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"This is Our Home"

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Published in:
Social Analysis

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
10.3167/sa.2023.670203

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Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication from Aalborg University

Citation for published version (APA):
Nyambedha, E. O., & Aagaard-Hansen, J. (2023). "This is Our Home": Notions of Home and Childhood Vulnerability in Western Kenya. *Social Analysis*, *67*(2), 41-60. https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2023.670203

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"This Is Our Home"

Notions of Home and Childhood Vulnerability in Western Kenya

Erick Otieno Nyambedha and Jens Aagaard-Hansen

Abstract: Luo orphaned children derive their conceptualization of home from historical ideologies of patrilineal kinship and the local discourses of belonging situated within properly constituted marriage. Contrary to older literature that presents home as a domestic spatial arrangement, orphans understand home as a relational pathway that safeguards growth. We show that orphans use their notion of home to express feelings of vulnerability and apply their agency against adult-initiated fosterage practices. The article contributes to an enhanced understanding of Luo sociality and promotes a dynamic anthropology of relationships and child anthropology by unpacking the facets of childhood vulnerability. Our analysis points to analytic themes of contradictions and paradox in Luo kinship values in relation to child support and ambivalence in how children's agency is exercised in fosterage arrangements.

Keywords: childhood vulnerability, fosterage practices, morality and kinship values, notions of home, orphans, Western Kenya

Children learn about and internalize meanings of key cultural concepts such as home in their daily interactions and conversations with adults as well as in the playing fields away from adult-dominated social spaces. When asked about their home, children respectively refer to the places and genealogical relations where their parents originated from. For children, 'home' is primarily defined according patrilineal kinship relations and spatial arrangements, as illustrated in the following vignette:

> Achieng': Where is your home, Odhiambo?
> Odhiambo: In Kambiyo [a neighboring locality from where the parents living in the local market center originated].

Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology, Volume 67, Issue 2, 41–60
© The Author(s) • doi:10.3167/sa.2023.670203 • ISSN 0155-977X (Print) • ISSN 1558-5727 (Online)

Achieng': And you Anyango, where is your home?
Anyango: In Kulundeng' [the natal home of her unmarried mother]
Oloo: No, you are lying, Kulundeng' is your mother's home [trying to correct Anyango that her mother's natal home cannot also be Anyango's home].

This conversation shows that children, like adults, perceive the idea of one's home as constituted by Luo patrilineal relationships and marriage practices acquired at birth. The conversation between the children displays the differences between mere residential arrangements in a homestead as compared to their understandings of a home situated within the Luo kinship notions of belonging and identity.

In this article, we will explore how children's concepts of home and belonging as well as their movements in the contexts of the HIV and AIDS epidemic may enhance our understanding of childhood vulnerability. Childhood vulnerability is multi-dimensional. It has occurred at all times and due to many causes, but this epidemic has been unique in recent times by its magnitude and the imbalanced combination of orphaned children and loss of caretakers.

In an article published in 1949, Edward Evans-Pritchard describes the Dholuo word *dala*[1] (homestead) as the residence of either an elementary or joint family (Evans-Pritchard 1949). His description denotes the spatial conceptualization whose composition goes beyond the understanding of home—patrilineal relations situated within the institution of family in Luo social life. Our analysis of Luo home departs from Evans-Pritchard's spatial conceptualization of a Luo homestead and embarks on a relational description of a Luo home that is similar to other definitions of a home existing in African literature, indicating that the notion is closely linked to ideas about family life, residence, identity formation, and a sense of belonging and well-being (Cheney 2010a, 2016; Cooper 2011; Geissler and Prince 2013; Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Southall 2004 [1956]; Whyte 2005). Similar ideas about home are explained in research conducted among the linguistically related Acholi people of Northern Uganda (Meinert and Whyte 2013; Whyte et al. 2013). This Ugandan study links the notions of home and the Acholi marriage practices of transfer of bride wealth (*Luk*) to kinship ideas of belonging and identity based on ethnographic data on reburials of refugees in their proper homes and integration of internally displaced people after the camps' closure in Northern Uganda. Their findings resonate well with the ideas of Paul Geissler and Ruth Prince (2013), who argue that from a traditionalist perspective, home is by no means a mere material structure but is part of the core of Luo culture, kinship, and social order that pervade everyday Luo life.

