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# Ugandan Women on the Move to Stay Connected: The Concurrency of Fixation and Liberation

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**Abstract:** Many Ugandan women are constantly moving around as part of their everyday efforts to make life continue. Based on fieldwork in southeastern Uganda in the past 15 years, examples are given of how women moving between relatives and temporary jobs obtain continuity in their lives while also attempting to break with previous relationships and contexts to embrace new situations and possibilities. It is suggested that we need to approach connection and disjunction, fixation and liberation as concurrent principles in the ongoing struggle for their own and their children's survival, in order to catch sight of the different kinds of networks and relationships that are at stake in people's lives.

**Keywords:** Uganda, women, mobility, collective identities, change, continuity

**Résumé :** De nombreuses femmes ougandaises sont en déplacement continu, dans le cadre de leurs efforts quotidiens pour assurer leur survie. À partir de travail de terrain mené dans le sud-est de l'Ouganda au cours des 15 dernières années, l'auteure montre comment des femmes qui se déplacent entre les domiciles de parents et des emplois temporaires s'organisent pour obtenir une continuité dans leur vie, tout en essayant de s'affranchir de relations et de contextes antérieurs pour accueillir des situations et des possibilités nouvelles. L'auteure suggère que nous devons approcher la connexion et la disjonction, la fixation et la libération comme des principes concurrents dans la lutte qu'elles mènent en continu pour leur propre survie et celle de leurs enfants, de manière à pouvoir nous donner un aperçu des différents types de réseaux et de relations qui sont en jeu dans la vie de ces gens.

**Mots-clés :** Ouganda, femme, mobilité, identités collectives, changement, continuité.

## Introduction

The postmodern turn in anthropology resulted in a growing willingness to separate place and culture, and a shift in focus to transnational cultural flows (Olwig and Hastrup 1997). Nevertheless, as Amit and Rapport (2002) have noted, anthropologists continue to struggle to deal with fragmentation, dislocation and destabilization. In what follows, I will describe the movements of a Ugandan woman, Anna, and her adult daughters, and discuss how they can help us challenge the association of place with continuity and of movement with rupture and change. Many Ugandan women are constantly moving around as part of their everyday effort to make life continue. Their movements are part of an ongoing process where the maintenance of connections goes hand in hand with continued attempts to distance themselves from these connections. Their lives show us that we need to approach fixation and liberation as concurrent principles in order to catch sight of the different kinds of imagined and actual collectivities that are at stake in people's lives.

## Place, Ethnicity and Kinship: From Categories to Life Trajectories

A mosaic of Bantu and Nilotic speaking groups inhabits the eastern part of Uganda. The area is known as an ancient migration corridor through which many people have passed. In 1995-96, I lived among the Jopadhola, one of the four ethnic groups, which at that time were part of Tororo district in the southeastern region of Uganda. In the years that followed, I did fieldwork regularly both in the same area and in other parts of Uganda and I have followed up on the lives of a number of members of the family that hosted me during the initial fieldwork.

All of the ethnic groups refer to themselves as distinct "tribes," and they each occupy a well demarcated physical area. The Jopadhola are surrounded by three Bantu and one other Nilotic group, all speaking distinctive languages. Historians, as well as the Jopadhola themselves,

consider that they originally migrated from the north, like other Nilotic speaking groups, following the Nile south. Their oral history of migration has been described by Ogot (1967a, 1967b) but is also readily narrated by anybody presently living in the area. As has often been suggested, much tribal—or ethnic—identity in Africa is largely a 20th century creation and colonial construction, and the ethnic groups of eastern Uganda are no exception (see for example, Southall 1970). Hansen (1977) describes how ethnicity has changed form and importance over the years as events unfolded in Uganda's politically turbulent post-independence history. Ethnic and regional identification in Uganda has been heavily influenced by the particular role of the Buganda kingdom in Central Uganda. The colonial power and the protestant mission made Buganda into the administrative and economic centre and with time, other Bantu kingdoms in the western part of the country also obtained special agreements with the colonial power (Hansen 1977:38). The northern and eastern parts of the country were inhabited by lineage-based groups with no centralized political system, who were forced to orient themselves towards the centre. Their relations with neighbouring groups eventually became less important to the emergence of their ethnic consciousness than their relations with the centre (Buganda) (Hansen 1977:37). An opposition developed between the privileged Westerners and the disadvantaged Easterners (and later also increasingly between the North and the South), and though the Jopadhola do recognize themselves as a distinctive "tribe" of Nilotic origin and speak a language closely related to the other groups in the North, their position as "Easterners" (as opposed to "Westerners") has long played a much larger role in everyday interactions and struggles for survival.

Milton Obote, who was the dominant political figure from independence in 1962 to the military coup of Idi Amin in 1971, proclaimed that his goal was to fight the problem of people putting the tribe above national consciousness. However, his attempts to struggle against the privileges of the Baganda and other Bantu kingdoms in the west, and his reliance on the support of the army, which had become identified with the northern Nilotic groups, signified a shift in power to the northern region in the course of his political reign (Hansen 1977:63). A conflict between North and South was taking shape and in many respects still exists. Idi Amin, who seized power in 1971 through a military coup, represented, on the one hand, the West Nile (the northwestern part of the country) and, on the other hand, Muslims all over the country (including Muslims in Baganda). He played on ethnic conflicts among the various—mostly Nilotic—groups in his

infamous and badly disciplined army, which brought terror to the country in the 1970s (Hansen 1977:93-111). Despite some initial popularity across the country, Amin found no more support among the Nilotic Jopadhola than he did among their Bantu neighbours in the east. In a sense, Southall (1988) argues, Amin's violent onslaught on Ugandan society simplified matters at the time. Many of the conflicting issues and factions that plagued Obote's first civilian regime were temporarily expelled or obliterated. Complex issues were reduced to the stark question of life or death (Southall 1988:60). The same may be said of Obote's second term (1980-85, known as Obote II) when the population had been impoverished and a civil war was developing that ended up killing even more people than had died under Amin.

