

# GENDER EQUALITY OR INEQUALITY IN AFRICA? AFRICAN FEMINIST THINKING

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## Introduction

I would like to start by stressing the scientific framework of the present essay: the “cognitive analysis”. The term is based on the work of Teresinha Froes Buhrman (2012), whose method is beyond the analysis because it focuses on the subject of transductibility and, more than that, deals with a new field of knowledge that stresses the multi referentiality. Some authors have critically named that field as “lower knowledge”, subjective knowledge and, being a critique to eurocentrism, the negation to monologic science and to objectivity as the legit form of doing science.

The cognitive analysis moves through interdisciplinarity, in which we are the agents of knowledge and not the others Westerly authorized. The most effective way to exchange knowledge is through Diffusion of Knowledge, which opens the door of knowledges in the restrictive and hierarchical process of global knowledge.

The present essay has cognitive analysis as theoretical and methodological perspective and its focus is on thoughts and theories of African authors, particularly in Nigeria, of gender conceptions in Africa. In the first part, Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronké Oyěwúmi epistemologies point to an egalitarian Africa regarding gender relations before colonization. In the second part, Chimamanda Adichie and Paul Zeleza (from Zimbabwe) talk about an unequal Africa regarding gender relations, particularly binary. They put into evidence the decentralization of the hegemonic epistemology

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from Europe and North America as important to comprehend the debate about gender in Africa.

The study comes from the author intention to explore African epistemologies in the context of gender and feminism, and from the incursion (in 2017) in the course of “Gender and África”, and this research was developed after the incursion of the author in the doctorate study (in 2016), in fields of “Contemporary Philosophy and African Philosophy”, which encouraged the author to study different kinds of epistemologies. In addition, the essay aims to diffuse those knowledges.

## The exclusion of gender in the spheres of power and the intelligence of racism: an African approach

Regarding the knowledge about gender in the African context, the studies of African authors Patrícia Gomes (2015; 2017) and Ângela Sofia Benoliel Coutinho (2017) with the studies highlighting the production of knowledge in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde. And putting into a historical perspective the participation of the first women in the liberation movements of their countries and parties like PAIGC, PAICV and UDEMU’s formation<sup>3</sup>. Both authors contribute to give visibility to the women participation in the independence movements of their countries, as emphasized by Patricia Gomes in many articles.

According to Coutinho (2017)<sup>4</sup>, Guinea-Bissau became independent in 1973 and Cape Verde in July 5, 1975. The author, by analysing documents and focusing on oral interviews and biographies, spotlights African women who participated of the independence movements, despite the fact that more than 50 women stories are presented. She brings information about their trajectories, origin and nationhood, and highlights their influences and the silencing surrounding the role played by gender to free and reform African society.

Introducing possible reasons for this question, according to the author, the erasure of women political protagonism is a tool of androcentrism

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3 PAIGC – Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, officially founded in Bissau in 1956 by cape-verdeans and guineans under the leadership of Amílcar Cabral. Main party: PAICV Party of Cape-Verde.

4 The text “The participation of cape-verdeans women in the National Liberation Movement of Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau, 1956-1974: the pioneers” was originally written in English and translated by the authors

to keep women submissive to men. The author concludes that the long and complex fight for independence in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde had significant participation of women.

Gomes (2015) underlines that the end of the 60's was marked by a growing interest of African intellectuals in "rediscovering" the historical past of the continent, in addition to the ideals of freedom and unity. In this sense, the emancipation of african women was conditioned substantially and formally, differently from the Western women experiences over the years.

According to the author, colonized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the economic context Guiné Bissau is a agricultural country with a cultural context and one of the few countries where matriarchy societies still exist – political power exercised by women (monarch, chief, queen) but with deep changes and retreats in the freedom's field, provoked by the colonial legacy.

