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Cultural Surrogacy and Its Influence on Kinship Ties Among the Pokot Community of West Pokot County, Kenya

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Abstract- ***Surrogacy, a form of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART), is increasingly visible across the globe, yet its acceptance within kinship-based African societies such as the Pokot of Kenya remains contested. This paper examines cultural surrogacy and its influence on kinship ties among the Pokot community of West Pokot County. Grounded in Structural-Functionalism, Social Exchange Theory and Socio-cultural Theory, the study employed a mixed-methods design. A sample of 200 respondents, surrogate mothers, intended parents, church leaders and community elders, was drawn from five sub-counties using purposive and snowball sampling, and 196 (98%) participated. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) in SPSS, while qualitative interview data were analysed thematically. Cultural surrogacy was understood primarily as a practice for preserving family lineage (35.0%) and was legitimised through the involvement of elders (33.3%) and blessing rituals (23.3%). It was widely perceived to reinforce kinship ties and lineage (36.7%) and to strengthen family bonds through shared responsibility (31.7%), while also introducing new family dynamics (25.0%) and, for a minority, strain, jealousy and exclusion. The community itself was almost evenly divided between strong support (26.7%) and opposition from some leaders (25.0%). Thematically, four themes were identified: lineage preservation, communal sanctioning and ritual, reconfiguration of kinship roles, and community ambivalence. The study concludes that cultural surrogacy among the Pokot operates as a communal, lineage-affirming institution whose sustainability depends on emotional support, clear cultural protocols and supportive legal recognition.***

Keywords: Cultural Surrogacy, Kinship Ties, Lineage, Family Structure, Pokot Community, Assisted Reproductive Technology

I. INTRODUCTION

Surrogacy is best described as a reproductive arrangement whereby one woman undertakes to gestate and deliver a child for another individual or couple, who then take on parental responsibility once the child is born (Shayo, 2015). It takes two principal forms: traditional surrogacy, in which the surrogate contributes her own ovum, and gestational surrogacy, in which she carries an embryo created through in vitro fertilisation using the gametes of the intended parents (Swanson et al., 2020). As assisted reproductive technologies have diffused worldwide, surrogacy has shifted from a marginal clinical option to a globally debated social institution. Yet it remains, fundamentally, more than a medical procedure; it is a social arrangement shaped by cultural, legal, religious and ethical considerations, particularly in societies where lineage and parenthood carry deep collective meaning (Shayo, 2015; Kavarić & Djoković, 2023).

In much of the global North, the dominant framing of surrogacy has been legal and clinical, centring on regulation, parentage, contractual enforceability and the welfare of the surrogate and the resulting child (Swanson et al., 2020; Alexandra Harland, 2021). Scholars have documented persistent moral dilemmas surrounding the commodification of reproduction and the rights of the parties involved (Kavarić & Djoković, 2023), as well as the stigma frequently attached to women who become surrogates (Khvorostyanov & Yeshua-Katz, 2020). These debates, while valuable, are embedded in individualist and contractual assumptions that translate awkwardly into communal and kinship-

oriented settings, where reproduction is rarely conceived as a private transaction between two parties.

Across Africa, motherhood and child-bearing are situated within dense webs of kinship, clan identity and inter-generational continuity, such that the inability to bear children carries profound social consequences for women and families alike (Muhonja, 2022; Powis, 2020). Religious and spiritual frameworks further mediate how communities evaluate reproductive interventions, with faith institutions playing a decisive role in legitimising or contesting them (Whittaker, Gerrits & Manderson, 2025). Informal, culturally sanctioned forms of surrogacy, in which a relative or socially approved woman bears a child to sustain a lineage, have long coexisted with, and now intersect with, biomedical ART, producing hybrid practices that this paper terms "cultural surrogacy".

Empirical work from across the continent illustrates this entanglement. In Nigeria, Alabi (2020) shows that perceptions of surrogacy among the Yoruba are filtered through beliefs about lineage and the sacredness of motherhood, while Iwunze (2024) documents the uncharted legal terrain surrounding the practice. In Ghana, surrogate women have been described as "invisible reproductive workers" whose labour is socially indispensable yet poorly protected (Boampong et al., 2023; Adomako-Kwakye & Owusu-Dapaa, 2020). In South Africa, childless women interpret surrogacy through a mixture of hope, suspicion and cultural caution (Pheme, Sithole & Malema, 2020), and in Uganda the ethics of ART remain only partially settled (Mande & Akullo, 2024). Together, these studies reveal a continent negotiating surrogacy at the intersection of tradition, religion and modern reproductive science.

