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Anomalous Children
Orphans and Interlineage Marriages in Malawi

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Social Anthropology at Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand

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Abstract

Although lineage studies have largely been forgotten by contemporary anthropology, tracing descent through either the maternal or paternal line remains a meaningful feature of everyday relatedness for people in Malawi. Following Harré’s discursive approach, this thesis reconceptualises matriliney and patriliney as clusters of relatedness practices avoiding a tendency to reify lineages as social structures, ascribing them erroneously with agency. This ethnographic study explores what it is to be an orphan in Malawi today and why orphans of interlineage marriages, that is, marriages between patrilineal women and matrilineal men, seem to be rendered the most vulnerable to mistreatment.

The term orphanhood suggests a fixed state, defined by the death(s) of parent(s), from which children cannot escape until they reach adulthood. However, I found that in Malawi, being an orphan is more of a process, as people can be positioned as no longer an orphan when their living conditions improve. Being an orphan in Malawi is to be in need both materially and emotionally, having lost family support through death, illness or abandonment. It is a position often characterised by feelings of loneliness and isolation due being excluded from family sharing practices.

Orphans of interlineage marriages seem to be the most vulnerable, due to falling between two contrasting discursive constructions of children’s belongingness. In matrilineal groups, children belong to their mother’s family. Conversely, in patrilineal communities, children are affiliated to their father’s family providing the bridewealth requirements have been fulfilled. Thus, children of interlineage marriages are anomalously positioned as belonging nowhere. Matters become more complex if the matrilineal family pay the patrilineal custom of bridewealth as they (mis)interpret it as providing indisputable rights to the children. This (mis)interpretation originates from the colonial period when bridewealth became an official and enforceable means of determining to whom children belonged, particularly in cases of interlineage marriages. Thus, matrilineal families claim
the children based on a (mis)perceived transaction-based entitlement, only to then mistreat them. They claim the children belong to them not as kin, characterised by bi-directional belonging (belonging to each other) but in terms of unidirectional (transactional) belonging, as in property.
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who lived with us as an integral part of our family

Although they all died when I was a child, they gave me a strong start to life which equipped me with the resourcefulness to cope with life’s challenges.
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