GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

# Reflections on the Coloniality of Gender: A Conversation in the Global South

**By Leila Gómez | March 29, 2025**

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?
- **Methods:** What does the research process (identifying materials, fieldwork, archival research, and dealing with lack of access to materials, etc.) look like in the context of building connections between Africa and Latin America

I would like to begin by commenting that my research focuses on territorial conflicts and Indigenous peoples, mainly the role of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in the fight for territory and land issues. This research is inserted into a larger discussion about the coloniality of power, external and internal colonialism, settler colonialism, and the coloniality of gender. I also teach classes on gender, race, and class in global contexts, where indigeneity, colonialism, and the territorial problem in Africa and Latin America are central axes of discussion.

I take as a starting point three authors—there are more, of course—who have contributed significantly to the discussion on coloniality of gender: María Lugones, the Argentine professor who taught at the State University of New York at Binghamton until her death, and her text, "The Coloniality of Gender" (2007; 2016); the Nigerian sociologist, professor at Stony Brook University, New York, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyèwùmí, and *The Invention of Women* (1997), on the absence of a binary gender system in Yoruba society in Nigeria, as well as *African Women and Feminism: Reflections on the Politics of Sisterhood* (2003); and the Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato, in particular her criticism of Oyèwùmí, which is based on her research on the Yoruba, in Brazil. These texts and authors are put into dialogue through my research on the work of Moira Millán, a Mapuche novelist and screenwriter, as well as founder of the Movement of Women and Diversities for the Good Living in Abya Yala (the Americas). What unites all these authors from the global North and South, in Africa and Latin America is their deep reflections on colonialism and how it has impacted the lives of Indigenous women.

There are four important points about these thinkers that I would like to note: first, despite their disagreements, most of them have read each other, and their texts have been translated into multiple languages.

Second, the role that Oyèwùmí's problematization of the Western category of "woman" has played in paving the way for a decolonization of feminisms, which attempted to impose a single hierarchy and gender inequality on all societies and historical periods. Oyèwùmí' puts forth a forceful critique of Western and Global North feminism as a-historical and a-

geographic. In *The Invention of Women*, Oyèwùmí maintains that the system of gender oppression that European colonialism imposed on the Yoruba covered all aspects of women's lives, not just reproduction. Oyèwùmí argues that before colonialism in Yoruba society there was no such division of labor according to gender. The anatomically female (anafemale) and the anatomically male (anamale) did not have fixed roles in government or public life. The hierarchical gender system did not exist. The different positions occupied by anafemales or anamales were much more interchangeable and flexible. With the advent of colonialism, the inferiorization of Africans widely extended the inferiorization of anafemales, excluding them from leadership roles, and causing them to lose ownership over land and other important economic domains.

Third, these three thinkers offer a plausible explanation as to why some Indigenous (or African) and white men collaborate to undermine the power of women. Why machismo, abuse, rape and other types of violence are exerted on non-white women by non-white men. Lugones and Millán, for instance, discuss how, with colonial imposition, non-white men were co-opted into the patriarchal roles that the colonial system imposed, disrupting more egalitarian or gynocentric generic systems. Segato reaches a similar conclusion: non-white men were co-opted, but because there already existed a favorable terrain—that is, the possibility for such co-option with a low-intensity patriarchy—prior to colonial intrusion. Therefore, Segato's main criticism of Oyèwùmí is that although the gender system of the Yorubas was more flexible, the female gender already existed in an unequal distribution of social power. For Oyèwùmí, by contrast, the hierarchical gender system did not exist in Yoruba society before colonization.

However, "in the pre-intrusion world," Segato writes, the construction of masculinity has accompanied humanity throughout the entire time of the species, in what she calls the "patriarchal pre-history of humanity," characterized by a very slow temporality, that is: a longue durée that is confused with evolutionary time (2021, 83). This masculinity is the construction of a subject forced to acquire it as a status:

> On this subject weighs the imperative of having to conduct himself throughout life under the gaze and evaluation of his male peers, testing and reconfirming abilities, aggressiveness, capacity for dominance and collection of the "feminine tribute" This indicates, on the one hand, that the gender exists, but it does so in a different way than in modernity. And on the other hand, when that colonial modernity approaches the gender system of the village, it dangerously modifies it […] capturing and reorganizing them from within, maintaining the appearance of continuity, but transforming the meanings, by introducing an order now governed by different rules […]". (2021, 83)

Indigenous feminist thinkers like Aymaran Julieta Paredes and Maya Q'eqchí-Xinka Lorena Cabnal, meanwhile, speak about "el entronque del patriarcado" (patriarchal juncture), defining it as mixed patriarchy, which is the result of the continuity and combination of the Indigenous ancestral patriarchal systems with the Western Christian patriarchy (Gargallo, 2014). Notwithstanding, other Indigenous women, such as the Mapuche Moira Millán, seem to be aligned with Oyèwùmí, when Millán declares that in the case of the Mapuche world:

