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# Re-visiting 'African Tradition', Re-thinking Gender and Power: Learning from Fieldwork in Northern Mozambique

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## Abstract

This article takes its point of departure in the author's research experience in matrilineal northern Mozambique in the early 1980s as an employee of the National Women's Organization, the OMM (*Organização da Mulher Moçambicana*). Confronted with female war veterans of Mozambique's liberation struggle, who insisted on celebrating traditional rituals of female initiation – rituals banned by the Frelimo party (the previous liberation front, which transformed itself into a ruling party) – the author was prompted to embark on a long process of re-thinking issues of 'tradition' and 'modernity' from local women's points of view. After failed attempts at understanding matriliny through the use of classical anthropological tools, the author found help in decolonial African feminist thinking in understanding the dilemmas of women in northern Mozambique. Against this background, the current article discusses aspects of female sexual socialization – still practised, yet with deep historical roots, such as labia elongation – along with manifestations of Female Genital Power, as well as the resilience and resistance of these women, now confronted with the demands of 'modernity' and 'development'. The article also considers issues of temporality as it re-visits aspects of 'African tradition', which 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. Thus, the assumed temporal progress from 'tradition' to 'modernity' is destabilized and disrupted.

**Keywords:** African decolonial feminist thinking; female rituals of initiation; labia elongation; Female Genital Power; critique of development thinking

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## About the author

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The story of colonialism – as told by the colonizers themselves – was a story of progress, a civilizing mission, the long laborious walk from 'tradition' to 'modernity'. In general terms the story of postcolonial development in Africa is a story of continued movement in the same direction. Nation states have become independent, governments are staffed with Africans, but the signposts of the move have not changed; the direction is still from (African) 'tradition' to (Western) 'modernity'. The process is conducted by African governments, overseen by powerful Western institutions (the IMF, the World Bank, the EU, etc.). As in colonial days, the benefit of local populations is the proclaimed objective. This indicates that the civilizing mission is still going on.

A particularly virtuous aspect of the colonial civilizing mission was often 'the liberation of women' – the poor oppressed women of the colonized world. White men were coming to the rescue of Third World women, as sarcastically put by postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak (1988): "White men saving brown women from brown men". Today, this aspect of the civilizing mission/development work is framed in terms of 'gender equality' and the 'empowerment of women' – a very strong Gender-and-Development discourse, carried forward by Western development organizations including the UN, the implicit idea being that prior to this benevolent intervention, women had lived oppressed and disempowered lives. I want to disturb and destabilize this dominant discourse, particularly from women's points of view. The tradition-to-modernity tale is a male based story. It is also a Eurocentric story. My critique of this male Eurocentric focus has developed over the years (most recently in Arnfred 2022) – but it all started decades ago with my work in Mozambique. What I want to do in this article is to show that what, 'under Western eyes', has been perceived as woman-oppressive 'tradition', in a different approach, with different conceptual tools, may be seen as women's power. In this move the implicit temporality of the presumed progressive move from 'tradition' to 'modernity' is also questioned; I want to show that, possibly, from women's points of view, aspects of 'tradition' may hold a promise of different futures. I suggest that for feminist researchers of gender in Africa it might be a good idea to go back in time in order to discover aspects of power in women's lives – such as the power of motherhood, as highlighted by African gender scholars (see below) – which in the process of 'modernity' have been pushed into the background, while the idea of women's universal subordination has taken centre stage.

The very notions of 'tradition' and 'modernity' are of course broad and flawed; when I use them here it is in a kind of polemical setting, reversing their immediate connotations by approaching these issues in contexts of women's lives. Regarding European history, feminist historians have noted "a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women precisely in those periods of so-called progressive change" (Kelly 1984, 2), in this case regarding the celebrated events of the European Renaissance. Similar trajectories have been exposed more recently by Silvia Federici (2004) and many others. The polemical edge of this article is directed against current advocates for 'gender equality' and 'women's empowerment' in Africa. With a point of departure in dialogues with rural women in northern Mozambique, and informed by African feminist thinking, I want to highlight aspects of women's lives that are generally unseen and/or misunderstood by Western development agents. This is not to deny that 'development' indeed may and often does have beneficial aspects, including for women, such as better education and improved health services. However, what I want to show are the possible resources – from women's points of view – of aspects of so-called 'tradition'; resources which become invisible, neglected, and/or condemned in contexts of Western approaches and understandings. On a more general level the article aims to destabilize taken-for-granted ideas of

gender relations as a given hierarchy of male dominance/female subordination – what I call the *universal subordination of women* syndrome – and replace it with very different notions of gender and gender relations, along lines of thought developed and expressed by African gender scholars.

Thus this article aims to re-think issues of gender, sexuality, and power in African contexts, which to a certain extent also involves rethinking the very notion of gender. Persons with male and/or female bodies are everywhere, but the *implications* of being a man or a woman or in between or moving between positions of gender – all of this may vary widely. For my own work along these lines, the thinking of Nigerian gender scholars Oyèrónké Oyéwùmí and Ifi Amadiume has provided important inspiration. Oyéwùmí (1997, 3, 5) is fiercely critical of Western gender thinking, which takes its point of departure in male/female bodies, rather than in male/female social spheres, "Western somatocentricity" or "body-reasoning", as she calls it. Amadiume (1987, 15) emphasizes how "the flexibility of Igbo gender constructions meant that gender was separate from biological sex". In the thinking of these African scholars, gender is not fixed on bodies; gender is allocated according to the situation. This approach is in tune with US feminist philosopher Judith Butler's (1990) thinking on gender performativity – but also, like Butler's thinking, at loggerheads with mainstream Western gender thinking. The Western focus on male/female bodies leads to dichotomous thinking, which, combined with the taken-for-granted hierarchy of male dominance/female subordination produces the *hierarchical dichotomous thinking* which is the bottom line of the above-mentioned Gender-and-Development discourse.

In her native Yoruba society, Oyéwùmí insists, gender was not a dimension of power; power hierarchies were rooted elsewhere, in relative age (seniority) and in lineage, not in gender. However, in a context of Western hierarchical dichotomous terms of male dominance/female subordination, women's struggles become struggles for equality with men, i.e. struggles for women to share male power and privilege on an equal footing. Under these conditions motherhood becomes an obstacle, not an asset. Oyéwùmí and Amadiume urge us to see things the other way round: they see motherhood as a life-giving force and as a position of power in itself. Thus, with a point of departure in women's lives, very different visions of culture, society, and gender equality emerge. This is the challenge of African feminist thinking.

