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# Family matters: same-sex relations and kinship practices in Kenya

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Guided by social justice and sexual health concerns, scholars of same-sex sexualities in Africa have mainly examined related conflicts and inequities, generating an unbalanced emphasis on homophobia. Following Stella Nyanzi's plea for a broader exploration of queer sexuality in Africa, we move beyond the strictly sexual sphere to study the kinship arrangements of same-sex couples in Kenya. These couples rely on the different possibilities afforded by kinship – in both its inclusive and exclusive capacities – to create accommodation and acceptance. Capturing the complexities and paradoxes of social life, the ethnographic study of kinship practices in everyday life shows how homophobia and accommodation can co-exist. Furthermore, the embeddedness of same-sex relationships in kinship structures and the subscription of same-sex couples to the same norms held by cross-sex couples clearly indicates the difficulty of construing these forms of relatedness as essentially different from other kinship formations. Thus 'queering queer Africa' requires not only taking a broader perspective and looking beyond what is usually classified as 'queer' but also un-queering what at first appears as queer and thus 'queering' the barriers and the range of possibilities that characterize the lives and subjectivities of people with same-sex desires.

Happy birthday, uncle  
You are my best uncle  
I love you like my father  
Please uncle, love me like your child  
Happy birthday to you  
This Sunday we will pray  
We wish you happy birthday  
We love you

A 6-year-old girl wrote these words for her uncle Kanja's<sup>1</sup> 38th birthday and recited them at his birthday party, which took place at his apartment in a poor neighbourhood of Nairobi. The party was crowded with people: friends, neighbours and relatives,

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including Kanja's younger brother, were among the guests. But though the girl called Kanja 'uncle', she was not the daughter of Kanja's brother. Rather, she was the granddaughter of Kanja's partner, Francis, a 61-year-old man whom Kanja called his 'husband'. Kanja and Francis shared a home and together were raising her, as well as the youngest child from Francis's first marriage. Born outside wedlock, the girl had been left by her mother, Francis's eldest daughter, to be raised by Francis and Kanja when she migrated to a Middle Eastern country to work. After the little girl finished reciting the poem, Kanja wiped tears from his eyes and embraced her. He thanked her for 'the very emotional poem', and then exclaimed, 'She loves me so much!'

Same-sex couples like Kanja and Francis, who live together, raise children, and have caring relations with their relatives, disrupt popular representations of African societies as homophobic.<sup>2</sup> Dominant media and NGO discourses about LGBT+ issues on the continent foreground homophobia, discrimination, and violence, painting a picture that excludes the ways that queer people are accepted and accommodated. A growing number of academic studies, particularly in anthropology and cultural studies, lend nuance to such partial representations, but there still remains a tendency among sexuality researchers to emphasize homophobia and discrimination in African societies. In this context, stories of same-sex couples who have formed their own families and crafted meaningful relations cannot be easily understood and may even be met with scepticism or disbelief. For instance, when Andrikopoulos presented the case of Kanja and Francis at a European interdisciplinary conference in 2019, his findings were challenged by the panel's discussant, who urged him to address homophobia in Africa and even recited public statements by African leaders as evidence of homophobia that contradicted his presentation. More than ten years ago, in 2008, at another academic event, Spronk received similar reactions to a paper she presented that also focused on two Kenyan men who lived together and raised their own children in Nairobi. In both instances, the audience's reactions suggested there was consternation at the thought of relatively accommodated and somehow accepted same-sex lives in Kenya.

These two encounters made us ask why accounts of the suffering of African queer subjects are more legible to scholars (and others) than accounts of their personal fulfilment and possibilities of queer inclusion. Why are narratives about LGBT+ refugees, HIV-positive men who have sex with men (MSM), queer people ostracized by their families, and homeless sex workers more easily understood? An easy answer would be that these are existing and pressing social problems. We do not neglect the different forms of suffering caused by homophobia, but we maintain that the answer to this question is more complex and multifaceted. Certain tendencies in the study of same-sex intimacies may shape scholars' perceptions and assessments. Analytical frames such as health and injustice construct the object of enquiry (sexual minorities), create concepts and categories ('homosexuality', 'MSM', 'LGBT+ sexualities', 'LGBT+ refugees'), and, most importantly, generate knowledge that scholars have at their disposal. Queer sexuality research in Africa has followed particular twists and turns in scholarly praxis that have resulted in a partial formation of knowledge. Concerns about social justice and sexual health, violence, discrimination, and ill-health have been the dominant prisms through which researchers have studied same-sex lives and intimacies.

Kanja and Francis's story, like the stories of other same-sex couples with children, problematizes the neat division between homophobia and acceptance. In this article, we turn the assumption that homophobia and inclusion are mutually exclusive into

an empirical question and ask whether they can concur and, if so, how. Stella Nyanzi (2014) calls for 'queering' queer studies by broadening the scope of investigation: a 'queer production of knowledge', she maintains, should go beyond sexual practices and include all aspects of life. Aiming to follow her call and expand our analytical gaze, we foreground kinship practices and the kinship formations that same-sex couples forge and are embedded in. Our ethnographic lens directs attention to the intricate processes of meaning-making in everyday life, how people negotiate social relations and boundaries, and how they enact their self-understanding. We explore people's efforts to navigate kinship norms and family relations 'where violence and care intermingle' (Horton 2018: 1060).

