

Female Sexuality as Capacity and Power? Reconceptualizing Sexualities in Africa

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Abstract: The article argues for an approach to studies of sexuality in Africa that considers the subject of female sexuality from the perspective of capacity and power. Based on data from Mozambique, and informed by conceptual frameworks as well as by research findings from other African countries, the article investigates preparations of the erotic female body such as body tattoos, hip belts of glass beads, and elongated labia. It also discusses how “traditional” sexual capacity-building has been transferred from rural contexts into urban settings, empowering young women in love relationships with older, richer men.

Résumé: L'article fait valoir une approche des études sur la sexualité en Afrique qui considère le sujet de la sexualité féminine du point de vue de la capacité et de la puissance. Il est basé sur des données en provenance du Mozambique, et éclairé par des cadres conceptuels ainsi que par les résultats de recherches provenant d'autres pays africains. Ce faisant, il examine les préparatifs du corps érotique de la femme tels que les tatouages du corps, les ceintures de hanche en perles de verre, et les lèvres allongées. Il explique également comment le renforcement des capacités “traditionnelle” sexuelle a été transféré de contextes ruraux en milieu urbain,

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donnant aux jeunes femmes plus de pouvoir dans les relations amoureuses avec des hommes plus âgés et plus riches.

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For a long time it was a mystery to me why until a few years ago issues of sexuality were almost invisible in African feminist writings. Taking into consideration that sexuality was and is a major issue in Western feminist scholarship and women's movements, I was puzzled by the fact that important African gender theorists such as Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, who have been rethinking notions of gender and power in radical ways, had so little to say about sexuality. In my initial attempt at providing an explanation—in the book *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (2004)—I followed the lead of Amina Mama, who suggested that it was “the historical legacy of racist fascination with Africans' allegedly profligate sexuality” that had deterred researchers (1996:39)

Today, ten years down the line, many more contributions to the analysis and discussion of African sexualities have appeared, with Sylvia Tamale's sizeable reader *African Sexualities* (2011) standing out as a landmark volume. But already, from 2004 onward, African feminist reviews like *Agenda* and *Feminist Africa* carried special issues on sexuality (see Arnfred 2009). Following clues in this literature and in my own fieldwork data from Mozambique, I have arrived at a different explanation for why African feminists, compared to Western feminists, have not felt a similar need for analyzing sexualities. The new explanation is a simple one: whereas sexuality in Western contexts was a site for women's subjugation and objectification (and thus, in order to overcome this, had to be analyzed anew, on women's own terms), sexuality in Africa has been—and to some extent still is—a site of female capacity and power. As such, the need for critical analysis may not have been felt as urgently, and not in the same way, as for feminists in the North.

However, in order analytically to come to grips with this situation of possibly different power relations of sexuality, new conceptual inroads are needed. All too often, taken-for-granted power relations are implicitly embedded in apparently innocent concepts, thus biasing the analysis. In order to avoid this, and in order to carve out new, more inclusive lines of thinking, conceptual discussions are necessary and important.

In recent years, two contributions from the body of African feminist writing have been particularly significant for taking up this conceptual challenge: Nkiru Nzegwu's essay titled “‘Osunality’ (or African Eroticism)” (2011) and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf's “Thinking with Pleasure: Gender, Sexuality and Agency” (2013). Both works discuss the issues involved in African sexualities on conceptual and epistemological levels, trying to figure out the implications of different conceptualizations and framing alternative approaches. In the next section I will introduce and discuss these two contributions.

In the following section I will discuss some of my own findings regarding female sexuality in Mozambique along with findings from elsewhere in Africa. The focus is not on the ethnography as such, but rather on interrogating stories of female sexual capacity building and sexual self-confidence from a variety of African locations in order to open up new ways of thinking about sexualities, in Africa and elsewhere. The final section of the article is based on material collected by other researchers concerning female sexual agency, capacity, and power as evidenced by young urban women in contemporary African capitals: Dakar, Maputo, and Nairobi.¹

Framing Alternative Approaches to the Analysis of Female Sexualities

In her chapter in Sylvia Tamale's *African Sexuality* (2011), Nkiru Nzegwu, with reference to Cheikh Anta Diop's classical works, presents a comparison between Africa and the West as a matter of two different logics dividing Indo-European cultures from African cultures: "[The] sexualized gender hierarchy of the West," she says, "eroticizes male dominance and female subjugation as sexual, . . . making eroticism and sexuality a basis for women's moral anguish, conflict and downfall" (2011:255). In African cultures, in contrast, "sexual pleasure and fulfillment were equally expected for both women and men, and sensuality was neither pornographic nor the basis of women's subjugation and domination, as was the case in Europe" (2011:254). Nzegwu points out "the error in believing that terms such as *erotic* and *sexual pleasure* have the same meaning in the mother-centered African cultural universe as they do in the patriarchal European cultural universe," maintaining that "we do epistemological violence to Africa and the conceptual schemes of similarly situated cultures, when we fold their underlying matrifocal ideology and principles of complementarity into Europe's patriarchal structure" (2011:256; italics added). "African sexual ontology" she asserts, "is not Western sexual ontology in a black face. . . . It has its own defined history. . . . It is in fact quite progressive and a resilient stronghold of female power" (2011:254).

In Yoruba contexts this female power points back to Osun, the Yoruba divinity of "fertility, wealth, joy, sensuality and childbirth" (Nzegwu 2011:258). Based on ancient sacred texts of Yoruba culture (Ifa divination), Nzegwu describes Osun as representing "a pronatalist, female-centred, life-transforming energy . . . [that is] highly sensual and sexual" (2011:258). This interconnection of sexuality and fertility makes an interesting contrast to Western notions of sexuality as different from, even opposed to, fertility and motherhood, as epitomized in the Madonna/whore dichotomy: women as seen (by men) as either asexual mothers (morally elevated) or as sexual objects (morally debased).