Throughout this article I root the discussion in my own research experience in Mozambique, from the early 1980s onwards. In doing so, I want to show how I could not have understood what I met in northern Mozambique without decisive input from African feminist thinkers; this also made it clear that we as Western feminists need to learn from others who think about gender from other vantage points. In this process we also need to acknowledge the flaws and limits of Western thinking.

It is my conviction that Western ideas of a fixed gender hierarchy of male dominance/female subordination – ideas embedded in the 'modernity' introduced by colonialism and perpetuated by development organizations, as well as by African states – are unfit as tools for understanding relations of gender and power in Africa. Different understandings of gender and power are also important in enabling further development trajectories to build on the relative power of women. Often, in Africa, the 'empowerment of women' does not have to wait for development interventions; it is already there, but of course it may be enhanced, reinforced, stabilized, changed, and developed – preferably, however, on terms indicated by the women themselves, not imposed from above. In current development contexts, 'women's empowerment' very often involves issues of money, just as 'gender equality' often has strong components of access to money in terms of income generating activities in

one form or another. True, women's access to education and to political participation are also included in 'development' notions of 'gender equality'. But again: not infrequently, women in pre-colonial African societies actually did have political power – a fact which is conveniently forgotten, just as it is forgotten that the people who undermined this women's power were colonial agents. Among feminist academics working on these issues, it seems to be generally acknowledged that European conquest seriously weakened women's positions in African societies (for examples, see Oyewumi 1997; Becker 2021; Katto 2023). Heike Becker relates how, in Namibia, colonial civil servants directly opposed power, authority, and control being exerted by women. Thus "the administration's redefinition of what constituted 'women' in the Owambo context entailed a distinct loss of power and authority for women of the local elite" (Becker 2021, 5).

My attempts at rethinking gender in Africa, including explorations of what in this article I call 'the relative power of women', have been going on for a long time, more than four decades; it has not at all been easy, often being out of tune with dominant trends of thinking at the time. The whole process took off when I lived in Mozambique in the early 1980s, working in the National Women's Organization, the OMM – *Organização da Mulher Moçambicana*. The OMM was closely linked to Frelimo – *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* – the Mozambican liberation front, which, after eleven years of guerrilla war (1964–1975) against Portuguese colonial power, finally won Mozambique's independence, whereafter the previous liberation front transformed itself into a ruling party. Now, almost 50 years down the line, Frelimo is still the ruling party and the OMM is still closely connected to Frelimo. OMM's beginnings during the liberation war were different, manifesting more of a 'relative power of women' than what later became the case. In the early phase of the Mozambican war of liberation, women as well as men were recruited as guerrilla soldiers (Katto 2019); on the initiative of women soldiers, in 1966 Frelimo agreed to the creation of a special women's detachment – *Destacamento Feminino*. Some years later, in 1972, the OMM was created as a women's organization for the broader political mobilization of women in support of the liberation war (Sheldon 2002). The OMM inaugural conference was held in 1973 in Tunduru, southern Tanzania, at a point in time when Mozambique was still under Portuguese colonial rule.

The structure of the article follows aspects of my own decades long process of rethinking gender in Africa. The first section is a narrative of my research in the early 1980s, when I worked as an employee of the OMM.[1] In this opening section I expose the contradictions and puzzles I encountered when I tried to understand local women's lives from my Western feminist standpoint. The second section is devoted to discussions of matriliny; I realized that some parts of the puzzles might be due to the fact that kinship systems in northern Mozambique are matrilineal. In attempts to come to grips with matriliny, I drew on classical anthropology, Audrey Richards (1950, [1956] 1982), David Schneider and Kathleen Gough (1961) and others; I also read feminist anthropology from the 1970s onwards. However, even if this feminist anthropology was helpful in many ways, the decisive theoretical input for understanding my experience with women of northern Mozambique was critical thinking produced by African gender scholars; the discussion of this decolonial African feminist thinking is the subject of the third section of the article.

The subsequent sections of the article start from a different vantage point, inspired by the *Rethinking Time and Gender in African*

[1] At this point in time there were no development workers in Mozambique; expatriates could only work as *cooperantes*, employed by the Mozambican state. As an exception I worked in the OMM, which was a so-called 'mass organization' linked to the Party, not to the state.

*History* workshop in Ghent in April 2022. This African historical approach was new to me; previously I had never worked with history beyond colonialism and the slave trade. However, now reading work dealing with the deep history of the African continent, I realized that matriliny as such, as well as some of the traditions and customs I had encountered in northern Mozambique, actually has deep historical roots. During my years in the OMM, in addition to making anthropological investigations on the OMM's request, I was also charged with preparing and co-organizing an OMM national round of discussions regarding women's issues and women's lives in Mozambique, including assessments of customs and traditions, all as preparation for an Extraordinary OMM conference in 1984. In this process a lot of data material was produced in terms of reports from discussion meetings with women and men all over Mozambique. Some of the hotly debated topics were women's rituals of initiation, along with the custom of 'labia elongation'[2]. Thus, in the fifth section of the article, I revisit and discuss some of the reports gathered in the process of preparing for this OMM Extraordinary Conference, particularly reports on 'labia elongation', since this connects to the points I raise in the last section of the article, where I introduce the concept of Female Genital Power, referring to historical and contemporary actions of female protest engaging female genitalia as weapons of protest and power.

## My history with Mozambique

Since my very first meeting 1982 with women in Cabo Delgado, northern Mozambique, I have been aware of the necessity of re-thinking gender. I realized that my Western concepts and ideas, brought along from the Danish New Women's Movement of the 1970s, did not work for understanding the ways in which Cabo Delgado women saw themselves, their possibilities for action, and their dilemmas in the current situation, shortly after the end of Frelimo's guerrilla war against Portuguese colonialism – a war in which many women had been active as guerrilla fighters, as carriers of war materials over long distances and/or as providers of food for the guerrillas. Frelimo had won the war and Mozambican independence was declared in June 1975. But for the women of the north, a new struggle – rooted in serious points of disagreement – had started with the Frelimo regime. Frelimo saw itself as a modernizing force; Frelimo wanted to shape history in a unilinear move from 'tradition' to 'modernity'. The women of Cabo Delgado were not happy.

