

# Stepchildren and Stepmothers: Ethnographic Reflections from Uganda

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren, based on field research carried out on two Ugandan families between 2016 and 2017. Both families considered are traditionally patrilineal, implying that in case of separation the father generally exercises guardianship over the children. As a result, his next wife or partner is responsible for the care of her husband's children from the previous marriage, as well as those born from the new union. In a context of high fertility rates and widespread poverty, this situation can entail an enormous workload and responsibility for the new bride, often leading to a problematic and confrontational relationship between her and the stepchildren. By collecting and analysing childhood memories from two women, one of whom also fostered her previous husband's children, the article attempts to shed light on the socio-cultural and economic forces that shape the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren. The life stories considered in this article are ordinary stories in contemporary Uganda, and in no way do I aspire to generalise about the psychological consequences that these relationships can have on children.

**Keywords:** Stepmother, Stepchildren, Children, Uganda, Africa

By using a narrative approach focused on the analysis of life stories, this article explores the social forces that have structured the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren in Uganda in recent decades. It is a neglected topic: in the past, anthropological literature on Uganda has focused mainly on the attachment style within the relationship between mothers and children from a culturalist perspective (Ainsworth 1967) and on the theme of fostering (Page 1989, Roscoe 1911)<sup>1</sup>. Nowadays, anthropologists mostly

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1 Recent literature has emphasised the role of grandparents in fostering due to HIV epidemic (Kasedde et al. 2014, Mugisha et al. 2013, Seeley et al. 1993).

view children as social actors. Through their agency, they try to cope with local cultural codes as well as with human rights discourse, in urban and war settings, as in the paradigmatic cases of street children and child soldiers (Cheney 2007, Young 2003). However, developmentalist studies devoted to health and children's rights seem to prevail as these topics are particularly close to the concerns of the Ugandan government and the International Organizations (UNICEF 2014, UNICEF 2015, UNICEF & ODI 2015, USAID 2016).

However, I believe it is important to shed light on the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren because Ugandan society, just like others all over Africa, is characterised by high instability in couples and families, due to frequent separations that lead to the formation of new couples, or to the death of one or both parents. Moreover, the widespread practice of fostering further contributes to children's high mobility in a context where traditional parental roles do not coincide strictly with biological motherhood and fatherhood, as in Western societies. As a result, according to the report of the Social Trends Institute (2017, p. 27), in 2011 only 56% of Ugandan children were living in a household with both biological parents.

The subjects considered here belong to the Baganda and Banyankole-Bafumbira ethnic groups, all of which are patrilineal. Therefore, in the event of divorce, the father is supposed to take care of the children, or at least has the authority to decide whom to entrust them to<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, these social norms, which have never been firm, are becoming increasingly untenable today. As I shall argue later in this paper, due to their changing economic role, men nowadays tend to neglect their children.

It is very common for separated men to quickly develop a relationship with a new partner, generally a woman who is younger than the previous one. The new female partner must, therefore, take care of the children from the man's previous relationship and often, in a country characterised by high fertility rates, ends up getting pregnant very soon thereafter, giving birth to additional children to also attend to. Thus, she has to bear both a heavy responsibilities and a huge workload, in a context characterised by widespread poverty. Moreover, the fathers are frequently absent, often migrating in search of work, and in any case, they scarcely participate in the daily management of their children. As a result, in many cases the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren becomes problematic and characterised by violent attitudes on the part of the former and by rejection and resistance

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2      Actually, in many cases the mother takes care of the children after the separation. Moreover, as we shall see in the following examples, children are very mobile. In case of separation, for example, they may live for some years with the father and the stepmother and then they move and join their mother again.

on the part of the latter<sup>3</sup>.

To address this issue I will first focus briefly on changing family structures in contemporary Africa, particularly in Uganda. Then, I will outline the way the economic and social crisis has redefined the local concepts of masculinity. Family structures, far from being stable, are deeply affected by socio-economic dynamics, as well as by government policies. At the same time, the family is the social space that most influences the experience of childhood. For these reasons, in order to better frame my argument, it is important to touch upon the macro-transformations of contemporary African families; then I will turn to a more extensive microanalysis based on two case studies. I shall consider two life stories, i.e., the first-person narratives of two women who are now adult and have become mothers themselves. It is a reconstruction from their autobiographical memory, in which themes of violence and suffering are central. Moreover, the second woman also fostered her previous husband's child, who is currently 22 years of age, and she told me about this experience as well.

The use of decentralised points of view, both internal and external, aims at grappling with the phenomenon from different perspectives in order to account for its complexity, which inevitably can only be partially investigated here. Moreover, the subjects of this article are all people I have known for several years and with whom I have discussed their childhood on many occasions.