From a similar position Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2013), also seeing sexuality as a stronghold of female power, draws a parallel between the Nigerian deity Osun and the biblical figure of Eve. Eve also represents female desire—with the well-known consequence of being expelled from the

Garden of Eden. There is a tension at the heart of Christianity, Bakare-Yusuf says, insofar as “desire manifests itself at the outset and is immediately cast out. At the moment of desire’s coming to presence, it leads to expulsion. Fertility must be excised from any relation to an originary female desire or action” (2013:34). Of course, as Bakare-Yusuf also points out, “coitus is what leads to fertility and reproduction, and not the other way round” (2013:34). Nevertheless, Christianity has managed to separate the two in the figure of Mary and her miraculous conception and the result—the restraint and concealment of female desire—serves patriarchal power: “For societies that have been subsumed under the panoptical gaze of Christian colonialism,” she says, “. . . occluding female originary desire . . . helps to reduce the opportunities for resistance. In other words, if female sexual pleasure and desire is highlighted, the supremacy of male desire, power and control is called into question” (2013:35). In this optic, maintaining a focus on female sexual pleasure and desire has important political implications in terms of resistance to patriarchal power. One may here recall Audre Lorde’s assertion of the erotic as power. In Lorde’s understanding, “the erotic” is an inherently subversive force, a source of mobilization against oppression: “In order to perpetuate itself,” she says, “every oppression must corrupt and distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives” (1984:53). Lorde’s insights have been brought into African sexuality studies by, among others, Patricia McFadden (2003) and Sylvia Tamale (2005).

This does not mean, of course, that female sexuality is not also an area of “violence, sexual epidemics, population explosion, domination, mutilation, repression and lack of choice” (Bakare-Yusuf 2013:28). But it is not only that. However, the dominant discourse in African studies and in development contexts is this “hegemonic discourse of sexual terrorism,” as Bakare-Yusuf calls it (2013:29). Furthermore, “positioning women as weak or damaged subjects gives renewed legitimacy to patriarchally motivated discourses of control and protection” (2013:30). The importance of counter-narratives becomes obvious. “Telling stories about female sexual pleasure, agency and power allows us to uncover a tradition and community of powerful, feisty, indomitable women who will not be cowed by oppression or violation” (Bakare-Yusuf 2013:37).

Nzegwu actually tells such stories. The ways she does so, however, by juxtaposing African and Western logics, is risky, and open to misunderstandings and charges of essentialism. Nzegwu is aware of this danger, also inherent in Cheikh Anta-Diop’s (1978) scheme of two cradles of civilization, which sets up patriarchal Indo-European cultures as against the mother-centered logic of African societies. Nzegwu defends her position in the following terms:

Some might construe this reference to an African sexual universe and . . . African sexual ontology as a gross homogenization of Africans, at best, and

of essentialism at worst. I should state that I am well aware of the diversity of cultures and the heterogeneity of the peoples of Africa. However, recognition of differences does not automatically preclude identification of similarities. . . . [There are] underlying structural commonalities in the patterns of beliefs, family systems, social ethos, ideology and practices that need to be articulated." (2011:266)

I both agree and disagree with Nzegwu here. Yes, there are many commonalities in patterns of belief, family systems, and so on across Africa. However, the issue at stake has to do with sexual cultures, and Western sexual cultures are indeed heavily influenced by Christianity. But so are African sexual cultures, after colonialism, and particularly after they were "transformed and reconfigured by evangelical strains in the post-structural adjustment era of the 1980s" (Bakare-Yusuf 2013:33). After all, it is not a question of generalizing about Africa (or about the West, for that matter), but of replacing misleading Western categorizations and assumptions of male dominance/female subordination with alternative, more inclusive conceptualizations, open to different realities. The issue thus is how to think about male and female sexualities, deconstructing and unlearning dominant ideas and lines of thinking, in the field of sexuality as in gender relations in general.

Regarding "unlearning," Sylvia Tamale has this to say: "Unlearning . . . requires us to discard our old eyes and acquire a new set with which to see the world. It requires us to jettison assumptions and prejudices that are so deep-seated and internalized that they have become normal and appear to be natural" (2011:3). Step one in the process of unlearning is to identify those deep-seated assumptions and prejudices that have been part of our beliefs for so long that they seem natural and normal. Step two is then to look at the world anew, from different vantage points, with different tools of analysis, in order to relearn in ways that are better tuned to the phenomena we wish to understand.

Female Sexuality in Mozambique: Findings and Analysis

My data on sexuality in Mozambique derive from two different sources. One set of data was obtained from my own interviews and investigations conducted from 1981 to 1984, when, living in Maputo, I was an employee of the National Women's Organization, the OMM (*Organização da Mulher Moçambicana*), and later (in 1998–2005) when I returned to Mozambique as an independent researcher. Another set of data derives from the OMM archives: a nationwide database on women's social situation collected in meetings and discussions all over the country from 1983 to 1984 in preparation for the OMM Extraordinary Conference in 1984.² Preparation for and supervision of this nationwide study was the reason for my employment by the OMM.

Mozambique in the early 1980s was a one-party state, and the OMM was closely linked to the governing party, Frelimo. After a while I realized that

the OMM's official narrative about women in Mozambique did not match the stories I heard from the women themselves, particularly women in the northern provinces of the country, where I was sent by the OMM on a research trip in 1982. Contradictions centered on different understandings of the female rituals of initiation, which were seen by Frelimo and the OMM as oppressive to women, degrading, and contributing to the subordinate status of women. I found, however, that these rituals were experienced by the women themselves as absolutely indispensable, central to their femininity, and (in my analysis) key in their power struggle with men. In fact, it was my impression that local gender struggles had intensified after the coming to power of Frelimo with its socialist and astutely masculinist ideology, despite political declarations in favor of women's emancipation (see Arnfred 2011, 2014).