'Tradition', as seen by Frelimo, was social customs and ways of life which were to be left behind as quickly as possible; 'modernity' was education, industry, and largescale agriculture. Frelimo's idea of modernity was inspired by contemporary socialist countries; in many ways, however – and certainly regarding gender – the socialist ideas were not very different from mainstream capitalist ideas. The nuclear family was unequivocally seen as 'the basic cell of society', with a man as the family head, the woman as subordinated wife and mother. Campaigns were staged against various elements of 'tradition', such as initiation rituals, *lobolo* ('bridewealth'), and polygamy. These were the *abaixo* campaigns (*abaixo* means 'down with' in Portuguese). At the beginning and end of every political meeting, fists were raised and slogans shouted: "*Abaixo ritos de iniciação*", "*Abaixo lobolo*", "*Abaixo poligamia*". All of these customs were seen as oppressive of women and as obstacles on the way to modernity.

In 1980 I had come to Mozambique as a *cooperante* (a sociologist/anthropologist and gender scholar), with my husband (likewise a *cooperante*, an architect) and two daughters of 3 and 0 years. I managed to get myself a job in the OMM. In 1982 I was sent off to

[2] From my history readings I learnt that women's rituals of initiation, as well as 'labia elongation', have deep historical roots.

Cabo Delgado, the northern province where the struggle for liberation had been most intense. It was well known that many women of the northern provinces had been active guerrilla fighters in the war and/or had actively supported guerrilla soldiers with food and shelter. The OMM wanted to know about the impact of this experience on women's lives, the assumption being that these fighting women would have left 'traditional society' behind, now being the vanguard of modernity in northern Mozambique.

However, as it happened, my investigations turned out rather differently from what the OMM had expected. What I found in Cabo Delgado was also different from what I myself had expected. In the Danish women's movement – like in the Second Wave women's movements elsewhere in the Western world – we believed in *the universal subordination of women*. We saw patriarchy as a global phenomenon, with local characteristics maybe, but always rooted in gender hierarchies of male dominance and female subordination. A very similar approach was also the bottom line of the Documents of the OMM's Second Conference 1976 – *Documentos da 2a Conferéncia da OMM* – which in the early 1980s served as political guidelines for the organization. Here it is spelt out how women are suffering under the burdens of culture and tradition, oppressed and marginalized by men. For example, concerning the rituals of initiation it reads:

> The rituals of initiation impose on women a spirit of total submission and dependence of men. The woman is conditioned to gradually accept her subordination. She is educated only for being of service to the man – as a source of pleasure, as a force of work, and as a producer of even more workforce for the man. (OMM 1977, 90)

The OMM's ideas of women and gender were – like my own – imprisoned by *the universal subordination of women* syndrome, according to which patriarchal power and women's subordination are things of the past, while women's emancipation and equal rights between women and men are bright goals of the future – the bright future of modernity towards which Mozambique was now heading.

The problem was that all the rural women I met in Cabo Delgado – including the most politically conscious ones – were keen on 'tradition'; they did not want the 'modernity' offered to them by Frelimo. In practice the women of Cabo Delgado insisted on being 'backward'; I later came to see this as a conscious move of resilience and resistance. Talking in terms of gender and history, one could see this as a rejection of the idea of 'modernity' as progress, a rejection of the idea of time as a unilinear move from a dark and deplorable past to a luminous, glorious future. I returned from Cabo Delgado and wrote a report for the OMM. The OMM did not like my findings, and I had trouble understanding them myself. But the fact was that the Cabo Delgado women's rituals of female initiation – rituals which, in the eyes of Frelimo/the OMM, were seen as decidedly backward and oppressive – were highly cherished by the women themselves; they were *not* going to let them go.

The women insisted that it was Frelimo/the OMM who had got things wrong; for the women themselves the rituals were part of their identities and of their power. These women were keen supporters of Frelimo, the decisive force in chasing out the Portuguese – but they failed to understand what Frelimo/the OMM saw as the problem with their rituals. They were just singing and dancing, educating their daughters, like they themselves, when young, had been educated by older women. What was the problem with that? Besides, as I realized along the way, from the women's point of view 'modernity' did not bring either emancipation or equality. Going into details – as I did in my interviewing in attempts to find out what this was all about – there were many

points of contention. Frelimo promoted monogamous marriage with the husband as family head, seeing this as 'the socialist family', an icon of socialist modernity. Frelimo also campaigned against divorce. For the women of northern Mozambique Frelimo's preaching about the man as head of the family did not make much sense. Family heads were women; the men with responsibility were their brothers, not their husbands. As for divorce, the women considered divorce a women's right.

It turned out from my investigations that in the northern provinces, including Cabo Delgado, kinship was traced along maternal lines. Furthermore, a newly wed couple would typically settle on the land of the woman's family (i.e., what anthropologists call matrilocality). This gave women privileged positions. Unlike in the patrilineal-cum-patrilocal south of Mozambique, women in the north were not tied down by marriage. If the marriage did not work, the husband would have to leave; the woman and her children would remain in her house surrounded by her own kin. Matrilineal kinship systems are based on blood relationships, consanguinity, rather than on marriage, conjugality. This is a decisive difference. In relationships based on consanguinity the unit of mother and child(ren) is the centrepiece; husbands come and go, while the woman/mother and her children stay where they belong. In relationships based on conjugality this whole thing is disrupted; marriage is the centrepiece, women depend on husbands and move away from home in order to stay on the husband's land, children belong to their father's lineage. If a mother wants to stay with her children, she must stay with the husband too. Actually, both matriliny and patriliny come in many different shapes and shades, but the above characteristics are the bottom line.

