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Boxing family: Theorising competition with boxers in Accra, Ghana

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Abstract

Anthropologists have often conceptualized competition by contrasting it with cooperation, even when collective ends are sought and achieved by competing. This approach tells us little about the qualities of the relationships and subjectivities that competition sustains. I explore the qualities of competitive relationships and subjectivities among Accra boxers, many of whom feel a constant, simmering sense of competition with one another. Boxers describe these competitive relationships using kinship idioms, and distinguish keenly between these kinship metaphors and non-metaphoric kin relations. A sustained comparison between competitive relations and kin relations in Accra reveals how competition intertwines subjectivities and futures, rather than producing hyper-individualistic and self-interested 'neoliberal subjects'. I thus argue that boxers use kinship as a metaphoric resource to help them navigate the fraught intimacies that competition fosters. Their rendering of competition as kinship suggests how anthropologists might theorize the contradictory nature of competitive relationships with more nuance.

Keywords

Boxing, competition, Ghana, kinship, neoliberalism, subjectivity, sport

Introduction

In Ga Mashie, an ethnically Ga neighbourhood of Ghana's capital Accra, boxing is the sport of choice for many young men seeking wealth, global mobility and public renown. Although most aspire to box outside Ghana, competition between rivals in Accra is fierce

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and a necessary step to becoming a globally mobile athlete. Over a meal one evening, a boxer called Seidu explained the pitfalls of making friends in such a competitive context:

> *Seidu*: I don't have friends. Friends are always asking you for things, they take things from you, so I try not to have them.
>
> *Leo*: What about the boys from the Attoh Quarshie [Seidu's gym]?
>
> *S*: We are like family; they are my brothers.

Other boxers hold similar suspicions about friendship, reflecting the common sentiment in sub-Saharan Africa that intimacy, and friendship in particular, is potentially dangerous (Geschiere, 2013; Gilbert, 2018). Yet these same boxers form close bonds with their gym-mates and often know rivals from other gyms well. They laugh and joke together at training, help one another with their problems, accompany one another on errands, and offer advice on the challenges of being young (and often single) in Accra. These close, and often competitive, relationships between boxers are conceptualized using kinship terms, most often junior/senior 'brother' and 'sister'.

Kin terms are similarly used to describe the boxing scene more widely. Coaches and boxers use 'the boxing family' to describe the constellation of actors involved with the sport in Accra; including active and former boxers and coaches, referees, judges, promoters and managers. While 'family', 'brother' and 'sister' are the most commonly used kin terms, intergenerational kin terms such as 'father' and 'uncle' are occasionally used by boxers to describe coaches, promoters and other non-boxers in the boxing family. The boxing family is also bisected by myriad relations of descent and marriage, and many boxers find that their training partners and potential opponents are their relatives. Despite kin terms being used to describe competitors, and the proliferation of kinship relations in the boxing family, competitive matches between kin are seen as highly problematic and avoided wherever possible. Why, then, do boxers use kinship terms to refer to their peers and rivals, if boxing between kin is taboo?

I argue that competition between boxers fosters mutually constitutive and dependent subjectivities, establishes normative hierarchies and axes of respect, and produces tensions that risk undermining these mutualities and hierarchies. 'The boxing family' and other kin terms reflect the similarities between kinship relations in Accra, and boxers' competitive relationships.[1] Boxers use kinship idioms to conceptualize competitive relationships that are at once mutually affirming and potentially dangerous, helping them to navigate the fraught intimacies that competitive boxing demands. Conceptualizing competition through the lens of kinship highlights the complex and contradictory nature of competitive relationships. This, in turn, offers a way to reinvigorate anthropological approaches to competition, which have too long relied on comparisons with cooperation to conceptualize competition.

My analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork with boxers in Accra from 2014 to 2018. During this time, I trained as a boxer at the Attoh Quarshie Boxing Gym in Ga Mashie for 24 months, lived alongside my gym-mates, and came to appreciate how boxing fitted into their lives beyond the sport.[2] My analysis focuses on relationships between men – as kin

and as boxers – because the vast majority of the Accra boxing family are men.[3] For the purposes of this article, I borrow Anni Kajanus' definition of competition as 'individuals or groups pursuing an objective by trying to surpass others' (Kajanus, 2019: 68). Defining competition as a process allows me to explore the forms of relating this process sustains, without presuming those relationships are defined by *either* winning *or* losing.

Competition – cooperation's other?

Anthropological literature explicitly theorizing competition is sparse (Kajanus, 2019: 68). What conceptual engagements there are often deploy a comparison with cooperation to account for what competition is and does. This stems, in part, from the vernacular understanding of competition as the opposite of cooperation. To frame my discussion, I sketch two widespread conceptual approaches to competition in anthropology – one pitting it against cooperation, the other asserting the intertwinement of competition with cooperation. Both bear nuancing in light of my ethnography.

Margaret Mead begins her treatise on competition and cooperation by laying out the definitions given to her by the American Economic and Social Research Council (AESRC), who commissioned the book:

> Competition: The act of seeking or endeavouring to gain what another is endeavouring to gain at the same time.
>
> Cooperation: The act of working together to one end.
>
> (Mead, 1966 [1937]: 8)

For the AESRC, competition and cooperation are diametrically opposed orientations towards others – the former privileging a logic of zero-sum gain/loss, the latter oriented towards collective gain. This 'common-sense' understanding of the concepts as opposites (Mead, 1966 [1937]: 16) is often implicit in the history of anthropological theory (Hopkinson and Zidaru, 2022), and continues to be influential in anthropology (e.g. Molina et al., 2017), in disciplines such as social psychology, and in vernacular usage.

