

Research Report

Women and Agriculture in Northern Mozambique: A Village-Level Analysis

BARBARA INAGAKI

Osaka University

Women play a fundamental role in Mozambique's agricultural production. Nevertheless, they have rarely been the main focus of study in the research on agricultural production in the country. This article explores the matter by examining the case of Makua women in a village located in the interior of Nampula Province in northern Mozambique. Through a local-level analysis, this article presents a picture of women's agricultural work in present-day Mozambique.

Key words: women, agriculture, Makua, Mozambique

1. INTRODUCTION

Mozambique has a population of approximately 28 million people of which 52% are women (INE, 2017). As a country where the majority of the population (around 80%) depends on cultivating agricultural fields for subsistence, 90% of females dedicate a great part of their time to the cultivation of the *machamba* (a general term used countrywide to refer to agricultural fields) (MITESS, 2016), growing staple foods (such as maize, sorghum, cassava) and cash crops (that vary greatly according to the region, and are usually sold to village neighbors and local/foreign buyers who come from the cities seasonally to purchase the products at lower prices). In this sense, agriculture is an essential activity, not only for maintaining the household in a very pragmatic sense (as it provides food for subsistence), but also for guaranteeing women's participation—though not without constraints—in the dynamics of the cash economy. Generally speaking, agriculture is one of the most important and commonly shared practices among women in Mozambique.

Despite their significant role in the country's agricultural production, however, studies shedding light on the relationship between women and agriculture remain scarce. Investigations on agriculture are especially dedicated to elucidating the historical development of agriculture in the colonial, post-colonial/Socialist, and post-Socialist periods, tracing a general analysis that rarely include women's conditions and perspectives on agricultural practices (Munslow 1984; Isaacman et al. 1980; Pitcher 1998), which are relevant considering their high engagement and contribution to the sector. Pitcher (1996) attempted to make women's role in agriculture visible by putting them in the center of her analysis of cotton production in northern Mozambique, but still little research has been conducted on the topic.

This article depicts the relationship between women and agriculture in contemporary Mozambique by examining the case of a village (henceforth referred to as N village) located in Malema District,

Nampula Province in northern Mozambique. Through a local-level analysis, I hope to enhance the understanding of women's agricultural work and their lives in present-day Mozambique.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE VILLAGE

In 2016, I conducted fieldwork over an eight-month period among the Makua people in Malema District. Initially, my main objective was to conduct a general survey on the village's agricultural activities. Soon after moving to the village, however, the significant presence of women working in the agricultural fields led me to a more focused investigation of their role in agriculture.

N village is about 15 km away from Malema city in an area that is difficult to access due to the lack of public transport. Situated in an area with an altitude of about 650 m, the village is surrounded by several granite mountains that can reach 900 m in altitude, and is divided by streams that allowed the development of an irrigation system by gravity, favoring local agricultural production.

The village has a population of around 650 people, of which approximately 190 are women⁽¹⁾ working primarily in subsistence agriculture. The basic products cultivated in the village are maize and sorghum (staple foods), onions (a cash crop), beans (a semi-cash crop sold only if there is a surplus) and, in minor quantities, rice, cassava, tomato and cabbage. Women also grow sweet potato, pumpkin, and amaranth in small quantities in the house yard. The leading tool used in cultivation is the short-handed hoe (*ebipà*).

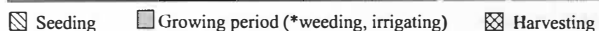
The village is chiefly composed of the Makua people, the largest ethnic group in Mozambique, whose members live predominantly in the north of the country and whose social organization is based on a matrilineal system. Within this system, land is passed down from mother to child, but since marriage is uxorilocal, with the man moving into the wife's house after marriage, the effective heirs of the land are the daughters, for they remain in the land while their brothers leave the house after marriage. In this sense, women are much more attached to land than men, who have much more mobile lives, frequently going back to their mothers' houses to participate in occasional events such as funerals and male initiation rituals. Male polygamy, a widespread practice among the Makua, also encourages male mobility by demanding that they move periodically among their wives' houses. Women's attachment to land and men's mobility, as seen later, are important factors when considering agricultural production.

3. WOMEN AND AGRICULTURE IN THE VILLAGE

N village is characterized by smallholder agriculture, with the average size of a cultivated field being 0.25 to 0.5 ha.⁽²⁾ Each woman normally owns two fields that are scattered throughout the village and which she cultivates with different crops and different techniques following a seasonal cycle.

