Positioning children and institutions of childcare in contemporary Uganda

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Currently more than half the population of Uganda is under 18 years — a demographic dispensation caused by civil war, poverty, high fertility rates, and the AIDS epidemic. Drawing upon ethnographic research in south-eastern Uganda, the study analyses the difficulties of integrating increasing numbers of adolescent orphans and other vulnerable children into Ugandan society. Aid workers and researchers generally agree that the extended family should be the first choice for assuming care of orphans and other vulnerable children, while they regard institutional care as a last resort. This article questions this common view. The author argues that understanding the consequences of childcare demands consideration for childcare settings, the interpersonal relationships between care-giver(s) and care-recipient(s), and the cultural notions of childcare. By focusing on children's position in society, while examining issues such as patterns of parental relations, leviratic practices, and the importance of land ownership and education for children's long-term well-being, the author contributes to understanding the complexity and changing patterns of childcare relations. Such patterns, she argues, call into question whether or not family caretaking should persistently be given preference over support in institutional settings like boarding schools.

Keywords: Africa, boarding school, culture, family care, institutional care, kinship, well-being

Introduction

AIDS is posing one of the greatest threats to development in much of Africa. The changing circumstances for rearing the future generation bear witness to this. One of the most visible social consequences of the pandemic is the large number of children who lose one or both parents to AIDS illnesses. Since the high scale of orphaning correlates with high mortality rates among people in their reproductive years, familial networks are challenged to provide adequate care for all children. Familial units and relations in African social networks are perceived as crucial to a person's well-being and aspirations. Hence, the 'poverty of people' and the 'poverty of economics' in raising children within kin-based networks have elevated contemporary orphaning from the personal or familial sphere to concerns about the organisation and stability of future civil societies. Aid workers and researchers commonly agree that the extended family network should be the first choice for taking care of orphans, while institutional care is viewed as a last resort (Ntozi, Ahimbisibwe, Odwee, Ayiga & Okunut, 1999; Hunter & Williamson, 2000; UNAIDS, 2002; Wakhweya, Kateregga, Konde-Lule, Muyala, Sabin, Williams & Heggenhougen, 2003).

Drawing upon ethnographic research in Uganda, this article questions the priority commonly assigned to family care for orphans and other children not living with their biological parents. The main research was carried out in rural south-eastern Uganda, in 2003–2005, among adolescents (13–19 years old) who were living either with relatives in households or in hostels and boarding schools. By focusing on children's position in society, patterns of parental relations, leviratic practices, and the importance of land and education, I describe the complex and changing patterns of childcare relations. These patterns call into question whether or not family care should persistently be given preference over institutional care.

Socio-political background

The combination of 25 years of wars and civil conflicts, high fertility rates, and the AIDS pandemic makes Uganda a 'young country' in the sense that 51% of the population is aged between 0–14 years (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2001); 20% of the population is below age five while 25% is between ages six and 12. Of the total population of 24 million, orphans make up approximately two million — about 15% of all children in Uganda. In the mid-1980s, towards the end of civil strife, the spread of HIV/AIDS began to exceed all other causes of young adult mortality and appears to be the leading cause of orphaning today; the proportion of total orphans in Uganda due to AIDS deaths rose from 17% in 1990 to 51% in 2001 (Wakhweya et al., 2003). Although Uganda is one of the few countries that had been able to reduce HIV-prevalence, the current scale of orphaning will continue for another decade because of the lag between infection and death. Accordingly, the proportion of orphans due to AIDS may merely decline to 39% of all orphans in 2010 — about 1.9 million children (Hunter & Williamson, 2000). In addition to the high proportion of orphans in Uganda today, a large number of...
children are made vulnerable due to war, living with an HIV-positive parent, sharing their caregiver with orphaned relatives, divorce, being born out of wedlock, or disabilities (Odongkara, 1999; Gilborn, Nyonyintono, Kabumbuli & Jagwe-Wadda, 2001; Basaza & Kajja, 2002). Furthermore, children are disproportionately affected by economic misery, as they make up 62% of the population living in absolute poverty (NSPPI, 2004).

More encouraging is that the Ugandan government has made strong efforts to deal with the issue of child welfare, such as by providing free primary education, adopting international conventions on children’s rights, developing policies, and strengthening institutional capacity at all administrative levels (Odongkara, 1999; Basaza & Kajja, 2002; Wakhweya et al., 2003). Based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the government developed the Ugandan National Programme of Actions for Children (UNPAC) in 1992/93 and the Uganda Children Statute in 1996, which together form a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for protection of children (National Council for Children, 2001). The government recently launched the National Strategic Programme Plan of Interventions for orphans and other vulnerable children (NSPPI, 2004), developed in collaboration with key sectors of civil society, the private sector, and NGOs, hopefully to foster concerted action to support the needs of the young generation (Wakhweya et al., 2003).

As a country that seems rather popular among development agencies, Uganda receives considerable assistance from bilateral and multilateral institutions, as well as from NGOs and religious groups, to help provide for vulnerable children. However, the assistance is not sufficient as it only reaches a small proportion of children in need (Wakhweya et al., 2003).

