



Rural Women in
So. Mozambique
Back to the Past
Oral History & Memory
Life Histories
Women's Lives & Voices

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Rural Women in Southern Mozambique: Histories and Historiographies

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Back to the Past: Seeking (Women's) History after War

When I first began to think about this project in the early 1990s, I planned to use the life histories of rural women as a source (previously ignored, or "untapped") for a gendered analysis of agrarian change in southern Mozambique since the nineteenth century. This region had endured two waves of imperialist conquest, Nguni and Portuguese, between 1820 and 1895, and since the late nineteenth century had been exploited as a reserve of male migrant labor for the gold mines of South Africa. The kind of study I had in mind placed me at the confluence of two then-prominent streams in African historiography: the rich, often controversial tradition of oral history in South Africa, and the broader, sometimes equally polemical field of life-history research on African women. Building on the insights of feminist scholars who had used personal narratives to explore women's constructions of the past, I sought to prove that during the last two centuries women in the rural communities of southern Mozambique had not suffered as silent, helpless, or, at best, coping victims of Gaza Nguni conquest, Portuguese colonialism, South African mining capital, and patriarchal clan rule. How, I wanted to know, did women experience and explain the sometimes colliding, sometimes colluding forces of ostensibly masculine power that had transformed the region, so often destructively, since the early nineteenth century? Were imperialism and capitalism, guns and gold, tradition and patriliney really as omnipotent in determining the exterior and interior landscapes of women's lives as scholars had claimed? Would the dynamics of precolonial or colonial political power, proletarianization, mission Christianity, agriculture, or African marriage and family look the same if we examined them from the point of view of rural women?

At the time I was pondering these questions, of course, Mozambique was a country at war. Since 1976, the Rhodesian- and then South African-backed forces of the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) had waged a brutal and devastating campaign against Mozambique's Frelimo government, whose commitment to revolutionary socialism and African liberation movements had provoked a furious backlash from white-ruled countries in the region. By the 1980s, this externally sponsored war of destabilization had taken root within Mozambique and escalated into a civil war; by the early 1990s, violence and famine had claimed more than a million lives and displaced several million men, women, and children both inside and beyond the country's borders. In 1992, the year I conducted two months of pre-dissertation research in Mozambique and began to write grant proposals for doctoral research, the government and Renamo agreed to a cease-fire and signed the Rome Peace Accord, bringing a formal end to the hostilities. When I arrived in Maputo to begin fieldwork in December 1994, Frelimo was enjoying a parliamentary majority under the continued leadership of President Joaquim Chissano after winning Mozambique's first multiparty elections in October. War-related suffering and violence, however, would persist in many parts of the country for months to come, as some Renamo units refused to leave their rural base camps or to release the women and children they held captive, as land mines continued to claim lives and livestock, as weapons infiltrated the countryside, as refugees and *deslocados* (internally displaced persons) returned home to confront the enormity of their losses, and as civilian survivors battled hunger, disease, and the psychological trauma of having witnessed Renamo's savagery against family or neighbors or, in some cases, of themselves having been forced to commit acts of violence against loved ones.

The war and its consequences, in other words, defined the circumstances in which I planned and carried out a research project in whose original conception I barely acknowledged the reality of war. When fellow graduate students and professors pointed out this omission, or challenged the idealism (or simplicity) of my faith that rural women's voices and agency were recoverable under these circumstances, I dug in my heels, believing (or so I remember now) that the war simply represented a more terrible form of (post)colonial-capitalist domination: To focus narrowly on women's victimization, I thought, was once again to deny them an active role in Mozambique's history. When I looked at the war, I preferred to see heroic stories of popular resistance to Renamo, especially movements of "traditional" religious protest such as Manuel António's Naprama army in rural Zambezia, in which peasant soldiers armed only with spears, machetes, tin cans, and faith in the protective power of ancestral spirits managed to infiltrate Renamo-held areas and free hundreds of captives from Renamo camps. ¹ To the suggestion

that rural women interviewed in the immediate aftermath of the war would be too frightened, mistrustful, or distraught to offer reliable testimony about the prewar past, I responded with a methodological adjustment inspired by the work of feminist anthropologists and archaeologists: I would supplement life histories with forms of material culture produced by women in the context of farming, domestic work, and everyday agrarian life. These traces—pottery, tattoos, alterations to the landscape—of the experiences of rural women would, I argued, be impeccably authentic evidence of women's knowledge and experience because they had been created for and among the women themselves, rather than for me. ² Here, I was sure, I could tap the contents of women's memories in order to retell the history of southern Mozambique with women's perceptions, activities, and relationships at the fore. The war may have muddied—or bloodied—the terrain of my research, but I knew the story I was after, and I was determined to track it down and see it told.

How does one prepare to do historical fieldwork in communities ravaged by such violence? How does one—how can one—predict the effects of war on memory, not only on what people remember but on how, through which practices and paradigms, remembering is done? In the decade that has passed since I began the research for this project in earnest, some of these questions have wound their way into African historiography, particularly in historical writing on South Africa as the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have been analyzed and revealed. ³ Forty-odd years after Jan Vansina galvanized the profession of African history by proposing a scientific method for the treatment of oral tradition as historical evidence, ⁴ historians still agonize (and argue) over how to interpret the meanings of African speech; now, though, we imbue speech with a daunting array of powers (invention, distortion, erasure), especially when it emerges from situations of violence or war, and we shift our analytical vision to the slipperiness of memory—master of disguise, spinner of stories, medium of truths we can never truly know. Memory and its crafty henchmen, the habits of narrative, stand between us and what really happened in the time before now; and yet memory and narrative also, in the very act of obscuring the past-as-lived from our view, perform a good deal of our interpretive work for us, sifting and culling and organizing (i.e., constructing) experience to make it available for particular audiences, at particular places and times. ⁵ Indeed, we have come to count on the potent revelations of memory, as much for its accidental missteps, meaningful silences, and innocent betrayals as for the purposeful information it provides. ⁶ But in taking for granted that narrative, above all spoken story, is memory's chief tool for presenting remembered experience, we have too often presumed that memory is always available: Loquacious or mute, broken by violence or elaborated by deceit, memory-as-voice always waits—we trust—in one narrative guise or another to be told.

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But what if some people remember differently—not in the sense that the details of their memories differ, but in terms of the *tools* of their memory, the *forms* their remembering takes? What, for instance, if some people choose not to put experience solely into story, or not to articulate their memories through language at all? The work of remembering, like the work of history, involves sorting through and making sense of the jumble of what happened: We take what we know, we arrange it, we come up with an explanation, and we store that explanation somehow—because we created it for a purpose, and for an audience of some kind. After all, we do the work of remembering in company, as members of a community, never in a social vacuum and never entirely on our own. ⁷ But who is to say that these explanations, these records of interpreted experience, must be organized and presented as narrative, in discourse rather than some other form? Is narrative our only medium of access to the past, the only meaningful shape remembrance—or history—can assume?

When I set off for Mozambique in pursuit of women's memories, I had no way of knowing that the women I would interview in Magude district were engaged in a similar quest. I knew the extent of the war's destruction, knew that much of the inhabited countryside had been razed; I knew that AK-47s, machetes and explosives—and the shockingly cruel uses to which Renamo put these weapons—could damage memory, even mortally wound it, even (in rare cases) take it away. What I did not know was that in Magude, and I suspect in many other such communities around the country, the impact of the war on women's memories was more catastrophic, more life-threatening, than I think any historian could have guessed. More creative in their remembering than historians (and, I would argue, than the men in their own communities as well), these women indeed shared traditions of recording experience not only in discursive forms such as story, but in homemade objects, on and through their bodies, and in the contours of the soil itself. Retrieving and presenting these forms of memory—forms of

history—sometimes, but not always, required the assistance of narrative; narrative, however, could never articulate or substitute for this remembering on its own. Thus when these women fled the countryside and each other, scattered by the threat of capture, rape, maiming or slaughter at Renamo's hands, they were leaving behind memories—but also, and more dangerously, certain kinds of *memory*, certain practices of remembering, certain ways of knowing the past—to suffer theft or destruction along with the rest of their possessions.