I am aware that the sample on which this article is based is limited, but this is still a preliminary work on a topic I'll explore more deeply in the future. My aim is to investigate social phenomena from a qualitative perspective, without overlooking the demographic data on the transformations of family structures in Africa and in Uganda that can give us a broader picture to better understand the issues analysed here. Besides, the two subjects, whose infancy and family lives are considered here, have been close friends of mine, for 3 and 9 years respectively. I think that our long-term relationship was a precondition to address delicate matters such as the relationships with their parents and their stepmothers that caused them deep suffering, which still influence their present lives. The necessity of an intimate relationship, obviously quite rare and more difficult to build, to address these topics can be a partial justification for the limited number of subjects with whom I carried out my ethnographic work.

The article has limitations, if only because of the impossibility to deal

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3 As I will present better later in the article, the tendency of men to pursue multiple female partnerships finds its roots in the current deep transformation of masculinity and consequently of gender relationships. Nevertheless, I think that present multiple partnerships, in a patrilineal society, presents some evident continuities with the co-wives system and polygyny. I am however, aware that additional historical and ethnographic research is needed in order for this assumption to be verified.

with representative samples and the lack of both qualitative and quantitative scientific literature on this specific topic. However, in my defense, I can only add that the stories narrated and analyzed here are absolutely “modal stories”, there is nothing exceptional in them and many of my Ugandan friends, who for obvious reasons do not appear in this article, lived through and spoke about very similar experiences.

### **Changes in family structure in Sub-Saharan Africa: the case of Uganda**

The family is an institution that performs, among other things, an economic function and is, therefore, at the heart of the strategies of production, reproduction, accumulation and consumption. For this reason, family structures are not stable, but change in relation to the political and economic dynamics within the society. These changes can often lead to a mismatch, sometimes quite conflicting, between the ideals of family in a given society, on one hand, and the concrete social practices in place on the other. For example, in Uganda, a growing number of mothers today are single and unmarried; however, despite their increasing presence in the social landscape, especially in urban contexts, there is a widespread tendency to judge them negatively (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 56). This means that changes in family structures often take place in a context of tension between traditional forms, which often persist at least in the local moral conception of a family model that is considered upright and desirable, and the emerging family structures reflecting actual social changes taking place.

Before focusing on the transformations involving family structures in Africa, and Uganda in particular, dealing briefly on the broad demographic dynamics of the continent is in order (Ferry 2007). One of the most significant factors is the persistence of high fertility rates, ensuring that Africa is the continent with the highest population growth globally. The average fertility rate in Africa is 4.7 children per woman, a difference of over 90% from the global figure of 2.5 (UN 2015). Analysts mostly explain the persistence of high fertility as the result of a combination of factors: the persistence of a high infant mortality rate; strong cultural and social value attributed to children; poor use of contraceptives; early marriage and early pregnancies (Bigombe, Khadiagala 2003). There are certainly other factors that may contribute to the phenomenon, but these seem to be the main ones. However, it should be noted that there are marked differences within the continent and that Uganda, with a current fertility rate of 5.8 children per woman (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 31), far exceeds the African average. Therefore, it is among the countries with the highest birth rate and the highest population growth in the world. In addition, there is

great variation in fertility within the country. The most obvious difference is between urban areas, with a fertility rate equal to 3.8, and rural ones, with the average of 6.8 children per woman (Uganda Bureau of Statistics and ICF International Inc. 2012, p. 59), a difference that is in line with global trends. Despite the high fertility and population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, the region also seems to be moving towards a demographic transition. In fact, in many contexts the fertility rate is declining, although in Uganda the decline is slower than elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is likely that African countries will show different trends in demographic transitions (Canning, Sangeeta, Abdo, Yazbeck 2015).

