FAMILY FORMS AND GENDER POLICY IN REVOLUTIONARY MOZAMBIQUE (1975-1985)

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Preface

The paper on *Family Forms and Gender Policy in Mozambique* was written in 1990 but never published. For years it circulated in a photocopied edition. Now when – thanks to the initiative of CEAN, Bordeaux – it gets the chance of being published, I want to provide some background information regarding the very specific ways in which the main body of data, on which the paper’s analysis is based, was collected.

The OMM – *Organização da Mulher Moçambicana* – had been established already during the armed struggle, i.e. before Independence in 1975. It was created by the initiative of the women in the *Destacamento Feminino* – the women’s section of the Frelimo guerilla fighters – as a civil organization for mobilizing women to support the struggle against the Portuguese colonial power. If not before then at least by November 1976/March 1977 (dates for the Second OMM Conference and the Third Frelimo Congress, respectively) OMM was seen as a wing of the Party, Frelimo. By this time the organizational setup of the classical Communist Parties served as the model for Frelimo, and thus not much autonomy was granted to the OMM.

To some extent, however, the OMM – just like the Party as such – was a battleground for different influences and trends. When the OMM very quickly grew to a national organization, with representation in the smallest and most remote settlement of vast and sparsely populated Mozambique – this had little to do with the political style of the Communist Parties and so much more to do with women’s important positions in rural Mozambique, particularly in the matrilineal North (north of Rio Zambeze) where kinship relations go through the female line, and where habitation patterns are often matrilocal. Even in the patrilineal south of the country, however, women’s position as major food producers in agriculture is of prime importance. Furthermore, in the North as well as in the South, there are strong traditions of women-to-woman relations. Many aspects of daily life are gender specific – women spending work and leisure time with women, and men with men. Thus for women to organize together was nothing new. OMM drew much of its strength from this fact. Another influence was the political one, channelled through Frelimo, but this in itself was split. One strong influence emerged from the lessons of the armed struggle: the guerilla fighters’ awareness of the necessity of working together with the people, of listening to ideas and inputs from below. And another strong influence was rooted in the Communist Party tradition of democratic centralism, with a focus on the leaders, and with political guidelines and directions emanating from above.

OMM had held its third national conference in 1980. Not much had happened, no important decisions had been taken, no new political guidelines had emerged. When I started working as a sociologist at the OMM National Secretariat in Maputo in early 1981, a desire had been expressed by Frelimo that more work should be done by the OMM, in terms of preparing a basis of knowledge for policy decisions regarding women’s issues. This in fact was the very reason that I was employed: A sociologist was needed for running and directing collection of information in this respect.

Mozambique in 1981 was very different from Mozambique today, in 2001, twenty years later. The early 1980s was a time with very little development aid from the West, apart from a group of idealistic European, American and Latin American left-wingers, working as so-called *cooperantes*, and some aid from the Nordic countries. There were close connections to Eastern Europe, and the army, the university and several ministries were spilling over with East-German, Russian and Bulgarian experts. When I started working in the OMM, I was the only non-Mozambican around. In the first year or so there were no clear directions as to what I was expected to be doing. So I started by sketching out some investigations to be undertaken of the lives of women in the city of Maputo – in the spirit of the time with a focus on wage-working women in the (few) Maputo factories employing women, and in some urban production cooperatives as well – and later in the countryside of Maputo province, with a focus on women farmers. These were the two first investigations, undertaken by myself with a local OMM staff member as an interpreter, and with some 60-70 women interviewed (life-story type interviews) in each investigation. The following year (1982) I made a similar type interviewing enterprise in the province of Cabo Delgado. Here some 120 rural and urban women were interviewed. Cabo Delgado was chosen (not by me, but by Frelimo) because of the story of this province during the armed struggle: Among other things I was supposed to find out about the women’s participation in the struggle and what had happened since then. The results of all these investigations were written into reports (in Portuguese) and handed over to the OMM.

During my first years in the OMM I was working very much on my own, however with support from the local OMM wherever I was working. I also had the feeling that nobody read my reports. This however changed by August 1983, when the Fourth Frelimo Congress was successfully completed (April 1983) and the Party had again resources and energy for other matters. The OMM had waited for guidelines from the Party, and now at long last the Party took action and
convened a meeting in Maputo for starting up the nation-wide process of preparation for the Extraordinary OMM Conference, eventually to be held in November 1984.

This meeting was important. The political style that came forward in the opening speech of the Minister of Information, Luis Cabaço, was the bottom-up approach. This conference preparation campaign was not for handing out directives to the population, but to pose questions, to listen and to learn. Why had the abaixo lobolo/abaixo polygama/abaixo ritos de iniciacão – campaigns (“abaixo” means “down with”) had not worked as desired? Why had people continued demanding and paying lobolo (= “bride price”)? Why had men continued marrying several wives? Why were girls and boys still being sent for initiation rituals, in spite of the Party campaigns to finish with it? The actual way of going about this bottom-up process of listen-and-learn was similar to the one that Frelimo had employed very successfully in the preparation for the Fourth Party Congress. In the case of the OMM it worked like this: Brigades trained for the purpose and equipped with questionnaires and guidelines for how to chair the discussions were sent out from the National Secretariat to each of the provinces. There new training sessions took place, more people were involved, eventually to be dispersed at district level (each of the 10 provinces of Mozambique is made up of a number of districts) where the actual data collectors were trained. Interviews were conducted and discussions monitored in each and every district of the entire country, in cooperatives, state farms, factories, villages and bairros. At some point in late 1983 and early 1984 this almost took on the character of a popular movement. Everywhere people were discussing the issues involved in the investigation: lobolo, polygamy, initiation rites – and also premature marriages, divorce, and inter-generational relations. After the data-collection, results were processed and analyzed, first at local level (the districts) and later at province level, in district and province preparatory conferences. Lastly the national conference – the so-called Extraordinary OMM Conference – was held in Maputo, in November 1984.

Most of the data on which this paper is based, were produced in these rounds of discussions and data collection, the “raw data” as well as the district and province reports later read and analyzed by me. My assignment in the OMM finished with the Extraordinary Conference in 1984. In the years since then I have visited the country a number of times on a variety of other assignments (always with a focus on gender and/or social science methodology). Because of the time that has passed since these data were gathered, the paper has acquired a historical flavour. The issues discussed, however, are no less urgent to day: How does a unified family law, based on a notion of gender equality, work in diversified realities? And as a sub-question to this: How to conceptualize gender equality taking due account of male/female positions and relations under conditions of matriliny/matrilocality? Frelimo of course points out the discontinuities between Frelimo political approaches as compared to the colonial ways; what surfaces again and again in these data, however, are the continuities and the similarities, between the Christian/colonial ways of conceptualizing women, as compared to the Frelimo/socialist ways.

The proposal for a new family law, first drafted in 1980, has in more than twenty years still not made its way to a final legal document. The content of a new family law is still a contested issue. The law has been re-drafted several times, and a sixth version has very recently been approved by the Conselho de Ministros. It will be presented to Parliament in October 2001. The most debated issues, however, are no longer the same. In the early 1980s the hot issues were divorce by mutual consent, and recognition of de facto marriages, while nobody protested to the illegalization of polygamy. Today when the law is going to be presented in parliament in October, the most difficult discussions are expected to revolve around the issue of polygamy, as parts of the Muslim community in Mozambique do not want polygamy illegalized.

Only very little has been changed in the 1990 text, but some of the footnotes have been updated.

Signe Arnfred
In 1982 a pioneer article was printed in the new bulletin of the Mozambican Ministry of Justice, Justiça Popular (Dagnino, Honwana & Sachs 1982: 6). The article dealt with the diversity of family forms in Mozambique, thus establishing an anthropological overview that to my knowledge had not been there before, and on that basis discussing the difficult task of making a unified legislation function on such a diverse social base.

The article pointed out (at least) five different family forms, or rather marriage systems existing in Mozambique:
1) The traditional matrilineal system of marriage, which is the most frequent one in the northern part of the country; 2) the traditional patrilineal system: marriage with lobolo (« bride price ») dominating in the south; 3) the traditional Muslim system; 4) marriage according to Christian rites (Catholic or Protestant); and 5) civil marriage at the civil registry, the marriage form promoted (although without any great success) by the new Mozambican state.

This diversity is important. The first two forms of marriage, matrilineal and patrilineal, are especially important as they indicate two different sets of rules, norms and morals governing not only kinship relations but the very structures of society as such, structures according to which the lives of men and women have been formed for ages.

Compared to the importance of the matrilineal/patrilineal diversities the other differences – of religious vs. civil marriages – are minor. But of course they must be taken into consideration in an article aimed at discussing the legal base of marriage, because it is to this existing traditional/legal diversity that the attempts to create a new Mozambican family law have been addressed.

In 1982 this insight into the diversity of family forms was new and needed. And yet it is not nearly profound enough. In this paper, based on material that was collected by myself and by the OMM (the Organizaçao da Mulher Moçambicana – the Mozambican Women’s Organization) in 1981-1984, I shall discuss in greater detail some of the – unexpected – consequences of imposing a uniform legislation – based on an abstract principle of gender equality – on social realities so diverse as the ones found in the different parts of Mozambique.

The new legal framework: The proposed family law

A few years after the Mozambican Independence in 1975, after the important post-independence conference of the national Women’s Organization (the Second OMM Conference, in November 1976), and after the very important post-independence Party Congress (the Third Frelimo Congress, in March 1977), work was initiated regarding a new family law to replace the Portuguese Código Civil and create a unified legal basis regulating the family lives of all Mozambicans, irrespective of race, colour, religion, etc.

A draft of such a new family law was finished in 1980, and there was a plan that it should be put out for public discussion, as everybody was well aware how difficult a task it is to interfere with norms and rules that have been governing marriage arrangements and family life for generations.

This, however, never happened. Nor was the proposed family law released and codified as a law, apparently because at higher political levels there were disagreements as to parts of its content. Thus the project of the family law remained a project for years, in Mozambican legal circles, named the PLF (Projecto da Lei da Família).
Like other parts of new Mozambican legislation, prominently the Constitution, the proposed family law was based on three basic principles:

1. First, uniformity – that every Mozambican citizen should be subject to the same laws, thus doing away with the legal diversity of colonial days, with one set of law for the Europeans and « assimilados », another one for the natives (indígenas), different laws for the Muslim communities, etc.

2. Second, equality – that everybody, women as well as men, should be equal before the law. This marks a difference from the « traditional laws » of the indígenas, as well as from the Código Civil of the Portuguese: in both cases women were subject to different rules and morals from men. This principle of gender equality is rightfully a source of pride to the Mozambicans. In the Constitution, §§ 17 and 29 it reads:

« The emancipation of woman is one of the essential tasks of the State. In the People’s Republic of Mozambique woman is equal to man in rights and duties, this equality being extended to political, economic, social and cultural fields » (§ 17).

« In the People’s Republic of Mozambique women and men enjoy the same rights and are subject to the same duties. This principle governs all of the State’s legislative and executive acts. The State protects marriage, family, maternity and infancy » (§ 29).

3. Third, secularism, i.e. the dissolution of any previous tie between civil law and the Catholic Church. People are free to belong to any congregation of their choice, but a religious marriage shall have no legal status. You may marry according to any faith, but in order to give legal validity to your marriage you must marry at the civil registry as well.

In spite of the political hesitation regarding the law as such, it was agreed in 1982 to release some basic points of the PLF as guidelines for the tribunals. These guidelines were issues in the Directiva n° 1/82 of February 27 1982. There was an acute need for unified guidelines for the resolution of family conflicts, especially as the colonial Código Civil Portugues would still be in force as long as there was no new law. These points thus represent the aspects for which there was political support in the Party.

Principal issues of the directiva of 1982 are rules regarding divorce, de facto marriage, and polygamy.

**Divorce**

Divorce is a central issue in the PLF, as well as in the 1982 directiva. But it is an issue replete with inherent conflict. On one hand the possibility of divorce is a sine qua non of a progressive family legislation, in Mozambique, important among other things to mark the break with the laws of Catholic marriage. On the other hand the stability of the family is the guiding principle n° 1 of Frelimo morality.

This ambiguity comes forward clearly in the first article of the section on divorce in the proposed family law, which more than the subject of the divorce deals with its undesirability (seen from the state/society’s point of view):

« The stability of the family is essential for the realisation of its functions in relation to its members, and in relation to society. It is the interest of the State to defend and preserve the relation of marriage.

However, factors exist that may provoke a crisis in the married relation, and which may lead to its destabilization, to such an extent that the family no longer fulfills either the aspirations of the married couple, nor its obligations in relation to society. In such circumstances the dissolution of the marriage will be justified… ».

The ambiguity continues all way through, not only in the text of the law, but in its practice as well. Consented are two kinds of divorce: « Normal » litigious divorce, and divorce by mutual consent.

The litigious divorce (the only type known from the Código Civil) like any criminal case operates with an « offended » and a « guilty » party, an « accuser » and an « accused ». According to the PLF in case of « grave violation of the rules and duties of marriage and family life » either of the spouses can put in a plea for divorce. This is an important step forward compared to the indissoluble Catholic marriage, and an advantage in relation to the lobolo-marriage of Southern Mozambique, which gives the woman and the man incomparable possibilities of divorce – in Northern Mozambique the situation is very different, as shall be shown below. But a plea for divorce has to be taken to the court, thus giving the court a possibility for attempts of reconciliation.

Divorce by mutual consent – the proposed possibility for a couple to agree to divorce, simply because they want to, even if the rules and duties of marriage have not been violated by either party – has been considered a very radical proposal, too radical for some people who have maintained that this possibility would make divorce too easy, thus leading to promiscuity among young people and diminishing the respect for marriage. As a consequence, in the edition of the Family Law project referred to in the 1982-directiva divorce by mutual consent is preceded by a series of preconditions: it can only be granted after three years of marriage and one year of separation, and even so the tribunal should attempt

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1. The following is based on a series of documents prepared by the Departamento de Investigação e Legislação (DIL), Ministério da Justiça, for an internal seminar. They were given to me in 1986 by Albie Sachs, at that time Director of Investigation in the DIL.
3. Directiva n° 1/82 de 27 de Fevereiro, Ministério da Justiça, Tribunal Superior de Recurso.
4. Projecto da Lei da Família, Ministério da Justiça (dated 821223) art. 33.
reconciliation.

Altogether the atmosphere around divorce is that it is legal, certainly, but politically disapproved, the political goal being the stable, harmonious nuclear family.

De facto marriage, i.e. traditional marriage

The proposed recognition of de facto marriages is another of the points in the Family Law project that has been frowned upon. It was seen as counteracting the political request for registered marriages. In actual fact, however, what in the law are called de facto marriages, is just another name for the vast majority of all marriages in Mozambique, now as before contracted according to tradition, depending on the kinship system, customs and rules of a particular area/ethnic group.

In spite of political campaigns aimed at getting people to marry at the Registo Civil, only a minor percentage of the marriages actually in force in fact have been registered. In 1981–1982 (according to the above-mentioned article in Justiça Popular) the number of officially registered marriages was estimated to be just 10% of all newly established marriages during those two years. Thus in fact there was not much choice; if no less than 90% of the married population would not stay out of reach of the family law, the only thing to do was to legalize de facto marriage.