Recently, sustained anthropological attention has considered the role of competition in neoliberal ideology, and the effects of proliferating competition under neoliberal governance. In neoliberal market orthodoxy, competition is assumed to be the driving force of market relations and the ideal mode of sociality that authoritatively reveals 'facts' about relative value in particular contexts and justly (if not evenly …) distributes wealth (Hayek, 2002 [1968]). Critical scholars emphasize the individualizing and atomizing effects of neoliberalism's competitive ethos, suggesting that it creates narcissistic (Layton, 2014; Rustin, 2014) and individualistic subjects, and weakens relations of mutuality and community (Asen, 2017; Gershon, 2011; Hart, 2005; Urciuoli, 2008). In much of this work, market-based competition becomes a shorthand for an 'asocial self-interest' (Ferguson, 2015: 127), implicitly juxtaposing competition against cooperative social forms.

Sporting industries have been key sites for analysing such neoliberal subjectivities. Against the backdrop of an extended phase of youth, social exclusion and valorized entrepreneurship caused by economic-political liberalization, aspirations to dramatic sporting success have become increasingly popular across the Global South, including among Ghanaians (Besnier et al., 2018; Esson, 2013). Recent ethnographies suggest that aspiring athletes see themselves as 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Foucault, 2008), constantly engaged in increasing their competitive potential through training regimes, spiritual practices and networking (Besnier, 2015; Guinness, 2018; Hann, 2018; Kovač, 2021). Athletes' reflexive and individualistic sense of agency manifests the imperatives of neoliberalized sporting industries, in which 'competition frames social relations as a zero-sum game; one person's success and standing appear at the expense of another' (Asen, 2017: 339). In this body of work, sporting industries shape neoliberal subjects whose competitiveness precludes, or marginalizes, cooperative modes of relating.

Boxing often provides a distilled image of this common-sense notion of competition as a zero-sum contest for personal gain at the expense of another – an association that extends to the anthropological imagination. For instance, in their introduction to Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*, Graeber and Grubačić conjure a Hobbesian vision of competition through the image of people 'duking it out like boxers in the ring' over limited resources from time immemorial (Grubačić and Graeber, 2020: 2). They do so to highlight Kropotkin's proposition that mutual aid, support and solidarity – *not* competition – are fundamental human behaviours. Here, competitive boxing stands for an aggressive individualism that is fundamentally opposed to cooperative socialities.

A second approach suggests that competition and cooperation are intertwined, not opposed. This approach is implicit in classic ethnographies of competitive practices including: Mauss's analysis of the Haïda and Tlingit potlatch (2002 [1954]), Moka ceremonies (Strathern 1971) and the Kula ring (Malinowski 1922). Here, competition necessitates collective effort, forges cooperative ties and facilitates the distribution of resources.

Explicitly theorizing this relationship, Margaret Mead explores how competition may serve shared (rather than individual) ends, and that competition and cooperation are both always relational dispositions (1966 [1937]: 16).[4] Elsewhere, Rudi Colloredo Mansfield argues that competition between Ecuadorian craftsmen involves a relational 'positioning' among competitors, rather than a 'go-it-alone individualism' (Colloredo Mansfeld, 2002: 114). Similarly, Fredrik Barth shows that Norwegian fishing boat captains, elected for their competitive prowess, in fact follow one another to fishing grounds for fear of standing out as a failure – cooperating even as they ostensibly compete (Barth, 1966). In these accounts, cooperation is clearly enfolded into dynamics of competition, not opposed to it. Yet, these analyses continue to define competition through a comparison with cooperation – albeit an inclusive comparison rather than a juxtaposition.

However, noting that competition involves cooperation (rather than being opposed to it or undermining it) still tells us little about the qualities and effects of competitive relationships. Anthropological engagements with friendship, marriage, siblingship, warmaking, love, envy, rivalry, sorcery, gifting or exchange do not culminate with the statement that these relations and practices involve degrees of cooperation – although this

may well be true. After all, to note that people act in consort towards shared ends – that they cooperate – tells us little about the qualities of the relationship between them. Instead, we might ask: What logics motivate cooperation in a particular relationship? What (if any) obligations does this relationship entail and elicit? What are the limits of these obligations? What emotional and affective registers are activated by specific acts of cooperation? By engaging similar questions ethnographically, anthropologists have teased out the subtle dynamics and consequences of the aforementioned modes of relating, going beyond a statement that they are/are not cooperative. In a similar vein, I trace the qualities and logics of competitive relationships and subjectivities among Accra boxers. Ultimately, I find their rendering of competition as kinship more revealing than a statement of whether competition involves, undermines or facilitate cooperation.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of relational moralities in neoliberal contexts (Muehlebach, 2012; Rangel and Adam, 2014; Trnka and Trundle, 2014), particularly those where competition is rife (Crawley, 2021; Ferguson, 2015). In this vein, I show that becoming a competitive boxer requires athletes to recognize their relationality and mutual dependence as competitors. Consequently, my argument adds to scholarship examining the contradictory nature of individualistic forms of agency and subjectivity instilled by contemporary capitalism (Bear, 2014; Cook, 2016; Gershon, 2016: 225).

Unpicking literal and metaphoric kinship

In Ga Mashie, older relatives often bring younger siblings, cousins, nephews and sons to Accra's gyms to begin training. Hence, sibling, cousin and intergenerational kin relations are particularly common among boxers. However, boxers and coaches distinguish sharply between these kinship relations and 'fictive' kin terms like the boxing family, or the description of training partners as brothers and sisters. They describe descent and marriage relationships in detail when distinguishing literal from fictive kinship, and I rarely encountered confusion between the two. This distinction is underlined by the fact that it is morally problematic for relatives to compete, while competitors who are not related describe one another (and the boxing scene more widely) using kinship idioms.