This brings me to the main changes in family structure in contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa. First, the data indicates that there is a certain resilience in family structures. For example, polygyny persists in rural areas, although it is declining in urban ones. Nuclear families are expanding, but the extended family is still widespread, just as it is in Asia and South America, and seems to compensate for the frequent absence of one parent (Social Trends Institute 2014, p. 12). In South Africa, a country where male migration has historically influenced family structures and undermined couple stability, multi-generational families are common and the elderly, often the only ones with a guaranteed income related to some form of pension, have a central role in the domestic economy (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 44). There, only 32% of the population under 18 live with both biological parents and as many as 33% live with neither parent. Although these statistics are quite out of line compared with the other African countries, from this point of view Uganda is the country that slings most closely with South Africa, as far as these figures are concerned. In Uganda, in fact, 20% of children live in family units where both parents are absent (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 27). Another particularly significant figure, again for Uganda, is the percentage of births to unmarried women, which tops at 54% – by comparison, it is significant to consider that this figure in Italy stands at 29% and is the lowest among European countries (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 32). One of the most significant phenomena to emerge in contemporary Africa is the rise in single motherhood, which can be a temporary condition, especially in urban contexts. As previously pointed out, single mothers are still barely accepted and partially stigmatised social subjects, in spite of their increasing presence in the continent. They are a predominantly urban phenomenon that cannot be simply associated to a process of women empowerment or emancipation: the data, in fact, shows that single mothers mostly belong to the poorest strata of the population (Antoine, Nanite-Iamio 1991; Bigombe, Khadiagala 2003; Garcia, Pence, Evans 2008; Jones 1999). In many cases, in a context where men tend to have multiple partners, scattered and often neglected children, it simply means that they are women who have been abandoned by their partner.

## Poverty, HIV and changing masculinity

It is certainly impossible to discuss issues of poverty and inequality in contemporary Africa in a comprehensive way in one paper. However, we do need to refer to these matters in order to better understand the recent changes in family structures. Since the 80's, many African countries were forced to adopt the Structural Adjustment Plans (SAP) imposed by World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). These plans envisaged severe reduction in social spending, privatizations and liberalization of the markets, including the labour market. There seems to be no doubt about the disastrous social effects of these policies and children, as a social category, have been particularly affected. As Rene Loewenson summarised, "The evidence indicates that SAPs have been associated with increasing food insecurity and undernutrition, rising ill-health, and decreasing access to health care in the two-thirds or more of the population of African countries that already lives below poverty levels" (1993, p. 717). Since the 90's, globalization has generated dramatic contradictions (Ferguson 2006). Indeed, Africa is a grey area: despite the economic growth on the continent, data shows that income inequality has increased within African countries in the last decades (African Development Bank Group 2012). Since the end of the Cold War, the African continent is the region that has experienced the largest number of conflicts and political crises at the global level, accompanied by devastating social effects.

These historical processes have heavily affected family structures causing their drastic transformation. The profound change in the economic role of men within the family is significant phenomenon as far as this study is concerned. In my opinion, this transformation reveals an evident gap between the social representation of the roles of husband and father on one hand, and historical reality, i.e., the praxis associated to them, on the other. In fact, contemporary economic and social changes have left men with patriarchal ideology, but unemployment and low wages prevent them from continuing to serve as breadwinner for the family. This affects and diminishes the social value of men and, as a result, their self-esteem<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, men tend to regain their self-esteem and sense of masculinity by resorting to multiple-partner relationships and violent behaviour in an attempt to recover their own sense of masculinity and their power over women. (Silberschmidt 2001). This attitude, however, also exacerbates the precariousness of couples, resulting in a tendency for them to break up more easily. As a result, many children grow up without one or both parents. From this

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<sup>4</sup> In his work on eastern Uganda, David Kyaddondo (2008) has shown that the little money earned by his children can also affect fathers' self-esteem. While the mothers often appreciate children's contribution to the family's economy, fathers tend to perceive it as an act that highlights their incapacity to take care of the family.

point of view, the data on Uganda is quite striking: as I mentioned before, in 2011 the percentage of Ugandan children who live with both parents is only 56%; 24% live with only one parent and 20% with neither. According to these figures, after South Africa, Uganda is the African country with the largest percentage of children living without at least one of their biological parents (Social Trends Institute 2017, p. 27).

The HIV pandemic has also contributed to the increase in these figures. Uganda was one of the countries most affected by HIV, although in recent years, prevention campaigns have paid off, bringing the adult prevalence rate down to 7.1%. Prevalence has decreased but not in a linear manner, and AIDS is estimated to be the second leading cause of death among adolescents (UNICEF 2015, p. 3) and obviously, responsible for the rising number of children living without at least one parent.

Finally, I think that the instability of couples and the large number of children living without at least one parent are strictly related to the profound transformations in the economic role of men as well as changes of the ideals of masculinity. Robert Wyrod, in his study on HIV in Kampala, has framed this phenomenon as follows:

an ideology of male sexuality rooted in men's privileges of controlling sex and having multiple sexual partners; the multifaceted impact of precarious work and economic inequality on male sexuality; the intertwining of anxieties about women's rights and gender equality with masculine sexual privilege; and, most significantly, the limited effect the AIDS epidemic has had on re-making masculine sexual privilege (Wyrod 2016, p. 220).