A perspective on childcare practices

In contemporary Uganda, raising children to become productive socialized adults is no longer entirely the domain of the extended family. At a local level, caregivers who are not part of the extended family are primarily NGOs that run a range of programmes that primarily assist orphans living in households and their local community. This support is either given directly to children (as items such as school fees, clothes, medical care, and food) or indirectly through micro-credit loans to ‘orphan-households,’ and some programmes give assistance to children who live in institutions like hostels and boarding schools. Thus, orphans and other deprived children may become part of institutionalized care that will provide them with the material resources and concern that are otherwise intrinsic to reciprocity among kin.

Research on these changing patterns of care for children has produced knowledge about immediate impacts — issues of orphans’ health (including their psycho-social well-being), education, nutrition, vulnerability to HIV infection — as well as knowledge on the increasing practice of grandparental care and of maternal kin caring for orphans in patrilineal societies (Ntazi et al., 1999; Foster, 2000; Nyambedha, Wandibba & Aagaard-Hansen, 2003). References to the long-term consequences of the type of care given to orphans and other deprived children are comparatively few; these are mainly found in the literature about mission schools in colonial and post-colonial Africa (Smythe, 1999; Frederick, 2002; Simpson, 2003).

Research setting

It is my conviction that the basis for research on long-term consequences should be the local social context within which care is provided and negotiated. This entails approaching diverse childcare settings, and focusing on cultural notions about childcare as a dimension of wider cultural ideas as well as on care as a social practice played out in interpersonal relationships (Christiansen, 2003). By researching various childcare settings and the diverse relations between care-giver(s) and care-recipient(s), and guided by cultural notions about childcare, it is possible to gain comprehensive knowledge about the care given and its immediate implications, such as children’s social competences, well-being, and sociality (see Goody, 1982; Kilbride & Kilbride, 1990; Levine, Dixon, LeVine, Richman, Leiderman, Keefer & Brazelton, 1994). An understanding of the long-term consequences can be achieved by following the young people beyond the actual childcare settings and, of course, over extended periods of time.

This article presents findings about sociality and childcare among the Samia people. The empirical basis is ethnographic research conducted in south-eastern Uganda since 1998. Most recent data was produced during fieldwork for the research project ‘Socializing Children: Kin and Christian Churches in Uganda’ during 2003–2005. The objective of the research was to study the support provided to children who did not live with their biological parents. During the fieldwork (four months) I carried out two surveys: one among young people (73 respondents), the other with adult men in Busia District (21 respondents). Of the 73 young, student respondents, I interviewed 39 living in hostels or at a boarding school; out of the 21 adult male-respondents, I interviewed three. I recorded 31 interviews (57 hours), equally divided between group interviews with young people in school and individual interviews with parents and other adults. I carried out another 25 semi-structured interviews, and had many informal conversations with young people living in households that I have known since 1998. I also carried out participant-observation in several households, at churches and schools, and took part in daily activities in the local community.

In order to get an overview of the development projects providing support to children, my main assistant spent 10 months mapping the 644 diverse projects running in Busia District in 2004 (Christiansen, 2005). In the following analysis of relations and social practices associated with childcare, focus is on key aspects of belonging to a patrilineage, patterns of parental relations, and uncertainties about growing up with maternal kinsfolk in a patrilineal society.

General living conditions of the Samia

The Samia people live in the south-eastern corner of Uganda, towards the shores of Lake Victoria, and along the border with Kenya. The Samia make up the majority of the
227,560 inhabitants of Busia District, and the community lives in peace with other ethnic groups; they enter into marriages across ethnic divisions, and communicate in their common language Lusamia.

The physical living conditions in the community resemble those of many African rural districts. The infrastructure is in many ways insufficient: most roads are unpaved and often not passable during the rainy season, scores of children are taught under the shade of mango trees, access to clean water is not easy, and electricity and telephone connections exist mostly in and around the district town of Busia. The health facilities are poor in respect to buildings, medicine, and personnel (for example, the doctor-patient ratio is 1:27 140). Trade and fishing create a few employment options, besides the common subsistence agriculture. Such employment options are becoming more important as cultivation has been severely depleted by an expanding population, loss of cultivation area, and declining soil fertility. At the same time a cash income is crucial for meeting general living costs such as food, education, clothing, and transport, and becomes especially important when rearing children.

On a positive note, the district became independent (from Tororo District) in 1997; the administration has recently moved into more ample accommodation, but most people are still looking forward to harvesting the benefits of having ‘their own district’. One apparent advantage is that the district may now host a number of development projects financed by government, multilateral and non-governmental organisations. Among the 644 projects (of which most were, however, community-based organisations) that were running in the district in 2004, support to children and young people (110 projects) was the third main objective, following poverty alleviation and enhancing food security (Christiansen, 2005). Most projects directed towards the younger generation have aimed to provide education at primary or secondary level.

The lack of means to test blood systematically leads to uncertainty about zero-prevalence and whether incidence is increasing or decreasing. During fieldwork in 2003, I was informed that “Busia District is now no. 2 in Uganda,” meaning that HIV prevalence in the district was the second-highest in the country. The background for this estimate was the first-ever round of local voluntary testing (in 2002), where 180 people out of 302 tested HIV-positive. However, this alarming result cannot be considered representative of the population; according to the District Director of Health Services, HIV prevalence was at about 10% (personal communication, May 2003). In the border area of Busia town and along the lakeshore, prevalence is expected to be higher due to people’s mobility and semi-urban lifestyles. District wide, the social consequences of high mortality among working-age men in particular has an impact far beyond the lives of those infected.