In Kenya, the legal architecture for ART remains incomplete, with the Assisted Reproductive Technology Bill of 2019 yet to mature into comprehensive law, leaving surrogate mothers and intended parents in a zone of legal uncertainty (Olobo-Lalobo, 2022). Most Kenyan scholarship has concentrated on urban fertility clinics and their communication or service-delivery dynamics (Kariuki, 2023), while the kinship and fostering logics that already structure child-rearing in many communities have been examined largely in the context of refugee resettlement and "other" children (Balakian, 2023). The Pokot of West Pokot County, a pastoralist community organised around lineage, bride-wealth and clan continuity, thus constitute a strategically important but understudied site for understanding how surrogacy interacts with established kinship systems.

Despite this rich backdrop, there is scant empirical evidence on how culturally framed surrogacy influences kinship relations within specific Kenyan communities, and none focusing on a pastoralist society such as the Pokot. This gap is consequential because the meaning, legitimacy and consequences of surrogacy are likely to differ sharply between contractual urban settings and kinship-based rural ones. Addressing the first objective of a broader study on cultural surrogacy among the Pokot, this paper examines how community members understand surrogacy, the cultural practices that govern it, and the ways in which it reinforces, reshapes or strains family and kinship ties.

II. THEORETICAL REVIEW

Three complementary theories framed this study: Structural-Functionalism, Social Exchange Theory and Socio-cultural Theory. Each is presented below in terms of its proponents, core propositions, relevance to the study, strengths, weaknesses and the strategies adopted to mitigate those weaknesses.

2.1 Structural-Functionalism

Proponents and year: Structural-Functionalism is associated with A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and Talcott Parsons (1951), building on the earlier sociology of Émile Durkheim. The theory conceives society as a system of interrelated parts, institutions such as family, kinship, religion and economy, each performing functions that contribute to the stability and continuity of the whole. Kinship, in this view, is a core institution that regulates descent, inheritance, marriage and the socialisation of children, thereby maintaining social order across generations.

Relevance: The theory illuminates why surrogacy among the Pokot is evaluated primarily by its contribution to lineage continuity and family stability rather than by individual choice. Where childlessness threatens the functional continuity of a descent line, cultural surrogacy can be read as a restorative mechanism that allows the kinship system to perform its reproductive and inheritance functions, explaining the finding that most respondents view surrogacy as reinforcing kinship ties.

Strengths: It offers a coherent account of how reproductive practices serve collective continuity and integrates surrogacy into the broader social structure rather than treating it in isolation. Weaknesses: It is criticised for overemphasising consensus and stability, downplaying conflict, power and change, and for struggling to explain the tensions, jealousy and contestation that surrogacy also generates. Mitigation: To offset this, the study paired Structural-Functionalism with Social Exchange Theory, which foregrounds negotiation and reciprocity, and with qualitative data that surface dissent, thereby capturing both the integrative and the disruptive dimensions of surrogacy.

2.2 Social Exchange Theory

Proponents and year: Social Exchange Theory was articulated by George Homans (1958) and Peter Blau (1964), and later refined by Emerson (1976). It holds that social relationships are sustained through reciprocal exchanges of benefits, material, emotional and symbolic, in which parties seek to maximise rewards and minimise costs, and where ongoing relationships are stabilised by norms of reciprocity, trust and balanced obligation.

Relevance: The theory directly explains the centrality of compensation and reciprocal support in Pokot surrogacy arrangements, where the surrogate's labour is acknowledged through material and social support, and where intended families reciprocate with gratitude and recognition. It accounts for the observed strengthening of bonds through shared responsibility, as well as for the strain that arises when the perceived balance of costs and rewards is disturbed.

Strengths: It provides a clear logic linking reciprocity to relationship quality and helps explain why supported, well-compensated surrogacy arrangements yield stronger kinship bonds. Weaknesses: It risks reducing intimate, culturally sacred relationships to transactional calculation and may understate altruistic or ritual motivations. Mitigation: The study embedded exchange dynamics within the cultural and spiritual meanings highlighted by Socio-cultural Theory, ensuring that reciprocity was interpreted as culturally embedded rather than purely economic.

