

# Making visible the unspeakable: capulanas in Northern Mozambique

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a theoretical reflection on capulanas (wax print fabrics) in the northern region of Mozambique. It is based on fieldwork conducted in Nampula and Ilha de Moçambique in 2015 and 2017. Beginning with a dialogue with the theoretical propositions of Alfred Gell and Bruno Latour, it suggests that “making capulanas” is not restricted to production. Instead, it happens mainly through circulation and its multiple forms of use. In addition, it addresses what capulanas are “made to do” (*faire-faire*) and especially what they “make not do” (*faire ne pas faire*). By covering the bodies and transmitting messages about sensitive matters such as illness, death, and menstruation, they harbor the spheres of the invisible and the unspeakable, and thus they “keep secrets.”

## KEYWORDS

Anthropology of art; attachment; objects; wax print fabrics; Mozambique

Capulana is the Mozambican name for what is known as wax print or *pagne* - the African printed fabrics. Some of them, called *kissambi*, are made of dyed threads, but they are also capulanas since they are used as such. As we will further discuss, capulanas are defined by their use rather than their fabrication. Their vibrant colors and multiple functions may dazzle those who arrive in Mozambique, and capulanas have become both ethnic symbols associated with the image of Makhuwa women<sup>1</sup> and national symbols. On Nampula's streets, tied around the waist, on the head (wraps), or shoulders (*nsunki*), they are women's clothing *par excellence*; transformed by tailors, they also become male and female garments. Inside the houses and in the yards, they are present in domestic activities: to carry children (*muthete*) or things; to wear at home by men; as household linen or dishtowels; to limit internal environments; and for decoration purposes. Capulanas are not only everyday objects but also essential for ritual moments such as funeral and initiation rites, as well as for pregnancy, childbirth, and after the birth of the children. As we shall see, capulanas are related to situations of danger and care: such as sickness, death, and menstruation.

Capulanas were a part of the first contacts I had in Mozambique. In 2015, as I participated in a joint research concerning the mining company Vale S.A.'s activities in the north of the country<sup>2</sup>, the fabrics were the first gifts offered as hospitality gestures. Later, when I already lived in Natikiri, on the outskirts of Nampula, I started wearing capulanas to move inside the neighborhood, covering my legs to avoid embarrassing situations and letting the capulana-clothes (*ekhuwo*) also mediate my relationships there. Finally, living together with and befriending some neighbors led me to write about the uses of capulanas in the daily life of Nampula women and the various bonds they foster in their multiple attachments.

In 2017, when I returned to carry further the research, I lived for two months in another district of Nampula and spent a few weeks on the Island of Mozambique, where the expertise in the use of capulana is even more elaborate. During this period, I met some of the people whose testimonies are part of this text: Sebastião Chinsipo, an expert in capulana production and writer; Mariamo Mutequia (Mamá Mariamo), a community reference and counselor at the Nampula High School; Sania Issufo, my host in Mozambique Island, who participated in the research with her curiosity, patience, and detailed explanations; Felisberto Aranha, an elder who became a social sciences' student in Mozambique Island and was also interested in the knowledge surrounding the secrets of capulanas. These people, among many others, made me learn and contributed to the reflections that resulted both from fieldwork and anthropological readings. These reflections were condensed in the thesis *Talking and keeping secrets: the capulanas of Nampula* (Assunção, 2018).

This text aims to bring forward some theoretical considerations about objects and materialities in anthropology based on this research material. This ap-

<sup>1</sup> I use the spelling 'Makhuwa' following the Report of the I Seminar on the Standardization of the Spelling of Mozambican Languages of NELIMO (1989). It is the predominant ethno-linguistic group in the region of Nampula, where I conducted fieldwork. Emakhuwa is the most spoken language in Mozambique, practiced by 5 million people, according to 2007 census data. Portuguese, however, is the only official language. The populations speaking Emakhuwa are concentrated in the north of Mozambique, in the provinces of Nampula, Niassa, Zambezia and Cabo Delgado. In Nampula province alone, there are six variants of Emakhuwa, one of them being Enahara, the variant of Ilha de Moçambique (Saguate, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> At the end of my undergraduate studies, I was part of a team with Patrick Arley, Raul Lansky and Ana Luisa Martins, coordinated by Eduardo Vargas (UFMC), in the project "Vale in Mozambique: socio-technical controversies in Africa and elsewhere", funded by CAPES - AULP. We lived for four months on the outskirts of Nampula, where the railway line that would be used by Vale S.A. to transport coal divided the neighborhoods. As in the dissertation (Assunção, 2018), I keep the original names, as agreed with the interlocutors during the research. When I handed in my papers after the returns to the field, the recognition of their names, and especially their images, in the work was something valued and important to them.

proach favors theoretical dialogues and some reflection points, in contrast to more detailed and dense ethnographic descriptions present in other works. This effort is justified as it contributes to the academic and artistic literature that tends to privilege fabrics' communicational, historical, and symbolic aspects.<sup>3</sup>

Hence I suggest a theoretical vocabulary that allows us to describe and think about the relationships between women and fabrics and to look at capulanas as objects that make a lot of difference and do many things (Latour, 1998). Along the lines of Alfred Gell's (1998) propositions, I treat these objects as anthropology would treat any other social phenomenon, that is, to look at the relations - connections, compositions, effects, and differences - that capulanas engender in the lives of women in Nampula. In the first moment, I propose thinking about how capulana making is not restricted to production but includes circulation and its multiple forms of use. Then, I meditate on what capulanas are "made to do" (*faire faire*), but mainly what they are made to "not-do" keeping the spheres of the invisible and the unspeakable.

