SEXUALITIES

Abstract Issues of sex and food are often inscribed in male/female relationships. Frequently in a western context sex is perceived as a site of male power and female subordination, while food and cooking are seen as female domains, but still sites of subordination, as elements of women's household chores. In this article, looking at issues of sex and food in a rural matrilineal setting, power aspects of male/female relationships as mediated through sex and food emerge somewhat differently. Sexual proficiency is here a woman's art, mastered by old women and transmitted to the young. Also, in a setting where daily life is largely based on subsistence production, food and cooking become domains of power, again with old women in control. Based on fieldwork in northern Mozambique and with reference to African feminist conceptualizations of male/female power relationships, the article makes a case for rurality and 'tradition' not necessarily being adverse to female power in social relationships.

Keywords African feminism, female power, Makhuwa, matriliny, sexuality

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Sex, Food and Female Power: Discussion of Data Material from Northern Mozambique

Sexuality is often perceived as a site for women's subordination. Through the institution of marriage, a woman's sexuality is placed under her husband's control, for his pleasure and for patrilineal procreation. Food and cooking are similarly perceived as part of women's household chores, adding to the double workload impeding women's advancement in society.

From the point of view of such perceptions the title of this article may seem controversial: how could one argue for a perspective, in which sex and food may possibly be acknowledged as areas of female power? The

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article will proceed first by briefly discussing these perceptions as applied to Africa and in a historical perspective, and secondly by introducing the matrilineal context in which the article's discussion is positioned – a context which makes implicit androcentric assumptions in mainstream perceptions more visible. Thirdly the conception of 'female power' will be debated in the light of feminist theorizing. After this overture data from northern Mozambique with a focus on male–female relations as mediated through food and sex will be presented and discussed. Finally I will draw some conclusions, posing questions for further inquiry.

'Sexuality is a key site through which women's subordination is maintained and enforced in postcolonial Africa', Sylvia Tamale says (Tamale, 2005: 1) proceeding to show, however, how this state of affairs has been constructed in and through European colonization:

> The colonialists' constructions and perceptions of Africans as profligate and hypersexual led to intensified surveillance and repression, of African women's sexuality in particular. Having constructed the hypersexed female body, the case was made for the strict regulation and control of women's sexuality. (Tamale, 2005: 1)

In this endeavour, Tamale continues, 'colonialists worked together with African patriarchs to develop inflexible customary laws that evolved into new structures and forms of domination' (2005: 2). I take my point of departure in this recent contribution by a well known African feminist, in order to position the following discussion in a context of feminist thinking.

According to Sylvia Tamale (2005) – as also previously pointed out by Ifi Amadiume (1987) and others – patriarchal forms of Christianity and Islam were highly instrumental in promoting a view of women's bodies as inherently sinful and impure. Such perceptions, backed by state and patriarchal power under colonial and postcolonial rule, have unsurprisingly seeped into women's perceptions of themselves. Nevertheless, a certain ambivalence persists. This ambivalence is the focus of Tamale's article, an analysis of the Baganda institution of *Ssenga*, referring to female sexual initiation and/or to the women counsellors instructing the young initiates. 'Sexuality among the Baganda was traditionally defined along gender and class lines, with wifehood and motherhood central in shaping women's sexuality' Tamale says (2005: 4). Still, however, a wife's lack of sexual satisfaction in marriage was a legitimate reason for divorce. Also the *Ssenga* institution is ambivalent, the role of the *Ssenga* instructors being on one hand to turn the young girls into good and well-behaved Baganda women, while on the other hand, in the case of some *Ssengas*, instructions also embody a continuation of different sexual messages, destabilizing dominant patriarchal assumptions and matching more modern and radical views voiced by young urbanized women (Tamale, 2005: 10).

The subversive aspect of the *Ssenga* tradition, described by Tamale, corresponds well to my own findings from northern Mozambique, and supports my general view that behind a certain façade of wifely submissiveness, power relations of sexuality may well be different from what patriarchs in power might want to believe. A distinct male fear of autonomous female sexuality is illustrated in the reports about the uproar in Uganda on the occasion of the planned staging of The Vagina Monologues in Kampala February 2005 (see Moffett, 2005). According to Tamale, the university authorities at Makerere University condemned *Ssenga* activities on campus, claiming that these were not matters deserving the attention of 'honourable educated girls'. 'It is clear, however,' Tamale comments, 'that much of their discomfort derived from the potential that such *Ssenga* sessions held for young women to take control of their sexuality' (Tamale, 2005: 11).