The notion of home is closely connected to Luo conceptions about the origin and persistence of life that is given through Luo kinship rules of marriage and patrilineality and manifested in the social safeguards (see for example,

Bourdillon 1999) that guarantee growth and development of members of the home. We will trace these ideas in children's conversations and show how they influence children's movements in Luo life. Besides being premised on culturally grounded kinship studies, the article contributes to contemporary kinship studies that focus on everyday life experiences, understandings, and representations of the notion of home in Luo children's life in modern times. We emphasize the contradictions between the everyday use of the word *dala* (homestead) and the vulnerable children's conceptualizations of home and its manifestations in adult-dominated child fosterage practices (Peletz 1995). We show how orphaned children have internalized the Luo cultural notion of home and used it to organize their understandings of the world around them within the kinship structures and extended relations and deploy their agency (James 2007; Prout 2000; Prout and James 1990).

Existing literature has linked the African notion of home to child fosterage practices, where it is claimed that child fosterage practices within homesteads are portrayed as means of adult exchange relations within networks with no regard for children's own perspectives of home as differentiated to a Luo homestead (Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe 1989; Shipton 2007). This is further discussed in a Ugandan study that stated how children have an inherent feeling of non-belonging and become hypersensitive about their status in the foster households (Roby et al. 2014). Parker Shipton (2007) further explains that children's movements between homes for care can be considered fosterage, but it can also be seen as a kind of apprenticeship for adulthood. In other circumstances within Luo social life, child fosterage activities can be interpreted as forms of credit that can either make or break social ties within kinship networks. We have used the vulnerable children's ideas of home to analyze how orphaned children deploy their agency in contexts of voluntary or involuntary fosterage in homesteads inhabited by members of their kinship network to reclaim their sense of belonging, identity, and perceived well-being. Our analysis is anchored on practices of child fosterage and movements within and between kinship networks as situated within the frameworks of the values and moralities attached to growth in Luo kinship system, revelations about the meanings of life, what constitutes life, and processes that maintain life as constituted in the Luo notion of home and specifically family life (Cooper 2011; Geissler and Prince 2013; Opande et al. 2022). We have tied our analysis to emerging understandings of childhood vulnerability and well-being from a historical perspective of Luo social life (see also Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 1989, 1992; Kilbride and Kilbride 1993; Mbuya 1965 [1938]; Nyambedha 2004; Ocholla-Ayayo 1976). From the standpoint of kinship obligations, we argue that growth through exchange of orphans within the extended family is a representation of norms of collective survival that is reminiscent of the historical egalitarian mode of livelihood found in many African cultures, including that of the

Luo. However, the experiences of fosterage that the Luo orphans encounter in their everyday lives have interacted with modernizing social forces in diverse ways. In these interactions, local material circumstances have given rise to adults' understandings of childhood vulnerability and a wide range of fosterage practices for orphans taking into consideration cultural sensibilities and dialectics of Luo social life. The significant attention accorded to material circumstances in fosterage practices particularly affecting Luo orphaned children introduces new ways of analyzing and understanding childhood vulnerability when looked at in relation to existing socio-economic changes.

Childhood Vulnerability

Several attempts have been made to analyze and define vulnerability in general and childhood vulnerability in the context of HIV and AIDS in particular (Cheney 2010a, 2010b; Delor and Hubert 2000). According to these authors, vulnerability is associated with concepts such as dependency, fragility, victimization, insecurity, and risk, which change meaning depending on particular social contexts. Furthermore, it has been argued that the existing definitions of childhood vulnerability, which are based on profound poverty, violate the rights of children because of their inclination towards addressing the material aspects of vulnerability (Cheney 2010a; Kendall 2010), and that they overlook the fact that children have the capacity to deploy their agency in circumstances surrounding their lives (Prout 2000). Earlier attempts in literature have linked childhood vulnerability due to HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa to lack of adequate resources, lack of psychosocial support within the orphaned households, and weakened functionality of the extended family without aligning the concept to the orphans' own notion of well-being derived from their understanding of home (Barnett and Blaikie 1992; Nyambedha and Aagard-Hansen 2003, 2008).