I tried to focus on the experiences and perspectives of the women themselves, taking this as a point of departure for analysis. A particularly relevant fact that was not known or accounted for by Frelimo or by the OMM is that the ethnic groups in northern Mozambique are matrilineal. The Frelimo/OMM understanding of women's lives seemed to have more to do with received ideas of women's emancipation (in this case socialist theories from Friedrich Engels onward) than with knowledge of gender relations on the ground. On my return to the OMM headquarters in Maputo my attempts to explain how I had come to see these issues had no impact whatsoever. The OMM leadership was more interested in listening to the bosses in Frelimo than to rural women in a faraway province. It also complicated matters, of course, that in a certain sense the rituals *were* oppressive; the oppression, however, had nothing to do with relations between women and men, but more with relations between older and younger women. The older women were in power, the young initiates the underdogs. But once initiated, every woman could take part in future rituals of initiation and could enjoy her position of increasing seniority. Thus the experience of the rituals was very different from the points of view of the initiates (who were bossed around by older women) and all other participating women, who had a good time telling juicy jokes, dancing provocatively, and laughing.

I came to see the female initiation rituals as very important for the women and for their unity and strength vis-à-vis men, particularly at the historical juncture of the early 1980s, shortly after the end of the war of liberation (against Portuguese colonial power) when male dominance (supported by Frelimo) was gaining ground even in the matrilineal north. Women felt squeezed and pressured to give up traditional rights rooted in matrilineal norms, such as easy access to divorce and—in the case of divorce—gaining custody of the matrimonial house and children. It was my clear impression that the usual balance between male and female domains of power had been disrupted during the war and now again after independence. At first it had tilted in favor of women, who had entered male domains as carriers of war material for the guerrilla soldiers and become

active beyond the confines of the lineage and the village. But now, under the Frelimo regime, power had tilted back in favor of men—partly because of the socialist masculinist ideology, partly because Frelimo administrators often came from the south of Mozambique and thus were accustomed to patrilineal kinship norms. For the women of Cabo Delgado, where in 1982 I spent one month interviewing women in different districts of the province, the early 1980s was a moment of crisis; the women ardently defended their initiation rituals against Frelimo's campaigns to have them stopped. Similar scenarios were recorded from the other northern provinces: Niassa, Nampula, and Zambézia, and documented in the OMM database (see note 2).

I was intrigued by these rituals, and it took a while for me to figure out what they were all about. It seemed to me that in the matrilineal setup of northern Mozambique, particular emphasis was given to female sexuality. From the mid-1980s onward, the Renamo/Frelimo civil war in Mozambique made field research in the north impossible. Thus it was only in the late 1990s that I was able to go back to Mozambique to do fieldwork in the north, now as an independent researcher. In the meantime the political climate had changed, from the Frelimo one-party state to a multiparty neo-liberal set-up, although Frelimo was still in the government. Initiation rituals were no longer campaigned against, and people were free to do as they liked. My later fieldwork was conducted among the Makhuwa, who, like the other major ethnic groups of northern Mozambique (the Makonde of Cabo Delgado and the Yao of Niassa) are matrilineal. The Makhuwa is the largest ethnic group in Mozambique, inhabiting all of Nampula province as well as parts of the provinces of Cabo Delgado, Niassa, and Zambézia.³

Preparations of the Erotic Body

After all these years of research, what I found was the following: during the initiation rituals, young women are educated as sexual experts, instructed in how to seduce and have pleasurable sex with the male partners they need for becoming pregnant. Of course the entire range of sexual preparations of the young women's bodies—from the elongation of the labia minora (starting well before puberty, so that the desired length has been reached when the initiation takes place), to body tattoos/scarifications, to the strings of glass beads (*missangas* in Portuguese) worn around the hips—might be interpreted in a patriarchal context as female subordination to male sexual pleasures. But nothing in my data indicates that this was the case. On the contrary, it was my clear impression that women were proud of their capacities as masters and initiators of sexuality and that they enjoyed the sexual encounters as much as the enchanted men did. In this social arrangement women emerged as sexual agents, men as the ones being seduced. Older women were the seasoned experts, particularly those whose business it was to act as experts of female initiation; these women would often also be diviners, with special gifts and capacities in relation to the world beyond. In Makhuwa contexts it is not just the living who belong to lineages, but also

the dead, the ancestors, and the yet unborn, and women are seen as central in reaching out to these sectors.

Of course, the implicit rationale in a matrilineal setting of educating young women as sexual experts is that they should be able, in Karla Poewe's words, "to engulf male strangers and convert them into kin" (1981:68). Male strangers (or "progenitors," as Christian Geffray [1990] calls them) are needed for the continuation of the lineage. This means that in this rural setting the ultimate goal of the ceremonial activity is that the young women will eventually get pregnant. But the point is *also* sexual pleasure, for men as well as for women. Thus in this context sexual pleasure and procreation are closely connected, remarkably *unlike* the Madonna/whore dichotomy of the Bible in which motherhood is sacred while (female) sexuality is sin. The conclusions that I came to in the course of my fieldwork are thus very different from the "hegemonic discourse of sexual terrorism" (Bakare-Yusuf 2013:29) or "sexuality . . . as analysed within the epidemiological paradigm, which reads sexuality as disease and focuses on the need for sexual behaviour to change" (Manuel 2014:107). Indeed, the many women I spoke with on such topics as tattoos, missangas, labia elongation, perfumes, and erotic movements seemed to be engaged in what I call "sexual capacity building." Later I have found this point of view supported by observations reported by other researchers from elsewhere in Africa.

Body Tattoos/Scarifications

It was my impression in the early 1980s that women's body tattoos, particularly in urban settings, were less prevalent than they had been in the past. However, a particularly memorable experience was an interview with a group of women in a Maputo factory in 1981, in which one participant after another laughingly pulled up her blouse to show off her tattooed stomach. These women, who were in their thirties and forties, had all been raised in the countryside in the southern provinces of Mozambique, only coming to the city as adults with their husbands or as single or divorced mothers seeking jobs. Twenty years later, when I attended several women's initiation rituals in the north of Mozambique, I noticed that most women in their twenties and thirties had elaborate body tattoos, while as a general rule the young teenaged initiates did not.