It is such undercurrents of female sexual autonomy on which I want to focus, using for the purpose fieldwork material from Ribáuè, a rural area in northern Mozambique, Nampula province, inhabited by matrilineal Makhuwa.[1] Emakhuwa speaking people belong to the largest population group in Mozambique. Emakhuwa is spoken all over the province of Nampula and in parts of the neighbouring provinces of Cabo Delgado and Zambézia. According to the 1997 census 26 per cent of the Mozambican population speak Emakhuwa as their mother tongue, as compared to the second largest group, the Xichangana speakers in southern Mozambique, which amount to11 per cent of the population (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 1999). Like other population groups of northern Mozambique the Makhuwa count descent along matrilineal lines. In addition to being matrilineal, the Makhuwa are also matrilocal, that is, the usual location of a young newly married couple will be on the land of the family of the wife. Matriliny and matrilocality carry a series of advantages seen from the point of view of women and compared to patriliny and patrilocality: at marriage it is the young man, who has to move into the unknown, with an alien family/lineage, while the young woman stays put in her own context among her own kin; the land is inherited from mother to daughter, and giving birth to daughters is greeted more warmly than giving birth to sons (Arnfred, 1988a, 1988b, 1990, 2001). Conditions of matriliny constitute an important background for my argument: that mainstream assumptions regarding male/female power relationships as mediated through sex and food need to be re-thought.[2]

Female power?

My thinking about female power in the context of gender is inspired by the writings of Ifi Amadiume (1987, 1997) and Oyeronke Oyewùmí

(1997, 2002). In different ways Amadiume and Oyewùmí both destabilize the mainstream idea of a 'woman'. In mainstream feminist thinking the notion of 'woman' is inscribed in a binary opposition to 'man'. This concept does not work well in African contexts where, according to Amadiume, a more flexible concept of gender is needed in order to capture situations where certain social *positions* may be gendered, but where these positions may be taken up by a man or a woman as the case may be (Amadiune, 1987: 17). Oyewùmí makes a similar point when she argues that the concept of woman is not – or at least *was* not, in pre-colonial days – applicable in her native Yorubaland. 'I came to realize,' she says, 'that the fundamental category 'woman' – which is foundational in Western gender discourses – simply did not exist in Yorubaland' (Oyewùmí, 1997: ix). According to her analysis, the whole idea of male dominance and female subordination is embedded in the concept of 'woman' (1997: xii). This idea, she says, does not make sense in Yorubaland: biological women are not *a priori* subordinated to biological men, hierarchy depends on social relations and positions. One relation that must be taken into account is *seniority* (Oyewùmí, 1997: 13). Seniority is a relational characteristic (older than, younger than) which means that position and power depend on context, they are not *a priori* or given. Another relation which is important is inside/outside a certain family or lineage (Oyewùmí, 2002: 4). The designation in Yoruba generally translated as 'wife' signifies a subordinate position. According to Oyewùmí this has nothing to do with gender: the word translated as 'wife' literally means 'stranger married into the lineage'; such an outsider will for the first many years remain in a subordinate position in the lineage into which she or he has married. In patrilineal settings the in-married stranger will be a woman, but in matrilineal settings it will be a man. Thus the subordination of a 'wife' rests in his/her position *vis a vis* the lineage in question, not in the biological sex of this particular person.

Certain social positions carry more power than others and, depending on the context, these positions may be occupied by biological men or biological women. A 'wife' is not always a woman; a 'king' is not always a man (Oyewùmí, 1997: 29). Some positions are female, even when occupied by a biological male and vice versa. The phenomenon of a 'female husband' (see Amadiume, 1987; Chacha, 2004) is an example of this: by marrying another woman, a woman may put herself in a male position. The woman-woman marriage is about power and offspring: the children of the wife, biologically fathered by an anonymous man, will be counted socially as children of the male wife (or of her late husband). Whether or not the woman-woman marriage also provides possibilities for greater flexibility in sexual relations is another issue (see Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999; Ampofo et al, 2004; Wieringa, 2005).