Calling someone 'brother', as Accra boxers do, is a common expression of solidarity across the world (Thelen et al., 2013: 4). Hence, idioms of kinship among boxers might reflect a solidarity built on hours of training together and the shared pursuit of championship dreams. In Brooklyn's Gleason's Boxing Gym, Lucia Trimbur (2013: 60) argues that 'training engenders and enacts the practice of kinship' among men whose life chances are stymied by institutional racism and economic marginalization in post-industrial New York. Emphasizing the processual character of kinship (Weston, 1991), Trimbur suggests kinship is literally forged in Gleason's, rather than used idiomatically. The sharp distinction between literal and fictive kin relations in Accra, and the taboo on competition between relatives, suggests that this is not the case among the boxing family. Rather, Accra boxers' kinship idioms function metaphorically – they draw equivalence between relationships of competition and family without suggesting that they are coterminous. To explore these equivalences, I draw on Marshall Sahlins' suggestion that kin 'are members of one another, who participate intrinsically in each other's identity and existence', which

he glosses as the 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins, 2013: 62). Boxers 'participate intrinsically in each other's existence' when they compete not *as* kin (as Trimbur's interlocutors do), but *like* kin.

My argument supports recent accounts of how kinship logics, and practices of kinning, enable people to manoeuvre and organize collectively in the face of punitive labour regimes (Kapesea and McNamara, 2020; Lazar, 2018). Accra boxers deploy kinship logics to navigate a highly competitive sporting industry fraught with contradictory imperatives, demonstrating that kinship remains central to the social organization of purportedly 'modern', capitalist spaces such as the boxing industry (cf. McKinnon and Cannell, 2013). Understanding kinship merely as the 'mutuality of being', however, risks over-emphasizing kinship's affirming potentials and ignoring the ways kinship relations can be axes of subjection, violence and inequality (Carsten, 2013: 246). In this vein, boxers recognize that the mutual implication of their lives as competitors is always fraught with danger.

I begin by sketching the boxing family's ambivalent attitudes towards competition – a potentially affirming *and* harmful process. I then explore the form of kinship relations in central Accra. Ethnography of a debate about matchmaking siblings outlines the difference between ideal sibling relations and lived experiences of siblingship, demonstrating how kinship (like competition) implies potential harm and affirmation. I then examine the mutualities and dangers of competitive relations between boxers, and trace how kinship idioms help boxers to navigate these vital but dangerous intimacies. Finally, I reconceptualize competition as a mode of relating riven with contradiction, and explore kinship idioms as a window onto these contradictions.

Competition's ambivalent outcomes

It is 6.30 a.m. on a Friday morning in the Akotoku Boxing Academy club room, a small wooden building beside a courtyard where boxers train. The club room smells of sweat, dust and leather. Washington and Theophilus, head coaches of the Attoh Quarshie and Akotoku Academy respectively, sit on plastic chairs while Quaye, coach of the national amateur boxing team – the Black Bombers – paces around the room. We are gathered to weigh-in boxers and make matches for bouts that evening at a venue in Accra's prison officers' barracks, known as the 'Prison Canteen'. The fights are part of the Black Bombers' preparations for the upcoming World Championships. Quaye is keen that the Black Bombers box that night:

> They need competition to bring up their performance, to make them sharper. Training in the gym is good but competition is necessary for their performance to increase.[5]

Here, Quaye theorizes competition as a space of mutual benefit (despite one boxer notionally defeating the other) not as a zero-sum contest. The *process* of competing is what matters, not the outcome. However, competitive boxing is always shadowed by the risk of injury and serious damage to competitors. Broken hands, facial cuts and fractured facial bones are common and pose serious threats to boxers' prospects of attending the

World Championships (and their futures in the sport, should they become recurrent). Boxers are also aware of the cumulative neurological damage competing inflicts, and familiar with the numerous 'punch drunk' ex-boxers in central Accra. Hence coaches carefully control the number and timing of bouts to balance potential harm against mutual benefit.

Reflecting on the bouts to come, Kofi – a featherweight Black Bomber – explained:

> The fights must come on [happen] so we can compete together and get sharp, to be ready for the championships. I *must* win my bout, to show them they can take me to the championships.

Kofi sees his bout as an opportunity to 'justify' his selection by beating his rival. Boxers like Kofi understand competition as both mutually affirming – a pedagogical exercise from which both competitors benefit; *and* an opportunity for individual gain – of a place on the squad at the expense of another. Shadowing each of these potentials is the possibility that competition might be a moment of loss and danger. Although Kofi might 'become sharper' by competing he *must* win his bout because, if he loses, his opportunity to attend the World Championships may disappear. Likewise, while coaches see the potential benefit of these bouts, they also recognize the risk of injury to their boxers, and with it the risk to their squad and personal success at the championships.

Making matches: Kinship in theory and practice

Presently, a young man walks into the Akotoku courtyard wearing the sandy camouflage fatigues of a prison officer and a pair of aviator sunglasses. He is Kwesi – a long-time lightweight boxer for the Black Bombers. Kwesi strips to his underwear and steps onto the scales. Washington announces his weight: '64.5 kg'.

Theophilus notes it down in a red A5 notebook while Kwesi dresses. Peering over Theophilus's shoulder, I notice the name Yaw Laryea, Kwesi's younger brother, further up the list – weighing in at 59 kg. By 7:30 all of the boxers have weighed in. The scales are put away and the coaches huddle around the notebook to make matches.

