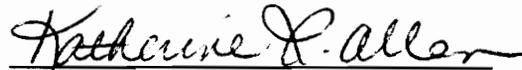A REFLEXIVE UNDERSTANDING OF WOMAN/WOMAN MARRIAGES
AMONG THE GIKUYU OF KENYA

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Family and Child Development

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January, 1994

Blacksburg, Virginia

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(ABSTRACT)

This study concerns the practices of woman/woman marriage among the Gikuyu of Kenya. Though widely practiced, such marriages have seldom been studied, and virtually not at all among the Gikuyu. Such practices had been only lightly, and inadequately, addressed over five decades ago by Leakey (1938/1977). This study, designed as preliminary fieldwork, explores Gikuyu woman/woman marriage practices to gain useful basic information to provide a point of entry for future research.

In this study I address shortcomings of previous research on woman/woman marriages, such as the prevalent emphasis on reductionist explanations for their occurrences. On the basis of preliminary fieldwork among Gikuyu women engaged in these practices, and my experiences as a member of Gikuyu society, I assert that women have much greater latitude in choosing how and why they participate in woman/woman marriages than the literature suggests. Such marriages take diverse, and often complex forms that are not adequately addressed by single-explanation definitions or

descriptions. Secondly, the study attempts to locate a space for these practices in the feminist and family studies literatures, while questioning the absence of woman/woman marriages from both arenas of discourse. I argue that the exclusion of woman/woman marriages from feminist discourse and the family studies literatures is not an accident, as both discourses have marginalized voices from so-called "third world" locations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Master's thesis committee--
Drs. Katherine R. Allen, Joyce A. Arditti, and
Victoria R. Fu--for their guidance and concern for my work.
I appreciate their patience while I returned to my home in
Kenya to collect data for this thesis, and then began a new
graduate program before finishing this one.

Special thanks and love go to my husband,
William O'Brien, for his tireless encouragement and support
through this process, and to my precious daughter, Mumbi.

Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation to
all the Gikuyu women who participated in this project and
allowed me into their personal lives. They made this thesis
possible, and I dedicate this work to them.

A REFLEXIVE UNDERSTANDING OF WOMAN/WOMAN MARRIAGES
AMONG THE GIKUYU OF KENYA

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"I know that some people do talk negatively about our marriage although honestly I have never caught anybody personally. But I ask myself, 'What is it that women who are married to men have that I don't have? Is it land? I have land. Is it children? I have children. I don't have a man, but I have a woman who cares for me. I belong to her and she belongs to me. And I tell you, I don't have to worry about a man telling me what to do. Here, I make all the decisions for myself."

<div align="right">

Ciru (interviewed July, 1992)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF WOMAN/WOMAN MARRIAGES

Introduction

This study discusses practices of woman/woman marriage[1]
among the Gikuyu of Kenya, and their implications for family
studies and western feminist perspectives. Practices of
woman/woman marriage exist in societies in West Africa,
Southern Africa, East Africa, and the Sudan (O'Brien, 1977).
Though widely practiced, such marriages have seldom been
studied. Among the Gikuyu, such practices had been only
lightly, and inadequately, addressed over five decades ago
by Leakey (1938/1977). Since O'Brien (1977) called for
field research into woman/woman marriages 17 years ago,
there has been no study of Gikuyu woman/woman marriages, and
few studies anywhere else. This study was designed as
preliminary fieldwork to gain useful, basic information to
provide a point of entry for later research.

A major part of this effort is an attempt to show that
Gikuyu woman/woman marriages are diverse and difficult to
reduce to singular definitions or explanations. Krige
(1974) defines woman/woman marriage among the Lovedu (South

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[1] The term "woman-marriage" is also used to describe
these practices. However, "woman/woman marriage" is
preferred here because of its greater clarity.

Africa) as an "institution by which it is possible for a woman to give bridewealth for, and marry, a woman, over whom and whose offspring she has full control, delegating to a male genitor for duties of procreation" (p. 11). Speaking of the Nandi in Kenya, Oboler (1980) defines the term "female husband", the woman who initiates the woman/woman marriage, as a woman "who pays bridewealth for, and thus marries (but does not have sexual intercourse with) another woman, and by doing so, becomes the social and legal father of her wife's children" (p. 69).

These definitions of woman/woman marriage are problematic. They emphasize a monolithic view of the practices, describing what appears as a rule to be followed. This emphasis gives the impression that there is no diversity in practices nor in the women who engage in them. As I will later argue, based on interviews with women engaged in woman/woman marriages, differences exist not only among the women who initiate such marriages, but also among their wives. There is no single explanation for why these women come together, no social rule to be followed that guides women towards woman/woman marriages, making it difficult to justify a singular definition. Practices are diverse both between ethnic groups and within them: there is even diversity in woman/woman marriages within a very small,

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ethnically homogeneous locality, as with the cases in this preliminary fieldwork.

In addition to addressing shortcomings of previous research on woman/woman marriage, such as the prevalent emphasis on reductionist, single-factor explanations for its occurrence, the discussion attempts to locate a space for these practices in the feminist and family studies literatures. Although such practices have been excluded from discussion in these arenas of discourse, the woman/woman marriages described herein have implications for both.

Research Questions

This study addresses four research questions. Implied in these questions is the need to describe woman/woman marriages as they are practiced and perceived in Gikuyu society and by the women engaged in these relationships. Questions guiding the study include:

[1] How do women involved in woman/woman marriages describe their reasons for marrying? In light of their descriptions, is the term, "female husband", inadequate for describing women who initiate woman/woman marriages?

[2] How can the exclusion of woman/woman marriages from feminist discourse be explained?

[3] How do practices of Gikuyu woman/woman marriage inform discussions of diversity in family relationships, where the western form of nuclear family is the most privileged and universalized?

[4] What are implications for future research centered on the perceptions of Gikuyu women practicing woman/woman marriage?

   With the first question, I attempt to undermine earlier characterizations of woman/woman marriages. Earlier studies include Leakey (1938/1977) on the Gikuyu, who only devoted two pages to the topic out of a 1,400 page ethnography on this ethnic group. Oboler (1980), who studied these practices in more detail among the Nandi, emphasized, like Leakey, that woman/woman marriages occur only under very specific circumstances, and fulfill some function for the society in question. As a result, the explanations of both authors sound mechanical and socially deterministic: it would seem as though women are not permitted to engage in woman/woman marriages unless they fit the specific profile outlined by the authors.

   On the basis of the preliminary interviews with Gikuyu women engaged in these marriage practices, I suggest that women have much greater latitude than such authors allow in choosing how and why they participate in woman/woman marriages. Such marriages take diverse, and often complex

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forms that are not adequately covered or predicted by single-explanation definitions or descriptions.

O'Brien (1977) and Oboler (1980) assert that women engaged in woman/woman marriages identify themselves, literally, as males. As a result, they apply the term "female husband" to the woman who initiates the marriage; the one who now becomes identified as male. While Oboler (1980) is careful not to generalize the use of this term beyond the Nandi, O'Brien (1977) is more willing to generalize both the term and the male-identification across cultures. My preliminary fieldwork and experiences among Gikuyu women suggests that the term "female husband" and the male-identification it implies does not describe their thoughts or feelings. The motivation for many towards woman/woman marriage is partly to separate themselves from men and maleness, not to identify with them.

The second question points to problems in feminism regarding the absence of woman/woman marriages when the discourse turns toward African women. Though the ideals of feminism are by no means rejected, I argue that empowering options for African women, like woman/woman marriage, are overlooked by western feminists, many of whom see themselves in the role of liberators of "sisters" in other parts of the world who are portrayed as more oppressed. While they perceive African women as oppressed by what they call

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"genital mutilation" and the men that force them to endure it, they remain ignorant of the diverse circumstances of female circumcision practices and the reasons for their existence.

Regarding the third question, I argue that discussions of family diversity are hampered by prevalent, and persistent, perceptions of African family forms as unsuitable in one way or another. The western nuclear family model, privileged as the ultimate and most civilized family form, is still used as the benchmark against which all other family forms are measured (Scanzoni et al., 1989). As a result, other family forms still tend to be devalued and even ridiculed (Foster, 1983; Scanzoni et al., 1989; Sudarkasa, 1986). I argue that the extreme diversity and complexity of these woman/woman marriage families confounds common definitions of family, thus exposing the problematic nature of attempts to define "family" or "families".

The concluding chapter deals with the fourth research question: adapting the insights of this investigation, based on preliminary fieldwork and a critique of both the family studies and feminist literature, to a more comprehensive study of woman/woman marriage practices.

Critique of Prior Research

African woman/woman marriages have been discussed mostly by anthropologists of an earlier generation who wrote primarily during the colonial and early post-colonial era. Critics of that earlier generation (e.g., Rosaldo, 1989) argue that their writings cannot be separated from their racist, sexist, heterosexist, and imperialist roots in colonialism. Krige (1964) viewed the "natives" of southern Africa as "primitive" and "backward", terms that were generated to justify the violence of imperialism (Davidson, 1974). Such ethnographers often make statements like Langley (1979), who credits colonial explorers Ludwig Kraft and H. M. Stanley as being the first people to mention the name "Nandi."

Many of these authors were working directly in the interests of colonial administrations. For example, Talbot's (1926/1969) descriptions of southern Nigerian peoples were done to be "of use to the new [colonial] administrators, who have had no opportunity of gaining knowledge on the subject" (p. vi). Herskovits (1938), stating that his research had the approval of the French colonial office, indicated that his study of Dahomey was aimed "at extending our knowledge of primitive life in general and of the culture of the region described in particular" (p. iii). Langley (1979), in her study of the

Nandi of Kenya, implied that if it were not for the missionaries and colonial agencies who guided and encouraged her, her research would have been immature.

With two exceptions (Krige, 1974; Oboler, 1980), what is common to older and later ethnographies alike is that woman/woman marriages were never the focus of study, but only a brief side-track. Woman/woman marriage is always mentioned only briefly and superficially, and its "discovery" almost seems accidental. What also seems clear about these references is that the data gathered by researchers were not directly drawn from the women engaged in woman-marriages, but rather from other informants who offered an explanation for the "strange" practice, to use Evans-Pritchard's (1951) adjective.

This criticism applies to Leakey's (1938/1977) study of the southern Gikuyu. His treatment of the subject suggests that Gikuyu woman/woman marriages remain very poorly understood. Leakey's discussion of his data-collection strategy, for instance, indicates that he used only male informants in learning about woman/woman marriages; hence the need exists for more responsible future work that includes perspectives of women participants in these practices.

Ideas Guiding the Study

The concepts of heterogeneity and representation are two threads that tie together the diverse research questions guiding the study. Flax (1990) points out that a focus on heterogeneity, towards multiple perspectives and localization of issues, has become central to much of current scholarship. Part of this trend lies in the efforts of marginalized groups to claim legitimacy for their own voices on issues that affect them; representation by others who are seen as dominant is viewed with suspicion and is often rejected. Part of this trend towards heterogeneity and recognizing the problematic of representation includes African scholars' attempts to claim legitimacy for local idioms in the production of knowledge (Akiwowo, 1990).

This global movement towards indigenizing scholarship "encourages scholars in the developing world to look to their own traditions of thought for independent inspiration in analysing their own societies" (Albrow & King, 1990, p. 101). This approach provides a way to assess the practices of woman/woman marriage from a Gikuyu conception of family that tries to avoid the logocentrism of western categories.

The second idea, representation, also informs the discussion of family in the context of woman/woman marriages. The problem of representation is the real possibility of misrepresentation, as in the case of a

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too-restrictive definition of "family." Those family types
that do not fit into the prevailing definition face not only
neglect, but ridicule, for example, gay and lesbian
relationships as perceived by the mainstream, and in this
study, woman/woman marriages. The problem of representation
is also central to current debates among women worldwide
regarding the status of feminism (see Mohanty, 1991a;
1991b; Spivak, 1990).

Heterogeneity and representation combine to inform the
questions surrounding woman/woman marriages and their
relationship to family studies and western feminism.
Misrepresentation of African families in both the
anthropological and family studies literature has created a
problem for portrayals of family forms such as woman/woman
marriage. African perspectives can be useful for
rehabilitating the discourse and helping to provide a more
equal footing for discussing families that do not fit into
the western, nuclear family mold.

Methods and Description of Cases and Study Location

This research contains a preliminary empirical focus on
the practices of woman/woman marriages among Gikuyu women in
Kenya. Second, it contains a theoretical critique of the
western notion of family, its misrepresentation of other

family forms, and of feminist perspectives that presume a unitary focus on women's oppression.

My study replaces the search for a fictional objectivity with a reflexive approach (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). A reflexive approach attempts to account for the ways that my own life history, including my life in Kenya, schooling, and values, leads to the particular construction of the problem and viewpoints on its resolution that I adopt. The study is thus more honest because in it I do not pretend to present an authentic "truth" that can be treated as a resource of factual information. Rather, my storytelling is intended to remain open to all kinds of suggestions and criticisms, and does not represent a "final word" on the topic.

Thus, my story is not meant to offer a fuller, more coherent, or accurate vision of African families--Gikuyu woman/woman marriages in this case. Instead, I use a form of narrative or storytelling to alter "possible explanatory accounts, by destabilizing the plausibility of some strategies of explanation" (Haraway, 1988, p. 81). Every story on a topic, Haraway (1988) explains, "alters the status of all the others" (p. 81), but does not necessarily replace them. Therefore, mine is just that--an account.

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Preliminary Fieldwork

The empirical data were collected as preliminary fieldwork during a three month return to my home community in Kenya during the summer of 1992, with the permission of my thesis committee. Since Gikuyu woman/woman marriages have not been satisfactorily studied, preliminary research was necessary to explore relevant issues for more comprehensive study in the future. In this sense, the term "preliminary study" implies developing this basic understanding of woman/woman marriage practices and identifying theoretical concerns for future research. The specific information gathered on Gikuyu woman/woman marriages in the preliminary study provides a basis for understanding how these family types differ from and/or resemble other types of families--of where woman/woman marriages stand in relation to prevailing notions of "family" in the literature. In addition, the information gained is important for showing the diversity of types of woman/woman marriage arrangements among the Gikuyu alone. This information is used to inform my assertion that the practices are too diverse even within a single society to be consolidated within a single definition, let alone generalizing a definition of woman/woman marriages for the entire African continent.