The community’s declining capacity to provide inter-household assistance increases the importance attached to the single household to provide — in the context of childcare — everyday, affectionate, and socialising care as well as material resources and entails intensified focus on intra-household dynamics. Locally, two forms of households dominate: the extended and the nuclear household. An extended household is one made up of several houses belonging to a patrilineage; each woman and her children share a house, though teenage boys are expected to construct their own. A nuclear household is most often one consisting of a man, his wife or cohabiting partner and their children, or a widow and her children. Only a monogamous man will permanently share a house with his wife, while a polygamous man will move between the houses of his wives. Grandparents from both sides and ‘extra’ children may also form part of either form of household. Hence, the main disparity between an extended and a nuclear household is the proximity of relatives through patrilineage or conjugality. While such proximity influences internal dynamics in complex ways, the relevant feature here is that both the younger and the elder generations increasingly regard childrearing as the responsibility of the individual mother and father rather than of the extended household or community.

In an East African context, where childrearing has been conceptualised as a central dimension of community life (see Kilbride & Kilbride, 1990; Shorter & Onyancha, 1999; Swadener, Kabiru & Njega, 2000), rural Samia people (even from extended households) say that childrearing is becoming more a duty of the single house and the biological parents. Meanwhile, raising children can be expensive since they require school fees, clothes, medicine and food, while schooling keeps them from many hours of household chores. When allocating household resources, parents often give priority to their own children rather than orphaned relatives or other vulnerable children whom they have otherwise accepted. Besides orphans the group of children who do not live with their biological parent(s) consists mainly of those whose parents are not married or who are separated/divorced, and, to a lesser extent, children of polygamous marriages.

Orphaning, ‘illegitimacy,’ and marital break up are three everyday phenomena that cause children not to live with their biological parents. These children depend profoundly on care provided by the extended family and non-kinsmen. Similarly, children of monogamous parents generally are not as dependent on care provided through other familial and non-familial relations. However, there are exceptions, such as parents who are extremely poor, abusive or alcoholic, or have disabilities (see Meinert, 2003). While the socio-cultural ideals of familial interdependence may remain strong, there are children and adults who look towards churches, NGOs, and other organisations for assistance that they cannot expect from familial relatives.

Patrilineal property

During these times of social transition, certain fundamental notions remain firm among the Samia, including ideas about children’s position in society as part of the patrilineal property. The Samia are organised into patrilineal clans (as are most other tribes in Uganda), which determines that children become part of their father’s clan and are generally perceived to be the ‘property’ of the paternal kinsfolk. To belong to one’s father’s clan is a permanent identity. When a woman marries she remains part of her father’s clan, and so in case of marital break-up she may return to her natal home. Sons inherit land from their father; patrilocal enclaves
are established where children are brought up in close relations with the paternal kinsmen.⁷ Boys learn that they will stay on that land and can bring a wife to help cultivate it, whereas girls learn that they must join their husband’s home when they marry (Meinert, 2003). Maternal kinsmen have always been recognised as having an important role in childrearing, but the intimacy they offer to children appears to depend on the geographical distance and amount of time spent together (see Whyte & Whyte, 2004).

Among people of the generations born in the 1930s to 1960s, many have stayed for prolonged periods with relatives other than their biological parents. ‘Staying out’ or being ‘fostered’ by kinsmen does not appear to have been an integrated practice of childrearing, wherein the caretaker should teach the child specific knowledge and skills, but rather a matter of shared family support in childrearing (Weisner, 1995). For instance, children may ‘stay out’ to assist uncles in tilling a large piece of land or to assist a sick or childless paternal aunt.⁸ Pragmatics may make a child ‘stay out’ to reduce the cost of secondary education by day-schooling rather than boarding, by having the child live with a relative nearer the school. A primary school-age daughter may occasionally ‘stay out’ to assist an aunt. It is noteworthy, however, that nowadays children are increasingly staying temporarily with maternal kinsfolk (for similar findings in Kenya, see Nyambedha et al., 2003).

Besides temporary stays away from biological parents, children are more likely to live permanently with maternal kinsfolk than with paternal relatives. This shift is noticeable at a national level where surveys show that 42% of all children do not live with both their parents, and, out of this group, 17% live with their mother and 6% live with their father (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Several factors have contributed to the expanded role of maternal kinsmen. The most important are adult mortality, increasing numbers of children born outside marriage, unstable parental relations, and changes in leviratic practices.

Children of unstable unions

Within Busia District, people commonly suppose that more children are being born outside marriage, mostly to young women aged 15 to 30 (Sekiwunga & Mulumba, 2003). National statistics show that childbearing begins early: 30% of girls aged 15–19 years are already mothers or pregnant with their first child (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Seeing that the rate of marital break-up is also high, these changing patterns of parental relations raise discussions about who should care for these children and engage issues such as inheritance of land, roles of mothers, and differing moral values.

According to people in the two prior generations, now aged between 40 and 70 years, once an unmarried girl got pregnant her relatives would demand that the man who impregnated her take responsibility and marry the girl, thus getting the child within a formalised marriage. In accordance with this idea unwanted pregnancies are commonly considered the reason why young women ended up being an unplanned second or third wife. For young women who were already mothers, marriage reduced the associations of their pregnancy with a curse, and they could enjoy the status of married women.

