Reformulating identity in post war Mozambique: Sexuality and initiation of women in the Pafuri Triangle[1]

Teresa K Connor
University of Fort Hare
TConnor@ufh.ac.za

Abstract

This paper explores the initiation of women – or *Vukhomba* – in Pafuri, Mozambique. As historical literature illustrates, this is an event that is linked to the repression and regulation of sexuality by colonialists, missionaries and independent state rule. However, the paper forwards the proposition that initiation and sexuality are crucial for the self-expression and authority of women, and that it is in fact, central to the way in which people re-orientate themselves after events of war and displacement. Sexuality is part of the allure of the Pafuri as a border region, particularly for residents in South Africa and Mozambique, who share common linkages with each other over international boundaries. The paper argues that *Vukhomba* is an important aspect of indigenous knowledge that is central to the way in which people manage disruption.

Keywords: Initiation; Sexuality; Women; Ritual; Control; Pafuri Triangle; Mozambique; Identity.

Lewin and Leap write that sexuality is far more than the act of sex, but is a way of thinking about the significance of the human body that is common to all cultures.[2] Sexuality is part of the way in which one conceptualise gender, marriage and kinship, and has important implications for the study of power and stereotype, particularly within the dichotomies produced by gender. Niehaus, Reid and Walker demonstrate that the regulation of sexuality, expressed through bodily encounters between genders and cultures, is a mechanism of control that can transform people and societies.[3] This has a particular impact on women, and girls, since the start of adulthood also coincides with a rite of passage, from which girls emerge with a different identity. This identity distinctly revolves around the control of sexuality by men, but also around the expression of sexuality by women themselves.

1 This author would like to thank the Editors and reviewers of New Contree for their comments, as well as the community of Makuleke in Limpopo Province, particularly Norman Maluleke. The term 'Makuleke" refers to a physical location or village, while "Maluleke" is used for reference to a person or community.

2 E Lewin, WL Leap and W Leap (eds), *Out in the field: Reflections of lesbian and gay anthropologists* (University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 2.

3 I Niehaus, "Towards a dubious liberation: Masculinity, sexuality and power in South African Lowveld schools", 1953-1999, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26(3), 2000, pp. 387-407; G Reid and L Walker, "Masculinities in question", G Reid and L Walker, *Men behaving differently: South African men since* 1994 (Johannesburg, South Africa, Double Story Publishers, 2005), pp. 1-20.

Transformative rituals such as initiation suggest new beginnings, and a budding and blooming of an individual into adulthood. These events are essential to understand the changes that affect societies themselves, particularly when rituals are used to address past injustices and create a sense of reconciliation. In South Africa, rural rituals such as beer drinks, funerals and initiation are particularly important for those people who have been removed from their original homes, as well as migrants returning home after a long absence.[4] One must, as Appadurai suggests consider the possibility that rites of passage are spatially symbolic in that they link people to territory and land.[5] For refugees and those affected by trauma in Mozambique, rituals are essential for re orientate and place people upon their return to a place of origin. Rituals are transformative and performative events that embody and reconnect people to lost homes and re-establish contact with old networks.[6]

This paper is a historical and ethnographic examination of the way in which gender and sexuality has shaped the identity of girls in Pafuri, Mozambique. I examine how girls in Mozambique "become" women, through a ritual process which is both physically transformative to women and sexually attractive to men. This is couched within a historical discussion of the impact of migrant labour and warfare on the regulation of women and sexuality, both in South Africa and Mozambique. Rituals are particularly relevant as transformative events for those affected by civil war in Mozambique, which occurred from 1976 to 1992. Most refugees from Pafuri fled to South Africa or were transported to refugee camps in Zimbabwe, where they remained until their repatriation by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1994 and 1995.

In post-war Mozambique, rituals were often enacted by returning soldiers in order to enliven ceremonies that had once been lost, and to provide cleansing.[7] Among women, the rites of female initiation gained particular prominence as events that re-united homesteads and family, and re-established subsistence agriculture.[8] As this paper will illustrate, among war returnees in Pafuri, these female initiation rituals were enacted on ancestral land, as this connected people symbolically, through their bodies, to their place in society.[9] The sexual elements present in initiation were just as important, as these encouraged ties between spouses and towards ancestral land, elements that were missing in exile.

4 PA McAllister, "Beasts to beer pots: Migrant labour and ritual change in Willowvale District, Transkei", *African Studies*, 44(2), 1985, pp. 121-135.

5 A Appadurai, *Modernity at large: The cultural dimensions of globalisation* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 179.

6 MH Pedersen and M Rytter. "Rituals of migration: an introduction", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44 (16), 2018, pp. 2603-2616.

7 S Arnfred, *Sexuality and gender politics in Mozambique: Rethinking gender in Africa* (Rochester, New York, Boydell & Brewer, 2011), p. 10.

8 S Arnfred, *Sexuality and gender politics in Mozambique: ...*, p. 12.

9 T Kaiser, 2008. "Social and ritual activity in and out of place: The "negotiation of locality" in a Sudanese refugee settlement", *Mobilities*, 3(3), 2008, pp. 375-95.

