

# Boundaries of beauty: tattooed secrets of women's history in Magude District, Southern Mozambique.

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## **Boundaries of Beauty: Tattooed Secrets of Women's History in Magude District, Southern Mozambique**

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### Abstract

This article explores women's experiences of Portuguese colonialism in southern Mozambique through their changing practices of body-marking since around 1800. Arguing that women have historically used tattoos (tinhlanga) both to reflect on agrarian social change and to assert the importance of female affiliations in a male-dominated world, it charts the increasing incorporation of European ideas and objects into what women continued to call a "traditional" practice, and the heightened significance of tattooing for those women most adversely affected by colonial rule. The persistence of tinhlanga challenged Portuguese colonial and missionary efforts to implant "civilization" through new standards of feminine beauty and bodily

adornment. The ensuing struggle pitted colonizers and African "middles" against girls and women who were fully aware of the significance of their bodies in the colonial contest, and whose memories (and tattoo scars) reveal the gendered meanings of racial difference and the limits of European power in colonial Mozambique.

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## BOUNDARIES OF BEAUTY

### *Tattooed Secrets of Women's History in Magde District, Southern Mozambique*

Heidi Gengenbach

The Lenge and the Tsopi women have the story of their lives written on their own flesh. . . .

E. Dora Earthy, *Valenge Women*<sup>1</sup>

*This article explores women's experiences of Portuguese colonialism in southern Mozambique through their changing practices of body-marking since around 1800. Arguing that women have historically used tattoos (tinhlanga) both to reflect on agrarian social change and to assert the importance of female affiliations in a male-dominated world, it charts the increasing incorporation of European ideas and objects into what women continued to call a "traditional" practice, and the heightened significance of tattooing for those women most adversely affected by colonial rule. The persistence of tinhlanga challenged Portuguese colonial and missionary efforts to implant "civilization" through new standards of feminine beauty and bodily adornment. The ensuing struggle pitted colonizers and African "middles" against girls and women who were fully aware of the significance of their bodies in the colonial contest, and whose memories (and tattoo scars) reveal the gendered meanings of racial difference and the limits of European power in colonial Mozambique.*

### Introduction

Some of the most innovative work in African history in recent years scrutinizes the body—the gendered, dark-skinned body—as text, social object, and field for the inscription and operation of colonial power. Focusing on the range of practices through which African bodies were disciplined and commodified by European regimes, this literature has paid particular attention to the role of Christianity, clothing, and biomedicine in the transformation of African lifeways between the late nineteenth century and today.<sup>2</sup> Much of this research has been inspired by philosopher Michel Foucault's arguments about "bio-power": "The body is . . . directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."<sup>3</sup> Yet discussions of colonized bodies



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The clan of one-breasted women, probabilistic logic, as follows from the set of experimental observations, generates and provides a constant base personality type.  
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