Various regional, political and economic factors feed into Jopadhola ethnic identity. At times, their Nilotic identity, as opposed to Bantu identity, is brought up in discussions of marriage rules, customs, language issues, et cetera, and Jopadhola women are proud of the strength and endurance of Nilotic women as compared to Bantu women. At the same time, however, I did not get the impression that they were eager to boast about this outside of Padholaland. I commonly heard them say that when outside of Tororo district they would downplay their Padhola origin, if their knowledge of Luganda (the language of the Baganda and the most commonly spoken Bantu language in the country) allowed them to do so. They had little interest in being seen as a backward "Easterner," or as a "Nilotic relative" of the even more backward and war-torn North, the origin of the majority of the soldiers, who brought terror and insecurity to the country in 1970s and much of the 1980s. People in the east, including the Jopadhola, were, in the 1990s, overwhelmingly grateful to Yoweri Museveni for restoring peace and order in the country, in spite of his Western and Bantu origin.

In recent years, there has been a growing nationwide dissatisfaction with Museveni and his reluctance to step back after 24 years in power. Desire for change and hopes for other presidential candidates among the Jopadhola have at times had ethnic (Nilotic) undertones. In addition, the process of decentralization presently being carried out in Uganda has contributed to a renewed focus on ethnicity. New districts are formed along ethnic lines. An ethnic association of the Jopadhola appeared in the 1990s and the first ever king of the Jopadhola was installed in 1999.<sup>1</sup> I will argue, however, that this ethnic association does not yet play any role in the life of the women I describe here. When they migrate to town, there is a tendency for them to develop personal networks along what

may seem like ethnic lines, but which could also be explained in terms of language and of kinship.

Like other Nilotic language groups, the Jopadhola are said to have a patrilineal and patrilocal segmentary lineage system. This became known to anthropologists through Evans-Pritchard's (1940) description of the Nuer segmentary lineage system, and the Jopadhola themselves, women as well as men, are happy to outline it for anybody inquiring about it. Territorial affiliation is expressed in a lineage idiom, and lineage affiliation is expressed in terms of territorial attachment. As Amit and Rapport (2002) point out, it can be tempting to converge informants' use of place, culture and community with the anthropologist's quest for people's ways of conceiving and constructing collectivity. It is thus necessary to pause for a moment and consider the role of descent theory in anthropology and in Ugandan lives.

Descent theory is conventionally traced to, among other things, Evans-Pritchard's published work on the Nilotic Nuer and discussions about descent and lineages dominated the study of social structure in British social anthropology for many years (Kuper 1982:71). Descent theory has been challenged from many sides and for various reasons over the years, in particular for its search for its emphasis on ideal types rather than actual social relations (Kuper 1982:82). Kuper cites Evans-Pritchard himself noting that: "the underlying agnatic principle is ... in glaring contrast to social actualities" (1982:83). In his attempt to outline the segmentary lineage system, Evans-Pritchard notes that, "they [the Nuer] see it primarily as actual relations between groups of kinsmen within local communities rather than as a tree of descent" (Evans-Pritchard 1940:202-203). Still it was the enduring principle that interested him, not the changing actualities.

The central issues in the debate over lineage theory have remained remarkably constant over the years. On the one hand, there is the question of the relationship between kinship (or descent) and territory, and on the other hand, there is the relationship between the "family" and the "clan" (Kuper 1982:72-73). This translates into the question: can we talk about descent groups as actual corporate groups or simply as an idiom for expressing common residence? Based on his work in the New Guinea Highlands, Strathern suggests that the question should not be whether descent groups exist, but to which levels of group structure "descent dogmas" are applied (Strathern 1968:37). Even if descent dogmas are regarded merely as an expression of common residence, the choice of this particular expression rather than alternative paradigms is still noteworthy (Strathern 1968:38).

Uganda is one of those places where descent dogmas are often drawn upon in attempts to express, explain and negotiate collectivity and solidarity, and are also often drawn upon as expressions of common residence. During my first year among the Jopadhola, I stayed in a place closely associated with one particular descent group. However, my observations of various kinds of relatives' movements in and out of this place made me increasingly interested in following these people's life trajectories over time and space. In the years that followed, I did so through life story interviews, regular but relatively short stays in Uganda, as well as through the exchange of letters and later also emails. As I will show below, this changed my focus from a place in Padholaland inhabited by a particular patrilineal clan, to kinship relations as coordinates in different locations among which people move. It also made me increasingly aware of the importance of not only patrilineal, but also matrilineal relations for understanding mobility.

Amit and Olwig note in the introduction of this volume, that in spite of all disjunctures and improvisations that are necessarily vested in changes of place, there is often a striking unwillingness to abandon the key paradigms that frame movements (for example, ethnicity and kinship). This seems to be the case even when many people's experiences appear to contradict important aspects of the premises they continue to claim. Amit and Olwig suggest that this may, at times, be due to the lack of power to challenge these prevailing tenets and to the investment that the migrant has placed in a particular construction of movement. In addition, continued adherence to certain indexical concepts may sometimes enable people to be more comfortable with a measure of improvisation and change than an open challenge to treasured principles would permit. They conclude that the basis for change may be the reassurance of the continued solidity of key institutions and paradigms. In what follows, I wish to take this point further by suggesting that local identities, ethnicity and kinship continue to constitute important elements in Ugandan women's lives, not only as reassurance, and not despite, but as a result of mobility.

### **Mobility and Continuity in Women's Lives and in Kinship Relations**

Southern Uganda is overwhelming rural (85%) and densely populated. It is a region characterized by fairly good soils and reasonable rainfall twice a year. Even in pre-colonial times, rural population densities were high. In contrast to much of Central Africa, peasant-produced agricultural exports (cotton and coffee) encouraged Ugandans to remain in rural areas as producers (Whyte 1990;

Whyte and Whyte 2000). Whyte and Whyte (2000) suggest that the rural-urban contrast is not useful at all when trying to comprehend the larger field of social relations in which Ugandans move. An educated rural elite had existed in southeastern Uganda long before the 1970s and urban experiences and urban values are meaningfully expressed in rural areas. Even back in the 1960s when Whyte and Whyte started doing fieldwork in Uganda, it was not uncommon to move back and forth between town and village. However, married women then, as now, always expressed an attachment to their husband's country home, seeing their stay in town as temporary and having as their ultimate goal to establish themselves on their husband's land. Women without a husband are in a radically different situation. Their movements may be continuous and without a clear direction, as I will show in this analysis of Anna and her daughters.