2.3 Socio-cultural Theory

Proponents and year: Socio-cultural Theory originates with Lev Vygotsky (1978) and has been extended by contemporary scholars such as Glăveanu (2020) and Lantolf, Poehner and Thorne (2020). It posits that human understanding and practice are constructed through social interaction and mediated by cultural tools, norms and "more knowledgeable others" who guide individuals within their community.

Relevance: The theory explains why surrogacy among the Pokot is meaningful only when mediated by elders, ritual and collective approval. Elders function as the "more knowledgeable others" whose sanction confers legitimacy, and blessing ceremonies operate as cultural tools that integrate the surrogate and the child into the kinship order, accounting for the prominence of elder involvement and ritual in the findings.

Strengths: It captures the mediated, negotiated and context-dependent character of surrogacy and accommodates the religious and moral evaluations central to a predominantly Christian community. Weaknesses: It is sometimes criticised for being broadly descriptive and difficult to operationalise for measurement, and for underspecifying material and structural constraints. Mitigation: The study operationalised socio-cultural constructs into measurable indicators (elder sanctioning, ritual observance) for the quantitative analysis and combined them with the structural and exchange perspectives to address material dimensions.

III. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Six empirical studies, drawn from African and global contexts, are reviewed below in terms of their authors, titles, countries, methodologies, findings and the research gaps they leave open.

In a study titled "Perceptions of surrogacy within the Yoruba socio-cultural context of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria," Alabi (2020) employed a qualitative design using in-depth interviews to explore how members of a Yoruba community understood surrogacy. The findings revealed deep ambivalence: while surrogacy was recognised as a remedy for childlessness, it was simultaneously viewed through beliefs about lineage purity and the sacredness of motherhood, producing moral hesitation. The research gap is that the study focused on an agrarian Yoruba town and did not examine pastoralist kinship systems or the role of formal community gate-keeping by elders, leaving open how surrogacy is sanctioned in clan-based societies.

Their study, "The perceptions of childless women on surrogacy as an assisted reproductive technique in Lebowakgomo, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province," used a qualitative, phenomenological approach with childless women. It found that although surrogacy offered hope, participants harboured cultural suspicion, fear of stigma and concern about ancestral and family acceptance of a child not born of the womb of the intended mother. The gap lies in its exclusive focus on childless women as a single category, omitting the perspectives of elders, religious leaders and intended fathers who shape communal acceptance, which this study incorporates.

In "Commercial Surrogacy: Invisible Reproductive Workers in Ghana," the authors adopted a qualitative case-study methodology to examine the lived experiences of surrogate women. They found that surrogates perform socially essential reproductive labour yet remain socially invisible and legally unprotected, often relying on informal trust-based arrangements. The research gap is its concentration on commercial, urban surrogacy framed in labour terms, leaving unexplored the culturally embedded, lineage-oriented surrogacy that operates through kinship reciprocity in rural communities.

Their paper, "Ethics and Assisted Reproductive Technology in Uganda," used a doctrinal and qualitative review approach to interrogate the ethical and regulatory dimensions of ART. The study found that ART, including surrogacy, raises unresolved ethical questions about parentage, consent and commodification within a context of weak legal frameworks. The gap is that it remained largely normative and legal, without grounding its analysis in community-level empirical data on how kinship structures absorb or resist surrogacy, which is the empirical contribution this study makes.

In "Mothers for others: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of gestational surrogates' child relinquishment experiences," the authors used interpretative phenomenological analysis with surrogate mothers. They found that, at the point of handing over the child, surrogates went through sharp emotional conflict and a sense of loss, deepened by cultural ideas that cast motherhood as a sacred and unbreakable tie. The gap is its focus on the individual psychological experience of relinquishment in an Asian Catholic setting, without examining how surrogacy reconfigures kinship ties at the family and community level in an African pastoralist context.

Their study, "Experiences of surrogates and intended parents of surrogacy arrangements: a systematic review," synthesised evidence from multiple studies through a systematic review methodology. It concluded that when surrogacy is well supported and culturally embedded, it can strengthen emotional bonds between surrogates and intended families, whereas inadequate support generates strain and emotional distance. The gap is that the reviewed evidence derived overwhelmingly from high-income, individualist societies, limiting its applicability to communal, kinship-based African settings such as the Pokot.