What women did to restore narrative and non-narrative forms of memory when they returned to their flattened homesteads and ruined fields, always nearly empty-handed and with bodies transformed by years of hunger and distress, is, in a way, the real subject of this book. It is not the subject I started out with, nor do I treat it as the explicit basis of my argument in any of the following chapters. But by arriving in Magude so quickly on the heels of their return, I inadvertently witnessed—and, in a sense, participated in and perhaps encouraged—women's individual and group efforts to get this process underway.

Not all women, perhaps not even a majority of the women who had resettled in the district by the time I arrived, took part in this process. Among the many tragedies of Mozambique's war for rural communities were the premature loss of a large number of elderly women, who were more vulnerable to death from illness, hunger or exhaustion during displacement (or, in the most painful cases, to being left behind when families abandoned their villages); and a declining interest in traditional culture among younger women who had spent between five and ten years as *deslocadas* or refugees in urban centers in Mozambique or South Africa. As a result, although accurate gender- and age- specific population data were unavailable at the time, the female population of Magude district in 1995-96 appeared to have an unnaturally small proportion of women over fifty years of age (i.e., women who would have been more committed to traditional forms of remembering), and an unusually large proportion of women between the ages of twenty and fifty whose separation from the land and exposure to urban life during wartime had weakened their attachment to rural customs. ⁸ But the elderly women who were openly committed to recovering "old ways" of memory were (despite stereotypes of female powerlessness in Shangaan culture) capable of making a disproportionately large amount of *pongo* (noise) on behalf of their cause. And over the course of the roughly eighteen months that I knew them and was able to witness some of their daily exertions to cajole, scold and remind younger women about the importance of what they had collectively lost, elderly women's campaign to recover prewar practices of remembering had just begun. ⁹

I also witnessed efforts to recreate older forms of historical memory among men in Magude. Yet whether these efforts consisted of informal discussions of family history—neighbors passing a hot afternoon in the shade, for instance, reminiscing about their grandparents between swallows of homemade *mahewu* (maize beer)—or public debates about clan genealogy, private resumption of sacrificial offerings at ancestral burial grounds or organized revival of communal customs such as the rites of *vukanyi* season, men's quest for the past differed from women's in several important ways. More straightforward and confidently open, men's remembering also involved (as women liked to point out) significantly more *kuvulavula* (talk). Under the banner of recovering "what happened" or "what we did," and precisely when and where, men's remembering claimed a more objective, authoritative, and rational kind of truthfulness, even in disagreement, than women's dared. Here, as in the forms their remembering took—the narrativized renderings of personal or kin-group experience, the ritual tributes to patrilineal forebears and chiefly power—men's knowledge of the past occupied recognizably "historical" ground, following conventions of representation and content both dominant in their own culture and familiar to Western scholars.

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To the extent that some of women's ways of memory were more lived than told, more embodied or enacted than articulated or voiced, their records of experience—their histories—were less visible, less easy to access and understand than men's in postwar Magude. ¹⁰ The fact that the war had destroyed so much of women's histories, and that these histories often required substantial labor to replace, obviously widened the gender gap in terms of the availability of prewar remembrance. And yet ironically, as I hope the following chapters demonstrate, we gain richer and, I think, more challenging insight into Magude's and southern Mozambique's past from what remained (or what was being resuscitated) of female memories than from the more strictly storied, ideology-laden, correctness-bound rememberings of men. Inseparable from the praxis of everyday life rather than confined to a discrete discursive or ritual domain, women's histories asserted an unabashedly pathic epistemology in which knowledge

rests primarily in emotions and sensory perceptions, and bodies and objects also speak, sometimes more candidly and compellingly than voices, about how the agrarian world has changed—or, more intriguingly given the hardships of the last two centuries, remained in certain crucial ways the same. And while I may have had a wisp of an idea, caught from the historiographies within my reach, that I might find evidence of rural women's pasts in such unlikely forms as pottery, such unexpected places as cultivated fields, this evidence was neither "already there" waiting for me nor experientially true in the manner I had imagined. It was an accident of timing, and the brave determination of Magude's eldest women to resurrect their histories from the ruins of war, that won me the privilege of glimpsing ways of remembering—ways of understanding the past—that academic historians of southern Africa have for the most part overlooked, and whose potential I happily acknowledge I have only begun to grasp.

Oral History and Memory in South Africa

In a review essay first published in 1990, Paul la Hausse described the idealistic—and openly political—roots of oral history among academic historians (then predominantly white scholars) in South Africa in the 1970s. Part of a wider "radical" reorientation in South African historiography, these scholars embraced oral testimony initially as the means for writing "history from below," an enterprise La Hausse described as "recovering the subjective popular experiences of social change wrought within living memory"—in particular, social change associated with South Africa's mineral revolution and industrialization. ¹¹ Identified by the mid-1990s most powerfully with Charles van Onselen's work on sharecropper Kas Maine, this scholarship set out to "right a historic wrong" ¹² of apartheid by recording the memories and histories of South Africa's black underclasses: peasants, sharecroppers, labor tenants, and the rural dispossessed; ¹³ migrant miners, industrial workers, domestic servants, and displaced township dwellers; ¹⁴ political organizers, protestors, militant youth, and union activists. ¹⁵ In part, its authors were motivated by a desire for evidentiary justice, the belief that the absence of these voices from South Africa's archival records—hence its official memory—had the effect of both hiding the full extent of apartheid's crimes and denying how the struggles of oppressed groups had helped to shape the country's past. Studies based on oral testimony "enriched the historiography," portrayed "the depth of the black South African experience," and evoked "a dimension of social reality . . . that never emerges from the official archival material;" yet they could also challenge previous understandings of social change, race relations, political consciousness, and the dialectic of agency and structure in processes of capitalist "penetration." ¹⁶ In particular, Belinda Bozzoli in *Women of Phokeng*, through her sensitive use of life histories to explore women's experiences of migrancy, urbanization, and political protest in the Transvaal, illustrated the transformative potential of oral sources through its inclusion of long excerpts of testimony in which—for the first time in the literature—peasant-born women living within the mighty reach of the Witwatersrand gold mines represented themselves as creative and purposive social actors, consciously pursuing "life strategies" of education, employment, and household-building within the structural constraints of the tumultuous twentieth century. ¹⁷

The prominence of African women's oral recollections in Bozzoli's study, however, raised a host of other questions about the epistemological status of the spoken word in South African historical writing. While Bozzoli was careful in her introduction to critique the interview process through which she—with the assistance of "local girl" Mmantho Nkotsoe—generated the 22 life histories used in her book, and while she recognized the "storytelling" quality of women's accounts, ¹⁸ she failed to examine or question the narrative form of women's remembering. Her determination to make a particular case about South African history led her to treat women's words as "repositories of . . . consciousness" and illustrative fact—rather like the two sacks of documents presented to van Onselen's researchers by Kas Maine's family after the sharecropper's death, an event van Onselen describes, completely without irony, as his "luckiest break of all." ¹⁹ As Isabel Hofmeyr observed in her 1995 review of oral studies in southern Africa, this approach suffered from its "conflation of testimony with experience and . . . willingness to see narrative as reality." ²⁰ Hofmeyr in her own work at the time, like Leroy Vail and Landeg White in *Power and the Praise Poem*, ²¹ focused instead on the historicity of forms of oral narrative, highlighting how gender (among other things) structured the meanings of colonialism, capitalism, and literacy for local traditions of history-telling and for the cultural constitution of memory in southern Africa. These scholars recognized African-voiced representations of the past as intrinsically political—both an "arena where competing 'histories'

clash" and a self-conscious discursive intervention in the present. ²² It is interesting, then, that here too the politics of the authors' own presence are mysteriously filtered out, as though memory and narrative as objects of study can be isolated (unlike "testimony") from the social situations that produce them, even while scholars dutifully acknowledge the linguistic and power differences complicating their use of African oral sources in translation. ²³