**3** | The academic literature on capulanas in Mozambique is still scarce, but it is worth noting the work of Meneses (2003) and Arnfred and Meneses (2019). In the literary field there is Luis Polana's novel "História de uma capulana de algodão" published in the newspaper O Brado Africano in 1950, and journalistic publications such as Capulanas e Lenços (Torcato and Roletta, 2011). In cinema, the documentary 'Na dobra da capulana' (2014) by Isabel de Noronha and Camilo de Sousa: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MhSzSirjw>

## AGENCIES AND INTENTIONALITIES

To follow this path, it is worth considering theoretical proposals in which things and people are not so separated, or rather, in which things and people can emerge through relations. It doesn't mean that there is no difference or possibility of differentiation between the various beings or entities that inhabit the world (people, things, spirits, animals, plants, etc.) Instead, it means not taking these distinctions a priori and observing how they emerge and operate in the interactions between these various beings. In anthropological work, of course, there will usually be a greater emphasis on the point of view of human subjects since there is a distinctive language and access to them in relation to other beings. Ultimately, we can only access these other beings through people (what they talk about or how they interact with them), but this does not mean that their existences are subordinate to the sphere of human existence.

It is not my intention to embrace a complete dilution of the division between people and things. Nonetheless, it is crucial to make use of a vocabulary that allows one to, at least, try to think of such terms in a more imbricated way, more closely related, and more symmetrical.

Alfred Gell's proposal, for example, can help unpack this question. He developed the notion of agency to think about art objects anthropologically. Moving away from essentialist currents (tied to the universal idea of Beauty), Gell argues that art objects do not have a "symbolic meaning" or "visual language" by themselves since there is no aesthetic or symbolic property separated from social interaction. Thus, he emphasizes not meaning and who defines it but agency, intention, causation,

result, and transformation (Gell, 1998: 6). He proposes an action-centered approach, concerned with the mediating role of art objects in the social process, instead of a semiotic approach that interprets art objects as if they were texts.

His definition of art object is quite broad and not limited to what is usually called in the West “artwork.” Anything could potentially be an art object: “including living persons, because the anthropological theory of art (which we can roughly define as the “social relations in the vicinity objects mediating social agency”) merges seamlessly with the social anthropology of persons and their bodies” (Gell, 1998: 7). He also points out that “each artwork is a site where agency ‘stops’ and assumes a visible form” (Gell, 1998: 250).

In other words, an art object would be a condensation of the relations and agencies surrounding it, embodiments or residues of complex intentionalities. However, these intentionalities would be human, and the relations and agency would be social. It means that objects, no matter how “endowed with agency,” can only access a kind of “secondary agency,” which would be an “abduction” of a first agency, the “social” one. And this would only be possible due to the imbued intentionalities of their creators or fabricators.

In my perception, although Gell’s theory has been very stimulating for several works in the anthropology of art, aesthetics, or the anthropology of objects<sup>4</sup>, there is a limit to its use in the case of capulanas. I do not mean a limit that would imply categorizing capulanas as “art objects” or not, according to the author’s definition, but rather the limit of the creators’ intentionality or the abduction of agency. As Els Lagrou argued:

Abduction is a term derived from semiotics and refers to a particular cognitive operation. Abduction is a type of inference, a hypothesis formulated from a perception that carries a certain degree of uncertainty. When I see smoke, I can abduce the existence of fire. The smoke, however, may have other causes. Abduction carries a gray area of uncertainty, unlike spoken language or mathematics. **Gell’s abductive inference starts from an object that is interpreted as an index of someone’s agency. The way art acts on the person is situated, according to Gell, in the field of inter-subjective experience in which an image always refers to an artist who made it with certain intentions, to someone who commissioned it, or to the person represented in the image.** The work acts in the vicinity of people and will be read as an index of the complex network of agencies around it. (Lagrou, 2010: 25, *my emphasis and my translation*)

Moreover, according to Lagrou (2010: 8), in several indigenous contexts, the people who make objects or make body paintings are not considered their creators but rather transmitters, translators, and intermediaries (the “creation” being attributed to deities and non-human beings). While complexifying the notion of “artist,” it still seems to prevail the need for a person (or several) whose agency will

4 | Notably the works on indigenous art by Els Lagrou (2007; 2010), Carlos Fausto (2013); Barcelos Neto (2008).

be proliferated by the object. In Gell's case, the situation where this agency includes non-human agencies would be that of the trap. In "Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps" (1996), he analyzes the zande net, an object in which the creator must adopt the animal's perspective to deceive it. Thus, the network of intentionalities operating there would also be animal. Even so, the animal "mind" and "intentionality" remains a residue of the human mind, for it is the only one to which we have access:

Animals and material objects can have minds and intentions attributed to them, but these are always, in some residual sense, human minds, because we have access 'from the inside' only to human minds, indeed to only one of these, our own. (Gell, 1998: 17)

Since capulanas are industrialized objects, how could we attribute this kind of intentionality to them? How to define their "creators"? Would they be the creators of the drawings that make up the prints?

