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To cite this article: Siphokazi Magadla, Babalwa Magoqwana & Nthabiseng Motsemme (2021) Thirty years of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*: revisiting Ifi Amadiume's questions on gender, sex and political economy, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 39:4, 517-533, DOI: [10.1080/02589001.2021.1926442](https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2021.1926442)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2021.1926442>



Published online: 12 Jul 2021.



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Thirty years of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*: revisiting Ifi Amadiume's questions on gender, sex and political economy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the legacy of Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987) to African gender theorisation three decades after its publication. We argue that Amadiume's detailed ethnography of the Nnobi society provides an example of what can be achieved when African scholars centre local histories, languages, and kinship ties to provide contextualised understandings of sex and gender. In southern African societies, we assess the ways in which gender fluidity, drawing from local languages, age, seniority and lineage do not strictly fix sex to gender, thus providing possibilities for flexible gender structures that allow women to access institutions of power through the lineage as first daughters (*umafungwashe*) and wives, among others. We further examine the ways conservative patriarchal discourses continue distorting African cultures and traditions, thus undermining women's rights and access to social, cultural, economic and political power. We argue that current Eurocentric attempts that aim to delink sex and gender do not move us beyond the universalised binaries of gender and sex. Through revisiting local social and linguistic histories that practised gender fluidity and tolerance, we can also begin to challenge the conservative attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ communities. Given the continued sexual and gender diversities that are being challenged daily in the African continent, it is timely that we revisit the historical meanings along with their contemporary implications for sexual citizenship and gendered power relations today.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 March 2021
Accepted 30 April 2021

KEYWORDS

Ifi Amadiume; gender fluidity; seniority; *umafungwashe*; gender and language

Introduction and background

This special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* brings together papers and materials from the colloquium, *Celebrating 30 years of Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (21–22 September 2017), hosted by the Political and International Studies (Rhodes University, Makhanda) Sociology and Anthropology (Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha) and the African Gender Institute (University of Cape Town). The colloquium was a commemoration of the 30th anniversary of Ifi Amadiume's seminal text, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987). The work of Ifi

Amadiume brings to the fore the place of sex and gender in Africa and its impact on access to institutions of power for men and women in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa. Through her study of the Igbo society in Eastern Nigeria, Amadiume was able to ask:

What structures allowed women to achieve the power that it is generally agreed that they had? What were the effects of colonial institutions on the old structures of the traditional society and on women's choices and situations? Finally, what is happening to women in contemporary local politics and consequently national politics? (Amadiume 1987, 17)

Through this study, Amadiume (1987) argued that in precolonial society, sex and gender did not necessarily coincide. In this regard, the fact that biological sex did not always correspond to ideological gender meant that women could play roles usually monopolised by men or be classified as 'males' in terms of power and authority over others. Amadiume's (1987) pioneering work showed that colonialism was an ideologically gendered project which systematically made African female power invisible, whilst entrenching rigid dualistic Western gender categories, thus effectively foreclosing the fluidity that existed within African gendered structures that made it possible for women to access a wide set of social, cultural, and political power structures.

Over thirty years later, Amadiume's (1987) work forms part of what can be called the 'distinctive characteristics' (Mama 1996, 4) of both African women's studies and the foundational literature of African feminist thought, with its epistemic power and resonance also shaping study fields such as African Studies, Heritage Studies and African Cultural Studies. As Adésinà (2010) points out, this interdisciplinarity, yet historically rooted and thickly contextualised element of Amadiume's work is an example of 'what can be achieved when we allow the local ethnographic data to speak ... in ways that are distinctly epistemic in outcome' (3). By proclaiming that 'daughters could be sons and consequently male' and 'daughters and women in general could be husbands to wives and consequently males in relation to their wives' (Amadiume 1987, 15), Amadiume challenged a universal definition of male, female and a homogenous depiction of women's status and relationship to power that was grounded on purely male based forms of power, ethics and morality. This created a conceptual space to explore alternative formulations of female power within African societies. As Patti Henderson stated in her 1988 review of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 'some books have a way of toppling old ideas which are taken as naturally given. Ifi Amadiume's book is one such' (Henderson 1988, 43).

Ten years after the text was published, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) made similar conclusions about the Yoruba societies in Nigeria. Oyèwùmí (1997) argued that the colonial project was a gendering project, which sought to violently impose and universalise gender categories to societies that historically organised and reproduced themselves also through lineage, age and seniority. As Adésinà (2010, 3) argues, Amadiume and Oyèwùmí's 'works produced epistemic ruptures in the global discourses around the sociological meanings of gender relations and how we understand "gender"'.

This special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* revisits Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* through the eyes of a new generation of African scholars, who are thinking through and beyond Amadiume's ideas in making sense around

questions of sex, gender, and power in the twenty-first century. Principally drawing from southern African societies, their local languages and every day gendered experiences, this special issue seeks to make connections and assess continuities and discontinuities with Amadiume's classic work. Given the continued sexual and gender diversities that are being enacted and challenged daily within the African continent (Matebeni 2021), it is fitting that we revisit the historical meanings of African female power forms and structures, along with their contemporary implications for sexual citizenship and gendered power relations today. The continued invisibility and lack of representation of African women leaders despite the high numbers of women in these societies, requires further research if we are to understand the continued insecurity of women in southern African states. It is clear that post-colonial 'rigid' gender categories persist and continue to instrumentally serve the narrative of fixing women as vulnerable 'objects' of state politics and society in general.