In this context, the author underlines that the first information about Guinea Bissau was written from 1961 to 1974, but in the field of feminism and gender only in the 90's, despite the fact the the first studies on African feminism were published during the 80's (Gomes 2015). The author describe the importance of gender as determinants in the course of the of United Nations:

The "gender" category started to be utilized to indicate the construction of social differences in human society, particularly the Westernized ones, but not only. The "gender" was conceived as a political category, oriented in the sense to redefine power relations, public and privately, between women and men, at the same time that it became an epistemological category with the objective to refund the process of knowledge production (Gomes 2015, 169).

According to the author, from the theoretical point of view, 80's onwards, in the sense of deconstruction of post-colonial studies, in terms of gender, were raised fundamental questions regarding knowledge production: who produces it, in what social and political conditions is formulated the discourse and to whom this knowledge is intended. In this sense, it is advisable to introduce the discussion proposed by the cape-verdean Crispina Almeida Gomes, that relates those factors to a specific kind of racism – the racism of "intelligence".

Crispina Gomes, one of the founders of the Women Organization of Cape Verde, and one of those who has held several important positions, including as National Representative for years, discusses in her book "*Mujer y*

*poder: El caso de Cabo Verde*" (Gomes 2009)<sup>5</sup> the case of feminism, for gender inequality and women participation in political functions in Cape Verde. The author stresses that after the country independence only one woman was elected to the parliament. Cape-Verde is a country of the African continent (sub saharan Africa) which was a Portuguese colony from the 15<sup>th</sup> century until its Independence in 1975, in a complex fight.

The author approach the causes that prevent the participation of women in the instances of power, as well as the political participation and in several sectors of society in terms of equality with men. However, through the method of orality and life story, Gomes points to a significant participation of women in the fight for independence. In the beginning of the text, the author tells her experience, and tells of her history of violence suffered by racism in becoming a university professor (in Cuba, in 1980), when she faced the gender exclusion and racism of the academy. She detected a specific kind of racism, which she called "racism of intelligence". In other words, it is the white privilege to produce academic knowledge (of both sexes) with the exclusion of black people from intellectual thinking and diffusion of self-knowledge and other cultures, including the denial of epistemology to the "under people" (term used by many authors that we appropriate, refers to the vast majority of the poor population and to popular culture).

## African Epistemologies: gender in Africa by decentralizing global gender

African epistemologies reveal complex cultures, as discussed before by feminists, authors of gender studies in Africa. Considering the vast territory, many ethnicities and cultures, I approach in the present cognitive analysis the studies of Nigerians authors that highlight the gender conceptions in Africa.

### *Synthesis in the conception of Oyeronké Oyěwúmí*

To initiate the debate about the complexity of African culture, I stress the Nigerian Yoruba author Oyeronké Oyěwúmí, that discuss the Yoruba culture in the context of feminism and gender. Oyěwùmí (2004) in the text "Conceptualizing Gender" discuss the cultural complexity by describing that "husband" and "wife" have no gender specificity. According to her, in that

<sup>5</sup> The original text is written in Spanish, whose translation to portuguese was made by the author under the responsibility of interpretation.

complex culture, men can be wives as well as women can be husband. In the text about family ties (Oyěwùmí 2000) says:

In many parts of Africa, “wife” is just a word of four letters [...] Being a wife is playing a role, not a kind of identity [...] All around Africa, the category of wife does not represent a specific gender, but a subordinated relation between two people of any kind.(Oyěwùmí 2000, 04)

Once the subordination does not come from gender roles, the author affirms that in some places in Africa, the subordinated can be from any gender, depending on the descent (matrilineal or patrilineal).

The author defends the recognition of their own concept of gender through the recognition of African epistemology against the eurocentrist concepts of feminism (Oyěwùmí 2000)<sup>6</sup>. In her work she debates the role of ethnocentrism and epistemicide, as well as Western mechanisms to the maintenance of its knowledge as legit.

