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Gender and Ritual Power in Africa: A Genealogy Beyond the “Women’s Issue”

Vathiswa Papu-Zamxaka

Directorate of Research Innovation and Engagement, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria 0001, South Africa; papuvb@tut.ac.za

Abstract

The claim that gender diversity is a leadership issue rather than a women’s issue circulates widely in transformation policy and university planning, yet it is rarely given historical or epistemic grounding, and almost never an African one. This article asks how ceremonial and ritual authority was gendered in selected African cultural institutions, through what mechanisms colonial rule reconfigured that gendering, and what follows for contemporary leadership theory and for African higher education and public governance. The study is conceptual and qualitative. It applies genealogical documentary analysis to a purposively assembled corpus of forty scholarly and policy texts published between 1976 and 2026, analysed in three phases of descent, emergence and residue. The framework combines the coloniality of gender, Foucauldian genealogy, Weberian authority and relational leadership read alongside Ubuntu, and it operationalises two constructs defined at the outset: authority as an installed position and authority as a relational function. Six findings are reported. Authority was installed rather than possessed, distributed across complementary gendered offices, and carried by statuses detachable from anatomy; ritual office formed a distinct register; colonial indirect rule masculinised public office and bureaucratised what had been relational; and the women’s-issue framing is the residue of that sequence. Seven recommendations follow, centred on measuring the distribution of authority rather than headcounts alone.

Keywords: gender diversity; leadership; ritual authority; installed position; relational function; decoloniality; genealogy; African epistemologies; higher education governance

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

One sentence recurs across transformation policies, diversity charters and university strategic plans: gender diversity is not a women’s issue, it is a leadership issue. The sentence does useful work, telling institutions that the scarcity of women in senior positions will not be remedied by asking those women to network harder, and that responsibility lies with those who govern. It nonetheless reaches African institutions largely intact from Anglo-American human resource writing, and it circulates without any account of why it should be true.

South Africa illustrates the difficulty. Education White Paper 3 ([Republic of South Africa \(RSA\) 1997](#)) and the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 ([Republic of South Africa \(RSA\) 1998](#)) committed the higher education sector to redress and to equitable representation, and three decades of such instruments have produced measurable movement. Women held 23.7 percent of senior leadership positions across South African public universities



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in 2014 and 39.6 percent in 2024. The composition of that movement is instructive. Representation among deputy vice-chancellors for academic affairs rose from 28.6 percent to 62.5 percent, representation among vice-chancellors moved only from 17.4 percent to 26.9 percent, and representation in the deputy vice-chancellor portfolio for institutional culture, the portfolio that carries transformation itself, fell from 36.4 percent to 18.2 percent. Once position and institution are controlled for, women remained 36 percent less likely than men to hold a leadership position (Moodly and Fouten 2026). At the global rate of change, parity in management positions is estimated to require a further 176 years (United Nations 2024).

Such figures are usually read as evidence that policy has been implemented too slowly. They can also be read as evidence that the object of policy has been misidentified. Women entered the institution in growing numbers while the distribution of authority within it barely moved, and the portfolio charged with changing institutional culture lost women fastest. The framing that produced this result treats leadership as a room into which women must be admitted. That framing has a history, and the history is not African.

1.2. *Statement of the Problem*

Describing gender diversity as a women's issue does identifiable damage. It converts a structural matter into a personal one, a question about particular women and their careers rather than about how institutions are built; it marks the issue as a women's concern, which in most organisations is a way of marking it as marginal to the real work; and it returns the cost of exclusion to those who already bear it. Eagly and Carli (2007) named the arrangement a labyrinth, since the barriers are dispersed and built into the walls, and Acker (1990) had shown two decades earlier that organisations are gendered in their picture of the ideal worker and in their sense of what authority looks like when it enters a room.

The corrective slogan is therefore welcome, and it is also insufficient. It asserts that leadership owns the problem without explaining why leadership should have come to look male in the first place, and where that prior question goes unasked the reform inherits the premise it should be interrogating. What such reform produces is entry without redistribution, and the figures above are its measure.

The problem addressed here is accordingly epistemic. There is no sustained genealogical account, grounded in African ritual and cultural institutions, of how public authority came to be equated with maleness, and consequently no African warrant for the framing African institutions have adopted from elsewhere. That archive remains largely absent from leadership and governance scholarship, where it appears, if at all, as ethnographic background rather than as theory. This is the gap the study addresses.

1.3. *Clarification of Key Concepts*

Installed position. An office whose authority derives from a public act of installation performed by a recognised collective, held on stated conditions, and analytically separable from the person who occupies it. Authority so constituted is conferred, and what is conferred can be withheld or withdrawn. The construct is opposed to authority understood as a personal attribute or as the property of a particular kind of body.