Inspired by Amadiume's work, this introductory article is structured to give both historical and methodological reflections of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, supplemented by the multiple meanings it continues to have for current women's struggles especially those lived by young women and queer communities under uncritiqued 'rigid' gender relations in contemporary African communities and societies. After a careful reading of the contributions in this special issue, we hope to have raised critical questions around the implications of systems of gender, sex and power that reproduce the socio-cultural and socio-political cultures that routinely and structurally undermine women's existential, citizenship and leadership positions. As part of the project to unravel prevailing hegemonic gender categories and gender relations, we ask – Can we theorise sexual violence as part of the systematic weapon against the full citizenship of women? How do we tap into traditional gender flexibilities as articulated by Amadiume, and mobilise them to push against 'rigid' gender binaries to ultimately expand African feminist vocabularies and experiences?

The contributors to this special issue engage these questions using different themes inspired by Amadiume's analytical and epistemological tools, including, for example, women's access to power and land; relationship between language and gender; matriarchal histories and gender fluidity; spiritual connections of women's power and language; and masculinities under precarious socio-economic conditions. As the editors of this special issue, we are aware of the critical engagements with this work regarding 'binary thinking on sexuality' (Lindsay 2017) and Nzegwu's (1998) detailed methodological and theoretical engagements (which are discussed later). Despite these obvious contextual challenges of an ethnographic study like this one, we believe that 'Amadiume has set the agenda for much of future feminist research in Africa' (Parpart 1989, 130), which still needs deep epistemic interventions in the global gender agenda. This work is very important to many of us based in the Global South as part of intellectual engagements to decolonise knowledge and challenge the hegemonic Western based, Cartesian forms of knowledge and knowledge production, with its inclination to undermine and distort locally produced knowledges (Lugones 2010). From our distinctly African gendered positionalities, we are also able to observe the tendency within African emancipatory projects to maintain the 'masculinist bias in the decolonization project' (Tamale 2020, 3), which then necessitates that we revisit Amadiume's seminal work on matriarchal legacies, female power, and flexible gender systems.

African ethnography, methodology and 'dirty gossip'

Ifi Amadiume's (1987) text was inspired by her 'anger' against the colonial foundations of social anthropology, ethnocentric methodologies, and in particular her expressed disbelief at white women's racist anthropological use of African data, which was used to 'justify conquest and the subjection of indigenous peoples and their cultures to foreign rule' (1). In her book preface, she points out that 'the primary incentive determining both the subject and the methods of research was my reaction, as an African woman to both the interpretation and use of data on African women in the West' (Amadiume 1987, 1). She evokes Okot p'Bitek, the Ugandan scholar, who was so shocked by the racism in social anthropology at Oxford University in 1960 that he called it 'dirty gossip'. 'Anger and disbelief' (Amadiume 1987, 1) thus drove Amadiume to engage critically and write this classic text beyond the 'dirty gossip' initially spread by the social anthropologist to facilitate indirect rule of African societies at the time.

As Steady (2005) has argued, African researchers can never afford to be bystanders and objective researchers in crisis, and thus 'emotions then become central to our work, and perhaps this must also affect the languages we consciously use in our research' (Mottsemme 2007, 65). Amadiume (2017) reflexively notes that

Going into the field would be a different experience for me because I had some local knowledge and memory, but I still had gaps to fill. I was not starting from scratch as would a stranger but had been taught falsehoods and misinformation about the people and their culture that would need unlearning in the process of relevant knowledge construction (Amadiume 2017, 132).

She was epistemologically and methodologically aware that to take her locale seriously, she needed to reject prevailing normative colonial knowledge system which selectively supported and promoted already existing patriarchal power structures within African societies. As the main tool of dealing with the 'dirty gossip' (Amadiume 1987, 2) about African societies and African women in particular, ethnographic evidence was used to justify colonial and racist categorisations, imposed terminologies and alienating policymaking about African societies. This meant that prevailing methodologies and conceptual tools adopted to study African societies and African women cannot be left uninterrogated, as these were used to normatively categorise, classify, and prescribe solutions, shifting epistemic power towards so called 'neutral' data collectors and interpreters.

The idea of centralising the local context seriously in its own terms in order to produce historically and contextually grounded theorisations of local conditions has been supported by many African scholars, including Adesina (2006) and Mafeje (1991). Furthermore, it has been extensively documented how African societies have served as the source and 'exporters of data' (Alatas 2000; Hountondji 1991; Nyamnjoh 2012) to the Global North, then processed and imported back to Africans in the form of mostly ahistorical and acultural theories and conceptual tools to study Africa. Such absurd prevailing imperialistic tendencies must be rejected wholesale as they serve knowledges, practices, and power relations that continue to bolster patriarchal ideologies and male forms of power, which objectify and subordinate Africa and Africans. Thus, the challenge posed by Amadiume (1987) in this book for African researchers is that

We cannot afford to be indifferent researchers, glossing over the local struggles in which women in our countries are involved. [...] African and Third World women still have a role to play in exposing the contradictions in their own societies, recording their own social history with a view of challenging where necessary, discrimination against women and positively aiming for more power for the women and more egalitarian societies for everyone (Amadiume 1987, 9).