The author criticizes Western feminist studies and the nuclear European family, that ignores other kinds of family, as the African ones that are not established following men/women gender or binarism between sex/body, but in the ancestry, age and generation. To her, the discourse about family is everywhere, but the unsettling question is the generalized use of the family metaphor. For that reasons, she questions Western feminism: what kind of family are we talking about?

Another aspect raised by the author concerns the question of race. In this sense, is very close to the critiques made by black feminists (North Americans, Latin-americans and particularly Brazilians). She tries to deconstruct the idea of family as universal, as proposed by North American and European feminists, as original and legit, because they do not bring the elements of race and class to their analysis (Oyěwùmí 2000; 2017).

In the classic work “*La invención de las mujeres: una perspectiva africana sobre los discursos occidentales del género*”<sup>7</sup> the author focus in the African discussions about gender and the role of women, whose Western feminists see as oppressed by the patriarchy in any society. However, she points out that in Yoruba society the social category of “women” – anatomically identified and socially submissive – does not exist. Her study deals with the absence

6 Critique to the global gender and universal woman. Question also raised by Lélia Gonzalez, Raquel Barreto, Cláudia Pons Cardoso, among others, in Brazil.

7 Originally published in English in 1997, was translated to Spanish in 2017.

of gender in the old Oyó, pointing out that gender only came to that society after the colonial period.

To the author, outside Africa the interpretation of family is Western and have the patriarchal perspective. She considers that kind of relation as not part of the pre-colonial culture in Africa, but a product of modern times with the imposition of gender in the continent through the English language. Based in strong evidences, (Oyèwùmí 2017) discusses in her classic book the imposition of gender in Africa and the colonization of minds and bodies since the pre-colonial period.

Her critique to gender studies and Western feminisms approaches biological determinism, recognizing the efforts of Western authors in differentiate gender from sex, despite the fact that those concepts are still interdependent and sometimes inseparable in their view. Thus, in a Western perspective gender is defined as “BIO-LOGICAL”. She compares the Western perspective with the African one to conclude that gender in Africa is not based on biology/sex but in the “*Senioridad*” system, in other words, in command, hierarchy, social position, age and generation, in the context of leadership and respectability.

### ***Synthesis in the conception of Ifi Amadiume***

Ifi Amadiume (2005) revisits authors as Adam Kuper, Cheikh Anta Diop and Mudimbe to explain the complexity of African culture. In the chapter “Theorizing matriarchy in Africa: ideologies and parentage systems in Africa and Europe”<sup>8</sup>, the author criticizes the Western anthropology and the theory of patriarchy. Against that theory, she presents the existence of matriarchy by bringing contemporary data, comparing the past and present and discussing about cultural changes in African territory, especially destructives during the colonial process to the extent that the traditional families were replaced by Western ones.

According to the author, we can still track evidences of plural, matriarchal and matrilineal cultures in Africa. When compared to European feminism, distinct meanings for gender in the context of reproduction, family and marriage are found in African culture, contrary to those in western, that see women as subordinated in reproduction terms.

The author points out that in African culture, reproduction appears in a different way, related to ancestry, subjectivity concerning empowerment and autonomy. In the political arena, women have power because of the

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<sup>8</sup> Originally published in English, in a compilation of articles.

reproduction – being a mother is a responsibility with the ancestry; in addition, during marriage in the molds of polygamy, the women position differs and has socio political, economical and cultural relevance.

The question of women losing power also appears in this context. According to the author, men has less value in the society because it is not their responsibility to maintain the ancestry, however, men get proper value during childhood, after being born. Because they are men they are responsible for the clan (Amadiume 2005) – and this is the sex that will permit the ancestry, despite the fact that it is not related to virility but to ancestry.

Regarding polygamy, Amadiume explains that in the polygamous family, everyone in the group have distinct functions, and it is not the man the provider; women have many roles and are not limited to domestic functions. One of the main functions of women is to provide food for the family, which is not served in the table – it must be provided and produced daily.

