Lost in Translation: Cultural Interpretations of Family in East Africa and Implications on Children's Care

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Background

The Government of Ethiopia welcomed 2018 by passing a law restricting intercountry adoption (ICA).[1] While this move may have seemed extreme to some, those who have observed ICA in Ethiopia over the last decade were not surprised. In 2016, the Government of Uganda passed similar revisions to its guardianship and adoption laws aimed at closing loopholes and reforming inadequate regulation of ICA systems.[2] Yet, despite these efforts, the global community was made aware of two unethical and concerning cases of ICA in Uganda in 2017.[3] The cases set a precedent regarding adoption-related ethics and child rights violations, exemplifying the precarious history of ICA in East Africa over the past decade. Furthermore, both examples illustrate the complexities of cultural understandings of the concept of family and how they have been manipulated in ways that are neither in the best interests of children nor in line

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with international child rights instruments. While often beginning with the best of intentions, ICA practices and the related expansion of orphanages (also referred to as residential care) in the East African context have created a child care system that separates children from their families rather than strengthening the capacities of families to care for their children. The systems claim to serve "vulnerable children," yet often do more harm than good. These faulty foundations often violate children's rights, weaken family and community structures, and create long-lasting scenarios whereby traditions of care and protection of children are eroded, overlooked, and in the worst cases, intentionally manipulated.

Defining Family in the African Context

While poverty, internal and external migration, and natural- and human-made disasters continue to create hardships for millions, African families have remained resilient for centuries. There is no denying that children on the African continent still face many challenges to their rights and wellbeing. It is also true that the family unit (including the nuclear and the extended family and tribe) have been a mainstay in caring for and raising children. Orphaned children are not new to Africa. Long before ICA or orphanages ever began, communities had ways to care for children who had lost one or both parents.[4]

The responsibility of caring for children when their parents are not present or available to do so has most often fallen on the extended family. According to Margaret Lombe and Alex Ochumbo, close to 90 percent of assistance to orphans in Sub-Saharan countries has been provided by traditional family networks.[5] Similarly, Madhavan notes that "despite high rates of maternal mortality in Africa, due to the strong extended family system, orphans usually have been willingly and relatively easily adopted by other family members."[6]

Understanding Orphanhood in Uganda and Ethiopia

Like their neighbors, Ethiopia and Uganda are not new to orphanhood and have traditionally found ways to care for children within their communities. Tatek Abebe and Asbjorn Aase state that "orphanhood, both biological and social, is a significant structural feature of Ethiopian society," one of the oldest cultures in the world.[7] They write that orphans have been a part of Ethiopian culture and families for centuries, and that Ethiopians have dealt with children without parental care in constructive ways.[8] Ethiopia has more than 100 million inhabitants, dozens of ethnic groups, multiple languages, and is made up of a myriad

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of traditions and complexities that are based on nuclear and extended family, tribe, and community. The phrase "it takes a village to raise a child" has always been true within Ethiopian culture and traditions. A child is not viewed as the sole responsibility of the biological parents but rather as part of a larger network that includes extended family, community members, and

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entire ethnic groups.[9] Similarly, Uganda has experienced devastating civil war, creating massive displacement—particularly in northern regions—and parental mortality brought about by disease, poverty, and conflict. However, when hardship hits, communities have traditionally come together to provide care.

Impact of Globalization on Children's Care

Through increased travel, globalization has emerged as one of the greatest threats to traditional child care systems and even to notions of family. The ability of people from other countries to visit, fund, build, and volunteer within orphanages, as well as adopt children, has undermined the long-held tradition of community child care. The traditional family care models described above are often now perceived as insufficient for children. This phenomenon, when combined with faith-based ideals about the importance of directly caring for the downtrodden, the widowed, and the orphaned, has led to the creation of an orphanage system that was, until only a few decades ago, a foreign concept in many African communities. As the rapid expansion of orphanages—primarily funded by people outside of Africa—continues, these institutions are now being sold to parents and caregivers as a better alternative to the care that can be offered at home. Coinciding with this notable growth in orphanages, there has also been a broader shift in the definition of "orphans" to include children who have lost both parents, have one living parent, or have extended family who, under traditional models, would be providing care. This misrepresentation has promoted a rhetoric of "orphan rescue" in many Western countries and organizations.[10]

A recent paper on voluntourism (a form of travel in which tourists volunteer their time to a cause or charity) and child trafficking into orphanages describes the experience of a Ugandan organization that, after stepping in to help a failing orphanage, found that the children were not orphans at all, but had rather been

taken from their homes "for the purpose of being falsely presented as orphans to live in the orphanage and elicit international funding."[11] The trend of recruiting non-orphan children to fill orphanages is illustrated in the dramatic increase in the number of orphanages. In less than 20 years, the number of orphanages in Uganda went from 75 in 1998 to an estimated 657–1,000 in 2015.[12] These figures are not inclusive of the hundreds of orphanages that are not registered with the Government of Uganda. Similarly, in Ethiopia, although figures are not available pre-2000, two different studies found that the number of orphanages went from 87 to 107 in just two years; of those, only three were operated by the Government of Ethiopia.[13] The total number included in the study does not necessarily count the "transition homes" used for children in the ICA process, which, as is the case in Uganda, were often unregistered and therefore unable to be identified by local authorities. Estimates put the number of transition homes in the hundreds.