## MAKING CAPULANAS

In debates and conversations about my research topic, colleagues often asked me who created the capulana designs. Moreover, whenever I said that I was studying fabrics in Mozambique, interlocutors commonly imagined that I was researching a handmade fabric. In some debates in Brazilian academic environments, it seemed to me that finding out that they are not produced (or worse, not "conceived," in the sense of the creation of the design) by Africans but by Dutchmen, for example, at the Vlisco factory, took away a sense of authenticity. This aspect is central for artists and intellectuals working with the "African fabrics" topic, like Yinka Shonibare<sup>5</sup>, or, in Mozambique, for designers like Wacy Zacarias and Ricância Agira (AfroRicky)<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, during my fieldwork in Nampula, this was not a matter interrogated and discussed by my friends and interlocutors. The drawings only became relevant as they received names.

The names can be iconic associations between the print and elements of women's daily lives. For example, Paisley designs, prevalent in Indian fabric prints, are called *nakhorosso* in Nampula because they resemble the curves of the cashew nut. A green capulana with tiny drops is called "Sporting tear," in reference to the Portuguese soccer team; others are called *nabolacha maria* (a print of circles with little balls inside) or *nadoce* (peanut candy in the shape of a diamond).

All capulanas have names assigned by women or merchants at the time of sale: these names may also refer to an event that occurred concomitantly with the arrival of the new wax print in stores. When Sania Issufo, my host in Ilha de Moçambique in 2017, began to tell me stories about her capulanas, she opened one of the

**5** | The Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, now well known in the European artistic milieu, creates re-readings of famous paintings from the history of English art or scenes from the Victorian era using "African fabrics" to make the works. The court suits are given colors and prints while the headless dolls that wear them represent everyday scenes of the aristocracy. With this, the artist plays with the relations between Africa and Europe, and with the fact that the fabrics that are given and confer an "African identity" to those who wear them are actually produced in the Netherlands, by Vlisco, among other European factories. Some of his works can be viewed at <http://www.yinkashonibaremb.com>.

**6** | Ricância Agira is a young designer who set up her atelier in Maputo and at the time of the research worked with recycling capulana fabrics and organic fabrics with natural dyes. Wacy Zacarias is a designer who founded a brand of textiles called Karingana wa Karingana, in partnership with Djamilia de Sousa, and is part of collectives that aim to develop the creative industry in Mozambique. For a discussion on the creation, production and consumption of textiles, see "Karingana: a story told by us", available at [https://www.ted.com/talks/wacy\\_zacarias\\_karingana\\_uma\\_estoria\\_contada\\_por\\_nos](https://www.ted.com/talks/wacy_zacarias_karingana_uma_estoria_contada_por_nos), accessed on 3 Dec. 2022.

four big wooden chests of capulanas she keeps in her house. One was given to her by her husband when she got married; one was inherited from her mother; and two others belonged to her deceased sister and were kept to be given to her nieces. She took dozens of capulanas off the chest as she talked about them. First, she referred to each one by its material qualities (“this one is *casquinha*, this one is *rupi*, this one is *epathi*”) or their ownership (the *mucumis* that belonged to her mother, her aunt, etc.).<sup>7</sup> But she also remembered some names. One of the kissambis she showed me was called “the bank’s mortar” because it reminded Mozambique Bank’s floor when it was built. The others were all related to events: one kissambi was called “Alberto Carlos” because it was launched when this singer came to perform on the island. A flowered capulana was called *ohomaua omuassata* (Muassata’s stabbing), as she explained:

It is called *ohomaua omuassata* because that lady had stabbed her husband. So, at that time, as there was a lot of joking, and the whole town knew, soon this capulana was turning up, and when it hit the market, women decided to give it this name, [...] Muassata’s stabbing (Sania, 04/25/2017, *my translation*)

The fabrics have mnemonic effects, operating as inscriptions of past situations, constantly making memory and history visible. Capulanas’ mnemonic effect does not refer only to the personal events of the women who earned and used them, nor to collective events such as initiation rites, weddings, or funeral rites. They also refer to events in a locality – moments of privation, visits from someone important, scandals, etc. Therefore, they mark shared temporalities and histories among the women who lived in a specific place and time.

In considering name attribution, the creation of capulanas can be somewhat disassociated from manufacturing or production itself. This dissociation seems analytically more fruitful when we consider the women’s perspective. It is worth mentioning that there is a capulana factory in Nampula, Nova Texmoque, the only one that still produces wax prints in the country.<sup>8</sup> During a visit to the factory to better understand the manufacturing process – which was limited to the printing process since the cotton fabric was imported – I met a Mozambican employee, Sebastião Chinsipo, who had worked for over thirty years with textiles. We met several times, had long conversations, and gradually built a friendship.<sup>9</sup>

Once I asked him whether the Indian nationality of the designer could possibly influence the patterns of the fabrics. He explained that the design is not “original” but made at the client’s request, who sometimes comes in with a piece of an old capulana to be reproduced or a sketch. The designer then completes the drawing with the client, defines the colors, etc. Sebastião said patterns could be, for instance, “ancestral motifs” or “copies of things,” as occurs with reproducing old capulanas.

**7** | As will be described throughout the text, there are specific designations for the texture of the fabrics, from the lightest (*casquinha*) to the firmest (*rupi*). *Mucumi* is a large piece made up of two capulanas sewn together with an ornament to bind them, used as bed linen and also in important ceremonies such as weddings and funeral rites.

