Parallel lives and scattered families: European immigration rules and transnational family practices between Africa and Europe

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As an anthropologist, one of the first things one learns is that marriage and family come in very different forms in different social contexts, and even *within* societies. In much of contemporary Europe, nuclear, heterosexual families exist side-by-side with 'recomposed families' in which children from previous relationships are shuttled back and forth, *de facto* polygamous families, and same-sex families with children. Secret families from previous lives are much more common than is usually assumed as people try to protect relationships in the present from being overshadowed by the past. If diversity is the norm in human life, why, then, is there increasing anxiety around 'immigrant' family practices in European states? And given the growing proportion of transnational families globally, what are the effects of immigration rules on family relationships across national borders?

One of the practices that has generated rising anxiety in many European states is polygamy in its various forms (cf. Charsley and Liversage 2012). Of course, states have always sought to control family practices, so in a sense this is not new. But what characterises the contemporary period is the way in which family practices are explicitly invoked by European Union (EU) states to delineate ever more rigid external as well as internal boundaries (Fassin 2010; Anderson 2013). Among those family practices associated with immigrant populations, polygamy has become increasingly targeted in French public discourse, particularly in reference to Muslims of African descent. African men with several wives are invariably portrayed as individuals with low moral standards, who

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are too attached to African traditions to deserve either residency or citizenship. In 2005, several politicians and public intellectuals thus blamed the French riots on the disenchantment produced by immigrant childhoods spent in poor, polygamous households.

Meanwhile, marriage has become one of the few remaining routes enabling non-EU citizens to acquire long-term legal status (Beck-Gernsheim 2011; Wray 2011). Marriage to EU citizens or residents, therefore, has become increasingly treated with suspicion, in the name of the fight against 'marriages of convenience'. In this context, it is essential to understand the role played by immigration rules in transnational family practices. Through my research with transnational families between France, the UK and Senegal,[1] I have found that many Senegalese men found themselves in the paradoxical situation of having to establish a new family in Europe in order to fulfill expectations of care towards their families back home. As Charsley and Liversage (2012: 60) remind us, polygamy encompasses a wide range of practices, 'some of which are new constructions arising from the specific conditions of transnational migration'. Indeed, whereas in some cases 'transnational polygamy' may be seen as a migration strategy, in others it arises as the outcome of the migration process.

Transnational polygamy as an extension of regional practices
Polygamy has a long history in the Senegambian region, and the practice has come in many different forms. In recent decades, polygamy has played an important role in facilitating translocal migration, with men simultaneously maintaining a household in a rural area of origin and one in a city. In some instances, therefore, the aspiration to have a family in Europe and another in Senegal may be seen as an extension of translocal practices.

This was the case of Amadou, a gifted musician who lived in Dakar with his wife of many years and their children. The international career to which Amadou aspired was often hampered by the difficulty of getting visas, especially given the suspicion of being would-be migrants which touring artists now faced with embassies. Amadou was therefore cultivating relationships with foreign women visitors. His wife did not seem to mind the frenzy of female activity around

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her husband. She expected to have a co-wife at some point, and said that a foreign wife living far away was less likely to cause trouble. Amadou eventually met a European woman who was keen for him to settle in her home country and teach at her music school, and they were soon married in Senegal. When I met her, she praised Amadou's first wife, whom she found to be a wonderful person. Amadou eventually moved abroad with her. Since then, Amadou and his new wife have had a child, and having been granted settlement, he is able to travel back home every year.

Parallel families as the outcome of the migration process
In contrast with Amadou, Djibril, a young Senegalese man who arrived in France in the mid-2000s, had never intended to establish a new family. On the contrary, he expected to work for a year or two, save up and return home to his young wife and child. Djibril travelled with a short-term visa, and simply overstayed. He soon found small jobs, but with the cost of living and debts from the cost of the trip to repay, he was unable to save much. His family discouraged him from returning home empty-handed, for then the sacrifice of his departure would have been in vain. Moreover, there was fear that leaving before acquiring legal status would prevent him from being able to travel back to Europe.

Djibril eventually met a young French woman who soon became pregnant by him. A lawyer assured him that fathering a French child would likely entitle him to temporary settlement. A Muslim wedding was held in Senegal, *in absentia*, a common practice in the region. Djibril was eventually granted legal status on grounds of paternity, but he was now caught in a difficult situation: he had two wives, neither of whom knew about the other. Paradoxically, it was establishing a new family that made it possible for him to travel back to Senegal to visit his first wife and child. He told his Senegalese wife about the French one, but the French wife was not to know about the Senegalese one for Djibril believed (inaccurately) that a European woman would never go along with polygamy. Djibril often felt the strain of having to manage the flow of information about his past life in order to secure his future in France. Having arrived in France with the intention of caring for his wife and other relatives back home before returning to a monogamous

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marriage, he also felt trapped in a situation in which either choice would mean leaving loved ones behind. Djibril's case exemplifies the many situations in which polygamy is the result of a protracted period of irregularity, with little hope of acquiring a dignified life as someone able to care for his family back home. It also illustrates the mutual constitution of immigration rules and marriage practices.

The paradoxes of transnational polygyny

The contemporary period is marked by the increasingly transnational character of families. Social reproduction is therefore highly contingent on cross-border mobility. Migrants from African countries to Europe are often caught up between three forces in tension with each other: the moral economy of kinship back home, ideas about love and nuclear family in their new households, and European states' intent on controlling marriage migration and family reunification by imposing rigid standards for what constitutes appropriate forms of love, intimacy, and family. In this confrontation, however, power lies squarely with states. New family arrangements and immigration rules are mutually constituted, but this mutual constitution is by no means a politically neutral process since destination states have the legal power to decide which family practices will be regarded as acceptable. Increasingly, sovereignty involves the simultaneous capacity to control human mobility and to impose specific family values and arrangements.

Transnational polygyny involving Senegalese men having a wife in Europe and another in Senegal appear in some cases as extensions of older practices. In other cases, however, it is the outcome of migration trajectories in an increasingly restrictive context. While these patterns seem to support current European discourses about African men trying to cheat the system to obtain visas, it is far too simplistic to criminalise those trajectories. Firstly, they may be explained by the absence of alternatives for regular migration. Secondly, marriage aspirations and ideas of love in Africa as elsewhere are almost always linked to hopes of social and geographic mobility. It does not make sense, therefore, to assume that these men do not care for their European families. There is often a strong emotional attachment to the new family abroad, especially when children are born. Men end up being caught up between two families among whom they must

share their resources, which inevitably leads to tensions. This is especially the case when they remain dependent on their European spouse to renew their initial residence permit. These competing demands put tremendous strain on the migrants, which is intensified by European social climates increasingly hostile to Muslim men. In the Senegalese context however, where polygyny has come to be associated with translocal migration, having a spouse and children in two places makes sense in moral terms. French public discourse condemns polygamy as immoral and incompatible with human rights, but French immigration laws actually reinforce the practice by pushing individuals into marriage if they want to stay. Ultimately, one may ask what the consequences will be for social cohesion in European nations when significant numbers of migrants, themselves often future citizens, are pushed into practices for which they end up being stigmatised. □

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Endnotes

1. This contribution draws on an Oxford Diaspora Programme project entitled 'Multinational families, creolized practices and new identities: Euro-Senegalese cases'.

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