Linking Expansion of Orphanages and Intercountry Adoption

The disconnect between traditional family care for children, Western perceptions of which types of families are good for children, and concepts of orphanhood results in the separation of children from families and communities, thereby blurring the lines of ICA. Unethical and illicit ICA practices in Africa and elsewhere have emerged as a result of conceptions of poverty, desperation, and hope.[14] Most parents hope for and work toward a better future for their children. For many African families, hope is complicated by the desperation brought on by extreme poverty. This, combined with cultural differences in how family and child care are understood, exacerbates an already complicated situation. The differing interpretation of "family" practiced by many African communities (i.e., a wider definition that includes extended members, neighbors, and clan or tribe) and the understanding of permanency impact how adoption, as a concept, is understood by all involved.

The dissolution of familial ties and the cultural differences in understanding adoption are exemplified by the experience of another African country, Liberia. A decade ago, there were serious and persistent problems in Liberia related to misinformation and coercion within the adoption process. In her speech on the cessation of ICA, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf underscored important ideas about this intersection of hope and desperation and clearly illustrated how the concept of family can be lost in the translation process:

…neither did the law contemplate calamities caused by nature or by humans that would separate children from their biological parents and other immediate family. The law also did not contemplate circumstances that would coerce biological parents to give their children to other persons to be reared in foreign lands.[15]

Sirleaf pointed out that many Liberian families did not understand the permanent nature of ICA, and they simply "thought their children would be taken abroad for school and that the children would return periodically to visit their biological parents and these biological parents became heartbroken when they discovered otherwise."[16] The idea that the biological familial ties would be permanently (and legally) severed is simply not understood by many African parents because that concept does not exist in many African cultures.

PUSH FACTORS FOR CHILDREN ENTERING ORPHANAGES

Similar to the example of Liberia, many Ugandan parents make the difficult decision to send their children to orphanages in the hopes that they will have better access to education, health care, and other basic needs. One study found that court decisions increasingly favor adoption based on the ability of adoptive parents versus birth communities to provide for the physical and emotional needs of the child.[17] The study established an overlap between actual poverty and what appeared to be an uncomplicated approach to exonerating parental responsibility, due in part to the misconception that foreign adoptive parents have the resources to take care of the child as well as support the birth family. In a number of instances, the decision to relinquish parental responsibility is also influenced by financial incentives from adoptive parents and children's homes.[18] In other words, contrary to the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care for Children, which state that poverty shall not be a reason to remove a child from parental care, decisions are being made based on biological parents' ability to meet material needs.

In the 2000s, Ethiopia saw a rapid expansion in the number of orphanages and a dramatic rise in the number of ICAs. This increase was in part due to the closure of ICA in Guatemala, which resulted in many American and European agencies shifting operations to Ethiopia.[19] The correlation between increased numbers of orphanages and thousands of children being placed in ICA has been well documented.[20] The number of Ethiopian children placed in ICA tripled in four years from 1,713 adoptions in 2005 to 4,676 in 2009.[21]

In 2008, the first ever national study in Ethiopia on residential child care

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was conducted. The study specifically targeted registered orphanages and did not include transition homes used for adoptions.[22] Results showed approximately 6,500 children in orphanages. Noting that approximately 4,500 children were placed in ICA in 2009 and almost all of these children lived in transition homes run by adoption agencies before they left the country, one could safely assume that an estimated total of 11,000 Ethiopian children live in some sort of orphanage or transition home.[23]

Orphanages, Adoption, and Children's Rights

As human rights organizations, journalists, and even adoptive parents started asking questions, the government conducted several situational assessments of the child protection system. A 2010 study, which was not made public, assessed a total of 107 orphanages in four regions of the country. The results of this study demonstrated a significant lack of quality care in child protection institutions as well as an indisputable connection between institutional care and ICA.[24] Three government ministries responded to the findings by developing short- and long-term work plans that included the closure of 45 orphanages, family tracing and reunification for children in those facilities, and the expansion of family- and community-based options for children who could not be reunified.[25] The assessment found that approximately 41 orphanages relied exclusively on funds from adoption agencies and only half of the institutions had appropriate and available financial accounting systems in place.[26]