Even in the most innovative historical work on orality and memory in the last decade, scholars have continued to problematize the spoken remembrances of African men and women while erasing much (if not all) of their own role in the processes that produce oral sources. If oral history blossomed in South Africa as a method, proudly claimed by social historians, for democratizing knowledge of the past and making "an obscured African agency . . . visible" ²⁴ through the recovery of individual experience, it has aged somewhat defensively, redefining its focus from "testimony" to "text" or "discourse" in order to highlight the constructed quality of all narrations of experience, and to demonstrate that memory—like the written word—always speaks from a particular historical context. Scholarship that explores the differences between oral (indigenous) and written (colonial) narratives, such as Terence Ranger's more recent work on Zimbabwe, ²⁵ or—as in Carolyn Hamilton's *Terrific Majesty*, the dialogic interplay between them ²⁶—deepens our understanding of the evidentiary value of oral sources by using them to reveal the constraining power of African discursive agency vis-à-vis colonial/white representations of the past. Here, as in the latest historiographic gauntlet to be thrown by Luise White, scholars' presumption of the generic identity of oral and written narratives—as texts equally capable of illuminating (and obfuscating) contests over the meaning of events—can help to unveil what is at stake in the politics of colonial and postcolonial memory, and sometimes lead us to fascinating new conceptions of African "realities" past and present. ²⁷ Yet while this approach to orality may offer a beguiling alternative, it also tends to result in a too-familiar masking of crucial elements of memory's politics: the identity, history, and agency of the African oral text-maker and the scholar. When testimony becomes text, we can lose the relational moment of a story's telling—the social situation that made the production of that historical narrative uniquely possible. The omission is ironic: Critics of social historians' treatment of oral sources as experientially "truthful" evidence rightly insist that testimony, like experience, is a social rather than individual product; ²⁸ and yet these same scholars typically beg the question of what, for the men and women they interview, "social" actually means, and what justification historians have for excusing themselves from that discursive arena, and from the oral texts yielded therein.

Life Histories of African Women

Like Belinda Bozzoli, scholars involved in the production and use of women's life histories in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent have rarely enjoyed the luxury of textual self-erasure, nor the authority to represent their sources—women's words—as bearers of "fact," at least not since anthropology's crisis of conscience in the mid-1980s. ²⁹ While some feminist anthropologists took their post-modernist male colleagues to task for reducing ethnography to an invention of self and other, thereby denying all claims voiced through collaborative efforts between Western academics and non-Western subjects, ³⁰ feminist scholars working with African women's life histories went to ever greater lengths to explain their research process and defend the value of "intersubjective" fieldwork. ³¹ Indeed, concern about the power dynamics of interview relationships and the translation of those relationships into publishable texts has long been a distinguishing feature of this field, from the days when feminist academics viewed life histories as a means for building cross-cultural theories of gender oppression ³² to their more recent use for challenging androcentric (and ethnocentric) metanarratives of African historiography. ³³ The politics and process of women's life history research in Africa have already undergone several thorough reviews, and I will not rehash old arguments here. ³⁴ Clearly, no amount of methodological transparency or authorial self-positioning can eliminate the privileges of Western scholars; yet as numerous researchers have noted, ethnographic subjects can and do exert power over interview agendas. ³⁵ Moreover, an important conceptual shift—from "life history" to "personal narrative"—helped, by the 1980s, to move this literature beyond dead-end debates about the "truthfulness" of testimony uttered within postcolonial field encounters. Having reached an understanding that life stories are valuable precisely because they are shaped by "deeply embedded notions and expectations about the 'normal' course of a life, as well as unconscious rules about what constitutes a good story," feminist scholars (Western and

African) began increasingly to attend not only to what women said of their lives, but to how—and why—they said it, truths over which interviewers more obviously have little control. ³⁶

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Although recasting life histories in terms of narrative opened new dimensions of meaning for the scholarly use of these accounts, and stimulated exciting work on oral/women's history in other parts of the world during the 1990s, ³⁷ the full implications of this shift were slower to penetrate writing on women in sub-Saharan Africa. Recognizing that "life histories are actually stories that people tell about themselves" ³⁸ involves paying attention to culturally and historically specific conventions of storytelling and constructions of experience; to memory as an active, simultaneously individual and social process of structuring knowledge of the past; ³⁹ to language and the linguistic forms through which understandings of the past are organized and expressed; and, finally, to the occasions and audiences for which life stories are told, and within which they matter and make the richest sense. ⁴⁰ This approach may also require moving away from the heroic or celebratory model of women's life history, with its textual isolation of individual women (e.g., presenting each life history in a discrete section or chapter) and its recuperative preoccupation with what the "sacks" of women's memories contain—an emphasis that runs the risk not only of essentializing "what women remember," but of losing the wealth of meaning conveyed by memory's other creative powers: forgetting, invention, myth, suppression, fantasy, lying. ⁴¹ Anthropologists have long argued that the very notion of a "life" may not be meaningful for everyone, and that conventions for talking about oneself may differ radically across cultures. ⁴² An equally important point is that these conventions—like memory—have a history of their own, and even within one culture may be inflected by gender as well as age, class, education, religion, etc. ⁴³ Indeed, an individual's self-voiced autobiography may not tell us all we seek to know about his or her life, which is what we assume when we privilege conscious experiential memory over the other ways in which people create and express memories of self—through landscape, objects, rituals, or other oral forms besides life story. ⁴⁴

This question of memory's form recurs in scholarship on another genre of spoken narrative—oral tradition—with which African women's life histories often appear to have much in common. From Alison Baker's research among Moroccan women to Harold Scheub's long collaboration with Xhosa storytellers, we have been reminded of the frequent overlap in content, style and structure between women's life-narratives and imaginative traditions such as folklore and legend. ⁴⁵ Indeed, some studies of gender and genres of African historical narrative have asserted that men and women do have different forms of speech—different "traditions"—for recounting the past, with women's speech described as emerging from separate and less powerful social spaces ("domestic," "offstage," "hidden," in "unexpected locations") and associated with discursive marginality or incoherence ("informal," "private," "divergent;" characterized by "anecdotes" and "everyday" matters). ⁴⁶ Yet apart from noting the existence of these gendered patterns, few scholars have attempted to theorize or historicize forms of remembering identified with women—to interrogate them, in other words, in the same way they have done with more formal, male-authored oral traditions, seeking to understand their role in creating knowledge of the past, their relationship to political power, and their engagement with social concerns and struggles in the present. ⁴⁷

Not coincidentally, this tendency has been most pronounced in work on southern Africa, where Hofmeyr, for instance, in her influential *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told*, posited an absolute distinction—a "gendered division of genre"—between men's "historical" stories and women's "fictional" narratives. Hofmeyr related women's tradition of "institutionalized speaking" through storytelling to "the institutionalized silencing that characterized [their] subordination in precolonial . . . societies." ⁴⁸ Arguing that this feminine tradition was rendered increasingly "incompetent" by forced resettlement, homeland politics, and exposure to literacy, Hofmeyr implied that women's narrative forms were especially vulnerable to losing their significance when separated from the "wider institutional context" on which they depended—in this case, the *dikgoro* (courtyards) of the Ndebele-Sotho chiefdom of Valtyn, symbolic and social center of the "traditional . . . chiefly universe." Yet this conclusion itself relied on a set of unexamined assumptions in the metanarrative of South African historiography: that, in "traditional" society, women's experiences, identities and memories were wholly determined by their relationship to formal political institutions; that structural weakness vis-à-vis male political and economic power deprived women not only of public speech but of historical consciousness; and that narrative forms of remembering are only relevant to studies of the past insofar as they conform to

(Western) standards of academic history. ⁴⁹ The limited interest shown by historians in several book-length life histories of black South(ern) African women published in the last decade—*The Calling of Katie Makanya* (Margaret McCord), *Singing Away the Hunger* (Mpho 'M'atsepo Nthunya), and *Zulu Woman* (Rebecca Hourwich Reyher) ⁵⁰—indicates that Hofmeyr's "gendered division of genre" is still alive and well in scholarly circles, and may in fact be more a product of scholars' imaginations than of African ones. In all three cases, a white American woman edited and arranged an African woman's oral telling of her life for print publication, and chose to package the resulting text not as "history" or even "life history" but (respectively) as "memoir," "autobiography," and "life story." While there are sound reasons for making this choice (e.g., broader marketing appeal), the decision to foreground qualities of remembrance and creativity (as in "story") instead of what these texts offer as narrative representations of Africa's past not only relegates them to what many scholars consider dubious epistemological ground, but makes it easier for historians to overlook African women's participation in the making of African history, and their ways of remembering as legitimate knowledge of Africa's past.