Redirecting the focus in this way reveals the ambiguities and paradoxes of social life. We build on Francis Nyamnjoh's plea to study the 'incompleteness' of existence by paying 'greater attention to the interconnections, hierarchies, and gradations that spring from and are consolidated by the ever-evolving messiness of lived experiences that continually reconfigure human reality' (2017: 255). Attending to this incompleteness is necessary not only to destabilize neat dichotomies – characterizing 'taken-for-granted and often institutionalized and bounded ideas and practices of being, becoming, belonging, places and spaces' (Nyamnjoh 2017: 258) – but also to incorporate (seeming) inconsistencies. To grasp this 'incompleteness' of life, sexuality research needs to broaden its methodological approach to include both barriers *and* the full range of possibilities that characterize the lives and subjectivities of people with same-sex desires. In other words, we wish to 'queery': 'Unlike the corresponding noun [queer], queerying implies inquiry, curiosity and unfinishedness while its horizon is clear: the arena of non-normative desires and practices' (Spronk & Nyeck 2021: 392-3).

This article is based on ongoing research projects in Kenya from 2001 through the time of writing. Andrikopoulos conducted seven months of ethnographic fieldwork (2018-19) in Nairobi on same-sex intimacies and social mobility. His fieldwork also included interviews with twenty-nine men and fifteen women who have had a sexual experience or erotic relationship with a person of the same sex. Spronk conducted fieldwork on gender and sexuality in Nairobi from 2001 onwards, and although her research has mainly focused on people with cross-sex-oriented lives (Spronk 2012), quite a few of her interlocutors have had same-sex sexual and erotic experiences (Spronk 2018).

### Sexuality research in Africa

In the last thirty years, researchers' interest in issues related to same-sex sexualities in Africa has primarily been driven by concerns about sexual health, particularly HIV/AIDS; social justice, particularly sexual violence and violations of LGBT+ rights; and, more recently, LGBT+ asylum. This is an important development as same-sex intimacies were once clouded by 'the thick veil of ignorance that [has] hitherto obscured people's perception of sexual realities' (Ajen 1998: 125). More than twenty years ago, the book *Boy-wives and female husbands: studies in African homosexualities* (S.O. Murray & Roscoe 1998) aimed to bring together almost all that had been written about same-sex desires. As the volume's title indicates, kinship was central in studies of same-sex intimacies. Since then, the development of the field has moved in different directions and almost abandoned kinship as a topic of interest.

*Boy-wives and female husbands* appeared when the HIV/AIDS pandemic was at its height on the African continent. Previously, sexuality had been studied as part of

a subset including initiation, marriage, and reproduction; then, with the expansion of development studies, a health-based approach became dominant. The urgency of HIV/AIDS put the study of sexual behaviour squarely on the research agenda, and the massive involvement of international organizations such as the World Health Organization, bilateral partners, and international NGOs came to frame the field of the study of sexuality in particular ways. Given this focus on health, sex was mainly studied as a practice with problematic consequences. It took a while before HIV/AIDS researchers realized that male same-sex behaviour was being overlooked.<sup>3</sup> Since then, an epidemiological focus on men has become dominant.

Alongside the rise of HIV/AIDS research, the role of activism also grew. The global discourse on human rights has become an important framework for inventorying and responding to social (in)justice. Same-sex intimacies have become a particular focus of this discourse and various (international) NGOs in different African countries have become the most important knowledge brokers. Apart from the knowledge generated by NGOs and in the field of global health, other fields of knowledge production remain small. More recently, there has been a growing interest in LGBT+ Africans who seek asylum on grounds of persecution due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Usually motivated by concerns about injustice, research on LGBT+ asylum reveals the biases of asylum services and discrimination in the country of asylum (Cammaing & Marnell 2022; D.A. Murray 2015; Tschalaer 2021).

There is also a subfield in the humanities where queer sexualities are taken up (Abbas & Ekine 2013; Matebeni 2014; Nyeck 2019).<sup>4</sup> This body of literature uncovers the colonial roots of homophobia in Africa and addresses the representation of same-sex intimacies both in popular culture and literature and in homophobic discourse. Ethnographic studies, on the other hand, prioritize people's experiences and practices and pay close attention to the 'queer affordances' of everyday life (Hendriks 2016) as well as the complexities and contradictions of social life. Unfortunately, there are only a handful of book-length ethnographic studies where people's lives and experiences stand central (Dankwa 2021; Gaudio 2009; Otu 2022; Reid 2013), and these are often dissertations (e.g. Banks 2013; Peters 2014; Shio 2021) that remain unpublished if their authors do not manage to secure an academic job. The lack of resources for ethnographic research into queer sexualities and the lack of recognition of the importance of such research remain stubborn limitations for the field's development.

While health, justice, and their violations are crucial to investigate and act upon, when the production of knowledge about same-sex sexualities in Africa remains limited to social problems, it does not take into consideration the wider characteristics and implications, and consequently produces incomplete knowledge (Hendriks & Spronk 2020; Izugbara, Undie & Khamasi 2010; Nyanzi, Nassimbwa, Kayizzi & Kabanda 2008; Tamale 2011). The question is how to cast the net wider, in order to study how both challenging and less problematic circumstances may co-exist. We maintain that the study of same-sex intimacies can benefit from a return to the most basic of lessons in anthropology: the study of daily life with all its inconsistencies and complexities.

### **Kinship and the messiness of life**

In line with recent developments in the anthropology of kinship (Carsten 2004; Franklin & McKinnon 2001), our approach focuses on the practices of kinship and the processes of becoming related. The shift towards a processual approach to kinship introduced new themes in kinship research, such as gay and lesbian kinship, that previous intellectual

traditions had neglected. Research on this topic is commonly framed as ‘queer kinship’, ‘families of choice’, and ‘alternative kinship’ (Bradway & Freeman 2022*b*; Levine 2008; Mizielnińska, Gabb & Stasińska 2018; Weston 1997 [1991]), and is predominantly based in Euro-America (for exceptions: Brainer 2019; Dankwa 2021; Morison, Lynch & Reddy 2020). Although our study builds upon this important body of literature, we refrain from labelling the relations we study as ‘queer’, ‘alternative’, or ‘chosen’, because these frames emphasize difference. Our ethnographic material, instead, indicates similarities and continuities with other forms of kinship in Kenya.

