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The Varying vulnerability of African Orphans

Oleke, Christopher, Astrid Blystand, Karen Marie Moland, Ole Bjorn Rekdal, and Kristian Heggenhougen. (2006) The Varying Vulnerability of African Orphans: The Case of the Langi, Northern Uganda. *Childhood*, 13(2): 267-284.

Christopher Oleke, Astrid Blystand, and Karen Marie Moland are professors at the University of Bergen. Ole Bjorn Rekdal is a professor at the Bergen University College. Kristian Heggenhougen is a professor at the Boston University School of Public Health.

In June 2002, Christopher Oleke and associates executed a study in Lira District, Northern Uganda. They were looking at the treatment of orphans by their extended families with whom they were living. This study lasted nine months, with a follow-up study which lasted three months. For this study an orphan has been defined as a child under the age of 18 who has lost one or both parents. In the Langi culture, it is an obligation and responsibility of the kin to care for these orphaned children. This study examines the quality of life that these orphan children received while living with their relatives.

The researchers found that there are three types of family units with whom the orphans were living: the paternal kin or father and his family, the maternal kin or the mother and her family, or the grandparents. The living circumstances within all three types of kinship groups were different with regard to how they cared for the orphans. While living with the paternal kin, an orphan is more likely to grow-up with heavier work loads and poor personal care (neglect). It was also noted in this study that step-mothers often treated the orphans with inferior care in contrast to her offspring. On the other hand, those orphans whom were living with the maternal kin were reported to have more

care and are more likely considered an important part of the family. A major problem found in the maternal kin home for female orphans was sexual abuse. Sexual abuse often occurs when a female orphan lives with her mother, because her mother has remarried into a different clan. It is rarely talked about because of the conflicts that it brings between the new husband and wife. In these types of situations, it is safer for female orphans to live with her paternal family rather than her maternal family. Those orphans living with their grandparents seem to have had mainly positive experiences. More care and support was given to orphans living with their grandparents.

The age of the orphan was also a factor considered during the study. Older orphans fared better than the younger ones because they are more capable of obtaining food on their own. They experienced starvation less often than the younger orphans. Female orphans between ages 5 and 12 were more likely to be used as domestic servants and therefore they missed out on education opportunities that the male orphans received.

In cases where the orphans' parents had died of AIDS, they were neglected. Money was not to be wasted on these children for medication or treatment because they were going to die of AIDS anyway.

An orphan which lives with either their maternal or paternal kin has its downfalls. The economic situations are far from satisfactory for any orphan, male or female. The conclusions made by this study are simplified due to the complexity of the situations and the constant changing vulnerabilities of the orphans in Uganda.

(This summary was taken from a paper written by Amanda Keller a student at USU)