Reports from the OMM archives suggest an increasing repudiation of the custom. An observer in Gaza province (southern Mozambique) in 1983 reported that "the young men of today don't like women with tattoos, and the girls themselves don't like them either. They feel embarrassed when practicing sports and gymnastics and expose their body due to the type of clothing that goes with these activities; they are exposed to laughter." And from the province of Sofala (mid-Mozambique) in 1983: "The tattoos are already in a process of extinction. The girls that were born towards the end of the 1950s don't have them. Tomorrow they will be considered a disgrace."

Of course, however, these were only two observations, and some of the initiates I encountered might have acquired tattoos later on.

The body tattoos are folds of skin filled with charcoal powder. When healed they give an uneven body surface, which—cut in pretty designs—is considered to have aesthetic value as well as important sexual functions. According to what I was told, there is a free choice of patterns according to the preference of the young woman. In some cases the work is done by a tattoo-cutting expert, in other cases by the women themselves. Here is a description from an interview with a woman in Cabo Delgado in 1982:

The women have tattoos on the stomach and on the thighs, in order for the man to get aroused very fast. These tattoos don't have a fixed time: the first ones are made when the girl is still in the initiation hut, the next ones maybe after 2–3 months of marriage, and so on. A woman may have tattoos made throughout her life. . . . It is the women themselves who make the tattoos. They'll make an agreement to meet at the river, and then they'll make them on each other, respectively. They'll bring a knife and charcoal powder. It hurts a lot, your clothes will be full of blood. It is done on the back and on the buttocks as well. When you have been cut you'll have to wait for 2–3 days without having sexual relations with your husband.

There is a general agreement that these tattoos promote sexual pleasure for the woman as well as for the man; like the other key sexual adornments—missangas and elongated labia—they promote eroticism and extended foreplay. As explained in an OMM report from Zambézia in 1983,

The tattoos as well as the missangas serve to motivate the man, as certain men do not know how to arouse the woman sexually; when they feel the need of having sexual relations they take the woman by surprise, and under such circumstances she has little chance of reaching full orgasm, that is sexual pleasure. However, if the woman has tattoos on her body, if she wears missangas and if she has the elongated lips of the vagina, the man has to start by playing with these things. By his doing this, the woman becomes prepared for the sexual act, resulting in satisfaction for both parties.

Cabo Delgado, Zambézia, and Niassa provinces are parts of northern Mozambique, inhabited by matrilineal Makhuwa, Makonde, and Yao peoples. However, as indicated in my Maputo factory experience from 1981, body tattoos are also popular in southern parts of the country. In the OMM material the tattoo tales from the south are very similar to those from the north, as a 1983 report from Gaza province suggests:

In every region there would be women known as experts for cutting tattoos. Generally they would use a piece of wire bent like a hook, together with a razor blade. They would cut the tattoos in accordance with the preference of the girl in question. The expert would oblige the girls or women for whom she worked to do her favours in return, by working in her field, fetching water or firewood for her, pounding maize etc.

Anthropological literature on women's body tattoos is scarce, particularly literature based on women's own stories. A remarkable exception is the work of Heidi Gengenbach (2003) from fieldwork in Magude district (a remote part of Maputo province, southern Mozambique) in the mid-1990s (see also Sheldon 2002). Gengenbach's observations run parallel to my own, and to what I found in the OMM material from the early 1980s: Women cut tattoos in order to "make the body beautiful," with the tattoos being cut by fellow girls or by a tattooing expert, in the bush or at the river-side. Gengenbach's interviewees also stated that tattoos "make your husband happy," and they "clearly linked heightened male excitement with their own sexual satisfaction" (2003:115). Beyond beauty and eroticism, however, tattoos, in Gengenbach's insightful analysis, also serve a function of female bonding beyond and across patrilineal kinship ties: "The key site of female connection was at the river's edge, where girls and women went to draw water, wash clothing and bathe every day. . . . 'At the river' was a pivotal location in tattooing stories, the place where fellow girls and women compared the beauty of one another's tattoos . . . and where tattoo-based friendships were negotiated and sealed" (2003:117). Gengenbach sees women's persistent cutting of tattoos as aspects of tacit resistance against missionary and colonial ideals of smooth female bodies and as "resilience of 'traditional' practices in the face of colonial pressures to become 'civilized' and 'modern'" (2003:135). Since independence, Frelimo's campaigns continue the pressure to give up "tribal" practices as inconsistent with socialist ideology and the government's push for national unity and modernization. Nevertheless, according to Gengenbach, "in post-war Magude, the stirrings of a tattoo revival confirm the vital role that body-marking has historically played for rural women" (2003:133).

Gengenbach's focus on tattoos as an aspect of feminine culture and female-centered networks of affiliation resonates with my own interpretation of women's rituals of initiation as spaces for women's culture and female bonding, and her observations regarding "the stirrings of a tattoo revival" point to the resilience of women's culture, even in the twenty-first century and even in the patrilineal south of Mozambique. Although Gengenbach mentions the erotic function of tattoos, her analysis focuses on their importance in women's culture. There is, however, an important connection between these two functions. Ornamenting and decorating the body are a part of a female culture in which eroticism—on women's own terms—is an important element. A similar conflation applies to other aspects of "preparations of the erotic body," to be discussed below.