As matches are made, names on the list are crossed out until only a few remain, including Yaw and Kwesi. Looking up from the book, Theophilus asks 'What about Yaw and Kwesi?' There follows a heated discussion about whether the two brothers should box. Recounting the debate later, Washington explained why they might make a good match:

> Kwesi and Yaw are brothers, so they are going to be similar because they are from the same material – one father, one mother. Kwesi is lightweight (61 kg), he is the senior. Yaw is boxing at featherweight (56 kg) but he is getting bigger, now he is coming to lightweight too. They are the same design.

Similar body weight is a prerequisite for competitive boxing, with matches being made between boxers within a specified weight range (e.g. lightweight being 56–61 kg).[6] Hence, the material manifestation of Kwesi and Yaw's relatedness – being 'the same

design' – makes them potential competitors. The material manifestation of kinship aligns with the similarities which define legitimate competition in the ring, making kin potentially suitable opponents. Despite being younger and less experienced, Yaw's skill was coming to rival his brother's. Hence, the two would make a pedagogically productive match. Theophilus suggested that they should compete despite being brothers, while Washington argued they should not compete *because* they are brothers. Eventually, the three agreed that the match was a bad idea and it was scratched from the ledger. To understand why, I explore the two different arguments against the bout.

'Blood is thicker than water': Modelling sibling ideals

Washington initially suggested that Yaw and Kwesi would choose not to compete because they are brothers. Theophilus agreed that the brothers would likely do 'combat school' – a form of low-intensity sparring. To the untrained eye, combat school looks like a boxing match: punches are thrown and boxers move together in a seemingly agonistic fashion. However, the purpose of 'combat school' is to allow your partner space and time to practise moving with you and responding to your movements, and not to hit them hard if they fail to do so. While combat school is pedagogical and agonistic, it is explicitly not competitive – there is no sense in which one gains by surpassing the other. By doing 'combat school' the brothers would not 'bring up their performance' through an intensely contested bout, nor would it serve as a useful barometer of their relative skill.

David, a successful professional whose brother also boxes, explained why brothers avoid the attrition of competition proper:

> *Leo*: Can brothers compete?
>
> *David*: There is no way you are ever going to compete with your brother.
>
> *Leo*: Why?
>
> *David*: Boxing is not a joke, boxing is not artificial. Everything you see in there is real. The punches, the injuries…. You are automatically guaranteed that you are going to get cuts when you sign the contract … you're going to get a swollen face; you're going to feel body pains. So, are you going to hurt your brother? Blood is thicker than water.
>
> If you beat up your brother you haven't done nothing. When you are enjoying your life while your brother is dying in the hospital, that's not good. That's why we [David and his brother] will never fight.

David's logic echoes Sahlins' account of kinship as a 'mutuality of being', in which relatives constitute one another intrinsically. To become successful at his brother's expense would undermine David's sense of self as a sibling. In this ideal rendering of siblingship, violence for personal gain by one sibling against another is tantamount to violence against the self.

Competition between brothers also risks unsettling normative hierarchies between siblings, as Theophilus explained:

> If Yaw and Kwesi box, then maybe Yaw – who is junior – will step back and allow Kwesi – the senior – to win. [In Accra] brothers should show respect to their seniors. How can you show respect if you are trying to beat him [a senior brother] in the ring?

Across Ghana, younger siblings are often expected to be deferential towards older same-sex siblings, who in turn are expected to share material resources like money and food with their younger siblings, and shoulder some responsibility for their care (Van der Geest, 2013: 60–61). A younger brother who tries to physically subordinate an older sibling as competitive boxing demands – even if this might otherwise be understood as a mutually beneficial process of 'bringing up their level' – inverts the normative relationship of deference between siblings. The attrition of competition also contradicts elder brothers' responsibility to care for their juniors. Here, the logic of competitive boxing as mutually affirming contradicts the asymmetry of ideal sibling relations.

In this first line of argument against the bout, siblings understand themselves as mutually implicated in one another's lives to the extent that violence between them woul constitute violence against the self. Ideal sibling relations also demand 'a set of commitments, played out in practice and publicly articulated' (Lambek, 2013: 3), which competition undermines. For ideal sibling relations to be maintained, brothers must not compete. While care and support often pervade kinship ideals, kinship also holds the potential for misrecognition and the un-making of others (Geschiere, 2013; Lambek, 2011: 6), as the coaches' subsequent discussion showed.

'We quarrel': Siblingship in practice

Having just suggested the brothers would refuse to compete, I was surprised when Theophilus said:

> If they fight, they will go *gidigidi* [Ga – fast and vigorous]. Kwesi [the older] might beat Yaw [the younger] too much.

His allusion to heightened violence inverts the coaches' initial assertion that the bout might be refused or merely 'performed', highlighting the gulf between kinship ideals and their lived reality – that siblings 'are rivals beneath the surface of their amity' (Fortes, 2018 [1969]: 176). This darker dynamic emerged when David spoke about training with his brother as a teenager:

> *David*: We started training together, I looked up to him. I followed him to the gym and to jogging, so I became a boxer.
>
> *Leo*: Did you box each other?
>
> *David*: We used to spar. That was a long time ago. But anytime we spar it becomes like … [pause] … a fight.
>
> *Leo*: Why?

David: Because it is different when you put the gloves on. It changes you.

Leo: How so?