During my initial fieldwork among the Jopadhola (1995-96), I lived in a homestead with the families of three brothers, which was surrounded by the homesteads of their "cousin-brothers" (i.e., paternal cousins). I shared a house with Anna, the sister of the brothers, and her two youngest daughters, then three and five years old. Anna was divorced and had returned to live on her father's land. The differences between the Nilotic marriage model and that of the inter-lacustrine Bantu groups in East Africa have often been discussed. Among Nilotic people, the woman is, in theory, transferred to her husband's group when she marries, bridewealth is relatively high and divorce practically

impossible. A woman acquires her primary social identity from her roles as a wife and a mother, rather than as a sister and a daughter (Håkansson 1994; Obbo 1980; Southall 1960). As Anna said, when explaining it to me,

For us Jopadhola, it is only something very serious, like murder in the family, that can make us divorce. Our women, they really endure marriages even if they are suffering. Bantu women, on the contrary, marry temporarily, and they just want to "eat" as much as possible of the man while they have him. We, the Jopadhola women, we want to build permanent homes in the [husband's] village. We know that we are going to stay for life.

In reality, divorce is also very common among the Jopadhola these days. More often than not, brideprice is not even paid and women move in and out of marriages without much interference from their relatives. Still, the ideal persists and is often used as a marker of ethnicity when comparisons are made between Nilotic and Bantu groups in the country.

There had been no murder in Anna's family. Still, she had decided back in the mid-1970s that she could not endure the suffering she encountered in her marriage and she left her husband. Prior to the divorce, she had given birth to three daughters and in the years that followed, had another four children with different fathers. The first week that I was staying with the family, Jane, her then 16-year-old daughter, turned up, asked for school fees and disappeared again. Later, Nelly, her first-born, arrived, stayed for a while, left her five-year-old daughter with Anna and disappeared again. At some stage, I realized that Anna's second-born, Catherine, now in her early 20s, had settled in our house with her four-month-old son. I first assumed she would disappear again to the— for me yet unknown—place that she and her sisters had come from and all returned to. But she did not. She remained in the village for as long as I did.

Six months after completing my fieldwork, I received a letter from Catherine in which she wrote:

When all the food and money got finished, what I did was to take my son to my grandmother in Jinja and go looking for a way to help myself and the others in the village ... I got a job with Indians, but the salary was very little so I only stayed four months. Then my son got some problems with the stomach, and I went to uncle's place to ask him for money in order to take him to the hospital. I stayed with uncle for some few weeks, but then I got a job with an African family. Now I am back in the village with my mother but I don't think I can manage to stay for long since there is nothing for me to do here. [1997]

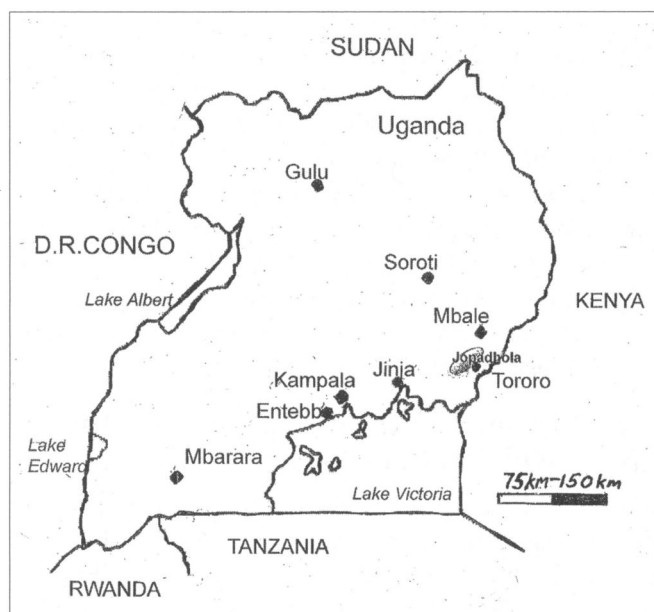


Figure 1: Map of Uganda. Reproduced by permission of the author.

Catherine's journey between relatives and workplaces began at the time of her parents' divorce in the mid 1970s. She had stayed for almost a year in her maternal uncle's village while I was there, but as I could read in her letter, the journey recommenced after my departure. I had come to see Cathering as part of the place I studied, but thanks to her letters and the opportunity I got to keep in touch with the family network in the years that followed, I came to realize that the period she had spent in her maternal uncle's village was but one stop in an on-going journey.

When I decided to explore further the life trajectories of some of these mobile women, it struck me that their accounts were largely structured around their continuous movements among relatives. Significant events and turning points in their lives all took as their starting point "which relatives" they had lived with at the time and they made very little reference to the turbulent past decades of Ugandan history. Whyte and Whyte (2000) had a similar experience when they interviewed Banyole (the neighbouring group of the Jopadhola) about life during the 1970s and 1980s. With few exceptions (all of which concerned educated men living in town), they did not try to explain what happened and how things developed in those years. They did not see their lives as framed by political history or the divide between rural and urban lives. Political history was their own personal history of danger and loss and, in the case of women, it was usually described in terms of movements from home to husband's home. If disruptions or tragedies happened on the way, they were recounted as turning points in their personal space, not as examples of urban danger or political history (Whyte and Whyte 2000:8-9).

The following description of the movements of Anna and her daughters is based on the women's personal stories of moving between relatives, as well as what I learned and observed from living with, and staying in touch with, their relatives over the years.

### *The Mother*

When Anna left her husband in the mid 1970s, she first went to stay with her mother who had divorced her husband when Anna was still a young girl. Her mother was now married to another man. Anna soon moved on and started staying with her mother's sister who had more land than she could manage to cultivate herself. Eventually Anna got a job as a schoolteacher in the nearby military barracks. When asked what it was like to work for Amin's soldiers, Anna replied:

I know that they were not always polite to other people, but the good thing was that they were polite to

people working with them, and there in the barracks things were so cheap. Outside, things were scarce, but there they were plenty and cheap. So I could buy things from my salary, sell them outside the barracks and bring the money to my mother and my brother in the village who looked after my children.

Amin's regime was overthrown by a combination of Tanzanian and Ugandan forces in 1979. Anna had to flee from the barracks with the two children she had given birth to there. Their father, a soldier from the barracks, was killed by Tanzanian soldiers, "but in any case I had no plans of marrying him and he already had at least one wife back home," she said. "I was still enjoying being a free woman and I had already tasted life in a marriage with two wives." Anna began staying with another brother in the town of Tororo who worked for Ugandan railways. During the Oboto II years, she used her brother's house in Tororo as a base while "moving up and down the country buying and selling millet and sorghum," (i.e., trading on the black market). When asked about the insecurity of those years she said:

When I was still in Tororo, thieves would attack me every now and then. They would come and steal my things. Afterwards, I heard rumours that my former husband was the one who brought those thieves to me, to make my life hard. But the good thing was that they never found me at home. I think they came three times in one year. That is when I decided to stop business and go to Jinja.