Missangas and Erotic Scents

Strings and hipbelts of glass or clay beads, or *missangas* (also called *bine bine* in Senegal, where the art of female eroticism seems to be particularly well developed), are found throughout Africa (Nzegwu 2011), including in Mozambique. In 1983 in the northern province of Niassa, a woman said this

about the missangas: "A custom that we feel ought to continue is the use of missangas, since the men, when they go to sleep, like to play with these, here around the hips of the wife." Similarly, in 1983 a woman in Nampula province "stressed the importance of the continuation of these habits [tattoos and missangas], as they attract the man and increase his force for making love to the woman." Even during the day, when the beads are worn beneath women's clothing, their presence is detected via the subtle sounds they make. The importance of such invisible assets—things that are not seen but only heard—brings to mind an observation made by Oyèrónke Oyewùmí regarding the way in which the West so often gives priority to vision, to what can be seen. In Africa, Oyewùmí says, *hearing* plays a much more prominent role as against the Western "concentration on vision as the primary mode of comprehending reality, promot[ing] what can be seen over that which is not apparent to the eye" (1997:15). Eroticism is located in feeling and hearing, in hands and ears—and also in the sense of smell. In Senegal a particular ethnic group, the Lawbe, has specialized in erotic paraphernalia and knowledge, among which scents and perfumes have a special standing. According to Abdoulaye Ly (1999:47), "the eroticism of the Lawbe is most vividly expressed by the consummate art of their women to concoct a variety of scents ranging from the incense to the pearl belts soaked in a cocktail of diverse perfumes." Similarly Sylvia Tamale, in her descriptions of the role played in Uganda by the *Ssenga* (originally the name for "paternal aunt," but now referring generally to an older female mentor and instructor), writes of tutorials in the female sexual arts that include instruction about "sexual paraphernalia and aphrodisiacs in the form of herbal perfumes, sensual oils, sexual beads (*obutiti*) and so on" (2005:17).

Elongated Labia

In the discussion of female initiation rituals during the preparation for the OMM Extraordinary Conference, a key topic of interest was the elongation of the female labia minora. In many places in Mozambique the practice is known as *puxa-puxa* (*puxar* is "to pull" in Portuguese). Before their initiation, young girls from the age of eight to ten are instructed by an older female relative (though never her mother) regarding how to apply a homemade pomade and gently pull the small lips of the vagina with the purpose of making them longer. About five centimeters is the desired length. After the first instruction girls are left to do the work on their own or preferably with other girls at some secluded place. In the countryside the girls go to a secret place in the bush; in the cities the bathroom of an apartment will serve the purpose. In 2005 in Tete province (northern Mozambique) Brigitte Bagnol and Esmeralda Mariano studied the practice: "They pull each other so that it will not hurt, among friends, one in front of the other. . . . They pull each other when they are young, only those who are not married" (2012:46).

A frequently used metaphor for elongated labia across African countries is that they serve as “doors” to the vagina. The young Malawi men and women interviewed by Chi-Chi Undie and colleagues (2007:226) reported that “the labia are like doors”; in Mozambique, according to Bagnol and Mariano, “references to elongated labia often use the metaphor of ‘the door’: Before having sex, partners must open ‘the door’; ‘the man cannot enter just like that’” (2012:53). In much of the testimony presented at the public meetings held in preparation for the OMM Extraordinary Conference, the elongated labia were seen, similarly, as an important element of erotic foreplay, sometimes in lieu of the less prevalent practice of kissing. Below are some quotations from what was said in some of the meetings held throughout the country.

Regarding the elongation of the vaginal lips, it is the general feeling 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 elongated labia are a great stimulation for the man; before starting sexual intercourse he will become excited by pulling the lips of the vagina. If the civilized way of having sexual intercourse is kissing and embracing, this is what we are doing with the lips of the vagina. (Report from Zambézia, 1983)

The elongated labia stimulate the man as well as the woman during the sexual act. Furthermore, the labia act as a substitute to kissing for those that are not used to kiss. (Report from Nampula, 1983)

This thing [elongation] is practiced simply in order to have sexual pleasure with your husband. . . . 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 by caressing the woman’s vaginal lips, in order that he should be able to feel himself more like a proper man. (Report from Nampula, 1983)

The preparation process for the OMM Extraordinary Conference involved meetings convened throughout the nation, in village squares, in cooperatives, and in factory meeting halls. I was impressed by the way in which men and women were able to describe and discuss details of their sexual lives in these public fora. Whereas the rituals of initiation were a taboo subject that could not be discussed in public, there seemed to be no such prohibitions regarding sex. Also striking for me as an observer was the fact that the practice of labia elongation made girls acquainted at a tender age with their potential for sexual pleasure, and furthermore that the practice of pulling was undertaken in the company of other girls. This indicated to me a very different starting point for young girls regarding sexuality as compared to Western norms. Such differences support Nzegwu’s assertion that women’s sexuality is differently structured in at least some African contexts, where borderlines between friendship, mutual touching, and sexual arousal seem blurred and floating.

Prior to my encounter in Mozambique with the phenomenon of labia elongation, I had never heard about it. There was an abundance of feminist (and other) literature on female genital cutting or mutilation (FGM)—but nothing on elongation. Could it be that to Western feminists, images of women in Africa that present them in terms of risk and danger, violence and mutilation had greater purchase than images of sexual pleasure? Fortunately, today this situation is changing and research on female sexual pleasure is emerging.⁴ One particularly interesting contribution is the documentary film *Sexy Uganda* (2011) made by the Dutch filmmaker Sunny Bergman.

A remarkable aspect of this documentary is the way in which the young woman filmmaker approaches the issue of female sexual practices in Africa. She explores this with an open curiosity and a wish to learn from her Ugandan interlocutors—an attitude very different from the “othering” gaze of the classical anthropologist describing unfamiliar sexual practices as exotic (at best) and/or repugnant (at worst), and the development practitioner who—even, or precisely when, feminist—focuses on helping less fortunate and suffering sisters. At one point in the film Bergman disappears into a bathroom with a Ugandan woman friend for mutual inspection of elongated versus not-elongated labia. In another scene she lets a Ugandan *Ssenga* pull her labia, showing her how she herself can proceed with the pulling—just like instructions given to Baganda girls. In yet another scene Bergman tells her Ugandan woman friend that in Dutch the labia minora are called “shame lips,” and the Ugandan friend is surprised: “Shame lips? Why? How can you be ashamed of your own body? You should be proud of what you have got, of the way you are as a woman!” Bergman is impressed by the sexual self-confidence displayed not only by young women but also by older women in Uganda, very much unlike “older women in Western countries who aren’t quick to dish out graphic sex stories.”

