

## **Impact of AIDS on marriage patterns, customs and practices in Uganda\***



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Uganda has one of the highest numbers of reported AIDS cases in sub-Saharan Africa. This is mainly due to a number of historical and political factors. The government of Uganda has openly dealt with the AIDS crisis since 1986 but before that the socio-economic and political chaos in the country created an ideal situation for HIV to spread widely in both rural and urban areas. The HIV infection rate varies among different population subgroups: the 1987/88 sero-survey showed variations among regions and between rural and urban areas. In the most urbanized central region, 21.1 per cent of urban and 12.1 per cent of rural residents were estimated to be HIV-positive. In Western Region which is less developed than Central, 29 per cent of urban and 5.7 per cent of rural residents were infected. In contrast, in the remote and rural West Nile Region, 7.7 per cent of urban and 6.6 per cent of rural residents were HIV-positive (Asedri 1989).

There is now a sizeable body of research in Uganda on sexual behaviour, social networking and HIV transmission, including sexual partner studies and studies of changing sexual behaviour in response to the epidemic (e.g. Berkley et al. 1990; Serwadda et al. 1992; Konde-Lule, Musagara and Musgrave 1993; Mulder et al. 1994). However, there is a need for more research on the impact of AIDS on the individual, the family and the community. Little is currently known about changes in households, extended families and their coping mechanisms, and the impact of AIDS on future productivity at the family level and within the community.

The household is the basic unit of subsistence production in Uganda, and its existence and that of the extended family system within which it is embedded has enabled the society to weather the many stresses of war and social dislocation which have occurred in the country for over two decades. It is anticipated, however, that the increased stress occasioned by AIDS will be too much for the extended family systems to bear in the long run.

### **Methodology**

Against this background, therefore, a study to examine household composition and family structure under the conditions of high AIDS-related mortality is being carried out in six districts in Uganda: Hoima, Iganga, Kabale, Masaka, Mbale and Mbarara. The study is being carried out in three phases, of which the first involved the review of ethnographic materials on the populations in the six districts and collecting information from elders and youths

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through focus-group discussions and also administering an individual elders' questionnaire. Phase 2 was a large-scale household survey in the six districts to document the recent changes in household composition and family structure. Phase 3 will be carried out three years after the second phase. During this phase the areas covered in the second phase will be re-surveyed to determine subsequent changes occurring in the communities.

The data collection for the first two phases is complete and this paper presents the results from the focus-group discussions held for all the six districts during Phase 1. The groups comprised young people and elders of both sexes. The total number of female elders who participated in twelve focus-group discussions in all the districts was 104 and their ages ranged from 35 to 90 years. Most of the female elders were married but some were widowed and others were separated or divorced. Most of them were peasant farmers. Twelve focus-group discussions for male elders were held in the six districts, involving 128 male elders aged from 38 to 92 years. Their occupations varied but a number of them were retired civil servants like teachers and clerks, some were businessmen but most were engaged in peasant farming. The majority were married and a few were widowers.

Eleven focus group discussions for young females and eleven for young males were conducted in the six districts. There were 114 females aged 14-34 years and 103 males aged 19-34; some were employed and some were students.

## **Results**

The focus group discussion topics solicited information on the status of marriage in the communities; the normal age at first marriage for boys and girls; prevalence of polygyny; marriage customs and practices and effect of AIDS on marriage in the communities. The participants were encouraged to compare the past and the present in their discussions.

### ***Marriage in the past***

All the participants agreed that marriage as an institution was respected and it was almost everyone's desire to marry. It gave parents pride to have their children married and established in stable homes: for this reason parents were obliged to look for well behaved, obedient and respectable partners for their children. In Mbarara, it was the duty of the boy's paternal aunt to look for a wife for him; in Kabale, once a suitable partner was identified, the parents would look for a mediator who knew both sides well to bring the girl and the boy together. In other districts parents helped in identifying and selecting suitable partners for their children. In all the districts the parents played a big role in the selection of their children's partners.

Historically, because parents wanted their children to have successful marriages, they took it upon themselves to train the children in issues pertaining to marriage. The girls and boys were taught how to handle certain roles and responsibilities appropriate to their sex. In Mbale, for example, the boy had to be circumcised and had to have a house of his own as a sign of maturity and responsibility before being considered for marriage.