Relational function. Authority performed within, and answerable to, a web of standing relations, which in the institutions examined here include lineage, council, market, congregation and the ancestral dead. Legitimacy on this understanding is sustained by the continuing recognition of the collective that conferred the office, rather than secured once at appointment. The construct is opposed to authority understood as a possession the holder disposes of at will.

Ceremonial and ritual authority. The capacity to bind others that is generated, displayed and transmitted through ritual performance and ceremonial office, whether or not the holder also occupies a formal political position.

Gender diversity. The distribution of women, men and gender-diverse people across the positions of an institution. The article distinguishes throughout between the demographic sense of that distribution, which counts bodies in posts, and its constitutional sense, which concerns how decision rights are allocated among those posts.

1.4. Research Questions and Objectives

RQ1. How was ceremonial and ritual authority constituted and gendered in selected African cultural institutions, and on what logic did that constitution rest?

RQ2. Through what mechanisms did colonial administration and mission Christianity reconfigure that gendering, and with what epistemic effect on the category of leadership?

RQ3. What follows, for contemporary leadership theory and for African higher education and public governance, from reading the claim that gender diversity is a leadership issue genealogically?

Four objectives give effect to these questions: to trace, across a documented corpus, the logic on which ceremonial and ritual authority was constituted in selected African institutions; to identify the administrative and religious mechanisms through which that logic was narrowed under colonial rule; to establish the descent of the contemporary women's-issue framing from that narrowing; and to derive from the recovered logic a set of implementable obligations for African councils, executives and curricula.

1.5. Significance and Contribution

The study supplies an African genealogical grounding for a claim that transformation discourse asserts without evidence, demonstrates genealogical documentary analysis as a disciplined procedure for conceptual work in this field, and converts the argument into governance obligations capable of being written into a charter and audited. It also extends the genealogical method beyond the European materials on which it was formed, towards the making and unmaking of authority in African institutional life.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender, Diversity and Leadership in Organisational Scholarship

Organisational scholarship has established that the obstacles facing women are structural rather than dispositional. Acker's (1990) gendered organisation locates gender in the ordinary machinery of institutional life, and Eagly and Carli (2007) replaced the glass ceiling with the labyrinth, since the impediment is dispersed throughout the route rather than concentrated at the top. Uhl-Bien (2006) reframed leadership as a relational process constituted in social interaction, which opens the question of how the relations constituting it are themselves ordered. Hardacre and Subašić (2018) tested the framing question experimentally: presenting workplace equality as a women's issue reduced men's mobilisation, since the framing gave them no position from which to act, while a solidarity framing mobilised both. The lever they identify is leadership. Nkomo (2011) introduced a caution that bears directly on this study, since organisational studies have tended either to ignore African leadership or to romanticise it, and the literature on 'African' management often reproduces the colonial othering it means to resist. Any recovery of indigenous logics of authority must proceed without idealisation.

2.2. African Gender Scholarship and the Coloniality of Gender

A body of African scholarship has established that the equation of public authority with maleness is a historical outcome rather than a starting condition. Four strands carry that finding, and the evidence in each is presented in Section 5: work on political constitution, documenting dual-sex orders in which authority was held on a male side under the obi and a female side under the omu (Okonjo 1976; Sudarkasa 1986); work on lineage, documenting statuses such as the male daughter and the female husband that carried authority without regard to anatomy (Amadiume 1987, 1997; Nzegwu 2006); work on high office, reconstructing women who held warrant chieftaincy, kingship and regency in West Africa and in the southeastern African record (Achebe 2011; Steady 2011; Tisani 2023; Magoqwana and Maseko 2023); and work on ritual and spiritual office, establishing women as principals rather than auxiliaries and showing ritual still operating as a live arena in which gendered authority is contested (Boddy 1989; Olajubu 2003; Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010; Kangwa 2016; Khosa-Nkatini 2023).

Decolonial scholarship supplies the analytic vocabulary for reading these materials. Quijano (2000) described a colonial matrix of power that outlived formal empire, and Lugones (2007, 2010) carried the analysis into gender, arguing that the ranked binary of man and woman was an instrument of conquest rather than a shared inheritance. Oyèwùmí (1997) made a cognate case from inside African thought, arguing that seniority rather than sex organised Yoruba social life. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) situated the gendering of authority within a coloniality that survived the lowering of colonial flags, Tamale (2020) reclaimed indigenous resources while refusing the nationalist habit of presenting invented tradition as authentic, and Matebeni et al. (2018) documented a contemporary plurality that cuts against the binary administration attempted to fix.

This literature is contested, and the contestation matters here. Bakare-Yusuf (2004) objected that Oyewumi's opposition between Yoruba culture and the West is rigid and essentialising, disregards traffic between them, and overloads seniority, since a society may organise power through seniority and still gender it. Mama (2003) separately warned against inventing a precolonial community from which gender was absent. The present article does not require Oyewumi's strongest claim. It requires her weaker and better-supported one, which survives the objections: if authority was not fastened to maleness at the outset, then the question of how to bring women into leadership carries a prior masculinisation that must be explained rather than assumed.