### **Naburya's childhood memories**

Now I will focus on the recollections of two women that narrated their childhood experience to me<sup>5</sup>. The first one is Naburya, a Muganda who is now 19 years old. She lives in Konge, a suburb of Kampala, and has a one year old daughter, but her partner died recently in a car accident. She lives with her mother, her sister and the latter's two sons in a small house in Konge. I have known her for three years and in the past we have occasionally spoken about her childhood. I told her about my project to write an article on childhood in Uganda focusing on the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren and she agreed to relate her experiences to me:

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5 I have used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of my interlocutors. All dialogues reported here were in English, since both my interlocutors are fluent in this language. In the transcripts, I decided to stay faithful to the orally delivered narration to minimise the gap with reality.

I was born in Junggo a village in Mpigi district. My father had already 2 daughters not with my mother, but from another woman. He had a girl with my mother before me. I was born twin. My two sisters, the first-born, grew up with my father, but when they were 15 the mother took them away. I never lived with them they could come to visit for a few days. My 2 sisters and I lived with my mother and father for five years. We were living in Entebbe, my mother was a businesswoman with a small shop selling vegetables and food. My father was very rough; he was beating us. If he found us by 7 pm that we did not shower yet, he could beat us. If he didn't beat us he used to send us to bed without eating. But he never beat my mother.

My mother and father were not married but they separated when I was five years old. My mother got tired of my father, she didn't like his behaviour. She is the one who decided to leave. She left me and my sisters with my dad. We didn't know that my father had another woman outside. We saw her coming with 2 children, two boys, one was a baby and the other one was about 2 years old. They were the babies of my father. This stepmother was Burundian but she grew up in Uganda. Me and my sister had really bad time with this stepmother. She could beat us; she could not give us food. One day me and my twin sister pooped in the bed and she forced us to eat the poo with the food. I will never forget this in my life. My father used to buy everything at home, we had no problem with food, but this woman could give us the leftover from last night. But she could give her kids bread. My father didn't know about this because he used to leave at 7 am every morning for work, and from work he could go around to drink local drink like *marwa* and come back drunk late in the evening. She hated us so much because we were not her kids; that is how stepmothers behave. It is very difficult to find a good stepmother here in my country. One day my older sister got sick, she had wounds in the head, I don't know how to call it in English. It smells bad if you don't treat it and the pus comes out. My father left in the morning and told this stepmother to cook some herbs and put them on the wounds to wash. But this lady did not do it. My sister had fever and pain. When my father came back home he asked her if she had taken care of my sister. She said she forgot. After that, my father called my sister to see if it was true. He found out it was true and she was smelling and cry. This lady was in the bedroom and my father entered the bedroom and closed it and started beating her. He tied her ends with a rope and put her head in the iron circle of a wheel [wheel rim]. She shouted for help but no one could come because my father was very rough and people could fear him. After two days she was beaten she left with her two kids. During that time, no woman was at home, only our dad and us. After, we stayed alone like 2 months. Even we got tired to be beaten by our dad and we had to cook for ourselves. One day we, three of us, sat and decided to look for our mother. Our dad had told us to cook beans; we had a kitchen inside and one outside. We got firewood and put the beans on fire with too much fire and water and we collected our clothes. We tried to look around if anybody could see us but nobody saw us. Then we left but we were very dirty and we walked to Entebbe town on the street looking around for our mother.

Because we didn't know where she was, we just knew she was in Entebbe. We kept on walking, we saw a flat, and then we sat there in front of it. It started getting dark and one lady came out from that flat and asked us 'what are you doing here, where are you going at this time?' and we told her 'sorry madam we run away from home because our dad was torturing us. We are looking for our mum but we don't know where she is. She said 'you are very dirty and all your clothes are full of holes. Now I am going to help you. We knelt down and we said thank you so much. But we didn't know how she was going to help us. She said 'bring your clothes I show you the garbage and you throw them. We took a shower and her housemaid helped us to shower because we were very dirty. They gave us some clothes because she had some kids. After that she gave us food and juice. We slept there. The next day in the morning we woke up, we took breakfast and she bought for us clothes. She said she was going to tell the local chairman to look for our mother. She did it and we told the name of our mother and her sister, that is how we found our mother. After 3 days they took us to our mother, she was very happy and she cried. After that, we stayed for some years with my mother, may be three years. We never saw our father. Then our father came and picked us. The sister of my father had died and my father wanted us to go to the *olumbe* [a funeral ceremony during which the heirs are designated]. Our father took us to the village in the house of the sister who died. He said you are going to start studying from here and you not going back to your stupid mother, he used to say like that. My mother felt bad, but she had no choice because she could fear my father and whatever my father said it had to be done. We were 7 to eight years old. We started the village life and she took us to school. We had to work for our school fees. We had to go to the forest to get bundles of firewood for sale. We had to dig planting vegetables and sugar cane. And we were making charcoal, he taught us everything. We were missing my mother for many years. Our father could not allow her to come because he thought she could take us. And she also feared him. Our father was still beating us very much. He could come back drunk or find us that we didn't shower. He could quarrel and he had some sticks in his bedroom for beating us. He could give us also other punishments like kneeling down holding a block in each hand and then we had to walk on our knees.