Once a marriage partner was identified the children never objected to the choices made for them. This was mainly because they had to be obedient and the parents had tried their best to make the right match for their children. The parents carried out investigations to make sure that the chosen partners came from respectable families.

The participants reported that most girls got married with traditional legitimacy, that is with the consent of their parents. After identification and agreement, bridewealth was negotiated and when it was paid the girl was free to go to her husband. The departure day was celebrated with a big feast.

In Mbarara and Masaka the bride's aunt escorted her and took back the bedsheet which the couple had slept on; this was for proof of virginity, the virgin bride's bedsheet being bloodstained. A bride who was a virgin brought pride to both her parents and her husband and for this presents were given to her and her parents. In the past most girls were virgins because premarital sex was not allowed. If a girl was found not to be a virgin on the consummation night, her in-laws would send a copper coin with a hole in it to her parents. In Kabale they would send a hoe without a handle to the bride's parents. Premarital pregnancies were punished severely, sometimes with death but at least with banishment from home.

The participants noted that marriages in the past were stable because women were obedient to their husbands and there were enough resources to manage homes. It was the duty of the boy's parents to give a firm start to their son by providing him with enough land and paying his bridewealth. In Mbarara it was reported that because of the authority parents had over their children, elopement was very rare. If it happened, the young man would formalize the marriage later, but after paying a fine to his partner's parents for staying with her illegitimately.

### ***Current status of marriage***

All participants agreed that marriage has changed from what it used to be several decades ago. Parents no longer help to identify and select potential partners for their children. All groups in Iganga and the youth group in Kabale noted that present-day marriage is mainly by individual choice. The intending marriage partners meet and make their own decisions. In Mbarara all groups observed that current marriages are on a trial basis, where a girl stays with a boy before involving their parents. Elders in Hoima pointed out that at the present time boys and girls meet in social gatherings and decide to get married. One female elder in Hoima comments that 'these days the girls simply go'. Youths from Mbale complained that marriages of today do not last long. Young females of Mbale emphasized the fear of HIV/AIDS which has 'poured cold water' on the institution of marriage. They further argued that marriages are difficult because of mutual suspicion among couples. There are still promiscuous men and women who destroy marriages. Mbale young people say that modern marriage is expensive; so one has to 'think twice' before getting involved in it.

In Masaka participants classified the current types of marriage into three. The first one is the traditional type, where parents and relatives still play a big part in selecting the marital partner, and provide guidance in their children's marriage. This type is common in rural areas and for children who have not had much education. The second type is one based on modern individual choice: these marriages start as love affairs, usually at school or places of work. Parents are informed later and then marriage follows. The third type is cohabiting: for such reasons as lack of bridewealth, which is high in some communities, young people may cohabit before marriage in the hope that the relationship will mature into a formal marriage. They noted that this approach is risky because there is no legal bond between the cohabiting individuals. The female elders felt that this has resulted in prostitution.

### ***Causes of change in marriage***

Marriage has changed a lot from the past. This is not only because of AIDS but because of other forces of social change which have affected marriage and the family over the years.

The participants were asked what they thought was causing the changes in marriage. The following factors were identified: limited resources coupled with economic problems that have resulted in a high cost of living and high unemployment rates especially among youth; modernization and the influence of Western cultures; high bridewealth; intermarriages between ethnic groups; education; modern religions; society's acceptance of cohabiting; lack

of parental guidance; lack of trust and confidence among married couples; promiscuity and AIDS.

These have been important factors in changing or even eradicating some of the marriage customs and practices. People used to adhere to the traditional customs for fear of being cursed by the ancestors unlike today when education, modernity and Christianity have brought changes. Modern religions have diluted some of the previous practices by adding a religious tint but have not eradicated earlier forms. Only those rituals considered to be pagan practices have been eradicated. For example, in Iganga the bridegroom had to take a goat to the bride's home for sacrificing to the gods but this has changed with Christianity.

### ***Prevailing marital customs***

The participants were asked about the marriage customs in their communities. All the participants agreed that brideprice is one of the old customs which has survived, although with some slight changes. In the past payment took the form only of animals but today it can be made either in cash or animals or both but it is still strictly observed. Some of the other practices that were highlighted by the different groups are indicated below.