As a result the section in the PLF on de facto marriages is included in the 1982 directiva:

« A de facto marriage as considered by this law is a relation between one man and one woman, who, being both legally eligible for marriage, establish between themselves a community of material and affective life with the character of sincerity and stability fitting for a family. They shall thus be considered by society as such ».

This means that all the rules regarding divorce, division of goods in the case of divorce, inheritance rights of children and spouse etc. are applicable in principle to these de facto marriages just as they are to the officially contracted ones.

Thus the marriage contracted through lobolo is accepted as a legal marriage, even though lobolo as such is campaigned against; in a different paragraph of the same family law proposal it is stated that « the state in particular combats the handing over of any values or goods, be they called lobolo, gratification, anelamento (anel = engagement ring) or compensation ».

Polygamy

Dealing with polygamy at the level of the law has been uncontroversial, in so far as there has been political unanimity regarding the proposal in the PLF that:

– a polygamous marriage cannot be registered as such, because an already married person cannot enter a new marriage (before the first one has been dissolved);
– whoever wants to leave a polygamous union should be helped in doing so (assisted by the courts in questions of parental rights, division of goods, rights of alimony etc.). That the latter point is not always followed in practice is a different issue, to which I shall return later.

This then was the principal legal framework put in place on the diversity of the Mozambican family systems and issues.

Family forms in Southern Mozambique

I will now return to take a look on the family diversities in the northern and southern parts of the country respectively (starting with the South).

After a description of the state of affairs in « the old days » (an expression frequently used by Mozambicans) I shall investigate how things changed in the so-called process of modernization. Major factors in this process of change are mission, money and colonial administration. It is important to note that even if Mozambique at Independence, was relatively backward compared to other countries in Africa because of inefficient Portuguese colonialism (cf. Newitt 1981: 95; 145) it was not unchanged, especially not in the South. Processes of change were taking place, in people’s everyday lives and in their conceptions of it, induced by economic changes, by Christian missions and by colonial rule.

Finally I shall see how the new norms regarding family structure formulated in the new legislation of Independent

5. Projecto da Lei da Família, op. cit., art. 23.
6. The list of « cover names » for lobolo reflects popular attempts to pretend that they – in response to the political request – had given up marriage by lobolo, when in fact they had not, just hiding the exchange of lobolo by giving it other names.
7. In most cases the expression « the old days » refers to a particular state of affairs rather that to a particular point in time. Nevertheless the expression « the old days » has, I think, a certain advantage compared to the expression « traditional society ». It does not invite dichotomous thinking to the same extent, and it tends to be more indeterminate, open and blurred at the edges – just like the phenomena it is supposed to name.
Mozambique were put into practice (in the early 1980s) and how they worked.

**Southern Mozambique in « the old days »**

Under conditions of patriliny⁹ the children of a married woman belong to her husband’s family. Most frequently patriliny goes along with patrilocality, which means that at marriage the woman has to move away from her own family and settle with the family of the husband.

In Southern Mozambique, this was considered (with good reason) a period of crises for the young newly wed woman, especially as during the first year of marriage she was obliged to live and work more or less as a servant in the house of her parents-in-law, i.e. without a home or house, essentially without a fogueira – a fireplace – of her own (Junod⁹ 1974: 179).

Marriage as a whole was anticipated without enthusiasm by the young women, or by their families. This is an ancient wedding song from Southern Mozambique (it goes along with a particular wedding dance)¹¹:

« Go away my daughter go away
you do not know to where you are going
weep my daughter weep
you will suffer in the house of your husband
you will have to work a lot
may not even sit down when you are eating
you will be everybody’s servant
fetching the water
chopping the firewood
washing the clothes for everybody else
you will have to heat the water
preparing the bath for your husband
for his father, for his mother, for his aunt
the water is not enough
you must go to the river for more
working, working
your husband will beat you
your mother in law will call you a thief and a liar
you who never stole nor lied
weep my daughter weep
you will suffer in the house of your husband ».

There is certainly no vision of a « romantic wedding » here! And yet, marriage is the way to fulfillment for a woman (the only way, the best way). It is through marriage that you get access to land and to socially accepted motherhood.

Frequently the young woman would not know her husband before marriage, and even more frequently he would not be a man of her own choice. However, if a young girl objected very strongly to a suggested husband, she would be listened to, according to Junod (1974: 106).

In a society structured by kinship relations, marriage arrangements are no individual affair, just concerning the two people who actually get married. By marriage the whole family group becomes related to another family group, and the kind and character of these relations are essential for power, influence and sometimes even survival of the families in question. Thus marriage arrangements are far too important to be left to young, inexperienced members of the family groups. Marriage arrangements are essentially the business of the fathers, the heads of the family groups, the patriarchs. Marriage arrangements and lobolo negotiations are their principal means of exercising power and influence.

Accordingly, following the accounts of Mozambican women (of middle age) the fact that their husbands were not of their own choice has no great importance in their tales of their lives. A series of newspaper debates in Mozambique in the early 1980s¹² point in the same direction: The whole concept of courting, falling in love etc. is new, it has no history in Southern Mozambique. Young people of today wondering about what is expected of them seek advice in the newspaper debates on how to behave. The tradition for individual pairing as a prelude to marriage is very young.

However, moving away from one’s own family, becoming a part of a strange and alien family group – that of the husband – was a strain, and most of the women recounting their lives dwell on this period as being particularly difficult. The problem is not the husband, but his family, and more particularly his mother. The husband is only a problem in so far

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8. The section on Southern Mozambique is based on data collected in the two investigations conducted by myself in 1981-1982 in the City of Maputo and in Maputo Province, as well as on the data gathered in the OMM Extraordinary Conference preparation period from August 1983 to March 1984.


11. This wedding song was recorded by myself in Maputo province in 1982.

as his solidarity, as it appears, is more with his family/his mother than with his (miserable) wife. For the men who went to
the mines it was normal to send money to their mothers, not to their wives; the mother could then give a hand out to her
daughter-in-law if she wanted to. Sometimes she didn’t.

A former miners wife (she later ran away, and is now working in a Maputo cashew factory) tells about her married life:

« Quando ele chegou de África do Sul, ele só ficava na casa
da mãe dele e só deu dinheiro a ela. Era ela, a Sogra, que
depois levou-me para a cantina onde podia escolher uma
capulana. Uma só. Ela própria ficava com muitas
capulanhas ». 

Many are the tales of harsh relations between mothers and daughters-in-law. Those who were in power were the older
women; there was no doubt about that.

Especially precarious was the situation of the younger woman if the husband went to South Africa, to the mines – and
stayed away, for years on end, or maybe forever. This of course was not the norm, but it did happen. In that case his wife
was stuck: she was married, she belonged to the husband’s family – but because she was abandoned she was bound to stay
the underdog. It was even worse if the husband disappeared before she had got pregnant and borne a child.

I met a number of women who told this story. I met them in the factories of Maputo, those that were there had fled the
unworthy life as a married but single woman in the husbands family and had gone to town on their own. Obligation n° 1 in
those circumstances was to repay the lobolo.

This is the story of one of them. Let us call her Maria:

« Estou natural de Inhaca; casei lá. O casamento foi
decidido do meu pai e do marido, nunca namoramos. O meu
marido não tratava-me bem. Ele estava a trabalhar em
Maputo, eu fiquei na casa dos pais dele. Apanhei grávida,
as a criança morreu. A sogra não gostava de mim. Outravez,
momento que apanhei grávida, saiu a criança. Eu
estava a sofrer, chamei a família disse: “O meu Marido não
pensa que sou mulher dele. Não dá vestido nem nada. Quero
sair do casamento”.

Mas a mãe e o tio disse: “O teu pai já morreu. Aonde
arranjar dinheiro para voltar o lobolo? Vais ficar com o teu
marido” ».

The husband returned to Inhaca, but the situation didn’t change. At last Maria decided to flee to Maputo, in order to
earn money to be able to pay back the lobolo herself.

« Apanhei o barco sem dizer a ninguém. Comecei trabalhar
nos quintais. Quando era descoberta a fuga, os sogros foram
para a casa da mãe e do tio disseram: “Precisamos a nossa
nora”.

Eles responderam: “Não, ela não há de voltar, mas vocês
podem ir procurar ela, ela tem de voltar o lobolo”.

Então os sogros foram para Maputo buscar-me, levaram-me
para Inhaca. Apresentei o dinheiro que já tinha feito:
1 500 escudos (o lobolo era de 2 500 escudos) Pedir para
Maputo outravez fazer o resto: 1 000 escudos. Voltei,
paguei ».

In Maputo Maria was living in the house of a married sister. Another husband turned up. He was willing to pay lobolo,
but Maria said no: « I didn’t want to have anything more to do with lobolo ». Still she didn’t get pregnant. The husband
said:

« I was born in Inhaca\(^\text{13}\). I also married there. The marriage
was decided by my father and my husband, we never had a
period of courtship. My husband didn’t treat me well. He was
working in Maputo, I stayed in his parents’ house. I got
pregnant, but the baby died. My mother-in-law didn’t like
me. I got pregnant again, but this time I lost the child. I was
suffering and I called my family, I said: “My husband
doesn’t treat me as his wife. He doesn’t even buy me clothes,
nothing. I want to get out of this marriage”.

But my mother and my uncle said: “Your father has died.
Where do you think we could get hold of money to pay back
the lobolo? You had better stay with your husband” ».

So my parents-in-law came to Maputo, they found me and
took me to Inhaca. I gave them the money that I had already
made: 1,500 escudos (the whole lobolo was 2,500 escudos). I
asked for permission to go to Maputo once more in order to
get hold of the rest: 1,000 escudos. I returned, I paid ».

13. Inhaca is a small island a few hours boat journey from Maputo.
Society together. I will quote two very different sources to support, or rather to illustrate, this point of view.

Agriculture in these conditions necessitates a dispersed habitation, and an expanded network of social relations of rights. Floods are not infrequent either, the big rivers (Limpopo, Incomati) are a blessing but are dangerous neighbours.

The problem is the following: Does he have to demand a lobolo? As a Christian he should not demand it. Another Christianized Mozambican, Zebedeus (later a well-known opponent of Portuguese colonialism, eventually murdered by PIDE, the Portuguese secret police) explains it to Junod like this:

"Due better go to the hospital, it isn’t good to stay without children. She had some treatment at the hospital, but it only resulted in stomachache, and a halt in menstruation. This husband is good. He doesn’t reproach me, he never beats me, he never has lovers. As soon as he is off from work, he’ll be home."

« Lobolo »: Kinship relations

Lobolo is to be found widely in southern Africa. It is even called the same all over: lobolo or lobola. In the recent tradition of southern Mozambique lobolo was heads of cattle. Before that, according to the women, it had been a series of other things: bunches of firewood, the hide of a leopard, a number of hoes.

According to Junod (1974) history went like this:

« The lobolo first was esteiras (i.e. straw mats) and different kinds of baskets. That was in the ancient times when the whites had not yet appeared. After that, big rings of iron were used; they came in by trade with the sailors visiting the coast. […] Also heavy rings of cobber were used in the old days. […] For a long time cattle were used for the lobolo. […] The lack of cattle, probably caused by the wars with the Zulus, surely is the reason for cattle being substituted by hoes for lobolo. Thus hoes were in use, all over, from 1840-1870 along with cattle when available. Ten hoes was the normal amount for lobolo. Later parents started demanding twenty, thirty or fifty hoes. […] Hoes in turn were substituted by pounds sterling. […] In the beginning one pound sterling was equal to 10 hoes, and the lobolo was settled at 8 pounds for chiefs. […] Later the amount rose to 20 pounds for an ordinary girl, and thirty pounds for the daughter of a chief » (Junod 1974: 265-267).

Thus lobolo has been many different things. What matters is not what lobolo is, because it is first and foremost a symbol, a token exchange. On the other hand, the amount, the value of lobolo, has mattered. It has always been higher for the highest (the chiefs). And generally it has gone up and up. Presumably because of this, lobolo is often called a price. But lobolo in the old days had nothing to do with buying and selling. Thus the European name « bride price » is misleading. Lobolo is an exchange, but not a price. It is a token of a new or reinforced relation between two family groups.

Lobolo creates relations. Between families and between men, just as much as between a man and a woman. Very often lobolo is not fully paid at once, and complicated relations of debt, dependence and dominance result. Sometimes I have had the feeling that the importance of lobolo could not be overstated. It seemed to be the very glue fitting holding society together. I will quote two very different sources to support, or rather to illustrate, this point of view.

One is from Junod (1974), in an appendix to his book where he discusses how, from a Christian point of view, to deal with the pagan habit of lobolo. An old man has been baptized, but he is still tied up in « pagan customs » (as Junod says). The problem is the following: Does he have to demand a lobolo that someone owes to him, in order to pay a lobolo that he owes to somebody else? As a Christian he should not demand lobolo; on the other hand how can he escape the obligation of paying the lobolo to a pagan creditor? And in order to fulfill this second obligation, he has to demand the lobolo himself. Another Christianized Mozambican, Zebedeus (later a well-known opponent of Portuguese colonialism, eventually murdered by PIDE, the Portuguese secret police) explains it to Junod like this:

« These debts of lobolo are like strings that go from the neck of one man to the neck of another. Even if your father dies, this string will keep you fettered, you are tied to the bones of your father by this blasted chain. Others are pulled into its knots, and you will stay imprisoned in its loops. Cut it, and you are free » (ibid: 109).

This is what lobolo is really about: relations and obligations in the kinship network. From a « modern », i.e. Western/European and/or Christian point of view, such kinship relations are chains and fetters, limiting the freedom of the individual person. From a different point of view, these are the strings of a network that keeps people alive. The Portuguese anthropologist José Fialho (1982) is my second source, representing this different point of view.

Southern Mozambique is very dry. In great parts the soil is sandy, the rains are irregular, droughts are not infrequent. Agriculture in these conditions necessitates a dispersed habitation, and an expanded network of social relations of rights and obligations: If your own area is struck by drought or failure of crops, it is essential that you have relatives and allies in other things: bunches of firewood, the hide of a leopard, a number of hoes. It creates relations for the exchange of other goods and services as well. There are lots of
different rules about what should be given when to whom by whom:

« The relations between the allies in this system are egalitarian; the relations are symbolically expressed, and they are also expressed in circuits of exchange of particular goods seen as feminine from the party that supplied women, and another set of goods, seen as masculine from the party that supplied lobolo. Thus it is the institution of lobolo that guarantees the functioning of this whole system… » (Fialho 1982: 16).

Thus in the old days the exchange of X heads of cattle was more than just a token. The token exchange is material, in so far as it creates social relations, i.e. channels along which goods and services can flow. The lobolo of the old days had, however, on top of this the very practical effect of enabling the family that gave away a daughter to get hold of another one! As a head of family A, you marry away a daughter to a son of family B. Family B in exchange provides you with X heads of lobolo cattle. This lobolo cattle subsequently is passed on to family C, who has got a daughter, suitable as a wife for your eldest son. A group of cattle has changed hands, and two women have changed families, not in direct exchange, but with the cattle as intermediary. Of course in order for everything to fit so neatly all families should have an equal number of sons and daughters. Which clearly is not the case. Nevertheless, this exchange of women and cattle is the basic principle of lobolo. Lobolo is a particular kind of compensation that enables you to replace the woman lost.