Women's Lives and Voices in Histories of the Sul do Save

Assumptions about the limited evidentiary value of oral sources, and perhaps of rural women's words and memories in particular, have exercised an especially firm hold on research in southern Mozambique. Also known as the Sul do Save (referring to the land south of the Save River) after the territorial unit created by Portuguese-South African legislation in the late nineteenth century to facilitate labor recruitment for the Transvaal gold mines, southern Mozambique has inspired a dynamic and often impassioned body of historical scholarship, in which oral history—the use of personal testimony, in Jeanne Penvenne's words, to capture "the rich texture of popular experience in its beauty, complexity, and ugly detail" ⁵¹—has helped to compensate for the inadequacies of Portuguese colonial archives. Although historians have explained the region's precolonial past primarily in terms of external factors highlighted in European writings—the Gaza Nguni invasion and empire, the international slave and ivory trades, Portuguese military offensives, the pull of South African industrial capitalism on African male labor ⁵²—the oral reminiscences and songs of Mozambican peasants and urban workers featured prominently as illustrative material in early post-independence studies of migrant labor, proletarianization, and agrarian change in the twentieth century. ⁵³ Researchers who focused on gender, ecology, and kinship as local factors conditioning African responses to exogenous processes during the precolonial and colonial periods also sometimes used interviews to explore how everyday struggles in rural communities complicated the theoretically neat trajectories of imperialism or capitalism on the ground. ⁵⁴ However, the pervasive use of the Sul do Save as a unit of analysis in this literature reflected the general view that change in this region was mainly a function of the needs of mining capital, and that academic historical narratives were best grounded in the categories and knowledge of Europeans. Within this paradigm, oral history tended to function as the handmaiden of scholarly discourses that pitted overdetermining structures against alternatively heroic and tragic African actors, and that saw their most urgent goal as explaining postcolonial economic dilemmas whose origins lay in colonial-capitalist exploitation.

Until recently, histories of rural southern Mozambique that drew primarily on women's oral testimonies contained a curious paradox. On the one hand, scholars preoccupied with the relationship between Portuguese colonialism and the region's role as a "labor reserve" for the South African gold mines cast the countryside south of the Save River as a land of emasculated farming communities maintained by desperately poor female-headed households. According to this literature, the women of the Sul do Save were a uniformly exploited and powerless population, their lives determined by patrilineal and colonial-capitalist structures that tied them to the "reproductive" needs—biological and otherwise—of rural families deprived of adult men. ⁵⁵ On the other hand, the oral interviews, life stories and songs presented as primary evidence in these studies often suggested that migrants' wives viewed themselves as self-determining and powerful social actors, their de facto management of rural communities a source of autonomy and influence rather than misery or oppression. ⁵⁶ Sherilynn Young's pioneering fieldwork in the mid 1970s both challenged and reinforced stereotypes of the "women left behind" by tracing, through written and oral sources, rural women's mounting ritual initiatives to "[rebind] the community in crisis"—initiatives that became both more aggressive and more widespread in the early twentieth century as women collectively assumed greater responsibility for agriculture in the face of rising rates of male migrancy, ecological disaster, and colonial

taxation. ⁵⁷ And yet despite forceful evidence that the women of the Sul do Save were using such broadly communal channels as spirit possession not only to organize their response to agrarian distress but to articulate more managerial identities and female support networks beyond the family, Young's argument does not venture beyond the paradigmatic focus on rural women as migrants' wives and mothers, or acknowledge how women's own self-voiced explanations of these events might radically negate the region's existing historiography.

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Historical writing on Mozambique in the 1990s moved beyond the presentist and Frelimo-centric orientation of the 1970s and 1980s, when work such as Ruth First's *Black Gold* (the first comprehensive look at labor migration from southern Mozambique) explicitly sought to inform government policy, and when Mozambican historians stressed the need for coordinated effort in "reconstructing" a past that would contribute to national historical consciousness and cultural decolonization. ⁵⁸ Even well into this decade, however, methodological debates among Mozambican historians in particular continued to dwell on the "problematic" and class-specific nature of oral evidence, ⁵⁹ with little consideration of what indigenous narrative (or non-narrative) historical traditions might contribute to the project of "recovering" the nation's past. Concern with the potential unruliness of oral sources generated often parochial discussions about the politics of history-writing, with an inordinate amount of squabbling over the "correct" interpretation of evidence, proper periodization, and the role of ideology in research on a country where scholars believed unhappiness was the only "constant" in its history. ⁶⁰ Absent from this debate was critical reflection on the notion of history scholars brought to their interpretive process, and which "realities" of Mozambique's past might be distorted or neglected by a disciplinary practice so rigidly anchored in its nineteenth-century Western epistemological origins. In this context, the suggestion that there might be alternative ways of apprehending historical experience in Mozambique—that people's memories, for instance, might legitimately represent their understandings of history despite alleged empirical "inaccuracies"; that certain people (such as elderly rural women) might possess unique ways of expressing their knowledge of and relationship to the past—was likely to fall on deaf ears. There were good reasons for this situation, of course: just barely emerging from the war, with the countryside (and much urban space) in shambles well into the mid 1990s, Mozambique offered few opportunities for sustained rural interviews or fieldwork, especially for local scholars with limited research resources—beyond the archives—at their disposal.

Perhaps as a result, it was only in work published after the mid-1990s that scholars' much-vaunted concern with the voices of Mozambicans translated into an effort to build historical analysis more carefully on the foundation of what those voices were saying. Allen Isaacman and Jeanne Penvenne, in their sensitive studies of forced cotton production and African working class history in Lourenço Marques (respectively), teased from their extensive collections of oral interviews from rural and urban Mozambique new meanings of Portuguese colonial rule—and sometimes unexpected articulations between gender, race and class—not accessible through conventional archival sources. ⁶¹ Dozens of "ordinary" (i.e., nonelite) African men and women appear by name in these texts, often with vivid biographical detail, cast as leading characters for the first time in scholarly narratives of Mozambique's colonial past. In their most recent work—Isaacman's (with Barbara Isaacman) on the history of the Chikunda, and Penvenne's on female wage-workers in late colonial Lourenço Marques—these scholars delve more deeply into the explanatory potential of oral testimony, and surface with powerful arguments that use experiential memory and individual negotiations of local gender systems to challenge theories of ethnicity and urbanization in southern Africa. ⁶² A similarly weighted balance of oral and archival evidence drives Arlindo Chilundo's research on colonial transportation history, Elizabeth MacGonagle's creative exploration of Ndau identity in precolonial Mozambique and Zimbabwe, and Teresa Cruz e Silva's detailed look at the relationship between Protestant missions and Mozambican nationalism during the late colonial period. ⁶³ Oral sources do not, perhaps understandably, figure as prominently in Kathleen Sheldon's comprehensive new history of Mozambican women as in her earlier publications on urban women workers and colonial education; but here too, women's voicings of their life choices and perceptions of social change alert us not only to the "rich texture of popular experience" but to gendered dimensions of colonial power, missionization, the liberation struggle, the making of cities and working classes, the civil war, and the impact of structural adjustment policies. ⁶⁴

Interestingly, despite its explicit ideological commitment to oral history, Mozambican historiography has remained rather stubbornly indifferent to the varieties of life history research that became popular elsewhere in Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s. Isaacman's *Life History of*