Historically, this definition of childhood vulnerability has been used to justify fosterage practices in many African family settings (Abebe and Aase 2007; Ankrah 1993; Barnett and Blaikie 1992; Foster et al. 1997; Notermans 1998; Nyambedha 2006, 2012; Young and Ansell 2003). However, some authors have argued that the definition of childhood vulnerability has ignored children's experiences of everyday life in foster homesteads, which are linked to notions of lineality and gender (Cheney 2010a; Kendall 2010; Ocholla-Ayayo 1976). Their arguments mirror Shipton's (2007) concept of intergenerational indebtedness, which influences spheres of exchange among the Luo and leads to exchange relations with a sense of obligations driven by not only economic but also social and moral concerns. Thus, child fosterage practices place significant emphasis on lack of material resources in orphan households as an indication

of vulnerability and ignore emotional and psychological well-being as well as community safeguards that children derive from staying and identifying with home relations. Children feel more vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse due to a perceived lack of the community safeguards that are associated with living in home environments and that are absent in foster homesteads, as we demonstrate in this article. This relationship between adults' understandings of vulnerability and emerging child fosterage practices and children's understandings of the notion of home and belonging as well as the associated well-being helps us to explain the children's movements within homesteads different from their homes.

The Notions of Luo Home, Relations, and Fosterage Practices

The Luo notion of home is intimately linked to the descent rules of patrilineality, virilocality, as well as concepts of belonging, identity, rights, and obligations (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 1992; Geissler and Prince 2013). Furthermore, notions of belonging and identity are gendered because of Luo marriage practices and the transfer of bridewealth, where married women and their children 'belong to' and identify themselves with their marital homes on transfer of bridewealth. Whyte and colleagues (2013) explain similar kinship rules among the linguistically related Acholi people of Northern Uganda (see also Otto et al. 2023). According to Acholi cultural rules of belonging, children whose mothers were not properly married and for whom no bridewealth was transferred, belong to their mothers' patrilineage. Seen in a patrilineal perspective, they are 'non-belongers.' David Cohen and Elisha Atieno-Odhiambo (1989) further describe the Luo home as a social institution through which corporate actions of agnatic groups associated with security, food, and well-being are practiced.

Luo people use the concept of home (*dala*), which straddles beyond the spatial notion of a homestead when combined with the reference to people (*jo*) to produce such relational kinship terms as *jodala*, to signify a sense of patrilineal affiliation and therefore a sense of belonging, identity, and rights (Geissler and Prince 2013; Nyambedha 2006; Otto et al. 2023; Southall 2004 [1956]). *Jodala* are sometimes referred to as *anyuola*—a network of patrilineal relatives who share a common sense of identity, belonging, and entitlement. Many practice polygyny and where more than one woman is married to one man, they are referred to as *nyieke*, which signals co-wife rivalry in Luo family relations. These *nyieke* form opposite sub-lineages within the patrilineages known as *libamba* (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976). *Libamba* are characterized by competition and rivalry within *anyuola*. As a cultural practice embedded in this rivalry relationship, people prefer not to foster children in households belonging to

people of *libamba* despite the fact that they share home relations. However, co-wives can also build alliances and enjoy friendly relationships marked by sharing of resources and child nurturing within a *dala* (Mbuya 1965 [1938]; Nyambedha 2006; Whisson 1964). Shipton's (2007) study has further shown how child fosterage between Luo homes plays an important role in economic life and contributes to mechanisms of enforcing relationships within a kinship network. Shipton's study explains that this is a manifestation of a sense of indebtedness and obligation learned early in life through the Luo cultural system. However, these historical explanations by earlier researchers of Luo child fosterage practices do not provide a social analysis of the dialectical interactions between the modernizing forces and local conditions that give rise to circumstances within which contemporary Luo fosterage practices for orphans are practiced and experienced.

