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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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2015



# 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.

## Acknowledgements

This PhD journey has taken me much longer than I ever anticipated with so many unexpected events happening along the way that I barely know where to begin with giving thanks as so many people have supported me in various ways at different stages of my journey. There are too many people to list everyone but I hope they know how grateful I am for their support. To protect the identities of all of my participants, I have used pseudonyms for all the people (and places) connected with my fieldwork in Malawi, but I am sure the people concerned will be able to work out who they are.

First of all, my heartfelt gratitude goes to my participants for sharing their thoughts, viewpoints and their stories with me. I am particularly grateful to the orphans and widows for trusting me with their personal stories - I hope that by raising awareness about their difficult circumstances, others will be able to avoid such suffering in the future.

*Zikomo kwambiri* to the people of 'Mapira', particularly everyone connected with the Orphan Care CBO for welcoming this *mzungu* into their community. I thank them for their tolerance of my numerous questions, their patience as I tried to speak Chichewa and their friendship. I would particularly like to thank, 'Mr Magwira' and 'Mr Bwanali' for organising interviews, arranging trips and the myriad of other things they did to help me. Their enthusiasm, perseverance and ability to get things done were very impressive. I am also very grateful to my two translators and assistants 'Chisomo' and 'Ruth' for their patience with me, their insights and their enthusiasm for this project. I thank 'Mr and Mrs Namasani' for welcoming me into their family compound. I would also like to thank 'Chief Ndaba' for her support and advice over my two periods of fieldwork. Likewise, I thank 'Howard and Maxine', for their friendship, hospitality and support - I am hugely grateful to 'Howard' for the loan of his car which was invaluable.

Next, I would like to thank everyone involved in my supervision, starting with University of Canterbury (UC). I am grateful to Dr Patrick McAllister for his encouragement right at the very beginning and to Dr Martin Fuchs for his advice, guidance and enthusiasm in the early stages, before he returned to Germany. I thank Dr Ruth McManus for stepping in when both of my supervisors had left UC and to Dr Lucy Johnston for her help with my transfer to Massey University.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Dr Carolyn Morris for her friendship and her continuous support throughout my PhD journey, starting at University of Canterbury and continuing to Massey University. I would like to thank her for continuing to believe in my ability to complete this project even when I had severe doubts and for her support through my most difficult challenges including her supportive telephone calls to me in Malawi in the days following the robbery. Carolyn's gentle but persistent encouragement helped me find the courage to resume my studies after a two year break and she helped to organise my transfer to Massey University. I would particularly like to thank Carolyn for her rigorous critique to help me articulate my ideas more clearly. Additionally, I thank Carolyn for reviewing endless pieces of writing and for showing me how to write like an anthropologist.

I am also grateful to Dr Robyn Andrews for joining my supervisory team after my transfer to Massey. I would like to thank Robyn particularly for reviewing my chapters even when she was travelling overseas and for her encouragement. It was always a pleasure meeting Carolyn and Robyn for supervisory meetings over coffee. Their enthusiasm was refreshing and their feedback was always very constructive.

I would like to thank my friends and colleagues from UC and Massey for all the helpful chats and support. There are too many to list but particular thanks go to Dr Annette Wilkes, Deborah Rhode, Eva Maureau and Nina Harding. I would particularly like to thank Marie Bannister, my close friend from the UK, for helping me find a way through when things got really tough. Special thanks also to Regina Smedley for her help with Chichewa translation when I was back in

New Zealand and to Dr Trevor Hussey for introducing me to Rom Harré's discursive approach.

I am indebted to the organisations that provided funding to support this work and finance the fieldwork trips: the UC Doctoral Scholarship in 2007 and the NZAID Postgraduate Field Research Award in 2006.

I thank The Centre of Social Research of the University of Malawi for their clearance to undertake this research in 2007 (Ref: 1/12/3/12/1) and to University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee for their approval in 2007 (HEC Ref: 2006/125).



This work is dedicated to my parents,

Geraldine and Michael Donovan,

and my Great-Aunt,

Bridget Kavanagh,

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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