According to the elders in Mbale, elopement is still handled according to custom. When a girl elopes with a boy, relatives of the girl go to the boy's home and are given a goat and then matters are sorted out normally. The other marriage custom in this area is that the boy must be circumcised and must have a house of his own as a sign of maturity and responsibility before he is allowed to marry.

In Mbarara, at the time of their introduction the boy's family has to take beer to the girl's home and pay bridewealth before the wedding takes place. Dowry (*emihingiro*) in the form of clothes and other items to assist the couple to start a home is still being given by the bride's parents and a formal wedding ceremony is still required. The girl's family has a ceremony at the end of the bride's seclusion period (*okwaruka*). A goat is also given to the girl's maternal uncle and paternal aunt.

In Hoima the boy's family chooses some respectable elderly men to go to the girl's home to make the introductions and to negotiate the bridewealth. Once bridewealth is paid, the boy is free to marry the girl. In the case of elopement a fine is paid by the boy.

In Kabale, the girl's aunts give her advice on how to behave in marriage. A boy is given land by his father so that he establishes himself in preparation for marriage. Once bridewealth is paid the girl is considered as the man's property because he has 'bought' her. The parents of a non-virgin girl receive a coin with a hole in it or a hoe without a handle. A fine (*omutango*) is paid in the case of elopement.

In Iganga, a letter of introduction is written to the girl's parents to inform them of the boy's intention to marry their daughter. The introduction ceremony follows. There should never be marriages within the same clan.

And in Masaka there has to be a formal introduction (*okwanjula*) of a future son-in-law. The paternal aunt and other elderly women make sure that the girl is properly prepared for marriage.

### ***Basic marriage practices that should be promoted***

We asked what people would like to see as the basics that are retained in order for marriage to have meaning. The participants dwelt mainly on bridewealth. They argued that bridewealth formalizes marriage, gives it a stable foundation and yields a respectable marriage. All agreed that, in order to safeguard the marriage institution, the traditional customs should be maintained. Bridewealth must be paid but the amount of money or the number of animals

asked should be reduced so as to be affordable and parents should participate in identifying and selecting partners for their children.

In general, there is agreement that the customs and practices concerning marriage make sense and are meant to strengthen marriage and the family. Since there are fewer marital disruptions where they are observed, they should be sustained.

### ***Effects of AIDS on marriage***

The discussions included the proposition that the AIDS epidemic has had an effect on various aspects of marriage.

All participants agreed that the institution of marriage has been greatly affected by AIDS. Marriage has been affected through all its stages, right from the identifying of partners to the time of dissolution. Participants in all the districts reported that people fear to get married because they are not sure of the sero-status of their potential partners. In Hoima, for example, the youths said that 'men avoid women these days'. In Kabale, all the groups reported that boys and girls are not eager to marry for fear of AIDS. In Mbale, the male elders said that AIDS has resulted in people fearing others, especially women. Each woman is looked upon as an AIDS victim or HIV carrier. The young males added that it is not only women but almost all people who seem to be 'moving corpses'. In Iganga a female elder reported that her son refused to marry because many newly married people are dying of AIDS, so there is no point in soliciting death through marriage. In Masaka, the male and the female elders held the view that AIDS is discouraging marriages among young people. The male elders say that 'one who forgets marriage altogether is now better off'. In Hoima and Mbale, participants reported that infected people return from towns, especially Kampala, and spread AIDS to rural dwellers. People are now very suspicious of urban-to-rural migrants. The frequency of marriages has declined because of fear of AIDS, according to male elders and youths from Mbarara and male elders of Kabale.

While some participants said that AIDS has made people firm in their marriages, others said that it has increased the rate of separation and divorce. For example, female elders, young males and young females in Masaka claimed that AIDS had resulted in increased separation. The female elders said that when one partner is infected couples can separate or continue staying together but abstain from sex. The young females said that women and men separate from partners who are unfaithful and are therefore likely to bring HIV into the home. This same view was held by old and the young females of Mbarara who said that, while some couples just abstain from sex and have separate beds, others seek divorce because, with the former arrangement, the couple may be tempted to sleep together again. Therefore, to avoid this, couples are divorcing. They say that in the past divorce was looked upon as belonging to the Western world, but today AIDS has encouraged it because people are not willing to stay with unfaithful partners. The young females of Iganga add that AIDS has put married people's lives at risk because they cannot simply divorce even if the partners are not faithful.