2.3. Gender and Leadership in African Higher Education

Mama (2003) identified the pattern that has become familiar, in which African universities restore and reform without transforming, so that the numbers improve while the culture and the appearance of academic authority remain male. Toni and Moodly (2019) found institutional culture itself operating as the impediment, and Mdleleni et al. (2021) traced the tenacity of gender inequality despite three decades of policy. Moodly and Fouten (2026) supplied the quantitative picture summarised in Section 1.1. Lynch et al. (2024) concluded from a multi-country programme with African science granting councils that movement requires targeted measures combined with work on the structures, norms and power relations that reproduce exclusion, and Rossouw (2025) offered a counter-image at the classroom scale.

2.4. The Gap in Knowledge

Two studies are therefore available and are not in conversation. Organisational scholarship has established that the impediments are structural and that leadership owns them, while remaining inside a frame in which the gendered organisation appears as a universal

default requiring repair rather than as one historical formation with a traceable colonial descent. African gender scholarship has established the descent, while addressing itself chiefly to anthropology, history and philosophy, and has not been taken up as a resource for leadership theory or governance design. What is missing is an account holding the two together: a genealogy of gendered ceremonial and ritual authority in African institutions carried forward, without nostalgia, into the leadership question African institutions actually face.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Paradigm

This is a qualitative, conceptual study conducted within an interpretive and critical paradigm, and specifically within a decolonial variant of it that treats existing categories as historical artefacts to be accounted for rather than as neutral instruments of description. The design is genealogical documentary analysis, meaning a systematic, criterion-based reading of a defined corpus of texts for the descent of a present-day category.

The design follows from the questions. RQ1 and RQ2 are historical and epistemic: they ask how a category was assembled, out of what materials and through which mechanisms, over a period beginning well before living memory. Such questions cannot be answered by eliciting the perceptions of present-day participants, since present-day perception is itself among the outcomes the study seeks to explain. RQ3 is a question about entailment, answered by argument tested against evidence. No primary data were generated and no human participants were involved. The study's materials are documents, and they are specified below with the care a study of human participants would give its sample.

3.2. Corpus Construction and Characteristics

The unit of analysis is the documented institution of authority as reconstructed in scholarly and policy texts. The corpus comprises forty sources published between 1976 and 2026, assembled by purposive sampling and extended by reference-list snowballing until no further category of institution or mechanism was added by additional reading (Table 1).

Table 1. Composition and characteristics of the documentary corpus (N = 40).

Category of Source	n	Span	Illustrative Sources
African gender, ritual and religious scholarship	14	1976 to 2023	Okonjo (1976) ; Sudarkasa (1986) ; Amadiume (1987, 1997) ; Boddy (1989) ; Olajubu (2003) ; Nzegwu (2006) ; Achebe (2011) ; Steady (2011) ; Khosa-Nkatini (2023) ; Tisani (2023)
Decolonial and Afro-feminist theory	8	1997 to 2020	Oyèwùmí (1997) ; Quijano (2000) ; Bakare-Yusuf (2004) ; Lugones (2007, 2010) ; Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) ; Matebeni et al. (2018) ; Tamale (2020)
Leadership, organisation and diversity research	5	1990 to 2018	Acker (1990) ; Uhl-Bien (2006) ; Eagly and Carli (2007) ; Nkomo (2011) ; Hardacre and Subašić (2018)
African higher education and research governance	6	2003 to 2026	Mama (2003) ; Toni and Moodly (2019) ; Mdleleni et al. (2021) ; Lynch et al. (2024) ; Rossouw (2025) ; Moodly and Fouten (2026)
Theory of authority, colonial administration and method	4	1977 to 2011	Foucault (1977) ; Weber (1978) ; Mamdani (1996) ; Metz (2011)
Policy, statutory and multilateral instruments	3	1997 to 2024	Republic of South Africa (RSA) (1997, 1998) ; United Nations (2024)
Total	40	1976 to 2026	

Source: compiled by the author.

