can be reconstructed to an earlier era (Ehret 2002, 105).

1600, enslaved Africans from the Congo and Angola would dance with vigorous movements at religious holidays (Iyanaga 2015). In Brazilian literature, the actual word *samba* as the name for the national dance only appears in the literature around 1800, but the evidence indicates that its origins are from enslaved people brought to Brazil from southwest Africa.

Using linguistic data, ethnographic studies, and oral traditions reveals how both non-binary gendered concepts and the fluidity of identity are built into Bantu languages. For example, in the last 500 years, the Lunda (Ruund) considered ‘a mother without breasts’ (*makw wakad mayel*) as an appropriate term for a maternal uncle, as did many other Bantu-speaking peoples (Hoover 1978, 85). Ethnographic studies on their own can discover important aspects of Bantu social history, such as the description of various ceremonies. For example, among the Ambo peoples of Zambia, in the early colonial period, and probably earlier, there was a ceremony in which the father nursed his newborn approximately two weeks after birth. By doing this he acknowledged paternity of the child, but to do so he had to breastfeed the baby as though he was the mother (see Whiteley 1950, 49).

Other examples found in studying the ethnographies of various ethnolinguistic groups in the BMZ have shown that parenthood was relational, as exemplified by institutions that allowed bio-males to be mothers and bio-females to be fathers.[31] Numerous studies conducted in West Africa among Benue Kwa ethno-linguistic communities describe traditions referred to as ‘female husbands’ or ‘woman to woman’ marriage, providing interesting models to consider for the analysis of institutions and practices in the BMZ. While the literature uses the term ‘female husband’, this terminology over-emphasizes the marital aspect, since it is the parenting that is essential in these kinds of relationships. Thus, in this study they are referred to as ‘social parents’ who could be considered either biologically male or female. As in the distantly related Yoruba and Igbo communities of West Africa, social fatherhood is only found in patrilineal Bantu societies. Though less studied, social fatherhood institutions have existed in Bantu communities at least as early as the late precolonial period.[32] A social father has been described in the literature as an older mother, usually divorced, with assets, and one who was a member of a patrilineal family. They wanted to create their own branch of the patrifamily but could only do that as a father. They provided a brideswealth that was used to negotiate with a family for them to marry a bio-female, who in turn would produce children for this newly formed branch of the patrilineage.[33] The resulting children become the progeny of the social father who had negotiated the brideswealth. The social father, as a progenitor of children, could now participate within the patrilineal society as such. If, as several scholars have suggested (Ehret 2002; Klieman 2003; Saidi 2010), the vast majority of Bantu families were matrilineal until around 1,000 years ago, the institution of

[31] A female husband was first discussed by Amadiume (1987), who wrote about the role of female husbands in West African patrilineal societies. While scholars use the term ‘female husband’ or ‘woman to woman marriage’, the name ‘social father’ seems to describe the relationship most accurately.

[32] See Greene (1998). Female father institutions existed in Bantu societies, at least as early as the late precolonial period, in southern Africa among the Venda, Lovedu, Pedi, Zulu, Sotho, and Tswana; and in eastern Africa among the Kuria, Simbiti, Ngoreme, Gusii, Kamba, and Kikuyu.

[33] In patrilineal, patrilocal communities, marriage was secured by the payment of brideswealth, a set of items transferred from the groom’s family to the bride’s family. This payment was meant to compensate for the transference of the the daughter’s labour and reproductivity to the husband’s family and to acknowledge the social significance of the children she would bear as members of her husband’s patriclan.

'social fatherhood' can be dated to around 1000 CE among Bantu-speaking peoples.[34]

By the 17th century in the BMZ, local trade was beginning to become long distance and traders, primarily fathers, became quite wealthy due to expanded trade (Vansina 1978, 90). Clientship and pawnship were forms of stratification developed in geographically and historically non-contiguous communities such as matrilineal Lele, who are Kuba-related people residing along the Kasai River in the DRC, and Pende, matrilineal Western Savanna Bantu-speaking people who reside between the Lyongo and Kasai rivers, also in DRC; and Kaguru of Tanzania.[35] These traders had considerable wealth, but they had no ability to create their own branch of the family and were still under the authority of sororal groups, which consisted of related mothers and grandmothers.[36] Each of these communities had blood debts or a judicial system which would assign blame for most deaths. Some family had to pay for the death of a person and they would borrow to pay the debt. During this period of time, traders had more assets than others and could pay the debt for a family, with the understanding that a member of the family would become collateral. The system was quite complicated and pawns had some freedoms, but traders who had paid blood debts began to accumulate people. They would often marry or give in marriage a collateral bio-woman, which would create a marriage institution outside of the control of the matrilineage. The most important aspect of these institutions were that any children, born either to a trader's collateral wives or to collateral wives given by them in marriage, became the trader's children. It is proposed here that both Pende and Lele societies recognized an institution that allowed bio-male traders to become social mothers through the pawn or collateral system. This may have been a strategy used to create positions of authority for successful traders, but within a matrilineal system. There are also indications that other Bantu-speaking matrilineal societies had such options. For example, during the early colonial period, missionary court documents report that: "Wealthy Kaguru men enjoyed advantages in this contest over conjugal authority. Male entrepreneurs who invested in the nineteenth-century caravan trade were able to trump in-laws' claims, establishing virilocal, patrilineal homesteads." Kaguru traders were able to do this within the overarching ideology and institutions of matrilineality (Peterson 2006, 991).

