



## Uganda's child adoption 'market' brings misery and confusion

Family distraught at losing contact with son, now living 8,000 miles away in US after adopters told he was abandoned

**Amy Fallon in Kampala**

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Staring down at two sketchy black-and-white photos of a young boy, Nakiwala Hasifa uses the beige top she is wearing to dry her tears. The child is her son, Stuart Bukenya, a “playful” boy who loved his family, his former parents and 12 siblings.

But today he is a stranger to her. Living in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 8,000 miles away, Stuart has a new family and even a new name. “Silas Hodge” is written in pencil on the photos given to Hasifa and her husband, Festo Matovu, via their lawyer. They have not seen him for five years and fear they will not do so again.

“We couldn’t afford school fees, so these people promised to help us and take care of him,” said Hasifa, speaking through a translator in the Luganda language, while sitting with Matovu on the floor of the family home in Kiwumu village, about 25 miles outside Kampala. “We thought it was a good chance but now it has turned sour because we do not see him, we do not communicate at all.”

Stuart, then five, and his cousin Juliet Tendo, seven, were taken to the US by a caring Baptist family who had been given a legal guardianship order in June 2009 after arriving in Uganda. The children were later adopted through a US court.

Adam and Jill Hodge, who were desperate to give Ugandan orphans a home, say they were told the boy’s father had died, that Hasifa was planning on leaving her children to go and live with another man, and that she and Juliet’s

grandmother had understood and agreed to the terms of the legal guardianship, which were translated and explained to them. They were given what were said to be legal death certificates for Juliet's mother and Stuart's father.

It was only in summer 2011 that the Hodges learned that both were, in fact, still alive.

Reliable statistics on international adoptions of Ugandan children are hard to come by. In 2009 there were 69 adoptions from Uganda to the US, state department figures show. In 2013 this jumped to 276.

A report released in July by the Ugandan auditor general raised alarm about the "continued increase in the international adoption industry", singling out the US. "Domestically, Ugandans fear that children leaving the country are being exploited or abused," it reads.

At the heart of this "market" lies an uncomfortable fact: Uganda has a huge child abandonment problem. Newborns are dumped in pit latrines and on benches every week, and many spend years in orphanages.

In a country with limited child protection, and where documents can easily be falsified, international adoption can flourish, according to Freda Luzinda, a lawyer who heads an advocacy group called A Child's Voice. "It's very easy to beat the system," she said.

Hasifa and Matovu said they did not understand the papers they signed as they were not translated into their language. They claim they were promised their son would return every two years "for a holiday", and there would be frequent communication, but that the only contact has been a few photographs sent through their lawyer. The Hodges say they have sent many more pictures over the years to be forwarded.

Ugandans Adopt, an official campaign launched in 2011, has led to at least 49 Ugandan children being successfully adopted or fostered by Ugandan parents. Another 14 local parents are waiting for youngsters, according to communications officer Aidah Agwang.

But there are "loads" of recent "horror stories" involving international adoption, according to a source at a Ugandan child rights group.

"We have had a number [of children] sent back to Uganda, even one left at the US embassy, because it did not work out," said the source, who did not want to be named. "We have seen disruptions in the US because the families are not prepared to deal with the children they adopt. Some adoptive parents find out, when their children start to talk and understand English better, that they had a family. We have also seen false paperwork and one case where the so-called deceased mother was found on Facebook."

One couple arrived in Uganda in 2012 expecting to adopt twins, she said. When they discovered the siblings were, in fact, triplets, they left one behind.

The same year, the Netherlands suspended all international adoptions from Uganda, saying it wanted more clarity on the circumstances in which biological parents were giving up their children.

Some child rights advocates claim the orphan care movement, which is largely linked to Pentecostal churches, and the international adoption lobby have misrepresented Uganda's ability to develop their own solutions for neglected children, and the need for western intervention. Last month the minister for children and youth affairs promised that unlicensed homes and charities soliciting money for "orphans" would be shut and their proprietors arrested.

Luzinda described the Kiwumu episode as an "obvious recruitment case". "[The parents] didn't come looking for the help, someone went to the village to find children and of course the parents were like, 'Can we apply?'" she said.

She said she had seen cases where adoptive parents found they had been lied to after arriving in Uganda, and walked away. Others had so much invested emotionally and financially that they "turn their backs on the truth" and persevered.

"Adoption is just one symptom of the real problem," Hasifa said, adding that she and her husband were happy for their son to stay in the US if he was being cared for. But they were desperate to see him for holidays and said that if his adoptive family could not agree to that, "then they better bring him back for good". "We are really worried about this happening to other parents in Uganda," she added.

Through their Christian adoption agency, Lifeline Children's Services, the Hodges have tried to speak to the family via Skype three times, but "all have fallen through on the Ugandan side". In light of the "seeming animosity toward

adoption” and hostile TV coverage of their case, they now fear for their safety if they return to Uganda, but “remain open for contact”.

“My wife and I hold no hard feelings toward the families of our children,” said Adam Hodge. “When they are adults, they will decide if they want to return to Uganda for a visit or for a longer term.”

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