Similar differences in Western and African approaches to sexuality are demonstrated in Shanti Parikh’s research, also from Uganda (2005). Parikh discusses Christian missionary opposition to the practice of labia elongation, showing how the missionaries “believed that pulling was masturbation or body mutilation and hence uncivilized and immoral. Furthermore, female missionaries stationed at schools and health wards asserted that pulling promoted promiscuity by introducing girls at an early age to their genitalia and sexual sensation.” However, as she says, “foreign religions have interacted in complex and multiple ways with local ideas about sexual learning and morality through the colonial project aimed at “civilizing” African sexuality,” resulting in a situation where “church and health centres became important interventions for reformulating African bodies, sexuality and moral codes” (Parikh 2005:149,150).

To a Western eye, the mutual pulling involved in labia elongation likely has elements of homoeroticism. But in local terms this has nothing to do with sexual orientation. “Pulling each other is normal, like doing each other’s hair,” a Ugandan woman says in Bergman’s film. The categorization

of what is sexual (or homosexual) is thus culture specific. From her fieldwork in Lesotho, similarly, Kendall observed that two women could have intimate body contact without this being regarded as sexual. "It is impossible for two women to share the blankets [local euphemism for having sex]," she was told; "you cannot have sex unless somebody has a *koai* (penis)." Similarly "no *koai*, no sex means that women's ways of expressing love, lust, passion or joy in each other are neither immoral, nor suspect" (1999:162,167). Marc Epprecht, writing about Zimbabwe, states even more categorically that "the homosexuality/heterosexuality dichotomy is a false one" (2004:11). Intimate body contact in Uganda, Mozambique, Lesotho, Zimbabwe—and presumably elsewhere in Africa—is categorized (locally) in different ways.

Erotic Movements

In addition to body tattoos, missangas, scented oils, and elongated labia, instructions regarding erotic movements are part of initiation rituals that prepare young women for fulfilling sexual lives. In Sunny Bergman's film from Uganda, her female friends show her their bedroom dances, and her *Ssenga* instructs her regarding how to move her hips and pelvis in the proper way. In Mozambique, Uganda, and elsewhere in Africa, women are expected to contribute actively to sexual intercourse, even to take the lead. Women's particular erotic movements and bedroom dances were celebrated in the OMM data material collected for the OMM Extraordinary Conference. According to a report from Cabo Delgado, "During the initiation rituals the girl is instructed regarding how the husband will behave in bed, and how the woman must follow his movements. To remain motionless is no good." A woman from Niassa reported how, "while beating the drums, the old women instructed us how to dance in order for us to learn the different ways of receiving the man for the sexual act." And a man from Sofala, obviously speaking from personal experience, said that

the girl is instructed to move in that way in order for the man to get erection more quickly. Without this, when the girl has not been instructed, it is much more demanding on the man, having to make all the work by himself. In this way he'll soon get exhausted, not being able to have intercourse more than twice a night. The girls in the countryside move differently from the ones in the city. The ones who move the most are the countryside girls.

As a man from Tete summed it up succinctly, "To have sex with an un-initiated woman is like sleeping with a dead body."

Once again, it is remarkable how these aspects of sexuality until very recently have been almost invisible in research. Sexuality in Africa has largely been constructed by colonialists, African presidents, and development agencies as a troubled area—a problem for everybody, even if perhaps in slightly different ways. Neither in the research nor in development

initiatives was there any attention to the element of pleasure—presumably what sexuality to a large extent is about, in Africa and elsewhere. As we have seen, however, in recent years a growing body of writing takes a point of departure in sex as experienced by men and women, sex as pleasure, and the role of sex in maintaining social networks. Some of this new research, which is discussed below, focuses on sexual agency and power as employed by young women in urban contexts, with the links to sexual capacity-building in the countryside more or less explicitly drawn.

The Power of Pleasure: Young Urban Men and Women in African Capitals

In Francis Nyamnjoh's article "Fishing in Troubled Waters: *Disquettes* and *Thiofs* in Dakar" (2005), the author discusses female sexual agency and is strongly critical of what he sees as the "accelerated commoditization of sex in Africa," which "put[s] morality and God on hold as money and survival take centre stage" (2005:296). Nyamnjoh describes the women known as *disquettes* as young, thin, and Barbie-like, dressed in smart and modern outfits and perpetually on the lookout for wealthy and socially connected male *thiofs* (the Wolof name of a most prized fish), who are often manipulated by the clever, seductive females. According to Nyamnjoh,

what most distinguishes the grand/super thiofs are the latest, flashy cars they ride, state-of-the-art mobile phones, sumptuous villas in upmarket parts of town and an appetite to explore restaurants, hotels, beaches and resting-places with disquettes. . . . Nevertheless, in some situations a thiof might be completely swept off his feet by a disquette, who manipulates him at will. . . . In such situations the disquette pulls the strings and is often said to have the thiof at her beck and call. (2005:307)

In order to hold on to their men, "disquettes invest remarkably in making themselves beautiful and desirable" and "invest a lot of energy, vigilance and assistance from marabouts to watch over their precious but capricious catch" (2005:310).⁵ Stories follow of men who have been seduced and drugged by disquettes with doctored drinks, only to wake up and discover both the women and their valuables gone. In telling all these stories, the author's tone is characterized by curiosity regarding the specific urban metaphors for different types of women, men, and sexual relationships, but also quite a strong (moral) condemnation of this life of "generalized promiscuity" and "commoditized sex" (2005:295,298).