Theoretical Orientations

Child fosterage practices among the Luo reflect traditions of shared upbringing of children within the wider notion of reciprocity in sub-Saharan Africa (Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe 1989; Nyambedha 2006). Janet Carsten's (2000) concept of relatedness explains how such shared upbringing of children is a reflection of adult exchange relations that people negotiate in everyday life practices within and beyond kinship networks. Analytically, these adult exchange relations ignore orphans' feelings of well-being and vulnerability based on children's internalization of the notion of home as shown in movements by orphans from fostered homesteads back to their homes. In another publication, entitled *After Kinship* (2004), Carsten has further developed her earlier discussion on relatedness by arguing that kinship is made in the homes through intimate sharing of space, food, and nurturance that go on in domestic spheres (see also Carsten 2011). Her argument in this later publication shows how current kinship is not only based on shared biological origin made out of marriage and transfer of bridewealth but also on a blend of shared spaces, food, and nurturance that is constructed and nurtured within homes and go beyond the traditional conceptualization of kinship relations. We argue that this sharing has created relatedness within the networks of *anyuola* in Luo kinship and influenced the observed orphan fosterage practices. However, the orphans in our study have counteracted these fosterage practices by applying their agency to respond to adult-initiated practices of relatedness that do not consider the fact that children exist as active agents in circumstances involving their lives.

In the beginning of the 1990s, childhood theorists such as Allan Prout and Allison James unveiled the paradigmatic shifts in the way children need to be

understood in a globally changing world. Their concept of children’s agency is used in this article to analyze orphans’ actions in response to the adults’ exchange relations as they are manifested in fosterage practices and children’s own narratives of their lived experiences within the adult-dominated spaces (Prout 2000; Prout and James 1990). Our analysis goes beyond the notion of home as a spatial arrangement envisaged in Evans-Pritchard’s 1949 publication, which emphasizes the western notion of home that is closely linked to the ideas of family life and co-residence. We examine home as a relational concept within Luo kinship structure and how it influences children’s ideas about social life and provides pathways for growth and continuity as well as how such ideas trigger children’s movements (Nyambedha 2006; Nyambedha et al. 2003).

Study Setting and Methodology

Data for this article are derived from a longitudinal ethnographic study of the livelihoods of Luo orphans and vulnerable children conducted between 1998 to 2010 in a region with high HIV and AIDS prevalence and the associated high rates of orphanhood in Siaya County, Western Kenya. The Luo ethnic community is a patrilineal kinship group who mainly live along the shores of Lake Victoria. They are agro-pastoralists who practice subsistence farming, fishing in Lake Victoria, and cattle keeping. High HIV and AIDS prevalence in the community is mainly attributed to transactional sexual activities in the fish landing beaches and the long-distance truck drivers’ sexual activities on the Northern corridor that leads to land-locked countries of eastern Africa, such as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan (Nyambedha 2007; Ombere et al. 2015). Data were collected on orphans’ experiences of moving from their parental homes to other places within or beyond their kinship networks. We also gathered narratives on livelihood experiences of orphans in foster households. The first author was involved in daily collection of data, participant observation, data interpretation, and follow-up, and developing the manuscript. The second author supervised the fieldwork, supported the interpretation of data, and reviewed draft manuscripts.

The study involved tracing movements of orphans who had either migrated within or outside their home village. Twenty-one orphans of both sexes were purposively selected based on their age, ability to express themselves, and the nature of orphanhood, such as double, paternal, and maternal orphans, as well as caretaker arrangements based on the principle of maximum variation. Ethnographic methods of data collection were used through orphans’ narratives regarding their living conditions, experiences in the foster homesteads, and reasons for their movements alongside interviews with key family members

and care-takers. The orphans who had migrated were traced to the various destinations and narratives regarding their experiences of migrating to stay with various relatives were recorded. Oral informed consent was provided and confidentiality was adhered to (Nyambedha 2008). The no harm principle was achieved by being aware of intrusive questions and training the research team in counselling. The main findings were disseminated to relevant community opinion leaders and local authorities. All names used in the article are fictitious.

Narratives of Movements and Dynamics of Fosterage Arrangements

The narratives of movements within and beyond the kinship networks were analyzed from 21 orphaned children, as shown in the sub-sections below. The narratives of movements provide insights into the vulnerable children's lived experiences of the migration process, the extent to which their physical and emotional needs were met, and how they negotiated and developed relationships in order to navigate within the context of movements and fosterage arrangements.