Along these lines of thinking it is perfectly possible to subscribe to flexible and situational notions of gender, while at the same time talking of female and/or male positions, and of positions of power as linked to certain capacities. Some positions linked to certain capacities in Makhuwa society are ungendered. The words for counsellor (for male/female initiation rituals) is *olaka*, an un-gendered noun. And similarly the word for healer/diviner, *kulukana*, is also un-gendered. These positions may be filled by either men or women. Other positions are gendered. Somebody who is an expert on food and sex occupies a female position. Generally such a person is a biological women, but occasionally may be a man. Men who practice cooking, will know all along that they are guests performing in a female domain unless, of course, we talk about wage work, in which case the whole register of values and expectations will be changed (see also Tamale, 2005: 7). My concern in this article is to explore the extent to which Makhuwa expertise in food and sex is defined as a female gendered position, and also to show how capacities in these domains go beyond conventional western divisions of 'public' and 'private' spheres.

Exactly because of the conventional division of public and private spheres, to talk of *cooking* as a female domain of expertise is uncontroversial in a western context. Located in the private sphere, it is also an activity to which little power is credited. To talk of *sex* as a female domain of expertise and autonomy is much more controversial. Part of the package of male dominance/female subordination, which is generally taken for granted in western contexts, is the sexual subordination of women: woman as 'other', as sexual object for *man* as the subject. This notion is embedded in Christianity where the (sexual) initiative of Eve in the Garden of Eden is regarded as primordial sin. The Christian/western idea of female (sexual) subordination has been read into the positions of women elsewhere, including in Africa, where women have been/are perceived as subordinated and subdued, sexually and otherwise. Also, Islam nurtures notions of female subordination (see e.g. Mernissi, 1991).

When first I came to Mozambique in the early 1980s, I was told that married women could show no sexual initiative, having to heed the beck and call of the man/their husband. Later investigations have shown me that this is not necessarily the case. Realities are often more multi-faceted and complex. Mozambique has been influenced by Christianity and/or Islam and some 55 per cent and 17 per cent of the population respectively, according to the 1997 census, count themselves as Christians in one way or another, or Muslims (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 1999). Most women have adopted religious rulings in terms of male dominance and female subordination, sexually and otherwise. Nevertheless, 'obeying your husband' may also be a pretext for doing what you like as the story of the *União Baptista* wedding given later in the article illustrates.

On Makhuwa matriliny: The matriclan *(nihimo)*

In Makhuwa contexts descent is counted along the female line. A person belongs to the *nihimo* of her or his mother. *Nihimo* is not just a family, and not just a family name. *Nihimo* is a unit of belonging, reaching far beyond the visible world. 'The *nihimo* reaches from the beginning of human beings including the ones who are yet to come' as it was explained to me in Ribáuè. 'To possess the substance of the *nihimo* is the same as being possessed by it, considered that each single human being is just a temporary embodiment of this substance', Soares de Castro says (1960: 55). To be of a certain *nihimo* is to be of a certain kind. The *nihimo* is exogamous. Young women have to go outside their own *nihimo* in order to find fathers for their children. The children belong to their mothers' *nihimo*. As said in a group interview with men in Ribáuè in 2003: 'We men support the families of the women.' The matriclans of the men are supported by men from elsewhere, fathering children of their sisters.

The substance of a person comes from the *nihimo* and returns to it after death (de Castro, 1960). The *nihimo* is a spiritual and esoteric entity, and it is transmitted through women only. Often a *nihimo* is vast and dispersed (Macaire, 1996), but its members will recognize each other by the same family name. A *nihimo* is subdivided into a number of lineages; certain lineages inhabit certain lands, and like the *nihímo* the land is transmitted through women.

> Only women know the magical techniques of sowing and harvesting, the secrets of cooking and the production of beer and alcohol, as well as the ways to make the clay pots and vessels in which food and beverages are produced and served. Since the women do not move away from the village where they were born, they keep intact the language as well as the tradition, being in permanent contact with the dead of the *nihimo*, who are buried in the same village. (de Castro, 1960: 57)

Makhuwa society is basically matrilocal, meaning that a woman stays in her own village, among her own folks, while at marriage the young man arrives as a stranger to the village. A Makhuwa proverb runs like this: 'It is not the watermelon that searches for the wild pig; it is the wild pig that goes to find the water melon' (de Matos, 1982: 136). The girls are the watermelons staying put where they are. The young men are the wild pigs roaming.