David: Sparring has to be tough. It makes you condition to a fight. But the fact that he is the senior brother, if today I beat him, he will not agree. We start quarrelling, he gets angry. If he beats me, the same thing, I will get angry. Any time we spar, we quarrel. So it is just better that we stop sparring.

As David and his brother grew older their corporeal similarity and increasing parity in skill made them suitable sparring partners and potential opponents. For David, like many other boxers, 'tough' sparring is a necessary and desirable element of training. Indeed, boxers talk about 'giving' hard sparring to one another and are grateful to those who give it. However, David's brother saw 'tough' sparring as disrespecting the normative hierarchy between them. He read the violence of sparring as subordinating *because* they are brothers. Hence, David's brother would try to beat David into submission on account of David's perceived disrespect. When this happened David would do likewise, transforming mutually beneficial sparring into a bitter encounter experienced primarily as the violent inversion of a normative hierarchy. Though the actions may be the same – hard sparring – their significance changes in the context of a fraternal relationship. Recalling David's claim that 'if you beat your brother you haven't done nothing' – such heightened violence effectively constitutes violence against the self.

David went on to have a more successful career than his brother, both financially and in his public renown. I heard rumours that David's brother often asked David for money, and suggestions that he might be jealous of David. My friends noted that a senior brother should be taking care of the junior, not the other way around, and that to persistently ask a junior sibling for money showed a lack of self-respect. David, I was told, gave a 'respectful' allowance to his brother, but the two were on bad terms and David avoided his brother wherever possible. Although they avoided competition in the ring, competitive comparison over the course of their lives and careers troubled their normative sibling relations and fuelled tension between them.

Accra boxers' sibling relations exhibit the contradictions and tensions that animate kinship the world over (Peletz, 2001). Siblings feel a sense of immanence in one another's lives, and normative sibling relations are hierarchical, caring and respectful. However, obligations may be unfulfilled and normative hierarchies not respected, subverting or undoing the relational subjectivities they support. Siblingship is fraught with tension, in part because siblings' subjectivities are mutually constituted, but also because the relationships between siblings transform and develop over time – despite the notional fixity of hierarchy and care between elder and younger siblings (Cruz, 2020; Lambek, 2011). Competition in the ring heightens the likelihood of violently un-making kinship, hence it is taboo, and competitive comparisons over the *longue durée* awkwardly undermine normative sibling relations. Despite these contradictions between competition and siblingship, I now show that relationships between competitors are profoundly similar to siblingship as I have sketched it above. Competitive boxing produces normative

hierarchies between subjects whose lives are intractably intertwined, and whose intimacy is a source of both affirmation and danger.

Boxing family: Navigating competitive relationships

Omar, an Attoh Quarshie coach, explained that he uses the metaphor of the boxing family because:

> Boxing takes a lot from you. You train hard every day, you do road work (jogging), you make weight. If one of us in the gym is doing well – like one boy goes to the USA to fight for a world title – then the others are doing well because that can benefit us all. If one of us is hurting, then we are all hurting.

For Omar, kinship idioms reflect both the shared experience of demanding training regimes, and the sense of entangled lives among boxers. For one boxer to compete on a world stage might bring notoriety, experience and financial wealth to both the Attoh Quarshie and the boxing family at large.

Although boxers often spoke about highly individualized aspirations – global mobility, material wealth or winning championship belts – their work in the sport is largely done with others and instils a relational sense of self. Boxers are regularly asked by coaches to rank themselves 'by level' – an idiom that combines skill and experience in the sport. This ranking encourages boxers to be constantly aware of their relative standing in the gym, and thus of who is deserving of respect as a 'senior' in the sport. Coaches prize, and invest significant effort in maintaining, their knowledge of the relative 'level' of Ga Mashie's 250 or so registered boxers. Boxers themselves are regularly publicly weighed and encouraged to maintain a sense of who their rivals of a similar weight and 'level' are, both among the gym corpus and the boxing family at large. In short, boxers continually evaluate and rank themselves and others – both as potential opponents and as 'senior'/'junior' boxers by level. This generates a sense of simmering competition, even when there are no bouts scheduled.

Despite this continual ranking, training also instils a sense that becoming a competitive boxer is a shared endeavour and achievement. One afternoon at the Attoh Quarshie Joshua Clottey, the gym's most successful professional, warmed down beside the ring while a group of amateurs shadowboxed around him. Shadowboxing is a seemingly individual activity that involves throwing punches into the air at imaginary opponents. As the amateurs shuffled and bounced, they bumped into one another, and Joshua was knocked off balance mid-stretch by one such collision. Clearly frustrated, Joshua shouted for the amateurs to stop: 'Shadow boxing is about learning where you are, stop bumping!'

The coaches nodded their agreement and Washington shouted over the mass of bodies 'Work! Don't bump!' Whether this is explicit or implied, training is not only alongside but *with* others. Being and becoming a competitive boxer makes one dependent upon one's gym-mates, coaches and training partners. Yet, it also demands a continual competitive ranking against those one depends on. Here the similarities between being a boxer and being a sibling become apparent – both involve hierarchy and mutuality, but also foster a

sense of comparative evaluation. Open or 'hard' sparring most clearly demonstrates the tense intimacies that emerge through these hierarchical, competitive and mutualistic relationships between boxers.

On sparring and dependence

One afternoon at the Attoh Quarshie I watched Ofori, a professional middleweight, spar several others in turn. Washington implored Ofori's partners on:

> *ma lɛ, ma lɛ wa! Work! Work!*
>
> Hit him, hit him hard! Work! Work!