Our preference for a processual approach to kinship does not mean that we do not engage with the contributions of earlier kinship scholars. There is a wealth of anthropological studies of different forms of same-sex marriage in colonial and precolonial Africa<sup>5</sup> (Cadigan 1998; Evans-Pritchard 1970; Herskovits 1937), even though some anthropologists disputed that these marriages entailed sexual relations between spouses (Amadiume 1987; Oboler 1980; Signorini 1973). As a product of their time, these anthropological studies focused on the formalities of kinship (marital payments, rituals, titles, etc.) and paid less attention to everyday arrangements and the lived practices of same-sex couples. Nonetheless, one of the great contributions of these studies is that they problematized rigid binaries by exploring the permeable boundaries of gender and sexuality. For example, Ifi Amadiume (1987) documented how Igbo women could assume the social role of men and could accumulate honorific titles and wealth by marrying wives. Azande parents received bridewealth in exchange for letting their sons marry senior male warriors, and if they were satisfied with their sons-in-law, they could replace their son with a daughter (Evans-Pritchard 1970). In southern Africa, young male partners who assumed the role of the wife and performed the receptive sexual role in ‘mine marriages’ could become husbands and then adopt the active sexual role as they grew older and found their own younger wives (Moodie 1988). All these marriages might be different from same-sex marriage as we have known it in Euro-America in the last twenty years. But as Amadiume reminds us, ‘indigenous Africans sowed the idea ... and Euro-America is reaping the victory’ (1987: xv).

In Euro-America, same-sex marriage came to represent one of the most idealized forms of modern intimacy (Coontz 2006; Giddens 1992). It is assumed that same-sex marriages are unions between two individuals based on romantic feelings and exclusivity. They are seen as the opposite of marriages embedded in webs of kinship in which family interests and materialistic considerations take precedence over individual preferences and feelings. Along similar lines, Michael Yarbrough (2018) anticipates that same-sex marriages will start becoming accepted in African societies once the ideal of companionate marriage has become dominant for heterosexual couples (see also Mupotsa 2020). By contrast, the cases that follow suggest a different conclusion because they show that same-sex unions that are already accepted in certain contexts are not seen as dyadic unions disconnected from kinship networks. The cases demonstrate that the acceptance of these unions rests on compliance with norms of kinship and crafting relationships within a wider kinship network of exchanges.<sup>6</sup> These interconnections are not just valuable from a strategic point of view; they also enact self-perceptions in profound ways. Moreover, while people desire and enjoy emotional intimacy, or love, these desires cannot be reduced to modern ideals of individuality, romanticism, and free will, as these desires are intimately intertwined with more instrumental motivations (cf. Dankwa 2021; Spronk 2019). Furthermore, neither the embeddedness of same-sex relations in wider networks of kinship nor the entanglement of love and interest are

specific to African contexts; they are also prevalent, although perhaps in subtler ways, in Euro-American societies (e.g. Lewin 1998; Weston 1997 [1991]; Zelizer 2005).

Lastly, a focus on kinship illuminates not only the paradoxes of sociality but also the discrepancy between authoritative discourses and everyday practices. In homophobic discourses, for example, 'homosexuality' is perceived as an unproductive sexual behaviour that endangers families, communities, and the social order in general (Meiu 2020; Ndjio 2020; Nyeck 2013). As such, homosexuality is construed as a social threat that has to be policed and eradicated. The recent proposal for the Family Protection Bill in Kenya<sup>7</sup> is an example of such efforts.<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging the importance of kinship in social regeneration, homophobic politics attempt to control families and impose their own definition of family relations, along with a particular morality that stigmatizes practices perceived as anti-social, such as same-sex relationships and anal sex. Nevertheless, and even though the state has the symbolic power to define the family (Collier, Rosaldo & Yanagisako 1997), what counts as kinship depends on the meaning people place on their relationships, which is also a matter of everyday practices and negotiations. Therefore, studying how same-sex couples form families and negotiate kin relations is of utmost importance to understand actual queer life in Africa.

### Doing kinship

During our fieldwork in Nairobi, we encountered several women and men who lived with their same-sex partners and created households with them. Some of these households, especially among women, included children whom the couple parented together, usually children from previous marriages, children conceived outside of marriage, or foster children of relatives. Male couples raising children were less common, but present. In 2018-19, Andrikopoulos met and talked with two male couples and four female couples who lived and raised children together. Here we present two such narratives: the story of Kanja and his marriage to Francis; and the story of Pauline and her multiple marriages. Their cases are by no means indicative of the family arrangements of other same-sex couples.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, we find it important to explore how these families live their lives and manage, not always easily, to gain the respect of people around them. Their stories help us understand kinship as 'a horizon of violence and possibility' (Bradway & Freeman 2022a: 3) and illustrate how different articulations of rejection and acceptance can be simultaneously present in the social lives of these families. A closer ethnographic analysis of kinship practices reveals the intricate articulation of possibilities that appear contradictory. Kinship encompasses possibilities, problems, and promises that, at first, may seem incompatible (Lewin 1998). Motivated to go beyond one-sided representations of queer life in Africa, we are attentive to how same-sex couples do family.