This methodological approach to studying African societies, which privileges historical contexts, cultural and linguistic particularities resulted in a detailed ethnographic study of the gender systems of the Nnobi people in West Africa, where Amadiume used her 'kinship ties' and 'local language' to access local histories on family, motherhood, marriage, religion, sex, gender, and political organisation of women and many other themes. This ethnographic research by Amadiume was conducted for her PhD dissertation study for two years (1980–1982, retuning later in 1987 for clarifications) culminating in this phenomenal classical text that we continue to celebrate and engage 30 years after its first publication. Drawing on the oral traditions of the Nnobi people, Amadiume sought to supplement the documented histories of the region by forefronting the socio-historical and socio-cultural continuities of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial societies. Building on the 'personal and political', Amadiume's work is the evidence of the powerful combination of academic rigour, the eye of the reflexive insider, taking your local context seriously, and the use of kinship ties, moralities and ethics to access data and experiences that would be otherwise impossible for 'outsider/stranger' to the area.

The efficacy of detailed ethnographies to unearth deep knowledge structures of African communities was re-iterated by Ifi Amadiume in our personal communication with her, as we sought permission to honour her through the colloquium marking the thirtieth anniversary of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* in 2017. In an email correspondence (21 September 2017), which was shared with attendees of the colloquium at Rhodes University, she stated:

I appreciate what you are doing over there to celebrate 30 years of the publication of my book, MDFH. I read your concept note again and noted your key points and questions. My new preface to the latest edition of the book (2015) addresses some of these questions, including advancements since. Here are some possible points for discussion to share with your colleagues:

- (1) The usefulness of detailed ethnographic works as foundations on which to stand or begin, given the erasures of the colonial imperialist project. Therefore comparing pre-colonial socio-political institutions and post-colonial institutions. Empirically, the placing of people; conceptually and ideologically, the question of power and choice on the usual analytical categories of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.; citizenship and marginalisation or non-representation.
- (2) On values and knowledge: progressive matriarchy (legacy) as a huge all encompassing (multi-disciplinary; all disciplines and interdisciplinary) dynamic empirical context for perspectives, discourse and contestation (opposition and critique). We have done, we have created, we have invented, we think, we say, we imagine. Having something to take to the table = strong playing cards linking the past and inspiration for own sustainable development and future.

The emphasis on using detailed socio-historically based ethnographies to generate new knowledges linked to African-centred values, is clearly stated in this message. This epistemic intervention is necessary with the humanities and social sciences if we are to reconceptualise forms of power and power relations towards total freedom in contemporary southern Africa and beyond. We argue that these inter-disciplinary methodological tools which favour such historically, culturally and linguistically thick descriptions and analyses will ultimately produce textured meanings which will facilitate in-depth understandings of these societies that have been deliberately mis-framed as reductionist discourses which favour cultural particularities and imperialisms (Motsemme 2007).

Writing as the first daughter, (*ada*); with a two-year-old daughter, having lost her 55-year-old mother, Amadiume needed to be reintegrated back into her community upon her return from London. Her integration as a member of the community, cum researcher, was facilitated by her 'kinship ties' and multiple intersectional identities underscored by motherhood, daughterhood, wifehood and sisterhood. She deployed these different identities to understand her lineage and woman's political status and ultimately women's power in Nnobi histories and society. As an *ada*, she was given the 'wooden bowl' by her father to make her a 'male daughter' (Amadiume 2017, 133). This meant that her position was that of '*onye isi*' (head/leader) which gave her the same rights as the male first born, despite being female, reflecting how Amadiume's own experiences embody the fluidity of the Nnobi gender structure where gender is not linguistically and relationally fixed to sexual orientation.

The section below examines continuities and ruptures in sex and gender, by exploring the continued evidence of fluidity of African gender structures which do not fix sex to gender. We do this by examining two moments in two of Africa's most celebrated families, the Mandela and Madikizela families. The episodes provide insightful examples of an African gender structure that values seniority over sexual orientation, supported by a language structure that makes such gender fluidity possible. However, we also demonstrate that this fluidity does not remain uncontested. Specifically, the case we focus on of Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah and Mandla Mandela shows that ideologically motivated and conservative interpretations of African culture continue to be biased towards male power forms, where African men are assumed to be the authorities of culture, while African women remain embodiment and carriers. Strategically positioning themselves as voices of reason and defenders of culture, in this instance African men selectively borrow colonial mis/understandings of gender and weaponise them to exclude and undermine African women's rights to cultural power.