If the parents-to-be did not marry, the child would either grow up at the paternal home or at the mother’s home with the father as a subsidiary character so the child knew its origin. In case of the latter, when a boy became old enough to marry he could go to the father’s home and settle. This practice seems accepted since older people talk about the required ritual practice in rather unproblematic terms, emphasizing that at the time land was plentiful so patrilineal kinsmen could easily absorb the son (see Whyte & Whyte, 2004).

Nowadays such inclusion frequently becomes problematic. Inclusion becomes interwoven with discussions about some clans giving higher priorities to retaining land than to recognising ‘their own’ children, the risks of boys becoming landless, and the fact that nowadays men tend not to wed the woman whom they (due to a pregnancy) are supposed to marry. Many people regard these issues as side-effects of AIDS having taken a heavy toll of the working-age adults and changed local morals and values, including the notion that children may not be a blessing but rather an expensive burden.

Women who have children out of wedlock are most commonly teenagers or employed women in their thirties. Teenage-pregnancies regularly occur through relationships with an age-mate or ‘sugar-daddy,’ neither seriously considered as potential husbands (Silberschmidt, 2001), as the former is unlikely to be able to provide for a woman and a child, and the latter is likely to deny any responsibility. Even so, the young woman’s close relatives will often seek the boy/man to ask that he wed her, or request endowment to the maternal kin or parental kin to raise the child.¹⁰ With certain exceptions,¹¹ teenage pregnancies usually lead to an additional child being brought up in the maternal home.

Many single, educated women in their thirties produce one or more children, often with different men, before they marry. These women call themselves professionals, meaning they are educated and make their living through working in an office (as a typist, secretary) or institutional setting (as a teacher, nurse), or through trading or housekeeping. Due to their way of living they are seldom able to look after their children or pay someone to care for them, and many choose to place the children in their own home of origin to be raised by the grandmother.¹² In this situation it rarely seems an option to have paternal kin raise the child, either because the father is not known or because he may be married, meaning the child would be brought up by a stepmother.

Similar preferences — that maternal grandparents rather than a father and stepmother rear children — are commonly expressed in the situation of marital break-up. In her research in Sierra Leone on children of previous parental unions, Bledsoe (1995) found similar concerns and practical arrangements. Bledsoe (1995, p. 131) writes, “Because children are symbols of links between adults, resource allocations to children, like the performance of sexual or domestic duties, become barometers of adult relations.” Hence caring for other people’s children shows that you care about those people (the parents) and conversely, mistreating other people’s children refers to a
discrepancy within the adult ties between a parent and the caretaker. When mothers avoid putting their offspring in the care of a stepmother, the manoeuvre may be intertwined with competition and jealousy between co-wives, or between women who produce children with the same man. In the context of the females’ competition for a man’s affection and material resources, one can grasp why stepmothers are notorious for mistreating children of their husband’s previous union (Bledsoe, 1995). An interesting exception, in the Ugandan context, is the stepmothers who are known for being less resentful towards maternal orphans (as compared to stepchildren whose mother is alive); for this reason, maternal orphans may be considered better off than children of divorce.

Uncertainty in parental relations produces a large number of children who are born outside of a marriage or who experience their parents’ separation, both circumstances that lead to children who do not live with their biological parents. Grandparents and other maternal kinsmen frequently become caretakers of these children, since on the one hand men often remarry and women circumvent stepmothers to raise their children, and, on the other hand, women are seldom able to rear children single-handedly. Locally, people ascribe the reduced capability and willingness of paternal kinsmen to absorb the children, as responsible for increasing the numbers of children brought up by maternal kin.

Dilemmas of maternal care and patrilineal belonging
The increase in of childrearing responsibilities for maternal kinsmen does not reduce the strong notions of one’s identity having patrilineal affiliation. Even adults and adolescents who have spent most of their childhood, youth, and perhaps even adult years living with maternal kinsfolk, and who may never talk about paternal kin or their land of residence, do not question their patrilineal belonging when asked.

I encountered two cases of parental separation that illustrate this central aspect of belonging. The first example concerns Sarah, a woman about 30 years old, and a friend of mine since 1999. Sarah has not been in contact with her father or paternal relatives since she was three years old. Her parents were not married and didn’t share a religion (the father’s side were Christians, the mother’s side were Moslems); her maternal grandfather removed her from her parents’ home (the mother was staying at the father’s place) and placed her with her maternal aunt. Sarah narrates, ‘My aunt mistreated me badly; she made me work so I never had a rest, and she put me in a bad school.’ Thus Sarah was glad when her mother left her father and the two of them could stay together at the mother’s home of origin. The paternal relatives have never claimed Sarah or asked any questions about her upbringing. This lack of interest has been attributed to the father’s two new wives having produced many children. Sarah’s mother never remarried or had more children. Due to the mother’s efforts to provide Sarah with adequate education, Sarah managed to get a well-paid job in Dar es Salaam. While enjoying the benefits of urban living Sarah established a relationship with a rich Tanzanian man. She became pregnant, lost her job, and delivered the child in Dar es Salaam. Soon afterwards she discovered the man was also seeing another woman and so she decided to return to her mother’s home. Of course, Sarah’s mother was thrilled to receive her only child, as well as the grandchild, and the three of them formed a strong household. A repeated topic of conversation in their home is that Sarah and her mother will not let the man ‘claim’ the child, meaning that he would take the son back to Dar es Salaam. These women are certain that his partner will not properly care for the child and they doubt the capabilities of the paternal relatives. Sarah and her mother are prepared to go to the local court in order to be acknowledged as the child’s rightful caretakers. In case this takes place before the child is six years old, their plan is to argue for the child’s need to live with his mother; if he is older, they will argue that the mother has provided for the child’s upbringing. An aspect that is never questioned is the legitimacy of the child belonging to the patrilineage. Likewise, when I questioned Sarah about her clan belonging, she lightened up and explained where ‘their’ land is and how much land they have, showing no signs of detachment even though she has long had no contact with any patrilineal relative. Growing up with one’s matrilineal kin does, so to speak, not alter who you are (see Goody, 1982; Whyte & Whyte, 2004).