#### *Kanja and Francis*

Just after Kanja finished school in his village, he moved to Nairobi to study machine operation. Kanja's parents were not financially stable and had to combine all their resources in order to finance his vocational training. Even Kanja's underage brothers had to work in order to contribute to the costs of his education. 'That's why I want to support them back', Kanja said. Indeed, when he finished his training and found work, he immediately started sending money to his parents and siblings. If he did not send money, he explained, 'you will be seen that you are so mean and selfish!' In that period, Kanja had occasional, short-lived sexual affairs with men. As the years passed,



his relatives' insistence that he marry and have children increased: 'I am the first born. Age is touching me. My parents want to see the granddaughter or the grandson. Society is still looking at me.' He returned to his village and searched for a wife among the Kamba ethnic community, as his parents preferred their first-born son to marry within the community. Kanja met a woman, paid the bridewealth to her parents, and they married and soon had two children. Kanja fulfilled his family members' expectations and, as a husband and a father, enhanced their appreciation for him, which validated his understanding of himself as a son and a responsible man (see also van Stapele 2019; Woensdregt 2023). He moved back to Nairobi so he could work and send money home, leaving his wife and children in the village. But now, as a married man and a father, he had to support more people than before. In Nairobi, Kanja again engaged in same-sex relations, but this time he was more selective: 'Ambitious bottoms have two choices. Either to find a very supportive partner or to be alone', he once posted on Facebook. Kanja started dating Francis, a civil servant who was about two decades older than him, and found in him the supportive partner he was looking for.

Francis was raised in a polygynous family. His father had five wives and about forty children, and Francis was one of the last children of the fifth wife. The children of the first wife paid for Francis's education and subsequently helped him to get a civil service job in Nairobi. He relocated to the capital and lived there for more than thirty years. There he met and married a woman from his region, and together they raised four daughters. Meanwhile, he was regularly having sex with other men. 'I was born with this in my blood', he explained. Over the years, Francis bought land in his village and built a house where he planned to relocate with his wife, once retired. A few years before his retirement, his wife died and his plans changed. Francis remarried and his new wife, Agnes, stayed in the house he had built in his village. 'It profits both of us if somebody can stay there', Francis said. Agnes managed the farm in the village while he lived and worked in Nairobi and raised one of his daughters, who had an intellectual disability, and his granddaughter, whose mother had migrated out of Kenya. Around that time, Francis started his relationship with Kanja. About two years later, Kanja moved in with Francis and joined him in taking care of the two girls.

In Nairobi, Francis's role in the household remained the same as when he was married to his first wife: he paid the rent and took financial responsibility for all the needs of everyone in the household. Everything else was left to Kanja, including spending time with the girls in their daily routines. He helped the older girl to execute household tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, and he helped the younger girl to prepare for school and complete her homework. Being a guardian of the two girls, Kanja advised them about their behaviour, supervised their daily hygiene, and ensured that there was food for them to eat. But also he had fun with them, watching movies and going swimming together. As it is evident from the poem by Francis's granddaughter that opened this article, the girls developed strong emotional ties with Kanja.

Both Francis and Kanja described their relationship to Andrikopoulos as 'marriage'. 'As a married couple, he takes care of me, I take care of him', Francis commented. Their daily life as a couple, the way they divided household tasks and took care of two children, was not much different from other (cross-sex) marriages in Nairobi. In private, or in front of other men who engaged in same-sex intimacies, Kanja called Francis his 'husband' or 'hubby' and Francis addressed him as his 'wife'. For Francis, marriage is a relationship of care: 'Somebody you marry is somebody who cares for you. You go together. You share your problem together. You eat together'. Kanja took care



of Francis and his daughter and granddaughter as his own family. Francis, in return, helped Kanja to fulfil his dream to become a successful entrepreneur, giving him a generous amount of money to buy a packaging machine and to open his own small business. Kanja was appreciative to Francis and felt that his wishes and aspirations were acknowledged and supported by him. 'I remind you what I have passed through', said Kanja to Andrikopoulos, and then continued:

I don't like [a man] to draw me back to where I came from. I call myself a career woman ... I need somebody who will mentally appreciate that my job comes first ... He has to accept that because I cannot just stay in the house all day doing nothing [and] I am just there waiting for him, to bring everything.

Kanja assumed the role of wife in his marriage with Francis and complied with gender norms that require the woman to be in charge of household tasks and the man to be the provider. But like many other wives, he also wanted to earn an income. This would allow him to fulfil his aspiration and self-understanding as a good son, husband (of his wife in the village), and father. The opening of the packaging shop enabled Kanja to earn his own income and thus send more money home to support his parents and his daughters. Over the years, he managed to build a house in the village and to finance a substantial renovation of his parents' house. The successful performance of these kinship roles became possible due to his marriage with Francis. In effect, Kanja complied with societal norms by *transgressing* them (cf. Meiu, 2017).

When asked what makes his relationship with Francis a 'marriage', Kanja gave the following answer: 'His people know me and they accept me. They like me. He knows my family too. They know him. Yes. And he is accepted there ... He is welcome to my family and I am welcome to his family'. For Kanja, it was not just the mutual care, as Francis had suggested, that made his relationship a 'marriage'. It was the social recognition of their relationship. It is significant, however, to stress that their relationship had not been widely accepted as 'marriage'. Kanja and Francis spoke explicitly about the nature of their relationship only to their friends and a few of their relatives. Others were told that Kanja was Francis's son and the brother of his daughters. This claim, however, even for those who knew them only a tiny bit, could not be taken literally. Some people might have assumed that Kanja had the status of an adopted son, and their age difference and the fact that Francis did not have a son made such an interpretation plausible. For most people, however, the men's relationship was clearly erotic, even if they were not explicit about it. This lack of explicitness and verbalization, as other scholars have shown for different contexts (Decena 2011; Horton 2018), should not lead to interpretations that these men were 'closeted' – a term with very particular Euro-American connotations.<sup>10</sup> Kanja and Francis relied on the creative possibilities and elasticity of kinship terminology to tacitly express their intimate relation to others.<sup>11</sup> Their relatives might not have been told that Francis and Kanja were a couple but they implicitly understood it. 'I expect them to know. Some things you do not even need to explain to people. They know by themselves', Kanja maintained. As Bakuri, Spronk, and van Dijk (2020) suggest, what is called secrecy is often the result of some who shield information and some who perform a not-knowing. Secrecy is, then, more of a productive process than a restraining one, as it is based on the importance of mutual respect and practised through various cultural forms of indirection (Dankwa 2021; Gaudio 2009; Oudenhuijsen 2021). Through secrecy and tacit forms of knowing, people can comply with norms and moral obligations and, at the same time, pursue their