In two group interviews in Ribáuè in 2003, with men and women respectively, the vast majority indicated that the land that they cultivated belonged to the wife's lineage. The wife had achieved the land from her mother, who had it from her mother and so on: 'land follows the blood of the mother'. In a context of subsistence agriculture land and food are obviously connected. It is the task of the mothers and grandmothers to

feed the offspring, and in order to do so they need the land. 'You who are women, you will get children. Here is your land', as said by a Ribáuè mother to her daughters (interview with daughter in 1999).

I have written about the central position of women in the Makhuwa context elsewhere, with a focus on ancestral spirits, land and food (Arnfred, 2001). In this article I focus on the issues of descent (the matriclan), on sexuality and once again on food. Like the land food is a holy entity, and the *nihimo* is behind it all. The central position of women in Makhuwa culture is connected to the matriclan, and to the whole issue of descent following female lines. The womb of the mother – *erukulu* – is also the name for the closest kinship relation between 'children of the same womb' (Martinez, 1989). In Luapula province, in neighbouring Zambia, according to Karla Poewe (based on work in the 1970s) womb – *ifumu* – not only indicates wombmates and matrilineal descent group; it has also larger connotations of social universe, life and abundance.

> Infused with spiritual and natural power . . . *ifumu* guarantees the reproduction of the Luapula social order. *Ifumu* here 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. (Poewe, 1981)

The *erukulu* is the nodal point and the link between the living, the dead and the as yet unborn members of the *nihimo*. Presumably for this reason women are considered the ones who are in the best positions to communicate with the ancestors. When in the Ribáuè area there is a need to make a ceremony for calling rain, or some other community ceremony, the *pwiyamwene* must be there to pour *makeya*. *Makeya* is the name for finely ground flour of *mapira* (millet) when used in a ceremonial context. *Mapira* is a female crop: cultivation, weeding and harvesting are exclusively done by women, as is the pounding of the grain (three times over) and its subsequent grinding between two stones. The *pwiyamwene* is the 'female chief', the woman responsible for matters related to the invisible world, but also on other issues she will be consulted as the counterpart to the male chief, the *mwene*. The *mwene* and the *pwiyamwene* belong to the same *nihimo*, thus they are related as sister/brother or (grand)mother/son but never as wife/husband.

The *mapwiyamwene* are clear examples of the kind of female authority which 'modern' systems of governance do not accommodate. Also the *mamwene*, the male chiefs, have links to spirits and ancestors and to systems of belief beyond the modern world. Being men, however, they more easily fit into modern systems of 'decentralization'. Due to the androcentric structure of modern society, the *mapwiyamwene* are not adaptable in this way; they must be either demonized or neglected. Evidence of western demonization of female power in Africa is plentiful

(see e.g. McClintock, 1995). In Mozambique the *mapwiyamwene* have remained unseen.

A major task of the *mampwiyamwene* is to pour *makeya* whenever needed. To pour *makeya* is to call the attention of the ancestors. '*Makeya* is our pencil' as it was put in a group discussion in Ribáuè in 2003. When you want to communicate with the government you take a pencil and write a letter. When you want to communicate with the ancestors, you pour *makeya*.

On food: Beer-brewing, cooking and control of food

It is not by accident that the 'pencil' for communicating with the ancestors is flour = food. *Makeya* is a very particular form of food, quintessential food, produced from the central crop *(mapira)*, which also provides the essential yeast (*miropo*) for the brewing of *otheka*. Food and drink have a touch of the holy, particularly in ceremonial contexts (parallels exist with the Christian communion) and the ceremonial drink in Ribáuè is *otheka*. For any ceremony or celebration *otheka* is an essential. *Otheka* is also brewed and served on the occasion of *olimiha*: mutual help work-parties, when people are invited to give a day's work in return for an afternoon and evening of socializing around the pots of beer (Arnfred, 2001: 166). As pointed out by Audrey Richards, writing about Bemba people of northern Zambia, millet beer (in Ribáuè fortified by cassava) is important for nutrition, but is also more than mere food. Beer is 'the common, and sometimes the essential way of fulfilling social obligations. Beer is the present of honour between kinsmen . . . Without it tribal councils cannot be held, and marriage or initiation ceremonies do not take place' (Richards, 1995 [1939]: 77). This description holds true also for Ribáuè.