Participants

The preliminary study included six households of Gikuyu women who participate in woman/woman marriages. The sample was drawn from households in Murang'a District of Central Province, Kenya. Participants were identified through non-probability, "purposive" sampling (through personal knowledge and key informants) (Denzin, 1989). Prior to data collection, the potential participants were visited three times to inform them about the study and to get to know one another. At this time I also told them that their identities will be kept confidential (their names are changed in this thesis) and of their right to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable in any way. As a native speaker of the Gikuyu language, I translated myself the interviews with the participants.

The location for the study is part of what is known as the Central Highlands. The topography of the area is characterized by a series of ridges and valleys. The overwhelmingly dominant ethnic group in this location, is the Gikuyu (of which I am a member). The Gikuyu were among the very first various groups in the interior of East Africa to come in contact with European colonizers and missionaries, and again the first also to lose much of our indigenous culture for a Christian-based one, resulting in rapidly changing social values. Most Gikuyu people are

either Catholics or Protestants. Thus, more traditional practices, such as woman/woman marriages, that conflict with the new, Eurocentric, Christian values have been systematically devalued through church policies and then transferred to public opinion. For example, the Catholic church (Kenya Catholic Bishops, 1991) devotes an entire paragraph in their guidelines on baptism to "women who 'marry' other women":

> In regard to this traditional practice, the first
> step is to insist that this arrangement be given
> up completely and that meantime all those
> involved, plus any other persons directly
> responsible for the arrangement, be denied the
> Sacraments. After the women have separated
> completely, each one will be helped separately and
> any infants will be baptised following the
> procedures in Case III or Case V, whichever is
> applicable. (p. 21)

In spite of these social pressures, my experience suggests that practices of woman/woman marriage remain relatively common, evidenced in part by the fact I was able to easily locate eight households containing woman/woman marriages in one small village.

Cases of Sample Households

The cases of woman/woman marriage in the preliminary study defy easy categorization. They are diverse and contain a number of types of relationship unfamiliar to most western readers in family studies. What follows are brief

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descriptions of the situations of each woman/woman marriage household, starting with Nduta and Ciru's household.

Nduta and Ciru

Nduta's household is made up primarily of herself, Ciru, her *muka* (wife)[2] of over 20 years, and their six children who range between the ages of five to 25. Nduta is an elderly woman, roughly 90 years old, while Ciru is somewhere between 40 and 45 years old. It is hard to accurately state when Nduta was born, though she belongs to the *riika* ("age-set") of *Kihiu Mwiri*[3]. In their homestead compound, there are three houses, one for Nduta, one for Ciru, and another one their three older sons. The younger children sleep in Ciru's house. Nduta divided her land into two halves, with half belonging to her and the other belonging to Ciru.

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[2] The English term "wife" is used here, although it does not accurately describe these women's characterization of each other. The Gikuyu word *"muka"*, used by all the women to refer to their women partners, translates better as "female" or "woman," and does not carry the gender-role connotations of "wife".

[3] The name of the *riika*, or "age-set," is that which is applied to the cohort of all people circumcised at a particular time. The year the circumcision took place can be traced through a chart found in the National Archives in Nairobi. *Kihiu Mwiri* translates as "body heat", and refers to a memorable event around that circumcision time in which a group of middle-aged women (jokingly) chased a group of newly-circumcised young men for sexual gratification.

Ceke and Ngware

Nduta's daughter, Ceke, and her family live on a plot of land just next-door. Her household is also important in this study because besides being married to a man named Ngigi, she had once at the same time been married to a woman, Ngware, who no longer lives with them for reasons too personal to reveal. Both Ceke and Ngigi are middle-aged, and together they have one daughter, Wahu, who lives permanently with them and who has given birth to several children who, according to Wahu, belong not only to her, but also to her parents who raised them.

In Ceke's compound, there is one main, stone house, which is occupied by Ceke and Ngigi. Wahu and her older son, who is married and has a child, occupy a smaller stone house built next to the main one. Before she left, Ngware lived in the main house as well. There is one common kitchen built separately. Ceke's land is not divided, and everyone helps on the farm. As will be shown later, Wahu's children call Ceke "mother" and live with Ceke in the main house.

Mbura and Nimu

Another household is that of Mbura. She is a middle-aged woman and, like Nduta, it is hard to say exactly when she was born. She belongs to the age-set called

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Ngirigacha (named after the period when colonial
agricultural officers started to appear in the villages to
force "natives" to grow crops for the British). Mbura's
muthuri (husband)[4] died more than 40 years ago, leaving
Mbura and her *muiru* (co-wife)[5] on the same land she still
occupies today. Her co-wife, Nana, left to settle on a
separate piece of land which also belongs to them. Even
though their husband died[6] and they are no longer living in
the same household, they are still considered to be related.
They regularly visit one another, and since Mbura fell sick,
Nana passes by more often to see how she is doing. Like
Mbura, Nana has no children. However, unlike Mbura, who
never conceived or bore children, Nana had several children,
all of whom died shortly after birth. Although she still
maintains her land, Nana today lives with her brother who
actually takes very good care of her. Mbura, on the other
hand, continued to live by herself until she married her
wife, Nimu. They lived together for a couple of years until

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[4] *Muthuri* is translated as "husband," though not
fully adequately. *Muthuri* translates better as "male" or
"man," and does not carry the gender role connotations of
"husband."

[5] *Muiru*, or "co-wife," is a term women in polygynous
marriages apply to one another.

[6] Just to clarify, Mbura and Nana were married to the
same husband, making them co-wives. They are not married to
one another.

Nimu left, leaving Mbura alone again. In Mbura's compound
there are two houses, one in which she lives and the other
built later for Nimu. Mbura married a new wife, Kabura, on
the day I left the field to return to the USA.

Kuhi and Wamba, Wamba and Wambui

The next household is that of Kuhi. At first, Kuhi was
married to a man, Huta. According to Kuhi, after living
together for a while, they decided together that Huta should
go ahead and marry a second wife, Kara. However, a white,
Catholic priest called Petro (who was among the first of the
Catholic missionaries to settle in that location) became
very angry with Kuhi and Huta (both Catholics) for allowing
such an "evil" thing as polygyny to take place. The priest
demanded that Huta choose between the two wives, Kuhi and
Kara, and thus to abandon one of them. After refusing the
priest's order, Huta was excommunicated from the church and
was re-accepted only when he agreed to have a Christian
wedding with his first wife, Kuhi. But even after that, the
priest continued to try to persuade Huta to abandon Kara,
but Huta kept refusing until the priest gave up.

In the midst of this turmoil, Kuhi married a woman named
Wamba. Later on, while still married to Kuhi, Wamba also
married another woman of her own, named Wambui. To add to
this complexity, one of Kara's sons, Maina, married a woman

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(Suzanna) who later also married a woman named Karuna. No interview was conducted with Suzanna or Karuna due to a lack of time and their distance from the study area. Suzanna, who lives with her wife, comes to visit Kuhi's place to see her husband, Maina, who together with his young children (born in a previous marriage) still live with the rest of Kuhi's family in that household. It is common among Gikuyu families for husbands and wives to live apart and yet be married without any connotation of being "separated".

During my visit, Kuhi, Kara, and Wamba had one house each. Huta had died of old age several years earlier. Sadly, Kuhi and Kara died, also of old age, before this preliminary study was completed. Each time I went to see Kuhi, she would beg me to go and pray for her to die, for she was tired of waiting. And each time I returned to her and found her alive, she would jokingly accuse me for not doing "my homework;" for not praying hard enough. According to Kuhi, death was a blessing, and she was ready and waiting. She would say to me, "Sometimes we have to desire death and that is perfectly alright just as sometimes we do not desire it." And for that I must say that I was blessed by Kuhi and her teachings. For, among many things, she taught me to look at death from a new perspective.

Kaba and Ngara

Another family relationship is Kaba's. Kaba is married
to her husband, Nga'nga, and together they have one
daughter, Cici. Cici is married to her husband, Aruta, and
has six children. At the same time, Kaba is married to a
woman, Ngara, who has five children. According to Kaba and
Ngara, all of these five children are from a previous
marriage between Ngara and her former husband, but as Kaba
expressed during the interview, "what difference does that
make. Children are children, and these children are mine."
According to Ngara, the children no longer carry the
identity of their father. He is history, according to her.
The children's last name is now that of Kaba's husband,
Nga'nga.

Instead of dividing their land into halves, one for
each, like in some of the other cases, Kaba and Ngara
decided not to do so, but rather work to produce the best
they can together. According to Kaba, her husband likes the
idea that she and Ngara both work together because it can be
lonesome working by oneself all the time--especially because
he is unable to work due to a serious chronic illness. One
thing that Kaba and Ngara do not do together is share a
house. Each has a separate house. Kaba and her husband
stay in one; Ngara and her younger children in the other.

Her older children, especially the two oldest sons have their own separate house.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I introduced the subject and literature of woman/woman marriages among the Gikuyu and throughout Africa. To address specific research questions connected to this topic, I relied upon several sources of information including interviews among Gikuyu women engaged in such practices as part of a preliminary fieldwork, library materials, as well as my own experiences as someone from the study area. Several cases of woman/woman marriage households were presented to provide an introduction to these practices and their complexity.

CHAPTER 2

WHY WOMAN/WOMAN MARRIAGES? LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSIONS WITH GIKUYU WOMEN

Introduction

This chapter addresses the first research question regarding reasons behind these women's decisions to marry other women. A key part of this question regards the male-centered connotations of the term "female husband", the most prevalent term used to describe women who initiate a woman/woman marriage, and whether it is appropriate for describing the Gikuyu women in this study. Authors using the term "female husband" assert that it describes these women's desire to attain male social characteristics through such a marriage (O'Brien, 1977). Hence, as the initiators of the marriages, they become the "husbands." Oboler (1980) provides the clearest example among the Nandi of Kenya, suggesting that such women literally describe themselves as men.

While authors such as O'Brien (1977) assert that this male-identification is a feature of all woman/woman marriages across the African continent, my observations call such a generalization into serious question. The women in my village gave no indication that they wished to be like men: often their opinions were just the opposite. Some wanted to have little to do with men, let alone take-on

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their characteristics. Such information provides a good starting point for future study.

Existing Literature on Woman/Woman Marriages in Africa

In all of the studies of woman/woman marriage, the authors assert a single, bottom-line feature of such relationships that explains their existence, portraying *the* set of circumstances that must be present to allow such a union to occur. Such explanations are usually functionalist, asserting that such marriage arrangements are adopted by women who find themselves in particular circumstances (and, by implication, in only those circumstances).

For Krige (1974), for example, the right of the mother of whom she calls the "female husband" to the services of a daughter-in-law is the basis of Lovedu woman/woman marriage. Oboler (1980) states of the Nandi that the purpose of woman/woman marriage is to provide a male heir to a woman of advanced age, the female husband, who has failed to bear a son. Leakey (1936/1977) asserts that among the Gikuyu it is barren women who marry women in order to continue their husbands' lineages.

In fact, barrenness appears in the literature as a general theme that unites woman/woman marriage practices throughout Africa: woman/woman marriages are typically seen

as the way for barren women to have children and thereby fulfill their social roles as mothers, or as a way for childless widows to have children and thereby carry-on their husbands' names. For example, Mair (1971, cited in Krige, 1974) states that: "According to Evans-Pritchard's account of the Nuer it is usually barren women who make such marriages, and indeed it is hard to imagine a woman who had her own children doing so" (p. 11). Langley (1979), speaking of the Nandi, said that three types of women practiced woman/woman marriage: those childless married women who are too old for child-bearing, childless widows, or a childless wife unable to conceive. In his study in southern Nigeria, Talbot (1926/1969) also made a similar argument that the practice of woman/woman marriage "is often simply a means employed by a barren woman to avoid losing her position in the household" (p. 431).

While most studies assert social and economic functions, in situations such as barrenness, a few studies also imply that there may be a sexual connotation to these marriages involving preference for same-sex partners. Davis and Whitten (1987), who have not studied woman/woman marriages themselves, state that the main issue in explaining these relationships is over whether reasons for such partnerships are in fact "homoerotic" (p. 87) or strictly socioeconomic.

This issue is not explicitly addressed here due to the
sensitivity of the subject. However, I do not agree that
this dichotomy is the main issue: my experience as well as
interviews with Gikuyu women tells me that neither choice
offered by Davis and Whitten (1987) is adequate. While
these relationships are clearly emotionally-based, and not
simply based on social and economic incentives, there is no
evidence that they are based on a sexual attraction. The
issue of sexuality in woman/woman marriages is an important
topic for future study.

Interviews and conversations with some of the Gikuyu
women suggest multiple and complex explanations for their
engagement in woman/woman marriages, suggesting that
focusing only on one factor obscures the complexity of these
women's relationships.

Summary of Women's Explanations for Marrying Women

Among the reasons offered by these Gikuyu women are some
conventional explanations, such as barrenness. However,
such explanations are never offered as the exclusive reason,
nor are they offered by all women, thus discrediting the
monolithic account of Gikuyu woman/woman marriages provided
by Leakey (1938/1977). Participants' explanations of their
marriages are diverse, and include reasons such as: the

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desire to have a child; marrying for one's dead sons; to
have someone to assist with raising already-present
children; to have one's name remembered after death, just as
men are remembered when they die; because one is advised to
do so; and not least importantly, because it is an available
marriage option that provides relative freedom for women,
without direct domination by men.

Further reasons for marrying are also given by the
women, and include the need for the marriage initiator to
find someone to inherit property; promises of relative
financial security for the woman who is proposed-to;[7] the
desire to perpetuate a woman's homestead and her, as well as
her husband's, family lineage. Some wanted to protect their
lands from being stolen by unscrupulous relatives, and/or to
have someone else to pass land to upon death.