Raúl Honwana: An Inside View of Mozambique from Colonialism to Independence, 1905-1975, whose subject is not at all "ordinary" in the conventional sense of the term, is still the only book-length life history available for southern Mozambique, although its production and structure bring it closer to Western-style autobiography. In his introduction, in fact, Isaacman acknowledges the "hybridity" of this text, which was based on a combination of Honwana family stories, interviews, and Honwana's own written memoirs. ⁶⁵ Cruz e Silva's more recent use of interview material to construct biographical narratives through which to explore the influence of the Swiss Mission similarly spotlights prominent national figures such as author/activist Lina Magaia, and subordinates the intricacies of individual remembering to her broader concern with the formation of political consciousness and the impact of mission education and colonial ideologies. ⁶⁶

In this respect, Cruz e Silva's approach dovetails—in its strengths and its weaknesses—with that of theoretically compelling feminist scholars Signe Arnfred and Ana Loforte, for whom experiential evidence of individual Mozambican women's lives, gathered through a deliberate joining of historical and anthropological research methods, serves mainly to illustrate national patterns of gender inequality in development and modernization processes, modulating but persisting in their diverse local forms over time. ⁶⁷ In this literature, the lives and voices of the rural women of the Sul do Save tend to fade behind highly conceptual or legalistic discourses centred on polygyny, bridewealth (*lobola*), virilocality, and other purportedly disempowering (i.e., patriarchal) manifestations of patrilineal kinship. Orality itself inevitably falls beyond the purview of these discussions; apart from occasional observations about bias or distortion in oral testimony, scholarship in this vein rarely concerns itself with methodological reflection, and the possibility that oral testimony might tell only part of women's experience is simply beside the point. Understandably, for some, the imperatives of women's material needs and gender-conscious policy reform are too urgent for what may be seen as the academic indulgence of evidentiary critique, or for experimentation with alternative ways of knowing Mozambican society past and present.

Not long after I arrived in Maputo to begin my doctoral research, a senior historian of southern Mozambique who was based at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane asked me why I wanted to focus my project on Magude, an unexceptional district in the already "well-studied" region of the Sul do Save. "What more is there to know?" he asked—genuinely concerned, I think, that I would be wasting my time on this heavily traveled ground, because he proceeded to offer enough helpful advice (on archival sources, bureaucratic requirements, rural politics, and the like) that I filled three pages of my notebook with his suggestions. As I recall, he seemed pessimistic about my prospects for interviewing rural women and not visibly interested in the notion of life history research at all. On the subject of pottery, though, he became almost animated, imagining that I might uncover useful information about changing patterns in ceramic production and trade—not, however, about women's memories or female culture, which I believe (with all due respect for a man whose research I admire) he regarded as historical fluff. ⁶⁸

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Much sharper comments have come my way since I first formulated the topic and methodology of the fieldwork on which this book is based. My decision to interview rural women in the immediate aftermath of the war—and not about the war itself—has been described as insensitive, and my interest in women's cultural production (tattoos especially) as irrelevant, another unfortunate case of First World privilege ignoring "real" Third World needs. Some Mozambican historians have criticized my commitment to prioritizing the self-expressions of rural women over the written evidence preserved in national archives; one of the harshest of these criticisms labelled as offensive my curiosity about interracial relationships, a widespread phenomenon in colonial Magude about which many women spoke to me at length, and which left only superficial traces in the documentary record. Some North American historians, on the other hand, have remarked that I seem more attached to a particular place (Magude) or culture (Shangaan) or group of women than dedicated to exploring "big historical questions," and that my work is not history at all but anthropology—and an esoteric, hyperfeminist anthropology at that.

How does one answer these charges without sounding defensive? Taken together, they imply that I hold myself and "my" interpretation of southern Mozambican history above or apart from

the work of fellow historians on either side of the Atlantic, from the survival concerns of an impoverished country, and from an ethic of historical inquiry that all Mozambicanists are presumed to share. My conclusion, after too many years of wondering whether these critics are right, is that I have not explained clearly enough why the spoken memories of a few dozen elderly women make a difference to the historiographies of the Sul do Save, of Mozambique, and perhaps of southern Africa more broadly, or why memories these women chose not to put into words merit as much of historians' attention as those they did, if not more. If I have not spoken or written more plainly about how deeply invested I have felt in debates about how history can serve the needs of a nation that has already suffered so terribly at outsiders' hands, that may be because I have not seen it as my place to advocate for a country or for people I have known only as a guest; but perhaps here I have been in error too—certainly the women I became close to in Magde expected that when I returned to America I would do more public clamoring on their behalf than I have done so far.

I hope that in the chapters that follow I have managed to rectify these problems at least partially. If I have not, the judgments of academic colleagues will weigh less heavily on me than the knowledge that I have failed the very people whose survival (in the fullest sense of that term) I do indeed care very much about: the women who stopped what they were doing, pausing from the relentless labor necessary to keep themselves and their dependents alive, to show me how—in their opinion, at that precise and desolate postwar moment—we academic historians should comprehend rural women's histories, and remember them, and put them to use.

Notes:

Note 1: The Western press paid considerable attention to the Naprama movement. See, for example, "Mystic Warriors Gaining Ground in Mozambique War," *Chicago Tribune*, 9 December 1990, 1. See also Alex Vines, *Renamo: Terrorism in Mozambique* (London: Centre for Southern African Studies, University of York, in association with James Currey; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 118-19. [Back.](#)

Note 2: For an elegant model of this feminist-ethnoarchaeological approach to material culture, see Janet Spector, *What This Aul Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1993). See also Henrietta Moore, *Space, Text and Gender: An Anthropological Study of the Marakwet of Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). [Back.](#)

Note 3: For discussion of the relationship between the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and views of oral history in South Africa, see Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, "Orality, Memory, and Social History in South Africa," in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998). Other essays in this collection explore in more depth some of the debates surrounding the premises, procedures, and findings of the TRC; see, for example, Anthony Holiday, "Forgiving and Forgetting: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission," and Ingrid de Kok, "Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition." [Back.](#)

Note 4: Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). Originally published as *De la tradition orale: Essai de méthode historique* (Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1961). [Back.](#)

Note 5: For a recent statement of this view, see Luise White, "Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History," in "'Not Telling': Secrecy, Lies, and History," ed. Gary Minkley and Martin Legassick, special issue, *History and Theory* 39 (December 2000): 11-22. [Back.](#)

Note 6: For an eloquent exploration of memory's unintended meanings in the South African context, see Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, "'I Saw a Nightmare . . .': Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)," in "'Not Telling': Secrecy, Lies, and History," ed. Gary Minkley and Martin Legassick, special issue 39, *History and Theory* (December 2000): 23-44. [Back.](#)

Note 7: For one of the clearest early explanations of the inescapably social character of memory, see the Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics*, ed. Richard Johnson et al. (London:

Hutchinson in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1982). [Back.](#)

Note 8: The ages I use here are approximations. According to the 1980 national census, Magude district had a total population of 104,011, including 48,526 men (46.7 percent of the total) and 55,485 women (53.3 percent of the total). In the mid-1990s, district officials were struggling to keep track of population totals, as displaced individuals and families began to return to rural Magude but often retained an urban residence elsewhere, for reasons of security and better access to resources. The official district count of Magude's population as of July 1995 was 74,442 (Heidi Gengenbach, *Women, Land and Resettlement in Magude District: A Field Study* [Maputo: Norwegian Refugee Council, 1997], 8-9). The 1997 census gives Magude's total population as only 42,788, with 18,160 men (42.4 percent of the total) and 24,628 women (57.6 percent of the total)—and reveals a noticeable drop in the "masculinity index" over this period, from 73.7 to 87.6. [Back.](#)

Note 9: I lived in Magude continuously from April 1995 to March 1996, and then again from September to December 1996. [Back.](#)

Note 10: Cf. Steven Feierman, "The Creation of Invisible Histories," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), especially 196-209. [Back.](#)

Note 11: Paul la Hausse, "Oral History and South African Historians," in *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices*, ed. Joshua Brown et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 345. First published in *Radical History Review* 46/47 (winter 1990): 346-56. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Charles van Onselen, *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 11. [Back.](#)