The Yao also appear to have created social motherhood for traders. But since their major trade items in the century prior to colonialism were enslaved people, it was not based on pawnship. Instead, bio-male traders just married enslaved women who had no family; thus there was no need for brideservice or processual marriage. Bio-male Yao traders could become social mothers over the children born to their wives.[37] With the arrival of colonialism, these long-distance trade opportunities

[34] Since, in a matrilineal community, the mother created the family, there was no need for 'social fatherhood'. One might hypothesize that matrifamilies innovated social fatherhood to ensure the continued heterarchical distribution of authority and to secure positions of authority for members of the matrilineage, at least for elite members, as families began to shift toward patrilineal organizing in the context of new long distance trade economies, centralization, or other environmental influences.

[35] To understand the dating and classification of these two linguistic groupings, see Klieman (2003); Ehret (2002, 105); Fourshey et al. (2017, chapter 1).

[36] For Lele, see Douglas (1964); for Pende, Sousberghe (1963); for Kaguru, Peterson (2006).

[37] According to Edward Alpers (1969, 412): "In normal circumstances a man's children did not belong to his own lineage but to that of his wife, owing to the Yao system of matrilineal descent. (…) The advantage to an ambitious Yao headman of having slave wives was that, as they were his property, so were their children." And since the Yao remained matrilineal throughout this entire period, the children were his, but he was a social mother within his own branch of the matrilineage.

for the Yao, as well as other trading communities in central Africa, dried up and each of these communities within the BMZ returned to matrilineal social organization, including brideservice (Mitchell 1956).

Parenthood may or may not have been contingent on gender, considering that in the above examples there are various creative ways in which parenthood was actualized and all people can potentially be social parents as either fathers or mothers. Since not everyone can a biological parent, this may be additional evidence that motherhood and fatherhood were not necessarily only grounded in reproductive abilities, but in social roles too.

Bantu-speaking communities in the BMZ probably recognized identities as both a continuum and as an intersecting set of categories. In various social, religious, and political contexts individuals who were anatomically or socially one identity could, through social actions or spiritual transitions, embody various genders intersecting from one world, one life stage, or one social title to the next. Examples of these kinds of changes are supported especially in some ethnographic studies and oral traditions. This is probably true of most communities within the BMZ, but the examples below are those that have been well-documented. Spiritually and socially, such gender transitions are found among the Nyau masked dancers who perform at all the important religious events in Chewa and related communities in Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique. In modern times and according to some oral traditions, Nyau masked dancers have been exclusively bio-male (Rita-Ferreira 1968). When Nyau dancers put on a mask, they were no longer themselves but the spirit of the mask, which often would represent a mother, grandmother, female ancestor or, in more recent times, a bio-female missionary.[38] As they danced they became the spirit of the mask as long as they were wearing the mask, regardless of their biology. Another example is found in the recent history of the N’gandu chiefly families of the Bemba, who, around 200 years ago, created the office of the centralized ruler, *Citamukulu*. *Citamukulu*, who historically was a father, spiritually became the mother of the people. This expanding of his identity was a requirement for a successful coronation.[39]

In contrast, over a hundred years ago, at the northern edge of the BMZ in the Great Lakes region, among patrilineal societies, there is also evidence of spiritually transforming gender. Historian David Schoenbrun describes, in *Names of the Python*, the new roles for royal mothers and sisters in the Buganda state during the 19th century as follows: “At court, biological royal women became sociologically male actors” (Schoenbrun 2021, 53). While, in the matrilineal Bemba societies, the ruler included motherhood in their identity, in the patrilineal Buganda state, bio-females from the royal family became social males. These examples from different time periods and geographical regions show how, under certain circumstances, people can experience identity metamorphosis during political, social, or religious ceremonies.