In this article historical material is used on female initiation rites in southern Africa to support and inform ethnography in Pafuri. These historical sources reveal that the colonial control of sexuality resulted in bias and misinterpretation, which was particularly prevalent against African sexuality during the colonial era. Local initiation and sexuality was misconceived as being "pathological, perverse and primitive", and European sexuality as "healthy, normal and civilised".[10] This was common in much of early colonial encounters in Africa, particularly among the missionaries who first made contact in the Pafuri and upper Limpopo valley. Swiss missionaries in the 1870s reportedly continually fretted about the "nefarious influence of women who drank and/or participated in spirit-possession ceremonies".[11] In 1912, Junod[12] referred to the sexuality of the Tsonga as "vile and immoral",[13] while African colonial governments as well as independent states usually repressed African customary rites of initiation, as they were regarded as barbaric. However, as Gengenbach points out "control is itself a colonial construct", and tells us very little about the meaning and everyday practise of these encounters.[14]

I conducted fieldwork in the Pafuri Triangle, Mozambique, for two years during 1999 and 2000. Visits were preceded by a two week residence in Makuleke village, where I secured the services of a community elder who assisted me throughout my work in the Pafuri region. Fieldwork was limited due to visa restrictions, as well as the high cost of work outside of South Africa, but I did spend a total of four months in the field. I collected information based on a survey of 28 households (out of approximately 110) in Dumela, a village near the border triangle. I also conducted ethnographic research and observation in two other hamlets located alongside the Limpopo River, towards the settlement of Mapai. During 2013, a workshop was held to gauge the impact of the Limpopo Transfrontier Park, and information provided by participants was essential in determining the conditions of residents in Pafuri after my period of fieldwork.[15] The historical work of Junod, Earthy and Harries is used to supplement first-hand data,

10 D Kulick,and M Willson, "Introduction: The sexual life of anthropologists: erotic subjectivity and ethnographic work", in D Kulick and M Willson (eds.), *Taboo: Sex, identity, and erotic subjectivity in anthropological fieldwork* (Routledge, London and New York, 2003) p. 4.

11 H Gengenbach, "What my heart wanted": Gendered stories of early colonial encounters in southern Mozambique", JM Allman, S Geiger, and N Musisi (eds), *African women and colonial history (*Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 25.

12 HH Junod, *The life of a South African tribe*, 1 (Attinger Frères, 1912), p. 7. Henri Junod (1863-1934) was a Swiss missionary, ethnographer, anthropologist, linguist and naturalist, who was stationed at the Shiluvane Mission Station just outside the town of Tzaneen in Limpopo Province.

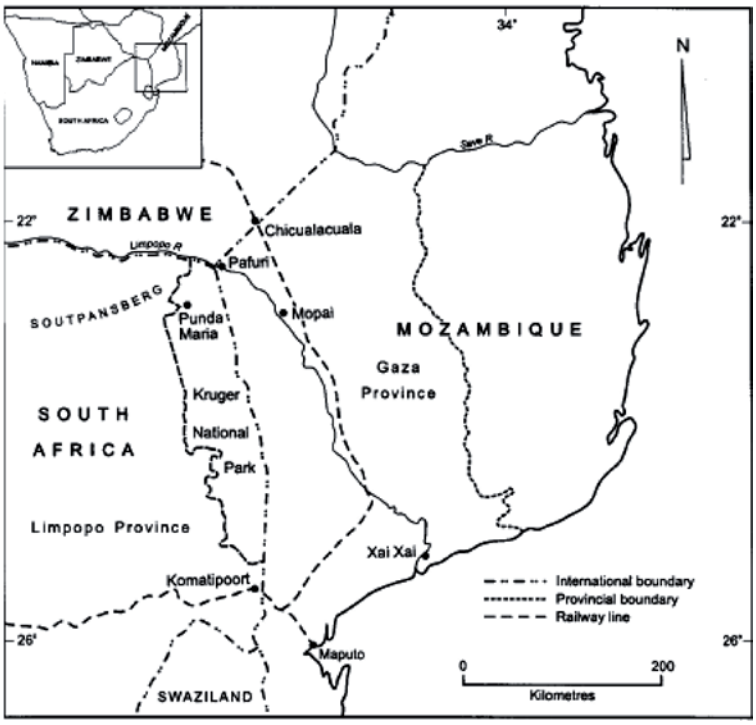
13 S Arnfred, *Sexuality and gender politics in Mozambique: ...*, p. 80.

14 H Gengenbach, "What my heart wanted", JM Allman, S Geiger, and N Musisi (eds), *African women and colonial history*, p. 20.

15 The Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area a decade after inception: Taking stock of current socio-ecological research. Workshop held at the Southern African Wildlife College, 24th to 25th July 2013.

but mainly contextually,[16] but these are mainly used contextually and do not imply that current practises are unchanged. Ultimately, the article aims to examine how the control of gender and sexuality in Pafuri – historically and concurrently – influences the identity and visibility of women within a context of war, violence, work and sex.

Image 1: Location of the Pafuri Triangle



Source: Designed by author.