Movements within the Dala

The first type of movement documented involved orphans moving between different houses within the same homestead where their widowed mothers lived. According to the narrative by Aduol, a twelve-year-old female paternal orphan, she retained the feeling of being at home and did not have any sense of insecurity due to isolation from the rest of the *jodala* because she was fostered within her stepmother's household within their home. This is a typical case in Luo homesteads where the co-wives sometimes build alliances and enjoy close ties that go beyond cultural understanding of *nyiego* relationships (see for example, Carsten 2000, 2004, 2011). "Why is one of your children staying in the other house?" I asked one of the widows when I visited their homestead during fieldwork. "She just decided to stay in my co-wife's house [*od nyieka*] and she does everything there, including eating," Aduol's mother, who is a third wife of a deceased teacher, explained. "But she comes here to be with me any time she wants," she added. Her daughter went to stay with the second co-wife, who had one child, a daughter who lived in Nairobi with her husband. The foster co-wife's married daughter regularly sent money and foodstuffs to maintain her mother in the village. Part of the daughter's responsibility to her mother in the village was to pay school fees and bring clothes for Aduol, who was living with her mother and helping with household errands. Aduol narrated:

> I got used to her [the stepmother] when I was still very young. She loved me and could give me food whenever I went to her house. Then I decided to stay with her. I help her to do many things in the house because she does not have anybody else to stay with. I do everything there and only go to our [the biological mother's] house during daytime after I have finished work. She [the foster mother] pays my fees and buys me clothes.

This narrative is an example of child fosterage practices that are anchored on the concepts of reciprocity and anticipated benefits as well as shared upbringing of children within Luo homes. It shows how orphans' emotional well-being is enhanced when fosterage practices do not alienate them from what children themselves consider as home relations.

Movement within the Village

The second type of movement involved orphans leaving their homes to stay in another homestead within the village with other members of *anyuola*. Members of the *anyuola* have various networks of exchange relations within the village, which mediate orphans' movements through practices of relatedness. Some adults ask for orphans from members of their kin group with whom they have had previous exchange relationships. As part of village gossip, many people within *anyuola* speculate on the possible reasons why some orphans have changed residence. "Lineage people always have rumors," Gaudencia, a widow in her fifties, lamented. Two of her daughters, Norah and Adongo, eleven and thirteen years old respectively, were living with a distant cousin of her mother in another home in the same village, but married in the opposite lineage, a member of *libamba*. People in the village secretly gossiped that she had allowed her orphaned children to stay with members of the *libamba*, and that this would reflect badly on the reputation of the *jodala*. This is due to the fact that people of the *libamba* would laugh at them for their poverty and inability to take care of their own orphans. Gaudencia herself had five children in her household. Three of them were her own, and one was a grandchild (called Onyango) from a daughter whose marriage had not worked out well. She also took care of another orphan belonging to her widowed sister. When asked why the father of her grandchild (Onyango) had not come to ask for the child, she explained: "He did not transfer bridewealth"—her grandchild did not therefore belong to the kin or the home of the biological father because the transfer of the bridewealth would have signaled a marriage and guaranteed the orphan a home and patrilineal affiliation to the lineage of the biological father.

Onyango did not meet the criterion of belonging to a particular home, at least not as long as the mother remained unmarried or the father's family did not bring cattle (bridewealth) to the mother's natal home. Gaudencia was annoyed at what other people in the village discussed about her orphaned

children living outside their home. However, she admitted that she was not leading a good life as compared to some people in the village, including those where two of her orphaned children lived. She explained: "My income has been small since my husband died." Her orphaned children usually came from the foster homestead to see her and sometimes spent the night at her place, and they spent much more time with her during the school holidays. One of her daughters, Norah, eleven years old, described her stay with her godmother:[2]

> I started staying here during the April holidays. She wanted me to come and stay with her because she is my godmother. I had never stayed anywhere else other than home and when my godmother came to talk to my mother, I first refused. This was because I did not know what it was going to be like. When her [the godmother's] daughter came for me, my mother insisted that I go. My godmother had gone to Nairobi by then for a short visit. Therefore, her daughter, who is also my friend at school, was lonely. When I compare staying with my godmother to staying at home, I still prefer staying at home with my mother. My mother loves me a lot and we discuss a lot of things when we are together. This is despite the fact that, in the godmother's house, there is more food than our home, we are few in the household as compared to our home, and my godmother's daughter-in-law makes me clothes for free. Here we do not go hungry, but still I like our home.