There are a number of ways that the information for this
chapter could be organized. I decided to organize around
the women, rather than around categories of reasons for
marrying. Given the diversity of Gikuyu woman/woman
marriage practices, it seems more appropriate to me to focus
on the women since many of their expressed reasons for
marrying are unique, or only shared by a small number of

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[7] The terms "marriage initiator" and "proposed-to"
women are used for lack of better terms. I use the two
terms to describe the act of marrying someone, and the act
of being married to someone respectively.

situations. Thus, organizing around explanations, then selecting cases that use such explanations, seems less fitting.

All of the women in the preliminary study underwent a marriage ceremony to affirm their relationships. Though the ceremonial aspect is not explored here, and is a potential topic for future study, I can say that the ceremony for woman/woman marriage is no different than that for an opposite sex, traditional (i.e., non-Christian) Gikuyu marriage. Like other marriages, woman/woman marriages are facilitated by clan elders from both women's families (rather than priests or ministers), and involve an exchange of gifts between both families (*ruracio*) as well as dances and food. Thus, such marriages are clearly not hidden or "underground" in any way.

Another issue regards the use of these women's voices to portray their reasons for marrying. Rather than selecting short segments of their words which focus strictly on the point under discussion, I have embedded these specific relevant quotes within their larger discussion context. This approach, on the one hand, avoids some of the artificiality of such selectivity, and on the other, provides a fuller picture of these women's expressed thoughts and feelings as a demonstration of the complexity

of the practices. What follows are two preliminary cases of women and their households, starting with Nduta.

Nduta

Nduta was born at Wangu wa Makeri's place (a famous Gikuyu "queen", forced out of power by the British colonizers in the early 19th century), called Koimbi, in Murang'a District. Her parents moved to the study area when she was a young girl where she has been living ever since. There she fell in love with a man called Ndungu whom she married and with whom she had three sons. Early in their marriage, she said her husband and their three sons were poisoned to death by some people in her husband's clan who desired to take possession of lands that Nduta's *nyaciara*[8] had given to Nduta and her husband. After realizing that Nduta's husband and children had all died, except for her daughter, Ceke, Nduta's *nyaciara* advised Nduta to marry a woman as a way of protecting their family from being destroyed by those who wished to steal their land. However, even though her *nyaciara* influenced Nduta in her decision to marry another woman, Nduta asserts that she would have married a woman anyway even without that advice.

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[8] The Gikuyu word for "mother-in-law".

Being brought up in Gikuyu ways of living, Nduta knew
that woman/woman marriages were fairly common and was aware
that they were empowering options, whether her *nyaciara* had
anything to do with it or not. Thus, *nyaciara's* advice,
together with Nduta's awareness of the woman/woman marriage
option, created one of the factors that led Nduta to marry
another woman. This is what Nduta said during the
preliminary fieldwork regarding that situation:

> My *nyaciara* advised and guided me on this matter.
> My *nyaciara* told me that it was my responsibility
> to bring the seed back home.[9] Some people might
> look down on and even reject *kirira*,[10] but I can
> assure you that *kirira* does help. *Nyaciara*
> introduced me to this journey of woman/woman
> marriage. She warned me that since my man and my
> children were not given a chance to live, what
> they want is to occupy our properties by force.
> She said, 'Make a strong move and marry a woman
> who shall protect our family as well as our
> properties.' ...I have never quarrelled with my
> *nyaciara*. I respected her deeply, needless to
> say, that even if she did not recommend me to the
> practice for sure, my own hands are sources of
> wealth. There is nothing in this world that these
> hands of mine won't do, even today. That I and
> everyone here know too well. I had style and
> dignity like a Gikuyu woman. When a woman is left
> alone, she should not be frightened, but must be
> brave. You must make yourself a queen, otherwise,
> be a coward and everything you stand for will be
> taken away from you by those who are hungry for
> what you have... If you were a woman, and you had
> properties, you will be the first one to be stolen
> from by the men who thought they were more
> important than women. So, she must act. In fact
> these men were acting like there shall never be

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[9] *"Guchokia mbeu mucii"*.

[10] A Gikuyu term for education or advice.

borne no other men but them. They would say to me, 'Look at her, a woman without a son.' And I would ask them, 'What is it that buys a son, if at all a son is bought and not borne?' And it is them who actually poisoned my children so that they could steal my land from me. Them you see there building that house. I'm related to them. My mother was born in their clan--Ambui.[11] And I tell you, even if one is related to someone, no one has got a right to do that to anyone. One must stick to what belongs to oneself and let others stick to what belongs to them. If you were a woman without a son, you were considered to be a nobody. I had a lot of properties and if it were not for the pen that cheated me out of many of them, I would still have a lot.[12] I lost many of them because I was a woman and I had no sons. So, my *nyaciara* advised me to marry my own woman because all my people had been finished [i.e., killed] except for my daughter. And that is the piece of advice that I myself chose to follow. So I married her. When I married her, she said 'It is better to live with a woman. I'm tired of men.' I responded, 'Is that so?! I love that.' We became good friends and partners and thereafter I gave *ruracio*[13] to her family.

Some readers might see this expression as supporting a view in the literature that Gikuyu women marry woman as a strategy for protecting lands from theft (e.g., Mackenzie,

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[11] Ambui is the name for one of the clans among Gikuyu people.

[12] The "pen" refers to the use of title deeds that conferred private ownership of property since the 1960s. This private ownership was started under colonial rule and undermined (though did not eliminate completely) more traditional land tenure rules.

[13] *Ruracio* is a token gift, given to the family of the wife, symbolizing that she will be taken care of and not abused in any way. This custom was totally taken out of context by colonizers and anthropologists alike who defined it as "dowry" or "bride-price".

1986). While this explanation has some truth, Nduta's situation is not easily reduced to that explanation alone. While Nduta married a woman partly to avoid having her lands stolen, such a marriage was not her only available option for achieving this goal. A much simpler arrangement was right in front of her to achieve the goal of protecting her land.

According to common local perceptions of Gikuyu traditions, sons are typically supposed to stay at their birth homes permanently to inherit family property, and to continue the family lineage (whether they like it or not), while the daughters are supposed to leave (through marriage or otherwise) to create their own family as well as continuing their family of origin elsewhere. However, even though it is typical for sons to stay at home, any child, daughter or son, can do so and inherit land. Thus, her daughter, Ceke, could have inherited the land, protecting it from others. Even though she had a daughter still alive who could inherit the property, Nduta chose to marry another woman.

Nduta explains why she allowed her daughter, Ceke, the freedom to marry and move out instead of being expected to stay because there was no other child to continue that family:

Why would a woman in her right mind want to choose
to stay at her birth-home permanently? Women
always want to leave and go to their husband's
place or wherever. It is better to leave, and
come back to visit. Because if you are a daughter
and happen to stay at you birth-home, you can
expect to be under authority of virtually everyone
in that family. Everyone would make a slave out
of you. So if you want to have authority
yourself, you have to leave and find it elsewhere.
Find your own someone to rule (she laughs).
Therefore, with that picture in mind, I didn't
want my daughter, Ceke, to stay here. I gave her
freedom to fly and land wherever she wanted. That
is the same freedom that brought me here. So why
would I want to hold her here? Women like to go
far. They don't like to be held down at their
birth-home.

In spite of this freedom given by her mother, Ceke chose

not to leave her mother behind after marrying her husband,

Ngigi. As a result, her mother gave them many pieces of

land, one of which is located just next door to Nduta's

house, and upon which they built their own house and

settled. Why was Nduta's daughter's availability not enough

to fulfill Nduta's desire to keep property from the hands of

undesirable family members? That is, why did Nduta marry

another woman when the same effect on property inheritance

could have been served by her daughter?

There are other reasons besides her need to protect

property, following advice from her *nyaciara*, or recognizing

woman/woman marriage as an empowering option for her. These

other reasons become clearer as one listens to Nduta talk

about her dead sons who occasionally pay her visits in her

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sleep, thanking her for marrying a woman for them as a way of bringing them back home again:[14]

> The spirits of my dead sons come to visit me to show appreciation for what I have done for them. One time they came and told me, 'Thank you *maitu*[15] for marrying Ciru for us. We are very grateful for bringing us dead people back home again. We are grateful indeed. For that we will always be watching over you. Nothing will ever harm you. We will take care of you.' And then I would say, 'If I didn't marry Ciru for them, who else would I have married her for?' Then the other day they came to tell me that I have got only five years to live; that I'm going to die soon (she laughs hard). I said, 'Is that so? Thanks a lot and may *Ngai*[16] be praised!' That is fine for me. I need rest.

Thus, another reason has now emerged why Nduta married Ciru. That is, she married for her sons who died long ago, and very young, and had, therefore, not been able to accomplish much. Why would this marriage "for her sons" be important? Some Gikuyu people believe that if one dies suddenly, their life activities can be carried on as if they are still alive (even though everyone acknowledges that they are dead) so that their opportunities would not be denied.

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[14] This means that when their mother married Ciru, she married her the same way these sons would have married women if they had lived. In this sense, even though these sons were already dead, they feel quite at home because of Ciru's presence.

[15] A Gikuyu word for "mother".

[16] *Ngai* translates at "Supreme Consciousness", the Great Divider (the one who loves and divides everything equally to all being), or God.

Such cultural beliefs and traditions are much more complex
than my explanation. To understand them, we would probably
need *kirira* from older Gikuyu people who know much about
that.

Without having to ask, Nduta and Ciru told me how they
feel about one another. Their words did not in any way
resemble portrayals of "emotionless" relationships among
Africans (discussed in Chapter Three), typical of many
anthropological writings (e.g., Kilbride & Kilbride, 1990).
Nduta proclaims her feelings for her wife. In this passage,
she also expresses that she does not consider herself to be
a man, or playing the role of a man simply because she
married Ciru:

> No one dare to disturb my wife in any way, and
> especially knowing what I would do to them. No
> one dares point a finger at her. I tell her to
> proudly proclaim her belongingness to me, and I to
> her, and also to Ndungu, who, if not for him I
> wouldn't have been here. For these people laugh
> at me saying that I am a man. I'm not a man. I'm
> neither a man nor a woman. That is who I am, like
> a decent being. So I tell them. I have to be
> strong. Well, I'm not a man... What I hate most
> is when people come to gossip to me about my
> wife's whereabouts or who they have seen her with.
> I don't care as long as she is here for me now and
> even after I am gone....Regardless of what she
> does, she is here because of me. Then why should
> I tell her what to do and what not to do. She is
> a free woman. And that is what I want her to be.
> So, when they come here to gossip, I tell them to
> leave her alone. She is mine and she is here on
> my property, not yours. I ask them, 'What is it
> that you come here to tell me?....So, leave her
> alone.' She who sincerely loved me and I loved
> back, let her stay mine. It is she who shall

enshrine and take over this household when my time comes.

The views of Nduta's wife, Ciru, were important in this interview considering that earlier studies never mentioned the women at the receiving end of the marriage proposal. They only mention the marriage initiator, typically referred to in the literature as the "female husband".

Ciru: Nduta's *Muka*

Ciru is a middle-aged woman, and she has been married to Nduta for more than two decades. She was born not far from where she lives now, and she knew Nduta when she was a young girl. She said that although she used to admire Nduta when growing up, little did she know that one day she would be married to her. Ciru said that she no longer had to worry about who will do this or that for her because, married to Nduta, she had to learn to be independent, making all her decisions by herself. She and Nduta take care of each other, and although she is quite aware of some people's negative gossip regarding their marriage, she doubts whether there is there anything that women who are married to men have that she does not. What follows is a rather moving, lengthy quote by Ciru in which she expresses her feelings for Nduta, along with Ciru's and her children's satisfaction with their involvement in a woman/woman marriage with Nduta:

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I married Nduta. She is very strong. Nothing
ever scares her. I'm supposed to have been
married for her sons who died a long time ago, but
I'm also Nduta's wife because we are partners in
every way. All of my children are her children
too; even the ones that I brought here with me
from the previous relationships. We care about
one another. If I'm sick, she is the one who
looks after me, not to mention paying all the
medical payments. I do take care of her too when
she is not well. When I get up in the morning, I
never expect a man to be there to support me. I
get up knowing that I have got my own two hands to
support myself just like Nduta has taught me.
When I came here, Nduta divided her lands into two
halves, one half for me and the other half for
herself. Nduta's daughter was already given hers.
So, I have got my own land, and Nduta has got
hers. We work very well that way. I plant
whatever I wish and she plants whatever she wishes
without anyone stopping the other. During the
harvesting we do assist one another and especially
when one of us is lagging behind. Then, after, we
do whatever we each want with our crops as long as
there is enough food available...

I know that some people do talk negatively about our
marriage although honestly I have never caught anybody
personally. But I ask myself, 'What is it that women
who are married to men have that I don't have? Is it
land? I have land. Is it children? I have children.
I don't have a man, but I have a woman who cares for
me. I belong to her and she belongs to me. And I tell
you, I don't have to worry about a man telling me what
to do. Here, I make all the decisions for myself.
Nduta likes women who are able to stand on their own,
like herself. I do what I want and the same goes for
Nduta. Now I'm so used to being independent, and I
like that a lot. I married Nduta because I knew we
could live together well. She is a very wonderful
woman with a kind heart. Everybody here knows her as a
very hardworking and a very strong-willed woman. I
tell you, she is very tough. Nobody can mess with
Nduta. Don't you know that yourself? If you come from
this village you must already know that about her. And
she is funny too. She gives me a lot of education and
she tells me and the children many stories. My son,
the one who has eye problems, once told me that if I
ever decide to leave Nduta that I will leave by myself;

that they will not come with me because they also
belong to Nduta and they will never leave her. Oh,
they love her! When my son, the oldest one, the one
who works in Nairobi, comes home, even if it is just
for a day, he would not go back without seeing her with
his own eyes no matter where she is. Even if he has
got nothing for everyone, he must have something for
Nduta. We are all here because of Nduta and nobody can
change that.

Her words hardly need elaboration. However, some of
Ciru's words point to why she married Nduta. She was
attracted to Nduta's independence and strength as well as
that she desired the independence for herself that she saw
in such a relationship. Also, Ciru indicated that she
"married Nduta because she knew they could live together
well and that Nduta is a very wonderful woman with a kind
heart."