Some way through his seventh round, Ofori dropped his hands and beckoned his partner on, encouraging him to throw punches at his unguarded face. After the session, Omar explained that Ofori might want to practice bobbing, weaving and counter-punching, or that:

> He [Ofori] needs to be hit so that he will not get body pains when they hit him in the ring [during a bout]. If you are going to fight, you need sparring … so that in the ring if they punch you, you won't feel much pain.

Hitting hard in sparring is positively inflected as 'help' by boxers and coaches. Ofori's capacity to compete effectively is, by Omar's logic, dependent on the quality of the sparring he is 'given' in the gym. Such dependency fosters close relations between long-term sparring partners, who embrace affectionately, thank one another sincerely and sit together chatting before and after training. As sparring partners, in combat school, and as they shuffle around one another in the cramped gym, boxers' energy and effort shapes others around them just as others' work shapes them. To become a competitor is an emergent quality between boxers, not something achieved through reflexive self-improvement alone.

Hierarchy and harm

Like bouts, however, sparring is also cumulatively damaging. A cut or broken hand might stop a boxer fighting in the short term, while cumulative rounds sparred in the gym contribute to long-term neurological damage. Boxers and coaches thus see their bodies as limited resources which are inevitably worn down, and which they must take care to preserve. In Washington's words:

> Ideally before a fight someone will spar five times, maximum. They need to spar to prepare, but you can only spar a certain amount before you use up your body, and your body will fall apart.

Although sparring is ideally mutually beneficial, misrecognition of hierarchies of 'level' during sparring can lead to unethical and immoral violence. This became clear in a spar between Seidu, the aspiring light-heavyweight, and Ekow, a super-middleweight professional. Ekow had boxed for 10 years when they sparred, had been a Black Bomber and was tipped for future title success. Seidu, by contrast, had begun boxing just 18 months before. Seidu had potential but was not as technically proficient as Ekow. Seidu was widely considered to be a lower 'level' than Ekow.

The spar began at a frenetic pace. Seidu rushed Ekow with fast-paced attacks and arcing swings of his fists, while Ekow defended himself calmly and effectively. Throughout the first round the coaches repeatedly paused the spar to tell Seidu to calm down, stop trying to hit Ekow so hard, and focus on his technique. However, Seidu did not heed their advice. During the second round Ekow knocked Seidu down with a right hook and the session was abruptly called to a halt. Knockdowns in sparring are avoided because of the lasting damage they are perceived to do. The following Saturday, Ekow explained what had happened that afternoon. His explanation highlights the way that notionally mutually beneficial sparring can precipitate tension when it contradicts established hierarchies between boxers.

> He [Seidu] was going *gidigidi* [Ga – fast and vigorous] – always trying to knock me [out].

As he spoke Ekow whirled his arms in stiff, awkward hooks – a parody of Seidu's unrefined technique.

> Seidu is not my level, but still he is trying to knock me [out], even after Washington has said to focus on technique. I am his senior, he has to respect my level.

Ekow felt that Seidu was trying to prove he was the better of the two, despite their noted disparity in 'level'. Consequently, Ekow decided to throw 'effective punches' in the second round to reassert his higher 'level'. He mimed throwing two straight punches and a right hook. Becoming Seidu again, he dropped his hands, snapped his head from side to side, wobbled his legs and collapsed in a heap. A moment later he jumped up, clearly pleased with his pastiche. He was 'right' to knock Seidu down, he explained, because Seidu was disrespecting both him and Washington. This, despite Ekow's knowledge that the spar should have been focused on technique not power.

From Ekow's perspective, Seidu had failed to recognize the disparity in 'level' between the two, and Ekow felt justified in physically reasserting that hierarchy. While some agreed with Ekow's actions, others suggested privately that the coaches should have stopped the spar before the knockdown happened. They explained that Ekow's actions contravened his responsibility, as the senior, *not* to hurt Seidu. Washington and Omar seemed torn. On the one hand Ekow was right, but on the other his actions undermined sparring as a mutually beneficial exchange. Echoing Daniel's reflections on sparring his brother, or the assessment of what might happen if Yaw and Kwesi *did* fight, a potentially mutually beneficial and affirming moment between Ekow and Seidu becomes one of

dangerous, morally dubious violence when normative hierarchies and mutualities are subverted through an act of competition.

Relationships between training partners involve similar dynamics to those between siblings and close age-grade relatives. Both are characterized by a sense of mutuality and established hierarchy. Both also harbour tension and danger on account of this mutuality. Competitive comparisons between siblings or among training partners – which are seen as legitimate in certain respects, but as problematic in others – risk undermining the mutualities and hierarchies between them.

'Opponents': Mutuality in the ring

In his canonical account of boxing in Chicago, Loic Wacquant suggests that 'the agonistic cooperation' of sparring 'is expressly banned from a bout' (Wacquant, 2004: 86), again juxtaposing competition against cooperation. However, competitive bouts between non-kin in Accra are also understood as moments of mutual becoming, whether boxers win or lose. A bout between two professionals – John and Enoch – sketches this understanding.

John and Enoch entered the sport around the same time, are a similar age, had been matched several times as amateurs given their similar 'level', and were rivals for a spot on the Black Bombers squad. Over the years they had come to know each other well and a sense of competition pervaded their relationship, whether acutely felt during a bout or as rivals throughout their careers. By mid-2015 both had turned professional, and had long been noted down as 'opponents' – evenly matched boxers between whom a lucrative professional bout might occur. The match, Omar explained, had finally been made. It would happen at the national stadium before an audience of several thousand, would be televised and the winner would be crowned Ghanaian Lightweight Champion.