By comparison, the tone of Christian Groes-Green's "'To Put Men in a Bottle': Eroticism, Kinship, Female Power and Transactional Sex in Maputo, Mozambique" (2013), which investigates very similar phenomena, is remarkably different. Groes-Green sees things from the points of view of young men and women, with a particular interest in the strategies employed by the young women—in Maputo called *curtidoras* (women enjoying life)—vis-à-vis

the older, wealthy men, the *patrocinadores*, meaning “donors” or “sponsors” (2013:102). He looks at what is often termed “sugar-daddy relationships” (a term that also includes the disquette–thief relationships described by Nyamnjoh), but he does so in ways that are quite different from Nyamnjoh’s approach. The mainstream perception of sugar-daddy relationships take male supremacy for granted, with the young women often portrayed as victims of male manipulation. In Nyamnjoh’s rendering, this relationship is (almost) turned upside-down, with hapless men portrayed as victims of female manipulation. Groes-Green tries to look at things in more nuanced ways. For example, he is interested in discovering those “female spaces in which erotic power can be exerted over men,” but he is emphatic that the existence of such spaces by no means implies “that eroticism has the potential to overthrow larger socioeconomic, gendered or racial structures of inequality.” His investigation and his approach nevertheless suggest “that even in societies that appear heavily patriarchal we might find spaces for female assertiveness” (2013:103).

The most impressive contribution of Groes-Green’s approach is the contextualization of his observations: his investigation of how “the power of female eroticism . . . connects to kinship, gender dynamics and moralities of exchange . . . [and] how *curtidoras*’ sexual–economic exchanges with men are never fully divorced from moral obligations toward their female kin” (2013:103). This is not just consumerism, he says, focusing on the ways in which the sexual agency of *curtidoras* fits into larger networks of reciprocity and exchange. He shows, for example, how young Maputo *curtidoras* manage their sexual relationships with older men through close relations to female kin, from whom they learn not only how to seduce men, but also how to keep them enchanted. “The erotic knowledge that female elders transmit to daughters and nieces,” he says, “is transformed into bodily capacities that women use to seduce *patrocinadores*. . . . Erotic powers are reproduced within a female space where secret knowledge is passed on from older to younger women” (2013:106). These “female elders” play roles similar to those of the *marabouts* in Nyamnjoh’s account from Dakar, who provide women with aphrodisiacs and other concoctions in return for payment. Here, however, the relationship between young women and female elders is part of larger circuits of reciprocity and attachment. “As *curtidoras* earn money (and other material resources such as clothes and mobile phones),” Groes-Green says, “they keep some of it to cover ‘nightlife expenses’ and other necessities, and then distribute the rest among female kin. Elders, mothers, aunts and older sisters use this money to buy food, medicine, and clothes for the children” (2013:106).

Groes-Green thus points to a connection between “traditional” sexual capacities of rural women, on the one hand, and “modern” eroticism and female powers of seduction on the other—a connection that is also pointed out by Sylvia Tamale (2005) in her writings on the Baganda institution of *Ssenga*. The *Ssengas* who act as sexual advisors to young girls seem to be an institutionalized version of the Mozambican female elders. Three points

are important here: (1) the sexual agency and strategizing of the young women, (2) the fact that income from sexual activity is distributed in kinship networks, also bolstering the family positions of the young women, and (3) the ways in which “traditional” sexual knowledge (and magic) serves “modern” purposes in urban sexual exchanges.

Whereas the focus of Groes-Green's fieldwork is young, not-so-well-off women (and men) in Maputo, Sandra Manuel (2014)—herself a young Mozambican woman—focuses on the sexual agency demonstrated by young women and men of the Maputo elite and middle class and what she calls the “normalization of the sexual appetite.” The point of this conceptualization is to see sexual desire as an experience that is as normal and natural as the appetite for food, along with “the idea that a regular sexual life is essential in the maintenance of good health.” This approach also points to the fact that “female sexuality . . . is no longer, in the urban popular discourse, verbalized in terms of procreation and pleasing the male partner, but associated primarily with women's (and men's) pleasure and intimacy” (2014:99). She suggests that this attitude toward female pleasure, far from being an entirely new development, links younger women to previous generations. Among her interlocutors, she reports, “many women confessed to me their desire to participate in the initiation rites for women done in the Makua [Makhuwa] society in northern Mozambique, which, among other aspects, give instructions on the sexual life” (2014:102).

Another important observation from Manuel's fieldwork is the association that many younger Mozambicans perceive between “sexual satisfaction . . . [and] novelty and diversity, which is acknowledged as unattainable with a single partner” (2014:104). Her fieldwork shows an abundance of men and women juggling lives with different partners, generally within the context of a basic relationship, sometimes including children. These other relationships have to be conducted with secrecy and discretion, and usually a number of rules apply. “The materialization of the sexual appetite with partners other than the steady one happens in an ordered manner,” she observes. “Desire is highly controlled and rule-bound. . . . Men and women who carefully hide their affairs with a degree of complicity from their friends highlight the role of secrecy in the management of romantic and sexual relationships.” Many take HIV tests on a regular basis, and as one woman said, “condom use is part of the sexual ritual, and it is as ordinary as wearing a bra” (2014:117–18,119,123). What is particularly interesting is that women as well as men have relationships on the side. The tradition of multiple partnerships (e.g., polygamy) for men in many African societies, including Mozambique, is well known, as is the opportunity for young men to legitimize their sexual arrangements through this means. Multiple partnerships for women, however, are less well documented, although they may not be entirely new. When working in Nampula province, I came across an unpublished document written in colonial days by a Portuguese Catholic *padre*, Alexandre Valente de Matos, that includes a description of Makhuwa female initiation rituals (which he

himself found grossly immoral). Here he writes that the young initiates were instructed that “os homens é não só um”—that men are more than one—and that women, provided they take the proper precautions in terms of concealment and discretion, may take a secret lover (Valente de Matos 1968).