The second case concerns Peter, a young man about age 29, who has also been a friend since 1999. Peter’s mother is the first wife of a polygamous man, who lives with his second wife in a neighbouring district. Throughout the childhood and youth of Peter and his older brother, ‘...he [the father] came as a visitor; he never stayed for long.’ Similarly to Sarah’s childhood, Peter was born at his paternal home, but when he was about five years old, his father brought in a second wife, and Peter accompanied his father and his older brother to her home of origin. Without dwelling on what made the mother move he explained that ‘the other woman did not have a good heart’, referring to dissonance between the co-wives and their offspring.

Peter’s maternal uncle gave his mother and her children a small piece of land to build on and to till. According to Peter, the two wives have subsequently raised their children quite differently: his mother has concentrated on educating her sons, whereas the stepmother encouraged her sons to make quick money in trade. His father never contributed to his two sons’ education. Instead the maternal uncle helped to pay school fees for the elder brother, who then paid for most of Peter’s schooling. Both brothers now have well-paid positions and they provide for their mother and some children of the uncle who had helped. Apparently Peter’s father and ‘stepbrothers’ complain of not benefitting from these salaries, while the co-wife accuses Peter’s mother of using witchcraft against the prosperity of her offspring. Peter explains that ‘through the power of the Father in Heaven’ he has forgiven his father, but he does not want to give anything to the man who has inflicted so much pain on his mother and who neglected rearing him and his brother. Since his stepbrothers cultivate and live on the father’s land, they are likely to inherit it all, thus Peter sees no reason to support them or their children. He says, ‘I
will not fight for the land...they may kill me for that...but if they give me a small piece I will appreciate and till that land.' Implicitly Peter says if he tries to claim the land that he is entitled to, he may risk his life. He feels he belongs to that land but can never settle permanently because of the enmity with the stepbrothers. Fortunately, the maternal uncle has given the two brothers the small piece of land that they have been living on and tilling for about 30 years. But because that land is not clearly demarcated and there is no existing will, the two brothers must buy up their own land, because the sons of the uncle may claim the land and chase them away. Being raised by maternal kinsmen does, so to speak, not alter where you have entitlements of belonging.

As a fundamental aspect of sociality, the cultural notions of patrilineal ‘property’ raise questions concerning the long-term implications of maternal kinsmen taking over childrearing.

Land is a crucial resource in an agrarian society where the majority base their livelihood on small-scale farming. Both Sarah and Peter managed to pass advanced studies, get well-paid jobs, and accumulate wealth enough to eventually buy land. However, what are the options for the large number of children being brought up by relatively poor maternal kinsmen, when only a minority may proceed to secondary school, and a smaller fraction to advanced studies, and only some may find employment — how can they reach beyond the uncertainty that goes with having no rightful place of living and secure their future?

Due to the increasing number of orphans and widows in the care of maternal relatives, some local initiatives have shown specific concern over boys who may lose their property rights. In a seemingly uncoordinated effort, local government (i.e., the Probation and Child Welfare Office), an organisation for people living with HIV/AIDS (Businet+), and the Catholic church now encourage people to write wills and see to it that wills are respected. In discussing clan belonging, elderly men tend to emphasise that wills are probably useful within other clans, since land grabbing has taken place, but that this does not occur in their own clan — hence wills may not be relevant. However, widows and young people who have lost their father are often the subject of stories about movement away from the land due to some relative's land-grabbing efforts. The complexity of introducing wills in a poverty-afflicted agrarian society requires a coordinated effort and in-depth knowledge about the range of land status claims and personal rights regarding claims (Gilborn et al., 2001).

The local Catholic church has also initiated sponsorship programmes to enrol such vulnerable children at either secondary or technical schools. According to one of the founders, a preference for helping with children's education is based on the assumption that those children's future is in employment and not in small-scale agriculture. Thus, the church seeks to ensure that boys do not risk their property rights while they are receiving an education, while on the other hand, they consider education (rather than farming their own land) the basis for the boys' future living.

Education is also vital in rearing girls; however, skills training is often intertwined with expectations about their dowry. A local concern is often expressed that maternal relatives do not educate girls because they must share their dowry with paternal kinsfolk. Thus, in poor households a girl may be the last in line for receiving an education when her own mother cannot raise adequate financial support and her relatives prioritise their own daughters (see Bledsoe, 1995).

In brief, recent transformations in parental relations produce large numbers of children not living with their biological parents, a condition that influences the children's immediate as well as long-term well-being. Caretakers cannot change a child's position as part of their patrilineage, which influences their sense of who they are and where they belong. However, caretakers can provide children with education opportunities and affectionate care, and perhaps the chance to acquire land in the case of boys, in order to enhance a child's options for prospering as an adult.