In contrast to the above statements, some participants, like the young males of Mbarara and Iganga, male elders from Masaka and young females of Iganga, argue that AIDS has made married people firmer in their marriages. Couples have decided to 'zero graze' and stick to their partners so as not to contract AIDS. The Masaka youths say that AIDS has led people to seek proper and permanent relationships, to be faithful and to engage in stable marriages in contrast to the pre-AIDS times when men and women would have several sexual partners. Female elders in Mbarara argue that people are not separating. They add that married people cannot separate easily. They have to stay in their marriages and if the partner brings them HIV then it is their fate. On the issue of sticking to partners, the male elders of Iganga add that there is extra strictness even in polygynous families. Co-wives co-operate in spying on their husband to make sure he is not lured out of the ring.

Participants say that, while AIDS has 'poured cold water' on the institution of marriage, there are people who have ignored the presence of AIDS and have continued with their previous life styles. For example, women elders of Iganga say that there are people with the 'I don't care attitude' who say 'I am not a piece of wood'. This means that human beings are destined to die unlike wood which can be used for some other end product. They add that some men have not changed and maintain that AIDS affects only those who have an affinity for it: *silimu asima mubiri*. With such tendencies and ideas, the participants agree that it is hard to reduce HIV infection among people. The male elders of Mbale add that rich men give money to girls and infect them with AIDS; and such men do not care about their wives.

People with this 'I don't care' attitude are even unwilling to go for HIV tests to ascertain their HIV status. The women elders of Hoima say that when such people fall sick with AIDS they claim it is witchcraft and not AIDS. Some people no longer even believe in results from the testing machines because they claim that one may test negative when in fact one is positive. Female elders of Mbale add that marriage and sexual behaviour have not been affected by AIDS. They maintain that those who want to marry do so without fear. They argue that after all many cars collapse while on the road, and, if the owner did not want to be in it when it collapsed, then he would not use it. Few people take this view. Contrary to this idea of marriage and sexual behaviour not being affected by AIDS, the young females in Mbale say that people are careful and conscious about risky behaviour. People used to look forward to attending ceremonies following somebody's death but today they are conscious about risky behaviour at funerals. It is believed among the Baganda, for example, that during the last funeral rites people should celebrate and engage in merrymaking activities like having sexual relations in the hope of replacing the dead person.

AIDS has threatened circumcision in Mbale district. The Mbale youth noted that there is a tradition that after circumcision a boy looks for a woman to teach him about sexual relations, and, after he has learnt, the relationship ends, but with AIDS this practice has died out. AIDS has also threatened the practice of widow inheritance. In the past, widows would be inherited, but, with AIDS, this has stopped. Young males in Mbarara claimed that women have 'lost market' because of AIDS.

On the question of age at first marriage there were differing opinions. Some participants said that girls in the past married when they were old while others said that they married at an early age. They argued that, as soon as a girl started menstruating, she was considered old enough for marriage. They attribute this to the betrothal of girls, when young, and, because girls did not go to school, they were there for marriage. Currently, owing to education, girls get married when they are old, some as old as 25 years. For the boys, the participants had diverging ages for marriage. Some said that these days boys marry at an early age (18-20) while others said that they marry at a late age when they are already established. The elders said that, in the past, the reason for marrying early was that the boy's father would pay the bridewealth for him.

The participants were asked whether it was common for men in their communities to marry more than one wife these days. The elders generally pointed out that it is not common for a man to marry more than one wife. They noted that most men have one official wife. The female elders said that it is the Muslims who have more than one wife but all these wives are official and are known to each other, unlike the practice among non-Muslims who have other wives secretly. The young also agree that most men have only one wife although some have concubines: the reason they gave for having one wife is the fear of AIDS.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The evidence from the focus-group discussions is that marriage customs and practices have changed over time because of factors related to socio-economic development, modernization and Western culture. More recently the changes in marriage have been closely connected with the AIDS epidemic in Uganda. However, many customs have persisted, such as parental participation in the introduction and negotiation for children's marriages, bride price, dowry, circumcision of boys before marriage, fining boys who elope with girls and rewarding virginity at marriage. The societies where these practices exist want them to continue because they regard them as good.