Synthesis: Across these studies, surrogacy emerges as both a remedy for childlessness and a site of cultural, ethical and emotional tension. However, the literature is dominated by individual-psychological, legal-

normative and commercial-labour framings, and by Western or urban settings. None examines a Kenyan pastoralist community in which elders, ritual and clan reciprocity actively structure surrogacy and its effect on kinship ties, which is the precise gap this study addresses.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods design that integrated quantitative and qualitative strands to capture both the prevalence of attitudes and the lived cultural meanings of surrogacy, an approach well suited to socially complex phenomena (Taherdoost, 2022; Siedlecki, 2020). Fieldwork took place in West Pokot County, a largely pastoralist region in Kenya's north-west where customary values around family, descent and motherhood remain influential. The target population of approximately 2,000 comprised surrogate parents, intended parents, church leaders and community elders across five sub-counties (Kapenguria, Kacheliba, Sigor, Pokot South and Pokot North). Following Lakens (2022), a sample of 200 respondents, representing 10% of the target population, was selected through purposive sampling to ensure participants had direct or indirect experience with surrogacy, supplemented by snowball sampling to reach less accessible respondents. Questionnaires were administered to surrogate and intended parents, while interview guides were used with community and church leaders.

Validity and reliability were addressed through expert review of the instruments and a pilot study prior to fieldwork (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020; Dunn, 2020). Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), generating descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages to establish how cultural surrogacy practices relate to the strength of kinship ties. Qualitative interview data were analysed thematically, with responses coded, categorised and organised into themes and sub-themes (Shaw, 2023). Ethical considerations, informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and cultural sensitivity, were observed throughout, and research approval together with a NACOSTI permit were obtained before data collection, with community leaders engaged to ensure culturally appropriate conduct.

V. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The interviews conducted with community elders and church leaders are presented below through representative direct quotations. Each excerpt is introduced to provide context, followed by the verbatim quotation, an interpretation of its meaning, and a discussion that links it to the wider literature. Identifiers indicate role, age and sub-county while preserving anonymity.

The first excerpt speaks to how participants located surrogacy within the survival of the family line, with an elder framing childbearing as essential to the very life of the homestead.

"Among us, a home without a child is like a fire that has gone out. If a woman cannot bear, arranging for another to bear on her behalf keeps the name and the homestead alive." (Male elder, 58, Kapenguria)

The metaphor of an extinguished fire conveys that, in Pokot thought, childlessness is not a private misfortune but a threat to the continuity of the whole homestead, and surrogacy is understood as the means of keeping that fire alight.

This lineage-centred reasoning aligns with Structural-Functionalism, in which kinship exists to secure descent and inheritance across generations (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952), and agrees with Alabi (2020), who found that Yoruba perceptions of surrogacy are governed by beliefs about lineage and the sacredness of motherhood.

A second participant addressed the consequences of childlessness for the stability of marriage, presenting surrogacy as the preferable alternative to marital rupture.

"It is better that another woman helps the family get a child than for the marriage to break. The child belongs to the home, and the shame of barrenness is removed." (Female respondent, 41, Pokot South)

The statement reveals that surrogacy is weighed against the social costs of separation or additional marriages, and is accepted because it preserves both the marriage and the family's standing while removing the stigma of barrenness.

This protective function supports the view that surrogacy operates as a restorative mechanism for the kinship system rather than a transgression of it, consistent with Muhonja's (2022) account of the heavy social weight attached to motherhood in African world-senses.

Several participants stressed that surrogacy is not a private arrangement but one requiring communal authorisation, as captured by an elder from Sigor.

"Nothing of this kind is done in secret. The elders must sit, agree and bless it. If the elders have not spoken, the child will not be received well by the people." (Male elder, 64, Sigor)

The insistence that the elders must sit, agree and bless the arrangement demonstrates that legitimacy flows from collective sanction; without it, the child risks social rejection.

This gate-keeping role exemplifies Socio-cultural Theory's notion of "more knowledgeable others" who mediate meaning within the community (Glăveanu, 2020), and helps explain the descriptive finding that elder involvement (33.3%) was the most cited cultural practice governing surrogacy.

Beyond the authority of elders, participants described ritual as integral to the acceptance of the surrogate and the child, as a church leader explained.