Crooks, connections and conservation: The Pafuri Triangle

The Pafuri Triangle is an area of land situated at the confluence of the Levuhu and Limpopo Rivers, between South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The region is culturally diverse, economically mobile and historically interesting for three reasons: Firstly, it is the primary entry point into what is now known as the Limpopo Transfrontier Park, a huge area of land in Gaza Province, Mozambique, which was created in 2002. While I was doing work in 1999 and 2000, the Transfrontier Park

16 HH Junod, *The life of a South African tribe*, 1; DA Earthy, *Valenge women: The social and economic life of the Valenge: Women of Portuguese Africa* (London, Oxford University Press 1933), p. 20; P Harries, "Exclusion, classification and internal colonialism: The emergence of ethnicity among the Tsonga-speakers of South Africa", L Vail (ed), *The creation of tribalism in southern Africa,* 43 (University of California press 1989), pp. 82-117; P Harries, "Slavery, social incorporation and surplus extraction. The nature of free and unfree labour in south-east Africa", *The Journal of African History*, 22(3), 1981, pp. 309-330.

was in a formative stage, and inhabitants in Pafuri had not heard of it as yet. Funded by the World Bank and the Peace Parks Foundation, the Limpopo Transfrontier Park in its current form spans approximately 100 000km^2, and is situated in three countries - Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique. Before 2002, northern Gaza province in Mozambique had only recently emerged from civil war (from 1976 to 1992), after which refugees were repatriated by the UNHCR in 1994 and 1995. During my time there, the Limpopo Transfrontier Park seemed to threaten the tenuous social and economic networks in the area with a renewed emphasis on resettlement and disruption of residents, although the precise boundaries of the reserve were not known at that stage.[17]

A second theme is Pafuri's notoriety as a borderzone. Although close to South Africa, Pafuri has always been a remote outpost of Mozambique removed from the mainstream laws of the state. Historically, it became known as a zone that was betwixt and between, all that is familiar and unknown.[18] Located between three countries, the Pafuri Triangle was infamous for harbouring thieves and elephant poachers, hence its name "Crooks Corner". The region also contains an ancient trading route used by slave and gold traders, which led from the old Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) through to the Limpopo River and eventually to Lourenço Marques (now Maputo).[19] Murray points out that the region was situated on the edge of the area from which the Swazi and Gaza empires drew tribute, which attracted a large number of adventurers.[20] These included slave traders, poachers and labour recruiters for the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (or Wenela), who moved Mozambican mine labourers from the East Coast to holding camps around Massingir, Pafuri and Phalaborwa. When I was there, the border was relatively porous, and people from Zimbabwe could walk across the river and visit kin, while family members in South Africa did not need a visa to move into Mozambique through the Pafuri border post. The permeability of national and natural borders in Pafuri encouraged a vibrant informal economic and social thoroughfare, a conduit through which residents moved in order to visit kin, harvest natural resources, and graze their cattle.

The third theme in Pafuri centred around the connections that South Africans had with Mozambique. The Maluleke were forcibly removed from the northern Kruger National Park by conservation authorities in 1976[21] to a site in Limpopo Province, and were fairly well known at the time of my work as one of the first recipients

17 G Rodgers, "The faint footprint of man: Representing race, place and conservation on the Mozambique – South Africa borderland", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22(3), 2009, pp. 392-412.

18 TK Connor, "'*Umgidi* at the Mabambas': Gender, practice and performance among farm workers in the Sundays River Valley", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36(1), 2010, pp. 95-111.

19 M Newitt, *A history of Mozambique* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), p. 293.

20 MJ Murray, "Blackbirding at 'Crooks Corner': Illicit labour recruiting in the north-eastern Transvaal 1920-1940", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21(3) 1995, pp. 373-397.

21 P Harries, "Exclusion, classification and internal colonialism...", L Vail (ed), *The creation of tribalism in southern Africa...*, p. 110.

of a land claim in a national park. The area in the northern area of the Kruger Park is termed the Makuleke concession, the reclamation of which in 1998 was the first of its kind within a national park after 1994. The claim was contentious, since the Maluleke had fought off a counter claim by the Mhinga community, who held that they were the rightful heirs to the land. These differences arose from a historical dispute and battle of succession[22] between two brothers who stemmed from a common ancestor – Mashakadzi – resulting in the split between Mhinga and Maluleke.

Despite these conflicts, it was very clear during fieldwork that South African Makuleke and Mhinga communities both had very close connections to Pafuri. These were very important for Mozambicans during the civil war, as many relocated to South Africa as refugees, some of whom opted to stay permanently after repatriation in 1995.[23] While research was being conducted, South African informants in Makuleke and described their connections to Mozambique in a romantic fashion, expressing their desire to return to their ancestral home, a place of origin, where the natural environment was unsullied and resources were still abundant. Pafuri was regarded by many South Africans as a place where life was uncomplicated, a place of tradition, achieved through (mostly) polygynous households shifting agriculture. By all accounts, particularly among the Maluleke, the women of Pafuri held a similar allure for South African men, since they were regarded as more traditional than their South African counterparts, and leaner and fitter from years of manual labour. In fact, many Maluleke who worked in South Africa had two households – one with a Mozambican wife, and the other (usually a girlfriend) in South Africa. In these instances, a home in Mozambique was regarded as a place to send children to, so that they might grow up in a more natural way than in South Africa.

However, life for men and women in the Pafuri area was anything but uncomplicated. People living in the region experienced multiple disruptions: First by the Portuguese as part of a resettlement process around 1976; then through a war with Rhodesia around the same period. Floods in 1976 (and again in 2000) devastated the area, and a long civil war between Renamo and Frelimo[24] in 1983/4 literally emptied the area of both humans and animals. Everyone I interviewed had suffered some trauma related to these events. During the war, border villages such as Pafuri and Dumela were particularly badly affected as they were vulnerable to attacks by Renamo guerrillas from Rhodesia. Of the 28 families that was interviewed in Dumela, three fled to unspecified locations in Zimbabwe, while another twelve were incarcerated in refugee camps in Zimbabwe. The conditions in these camps were atrocious – disease

22 P Harries, "Exclusion, classification and internal colonialism...", L Vail (ed), *The creation of tribalism in southern Africa...*, pp. 115.