**8** | Nova Texmoque was bought in 2006 by the Tanzanian group MeTL (Mohamed Enterprises Tanzania Limited) and is managed by Indians. According to Sebastião Chinsipo, the textile industry in Mozambique began in the 1950s, receiving greater investment in the period immediately prior to the 1975 independence (TEXLOM starts activities in 1973 and TEXMOQUE and RIOPELE in 1978). It was one of the main industries in the socialist period - until 1983, the textile industry as a whole was composed of 30 factories - and it suffered severe degradation during the entire 16 Years War (1976-1992) and by the international conjunctures. Texmoque shut down in 1994 and only reopened under the direction of MeTL.

**9** | Sebastião Chinsipo, over the course of our conversations, went on to write manuscripts in small craft books, such as “Breve História da Indústria Têxtil em Moçambique” (A Brief History of Mozambique’s Textile Industry); “Designações de capulana e roupa em alguns línguas moçambicanas” (Capulana and cloth naming in some Mozambican languages); and “O longo e sinuoso caminho da capulana” (The long and winding path of capulana), in which he detailed the process of making the fabric and some personal comments on its use in Mozambique. He also wrote a book of comments on my monograph, and two poems entitled “I am a capulana” and “We are friends” in which the lyrical self assumes the voice of a capulana. For more details on Sebastião’s life and written work, see Assunção (2018).

“Ancestral motifs” are designs that “man can invent,” but, he completes, this invention comes “from nature, from the environment.”

According to Sebastião’s reasoning, there is no point in defining who creates the capulanas or the designs since these will always be, to some extent, replications: whether of old capulanas or ancestral motifs - inventions based on what exists in nature, in the environment. So, while the designs’ origin doesn’t seem to inform much about capulanas, we could still ask ourselves if their fabrication origin (even if industrial) makes a difference.

That question is also pertinent since the history of what became the Mozambican capulana also brings out the intersections that connect India, the Persian Gulf, and the East African coast, which includes the northern part of the territory that became Mozambique. According to Liesegang (2000), there is evidence of a progressive settlement of populations coming mainly from the Persian Gulf on the East African coast, particularly in Pemba (northern Mozambique) and the Zanzibar Islands between the 9th and 13th centuries. Al-Masudi, a 10th-century Arab author, reported that the Asian ships that landed in the coastal cities traded Indian cloth for gold and metals (Liesegang, 2000: 26). Pedro Machado also notes that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Indian textiles “were in great demand as exchange commodities in African trade of the interior and were regarded as ‘the currency that is accepted in the ports’” (Machado, 2009: 57). This African demand made the Indian production itself adapt to the taste of the local elites “who purchased the fabrics. This fact was visible, for example, in the coincidence between the colors of Indian fabrics sold and the colors produced locally from plant pigments - especially red, black and white.

It is worth noting that these exchanges oriented to the Indian Ocean did not simply imply the arrival of Arab traders or Indian products in a territory that started to consume and receive these influences. Instead, it is adequate to think of an intersection of influences, in which subjects not only adapt to a world in constant transformation but also adapt the world by transforming it. In this sense, it is interesting to look at an aspect highlighted in several texts (Machado, 2009; Zimba, 2011; Rezende, 2014) and also present in the fieldwork I conducted, namely Mozambican women’s preference for imported fabrics.

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When I arrived in Nampula city, many people told me that I should go to Ilha de Moçambique, in the coastal area of the province, because there were the *donas das capulanas*.<sup>10</sup> Some of these capulana masters, who were introduced to me precisely because they were senior and knew stories “from the old days,” spoke of the origins of the fabrics as coming from the Indians or Arabs. However, it seemed that the exact provenance of the fabrics did not matter much. Instead, they emphasized

<sup>10</sup> | *Dona* (masc. *dono*) is a word often employed in Mozambique, which means not only “owner”, “proprietor”, but also “master”: the experts, experienced ones, who have the knowledge and legitimacy to talk about a subject.

that the capulanas made their way to their hands through Indian stores. Buying in the store was the most important feature to distinguish them from “inland Makhuwas,”<sup>11</sup> who used fabrics made from tree bark, called *nakotho*, as Mamá Muhanjuma reported.<sup>12</sup> When I asked her if they also used this handmade fabric on the island, she replied, a bit exasperated, “why would we use nakotho? If we had stores here?”. In another conversation with Sania and her aunt, Mamá Molde, the two discussed the probable origin of capulanas, starting with the hypothesis that the Arabs had brought them or the Indians. But they soon dismissed this idea because they wore different clothing; they concluded then that “it’s our Makhuwa naturality.”

Hence, the fact that the fabrics “came from abroad” and were not produced locally does not seem to be a problem for the women who wore and wear them; on the contrary, it was something valued. Moreover, there does not seem to be a great contradiction between the fact that the capulana’s foreign origin and their “being the Makhuwa naturality,” as suggested by Sania and her aunt. There would not be, then, for the women I talked to, an issue concerning the authenticity of the fabric or the identities constructed with the capulanas.

At marketplaces, sellers qualify some capulanas as “original,” that is, high-quality capulanas. These are the most expensive ones, less usual on Nampula streets. According to the sellers, they come from Mali or Nigeria, therefore their origin is traced back not to the Dutch companies such as Vlisco where they are manufactured, but to the African countries through which they enter the continent. However, who manufactures them or where they come from are not questions asked by the female buyers. Often not even the merchants know how to answer that question.