Ceke: Nduta's Daughter

Other women in Nduta's family have followed her example
and have opted for woman/woman marriages. One such person
is Nduta's own daughter, Ceke. Like her mother, Ceke has
got only one daughter, whom Nduta insisted be named after
herself. Gikuyu naming customs, which are almost
universally followed, demand that a family's first girl be
named for the husband's mother. Thus, Nduta's actions
express her independent spirit. As Nduta states:

Who cares about that tradition. I said I am the one
the child will be named after. After all, I am the
founder of this family.

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Although Ceke did marry a woman, unlike her mother she was at the same time still married and living with her husband, Ngigi. According to Ceke, she married a woman, Ngware, so that through this woman and Ceke's husband, Ceke could have more children. Despite her great desire to have more children, Ceke was unable to have more than her one child, Wahu, and her marriage to another woman provided a way to fulfill that obligation. While the literature suggests that women marry women to continue a lineage, I suggest that there is a difference between desiring to have more children for the sake of wanting children, and wanting children so that there are family members around to continue one's family lineage and to inherit property. Ceke did not need children to carry on the lineage since she already had a daughter present who could do that for her. In Ceke's case, according to her, she simply desired to have more children. This desire will be noted again later in Mbura's case, whose desire for having a child was enormous.

Ceke's multiple marriage could be mistaken for a polygynous marriage whereby a husband has got two or more wives. The assumption from an outsider's perspective might be that Ndungu is married to two women, rather than the reality that he is married to Ceke, and Ceke is married to Ngware.

As with other Gikuyu woman/woman marriages in this situation, Ceke's decision to marry a woman does not depend on her husband's approval. However, before such marriages take place, according to Ceke, the issue is usually thoroughly discussed between the people involved and especially between the woman initiating the marriage, her husband, and the woman who is proposed-to, to ensure that everyone's wishes are met.

Why didn't Ceke's husband just marry a second wife? Why did a woman/woman marriage take place rather than a more typical polygynous one? Although this should be explored further in future research, one possible explanation based on my experience is that women in Gikuyu society have some power to decide what is good for themselves. It is clearly not the case that all women have equal power with men in their households or in the Gikuyu society generally. However, for those women, like Nduta and Ceke, who are personally more powerful, there is still social acceptance for them asserting their will, despite social changes through Christianization and westernization that have resulted in a generally demoted women's status (Mazrui, 1986). This is the case with Ceke, who said she undertakes all sorts of activities without feeling obligated to consult anyone, just like her husband does.

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There are several things that I learned from Ceke's case. One is that what seemed to bother her was the fact that she simply was not able to have more children, as she desired. That experience bothered her to the extent that even after raising and becoming attached to her daughter's children, who called her "mother", she was afraid that one day they will disappear from her home. She told me that to protect herself from such a loss, she married her wife Ngware, and only after Ngware left due to a breakdown in the domestic agreement did Ceke approach her daughter, Wahu, to find out what she should expect regarding Wahu's children; that is, whether Wahu had any plans of ever moving them away from Ceke's place. As Ceke states:

> Although my daughter was living with me at the
> time, and had all these children that you see
> here, I did not know what to expect from her. I
> did not know whether one day I will wake up and
> find her gone with all her children that I
> personally have raised and who actually call me
> mother, or whether she had already made up her
> mind that she will never leave. I made that move
> of wanting to find out when my wife left us.
> After that, my husband and I made an agreement
> with her that she will live with us permanently
> and that if she will ever feel like leaving, her
> children that we have raised as our own will be
> welcome to remain with us where they are already
> guaranteed good care as well as land settlement
> when they grow up. In any case, this is her land
> too, you know. Since we have got no other
> children, everything we have belongs to her and
> her children and to my other son borne by my wife
> before she left.

As she indicated, the agreement Ceke made with her daughter guaranteed the presence of her daughter's children in Ceke's home. Even after Ngware left her, Ceke did not simply forget their son who was born as a result of their marriage. Certainly, Ceke acknowledges that child as her son who also has a stake in her properties.

Mbura

Of the women interviewed, Mbura is the one who lives closest to my mother's house: it takes about ten minutes to get to her house. Mbura's house is located just opposite my former elementary school, and I remember how she used to feed my friends and me mangoes, bananas and any other foods from her home during lunch hours at school. Like Nduta and Ceke, I grew up knowing Mbura not just as a woman who loved children, but also as someone who was very famous locally, and very tough, whom no one messed with. At the time of the interviews, I was surprised to see that school-children still flock to her house, as my friends and I did when we were little.

Mbura discussed many things with me, including her frustration over being unable to have a child of her own with her husband, who died four decades ago, leaving her by herself. Mbura discussed several motivations for her involvement in a woman/woman marriage with Nimu. One

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motivation was the desire to have a baby. According to
Mbura, she wanted to have children so badly that even the
sound of a baby crying was enough to make her cry, not only
because of sadness, but also because of joy. Her stated
reasons for marrying are clear:

> I married Nimu because I never could have children
> myself. I did not even give birth to children who
> later died, nor did I experience any miscarriage.
> I remained the way I came out of my mother's womb.
> And now I'm getting old and there is no way I can
> sit, think and decide to have a baby. Because my
> time is over, unless *Ngai*'s miracle happens to me
> (she laughs). I think a lot about how my husband
> left me and how I can't have a baby. That is why
> a cry of a baby makes me happy and sad at the same
> time. One has to realize how special a child
> is....So, when I think about all these things: how
> I can't have a child, how my husband died and
> left me nothing, and how I have this illness, I
> ask *Ngai* to please bless me with another
> woman....'Won't you please send that woman here to
> my home'. Who knows, that woman might...give me a
> child....Don't you see when I die I will be
> satisfied that I have left somebody in that home,
> who shall continue and revive that home?

Mbura states two reasons for choosing a woman/woman
marriage: she desires children for their own sake, and she
wants a child to continue the family lineage. I think that
these must be looked at as separate factors that are
intertwined, without privileging one over the other, as the
latter is privileged in the literature. These two reasons
cannot be reduced to the single explanation that children
are desired simply to continue a lineage (as does Leakey
1938/1977).

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Another related reason Mbura chose woman/woman marriage, according to her, is so that she would be remembered when she dies, just as her husband is remembered to this day. The following is an example of Mbura making that statement:

> if I were to die even as we speak, that would be
> the end of it. I would be completely forgotten.
> No one would ever mention my name. That is simply
> because there would be no one to carry on my
> name. Since my husband died he is still
> remembered by many. But the key reason why he is
> still remembered is because of me. Someone may
> pass through here and demand to know 'Whose home
> is that?' Then turn around and ask, 'What about
> the next one?' One would reply, 'Did you know so
> and so? This is his wife's home.' Now do you see
> that the reason he is being remembered is because
> of me. Because I can be seen. But, if I were to
> die, who will make me be remembered?.... That is
> why the idea of marrying another woman came to me.
> Even now as we speak, if *Ngai* would bless me with
> another woman, I would appreciate her. That is
> why I even have that house you see there. I built
> that house for my previous wife before she came
> here....So, if another one shall come here, I
> shall accept her. Or if the previous one decides
> to come back, that's okay. I shall accept her
> too. After all, she was once mine....I had gone
> for her, but she didn't feel like coming back yet.
> That's okay. I'm still here, and I have not given
> up the idea of marrying another woman yet. One of
> these days you will find a woman here. You will
> see.

Mbura also expressed that loneliness was a factor in choosing a woman/woman marriage to Nimu. Emotional factors such as loneliness are simply ignored in the woman/woman marriage literature:

> Let me tell you, Wairimu, I'm not the only one or
> the first one to marry a woman. And certainly,

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there are many others out there like me. I'm all
alone just like that. No husband, no child, just
poor me. No one is here to keep me company or
even to ask me *"Uraire atia?"*[17], except for
occasional visits by some people like those you
met here the other day.

Finally, Mbura states that protection of property is

also a reason for marrying Nimu. While explanations for

marrying women in many of the cases discussed above do often

include reasons privileged in the literature, such as this

last expression in Mbura's case, there are also a number of

other explanations given by these women that do not clearly

privilege economic motives, or social prescriptions. Future

research should focus more intensely on this issue as it has

possibly important implications for problematizing prevalent

dichotomies in social theory, such as idealism vs.

materialism and structure vs. agency.

Now the discussion turns from women's reasons for

marrying women to a critique of widely-used terminology for

describing woman/woman marriages in the literature.

Is "Female Husband" a Useful Term?

Several terms used in the literature regarding

woman/woman marriages are problematic, including the term

"woman/woman marriage." While a critique of this term is

postponed for future consideration, it should be noted that

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[17] "Did you sleep well?"

the Gikuyu language does not have a term for "woman/woman marriage." Gikuyu people, including the women involved, do not make a verbal distinction between woman/woman and other marriage forms.

Other terms, such as "wife," as mentioned in footnote # 2, are also inadequate translations of Gikuyu concepts into the English language. The focus of this section, however, is on the use of the term "husband" to describe certain women in woman/woman marriage arrangements. My argument here, based on the preliminary fieldwork among these Gikuyu women, is that the term "female husband" is inappropriate for describing women who initiate woman/woman marriages. I see no reason, based on my experience as a Gikuyu person and on the interviews, why these relationships must be dichotomized into male versus female roles. It reminds one of the "butch/femme" constructions portrayed in many heterosexist views of lesbian relationships.

Descriptions of woman/woman marriages have tended to portray the practices as the expression of male-centered social values, or, as Evans-Pritchard (1951) states of the Nuer (Sudan), it is women playing the role of men; leading him to call women engaged in such practices "female husbands." In virtually every study, authors seek to define the female only in comparison to the male. Talbot (1926/1969), in his study of southern Nigeria, also refers

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to women who marry other women as "female-husbands."
Herskovits (1937), in his study of Dahomean society in West
Africa, contends that the woman initiating a woman-marriage
"supports all the payments of gifts decreed for this form of
marriage in the same manner as though she were a man" (p.
320), and she is regarded as a husband and called so by her
wife. Similarly, Gray and Gulliver (1964) stated that:

> the queen and women who rule districts on behalf of a
> deceased or non-existent brother are called 'husband'
> by their 'wives' when they marry on behalf of their own
> lineage, and papa (father) by the children of these
> wives, just as though they were men. (p. 166)

Evans-Pritchard (1951) commented, regarding the Nuer,
that the woman who marries another "administers her home and
herd as a man would do, being treated by her wives and
children with the deference they would show a male husband
and father" (pp. 108-109). He also added that "her children
are called after her, as though she were a man" (p. 108).
Seligman and Seligman (1932/1965), also regarding the Nuer,
stated similarly that, after a childless widow marries
another woman, she is regarded as a husband, and the
children born out of such a marriage are supposed to call
her "father."

More recent studies perpetuate this older trend. Oboler
(1980) asserts that those women actively take-on a male
gender identity. Oboler (1980) opens her paper with a quote
from one of her informants: "No, I don't (carry things on my

head). That is a woman's duty and nothing to do with me. I became a man and I am a man and that is that. Why should I assume women's work anymore?" (p. 69). O'Brien (1977) holds the view that, in general, African woman/woman marriages represent an accommodation to patriarchy. Not surprisingly, therefore, autonomous women's power is denied as an explanation, evident in her choice of the synonym "female husband" and in her conclusion:

> Given the data currently available, we can conclude that in at least some societies, if women are expected either to exercise power or to symbolize power, they must be conceptualized as male, or at least must not take on the subordinate status of wife. Women with a high ascribed status are already "royal," perhaps "divine," but they may still need a male element to mark their elevated roles. Women who achieve high political status may even have a greater need for some dramatic marker to symbolize their new role and set them apart from other women. What more effective symbol than a reversal from the expected roles of wife and mother to those of husband and father? (O'Brien, 1977, p. 122)

The term's justification is that it describes the woman who takes what is seen as the male role in the marriage. I see this as a sexist, and a heterosexist, notion that one who approaches another for marriage necessarily should be viewed as male and heterosexual. While O'Brien (1977) asserts that the female husband label can be generalized across cultures, it does not seem to apply in the Gikuyu context.

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On the one hand, I am suspicious of the English translations of words in these other studies that are taken to mean "male," "man," and "husband." As I had pointed out earlier with the term "wife", the Gikuyu term *"muka"* does not carry the gender-role connotations of its English so-called equivalent. As translation is ultimately political (Spivak, 1992), two translations from varying perspectives can yield greatly divergent results. Thus, while I cannot address the quality of earlier translations from other languages, I can assert that they should not be accepted uncritically.

On the other hand, my dislike is not only of the male-identified sound of the term "female husband", but more empirically, because the Gikuyu women in my preliminary field study did not see their situations in that way. To give one example, what follows is Nduta's perception of herself:

> All of them [her entire family] are very important to me. I dislike no one. They are all mine: they belong to me. Why should I dislike anyone...If I were to run away from here you would see them running after me (she laughs), saying 'Where are you going. Come back!' I stayed at Nairobi for three weeks at my daughter's house, and when I came back they were joyfully shouting 'She is back!' And because I brought them bread just like other men who work in the city do around here, the children started shouting, 'Here comes our *baba!*[18] Our *baba* has arrived! Our *baba* has arrived!' (she

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[18] *Baba* is pronounced "fava", and means "father".

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laughs). I called them *ndungana ici*.[19] 'Who told you that I am your *baba*? (she laughs again). So I asked them, 'Is that what you see me as? I'm not your *baba*. But thank you for appreciating that I also bring bread home.' Therefore, even when you see me quarrel with them sometimes, I don't store those quarrels in my heart. I founded this family not to destroy it but to care for it.

Another example of Nduta's resistance to "male-identification" was previous displayed in this chapter when Nduta was proclaiming her feelings for her wife, Ciru. As she stated:

For these people laugh at me saying that I am a man. I'm not a man. I'm neither a man nor a woman. That is who I am, like a decent being. So I tell them. I have to be strong. Well, I'm not a man.