Consequently in the old days the lobolo cattle were « earmarked » for lobolo. You could not receive X heads of cattle as exchange for your daughter, and then sell the cattle or exchange it for something else. Lobolo cattle were for lobolo only. If there were no more sons in a family group in need of wives, the cattle could wait for a while. New generations of sons would grow up, and they too would have to get married. Far into this century, when lobolo had turned from cattle into money (sometimes cattle and money) the air of not being a « general equivalent » stuck to lobolo money.

Mozambique’s first female academic lawyer, Gita Honwana Welch, wrote in 1982 her Tesi de Licenciatura on lobolo, based among other things on an interview with her father, Raúl Honwana. This is part of her father’s tale, illustrating the complication of lobolo-relations, as well as the « ear marking » of lobolo money:

« I’ll tell you the story of my mother, your grandmother, Vulande. Vulande who was an only daughter was lobolo’ed by an Indian. At that time the Indian traders did not bring their families with them when they came to do business in Africa. Vulande had a daughter, but in the meantime her husband died, and she returned to her parents’ house. Some time later Vulande was lobolo’ed by a man by the name Massinga, with whom she had two sons. These sons died however, and as she did not get on well with her husband, she returned once more to her parents’ house. In the meantime Vulande’s father, Mutxeketxa Hunguana, who was a resistance fighter, was in Gaza where he participated in the battle at Magul together with the troops of Gungunhana against Portuguese domination. [This was in 1895] After this battle Mutxeketxa went home to his land in Marracuene, but as he found everything destroyed by the Portuguese – the fields ruined, the cattle killed – he decided to go and found a new settlement near the beautiful lake Malongotiva, thus restarting his life.

Vulande, wanting to alleviate the sadness of her father, lobolo’ed a wife for him, a widow named Mi Hambene, who already had a daughter from her previous marriage. However, Mutxeketxa died without having fathered yet another child. Following the laws of lobolo, Mi Hambene was inherited by Mwa Massangalane, Vulande’s cousin on her fathers side, and with him she had a daughter, Babalala. Later however, Mi Hambene left the home because Mwa Massangalane maltreated her.

In this way Vulande was left with the rights over Babalala, because Babalala was born as a consequence of the lobolo paid by her.

Later again Mi Hambene started living with another man, named Nwa Vilanculo, but she refused to be lobolo’ed by him, as long as the bond of lobolo with the Hunguana family had not been undone. Mi Hambene had children with Nwa Vilanculo. When the first daughter Honipane was lobolo’ed, for 35 pounds sterling, it was Vulande who according to her rights received this lobolo.

When Vulande died, the person who inherited this money was her only proper son, myself, who had been born in a later marriage with Manuel Honwana in 1905. However, when I married for the first time in 1927, the father of my wife who was a dignitary of the [protestant] church [just like Zebedeus, quoted above, SA] did not want any lobolo, for which reason I used the 35 pounds sterling to build myself a house in which to live together with my wife »

This story further illustrates lobolo’s consequences in relation to children, and to levirate marriages. Levirate marriages are less common nowadays. Seen from the point of view of families and relations a levirate marriage is nothing strange: it creates a way for the widow to remain a member of the family group to which her children belong. It is an arrangement that allows her to go on with her life as before. Frequently her new husband will have another first wife, and especially if the widow is aged this may be a good solution to the problems raised by her husband’s death. It is seen as such by Raúl Honwana: « To the woman who became a widow when she was no longer very young it was comforting to feel protected and to be guaranteed a companheiro; and to the kinsmen of her deceased husband this was a duty of honour » (Honwana Welch 1982: 16). If the widow is young of course things might look different. But even in the old days the inherited marriage would not normally be carried out if the woman was very much against it.

The lobolo’s effects on the rights to children, however, are valid even today, even in the judgments of the courts of independent Mozambique, as says the Juiz Presidente of the tribunal of Sabié (in Gaza Province), interviewed by Gita Honwana Welch:

14. This first wife died; Gita is a daughter of Raúl Honwana’s second marriage in 1940 with Nely Nhaca.
"In cases of separation when there are small children, they will stay with the mother until they are seven or eight years old. After this, and especially if the mother marries again, the children will go to stay with their father or with his family, because of the strong sentiment (of the mother as well as of the father) that the child belongs to his father’s family. Also because a man who marries a woman who already has children, is not very likely to accept to bring up these sons and daughters of another man» (Honwana Welch 1982: 17).

To be sure, everyday Mozambican life follows the same rules, even though in some cases it is very hard on the women to have to leave their children. The way for the woman to keep the children is to pay the lobolo back, as in the following case, recorded in one of the cashew factories of Maputo:

"My husband had gone to the mines, but he never sent home anything from South Africa. I had to go fishing for shrimps at night, and then in the morning go to the market to sell them. It was very hard, I was worn out, I went to the règulo (the chief) who said that I was right, it would be OK if I left my husband and took the kids with me, but I had to repay the lobolo. So I went to Maputo and started working at the cashew factory ».

As a general rule, when lobolo has been given, the woman as well as her offspring will belong to the family of the husband. The woman, however, keeps her own family name. This is an indication that even if she belongs to the husband’s family, her ties with her own family continue to be strong. The children get the surname of the father. This is an indication that even if she belongs to the husband’s family, her ties with her own family continue to be strong. The children get the surname of the father. In cases when no lobolo has been paid, the children as well as their mother belong to her family group, they stay with her family (frequently in the settlement of the mother’s uncle) and take her family name.

In the old days (before the influence of the Christian church and the politics of Frelimo), not paying lobolo was disrespecting the woman and her family. Again, let us listen to Raúl Honwana:

:""In the old days there was no such thing as a “civil marriage” for us (i.e. at the registo civil, SA). Lobolo – that was our way of marrying. Even at that time we had to have something that distinguished a proper wife from a mistress (amante). To start living with a woman without lobolo, without anything, that was abduction. That could only be excused if the man, when the two were living together (it might be many years later) eventually did pay the lobolo to the woman’s family. Otherwise this marriage would not be regarded as a marriage. It had no value. The woman’s family had no regard for their son-in-law. And the woman did not feel protected; she had no guarantees. The man could tell her to leave at any moment. If she was lobolo’ed it wasn’t like that. The matter had to be talked over very thoroughly before there could be a divorce, which meant that the goods handed over by the husband should be handed back, i.e. returning of the lobolo » (Honwana Welch 1982: 35).

Thus there is no sense in talking of lobolo as such as woman-oppressive. On the contrary lobolo can be seen as a tribute to women – as a recognition and indication of their value and importance. Without women there is no continuation of society, nor of a particular family group. Women indeed were very valuable (as also recognized by Meillassoux 1981: 49) and the lobolo may be seen as recognition of this value. This was how it was seen by the women themselves – in « the old days ». An unhappy lot was bestowed on the women for whom no lobolo had been paid. In the province of Gaza the women describe the situation like this:

"Uma mulher que não fosse lobolada não tinha valor na sociedade, não era respeitada, tanto pelo marido como pelos seus familiares, e não podia interferir em assuntos internos e segredos da casa dos seus próprios pais, por eles não terem recebido dinheiro por parte do marido. A mulher nestes condícios a pilar e ao realizar outras tarefas domésticas, normalmente entoava canções sentimentais em como não foi lobolada ».

"Quando uma mulher não foi lobolada, não era considerada. Mesmo que na família realizasse uma reunião, ela não tinha direito de participar porque não foi lobolada. Também quando realizava-se uma missa, não era convocada, isso porque as menes da casa não lhe conheciam. Mesmo ela em si não se sentia como nada, exemplo concreto disto quando ela estivesse a pilar ou a moer tinha que inventar canções sentimentais que demonstram que ela não foi lobolada. Ainda como não foi lobolada, não havia de dar filhos, porque as menes da casa não lhe conheceu ».

"A woman that had not been lobolo’ed had no value in society, she was not respected, either by her husband, or, by her own family, and she could not take part in certain specific and secret ceremonies in the house of her own parents, as they had not received lobolo from her husband. A woman in these conditions was to be pitied. When she was pounding or doing other domestic work, she would sing sorrowful songs about her sorrowful fate of not being lobolo’ed ».

"When a woman was not lobolo’ed she was not taken into account. For example when a meeting was held in the family she could not participate because she had not been lobolo’ed. Or when some ceremony was held she was not invited, because the spirits of the ancestors of the house did not know her. Nor would she herself have any self-esteem. An example of this is that when she was pounding or grinding millet she would invent sorrowful songs about the fact that she hadn’t been lobolo’ed. Furthermore, as she hadn’t been lobolo’ed she wouldn’t bear any children, because the spirits of the ancestors didn’t know her ».

The connection between lobolo and offspring is mentioned many times in the material resulting from the OMM conference preparation discussions, particularly in the provinces of Maputo and Gaza. It confirms the general impression that lobolo indeed was an integrated part of the kinship structure. And it shows the importance of the spirits of the ancestors that are alive in people’s minds, even today.

This is a report to the preparatory OMM conference of the city of Maputo from one of the urban districts:

"A população de alguns bairros dizem que o lobolo deve continuar porque é através do lobolo que são informados os defuntos que a filha sai para casa do seu marido. Sem lobolo os defuntos não terão conhecimento da saída da menina, « The populations of some neighbourhoods say that lobolo must continue, because it is through lobolo that the ancestors are informed about the fact that the girl is leaving for the house of her husband. Without lobolo the ancestors will not
como consequência esta não iria conceber, e assim o marido será obrigado a arranjar outra mulher ».

Similarly the conception of lobolo as a valuation of the woman, and lack of lobolo as a de-valuation, holds true even today to some extent.

When interviewing women workers in Maputo, I noticed that a great many of the factory workers who had started working when they were still young girls, i.e. before marriage, a) were girls who had grown up without fathers, or b) were girls that had become pregnant without marriage, with a big overlap between the two.

Which means that a girl who works as a wage-earner will very often be a fatherless girl (having to help her mother to support any brothers and sisters), and a girl who has no father is accessible, you can treat her in any way you like. You don’t have to respect her or to marry her, you just seduce her. In other words, there is felt to be no lobolo-obligation on fatherless girls, and thus they may be maltreated15.

During the OMM conference preparation discussions in Gaza province it was expressed like this:

« A mulher que não fosse lobolada não tinha nenhum valor; qualquer homen podia conquistar, isso quer dizer que é mulher de qualquer homem ».

« Lobolo é uma forma de a mulher ser respeitada, uma vez que sem lobolo ela é tida como prostituta ».

Polygamy: Everyday life

Lobolo has to do with the structures of kinship, which other family groups you are related to by marriage and how these relationships work. Polygamy has to do with everyday life: how family life is organized, how work is divided, how the days are spent. And basically it has to do with production.

Like lobolo, polygamy is not just a fancy custom that you can finish off with a political declaration. Like lobolo, you might call polygamy an aspect of a particular system of reproduction. However, in the economy of pre-colonial and early colonial Mozambique production and reproduction are so closely interlinked that it hardly makes sense to make a distinction. Thus in this economy, lobolo and polygamy, each in its own way, are really relations of production.

In a farming economy, like Mozambique’s, based on very simple technology (the plough was only introduced in the 1920s, and only in limited areas of southern Mozambique), the major means of production besides the land itself is human labour. And apart from occasional ploughing and clearing of new land, which is the men’s job, all other aspects of farming depend on women. The more women in one family group, the more land can be taken under cultivation, the more food can be produced and the more prosperous the family head will be.

Land in Mozambique has always been plentiful. The country as such is sparsely populated. Of course all land is not the same. Some land is better than other land because of soil quality, rains, proximity to rivers, etc. Sites may be of different desirability for other reasons as well. But basically the impediment to wealth in old-time Mozambique would not be land so much as people, human labour power, which means wives and daughters to do the cultivation, and sons to look after the cattle.

Thus until the system of production has been altered you cannot expect polygamy to disappear. Of course not all men had two (or more) wives. But the important ones – like chiefs (heads of family groups) and curandeiros (medicine men) – were sure to. They were the Munumuzanas:

« O homem com única mulher não podia se reunir com os Munumuzanas com muitas mulheres, porque ele ainda não era Munumuzana » (Relatorio de uma Aldeia Comunal na Provincia de Gaza).

The number of wives was considered a sign of virility and prosperity. To be polygamous was the desired state of manhood. As a southern Mozambique proverb, quoted by Junod says (1974: 276): « Uma única mulher não constitui uma povoação », which is: One single woman does not make up a village.

All subsequent marriages would be contracted like the first one, through lobolo, and the new wife would settle in the

15. In the 1982 investigation of women workers in Maputo, I found that the women who had started working as girls were a minority. The woman factory workers would mostly be previously married women, who for some reason or other had left their husband or had been abandoned/ divorced by him. Very few woman workers would be married.
husband’s village (povoação = family-settlement) – if he wasn’t the head himself, the head would be his father or his elder brother – in a hut of her own (built for her by the husband) next to the hut of the first wife. A typical old-time settlement (as described by Junod 1974: 299 ff) would be a ring of huts surrounded by a circular fence, with just one broad entrance, opposite which you would find the hut of the first wife of the village head, the huts of the subsequent wives next to it on either side. After these huts, completing the circle you would find the huts of younger brothers’ wives, and the huts of wives to married sons.

It is the men’s work to construct the huts, but the number of huts is determined by the number of women. The man’s quarters will be in the hut of his first wife, but being polygamous he is obliged to sleep regularly, at fixed intervals in the huts of each of the other wives. Unmarried young men would share a special hut near the entrance, not too far from the similar hut of the unmarried young girls. And in the middle of it all you would find the corral for the cattle, and smaller pens for goats and chicken, maybe pigs. A special shaded area on the left hand side of the entrance is the bandla, the meeting place of the men. This is where the men receive visitors, talk and eat. At meal-times each of their wives bring their husband’s food to this place, and the married men share the food between themselves, the young men, and any visitors. Many women mean rich varieties of food.

« In the outdoor kitchen of her hut each woman will cook the maize [i.e. the basic stiff porridge, made of finely pounded maize flour, SA] and the sauce [various vegetables, occasionally meat or fish, cooked with ground peanuts, SA] in two different pots. [...] From everywhere dishes with food are brought to the men’s meeting place. Not all of the plates come with just plain millet porridge; some are filled with mandioca (cassava), sweet potatoes, etc. The men plunge into the first dish, all of them eating with their fingers. Then they go on with the next one, and so forth until everything is finished » (Junod 1974: 305).

Another proverb on polygamy, quoted by Junod (ibid.: 276) refers to this: « Não basta um só dedo para meter os graus de milho cozido na boca » which means: One finger is not enough to put the cooked maize into your mouth.

The husband with many wives must take care to treat his wives according to the rules. No one must be neglected, and he must sleep with the wives in turn. But the wives are not equal. The first wife has a special status. She is the « big wife » as compared to the subsequent « little wives ». She has special ritual duties and rights. And if and when the husband wants to marry another wife, the first wife must be consulted. She may very well herself be the one to suggest that the husband take a second wife. She is sure that she will stay in charge, and a second wife can alleviate her workload; she herself will still be the one in command.