Capulanas produced locally by Texmoque are less valued, both for being cheaper and more common and for the quality of the fabric. It is worth noting how important the fabric materiality is for these women: there are four categories to classify capulanas according to the lightness/firmness of the fabric. *Casquinha*, also named *sesseca* on the coast, is the lightest and usually used to stay at home or under another capulana; *miaphano* is a half-cloth and an intermediate category still considered light; *epathi* is stiffer; and, finally, *rupi* is the stiffest and most valued capulana used to go out. Firmness is associated with durability and confidence in the fabric to hold the baby on the back and prevent it from untying and falling off the woman’s waist. On the other hand, capulanas made of synthetic fabric and very light, such as those distributed by Frelimo during election periods, are considered ugly and called “fire catchers” (because they crackle with heat and burn with the sparks of the charcoal used for cooking). Another critical factor is the colors and combinations, that is, their ability to draw attention. Thus, for Nampula women, the material and the aesthetic aspect seem more relevant than their origin or brand.

I once asked Sebastião about a possible distinction between national and foreign capulanas and mentioned the critiques of “African fabrics produced in Europe.”

<sup>11</sup> | Also called simply “Makhuwa” on certain occasions by the people from the coast, when they are claiming to be “more civilized” than the allegedly “backward” people from inland.

<sup>12</sup> | Mamá Muhanjuma is a counselor (who participates in traditional ceremonies such as women’s initiation rites). She was married to the father of Sania, my host on the island, who participated in the interview as a translator. Sania would take me to her aunts and older relatives, so we could talk about “the Island culture”. Even though she knew many of the issues covered in these conversations, she liked to honor the knowledge of her elders and learn from them during these encounters.



He replied that “it doesn’t matter where the capulana comes from; what matters is that it is the capulanas that we like, that we wear as we want, use as we want... we make use of it for various purposes that we know of.”

Therefore, rather than a definition by the characteristics of the object (provenance, dimensions, colors, materiality), it is its use that characterizes it more precisely: “a fabric wrapped around the waist,” “a fabric that wraps babies,” “a fabric that covers women,” “a fabric used in rituals” etc. The historical and material dimensions of the capulana are only relevant to the extent that they generate effects and are actualized in their everyday and ritual uses by the women who attach them and are attached to them.

Consequently, it is not so important to look at the making of the capulana or the creation of the prints to consider their possibilities of agency, as discussed by Gell. If the object acts as an “index of one’s agency,” if the agency of the objects is connected to the intentionality of their creators, in the case of capulanas, we could think that the different forms of use and circulation (more relevant to the people who attach themselves to them) could also be considered as moments of emergence and abduction of agency.<sup>13</sup>

### WHAT CAPULANAS MAKE-DO

It is worth noting that Gell’s pragmatic proposal, which highlights the efficacy and effects of objects in the world rather than their representations or aesthetic qualities disconnected from their functionality – a point often used to distinguish art and artifact – is inspiring to study capulanas.

I seek approaches where the social does not appear as a background where things circulate or are created. I rather conceive of society or culture as the effect of interactions and agency in which diverse beings participate. As Latour (2012: 110) proposed, if objects “express,” “symbolize,” and “materialize” power/gender relations/ hierarchies, etc., it entails that they are not at the origin of social activity and, consequently, “do not do anything even comparable or even connectable to human social action,” for they do not create anything. In opposition, it would be necessary, therefore, to recognize the so-called “agency of objects” or “agency of non-humans,” since “actors,” or better said, actants, are nothing more than beings who participate in action – “*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference” (Latour, 2005: 71) – regardless of subjectivity or intentionality. What matters is to make a difference.

However, as he cautions, the point is not to draw an absolute symmetry between humans and non-humans. Instead, “to be symmetric, for us, simply means not to impose a priori some spurious asymmetry among human intentional action

**13** | This is also an interesting possibility to think capulanas in the light of Strathern’s (1988) proposals, asking how people and things emerge from the circulation of the objects (who gives; who receives; in which situations) and how they emerge in the uses (since capulana is an object of the feminine universe, gendered relations are also produced during its use). For a more detailed discussion about capulanas in the relations between men and women and in female initiation rites, see Assunção (2018).

and a material world of causal relations” (Latour, 2005: 76). This “a priori asymmetry” occurs precisely when we take “social” or “culture” as the explanation of all phenomena, and not as the very matter that must be explained. For instance, to say that women wear capulanas in Nampula because it is part of their “culture” means everything and nothing at the same time and ends the matter without proliferating other elements to be worked out. Interestingly, capulanas also serve as an element that makes what they call “Makhuwa culture” tangible and recognizable, leading to a tautological argument. On the other hand, to say that women wear capulanas or always carry one with them because they may need to cover someone who has had an accident and died suddenly indicates further possibilities for understanding how capulanas make a difference in certain situations and how they operate as actants in various moments.

By taking capulanas as actants, we can make room for other possible relations – beyond the unidirectional model of a subject acting upon an object. Moreover, such an approach goes beyond the idea of functionality or utility and conceives of its use as an engagement in a relationship that potentially transforms the parties involved.