What I figured out in the end was that the women of northern Mozambique felt threatened by 'modernity'; from their point of view, 'modernity' gave power to men, taking it away from women. With Frelimo came a male power regime, unmitigated by female power. Frelimo installed male administrators at all levels, often people from the patrilineal south of Mozambique; they insisted on the stability of marriage and they banned divorces. Indications of female power – as I found out over the years – were also the 'female chiefs', *apwiyamwene*. The Makhuwa – the people of the southern part of Cabo Delgado Province, as well as of the neighbouring province of Nampula, where I ended up doing most of my later fieldwork in Mozambique (1990s to 2000s) – have a system of double chieftainship: a man and a woman. "Whenever you have a *mwene* (male chief) you also have a *pwiyamwene*", people said. The *mwene* and the *pwiyamwene* have different tasks. The *mwene* deals with politics, as this is usually understood; the *pwiyamwene* deals with the invisible world.[3]

All of my investigations into matriliny, which I continued in the following years, started with the conflict in the 1980s over the rituals of initiation. It was not really a conflict; the power relations were grossly uneven: the ruling Party versus uneducated peasant women of the north. It was rather that on this issue the women chose to be disobedient. Their rituals went underground. When the Frelimo cadres visited the villages shouting the political slogans: "*Abaixo divórcio*", "*Abaixo ritos de iniciação*", the women shouted along – but when the Party people left the village they went on with their rituals as they had always done. I came to the conclusion that the rituals, contrary to the expectations of Frelimo/the OMM, actually supported the strength, autonomy, and relative power of the women *vis-à-vis* the men; that the kind of 'modernity' pushed and promoted by Frelimo in practice favoured men, tipping the gender power balance of the society as a whole in men's favour;

[3] For further analysis and details regarding different forms of matriliny/matrilocality among the Makonde and Makhuwa ethnic groups in northern Mozambique (provinces of Cabo Delgado and Nampula), see Arnfred (2011, chapters 11–13).

and that an important function of the women's rituals was to strengthen women's community and women's identity as a group, thus also supporting the matrilineal kinship systems of northern Mozambique.

## Understanding matriliny

When, after four years in Mozambique, in 1984 I returned to my university in Denmark, I was very keen to read more on matriliny. During my stay in Mozambique access to scholarly literature had been very limited; this was a long time before the internet; you depended on books and printed journals. However, having returned to Denmark I realized with astonishment that even here, even at generally well equipped university libraries, literature on matriliny was scarce, almost absent. An overview of matrilineal kinship groups in Africa did not seem to exist. What I found was mainly the old stuff, authored by British and American anthropologists of the 1950s and 1960s.

I vested some hope in Audrey Richards, herself a woman and a celebrated expert on matriliny with many years of fieldwork among the matrilineal Bemba of former Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, close to northern Mozambique. Richards acknowledges the widespread existence of matrilineal kinship systems in Africa. "Most of the Bantu peoples of Central Africa reckon descent in the matrilineal rather than the patrilineal line", she writes, suggesting that for this reason one might refer to "the territory stretching from the west and central districts of the Belgian Congo to the north-eastern plateau of Northern Rhodesia and the highlands of Nyasaland (…) as 'the matrilineal belt'" (1950, 205). This 'matrilineal belt' also encompasses northern Mozambique (roughly north of the Zambezi River) and southern Tanzania, stretching into the sea, including the Comoro Islands.

However, even with her particular focus on matriliny, Richards – like everybody else in British anthropology at the time – takes man and marriage, both centrally placed in every kinship chart, as points of departure for analysis. In a famous article in a famous volume, Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde's *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (1950), Richards compares different matrilineal societies in Africa, discussing whether the husband has 'immediate', 'delayed', or 'no' right of bride removal, referring to varying customs for the location of newly wed couples. The issues are seen from the husband's point of view; he is the agent and the one supposed to have rights. In the article Richards discusses what she calls 'the matrilineal puzzle': "the difficulty of combining recognition of descent through the woman with the rule of exogamous marriage" (1950, 246). She takes for granted that the husband will find an obligation to live in his spouse's village "irksome" and that he will try to escape from it, whereas the opposite situation of a wife having to live in her husband's village signals a stable and durable state of affairs. The 'puzzle' is thus evidently created by the male point of view. Seen from the position of the woman there is no puzzle at all.

In another celebrated volume, this one from 1961, edited by David Schneider and Kathleen Gough and titled *Matrilineal Kinship*, it is reluctantly acknowledged that male authority may have to be replaced, from the father to the maternal uncle, but male authority as such is beyond questioning. In Schneider's introduction to the volume, he discusses in detail variations of *relations between men*, never moving an inch from his stated point of departure, that "the role of men is defined as that of having authority over women and children". Like other anthropologists of his time, Schneider is taking for granted the idea of *the universal subordination of women*. Putting this dogma into doubt would be unthinkable.

Karla Poewe, writing two decades later (1981), is one of a very limited number of feminist anthropologists who have managed to break through the established consensus,

actually perceiving the society she studies from women's points of view. Poewe's field of study is the Luapula society, northern Zambia. I happily read Poewe in the process of trying to make sense of my own investigations in northern Mozambique. What was really useful was her distinction between wombmates/children of the same womb (*befumu bemo*) and relatives by marriage (*balupwa*). Womb = *ifumo* is explained by Poewe as infused with spiritual and natural power, guaranteeing the reproduction of the Luapula social order: "*Ifumo* stands for the Luapula universe, which is seen by Luapulans as unbounded, filled with an abundance of critical resources (especially land) to which everyone has access" (1981, 56). *Baupwa* is generally translated into English as 'family'; more correctly, however, it "connotes a plurality of individuals temporarily associated with one another for the purpose of enabling the reproduction of the social universe (*ifumo*)" (1981, 56). 'Family' is thus a mis-translation; 'family' in English carries connotations of 'basic social unit', while in the Luapula context this is exactly what *balupwa* is *not*. The stable unit is the matrilineal kin group; men as spouses come and go. Poewe stresses that *balupwa* relations are explicitly temporary in so far as "ties of intimate dependency between spouses are discouraged in many more or less subtle ways. While sexual enjoyment is valued, it is not limited to one specific partner" (1981, 56). There is a pressure on women *not* to become too attached to their husbands; women's loyalties belong elsewhere, i.e. to their matrilineal kin group, the point of female sexuality being – with Poewe's mesmerizing phrase –"to engulf male strangers and convert them into kin" (1981, 68).

Beyond Karla Poewe (1981) I found a small handful of woman-sensitive anthropologists studying matriliny. One of them, Pauline Peters, edited a special issue of *Critique of Anthropology* in 1997. In her introduction to the special issue, titled *Revisiting the Puzzle of Matriliny in South-Central Africa*, Peters writes: "The conventional anthropological view that the only difference matriliny makes is that authority runs through the mother's brother rather than through the father, *is untenable*" (Peters 1997,141, emphasis added). What she is really saying is that the generally taken-for-granted assumption of male dominance/female subordination is untenable. And further: "The particular animus directed against matriliny is because of its different gender patterns, especially its association with more social independence and political authority for women" (Peters 1997, 141). This 'animus against matriliny' is pervasive and it has deep roots, to be further discussed below. Only from the 2000s onwards did Mozambican literature on matriliny start to appear. Among early publications are Carla Braga (2001), Liazzat Bonate (2006), and Isabel Casimiro (2008). An important later contribution is Carmeliza Rosário (2021). In all of these studies – focusing on different areas of northern Mozambique (Niassa, Nampula, and Zambezia Provinces respectively) and dealing with different topics (endangered access to land and natural resources; matriliny and Islam; changes in gender relations and women's power over the last 50 years; written history's neglect of women of power and authority) – the resilience of matrilineal kinship structures is emphasized.