In the weeks before the bout Enoch sparred may hard rounds at the Attoh Quarshie, trained diligently and grew more intense in the gym. The night arrived, and Enoch was cut badly above his eye in round three. Omar and Washington worked hard between rounds to prevent the cut worsening, but as the bout wore on it grew into a wide laceration. Enoch lost by majority decision – two judges scoring the bout in favour of John, and one scoring it a draw.

Walking back from the stadium to Ga Mashie that night, I asked Omar his thoughts on the bout:

> John is not better than Enoch. Enoch has beaten him before. But I think he [Enoch] was struggling with the cut. He hasn't had a cut before in a fight, not a bad one like that. So that was putting him off a bit. But now if it happens again [a cut], he knows he can keep going, he knows how to deal with it.

Reflecting on what might come next for Enoch, he explained:

> People are saying it is soooo bad because Enoch has lost, that this is a big problem for him.

Indeed, several Attoh Quarshie members who had come to support Enoch had suggested it was a bad loss, and that it might derail Enoch's future hopes. Omar, however, thought differently:

> He can take a lot from this fight. So he lost, but they saw him fight hard today – on TV, his fans, promoters. It was a good fight – he showed he was strong and people enjoyed it. From there, maybe he can get a title fight because a promoter can see how hard he has fought.
>
> So, maybe now he is sad [because he lost] and people are saying he is down, but he can go up from here.

Both John and Enoch earned more for this fight than they had for any other before. Each hoped that contesting a close, attritional and memorable bout on such a public stage would help them secure future higher-paid bouts, potentially abroad, and fulfil their gendered aspirations to material wealth, global mobility and public renown (Hopkinson, 2022; see also Esson, 2013). As Omar suggests, by competing John and Enoch call into being a future in which they both benefit, and in which they might both realize their sporting aspirations. Through the intense competition they shared at the stadium they mutually constitute one another as 'opponents' – without an opponent a mutually beneficial future cannot come to pass for either. Competition here is a vital relationship between competitors.

Yet, for Enoch the bout was also a moment of potential un-becoming; losing subordinated him to John, a moment now inscribed indelibly in his boxing record. The loss might undermine Enoch's sense of selfhood as a boxer and precipitate a moment of crisis, or mark a negative change in his public image and the fights he is offered in future. Furthermore, boxers like Enoch and John are well aware that the attrition of such intense competition is corporeally damaging in the long term. Ironically, this damage is inflicted by boxers whose lives and subjectivities are most intimately intertwined as competitors.

Rather than attempting to discern the 'correct' interpretation of Enoch's loss – as *either* a moment of becoming *or* a moment of loss and subordination – I suggest that the boxing family hold these outcomes in tension. Just as kinship is both a vital and vulnerable relationship for boxers, competing is a process of mutual becoming through which boxers 'participate intrinsically in each other's existence' (Sahlins, 2013: 62) *and*, by dint of this mutuality, also one of potential un-becoming and harm. It has become a truism in anthropologies of kinship that normatively harmonious relations harbour tension, rivalry and danger. The 'boxing family' encourages us to flip this analytic. Competitive relations which might initially seem individualistic, and even violent, are also permeated by mutualities and shared orientations to the future.

Theorizing competition's fraught intimacies

To characterize Enoch and John's relationship as either ultimately cooperative or shaped only by self-interest would obscure the way competition in the ring involves collective action, mutual orientations toward the future, *and* agonistic self-interest. Addressing these dynamics, Anni Kajanus (2019) distinguishes between 'zero-sum' and 'mutualistic'

modes of competition. In the former, competing is shaped by the imperative to overcome others, and subjects principally value outcomes which involve comparative ranking. This 'zero-sum' mode fosters an individualistic morality. In 'mutualistic' competition collective experiences and benefits, including 'the excitement of working together while trying to outdo each other' and the resulting value to all competitors (Kajanus, 2019: 72), are valued above comparative ranking (winning or losing). This 'mutualistic' mode reflects the way cooperation can be enfolded into competition. Kajanus (2019) suggests we might thus assess the extent to which competitive practices are *either* 'zero-sum' *or* 'mutualistic', and hence avoid aligning competition entirely with individualism, or contrasting it against cooperation.

However, a clear distinction between 'mutualistic' and 'zero-sum' modes of competition does not account for the qualities of competitive relationships among Accra boxers. Competitive relationships maintained over years – like John's and Enoch's – generate 'opponents' as dependent, relational subjects with intertwined futures, for whom competition is a vital relationship. Yet, such relationships are always fraught because comparison may ultimately be to the advantage of one at the expense of another. Likewise, specific bouts are potentially moments of mutual benefit and becoming. We see this in Quaye's account of Prison Canteen bouts, or when Omar reflects positively on Enoch's loss. Yet, they simultaneously involve individual gain/loss at the expense of another. This is demonstrated by Kofi's 'must win' attitude, and the widespread dejection among Enoch's gym-mates at his loss. Competing in the ring also brings the risk of acute injury, and the certainty of corporeal harm over the long term. In short, the mutual benefit, becoming, zero-sum ranking, and corporeal degradation of competition between the ropes cannot be easily teased apart.

Boxers use kinship terms to imagine and navigate the fraught intimacies of their competitive relationships. These metaphors recognize that competitors are mutually implicated in one another's lives, but by dint of this mutuality are potential sources of harm and un-making, and that their mutuality nurtures individualistic desires. Rendering competition as kinship highlights the contradictory imperatives and consequences of competing as a mode of relating. 'The boxing family' thus nuances anthropological approaches which take competition to be individualistic and opposed to cooperation, by emphasizing the mutualities competition promotes. It also refines approaches that suggest competition inherently involves cooperation. While this is certainly true, competition does more than just foster cooperation. Boxers' kinship metaphors speak to how competition fosters mutualities and cooperative relationships that are inherently fraught and antagonistic. This is so because these mutualities simultaneously support individualistic desires and zero-sum logics. Boxers' kinship idioms thus encourage anthropologists to theorize competition (and its contradictions) more subtly than we currently do.