23 G Rodgers, "The faint footprint of man: ...", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22(3), 2009, p. 396.

24 The civil war was fought between the Marxist Front of the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) and the insurgent forces of the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO).

was rife, and family members were separated from each other for up to ten years. When people returned to Pafuri, it was difficult to re-establish agricultural food production, as many were without family members, had lost limbs or were tortured, or had been raped. Other problems such as alcohol abuse, sometimes by victims of violence, or ex-soldiers was also noticeable, as was domestic violence and abuse. The levels of violence suffered by women in Pafuri was extraordinary, and every one of the households I interviewed had been affected (in some way) by the war. Problems such as alcohol abuse by men, domestic violence and abuse were common.

This was particularly true for the household of Chabane Chauke,[25] with whom I stayed for a number of weeks in Dumela during my first visit. The youngest of his three wives had recently given birth, but he was not aware of this at all. In fact, it was clear that he was continually drunk, and according to his wife, he had been drinking continually since he returned from the war. He was a prominent local fighter during the war and was regarded as one of the best in the region, although he suffered from depression and anxiety, which prompted his alcoholism.[26]

Another household, headed by the elderly widow Mrs Mhlaba,[27] was female headed and composed of her two daughters and two grandchildren. Around 1980, they were sent to a refugee camp in Zimbabwe, where they lived for 15 years. Conditions in the camp were atrocious – Mrs Mhlaba described the "sickness of locked mouths" (lockjaw) which affected many of the inhabitants, including her husband, who passed away in the camp. Upon their return to Pafuri in 1995, her daughter, who appeared to be mentaly unstable, was raped by a Frelimo soldier, who fled and left her pregnant with his child. Again, about two years ago in 1998, another ex-soldier again left her pregnant. Her mother described her condition as one that was triggered by sickness and poverty in the refugee camp in Zimbabwe, and aggravated by the actions of the soldiers upon their return. The family seemed to be in a bad way, and the children severely undernourished, as they have no able-bodied persons available to work in their field, and were reliant on their neighbours and relations for assistance.

Around 1994 and 1995, during the "largest repatriation programme in Africa",[28] the majority of land mines were removed and people slowly started to return to their homes. Returning home was not a simple process, and for many people, "it was almost like once again coming into an area as pioneers".[29] Gengenbach[30] has described post-

25 This was during April 1999. All first names of informants are pseudonyms. Surnames are retained in order to provide authenticity and to link with local events - such as the Makuleke land claim.

26 This analysis is based on my own observations.

27 TK Connor (personal collection), interview, Z Mhlaba (housewife, Pafuri), 2 December 2000.

28 G Rodgers, "The faint footprint of man: Representing race, place and conservation on the Mozambique...", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22(3), 2009, p. 399.

29 LA Covane, *Migrant labour and agriculture in the lower Limpopo valley, 1920-1992* (PhD thesis, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 1996), p. 59.

30 H Gengenbach, "Naming the past in a scattered land: Memory and the powers of women's naming practices in southern Mozambique", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33(3), 2000, p. 526.

war settlement in Mozambique as extremely fluid. Pafuri proved to be much more attractive for returnees than other areas in southern Gaza Province, partly due to the economic opportunities presented by cross border movement, but also due to the potential for agricultural activity alongside the Limpopo River. Many villages (like Dumela) were not controlled by a traditional leader but a government appointed representative, which made it easier to re-settle. However, some households found it difficult to survive, particularly those composed of single women or the elderly, and without migrant remittances or a cash income many found it impossible.

With the creation of the Limpopo Transfrontier Park, many of these memories of war and repatriation became invisible. Currently, although some communities alongside the Limpopo River have been allowed to remain in the Park, many of those in the centre portion of the Limpopo Transfrontier Park have been removed. Those that remain have to constantly deal with large mammals raiding their land, as well as limitations on natural resource harvesting and subsistence hunting. To outsiders and tourists, conservation has created a representation of Pafuri as naturally pristine, empty and inhospitable to human settlement. This view corresponds with state representations of rural development in post war Mozambique. In principle, all land in Mozambique belongs to the state, but in 1997 a radical new land law was passed that guaranteed the rights of communities and individuals to transfer and accumulate land-use titles. This actively encouraged corporate and private land deals, through local community buy-in in order to create a projected ideal of a thriving countryside.[31] Outside the Limpopo Transfrontier Park this has not strengthened family farming units or encouraged self-sufficiency, but prompted a race for private conglomerates to use local labour and land for intensive farming, and within Transfrontier Park has led to outright dispossession.

Women are largely missing from these discourses, and Gengenbach argues (2002 and 2003) land grabs and concessions have favoured a male-based economy, and women are secondary to the predominant patterns of migrant labour, war, independence and agrarian change. They are seen as more connected to the soil than men[32] and as more deferent and traditional. In contrast to men who migrate, women have been portrayed by the Mozambican state as being left behind, or chained to their marital home "to ensure the productive and reproductive base of the domestic economy".[33]

Vukhomba: Initiation and sexuality

31 E Lunstrum, "Mozambique, neoliberal land reform, and the Limpopo National Park", *Geographical Review*, 98(3), 2008, pp. 339-355.