It is relevant to consider the work of African studies which differ from the perspective exposed above. The studies of Fatime Samb (2017) e Eufémia Rocha (2017)<sup>9</sup> are against the territorial generalization, and focus on the case of Cape Verde and Senegal, respectively. They put the domestic function as a double occupation for women who work outside the house. In her case study, Rocha (2017) describes the monogamous marriage as the main factor to determine the women function. Marriage causes freedom limitation because of socio political factors, but in other cases, like the rabidancia, women appears as the maintainer of the family.

The submission of women is not exclusive of monogamous marriage, it also happens in polygamy, being this one the force of the family in Senegal. Monogamy, in Senegal, became an option after the changes in the legislation in 1972 (Samb 2017, 107). Through literature, discussing religion and polygamy, Samb points out social division of labor and social inequalities as the main factors that make women reclaim equal rights in society. In the novel that SAMB bases her study she highlights: “Mariama Bâ seeks to demonstrate gender inequality in Africa, since most societies do not question or report those oppressions”. (Samb 2017, 102).

In polygamy she points out an important aspect, that men usually prefer one of the four women – the legal number of wives he can have (108). The domestic violence occurs because men treat their women differently. The legislation prohibit unequal treatment in the polygamous structure, however, it ignores the subjective aspects and the inherent process to humanity of

9 The first discusses “Rabidancias” (traders) in Cape Verde and the second about religion and polygamy in Dakar, Senegal.

having feelings, which provokes machismo as a kind of forced masculinity. This is the opposite of what Amadiume and Oyěwúmi described. For them, in Nigeria men and women are equal, and sometimes women are superior, because of the power relation of the clan – name and ancestry are the determinants, not the sex as in the European androcentrism.

In the complexity of marriage forms, there is the marriage between women. Wairimu Njambi and William O'Brien (2005) explore that theme in Kenya in the text "*Casamento Mulher-Mulher: anotações sobre as mulheres Gikuyu*". The authors affirm that there are few studies about woman-woman marriage in Africa, because of that, they bring in their work the narratives and stories about that kind of marriage. The woman-woman marriage are institutionalized and recommended by older women as a way to maintain ancestry and the political autonomy of sex.

In both studies, the relation "women-women" or "husband-female" aims the empowerment, fellowship, affection, economy and financial social security, in addition to the maintenance of the ancestry. That relations are not seen through the logic of homosexuality, however, in the present essay we consider as homosexual relations the woman-woman marriage:

Homosexuals feel attracted to people of the same sex, what is not related to their gender identity. They do not question themselves about their identities as women or men, contrary to the transgender people (Jaqueline de Jesus 2012, 9).

The articles have a methodological gap, because they do not bring reports from the married women about sexual attraction. In addition, there is another question: the woman-woman marriage is not socially accepted in some cases, considering the new generation and new social impositions from colonial period. Thus, those women are exposed to violence and prejudice.

Therefore, is evident to African epistemologies about gender that woman-woman marriage still occurs, despite being scarce nowadays because of the process of colonization, whose religion provoked cultural changes in the complexity of African societies

To Amadiume (2005) and Oyěwúmi (2000) there is and there was matriarchal and matrilineal structures. This is not a strange phenomenon to the locals, only to the Western anthropologist, who see patriarchy and monogamy as the rule in a society controlled by a man-father-chief. According to the author, it only takes one case where men is the chief of the family to give centrality to that structure, hiding a group of women that effectively control the family.



## Gender controversies: between equality and binarism in sexual relations of pre-colonial and post colonial Africa.

There are controversies among African authors about the gender relations in Africa, as presented below by Zeleza and Amadiume.

### *Synthesis in the conception of Paul Zeleza*

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, from Zimbabwe, in the text “Gender Perspectives in African historiography”<sup>10</sup> brings the definition of Joan Scott about gender:

Gender has being defined as the social organization and the symbolic representation of sexual difference in transformation. It is the main field through power is articulated and signified. As a concept, gender offers an epistemological differentiation of the historical knowledge as construction instead of reconstruction (Scott 1988, chapter 1 and 2 *apud* Zeleza 2005, 225).