The production of *otheka* takes several days, and the work is undertaken by women only. *Otheka* brewing is a delicate affair, depending on skill and knowledge. For production of the *miropo* and for monitoring the fermenting process, skills are needed that are only acquired through long years of training and experience. Only women have and transmit this knowledge. *Otheka* is always made in large quantities, often 200 litres at a time. This means lots of work for the women – collecting water and firewood. During the production of *otheka* there will be no time for women to work in the fields.

Cooking in general is a female capacity and domain. In a western context this seems a trivial statement and may be equated with the burdensome household chores of a western 'housewife'. In a society like the one in Ribáuè, fundamentally based on subsistence production as far as food is concerned and only marginally involved in circuits of cash crops and

money, cooking and distribution of food has a different status. Food is a female domain and a basis for female authority. Men and women are both involved in the production (work in the fields), but at harvest time the products from the field are stored in the granaries of the older women, the grandmothers. They are the ones who control the granaries, deciding what to take out, when and for what purpose. A man, who wants to control the granary of his wife, gets a nickname, which is translated to *avarento* in Portuguese: the one who wants to have it all for himself[3] – as opposed to the women who are supposed to administer the granary for the benefits of all. Richards has a detailed description, from her fieldwork in the 1930s, of the female skill of assessing how much grain is left in the granary, and thus how much can be taken out on each particular occasion, still making sure that the granary will not be empty before the new harvest comes in (Richards, 1995 [1939]: 89). She cites a Bemba saying: 'Only old women know how to look after the food' (1995 [1939]: 88). This may be part of the rationale for the central position of grandmothers, which is a characteristic also of Makhuwa society. The young man, who marries into the family, must work on the fields of his mother(s)-in-law, the produce being stored in the granary of the grandmother. All of the men that I interviewed in Ribáuè (20 men aged 40 years and over), claimed to have worked for their in-laws when newly married. This was (in their opinion) how things ought to be. 'It is only today the youngsters don't want to do this work', they said, complaining that neither they nor their wives received the support from their sons-in-law to which they felt entitled.

It is a pride and a satisfaction for an elderly woman in Ribáuè district to live with her daughters and their families around her, and to feed her grandchildren. The road to this status has been long. As a young woman, even as a married woman, you do not get your own granary right away. The food is controlled, cooked and distributed by the older women. Control of food is power, but is also an obligation to generosity. Richards has long descriptions of how mothers-in-law, commanding the labour of their sons-in-law, also consider it a matter of prestige to feed them well. Cooking is a privilege and a pride, also for the young wife: 'I noticed that young girls, recently betrothed, would intimate this fact by saying shyly: "I have begun to cook for him,"' Richards says (1995 [1939]: 129).

Christian Geffray, in his analysis of the circuits of work and food in Makhuwa contexts, makes the observation (with a touch of resentment on behalf of the young men) that the work of the sons-in-law becomes *invisible*: 'Every morning the young man gets up before sunrise and waits outside the hut of his 'father-in-law', hoe in hand, in a posture showing his humility, availability, his willingness to work and on the whole his wish to behave well' (Geffray, 1990: 44). In addition to field work, the young

son-in-law is expected to give his mother-in-law a hand with the house-work, and if he 'refuses to fetch water, firewood, and to perform other domestic tasks, if he doesn't work well in the field, if he is lazy, if he doesn't respond willingly and nicely when he is summoned to work by his sisters-in-law – tensions and conflict are bound to emerge' (1990: 46). If, however, the young man survives the trials, eventually he will be allowed to build a house for himself and his wife, and with time the household will even get the right to cultivate its own piece of land and store the produce in its own granary. For the first years the young man and the young woman both work on the fields of the older generation, and the product is stored in the mothers' granaries, or in the granary of the senior great grand-mother. From here it is re-distributed to the children and grandchildren. Geffray describes how children more frequently eat with their grandmother or in some other house of the compound than with their own mother: 'The children are essentially fed from the produce which has been accumulated in the granaries of the older generation, largely the fruit of the work of the young men of the domestic group, the ones which are the biological fathers of the children' (1990: 55).