We stayed with my father from 7 up to 14 years old. But one of my cousin took my twin sister to live with him and study from his village. She was I think 12. When I became 14 I told my father that I wanted to go to look for my mother. I was tired of the life there, being beaten and harsh punishments. My father let me go because he thought I was going to come back, I lied to him like that. By that time, I had finished my primary school. So I didn't know where my mother was exactly. But another relative told me that my mother was working with orphans in Nakulabye in Kampala. I wrote it on the paper and when I finished my exams, the next day, I left. But my father never gave me any transport.

I reached Kampala, it was my first time in Kampala. They left me at Nakulabye market and then I walked around asking people where orphanage was.

Then they directed me. When I reached there my mother was very happy to see me and she told her boss about me so they allow me to live there. Life there was better, the care was good and I felt so relaxed. After one year, I went to see my dad to tell him that now he had to allow me to go and I needed his blessing so I could go and stay happy. I told him I was going to study. This a tradition to leave your parents in a peaceful way. From then I never went back to the village and my twin sister also joined us.

### **Irine's experience of childhood and motherhood**

Irine defines herself a Munyankole. Nevertheless: ethnic categories are fluid, as are ethnic boundaries: in her case, the father is a Mufumbira, belonging to the Abagahe clan, and her mother a Munyankole.<sup>6</sup> She is now in her early forties and has two children by two different men. I have known her for nine years and we've had many opportunities to speak extensively about her childhood. When I asked her to tell me about her relationship with her stepmother, she shared two stories. The first one (1) is her childhood experience with two different stepmothers, since her father separated twice when she was a child. The second one (2) is her adult experience as a mother when, after she separated from her boyfriend, she decided to retrieve her child who was living with his paternal aunt. According to tradition, she had no right to her child, that is why she had to resort to deception to take him and then disappeared. After some years, once the relationship with the father had become peaceful again, she decided to foster another of his sons who was mistreated first by his stepmother and then by his paternal aunt.

I was born in Rukungiri, my father and my mam were married. But after seven years my father got another woman because my mother was giving birth only to girls and he wanted a boy. We were five sisters. One day he told my mother that he had found another woman who could give birth to a boy. My mother agreed, she had no choice, and so the other wife was staying in the farm in the village and we were living in town. My father used to stay with her during the weekend, the other days with my mother. One day he told my mother he wanted to introduce her to the new woman. We went to the farm, the whole family, and we had lunch together; it was Sunday. Another Sunday she came to see us and our house was very beautiful, not like the house in the farm. So, she went back and she told my father that she wanted to live in our house, not in the farm. After one month, my father asked my mam if she wanted to go to visit her family in her village in Bushenyi. She was happy to go there but when she went there she received a letter from my father that

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<sup>6</sup> The Bafumbira speak Rufumbira, a language similar to Runyarwanda and they live mainly in Kisoro district.

she should not come back home. She could not believe it and she came back home and she found the young woman in the house. We were all there, my father stood in front of the door and told her she could not stay there anymore. My mam tried to enter and my father beat her and chased her with a stick. She went away with her last kid who was 4 months old. I tried to follow her but she said to go back to our father because she did not even know where to go. And she went.

We stayed with our stepmother and she started torturing us and beating us. She was telling us that our father was an old man and she did not want to take care of us because we were not her kids. We were four sisters, she was already pregnant and she delivered a boy. She could send us to fetch the water, and in one hour we had to fetch 20 litres as a punishment. She used to beat us with the stick and to punish us she could refuse to give us food. I was 8 years old and my younger sister was 2 years old and she was peeing on herself and but that wife did not clean her. It was me to take care of my sister. My father was working in the city, in Entebbe, as a driver and he used to come home once a month. My stepmother chased us from the house because my two young sisters were peeing in the bed. We started staying in the store with the goats. We could sleep in the house only when my father was there. We could not tell him anything because she told us “if you tell something to you father I will kill you”. But one day a friend of my father told him that my stepmother was mistreating us. When he asked us, we said it was not true because we were scared. So, one day my father found out that she had a boyfriend and he chased her and she left two children, a boy and a girl. The youngest was three months. I stayed with these kids and we started giving her goat milk. After two months we received another stepmother, my father got her from a nearby village. We made a party and we started another life. She was a drunkard woman, she used to go to work in the garden and after she used to drink in the bar. She did not cook, so it was me who was cooking. She was not beating us but it was difficult to live with her because she was not giving us the rules and she did not care about anything. We were not going to school and my father was never around. She could not buy anything and we were eating always the same food. She gave birth to a girl and one day my mother came looking for us. It was about 5 years we did not see her, she could not recognise us. The following day my mother asked my father if she could take her two youngest daughters because they were in bad condition, they were kwashiorkor, they had a big stomach with blond hair. My father agreed and my mother took them. After one year, she came back, she took me, and my sister and we all went to live with her.