The author criticizes the dominant historical perspective in Africa that describes themes as political development and conflicts, and celebrates life of great men. In other words, those studies have predominantly masculines and sexist perspectives, invisibilizing women.

Despite the fact that during the 80’s and 90’s the literary production about African women have increased, the androcentrism still prevails in African historiography and as well as the stereotypes of women. In the books analysed by Zeleza (2005), women are stereotypical and oppressed, they appear as reproducers, mother and wives, they also appear as victims being abused and incarcerated. There are cases where they appear seminude or do not appear at all, but those were removed from the subsequent editions.

He affirms that themes like marriage, fertility and morality are discussed through a missionary and colonial point of view. Few studies consider the woman as the protagonist in political activities. This is the case for the chief women in local institutions, as the Yoruba people and the kingdom of Wolof and Serer in Senegal: the role played by queen Amina; the jihadist revolutions occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; the famous revolution of “Aba” women in 1929. However, none of this is mentioned in African historiography.

<sup>10</sup> Originally published in English, was translated by the author, based in the studies about gender in Africa and collective discussions.

Following the author analysis, the division of labour can be seen in two contexts: the familiar labour and the local commerce, that undermines the influential role played by women in the economy. In his understanding, the familiar labour had complex forms during the pre-colonial period: men and women had distinct labours, but the distinction were not very rigid.

To summarize the author analysis, in the African historiographical studies still persist the stereotype of women as victims of a permanent structure of poverty. Analysing race, class and ethnicity, Zeleza (2005) informs that those concepts are considered secondary factors by the Eurocentric view of feminism and social science in general. However, she affirms that African academics, including feminists, have been fighting against intellectual imperialism from the West. It is important to stress that the author analyses is not limited to a specific territory in Africa, but comprehends all five African regions.

After criticizing historiography, she discusses the importance to restore African women. When they write about gender historiography they are doing a compensatory history, despite the growing number of studies concerning the role of women in literature, the systematic analysis of culture, solidarity networks and autonomous spaces for women to support each other. The author affirms that under the colonial rule women had an active role in contesting authority.

Zeleza (2005) critiques the oppression and discrimination discussed and analysed only in its relation to colonialism, being the African historiography very elitist. According to him, there is a connection between the pre-colonial and colonial past that was not explored in the previous studies. For example, the influence of Muslims societies in culture and gender relations; the development of oppression against women in polygamous relations, despite the fact that they are the key element to ancestry; the limited access to education during the colonial period; the gender retrocession after the independence; the naturalization of men labour as fighters and women labour as food suppliers – the imposition of and inferiorization of sex.

However, the statements of non binarism of gender in Africa, as pointed out by some authors, that refuse inequality and defend gender complementarity in the pre-colonial period are pure romanticism. The author notes that gender inequalities were present in Africa before the colonial period, but were intensified after colonization during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In conclusion, there was gender binarism in Africa as well as other forms of relations during different periods of African complex history.

### *Synthesis in the conception of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*

The Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2015; 2017) points out the relation of gender as unequal in African culture, and reveals the masculine superiority and androcentrism. She understands that the situation can be changed through education, but also sees it as a socio-cultural construction. In her work, gender relations, androcentrism and binary relations have a central place.

Feminism is a new movement in the African context, limited to a specific group of women, that are sometimes attacked as non women, maybe because of their resistance against gender impositions. The author understands to be necessary a feminist education, that must start at home (Adichie 2017). Because of the positive results of that practice, the author defends that “We should all be feminists” as a strategy to overcome gender inequality (Adichie 2015).