[38] There is a similar experience among the Chokwe dancers with the *Mwana wa Pwo* mask. The mask itself, then, is not the only element in these portrayals: in performance, the male dancer imitates the movements of a woman. As Elisabeth Cameron (1998) writes: “In Central Africa among the Chokwe, Lunda, and Luvale, the mainly female audience carefully judges the accuracy of these representations. If the masquerade is outrageously flamboyant, the women either jeer or cheer her (depending on their mood), aware that she is behaving in a satirical manner. When a man puts on a mask and costume depicting a female ancestor, spirit, or character, an interesting tension is created: he is transformed into a woman while at the same time remaining male. The male who becomes a female spirit and flirts with the women in the audience.”

[39] Victoria Phiri, Director of Moto Moto Museuam, personal communication during fieldwork, Mbala, Zambia. June, 2017.

Colonialism

While the early social history of the BMZ presents communities in which binary gender was not a major factor, no one can deny the presence of gender categories and elements of patriarchy throughout the continent today. Under colonial rule, the construction of binary gender categories was similar to the construction of race, since both are concepts developed in Western societies and imposed onto African ones. Western concepts of race and gender became the basis for the organization of colonial institutions and the colonized were often, at least superficially, forced to conform. Binary gender as defined by one’s sex organs became the only accepted way to claim an identity under colonialism and has been perpetuated in the constitutions and laws of many modern African states. Oyewumi sums up the results of enforcing these concepts on African communities: “For females, colonization was a two-fold 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” (Oyewumi 1997, 124). Signe Arnfred, who researches matrilineal Bantu Makhuwa of Mozambique, adds additional insights:

> The coloniality of gender means that male/female, masculinity/femininity as we know and recognize the terms have been imposed on colonized societies, and that these societies were subsequently conceptualized, interpreted and governed according to this imported gender pattern characterized by bipolarity, heterosexuality, and male dominance/female subordination (Arnfred 2011, 187).[40]

In modern African countries, binary gender is found in the laws and constitutions of the state; in Christian and Muslim religious institutions; and is intricately woven into how development agencies create their aid programmes. As a result, histories written about precolonial Bantu Africa often assumed binary gender and patriarchy as a given, with no need to look at evidence from the precolonial era.

Conclusion

Across the BMZ there were rarely words or concepts for separate categories of ‘women’ or ‘men’; siblings were organized by birth order; parents, political leaders and ceremonial leaders were able to expand their identities to include other genders; and people who did not often view family members through a gendered lens understood anatomical gender differences and indicated them when they were considered important. The non-binary gender concepts found in BMZ communities seem very complicated to those coming from binary gendered societies, but for Bantu communities it was natural and normal. Bantu-speaking peoples, at least for the last couple of thousands of years, certainly recognized biological distinctions expressed in people’s bodies, but they simply did not ascribe identity or authority based on those differences. Instead, matrilineal Bantu-speaking peoples seem to have valued generational differences, possession of specialized knowledge, accumulated influence, and the capability to mobilize people as the basis for attributing different kinds of authority and status.

As the Bemba origin myth indicates, Bantu-speaking Africans were comfortable with the concept of genderlessness and those studying Bantu communities need to be willing to move beyond binary gender concepts. This article is an attempt to challenge the parameters of how to study ‘gender’ in early Bantu social history. In the future, researchers should develop a more Bantu-centric worldview, especially as scholars and traditional teachers from various BMZ communities enter into academic research.

[40] See also Becker (2005).

Currently in Western countries there are intense debates about binary gender and cis-normativity. The clearest voices in the struggle against binary gender are people who consider themselves non-binary, but within a socially constructed binary system. As much as they are challenging their assigned identity within a binary system, few are debating whether binary gender is a universal human form of categorizing. This is in juxtaposition to the historical worldview of matrilineal Bantu communities, where gender, when considered at all, was rarely binary; this was the case for thousands of years. Bantu-speaking peoples lived quite successfully in worlds where there were no binary gendered institutions, at least prior to the impact of outside influences. The long-term social history of Bantu matrilineal societies reveals two very important points. The first is that there were and are people who created and sustained societies in which their ideologies did not include binary gender. The second is that since these communities existed, binary gender is not a universal way of categorizing humans and should not be assumed to be a component of every society. Africa and Africans have many important lessons to teach the rest of the world, and living in gender binary free zones is one of them. This is not to romanticize early Bantu history, but to reveal the very different ways in which some humans have organized societies.

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