I was 19 years old and I lived with my boyfriend for two years in Kampala, When I met him, after 2 months I was already pregnant. When my kid, Joseph, was 10 months, we separated because his sister did not like me and she told him to chase me. She wanted me to be her housemaid but I refused. I went away and he took my son to his sister. I looked for a job and I started working. I was missing my kid and I tried many times to see him but I could

not because the sister did not want. She did not like me and she did not like my tribe. After 4 months, I went there and I had bought a big chicken, a branch of banana and a sack of charcoal. I sent all these items to the sister where my son was living. So, they left the guy, who was carrying the things, to enter in the gate and they asked him who sent this. He said it was me and I was there outside. So, they let me inside and they allowed me to see my baby but he could not remember me. I had some biscuits, I give him and I hold him. From that time, I started to go there every week. One day Joseph was sick, he was missing the mother, and they allowed me to take him to my home for the weekend. I brought him back after 3 days and I let him there. One day I asked them to give me Joseph for another weekend and they allowed. But the father didn't trust me because he thought I could steal the kid and he came to see where I was living. It was ok and after some days, I took him back. After I organised myself. My sister came from the village and I went to ask for my son again. They gave him to me and then the day after I gave the baby to my sister to take him to the village of my mother. I shifted from the house and I rented another house so the father could not find me. I saw him again [the father] after four years. My son was living in the village with my mother and I was going there often.

My boyfriend had already 2 kids from 2 different women but I didn't know. I knew it when I was already pregnant. Both women had been the housemaids of his sister, one after the other. When the sister realised that the brother had a relationship with the housemaids, she chased them but they were already pregnant. One girl came back with the kid after two years, she introduced the kid and she went back with him to the village. When he was 4 years, they brought him back and she left him in the house of the sister. But my ex-boyfriend had already married another woman and he took the kid to stay with his new wife. This stepmother started to mistreat the boy because he was not her kid. She was beating him, sometime she could not give him food and he had to fetch water the whole day. One day I went there because I was taking Joseph to see his father, it was lunchtime. I found the father and his wife eating in the dining and the boy was outside eating under the sun. I asked them: why are you treating this poor boy like that? The father told me the wife didn't want to eat with him on the same table. After I went to the aunt and I told her all the story, so she told him to take the boy to her place. He took the boy and he started living there, and he was going to school. During a holiday, I sent Joseph to the aunt to stay with his family and his brother. They stayed together for the holiday and Joseph came back. But he told me that his brother was like a slave in the house, he was not allowed to watch the TV, he was not supposed to have food before the others had finished their food, he was the one to fetch the water and to clean the house and the dishes. He was not supposed to sit on the sofa; he was supposed to seat on the floor and eat on the floor. When I heard this, I asked the father if Moses could come to my place for a weekend and he allowed but he came with us to see my house. After a weekend, I didn't take Moses back because he didn't want any more to go back. The father called me on the phone and I told him Moses wanted to

stay with me. So, the father said he was going to call the police but he didn't, so Moses stayed with me.

### **Violence, suffering and resilience**

These biographical memories reveal the way social forces shape childhood, which proves to be clearly a historical construct, as well as the personal and emotional dimensions of childhood experiences. At the same time, they demonstrate how the stepmother-stepchild relationship is raised as an important socio-cultural issue and woven into childhood memories

It is important to trace the social and historical background of the two stories. Naburya's childhood was spent in Mpigi district, a rural area west of Kampala, between the end of 90's and the beginning of 00's. Her family was quite poor and the father used to drink. She told me on another occasion that her father had served as a soldier and bodyguard to President Milton Obote. When Obote was overthrown, he lost his job and had to go back to his native village to work as a farmer. Despite the fact that he no longer had to move from his village in search of work, he was essentially an absent father and within the family had mainly an autocratic and punitive role (Naburya used to relate his violent behavior to the fact he had been a soldier). All his wives were submissive to his authority; nevertheless, they had the opportunity to leave him. As it often happens, Naburya's mother migrated to Kampala where she had more working opportunities and she could attain a more emancipated life. Her position in the urban area afforded her the opportunity to get her daughters back. Nevertheless, some years ago, she lost her jobs and tried unsuccessfully to run a small apparel shop. The competition in the informal economy of Kampala is high and condemns people to a precarious life. Nowadays, she depends on Naburya and is not entitled to a state pension. On her part, Naburya is overwhelmed by the responsibility to take care of the whole family. She works as a waitress in a bar, a precarious job with a very low salary (about \$50 a month). She confided to me that she has to prostitute herself occasionally since her salary is not enough.