## Decolonial feminist thinking

For me the decisive change of ground only came when I started reading Ifi Amadiume (her first book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, published in 1987) and Oyèrónké Oyéwùmí (her first book, *The Invention of Women. Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*, published in 1997). This was groundbreaking work – for me like water in a desert. On the surface of things neither of these works deals with matriliny. Each of these two Nigerian gender scholars takes her point of departure in her own society of

origin, Amadiume in Igboland, Oyéwùmí in Yorubaland. They effectively dismantle the *universal subordination of women* line of thought – the line of thought which as a matter of course takes its point of departure in man and marriage. Amadiume and Oyéwùmí – each in slightly different ways – take their points of departure in the mother-child relationship, thus placing *motherhood* centre stage. This is indeed a break with Western social science thinking – including Western feminist thinking – where motherhood has hardly ever figured as theoretically/epistemologically important.

In the preface to Amadiume's first book (1987), she takes issue with the revered British anthropologists, Radcliffe Brown, Malinowski and all, and also with feminist anthropologists, who criticized classical anthropology for being androcentric, while nevertheless, in spite of this critique, continuing in the *universal subordination of women* line of thinking. "The methods they adopted", she writes – referring to renowned feminist anthropologists of the 1970s (mentioning, among others, Rosaldo and Lamphere [1974] and Reiter [1975]) – "indicated to Black women that White feminists were no less racist than the patriarchs of social anthropology whom they were busy condemning for male bias" (Amadiume 1987, 3). Amadiume points out the lack of attention to motherhood in these anthropological studies:

> 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. This, in my opinion, epitomizes the arrogance and insensitivity of 'abstract anthropology', an attitude which unfortunately also permeates the work of most Western feminist theoreticians. (Amadiume 1987, 3)

Amadiume shows how, across many African cultures, the relationships to one's mother and to one's maternal siblings – 'children of the same womb' – are the closest kinship bonds. She conceptualizes 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" (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 conceptualizes not an individual social position, but a social relationship, the relationship between mother and child(ren). This focus on relationship brings to mind the intersubjectivity of Ubuntu: "I am because we are" – altogether a very different epistemology compared to the Western mainstream focus on the individual (see Sylvia Tamale 2020, 139–147).

Compared to Amadiume, Oyéwùmí has a more head-on conceptual approach in her thinking. "I came to realize", she says, in the preface to her first book,

> that the fundamental category 'woman' – which is foundational in Western gender discourses – simply did not exist in Yorubaland. (…) This book grew out of the realization of Western dominance in African studies. That realization made it necessary to undertake a re-examination of the concepts underpinning discourse in African studies, consciously taking into account African experiences. (Oyéwùmí 1997, ix–x)

Oyéwùmí further explains how in pre-colonial African epistemologies 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 dichotomized, not hierarchical – and often not important at all. In pre-colonial societies social hierarchies followed other dimensions, such as seniority and lineage. Women could be rulers as well as men. 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. (Oyéwùmí 1997, 124)

According to both Amadiume and Oyéwùmí, *motherhood* is centrally placed in African cultures:

> In all African family arrangements, the most important ties within the family flow from the mother (…) These ties link the mother to the child and connect the children of the same mother in bonds that are conceived as natural and unbreakable. (...) The idea that mothers are powerful is very much a defining characteristic of the institution and its place in society. (Oyéwùmí 2000, 1097)

Latin American decolonial feminist Maria Lugones – whose work I read only later (her first important article was published in 2007) – puts it all nicely into context by coining the concept of the *coloniality of gender*. The European line of thinking regarding gender – the *universal subordination of women* line of thinking – was imposed on peoples elsewhere in the world through colonialism and Christianity. Locally, people conceive of issues of gender and gender relations in very different terms, as exemplified by Amadiume and Oyéwùmí above. In her argument for the *coloniality of gender* idea, Lugones (2010) uses Oyéwùmí's work: 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 exist of pre-colonial social structures; under Western eyes male power is everywhere presumed, while female power remains unseen.

These three authors – Amadiume (1987, 1997), Oyéwùmí (1997, 2000, 2002), Lugones (2007, 2010) – for me laid the ground for the kind of decolonial feminist thinking on which I have survived ever since. Lugones clearly defines herself as a part of the decolonial school of thought, taking her theoretical/epistemological point of departure in the work of Anibal Quijano ([1991] 2007), who is/was Peruvian and the grand old man of the decolonial school of thought. Some discussion has emerged regarding distinctions between postcolonial and decolonial lines of thinking (see Mendoza 2015). I have decided to classify Amadiume and Oyéwùmí as decolonial thinkers, because they not only speak up against Western/colonial lines of thought; they also present alternative epistemologies, rooted in local – in this case African – ways of life and lines of thinking, as clearly expressed in Oyéwùmí's title of a 2002 article: "Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies". Briefly put, this is what it is all about.

## How pre-colonial African history came into the picture

Making my anthropological investigations into matriliny and female initiation – initially in the 1980s in the context of the OMM, and later in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when I returned to Mozambique as an independent-of-the-OMM, Scandinavian funded researcher (at different points in time connected to Roskilde University, Denmark, and to the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, Sweden) – I focused on gender power balances and on local versus political and/or 'development' conceptions of sexuality and gender. I did not think much about the temporal aspects or historical roots

of ideas and practices, until after the April 2022 Ghent workshop, when I started reading books and articles by Chris Knight, Christine Saidi, and others writing about gender and pre-colonial history in Africa (Knight and Power 2005; Knight 2008; Saidi 2010; Fourshey et al. 2016; Gonzales et al. 2017).