« Muitas vezes a poligamia nasce depois de o homem ter casado a 1ª mulher, com qual mais tarde entra em acordo para casar a 2ª mulher, em virtude de a mulher tiver muito trabalho da machamba, que não consegue realizar sozinha. [...] Havia o hábito de a mulher casada sempre que possível trazer a sua irma da casa dos pais para a casa onde a mesma fosse casada, e esta sua irmã era considerada xlapswa, ficando deste modo com estatuto de nova mulher de tal regulo ou do tal curandeiro. [...] Outros casos salientes que originam a poligamia nesta zona é de grandes agricultores que devido ao peso de trabalho das machambas opinam a necessidade de conquistar mais uma mulher para ajudar o trabalho. [...]»

« Often polygamy will arise when the man, after having married his first wife agrees with her to marry a second one, because she has loads of work in the field, and she cannot manage to do it all on her own. [...]»

There was a habit that, when possible, the married woman would always take her younger sister from her parent’s house to the house where she herself was married, and then this sister would be called a xlapswa, thus becoming the new wife of the régulo (chief) or curandeiro (medicine man) in question. [...] Other important cases that have brought about polygamy in this area are the men with big farms who, because of the quantity of work in the fields, have considered it a necessity to acquire another wife in order to have more help with the work. [...] Frequently the husband (munumuzana) only considers his first wife (nkhonsikaze), the remaining ones being persons that have to subordinate themselves to the nkhonsikaze. Sometimes even she will be the one responsible for the distribution of food and clothes to the others. At times this will be taken to the extent that she is considered the mother of the other wives of her husband, and grandmother of their children » (Relatorio de uma Aldeia Comunal na Província de Gaza).

Even when the two (or more) wives of the same man were not actually sisters, they would often be related, and in any case they would consider each other sisters. Older and younger sister, this relation containing the emotional affiliation and solidarity, as well as the hierarchy of the relation.

Altogether emotional/hierarchical human relations seem to me to be the norm of human relations in this society, as opposed to today, when the general pattern seems to be on one hand un emotional/hierarchical (for the relations of production) and on the other hand emotional/egalitarian (at least as an ideal!) for the relations of reproduction, i.e. family life.
Many of the women I interviewed in the south of Mozambique had no complaints about polygamy. On the contrary: it was nice to be two, workwise and emotionally. It really is a terribly macho-fixed way of thinking that brings us Westerners/Europeans to suppose automatically that two wives to the same man must by nature be rivals to his favours. Why should they? It might as well be the husband having a hard time faced with two women. Jealousy was mentioned as a possibility when I asked the women what polygamous life was like. But for polygamy in a rural setting this is not the rule. What seems to be much more important is the companionship, especially in the areas where the husbands are away a lot of the time, and when the whole burden of running the farm thus falls on the women. In those cases it was very nice to be two.

And in fact in many of the rural households even today, when the big proud family settlements of Junod’s accounts have largely and for a variety of reasons disappeared, you still find more than one woman.

When interviewing in a remote locality in the Maputo province in 1981, on one of my very first interviewing trips, when I still did not know very much about women’s lives in Mozambique, I remember how impressed I was to find that the majority of the 10 households randomly selected for investigation were headed by women (because the husbands were away in the South African mines, in Maputo, in other places, working). Furthermore, in eight of the ten households there would be two adult women running the place together. There was always a clear hierarchy, as they would be first and second wives, mother and daughter or (most frequently) mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. But still: women working together all over the place.

Five of the ten women interviewed in this locality of the district of Magude, Maputo province, were or had been parties in a polygamous marriage. When asked what they thought of polygamy this was what they said:

« Não gosto de ficar sozinho »  
« Gosto porque pode descansar – o 2º mulher faz o trabalho »
« Gostava porque era a minha irma que era dona da casa »
« No tempo passado gostava, podíamos ajudar-nos. Agora não gosto »
« Porque foi casada tinha que gostar »
« I don’t like to be alone »
« I like it because I can rest now – the second wife does the work ».  
« I liked it because it was my own sister who was the first wife ».  
« In the old days I liked it, we could help each other. Today I don’t like it ».  
« I was married [to a polygamous man] so I had to like it ».  

Another illustrative story of happy polygamy is cut from the weekly magazine Tempo, of June 24, 1979. It is told by Joana Massimbo, now fifty years old and worker at Cajuca, one of the Maputo cashew factories.

Evidently the interviewer expects polygamy to mean suffering for the woman, but Joana tells a different story:

« Quando eu nasci, os vizinhos tinham um menino, cinco anos mais velho. Primaveria, éramos todos tratados como um casal, até que ele começou a trabalhar em Minas. A primeira vez que ele foi, eu tinha 13 anos, e quando ele voltou, ele queria pegar outra esposa. Então ele fez.  

Meus pais, contudo, não acharam que eu fosse muito jovem, e em um encontro entre as casas foi acordado que ele deveria me conhecer.  

Muitas das viagens que fui, eu era a primeira esposa, e depois que eu falei que eu não queria, ele passou o tempo nas minas e, ao invés disso, plantou batatas e vendia, e assim nós podíamos cuidar das crianças. [...]  

Em geral, a situação foi boa, embora o tempo de trabalho fosse longo. Nós sempre viveram em um ambiente de entrosamento e felicidade com o marido e as crianças. Além disso, a vida feliz foi interrompida dezenas de anos antes de o meu marido falecer. A minha irmã de agora chegou a nova idade. Eu tenho que deixá-lo para a minha irmã que cuida do casal.  

Assim você pode ver, não todos as mulheres de um casal poligâmico tinham de ter rivalidade. Muitas vezes, a intervenção da filha prometida criar rivalidade entre os dois, quando alguém se perguntar com uma das meninas para trás do outro, falando de favor, e vice-versa. [...]  

Altamente, eu sinto que essa poligamia no contexto de Southern Mozambique em « the old days », embora estivesse profundamente integrado no âmbito de uma instituição de uma sociedade e seu sistema de produção, também havia muitas vantagens para os pontos de vista das mulheres.

I do not say that men and women were equal. This was not the case; moreover the mere posing of the question in that way tends to lead the thinking regarding women’s issues in that society off on the wrong track. Men and women belonged to different gender groups with different tasks and responsibilities. Men had some positions and women had others. True enough, those who were heads of villages were always men. Those who led the negotiations on lobolo were men. Those

who administered the structures of kinship thus were men. But those who ran the everyday life of farming and cooking were women. Those who produced life and food were women…

Generally it is my impression that men and women respected each other, and if the women felt offended they would fight back! I found a nice example of this in Junod (1974: 277). He is discussing the incidents of jealousy among the wives in a polygamous marriage:

« What gives rise to this feeling? A husband shows preference for one of the wives, giving her better presents than the ones he gives to the others, staying in her hut more nights than he does in the huts of the others, or giving her, on his return from the hunt, the best piece, for instance a leg of gazela. This creates buculele (jealousy) in the hearts of the others, and when he continues in that way, a straw is enough to light the fire.

How then is this feeling expressed? By mutual insults between the wives […] by insults and threats against the husband; by refusal on the part of the abandoned woman to cook for him or to look after his harvest; by acts of violence directed towards him – a woman may get to the point of grabbing the husband in front of the hut of the rival and making life so intolerable for him that he’ll flee to South Africa just to find peace… ».

Junod as a Protestant missionary of course sees polygamy as essentially immoral, and he is trying to induce this feeling in the congregation surrounding the mission station of Rikatla in Southern Mozambique, where he lived and worked in the late 19th century. Regarding changing people’s attitudes to polygamy, however, his success was limited.

The above description of cases of jealousy in polygamous households actually originates from a small enquiry that Junod made at one point among his adult pupils (all male of course) of the missionary school. He received some twenty written answers listing the arguments in favour of and those against polygamy, seen from the pupil’s points of view. And in fact the point about jealousy is the only genuinely negative aspect of polygamy that the pupils can think of.

The arguments in favour of polygamy are the following:
1) Quotation of the proverb: « One single wife does not make up a povoação ».
2) To have several wives brings glory to a man.
3) A polygamous man may be generous and hospitable as his wives cook lots of food.
4) If the first wife dies he is not left alone.
5) If the first wife falls ill, he will not be in need of food.
6) There are lots of people to do the work of the household. The women help one another.
7) The polygamous man has many children.

The arguments against polygamy are not very convincing. All but 1), the above mentioned one about jealousy – which surely can create unpleasant situations for the man – are seen as if with the eyes of the mission:
2) Polygamy makes it easier to get drunk, because of the great quantities of beer that can be produced by so many people.
3) It makes pride swell in the heart of the polygamous man.
4) Polygamy is expensive because the husband has to pay one pound sterling in taxes for the hut of each of the wives.
5) It saps the man’s strength because of the sexual excesses that he has to perform.

This last point, Junod has to admit, as presented by one of the pupils, « seemed to have little value in the eyes of the others, as in fact it made them laugh » (1974: 277).

On the whole Junod cannot hide his disappointment at the outcome of this inquiry: The pupils do not really see the immorality of polygamy, he complains, and: « Not a single one mentioned the great principle of equality between man and woman in front of the law of sexual purity » (ibid.: 512).

Junod’s comments are interesting because they show some of the areas of conflict between the norms and ways of the « old days » Mozambique on one hand, and on the other hand the modern European standpoint (although in a very moralist edition) that Junod himself represents. In the following sections I shall investigate what happened to these characteristics of the southern Mozambican social network and everyday life: lobolo and polygamy, in the subsequent process of social and economic change.

Southern Mozambique: Impacts of colonization, mission and money

Basically what happens in the so-called process of modernization is that the social structure based on extended kinship relations and intricate lobolo-debt links is broken up. This break-up gives larger room for maneuver for the individual, or rather for some individuals. In a certain way you can say that the individual as such is created in the process.
This is Marx’s point of view. In the introduction to *Grundrisse* Marx criticises Adam Smith and David Ricardo for taking the human individual (whom they call « economic man »!) as the point of departure in their analysis of society. But the individual, Marx points out, is not history’s starting point – on the contrary « the individual » is a product of history:

« The single, individual hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belong in the unimaginative visions of the 18th century Robinsonades […] The 18th century prophets, on whose shoulders Smith and Ricardo are standing see this individual of the 18th century as an ideal, not as an outcome of a historical development, but as the starting point of history. This is wrong, because […] the further we go back in history, the less independent the individual becomes, the more he seems a part of a larger whole » (Marx 1939: 5-6).

To me it makes a lot of sense to admit a gradual but radical break in the ways society is working, a break that took place in Europe more or less at the end of the so-called « Middle ages », later named the « dark Middle ages » in contrast to the following « age of Enlightenment ». The following « age of Enlightenment » was indeed structurally different, with science and rational thought in central positions, initiating the gradual marginalization of religion. Conceptions of gender and general morality, however, are still firmly rooted in Christianity.

In Mozambique this process of so-called modernization was initiated in the late 19th century with more effective Portuguese colonization, with the introduction of money and paid work, and with the work of the Christian missions. The process was, however, gradual, multiple and diverse, with built-in incongruences of time. The new introduced itself in the guise of the old, and may stay so for a long time.

*Transformations of the « lobolo »: Commercialization*

Just as the first motor cars in the USA were shaped like stagecoaches (think of an old Ford T), so in the beginning when *lobolo* turned into money, the money behaved like cattle. It was « ear marked » for *lobolo*, and it could be used for nothing else.

But once *lobolo* has turned into money, there is a risk that it will start behaving like money. And the characteristic of money – again following Marx – is exactly *not* to be ear-marked, but to be a « general equivalent » exchangeable with anything else. And thus *lobolo* over the years – parallel to other changes in a society likewise initiated by missions and money – increasingly did become a « bride price » – a sum of money paid by the husband to the father for the delivery of his daughter. *Lobolo* became a price; marriage became commercialized. And *lobolo’s* implication for women shifted to the opposite of what it used to be. From being a sign of dignity and respect it turned into a mean of oppression.

The Mozambicans are well aware of this shift. Time and again in the OMM conference preparation discussions it was emphasised that in the old days *lobolo* was a symbol of exchange, an alliance between families, whereas nowadays… I quote from the OMM conference preparation district report from Chokwe, Gaza province:

« *Lobolo* não significa compra. […] O *lobolo* no tempo passado tinha uma característica muito diferente da actual. A entrega de objectos era sinal de respeito, era um acto cerimonial e não compra.

A certo passo o *lobolo* deixou deste característica toda, introduzisse o dinheiro desde os 500 escudos até aos 2 500 escudos. Para além de dinheiro levavam-se cabeça de gado […]

Mas nessa altura o gado bovino custava apenas cada cabeça 400 escudos e outros preços abaixo de 1 000 escudos. Deste modo, até esta altura do processo o *lobolo* não era caro.

Nestes últimos dias, desde 1975, altura em que ascendemos a Independência Nacional, o *lobolo* começou custar valores altamente consideráveis, variando dos 10 a 80 contos e cabeças de gado.

Neste momento as cabeças de gado custam muito dinheiro (15 000 a 30 000). Para além disso é preciso arranjar-se anéis, brincos, roupa, comidas, bebidas entre outros. […]

Assim o *lobolo* deixa de ter aquele carácter cerimonial, de respeito, sinal de compromisso do jovem sobre a rapariga, passa a ser processo comercial caríssimo como se se tratasse de compra de um objecto como carro ou outro de luxo ».

In this way *lobolo* has stopped having this ceremonial character of respect, of indication of commitment of the young man to the girl. It has turned into a commercial process, and a very expensive one, as if it were about buying a car or another item of luxury goods ».

There are two things in this report worth noting. One is the awareness that something important happened when *lobolo* turned into money. And the other is the concern about the elevated amount. This concern is shared by everyone (with perhaps the exception of men with daughters of marriagable age).
As a general rule people like lobolo because of what it meant in the old days, and they do not object to the fact that lobolo has turned into money. What they see as the problem is the way lobolo has gone up, the very elevated price that today (i.e. in the early 1980s when this data was collected) you have to pay in order to get married. The interconnection, however, between lobolo-turned-money and the price rise should not be missed. Once lobolo has turned into money the whole business may be seen as a commercial transaction. It is no longer a recompense for a daughter lost, enabling you to get hold of another « daughter », but as a recompense for expenses you incurred in raising this daughter – which is a totally different thing. As if the daughter were a commodity, the value of which is calculated by the cost of its production!

In the old-time lobolo-recompensation what counts is use value: women are precious and indispensable; in letting one woman go you must be assured of having access to another. The « rationale » of new-time lobolo however is exchange value: expense X must be replaced by income Y. This argument is very frequent in the lobolo debate. I will quote once more from the abovementioned Chokwe report:

« A subida de lobolo é especulada como sendo resultado de subida dos preços dos produtos de consumo. [...] Quando a pessoa reflecte nos gastos que teve pela filha, para mandá-la à escola, aos hospitais, estipula preços altamente exagerados para o lobolo da sua filha, com intuito de ser recompensado as despesas que fez.

Dum modo geral, a civilização moderna e a subida dos preços dos artigos de consumo é a fonte principal para a subida de lobolo ».

Anyhow, lobolo amounts have risen greatly in recent years.

From the district of Chibuto in Gaza province the situation is reported like this:

« Aldeia Comunal Ngungunhana: 60 000 meticais, + 3-4 cabeças de gado, para além das roupas para os pais ».

« Localidade Sede: 15 000-20 000 meticais + anel, relógio e roupa para os pais ».

« Aldeia Comunal Acordos de Lusaka: 40 000 meticais + 2 cabeças de gado ».