Uganda exemplifies a trend occurring in many countries: despite a compelling evidence base and strong international child rights instruments, there has not been a decrease in the number of residential care services or the number of children in care. A 2015 report found 657 orphanages and an estimated 50,000 children in care. However, there were also indications of as many as two "hidden" or unidentified orphanages for every one that is known.[27] Even though poverty and HIV are often drivers for children entering care, the geographic areas with the highest density of orphanages align with urban centers and popular tourist destinations, not with poverty or HIV "hot spots."[28] Unethical practices linked to the establishment and operation of orphanages, recruitment of children into those homes, and the process of adoption and associated financial gain were found to be closely linked.[29]

Many factors of vulnerability associated with poverty and HIV in Uganda have contributed to family breakdown and an ensuing increase in the number of children being separated from family and/or placed into residential care.[30]

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However, the majority of children living apart from their biological parents are living with relatives (at least three million, according to 2011 data.)[31] At the same time, since the early 2000s, there has been an increase in the number of orphanages, with a significant boom in the years 2003–2012.[32] Before 1990, there were less than 30 orphanages, and by 2003, that number had increased to 88, with a concentration in the northern conflict areas—perhaps a result of civil war.[33] A 1998 survey found over 2,900 children living in orphanages, with poverty being the main reason for placement, and at least 95 percent of these children had living parents or relatives.[34] While it is difficult to pinpoint trends occurring in exact years, the MGLSD (Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development) investigated and found an explosion in orphanages by 2012, with an estimated 600 mostly unregistered and concentrated in central regions. Furthermore, the number of children placed had exponentially increased to approximately 57,000. This reflects the fact that residential care had indeed become the default solution in Uganda without consideration for, or investment in, family-based options.[35]

Some reports suggest that the increase may be linked to ICA, with the funding for orphanage establishment and operation connected to the adoption fees paid by foreign families.[36] According to the U.S. State Department, the number of adoptions from Uganda to the United States increased from 311 during the 11-year period of 1999–2010 to 207 in 2011 alone. According to a 2017 article, the increase of ICA by 400 percent in Uganda between 2010 and 2011 was also related to the drastic reduction in available children for ICA from Ethiopia and Russia.[37] Furthermore, concerns have been raised that the number of registered adoptions does not account for the number of children leaving the country. According to a *Voice of America* article, "in 2012, 680 children left the country, while only 227 are accounted for in the adoption process."[38] The recent change to the Ugandan law governing adoption has made ICA much more difficult. The adjustments address certain loopholes around legal guardianship, which allowed foreign parents to take children out of the country and finalize the adoption outside of Uganda.

Another reason that orphanages have proliferated in Uganda is the immense amount of funding behind them. The annual funding received by a sampling of orphanages in a 2015 Makerere University study ranged from a low of $8,269 to a high of $302,846 per year. The money came mostly from child sponsorship from non-Ugandans, as well as donations from private international foundations, most often Christian faith-based.[39] The study found that most Ugandan orphanages were started and continue to operate as commercial opportunities,

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pulling children from vulnerable and poor families for access to supposedly free services such as education, food, and health care. The authors suggest that donors often have a misconception about the number of children in need of care and have limited knowledge of the harmful effects posed by residential care or of international and national standards for child care practice. They further describe how this has led to investment into the proliferation of institutional care at the expense of family preservation, traditional kinship care practices, and the development of community-based services that can keep families together and provide local services.[40]

MANIPULATING HOPE

Again, the supposed "rescue" of children, either when placed in an orphanage or subsequently in ICA, is linked to the concept of hope for all involved, including those involved in various models of humanitarian aid and relief. However, this misunderstanding of hope as a critical driver of actions on both sides of the equation is at the heart of the problem. In many cases in Ethiopia and Uganda, birth parents place children in these situations as a means of offering the children a potentially better life. It is not done with the intent nor understanding that this placement is permanent and will result in the severing of family ties. While placing the children in orphanages might result in greater material resources and access to basic services, the severance of family and community life within the African context is a contradiction to the hope that leveraged the child into the system in the first place.