Another interesting piece of recent research with a focus on sexual mores of young middle-class men and women is the work of Rachel Spronk (2012, 2014) based on fieldwork in Nairobi. Spronk’s research focuses on young urban professionals involved in (or trying to establish) love relationships rooted in equality of age and status. From her long, often intimate conversations with these young urbanites of the middle class, she learned that women as well as men see fulfilling sexual lives as an important aspect of their identities as professionals and as “being African the modern way.” For young women, “enjoying sex is considered to be part of healthy self-awareness, and they desire fulfilling relationships in which mutual sexual pleasure is the norm. Sexual pleasure, then, has become a positive self-identifier for being a contemporary independent woman.” Spronk concludes that for both men and women, female sexuality has been “redefined as pleasure and not exclusively as procreation” and that male sexuality has been “partly redefined in relation to female pleasure” (2014:14,17).

In his 2011 article “Philogynous Masculinities: Contextualizing Alternative Manhood in Mozambique” (2011), Groes-Green reports similar shifts in attitude among young men and women of the not-so-well-off groups in Maputo who are the subjects of his investigations. The *curtidoras*, who cultivate relationships with older, well-off *patrocinadores* in order to gain a living or to pay for their studies, often at the same time have a younger boyfriend, a *namorado* or a *bom pico*, who is a good lover and sexually attuned to women’s pleasure. “The *bom pico* notion,” according to Groes-Green, “could be seen as an expression of an emerging male ideal which provides young men with an alternative to more dominant and misogynist versions of manhood.” “Sex is all about the woman,” says one of his young male informants, “my pleasure is her pleasure.” In Groes-Green’s analysis, the notion of the *bom pico* is also linked to marginality; the *bom pico* is often a young man who compensates for a lack of financial resources by cultivating his capacity as good and caring lover. With the notion of *bom pico* and the concept of philogynous masculinities, Groes-Green affirms that he wishes to “open a theoretical landscape that is able to embrace contextual variations of men’s and women’s own enactments and notions of gender, power and equality, rather than a priori assuming universal gender inequalities across diverse cultural settings” (2011:10,15,17).

Conclusion

As the conceptual contributions by Nkiru Nzegwu and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf discussed in the first section of this article suggest, the study of sexualities in Africa is in need of a conceptual reframing, moving away from implicit,

taken-for-granted notions of male domination and female subordination, and of men as the sexual subjects and women as objects. Placing female sexual pleasure, agency, and power center stage, as a point of departure for analysis, changes the entire picture. In order to do so, however, it is necessary, as Sylvia Tamale points out, to accept a process of unlearning and relearning. This process, in my own thinking about this subject, has led me to the conceptual paradigm of female sexuality as capacity, agency, and power, which I see expressed in the preparations of the erotic body (tattoos, labia elongation, erotic scents) and the instructions in erotic movement that I observed in Mozambique. A review of other contemporary research also suggests that the mainstream “sugar-daddy/young female victim” conception of sexual and gender relations in Africa (rooted in the familiar male dominance/female subordination paradigm) does not capture the present reality, just as the reversal of that preconceived notion—which sees young women as predators, men as hapless victims—also misrepresents contemporary mores. The more interesting studies (in my optic, of course) are those that take a point of departure in women’s agency and power, however limited and constrained these may be—studies, in other words, that look at female agency in the context of networks of reciprocity and care among (mainly female) relatives. By pointing to important connections between town and rural areas, these studies (particularly those from Maputo) also link back to my own data on sex as female capacity and power from mainly rural areas in Mozambique.

Finally, the article discusses studies that look at sexual relations among young African men and women as a pursuit for both pleasurable sex and potential long-term partnerships. An interesting aspect here is not just young women’s self-assertiveness as sexual subjects, but also young men’s attention to female pleasure. According to these studies, fulfilling sexual lives with equal pleasure for men and women are seen as part of “being African the modern way.” The new empirical data provided by these studies inspires an extension and broadening of the effort to reconceptualize African sexualities, which will, hopefully, continue to open up new perspectives for analysis. This article is intended as a part of this process.

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Notes

1. Sections of this article are part of an as yet unpublished paper titled "The Power of Pleasure: Re-conceptualizing Sexualities" that resulted from my participation in the 2012 CODESRIA Gender Institute in Dakar, headed by Sylvia Tamale.
2. After its second National Conference in 1980, the OMM was tasked by the Mozambique government—i.e., the Frelimo party—to organize an Extraordinary Conference for specific discussion of what was called "women's social problems," in reality "traditional" aspects of family structure and gender relations, such as polygamy, *lobolo* (brideprice), and initiation rituals. As background preparation, discussions of these topics were organized in public meetings at the grassroots level all over the country, and by an agreement between DANIDA (the Danish development organization) and the OMM, I was selected to assist in organizing these discussions. Reports from meetings and discussions were brought to the OMM headquarters in Maputo as a basis for the national report to be presented at the conference. These data were (and are) kept by the OMM. At a later point (in 1987) I had the opportunity to return to Maputo and read through the conference files. My interpretation of the data differs on many points from the official report presented by the OMM (1984).
3. History has shown matriliney to be quite resilient in the face of social change; for instance among the Yao of Niassa, where for various reasons (as explained by Edward Alpers 1972) a mass conversion to Islam had taken place from the late nineteenth century onwards but "the principle of matriliney [had] been affected hardly at all by conversion to Islam" (1972:196).
4. Bakare-Yusuf's article (2013), discussed above, is part of a volume titled *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure* (Jolly 2013), with articles

from many parts of the previously colonized world (not just Africa). Sylvia Tamale's 2011 volume, *African Sexualities: A Reader*, grand in content as well as in size (656 pages), is another contribution to a different view on sexualities in Africa. See also, e.g., Tamale (2005); Parikh (2005); Undie et al. (2007); Groes-Green (2011, 2013); Nzegwu (2011); Bagnol and Mariano (2011, 2012); Spronk (2012, 2013); Manuel (2014).

5. A marabout is a Muslim scholar and/or holy man. In Senegal marabouts also engage in divination, the production of amulets and aphrodisiacs, and the like.