Note 13: See, in addition to *The Seed Is Mine*, Belinda Bozzoli (with Mmantho Nkotsoe), *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1991); Patrick Harries, "A Forgotten Corner of the Transvaal': Reconstructing the History of a Relocated Community through Oral Testimony and Song," in *Class, Community, and Conflict: South African Perspectives*, ed. Belinda Bozzoli (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987); Tim Keegan, *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1988); Ted Matsetela, "The Life Story of Nkgono Mma-Pooe: Aspects of Sharecropping and Proletarianisation in the Northern Orange Free State, 1890-1930," in *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture, and Consciousness, 1870-1930*, ed. Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone (New York: Longman, 1982); Jeff Peires, "The Legend of Fenner-Solomon," in *Class, Community, and Conflict*, ed. Bozzoli. [Back.](#)

Note 14: See Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry, 1900-1980* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: Domestic Workers under Apartheid* (London: Women's Press, 1989); Jeff Guy and Motlatsi Thabane, "Technology, Ethnicity and Ideology: Basotho Miners and Shaft-Sinking on the South African Gold Mines," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14, no. 2 (1988): 257-78; T. Dunbar Moodie, *Going for Gold: Men, Mines, and Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Bill Nasson, "'She Preferred Living in the Cave with Harry the Snake-Catcher': Towards an Oral History of Popular Leisure and Class Expression in District Six, Cape Town, c.1920-1950," in *Holding Their Ground: Class, Locality, and Conflict in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century South Africa*, ed. Philip Bonner et al. (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1989). [Back.](#)

Note 15: See P. L. Bonner, "Family, Crime and Political Consciousness on the East Rand, 1939-1955," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 393-420; Helen Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The I.C.U. in Rural South Africa, 1924-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Peter Delius, *A Lion amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996); Jeff Guy and Motlatsi Thabane, "The Ma-Rashea: A Participant's Perspective," in *Class, Community, and Conflict*, ed. Bozzoli; Paul la Hausse, "'The Cows of Nongoloza': Youth, Crime and Amalaita Gangs, 1900-1936," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16, no. 1 (1990): 79-111; T. Dunbar Moodie, "The Moral Economy of the Black Miners' Strike of 1946," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 13, no. 1 (1986): 1-35. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Charles van Onselen, "The Reconstruction of a Rural Life from Oral Testimony: Critical

Notes on the Methodology Employed in the Study of a Black South African Sharecropper," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 20, no. 3 (1993): 494-514. [Back.](#)

Note 17: Cf. Karen Jochelson, "Women, Migrancy, and Morality: A Problem of Perspective (Review)," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, no. 2 (1995): 323-32. [Back.](#)

Note 18: See Bozzoli's discussion of these issues in *Women of Phokeng*, 8-12. [Back.](#)

Note 19: Van Onselen, "Reconstruction of a Rural Life," 505. This approach fits what James Fentress and Chris Wickham called the "textual model" of memory. See James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 5-6. [Back.](#)

Note 20: Isabel Hofmeyr, "'Wailing for Purity:' Oral Studies in Southern African Studies," *African Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 26. The pioneering published work on narrativity and oral history in Africa was Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), where she argued that "professional historians who use the recollections of others cannot just scan them for useful facts to pick out, like currants from a cake. Any such facts are so embedded in the representation that it directs an interpretation of them, and its very ordering, its plotting and its metaphors bear meaning too" (6). [Back.](#)

Note 21: Isabel Hofmeyr, *"We Spend Our Years as a Tale That Is Told": Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994); Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991). [Back.](#)

Note 22: Vail and White, *Power and the Praise Poem*, xiii. Bill Nasson in *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) also explores the politics of memory and the institutions of memory's reproduction in South Africa. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Hofmeyr and Vail and White, for instance, include a perfunctory mention of the problem of language and translation, yet their concern for the relationship between the circumstances of interviewing and their scholarly conclusions appears to stop there. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Premesh Lalu, "The Grammar of Domination and the Subjection of Agency: Colonial Texts and Modes of Evidence," in "'Not Telling': Secrecy, Lies, and History," ed. Gary Minkley and Martin Legassick, special issue 39, *History and Theory* (December 2000): 49. See also Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, "Orality, Memory, and Social History in South Africa," in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Terence Ranger, *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture, and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999); Terence Ranger, "Violence Variously Remembered: The Killing of Pieter Oberholzer in July 1964," *History in Africa* 24 (1997): 273-83. [Back.](#)

Note 26: Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). [Back.](#)

Note 27: Luise White, *The Assassination of Herbert Chitepo: Texts and Politics in Zimbabwe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). In her previous book, White articulated a methodology rooted in the "telling" powers of rumor, make-believe, and lies in oral remembrance. See White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); also see her article "Telling More." [Back.](#)

Note 28: See, for example, Luise White, "Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History," in "'Not Telling': Secrecy, Lies, and History," ed. Gary Minkley and Martin Legassick, special issue 39, *History and Theory* (December 2000): 16-17. [Back.](#)

Note 29: See, in particular, James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). For the purpose of this discussion, I follow an early definition of "life history" offered by Langness: "an extensive record of a person's life told to and recorded by another, who then edits and writes the life as though it were autobiography" (L. L. Langness, *The Life History in Anthropological Sciences* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965], quoted in Susan Geiger, "Women's Life

Histories: Method and Content," *Signs* 11, no. 2 [1986]: 334-51). I recognize that there is a wide range of approaches to the textual rendering of a person's life, ongoing debate over methodology and authorship, and disagreement over whether "life history" can be considered a genre at all. However, narratives described and utilized as "life histories" in African historiography have tended to follow Langness's definition in its general outlines. For a recent overview of these discussions, see Corinne Kratz, "Conversations and Lives," in *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History*, ed. Luise White, Stephan F. Miescher, and David William Cohen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). [Back.](#)

Note 30: Critiques include Lila Abu-Lughod, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 5, no. 1 (1990): 7-27; Frances E. Mascia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe, and Colleen Ballerino Cohen, "The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective," *Signs* 15, no. 1 (1989): 7-33; Kamala Visweswaran, "Defining Feminist Ethnography," chap. in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). Feminist scholars were not of one mind on this subject, however; for a contrary view, see Daphne Patai, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?" and Judith Stacey, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991). [Back.](#)

Note 31: Jean Davison uses this term to describe the interviewing relationship she sought with women in Kenya. See Jean Davison, *Voices from Mutira: Change in the Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women, 1910-1995*, 2d ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Reiner, 1996), 15. [Back.](#)

Note 32: See Davison, *Voices from Mutira*; Anne Laurentin, "Nzakara Women," in *Women of Tropical Africa*, ed. Denise Paulme (London: Routledge and Paul, 1971); Sarah LeVine, *Mothers and Wives: Gusii Women of East Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Mary Smith, ed., *Baba of Karo, a Woman of the Muslim Hausa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954); Irene Staunton, *Mothers of the Revolution* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1990). [Back.](#)

Note 33: See Alison Baker, *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*; Barbara Cooper, *Marriage in Maradi: Gender and Culture in a Hausa Society in Niger, 1900-1989* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1997); Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1997); Sarah Mirza and Margaret Strobel, eds., *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989); Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women: Life-Stories from East/Central Africa* (London: James Currey, 1993). Some life history publications straddle this (admittedly somewhat artificial) divide—see, for example, Magdalene K. Ngaiza and Bertha Koda, eds., *The Unsung Heroines: Women's Life Histories from Tanzania* (Dar es Salaam: WRDP Publications, 1991), and Patricia W. Romero, ed., *Life Histories of African Women* (London: Ashfield Press, 1988). [Back.](#)

Note 34: In order of publication, these include Susan Geiger, "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content," *Signs* 11, no. 2 (1986): 334-51; Marjorie Mbilinyi, "'I'd Have Been a Man': Politics and the Labor Process in Producing Personal Narratives," in Personal Narratives Group, ed., *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Marjorie Shostak, "'What the Wind Won't Take Away': The Genesis of Nisa—The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman," in Personal Narratives Group, ed., *Interpreting Women's Lives*; Leslie H. Townsend, "Out of Silence: Writing Interactive Women's Life Histories in Africa," *History in Africa* 17 (1990): 351-58; Kirk Hoppe, "Whose Life Is It, Anyway?: Issues of Representation in Life Narrative Texts of African Women," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 25, no. 3 (1993): 623-36; Heidi Gengenbach, "Truth-Telling and the Politics of Women's Life History Research in Africa: A Reply to Kirk Hoppe," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 27, no. 3 (1994): 619-27. For overviews of this literature and of methodological debates, see the introductory chapters of Geiger, *TANU Women*; Mirza and Strobel, *Three Swahili Women*; Ngaiza and Koda, *The Unsung Heroines*; Davison, *Voices from Mutira*; and Pat Caplan, *African Voices, African Lives: Personal Narratives from a Swahili Village* (New York: Routledge, 1997). [Back.](#)