Thus the social image of the grandmother is maintained as the one who feeds the children: the young men (the biological fathers) do the work, but the mother-in-law gets the credit. 'Entering the granary [of the senior great grandmother] the grain is no more the fruit of the work of the men; it becomes a good to be shared by all, but entrusted to the wisdom and discretion of the women' (Geffray, 1990: 61). In this way, the work of the young men becomes invisible. The irony is produced by the fact that in modern contexts, what is usually turned invisible (by private/public divisions and by the market economy) is *women's* work. In the 'traditional', now disappearing, matrilineal set-up where sons-in-law work for their parents-in-law (so-called bride service), it is indeed the young *men's* work, which becomes invisible.

On sex: Men as genitors, women as seducers

Not only are the young men in a Makhuwa household presumed to work hard, they are also presumed to perform well as procreators. The young men provide the necessary input, the old women reap the benefits in terms of food and grandchildren. Young men have to perform sexually, and there are stories about how in the old days the quality of their semen was tested by old women (see also Dover, 2005). The ones in control are once again old women. They educate young women to attract and ensnare young men. Where the men are *progenitors*, in Geffray's analysis, the young women are *seducers*. Young women are expected to be proficient in erotic arts (they are checked in this discipline during the initiation

rituals) and in return for their role as progenitors the young men 'at least have the right of expecting their wives to seduce them and to give them sexual pleasure' (Geffray, 1990: 129). It is my own impression that sexual proficiency is considered a pride and a privilege by women. Young women are instructed in the art of lovemaking during the initiation rituals, but like other areas of women's arts, the learning process starts well before puberty. In parts of northern Mozambique, in bygone days, pre-puberty sexual relations between girls and boys were accepted and it was even believed that intercourse and caressing was important for making the girl's breasts grow and for menstruation to emerge. Also well before puberty the girls would be instructed regarding how to pull the small labia of the vagina in order to make them longer. This pulling of labia (*ithuna*) was – and still is – considered an important aspect of a young girls' preparation for lovemaking, and for giving and receiving sexual pleasure (Arnfred, 1988a, 1990). Sylvia Tamale provides similar evidence from her investigations in Kampala. Tamale found the practice of labia-elongation anything but dead in the capital of Uganda; her findings revealed it to be alive and thriving in the urban and peri-urban areas around Kampala. Tamale's findings also show the practice of elongation to be perceived as enhancing the erotic experience of both the male and the female: 'This practice, encoded within the *Ssenga* institution, has enhanced sexual pleasure for women and expanded their perceptions of themselves as active sexual beings,' Tamale asserts (2005: 12).

Seniority and women's arts: Old women run the show

From my early work in Mozambique, in the 1980s, I got an impression of men not being always and everywhere potent, such as men (and women) generally expect men to be in western societies (Arnfred, 1988a). In Mozambique male impotence seems to be a well-known phenomenon to which women respond with the art of seduction. Christian Geffray's notion of Makhuwa women as seducers fits well into my general impression of Makhuwa women as not only sexually active, but also sexually competent and capable and well educated in sexual arts. Young women have been trained in cooking, and they have been trained in sex; they express themselves in cooking as well as in sex. Cooking is a necessity – vegetables, cereals, meat have to be cooked in order to be turned into food. But cooking is also an art; you can perform it well, or less well. Performing it exquisitely is a pride for a woman. Sex (with a man) is also a necessary function as well as an art. Doing it well is a source of pride for a woman.

Women show their pleasure and gratitude to their husband by cooking for him and by inviting him to have sex. In Makhuwa society there are

particular ritualized ways for a woman to invite a man for sex. Conversely to refuse to cook and to refuse sex are women's weapons when they are dissatisfied with their husbands. I have always been fascinated by the tales of women's warfare in Nigeria and Cameroon, where by the sheer fact of lifting their skirts and showing their genitalia women would curse and scare men into obedience (Ardener, 1975, 1987). I have never come across similar tales in Mozambique, but they tally well with my impression of sex as female power.