personal desires and wishes (Decena 2011; Msibi 2020). Tacitness and the crafting of kinship allow people like Kanja and Francis to fulfil different roles and aspirations that at first may seem incompatible and, consequently, benefit from the associated statuses.

### *Pauline's marriages*

'I am a soft stud', said Pauline, a 45-year-old woman, in her first meeting with Andrikopoulos. As a 'stud', she explained, she is 'the man in the house'. But she clarified that, unlike some other studs, who 'are strict with their wives' and may even 'beat them up', she is gentle and caring with her wife. Pauline was living together with a woman, Jasmine, whom she called her wife, and their children from previous marriages. For Pauline, this relationship was a marriage, the fourth in her life. Her first two were with men, the last two with women.

When Pauline was 21 years old, her mother was diagnosed with cancer. To satisfy her mother's wish to see her married and with a child before she died, Pauline agreed to marry a man from her church who had expressed interest. After the man brought twelve cows and paid some 'good cash' to Pauline's parents, Pauline's family accepted him as her husband and recognized their marriage. A church wedding followed. Pauline moved with her husband to a large house on the outskirts of Nairobi where she had her own house help, a car, and a driver. Soon she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and her mother died shortly thereafter. Though saddened by her death, Pauline at least felt some satisfaction that she had managed to fulfil her mother's wish. A few years later, Pauline's husband abandoned her and left Kenya. But what was truly devastating for her was that he took with him ('kidnapped', in her words) their child. Pauline was convinced that her husband used her just to obtain a son. She suspected that her husband was 'gay', an explanation she offered to Andrikopoulos and others to argue that her failed marriage was her husband's fault and not hers.

Her husband's abandonment negatively affected Pauline's position within her family. Her siblings excluded her from family rites, insisting she needed a husband to participate. Facing this exclusion and motivated by a desire to have children and raise them, Pauline decided to marry again. She and her new husband had an informal 'come we stay' arrangement, a rather common kind of cohabitation in Kenya. Although these unions are not legally recognized, they are, to some extent, socially accepted, particularly in the slums and poor areas of Nairobi (Bocquier & Khasakhala 2009; Pike, Mojola & Kabiru 2018). A formal marriage would require Pauline's new husband to pay the entire bridewealth back to her former husband, which he was unable to do. Their relationship, even if it was not formal, was, however, sufficient for Pauline to restore her status in her family and be able to participate in family rituals: 'I was accepted back in the community as a daughter once again because now a man has come. He stood by the graveside of my mama and now I am accepted back'. Furthermore, Pauline conceived a son and two daughters by her new husband.

Having trained as a teacher and worked for a few years at a primary school, Pauline moved on in her career and opened her own small private school. This made her financially independent, and as she earned more than her husband, she symbolically articulated the role of the provider. Her husband had a hard time dealing with this, she recounted, mentioning that he occasionally became violent:

I would provide for him. I could buy him his boxers to wear in the pants. He had nothing. And he was drunk. And he would beat me like shit. He could mistreat me in front of my kids. I still could provide for him, pay for our rent, build a house in his home [for their kids].

Before they ended their relationship, at a time when her husband's physical abuse had intensified, Pauline had her first same-sex erotic experience. It was with the woman who cleaned her house and used to comfort her every time he maltreated her. Pauline recalled that with her she had 'enjoyed sex for the first time'.

Pauline's second husband was the last man she ever had a relationship with. Her next relationship, which she described as marriage, was with a younger woman she met on Facebook. Pauline rented a large apartment in Nairobi and moved there with her and their children. Pauline, in a ceremony officiated by two of her friends who were Pentecostal pastors, married her first wife in their home. 'I officially married her', she proudly said as she showed Andrikopoulos a picture on her phone of the wedding cake. 'We did something private', she added. 'We called some pastors. We exchanged [rings] privately in my home. The pastors were there. They are also gay and they understood. And we did it perfectly'. Although the wedding had no legal implications, it was a meaningful ritual in which their relationship was acknowledged and blessed by God. Despite widespread views that religion is incompatible with homosexuality, Pauline and her wife, as well as many other Africans with same-sex desires (Gaudio 2009; Reid 2010; van Klinken 2019), did not experience religion as oppressive; instead, they practised same-sex-oriented lives following religious norms and morals according to their interpretation of them.

In addition to having a religious ceremony, Pauline wanted their marriage to be socially recognized. Therefore she visited her wife's parents and gave them some money and gifts in the form of bridewealth, recalling, 'I somehow paid some dowry to her parents. And I told them I want to appreciate the love of your daughter. And I did somehow pay some dowry. And they came to know. Because my ex's parents really appreciated who I am'. Although Pauline's gifts were not officially framed as a marital payment, the act of giving presents to her in-laws made her in-laws 'know' without ever being explicitly told about the queer nature of their union. A moment of symbolic significance was when Pauline invited her wife's parents to a relative's funeral in her hometown. At her intervention, once they arrived, they were given the role of relatives rather than guests, which meant in practice that they were seated under a tent reserved for family members.<sup>12</sup> For Pauline, the willingness of her wife's parents' to attend the funeral and participate as relatives was highly meaningful, signifying that they had accepted her as family and had an idea of the kind of relationship she had with their daughter.