32 H Gengenbach, "Naming the past in a scattered land: ...", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33(3), 2000, p. 524.

33 JM Allman, S Geiger, and N Musisi (eds), *African women and colonial history* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 20.

The invisibility and misinterpretation of women and their role in society has clearly concealed the complicated roles that women have played in the history of southern Mozambique, and the way in which they continue to dominate the search for continuity among displaced communities affected by land grabs in Gaza province. This has much to do with their experience of dislocation and loss in their physical spaces, and their constant negotiation of their roles, both historically and politically, to gain control over their bodies and lives. The experience of initiation, like scarification of female bodies, has "bound their bodies to their histories",[34] so that each scar becomes a reminder of a formative event or person in the past.

On the one hand, initiation and the control of sexuality are part of a complex relationship between women and political authority. This has historically revolved around the regulation of indigenous groups and the subversion of practices that have been characterised by both colonial and post-colonial regimes as deficient. However, on the other hand, sexuality also forms part of the romantic allure that Pafuri has for outsiders, particularly South African men who visit the area and have kin who live across the border in Pafuri. Sexuality and initiation are used as ways to unify women after their traumatic experiences during the civil war, and marriage between men and women also ensures the survival of a household and family. For women, there has always been a greater sense of connection to family homes than men, who have largely been absent providers due to long periods of work in South Africa. Historically, the southern portion of Gaza Province in Mozambique (south of the Save River) was contractually rented out to South African recruiters who transported Mozambican men to mine contracts on the Witwatersrand. Although this practise has waned considerably, migration to South Africa is an established practise that has shaped the identity of Mozambican men and women since 1890.

However, unlike men, who primarily draw their identity from mine work and migration to South Africa,[35] women in Pafuri have an indigenous Lenge ancestry, which makes their identity much more localised. This is very different to the Nguni traditions of male initiation, migration, and warlordism within the former Gaza empire. As I will indicate furtheron, the use of sexuality in the education of girls in Pafuri hints at the use of sexuality as a "commodity of transactional value",[36] a mechanism whereby women have been controlled in order to fuel social reproduction. This has occurred historically in the Pafuri region as part of the disruption caused by the Difeqane.[37]

34 H Gengenbach, "Boundaries of beauty: Tattooed secrets of women's history in Magude district, southern Mozambique", *Journal of Women's History*, 14(4), 2003, pp. 106-141.

35 See P Harries, *Work, culture and identity: Migrant labour in Mozambique and South Africa c. 1860-1910* (London, James Currey, 1994).

36 C Groes-Green, "To put men in a bottle": Eroticism, kinship, female power, and transactional sex in Maputo, Mozambique, *American Ethnologist*, 40(1), 2013, pp. 102-117.

37 The Mfecane (or Difeqane) is defined by Hamilton (1998:12) as being a period of violence from approximately 1820 to 1840 that occured across the southern African subcontinent, and flowed from the expansion of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka. C Hamilton, *Terrific majesty: The powers of Shaka Zulu and the limits of invention*

Historically, the Malulekes are part of the indigenous Nwanati clan, or Makwakwa's, who were known to speak Lenge, a mixture of Chopi, Nguni and Ndau. They were originally dislodged from the coastal regions of present day Mozambique by Soshangane and his Ndwandwe (Zulu, or Nguni) warlords around 1850, and pushed further inland. However, through Ndwande and later colonial domination of leadership structures, the influence of Lenge has diminished. This mostly obscured the genealogy and authority of indigenous leaders in Pafuri.[38] Earthy, a missionary ethnographer who worked in coastal Mozambique from 1917 to 1930, documented that many women still spoke Lenge during the 1970s.[39] There were still a few women who did speak Lenge while I was there in 1999, but this was rare, and was clearly related to their knowledge of their matrilineal ancestry, passed down from their mothers and through local rites of initiation. On one particular occasion in Pafuri I searched for the elderly leader of the Maluleke – Gazane – whom I found alongside the road. He could not remember his own ancestry, but was quickly assisted by his granddaughter who recited his lineage for him.[40] From her account, corroborated by the Maluleke in South Africa, Maluleke and Mhinga communities in both South Africa and Mozambique stem from the lineage of Mashakadzi, a warlord who was under the rule of Soshangane in the 1850s. His sons, Makahlule and Dhlamini created a split in the lineage: Dhlamini was suspected of being illegitimate, the product of his mother's liaison with a rival chief, and Makahlule was eventually recognised as the rightful ruler, together with his descendants Phele and Maluleke. Makahlule suffered severe attacks from his brother and was forced to go into hiding. Eventually, they occupied separate territories, south and north of the Limpopo River respectively.

Historical literature indicates that the creation of the Gaza Empire by Soshangane in southern Mozambique was largely achieved through war and the enslavement of indigenous groups. This resulted in a "Ngunisation" of society: invaders achieved this through bridewealth, control over cattle and marriage, and strict enforcement of male circumcision. Harries writes that "labour was the most important system in Gazaland in the late 19th century", particularly procured through kinship and polygyny. Cattle wealth was used to attract women as dependents and wives in a homestead, the functioning of which was based on kinship obligaitons and partly on bridewealth. In extreme cases, many women were sold into partial slavery, and were known as *vatualizado,* or slaves, while their families and local groups who had not acceded to the system were treated as "dogs".[41] This was particularly true for those

(Cape Town: David Phillips, 1998), p. 12.