Note 35: Prominent early examples of feminist scholarship that depict ethnographic research as a contested, indeterminate process in which the researcher does not wield unchallenged authority nor fully control the "representation" of her subjects include Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Geiger,

TANU Women; Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). [Back.](#)

Note 36: Personal Narratives Group, ed., *Interpreting Women's Lives*, 13. See also Karen E. Fields, "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly," *Oral History Journal* 17, no. 1 (1989): 44-53. [Back.](#)

Note 37: See, for example, Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Ruth Behar, "Rage and Redemption: Reading the Life Story of a Mexican Marketing Woman," *Feminist Studies* 16 (1990): 223-58; Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); Blanca Muratorio, *The Life and Times of Grandfather Alonso: Culture and History in the Upper Amazon* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). [Back.](#)

Note 38: Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Lives*, 30. [Back.](#)

Note 39: See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Fentress and Wickham, James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics*, ed. Richard Johnson et al. (London: University of Birmingham, 1982). [Back.](#)

Note 40: Good examples of such work in Africa include Cooper, *Marriage in Maradi*; Geiger, *TANU Women*; and Richard Werbner, *Tears of the Dead: The Social Biography of an African Family* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). [Back.](#)

Note 41: As Portelli wrote, "'wrong tales' . . . are so very valuable [because] they allow us to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them" (Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 2). Some interesting studies that explore the mythical character of personal memory include Alison Baker, "History and Myth: Women's Stories of the Moroccan Resistance," *Oral History Review* 22, no. 1 (1995): 29-49; Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story*; Alexander Freund and Laura Quilici, "Exploring Myths in Women's Narratives: Italian and German Immigrant Women in Vancouver, 1947-1961," *BC Studies* 105-6 (1995): 159-82; Luisa Passerini, "Women's Personal Narratives: Myths, Experiences, and Emotions," in Personal Narratives Group, ed., *Interpreting Women's Lives*; Alessandro Portelli, "The Massacre at Civitella Val de Chiana (Tuscany, June 29, 1944): Myth and Politics, Mourning and Common Sense," in *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, ed., *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990). See also Justin Willis, "Two Lives of Mpamizo: Understanding Dissonance in Oral History," *History in Africa* 23 (1996): 319-32. [Back.](#)

Note 42: The anthropological literature is extensive. For an early example, see Vincent Crapanzano, "Life-Histories: A Review Article," *American Anthropologist* 86, no. 4 (1984): 953-60. Twenty years later, anthropologists working in Africa (and elsewhere) still grapple with many of the same methodological and epistemological questions. See also Kratz, "Conversations and Lives." [Back.](#)

Note 43: Or, as Elizabeth Tonkin put it, "what humans recall is strongly connected to their identities, which include their social roles. . . . [O]ral narratives [are] social actions, situated in particular times and places and directed by individual tellers to specific audiences" (*Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 96-97. See chapter 6 in its entirety for a thoughtful critique of social theories of memory and for a more elaborate statement of Tonkin's own views). On the cultural specificity of the "life history" genre, Paul Connerton argued that, while this form developed out of oral historians' effort to "give voice to what would otherwise remain voiceless" by "reconstituting" the life histories of individuals from subordinate social groups, it imposed a model derived from the culture of ruling elites: memoir-writing by "more or less famous citizens" who saw "their life as worth remembering because they are, in their own eyes, someone who has taken decisions which exerted, or can be represented as having exerted, a more or less wide influence and which have visibly changed part of their social world" (*How Societies Remember*, 18-19). [Back.](#)

Note 44: Tamara Giles-Vernick makes a similar point in her essay "Lives, Histories, and Sites of

Recollection," in *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History*, ed. Luise White, Stephan F. Miescher, and David William Cohen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). For non-African work along these lines, see Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Sarah Hill in *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) examines how Cherokee women have used basket-weaving to record their perceptions and experiences of social, economic, and environmental change—a history they might not have verbalized if asked to tell their life story without reference to material culture. Examples from anthropology include Joanne Rappaport, "History and Everyday Life in the Colombian Andes," *Man* 23, no. 4 (1988): 718-39; Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Jennifer Cole, *Forget Colonialism? Sacrifice and the Art of Memory in Madagascar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). [Back.](#)

Note 45: Harold Scheub, "And So I Grew Up: The Autobiography of Nongenile Masithathu Zenani," in *Life Histories of African Women*, ed. Patricia W. Romero (London: Ashfield Press, 1988); Nongenile Masithathu Zenani and Harold Scheub, *The World and the Word: Tales and Observations from the Xhosa Oral Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992). For a discussion of the importance of female character archetypes (e.g., women warriors, clever heroines who outwit men in authority) from Moroccan and Islamic legends, see Baker, "History and Myth." See also K. Limakatso Kendall, *Basali! Stories by and about Women in Lesotho* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995). [Back.](#)

Note 46: See Karin Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women, and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Francesca Declich, "'Gendered Narratives,' History, and Identity: Two Centuries Along the Juba River among the Zigula and Shanbara," *History in Africa* 22 (1995): 93-122; Liz Gunner, "Clashes of Interest: Gender, Status, and Power in Zulu Praise Poetry," in *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*, ed. Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Pier M. Larson, "Multiple Narratives, Gendered Voices: Remembering the Past in Highland Central Madagascar," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28, no. 2 (1995): 292-325; Leroy Vail and Landeg White, "The Possession of the Dispossessed: Songs as History among Tumbuka Women," in *Power and the Praise Poem*. The phrase "unexpected locations" is from David Cohen, "Pim's Doorway," *The Combining of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 112. Cohen argued that formalist definitions of oral tradition had rigidified scholars' thinking about Africa's past and that we should rather appreciate how historical knowledge may involve "the everyday, critical, lively intelligence which surrounds the status, activities, gestures, and speech of individuals" (Cohen, "The Undefined of Oral Tradition," *Ethnohistory* 36, no. 1 [1989]: 9-18). In his original article on *pim* (elderly widows who serve as "nanny" educators for Luo children), Cohen explored the "invisible" role women could play in the production of historical knowledge outside the "masculine" structures of the patrilineage. See Cohen, "Doing Social History from Pim's Doorway," in *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History*, ed. Olivier Zunz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). [Back.](#)

Note 47: As in C. A. Hamilton, "Ideology and Oral Traditions: Listening to the Voices 'From Below,'" *History in Africa* 14 (1987): 67-86; David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman, 1982); Joseph Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone: Dawson, 1980); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). In her review article "Popular Arts in Africa" (*African Studies Review* 3, no. 30 [1987]: 5), Karin Barber identified not gender bias but "literate bias" as the reason many Africanist oral literary scholars have also tended to prefer studying narrative forms with clear generic boundaries (such as praise poetry) over more fluid and "diffuse" genres of popular oral performance. [Back.](#)

Note 48: Hofmeyr, "We Spend Our Years as a Tale That Is Told", 25. [Back.](#)

Note 49: While some excellent critiques of the treatment (or nontreatment) of women and gender in South African historiography have been published in recent years, scholars' preoccupation with the relative wealth of documentary sources available for colonial and apartheid history in South Africa has left little room for examining unconventional forms of evidence that might shed new light on women's historical consciousness and memory, particularly in rural communities. See, for example, Helen Bradford, "Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and its Frontier Zones, c. 1806-70," *Journal of African History* 37, no. 3 (1996): 351-71; Linzi Manicom, "Ruling Relations:

Rethinking State and Gender in South African History," *Journal of African History* 33, no. 3 (1992): 441-65; Penelope Hetherington, "Women in South Africa: The Historiography in English," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26 (1993): 247-69. [Back.](#)