Irine, on the other hand, belongs to a previous generation. Her father was quite wealthy but when president Obote took power for the second time in 1980, his political party, the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), and his government became openly anti-Rwandan. In that tense political situation, Irine's father, being a Mufumbira, was considered a Rwandan, so some UPC supporters pillaged Irine's house and stole all the cows. This deeply affected the family's finances and the father had to migrate to Entebbe, where he found a job as a driver for the Red Cross. Since then, his presence with the family was sporadic and after he divorced, his children grew up with the

stepmothers in a poor and violent environment. Irine and her sisters finally went back to live with their mother, where they found a better life. When she was 18 years old, Irine migrated to Kampala, where she had a baby but soon after she separated from her partner. She was unable to find a stable job in Kampala, but her current husband, with whom she has a child, works for a telephone company and their standard of living is decent.

Despite the differences between the two narratives, some surprising similarities arise, even in the use of words. The first issue that emerges clearly is the presence of violence in the family relationships. In contemporary Uganda, violence against children is apparently decreasing; nevertheless, it is still a problem highlighted by international organizations and the government. Violence is frequent both in the domestic space and in the public space; for example at school where teachers often inflict corporal punishment on students (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children 2017). Both in its public and domestic dimensions, violence is often locally understood as a way to educate and discipline children. For example, beating a kid who wets the bed is generally seen as a way to educate him, since enuresis is frequently considered a voluntary act and a form of carelessness. At the household level, violence clearly exceeds its disciplinary function. Children are usually the weakest subjects in the family and they can become the target of adult frustrations. From this point of view, the relationship with their stepmothers takes place within a power hierarchy where children are usually at the bottom rung. In the case of Irine, for example, the father decided to leave his wife because she did not produce any male children (this is locally attributed to a woman's problem). As Irine pointed out to me later, her father married his second wife after an arrangement was made with her parents and she had no say in the matter. At the time, Irine's father was still quite wealthy and he paid a price of 22 cows for his new bride. Therefore, the bride was forced to live with an older man, whom she did not love, and she had to look after his children. In this situation, the violence against her stepchildren seems to be a kind of revenge committed by a weak subject, the stepmother, against even weaker subjects in a context in which her life is seriously curbed by social norms. Her stepchildren seem to become a sort of metonymy for her husband, whom she has difficulty opposing: in this sense, the stepmothers' violence is also a form of rebellion against rigid social norms linked to patriarchy. As both Irine and Naburya emphasised, such violence is locally attributed to the fact that the woman has to care for children who are not her own and are often a cause of conflict in the couple. The father tends to develop a protective attitude towards his children, while the woman can exert a silent and hidden violence. Consequently, the stepmothers are not subjects devoid of agency, although it is certainly restricted. Adultery and aggression against stepchildren take place in a narrow and hidden space of action – women can hardly rebel publicly – and a significant

change, such a separation, can hardly take place and requires a long time.

Women tend to challenge patriarchy by attempting to get their children back. Being usually vulnerable subjects, to succeed they may resort to deception, as in the case of Irine. Although the current Ugandan law protects women in case of separation and guarantees them the possibility to exercise the guardianship of their children, in real life the norms of patrilinearity often prevail, especially in rural areas. As a result, it is quite common that women, after a separation, may “abduct” their children from their partner under false pretenses. This “act of force” is more likely to happen when the woman finds herself in a stable economic situation, like Irine who found a job after her separation, strengthening her agency. To get her children back, the mother often needs the support and the complicity of her own family, a support that becomes quite important when she has a job that prevents her from caring full-time for her offspring. This form of complicity, from the woman’s family side, suggests that the rules of patriarchy are not rigid and somehow it is socially accepted for a woman to opt out without been necessarily stigmatised or socially isolated. Another theme that emerges strongly is the frequent absence of the father. Male migration from rural to urban areas is among the main causes of the absence. This also enforces men’s aptitude for having multiple partners. However, even when the father does not migrate, the daily care of children is predominantly a woman’s task; moreover, the older children too, usually girls, have to look after their younger siblings. The power of the father in the family seems to be inversely proportional to his involvement in the daily care of children. In the case of Naburya, the more constant presence of the father in the domestic space adds more violence to the violence already committed by the stepmother. In the case of Irine, the father has a more protective role, though his presence is occasional.