Describing women who marry other women as "female husbands," or as simply trying to achieve male social characteristics through such marriages is a matter of concern that needs careful rethinking in future research.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I discuss some of the explanations given by Gikuyu women in this preliminary study for why they engage in woman/woman marriages. Anthropological studies conducted earlier on these practices emphasized single-factor explanations for their occurrences, hence implying

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[19] *Ndungana ici* is a term used by older people to make fun of younger people. A translation is too difficult to attempt.

that there is no diversity among these relationships. Based on the preliminary field work, literature review, and my experience in Kenya, I argue that woman/woman marriages among the Gikuyu are diverse. They often take complex forms that are not adequately covered or predicted by single-explanation definitions or descriptions.

During the interviews with the women, multiple explanations for marrying other women were indicated. I argued also that the term "female husband," adopted by researchers to describe the marriage initiator, is not an appropriate term because it demeans these women's experiences. What I brought to this chapter is just a preliminary demonstration of woman/woman marriage complexities. I suggest that much remains to be studied regarding woman/woman marriages, and that future research should be geared towards learning about these practices without marginalizing any of these women's experiences.

CHAPTER 3

EXCLUDING WOMAN/WOMAN MARRIAGES FROM
FEMINIST DISCOURSES

Introduction

This chapter deals with the third research question,
asking why woman/woman marriages are excluded from feminist
discourses. I argue that one way to understand this
exclusion is by paying attention to the marginalization of
African voices within feminist discourse as well as the ways
many western feminists perceive and represent so-called
"third world women." In Africa, for example, feminists'
privileging of "female circumcision" provides a clear
example of what I perceive as problematic representation of
African women. The way such issues are presented
homogenizes all African women as primarily victims of
oppression and nothing else, leaving little space for
discussing ways that African women resist oppression.

By Using the Phrase "Western Feminist"...

By using the homogenizing term "western feminist," I am
not trying to imply that the view from this part of the
world is monolithic. Rather, as Mohanty (1991b) states, "I
am attempting to draw attention to the similar effects of
various textual strategies used by writers which codify
Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly)

Western" (p. 52). In other words, the global divisions that allow a portrayal of "First" and "Third" world has been internalized to the extent that western feminists are self-identified as such, and my use of the term simply reflects that.

However, I recognize that many feminists who fall under the umbrella of "western feminists" are themselves marginalized and their experiences colonized. Such is the case of feminists "of color," lesbian feminists, and lesbian feminists "of color," whose criticisms parallel those of the so-called "third world women". I also recognize that still others who fall under the label "western feminists," such as Haraway (1990), Spelman (1988), Mies (1986), and many more, have taken pains to re-evaluate the way western feminists perceive women not situated in the west.

Haraway (1991), self-critically points out how Euro-American feminist humanism is based on master narratives "deeply indebted to racism and colonialism" (p. 1). She emphasizes a view raised by many "third world women" that "adopting a non-fragmented conception of "woman" provides "an excuse for the matrix of women's domination of each other" (Haraway, 1990, p. 197). She also makes a crucial observation that "there is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed

in contested scientific discourses and other social practices" (Haraway, 1990, p. 197).

Spelman's (1988) concern about white, middle-class, western feminists, like herself, also raises an important question: What do feminists have in mind when they talk about women's differences?

> if we assume there are differences among women, but at the same time they are all the same as women, and if we assume the woman part is what we know from looking at the case of white middle-class women, then we appear to be talking about differences among women even though we are actually talking only about white middle-class women. This is how white middle-class privilege is maintained even as we purport to recognize the importance of women's differences. *Such privilege will thrive as long as there are lots of ways of appearing to talk about differences among women without really doing so* [italics added]. (p. 167)

She refers to "the phrase 'as a woman' as the Trojan Horse of feminist ethnocentrism, for its usage typically makes it look as if one can neatly isolate one's gender from one's race or class" (Spelman, 1988, p. 167). If that is not the case, Spelman asks then "how could it ever have seemed logical for some women to say to others: 'No, don't tell me about what it is like to be Hispanic, just what it is to be a woman,' or 'Let's just focus on women's issues, not on Arab-Israeli issues'" (p. 167). As an extension of that view, she asks another question: "Have white women ever ashed themselves to distinguish between being white and being a woman?" (Spelman, 1988, p. 167).

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Mies (1986) writes about colonization, housewifization, and the international division of labor, making a very significant contribution to feminist discourse. Her contribution is partly a self-criticism that shows how high standards of living in the west (including its women), and among elite men and women of South, are based upon the ongoing exploitation and domination of poor women and men in the "third world," suggesting that "it is not enough to say that all women are exploited and oppressed by men" (Mies, 1986, p. 1).

While there are many feminists whose writings are sympathetic towards those women of the "third world," Mohanty (1991b) points out that not all feminists from the west adopt such self-critical approaches and hence warrant critique:

> It is only by understanding the contradictions inherent in women's location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised....While there are now an increasing number of Western feminist writings in this tradition, there is also, unfortunately, a large block of writing which succumbs to the cultural reductionism... (p. 66)

Western Feminists and "Third World Women"

There is a pretence to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist.

Audrey Lorde

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Mohanty (1991a) provides an appropriate context for
starting the discussion of feminism and its exclusion of
woman/woman marriages, stating that "third world women" are
very often located by western feminists

> in terms of the underdevelopment, oppressive
> traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty,
> religious fanaticism, and 'overpopulation' of
> particular Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin
> American countries... [D]efining third world women in
> terms of their 'problems' or their 'achievements' in
> relation to an imagined free white liberal democracy
> effectively removes them (and the 'liberal democracy')
> from history, freezing them in time and space. (pp. 5-
> 6, 7)

My own perceptions of feminism have been influenced not
only by continual exposure to different literatures on
women, but also by my own construction of my experiences as
a rurally-based African woman currently living and studying
in the USA. My background, in part, has led me to
appreciate writings by minority women in the USA and so-
called "third world women" who adopt a critical position
regarding feminism, but still engage in anti-sexist
politics. Just as many such women point to their exclusion
from the dominant feminist discourse, I too, from personal
experience have felt marginalized.

I have experienced, for example, 23 years of picking
coffee with my mother on my small farm with little (and
often no) financial reward, understanding that this coffee
would be consumed in Europe and North America by *both* men

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and women who have historically dominated the "third world" through racial and cultural prejudices and imperialism. Having been in the USA for a number of years, where I have literally tasted coffee for my first time,[20] I have never seen a single feminist protest march/demonstration over the meager wages and deplorable working conditions of those "third world women" who grow their coffee, sew their clothing, assemble their children's toys, pick their fruits, etc. Rather, the only visible feminist protests are over issues that are important, but only of direct concern to women in the west.

Criticizing western feminism is not without risk, and it is not surprising that such views are resisted by more mainstream feminists (e.g., see the discussion between Urvashi Vaid, Naomi Wolf, Gloria Steinem, and bell hooks, in Vaid et al., 1993). As bell hooks (1984) points out regarding her personal experience in feminist activism, questioning the dominant feminism discourse can result in one's being dismissed as anti-feminist:

> If we [Black women] dared to criticize the movement or to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing new ideas, our voices were tuned out, dismissed, silenced. We could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse. (pp. 11-12)

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[20] Coffee, though grown by many rural farmers in central Kenya, is too expensive after processing to be purchased by most people there, including my family.

Spelman (1988) makes an equally relevant point on the issue of "tolerance" regarding the "problem of difference" in feminist discourse. She suggests that white, middle-class women's tolerance of "other" women might well stop at simply hearing their voices without resulting in any serious self-criticism within the dominant discourse:

> as long as I am simply tolerating your viewpoint, not actively seeking it out and taking seriously how it represents a critique of my own--indeed not wondering what it means to you apart from its representing a critique of me--I have not given any indication that I might be prepared to change my privileged position. This is especially clear if on examination of what I am now 'allowing' you to say, it turns out that there are limits on what I will allow you to talk about or how I allow you to talk about it. For example, I might only let you speak or continue listening to you as long as you don't make me too uncomfortable. (p. 182)

Minh-ha points out the thin line that "third world women" must walk when challenging the dominant feminist discourse. Such women, she suggests, must identify with feminism in the struggle for improving women's situations, but also maintain a distance:

> The fact is that we are standing on a very precious line. I see the women's movement as being necessarily heterogeneous in its origin, even though it may be claimed more readily by certain groups and remains largely white in its visibility. On the one hand, I readily acknowledge my debt to the movement in all the reflections advanced on the oppression of women of colour. On the other hand, I also feel that a critical space of differentiation needs to be maintained since issues specifically raised by Third World women have less to do with questions of cultural difference than with a different notion of feminism itself--how it is lived and how it is practiced. In a context of marginalization, at the same time as you feel the

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necessity to call yourself a feminist while fighting
for the situation of women, you also have to keep a
certain latitude and to refuse that label when feminism
tends to become an occupied territory. Here, you
refuse,not because you don't want to side with other
feminists, but simply because it is crucial to keep
open the space of naming in feminism. (in Pramar, 1990,
pp. 65-66)

I pursue in this section the notion that many western

feminists privilege those aspects of life among those

"other" women that support a view of universal women's

oppression while neglecting those aspects that portray

African women's sources of strength or empowerment, such as

woman/woman marriages. Furthermore, I argue that in their

quest to help liberate their oppressed "sisters" in the so-

called "third world," western feminist discourse is

paternalistic, suggesting that they not only understand the

problems of "third world women," but also that they are

needed by third world women to represent them. As Bourdieu

(1984/85) states, the most important "fact" that the

representative must establish is that his or her presence is

necessary.

As Mohanty (1991a) states, many third world women engage

with feminism, understanding the importance of an explicit

focus on women's conditions, but the term "feminism" is

often seen as problematic among these women for not only its

white, western origins, but also for what it has tended to

exclude from view. Mohanty (1991a) suggests that:

The term *feminism* is itself questioned by many third
world women. Feminist movements have been challenged
on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of
shortsightedness in defining the meaning of gender in
terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms
of internal racism, classism, and homophobia. (p. 7)

Furthermore, western feminist approaches are often

perceived in the third world as too narrow, focusing on

"women's rights" while not also including broader issues of

racism, imperialism, and international division of labor

that go beyond a simple female vs. male dichotomy (Johnson-

Odim, 1991; Mies, 1986). Feminist authors, like Harding

(1991), who assert that the term "feminism" is often used as

an epithet in the third world "by women as well as men, to

prevent women from organizing across class, race, and

national borders" (p. 6), miss the point made by many women

"of color", such as hooks (1984) that "the idea of 'common

oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and

mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex

social reality" (p. 44). Spelman (1988) critiques feminists

for ignoring the diversity of women's experiences as being a

product of ignorance. As Spelman (1988) argues:

One reason feminist theory by and for white middle-
class women hasn't said much about the variety of
women's experiences is sheer ignorance. When such
ignorance is combined with the power and authority to
decide what it is important to know, important to hear
about, it not surprisingly leads to a situation in
which a white woman at a conference on 'women's

history' can blithely refer to hearing about women of

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color as 'an extra burden'. (p. 178)[21]

Also, many Africans (e.g., Mazrui, 1986; Mudimbe, 1985; Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986; 1993) are now dis-identifying themselves from identities that colonialism had forced upon them, such as western names, as a necessary step in re-defining their own "Africanness" (Akiwowo, 1990; Albrow & King, 1990). Hence, many Africans are very reluctant to adopt new western categories, including feminism, without necessarily rejecting collective awareness for social struggles for women and other marginalized groups.

My criticism towards "western feminism" parallels that of African-American feminists against white, mainstream feminism. They critique the mainstream as misrecognizing the fact of its own domination over both women and men of less privileged backgrounds. The main point of contention in that discussion is over which form of oppression is more fundamental—sexism or racism. Mary Daly, for example, asserts that "racism is a deformity within patriarchy...It

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[21] Her reference is to a white feminist presenter at a 1986 conference in Amsterdam on women's history. Spelman (1988) relates:
"In response to questions about why 'women's history' in Western countries still is 'white women's history,' she replies: 'We have enough of a burden trying to get a feminist viewpoint across, why do we have to take on this extra burden?'" (p. 8)
Such attitudes, explains Spelman, hardly represent white middle-class feminists' "moving over" to make room for other voices, but rather is "the tip of a very slow-melting iceberg" (Spelman, 1988, p. 8).

is unlikely that racism will be eradicated as long as sexism
prevails (Daly, 1975, pp. 56-57). Such a view, the basis of
the mainstream concept of sisterhood, is criticized by
minority women as inadequate. By expressing what Spelman
(1988) calls an "additive" analysis of sexism and racism,
Daly "makes it look simply as if both Black women and white
women experience sexism, while Black women also experience
racism" (Spelman, 1988, p. 124). Daly's assertions,
which can be read as paradigmatic of white, mainstream
feminism, promotes the view that "sexism is the fundamental
form of oppression and that racism works in its service"
(Spelman, 1988, p. 124), created by patriarchy to keep women
from uniting. Thus, Daly promotes the essentialist view
that "it is through our shared sexual identity that we are
oppressed together; it is through our shared sexual identity
that we shall be liberated together" (Spelman, 1988, p.
124). The implication is that white women need share no
blame with white men for racism expressed towards
minorities.

What is Privileged by the Discourses of Western Feminism

Although western feminist writings are likely to assert
women's differences in the west, they do so less often when
dealing with women from what they call "non-western"
societies. By treating "third world women" as a homogeneous

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group, they rob them not only of their differences, history, and political agency, but they also treat them like children, who have not yet evolved or developed to the extent of those women of the west. Harding (1991), for example, suggests that while the women's movement in the west has a history stretching back over a century, women's movements in the third world have arisen only in the last 25 years.

A common view is that of a linear women's emancipation implicit among many feminists. As with modernization theories in development studies, which suggest that societies move through evolutionary stages along an upward continuum from "tradition" to "modernity" (e.g, Rostow, 1960), feminists often focus on oppressive practices in the "third world" in terms of their backwardness, suggesting that civilized nations should not tolerate such practices as Sati and "female circumcision". However, this linear view is problematic. For example, one can reverse the linear view of women's emancipation to say that for hundreds of years, Gikuyu women have been liberated enough even to marry other women, not only openly, but with no stigma or negative connotation, while in the west such arrangements have openly emerged only very recently.