Three characteristics of the corpus bear on the findings and are declared as a study of human participants would declare the demography of its sample. First, it is temporally stratified by design: twenty of the forty sources, which is half, were published from 2010 onward, and nine from 2020 onward. The older sources are retained deliberately, because Okonjo (1976), Sudarkasa (1986) and Amadiume (1987) constitute the primary ethnographic record whose descent this study traces, rather than dated secondary commentary, and a genealogy cannot dispense with the documents whose making it examines. Second, the corpus is regionally weighted towards West Africa, and within it towards Igbo and Yoruba materials, because that is where the institutional record of dual-sex governance is densest. The weighting was mitigated by deliberate inclusion of southern African material (Metz 2011; Khosa-Nkatini 2023; Magoqwana and Maseko 2023; Tisani 2023) and northeast African material (Boddy 1989), and the residual limit is recorded in Section 3.5. Third, the corpus is disciplinarily mixed, on the reasoning that a category assembled across administration, religion and scholarship cannot be traced within any one discipline.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included where they met at least one of four criteria: (a) they reconstruct, from ethnographic, historical or philosophical evidence, the constitution of ceremonial, ritual or political authority in an African institution, with attention to its gendering; (b) they theorise the colonality of gender or the colonial administration of authority; (c) they report empirical or policy evidence on gender and leadership in African higher education or public governance, published from 2000 onward; or (d) they are foundational theoretical statements on genealogy, authority, relational leadership or Ubuntu, admitted as analytic instruments rather than as evidence.

Sources were excluded where they addressed gender in Africa without reference to authority or office; where they consisted of popular commentary, journalism or institutional marketing; where they addressed non-African contexts and were not foundational under criterion (d); or where the full text could not be obtained and the argument could not be verified against the original. Works in languages other than English were outside the author's competence and are excluded, which is recorded as a limitation in Section 3.5.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Sources were identified through structured searching of Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, African Journals Online, SABINET and Google Scholar, using combinations of the terms gender, ritual authority, ceremonial authority, dual-sex, queen mother, female husband, colonality of gender, indirect rule, higher education leadership and governance, supplemented by snowballing and by targeted retrieval of the standing texts in African gender scholarship. Each source was read in full and recorded on a standard extraction sheet capturing the institution described, its region and period, the mode by which authority was conferred, the relations to which it answered, and the mechanism of any subsequent change. The extraction sheets constitute the audit trail.

Analysis proceeded in three phases, following the genealogical distinction between descent and emergence (Foucault 1977), with a third added for the study's forward-facing question. In Phase 1 (descent), each source was coded for the constitution of authority: how office was conferred, on what conditions it was held, to whom it answered, and whether it was separable from the holder. Codes were developed inductively from the first six sources and applied to the corpus, with recoding of the initial six once the code set had stabilised. This phase yielded F1 to F4. In Phase 2 (emergence), sources describing the colonial encounter were coded for mechanism: which offices administration recognised, which it recorded, which it left unrecorded, and how the recognised offices were subsequently

constituted. This phase yielded F5, and it is where Weber's (1978) account of rational-legal authority was applied as an analytic instrument rather than as evidence. In Phase 3 (residue), contemporary leadership, policy and higher education sources were coded for premises about authority, and specifically for whether the framing under examination presupposes the masculinisation traced in Phase 2. This phase yielded F6. Coding was manual and recorded against each extraction sheet. Where sources conflict, as they do on Oyèwùmí's (1997) claims, the conflict is reported rather than resolved by preference, and the argument rests only on the claims that survive the objection.

3.5. Trustworthiness, Reflexivity and Limitations

Credibility was pursued through the disciplinary and regional spread of the corpus, so that each finding rests on evidence from more than one institution and more than one field. Dependability rests on the criteria in Section 3.3 and on the extraction sheets, which permit the reading to be reconstructed. Confirmability rests on the requirement that every claim in Section 5 be traceable to a cited source, and transferability is claimed at the level of the logic recovered rather than of the institutions themselves.

Reflexivity is owed to the reader. The author writes as an African woman academic holding senior leadership office in a South African university, which supplies both an interpretive advantage in reading institutional practice from the inside and a standing interest in the conclusion. The finding that responsibility for gender diversity rests with those who lead is, in the author's case, a finding about her own office, and it is stated so that the reader may weigh it.

Four limitations follow. The corpus is English-language and therefore under-represents Francophone and Lusophone African scholarship. The regional weighting described in Section 3.2 is mitigated rather than removed, so the findings report a logic evidenced across several institutions rather than a continental generalisation. The study rests on the documentary record and includes no primary oral testimony, which is a real constraint where the colonial archive is itself an interested witness, as Tisani (2023) demonstrates. Genealogical analysis is interpretive, and a different reader working the same corpus could weight the mechanisms differently; the audit trail is offered so that such a disagreement could be conducted on the evidence.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study involved no human participants, no animals and no personal information, and required no ethics clearance on that basis. All sources analysed are published and publicly available, and all are cited. The historical figures discussed, among them Ahebi Ugbabe, Nosuthu and Nonesi, are treated through the published scholarly record and are named as that record names them.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1. Genealogy as Analytic

Genealogy asks where a category came from, what it displaced, and who gained by its appearing permanent (Foucault 1977). Turned on leadership and gender, it declines to assume that public authority has always been male, and treats that assumption as a historical outcome with a route that can be traced. Foucault's distinction between descent and emergence organises the analysis: descent attends to the accumulated inheritance carried in a present arrangement, emergence to the moment of forcible reordering at which it took its current shape.