'Makaziwe is Mandla's father': continuities and ruptures in sex and gender

Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah, born in 1954, is the second daughter of Nelson Mandela from his first marriage with Evelyn Mase. She was given the same name as the first daughter of Mandela and Mase, who died when she was nine months in 1948 (Mandela 1995, 122, 239). Mandla Mandela, born in 1974, is the son of Nelson Mandela's second son, Magkatho Lewanika Mandela, also from his marriage with Mase (Mandela 1995, 136). Both sons, Madiba Thembekile Mandela and Magkatho have died, leaving Makaziwe Mandela-

Amuah as the only remaining child from Mandela's first marriage and the eldest of Mandela's children.

In June 2013, it was reported that Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah and sixteen other family members 'filed an interdict with the Eastern Cape High Court, ordering Mandla [Mandela] to return the remains of three family members he controversially exhumed two years ago [2011] and re-buried in Mvezo' (Mail & Guardian News Report 2013). Other charges against Mandla Mandela included a criminal charge for 'tampering with a grave' (Eyewitness News Report 2013). In July 2013, a Mthatha High Court judgement 'ruled in favour of the complaints ... ordered Mandla to exhume and rebury the bodies' (Eyewitness News Report 2013).

The debate that ensued regarding the cultural rights of Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah and Mandla Mandela, who became chief of the Mvezo traditional council in 2007, are illustrative of the particulars of African gender structures that are not constrained by biological sex. This gender structure benefits from the fluidity of African languages in their absence of strict gender codes. The example shows the importance of seniority and the fact that African women, even after marrying, retain access to cultural power and control in their patrilineage by the virtue of their age. As Amadiume (1987) shows, women's identities as daughters, sisters, wives shape their access and exercise of power at various moments. As first daughters, they retain a different cultural power to that which they hold in their married homes as wives. It was drawing on these distinctions among women that Amadiume could challenge ideas of a uniform marginalisation of women. If women are differently located, then it is not possible to speak of a homogenous 'sisterhood' against patriarchy.

In the Mandela example, Chief Phathekile Holomisa argued that Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah, by virtue of marriage, did not have the authority in the affairs of the Mandela household because she now 'belonged' to the Amuah family (Holomisa 2013). According to Holomisa (2013):

The divisions within his offspring over the proper place for the reburial of the remains of his two sons and daughter are a matter of public knowledge. Nkosi Mandla Mandela (Ah! Zwelivelile) the heir-apparent to the Madiba dynasty, and *Mrs Makaziwe Amuah, *umafungwashe* (the senior daughter, the one by whom we swear), are the chief protagonists in the drama. Both of them are holding their respective positions by default by reason of the fact that Zwelivelile's father and Makaziwe's older sister (after whom she is named) passed away before they could take up their respective leadership positions. From what we see in the media, each believes they are *senior* to the other.

Of course, the fact of the matter is that there can only be one leader in any institution and in this case the person whom the Dalibhunga house designated senior leader is Zwelivelile. This does not take away the fact that *Mrs Amuah* is entitled to deference, by virtue of her being sister to Zwelivelile's father and *older* than him by age. Zwelivelile has to take major decisions affecting the family after consultation with her, much more so than he is obliged to the other family members. (*emphasis added)

Holomisa (2013) acknowledges in the article that Mandla Mandela 'was born out of wedlock' and therefore, under 'normal circumstances' would not be legible to become a chief because he would have culturally 'been considered a child of his mother's parents'. He is at pains to argue that his integration to 'his father's house' and historical examples among amaXhosa, make it possible for a son born out of wedlock to become

a traditional leader. Yet, conveniently, Holomisa (2013) says very little about the cultural rights and authority that Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah retains over the family as the Nelson Mandela's first-born daughter and eldest child. As Nokuzola Mndende reminded us:

Makaziwe is an *umfazi* (married woman) to her husband's family; but she is an *intombi* (daughter) [and *uMafungwashe*/first daughter] to the Mandela family. She has specific roles to play. Makaziwe, as the only surviving child of Madiba's first marriage, has the right to intervene when she sees something going astray (Mndende 2013 emphasis added).

Mndende argued that since Mandla's father had passed on, it meant that 'Makaziwe is Mandla's father, in the true sense of the word, without looking at her gender'. As Sesanti (2013) outlines,

Holomisa refers to Makaziwe Mandela as Mrs Makaziwe Amuah, even when the latter prefers to be referred to by her maiden name, this is as baffling as it is ironic. That is so because on one hand Holomisa writes and speaks in defence of African culture, while on the other he undermines an aspect of this heritage.

What Sesanti means is that Holomisa (2013) claims to recognise Makaziwe's rights as the first daughter of the Mandela family, while also drawing on the Western title of 'Mrs', which does not exist in isiXhosa, to diminish Mandela-Amuah's cultural status and rights within the Mandela family and clan. If she is 'Mrs', then she 'belongs' to her married family and therefore can no longer claim and wield her power among the Mandelas and broader Thembu clan.

As Nzegwu (1998) explains with regards to Igbo society,

unlike the Judeo-Christian marriage norms that places a wife under a husband, and insists that they cleave together as one ... marriage does not obliterate the identity and obligations of daughters, the daughter identity is the enduring, significant identity for females with their corollary responsibilities and rights intact. (608)

For his patriarchal convenience, Holomisa (2013) draws on a version of African culture that defends the cultural rights of Mandla Mandela as a chief of the abaThembu clan, while simultaneously drawing on Western titles of marriage to diminish Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah's cultural rights and the power that comes with them.