> Machismo and patriarchy did not exist; that came with the arrival of the conqueror. People were socially organized according to their *newen* [force/spirit of Earth]. There

> were (and there are) women who had the *newen* of a Machi (medicine woman) or women who had the *newen* of a Lonko (chief) or Weichafe (warrior), and those same roles were also in the male world, that is, your sex did not determine you to occupy a fixed role; it was your *newen*." (qtd. in Contreras 2017)

Fourth, these authors defend the right to self-determination of Indigenous and African peoples. Oyèwùmí in particular fits into the tradition of African self-determination — personal, cultural, and political — as she clearly states in *African Women and Feminism*:

> However, this very tradition of African self-determination, personal cultural, and political, has been truncated by a series of successive global historical processes. Most notably, the Atlantic slave trade in European colonization over the past five centuries, these developments have made Africa politically, economically and culturally, dependent on Western Europe and North America. As a result, Africa has become the recipient of ideas and goods of dubious, and often harmful value. In order to transform the many types of degradation and dependency that Africans face today, we must be cognizant of this complex history and its enduring effects, as well as the multiple forms of oppression from which African people continue to suffer. (2003, 2)

Segato argues for something similar, in the form of what she calls deliberative autonomy (*autonomía deliberativa*) for communities, or the "village." To achieve autonomy, it is therefore necessary to abandon relativist arguments and the right to difference — that is, to abandon multicultural and neoliberal ideologies — and to replace them with an argument that is based on historical pluralism. (That is what Oyèwùmí is doing: she is arguing for an historical difference). The collective subjects of this plurality of histories are the Indigenous communities — not the state — with deliberative autonomy to produce their own historical process (Segato, 2003b, 74).

Moira Millán has also written about the co-option of non-white men in patriarchal roles, the self-determination of peoples, and in particular the self-determination of Indigenous women to decide their own destiny and that of their children. In this sense, deliberative autonomy and self-determination continue to be an objective that is and must remain in the crosshairs of our discussions. Millán, like Oyèwùmí, perceives white/mestiza feminism as another sort of colonial "tutelaje" (tutelage) in many cases affiliated with multicultural and neoliberal ideologies, that are not rooted in the historical difference of the Mapuche, that's why Millán refuses to call herself a feminist:

> We are not feminists, we are anti-patriarchal and we believe that patriarchal oppression is part of colonization; that is, racism, patriarchy, materialism, anthropocentrism, individualism, capitalism cannot be abstracted; all of that is part of the same colonial package that we are going to get rid of. Therefore, accepting labels and embracing ideologies that do not belong to us is like subtly perpetuating a new colonization. (qtd. in Contreras 2017)

In *African Women and Feminism*, Oyèwùmí expands on the criticism of the colonialist aspect of white feminism: "white feminists have considered their experience of womanhood in their culture as prototypic female experience and have used it to define it" (2003, 4). Oyèwùmí refers in particular to the category of "sisterhood" as a white feminist category for global

feminist solidarity that nonetheless does not work for African, Chicana, or other non-white women. Interestingly, Oyèwùmí follows Lugones in her examination of sisterhood as a model for solidarity articulated inside the Western patriarchal nuclear family institution (Lugones 1995; Oyèwùmí 2003, 7). In accordance with Oyèwùmí's argument in *The Invention of Women*, in the traditional Yoruba household, for example, *Omoya* is the first and fundamental source of identification for the child, whereby a child does not initially need to be able to identify the genders of their siblings, but only to identify those siblings (without gender categorization) with whom the child shares the same mother. *Omoya* thus positions the mother in a powerful role in the household and anchors the mother-*Omoya*/children's place in the family. In Oyèwùmí's view, Western sisterhood forges alliances not only against the powerful father but also alliances that separate the sisters from a powerless mother, in contrast to the *Omoya* (2003, 11).

In my readings of Oyèwùmí's and Lugones's work, I have discovered that the two knew and discussed each other's ideas. Moreover, Lugones played a pivotal role at the intersection of Yoruba Studies and Latin American thought on the coloniality of power, opening a dialogue between African and South American thinkers such as Oyèwùmí and Segato. Lugones thus facilitated a conversation between Global South (feminist) scholars and activists, a conversation that is relevant today for understanding and disentangling the multiple perspectives on feminism, anti-patriarchalism, and coloniality held by Indigenous women of Abya Yala—such as Millán, Paredes, and Cabnal, to name a notable few.

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