In a short, intriguing text, “Factures/fractures: from the concept of network to the concept of attachment,” Latour proposes to abandon the notion of domination/control (*maîtrise*), which qualifies the opposition between subject and object, and that of structure/agency that divides modern sociology. This theoretical shift enables us to enter the multiplicity of what makes one act. In doing so,

we will cross spaces that never encounter either the individual or society; given that all setting-in-motion depends on the nature of attachments and their recognized capacity to render existent or nonexistent those subjects to which they are attached (Latour, 1999: 24)

The question, therefore, is not whether the individual is free or bound but whether he is well or poorly bound. There is no free individual who, guided by his will and needs, acts on nature and objects as he pleases. Any movement or action involves, by definition, other human and non-human actors who mediate this movement, are affected by it, and allow it to happen. To be bound is to allow oneself to be affected. “Attachments designate that which issues, that which sets in motion and, at the same time, the impossibility of defining this ‘faire-faire’ - this ‘made to do’ - by the ancient coupling of determination and freedom” (Latour, 1999: 31).

The vocabulary of attachment is interesting for capulanas: they must be well tied to the body not to fall off. At the same time, women are attached to them: they keep them in their wooden chests, wear them on special days, pass them on as an inheritance, feel safe with them, and tell stories about and through them. Capulanas also wrap another being to the woman’s body when the baby is on the mother’s

back.

These propositions lead us to pay attention to things that connect and provide firm and lasting bonds. Capulanas are “connecting things” - they mediate relations in multiple ways, as mentioned above. They move and are moved along with the women; they move and are moved in exchanges and gifts; and also move the affections: they are moving. Besides, “firmness” (*okhomaala*) is a material quality of the fabric that women desire: the capulana cannot be too light, otherwise, it shows through what it is supposed to cover, does not hold the baby well, and may be less durable. Thus, capulanas as “connecting things” must also provide firm and long-lasting bonds.

In a previous work (Assunção, 2015), I reflected on capulanas as things producing bonds (attachments) and creating various networks of relations: among groups of friends, relatives, and neighbors on festive occasions, such as the Mozambican Women’s Day, in marital relations and love relationships in general, where men are obliged to offer capulanas to their wives, in family relations through the inheritance of wooden chests filled with capulanas, among others. At the same time, I delved into the more physical sense of the attachments, thinking about how capulanas are tied to the body and what they cause: the impacts on walking, the possibilities of carrying things in the capulana, producing “pockets,” the risk of untying and falling, with which one must deal, and the production of a feminine body, of a “Makhuwa woman” - which is connected to the composition between body and capulana, or, using a Latourian formulation, to the body-capulana composite.

In that earlier work, I suggested that the capulana was wrapped in such a way as to cover the most valued parts of the female body: belly, backside, and thighs. It is considered inappropriate to exhibit these body parts in public while bearing ornaments - tattoos, beads - that make a body desirable and beautiful. Nevertheless, this trivial association, namely “capulanas serve to cover up the tattoos and beads” or “the most valued parts of the women’s bodies”, was soon rejected in my second fieldwork. Fatima, a neighbor with whom I occasionally had a beer in the shared backyard, found this association completely meaningless: “to cover up our legs and belly, we can wear pants”, she told me. “Now, imagine you have just given birth. Are you going to tie yourself up with pants?! That’s not possible! Are you going to cover a dead person with pants?! A sick person, will you cover them with pants? (Laughter) That’s why we Makhuwas cannot do without capulanas.”

Thus, the original question of my monograph, “what is the effect of capulana on the body?”, then reformulated in terms of “what capulanas are made to do?” could be deepened in other ways if we bear in mind the various possibilities of anthropological reflections raised above. In the second fieldwork, I looked more closely at another action engendered by the use of capulana: the act of “covering” (in addition to the action of “tying” with which I had previously worked).

By doing so, I intended to investigate what capulanas cover on the body of the women who use them daily but also to look at ritual moments. In these situations, covering people with capulana seemed to acquire more importance: at initiation rites, when boys and girls are covered with *mucumis* (two sewn capulanas), and also during funeral rites, a moment in which the capulanas are crucial (to wrap the dead person, transport and bury them, in the case of Muslim funeral rites). Therefore, I thought capulanas could also unlink, disconnect, and separate, especially in ritual moments: living and dead, children and adults, men and women. This way, capulanas would also be “made to do” (*faire-faire*) the differentiations that constitute these terms.

At the end of the second fieldwork, when I was presenting part of my research in a lecture at Lúrio University, one of the students, Felisberto Aranha<sup>14</sup>, made an intriguing observation. He said he had understood my argument about what the capulanas “hide” and “cover” but added that capulanas also communicate. Then he shared a long comment on the ways of communicating through the capulana, which includes knowledge about how to tie them, the places and positions in which they are stretched, etc.