These readings confirmed my vague ideas of matriliny as an older kinship system than patriliny: I was delighted by Knight's chapter title from 2008: "Early Human Kinship was Matrilineal", and even more by his detailed analysis (in this chapter as well as in a 2005 chapter co-authored with Camilla Power) of the ways in which British anthropologists, spearheaded by Bronislaw Malinowski, had waged a war from the 1930s onwards against any idea of matriliny being an earlier community based kinship system than patriliny, with marriage and nuclear family at centre stage. In a radio broadcast in 1931 Malinowsky described ideas beyond the individual family as the basis of society as "positively dangerous" (quoted in Knight 2008, 70). He further declared his intention to "prove to the best of my ability that marriage and the family have been, are and will remain the foundations of human society" (quoted in Knight 2008, 70). Knight shows convincingly how this campaign was politically motivated against Friedrich Engels' ([1884] 1893) approbation in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* of Lewis Henry Morgan's recent findings (of 1877) regarding matriliny, based on anthropological studies among the Iroquios and other native Americans. After Engel's endorsement of Morgan's findings, Knight (2008, 74) says "it became institutionally impossible to re-open any debate [on matriliny]". It is interesting to see how the resulting 'animus against matriliny' (see Peters 1997, quoted above) is politically and ideologically motivated, not rooted in anthropological findings, nor in scholarly argument.

Actually, Knight's exposing of the way in which a highly respected London School of Economics and Political Science Professor of Anthropology such as Malinowski's professional statements are purely politically motivated should keep us, as scholars, on the alert. Even today, mainstream politics determine professional findings. Mainstream politics, through funding practices and university boards, determine areas of investigation and also to some extent how investigations are conducted and what can be written or said. I myself struggled for years with my controversial findings. Could I write this as I saw it? Women finding power in initiation rituals, which everybody else saw as oppressive? Did it at all make sense?

## Labia elongation – reports from the OMM conference preparation process, 1983–84

Another thorny issue, in addition to my focus on women's initiation rituals – and similarly if not even more controversial – were the so-called 'labia elongation' practised by pre-pubescent girls, particularly in the matrilineal areas of northern Mozambique, as a preparation for getting ready for the rituals of initiation. I learnt about this practice during the rounds of meetings in preparation for the Extraordinary OMM conference 1984, and again during my interviewing in Nampula Province in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In my own analysis in the 2011 book, I see labia elongation as an aspect of what I call the 'sexual capacity building' of Makhuwa women (Arnfred 2011, 149, 193, 260–261). Labia elongation is also dealt with by other gender scholars with a focus on sexuality, such as Sylvia Tamale (2005) in Uganda and Bagnol and Mariano (2008) in Mozambique. Until the 2022 Ghent workshop and my subsequent readings I had no idea that labia elongation was an ancient custom. The fact that this is the case throws this custom into a different – and to me very interesting – light.

Labia elongation is about girls of ages 8–10 – i.e. before puberty – being instructed

by selected older women to gently but persistently pull the small lips of their vaginas in order to make them longer. In Mozambique this is generally done by applying a certain pomade prepared for the purpose, and the pulling should ideally take place twice a day. In the countryside the girls go to a selected place in the bush to do the pulling, sitting in a circle with other girls; in the cities the pulling may be done individually in the bathroom.

According to Saidi (2010), labia elongation is an ancient practice among Bantu-speaking peoples dating back thousands of years. Indeed, as noted by Saidi, very little scholarly literature exists on labia stretching. Evidently, for Western observers, men as well as women, this social encouragement of small girls' manipulation of their genitals, getting acquainted with their own potentials for sexual pleasure, has been just too hard to deal with, too 'repugnant' and 'obscene'. Saidi writes about Audrey Richards, who in the 1930s studied female initiation among the Bemba and wrote an entire book, *Chisungo* ([1956] 1982), on the subject, yet without ever mentioning anything about labia elongation. In Richard's fieldnotes one does find information about girls' practice of labia stretching, but these notes never made it into her published works (Saidi 2010, 159). To Richards, such obvious description of explicit female sexuality was beyond the pale, impossible to put into writing. Henri-Alexandre Junod of the Presbyterian Swiss Mission in Mozambique, who 1912 published his thorough studies of the Thonga people of southern Mozambique, did write about labia elongation in his published work, but only in an appendix in Latin for "doctors and ethnographers" to read ([1912] 1974, 464). In his view, too, this custom was too "vile and immoral" ([1912] 1974, 146), beyond the possibility of communication to lay readers.

Nevertheless, in Mozambique in the early 1980s, labia elongation was widely practised and much appreciated. In the nationwide preparation for the OMM Extraordinary Conference of 1983–1984 labia elongation was a cherished issue of debate, particularly in the north of Mozambique; not because people disliked it, but rather because they wanted to express how happy they were about this custom, men as well as women. As noted above, one of my tasks as an employee of the OMM (1981–1984) was to assist the OMM in the preparation for this conference. Frelimo had tasked the OMM with arranging an Extraordinary Conference, the point of this conference being a) the collection of data regarding women's social situations in various parts of the country, and b) nationwide discussions regarding this, i.e. discussions regarding customs and traditions of social life: what were they like, good or bad? What should be done? This was a new turn, away from the initial anti-'tradition' *abaixo* campaigns. Frelimo now wanted to listen to people's voices before deciding how to progress. Or maybe just some people in Frelimo wanted this.

The actual preparation for the conference took off in July 1983. The idea was to follow the pattern already used by Frelimo in the nationwide preparation for the Fourth Party Congress in March 1983. The Party Congress had been prepared through discussions of selected topics at all levels – i.e. locality level, district level, province level – throughout the country, local report-taking of all these discussions, summing up at province level, before finally being submitted to Party headquarters in Maputo. The OMM conference preparation proceeded in a similar way. A series of topics for discussion had been prepared by the OMM headquarters in Maputo, where I was working (as the only non-Mozambican in the office); cadres at all levels had been trained to conduct the discussions and collect the data. Among the topics for discussion were the following: rituals of initiation, *lobolo*, early marriages, polygamy, adultery, divorce, and relations between generations.

The process of preparation for the conference developed into a kind of social movement; everybody everywhere discussed issues

which had rarely been discussed before: what was good, what was bad – and why? What should be continued? I remember queuing at a bus stop in Maputo, waiting for the bus with people busily discussing with each other issues of marriage: *lobolo*, polygamy, divorce, etc. Newspapers carried articles with interviews regarding initiation rituals. There was a general excitement for some 6–7 months – until all of a sudden the conference itself, originally planned for April 1984, was postponed for half a year. The Frelimo bosses were getting nervous; something might result from this which they had not foreseen and had not planned. When the conference did take place in November 1984, it was indeed well controlled, with President Samora Machel himself heading all the proceedings of this women's conference, backed by the entire Frelimo Central Committee on the podium. Significantly, the OMM women of the Maputo head office did not perceive this as an offence; on the contrary they were deeply honoured by the whole setup; they were happily performing as dutiful daughters of male political power.