In their paper in this special issue, "When amalungelo are not enough: an auto-ethnographic search for African feminist idiom in the postcolony", Nomalanga Mkhize and Mathe Ntsekhe call Holomisa's behaviour 'neo-traditionalism' that is pervasive in post-independence Africa. As they point out,

neo-traditionalism is often a power play or political ploy, it will draw on a myriad of conservatisms to justify the curtailment of other rights. Indeed, one of the enduring features of African customary practice over the past 300 years has been its continuous synthesis with the major world religions and economic systems as they have taken root in Africa. Indigenous patriarchies are co-evolved with colonising patriarchies ...

Holomisa (2013) is able to appeal to tradition and history to defend Mandla Mandela's status as a chief, while relying on colonial marital codes to undermine Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah's claim and rights within the same culture and tradition that he claims to protect (Holomisa 2013). This is what Mkhize and Ntsekhe mean when they say neo-traditionalists such as Holomisa 'draw on a myriad of conservatisms to justify the curtailment of other rights'.

This fluidity of African languages and gender power relations was also evident at Winnie Madikizela Mandela's memorial service in April 2018. Thembelani Madikizela¹ – her nephew, who referred to Madikizela Mandela as *uDadobawo* (father's sister) exclaimed that while many in the country were saddened by his aunt's divorce from Nelson Mandela in 1996, his family rejoiced because they gained a 'father' in Madikizela Mandela. He explained that after the passing of his father, Madikizela Mandela was the eldest of four remaining children who were all women. In isiXhosa he proclaims:

Ungunmtu ebisolok'kufutshane kakhulu kuthi, ngakumbi emveni kokuba sashiywa ngutata. Phaya kokwabo, okanye kutata wabo, uCK[Columbus Kokani], utat'omkhulu wethu, bebe-shiyeke bengamantombazana amane. Inguye omdala. Yasinceda kelento yokuba abuye emendweni. Ndiyabona nje abanye belila, bekhuza besithi, ushiyiwe yindonda, waliwe ngumyeni, wohlulakele ngumendo. Thina ekhaya sivuyile ngoba sitsho safumana utata.

[She was always close to us, especially after our father's passing. At her home, or at her father's homestead, CK [Columbus Kokani], our grandfather, they were left as four girls. She was the oldest. The ending of her marriage helped us. I see those who were distraught, saying that she was deserted by her man. Exclaiming that she failed in marriage. At home, we rejoiced because we gained a father.]

Thembelani Madikizela's recounting of the social position his aunt held in their family shows that as the eldest daughter, Madikizela Mandela assumed the role of 'male daughter' in providing authority and leadership in her family, regardless of her gender. As Maseko (2018) explains, isiXhosa language has an absence of 'pronominal gender markers' because 'isiXhosa is not fixated on type of body of carriers of the name possesses, but rather on the being' (67). In isiXhosa, like in Igbo and Yoruba, language allows for the conferring of fatherhood or motherhood to members of all genders. Therefore, without contradiction or trip of the tongue, Madikizela can say that Madikizela Mandela was their father in the same manner that Mndende (2013) can proclaim that 'Makaziwe is Mandla's father'. Despite the criticism on the limits of language in understanding gender titles and gender power dynamics in Oyo-Yoruba (levelled against Oyèwùmí 1997) by Bakare-Yusuf (2004), language may still be one of the few indigenous resources to store and transfer oral gender knowledge systems in Africa as it evolves daily.

In this special issue, Yaliwe Clarke's paper "Considering 'gender fluidity' in Zambia: femininities, marriage and social influence", recounts an experience she had at her brother-in-law's funeral in Zambia that demonstrated to her that 'gender is situational to lineage systems'. She recounts her surprise when one of the women announced to her that she was her husband!

... When I reached the 6th woman, she held my hand and asked (in Nyanja) 'Do you know who I am.' I said I did not know ... She then asked me 'Are you not the one who is married to the son of ...' I said yes ... She sternly remarked 'Don't you know that I am your husband!' ... I later found out that this woman who claimed to be my 'female-husband' was a close senior aunt of my then husband. I was told that because she occupied a *senior* position in my husbands' patrilineage, she was a social 'husband' to me. (emphasis added)

Clarke argues that experience shows her that 'in most patrilineal family systems in Africa, a woman marries not only her husband, but also his lineage'.

In her critique of Amadiume's analysis, Nzegwu (1998) argues the gender system that is presented preserves 'intact the normative status of men, men's roles, and men's relationship to women' in ways that 'ultimately reinforces the existence of a patriarchal classificatory scheme in which males occupy privilege positions' (604). This is because Nzegwu (1998) argues that the flexibility and possible mobility that is described by Amadiume 'is toward men's roles and status, and rarely in female's direction'. With the examples discussed above, Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah and Winnie Madikizela Mandela are senior daughters who gain male status in the absence of their brothers. Nzegwu (1998) correctly warns that the danger with such a formulation is that 'it implausibly suggests that this daughter's presence is intelligible only if she is transformed into a male, a logic that casts the female presence as socially and ontologically deviant' (606). Would Mandela Amuah have used her first daughter's status to take her own brother to court if Magkatho Mandela were still alive and chief of the Thembu clan? What would have been Madikizela Mandela's authority among the Madikizela family if her brother were still alive? In Clarke's case, can we imagine a male family member proclaiming 'wife' status along lineage lines?