« Localidade de Chipadiap: 20 000-50 000 meticais + 5 litros de vinho ».

In more remote places, as for instance in the vast and sparsely populated district of Chicalualacuá (still the province of Gaza) apparently the habit of paying lobolo mainly in cattle is still in use. But if the cattle is calculated into money the end result remains much the same:

« Aldeia Comunal Maconguele: 1 500 meticais e 8 cabeças de gado ».

« Aldeia Comunal Obrigado Tanzania: 1 500 meticais e 8 cabeças de gado ».

« And this is what they say in Xilembene, a small town in the district of XaiXai, Gaza province: « O lobolo passou a ser um negócio, ilegalmente exercido. O lobolo actual é nada menos que candonga ».

As a thread through all the discussions of lobolo runs the proposal of a legally defined ceiling of the skyrocketing lobolo prices, and the suggested maximum is very frequently mentioned as 2,500 meticais. This was, it turns out, what it used to be in the later years of colonialism. Raúl Honwana tells how it came about:

« In the beginning of this century the Portuguese didn’t interfere directly [with the lobolo] but in the 30’s Augusto Cabral, who was Head of the Department for Native Affairs (Negócios Indígenas), ordered that the price of lobolo should be 2,500 escudos, and 4,000 if the girl was the daughter of a chief. This was because they [the Portuguese] were of the opinion that there was too much disturbance among the natives because of matters of lobolo.

Furthermore they wanted to control the movements of cattle, and enforce the use of money. In the colonial administration they had a veterinarian whose job it was to control the cattle of the region. Thus in the cases of lobolo still being made in cattle, you had to report it to the native register at the colonial administration, saying who provided the cattle and how many heads» (Honwana Welch 1982: 36).

I suspect that this official limit to lobolo set by the colonial administration was the main reason for the (reported) rocketing of the price after Independence. Since Frelimo came into power, it has campaigned against lobolo, but that has not had much effect apart from driving lobolo underground and changing the name of what was seen at the surface. In Frelimo in the beginning there was no understanding of the importance of lobolo in people’s minds. This understanding
Transformations of the « lobolo »: Individualization

In « the old days » lobolo was an aspect of the kinship system, commanded by the father, the head of the family-group living together. In the normal order of things, the lobolo obtained for the marrying away of one daughter would be used for getting a wife for the eldest son, and so forth. The sequence of marriage would be according to age, and it would be the father who ran the show and administered the lobolo.

By the turn of the century, however, and increasingly in the following decades, young men from Southern Mozambique started going off to the gold mines of the Rand in South Africa, near Johannesburg which is not very far from the Mozambican border. In doing so they earned their own money. In the beginning, they would hand most of it over to their parents; for a while the fathers were still in control. But their power was not as unquestioned as before. With the money from the mines, an alley had been opened for the young men to escape kinship hierarchy and order. If they didn’t want to wait for sisters and elder brothers to be married, they could arrange their lobolo themselves! For a while two kinds of lobolo, the old and the new, coexisted side by side. This is how the situation is described by Junod:

« Today you have two kinds of lobolo:
1) The lobolo that is obtained by the marriage of a sister, and which the young man, with the acceptance of the family, can use to get himself a wife. This, according to the old customs, is the way to get married.
2) The lobolo that is acquired as money earned by the young man who has worked for this purpose and who thus owns the money himself. This second type of lobolo is much easier to obtain with the new conditions of life, especially as a stay of a year or two in Johannesburg is sufficient to accumulate the money needed for the purpose. The young men that don’t have a sister, or who for some reason have been disfavoured in the past, now may dream of marrying even three or four women! » (Junod 1974: 267).

Increasingly the power and authority of the family heads were broken, and the young men took the matter into their own hands. Very different social relations resulted. The old povoação, the extended family settlement, was broken up. This happened for other reasons as well. Increasingly in the 1930’s and 40’s the Portuguese made raids on the settlements of the Mozambicans for labour power. The very conspicuous povoações were obvious targets. People dispersed and hid in the bush. Men now went to Joni (Johannesburg) in order to escape xibalo (forced labour).

The driving force behind the change from natural economy in a kinship network to a money economy based on paid work and cash crops, was the colonial power’s desire for exploitation and profit. A natural economy, just producing for people’s needs, cannot be exploited. Nevertheless the change did bring some advantages, especially to the young men. They gained a freedom they had not previously had: they could earn money and they could get wives. They didn’t have to depend (as much as before) on fathers and older brothers. They went off to foreign countries, learning new things.

Even if the mine work, as such, must be terrible (it is underground, hard, dangerous, off-work living in crowded compounds) in the minds of Mozambican males even today, there is a splendour about it. Going to the mines was still considered very attractive in the early eighties. Young men crowded outside the WENELA recruiting office in Maputo, waiting for days and weeks, hoping to get a contract. Going to the mines had become a sign of manhood.

However, seen from the point of view of the women, this same change in the social setup had very different consequences. The men became liberated. The women became imprisoned, to put it in the extreme. From being part of a larger kinship network, living in extended families with lots of other women for help and support in work and leisure, women increasingly came to depend on one man only, their husband, and they lost the close contacts with the other women of the kin group, even though women today very often succeed in arranging their daily lives together with at least one other woman.

With changing society, the implications of lobolo as such were radically changed. Not all of this had a direct link with the commercialization of lobolo. The implications of lobolo changed because the preconditions for it were changing. Perhaps the men stayed away in the mines. Perhaps the women wanted divorce. And then, seen from the point of view of the women, lobolo appeared to be the thing that prevented them from enjoying the same type of freedom as the men. As married women, they could not just go to town and earn their own money – because of the lobolo that obliged them to stay with their husband’s family, even if he himself was away, and even if they were suffering.

Lobolo prevented divorce where divorce was needed (seen from the woman’s point of view). In most cases a woman would have preferred to go home to her parents’, i.e. to her own family/land/kin group, because this was what you would normally do in this situation. However, with the parents not able to return the lobolo to the husband, the woman would have to arrange the money herself. This is the story that a lot of – now – middle-aged Maputo women factory workers can tell. In the cashew factories – which as the first factories employing women started in the 1950s – in the early 80s, judging from my interviewing experience, this kind of woman was the majority. Not surprisingly this kind of woman does not like lobolo. They have felt enslaved by lobolo, and they say so. This is a transcription from a typical woman’s intervention at...
an OMM discussion meeting in a cashew factory of Maputo:

« Quanto a mulher, não gosta, porque ela torna-se escrava por causa do lobolo. Em caso de divórcio, independentemente dos anos que tiver no lar, a família do marido exige a devolução do dinheiro, mas muitas vezes não consegue devolvê-lo, ficando obrigada a emprestar-se nas fábricas, como no caso dela ». 

« As for the woman she does not like lobolo, lobolo makes her a slave. In case of divorce, no matter how many years the woman has lived with the husband's family, when she wants to divorce they’ll demand all the money of lobolo back. Very often it is not possible [for the woman’s family] to raise the money, so she has to go to work in the factories. This is my own situation ».

Furthermore, even when the issue is not divorce, the new type of lobolo and the changes in society as a whole have produced a new type of attitude of the husband vis-a-vis his wife. The commercialization and individualization of lobolo make the husband think that he has bought the wife and thus has a personal right over her – something which was unknown before. These are reports from Maputo and Gaza provinces about how lobolo works nowadays, in the husband/wife relationship:

« O lobolo tem criado grandes problemas no seio das famílias dado que em certos casos o homem pode humilhar e reprimir a sua mulher com o argumento de ela não poder ter nenhumha observação visto a mesma foi lobolada (comprada). 

Por isso o homem pode maltratar a sua mulher tanto que pode, argumentando que aquilo corresponde o valor do dinheiro ou de gado que o mesmo tiu para lobolar ». 

« In this way the man may hurt and insult his wife as much as he pleases, saying that this only corresponds to the value of the money or the cattle that he had to pay for the lobolo ». 

« Na realidade uma mulher é espezinhalada e explorada no matrimônio por ter sido lobolada. Digo isso, porque em qualquer caso ou problema que surje na casa falando directamente da mulher, o marido sempre fala do seu dinheiro perdido por ter lobolado uma mulher como esta que não sabe fazer isto ou aquilo ». 

« Really a woman is despised and exploited in marriage because she is lobolé ed. I say this, because concerning any problem or issue that may arise in the home related to the wife, the husband will always talk of the money that he has now lost by getting himself this hopeless wife who doesn’t know how to do this or that in the house ». 

« Homens batem as suas mulheres por causa do lobolo, dizendo: “Não bato na minha mulher, bato no meu dinheiro” ». 

« Men will beat their wives because of lobolo, saying: ”I am not beating my wife, I only beat my money” ». 

« Lobolo has created great problems in the families, as in certain cases the man may humiliate and oppress his wife, maintaining that she is not allowed to utter any opinion because she was lobolé ed, i.e. bought. 

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« Men will beat their wives because of lobolo, saying: ”I am not beating my wife, I only beat my money” ». 

Whereas lobolo in the old form indicated mutual respect in the relation between husband and wife, lobolo in the modern form seems to have the possibility of turning any discord between the spouses into a reminder of the fact that he was the buyer and she the object bought. Thus from being an indispensable mechanism in the intricate functioning of an extended kinship system, lobolo has turned into a means of male dominance, in the form of husbands’ dominance and control over wives.

« Lobolo » and the rise of husband-power

I have the feeling that this is a major reason for the rise and spread of lobolo in later years: Lobolo works excellently as a vehicle for male dominance in the guise of husband power – a characteristic of gender relations in so-called modern society.

Previously, gender relations were about the group of men versus the group of women, the men’s domain vis-a-vis the women’s. The relation between husband and wife was hardly an issue; actually husband and wife did not have all that much to do with each other. This is how Junod describes the gender relation between husband and wife in the old days:

« What then are the relations between husband and wife after the honeymoon? Of course this varies a lot according to the individual persons. But generally they are not very intimate with one another; the man stays with the pals at the bandila, the space in the povoação that serves as the men’s meeting place, and he only seldom comes to the ndange, the enclosure of caniçho (cane, reed) where you find the fireplace and which is the true domain of the wife » (Junod 1974: 179).

But all this is changing. With so-called modernization, extended families break up, and nuclear families little by little become the norm: just one husband, just one wife, individualized relations. The structure of gender relations has changed,
from relations of gender groups to relations between individuals. And at the same time, promoted by the changes introduced with paid work and greatly supported by the patriarchal ideologies of the Christian missions, male dominance has increased.

An aspect of this pattern is the spread of lobolo to places where it was not known before, such as the Northern matrilineal parts of Mozambique where there used to be no lobolo. Lobolo in its whole conception (exchange, recompensation) belongs to patriliney. It makes no sense if the wife does not move away upon marriage. Conversely in these areas the future husband had to stay for a while working on the fields of his parents-in-law, in order for the wife’s family to see if he worked well.

Even here lobolo is increasingly adopted! Lobolo in the modern form: individual payment of money. This was clearly evidenced by the results of the OMM conference preparation inquiries and discussions. And in the areas where lobolo is new, as might be expected, the men are in favour, while the women are against. These are extracts from a discussion in southern Zambézia, just north of the Zambezi river:

– Man: « The woman for whom no lobolo has been paid is not likely to respect her husband ».
– Woman: « The lobolo’ed woman is considered a slave to the husband and she is subordinate to the husband’s family. When problems arise, she cannot take the initiative to leave the husband because she was paid for. And when she goes to her uncle’s house, he refuses to help her because he already has eaten up the lobolo money that he received. What happens then is that the woman is obliged to stay where she is, suffering ».

According to sources in the OMM, lobolo is now found in all provinces of the country, especially in the cities where the influence of modern life is strongest. Lobolo isn’t exactly modern, but it goes along well with other trends of rising male dominance as a result of modernization.

« Lobolo » as an issue between generations

I have dealt with lobolo as indicating and influencing a new husband/wife relationship. But modern commercialized high-price lobolo has another consequence as well. It is very hard on young people, who cannot get married because the young men cannot raise these exorbitant amounts of money. This aspect is also mentioned frequently, and very strongly objected to, in the OMM discussions.

« Modern » lobolo, which started as a liberation of young men from the power of their fathers, has ended up putting a heavy burden on many a young man for years on end, making it impossible for them to get married and thus to start their own lives. Now, not just Joni-goers, but everyone, including students with no income, are expected to pay the lobolo themselves. A group of young people from Gaza have this comment:

« O lobolo sabota todos os nossos princípios porque antes de tudo é preciso resolvemos o problema do dinheiro, roupas, artigos etc. para o lobolo, e é só mais tarde que vamos resolver os problemas da organização do nosso lar ». « The lobolo undermines all of our principles, as before anything else we’ll have to solve the problem of money, clothing, and various other articles for the lobolo, and only after that can we start thinking about the problems connected to the establishing of a home ».

When at last the lobolo has been paid the young people are absolutely broke, with no money to start living as a family. All this lobolo-business was especially severe in the early 1980s when all sorts of commodities were extremely scarce in Mozambique. At that time, getting hold of engagement rings, watches, suits, dresses, etc. for the lobolo demanded more than the usual skill and endeavour (most of it had to be obtained by smuggling from neighbouring countries). Amassing the lobolo under those circumstances could easily take years.
Traditional polygamy in the countryside

What about polygamy under the impact of modernization?

In the countryside it has stayed largely the same. The men may go to the mines or do other migrant work, but the farming goes on as before. This is a major point in colonial exploitation: the peasants-turned-workers stay linked to the land; they are only semi-proletarianized. While the men are away working, the women are farming on the land. This arrangement keeps the wages down.

Firstly the wage doesn’t have to cover the sustenance of the worker’s family: wife and kids. The wife looks after that. And secondly, the wage of a seasonal worker doesn’t even have to cover the survival of the worker himself when he is off work. The wife looks after that. The wage is thus not much more than food and board while working, and pocket money.

The Mozambican wage-earning husband was expected to send money home for capulanas and for clothes for his wife (and kids). Not for food. Food for the family is the responsibility of the woman. Under conditions of male paid work the demand on the woman for farming is intensified because she is now on her own, without the help from her husband that she previously would have had. Under such conditions polygamy may be very useful, as was shown above in the example from Magude.

In Gaza province they blame polygamy on the miners. They come home from Joni with their pockets filled with money, and they need wives to run their farms.

« Verifica-se o aumento da poligamia devido a situação económica que o nosso país apresenta nesta fase inicial. Geralmente estes tem sido em maior número trabalhadores das minas em África do Sul, possuem até neste presente momento mínimas condições da vida, e apoderam-se as mulheres. »

« Antigamente a poligamia era fomentada pela agricultura, porque os homens pretendiam ter muitas mulheres para produzir bem o algodão e o amendoim; neste momento é fomentada pelos majoni, porque têm muito dinheiro e haveres, que puxam às vistas das raparigas, e necessidades de muitos pais para terem roupa e cobertores. »

« Previously polygamy was encouraged by agriculture because of the situation of our country in this initial phase. Generally the major part of the polygamous men have been the workers in the South African mines, as until now they have at least had minimal living conditions (i.e. they are less poor than anybody else) and thus they succeed in getting women. »

As I see it, there is no less reason for polygamy today in the countryside than before. And if there is more money (with the majoni) one should expect more polygamy. Unfortunately I have no statistics to show if this is the case. The church, of course, has been against polygamy all along, but apparently without much result. As long as the relations and means of production in the countryside (family farming based on female labour with hoes) do not, polygamy cannot really be expected to change.