When peace and order was restored in the late 1980s, Anna lost her luck in business. When asked to explain why it became harder and whether conditions for doing business changed in those years, she returned to the story of her husband looting her things and making her lose a lot of money. Again and again, political and economic history was recounted as personal history.

Anna joined her mother in Jinja, a major town in the central part of the country. Her mother had been widowed and left with nothing and her husband's children from a previous marriage refused to care for their stepmother. She therefore had decided to try her luck in Jinja, where she made a living from cultivating a small piece of borrowed land when her daughter joined her. Brewing and selling millet beer eventually supplemented their income. The late 1980s and early 1990s are often described as a period of optimism, economic growth, political stability and openness (see for example, Parkhurst and Lush 2004) and this was indeed the case for many of Anna's relatives. But for Anna they were hard years. She had another two children with different fathers. They all lived

on the verge of starvation. Anna and her mother became increasingly dependent on the intake from their millet beer, and lived in what they later all described as total misery. "I even went mad due to hardship," she told me, and her brother in Kampala confirmed that in the end he picked up his sister, took her to Kampala where she took turns staying with him and one of her cousin-brothers (her mother's sister's son). When her condition started improving, her brother sent her back to their father's land in the village in eastern Uganda and she was still there when I arrived in 1995. "But I am only here temporarily," she often reminded me, "because a woman cannot die on her father's land. I have to move on." So she did. After I left she spent the next five to six years going back and forth between the urban and village houses of her three brothers in Kampala and Tororo respectively, as well as the homes of various matrilineal relatives around the country.

### *The Daughter*

Catherine (the second born) was about three years old when Anna left her husband in the mid-1970s. Catherine and her two sisters at first remained with their father and his second wife since children belong to the father's clan. They say that they were so young that they hardly realized their mother was gone and they had no contact with her while she worked in the barracks. As they were getting older they realized that their stepmother was not their real mother and that she treated them differently than her own children. Catherine ran away together with Nelly, her older sister, and joined her mother, Anna, in Tororo where she was trading on the black market, which prospered during the years of political instability and civil war. For some time, the two sisters went back and forth between their father in the village and their mother's place (actually their mother's brother's place) in Tororo. According to Catherine, their father was accused of being a rebel and sent to prison for some time. She told me about the day the soldiers came to arrest her father:

When we [Catherine and her two sisters] were at school, somebody told us that they had burnt our father. We were afraid that they would also burn us if we came close, but one of the teachers escorted us and we found that those who had burnt the house had already gone and taken our father with them ... Neighbours had seen them coming, very many, with bunkers, axes, digging sticks. They started beating our stepmother seriously, even our grandmother and aunt and the small children who were at home. They beat them very much. They poured petrol on our grass-thatched houses. They burnt the houses, caught the chickens and set them on

fire, caught the cows, set them on fire, the goats, everything. Cutting the mango fruits from the trees and leaving them all on the ground. Breaking all our plates. The village people gathered with the soldiers and took what they liked.

Catherine has no clear memory of the differences between the Amin and Obote years and she does not remember exactly when the incident took place or who was actually involved. She later told me that she had heard people in the family say that the arrest of her father and the destruction of his home had been organized by some of his cousin-brothers with whom he had a disagreement about land, and who had allied themselves with the soldiers. Catherine, like her mother, recounts the political story of Uganda as her personal story of loss and danger.

When the father got out of prison, he moved his family to the central part of the country. Once more, Catherine and Nelly ran away and joined their mother in Tororo. From then on they remained with their mother's family and lost contact with their father's family for many years. Anna had a cousin in Kampala with whom Catherine stayed for seven years:

I was very happy to go to Kampala. I even thought I was going by airplane and that my uncle was very rich. I thought that now I would have a very happy life. People told me there were many nice things in Kampala like traffic lights and machines that make food. I even thought that God would be in Kampala and I wanted very much to be eating well and sleeping well. I also thought that soldiers, they were in the village, but in Kampala we would be safe—when actually it was worse there. At least in the village you can run, but in Kampala you just see the bullets flying in the air at night. And you have nowhere to go. And sometimes the soldiers came to uncle's house and looted his things. But he was never in prison for more than one day ... And I was happy there. They treated me like their own child. Uncle was a businessman and he used to go to London now and then. There were so many nice things in his house.

What Catherine mostly remembers from those years was that she had enough to eat and enough clothes to wear—and that she was still full of hope for a happy life. She was doing housework for the family and hoping that her uncle (her mother's cousin) would one day tell her that he could now afford to send her back to school. Or, that one day she would meet a rich man in his house who would want to marry her. Instead, one day after 1986—she remembers that it was after the takeover of Museveni—Catherine was asked to move on and she went to stay with her maternal grandmother and mother in Jinja. Catherine became

pregnant before she turned 20, which was the beginning of her trouble. She gave birth, was abandoned by the father, left her son with the grandmother, found housework in Kampala, got pregnant again, gave birth at her maternal uncle's place in Kampala, disappeared from there, turned up at a different uncle's place, went to the village of her mother's father's clan to stay in the house of the anthropologist for some time, and then, as her letter indicated, went back to town to search for new possibilities for housework and trading.

