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Review of Arnfred, Signe. *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique: Rethinking Gender in Africa*. Suffolk, United Kingdom: James Currey, 2011, ix + 310 pp.

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**Arnfred, Signe. *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique: Rethinking Gender in Africa*. Suffolk, United Kingdom: James Currey, 2011, ix + 310 pp.**

Are women oppressed in the same way around the world? Are feminists correct to assume that men universally discriminate against women? *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique* is an opportunity to re-conceptualize Western feminist analysis and theory. The author explains that during the Second Wave of feminism in the 1970s, Western feminists did not think “that gender relations might be different elsewhere in the world, and that we could possibly learn about different, more balanced gender relations, by studying other cultures” (10). After reading the criticisms of Western feminism by African gender studies scholars, Arnfred concludes that Western scholarship patriarchalized African cultures. The book is her effort to provide a new way of examining and understanding gender and sexuality, using the Mozambiquan context as an example.

The book began more than 30 years ago after Arnfred heard the first president of Mozambique, Samora Machel, speak on the necessity of women’s liberation in 1975. She worked and lived in Mozambique in the 1980s. She returned in the 1990s and 2000s to collect data and participate in several academic, professional, and social events in the country. This book is presented in three parts, with an introduction and epilogue. Using observations and interviews, the author discusses gender and sexuality in Mozambique from the perspective and experiences of people in the rural areas. She also describes and reflects on her mental journey regarding gender and sexuality.

The first part of the book has five chapters and explores the policies, assumptions, and interpretations that guided gender politics in Mozambique since the colonial period. In chapter one, Arnfred tells the story of Mozambican women’s participation in the struggle for independence. The women’s accounts here add a fascinating, and sometimes comical, dimension to the book. The events and issues that defined and redefined gender and sexuality in Mozambique underscores the importance of considering historical, social, and economic contexts in examining and understanding different societies. It is a true strength to hear these women tell their stories in their own words as few African studies have “her-stories.”

In part two, which also has five chapters, Arnfred explores a subject that fascinated her during her time in Mozambique – women’s initiation rituals. She states that the sojourn enabled her to find meanings and interpretations for these rituals to understand the women and herself. Initially, she had interpreted the ritual as humiliating and oppressive. However, when she conceptualized it this way for the women, it meant something else to them. For the women, the initiation

ceremony was “about the creation of women” (145). In Mozambique, under the light of the moon, girls become women, not through physical and biological changes, but through “tests, trials, dances, performances and passing-on of secret knowledge” (145). Focusing on this lesser known and probably misunderstood custom in this way allowed the author to re-conceptualize/interpret the initiation ritual as an empowering tradition. Chapter 10 is a really helpful tool here. In it, the author discusses gender from the perspectives of Nigerian gender scholars like Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, Ifi Amadiume, and Nkiru Nzegwu. She applies their arguments to the discussion to facilitate or aid one’s re-conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. For instance, the section titled “situational gender,” emphasizes gender as a fluid concept. The term “woman” is presented as being overloaded “with implications and associations which are irrelevant and disturbing in African contexts” (205). This chapter has information to reframe the issue of womanhood in feminist scholarship.

Part three of the book has four chapters and here, Arnfred examines other issues. In chapter 11, one reads of male mythologies, chapter 12 of gendered power and land ownership, and chapter 13 of sex, food, and female power. This part could be described as the “fun” part of the book as one learns more about Mozambique’s cultures and traditions. Some of the topics are also regionally or ethnically contextualized. For instance, while northern Mozambique is matrilineal, southern Mozambique is patrilineal. Since little research exists on matrilineal societies in Africa, this part is a refreshing addition to the book. More importantly, it documents this issue from a political, economic, historical, and spiritual perspective. This part will definitely add to the discourse on issues like empowerment and development projects as it requires one to recognize the place and role of men and women.

Overall, *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique* does a wonderful job of providing an opportunity to see the subject matter from another standpoint. The author succeeds in her goal of challenging the reader to see gender and sexuality in a new way. However, the author sometimes generalizes her arguments and findings about Mozambique to Africa as a whole. When one wants others to contextualize gender and sexuality, why still believe that what pertains to Mozambique pertains to the entire continent? This ties in with the use of the term empirical to describe the data. Empirical suggests that the information observed or found is true. However, like all things human, empirical data is also influenced by previous beliefs. While one must applaud her efforts to be objective in her analysis of certain issues, there were times when criticism was called for.

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