The relation between this sense of genealogy and the ordinary sense of family trees requires a precise statement, since the two are neither identical nor unconnected. Genealogy

as analytic takes a category rather than a lineage of persons as its object, and it is not the charting of pedigree. It nonetheless retains the preoccupations of the kinship sense, which are continuity and transmission, and it asks of a category what a family tree asks of a family: through what line did this reach the present, and what was lost along the way. In the institutions examined here the two senses converge, because authority was in fact transmitted through lineage and conferred by ceremonial installation, so the descent of the category and the descent of the office run along the same line. The distinctive addition of the analytic sense is its attention to rupture, since a family tree records transmission and is silent about the conquests, conversions and migrations through which transmission was interrupted.

4.2. *The Coloniality of Gender*

Quijano's (2000) colonial matrix of power and Lugones's (2007, 2010) extension of it into gender supply the account of mechanism. If the ranked binary of man and woman travelled with conquest rather than preceding it, then the furniture of contemporary diversity discourse, including the category of woman as a group subordinated in advance, is itself colonial cargo rather than plain description. Oyèwùmí (1997) supplies the cognate case from inside African thought, subject to the qualification entered in Section 2.2. The framework takes from this literature one working proposition: the association of public authority with maleness in African institutions is an artefact of a datable administrative and religious process, and is therefore available for analysis and for undoing.

4.3. *Rational-Legal Authority and the Bureaucratisation of Office*

Weber's (1978) typology is used as an analytic instrument for naming what colonial administration did to African office. Weber distinguishes traditional and charismatic authority from rational-legal authority, in which command is legitimated by impersonal rules, discharged through a hierarchy of offices, and rendered accountable upward through that hierarchy. Its value here is that it identifies precisely what changes when an installed and relational office is absorbed into a colonial administration: the office survives in name while its principle of legitimation is inverted, so that it answers upward to the district officer rather than outward to the collective that conferred it. Mamdani (1996) supplies the historical account of that absorption, in which indirect rule fused administrative, judicial and executive power in a chiefly office answerable to the colonial state and released from the customary checks that had constrained it. The logic of authority becomes bureaucratic at this point, and the bureaucratic form is what contemporary African universities and boards have inherited.

4.4. *Relational Leadership and Ubuntu*

Uhl-Bien's (2006) relational leadership theory treats leadership as a social process constituted in relations rather than as the property of individuals, and it therefore provides the register into which the recovered African logic can be translated without distortion. Metz's (2011) reconstruction of Ubuntu supplies the normative correlate, in which personhood is realised through relations of recognition and authority is held on trust from the collective. Nkomo's (2011) caution disciplines the translation. No claim is made that African institutions were relational while Western ones were not, which would reproduce the othering it means to refuse. The claim is that a documented African institutional logic and a strand of contemporary leadership theory pick out the same object, and that the convergence gives African institutions a warrant of their own for a reform they currently import. Across the analysis, the two constructs defined in Section 1.3 do the operational work: authority as an installed position is the category applied in Phase 1 to the constitution

of office, and authority as a relational function is the category applied to its legitimization, while Finding F5 reports what colonial administration did to each.

5. Findings and Discussion

Six findings are reported. Table 2 maps them to the research questions and objectives and identifies the principal evidence on which each rests.

Table 2. Findings mapped to research questions and objectives.

No.	Finding	Answers	Principal Evidence
F1	Authority was constituted as an installed position: conferred by a public act of installation, held on conditions, and separable from the person who occupied it.	RQ1/Obj. 1	Okonjo (1976) ; Achebe (2011) ; Steady (2011) ; Tisani (2023)
F2	Authority was distributed across complementary gendered offices rather than concentrated in one, so that no single office held the whole.	RQ1/Obj. 1	Okonjo (1976) ; Sudarkasa (1986) ; Amadiume (1987) ; Nzegwu (2006)
F3	The social statuses carrying authority were detachable from anatomy and could be assumed as lineage required and standing permitted.	RQ1/Obj. 1	Amadiume (1987, 1997) ; Nzegwu (2006) ; Achebe (2011) ; Oyèwùmí (1997)
F4	Ritual and spiritual office formed a distinct register of authority, embodied, performed and transmitted through ceremony rather than held by formal appointment.	RQ1/Obj. 1	Boddy (1989) ; Olajubu (2003) ; Khosa-Nkatini (2023) ; Kangwa (2016) ; Bompani and Frahm-Arp (2010)
F5	Colonial indirect rule and mission domesticity masculinised public office and reclassified women's prior authority as custom, and converted installed, relational office into bureaucratic, rational-legal office answerable upward to the administration rather than outward to the collective.	RQ2/Obj. 2	Mamdani (1996) ; Weber (1978) ; Okonjo (1976) ; Amadiume (1987) ; Oyèwùmí (1997) ; Lugones (2007) ; Tisani (2023)
F6	The women's-issue framing is the residue of that sequence: it presupposes the masculinised institution it purports to reform and is reproduced where rising representation coexists with an unchanged distribution of authority.	RQ3/Obj. 3 and 4	Acker (1990) ; Hardacre and Subašić (2018) ; Mama (2003) ; Lynch et al. (2024) ; Moody and Fouten (2026)

Source: compiled by the author.