In matrilineal contexts the sexual capacities of the young women is an important asset, and it is treated as such. In Karla Poewe's phrasing it is the duty of the young women through their sexual powers 'to engulf male strangers and convert them into kin' (1981: 68). This sexual activity is geared towards procreation, but it is not necessarily geared exclusively towards a single partner. According to Poewe among the Luapulans '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' (Poewe, 1981: 56). Mating is a question of getting new blood and new children into the lineage; it is not a question of founding new families. 'A man's 'marital' role is to sexually satisfy and impregnate the woman and to provide for her during her pregnancy. The man should not, in any way, be an object of exclusive emotional investment nor the focus of attention. Instead women are socialized to invest their emotions and material wealth in their respective matrilineage' (Poewe, 1981: 67). Similarly in Nampula province the girls are instructed that *'os homens é não só um'* – the men are more than one. Valente de Matos, a Portuguese Catholic priest who worked in Nampula province in the 1950s and 1960s relates (with some apprehension) in his account of the female initiation rituals the following:

> The women have to give impression in talk and gesture of being shy and modest women, especially when confronted with other men, so that nobody, and least of all their own husband, should consider them women of bad reputation. Afterwards, in a low voice and taking advantage of some distraction on the part of the men present, the old woman in charge of the ritual of initiation will add that, provided they take the proper precautions, they may arrange a secret lover. (de Matos, 1968: 12)

Interviewing in Ribáuè, Nampula province, from the late 1990s onwards my impression of women as masters of sexuality has only been confirmed. I have witnessed several events of women's sexualities enacted in ways totally alien to previous experience from my own culture. At a certain point (in 2005) I was conducting a group interview with elderly women – elite women of the village, in fact. There were two *mapwyiamwene*, several *olaka* (counsellors of initiation rituals) and *makulukana*

(healers/diviners), all women. We talked about issues of land and labour, household composition, granaries and so on. When I started asking questions about initiation rituals the atmosphere of the discussion immediately changed. It was as if they had been looking forward to this moment. Some of the *olaka* had brought *chocalhos* (rattling instruments of a type used during female initiation and by certain *makulukana*). They started playing and chanting and before long they were performing central scenes from the rituals and dancing erotic and explicitly sexual dances while having a lot of fun. Being in the midst of this, surrounded by these old women behaving in ways which Catholic priests and colonial administrators would certainly have found most obscene, I came to think of older women of my acquaintance back in Denmark and I could not possibly imagine them behaving anything like this. But here, in Ribáuè, sexuality was obviously an area where these women not only felt at home and at ease but experienced power and joy.

Woman–woman fun and games

Young Makhuwa women are instructed and trained in the art of love-making. The point of this training – seen from the old women's positions – is (in Poewe's expression) 'to engulf male strangers and convert them into kin'. But sex is also, at the same time, a source of joy and pleasure for the women, young and old. Like food, sex is important as a means of survival (of the lineage), but like good food, good sex is also a source of pleasure and enjoyment. Sex-as-survival (that is, for procreation) is obviously heterosex, sex-as-enjoyment not necessarily so. I will readily agree with Marc Epprecht's statement that 'the homosexuality/heterosexuality dichotomy is a false one' (Epprecht, 2004: 11). This also links to insights provided by Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe in their collection of documentation regarding same-sex practices from all parts of Africa. They point to a remarkably different social code, compared to social codes espoused by Christianity and Islam: 'This social code does not require that an individual suppresses same-sex desires or behaviour, but that she or he never allows such desires to overshadow or supplant procreation' (Murray and Roscoe, 1998: 273).

In general it seems as if Judith Butler-type notions of identities as fluid and performative rather than fixed and stable would provide a fruitful entry point for understanding phenomena of same-sex in Africa. Butler's concepts are developed in a polemical discussion with mainstream feminist notions of male/female binaries and notions of male domination/female subordination as given points of departure. It is interesting to see, how on the one hand Judith Butler and on the other hand Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewùmí, from very different starting points arrive at

similar points of critique of mainstream feminist thinking. According to Butler,

> gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow . . . That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (Butler, 1990: 178–80)