Few delegates from the floor got a chance to speak at the plenary meetings, the President himself talking most of the time. Because of this control, the conference as such was a disappointment. Not much resulted; the OMM continued as before as 'an arm of the Party', with top-down communication. The bottom-up communication, which had been the excitement of the conference preparation process, was halted. Much data material had been collected, however, and at a later point I arranged a possibility to return to Maputo in order to read through all this documentation.

But first a brief report from my own experience and reflections on my participation in a large number of these meetings. I was travelling as part of a brigade headed by the General Secretary of the OMM. Initiation rituals and labia elongation were keenly discussed. For me as a Western/European observer, it was striking how this discussion of intimate sexual details could take place in large public meetings. I did get used to it as time went on, but at the beginning I was really surprised: serious men at a public meeting in the community square standing up and explaining the advantage of the elongated labia caressing and supporting the penis during intercourse; matron-like women stressing the importance of their own sexual satisfaction. I was impressed!

However, this public sharing was also new in Mozambique. So many things were new in those years; you often got this feeling of energy and enthusiasm, men and women ready to break through barriers and embark on new lives. What was new in this particular context was maybe not the sharing as such, but the sharing in a gender-mixed forum of men and women. Previously – this was my clear impression – Mozambican society (i.e. local societies in this part of Africa) had been gender divided in many ways. This impression was also confirmed by the behaviour in certain cases of older men or women. I remember one public meeting in a village square, where – when the female rituals of initiation were brought up for debate – an old man rose to his feet, suggesting that he and the other men present should leave the meeting, as he considered it unfit for men to be present for these women's matters. And in another meeting a woman wanted to speak, but not with men to hear, so she came right up to the head table, where the OMM representatives (including me) were sitting, and almost whispered her message.

The written reports resulting from the nationwide conference preparation process were a very diverse collection of material. Some were handwritten minutes from discussions and oral contributions, others were typed reports based on compilations made at district or province level, others again were something in-between. I read through it all, day after day, week after week, sitting alone in a windy office on the sixth floor of the OMM building with a wide view over Maputo Bay. The material touched on all of the issues out for debate during the conference preparation process. I

will present here just a few quotes from reports regarding labia elongation. As noted above, labia elongation was a keenly discussed and much appreciated issue of debate; there were many reports, particularly from northern Mozambique, praising this custom. Here is a report from the district of Gurue, Zambézia Province (Makhuwa country):

> Regarding the pulling of the labia it is the general opinion that this custom should be continued, as it has the advantage of working as a brake on the penis at the time of sexual intercourse, that is, it secures the slow entrance of the penis, tightly fitting around it, so as to let the man as well as the woman feel aroused. The extended labia are a great stimulation for the man. Thus before starting sexual intercourse, he will become excited by pulling the labia. If the civilized having sexual intercourse are kissing and embracing, this is what we are doing with the extended labia.

And another report from Ilha de Moçambique, Nampula Province (also Makhuwa country):

> This thing – i.e. the elongated labia – is practised simply to have sexual pleasure with your husband. The women that don't have these elongated labia, who have not been doing the pulling, are not well liked. In addition to this the elongated labia have another quality of making the penis rise faster. It is well known that some men have difficulties in getting an erection. For this type of men it is important to begin caressing the woman's labia in order that he should be able to feel himself more like a proper man.

Supported by my later interviewing in the early 2000s in Ribáuè District, Nampula Province, regarding female initiation rituals and conceptions of women's sexuality, I came to see women as masters of sexuality. This is not just about labia elongation, it is also about how younger women, during the rituals of initiation, learn from older women how to move during the sexual act. Women are the ones who know how to create a good sexual experience for themselves as well as for their partner; men depend on women for good sex. This is parallel, actually, to the situation in rural Mozambique regarding food: men do not know how to cook, thus they depend on women for a good meal. It was my impression from working in northern Mozambique that men highly appreciate women's capacities in both of these areas. In sex as well as in cooking women are the active agents, men the passive enjoyers of women's arts.

## Rituals of initiation, issues of sexuality, and Female Genital Power

Ever since my very first interviews in 1982 with women in Cabo Delgado, I have been interested in the female rituals of initiation. At that point, in 1982, this was the major point of disagreement between Frelimo/the OMM and the local women – in this context Makonde women, Makonde people being of particular interest to Frelimo. The Makonde had a reputation for being rebellious people, having had their own confrontations with Portuguese colonial power, resulting in the massacre of Mueda in 1960, years before the start of Frelimo's guerrilla war in 1964. Thus, Frelimo/the OMM wanted to know about the situation of Makonde women. The fact that the Makonde women, perceived by Frelimo/the OMM as the avantgarde of future independent Mozambique, insisted on the continuation of their rituals of initiation was not welcome information at OMM and Party levels. Seen from Frelimo/OMM points of view, these rituals were obscurantist 'tradition', to be left behind the sooner the better;

independent Mozambique was heading full steam for 'modernity'.

After my return to my university in Denmark in 1984, I found myself stuck with this contradiction; actually it took years for me to figure out how to deal with it all; time and again I was on the verge of abandoning my strange devotion to these odd issues of matriliny, sexuality, and ritual. At that point, when I had returned from Mozambique, taking up again my teaching position at Roskilde University, I was working in the Department of International Development Studies, totally immersed in development discourse. Female rituals of initiation were *not* a popular topic of research, nor was matriliny; topics like these had no currency whatsoever in contexts of Development Studies. Happily, in 1998 I managed to get a research grant for further fieldwork in Mozambique; I opted for research in the province of Nampula, the core area of the Makhuwa, the largest and most explicitly matrilineal-cum-matrilocal of Mozambique's population groups. In 2000 I succeeded in getting a temporary position at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in Uppsala, Sweden, tasked with running a research programme on *Sexuality, Gender and Society in Africa*. Thus, from 2000 onwards, things became easier. In 2002 the first issue of the journal *Feminist Africa,* edited in Cape Town, South Africa, came out. Actually, another South African feminist journal, *Agenda*, edited in Durban, had existed since 1987. My position at NAI enabled me to focus on network building among Scandinavian and African gender researchers, and to continue my studies in Mozambique; it also made it possible to undertake other projects in collaboration with African gender researchers in Mozambique and elsewhere.