One qualification governs what follows. Nothing here depends on a golden age. Many of the societies discussed were steeply hierarchical, and gender was among the ranks. The finding concerns the constitution of authority rather than its distribution among persons, and it is narrower and more durable than a claim about equality.

5.1. F1: Authority Was an Installed Position

Across the institutions in the corpus, authority was conferred by a public act performed by a recognised collective and was separable from the person on whom it was conferred. The omu of the midwestern Igbo communities held office with her own council and her own jurisdiction over women, markets and much of communal life, and held it by installation rather than by consanguinity with the obi ([Okonjo 1976](#)). Ahebi Ugbabe, who held the offices of warrant chief and king, requires care and cuts in two directions, since she rose through the machinery of indirect rule and her later excesses drew her community's censure ([Achebe 2011](#)). The case nonetheless establishes the finding, because a woman could hold those offices and be named in the masculine register of kingship, which is possible only where the office is not sealed to a kind of body. [Tisani's \(2023\)](#) reconstruction of Nosuthu

and Nonesi as regents at the height of British invasion establishes the same separation in the southeastern African record, and [Steady \(2011\)](#) traces its continuity into West African state institutions. The genealogical significance lies in the separation of office from person: where authority sits in the installed position, who may fill it is settled by the conditions of installation rather than by anatomy and is therefore a question an institution decides.

5.2. F2: Authority Was Distributed Across Complementary Offices

The dual-sex order [Okonjo \(1976\)](#) documented divided authority between a male side under the obi and a female side under the omu. The omu was neither consort nor figurehead. She ruled, each side held its own institutions, and neither held the whole. The premise beneath the arrangement is what matters: authority was not lodged in one gendered office and then extended to others by concession, so a woman's place in governance required no special pleading, since it was part of how rule was constituted. [Sudarkasa \(1986\)](#) generalises the pattern across a range of indigenous African societies, and [Nzegwu \(2006\)](#) recovers its philosophical grounding in the matricentric structure of Igbo thought. Distribution of this kind is not equality, and the distinction is worth holding. A dual-sex system allocates authority across two jurisdictions and may rank them. What it does not do is treat one jurisdiction as the whole of public life and the other as an accommodation within it, which is what the contemporary institution does when it adds women to an unchanged structure.

5.3. F3: The Statuses Carrying Authority Were Detachable from Anatomy

Lineage could bend gender to its purposes. Among the Nnobi Igbo, a daughter could stand in the social place of a son in order to continue a lineage and inherit, and a woman of means could marry a wife and occupy the husband's role towards that household, its labour and its children ([Amadiume 1987](#)). The statuses carrying authority could be assumed as descent required and as standing allowed. [Amadiume \(1987\)](#) extends the argument to the religious and cultural structures in which those statuses were embedded, and [Nzegwu \(2006\)](#) shows motherhood operating as a structural office rather than an affective relation. This is where the corpus's internal contestation is most productive. [Bakare-Yusuf \(2004\)](#) is right that the flexibility of these statuses does not establish the absence of gender, and [Amadiume's \(1987\)](#) own material shows gender operating throughout as a principle of social organisation. The finding survives in the weaker form the argument needs: gender was one movable axis within a larger machinery of lineage power rather than the fixed gate to it.

5.4. F4: Ritual Office Formed a Distinct Register of Authority

Women across African religious traditions held office as ritual specialists, diviners, priestesses and mediators between the living and the ancestral dead, exercising an authority that was embodied, performed and transmitted through ceremony. [Olajubu \(2003\)](#) establishes their standing in the Yoruba religious sphere as principals rather than auxiliaries; [Boddy \(1989\)](#) shows possession opening a register in which authority could be enacted and ordinary boundaries rearranged for a time; and [Khosa-Nkatini \(2023\)](#) shows Tsonga mourning carrying gendered roles and obligations across generations, seating authority in performance rather than in formal political post. Ritual remains a live arena in which gendered authority is produced and contested ([Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010](#); [Kangwa 2016](#)). The register matters to the genealogy for a specific reason. Ritual authority was legible to the community and largely illegible to the colonial administrator, whose instruments recorded chiefs and courts. An authority that is real, consequential and unrecorded is the easiest of all to reclassify as custom, which is the mechanism reported in F5.