Orphans and widows

The administrative authorities in Busia estimate that about 15 000 orphaned children live within the district. A higher mortality rate for working-age males than for females, means that mothers often outlive fathers. Therefore, orphan care should be conceptualised in relation to care for widows.

In Samia tradition, a widow is inherited as a wife by a brother, a co-wife's son or another male of her deceased's husband's lineage or clan. The passive verb reflects earlier practices where a widow did not have much say about who she would 'remarry' or 'be left to'. Among Samia in Kenya, Cattell (1992) reports that widow inheritance appears to have often been for ritualistic purposes — to clear the pollution of death rather than to establish a new marriage. The ritual, however, altered the status of the widow's, and/or children's land and of any other property that had belonged to the deceased husband, which now became part of the inheritor's (omukerami) wealth. With such ownership followed a man's access to the widow as well as expectations for him to care for the woman, children, and till the land.

These leviratic practices have changed gradually due to a variety of external influences. During colonial times, sharp criticism was expressed by upholders of Christian morals and education (Kirwen, 1979; Cattell, 1992), and more recently, changing patterns of familial support due to AIDS have meant some widows are economically relatively independent. The experiences of Julie, a woman around 40 years old, a nurse, and a member of a rather stringent Christian fellowship (Abazukufu), illustrate the complexity and uncertainty of care provided to widows and paternal orphans.

When Julie's husband died three years ago everyone knew he suffered from AIDS, but some of her husband's brothers still wanted to inherit Julie and her 'co-wife'. According to Julie, her co-wife was uneducated and so agreed to be inherited because she hoped the inheritor (omukerami) would assist her and the children. In opposition to the co-wife's choice, Julie hurried to convert into a Christian fellowship that prohibits widow inheritance. According to Julie she succeeded, as the brothers of the deceased have never bothered her or the children, and her own brother has supported them with small but regular contributions to the household. However, last year (2004) her
brother got sick and died five months later, leaving behind a wife and two children. A month later the husband of Julie’s sister also died, leaving behind his wife and five children.

At the time that Julie refused to be inherited she indirectly accepted that the decision implied that she would not receive support from her in-laws. She is able to accept this condition because she, in her own words, is ‘a working-class woman’, and having been locally married, her relatives live close by. Times ahead may be very difficult, as her brother is no longer alive to support her or the children, and instead she might have to share a low salary with her sisters and their young children. Samia widows’ coping strategies regarding their decision to accept or refuse a levirate involves a complex set of factors, such as the widow’s education, employment prospects, the probability that she may rely on her own relatives, her health, and her belonging to a Christian church (Christiansen, 2006b).

A decreasing interest among males to become a wife-inheritor greatly reduces pressure on widows. Due to a fear of AIDS fewer men want to establish sexual relations with a widow, according to the rationale that when a husband dies of AIDS, his wife or partner ‘will automatically also die’. The local churches strongly oppose the practice because it contradicts the Christian values of monogamy, church weddings, and personal integrity of a human being. With references to the social gospel, which praises values of compassion and social responsibility, some priests in the dominant Catholic church encourage clans to nominate a caretaker (omulindi) instead of an inheritor (omukerami). This bond involves no sexual relationship between the caretaker and the widow but makes the male responsible for the well-being of the widow and her children. While most adults agree to this care-taking arrangement in principle, male hesitation seems to hinder it in practice. Through interviews with adults, men and women alike, I found that becoming a levirate was once thought of as acquiring a gift — of more women, children, and land. The current situation challenges this notion as men may die before they have accumulated any real wealth to be taken over (households are further impoverished due to expenses used on the male patient), and young children with years of material needs are often left behind. Thus, becoming an inheritor is no longer enviable. According to men, if they then cannot even enjoy the pleasure of the young widow, they are just giving themselves pain.

Instead of appointing a caretaker (omulindi), or when nominating a male relative with many expenses and few resources, the responsibility of caring for widows and children may be shared among several brothers. In practice, this means that clansmen can contribute to the welfare of those left behind, but as an old man said, ‘This way is not binding for you — you can help this year whenever you vision the deceased, but when you forget the deceased you stop helping those women and children.’ Of course, this vague arrangement is very unstable for the widow and her children, and it may fuel internal rivalry in polygamous households.

The social status of orphans is most jeopardised when both parents die. Siblings are often divided between households when no one is likely to be able to care for more than a couple of extra children. Besides the familiar problem of stepmothers who may overburden such children, take them out of school, neglect their needs and health, a cultural fear exists among the Samia that ‘extra’ children might prosper better than one’s own, compounding the suffering of double-orphans (for similarities with the Luo in western Kenya, see Nyambedha et al., 2003). This culturally-based notion appears to be an expansion of the idea of competition among co-wives regarding their children’s prosperity. Such notions reveal an urgent need for research into the care relations between orphans and caretakers within familial relations in a given culture or locality. For instance, scrutiny of the local terminology, which may use the same word (abalekwa) for orphans or children of divorce, and other cultural features, would add vitality to research that contextualises the caretaking of orphans with childcare in general.