Polygamy of the city = « amantismo »

The situation in the towns is clearly different. Here you cannot expand production by getting more wives. Land is of course very scarce. Many women do manage to make a small machamba in the backyard, along the road, or in the countryside a long way away. But the household economy in towns is much more explicitly based on wage labour. This means that economically women are much more dependent on men than they used to be in the countryside. The household pattern of nuclear families aggravates the woman’s dependence.

Polygamy is no exception to this. The two wives rarely live together; rather it is two nuclear family setups with the husband going to and fro. Or to be more precise: polygamy in towns is what in Mozambican Portuguese is called amantismo: a married man has an amante, a mistress, somewhere else. A very common pattern is that the first wife is a « traditional » housewife/peasant, cultivating a small plot of land somewhere. The « second wife » however is a wage-earner. And she is not a proper wife. There was never a marriage, no lobolo has been paid. The « second wife » is just an amante, a mistress.

When interviewing working women in Maputo in 1982 in one of the cashew factories, Caju de Machava 1, and in a biscuit factory, Compania Industrial de Matola, of the twenty women interviewed (randomly selected), fourteen were this kind of amantes: living on their own, in their own houses, but with an amante (a man) who had a first wife somewhere else. He would come and stay with them time and again, and they would often have children together. Many of these women suffered from not being proper wives. Some of them would be informally officialized, i.e. they would have been introduced to wife n° 1, and to the family of the husband. This is the desired situation, because this looks most like proper (polygamous) marriage. One woman complained:
Many first wives do accept the amante and treat her like a sister, as you are supposed to do in a proper polygamous setup in Southern Mozambique: « É minha irmã como é mesmo marido/She is my sister because we share a husband.».  
But in other cases there is conflict and barulho (quarrels): hostility between the wives, jealousy, competition for the favours of the husband, etc. In other words, much more of the two-women-one-man situation that from a Western/European cultural background you would expect: « Há certas mulheres-amantes que estão no concurso. Quando o marido entre à casa da amante ele encontra água quente na casa de banho, perfuma na cama, etc. A amante pode cozinhar melhor – galinha e peixe – porque têm dinheiro. A mulher em casa está a esperar a chegada do homem, só pode cozinhar hortaliça ».  
« Amantismo »: It is the man who profits

The situation of amantismo thus very easily turns into a man’s privilege. It is he who profits from the setup and from the competition between the wives. He can play one woman off against the other, and he does so.  
In the « polygamy of the city » there is no shared daily life and no work relation between the wives. They do not live together; they do not help each other. They may know (of) each other, but only indirectly, through the husband. They are not related as closely and importantly as are co-wives in the countryside, and thus the main advantage of polygamy seen from the women’s point of view, has gone. « No campo as mulheres têm unidade/In the countryside the women are united », the factory women said. This is not the case in towns. It seems to me that, much more than in traditional rural polygamy, the « city polygamy » women are exploited by the men.

Accordingly the amantes/« second wives » feel insecure. Today is all right, but what about tomorrow? In marriage at least you do have certain guarantees: lobolo has been paid, divorce must be negotiated by the families. But in relations of amantismo the husband is bound by nothing. Any day he may disappear, leaving the « second wife »/amante alone with kids and everything. It is certainly not by choice that she is not a proper wife: « É o meu destino não casar, mas não gosto, não posso gostar. É o destino. Tenho três rapazes, cada um com pai dele. Fico vergonhada por causa de falta do pai. Seja melhor se o pai tivesse falecido ». « Sempre não tive sorte. Se conseguisse encontrar um homem que querria me casar, era para casar logo, acabar com esta vida [de amantismo] ». « It is my destiny not to marry, but it is not of my preference. How could it be? Destiny made it so. I have got three sons, with three different men. I feel embarrassed because they don’t have a father. It would have been better if the father had been dead ». « I never was lucky. If I succeeded in meeting a man that would marry me, I would marry right away, putting an end to this life of amantismo ».  

If the amantes could marry most of them would do so right away. Marriage is the known form of a proper, dignified, and reasonably secure woman’s life.

These women are economically independent. They work and are self-supporting, often with a number of children, and a sister or mother or cousin in the house to do the housework. In town you see the two-women household with an absent husband, just as you do in the countryside (Magude). But socially they are not independent: they feel that in order to be a decent woman, they should be married, they should have a husband. And sexually/emotionally they need a man.  
When I asked the working women/amantes, who were dissatisfied with their lives why they preferred to have an amante-husband instead of living on their own, these were typical answers: « O sangue está a correr/marido/The blood is running ». « O sangue manda relações, preciso arranjar um marido/The blood demands sexual relations, I have to get myself a husband ». « Ainda estou nova, necissito dum /I am still young, I need a husband ».  

Very few of the working women had come to a different conclusion: that they were better off without a man:

« Não hei de casar mais. Tenho medo disso. O que me deu? O que é o vencimento deste casamento não posso ver ». « I am not going to marry again. I don’t want it at all. What did I gain from marriage? I can’t see what would be the
What are the trends for the future? A new identity is emerging among these wage-earning women. But so far it is kind of passive, withdrawing from men rather than fighting for a new type of gender relations, which are more on women’s terms.

The major trend of the change from traditional polygamy to « modern » amantismo is a change in the gender balance clearly in direction of more male dominance and female dependence and submission. Again, the men seem to have gained by the change, whereas the women have lost.

The new family law put into practice in Southern Mozambique

From the point of view of the law, lobolo doesn’t exist. This means that the legal attitude applied to lobolo is ignorância deliberada, deliberate ignorance, as explained by Albie Sachs in an interview in the weekly Newspaper Domingo: « One consequence of deliberate ignorance is for example that the courts cannot recognize any obligation of either payment or return of the lobolo »17. So seen from the point of view of the law, lobolo is simply ignored. It is not criminalized and it is not legalized.

« Lobolo » – « Deliberate Ignorance » which is: « lobolo » goes on

The campaigns against lobolo have always been on the political level. In the early eighties « Abaixo lobolo » (down with lobolo) was one of the basic slogans, used for warming up and finishing off almost any political meeting – along with: « Abaixo polygama! Abaixo ritos de iniciação! Viva o Presidente Samora Moises Machel! A luta continua! », etc. Thus for a long time lobolo was considered one of the major indications of male dominance and female subordination in old-time Mozambique.

The introductory passage to the political resolutions resulting from the Second OMM Conference 1976 reads like this:

«… Besides this system of [colonial] exploitation and oppression shared by the whole people, the Mozambican woman is victim of a second form of oppression, originating in the traditional-feudal (sic) ideology. This ideology conceives of woman as having the role in society to serve the man, as an object of pleasure, as a procreator of offspring and as a worker without salary.

… This position of woman in society is consecrated through ceremonies and institutions like initiation rites, and the whole system of marriage: lobolo, premature and forced marriages, polygamy » (OMM 1977: 89).

Lobolo plainly was seen as um mal social, a social evil (OMM 1977: 95) and thus to combat lobolo was considered an important part of the fight for women’s emancipation.

The efforts, however, had little success. For a while lobolo went underground and/or changed name to gratificação, anelamento (gratification, putting on the ring) and others, but the content remained the same. And as mentioned above lobolo even spread to areas of Mozambique where previously (because of matrilinar kinship systems) there had been no lobolo. I see this spread as a consequence of increasing modernization: transformed, individualized lobolo supports expanding male dominance and husband power in gender relations. And these trends, combined of course with the esteem of lobolo from the old days, are stronger than ideological campaigns.

Compared to the early OMM conception of lobolo, and of the women’s question as a whole, the nation-wide exchange of information and the discussions raised by the OMM Extraordinary Conference preparation campaign 1983-1984 caused a significant rise in political knowledge and consciousness about these matters. It was only now that it was realized a) that lobolo was not the traditional way of marriage all over the country, but only in the patrilineal South, and b) that previously lobolo had had a different meaning, i.e. it was not just a commercial transaction with oppressed women as the traded goods. Compare this quote from the OMM Second Conference documents, expressing the early OMM conception of lobolo: « Lobolo. This praxis exists in the whole country. […] It places the woman in a situation of total dependence on the man who – because he paid for her – may use her and discard her like a simple object » (OMM 1977: 94).

Consequently, the issue which, at the start of the OMM Conference preparation campaign was labelled lobolo, towards the end of the campaign was renamed casamento tradicional (traditional marriage). This term covers the whole country – in the South « traditional marriage » is = lobolo, in the North it is something else – and furthermore this term is not derogatory, as lobolo had become with all the abaixo-campaigns.

Compared to the Second Conference – quote above, what is said about lobolo in the Resolução Geral of the

17. « Se nem o conservador registra o seu casamento… Entrevista com Albie Sachs », Domingo, 18th of October 1984.
Extraordinary Conference (November 1984) is very sensible:

« About traditional marriage:

Regarding traditional marriage the conference notes that this is the way in which the family is constituted for the majority of our people. [...] Nevertheless, the Conference consider it necessary to combat with efficiency those aspects of traditional marriage that reflect and transmit inequality between men and women and the subordination of the woman in the home and in society, such as: the aspect of commercialization which in the last decades and in some regions of the country has characterized the lobolo »18.

An overall result of the Extraordinary Conference preparation discussions was that now people – or at least the political structures – viewed « old customs », such as lobolo and polygamy, much more as something linked up with particular ways of production and with the structure of society as such, i.e. that you could not change those things merely through a political campaign. This of course is an important insight.

However, this attitude has had the effect of nothing being done politically about lobolo. The law system continues to be « ignorant », and as the abaixo-campaign has stopped (as a consequence of a higher level of knowledge and insight, showing that things are not as simple as that) the result, at least in the mid-eighties (I haven’t followed it further than that) was that lobolo was flourishing.

When I visited Maputo in the years shortly after the OMM Extraordinary Conference (in 1985 and 1987), when talking to women in the bairros and in the cooperatives I found a broad disappointment that no firm guidelines regarding the lobolo had resulted from the OMM Conference. From all over, it had been suggested that lobolo should be politically accepted, but with an upper limit of 2,500 meticais. But no action was taken by the OMM.

**Polygamy. Ideology: Nuclear family with gender equality. Reality?**

One major point in Frelimo/OMM policy and in the new family law, is the promotion and protection of the monogamous, nuclear family – man, wife and kids – as the « basic cell of society ».

Obviously « the recognition of monogamous marriage is a way of combatting, albeit indirectly, polygamy » as Albie Sachs said in the interview in Domingo, October 198419. In the mid-1980s this monogamous, nuclear family – or « socialist family » as it has also frequently been called by Frelimo and by the OMM – was in focus for political mobilization regarding women’s issues. The previously mentioned Palácio de casamento was renamed Palácio da família. In the first years of Independent Mozambique Christmas was not a public holiday, as the State has no religion (however, if you declared yourself a Christian you were allowed to take December the 25th off from work). But in the early 1980s December the 25th was made a public holiday, named Dia da Família, day of the family.

This nuclear family was expected to be based on « freedom of choice, reciprocity and equality in the relation between the spouses » (quote from Albie Sachs, in Domingo). In a small nice-looking pamphlet handed over to newlywed couples it is explained why the state protects marriage and the family and what married life should be like:

« The family is the basic cell of our society. It is in the family that man and woman in the most profound and total way share all aspects of life, helping one another, respecting one another, understanding one another. It is in the family that the parents educate the new generations in an atmosphere of human warmth, love and care. [...] Marriage is a union between a man and a woman with the intention of constituting a family, thus creating a community full of life, in equality of rights and duties between the two. Marriage is an act that is based exclusively on the free will of the two getting married »20.

The new nuclear family was expected to be everything that the old extended family had not been. Politically the old family was seen as a centre for exploitation and oppression. Suddenly and miraculously the new family was supposed to be exactly the opposite. There seems to be no end to the series of nice words attached to this vision of a new family. This is from the Resolução geral of the Extraordinary OMM Conference 1984:

« The extraordinary OMM conference specifically emphasizes the vital importance of the cohesion, stability and harmony of the family, as this is the basic cell of our society. [...] It is the forge of the new type of man, guaranteeing the interiorization of the new political, moral and civic values. [...] The family should be a cell that educates to love, understanding, mutual respect and reciprocal help » (Emphasis mine, SA)21.

In actual fact however, the nuclear family life seems to increase gender conflicts.

Previously in the « old » kind of family setup men and women had had little intimacy (cf. Junod 1974: 179), living each in their world together with other men/other women respectively. Husband and wife were not to any great extent directly exposed to one another.

When the family structure changes with modernization (paid work, money economy, break-up of extended families,

19. « Se nem o conservador registra o seu casamento... », op. cit.
20. Casamento [s.d.], [Maputo], [s.n.].
individualization, etc.), gender relations change as well. Husband and wife become much more directly exposed to one another, and in various ways in the modernization process men have gained the upper hand. All of this creates conflicts. As an example: Lobolo was not an issue of husband-wife contradictions previously. Now it is. Wife-beating is not uncommon. According to my sources it was much less frequent in the old days, if it occurred at all. In the new Aldeias Comunais (Community villages, with nuclear family life) the women complain that they have many more quarrels with their husbands than before.

Thus there seems to be a discrepancy, and quite a serious one, between the glossy ideology of family life and the realities. Ideology as expressed in the law stresses gender equality, mutual help, reciprocity, etc. In reality, however, very different things are going on. In talking about polygamy, a similar discrepancy can be observed. Polygamy is illegal. A man cannot officially and legally marry two wives. What does he do? He marries one of them legally, keeping the other one as an amante. This is certainly no better seen from the women’s point of view.

It looks as if, with modernization and promoted by political ideology and the new family law, ideology becomes nicer to women, whereas reality becomes harsher.

The law was intended as a tool to protect women (among others), but it cannot do the job alone without an organization to put it into practice. As a matter of fact the women in the bairros of Maputo, when I interviewed them in early 1982, were very interested in legalizing their marriage relations, because they saw it as a protection in disputes with their men. Generally, however, the men didn’t want to – and so the women were stuck. An article in Justiça popular makes the same observation: « There is a tendency for the women to want a marriage certificate as a guarantee for the future, whereas the men see the same thing as an obstacle to their liberty » (Sachs & Uate 1984).

A similar thing is true of the rights of unwed or divorced mothers to get alimony for their children, paid by the fathers. This is done by the State withholding a part of the man’s salary and handing it over to the woman. Many of the women, however, do not know how to approach the court or how to present their case. Some do not even know their rights. And in some cases, even when the woman succeeds in putting her case to court, in the meantime the man has quit his job, thus escaping payment.

To sum up: The family law supports an ideology of gender equality, reciprocity and freedom of choice as basic principles in the establishing of a family, that is a monogamous nuclear one. By promoting the nuclear family the law pulls in the same direction as the economic, political and religious changes in the process of modernization. By stressing gender equality, the law marks a difference from old-time Mozambique where gender equality was not an issue. Men and women were different, linked in complementary interdependence, but not to be measured with the same rod. By stressing gender equality, however, the law also marks a difference from the social consequences of contemporary economic and other trends, which are making women still more dependent on and subordinate to men.