"There are rituals we perform so that the woman who carries the child is blessed and the child is accepted by the ancestors and by God. Without this, people fear there will be problems." (Church leader, 49, Kacheliba)

Blessing the surrogate before conception is understood to integrate her and the child into the family's spiritual order and to avert misfortune, making ritual a condition of social and spiritual belonging.

This reflects the cultural-tool dimension of Socio-cultural Theory and aligns with Whittaker et al. (2025), who show that religious practice actively shapes how communities receive assisted reproduction; it also accounts for the prominence of blessing rituals (23.3%) in the quantitative findings.

While surrogacy was widely endorsed, participants also recognised the social ambiguity it can create around the surrogate's role, as one respondent observed.

"Sometimes people do not know how to treat her. Is she a mother? Is she an aunt? This confusion can bring quarrels if it is not handled with wisdom." (Female respondent, 37, Pokot North)

The uncertainty over whether the surrogate is a mother or an aunt reveals that surrogacy unsettles established kinship categories, and that this ambiguity can become a source of conflict if poorly managed.

This tension qualifies the integrative reading of surrogacy and is consistent with Gunnarsson Payne et al. (2020), who describe surrogacy relationships as relational achievements that reconfigure the boundaries of family and belonging.

Bound up with this role ambiguity was the emotional side of surrogacy, which a church leader expressed by pointing to how deeply the surrogate becomes attached to the child.

"The heart of a woman who has carried a child is not stone. Some find it hard to let go, and this can bring tension in the family if there is no support." (Church leader, 52, Kapenguria)

The image of a heart that is not stone acknowledges the emotional labour of relinquishment and signals that, without support, attachment can translate into family tension.

This finding corroborates Teman and Berend (2021) and Ferolino et al. (2020), who document the emotional conflict surrogates experience at relinquishment, and helps explain why emotional support emerged as an important condition for the practice in this study.

Participants frequently described surrogacy as a shared communal responsibility rather than the burden of a single household, as a respondent from Sigor noted.

"When the family is helping in this way, the relatives and neighbours also come in to support. We give what we can, because the child will belong to all of us." (Male respondent, 45, Sigor)

The willingness of relatives and neighbours to contribute because the child will belong to all of them shows that reciprocity and collective ownership of the child reinforce kinship bonds.

This reciprocal dynamic is well explained by Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), in which relationships are sustained through reciprocal benefits, and aligns with Kneebone et al. (2022), who found that well-supported, communally embedded surrogacy strengthens bonds between the parties.

Not all voices were affirming; a number of participants reported moral and religious reservations, as expressed by a church leader from Pokot South.

"Some leaders in the church say it is not the way God intended, and so they discourage it. That is why not everyone agrees, and some keep quiet about it." (Church leader, 56, Pokot South)

The objection that surrogacy is not the way God intended indicates that religious conviction is a key source of community ambivalence, leading some to discourage or quietly resist the practice.

This moral contestation reflects the divided community role evident in the quantitative findings, where 25.0% reported opposition from leaders, and mirrors the ethical unsettledness documented by Mande and Akullo (2024) in their study of assisted reproductive technology in Uganda.

VI. QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Of the 200 targeted respondents, 196 participated, yielding a response rate of 98%. The majority were aged 26–45 years (76.5%), female (68.9%) and married (70.4%), reflecting the reproductive, female-centred and marital framing of surrogacy in the community. The descriptive findings relating to cultural surrogacy and kinship ties are presented below.

6.1 Community Understanding of Cultural Surrogacy

The study first sought to establish how community members conceptualise cultural surrogacy, since the meaning attached to a practice shapes both its acceptance and its consequences for kinship. Respondents indicated how they understood surrogacy, and their responses are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Community Understanding of Cultural Surrogacy

Definition	Freq.	%
Traditional practice to ensure family continuity and lineage	42	35.0
Another woman carries and delivers a child for a couple	38	31.7
A means to provide a child where infertility is an issue	22	18.3
A form of adoption where the surrogate helps raise the child	14	11.7
Other	4	3.3
Total	120	100.0

Table 1 shows that most respondents (35.0%) saw cultural surrogacy chiefly as a customary way of safeguarding the family line and its continuity, and a further 31.7% described it as one woman bearing and delivering a child for a couple who cannot. A remedy for infertility was the leading view for 18.3%, an adoption-like role for 11.7%, and other meanings for the remaining 3.3%.