Despite Pauline's good relations with her in-laws, however, her marriage ended after three years. Subsequently, Pauline started dating Jasmine, a single mother with two kids. Impressed with the caring behaviour of Jasmine, Pauline asked her to move in with her, so they could live as a married couple and raise their children together. On several occasions, Pauline contrasted these two marriages with women. She recalled with bitterness that her ex-wife was not loyal to her, in contrast to Jasmine, who was committed to her. But Pauline was nostalgic about how she managed to establish a relationship with her ex-wife's family, whereas there was absolutely no contact with Jasmine's parents:

Now, my wife, she embraces me a lot. She understands me, she loves me wholeheartedly, but the parents, they don't understand this. I don't know how to go about it. I would love that I would go ... to her parents. [They] are in Naivasha. Take me to Naivasha to go and appreciate them. Appreciating someone is something – you can appreciate through any way. You can buy them sugar, you can buy

them milk. But introduce yourself like you are not just friends. I have your daughter, like she is me and I'm her. We love each other ... No, her parents are a bit adamant. How do I handle that?

For Pauline, marriage is more than just a relationship between two people. The refusal of Jasmine's parents' to acknowledge their daughter's relationship was hurtful and frustrating for Pauline. She was grateful, however, that Jasmine agreed to get pregnant and to raise the child together. Pauline might have failed to establish kin ties with her wife's lineage, but she was happy that their relationship will produce new kin who will connect her more closely to her wife.

In the end, Pauline came to realize that acceptance by relatives would be more easily achieved with descendants than with ancestors. Her own family had disowned her when she explicitly told them about her erotic relations with women. In contrast, her children, who lived with her and Jasmine, embraced her and supported her:

They are the only people who appreciated me and took me for who I am and loved me for who I am. And they told me, 'Mom, we love you the way you [are]. At least for once you can be happy. Mom, you're happy now'. There is no kid who is against me being me.

Being a parent and being connected to and through others was important to Pauline's self-understanding and explains why she took great efforts to create kinship and renegotiate kinship relations.

### Queering kinship?

Same-sex couples create kinship through everyday practices such as mutual care, raising children together, cohabitation, and commensality. Although same-sex relationships are not legally recognized in Kenya, they are socially acknowledged in different ways that do not always entail explicitness. Pauline's payment of bridewealth, for example, even if it was not referred to as 'bridewealth', was a way for her to forge a relationship with her first wife's family. In the same way, the acceptance of the bridewealth by her first wife's parents was an indirect way to recognize and accept their daughter's relationship (also Reid 2010: 110-12; Yarbrough 2020).

Forms of relatedness resulting from living together and raising children as a couple are important but not sufficient for partners in same-sex relations to affirm their moral personhood and imagine meaningful lives. Spouses in these same-sex unions wanted their relationships to be recognized by their relatives and to be embedded in existing kinship networks. Kanja succeeded in having his family's unspoken recognition of his relationship with Francis by successfully performing his role as a caring son and sibling. Meanwhile, he had already proved himself as a good son by respecting his family's wishes to marry a woman within their ethnic community and become a father. To a great extent, Kanja's love towards his relatives, expressed in material and immaterial acts, created the conditions for his kin to accommodate his relationship with Francis.

Nevertheless, the avoidance of conflict was not always due to acts of love or other pleasant emotions. When Agnes, Francis's wife, protested over his relationship with Kanja, Kanja talked to her and insinuated that she would regret it if she exposed them. He made her understand, Kanja said, that he was capable of influencing Francis's decisions about his will. Agnes knew that she was in a precarious position regarding Francis's inheritance because she did not have any children with him and his children from his deceased wife were taken care of by Kanja. Although Kanja and Agnes clearly did not like each other, as is often the case between co-wives in polygynous marriages, they managed to have a functional relationship. We see therefore that Kanja used

different tactics to ensure that his relationship with Francis would be accepted, even under precarious terms. In this endeavour, he invoked the possibility of excluding Agnes, Francis's second wife, from a key element of kinship: inheritance.

The embeddedness of same-sex relationships in wider networks of kinship clearly indicates the difficulty, or even inappropriateness, of construing these forms of relatedness as essentially different from other kinship formations. Kanja's, Francis's, and Pauline's same-sex marriages are not so different from their cross-sex marriages. Although same-sex relationships are not legally recognized in Kenya, they are socially acknowledged in the different ways that cross-sex unions are also accepted, such as through cohabitation, childrearing, religious weddings, and bridewealth payments.

Moreover, kinship relations created by same-sex couples subscribe to the same norms held by cross-sex couples. We see this, for example, in the gendered hierarchies and division of labour in households (Mbasalaki 2019), the significance of having children as indicators of adulthood and respectability (Morison & Lynch 2020), and the desire to be respectful towards parents and in-laws through material acts of care. In this regard, the kinship that Kanja, Francis, and Pauline crafted is not *queer* in the sense that it 'challenges, unsettles and troubles the normative character of heterosexuality and its associated gender hierarchy' (Morison *et al.* 2020: 1). To the contrary, their kinship practices similarly include 'come we stay' de facto marriages (Baral, Golaz, Kiereri & Schneidermann 2021; Pike *et al.* 2018); forms of intimate patronage that transcend inequalities of gender, generation, and ethnicity and regenerate kinship (Groes-Green 2014; Meiu 2017); interpretations of bridewealth as reciprocity in action (Andrikopoulos 2021; Piot 2019: 71); and maintaining indirection as part of respectful kinship relations (Bakuri *et al.* 2020). Thus 'queering queer Africa', as Stella Nyanzi (2014) suggests, requires not only taking a broader perspective and looking beyond what is usually classified as 'queer', but also un-queering what at first appears as queer – it demands a 'queering' of the particularities in people's lives.