Note 50: Margaret McCord, *The Calling of Katie Makanya: A Memoir of South Africa* (New York: Wiley, 1995); Mpho 'M'atsepo Nthunya, *Singing Away the Hunger: The Autobiography of an African Woman*, ed. K. Limakatso Kendall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Rebecca Hourwich Reyher, *Zulu Woman: The Life Story of Christina Sibiya* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1999; originally published by Columbia University Press, 1948). I gauge historians' interest in these texts by the scant attention they received from reviewers in scholarly journals: Among Africa-centered publications, only the *African Studies Review* has reviewed *Zulu Woman* and *Singing Away the Hunger*. I am aware, however, of many historians of Africa who do include one or more of these books in courses on South(ern) African history and African women's life histories. [Back.](#)

Note 51: Jeanne Penvenne, "A Luta Continua! Recent Literature on Mozambique," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18, no. 1 (1985): 136. [Back.](#)

Note 52: James Duffy, *Portuguese Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959); Alan Smith, "The Struggle for Control of Southern Mozambique, 1720-1835" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1970); David Hedges, "Trade and Politics in Southern Mozambique and Zululand in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1978); Gerhard Liesegang, "Notes on the Internal Structure of the Gaza Kingdom of Southern Mozambique, 1840-1895," in *Before and After Shaka: Papers in Nguni History*, ed. J. B. Peires (Grahamstown: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, 1981); Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860-1910* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994). [Back.](#)

Note 53: See Ruth First, *Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983); Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860-1910* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994); Alpheus Manghezi, "Forced Labour in Colonial Mozambique: Peasants Remember" and "Work Songs of Mozambican Miners," in *Third World Lives of Struggle*, ed. Hazel Johnson and Henry Bernstein (Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books in association with the Open University, 1982); Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Capitalism and Colonialism in Mozambique: A Study of Quelimane District* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980); Sherilynn Young, "Women in Transition: Southern Mozambique, 1975-6: Reflections on Colonialism, Aspirations for Independence," paper presented at History of Women Conference, 21 October 1977, St. Paul, Minn. The Centro de Estudos Africanos at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane took the lead in the postindependence project of rewriting Mozambique's history, relying largely on "popular" oral sources. [Back.](#)

Note 54: Sherilynn Young, "Fertility and Famine: Women's Agricultural History in Southern Mozambique," in *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, ed. Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); David Webster, "Migrant Labour, Social Formations and the Proletarianisation of the Chopi of Southern Mozambique," *African Perspectives* 1 (1978): 157-74. [Back.](#)

Note 55: See, for example, Marvin Harris, "Labour Emigration among the Mozambique Thonga: Cultural and Political Factors," *Africa* 29 (1959): 50-66; Manghezi, "Work Songs of Mozambican Miners," in *Third World Lives of Struggle*, ed. Hazel Johnson and Henry Bernstein (Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books in association with the Open University, 1982); Ruth First, *Black Gold: The Mozambican Miner, Proletarian and Peasant* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983); Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860-1910* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1994). For a fuller discussion of this literature, see chapter 1, "Historians' Maps: Origins, Destinations, and the Women 'Left Behind.'" [Back.](#)

Note 56: Sometimes even glaring dissonances between oral testimony and the nation-building/nation-rescuing agenda of postindependence scholars were ignored for purposes of telling the "necessary" story. For example, First's *Black Gold*, which was centrally concerned with documenting the rural costs (especially for women) of male labor migration, includes songs and oral accounts in which migrants' wives explicitly reject the stereotype of the "woman left behind" and insist to interviewers that men's absence was not a serious problem for them. To her credit, First chose to include this contradictory evidence rather than to leave it out of her text altogether, but she fails to address the complex social meanings of migrancy, meanings that women allude to through their choice of words, and that failure is symptomatic of this literature.

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Note 57: Sherilynn Young, "Fertility and Famine: Women's Agricultural History in Southern Mozambique," in *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, ed. Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 76. Building on the research of Marvin Harris, Young found that, by the late nineteenth century, women in southern Mozambique (particularly among the Tsonga-Shangaan) had begun to take over agricultural tasks (the felling and burning of trees, for example) previously performed by men and to assume sole responsibility for planting, field-watching, harvesting, and other tasks that men and women formerly shared (73). [Back.](#)

Note 58: For reviews of this literature, see Penvenne, "A Luta Continua!"; Landeg White, "Review Article: The Revolutions Ten Years On," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 11, no. 2 (1985): 320-32; and Arlindo Chilundo, "Recent Trends in Mozambican Historiography," unpublished paper, Maputo, 1987. [Back.](#)

Note 59: See, for example, Teresa Cruz e Silva and Alexandrino José, "História e a Problemática das Fontes," in *Moçambique—16 anos de historiografia: Focos, problemas, metodologias, desafios para a década de 90*, ed. Alexandrino José and Paula Maria G. Meneses (Maputo: CEGRAF, 1992). [Back.](#)

Note 60: René Pélissier, review of *A History of Mozambique* by Malyn Newitt, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, no. 2 (1995): 333. [Back.](#)

Note 61: Allen Isaacman, *Cotton Is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938-1961* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996); Jeanne Marie Penvenne, *African Workers and Colonial Racism: Mozambican Strategies and Struggles in Lourenço Marques, 1877-1962* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1995). [Back.](#)

Note 62: Allen Isaacman and Barbara Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identities in the Unstable World of South-Central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2004); Jeanne Marie Penvenne, "Seeking the Factory for Women: Mozambican Urbanization in the Late Colonial Era," *Journal of Urban History* 23, no. 3 (1997): 342-79. [Back.](#)

Note 63: Arlindo G. Chilundo, "The Economic and Social Impact of the Rail and Road Transportation Systems in the Colonial District of Mozambique (1900-1961)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1995); Elizabeth MacGonagle, "A Mixed Pot: History and Identity in the Ndau Region of Mozambique and Zimbabwe, 1500-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 2002); Teresa Cruz e Silva, *Protestant Churches and the Formation of Political Consciousness in Southern Mozambique (1930-1974)* (Basel: P. Schlettwein, 2001). [Back.](#)

Note 64: Kathleen Sheldon, *Pounders of Grain: A History of Women, Work, and Politics in Mozambique* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2002). Earlier publications include Kathleen Sheldon, "A Report on a 'Delicate Problem' Concerning Female Garment Workers in Beira, Mozambique," *Signs* 16, no. 3 (1991): 575-86; "Sewing Clothes and Sorting Cashew Nuts: Factories, Families, and Women in Beira, Mozambique," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 14, nos. 1-2 (1991): 27-35; "Creches, Titias, and Mothers: Working Women and Child Care in Mozambique," in *African Encounters with Domesticity*, ed. Karen Tranberg Hansen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); "'I Studied with the Nuns, Learning to Make Blouses': Gender Ideology and Colonial Education in Mozambique," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31, no. 3 (1998): 595-626. [Back.](#)

Note 65: Raúl Honwana, *The Life History of Raúl Honwana: An Inside View of Mozambique from Colonialism to Independence, 1905-1975*, ed. Allen F. Isaacman (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1988). [Back.](#)

Note 66: Teresa Cruz e Silva, "Identity and Political Consciousness in Southern Mozambique, 1930-1974: Two Presbyterian Biographies Contextualized," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 1 (1998): 223-36. [Back.](#)

Note 67: Signe Arnfred, "Notes on Gender and Modernization: Examples from Mozambique," in *The Language of Development Studies*, ed. A. Weis Bentzon (Copenhagen: New Social Science Monographs, 1990); Signe Arnfred, "Conceptions of Gender in Colonial and Post-Colonial Discourses: The Case of Mozambique," paper prepared for Africa in the New Millenium, tenth general assembly of CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in

Africa), Kampala, Uganda, 8-12 December 2002; Ana Maria Loforte, *Género e Poder entre os Tsonga de Moçambique* (Maputo: Promédia, 2000). [Back](#).

Note 68: Maputo work log, 7 January 1995. [Back](#).

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