Such a linear view ignores what in many cases are long

histories of women's empowerment and resistance, demonstrated here by woman/woman marriages. It also ignores the impact of western institutions, such as religious and educational systems, on undermining empowering options that may have previously existed for "third world women". Furthermore, it ignores western women's contribution to that undermining, through their role as missionaries and more broadly as beneficiaries of colonial and neo-colonial policies. In this sense, western feminism reflects the prevailing evolutionist view that the west is diverse and complex while the so-called third world is unitary and simple, and thus not much is lost by aggregating. Here, Mohanty (1991b) makes a very clear point regarding the underlying assumptions upon which feminist thoughts and writings are based:

> When the category of 'sexually oppressed women' is located within particular systems in the third world which are defined on a scale which is normal through Eurocentric assumptions, not only are third world women defined in a particular way prior to their entry into social relations, but since no connections are made between first and third world power shifts the assumption is reinforced that the third world just has not evolved to the extent that the west has." (p. 72)

The picture of "Third World women" that has emerged as a result of this discourse is that western women have largely raised themselves from their own subordination and are now in a position to help their "sisters" in Africa, Asia, and Latin America who remain "oppressed". Such views are

understandably resented among many so-called "third world women". Amadiume (1987) provides a strong example of this resentment:

> ...I asked a young White woman why she was studying
> social anthropology. She replied that she was hoping
> to go to Zimbabwe, and felt that she could help women
> there by advising them how to organize. The Black
> women in the audience gasped in astonishment. Here was
> someone scarcely past girlhood, who had just started
> university and had never fought a war in her life. She
> was planning to go to Africa to teach female veterans
> of a liberation struggle how to organize! This is the
> kind of arrogant, if not absurd attitude we encounter
> repeatedly. It makes one think: Better the distant
> armchair anthropologists than these 'sisters'.

This gradualist view also leads such feminists to privilege information that supports this model, and to ignore that which refutes it. It takes little effort, for example, to find abundant information regarding the "horrors" women face due to pressures of patriarchy, and from which they must be liberated, such as "African female circumcision", Indian Sati, Muslim veiling, and Chinese footbinding (Daly, 1978; Koso-Thomas, 1987; Toubia, 1993; Walker, 1992). On the other hand, experiences and/or practices among women in the same non-western societies that serve as modes of resistance, or sources of empowerment or strength, such as woman/woman marriages, are absent. By making visible the knowledge of women engaged in woman/woman marriages, for example, one can go beyond a sole focus on oppression to see the importance of such relationships to

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those concerned with women's empowerment, hence their challenge to male domination.

Woman/Woman Marriages: Sources of Resistance and Women's Empowerment Excluded from Feminist Discourses

In the previous chapter, I outlined woman/woman marriage practices as they exist among the Gikuyu women in the preliminary fieldwork. Implicit in the portrayal is that woman/woman marriages are not only associated with notions of empowerment and independence, but they also challenge male domination in ways that parallel western feminist ideals.

Many statements from the women interviewed in the preliminary fieldwork suggest such a notion. Nduta's statement that "men, because they have penises, they think they can control everyone in the world", or her refusal to follow the patriarchal Gikuyu child naming system (discussed in chapter two), gives a strong indication of an African woman who, like feminists in the west, who is politically aware of male domination and who resists.

Another example of challenge to male domination in woman/woman marriages is these women's access to multiple sexual partners, with no stigma attached. Consider Nduta's explanation of the relationship between her and a man named Njogu. In addition to expressing sexual freedom associated

with woman/woman marriage, her statement also suggests that she does not associate the caretaker role solely as a woman's domain:

> Another man? Women were always free to go with men (she laughs). If I did not go with them my daughter Tutu would not have been born. Njogu, who is my daughter's father, was sent here to my house by my *Nyaciara* to look after me when I was sick. He lived here with me. He made fire, drew water, fetched firewood, cooked, etc. In that sense he was my servant (she laughs again).

Another important example of how woman/woman marriages challenge male domination lies in their decision to marry other women. Recall (in Chapter 2) that some Gikuyu women married other women for multiple reasons, including the need to protect one's home and property from being stolen by men; to continue one's family lineage; to be remembered; and the preference to live with another woman. All these reasons call into question male domination. These examples, drawn from preliminary observations of the ways women involved in these relationships perceive their lives, will be useful in proposing future research on this topic.

The Problem of Representation

The point here is not that western feminists and others from privileged positions cannot speak for others, or that those who are marginalized have the only authentic voices to speak about their problems and life experiences. The

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perspective pursued here follows Spivak's suggestion that those in privileged positions can speak legitimately about others if they learn, as have authors such as Haraway, Spelman, and Mies, "how to occupy the position of the other" (Spivak, 1990, p. 121).

My criticism is not at all intended to imply that I am free from this problem of representation. While some may call for an end to representation, my critique does not deny the possibility of representation. Rather, as Spivak (1990) points out, denying representation is not a solution, leaving each subject to represent oneself alone. When representation is necessary, one approach is to engage in responsible representation that avoids homogenization, and rules out or minimizes misrepresentation:

> It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem. On the other hand, we cannot put it under the carpet with demands for authentic voices; we have to remind ourselves that, as we do this, we might be compounding the problem even as we are trying to solve it. And there has to be a persistent critique of what one is up to, so that it doesn't get bogged down in this homogenization; constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge... I think as long as one remains aware that it is a very problematic field, there is some hope. (Spivak, 1990, p. 63)

Responsible representation by western feminists regarding the "third world" should require a more careful appreciation of the perspectives of the women who are

represented. One also has to acknowledge the fact that
there are those who have never been given a chance to speak
for themselves before. In those cases, I argue that these
voices have to be privileged and be allowed to speak for
themselves as much as possible, not because they will
provide an "authentic" voice/truth, but simply because their
voices have been marginalized and devalued. Therefore,
western feminists should work on helping to create ways for
marginalized women to represent themselves.

The issue of representation is very compelling and
deserves careful treatment in future studies of woman/woman
marriages. As far as I understand, there is no single way
of resolving this issue in research. One approach is to
sensitize oneself to potential problems of representation
not only through an exploration of literatures concerning
this issue, but also by paying close attention to the
dialogues of those without access to published media.

Chapter Summary

The exclusion of woman/woman marriage practices in
Africa from feminist and family studies discourse makes me
curious to understand why that is so. In this chapter, I
addressed the tensions that exist between western feminists
discourses and those of "third world" and other marginalized
women. I also argued that the issue of representation is

very important, and that investigations of woman/woman marriages in future research will require one to be sensitized to its potential problems through a review of literatures and dialogues on representation. Finally, it may be surprising for some to know that all of the women interviewed regarding their involvement in woman/woman marriage relationships have undergone "female circumcision". Thus, these empowered women are paradoxically the same ones that western feminists see as among the world's most oppressed.

CHAPTER 4

THE FAMILY STUDIES LITERATURE AND ITS
EXCLUSION OF WOMAN/WOMAN MARRIAGES

*The value premise undergirding these comparative
studies asserted (and still asserts) that the
conjugally-based nuclear family is the 'healthy',
'normal', 'organized', and 'stable' form of family
whereas families that depart from the nuclear family
ideal are 'unhealthy', 'abnormal', 'disorganized', and
'unstable'. (Sudarkasa, 1981, p. 55)*

Introduction

Where the previous chapter addressed questions regarding
exclusion from feminist discourses in the west, this chapter
addresses the exclusion of woman/woman marriages from the
literature on families and family diversity. My main
objective is to point out that, because pervasive racism
that historically has led to the categorization of Africans
as "primitive," "backward," and "tribal," and an orientation
towards maintaining the ideals of the nuclear family, and
scholarly thinking regarding African families has been
subtly influenced so that African non-nuclear family forms
are not treated seriously. From that perspective, family
forms such as woman/woman marriages cannot be evaluated
fairly in spite of the current emphasis on family diversity.
I argue that one way to come to terms with misconceptions
and exclusions of family forms such as African woman/woman
marriages is to address the racism that underlies these
negative perspectives and misrepresentations.

An underlying theme of this chapter and the previous one is that of essentialism. The use of the concepts "woman" and "family" is critiqued for the assumption of universal, unifying characteristics that naturally place all women and families into those categories. The problem of essentialism is that it denies diversity, which facilitates marginalization of less privileged people, groups, and categories. There are parallels between the essentialism of the concept "woman" and that of "family" discussed below. For example, postmodern feminists are very critical of the modernist feminists who tend to adopt unitary, essentialist assumptions regarding women, ignoring women's fragmentation in terms of race, class, sexual orientation, and geographic position (Barrett & Phillips, 1992; Nicholson, 1990; Walby, 1992). The existence of woman/woman marriages undermines attempts at defining "family" or "families," showing that a search for an underlying, unifying commonality, or essence, of family is futile and unnecessary. One will never find any underlying, necessary common characteristic that connects these diverse forms.

African Families: Discourses on "Primitives"

The assumption of universality has usually defined what is normal and natural both for research and therapy and has subtly influenced our thinking to regard deviations from the nuclear family as sick or perverse or immoral. (Skolnick & Skolnick, 1989, p. 7)

The exclusion of woman/woman marriages from the family studies literature is related to the historical treatment of African family forms and non-nuclear family forms generally. Writings on families in the "third world" contain biases in the form of comparisons with western nuclear family forms, which are held up as the normative ideal. Due to this pre-existing prejudice, it is very difficult for particular non-western family forms, such as the varieties of woman/woman marriages in this study, to be evaluated as anything but bizarre novelties.

Founded during the age of European imperialism and colonial rule, western anthropologists studied what they called "primitive man," while often aiding colonial regimes to spread their own racism and ethnocentric views to the colonized. Consider how Talbot (1926/1969) views as scarcely human those people he writes about:

> In the African and Malaysian parts alone of the immense continent of Gondwanaland do the great anthropoids and nearly all the most simian of the varieties of man survive, while in the same regions flourished the most primitive member of the human family yet discovered. (p. 7)

Through an empiricist epistemology which claims knowledge on the basis of observation--"seeing is knowing"--combined with a writing style that implied objectivity, such anthropologists were able to obscure the importation of western racism into their descriptions and

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assessments. Thus anthropologists often wrote prejudicial descriptions of the societies they encountered, based on the values they brought into the description, and through these descriptions they influenced subsequent generations of anthropologists and other scholars who drew on these sources for an understanding of peoples outside the west.

These biases are reflected in research on families and women in non-western contexts. Many current researchers who write about African families and family issues draw directly from the descriptions from anthropologists who studied these cultures in the colonial era (e.g., Boserup, 1985; Gage-Brandon, 1992; Kilbride & Kilbride, 1990).

As examples below will suggest, African family forms, compared to the privileged, western, nuclear family form, are often portrayed as primitive and based on practical considerations alone, such as survival, as opposed to having an emotional aspect: 'love', portrayed as the motivating force behind western nuclear families, is often discounted regarding African families. In such writings, family members in these societies just do not seem to love each other, as evidenced by their lack of displays of affection and lack of romance.

Albert (1971), writing about people in Burundi, stated that: "Regarding the sentiments of the husband toward his wife, or men in general towards women, it is enough that in

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the rich oral literature of Burundi, there is not one poem

or song of love" (p. 198). Similarly, speaking on behalf of

Gusii people of Kenya, Le Vine (1970) generalized their

reasons for polygyny:

> They want wives for their reproductive capacity,
> daughters, because their bride wealth cattle paid for
> them enlarges the family herd and can be used to
> acquire wives for the homestead head and his sons, and
> sons because they expand the minimal lineage and take
> care of their parents in old age. This drive for
> numerical expansion of the homestead is a fundamental
> tendency in Gusii domestic life. (p. 68)

In his description of what he shows as a lack of

intimacy in African mother-infant relationships, Le Vine

(1970) states:

> In public, African mothers rarely lavish on their
> infants the kind of verbal and physical affection
> that we think of as 'instinctly maternal'
> behavior, and they are capable not only of
> carrying on conversations or tasks like trading
> while nursing their infants but also of inflicting
> necessary pain on them (in force-feeding and
> bathing) without hesitation and without concern
> over their crying. (p. 295)

Ainsworth's (1967) study of infancy in Uganda proudly

proclaimed that in American households, a child is under

loving hands compared to a Ugandan child who lacks such

loving:

> In our American households the parents, loving
> relatives, and interested visitors alike bend over
> the baby as he lies in his crib, presenting him a
> smiling face, and waggle their heads and talk to
> the baby in an effort to coax a smile. This kind
> of face-to-face confrontation was not observed to
> occur in this Ganda sample. Indeed it was rare

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for an adult even to hold a baby so that there could be a face-to-face confrontation. (p. 334)

African family relationships are not only portrayed as non-emotional, but often also as immoral. Polygynous marriages have been perhaps the most misunderstood and denigrated family forms in Africa, and seen as simply immoral. Upon the first contact with the Nandi people of Kenya, one of the early missionaries wrote that "the most formidable foe we have to face is their fearful immorality" (Langley 1979). Similarly, Massam (in Langley, 1979), reacting to the Nandi people's lack of nuclear or conjugal family wrote that "they are polyandrous [sic], and appear at first sight to have no moral code" (p. 2).

While many might think that these views of African families should not be taken seriously because they are of the past, these views are often re-created and re-shaped by contemporary scholars, western and from other places (Mazrui, 1986; Mohanty, 1991a; Mudimbe, 1985).

Beeson's Ideal of Civilized Families:
Nuclear and Conjugal Forms

Beeson's (1990) sociobiological study of the distribution and evolutionary organization of family systems worldwide is an example of the perpetuation of the work of the earlier ethnographers. Using Darwinian evolutionary and natural selection theory, he divides family types into

several levels with what he calls the tribal family, such as found in Africa and some other non-western societies, as the most basic and most primitive of all.