## Conclusion

Over recent decades in anthropology, there has been a shift towards the study of the 'harsh dimensions of social life' (Ortner 2016: 47). The 'suffering subject', as Joel Robbins (2013) called it, became the primary focus of anthropological research and replaced the earlier figure of the radical 'Other' which was previously at the centre of anthropologists' attention. In queer sexuality research in Africa, the 'suffering subject' has not taken the place of the radical 'Other'. It has rather reconstituted the 'Other' as one suffering from homophobia, injustice, persecution, and ill-health, in implicit contrast with the liberated and autonomous queer person in Euro-America. Beyond scholarly research, particularly in media representations and NGO discourses, the contrast between homo-liberal Euro-America and homophobic Africa is articulated more explicitly, with same-sex marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples as markers of difference.<sup>13</sup> Evidently, these approaches consider only the legally recognized forms of family life.

Although the state's recognition is of great significance for the equal treatment of all citizens, family and, more generally, kinship are primarily social institutions that are co-produced with the state but may also exist without it. Family and kinship formations are historically and culturally dependent and embedded in political-economic processes. As Henrietta Moore analysed in her monograph *Space, text, and gender: an anthropological study of the Marakwet of Kenya* (1986), patriarchal

and heteronormative discourse is produced within a given set of material and social conditions yet harbours the affordances of its own negation. Moore was then more interested in male dominance and female resistance, the scholarly discourse of that time, and she showed that while dominant ideologies often present themselves as ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’, they always exist in contested terrains. Rather than disapproving of compliance to norms as a wrong form of politics, and thus implicitly as a kind of false consciousness, we need to be accountable to our interlocutors so as to be ‘informed by the lived experiences of women and men on the [African] continent and the specificities of what they hold as their culture, taking into account that there is not always agreement among people in the same locale about the nuances and meanings of culture’ (Tamale 2011: 4). Instead of viewing queerness as in opposition to heteronormative and patriarchal social forms, our ethnographic cases indicated that queerness is (also) produced by complying with societal norms while simultaneously transgressing them.

The analytical gaze of kinship – although not a new approach in queer African studies – allows scholars of same-sex intimacies to move beyond the framings established over the last thirty years that emphasized homophobia, inequality, and injustice and consequently reproduced certain binaries and hierarchies. The empirical findings of this study do not negate the existence of homophobia and discrimination in Kenya, but they do demonstrate the partiality of this perspective and the possibility that homophobia and queer inclusion can co-exist. The ethnographic study of kinship practices allows us to see the possibilities of accommodation. If we told only the story of homophobia, our analysis would focus on certain life experiences and events, such as Pauline’s disinheritance by her family and Kanja’s anxiety over their potential exposure by Agnes. The description of these experiences alone would not only be inaccurate but also misrepresent how people imagine a life that is meaningful to them. Certainly efforts to forge kinship are not always successful and the worked-out solutions often remain precarious, but the full complexity of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion needs to be considered. Kinship matters, as kinship provides people with the means and resources to imagine a future.

In understanding the coexistence of same-sex intimacies and homophobia, family matters in three ways. First, family matters (‘matters’ as a noun) concern the drudgery of family: the fussing and fissures of kin, the tensions, conflicts, and work of parent-child and sibling relations, the larger constellation of aunties and uncles, authoritative elders and rebelling youth, and everything that comes with generational conflict. Family can be violent: it can lead to physical cruelty, emotional abuse, and ostracization. Yet family also matters (‘matters’ as a verb) as a place to turn to for help. Families, as Kath Weston maintains, ‘are sites of conflict as well as support, violence as well as love’ (1997 [1991]: xviii). Family proves important because apprehensiveness does not automatically imply violence. Family is also care, is a place to turn to for support, both financially and emotionally. The non-academic books *Rafiki Zetu* (Nzioka 2012) and *She called me woman* (Mohammed, Nagarajan & Aliyu 2018) – which interestingly have not received much scholarly attention – depict how kin may not necessarily agree with same-sex relations but still care. Kin ties can also be strong and have the capacity for compassion. Lastly, family matters (‘matters’ as a verb) because it forms and informs people’s sense of being, providing meaning and direction to self-understanding, and shaping presentation towards others. It gives a sense of grounding and belonging, by endorsing a sense of self as child, sibling, woman, man, spouse, parent, caregiver, and more.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'homophobia' is limited as it implies that 'anti-queer animus is rooted in fear rather than anger, hatred, bias, ignorance, jealousy, or other sources of antipathy ... It locates hostility in a person's psyche and not in sociostructural dynamics that cultivate prejudice and hostility' (Thoreson 2014: 25). Still, we use it to indicate non-accommodation of, rejection of, or violence against queer people. See also D.A. Murray (2009).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the way HIV/AIDS framed sexuality research, see Spronk (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Much of this work is from scholars based in and focused on South Africa.

<sup>5</sup> Woman-to-woman marriages still take place in some parts of Africa, including Kenya, but they are least popular and have been subjected to changes. Fearing possible interpretations of law that would open the way for the legalization of same-sex marriage, Kenya stipulates in its constitution of 2010 and the Marriage Act of 2014 that marriage is a union between a man and a woman. These provisions enhanced the uncertainty over the legality of woman-to-woman marriage in the country (Choge-Kerama, Rono & Dickerson-Putman 2021; Kareithi 2018).