These examples from the Madikizela, Mandela family and Clarke's experience as a wife in Zambia, speak to the resilient and enduring ways in which Amadiume's work continues to explain African socio-cultural and socio-political relations. As Clarke argues, 'Amadiume's study suggests that we need to avoid relying too heavily on a body-centric interpretation of "gender," which merely firmly uphold the colonial and Eurocentric gaze, male power and patriarchy in African societies.

Industrious motherhood and the limits of liberal equality

In mapping out women's power in Nnobi, Amadiume (1987) demonstrated that matriarchy and patriarchal gender structures are not mutually exclusive. Importantly, Amadiume showed the links between economic productivity and African-centred definitions of motherhood arguing that 'the gender ideology governing economic production was that of female industriousness' (27). She identified 'a matricentric principle in household organization,' showing us that 'these principles and ideologies governed the economic activities of men and women ... governed access to titles ... prestige and more wealth' (28). Through resourcefulness in farming or market trading, among others, women could achieve high economic success to support their household and achieve the *Ekwe* title, which marked the 'climax of economic success' believed to be associated to the goddess, *Idemili* (42).

As Henderson (1988) explains, Amadiume's theorisation of the importance of women's economic activities that are central to their definition of womanhood and motherhood, in fact challenged the white feminist thinking that assumed that 'because domestic and public spheres of life are separate under western capitalism ... domestic and maternal roles are responsible for this subordination' (43). As Amadiume upholds, 'in Nnobi society, motherhood was highly regarded and yet did not prevent women from attaining positions of economic, ritual and political power' (Henderson 1988, 43).

In her paper "Land in transition: from social reproduction of labour power to social reproduction of power", Lyn Ossome argues that

by historicizing the sexual division of labour, the book traces and locates the gender ideologies behind the Nnobi people's labouring practices as key to understanding the social relations of production, but also how in this regard, certain people in society were in turn able to emerge as powerful decisionmakers depending on their social and economic location.

Ossome contends that Amadiume's work shows that women are 'bearers of tradition, mediators of culture, reproducers of families and households and mediators of capital'.

As Ossome shows further, another important theoretical assertion from Amadiume's work is that before it became academically 'fashionable', she was already exploring the intimate interconnections between divine/spiritual centred industriousness, 'ecological factors, the sexual division of labour, and gender ideology,' which 'are now acknowledged in recent agrarian literature as major determinants of contemporary agrarian questions'. In our editorial conversation with healer, Lieketso Gogo Mapitsi Mohoto "Sex, gender and Uvalo/Letswalo centred spirituality", she speaks about the importance of land for spiritual work that is guided by ancestors. Gogo Mapitsi explains,

There are certain things that are available to us from the land that have very particular functions that only a person who is guided by spirit would find in the first place ... When you get *ehlathini* [to the forest], there's certain plants, certain trees that you see with your spiritual eye and there are somethings which says to you 'that thing will cure this kind of thing.' That means we should have the ability to have access to all kinds of land, so that we can have access to all kinds of plants so that we can have the ability to heal all kind of illness.

Mapitsi speaks to the multiple uses of land in Africa, which are not just for economic benefit, but land serving an important role for ancestral connection, and ancestrally guided ways of intuitively locating plants in the land that can feed and heal communities. She insists that the land belongs to the ancestors, a statement that challenges the colonial logic of the individual possession of land. Among the Nnobi, it was believed that it was 'the goddess Idemili – the ancestral religious deity' (Amadiume 1987, 27) who possessed the woman to 'give her the money or wealth with which to take the [*Ekwe*] title' (Amadiume 1987, 42). Amadiume (1987) shows how the 'introduction of Christian and Western and Victorian ideologies ... and the same process of masculinization occurred in political representation in the local government system' directly facilitating the systematic erosion and narrowing of women's access to land, power, and status. Importantly, Amadiume shows that the end of colonialism did not reconfigure but further entrenched the masculinisation of status and power that thrives on the ordering and regulation of land and women's subordination.

While Ncube (2020) explores the ways in which the valorised status of motherhood, conferred to biological and non-biological mothers as a symbol of respect and admiration, can be swiftly taken away from those women. Examining the political trajectories of former Zimbabwean vice-president, Joice Mujuru and former first lady, Grace Mugabe, Ncube (2020, 2) argues that both were

referred to as '*Amai*', an endearing Shona word for 'mother'. Such endearment nonetheless ended when they each eyed the powerful positions first of President of the ruling party and thereafter President of the country. The naming changed from '*Amai*' to the unpleasant insulting word '*hure*', Shona for whore.