Gaudencia mentioned that she had allowed Norah to go because her godmother had persistently asked for her to do so. She explained that the good relationship between them could have been threatened if she continued to refuse to let her daughter stay in her distant cousin's home. She was keen to maintain the good relationship because her cousin had helped her a lot in the past since she was widowed.

The example of Norah shows how practices of relatedness beyond material exchange and based on ideas of fictive kinship strengthens relationships between adult relatives thus creating opportunities for child fosterage without regard for orphans' needs. This underscores the importance of how the orphans' preferences and desires of being at home overrides the benefits associated with resources in fosterage homesteads. For instance, in the case of Gaudencia, she was widowed and did not have any source of income on which to support five children, one of whom was a child belonging to her widowed sister and a grandchild who did not have parental support and a home because Gaudencia's daughter was not properly married according to Luo culture. She thus had to depend on support received from relations within her extended kinship network.

Movement within Extended Relation Networks

A third type of movement involved orphans moving to homesteads in other localities. Orphans in this category mentioned that they were not comfortable

staying with their paternal aunts and missed their siblings and surviving parents because they were not allowed to visit *jodala* regularly. In fact, some orphans sneaked away from foster-families to stay with their ailing mothers, paternal uncles, their late mother's surviving co-wives at home, or their own siblings in sibling-headed households. For example, Omullo, a thirteen-year-old male double orphan, had stayed for two years with a paternal aunt who supported him fully to attend a local primary school. However, he moved back to stay with his ailing stepmother where he combined schooling and engaging in casual work in the village to support his stepmother. He said: "This is our home, it is better to be here." While orphans were not able to give a definition of home during the narratives, it seemed that most of them wanted to live near their *jodala*.

Emotional attachment to home by orphans is further illustrated by the case of Aloo, a thirteen-year-old girl who was a paternal orphan. When Aloo's father died, her maternal aunt travelled from Nairobi to attend the funeral in the village. The aunt had a bicycle in her Nairobi house that was not being used and suggested that her widowed sister could use it to start some income-generating activity. She convinced Aloo's mother to allow Aloo to accompany her to Nairobi to pick up the bicycle and bring to her in the village. When they reached Nairobi, Aloo realized that her aunt's intention was not to give her the bicycle to bring home. Instead, the aunt made her assume the duties of a house-help and look after her young children. After some months, Aloo, who had been taken to an informal school in the neighborhood, started missing home, especially her mother, who was expecting a baby and had recently been involved in a car accident. She also missed her brother, who was about to sit for his final Kenya Certificate of Primary Examination (KCPE). She heard from people coming from the village to Nairobi that her people (*jodala*) were suffering.

> I started changing my behavior. I was not eating sometimes. I saw my aunt did not want me to go back home, because I saw she had put her children in school and she was now looking for a school for me. Then I told a neighbor there that if she puts me in school, then I would disappear. The neighbor went and informed my aunt. I knew she would tell her.

Aloo had found it easier to talk to her aunt through the neighbors. The maternal aunt was harsh and might beat her. "She used to beat people. If you tell her, she could even beat you with a stool," Aloo explained when asked why she did not tell her aunt about her desire to go home.

Children belonging to relatives who live with people in large towns create fear among adults when they threaten to disappear. Seemingly, children too are aware that adults are most likely to react to their threats by allowing them to go back home. "Were you really going to disappear?" I asked. "No, I was just threatening her so she would get me money to return home." Aloo was very happy when she reached Bondo, the nearby township of her natal home: "I

even knew some people there and it was nearby. I could even walk home. And when I reached home, I was happy to see my mother and our siblings. The first thing I said to her was that I never knew I would reach here."

Aloo was happy to be back home because she could assist her mother, who had now given birth, with the household chores and rejoin the rest of the *jodala*. Following the experience she had with her aunt, she did not like going to visit relatives in towns like Nairobi. "The other aunt who stays in Maji poa [Nairobi] wanted me to go during the April holidays, but I refused. These days, I am very careful about relatives who tell me to visit them in towns far from home."