Chimamanda is an author who uses the method of personal experience and thus discusses about biology, body, education, marriage, and the process of becoming a woman, from childhood to adult life. In this context, the author breaks with the vision presented in “The Second Sex”, affirming that there is no universal women and the gender studies must consider ethnicity and culture. In this sense, literature is responsible for highlighting the narratives and stories of black women from Africa. In the Nigerian context she finds binarism, gender inequality, prejudice, machismo, misogyny among other elements. Thus, in face of such problematic question, the author defends gender equality through a feminist education.

In both novels (Adichie 2015; 2017), the African women of Chimamanda are not poor, they are healthy, educated, have good jobs, good houses and good salaries. In other words, a socially inclusive story. Chimamanda is concerned with gender relations in Africa and the reconstruction of the African women imaginary. The author shows that African women are not naturally poor, uneducated and excluded women, marked by diseases.

In addition, her works deal with the perspective of gender equality as well as ethnic, despite the differences regarding the relation between sexes and behavior during childhood: is it boy or girl? Pink to her and blue to him (Adichie 2017). Therefore, through her conceptions is evident the fight for recognition of different ethnicities, other communities and cultural value equality.

## Final considerations

African feminists and authors who study gender in Africa share crucial points of view: the critique to Western researches, Eurocentric, ethnocentric, with a hegemonic monological perspective regarding gender and feminism; they claim for an epistemological right and for the recognizing of different epistemologies; they also stand against colonization, imperialism and the imposition of European values, that contributed to devastating changes in the political, economical and cultural arena (Oyěwumi 2004).

Among the concepts we can comprehend as inherent to African culture are blackness, race and racism. However, those concepts are analysed from a secondary perspective, and the concept of ethnicity prevails. Still, Oyěwú mí and Chimamanda give centrality to the concept of racism, especially in the category of intelligence racism (Gomes 2009).

Race, class and ethnicity usually are secondary questions in African studies, as affirmed by Zeleza. In this sense, the debate about intersectionality has little focus, particularly in themes related to gender inequality. This is related to the critiques about the concept of race (Oyěwú mí understand race as a Western category, whose essence is hierarchical) and to complexity in what refers to political economy as a factor not related to capitalism and class in those studies.

In an attempt not to answer, but to comprehend the following question: equality or inequality of gender in Africa? Zeleza and Chimamanda have found inequality, while Oyěwumi and Amadiume have found equality. The last two bring epistemologies which point out to gender equality before colonization and the persistence of those structures nowadays; on the other hand, Zeleza and Chimamanda talk about an Africa unequal in gender and binary.

Following the cognitive analysis method, it was perceived a tendency to African culture lost originality and complexity after colonization. Authors present different views about gender equality before colonization, the influence of colonization in African culture and their impacts nowadays. In other words, there is a dispute between the cultural epistemology and the string of thought of despair, symbolically attesting the victory of the colonizer, despite the victory of independence. In short: resistance vs. despair.

Despite divergences about the concept of gender, those theories fight against ethnocentrism and epistemicide, and contribute to decentralize the European perspective by defending other epistemologies. In any case, it is important to reflect on the Western way to see African women, as powerless,

with no education, completely based in prejudice. The revisited African authors invite us to reconstruct the african imaginary, motivating us to think differently about other cultures, with new epistemologies.

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**ABSTRACT**

The study addresses the discussion of gender and culture in Africa, delimiting some territories, contributing to the decentralization of Western epistemologies through the discussion of gender in Africa in the perspective of African / theoretical. With the objective of discussing African culture from the perspective of gender devoid of Western conception, this work refers to African thoughts, highlighting other epistemologies and, aiming, on the one hand, to the decentralization of Euro-American hegemonic knowledge and, on the other, to understanding of the complex gender-related debate in Africa, focusing on the following question: Gender equality or inequality in this area? Theoretically-methodologically, a Cognitive Analysis of the conceptions of authors of the African gender studies was carried out.

**KEYWORDS**

Gender in Africa; Cognitive analysis; Diffusion of Knowledge.

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