This second difference results in a quite remarkable discrepancy between the law and adjacent ideology on one hand, and women’s realities on the other. The law is supposed to support women, but it does so only to a limited extent, because a network or an organization to support women in practical matters is lacking (like helping them to bring their case to court, or putting effective social pressure on men to legalize their marriage-like relations).

The OMM, officially the women’s organization, has not been doing this kind of thing, because even though it supports the ideology of gender equality, it does not recognize gender conflicts as being unavoidable on the way to this goal. Neither does it recognize women’s need of practical support in such gender conflicts.

Family forms in Northern Mozambique

South and North in Mozambique are in many ways two different worlds, for two major reasons. First: the traditional kinship systems are different: patriliny in the South, matriline in the North (as a general rule). And secondly the impact of modernization (so far) has also been different. Money economy and paid work have been integrated into daily life in the South much more than they have in the North. In discussing family forms the differences are striking: Matrilineal and patrilineal family structures are different to start off with, and furthermore they have reacted differently to the modernizing impact – which in itself has also been different in the North as compared to the South. As a consequence the intended gender equality of the new family law has had very different impacts, in the North as compared to the South.
Traditional marriage by bride service: Pette

An important characteristic of matriline – and matrilocality, in most places in northern Mozambique they go together – is the fact that when two young people marry it is the woman who stays with her family; her parents and her mother’s brothers and sisters, whereas the man has to move. He has to build a house for his wife on her family’s land, and that is where the couple will live after marriage. Marriage is unceremonial, at least compared to the complicated ceremonies of lobolo in the South, and it may be easily dissolved by the husband or by the wife, whoever feels dissatisfied by the relationship. After divorce the woman stays on in the house, near her family, with the kids (who belong to the mother’s lineage and are under the tutelage of her eldest brother). The man is the one to move out. In this family structure there is no lobolo to be paid back after divorce, etc. Before marriage it is customary, in parts of the North, for the husband-to-be to stay one year with his parents-in-law, working on their land. This is called pette.

This is how it is was explained in Zambesia:

« O lobolo neste local manifesta-se por seguinte: Todos os jovens que pretendem casar devem construir suas palhotas à beira da dos sogros para permitirem serem aproveitados de mão de obra barrata, e a rapariga ser controlada pelos pais e evitar abuso pelo marido.
Os recém-casados não possuem alimentos para sobreviver, necessitam de apoio. Só deverão sair dali quando tiverem filho ».

« O homem era obrigado viver na casa dos sogros fazendo o trabalho junto dos sogros até conseguir fazer um filho e entregar aos sogros para ajudar os trabalhos da casa. Então os sogros iam escolher um terreno para o genro fazer a sua palhota e fazer a sua vida porque já analisaram a seu coração. E se for preguiçoso o homem ou mau ou orgulhoso então os sogros mandaram embora o genro ».

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He also must accept that the girl is supervised by her parents, so as to avoid maltreatment by the husband. The newlyweds do not have anything for their survival, so they need help. They can only leave from there when they have had a child ».

« The man is obliged to live at the parents-in-law’s place, working with them until the young couple succeeds in having a child to hand over to the parents-in-law to help them in the home. Thus the parents-in-law will choose a piece of land for the son-in-law to construct his hut and make his own life, for now they have the opportunity of seeing what he is like. And if the man is lazy or a bad guy, or haughty, the parents-in-law will simply send him away ».

Pette is therefore not a « bride price », but a bride service. In both cases it is the man-to-be-married who must render something, but the « bride price » gives him rights to the offspring from marriage, and rights to a new wife from the same family if no children result from the first relationship, while the bride service gives nothing of this. Nor does it represent a procreation.

For the first year or so of marriage the newlywed couple live close to the woman’s family for them to see if the new in-law behaves well and if they get on well together. If there is dissatisfaction the marriage may be undone. Otherwise the young couple moves to a different place somewhat further away, starting their own life together.

This structure is indeed very different from the patrilineal one. It is simpler, because the women are placed at the centre. Biological fatherhood doesn’t matter all that much. The children belong to their matrilineage in any case. The major function of the husbands is as procreator. Where they exercise male authority is not in relation to their own offspring, but in relation to their sisters’ children, their nephews and nieces.

There is a rationale of placing women at the centre of an agricultural society, based on women’s work in production as cultivators and in reproduction as the ones that bear the children. Eduardo Medeiros explains:

« As agriculture was based principally on female work, in matrilineal society it would be the group of sisters who constituted the stable, productive centre, in direction of which the men had to move. Consequently, in these societies there was no need for an organized and non-violent circulation of women for marriage reasons. The marriage ceremonies were very simple, and divorce also more frequent. Anyhow, the young man had to prove that he was a good worker and that he would be a good husband. [...] In return the young man acquired the status of a married man, a father, etc. ». (Medeiros 1985a: 22).

For good reasons in this society, girls are seen as more precious than boys. Meillassoux (1981) has some interesting observations about matriline vs. patriline. I quote:

« In the first case [matriline] women live in their original communities, to which men are invited to procreate and eventually live. Such a system could be classified as gynaecostatic: the reproduction of the group rests entirely on the reproductive capacities of the women born within the group. In the second case [patriline] women, exchanged on a reciprocal basis, do not procreate within their community but in an allied community which recovers the progeny. Reproduction depends on the political capacities of the communities to negotiate an adequate number of women at all times. These two kinds of circulation are not equally efficient since they play on the different reproductive functions of the two sexes.»
Man’s ability to inseminate is practically unlimited, but any man can do, while woman’s procreative potential is only equal to the length of her fertile period divided by the length of the periods of gestation and breast-feeding – frequently extended by cultural restrictions.

During this gestation period the symbiosis between the mother and her child creates an entity which is strictly sui generis. In other words, in terms of procreative capacities, men are expendable; each pregnant woman is unique in her kind » (Meillassoux 1981: 24-25, emphasis SA).

Meillassoux goes on to explain how this difference in relation to the absolutely essential procreative capacities: men expendable, women unique – is the reason for the transformation of original matrilineal societies into patrilineal ones. He may be right, or he may not. In any case, matriliney is not his concern; what interests him is patriliney, based on the political capacities of men (as subjects) to negotiate exchange of women (as objects).

Even in the matriliney of Northern Mozambique, however, men are the masters. The big bosses here are the matrilineal chiefs, the powerful masters of large groups of sisters and nephews and their offspring. Preferential marriage, at least for the eldest son, is with his cross cousin, i.e. with the uncle’s daughter. So the big man lives with his daughters married to his nephews around him.

« Poligamia errante »: Travelling polygamy

According to Medeiros, who has studied in particular the matrilinear Macua of northern Mozambique, polygamy here, in the old days, was uncommon, except for these chiefs, who then would break the general rule of matrilocality and have their wives gathered around them. This was « the polygamy of the chiefs, to whose houses every allied or subordinated lineage would send a wife » (Medeiros 1985a: 24).

Polygamy for commoners typically would have the form of poligamia errante, travelling polygamy: the polygamous man would have a wife here, another there, the wives living in the family-villages, and he himself would travel from one to the other, spending some days in each place, helping the woman on her machamba. It is a strict rule for polygamy in the North that the wives must be treated equally. Here you don’t have the system of the first wife as the « big » one, the following being lesser wives. On the contrary, the husbands’ failure to treat all of their wives equally was – and is – a cause of bitter complaint from the women.

Polygamy over the years has become more frequent than it used to be (Medeiros 1985b: 32). When I was interviewing women in Cabo Delgado in 1982, polygamy was not at all uncommon in the North (with the Maconde), although more frequent than in the south (with the Macua). Of 231 recorded marriages dispersed all over Cabo Delgado, 78 were polygamous (34%). In 1979 the Centre of African studies (CEA) at the Eduardo Mondlane University was studying four aldeias comunais in the province of Nampula and found a polygamy-rate from 5% (in most) to 28% (in one of the villages) (CEA 1980: 19).

The women of the North dislike polygamy …

As a general rule the women of the North do not like polygamy at all. Unlike in the South with the conditions of patriliney, where polygamy may ease the women’s lives, as they get a companion with whom to share work and leisure, in the North, where the women live dispersed they cannot profit in this way from polygamy. Not only can they not profit from polygamy. They detest it. This was really my impression when I talked to the women in Cabo Delgado. They were all complaining about polygamy and divorce (issues of divorce will be discussed later).

These are typical women’s interventions from Cabo Delgado discussing polygamy:

« A poligamia é muito mais frequente agora de que antigamente. Casar com 2-3 mulheres para os homens é uma coisa normal, mas para a mulher é sofrimento, porque ela apanha nada. O dinheiro do homem tem de ser dividida, e o tempo também. Um homem que tem mais mulheres pode ficar 5-6 dias sem pisar a casa da mulher, ele fica nas outras casas ».

« Polygamy is much more frequent now than it used to be. Now men consider it normal to marry 2-3 women; but for the wife this means suffering, as she’ll get nothing. The husband’s money must be divided, and his time as well. A man who has several wives may stay away for 5-6 days without appearing in the house of one wife. He stays somewhere else ».
The men, however, see matters very differently. They like polygamy and as usual, they have got a series of arguments in favour of it. What if the wife falls ill? Who then is going to cook for them? Or what if she dies?

Besides, there is always the argument of women being more plentiful than men. This may be so to a very limited extent – according to the 1980 census the masculinity-rate is 94.5 – but certainly not enough to justify polygamy. Nevertheless the idea of a strong female surplus is a very persistent myth, presumably because it makes the men feel benevolent and self-sacrificing when they are polygamous. They just do it to help the poor women who otherwise wouldn’t have had a husband. In the patrilineal South the (supposed) infertility of the first wife is a standard argument for getting a second one. The husband goes to the other house while you are cooking the food you should eat together. He stays away all day. This is what I don’t like. My husband prefers this other woman, he has stopped eating the food that I cook.

The men for instance would argue like this:

« This argument for obvious reasons is less frequent in the matrilineal North. »

« Besides, there is always the argument of women being more plentiful than men. This may be so to a very limited extent – according to the 1980 census the masculinity-rate is 94.5 – but certainly not enough to justify polygamy. Nevertheless the idea of a strong female surplus is a very persistent myth, presumably because it makes the men feel benevolent and self-sacrificing when they are polygamous. They just do it to help the poor women who otherwise wouldn’t have had a husband. In the patrilineal South the (supposed) infertility of the first wife is a standard argument for getting a second one. The husband goes to the other house while you are cooking the food you should eat together. He stays away all day. This is what I don’t like. My husband prefers this other woman, he has stopped eating the food that I cook. »

« The reason for polygamy in this area is that the men are keen to get hold of more women to love them more intimately and also because the men want to experience the differences between one woman and another one. Because there are women who wear missangas (a string of glass beads), who have got tattoos, and who have extended vaginal lips » (Nampula province, Mossuril).

« The cause of polygamy here is that the men are keen to get hold of more women to love them more intimately and also because the men want to experience the differences between one woman and another one. Because there are women who wear missangas (a string of glass beads), who have got tattoos, and who have extended vaginal lips » (Nampula province, Mossuril).

« Polygamy hurts. The man marries 3-4 women, but you only have a real marriage in one of the houses. The others are just to show off. »

« Yes, we suffer. The husband buys meat, he buys capulana, and you feel that this would be for you, if it weren’t for this other wife. All these goods that he has bought go to the other house. »

« Polygamy is in this situation that he comes upon the idea of getting another wife in order to avoid suffering. » (Zambézia province, Milange).

« Yes, we suffer. The husband buys meat, he buys capulana, and you feel that this would be for you, if it weren’t for this other wife. All these goods that he has bought go to the other house. »

« The husband goes to the other house while you are cooking the food you should eat together. He stays away all day. This is what I don’t like. My husband prefers this other woman, he has stopped eating the food that I cook. »

« Polygamy shouldn’t be exaggerated. It should be limited to just two women. » (Zambézia province, Milange).

« Polygamy hurts. The man marries 3-4 women, but you only have a real marriage in one of the houses. The others are just to show off. »

« Yes, we suffer. The husband buys meat, he buys capulana, and you feel that this would be for you, if it weren’t for this other wife. All these goods that he has bought go to the other house. »

« The husband goes to the other house while you are cooking the food you should eat together. He stays away all day. This is what I don’t like. My husband prefers this other woman, he has stopped eating the food that I cook. »
But the women know how to answer. Their opinion is a different one:

« Deve-se combater a poligamia. Quem quiser deverá possuir um penis para cada mulher » (Província da Zambézia, Milange).

« Devemos acabar com a poligamia porque o sexo é um só » (Província da Zambézia, Gílê).

« Quem fomenta a poligamia são os homens. Porque querem chatar as mulheres. Ora vejamos: uma mulher acorda de manhã, vai buscar água, faz comida, ele come e dorme bem, mas no dia seguinte ele vai casar outra. Isso é uma chatice » (Província da Zambézia, Gílê).

« Mas se fosse a questão de ajudar a outra que está doente, porque que também não acontece para nós mulheres? Algumas têm os seus maridos doentes, mas nunca fizeram a mesma coisa que os homens fazem » (Província da Zambézia, Mopeia).

This last argument is very interesting because it takes as the point of departure a possible equality between women and men: the men do so and so. What if we, as women, did the same? Why is it an argument on their side, for polygamy, when it doesn’t count for us, for women?

I see this way of thinking as new in Mozambique and I suspect that previously it would have occurred to no one to argue like that. But actually this type of argument, based on a notion of gender equality, did appear now and again during the Conference preparation discussions, all over Mozambique, in the countryside as well as in the cities.

Another argument is interesting, too, because it uses the very process of modernization as a cause for polygamy. The man feels more developed than his backward wife, and this forces him to take a second wife, a more presentable one. It is a man speaking, of course:

« Para ser um polígamo é obrigado pela própria mulher. Nem são todos os homens que querem ser polígamos. As vezes é porque a mulher é porca, preguiçosa. Você compra roupas ela não põe, fica assim suja, não toma banho, nem põe sutien, ao pilar as mamas caem no pilão e o marido isso foge, vai para aquela outra, encontra a casa limpa ela toma banho, comida bem feita, vai com seu amigo, chega com toda vontade. E por isso que o homem esquece da mulher atrás. As vezes é porque a mulher não sabe abraçar o seu marido na cama, dar o amor para que com ele ganha vontade de fazer relação » (Província da Zambézia, Quelimane).

In spite of women’s protests, however, polygamy is becoming more frequent in the north of Mozambique. Maybe because modernization as such tends to favour male positions?

Women losing traditional rights: Divorce

Another area where women in the North are losing out is in the field of divorce. Previously divorce was easy for both parties. The making and unmaking of marriage did not matter that much because affiliation followed the mother. Thus, if for some reason a marriage went wrong, or was less pleasing to the husband or the wife, it would be abolished without much ado.

This wasn’t considered a tragedy, and it didn’t have any very negative consequences for the children either, as Dias & Dias (1970) point out:

« Contrary to what happens in Western society, divorces [by the Maconde] are far from having serious consequences for the children of a discordant couple. Life in an extended family creates an atmosphere of tranquility and joy that will extinguish the consequences of any divorce. The children have many other women and men whom they are used to considering as mothers and fathers. All the other children of the village are their playmates and life goes on without the children of a divorced couple feeling any consequences of the dissolution of their parents’ marriage » (Dias & Dias 1970: 267).