38 TK Connor, "Crooks, commuters and chiefs: Home and belonging in a borderzone in Pafuri, Gaza province, Mozambique", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 21(1), 2003, pp. 93-120.

39 DA Earthy, *Valenge women: The social and economic life of the Valenge: Women of Portuguese Africa (*London, Oxford University Press 1933), p. 39.

40 TK Connor (personal collection), interview, G Gazane (pensioner, Pafuri), May 1999.

41 P Harries, "Slavery, social incorporation and surplus extraction; the nature of free and unfree labour in south-

women who had not had the protection of a powerful father or husband.

Portugese colonists in Mozambique repeated this pattern through the division of society into *indígena* (indigenous) and *não-indígena* (non-indigenous), the former being regarded as uncivilised and only suited for menial labour.[42] In rural outposts such as the upper Limpopo Valley, this created a pool of indigenous groups that could be used for labour on colonial farms, through the control of families and households, who in turn, subverted female labour to support male authourity. This entire process was overseen by government supported *regulos,* an elite class of rulers and their vassals, who sometimes served as labour recruiters for the South African gold mines, but also recruited labour for the Portuguese.[43]

Migrant labour had such a great effect on male identity in Pafuri that even rites of male circumcision took place in South Africa. Male initiation was frowned on by the Portugese, and totally banned by Frelimo in Mozambique after independence in 1976, since customary activities were thought to be barbaric and not in the interests of a modern state.[44] Even though the Mozambican state eventually changed its position on customary activities, male initiation rites were still not conducted in Pafuri when I did fieldwork in 1999. Very few adult men had the training or the authority to perform the ceremony and young men usually went to South Africa to perform the ceremony where it coincided with the start of their working life away from home.[45]

On the contrary, female initiation (*vukhomba*) in Pafuri was different, and very popular. In fact, the practise was widespread both during Portuguese rule, as Rita-Ferreira[46] noted in 1964, as well as in the modern era.[47] In the 1960s, the popularity of female rites was associated with the absence of men on prolonged work contracts, which usually lasted from six to eighteen months. In the modern era, the popularity of female rites have much to do with the emphasis placed on sexuality and freedom of expression. In either case, female initiation remains to be an enduring and persistent practice in southern Mozambique, one that has largely escaped prohibition by various regimes. *Vukhomba* has occurred for generations in Pafuri, and is controlled by groups of women who have themselves undergone the rite in their youth. Unlike male circumcision, *vukhomba* is less physically invasive, slightly more obscure and has an entirely different function.

Male rites are directly connected to migration and revolve around work as a formative

east Africa", *The Journal of African History*, 22(3), 1981, p. 319.

42 B O'Laughlin, "Class and the customary: The ambiguous legacy of the *Indigenato* in Mozambique", *African Affairs*, 99(394), 2000, pp. 5-42.

43 TK Connor, "Crooks, commuters and chiefs: ...", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 21(1), 2003, p. 114.

44 M Newitt, *A history of Mozambique* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), pp. 546-547.

45 TK Connor (personal collection), interview N. Makuleke (tribal elder, Pafuri), 15 June 1999.

46 A Rita Ferreira, *Promoção social em Moçambique, junta de investigaçoes do ultramar,* 74 (Lisboa, 1964), p. 56.

47 S Arnfred, *Sexuality & gender politics in Mozambique: ...*, p. 25.

episode of male identity. Not surprisingly, the fact that male initiation is not held in Mozambique, but in South Africa, emphasises the idea of Mozambique as a largely female space, connected to sexuality and agrarian activity. After their rite of initiation, girls are usually allocated an arable plot by their father, which they retain even after they have married or moved away. When conducting fieldwork in Pafuri in the 21st century, *vukhomba* was very popular as it had disappeared during the civil war, and had only been re-instated after 1994. These ceremonies were clearly ways in which women revisited their home spaces and friends, reformed old groupings of lodge owners, and recruited new girls. Newly intiated teenage girls were relatively easy to spot in the Pafuri area, as they wore red headbands (*pandani*) and were immensely attractive to many men, since it was rumoured that girls underwent physical procedures that heightened physical pleasure and sexual enjoyment for both. *Vukhomba* parties were very popular in Pafuri, where groups of young girls were symbolically re-incorporated into their families as women, while remaining covered with blankets to symbolise the secretive nature of the ceremony. I attended two of these parties in Dumela, always accompanied by the lodge owner, a middle aged woman who married Chabane Chauke's brother and was responsible for co-ordinating rites in the village.[48]

Arnfred confirms the centrality of *Vukhomba* rituals in the formation of a strong female identity in Mozambique. She writes that rituals are not only about the construction of women, through the structural rules and regulations of behaviour, but also about the confirmation of a "gendered sphere of powerful female sociality".[49] After the civil war, initiation often became a way for adult women to assert their authority on the younger generation, and sometimes to "permit a very different behaviour: disrespectful, non subservient, mocking men". [50]

Initiation is about an introduction to this powerful universe, through which women often become diviners, lodge owners and prominent community members. Initiation rituals practised by people in the Pafuri region are diverse: they combine different variants of female rituals in southern Mozambique and north-eastern South Africa. *Vukomba* draws upon some Venda influences, but is mostly related to the South African Tsonga and Lenge rites. In South Africa,[51] the Tsonga rite is primarily used as a structural form of transition into womanhood, where girls are expected to change their status through learning the rules of adulthood. However, there are very close similarities to Mozambique and both are regarded as highly secretive. Everything that is learnt at the *murireli* (nightly gatherings) in the bush is regarded as sacrosanct. After three days, the girls attend a special ceremony, where older women come into