Thus, the veneration of motherhood in the postcolonial context often confines women to symbolic status that must present no real threat to institutionalised male power. Everyday

inequality sits side by side with African women's achievement of legal equality. As Gouws and Hassim (2014, 6) have reasoned,

Feminist engagement with institutions was very much dependent on a liberal understanding of feminism – that of law reform, equal opportunities and removing obstacles that create gender inequality ... Formal democratic procedures cannot deliver gender justice if they are not combined with notions of substantive equality that embody socio-economic rights that will deliver solutions to poverty, unemployment and marginalisation.

The discourse of liberal equality has codified women's equality, but substantive equality remains elusive. In the main, women and gender non-conformers are structurally poor and routinely subjected to daily physical, epistemic and symbolic exclusions and violence. Debates about the limits of liberal equality are, of course, linked to broader debates about the crisis of Western defined liberalisms and neo-liberalisms. Mkhize and Ntsekhe discuss how the liberal rights language, *amalungelo*, have been reconfigured and become masculinised in post-apartheid South Africa. They argue that the language of rights is being viewed as the 'urbane, learned' and disconnected from the African culture, hence the disconnect of *amalungelo* for women and children in South Africa with many saying in their private spaces, '*amalungelo* not in my house'. Using a conversation between the authors to excavate the local vernacular for matricentricity as argued by Amadiume (1997) in their local languages, they call for an African feminist vocabulary that epistemically resonates with the general oppressions of the African people while challenging the contemporary misappropriation of culture by neo-traditionalists.

What the authors make clear is that from six decades of Africa's political independence is that individually based liberal rights and neo-liberal economic approaches to structural redress have failed to provide substantive economic, political and social equality and security for women.

Beyond language and the body

The growing acknowledgement and attempts at sex and gender fluidity of European languages seems to be an attempt towards moving European languages beyond their 'bio-logic' (Oyèwùmí 1997) that fix sex and gender. We, however, contend that current attempts at sexual fluidity do not move us beyond the binary constraints of gender and sex. We argue that shifts in language, like law, require a deeper commitment to the rethinking of gender and female power and how these categories shape societies.

Male Daughters, Female Husbands (1987) centres women's relationship to sex, gender and power from a historically and contextually rooted perspective that explores questions of gender in language, its practices, performance and social organisation. By establishing that 'in subject pronouns, no distinctions is made between male and female' in the Igbo language 'unlike the English gender construction, which distinguishes male and female as "he" and "she"', (Amadiume 1987, 89) was able to argue that this absence of 'rigid associations between certain adjectives or attributes to gender subjects' (89) made it 'possible to conceptualize certain social roles as separate from sex and gender, hence the possibility of either sex to fill the role' (90).

While Amadiume (1987) did *not* claim that the Igbo language represents the organisation of all African languages, this particular argument about language, social order, and

subjective experience has resonated among generations of Africans because, indeed, many African languages, do not impose gendered subject pronouns. Oyèwùmí (1997) and Nzegwu et al. (2016) have argued the same of the Yoruba language; and Maseko (2018) argues similarly about the isiXhosa. This flexibility in the language offers gender fluidity possibilities in the everyday practice of gender and access to power.

In this special issue, Gcobani Qambela's paper, "There is nothing beautiful I see: Xhosa masculinities under structural violence, unemployment and changing political economies of sex", uses the deep ethnographic method inspired by a socio-historical model employed by Amadiume (1987). He extracts this paper from a two-year fieldwork conducted in Peddie/Ngqushwa, Eastern Cape among young Xhosa men who are dealing with masculinities in the mist of precarious socio-economic life conditions. Building from this local context, he proposes a fresh and grounded approach in understanding hopelessness imposed by the socio-economic structural brutalising conditions for young men in post-apartheid South Africa. Qambela challenges Mfecane's (2016, 207) argument that 'manhood status among amaXhosa is grounded primarily in the physical body (penis)', by arguing that it is rather 'money and wealth for young men [that] facilitates their access to manhood, rather than traditional initiation.' While Nathane and Khonou's article, "Bomalome: standing in the gap – social fathers in an African context", shows that 'while father absence has been widely reported, the absence of biological fathers does not necessarily mean that caring and nurturing men are not present in children's lives'. Similarly in this issue, Matebeni's article, "Nongayindoda: moving beyond gender in a South African context", explores the changing meanings to the term *unongayindoda*, which is 'popular among isiXhosa and isiZulu speaking people referring to masculine women or men-like women'. Through the work of the artist, Nicholas Hlobo, who interprets *unongayindoda* as 'one who almost looks like a woman,' Matebeni shows the gender fluidity of the term and its associated gender performance.

Yet, while it seems that at this moment in which queer theory and its centring of non-binary identities is productively challenging European based languages of their rigid gender organisation that fixes biological sex to gender, the current 'decolonial turn' in African academic and activist circles, speaks to particular ideas of a systematically brutalised 'black body' that 'fix' Africans in ways that seem at odds with the fluidity that Amadiume's presents. As Oyèwùmí (1997) argues, in Western discourse of sex and gender that speak in varied ways of 'male bodies, female bodies, Jewish bodies, Aryan bodies, black bodies, rich bodies, poor bodies ... the body is given a logic of its own' (1). Whether queer, trans, non-binary, cis, the body is 'in view and on view' (Oyèwùmí 1997, 2).