(...) Here on the coast, we could discover the language of this capulana from the ladies when they wore it. It was possible to know that this lady wore the capulana this way because she was a widow; that lady dressed that way because she was still a virgin. There were such languages. During the preparation of a man or a woman for the initiation rites, there was a story applied to the education of this individual, how he should understand the language in society [...] Hence, the capulana entered our tradition as a language to interpret our ways of being and our ways of living. There are things that we cannot inform. In the old days, I could hear someone crying in an area: if I ran to that area, I would come across a capulana; and from the way that capulana was laid out on the ground, right there, on that path, I had to know that, where I was heading, either a man had died, or a woman had died. It depended on the position of the capulana [...] There was also a particular language, because of shame, of tradition. If a mother is putting on her daughter's clothes, the husband wouldn't need to ask to know that the daughter, already grown up, has started to wear the menstrual napkin (*penço*). And that came up between women; it is information between women. Ladies keep a lot of secrets. But there is a language that I received in the initiation rites, and I must study the methodologies of the use of capulanas within my tradition to be able to know what that is, what this means here, why she is dressed this way, and what she wants to tell me. All that is to say that the capulana, besides only hiding, also brings a series of information and messages for the individual, especially us men, to be decoded. “I already know what is going on; I don't even need to ask,” as we were obliged to know and interpret the dressing of the Makhuwa women through the capulana itself. (...) Because there are issues that traditionally cannot be pronounced. Tradition forbids. We cannot speak of it. But we have to make a gesture that shows

**14 |** The Unilúrio Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities was founded in 2017 on Mozambique Island, when it opened the first classes of Tourism and Hospitality, as well as Development and International Relations courses. Felisberto Aranha was the oldest student in the class, in his 50s, and always well-respected in his remarks. I later found out that he did his own research with his elders (*mais-velhos*) from Mozambique Island and surrounding regions on aspects of the Makhuwa Naharra culture. Aranha also played guitar in the academic tuna at college, and, when younger, had been a professional musician and trained as an airplane pilot in the former USSR, where, like Sebastião Chinsipo, he studied and learned to speak Russian.

that this means that. My wife cannot tell me, much less my daughter. For shame, she has to interpret it another way for me to understand.

(Felisberto Aranha, CEDIM lecture in Mozambique Island, May 19, 2017, my translation)

Aranha's comment shows that the gestures and ways of tying and arranging the capulana are precise techniques that give information about death, mourning, the state of a woman, menstruation, etc., and allow us to avoid asking a series of questions that would be embarrassing for both men and women. These remarks open up new possibilities for thinking about the enunciations capulanas can make happen, or the events they can enunciate, without dissociating their aesthetics - color, print, and patterns - from their materiality, without having to restrict oneself to what they represent, or the symbols they carry.

### AVOID SPEAKING (MAKE NOT DO)

For some time in my fieldwork I avoided asking questions like "what does the capulana mean" or "what are the meanings" carried by the fabrics? I had already read or heard somewhere that "capulanas speak," but I did not pay much attention to this statement. Initially, I understood this in terms of the mnemonic effect of the fabrics, which are associated with personal events and community happenings ("the capulanas tell stories") or in terms of symbolism ("they represent our Makhuwa identity, our values, etc."). Encountering critical perspectives on the idea of representation and symbolism, which accompanied my interest in materiality, made me less interested in the communicational possibilities of capulanas. It was only after Aranha's remark that I became aware of the possible connections between a communicative approach and one that is action-centered, attentive to the effects and compositions. In retrospect, it seems evident that speech and communication are a form of action, entail effects, make a difference in the world, and connect beings.

Communication via fabrics is a topic addressed in the literature on kangas in Swahili societies, in places like Zanzibar and Tanzania, by Rose Marie Beck (2000) and Yahya-Othman (1997). The authors focus on the messages conveyed by wearing them publicly, tied around the waist, or offering a particular kanga to someone, based on the so-called *jina* – which are phrases in Kiswahili language, usually sayings or proverbs, inscribed on the fabric prints.

Both authors draw attention to the subtle and indirect nature of communication via kanga, by which women can issue criticisms and opinions indirectly and ambiguously without directly confronting their receptor. It is always possible to evade the situation by claiming that there was no particular intention behind the use or offer of that specific kanga with that particular *jina*.<sup>15</sup> In this way, women who use

<sup>15</sup> | According to Beck (2000: 5), even if they do not admit to making use of "kanga-communication," most women know how to do it and can tell anecdotes of incidents involving the fabrics. The title of Yahya-Othman's (1997) article, "If the Cap Fits: Kanga names and women's voice in Swahili society" is elucidative of how such communication proceeds: the message reaches the receptor "if the cap fits."

this type of communication manage to make their statements without breaking the rules of discretion and feminine respectability available in these societies.

Yahya-Othman (1997), as well as Arnfred and Meneses (2019), emphasize their analyses on the aspects of resistance that this practice enables for “demure” women in these patriarchal contexts; and on the possibility of choice and agency that they manifest in making use of a particular kanga/capulana or another in certain situations.<sup>16</sup>

Maria Paula Meneses (2003), in an essay focused on the messages transmitted by the capulanas, also argues that the capulana is a means of communication. Thus, it is essential for the author to discuss how we can access (and construct) aspects of Mozambican identity through these fabrics; that is to say, cultural domains (clothing, dances, sculptures, etc.) that are not necessarily in the written forms which “hold, in the modern world of ‘civilization’ a special status in the field of production and reproduction of knowledge.” (Meneses, 2003: 112).

However, the visual communication made possible by the capulanas is shown, in Meneses’ study, through the proverbs (texts printed on the fabric hems) or the iconography of the prints (Meneses, 2003: 115). In my view, this approach still anchors the possibility of communication very much in the register of the inscription (whether alphabetical or imagistic), which is not the only nor the most important form of communication via capulana, at least regarding the Makhuwa societies of Northern Mozambique. As Aranha reported, the tying and arranging of capulanas are as relevant as their patterns and participate in what Meneses calls “silent communication.”