48 TK Connor (personal collection). interview and observations, L Chauke (lodge leader, Pafuri), 3 December 2000).

49 S Arnfred, *Sexuality and gender politics in Mozambique: ...*, p. 188.

50 S Arnfred, *Sexuality and gender politics in Mozambique: ...*, p. 29.

51 J Urh, "Power after the break of modern reality: The creation of South African community" (MA, Croatia, Ljubbljana, University of Ljubljana, 2000).

the bush in order to verify that they have learnt the full set of rules and dances. These rules (*nawu)* reflect the accumulated knowledge of initiates concerning the treatment and respect of men, including aspects of sexual behaviour, cooking, cleaning and work. On the fourth day, girls receive presents and attend a celebration, where they don traditional garb and *pandani,* which they are expected to wear for up to three months. If girls have behaved well and worked hard, they are officially re-incorporated back into their families and communities as adult women, at their last *Vukhomba* party. The secrecy of these ceremonies are encouraged by giving each girl an initiatory "name", which is mostly used during informal banter and song, many of which are lewd and embarrassing for men to hear. As Urh writes:[52]

> Langutani nhlokweni ku na eluku ra Joni ho i ya
> Langutani milengeni ku na ntangu ya Joni ho i ya
> Langutani xisutini ku na bandi ra Joni ho i ya
> Langutani murini ku na hambe ya Joni ho i ya
> Siku a vuyaka ndzi ta n'wi manya hi mathanga ho i ya
> (Look at the head, there is a towel bought in Johannesburg
> Look at the feet there are shoes bought in Johannesburg
> Look at the waist there is a belt bought in Johannesburg
> Look at the body there is a shirt bought in Johannesburg
> The day when he will come back I will grab him with my thighs)
>
> *Na knofi khala mufana wa mina.*
> *No komenyana mufana wa mina.*
> (My boyfriend has the colour of coffee.
> My boyfriend is so small.)

These elements of initiation are common to Mozambican girls as well, although there are certain elements that are different. Junod described the ritual in Mozambique as a "nubility rite"[53] rather than a straightforward structural transition into womanhood. The Lenge rite was much more suggestive, as Earthy has discussed, since girls learned behavioural rules, but also entered a less restrictive zone, where they felt a sense of freedom and maturity through their new found sexuality. In fact, Junod only wrote about nobility rites in footnotes, and in Latin, as he obviously considered them too lewd to be placed in the main text.[54]

The Lenge ritual would have been a fairly intense, and lengthy period of initiation, lasting for two to three months from summer to autumn. In the past, girls underwent physical procedures that often started in childhood, including

52 J Urh, "Power after the break of modern reality: ...", pp. 84-86.
53 HH Junod, *The life of a South African tribe*, 1 (Attinger Frères, 1912), p. 87.
54 DA Earthy, *Valenge women: ...,* p. 44.

lengthening of the labia, that have continued into the present. For those who choose, tattoos and ritual scarification that may accompany initiation emphasise the nobility and sexuality of girls as they transition into womanhood. Girls also learn sexual techniques in order to heighten physical pleasure, and in some areas (particularly central Mozambique) female defloration, the use of an antelope horn (*tsondzo*), and use of a sedative derived from a local tree, are widely used.[55] These are practises that are derived from Arabic influences in Mozambique, particularly through nearby coastal communities in the historical centres of Sofala and Inhambane, and have been carried over into the present. In general, the timing of initiation in Pafuri is decided by a community leader, and directed by a mature woman (*nyambutsi*) or the lodge owner. As I discovered, women were very strict about who was allowed into the ritual process, as it is as much a spiritual event as a physical rite. Only close friends and assistants to the girls are allowed to visit, mostly at night.

I had the opportunity to visit a group of girls during my stay in an agnatic cluster of hamlets close to the Limpopo River, about 30 kilometres from the Pafuri border post. "Old man", as we referred to him colloquially, had three wives and numerous children, including a nineteen-year old daughter. She accompanied me on many occasions to the Limpopo River, where she socialised with her friends, as well as to nightly initiation ceremonies. She had recently returned from South Africa and underwent the rite a few years ago. Living with her and her family, I observed that household duties in general were extremely physically demanding. Women ground maize by hand, and had to travel between 5 - 10 kilometres to fetch water. Women were also responsible for weeding and cultivation of plots, as well as cooking and preparation of food at their homesteads. Girls from Mozambique were in particular demand as marriageable partners, as they were perceived to be much more hard working and subservient than women in South Africa. Young women were allotted a plot of land to cultivate by their father when they have been initiated and most importantly, become available as wives to young men.

The high regard that many men had for women in Mozambique contrasts to the perceived behaviour of women in South Africa, who were sometimes regarded as being lazy and immoral, and far too independent.[56] As I found out, accepted behaviour in Mozambique included eating and sleeping separately (sleeping on one's back was not accepted as it could entice men), as well as kneeling down when serving food or drink to elders. Objects such as knives (the possession of which was seen as a male prerogative) were only given to women to use with permission. Farming a plot of land, bearing children and attending to the needs of a household, were regarded as the primary roles of women in rural Pafuri.