To acknowledge that people identify their gender in ways that may not be linked to their biological sex, certain institutions, including academic journals and some popular media platforms, use inclusive gender pronouns, for instance she/her/hers, they/them, or he/him. At once biological sex is delinked from gender, yet the emphasis on pronouns make 'bodies' visible in ways that continue to entrap them within hegemonic gender definitions that do not clearly move us beyond the trappings of the hierarchical representation of gender.

What then is the ideal future? One with no gender or one with genders? Matebeni (2021, 2) believes that 'with the expansion and use of the acronym [LGBTQIA+] came the loss of local and culturally specific forms of association and naming'. She notes that the loss of the local terminologies in referring to the LGBTQIA+ communities within the

African context, has sometimes led to this community to not being easily acceptable, as such terminologies tend to be associated with Euro-American culturally alienating contexts. This special issue argues that it is through revisiting the local and linguistic histories that promoted gender fluidity and tolerance, that we can begin to challenge the conservative attitudes held towards the LGBTQIA+ communities. It is therefore imperative that we resuscitate, reconnect and re-interpret these histories towards an inclusive Africa-centred gender future that simultaneously does not 're-invent' or romanticise culture. There is value in the language in how we deal with the current sexuality pronouns that seem to be creating tensions that lead to a 'misgendering' of people. The continued salience of gender and sexuality politics speak to the need for an inclusive language that can deal with the growing conservatism that disregards African matriarchal fluid linguistic histories.

In her incisive critique on the limits of language and power, Bakare-Yusuf (2004) argues that 'removing inhibitive barriers (from language and the law) is just the beginning of a long process of creating a just society' (Bakare-Yusuf 2004, 6). Thus, ultimately, in the absence of robust institutional cultures that facilitate everyday inclusivity to dismantle patriarchy, the gender non-conformity in language may remain at a cosmetic one, which can also be observed with women's attainment of legal equality but continued struggle to find its full expression in their daily lives in Africa.

In this special issue, Uvile Ximba's paper, "Beyond the rainbow: creative approaches as dialogue for LGBTQIA+ intimate partner violence", draws on creative works, her adaptation of Can Themba's *The Suit* and a documentary *dear friend* by Tumelo Thamaga, to examine Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) within LGBTQIA+ women's relationships in South Africa. In spite of the language of legal equality, there is sporadic public discussion about the everyday lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual and other gender non-conforming, non-binary and/or sexually fluid people outside of homophobic/curative violence they experience. IPV within LGBTQIA+ women's relationships are imbued in homophobic reactions that force the victims into silence about their experiences. Thus, indeed as Bakare-Yusuf (2004) argues, law, like language, is only the beginning.

These papers consistently show that a fixation with language and/or the body is insufficient towards stripping forms of exclusions and dominance. In the context of pervasive neo-liberal inequalities, as young Xhosa men are not likely to achieve manhood by virtue of having been initiated. They need access to the social, economic, and political power and institutions that enables them to build sustainable lives and livelihoods. We have also learnt from the South African reality of homophobic violence, that the legalisation of homosexuality does not sufficiently protect gender queers in a structural context of homophobia. We maintain that local histories, contexts, cultures and power forms still matter.

Conclusion

This paper introduces the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* and seeks to engage and revisit the catalytic contributions of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987). As gender scholars from southern Africa, we hope to revive the analytical and conceptual tools applied by Ifi Amadiume in her study of Igbo society in Eastern

Nigeria. As the editors of this special issue, we have highlighted the resonance of Amadiume's work in South Africa today by exploring its links with the politics of language, tradition, and gender statuses. Both Makaziwe Mandela-Amuah and Madikizela Mandela became critical in the story of how traditions can be selectively appropriated and 're-invented' to privilege patriarchal ideologies. These cases reveal to us how women continue accessing power through different roles based on seniority. We thus challenged prevailing conceptions of male power forms that are entangled with static notions of culture and tradition, and fail to recognise that female power, seniority, and flexible gender systems are deeply imbedded in the social organisation and fabric of Nguni communities, as in Amadiume's Igbo traditional societies.

Despite the political work and sacrifice from decades of women's activism that resulted in connections between women's legal representation and substantive equality, we now know that representation on its own will not destroy patriarchal institutions and cultures that seek to undermine and obscure women's power and leadership contributions. It seems then that the task of the next generation of scholars building on Amadiume (1987) and other pioneering scholars in this field, is to continue to think through and theorise about what knowledges, languages, socio-cultural and socio-political practices, power forms and institutions are needed to dismantle patriarchy and achieve African women's freedom. It is our hope that this special issue will revive and inspire African scholars to expand their feminist vocabularies through also engaging history, language, culture, and traditions in ways that go beyond cultural relativism and universalism debates, while exposing the limits of individualising liberal rights discourses – towards ultimately fully recognising the citizenship of women and queer communities globally.

Note

1. Memorial Service for Mama Winnie in Bizana, Eastern Cape, 10 April 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_msBqY1QUj8&t=5488s.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Dr Magadla acknowledges the support of the Department of Higher Education and Training; [Grant Number RDG Phase-out P2-07]. Dr Magoqwana acknowledges the support by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences and National Research Foundation.

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