Perspectives on Local Discourses, Childhood Vulnerability, and Agency

Two main themes emerge in these narratives: cultural sensibilities and local discourses of belonging as well as children's intersubjective application of their agency. Local connections and dynamics of everyday Luo life enshrined within the practices of relatedness provide a theoretical framework through which individual practices in relation to childhood vulnerability can be analyzed and understood without necessarily referring to cultural rules for the constitution of relationships. Our analysis shows orphaned children's display of agency as a manifestation of the struggle for a meaningful life under perceived difficult life circumstances in fosterage arrangements. A central weakness of our data is related to the fact they were collected during a specific and turbulent period of epidemic and demographic changes that no longer apply. However, we contend that the emerging insights are of a general nature, and furthermore recent research among the linguistically related Acholi people of Northern Uganda still demonstrates the strong relationship between the notion of home and discourses of belonging, rights, and growth (Otto et al. 2023). Thus, this article advances the debate on new approaches to the study of kinship through analyses of local discourses and statements about Luo childhood vulnerability and how children and adults negotiate and create relationships in contemporary Luo kinship values. The two themes described below are derived from our data on how cultural sensibilities around discourses of belonging and children's intersubjective application of their agency promote a dynamic anthropology of relationships in which both positive and negative aspects of relatedness are demonstrated.

Cultural Sensibilities and Local Discourses of Belonging

As shown above, cultural sensibilities derived from historical patrilineal ideologies and their attendant local discourses of belonging have influenced meanings and conceptualizations that Luo orphaned children attach to the idea of home.

This is reinforced in the narratives of movements within and beyond kinship networks as it emerges in the informal Luo children's conversation about home at the beginning of this article. Just like among adults, these conversations and narratives of migrations by the orphans show that children are able to process the cultural sensibilities of the world around them to derive an emotional sense of security and morals of existence expressed through love among home relations. To these orphaned children, home relations bequeath them with relational pathways that ensure safeguards and growth, which transcend material aspects of life that they are exposed to in foster households. Narratives of orphaned children show that they understand one's home as constituted through properly constituted marriage and the father's patrilineal descent defines belonging where moral ideas about growth are negotiated and experienced in everyday lives.

The orphans' narratives in this study therefore underscore the fact that orphans place more emphasis on the emotional aspects of well-being and vulnerability found in *jodala* relations at the expense of material aspects of vulnerability that adults consider to be important in orphans' lives. The narratives further show how orphans are fostered in households and homesteads that belong to adults within the larger extended family network based on practices of relatedness and decisions made by adults. These fosterage practices by adults are based on sharing and exchange relationships between members of *anyuola* with disregard to the emotional needs of orphans. These fosterage practices are embedded in the generative, old traditions in sub-Saharan Africa of shared upbringing of children within and beyond families as a mechanism for creating relatedness, which responds to both internal and external forces of social change (Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe 1989; Shipton 2007). Thus, the orphans' ideas about home and the local discourses of belonging and their experiences of living in foster households seemingly influence children's movements and understandings of vulnerability. Such movements convey new knowledge on childhood vulnerability that links the orphans' notion of home, feelings, and well-being as espoused in Luo discourses of belonging to existing fosterage practices. This new knowledge underscores the need to construct childhood vulnerability from a standpoint of the orphans' own views of their needs as being different from the adults' ideas about children's needs (see also Abebe and Aase 2007; Kendall 2010; Madhavan 2004; Ngutuku 2020; Notermans 1998; Swift and Maher 2008). This is particularly the case with Norah, Aloo, and Omullo, whose actions based on the idea of home contradict adults' ideas about the holistic needs of orphans and presents us with an analysis of the dialectical relationship between adult practices of relatedness and fosterage practices and children's perceptions of their vulnerability. However, these fosterage practices stem from adult assumptions about children's places within the African cultural settings in which children's opinions are not sought in such matters because of their perceived inability to process and act

in circumstances surrounding their lives contrary to understandings of current childhood theories and children's agency.