### *The Interconnectedness of Kinship and Mobility*

Susan Whyte writes about life in Uganda that "people's social topographies are rich with coordinates in many different locations. Nor are these coordinates themselves necessarily stable" (In press). Daughters do not inherit land, but move to their husband's land—or search for other possibilities in town. Meanwhile, they retain close links to their natal family and often seek refuge there in times of need. Children may stay for shorter or longer periods with the father's or mother's family. Divorce and separation are common and the woman may go and stay with her parents or siblings elsewhere or remarry. Because of virilocality, sisters are dispersed. Men may have a home in the village as well as in town and move back and forth between these. A widow may leave her husband's family or decide to remain on his land. A divorced woman may return to her husband's land after his death. Young people go to school or work in town. In addition, Uganda has a fertility rate of 6.3 children per woman (Unicef 2010) and one man may have more than one wife. Hence, each person has many siblings and cousins to go to in times of need. Catherine and her sisters also had a social topography with many coordinates, and though they had found life to be difficult, they did not—as they themselves phrased it—end up as beggars in the streets:

After giving birth to my son I was saying to myself that I would just be walking in the streets of Kampala. If I see a European then I tell him all my problems, then maybe he can help me. Again, I thought, if I walk carelessly, then a car can knock me and the driver will have to give me some money, which can help me with the children. And again, I thought of wearing bad, bad clothes like someone who is just very poor and then start begging. All those thoughts were there ... But then I thought that if one of the uncles would find me there, I would be very ashamed. Also, the uncles are good and they have helped me a lot. But still I have found life difficult.

Catherine and her sisters were the third generation of women who were not properly married and they were indeed particularly vulnerable. But they were not the only ones in that situation and were not even the worst off. Most families have women who have failed to settle in marriages and Catherine and her sisters were at least fortunate to have several fairly prosperous mother's brothers. They had all been to school for somewhere between five and ten years. They had places to go to when food got too scarce, when a job finished, when a child needed to be taken care of so that the mother could take a new job, et cetera. They had people to inherit clothes from and who had access to land where food was grown. They had maternal uncles with occasional access to cash and thus to health services. They were not formally entitled to the resources of their father's or their mother's father's clan, but their relatives were still, to some extent, morally obliged to help them out. By moving around and taking turns staying with different relatives, they were entering into concrete everyday interactions with these relatives, reminding them of their existence and situation, and hence of their relatives' moral obligation to assist them. They could not settle with their fathers, brothers or maternal uncles permanently. They could not even stay for very long at one time or conflicts would arise and complaints would be made about their inability to find a way to settle down. They had to be on the move and on the search for a more permanent solution. But as long as they had not come up with such a solution, moving between relatives ensured some kind of continuity in their lives and in their living standards—and made it possible to keep alive their hope that one day it would be different.

Anna's brothers were constantly referring to the marginal position of Anna and her daughters, but they also made many references to the fact that "we are one. We are there for each other," as one of the most commonly heard clan songs goes. On the last night of my year-long fieldwork in the village, a celebration was held for Catherine's 12-month-old son. His upper teeth had appeared before the lower teeth, which is *juok* (extraordinary) and hence dangerous for the child as well as his relatives unless it is commemorated and sacrifices are made to the ancestors (see Mogensen 2002). The paternal and maternal grandmothers had to join hands in carrying out this ritual. The paternal grandmother, however, was nowhere to be found. The father had run off to Kenya without introducing Catherine to his family. But by playing around with kin relations, Catherine's aunt became the paternal grandmother of her son. Catherine's cousin was named after their common grandfather, and since you can jokingly call your grandfather "husband," this cousin could—for the

sake of the ritual—be said to be Catherine’s husband, hence this cousin’s mother would be the paternal grandmother of Catherine’s son. I became the maternal grandmother. I had been adopted into the clan as her mother’s sister, and was thus a classificatory mother of Catherine and hence grandmother of her son. After completing the meal, we all sang “we are one, one family. We are there for each other.” I left Uganda the next day. A couple of months later Catherine had moved on, first to her grandmother’s place in Jinja, later to a job with Indians, and then to her uncle’s place in Kampala.

The celebration of the little boy’s upper teeth is but one example of a common tendency for family gatherings, discussions, and celebrations to involve those members of the family who are not part of the patrilineal clan, but whose lives are brought to the centre of attention and responsibility and call for the need to sing the song about “being one, being there for each other.” “Dogmas of descent” are drawn upon in creative ways to express solidarity and to activate kinship relations. Thus, through their movements, women like Catherine and her sisters create continuities in their lives as well as contribute to a sense of cohesion within the family. One may say that in this context, kinship is that which makes mobility possible and mobility is that which makes kinship come alive.

### **Moving Away—Towards New Possibilities**

Anna divorced her husband back in the 1970s because, as she related,

He was abusing me and beating me. When he heard things about me, which he didn’t like he could just grab anything, a table, a chair, anything and start beating me. He was not a patient person. Also he refused to let me continue my work as a teacher, saying that I was running around with other men when I was supposed to be at work. So I decided to leave him.

Now, 40 years later, it continues to be common that men beat their wives. Men as well as women accept men’s need to discipline their wives. Women can even refer to beating as an expression of men’s love for them. In spite of this, Anna clearly shows us that there is a limit as to how much beating is acceptable. Her husband’s beating was too much. And he stopped her from working and having her own income. So she left him.

As Amit says, many movements are not undertaken with the intention of carrying along relationships formed in one context into a new situation, but with the intention of emphasizing separation, and reconfiguration (2002:35). Anna’s movement away from her husband is definitely one of these, and when I left the house in the village and

started following the paths of Anna and her daughters, I increasingly caught sight of their attempts to move away, not just out of need or because they had been thrown out, but in a conscious attempt to effect distance, cause a rupture and seek new possibilities in life. Their movements were not just attempts to maintain family connections but at times (and sometimes simultaneously) attempts to break with previous relationships and contexts and embrace new situations and possibilities.

“Those were good years,” Anna said when describing the early 1980s when she “moved up and down the country” buying and selling millet, sesame and cassava and never stayed more than a night or two in one place. During that period, the three oldest of her daughters were still with their father (her ex-husband) and the two who were born in the barracks were looked after by Anna’s mother. Eventually three of her children ended up with maternal uncles in Kampala:

I was a free woman. Nobody could tell me what to do. Not my husband. Not my brothers. I didn’t even have a steady lover. I didn’t want to depend on anybody. And I was doing well. I could provide for my children. Buy them clothes and school books. Those were the years of war. But for me they were good years.

While the country as a whole suffered from total economic breakdown, the black market prospered in Tororo, well situated near the Kenyan border. In addition Tororo District was not directly caught in the conflicts and fights of the 1980s. Anna managed to take advantage of this situation and to enjoy her position as a “free woman.”