The experiences narrated here reveal a great deal of suffering in children’s lives. It is significant that both interlocutors use the word “torture” in their stories. In cases of separation, the rupture of the maternal bond is inevitably painful and traumatic (sometimes, such a break can be permanent; in other cases, such as the ones reported here; the relationship with the mother is reconstituted after a few years). Stepchildren are often the weak link in the family and consequently they are exposed to the risk of becoming the scapegoats for adults’ frustrations. In such a case, to talk about “agency” could be misleading since the risk is to underestimate the social forces that shape these experiences. Due to their weak position, I prefer to use the category of “residual agency” to define their capacity of resilience, escape, and sometimes rebellion<sup>7</sup>. Escaping in search of the mother, as in Naburya’s

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7 Alcinda Honwana (2005), in her work on child-soldiers, used the concept of ‘tactical agency’, coined by Michel de Certeau (1980), in order to define the limited agency

case, is a common attempt to avoid suffering. The solidarity and support that children can receive during these attempts, from neighbors or people encountered during the flight, reveals a certain degree of social empathy towards them. In Uganda it is commonly understood that the relationships between stepmother and children can turn violent and cause suffering – many people experience it, thus explaining the solidarity and understanding towards children who flee their home in search of their mother. Another way for children to avoid suffering is to develop a privileged relationship with a protective adult. The mobility of children within the family networks can allow them to develop emotional relationships with different family members; this can also give them the possibility to link up and try to go live with a more affectionate and protective adult (as in the case of Moses).

## Conclusion

Childhood, especially in the Global South, is deeply affected and determined by political-economic structures as well as by everyday practices embedded in local cultures (Scheper-Hughes, Sargent 1998). In this article, I have tried to reveal the social forces that structure the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren in contemporary Uganda. In the cases I analyzed, three main forces seem to emerge: 1) the political crisis that affected Uganda up to the mid of the 80's, 2) the current neoliberal course that exacerbates uncertainty and precariousness, and 3) the sociocultural norms. In addition, I also considered changes in gender relationships and the crisis of masculinity, since both factors shape childhood experiences.

Nevertheless, there are some important clarifications that need to be made: in the cases analyzed here, the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren involved violence, causing a lot of suffering. As I argued above, these cases are not rare, on the contrary, they are quite frequent. However, it goes without saying that such a relationship can be often absolutely affectionate and protective. This is to clarify that it is not my intention to generalise or to assert the inevitability of violence: my suggestion is that such a relationship is deeply structured by the social forces at play, such as the economic dynamics and the unequal power relations between genders.

Moreover, the cases considered here refer to childhood experiences that date back to the 80's, in the case of Irine, and to the early 00's in the case

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of weak subjects. I prefer to use the concept of 'residual agency' since the children described here live under the heavy yoke of adults, while child-soldiers can occasionally confront adults (especially civilians). In the case of street children, they can build a parallel society with a high degree of independence despite the hard constraints of their daily life.

of Naburya. In a sense they are “old stories”, since the family structures and relationships can change very quickly and the differences between generations can be huge. Therefore, in order to avoid providing a static view, this analysis should be considered as a “punctual attempt” to account for the fickle social forces that shape childhood experiences. For this reason, I want to conclude this article by identifying some topics for further research that could help us to shed more light on the evolution of the family structures and their impact on children’s lives. Numerous studies, for example, have shown that gender relationships in urban settings are continuously redefined (cfr. Antoine, Nanitelamio 1991; Bigombe, Khadiagala 2003; Silberschmidt 2001). Couples can eventually become more collaborative and develop more equal relationships, since in cities both partners tend to work. At the same time, however, the number of single mothers is increasing and this could be a symptom of a decrease in the economic power of men. Rural areas are obviously not static, even if family structures can be here more resilient. Anyway, the fluid dynamics between rural and urban areas need to be better understood, and new phenomena, such as a rise in female migration, should serve as a warning to avoid simplistic dichotomies. In addition, we must consider that gender relations and family structures, and consequently children, are deeply affected by public policies, which may have a big impact in providing and improving educational and health services. Although Uganda continues to present a high fertility rate, further research should better clarify the way that efforts to promote women’s literacy affects their fertility, redefining their reproductive strategies. Ultimately, the dynamics of the phenomena investigated here, which affect and shape children’s lives, require a multidimensional analysis, both synchronic and diachronic, as well an approach that can integrate qualitative and quantitative data in order to account for the complexity of their etiology.

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