Over the years – in Uppsala and also after my return to Roskilde University in 2007 – I managed to summarize my findings from decades of research in Mozambique in a book (2011). In this book, findings, analysis, and reflections regarding female rituals of initiation take up considerable space (chapters 6–10 and chapter 13). In the present article, with its particular focus on "re-visiting 'African tradition', re-thinking gender and power", I want to take issues of sexuality one step further, going into a topic which I did not develop during my Mozambique fieldwork, but which – in my mind at least – is a continuation of the topic of labia elongation and the issue of 'women as masters of sexuality'; I am talking of Female Genital Power, the concept coined by Laura S. Grillo, based on decades of fieldwork in Cote d'Ivoire. I see this topic as centrally placed in the context of the present article, with its focus on areas which have been sidelined and invisibilized by modernity thinking.[4]

Similar to labia elongation, the issue of 'women as masters of sexuality' also seems to have ancient roots. Laura S. Grillo talks about Female Genital Power as a spiritual power vested in the female genitals, which is particularly powerful in post-menopausal women. Motherhood in Grillo's fieldwork area is highly revered; the mother-child bond and wombmate siblings are key kinship ties. Nevertheless, post-menopausal women are endowed with a particular genderless, spiritual power. Grillo (2018, 24) describes the nocturnal Ivorian *Egbiki* ritual, when naked women elders walk through the village, pounding pestles to the ground and shouting a particular cry, the ritual performed as a protective measure against evil forces. In her investigation of Female Genital Power (FGP), Grillo also mentions a contemporary women's society in Cameroon, in which the rite of FGP is performed as political protest, the marchers being postmenopausal women exposing their sexual organs. "The seat of the elders' power is (…) not the womb, but the vulva, clitoris, labia and vagina. (…) The menacing destructive force that the female elders emit from their genitals

[4] Another topic, which has also been sidelined in feminist/modernity thinking, is motherhood. I discuss the issue of motherhood in another article (to be published in a forthcoming issue of *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* [www.jendajournal.com]).

is a mighty arm of spiritual warfare" (Grillo 2018, 93–94).

It is interesting to see the custom of labia elongation in a context of Female Genital Power. When, at some point in the 1980s, I read Shirley Ardener's (1975) article on "Sexual Insult and Female Militancy", I was impressed by her reports from her research in Cameroon on the female battle tactics of *anlu*, defined as "the use of obscenity by women, including exposure (…) of parts of the body, which are normally covered" (Ardener 1975, 40). Ardener also refers to similar tactics of women's protest elsewhere in Africa, such as in Kenya, where she shows the existence of "a form of curse employed by women (…) the deliberate exhibition of the private parts towards the thing or person cursed" (Ardener 1975, 41). In another article in the same 1975 volume, Caroline Ifeka-Moller describes the Women's War of 1929 in eastern Nigeria. The women here – according to contemporary colonial reports – used similar tactics of being "nearly naked, wearing only wreaths of grass round their heads, waist and knees", the uprising "led by an old and nude woman of great bulk" (1975, 129). In this Igbo Women's War, the women, carrying sticks and machetes, were out for war in a physical sense but also on a spiritual plane, as pointed out by Grillo in her discussion of these women's wars and uprisings. Similar forms of protest are also known in Uganda, re-enacted in recent years by (among others) feminist activist Stella Nyanzi in her one-woman war against Uganda president Yoweri Museveni (see Thomas 2018). Stella Nyanzi is also an academic and a feminist writer (see Nyanzi 2011).

Of interest here is first the distinction between the power of women as mothers – the aspect of power particularly highlighted by Amadiume and Oyéwùmí – and the power of women as masters of sexuality, including its ritual implications. Furthermore, this female power is qualitatively different from male power. Generally, historians have only seen male power: conquests, battles, states. Such accounts, according to Grillo (2018, 60), "obscure a subtler conception of rulership in Africa, in which secular might was always tempered and conditioned by spiritual and moral authority, the purview of women".

Also of interest is the still active potential for protest, particularly rooted in ancient Female Genital Power. In her discussion of the "racialized, capitalist, gender oppression" which she calls *the coloniality of gender*, Maria Lugones makes a point of showing not just oppression, but also the potentials for conflict and resistance. "Instead of thinking of the global capitalist colonial system as in every way successful in its destruction of peoples, knowledges, relations and economies", she says, "I want to think of the process as continually resisted, and being resisted today. (…) I am investigating, emphasising (…) concrete, lived resistances to the coloniality of gender" (Lugones 2010, 748). Stella Nyanzi's naked protest is a clear-cut example of this kind of protest and resistance, but actually I also see the north Mozambican women's silent disobedience *vis à vis* Frelimo party politics (see the initial section of this article) as a form of protest. The female rituals of initiation are important to the women, and they continue with their practice and performance, in hiding if need be, no matter what the government says. Paradoxically, the real danger here, in relation to this form of protest, is 'development' – and the concomitant re-structuring of notions of gender and power along the well-known lines of male dominance/female subordination.

## Conclusion

My bewildering research experience in northern Mozambique in the early 1980s, as well as my subsequent readings of African feminist thinking, have motivated me to re-visit so-called 'African tradition' and to re-think conventional assumptions regarding gender and power, including the general idea of gender power relations conforming to a pattern of

*universal subordination of women*. I realized that from a decolonial point of view, rooted in ways in which rural women see themselves, such ideas just do not hold; from this vantage point gender power relations come to be seen in a very different light. Furthermore, readings of African deep history convinced me that some of the women's customs and traditions I encountered in Mozambique – such as labia elongation and women's rituals of initiation – have ancient roots, just like the matrilineal kinship system of northern Mozambique (where most of the research described in this article was conducted). All of this supports the relevance of the decolonial concept, *the coloniality of gender*, a concept which points to the fact that ideas of gender as a hierarchy of male dominance/female subordination are colonial impositions: imposed on colonized countries and endowed with values of civilization. From a decolonial point of view, previously undertheorized areas of women's lives, such as motherhood and female sexual power, are assessed anew. Motherhood is acknowledged as a position of power, and aspects of female sexuality – as expressed in ancient customs of labia elongation, celebrated in women's rituals of initiation, and performed in Female Genital Protest – emerge as powerful weapons of rebellion and protest.

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