Unfortunately, ICA has illustrated that unethical practices that utilize a market approach often override the best interests of the child. In Ethiopia, multiple unethical cases have been uncovered by child rights organizations, the United States Embassy in Ethiopia, and even adoptive parents themselves.[41] The first country to indicate alarm was Australia. In 2009, the state of Victoria, Australia placed a moratorium on adoptions from Ethiopia due to concerns of child sales, malfeasance, and deceptive means of securing relinquishment of children by birth families, meaning that it was not clear to birth parents that they were agreeing to adoption for their child or that the decision was permanently removing their rights as parents.[42]

As concern was raised within and outside of Ethiopia about unethical practices, child rights organizations began to focus on reintegrating children in orphanages back into families, piloting foster care initiatives, and promoting traditional child care practices such as *gudifecha*.[43] Gudifecha has been incor-

porated into legal language in Ethiopia via its inclusion into the 1960 Civil Code and is now used as a general term for adoption. There is legal gudifecha, which is a formal process recognized by the judicial system, and there is also cultural gudifecha, which involves a ceremony and oath-taking in front of the community or tribal leaders.[44] In existing research on the topic, there is frequent mention of the resiliency of Ethiopian families and the importance of established cultural responses to caring for children without parental care. This idea was also recognized by the United Nations Committee of Child Rights in their third periodic report:

> Guddifachaa practice provides [an] invaluable solution for foundling, abandoned and orphaned children. If such children are adopted [in] to a society with such fertile ground of cultural and value system, they can easily be integrated into the community and get access to resources and status. Encouraging and expanding such local and traditional adoption [would] enable monitoring and evaluation.[45]

It appears that the term "permanency" is not a concept that is easily translated. It is not mentioned in any of the literature about gudifecha. There is also no clear terminology or understanding of a permanent severing of ties with the biological family when this type of adoption occurs. The practice of gudifecha seems more like a "handing-over" and does not represent a complete loss of engagement with the biological family.[46]

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Ethiopia and Uganda illustrate how the manipulation of trust, hope, and diverse cultural understandings of key terms and processes can be lost in translation and manipulated to serve others—not children. There is no better example of this than the recent Ugandan cases under investigation by the U.S. Department and reported by CNN.[47] Two cases of Ugandan children adopted by U.S. families under false terms were discovered. Ugandan parents thought they were sending their girls

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to boarding schools to receive a better education, not knowing that their children would be taken out of the country under the permanent care of another family. Once the girls could speak English and were in the United States, they told their adoptive families that they were not orphans and that they had families back home. Both girls have since been reunited with their biological mothers

with the support of professionals. These cases are unprecedented within the ICA sector and shed important light on how cultural differences in practice and understanding are not only overlooked but at times intentionally manipulated by those in power.[48]

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The concept of family within the East African context has been manipulated by systems that are not working for the best interests of children. These systems exploit the human desire for hope—hope for better futures for children. Having a better understanding of these complex issues, we can begin to suggest some ways to address the factors involved in the current and often exploitive system. The myths perpetuated about African children, families, and communities must be tackled in a multi-pronged effort. The authors recommend:

1. Increasing public awareness about the negative effects of orphanages on children and the linkages between residential care and permanency decisions, which may not be in the best interest of children. Myths are perpetuated by misinformation and inaccurate perceptions. Efforts must focus on debunking myths about African children, families, and communities, as well as what orphanages are and how they fail the very children they are built to protect.

2. Increasing public awareness about the linkages between the "helpers with good intentions" (such as students, volunteers, missionaries, donors to orphanages, and even adoptive families) and damage to traditional family structures and promotion of orphanages.[49] This work has begun with initiatives such as Better Volunteering, Better Care, and ReThink Orphanages, but much more effort is needed. Leveraging good intentions but channeling them into development efforts that strengthen families and communities and aim to prevent separation is a must. More champions who have made this shift need to document, share, and post those stories on social media.

3. Strengthening gatekeeping mechanisms aimed at making decisions in the best interest of children and at keeping children in families and communities whenever safely possible. Focus on ensuring that children with families can be supported to remain in those families, and that families are given the support needed to care for their children in the first place. With this shift, orphanages no longer become the go-to when a struggling family wants a better future for its child.

4. Increasing governmental and non-governmental support for family-strengthening interventions aimed at reducing family breakdown and keeping

children and families together. Ultimately, governments have the responsibility to protect vulnerable citizens. Advocacy efforts, which bring together governments, non-governmental partners, donors, and communities, must look at what is needed to ensure that families are enabled and supported to care for children. This shift has begun in countries such as Ethiopia and Uganda, where attention toward unethical adoption practices and the orphanages that support them is beginning to transition from residential to family-based care and/or community-based services. However, long-term change for children will not come by simply ending such practices. It must be combined with a concerted strategy to enhance family-strengthening policies that increase the resilience of vulnerable families and enable them to provide safe and caring family environments for children. ⓌⒶ

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49. Karen Rotabi, Jini Roby, and Kelley Bunkers, "Altruistic Exploitation: Orphan Tourism and Global Social Work," *The British Journal of Social Work* 47, no. 3 (2017): 648–65; Linda Richter and Amy Norman, "AIDS orphan tourism: A threat to young children in residential care," *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 5, no. 3 (2010): 217–29.

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