Table 1. Agricultural Cycle in the N Village

	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	
	Rainy Season					/	Dry Season						
Maize*	Seeding		Growing period (*weeding, irrigating)				Harvesting						
Sorghum	Seeding		Growing period (*weeding, irrigating)						Harvesting				
Onion*				Seeding		Growing period (*weeding, irrigating)				Harvesting			
Common Bean*				Seeding		Growing period (*weeding, irrigating)			Harvesting		Growing period (*weeding, irrigating)		
Rice	Seeding		Growing period (*weeding, irrigating)				Harvesting						



As mentioned earlier, *machamba* is the general term for any cultivated field in Mozambique. In N village, however, villagers classify fields into two types: *machamba* and *ntharu*. *Machamba* usually refers to fields where they grow sorghum in an intercrop system along with Bambara bean, and groundnut. These fields are normally located in the higher areas of the village where the irrigation system does not reach and which therefore depend completely on rainwater. *Ntharu* (meaning “garden”), in turn, designates fields where maize, beans, and onions are cultivated in a crop rotation system. Since the crops need careful watering, *ntharu* are usually located in the lower areas of the village where the land can benefit from a gravity irrigation system or motor pump irrigation. Because the *machamba* dispense irrigation and weeding, it is more advantageous to cultivate sorghum than maize since women do not need to go to the fields every day during the crop’s growth period.

Both *machamba* and *ntharu* are located relatively close to the households, within 1 km of distance. Around 4:30 in the morning, women leave their houses with a hoe on their shoulders, and, accompanied by their children, walk to the fields. During the seeding and harvesting periods—the most time-consuming phases—they can spend 8 to 10 hours working, only taking a break for lunch between 11am to 2pm when the sunlight reaches its peak. Some of them return home to prepare a meal and take a rest before going back to the field again. Others prepare food in the *machamba* or *ntharu*, taking a quick rest under the shadow of a tree. They finish working around 5pm to 6pm, and on the way back home, they go to the river to bathe and wash their clothes. In this way, throughout the year, women are constantly circulating between their fields following the agricultural calendar to guarantee food for their families.

In addition to maize, sorghum, and other beans produced mainly for domestic consumption, women also grow onions (*esapula*), N village’s only cash crop. It is a relatively new crop introduced by the Portuguese during the colonial period, and was propagated by some villagers who had worked in settlers’ gardens and learned the cultivation techniques, especially after the country’s independence in 1975.

Since the onion has great potential to generate high income, women dedicate special effort to cultivate it. For instance, fertilizers and pesticides—which are rarely applied to other crops due to their high cost—are largely used in onion fields. When the prices of pesticides and fertilizers are too high for women to purchase, they can exchange it with a crop they have stored (usually beans) or buy the necessary quantity from a friend through a credit scheme, paying him/her the money after the harvest. Women also adopt this scheme to buy onion seeds. Taking and giving agricultural supplies through credit schemes is a very common practice in the village and works as a mutual aid system.



Photo 1. Field for sorghum, Bambara bean and groundnut



Photo 2. Field for maize, beans and onion

The income generated from the commercialization of onions, which takes place once a year, is especially important for women. First, the revenue enables them to purchase materials such as household items (plates, cups, pans, mattresses), products for daily use (soap, oil, sugar, and salt), as well as agricultural supplies. The amount of money earned from onion cultivation varies according to the size of the field. M, a married woman in her forties, for instance, said that in 2015 she grew onions in her *ntharu* of 0.5 ha and harvested 10 sacks (1 sack = 90 kg), selling each sack for 2,200 to 2,500 MZN (44 to 50 USD⁽³⁾), obtaining a final profit of around 440 to 500 USD.

Second, for women, the income earned from onion cultivation is particularly important today because it is used to cover (or help cover) the costs of the girl's initiation ceremonies, one of the most important life events among the Makua women. Locally called *emwali*, initiation rituals are mainly held during the dry season, roughly between April and November. This period is suitable for the ceremonies due to the absence of rain and, more importantly, because it is the time when people harvest and commercialize onions. The *emwali* can be held either individually or in groups, and demands a great deal of money since the initiate's family must purchase gifts for the girl, hire professional drummers, buy chicken, and other foodstuffs necessary for the communal meal that closes the ceremony, among other obligations.

As people are highly dependent on onion production for obtaining cash, if a family has a bad harvest, they must inevitably postpone the *emwali* due to a lack of money. This is one reason why it can take the family one year or even longer to organize the ritual, which used to be held few days after the girl's first menstrual cycle.

As the interviews with elderly women revealed, this is a recent phenomenon, since in their time (about 40 to 50 years ago, an estimated number) there were no cash crops in the village and money was nearly non-existent. Still, according to them, because agricultural fields were much more fertile at that time, the climate more stable, and food more abundant in the houses, they did not need to rely on cash to organize the rituals.

Agriculture has thus been and remains closely related to the construction and maintenance of the Makua womanhood, a topic that needs further analysis.

4. GENDER DIVISIONS OF LABOR AND WORKING PATTERNS

As mentioned earlier, the Makua people are a matrilineal group with uxorilocal residence whereby the husband moves into the wife's house after marriage. Unlike the patrilineal groups of the south, where

men have to pay a bride price (*lobolo*) to the wife's family, among the Makua, the bride price is absent. Instead, a man has to contribute to his wife's family by offering his labor for food production and proving himself to be a good worker and a good husband for the daughter, paying not a bride price, but a bride service (Arnfred 2011: 95).

Within this context, a husband is expected to have knowledge of agriculture and perform—together with his wife—all of the cultivation processes (from preparing the land to seeding, weeding, irrigating and harvesting) with great competence. With the exception of clearing new fields, a task carried out exclusively by men, crop production is performed jointly by both men and women.