Basing his arguments on earlier anthropological studies, Beeson repeats a common argument about African families, in this case polygynous ones, that they are based purely on material, non-emotional, motivations. He also attempts an explanation for woman/woman marriages based on his thesis that the "genetic self-interest" of supposedly lesser-evolved peoples and families leads to greater tension between women and men. This tension leads some women to marry other women:

> marriage is virtually 100% preferentially polygynous (85% worldwide). Polygyny as a viable form of affiliation does not depend on a close emotional bond between participants. The bonding obligation is primarily social, not personal, and it is based on reproductive and economic considerations: the inadequacy of either usually leading to the termination of the marriage. It is a system uniting sexual actors who largely live in separate social worlds. Given the contrary tactical demands of parental investment, polygyny is not an unexpected structural arrangement where high sexual separation exists. (p. 101)

> That sexual antagonism is a principal instrumental relationship in this area seems beyond doubt. The emerging picture shows maleness and femaleness separated by the tension filled gulf of genetic self-interest. Men and women largely live apart. When they do interact it is with wariness and mistrust. Trust is placed not in a potential sexual antagonist but in those most like themselves; women with women, men with men. The tension of antagonism is so high, in fact, it is not unheard of for women to formally (socially) marry other women. (Beeson, 1990, p. 103)

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This analysis exemplifies how African relationships that can just as easily be interpreted as empowering or liberating are instead interpreted as "primitive", based on prejudice and bigotry. In this case, according to Beeson, African women who engage in woman/woman marriages are not aware of their options, but act largely out of biological necessity. His assertions seem even more ridiculous as he implies that tensions between women and men in the west have largely disappeared as they have become more evolved in their relationships, thus ignoring decades of feminist writings that dispute such a view.

Kilbride and Kilbride on African Families

Kilbride and Kilbride (1990) not only embrace the racist views of Le Vine (1970) regarding how African peoples in general lack pity and sentimentality, but they also rely upon such authors to support their own views. Kilbride and Kilbride (1990), for instance, write of the almost universal lack of pity among the Baganda in relation to the expulsion of Asians (Indians) from Uganda by Idi Amin as indicative of a typical cultural trait. However, they never mention that the exploitation Africans have suffered at the hands of Asians may have influenced Baganda feelings.

They also agreed with Le Vine (1970) who felt that in many African societies, interpersonal relations are heavily

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rooted in material transactions. In terms of parent-child
relationships, Kilbride and Kilbride (1990) indicated that
all East Africans value their children, "among other
reasons, for the economic potential that interdependence
with them will one day hopefully realize" (p. 84). And, as
they indicated, although they did find much stronger
evidence for positive affect, especially in the area of
face-to-face interaction between mother-infant than
Ainsworth did, Kilbride and Kilbride (1990) appeared to
attribute this finding largely to social changes brought
about by westernization over this time.

> Over this time, some changes have occurred in Kiganda
> society, including, apparently, a more widespread
> practice of kissing in private sexual life along with
> the continuing acceptance of romantic love and related
> affects" (p. 146).

The Prevailing Ideologies of the Nuclear Family

*In a kind of ethnocentric myopia, Euro-American
scholars have taken the type of family that exists in
their own societies and rationalized its existence
elsewhere. (Foster, 1983, p. 222)*

Given this devaluing of "other" family forms, and the
prejudicial view of non-western families which are today so
frequently relied upon to make current assessments, it is
highly unlikely that woman/woman marriage family forms would
be given a fair hearing. Even in this current period, where
diversity in family types has been more greatly appreciated,

the attraction of the nuclear family as a benchmark persists. Cheal (1991, p. 3) observes that some family scholars look back with nostalgia at family life as it existed in the 1950s when theories developed by sociologists like Talcott Parsons and William J. Goode were dominant, and created an image of unity and certainty in theory in the United States.

In these standard, functionalist sociological theories, (Cheal, 1991), the family is believed to be an important unit/institution that bridges an individual to the society. The social functions of the family include reproduction, maintenance, social placement and socialization of the young (Ritzer, 1992), and through these functions, the family is viewed as guaranteeing the survivability of society as a whole. In addition, the family is typically thought to be a "unit" whose individual members work toward the good of the whole. As Glenn (1987) critically states regarding conventional notions of family: "The family is conceived as a unified entity ruled by consensus; its interests are synonymous with the interests of individual members" (p. 350).

Moving across cultures, anthropologists have been instrumental in extending the privileged status of nuclear families around the world, including in Africa. For example, on the basis of data from his sample of 250

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societies, Murdock (1949) asserted that "as the sole

prevailing form or as the basic unit from which more complex

familiar forms are compounded, [the nuclear family] exists

as a distinct and strongly functional group in every

society... [which universally performs] four functions

fundamental to human social life--the sexual, the

economic, the reproductive and the educational" (Murdock,

1949, p. 2-3). In order for any society to survive, Murdock

(1949) claimed that the functions served by the nuclear

family has to be universal. Given this condition, Murdock

(1949) defined "family" as:

> a social group characterized by common residence,
> economic cooperation, and reproduction. It includes
> adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a
> socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more
> children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting
> adults. (p. 8)

Also, Malinowski's (1930) usage of the principle of

legitimacy (that a child must have a father, or father

figure, present), and Seligman and Seligman's (1932/1965)

usage of the concept of "pagan" to refer to non-nuclear

families reflects the universalization of the nuclear

family.

This ideology of the family is not limited to Parsonian

functionalism nor an early, ethnocentric anthropology, but

has been adopted as an implicit gospel for popular thinking

on these issues (Cheal, 1991). How often has it been stated

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recently that the breakdown of the family is at the root of the breakdown of society, or more specifically, that the urban crime and violence has at its root the instability of black families and the absence of male role models in such families? What follows are suggestions regarding how woman/woman marriages in the preliminary study undermines basic tenets of nuclear family ideologies.

Ideologies of Monogamy and Permanence and Its Implications for Woman/Woman Marriages

There are several features of nuclear family ideology that go to the root of its alleged functionality: the notions of monogamy and permanence, compulsory heterosexuality or opposite-sex relationships, and the perceived need for a father figure. As nuclear families are privileged, these features have become staples in assumptions of what families are. The data on woman/woman marriages shows how such an emphasis on these factors excludes woman/woman marriages, which tend to violate each of these factors, from being considered as families.

Monogamy and permanence form a major part of the ideology of the nuclear family (Scanzoni et al., 1989), used to distinguish a "true" family relationship. As Caplow et al. (1982, cited in Scanzoni et al., 1989) argue, the "prevailing norm holds that adults are 'expected to stay

together' and that this sort of stability is optimum for the development of adults and children" (p. 24). In reality, even in the USA it is clearly known that "in terms of pragmatic experience, attitudes and behaviors, the majority of persons forego the 'ideal' of permanence for its own sake" (Scanzoni et al., 1989, p. 26).

The problems with these views on monogamy and permanence are not only that the expectation that adults stay together is somewhat unrealistic at this time in the west, and that it is ethnocentric as a universalized, normative ideal, but also the fact that what is really meant by the concept of "adults" is two people--a man and a woman. These most preferred "adults" are heterosexual couples.

Gikuyu woman/woman marriages challenge this thinking on all counts. Not only are the adults involved of the same sex, but also they may be more than two, and the form of the family is not necessarily permanent once a union is made, but may likely be periodically changing over time. Furthermore, men may be involved both in the married relationship as a spouse of one of the women, or in extramarital relationships with women involved in the marriages. Such multiple relationships do not break any "rules", expectations or ideals of woman/woman marriages, but seemingly are *themselves* an expected aspect of such relationships in Gikuyu contexts. Even the term

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"extramarital" contains a western value orientation,
carrying a connotation of deviation from expected monogamy
that is biased against these Gikuyu examples.

Secondly, the western ideal of permanence, that when two
people get married to each other they are supposed to stay
permanently together "till death do they part", or at least
with no major changes, such as the additions of other
partners (e.g., polygamous marriages and woman/woman
marriages), is not only ethnocentric, but it is also
challenged by the woman/woman marriages. In such marriages,
a woman often was, or is still, also married to a man, or
where one woman who is already married to a woman decides to
marry another woman as her own wife. In other words,
additions and/or departures of partners frequently occur in
woman/woman marriages: in such relationships, the women do
not restrict themselves from multiple sexual interactions
outside the marriages, nor even from marriages with other
women.

In some cases, such a multiplicity of relationships may
not start out in such complex form. Some start simply as
two women, or a man and a woman, who marry one another.
Gradually, since monogamy and permanence are not normative
ideals in these relationships, relationships may expand to
include more "significant others."

An Example: Kuhi's Family

One example is that of Kuhi's family. Originally it was
Kuhi (a woman) and Huta (a man) who were married to each
other as a wife and a husband. Then, after a while, they
both decided that Huta would marry a second wife, Kara,
creating a polygynous marriage. Then finally, Nyokabi (a
woman) came into the family. Even though Nyokabi was
approached by Huta, she came to that family as Kuhi's wife
to assist in raising Kuhi's and her co-wife, Kara's
children. According to Nyokabi, she was free to have a
sexual relationship with Huta (whom she also informally
regarded as a husband), but she was not restricted from
having sexual relationships with other men. Later in her
life, Nyokabi decided to marry another woman for herself.
The woman she married was Wambui, who had a baby girl named
after Nyokabi, conceived by a man whose identity she
conceals for its unimportance, as is typical in such
relationships: Wambui's sexual activities are her own
private business, according to Nyokabi. Furthermore, still
in the same family, Kara's son, Maina, married Suzanna, who
later married a woman herself (named Karuna).

Woman/Woman Marriages and the Nuclear Family
Ideology of "Father Figure"

One other point in the ideology of the nuclear family that remains strong, even among scholars (Cheal, 1991), but is challenged by the woman/woman marriage data, is the alleged need for a "father figure" to maintain "functionality": this is Malinowski's principle of legitimacy. No matter how diversified family lifestyles become, the presence of a father, whether played by the biological father or a father figure, is very much preferred and privileged over his absence. This is clearly shown and universalized in Malinowski's (1930) study in which he writes that "in every society a child must have a social recognized father to give the child a status in the community" (in Skolnick & Skolnick, 1989, p. 8), and hence, according to Malinowski, "illegitimacy" was considered to be a sign of social breakdown. It still is regarded as such by many, and there is a resurgence of this in the family literature (Scanzoni et al., 1989), as well as in popular family discourse.

In one of her views of what is universal about the family, Gough (1971), too, states that in all known human societies:

> marriage exists as a socially recognized, durable, although not necessarily lifelong relationship between individual men and woman. From it springs social fatherhood, some kind of special bond between a man and

the child of his wife, whether or not they are his own children physiologically (p. 23)

Even in polyandrous societies, where women have several husbands, Gough (1971) suggests that each child has a designated father or fathers with which he/she has a special relationship (p. 23). This bond of social fatherhood continues Gough (1971), "is recognized among people who do not know about the male role in procreation or where, for various reasons, it is not clear who the physiological father of a particular infant is" (p. 23).

Gough's expression of this preference obscures the fact that in some family forms, such as Gikuyu woman/woman marriages, the presence of a father or a father figure is not seen as an ideal. Skolnick and Skolnick (1989) observed rightly that "in some cultures the majority of people mate and have children without legal marriages and often without living together. In other societies, husbands and wives and children do not live together under the same roof" (p. 7). Practices of woman/woman marriage do not fit in with the notion of legal marriage, which requires the production of some documentation or other written proof for government or church purposes, privileged in the traditional family view, nor does it follow the principle of legitimacy. In fact, Gikuyu woman/woman marriages undermine that notion. The women involved may or may not live together, that is, in the

same compound or in the same house, and the children born in such relationships, also the children born out of previous relationships, belong solely to the women; fathers' identities often remain secret and unknown.

The presence of a father is typically not important in woman/woman marriages. For example, during my preliminary interviews with the women not already married to men about their relationships to other people, they tended to downplay the importance of men to their lives, though each expressed their rationales differently. On one occasion, Nduta mentioned that:

> We have no interest with a man who wants to stay in our home. We only want the bush men--meaning those who are met for temporary needs. The meaning for this is for a woman to be independent enough so that she can make her own homestead shrine. Ciru sees also that I myself do not keep a man here. What for? To make me miserable? If I kept a man here who will then start asking me for money to buy alcohol, where would I find such money? No, I won't agree to live like that. It is better for one to look after oneself. It is better for one to look after oneself.

Like Nduta, Ciru (Nduta's wife) emphasizes her optional independence from men as a primary virtue of participating in a woman/woman marriage:

> I have freedom to have sex with any man that I desire, for pleasure and for conceiving babies. And none of these men can ever settle here at our home or claim the children. They can't. They are not supposed to, and they know that very well. They come and go.

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Mbura responded to this question as well, adding that, to her, men are not trustworthy, though she still appreciates their temporary presence:

> Men, even the good friends, know that they are not welcome here. They are here just for a visit and to leave. Whatever they come here to do, they must leave. They cannot be trusted. That is not good. One is given respect and that's all.

Diversity and Woman/Woman Marriages

While some other family researchers do not adopt such blatantly racist and ethnocentric views as those discussed here, discussions of families still "normalize" western forms simply by excluding from serious discussion competing conceptions of "families" of many of the societies in the world. Even attempts at inclusive definitions of family, that attempt to account for greater diversity, fall short. For example, I agree with Scanzoni et al. (1989) that lay concepts like family should be left behind by scholars in favor of a focus on close or primary relationships. However, I disagree with their attempt to essentialize such relationships as a "sexual bond", because it excludes the close, primary relationships portrayed in the data on woman/woman marriages. Similarly, the data on woman/woman marriages creates problems for other attempts at finding inclusive definitions of family.

Attempts at defining "family" or "families", as a result still carry the influence of western value systems, and thus continue to exclude forms unfamiliar to western researchers. Definition always implies marginalization of what's already excluded. So, where would family forms such as the woman/woman marriages stand in these attempts to define family? Defining families requires asserting an "essence," a commonality that unites all the forms considered to be worthy of the title (Hallett, 1991). But, does such an essence really exist? It used be asserted that the essence of "family" was, more-or-less, an opposite sex couple with children. Obviously, that excludes too much. Today, the essence of "families" attempts to be broad, yet is still exclusive.