And actually: The facility of divorces is one – obvious – reason for the low rate of polygamy in Nampula and elsewhere under conditions of matriliny. It is very simple: The men like polygamy, the women don’t. When the man starts arranging a second wife, the first woman opts out of the marriage, i.e. she tells the man to stay away. She will be the one
to remain in the house and with the children anyway.

This inverse relation between polygamy and divorce emerged very clearly from the data I myself gathered in Cabo Delgado 1982. In the area where there was the lowest rate of polygamy (in the southern part of coastal Cabo Delgado), the divorce rates were the highest. And vice versa.

Accordingly, the most common reason for the women to want divorce was because the husband had taken another wife. In the 120 interviews conducted I asked the previously married women about who had taken the initiative to divorce, and why. In some 33% of the cases of divorce registered in the entire data material (from the whole province), the women would indicate the man’s inclination for another women as the cause for divorce. Other major causes for the women to want divorce would be that the man did not treat them well, that he didn’t work well, or that there was no love in the relationship.

This is what some of the women said regarding polygamy and divorce:

« Se o marido tem outra mulher que gosta para casar, ele deve deixe sofrer a primeira mulher, então ela quer divorciar, diz: “Vai lá ficar com esta outra mulher” » (Província de Cabo Delgado, Mecufi).

« Divórcio é o problema principal, porque os maridos gostar ter duas mulheres. A nova mulher é melhor, e a antiga pode divorciar » (Província de Cabo Delgado, Pemba).

« Divórcio frequentemente está ligado à poligamia de facto, no sentido que o marido começa viver com outra mulher. Acontece que a primeira mulher quer que o seu marido volta à casa; mas frequentemente ela quer ser despachada dele, mas quer regularizar o direito dela à casa » (Província de Cabo Delgado, Pemba).

« If the husband has got another woman that he would like to marry, he’ll let the first one suffer to such a degree that at last she’ll want divorce, saying “Go then and stay with that other woman” » (Cabo Delgado province, Mecufi).

« Divorce is a major problem, as the husbands like to have two wives. The new one will be the better one [seen from the husbands point of view], and the first one will ask for divorce » (Cabo Delgado province, Pemba).

« Divorce in fact is often linked to polygamy in that the husband starts living with another woman. Sometimes the first wife will want her husband to return home to her, but often she’ll want to get rid of him. However, she wants to be sure of her rights to keep the house » (Cabo Delgado province, Pemba).

The present problem in this context, and one of the reasons why polygamy has increased, is that this traditional attitude to divorce is being opposed by the new legal authorities. Frelimo wants to protect the family and is not at all fond of divorce.

This is complicated: According to the PLF, divorce is a legal right, but the general political position of Frelimo is for family stability and against divorce. Frelimo is also against polygamy – but in a situation (as in southern Cabo Delgado) where women use divorce to fight polygamy, Frelimo supports the polygamous men, castigating the women who want divorce. A strict line against divorces and permissiveness in relation to polygamy was what was presented to me, when in 1982 I interviewed the Juiz Presidente in Pemba (i.e. the top judge of the provincial court):

« Há um tipo de casamento muito fácil aqui, é uma consequência da educação familiar das meninas, elas não acham o casamento uma coisa muito importante. Aquelas senhoras velhas conselhadoras dizem que “tu não vais ficar com este homem se ele não presta. Se a vida corre mal, deixas o seu marido”. Com trinta anos as mulheres já estão no 3º ou 4º matrimonio. Isto é por causa da mulher, não é por causa do homem. Por exemplo, se aparece uma nova capulana e o senhor não tem dinheiro, é divórcio! Os divórcios são por causa da mulher. […] A atitude [do tribunal] perante a poligamia depende de economia. Se haja possibilidade para sustentar duas mulheres, não é tão má ».

« Marriage is very easygoing here, this is because of the way the women are brought up, they don’t see marriage as something very important. These old women conselhadoras tell them “you do not have to stay with a particular husband if he is no good (in bed). If things go badly, just leave your husband”. Within thirty years these women may be in their 3º or 4º marriage. This is because of the woman; it is not because of the man. For example, if a new capulana appears in the market and the husband hasn’t got the money to buy it, this is a reason for divorce! Divorces here are caused by the women. […] The attitude of the court to polygamy depends on economy. If the man has the possibility of supporting two woman, we don’t see polygamy as an evil ».

The position of the Juiz Presidente is obviously male. He himself doesn’t see it as such, however. He embodies Frelimo. The women are described as immoral and unreasonable, selfish, spoil, demanding, etc. The major critique seem to be that they are brought up not to put up with an unhappy marriage. Certainly these women do not know their place! That they might have good reasons for wanting divorce does not occur to the women. The women were concerned and enraged because of the Frelimo line against divorce, which they rightly saw as a serious limitation of their room for manoeuvre. They did not hesitate to interpret it as a male gender struggle, and it had not started with Frelimo either. The present line was a neat continuation of developments under Portuguese colonial rule. But it had worsened since Independence...

This is how it was explained to me by women in meetings in Montepuez, in Ilha de Ibo and in Mueda, i.e. all over Cabo Delgado. The statements are made by different women, supporting one another:
Antigamente o divórcio era muito fácil. A major parte dos divorços vinham por parte dos homens: o homem foi para outra mulher, a mulher perguntou, e quando o homem não responde, já a mulher com aquela raiva pegou logo no divórcio.

Antigamente Você ficava dentro da casa; se o homem queria sair, podia sair, fez outra casa dele. Para a mulher casada era fácil: Ele ficou dentro da casa junto com a família dela, dividiram-se as coisas, e o homem saiu » (Província de Cabo Delgado, Montepuez).

« No tempo colonial, quando uma mulher queria divorciar, ia na família e depois a mulher e o tio dela iam ao régulo. Ele disse: "Chama o teu marido". O marido trazia galinha e cabrito para o régulo, para o divórcio não ser complicado. O régulo então disse: "Todos os bens da casa vão com o marido". Se a família da mulher era uma família de grande poder, o tio da mulher podia ir ao régulo dar cabrito, etc., então o régulo disse ao marido divorciar e dividir as coisas com a mulher. O régulo gostava para as pessoas casar porque no dia de casamento ele recebia » (Província de Cabo Delgado, Montepuez).

« No tempo colonial não é tanto como agora. Se a mulher saiu de boa forma, dividiram-se as coisas. Mas agora o homem está a explorar a mulher cada vez mais. A mulher está expulsa da casa, só fica com dinheiro, e não sabe o que fazer com isso. A mulher fica limitada, não sabe cortar bambu, não sabe cortar pau, não sabe construir uma casa: ela fica com dinheiro só. A mudança da situação dos divorcios começou depois da Independência porque o Frelimo não quer divorcios sem justificação. Diz que os filhos não vão conhecer o pai. O Secretário do bairro não gosta de divórcio. Ele castiga as pessoas que querem divorciar. Têm de fazer trabalhos públicos na aldeia, por exemplo a casa do Partido foi feita desta maneira.

Este tipo de divorços estão a piorar depois da Independência. Se o homem deixa a mulher não fica em castigo. Mas se começa a mulher ela passa mal. Amarraram-na os braços, e ela está mandada trabalhar no trabalho forçado da aldeia.

Acho eu que o homem quando deixa a mulher também deveria apanhar castigo e ir na cadeia, mas isso não acontece » (Província de Cabo Delgado, Mueda).

« Estes homens estão como os colonos que ficaram aqui. Querem tudo. Casam duas mulheres. Diz a primeira mulher: "Olha meu amigo, esta situação eu não aguento". Mas o marido leva tudo para a casa da outra mulher. Mesmo a criança ele leva. Você vê que esta situação é demais e vai aparecer ao Secretário [em falta do tribunal na Ilha de Bó, é o primeiro secretário do Partido, o Administrador, que assume a autoridade jurídica]. Ele diz: "Não há divórcio. Você há de continuar o vosso lar".

Antigamente os divórcios vinham por parte dos homens: o homem foi para outra mulher, a mulher perguntou, e quando o homem não responde, já a mulher com aquela raiva pegou logo no divórcio.

At that time it was you, the woman, who would remain in the house; if the man wanted to go, he could go, he would make himself another house. For the married woman it was very easy. She would stay in her house, with her family, personal belongings would be divided and the man would leave » (Cabo Delgado province, Montepuez).

« In colonial time, when a woman wanted to divorce, she would go to her family, and then the woman and her uncle would go to the régulo. He would say: "Call for your husband". The husband would bring a chicken and a goat for the régulo, so that the divorce would not be complicated. And then the régulo would say: "All of the things in the house go to the husband". If the woman’s family was one of great power the woman’s uncle would go to the régulo with a goat etc. and so the régulo would tell the husband to divide the things of the house with the woman. The régulo liked people to marry because whenever that particular tax had to be paid to him » (Cabo Delgado province, Montepuez).

« In colonial times it wasn’t as bad as it is now. If the woman left the marriage in a decent way, the couple’s belongings would be divided between the two. But today the men exploit the women more and more. The woman is thrown out of the house, in compensation she just gets money, and what is she supposed to do with that? The woman doesn’t know what to do, she doesn’t know how to cut bamboo, she doesn’t know how to cut poles, she doesn’t know how to build a house. She sits there with the money [This was in the period of extreme scarcity of goods and abundance of useless money, SA]. The change in the situation regarding divorce started after independence, because Frelimo did not want unjustified divorces. They say that the children won’t know the father. The secretary of this bairro doesn’t like divorces. He punishes the people who want divorce. They have to do public work in the village, for example the Party headquarters was built in this way.

Previously it was much easier for women to get divorce » (Cabo Delgado province, Montepuez).

« The court passes judgments in the husband’s favour. When it is the man who asks for divorce the court will accept it right away, and the men do not have to go to re-education. But if the man beats his wife and she then goes to the court to ask for divorce, she will be sent to the village prison for three-four months, after which she is told to go back to her husband. When the man leaves the woman he will take with him all of the things in the house, even the capulanas of his wife. She is left with nothing.

This type of divorce got worse after Independence. If it is the man to divorce the woman the man will not be punished. But if it is the woman who starts, she will be given rough treatment, they will bind her by the arms, and she will be ordered to do forced work in the village.

I think that when it is the man who leaves the woman he too should be punished and go to prison, but this doesn’t happen » (Cabo Delgado province, Mueda).

« These men are like the colonos that used to be here. They want everything. They marry two women. Then the first woman says: “Look my friend, I don’t want to put up with this”. But the husband doesn’t listen. He takes everything to the other woman’s house. Even the child. You see that is too much and take the case to the Secretary of the Party. [Note: As there is no people’s court on Ilha de Bó, it is the first secretary of the Party, who is also the Administrator, in whom the jurisdictional authority is bestowed]. But he says: “No you cannot have a divorce. Go back to your home, you cannot disrupt your family".
The impact of the new family law in the North and in the South

Taken together, the consequences of the implementation of the new family law turn out to be very different from the intentions. The law is supposed to promote gender equality and women’s emancipation. Nevertheless, the ways in which it is put into practice tend to support male power and to undermine what power positions women might have had in matrilineal contexts (such as the facility of divorce).

In actual fact the very promotion of the nuclear family supports the men vis-a-vis the women. « The children should know their father » as the argument goes. Nuclear families with husband, wife and children in a stable unit break up the extended families based on matrilineal relations, with women in central positions. Women have central positions in matriliney, among other things because the male chiefs owe their positions to their relationships with women. The pivotal male/female relationship is brother/sister, not husband/wife. Where brother/sister relationships are central, the women tend to have a stronger social position than where husband/wife relationships are the important ones (Sacks 1979). In a nuclear family, however, the brother/sister relationship has little importance; what matters is husband/wife.

In the South of Mozambique, where the women have all sorts of difficulties if they want to get out of a particular marriage – the lobolo that must be paid back, etc. – the new law is, or at least it may be, an improvement. The women in the patrilineal South are in a weaker position than the men. With the new law their position may be strenghtened, but not automatically. Even when the letter of the law talks about gender equality, it often happens that the women come out as losers. Not because the law is on the side of the man, but because men often know more about how to behave in court, e.g. how important it is to get proper witnesses to speak on your behalf. The women are socially weaker than men, and this may easily undermine the nice intentions of the law23 – as long as the women are not organizationally supported.

Thus, even in the patrilineal South where the law is a potential advantage to the women, in actual practice the women often come out as losers.

In the North the situation of the women vis-a-vis the law is even worse. In the matrilineal North the law itself contributes to the undermining of women’s social positions, and even more so does the way in which it is administered. In the North, because of matriliney and matrilocality the women did have social and economic positions – as family elders, as controllers of food, as the ones with access to land – that could compensate for the political power of the men. There are several advantages of women’s positions in the North as compared to the South: upon marriage the woman stays with her own people, it is the husband who is the newcomer and the stranger – and who is treated as such. If no children result from the marriage, the first assumption is that it is the man who has the problem. Accordingly he will be sent back to where he came from and replaced with another man24. All of this has produced a certain gender balance in the matrilineal North – potentially, one should think, a very good basis for further work for women’s emancipation – i.e. the development of women in new directions, mastering new skills, looking to new horizons.

This, however, is not what happens. On the contrary, the women are pushed back, squeezed into the « stable, nuclear

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23. In 1983, at one point while working in the OMM I made an analysis of divorce suits in the Provincial Courts of Maputo province. It was impressive how frequently the women lost the case just because the men were smarter and more experienced in dealing with a public authority such as a Provincial Court.

24. The matriliney of Northern Mozambique is beautifully documented and analyzed by Christian Geffray 1990 in his book Ni Père, Ni Mère. I only came to knew this book after having finalized the paper.
family » where on the level of political ideology the genders are supposed to be « equal », while in actual fact it is taken for granted that the Chefe da família is the man. This is clearly stated in the Resolução Geral from the extraordinary OMM conference 1984: « The family should be based on the equality of rights and responsibilities, and on the fulfillment of the functions of each of its members, the father as head of the family, the wife as mother and housewife... ». Presumably the authors of the resolution don’t even see the contradiction. The duality of an ideology of gender equality combined with taken-for-granted male supremacy is similar to conceptions of gender in Christian ideology, as put by Charles Biber: Woman is equal to man before God. But on Earth, man is the master (Biber 1987: 30).

The OMM as well as Frelimo are unable (or unwilling?) to see women’s stronger positions under conditions of matriliny. To them the norm and the point of departure for talking about « gender equality » and « women’s emancipation » is patriliny – as a matter of course. Also the family law was created with patriliny in mind. Even if half the country was known to be matrilineal at the time when the major principles of the family law were codified as guidelines for the courts, the consequences of this difference were not considered.

Presumably and unfortunately, however, this is not just a question of lack of knowledge. Modern law anywhere is based on assumptions of patriliny. The process of modernity itself promotes patriliny and undermines female power. The nuclear family is a central factor. Wage-earning is another one. In a place like Mozambique, the wage–earners (with a few exceptions) are men, while the ones who remain on the land growing food are women. The increased importance of the money economy means increased male power. Christian ideology talks nicely of women’s liberation but in practice supports male dominance. Socialist ideology does the same.

And thus, notwithstanding a new family law with the best intentions of gender equality and women’s emancipation, what in actual fact happens – because of the implementation of the law, not in spite of it – is increasing male dominance, especially in the Northern parts of the country. Ideology may become nicer to women but reality does indeed become harsher.

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