Certainly in Africa same-sex behaviours and desires are in general not usefully studied as identities, but rather as practices or performance. Often, same-sex erotic play seems to be something in which you may indulge in certain contexts, on certain occasions. Female initiation rituals seem to be privileged spaces for such indulgence. This does not involve the initiates, who sit solemnly in a corner with motionless faces and downcast eyes. All the other women assembled for the occasion have a great time, however. During my stays in Ribáuè I was present at several celebrations of female initiation rituals. The one described in the following was the 'wildest' one. It was not even a formal initiation ritual, but 'just' counselling of a protestant minister's daughter on the eve of her wedding day. The father of the young bride was an important man in the local branch of *União Baptista* (the Baptist Union). *União Baptista* has roots in an old mission church, at the puritanical end of Protestant churches: No alcohol, no tobacco, no drumming and dancing, no participation in traditional ceremonies, no *missangas* (glass bead belts worn by women, a highly erotic device), no body tattoos (highly erotic as well), no *ithuna* (elongated labia), no initiation rituals. Nevertheless, a 'counselling' session was held on the eve of the wedding day. About 30–40 women were gathered in a fairly small room, lit only by a candle. One of the women said a prayer, a psalm was sung. The women who led the song had to keep the psalm book quite close to the candle in order to be able to read the text. Once the psalm was finished, the women initiated another song. While the psalm-singing had floundered, the new song was lustily sung by all the women. They obviously knew the song very well. It had a very characteristic rhythm. The women clapped for lack of a drum (prohibited in the Baptist church) but soon a metal bucket was produced from somewhere. The bucket was turned upside-down and served as a drum all through the night. One inciting song followed another. Each song had a different rhythm and melody, and its own dance. The women danced wildly, lifting their skirts, showing their bare bottoms. All of the dances were of the hip-undulating kind. You learn this movement as a little girl, and your proficiency is checked during the initiation rituals. At a certain point a

characteristically different rhythm-and-tune was initiated and two women entered the circle, starting to strip while still dancing. Before long they had done away with all their clothing and were dancing naked, grabbing each other with sexual movements, pretending intercourse from the front, from the back, while still dancing. In these dances only two women are dancing at any one time, the others are singing, clapping. Some of the couples roll around on the floor, together, naked. All want to join the dance, all push for getting their turn at the dance floor. The bucket is never silent, intensely beating the rhythm. The room is dark, lit only by a few candles. The atmosphere is agitated, very erotic indeed, but also one of fun and games. As the women undress their brightly coloured *missanga* belts become visible, as do the body tattoos on their breasts, thighs and bellies. I am later told that the point of these dances is to instruct the initiate regarding love-making movements. Surely, however, the instructors are also enjoying themselves. The dancing continues throughout the night, only finishing when the grey light of the morning creeps into the room.

While this was taking place the men had been with the groom in a different house (groom and bride are both very young, less than 20 years). When the men arrived, about 6 o'clock in the morning, the women are dressed in their usual *capulanas*, sitting quietly and subdued along the walls of the house or outside in the courtyard. There was no indication of what had transpired during the night.

All of the women belong to *União Baptista*, which prohibits dancing and drumming, and where female sexuality is only recognized as a means of procreation. The next day in church the pastor reads Paul's letter to the people of Ephesus, the (in)famous letter admonishing women to be obedient to their husbands. When later I conducted a meeting with these same women, I tried to understand how these members of a strict Christian church were still able to dance as they did that night. 'It is important to adhere to the prohibitions,' the women say, 'no *ithuna*, no *missangas* etc. But if your husband wants you to do it nevertheless, then of course it is a different matter. A woman should be obedient to her husband, you know'. I suddenly saw how this talk of female sexuality in order to please the man came about. This is the word of the Church, and the women use it as an excuse for maintaining their drumming and dancing, and their sexual fun and games. They justify their actions by referring to gospel and, at the same time, conveniently ignore the prohibitory elements of the Church's messages.

Conclusion

Women and men in Africa – and certainly women and men in Ribáuè – live in many worlds. One of these worlds is ruled by the Christian

prescriptions regarding female sexual subordination, modesty and morality. Yet it co-exists with a world were sex and cooking are female spheres of autonomy and potential power. Sylvia Tamale's findings, to which I refer in the introduction to this article, show a certain ambivalence in the *Ssenga* tradition and its reception by young women in modern urban settings, where these different worlds converge and combine. By lifting forward what I consider to be remarkable strongholds of female gender power in a not particularly 'developed' and certainly not urbanized part of northern Mozambique, I want to suggest that modern African women in their current quest for more autonomous sexual lives may find inspiration and support in certain aspects of African 'tradition'.

Notes

1. In older anthropological literature Makhuwa is spelt in the Portuguese way, as Macua.
2. My focus is on male/female power relationships as mediated through sex and food, not on symbolic parallels, in other words, it is on ways in which sex and food may be symbolically connected (cf. Dover, 2005), not on erotic values or implications of food and cooking – even if these aspects also may be seen as interconnected.
3. Compare the derogatory term *wakwaukanga* in Shimakonde: 'those who eat alone' (West, 2005: 37).

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