Wittgenstein (1960) replaced quests for essences with a concept he called "family resemblances." For example, in discussing the impossibility of finding an underlying commonality between those various activities we call "games" (e.g., football, poker, monopoly, etc.), Wittgenstein denied that an essence of "games" could be found. Instead, different games have overlapping characteristics, though no feature common to all:

> We are inclined to think that there must be
> something in common to all games, say, and that
> this common property is the justification for
> applying the general term 'game' to the various
> games; whereas games form a family the members of

which have family likenesses. Some of them have
the same nose, others the same eyebrows and others
again the same way of walking; and these
likenesses overlap. (Wittgenstein, 1960, in Monk,
1990, p. 338)

Similarly, regarding families, "resemblances" can be
seen among various types of family relationships, but that
is all one can reasonably assert. For example, there are
many overlapping characteristics between woman/woman
marriages, such as the fact that two women are married to
one another. However, the household contexts of these
relationships can differ greatly. Also, their reasons for
marrying women differ as well.

It is difficult to find even resemblances between
woman/woman marriages and western nuclear families (since,
for example, opposite-sex parents are not necessarily
present), let alone common, universal features that unite
them under a singular definition of family. Definitions of
family are undesirable in my view, if not impossible, since
definition implies exclusion, and those excluded under such
definitions would tend to be those who are already
marginalized.

It is fairly common nowadays in discussions of families
to define "families" as inclusive of all different forms of
relationship, in which "intimacy" and "commitment", above
all, are key factors. Such definitions are purposely
plural in this so-called western era of postmodern

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diversity. Although these are good attempts at inclusion, the search for a definition necessarily falls short.

Consider the following points. First, such a definition assumes that all family forms are known and fit into that definition. Second, these approaching types of definition requires a further clarification of "intimate" and "committed" which appear as the hurdles a relationship faces to determine inclusion or exclusion. Accepting commonsense definitions of both terms, I can think of several examples of "family" relationships that are excluded or have an uncertain status.

"Green Card" marriages are recognized as families by government policy if the partners in the relationship can successfully hide their intent, and often these "partners" must live together for the sake of demonstrating "intimate" knowledge of one another's behavior before immigration officials. Can these partners be considered intimate with or committed to one another? Even though they are known as a family and even live in a single household, there is often no intimacy since the relationship is either one of friendship or business.

Are they committed to one another? The partners have made a commitment to stay together for a certain time period, but that is hardly the type of commitment implied in a definition of family. This raises the question of

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whether, if commitment is necessary, does it need initially to be open-ended in terms of time (e.g., 'til death do us part)? Or can there be a clearly defined or projected end to the "family" relationship, such as an agreement to divorce upon receipt of the Green Card.

Another example that defies attempts at inclusion in family definitions is one of the woman/woman marriage relationships in the preliminary study; that between Kaba and Ruru. In this particular relationship, or set of relationships, a man (named Nga'nga) is married to a woman (Kaba), and that woman is married to another woman (Ruru). Is the entire set of relationships considered as one family if Nga'nga and the Kaba's wife, Ruru, are neither "intimate" with nor "committed" to one another? Or, are they separate families, under the definition, linked by a wife (Kaba) common to the man and the second woman?

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I discussed the prevailing thought on families and its implications for understanding African families in general and especially the practices of African woman/woman marriages. Specifically, because of a history of racism and the predominance of the nuclear family ideal, other family forms are devalued and marginalized as inadequate; hence the exclusion of woman/woman marriages

from the larger literature on families and family diversity.
I indicated then that even when family diversity is
acknowledged and family definitions become more inclusive,
the notion of nuclearity remains a benchmark by which other
forms are judged. I stated that definitions of family,
while attempting to identify "essential" features common to
all forms, have tended to privilege nuclearity while
marginalizing other family forms.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Overview of the Study

In this thesis, I attempted to discuss practices of woman/woman marriage as they exist among Gikuyu women of central Kenya as a topic of study geared towards gaining useful and basic information to aid future research. Based on my own experiences as a member of Gikuyu society, preliminary interviews with some Gikuyu women involved in woman/woman marriages, and my critique of earlier research, I attempted to tell a reflexive story of the practices of woman/woman marriages. I discussed this topic as not just one that has been excluded from contemporary discourses of family studies and feminism, but also as a topic of the experiences of people, who in the course of history, have faced the most cruel kinds of marginalization, exclusion, and humiliation one can imagine.

In that sense, as a part of reflexivity in this work, I did not intend to separate my activism (rooted in that awareness) from my production of this thesis. As a part of my reflexivity, the methodology of what Stanley and Wise (1991) call "hygenic research" was avoided: I avoided a so-called objective, value-free, neutral approach to research. In other words, this thesis was not written so that it can

offer a "better" and more "authentic" view of African woman/woman marriages, but was written in a way that does not hide the contingent, constructed aspects of research.

In Chapter 1, I indicated that the practices of woman/woman marriage are relatively common in many African communities and they have seldom been studied, and virtually not at all among the Gikuyu. Definitions applied to these practices by researchers who studied these practices fall short. They privilege a monolithic view of woman/woman marriages, implying that there is no diversity among woman/woman marriage relationships.

I included ideas used to guide this study which were based from awareness that African family forms in general, as well as practices of woman/woman marriage, have been misrepresented in the west. This points to the need for African epistemologies that are not necessarily confined to the importation of colonial categories to help us understand the nature of these marginalized ways of living to facilitate effective future research.

The women included in the preliminary fieldwork, undertaken in central Kenya, were also introduced in Chapter 1. The diverse forms of these households--a number of them include multiple, simultaneous marriages, to men and/or women--suggests that the notion of "family" is more complex than is often acknowledged.

In Chapter 2, I included women's voices who described their own reasons for marrying other women. They demonstrated the multiplicity and complexity of these practices as a way to not only counteract the monolithic view, but also to create that awareness to aid future research. The women identified multiple reasons for marrying women, challenging prevalent functionalist explanations in the literature which suggests that women marry women only under very narrow circumstances, and that these marriages serves some social role or function. From this approach, functionalist explanations not only distort the experiences of these African women, but the determinism of functionalism also denies them room for variation and diversity.

The women's description of their marriages and their reasons for engaging in them vary. Some of their stated reasons include: the desire to have a child; marrying for one's dead sons; to assist in raising already-present children; so that one's name will be remembered after death; because one is advised to do so; because of the freedom that such an arrangement provides to women; and because of the need to protect one's property from being stolen by relatives. I concluded that these variations and diversities demonstrated by women must be considered in future research.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I questioned the exclusion of woman/woman marriages from the feminist and family studies literatures. For the feminist literature, I suggested that in spite of the apparent freedom and empowerment that woman/woman marriage practices afford women, these relationships have been ignored in feminist discourses. Instead, feminists have focused upon "female genital mutilation" as the most relevant topic for discussion regarding African women. I argue that western feminists have colonized so-called "third world women" by assuming that they know what oppresses them, based on their own presuppositions; imposing their own views on what "third world women" need for their liberation. I argued that these problems are tied to the perception that many western feminists have towards "third world women". Also issues of representation were discussed. Future research must also deal with such issues.

Regarding exclusions from family studies (delineated in Chapter 4), I discussed the position of western racism towards African peoples and prevailing thought on family and family diversity and their implications for African families, including woman/woman marriages. The argument here is that historically, nuclear families have been privileged in both academic and more general discussions of families. While this focus has marginalized other family

forms, both longstanding and newly-emerging, more recently discourses have emerged to reclaim the legitimacy of these diverse forms. However, discussions of family diversity seems to have been limited to western contexts: African family forms, including woman/woman marriages, have been missing from these discourses. Information on woman/woman marriages was used to challenge expected "norms" of families, implicitly defined as nuclear families. Information on woman/woman marriages is also used to problematize attempts at defining "family" since the diversity of woman/woman marriage relationships and their divergence from other family forms suggests no unifying, universal characteristics among them.

Suggestions for Future Studies of Gikuyu Woman/Woman Marriages

Although this thesis was geared toward grounding basic information as a point of entry for future research, several suggestions are offered here for explicit inclusion in studies of woman/woman marriages. Certainly, there are further important issues that I have not raised, and my suggestions are not intended to restrict inquiry. Also, I will not suggest specific methods for researching these issues, but rather leave that for future researchers to decide for themselves.

1. Adopt a Critical Perspective

First, this is an area of study that has had very little recognition, and whenever African families are discussed they tend to be homogenized or dismissed negatively as "tribal" or "primitive" practices based mainly on economic motives. In this sense, practices of woman/woman marriages become badly devalued and marginalized. My suggestion, as a woman from Gikuyu society who also has relatives involved in woman/woman marriages, is that future research should explore more deeply and problematize those perspectives as an important point of entry. Exploring different histories of African peoples in general, and especially how the west perceives African peoples might be one way to do that, hence the importance of ideas of heterogeneity and representation, introduced in Chapter 1.

2. Incorporate Local Voices

Future research must rely more heavily on the voices of Gikuyu women to investigate this subject, not as a "better" and "authentic" way to tell these women's stories, but as a constant reminder that these women have never before had opportunities to speak and tell their own stories. In other words, future research must become sensitized to the idea of local voices to relate the complexities involved in practices of woman/woman marriage in the analysis of how

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these practices take place and how the women involved
perceive them.

Note that instead of a "Gikuyu-woman-centric"
perspective I am arguing for perspectives based on different
voices of Gikuyu women. The latter approach destabilizes
the mythology of essentialism which assumes "a woman",
generically as if all women are one and the same regardless
of their race, class, sexual preference, or geographical
position. Future research must become sensitized to the
idea of multiple voices and complexities involved in
practices of woman/woman marriages. To do this task
effectively, I suggest that one needs to acknowledge the
problems inherent in translating from one language to
another, and the political basis of translation (Spivak,
1992).

3. Investigate the Prevalence of Woman/Woman Marriages in the Gikuyu Population

A third suggestion for further study regards the
prevalence of woman/woman marriages among the Gikuyu. There
is currently no indication whatsoever of how many Gikuyu
women are engaged in woman/woman marriages. Leakey
(1938/1977) simply stated that such relations were "not
uncommon", while my own sampling uncovered a surprisingly
large number (to me) of such households within a small

locality. The result of an enumeration of these households
might show these practices to be more common than the
silence in the literature would imply. Oboler's (1980)
survey among a Nandi community in Kenya's Rift Valley
suggested that 3% of households were woman/woman marriage
households. However, this small sample does not necessarily
suggest that this rate of woman/woman marriages is the same
for Nandi society generally nor other societies containing
woman/woman marriages.

4. History of Gikuyu Woman/Woman Marriages

A fourth suggestion for future study is to construct a
history of Gikuyu woman/woman marriages. Again, given the
lack of documented information on woman/woman marriages,
nothing is written regarding when and how these practices
emerged nor how they have been transformed during the 500
year history of the Gikuyu. Understanding this history
might be one way to explore the great diversity of
woman/woman marriages.

5. Impacts of Societal Changes on Woman/Woman Marriages

A fifth suggestion for future research regards the
impacts of more recent social and economic changes on the
forms, prevalence, and attitudes towards woman/woman
marriage practices. The 20th century has been one of

dramatic/traumatic transformation for Africa generally.
Colonial intrusions helped set in motion cultural,
religious, and economic changes that have created enormous
tensions within African societies. The spread of Christian
values has also spread notions that woman/woman marriages
are deviant and even sinful (recall the Catholic baptism
guidelines in Chapter 1 regarding woman/woman marriages).
Western forms of education may have impacted the acceptance
of woman/woman marriage relationships among younger
generations, including their own potential interest in
engaging in such practices.

6. Impacts of Land Privatization on Woman/Woman Marriages

Another change-related suggestion for future
investigation is the effects of land privatization
initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s on the economic viability
of woman/woman marriages. The Swynnerton Plan (Swynnerton,
1954), initiated by the colonial administration in Kenya,
attempted to promote agricultural productivity among
Africans by replacing communal land ownership with private
ownership of land. This attempt undermined women's
traditional rights to land by issuing title deeds
exclusively to men. As Mackenzie (1986) states that women
engage in woman/woman marriages to prevent lands from being
taken by men, further research could help to understand how

women's insecurity regarding land tenure is reflected in woman/woman marriages, and to what extent this privatization undermines woman/woman marriages as a viable option for women in the future.

7. Consider Using a Reflexive Approach

Future research should consider using a more reflexive approach that not only acknowledges knowledge as a social activity, but also that there are multiple ways of knowing that must not be ignored. In other words, instead of searching for a single authentic story, future research on woman/woman marriages must acknowledge the multiplicities of social constructed stories that should not be collapsed into one single "truth." Future research must acknowledge how one's life history, ways of living, language and socio-economic status affects the ways one perceives and conducts the research project. Finally, future researchers must also acknowledge the limitations that accompany research and accept that ones' research should not be treated as a final product to be used as a source of factual information, but rather as an open area of study that will be used as a topic for others discussions.

Finally, as a reminder, in studying Gikuyu woman/woman marriages, researchers in the future must maintain an awareness that they potentially perpetuate a "colonial

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gaze"; a term suitable for any study "which treats Africans as objects of science, symbols of alterity, or even victims of oppression" (Apter, 1992, p. 1) and nothing else.

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APPENDIX

Glossary of Gikuyu Terms

Ambui -- The name for one of the nine clans among the Gikuyu people.

Baba -- Pronounced "fava," it translates as "father."

Kirira -- A term for "education" or "advice."

Maitu -- A term for "mother."

Muiru -- A term for women in a polygynous marriages, the commonly-used English equivalent is "co-wife."

Muka -- A word for "female" or "woman," it is often used as a synonym of the English word "wife." However, "wife" carries gender role connotations that are not apparent in "muka."

Muthuri -- A word for "male" or "man," it is often used as a synonym of the English word "husband." However, "husband" carries gender role connotations that are not apparent in "muthuri."

Ngai -- Translates as "Supreme Consciousness" or "God."

Nyaciara -- Translates as "mother-in-law."

Riika -- A word for "age-set," which is applied to the cohort of all Gikuyu people circumcised during the same time period.

VITA

Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi was born in Gaicanjiru, Kenya on March 18, 1964. She grew up in Kenya with her mother, Njambi, her father, Ngaruiya, and her seven sisters and three brothers.

Wairimu attended college at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia, receiving a B.S. in Family and Child Development. At the time of this writing, she is enrolled as a doctoral student in Virginia Tech's Department of Sociology. Wairimu is married to William O'Brien since April, 1987, and has one daughter, Mumbi, born in September, 1990.

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