110 | book review

sexuality and gender politics in Mozambique: rethinking gender in Africa

Signe Arnfred, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet/James Currey Press, Uppsala/Woodbridge, Surrey, 2011, 328pp., ISBN: 978-1-8470-1035-3, £40.00 (Hbk)

Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique: Rethinking Gender in Africa is an amazing collection of fourteen chapters that have been written and published as articles over a twenty-year period, from 1987 to 2007, all collected into one volume with a new, synthetic introduction and epilogue. While the chapters have been edited to different degrees to fit the context of the book, 'their character as individual articles' has been maintained (p. xiii). This helps the book serve as a source of important scholarship as well as a great teaching tool, which can be read in its entirety or as selected chapters, that covers the theories and practices of gender, sexuality, initiation and matriliney in Mozambique over a thirty-year period from Independence in 1975 to 2005.

What makes Arnfred's work so compelling is that she deftly combines some of the most difficult Western and African political philosophies and post-colonial theories with detailed ethnographic accounts of the empirical realities of women in northern matrilineal Mozambique in order to: (1) make a contribution to the literature on gender and sexuality in Mozambique; and (2) demonstrate what feminist theories of gender and sexuality have to learn from post-colonial African scholars and the experiences of women and men in Mozambique. Very few scholars are able to make contributions to both the theories and practices of post-colonialism and feminism using empirical research from the Global South. Arnfred is able to do so in a way that intrigues and fascinates feminists and Africanists on the one hand, and captures the imagination of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, historians and political scientists on the other. As the woodcuts crafted by artists in Cabo Delgado that open each chapter epitomise, her work is truly interdisciplinary.

Signe Arnfred's vast ethnographic and fieldwork experience comes from her time working with Danida (Danish Development Agency) and Norad (Norwegian Development Agency) in Maputo in the 1980s and returning to Nampula province in the late 1990s, mainly in Ribáuè district and Ilha de Moçambique, and again in the 2000s through her work with the *Sexuality and Gender in Africa* research programme of the Nordic Africa Institute. Arnfred began her experience in Mozambique working from 1981 to 1984 in the Maputo headquarters of the Oranização da Mulher Moçambicana (OMM) to help them plan the OMM Extraordinary Conference.

Arnfred's reputation as a scholar of Mozambique precedes her. I remember seeking her out for an interview when I was conducting my own research in Mozambique.¹ Arnfred analyses gender

¹Initial research led to my dissertation, 'Marxism, Feminism, Democratization, and Civil Society in Mozambique and Nicaragua', while subsequent research led to my book, *Women's Activism and Feminist Agency in Mozambique and Nicaragua* (Disney, 2008).

politics from the colonial era through the period of Frelimo socialism to the contemporary neo-liberal era, and concludes that 'conceptions of gender and sexuality have remained much the same' (p. 3). She also makes important contributions to post-colonial African feminist thought by arguing that, too often, gender hierarchies are assumed when other dynamics are at work. For example, Arnfred demonstrates that hierarchies of age are more prominent in female initiation rites, which actually work to build and maintain female identity, power and community in a 'powerful female universe' (p. 19).

Perhaps more importantly, Arnfred offers interdisciplinary feminist scholars a methodological roadmap of how to do cross-cultural, qualitative feminist work by: (1) searching for meanings; and (2) interrogating interpretations (pp. 13–14). Arnfred takes us on a journey, a twenty-year journey of theoretical and analytical discovery, as she examines her empirical data from northern, matrilineal Mozambique using different analytical lenses, from the lens of gender subordination, to those of embodiment and sexuality, to that of the 'coloniality of gender'.²

She begins with a standard analytical framework on gender subordination and male–female power relations, reminding us even then that we cannot assume 'the universal subordination of women':

Mainstream development policy, frequently based on gender-and-development conceptualizations, sees African women as subordinated and oppressed. In matrilineal northern Mozambique such assumptions do not fit reality very well. Rather than starting off from fixed assumptions, development policies for women should take into account the actual positions of power, which women do command, and go from there. (p. 3)

She then moves to an embodiment approach inspired by the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, inspiring us to not just *see* the data but to *hear* it and *feel* it as well. What Europeans (and men) may see during the day, Africans (and women) can hear and feel at night: 'I was present during ceremonies of initiation and at other ritual occasions, during which the most intense and holy moments took place in the dark of night, lit only by a few candles, with drumming and dancing and falling into trance all headed and monitored by women' (p. 17).

Finally, she examines her data of female initiation rituals from the perspective of what she and Maria Lugones call the 'coloniality of gender', inspired by post-colonial African gender scholars Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyewùmí. Arnfred argues that in the same way that race, a 'social, political, economic relation of domination, is reinvented as a biological difference, thus naturalized, [w]hat happens to "gender" is very similar: a social relation of male domination/female subordination, brought along with the European colonial powers and supported by Christianity, is represented as a biological difference between men and women, with the "natural" implication, that women are subordinated in relation to men' (pp. 185–186).

Using different analytical lenses, Arnfred helps us to recognise that gender itself is created and recreated in colonial and post-colonial contexts in ways that might blur what we are able to see when we study empirical phenomena such as female initiation rituals in northern Mozambique, the co-existence of matriliney with Islam in the coastal town of Ilha de Moçambique, and female power over sex, food and land in the context of matriliney and the logic of subsistence. This book is truly a work of feminist praxis.

²—thus phrased by Latin American feminist philosopher Maria Lugones (2007)—expresses the fact that in many Third World contexts, "gender", parallel to "race", was created in and by the colonial encounter' (p. 185).

references

- Disney, J.L.**, 2008. *Women's Activism and Feminist Agency in Mozambique and Nicaragua*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lugones, M.**, 2007. Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system. *Hypatia*, 22(1), pp. 186–209.

Jennifer Leigh Disney
Winthrop University

doi:10.1057/fr.2015.11