<sup>6</sup> In the United States, before the legalization of same-sex marriage 'emerged as the surprise demand of the 1990s' (Lewin 1998: 8), same-sex couples pursued forms of marriage that lacked legal recognition. These marriages were often perceived, even by the same-sex spouses, either as complying with and reproducing heteropatriarchal norms or as forms of queer resistance. Anthropologist Ellen Lewin (1998) examined the motivations of couples to marry in these ways and showed that the reasons were in reality more complex, combining elements of resistance and compliance at the same time.

<sup>7</sup> Our empirical findings challenge current political framings in Kenya, as seen in discourses supporting the proposal for the Family Protection Bill (2023) that depict homosexuality as dangerous due to its purported non-reproductive, anti-social, and anti-kinship characteristics. Cases like the ones presented in this article illustrate how men and women in same-sex partnerships strive to integrate their relationships into broader networks of kinship, aspire to have and raise children, and adhere to kinship norms in ways analogous to cross-sex couples.

<sup>8</sup> The proposal for a Proper Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill in Ghana and the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act in Nigeria are similar examples.

<sup>9</sup> In this research, almost all participants (except for two men) above the age of 30 had parented children.

<sup>10</sup> More specifically, the ideal of living a gay life outside the 'closet' became relevant only after the emergence of the gay liberation movement. Before Stonewall, forms of homoerotic social life in the United States were also characterized by secrecy, indirection, and lack of explicitness. As social historians have shown, these characteristics were not always the outcomes of oppression and fear – as the 'closet' metaphor would imply. Thus the notion of the closet cannot be applied retrospectively to describe individuals who lived same-sex-oriented lives in earlier times (e.g. Chauncey 1994; Kennedy 1996).

<sup>11</sup> The creative use of kinship terms to describe same-sex relationships or belonging in queer communities has been common in other contexts and has served a variety of purposes. In Ghana, as we learn from Dankwa's (2021) ethnography, women often referred to their same-sex partners as 'sisters'. The framing of these relationships as sisterhood dispelled possible suspicions by outsiders of the homoerotic dimension of these relationships. At the same time, for same-sex lovers, sisterhood was not just a tactic of concealment. For them, it also signified the closeness and attachment they had developed with their same-sex partners. Interestingly, in some cases where same-sex lovers discovered that they were genealogically related as cousins, they became concerned about breaching incest prohibitions (Dankwa 2021). In Northern Nigeria, *yan daudu*, 'men who act like women', formed kinship relations with other *yan daudu* in the urban neighbourhoods where they had settled and lived their lives 'out in the open'. Their use of kin terms such as 'mother' and 'daughter' is indicative of the relations of interdependence *yan daudu* had formed and were embedded in as well as the hierarchies and expectations of care in these relationships, the gendered ways they perceived themselves and other *yan daudu*, and the lack of sexual intimacy among them (Gaudio 2009). On the meanings of the terms 'sister' and 'auntie' among *sasso* men in Ghana, see Otu (2022), and on the use of 'bibi' (grandmother)



among gay men in Tanzania, see Shio (2021). The idiom of siblinghood in particular is common in other communities outside Africa. For instance, for gay men, who identified as 'fairies' in prewar New York, the framing of their relations in terms of sisterhood enhanced a feeling of belonging in a community. As these fairies did not have sex with each other and did not become 'wives' of other fairies, the idiom of sisterhood delineated 'the boundaries of social relationships, replicating the injunctions against "incest" and defining endogamous and exogamous relationships' (Chauncey 1994: 291).

<sup>12</sup> Pauline introduced her wife's parents to her own relatives as 'family' without providing further explanation about how they were related.

<sup>13</sup> Same-sex marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples came to be seen as a litmus test of queer inclusivity in international LGBT+ indexes. In these measurements, African countries, with a few exceptions such as South Africa, score very low and usually find themselves in the bottom part of the ranks. For instance, in ILGA's map 'Sexual Orientation Laws in the World' (<https://ilga.org/maps-sexual-orientation-laws>), all countries of the Global North appear in shades of blue, which indicate strong protection of LGBT+ rights, including family rights for same-sex couples, while almost all African countries appear in red and orange, which indicate that same-sex sexual practices are illegal and criminalized.

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## Affaires de famille : relations homosexuelles et pratiques de parenté au Kenya

### Résumé

Les recherches qui ont porté sur les sexualités entre personnes du même sexe en Afrique, animées par des idées de justice sociale et de santé sexuelle, se sont principalement intéressées aux conflits et aux iniquités résultant de l'homophobie, et ont généré de ce fait un déséquilibre. Dans le sillage de Stella Nyanzi et de son plaidoyer pour une exploration plus large de la sexualité *queer* en Afrique, les auteurs vont au-delà de la sphère strictement sexuelle pour explorer les arrangements de parenté des couples homosexuels au Kenya. Ceux-ci profitent des différentes possibilités qu'offrent les liens de parenté, dans leurs capacités inclusives aussi bien qu'exclusives, pour créer tolérance et acceptation. En retraçant les complexités et les paradoxes de la vie sociale, l'étude ethnographique des pratiques de parenté dans la vie quotidienne montre comment homophobie et tolérance peuvent coexister. En outre, l'intégration de relations homosexuelles dans les structures de parenté et l'adhésion de couples homosexuels aux mêmes normes que les couples hétérosexuels montrent combien il est difficile de concevoir ces formes d'apparentement comme différentes, par essence, des autres formations de parenté. L'étude *queer* de l'Afrique *queer* impose donc non seulement d'élargir le regard et de voir plus loin que ce qui est habituellement qualifié de *queer*, mais aussi de « normaliser » ce qui semble *queer* au premier abord et de questionner sous cet angle les obstacles et l'éventail des possibilités qui caractérisent la vie et les subjectivités des personnes dont les désirs vont vers le même sexe.

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