55 S Arnfred, *Sexuality and gender politics in Mozambique: ...*, pp. 171-172; C Groes-Green, "To put men in a bottle: Eroticism, kinship, female power, and transactional sex in Maputo, Mozambique", *American Ethnologist*, 40(1), 2013, p. 118.

56 TK Connor (personal collection), interview, N Makuleke (tribal elder, Pafuri), 12 December 2000.

However, besides the rules and regulations imprinted on girls during initiation, the influence of Lenge brings an overtly sexual aspect to the rite in Pafuri, much more than the South African version. The Mozambican version is connected to awakening the sexuality of young girls, and how to manage the demands of men on the bodies of women. It is clear that girls in Mozambique were not taught an anesthetised version of sexuality, but encouraged to celebrate their bodies and invest into the use of their sexuality wisely. During initiation they did not only learn new rules but entered into a complex field of performance, where they had to learn how negotiate their status using sexuality. Based on my observations in the field, this first occurred through their father, mother and aunts, but later through their husbands, and co-wives.

The attraction of men towards young women in Pafuri (and vice versa), was part of the glue that bound people to their home space, and in fact, encouraged very idealistic notions of identity. This process of place-making was clearly connected to identity within fluid border and migration zones such as Pafuri: Sexuality and attraction are about crossing physical boundaries, not only between countries, but between physical bodies. Sexuality also embodied the connections that many ex refugees felt towards their place of origin, and idealistically created a romantic connection to the soil, to the women in the area, and to family networks. This was clearly manifested in the pride that people felt in the ability to host *Vukhomba* in Pafuri, as was related to me on many occasions. Moreover, the physicality of the rite binds girls to their matriarchial family, through the communal labour which is necessary for subsistence agriculture and the continued existence of vulnerable households.

Maintaining these female connections are all the more important due to the persistent features of dislocation and disruption in the region. These are not limited to past experiences of war, but the ever present threat of climate change (including drought and flood), as well as displacement. Clearly, learning how to be a woman in Pafuri involves a lot of negotiation and performance, particularly since girls have to make sense of their new roles in society that demand their subservience, but at the same time, encourage a youthful independence and honesty.

Ritual scarification or *tinhlanga*, is also practised by some adult women in Pafuri, and these scars were shown to me by women on our trips to the Limpopo River. Here they were free to bathe, laugh and poke fun at their male friends and family. Like these scars, *Vukhomba* has a similar effect, both clearly "excite[s] the sensuality of [men],"[57] partly in order to mediate a male dominated world through the use of a secret female code that emphasises friendship, networks and connections to places and people. However, like the pain produced by *tinhlanga* and *Vukhomba*, women in Pafuri produced a physical version of the emotional scarring that they endured in the past. Gengenbach observes that: "The suffering endured by women as part of

57 H Gengenbach, "Boundaries of beauty: ...", *Journal of Women's History*, 14(4), 2003, p. 114.

initiation or bodily scarification - the loss of blood, transition, are all part of what it means to be beautiful, feminine - this is part of womanhood".[58] In this sense women in Pafuri were certainly not marginal members of their patrilineal kinships groups, or passively part of the clan into which they were born – but writers of their own ethnographies and histories.

Conclusion

Historical data has confirmed patterns of transactional identity in border zones such as Pafuri, particularly where patron-client relationships have dominated the interaction between groups and genders. As Webster indicated almost forty years ago, women in border spaces manage to retain a particularly vibrant and distinct space, among unequal conditions, through socialisation and the use of female agency.[59]

Part of the allure of the Pafuri Triangle is that it is a home of origin for many South Africans, including the Malulekes. Likewise, for many men the attraction of initiated girls forms part of the mystique of the region. For these girls, however, initiation revolves around the creation of a new status, which represents something different to that of migration and movement – a chance to freely express themselves, become rooted in a matrilineal home, and become women. The women who take part in *Vukhomba* are intimately connected through physical experience to their kin and ancestry in the region. The use of sexuality within female education is ultimately valuable as a tool for women to use in order to create female spaces separate to that of men, and this emphasises the value of female agency.

This creates both the conditions for female empowerment as well as a commoditised form of sexuality.[60] The main reason for the latter is the inherent secrecy of initiation, which has been misinterpreted by outsiders (including colonists), particularly men who can only speculate what happens during *Vukhomba*. This creates conditions of control, both by men over local women, or by people viewed as colonialists over local populations, as neither have had the opportunity to participate in these events. Gender and control is exacerbated by the unequal playing fields in Pafuri. The local population continues to suffer from resettlement and displacement and women still bear the brunt of work and labour for their families. Land grabs in and around Pafuri have continued, not only due to the Limpopo Transfrontier Park but most recently due to a huge land concession nearby - Procana, a sugar cane conglomerate, has used communal land and cheap labour for a bio-fuel industry in southern Gaza Province.

58 H Gengenbach, "Boundaries of beauty: ...", *Journal of Women's History*, 14(4), 2003, p. 116.

59 D Webster, "*Abafazi Bathonga bafihlakala*: Ethnicity and gender in a KwaZulu border community", *African Studies*, 50(1), 1991, pp. 243-271.

60 C Groes-Green, "'To put men in a bottle': ...", *American Ethnologist*, 40(1), 2013, p. 105.

Perhaps due to the absence of men due to labour contracts in South Africa, women have had the space to forge independent social connections with each other and express their feelings and frustrations. Girls and women who are involved in initiation have a way of challenging the disruption of movement and violence, and sexuality is a central part of this process.