Children's Agency and the Internalization of Luo Notion of Home

A vast body of literature in sub-Saharan Africa discusses differential treatment of children fostered in family settings away from their close kin relations, living away from home (Ankrah 1993; Bourdillon 1999; Dube 2000; Foster 1997; Lyons 1999; Nyambedha 2006; Young and Ansell 2003). Michael Bourdillon (1999), in his study among Zimbabwean children, argues that children who live away from close kin (home relations) are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation as compared to those who live near their kin. He explains that such children lack the community safeguards that other children benefit from in cases where adults within the community want to exploit and use them as symbols of adult relations, as is the case in the three narratives we have presented in this article. We argue that these fosterage practices provide a basis on which orphaned children in this study exercised their agency. In a study of Ugandan children living in kin-care, Jini Roby and colleagues (2014) have similar observations regarding lack of community safeguards. Their study explains that children's psychological health and sense of well-being is negatively affected if they are sensitive about their status in the foster households. The narratives in this article show how orphans' lived experiences of Luo fosterage households are constructed through adults' practices of relatedness but contested through orphans' own networks of relatedness and inter-subjective application of agency. Consequently, the orphans applied their agency to enhance their psychosocial well-being when they were fostered in homesteads far away from their *dala* and were not able to interact with their *jodala* by moving back to their natal homes, where they derived a sense of belonging, entitlement, and security (Andresen 2014). The actions based on orphans' understanding of the notion of home in Luo culture thus disrupt adults' arranged fosterage practices (Nyambedha and Aagard-Hansen 2003).

The actions by Aloo of using gossip via the neighbor to influence her return home from Nairobi and the case of Omullo show the dialectics of relationships that the orphans experience through adult-initiated fosterage practices. These narratives are clear demonstrations that Luo orphaned children, contrary to the perceptions of adults, are capable of deploying their agency by processing their life circumstances and prospects for growth based on their understanding of local discourses of belonging enshrined in the Luo notion of home (see also Shipton 2007). According to the narratives presented in this article, children applied their agency with differential outcomes because of the opportunities and limitations they encounter in the existing circumstances, which included the historical hierarchy of parental authority in Luo kinship structure. For

instance, Norah could not refuse to go and live in the godmother's home because of her inability to defy her widowed mother's parental authority, while Aloo could not directly confront the aunt who lived in Nairobi because of fear of punishment. Furthermore, the orphans in this study exercised their agency against such constraining structural factors as poverty in the households due to lack of income and mortality mainly due to HIV and AIDS. Furthermore, our data show that the children's agency is exercised against changed morals in which members of the extended family are resorting to deception, as is the case of Aloo and the promise of a bicycle, that adults engage in to respond to pressures of modern life in the cities where househelps are becoming costly to hire and the need for schooling (Nyambedha and Aagard-Hansen 2010).

Conclusion

Our analysis has demonstrated contradictions, paradoxes, and ambivalence that emerge within two main themes. First, cultural sensibilities and local discourses of belonging led to variations in conceptualization of childhood vulnerability and children's places within Luo kinship structure by adults and children. Second, children's agency and internalization of the Luo notion of home provided the children with cultural resources to navigate contested fosterage arrangements—albeit with differential outcomes due to structural constraints and material resource imbalances. Thus, the analysis in this article promotes an understanding of change and continuity in the application of traditional concepts such as home in everyday interactions between orphans and adults, and the implications of children's ideas about belonging and growth. The article further demonstrates how individual practices can be analyzed and understood without necessarily making reference to Luo cultural rules. Whereas adults' actions tend to reproduce existing kinship values and to be limited by material constraints, children—sometimes at least—can exercise their own agency within and against adults when it comes to fosterage and adoption. We have discussed children's agency in relation to their movements within and beyond kinship networks. It is clear that the values of Luo kinship, historical notions of 'home,' as well as the availability of resources in foster households play crucial roles here. But the agency of children themselves and how they act on these ideas and constraints is just as important.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the orphaned children and their caretakers in Nyang'oma division, Bondo sub-county, Siaya county in western Kenya for

their participation during the fieldwork. We are grateful to the Danish Council For Development Research (FFU) which funded this research through the now defunct DBL-Centre for Health and Development Research. We remain grateful to Professors Emeritus Karen Fog Olwig and Michael Whyte of the Department of Anthropology at Copenhagen University for their insightful comments during the initial analysis of this data. We appreciate the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments that have improved this article.

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Notes

1. We use the term *dala* or 'home' to signify the children's notion of belonging to a specific place and the people (*jodala*) living there.
2. Godmother is a person assisting in the baptism of a child, thereby taking on some kind of responsibility for overseeing the child's upbringing to become a good Christian.

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