Catherine and her sisters were painfully aware of their vulnerability due to their lack of fathers and husbands, but they had no intention of moving back to the village on a more permanent basis, nor of marrying a village man. As Catherine explained, “men in the village cannot be trusted. They say they love you. Then they beat you up and marry a second wife. And all you can do is to work in the field and see your skin go dry and your clothes get worn out.” Getting settled in marriage and thereby obtaining access to land was their mother’s and uncles’ hope for them, not their own. They saw the town as a place of hardship but also of opportunity. They hoped that maybe next month or next year they could start saving money to pay for a tailoring or secretarial course that would enable them to get a job where they could earn even more money. They wanted to move ahead, achieve different and better lives, and if possible, get far away.

In the 1970s, Christine Obbo (1980) studied single, unattached, migrant women in Uganda and the stereotypes attached to them. Ethnographies had, until then,



mostly contained information on women as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives, and men were portrayed as building up power bases by using women to weave kinship, friendship and marriage networks (Obbo 1980:1). In addition, public opinion in the Uganda of the early 1970s tended to maintain that the good woman should stay at home in the village and that any attempt at self-reliance and economic independence was a challenge to male supremacy. There was a tendency to regard all urban women as sexually loose (Obbo 1980:9). It is now far more common and accepted for women to have a job in town but women are still under pressure from male relatives to settle in marriages, or if unmarried, to settle with relatives in rural areas rather than becoming "loose women" in town. But as Obbo shows, even prior to the 1970s, whether married or single, Ugandan women have always had strategies for achieving economic autonomy and improving their social and economic conditions. Economic autonomy was the prevailing concern of women everywhere in town when Obbo carried out her study in the 1970s and many of them questioned male supremacy as well as the associated myths of the inevitability of marriage and the undesirability of illegitimate children (1980:5).

In Uganda, physical movement is considered a change in one's social position for men as well as for women, and is a crucial part of one's development toward adulthood. Some young men just move to a different hut on their father's land and some women move to their husband's place. But others move even further away to go to school or work and hence change their social position (Meinert 2005). In addition to being a crucial step toward adulthood, migration is and has for long been a way to escape obstacles and for women to create more options for themselves (Obbo 1980:5). And it seems that women, now even more than men, seek to move ahead by moving to town. As mentioned above, the rural-urban contrast is not useful in southern Uganda and urban experiences were meaningfully expressed in rural places even back in the 1960s (Whyte and Whyte 2000). Reliable population censuses were non-existent in the 1970s and 1980s, but there seems to be a general agreement among scholars that urban migration declined in those years, and possibly even changed direction for some years, due to the insecurity in town and the fact that the relative value of salaries declined as a result of the economic downturn (Whyte 1990:134). In the 1990s, urban migration began growing again, and according to Wallman (1996), increases in the female population in Kampala had been significantly higher than in the male population even during the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, when censuses were again carried out, there was an excess of girls and young women over

boys and young men. In the city as a whole, the difference persisted up to ages 20-24, and in the market areas it persisted into mature adult age groups (Wallman 1996:49-50). Wallman suggests several reasons for this. Girls and young women, sometimes as young as 8 or 9 (like Catherine), are sent to town to do housework in the homes of their kin or other families (Wallman 1996:70). Orphan girls are therefore more readily assimilated into town homes where they are more useful than boys. Young girls who drop out of village schools are more likely to go to town to trade than boys, who are more likely to remain or be sent back to their father's village. But some girls also go to town to attend school. School fees in town are higher but girls are often in a better position than boys to make a little money on the side (for example, trading, prostitution or in sugar daddy relationships) (Wallman 1996:70-71). In addition, women simply tend to do better in the informal urban economy. There is more work that women are expected to do, or are prepared to do, in the local informal economy governing life in Kampala suburbs (Wallman 1996:229, 235). In Kamwokya, the suburb studied by Wallman (and where Catherine and her sisters lived on and off for years), 25% of all households had no male adults. Formal marriage was rare though it remained the ideal for some, but others preferred single mother status because few men could or would take economic responsibility for children. Control over resources was greater for any women living alone than residing with a partner. Better off women living with a partner often had less personal autonomy than even poorer, single women (Wallman 1996:228-229), which is the situation also described by Obbo (1980). Neither Obbo, nor Wallman have specific numbers concerning the Jopadhola, but the migration patterns described by the women I followed seem to reflect the general tendencies described by these authors.

Catherine and her sisters are, thus, not the only women constantly attempting to "move away" to seek economic independence. They hope to find a job that would allow them to save up money which could be used to take a course which could give them an even better job, and ultimately, if in any way possible, a ticket out of the country—a whole new life. Catherine had hoped to marry the father of her second child and move to Kenya with him, but he disappeared before she told him she was pregnant. She added, after having described her desire to get far away from everything she knew and her sadness about the disappearance of her Kenyan lover,

Anyway, to leave the country, you need a passport. And in order to have a passport you need a birth certificate,

and I do not think my mother kept mine. She says, she thinks, the white ants ate it many years ago.

A ticket out of the country was out of reach for Catherine as it is for most women, and obstacles of various kinds often interrupt the search for opportunities and force the women to turn once more to relatives for assistance.

In 2001, I spent a couple of months in Uganda and during this stay, Catherine asked me to help her get tested for HIV. After testing positive, she told me to inform one of her maternal uncles of her HIV status, hoping this would ensure his support in the time she had left to live. A few weeks later, she was told to leave his home. The explosive spread of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s has added to the struggles and suffering of Ugandans. Uganda is, however, at the same time often described as an HIV success story and as one of the first countries in Africa where prevalence seems to have declined (Parkhurst and Lush 2004:1916). It was also one of the first countries in the developing world to face the challenges of antiretroviral treatment.

At the time of Catherine's HIV test in 2001, antiretroviral treatment at very high prices had started becoming available in Uganda. The prices had, however, begun to decline dramatically and become almost realistic for some people with regular incomes, like Catherine's uncle. But he could not afford to purchase medicine for everybody in the family network.<sup>2</sup> As her uncle said to me: "I could not help her, or even let you or my brothers help her, because imagine how many of her sisters and others like them that would be knocking on the door the next day with an AIDS diagnosis, asking me to help them, or to make you help them." Around 2004, antiretroviral treatment started becoming widely available for free. Presently, however, it is expected that there will be a flatlining of donor contributions. Consequently, those already on treatment may be able to continue accessing drugs, while others will not be able to enter treatment programs. Hence, the challenges faced by Catherine's family in 2001 are likely to once again become part of many people's lives.