It is also clear Ugandans are aware of the profound impact of AIDS on marriage as an institution: fear of potential partners being seropositive is holding back girls and boys from marrying, and this may have several effects. The reported promiscuity in some of these societies (Ntozi and Lubega 1992) may decline: Konde-Lule (1992) reported lower levels of sexually transmitted disease among adolescents in Rakai, perhaps as a result of reduced sexual activity. Since most adolescents do not use condoms (Konde-Lule 1992), premarital sexual activity is likely to decline.

The choice of a partner in future may be more careful than at present. The current 'love at first sight' may gradually be abandoned in preference for more research on the background of the suitor, as happened in the past. HIV testing centres in Kampala are reporting growing numbers of urban and educated boys and girls testing before making a commitment to marriage. This is to avoid HIV infection from a spouse who is infected before marriage.

However, because of modern circumstances, it is the concerned individuals who will be doing the research on their potential partners in contrast to the past when the parents did it. Unlike the situation in the past, the parents and society are likely to be tolerant and understanding of delayed marriages in future. They would rather have unmarried boys and girls than their coffins. Once this trend is accepted, delayed marriage may lower the very high fertility rates in Uganda.

Another consequence of AIDS is its effects on the stability of marriage. 'Zero grazing' or one-partner culture may be catching on. Although the elder participants were divided over the morals of divorce and separation in the face of AIDS, the young unanimously accepted it. This implies that in future society may no longer condemn those spouses who leave their partners because of unfaithfulness at a time of fear of AIDS. This change of attitude by the society may lead people to seek permanent relationships with one partner and abandon the practice of several sexual partners in order to save their nuptial unions. Polygyny may also decline in the long run even among the Muslims.

With increased knowledge of the harm some customs are creating, they are likely to be abandoned or modified to suit the circumstances. For instance, widow inheritance is declining fast although this has serious consequences for orphan care. Further the Baganda's sexual indulgences at the last funeral rites, the Banyakore's practice of having one wife for all brothers, and the Bagisu's sexual orgies at circumcision ceremonies are likely to be abandoned through fear of HIV infection. Already the last funeral rites in Buganda are no longer celebrated as in the past because the number of funerals has become too large; the performer of circumcision changes blades with individuals; and the Banyakore marriage practice has been condemned by the civic and religious leaders in the area. It will therefore be interesting to know what marriage in Uganda will be like in the post-AIDS era.

Further, it is unfortunate that women are being stigmatized by the society because it is scared of the disease. Although research so far has indicated that women are more affected by HIV/AIDS than men with an odds ratio of 1.4 times (Berkley et al. 1990), it is not true that they are the only carriers of the virus. In Uganda and Rwanda it is believed that the disease was spread from the cities to the rural areas by labour migrants who were mostly men

working in towns. Being lonely, the men are tempted to satisfy their sexual desires with prostitutes or 'free town women' from whom they may contract the virus. They then infect their faithful rural wives on the occasional visits to the villages (Ntozi and Lubega 1992). Research has also found that the higher rate of HIV infection of women is not because they are more promiscuous than men, but due to biological, economic, demographic and cultural factors which make them more vulnerable to the virus. For instance, Persson (1994) has reported that, because of the heavy virus load in the ejaculation of an infected male, there is much higher efficiency in male-to-female transmission than vice versa. The stigmatization of women as 'virus carriers' by some focus groups is a relic of the traditional belief that any evil in the home was brought there by women, who are regarded in some of the societies as outsiders to the husband's extended family (Ankrah 1991).

In addition, there are disturbing reports of an 'I don't care' attitude, mostly among young men and women who may already be HIV-infected. The society is worried about their behaviour and attitude towards the epidemic; it seems their aim is to spread the disease so that they do not die alone. The social workers, AIDS counsellors, chiefs and policy makers should target this group and influence their behaviour in order to save the population from more suffering. Although the Ugandan Parliament has recently passed a law to punish such people, its implementation needs the co-operation of all segments of the population.

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