Institutional living

When White missionaries introduced formal education in institutional settings, they introduced a prerequisite to social, political, and economic advancement alongside new ways of socialising children into a broader society (Tiberondwa, 1998; Kasibante & Kiwanuka, 2001). Educating children in schools reduced the teaching role of a parent, and changed the norms required for becoming a socialised adult. Eventually, this Western type of education became more attractive than traditional African forms (Tiberondwa, 1998). Writing about the Baganda in Central Uganda, Kilbride & Kilbride (1990, p. 89) found boarding schools to be among the ‘socialising agents’ responsible for instructing children and youth in social etiquette and interaction. Parents (commonly also other relatives) or local Christian churches selected children who seemed to be the brightest to receive an education at a reputable secondary boarding school with an option to continue in advanced studies. In Busia District, a large proportion of today’s leaders, such as district administrators, politicians, headmasters, teachers, nurses and priests, are products of boarding schools.

Children and adults alike today desire this combination of education and institutional living because, as Emmanuel, a boarding student, described:

‘If you are at home you are just sitting, just dig the land without a job or anything from which you can gain something to solve your problems. Then if you go to school but stay at home, the second you finish class your mother or someone will be waiting for you to fetch water, dig the gardens, help the young ones; they will never give you a minute off. That is why here at the boarding school it is very good because we go for preparations two hours before we begin class and then again after dinner, we even read on the weekends, you can really learn and become someone.’

Accordingly, when one lives at school one is better able to ‘become someone’ — meaning an educated person who can provide for himself/herself (possibly also for others), who may hold a professional title and who knows how to interact. The converse of ‘being someone’ is to ‘just sit’ in the sense of being without options or living as an unwelcome
load in one’s household — common experiences among orphans and deprived children.

Part of my research was carried out in two institutional settings; one is a well-facilitated secondary boarding school with 700 students (of whom 360 are enrolled in a sponsorship programme for orphans and deprived children), another is the boarding of 28 vulnerable children in a hostel at a Catholic mission while they attend the neighbouring technical school. According to the students, and their siblings, teachers and other adults, these students are given a chance to ‘become someone’ who in the future can support their siblings and caretaker, most often their mother or grandmother. Being a boarder may also serve as a refuge from extreme poverty and maltreatment in the home of a child’s widowed mother or other caretaker. Notions about a boarding school as a sanctuary were often expressed with the assertion that one will be given three meals a day there, and also in connection with a negative attitude towards long holidays, because one must face the reality and struggles at home/place of living.20

Even though school administrations and teachers acknowledged what are frequently ambiguous relationships between students and their caretakers,21 these schools seemed to have solid and important relationships with most students’ caretakers. Many of the students on sponsorships were children in the care of committed Christians or friends of the priest; others were selected through the village development committees. Enrolment in privately sponsored education at the secondary school appears to depend largely on personal connections between the Catholic priest and the individual caretaker (or deceased parent). This practice seems analogous to the care-taking of ‘extra’ children within familial structures (Bledsoe, 1995) and is, indeed, an important aspect in understanding children’s involvement in institutional settings. Of equal importance is the similarity with children’s perceptions of their own relationship with a caretaker. An example comes from a conversation I had with a student (at the secondary school for the past four years) about whether the priest at school was becoming ‘like a father’ to her. Clearly finding the question peculiar, she replied, ‘No, he can never be like my father because he is not married to my mother.’ These shared notions about care relations being mediated by a third person resonate with fundamental anthropological knowledge about social relationships (Jackson, 1998) and accentuate the importance of situating care relations within the broader socio-cultural context.

While personal connections with various adults are important for enrolment, students often emphasised the value of their relationships with other students for their future. In interviews the students underlined their feeling that in a good friendship you attend to a friend’s general condition, but more importantly, you will help one another through exams and assist one another obtaining employment in future. Thus, students expressed a clear awareness that to realise the potential advancement provided through a boarding school education, one must pass well and establish sound relations with age mates. While students’ social orientation included familial and non-familial relations, students unequivocally considered non-familial relations to be central to their current and future well-being.

Conclusions

Growing up as an orphan, or as a child born outside a marriage or from a broken marriage, may take place under similar circumstances and with similar long-term implications. In order to understand how to provide these children with adequate care and resources to become integrated and competent adults, research must recognise local social contexts and strive for insights into children’s position in society and their relations with parent substitutes. There are numerous reasons why children may not live with their biological parents; in the context of complex adult relations (between parents, kin, and ultimate caretakers), one can begin to understand the context of the actual care given. In particular, the internal allocation of resources in a given household may not be merely an issue of the caretaker’s resources, but may also be determined by the caretaker’s willingness to provide for a child’s immediate or long-term well-being.

Care-taking relations cannot change a child’s identity and sense of belonging as determined by the patrilineage. But giving children skills, education and social competency can to a large extent improve their potential as a socially responsible person, an umundo mulayi (Katahoire, 1998). The local aspirations for boarding schools appear to be an example of this. I assume a positive attitude towards the idea of children living in such an institutional setting, in stark contrast to the position of most researchers and aid organisations, who generally consider institutions the ‘last resort’ for taking care of orphans and other vulnerable children (UNAIDS, 2002; Wakhweya et al., 2003). Arguments against using this option centre on the cost of running an institution compared to assisting children living in households, the psycho-social state of the children being split from the family setting, the risk of abuse in schools, and the increased risk that especially boy orphans will not inherit land from their fathers. Although I agree with the potential for those problems, I suggest it is important that the benefits of institutional settings are taken into consideration when making policies and interventions. Perhaps boys with a good education but without land have greater prospects for shaping their future than uneducated boys with land; alternatively perhaps unemployment rates will remain high and well-educated youth will be caught in a ‘moral trap’ (Meinert, 2003) as their skills do not further their options for achieving adulthood. Maybe children growing up with caretakers not belonging to the extended family will become so socialised into new social networks that the biological familial relations will lose importance — as may the importance of belonging to a certain piece of land. Perhaps, too, the kin-based networks are such significant social units that children who are not socialised into biological families become marginalised and risk future instability.