5.5. F5: Colonial Rule Masculinised Office and Bureaucratised Its Logic

Ruling through chiefs, colonial administration as a rule recognised only male authority. Dual-sex orders were flattened into single-sex ones as officials transacted with the obi and looked past the omu, entered male office-holders in their records, and left the women's parallel institutions to wither (Okonjo 1976; Amadiume 1987). The mission station completed what the district office began, importing a Victorian domesticity that enclosed respectable womanhood indoors and rewrote public authority as men's work (Oyèwùmí 1997; Lugones 2007). Tisani (2023) documents the same process in the southeastern African record and shows the archive participating in it, since what the colonial record declined to write down it also declined to recognise as authority.

The damage went further than the headcount, and this is the aspect the existing literature has left underdeveloped. What changed was the logic of authority itself, and it changed twice. Office that had been shared across gendered positions was gathered up and made masculine, and women's prior power was struck from the record or reclassified as custom, which is the holding pen of a tradition imagined as timeless and set apart from the serious business of governing. That much is established. The second change is that the offices which survived did not survive as themselves. Indirect rule fused administrative, judicial and executive power in a chiefly office answerable upward to the colonial state and released from the customary constraints that had bound it (Mamdani 1996). In Weber's (1978) terms, an installed and relational office was absorbed into a rational-legal apparatus, in which accountability runs up the hierarchy rather than out to the collective. The office retains its name and loses its principle.

The second change explains a puzzle the first cannot. If the only injury had been the exclusion of women from office, then admitting women to office would repair it, and the South African figures in Section 1.1 would look different. They look as they do because the offices women are being admitted to are bureaucratic offices in Mamdani's and Weber's sense: answerable upward, insulated from the collective, and constituted so that occupancy carries no obligation to redistribute. Adding women to such an office changes who exercises it and leaves untouched what it is.

5.6. F6: The Women's-Issue Framing Is the Residue of That Sequence

When an institution asks today how to bring women into leadership, it has already conceded that leadership is a male room into which women must be ushered. The question is intelligible only because a masculinisation occurred first and was then forgotten, and the framing is the long echo of that forgetting. This explains why the framing survives the evidence against it: Acker's (1990) gendered organisation, Eagly and Carli's (2007) labyrinth and the mobilisation effects reported by Hardacre and Subašić (2018) all establish that it is counterproductive, and it persists nonetheless, because it rests on a premise about authority that the organisational literature has diagnosed without excavating.

The evidence of residue is visible in the outcomes. Mama (2003) identified African universities restoring and reforming without transforming, and Moodly and Fouten (2026) supply the measurement two decades later, reported in Section 1.1. The portfolio carrying transformation lost women while the sector gained them, and controlling for position and institution, women remained 36 percent less likely than men to hold a leadership position. This is the signature the genealogy predicts. Where authority is bureaucratic and the reform is demographic, bodies move and decision rights do not, and the portfolios that would redistribute decision rights are the ones that get downgraded. Lynch et al. (2024) reach the practical version of the same conclusion. Counting women in is necessary and nowhere near sufficient.

5.7. Discussion: Implications for Leadership and Governance

Read as a model rather than a museum piece, the archive recovered in F1 to F4 yields a coherent proposition: authority is an installed and distributed function, legitimated relationally and answerable to the collective in whose name it is exercised. This sits close to leadership theory that treats leadership as relational and constituted in social process (Uhl-Bien 2006), and it has a normative correlate in Ubuntu (Metz 2011). Inside this frame the slogan ceases to be a slogan and becomes a recovery. If authority is an installed and shared function rather than a male possession, then the diversity of those who hold it becomes a test of whether the leadership is legitimate at all, rather than an addition to it. Responsibility moves accordingly, landing on those who design and steward institutions, and not on women told to adapt to arrangements they never drew. The same move dissolves the zero-sum reflex that reads the inclusion of women as a loss to men, since where authority is genuinely distributed, more gendered positions make the whole more complete rather than slicing a fixed quantity more thinly.

For African higher education the consequence is that representation alone does not redistribute power, because the institution continues to encode a masculine norm beneath the new figures (Mama 2003; Toni and Moodly 2019; Mdleleni et al. 2021), and Rossouw's (2025) classroom shows the counter-image at a small scale. The same logic reaches the boards through which public and parastatal bodies are run. Treated as a women's issue, board diversity attracts a token appointment and is dropped the moment it becomes awkward. Treated as a question of leadership, it becomes a matter of legitimacy and of fiduciary duty, owned by those who appoint and those who chair. A caution closes the discussion. To recover an older logic of distributed authority is not to propose its wholesale return, nor to pretend it was free of hierarchies of its own; Tamale (2020) is exact on the danger of passing invented tradition off as authentic, and Matebeni et al. (2018) document a plurality no recovered institution would accommodate unmodified. What the recovery establishes is narrower and sufficient: the marriage of leadership and maleness is neither natural nor particularly African, and it is a settlement that history made and that history can unmake.