However, this does not always correspond to the reality on the ground. For instance, 15%⁽⁴⁾ of all families in the N village are headed by single mothers who work alone in the fields to produce the food necessary for their families' domestic consumption. L, a single woman in her forties, lives with her four children in the village. She also has a son who is married and now lives in the Malema city with his wife. L does not cultivate sorghum, owning, instead, two *ntharu* to grow maize, beans and onions. She performs all the agricultural tasks by herself and during peak periods (weeding and harvesting) receives help from her son, who comes from the city to support her. As a way to increase her budget, L intercroops tomatoes with maize, selling the tomatoes in small quantities in front of her house.

In order to ensure the sufficient quantity of food for consumption, L also rents a piece of land in a neighboring village (about 8 km away) during the rainy season to grow rice. When the land preparation season comes, from mid-October to November, she closes the house, and moves—along with her four children—into a temporary hut near the rice field she rented, spending at least a month there. As a single mother, her autonomy and capacity to work are remarkable.

Women married to polygamous men are also frequently left alone to cultivate the fields. A polygamous man can have two, three, or even more wives in other villages, districts and provinces, having to travel periodically from one house to another and remaining absent, sometimes for long periods of time. When considering agricultural work, the (potential) absence of men in the house becomes a great source of tension for women since it implies that they will have to cultivate the fields alone.

F, a woman in her forties married to a polygamous man and a mother of seven children, recounted the following during a conversation in her yard:

My husband went to visit his other wife in Ribáuè [a neighboring district] a month ago and still hasn't come back. In the past, *mana* [sister], he used to stay years—even two, three years—without showing up here. I practically raised my children alone! They [the children] are all here today, only because I worked hard in the *machamba*. Now, he [her husband] is probably spending all of his money there [with his other wife]. [Field note, 27/08/2016]

The constant uncertainty regarding the husband's presence in the house, causes women to avoid relying on men to grow crops, and to adopt instead a scheme of production whereby they independently carry out their work in the fields as much as possible. In a certain way, this is a risk management strategy used to cope with the disadvantages of male polygamy, a factor that augments women's responsibility for food production.

When the husband is absent during weeding or harvesting—the hardest periods—whenever possible, women hire others (no more than two people) to help them in the *machamba* or *ntharu*. This work is called *kanhu-kanhu*⁽⁵⁾ and can be paid either with money or food. M, cited above, who is married to a polygamous man, used to hire a young man she met in the neighboring community to weed her maize field. She paid him in cash and calculated the amount according to the number of ridges weeded at 5 MZN (around 0.01 USD⁽⁶⁾) per ridge. Hiring a *kanhu-kanhu* worker is thus a means to somehow lighten the workload.

Elderly women in the village also create strategies to keep up with crop production. Usually widowed, they live alone with no children to take care of, and, unlike young or middle-aged women who cultivate at least two fields, elderly women only cultivate one. They mostly choose to grow sorghum

and cassava, two crops that dispense weeding and irrigation (as mentioned before), alleviating a great part of the workload.

Although women engage in agriculture following the seasonal cycle mentioned earlier, how they work varies greatly depending on their individual backgrounds, especially in terms of marital status and age.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article depicted some of the characteristics of the Makua women's agricultural practices based on individual case studies conducted in N village in northern Mozambique.

Despite the cultivation of onions—the village's only cash crop—agricultural production remains strongly subsistence-oriented. The agricultural fields are small in size and cultivated following two systems of cultivation: the intercrop system in the *machamba* (for sorghum, Bambara bean and groundnut), and the crop rotation system in the *ntbaru* (for maize, beans and onions).

As mentioned above, agriculture is an essential part of a household's subsistence economy and a means by which Makua women ensure their autonomy, enabling them to obtain a certain amount of income. However, beyond this, within Makua society, agriculture helps maintain Makua womanhood by providing monetary support for the female initiation ceremonies held in the village.

Finally, how women work in the village varies greatly according to their personal backgrounds. Male polygamy posits some disadvantages for married women, especially regarding agricultural production. However, women's awareness of their condition stimulates the creation of strategies to cope with the uncertainties caused by male polygamy, making them choose their independence and autonomy in the agricultural fields.

This was a preliminary report on the relationship between women and agriculture in northern Mozambique. Further research is necessary to deepen the understanding of women's agricultural practices, and moreover, to explore the intersection of agriculture with other aspects of women's lives such as female initiation rituals, so fundamental to Makua womanhood.

NOTES

- (1) Data based on the census carried out in the village by the author in 2016. The survey—which took two days—was conducted with the help of the village leader by visiting the households and filling out a previously elaborated questionnaire. “Women” embraces all the female population of the village, with the exception of children (the number of children was registered in the questionnaire, but not the sex).
- (2) Data based on the census carried out in the village by the author in 2016.
- (3) In 2015, 1 USD = 50 MZN (Mozambique metical).
- (4) Data based on the census conducted by the author in 2016. The number is lower than the national average, which is 26% (INE, 2007).
- (5) The word *kanbu* derives from the Portuguese *ganho*, which means “income” or “salary” (Prata, 1990).
- (6) In 2016, 1 USD = 70 MZN.

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