Catherine's problems no longer made her relatives sing the song of "being one and being there for each other." She had become a threat to the family's collective identity and she had threatened continuity in her own life by demanding too much of her relatives. Catherine had often tried to "move away" from her kin relations in search of possibilities. But she had not anticipated the ruptures caused by her sickness. My involvement in the situation and the ethical dilemmas arising from it made me follow her and her sisters closely in the coming years and this

cast a new light on what I had previously learned about their lives. I started paying more attention to the many kinds of collectivities—other than those drawing on descent and kinship—that they tried out in their attempt to move on and to stay alive.

### **Moving Beyond Kinship: The Search for Other Kinds of Connections**

When I started visiting Catherine and her sisters in the dark, muddy alley behind one of Kampala's major market places, I realized that in between their stays with various relatives, they attempted to cope without these relatives through other kinds of collectivities. They built up their own personal networks in urban settings through which they found housing, jobs as maids, ideas for businesses, capital to start such business, lovers, friendship, et cetera. Often such networks took their starting point in kin relationships, for example, siblings and cousins from both the mother's and father's side, or in common ethnic affiliation, but they stretched beyond these to neighbors, business partners, friends, fellow churchgoers, et cetera, from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds. As discussed by Amit, such networks are, especially in complex urban settings, likely to extend across many different categories and situations and this form of social connection is highly sensitive to the vagaries and life cycles of interpersonal relationships. They require intensive, self-conscious and constant efforts to be maintained (Amit 2002:23). It is also my impression, from following the lives of these sisters, that their personal networks were constantly fluctuating and highly ephemeral—except for those relationships that overlapped with the more enduring kin groups. Still, for much of their lives these personal relationships played a much larger role in terms of concrete interactions than did their kinship relations.

Some of the most important but also highly ephemeral relationships in the lives of Anna and her daughters grew out of their involvement with the "born again," or "Balokole" movement, which has experienced phenomenal growth since the late 1980s. There is no precise data on the number of members in these congregations nor on the ethnic composition of the Balokole movement (Gusman 2009:69, 80).<sup>3</sup> This East African Christian revival movement requests of its members that they reject all kinds of "traditional beliefs" and any involvement in rituals having to do with spirits and ancestors (Cattell 1992). In practice this means rejecting involvement in most family events. On the last day in the village, when we were celebrating Catherine's son's upper teeth, we did so secretly. Anna was not informed that we were celebrating the juok of her grandchild, but when she nonetheless realized that

this was the case, she walked furiously into the midst of our gathering and pulled her two small daughters out of there. She lived on the land of her brothers but she did not participate in the family celebration. She had major conflicts with her sisters-in-law who did not feel respected by her and, in addition, years of experience had taught her that her relatives were not there for her the way she would have liked them to be. After having been brought to the village by her brothers, she increasingly turned towards the Balokole movement and established a personal, but highly ephemeral, network through the various churches in the movement, which she attended, lived in or even helped organize over the years. Her brothers eventually bought her a small piece of land, too far from their homestead for her to have daily fights with their wives, but close enough for them to keep an eye on her well-being. In 2001, Nelly, Anna's oldest daughter, died of what everybody talked about as AIDS. Her body was brought to her mother's place in the village to be buried and it was people from the church who helped her:

I could not do anything. My friend [from the church] hired a *boda boda* [bicycle taxi] even though she wasn't even related to me. Then another one came to sweep my house. I had nothing to wear and she took her very nice *gomas* [traditional women's wear] from the suitcase and gave it to me. She dressed me. She gave me her handkerchief. I didn't sleep for days. I was just like a mad person but they made sure that my daughter was buried properly.

The church came to play an immense role in Anna's life and supported her in crucial moments of hunger and suffering. But each time I returned to the country she seemed to be part of a new congregation or be attached to a new group of people in the church.

After testing HIV positive, Catherine joined TASO (The AIDS Support Organization) an internationally accredited non-governmental organization that since the late 1980s has provided support to HIV-infected Ugandans (Kaleeba 2004). It has been suggested that programs like TASO, which work for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, create a sense of belonging to a national or international polity in which citizens have health entitlements (Nguyen 2005). While this may be true for some very active members of such programs, it was not the case for Catherine. TASO became a place where, at times, she spent long days waiting in lines and, if lucky, ended up with treatment for some of her opportunistic infections. She appreciated the medicine she got by the end of the day, but she never felt like a member of a larger network or like a citizen with health entitlements. Now that anti-

retroviral treatment has become widely available, people who are HIV positive increasingly become members or "clients" of treatment programs. Like many other connections in the women's lives, relationships with health workers and other members of the same treatment program are of crucial importance at certain moments, but are also highly ephemeral.

Catherine died of AIDS in 2004. I visited her sister, Jane, a few months later. She worked in Kampala as a maid in the house of a pastor in one of the Balokole churches. Jane handed over some letters to me that Catherine had written but never managed to send. In one of them Catherine wrote:

I thank God for my uncles and their wives. They have helped me a lot and tried so hard to help me get the medicine. Only that because of money they are failing. But they make sure that I eat and they take very good care of me. I am so happy that I have them. I don't know what I would have done without them. [2004]

"I don't know why she writes that," Jane said. "It isn't true. Everybody refused to help. They just dumped her in front of my house whenever she had been to see them for assistance." There had also been a lot of confusion about the money I sent earlier that year in order to start Catherine on antiretroviral treatment. Somehow it never appeared or did not appear where Catherine and her sisters expected it to appear. Jane felt betrayed and was determined to cut off all contact with her maternal uncles.

The following year, things had changed yet again. Jane had met a man through the church and convinced him that he had to pay bridewealth for her, but that it should be paid to her maternal uncles since she never knew her father who had been a soldier in the military barracks where her mother taught in the 1970s. She also persuaded one of the more prosperous uncles to pay for her wedding. The uncle proudly wrote to me that finally one of his sister's daughters was getting properly married and that he had paid for her wedding. He included a CD of photos he had taken of the—so it seemed to me—rather extravagant wedding. Clearly, they were trying to reestablish a sense of "being there for each other" in spite of the disruption in their relationship caused by the death of Jane's two sisters, Nelly and Catherine. Soon after the wedding, with the help of the pastor in their church, Jane and her husband took out passports and started touring Africa by visiting churches of the same congregation in other countries. "To do what?" I asked her in an email. "Just to go travelling," she replied, and thereby Jane underlined for me again a repeated pattern in which her own life and that of her family members took shape

through the ongoing oscillation between, on the one hand, dependence on the support of relatives and, on the other, attempts to distance themselves from these relationships, manage on their own and achieve a different life.