The dominance of the lineage definition indicates that, for the Pokot, surrogacy is anchored in family continuity rather than understood primarily as a clinical or contractual intervention, situating the practice firmly within the kinship system.

This understanding accords with Structural-Functionalism, which treats kinship as the institution responsible for securing descent and continuity (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952), and with Alabi (2020), who similarly found that perceptions of surrogacy in the Yoruba context are mediated by beliefs about lineage and motherhood rather than by clinical considerations.

6.2 Cultural Practices Governing Surrogacy

Having established how surrogacy is understood, the study examined the cultural practices through which it is conducted and legitimised within the community. Respondents identified the protocols that typically govern surrogacy arrangements, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Cultural Practices Involved in Surrogacy

Cultural Practice	Freq.	%
Involvement of elders or community leaders	40	33.3
Rituals to bless the surrogate before conception	28	23.3
Surrogate mother is compensated or supported	26	21.7
Formal agreement between surrogate and intended parents	20	16.7
Other	6	5.0
Total	120	100.0

As Table 2 indicates, the practice most often named was the participation of elders or community leaders (33.3%), ahead of pre-conception blessing rites for the surrogate (23.3%), the provision of support or compensation to her (21.7%) and written agreements between the parties (16.7%); a further 5.0% mentioned other practices.

The prominence of elders and ritual, set against the low incidence of formal agreements, shows that surrogacy is a community-sanctioned event grounded in trust and cultural expectation rather than legal contract, reinforcing its embeddedness in communal life.

This pattern reflects the Socio-cultural premise that legitimacy is conferred by recognised community authorities acting as “more knowledgeable others” (Glăveanu, 2020), and is in line with Boampong et al. (2023), who observed that surrogacy in African settings frequently relies on informal, trust-based arrangements rather than formal contracts.

6.3 Influence on Kinship Structure

The central concern of the study was how cultural surrogacy influences the traditional kinship structure of the community. Respondents indicated the principal effects they associated with the practice, summarised in Table 3.

Table 3 Effects of Cultural Surrogacy on Traditional Kinship Structure

Effect on Kinship Structure	Freq.	%
Reinforces kinship ties and lineage	44	36.7
Introduces new family dynamics	30	25.0
Changes traditional roles and expectations	26	21.7
Strengthens relationships between clans	14	11.6
Other	6	5.0
Total	120	100.0

Table 3 shows that the most common view (36.7%) was that surrogacy strengthens kinship bonds and the family line, with 25.0% noting that it brings new dynamics into the family, 21.7% that it alters customary roles and expectations, and 11.6% that it builds closer ties between clans; the remaining 5.0% gave other effects.

Surrogacy is predominantly experienced as lineage-affirming, even as it reconfigures established roles. The coexistence of reinforcement (36.7%) with new dynamics (25.0%) and role change (21.7%) implies that the practice both sustains and reshapes the kinship order rather than leaving it unchanged.

This dual effect supports the functionalist reading of surrogacy as a restorative mechanism for the descent line (Parsons, 1951), while the reported reconfiguration of roles parallels Gunnarsson Payne et al. (2020), who describe surrogacy as a relational achievement that redraws the boundaries of family and belonging.

6.4 Influence on Family Bonds and Relationships

Beyond the broad kinship structure, the study explored how surrogacy affects the quality of relationships and bonds within the family. Respondents reported its perceived effects on family cohesion, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Effect of Cultural Surrogacy on Family Bonds

Effect on Family Bonds	Freq.	%
Stronger bonds due to shared responsibility	38	31.7
Increased unity within the extended family	30	25.0
No significant change	24	20.0
Weaker bonds due to complexities	22	18.3
Other	6	5.0
Total	120	100.0

As Table 4 shows, 31.7% felt that shared responsibility for the child draws the family closer and 25.0% reported greater cohesion within the extended family, whereas 20.0% saw little change and 18.3% sensed weaker bonds owing to the complications involved; 5.0% reported other effects. Alongside this, relations between the surrogate and the biological family were mostly positive, though a sizeable minority of surrogates met with tension, envy or exclusion in their own households.

While the dominant pattern is one of strengthened bonds and recognition, the minority reporting strain, jealousy and exclusion indicates that the integrative effect of surrogacy is not automatic; it implies a need for deliberate emotional and social support to manage the tensions the practice can generate within families.