In this sense, anthropological approaches that use Peirce’s semiotic theories, such as Gell’s (1998), could provide indications of ways to approach communication via capulana without reducing its potential to the symbolic modality of representation. Capulanas can often be deployed as icons (representation via similarity) or as indexes (which have an existential link, an attachment, to what they represent, like a footprint/footprint or smoke/fire). The names they earn can also be iconic (related to the print) or indicative (related to the event and simultaneity). However, it stood out to me that when capulana are made to communicate, as Aranha elaborates, they also allow for the avoidance of “a series of questions” and, in doing so, they create the possibility of “avoiding speaking”. Although this has not been directly developed in Latour’s propositions, I believe it is a modality of something we could call “make not do” (*faire ne pas faire*). The effects of their presence, the ways in which they are attached and combine with women’s bodies, not only create multiple possibilities of agency, but also create the possibility of not acting (not speaking) when the subjects are inappropriate.

Avoid talking about specific phenomena related to menstruation, sexuality, and death is linked to the preservation of that which should not be heard/said but

<sup>16</sup> | Arnfred and Meneses (2019) provide examples of capulanas with this type of inscription, and note that capulanas with jinas have recently appeared in the Mozambican market as well. Some of the examples they feature include: “Gossip is not good, better choose what you are going to say”; “The beauty of a wife is in her character, not in her appearance”; “I remain protected, your plagues do not reach me”. Last accessed on: 23 June 2021.

also not be seen. During the initiation rites, these same subjects are explicitly addressed. In these ritual moments, capulanas are also activated to create the ritual space in which secrets will be taught and, at the same time, preserved.<sup>17</sup> To return to the more material aspect of the cloth, the capulana covers, wraps, preserves, and protects the bodies that require particular care for being in specific situations or thresholds: menstruating women, newborns, and the dead.

In a lively conversation with Mamá Mariamo, who was called the “school mother” for her work as a counselor at the Nampula High School and a community reference in the Namutequeliua neighborhood<sup>18</sup>, she emphasized that “the capulana keeps lots of secrets”:

So, in the initiation rites, we (at least we Nahara, from the coast) inculcate in the woman, starting from the first menstruation, that she should take certain precautions. One of these precautions is that she must always carry her capulana with her because the capulana holds a lot of secrets. A woman can suddenly get her period [...] because some are irregular. She is on the street, in the supermarket, at school, and at work; suddenly, she can get her period, and stain her clothes, so with the capulana in her purse, she simply takes off the capulana, ties it up, and at least covers her shame. Also, nobody knows the moment that God brings death; you are on the street, and you can suddenly fall and die. So, the people who come to your rescue reach into your wallet, take your capulana and at least cover you up. Or you're with a colleague of yours, and something happened to him, like he gets hit or run over. A man never carries a capulana, so there's a woman around, we ask for her capulana and cover the body (Mamá Mariamo, Apr. 5, 2017, my translation)

Whereas the capulana is essential to cover the bodies, “keeping secrets” also implies the possibility of maintaining discretion in speech, as Aranha pointed out, and silencing words that - especially in the emakhuwa language - are learned in the initiation rites, together with the meanings and knowledge to which they are related, and that should not be pronounced outside this ritual space. After all, the secret can only be a secret to the extent that it is preserved. That is, it cannot be accessible to everyone and cannot be repeated or pronounced in any situation.

In this sense, in “speaking,” the capulana simultaneously “keeps the secrets” and does this through non-verbal communication, a message that is not enunciated, written, or spoken, i.e., through gestures and tying. The capulana makes visible the unspeakable to the extent that it refers to an enunciation (such as, for example, “I am menstruating”) that will be neither spoken nor exposed. Doing so keeps the blood, in this case, in the realm of the invisible.<sup>19</sup>

17 | In Ilha de Moçambique the capulanas are used, together with *macuti* (intertwined palm leaves) or canvas, to create the *nipantha*, a kind of porch, in front of a house, where the rites take place.

18 | Mamá Mariamo was not an advisor of female initiation rites (*namalaka*), however, like a large part of the Makhuwa women who were initiated, she regularly participated in initiation rites of relatives, neighbors, daughters of friends, etc. The role she performed very perspicaciously was a dialogue between traditional teachings and formal schooling, thus being a counselor at school for adolescent girls and also mediating dialogues with families.

19 | This reminds to some extent the discussion on the “figuration of the invisible” in Amerindian arts (Lagrou, 2017). The author addresses, following Severi's (2007) propositions, the image's chimerical character, which produces a “presentification of absence” (2017: 12), bringing together what is and what is not in the image and establishing a bridge between the visible and the invisible. I believe that there is also something of the order of suggestion in what Aranha called “the capulana language”.

## WRAPPING UP

Throughout this paper, I have brought into dialogue theories and discussions - elaborated from diverse ethnographic materials - that apparently may not connect directly to the object dealt with in the text. Contrastively, capulanas raise some questions when they are analyzed from the perspective of an anthropology of art like Gell's or a sociology of mediations like Latour's. We must look beyond what we conventionally call creation or production to anthropologically treat objects that enact multiple social relations, such as capulanas.

On the other hand, the mediation of objects not only implies physical actions (tying, wrapping), affections (attachments), preserving separations, and covering what should remain invisible. In certain situations, agency also means the possibility of avoiding other actions, "making not to do". By "speaking" through its attachments, the capulana makes it possible for women to "keep secrets."

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