6. Conclusions

This article tested the claim that gender diversity is a leadership issue against the record of gendered ceremonial and ritual authority in African cultural institutions, pursuing four objectives.

The first was to trace the logic on which that authority was constituted, and F1 to F4 answer it. Authority was an installed position, conferred by a recognised collective and separable from the holder (Okonjo 1976; Achebe 2011; Tisani 2023); it was distributed across complementary gendered offices, so that neither held the whole (Okonjo 1976; Sudarkasa 1986); the statuses carrying it were detachable from anatomy (Amadiume 1987; Nzegwu 2006); and ritual office formed a distinct register, embodied and transmitted through ceremony (Boddy 1989; Olajubu 2003; Khosa-Nkatini 2023). Gender mattered throughout, frequently as a hierarchy, and it was neither the licence for power nor the bar to it.

The second was to identify the mechanisms through which that logic was narrowed, and F5 answers it with two rather than one. Administration recognised male office and left women's parallel institutions unrecorded, and mission domesticity rewrote public authority as men's work, so that women's prior power was reclassified as custom (Okonjo 1976; Amadiume 1987; Oyěwùmí 1997; Tisani 2023). Beyond that, indirect rule converted the surviving offices into bureaucratic offices in the rational-legal sense, answerable upward and released from the collective that had conferred them (Mamdani 1996; Weber 1978). This second mechanism is the study's principal analytic contribution, because it explains

why demographic reform of such offices changes their occupants without changing their character. The third objective, establishing the descent of the women's-issue framing from that narrowing, is answered by F6: the framing presupposes the masculinised institution it purports to reform, which is why it survives a literature that has repeatedly shown it counterproductive (Acker 1990; Hardacre and Subašić 2018), and its signature is visible where representation rose by nearly sixteen percentage points in a decade while the apex barely moved and the transformation portfolio itself lost women (Moodly and Fouten 2026). The fourth objective is answered in Section 7.

The contribution is to hold ritual studies, African gender scholarship and leadership theory within one genealogical argument, and to press genealogy past the European materials on which it was formed towards the making and unmaking of authority in African institutional life. Within the limitations recorded in Section 3.5, three lines of further work follow: primary oral testimony to test the documentary reconstruction against the vernacular record, as Tisani (2023) and Magoqwana and Maseko (2023) demonstrate is both possible and necessary; Francophone and Lusophone materials to test the regional reach of the recovered logic; and an empirical study measuring the distribution of decision rights, rather than of bodies, across African universities, which would test the central practical claim that the two have been moving independently of one another. The thread joining all of this is a single change in question, from how women might be added to leadership, to how leadership itself might be understood, in African terms, as something held in common and answerable to those in whose name it is exercised.

7. Recommendations

The argument carries direct obligations for those who lead, govern and educate. They are deliberately firm, since half-measures are what the women's-issue framing has always produced.

1. Place ownership at the top and keep it there. Councils and executive leadership should treat gender diversity as a standing leadership responsibility, written into institutional strategy and into the performance agreement of every senior leader, rather than delegated to a transformation office or a women's forum.
2. Redesign the structure rather than merely populating it. Leaders should audit how authority is actually distributed, meaning who chairs, who decides and who is heard, and rebuild those arrangements so that authority is genuinely shared. Representation without redistribution is cosmetic, and the figures in Section 5.6 are what it looks like after a decade.
3. Make board and executive diversity a condition of legitimacy. Councils should set and enforce composition standards and regard a body that fails them as deficient in legitimacy and in its fiduciary discharge rather than merely behind on a target. Diversity belongs in the governance charter, carrying the same weight as financial probity.
4. Enlist men in leadership as a matter of duty rather than goodwill. Because leaders set the frame (Hardacre and Subašić 2018), senior men should be required to champion gender diversity as a shared institutional cause in their public framing and their appointment decisions. Silence from those at the top should be read as a failure of leadership rather than as neutrality.
5. Reconstruct leadership development. Programmes should stop preparing women to survive masculine structures and start cultivating, in all leaders, the capacity to share and distribute authority. African models of installed, accountable and distributed office belong at the centre of that curriculum rather than at its margin as cultural decoration.

6. Decolonise the curriculum on authority itself. Universities should embed the African archive of gendered ritual and political authority within their teaching of leadership, governance, management and the social sciences, so that students encounter distributed authority as theory rather than as folklore.
7. Measure the right thing and report it in public. Institutions should track the distribution of authority itself, meaning committee chairs, decision rights, budget control and promotion outcomes, disaggregated by gender, and publish what they find. The measure that would have caught the decline reported by Moodly and Fouten (2026) is a count of the decisions women are positioned to make, rather than a count of women in leadership.

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