In this era of AIDS, the method of socialising children into stable social units of Ugandan civil society is certainly undergoing considerable change, a situation that is generating notions of children — especially orphans and vulnerable children — as both threatened and as threatening. This state
of transition demands research and discussion about the complexities, ambiguities, and opportunities for children growing up in family settings versus institutional care.

Notes

1. Orphan estimates for Uganda range between 1.1 million and 2.35 million; recent percentage estimates of orphans in the total child population in Uganda range between 15% and 20% (Wakhweya et al., 2003). The marked difference validates the concern that estimates must be understood as an indication rather than a factual reflection of the situation.

2. The term ‘orphan-households’ means households where one (or more) adult guardian(s) is caring for one or several orphans (see Gilborn et al., 2001). This type of household is different to ‘child-headed households’ in which, by definition, there is no adult guardian.

3. The population is based on the national census 2002. The Samia are related to the Bantu people called Abaluya or Abaluhya, of whom the greater part live in Kenya (Katashoire, 1998).

4. Lusamia is classified as a Bantu language, related to the Luyia language group (Katashoire, 1998).

5. In this article I use a broad concept of marriage that includes various kinds of customary marriage.

6. Since there are many reasons why children do not live with their biological parents this category can also include, for example, children displaced by war or whose parents have migrated due to work.

7. Some children of polygamous marriages do not live permanently with their father because co-wives commonly stay a fair distance away. This distance may cross the border between Uganda and Kenya, be in a nearby district or sub-county, or just across a local field.

8. Among the neighbouring Iteso and Basoga, children stay for prolonged periods of time with the father’s sister or brother, depending on the child’s gender, who teaches them among other things about sex and reproduction, a practice common elsewhere in Africa.

9. Writing about the Samia who live across the Kenyan border, Cattell (1992, pp. 312–314) states that, in the past, females were married very young, even in their early teen years.

10. The national law on defilement brought out in 1995 provides that the parents of an impregnated girl under 18 can press charges against the impregnator, who may face imprisonment for life if he does not marry the girl. Parents sometimes use this law to force the boy/man to pay a huge amount of money, well exceeding a common dowry, without his ever being allowed to actually marry the girl/woman.

11. The Abakaziku are a lay group within the Church of Uganda who demand that an unmarried girl reveal the name of her child’s father and give the child to the paternal relatives immediately after birth.

12. If their business is doing well, some women may enrol children from the age of six in boarding schools; letting them be raised there is considered providing the child with an opportunity to become ‘a someone’, whereas letting the child grow up with grandparents can be considered as problematic. As one woman said, ‘in the village the schools are poor, the grandparents are poor, too soft on the kids, sometimes they are backwards, so they can’t teach the kids what they need to know.’ Such notions are widely held among the Samia.

13. All names are pseudonyms.

14. Siblings of the same father but of different mothers term one another a ‘step-‘ or ‘half-‘ brother or sister, implying a relationship where willingness to support one another cannot be taken for granted (see Goody, 1982; Shorter & Onyancha, 1999). People tend to praise the ‘good hearts’ of those older ones who support younger ‘step-siblings’, whereas siblings are expected to assist one another in general sustenance as well as in education or employment. The reasons behind a lack of support among ‘step-siblings’ is connected to the relations between the co-wives.

15. I refer to these programmes in the section about institutional care.

16. The figure is presented in the annual working plan for 2003/4 called ‘Gender & Community-Based Services’ (Busia District Local Government). A more reliable estimation and a breakdown into paternal-, maternal-, and double-orphan estimates is expected from the most recent National Census.

17. For a more comprehensive description and analysis of current discussions and practices related to widow inheritance, see Christiansen, 2006.

18. However, those who are still interested in the widows are considered mainly uneducated men or drunkards: ‘uneducated’ not necessarily in the sense of formal education, but in terms of awareness about AIDS. If the widow stays for a long duration, meaning five–six years, a brother of the deceased might begin to think her husband didn’t die of AIDS, and might come to take over the widow, especially when the widow is considered still beautiful.

19. An omulindi is someone who regularly comes to check the well-being of those he is care-taking and attends to their collective as well as individual needs. Being in this position one may also be called an advisor (omukeraki).

20. Occasionally, caretakers arrange with the headmaster that children remain at the boarding school during holidays, not due to economic reasons, but due to social tensions between the individual caretaker and a child.

21. As the school administration and teachers are aware of ambiguous relations between students and their caretakers they have implemented various regulations to protect students against aggressive relatives, such as the precaution not to accept cooked food from ‘outside’. This measure stems from an incident at another boarding school where a student died from poison in cooked food given by relatives, the offender being a jealous stepmother.

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