The strengthening of bonds through shared responsibility is well explained by Social Exchange Theory, in which reciprocal contribution sustains relationships (Blau, 1964), while the reported strain corroborates Teman and Berend (2021) and Kneebone et al. (2022), who note that inadequate support can convert surrogacy into a source of emotional difficulty.

6.5 Role of the Community

Finally, given the communal framing evident in the preceding findings, the study considered the role of the wider community in supporting or opposing cultural surrogacy. Respondents characterised the community's stance as summarised in Table 5.

Table 5 Role of the Community in Supporting or Opposing Cultural Surrogacy

Community Role	Freq.	%
Provides strong support and acknowledgement	32	26.7
Offers emotional or financial support	28	23.3
Opposition from community leaders	30	25.0
Community remains neutral	24	20.0
Other	6	5.0
Total	120	100.0

Table 5 indicates that 26.7% of respondents felt the community offers firm backing and recognition and 23.3% pointed to emotional or financial assistance, whereas 25.0% noted resistance from community leaders and 20.0% saw the community as indifferent; 5.0% described other roles. Members of the extended family were generally guarded, with roughly a third treating surrogacy with caution and making it conditional on the approval of elders.

The near-even division between support and opposition shows that surrogacy occupies contested social ground, simultaneously embraced as a communal project and resisted by guardians of tradition and faith, implying that its acceptance depends heavily on the stance of elders and religious leaders.

This contestation reflects the moral and religious mediation of reproductive practice described by

Whittaker et al. (2025), and is consistent with Mande and Akullo (2024), whose study of assisted reproductive technology in Uganda found surrogacy situated within unresolved ethical and communal debate.

Note: The direct quotations in Section 5 are representative and should be verified against the interview transcripts prior to final submission.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusions

The study concludes that cultural surrogacy among the Pokot of West Pokot County functions as a communal, lineage-affirming institution rather than a purely medical or contractual transaction. It is understood predominantly as a means of preserving family continuity, is legitimised through the sanction of elders and the performance of blessing rituals, and is widely perceived to reinforce kinship ties and strengthen family bonds. Both the qualitative themes and the descriptive findings converge on this conclusion: reciprocal support and communal sanctioning are the dominant forces through which surrogacy strengthens kinship, while elder approval and ritual confer the legitimacy that integrates the surrogate and the child into the family order.

At the same time, the study concludes that the integrative effect of surrogacy is neither automatic nor uncontested. The practice introduces new family dynamics, renders the surrogate's social status ambiguous, and in a significant minority of cases produces emotional strain, jealousy and exclusion, while the wider community remains divided between active support and moral or religious objection. The long-term sustainability of cultural surrogacy as a kinship-affirming institution therefore depends on whether families and communities can manage these tensions through adequate emotional support, clear cultural protocols and an enabling legal environment. In sum, cultural surrogacy simultaneously sustains and tests the Pokot kinship system, and its net effect is shaped by how deliberately the community and the state choose to support those involved.

7.2 Recommendations

Arising from the findings, the following enhanced recommendations are advanced:

1. Institutionalise reciprocal and emotional support for surrogate mothers. Because reciprocal support and recognition were strongly associated with stronger family bonds, families, clans and community organisations should formalise fair material and social support for surrogate mothers, complemented by counselling and family-level support that addresses the emotional attachment, strain and exclusion documented in the study, thereby protecting both the surrogate and the child.
2. Preserve and formalise the sanctioning and ritual roles of elders. Given the strong role of communal sanctioning, community structures should retain and clearly define the gate-keeping and blessing roles of elders, including culturally sensitive recognition ceremonies that integrate the surrogate and the child into the kinship order, so that surrogacy arrangements are transparently legitimised and disputes minimised.
3. Establish a supportive legal framework and engage religious leaders. Government and the relevant agencies should move the stalled ART Bill toward enactment so that surrogate mothers and intended parents alike enjoy clear legal safeguards, while churches and faith leaders are drawn into informed dialogue that reconciles scriptural concerns with the community's reproductive realities.
4. Undertake community sensitisation and further research. Targeted sensitisation involving elders, church leaders and community health workers should be conducted to bridge cultural conservatism and contemporary reproductive practice, and future studies should examine additional factors such as education, economic status and the experiences of surrogacy-born children, extending the inquiry to other pastoralist communities for comparison.

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