Forging kinship relations sustains people through the privations of social stigma (Weston, 1991), illness and disease (Reece, 2022), structural racism and inequality (Trimbur, 2013), and affords collective political action in in the face of atomizing labour regimes (Lazar, 2018). Such forging does not happen among Accra boxers, who distinguish sharply between 'real' kinship and their metaphoric rendering of competitive

relationships. Rather, kinship is a significantly different type of resource for them: it is good to think with (but not good to forge) in the context of competition's vital yet tense intimacies. Adam Kuper argues that asking what kinship *is*, by attending to emic invocations of relatedness, turns away from the question of what kinship *does* – how it shapes social structure and lived experience (Kuper, 2018: 10). For Accra boxers what kinship *is* – how it describes relationships of mutual immanence, hierarchical obligation, and intimate tension – is central to what it *can do* for them. Kinship provides them with a conceptual toolkit for navigating competition's fraught intimacies.

As a technique for navigating the contradictions of a highly competitive industry, boxers' uses of 'brothers', 'sisters' and the notion of the boxing family show how kinship continues to be a relevant structuring force in contexts of apparent 'modernity', and those shaped by proliferating logics of global capitalism (McKinnon and Cannell, 2013). Here, my argument supports feminist substantivist assertions that contemporary capitalism must be understood as constituted by, and intertwined with, 'the household, kinship and other "non-capitalist" institutions' (Bear et al., 2015), not as distinct from them. For Accra boxers, as for trade unionists (Kapesea and McNamara, 2020; Lazar, 2018), kinship helps people navigate the demands and contradictions of a capitalist world and industry.

Conclusion

Accra boxers' rendering of competition using kinship metaphors is an act of theorizing – an imaginative parallel they draw to address competition as a broader dynamic, beyond the specificity of particular incidents or relationships. It highlights the complex and contradictory socialities that competition sustains, and in doing so nuances prior anthropological approaches that suggest that competition involves cooperation, is opposed to it, or promotes a 'morally lacking' individualism (Gershon, 2011: 537). While competition might, indeed, precipitate these different outcomes, it often brings them about simultaneously. Kinship terms allow Accra boxers to understand the contradictory imperatives of competition in a familiar frame.

The Accra boxing scene demands that boxers think beyond a contrast between self- and shared interest, and find alternative ways to express their entanglement as competitors. In this sense, competition is a generative process which invites subjects to reimagine how they relate to one another. Anthropologists might usefully heed their creativity: by theorizing competition as a vital and fraught relationship – like kinship – we might nuance dominant disciplinary approaches to competition.

At first glance, boxing might appear as a paradigmatic form of individual, self-interested pursuit of limited resources at another's expense. This vision of problematically self-interested individualism has dominated recent anthropological accounts of what (neoliberal) competition does for relationships and subjectivity. For Accra boxers, however, competition's effects are more complex. I suggest that anthropologists must account for the simultaneous dynamics of affirmation *and* subjection, mutuality *and* individual self-interest that competition sustains. Theorizing competition through kinship is one way of doing so, but surely not the only way. Future ethnographic attention might thus usefully consider how people deploy diverse conceptual, symbolic and structural

resources to navigate competition's fraught intimacies. Doing so will chart the diverse ways that competition shapes relationships, and help us rethink the assumptions that have characterized conceptual accounts of competition to date. This, in turn, can only help anthropologists to theorize competition with more creativity, precision and nuance in future.

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Notes

1. 'The boxing family' thus has a significantly different meaning from corporate uses of 'family' designed to foster an image of a caring and supportive community e.g. 'the McKinsey Family' (McKinsey & Co., n.d.).
2. Being a white, British man with some boxing experience shaped my research profoundly. I was inferior to most of my peers in the ring, and insulated from the insecurity and inequality that pervades life as a Ghanaian in the global boxing industry (see Hopkinson, 2022). As such, I was not a 'competitor' in the broader sense described herein. However, my positionality was often utilized by my peers in their aspirational projects and life strategies. For instance, I was recruited as a faux interviewer for publicity videos, and often accompanied my gym-mates into the ring as part of their entourage, partly, I suspect, because of the cultural cachet of having a white, European 'follower'.
3. However, women do box and a significant proportion of female boxers I knew in Accra were very successful. 'Sister' was the most commonly used kinship term used to describe women who boxed.
4. Despite this, Mead (1966 [1937]: 458) insists on distinguishing competitive from cooperative cultures and upholding the idea that, although they may overlap, the two are distinct and opposed modes of relating.
5. *Ga* – a minority language spoken mainly in ethnically Ga areas of Accra – is the first language of boxing in Accra, attesting to the sport's ethnic inflection. Like many other migrant boxers in Accra, I learned Ga largely in the gym. English (not Ghana's lingua franca *Twi*) is the second most commonly used language. Often, my interlocutors code-switch between Ga and English, or chose to speak to me in English. I have left Ga-language words untranslated where they are central to the significance of quoted passages.

6. In international competitions weight categories are strictly observed and matches are never made across weight categories. At less formal events, like the Prison Canteen, coaches often matched similarly skilled boxers, like Kwesi and Yaw, across adjacent weight categories.

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