### Concurrency of Fixation and Liberation

The lives of Anna and her daughters suggest that mobility does not a priori entail either fragmentation or collectivity. Rather, these are two sides of the same coin. Georg Simmel's dialectic approach, his stress upon both connections and tensions between individual and society, and his recognition that human relations are characterized by ambivalence, can, I suggest, help us move beyond the association of place with continuity and movement with change, and to conceptualize fragmentation and collectivity, fixation and liberation as concurrent principles (1950:402-408).

Before being tested for HIV, Catherine had asked me to accompany her to a diviner whom she wished to consult about her lack of luck in life. She needed to find out who in her family had bewitched her: prevented her from getting properly married and obtaining a good job, caused her to become sick all the time, et cetera. The responsibility was placed on her father's family, but she left the consultation without feeling convinced she had been given the right answer. When we were walking back together, she suddenly started laughing. "While we were there, the diviner even wanted to make me believe that somebody had done something to you. Like cursed you or bewitched you. Isn't that funny?" "Why is it so funny?" I asked. "Witchcraft does not work on white people, you know that," she answered. My repeated attempts to make her explain in further detail why that is so resulted in a slightly offended Catherine, who thought I kept asking because I did not agree with what seemed evident to her: even though I had been given a clan name, it was not a real clan name and I could not use it to curse or bewitch anybody, nor could I be affected by other people trying to do so to me. I was in Simmel's terms a "stranger" and of a very different kind than other family members: the kind who is too different to be a threat, but who often is met with the most surprising openness about things (such as the fear of being HIV positive) that would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person (1950:402-408). I was somebody with whom Catherine tried to establish a different kind of connection in her attempt to deal with the uncertainties of life, and as she would later learn, her impending death.

Simmel uses "the social form of the stranger" to discuss the concurrency of closeness and distance, and of fixation and liberation. By stranger, Simmel does not mean

the one who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. The stranger is the potential wanderer: although she (or he) has not moved on, she has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. The inhabitants of Sirius, he says, are not really strangers. They are beyond far and near. The stranger, on the contrary, is an element of the group itself and his (or her) position as a full-fledged member involves both being outside the group and confronting it. And, as Simmel continues, if wandering is the liberation from every given point in space, and thus the conceptual opposite to fixation at such a point, the sociological form of the "stranger" presents the unity, as it were, of these two characteristics (1950:402)—of fixation and liberation. Simmel's notion of the stranger as a social form casts light on the constellation of closeness and distance which characterizes the role of the anthropologist in the field and thus my relationship with Catherine. We may, however, take his point about the concurrency of fixation and liberation even further by looking at other kinds of ambivalence and strangeness.

Wives in a patrilineage have often been discussed as an element of the group confronting the group. Fortes (1969:235-236) and Lindholm (1982:60) describe how incoming wives confront the men of the group in a continuous struggle for power in order to gain a position of dominance in their new homes, while maintaining their ties with their natal lineage. Anna and her daughters may be said to confront their natal lineages due to their lack of status as wives. More generally speaking, Catherine showed me—through her fear of having been bewitched by someone in her family—that it is often the people with whom you are closest, that you fear the most. It is those with whom you are connected, on whom you depend, that can hurt you the most. And at times, you need to separate yourself (or protect yourself) from their impact on you. The ambivalence inherent in kinship relations is expressed through the idiom of witchcraft in most African contexts. As Fortes further noted in "Kinship and the Social Order," it is as if marriage and warfare are thought of as a single constellation. Quarrelling is inevitable among kin and especially among members of the same family, as the many instances of witchcraft suspicions show (1969:234-235).

As discussed earlier, we should, however, not reduce women's lives to their kinship status or the absence of their status as wives. They try to create lives for themselves by distancing themselves from their status as sisters, daughters and wives. But in the dark alleys behind Kampala's markets, and in the ever changing congregations of the Balokole movement, they are also potential

wanderers who have not yet moved on. Their relationships in these contexts are intense and, at times, are a matter of life and death, but they are usually short-lived.

Anna lived on her brothers' land while trying to separate herself from them through her involvement in the Balokole movement. Her daughters were dependent on their relatives in their father's and mother's clans and they were given assistance by these as long as they kept a proper distance. If they got too close to their relatives, for example by attempting to settle permanently among them, or by demanding too much from them, they risked damaging their relationship with them. They had to effect a partial separation from these relatives in order to be able to maintain their connection with them. And they had to make use of their connection to them in their ongoing attempts to distance themselves, move away, and create whole new lives for themselves. Life was an ongoing attempt to maintain connections while also distancing oneself from these—to have a fixed point but also to try to move on.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have described the movements that Anna and her daughters made use of in their struggle for survival. They attempted to stay connected and simultaneously separate themselves from relatives and others in order to establish other kinds of connectedness. They were on the move in order to obtain and maintain unity with their relatives as well as with other members of their networks, while at the same time they used these movements to obtain distance, individuality, change and a different life. Kinship is an important—but not the only—kind of connectedness at stake in these women's lives. When it comes to concrete social interactions and actual collectivity, it is not just the patrilineal, but also the extended bilateral family network which is drawn upon, as well as more personal networks arising from individuals' efforts to move on in life. Still, paradigms of collectivity, such as kinship, continue to constitute an important and real element in Ugandan women's lives, not despite, but as a result of mobility.

I suggest that once we approach place and mobility, continuation and change, not as contradictions but as concurrent principles, we can begin catching sight of the complex interweaving of the many different kinds of connectedness that are at stake in people's lives.

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## Notes

- 1 See [flagspot.net/flags/ug-pad.html](http://flagspot.net/flags/ug-pad.html) for further information on the ethnic association of the Jopadhola.
- 2 See Mogensen 2009 for a discussion of the dilemmas faced by Ugandan families due to antiretroviral treatment.
- 3 According to widespread opinion in the Ugandan media, Pentecostal Charismatic Churches attract about 15 % of the Christian part of the population, the Roman Catholic Church about 45%, and the Anglican Church about 30%. However, the Christian circle composed by born-again Christians is wider than these data indicate because one can find born again Christians (Balokole) in the Church of Uganda too (Gusman 2009:80-81).

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