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Summer 2016

Adoption in Tanzania: Effects of Policy and Culture

Moshi, Tanzania

This summer, following six weeks studying Kiswahili in Morogoro, Tanzania, I studied adoption and child policy in Moshi, Tanzania. I worked at Upendo Children's Home and Mahabusu Juvenile Center with the children and staff at each organization. Through this experience, I developed a deeper awareness of Tanzanian culture, practiced my Swahili skills, and navigated travelling alone. I explored Child Policy and Protection in Tanzania with Social Welfare Officers that had a wealth of knowledge about adoption, orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) in Tanzania, the intersection between policy and practice, and avenues for improvement, primarily, within the public sector. I also gained a deeper understanding of the policies and systems, other than adoption policies, in place for children—how they play out, the immense influence of culture—than anticipated. Most satisfying, though, was my end ability to synthesize adoption policy, cultural values regarding adoption, the role of NGOs and the government, and how it all culminates to affect orphaned or abandoned children.

My time in Moshi presented various rewards and challenges that impacted my goals while there, as well as future academic and career goals. As I began my time at Upendo Children's Home, I realized that my perception of children's homes was highly influenced by the home I am involved with in Kenya. It was beneficial to gain broader experience, but challenging when the staff was not as resourceful—at

least not in the way I had anticipated. This perception was conceived from my time at a different home. Yet, the social workers at the Juvenile Center had extensive experience in the field of adoption and child policy. I was able to utilize them as resources, but navigating these different expectations and realities was difficult upon arrival. However, the perspectives I gained from the staff at both organizations, and in getting to know the children at the Juvenile Center, are what allowed for the more comprehensive understanding I acquired. It also pushed me to research other children's homes, NGOs, and Social Welfare Offices in Tanzania. Additionally, the continual learning of language and culture presented both challenging and rewarding moments. Having some knowledge of Kiswahili opened a door to experiencing Tanzanian culture more fully and it was incredibly rewarding to continue learning Swahili and work on it throughout my time in Moshi. There were still challenges to communication and cultural understanding, especially with the children at Mahabusu Juvenile Center that knew little English. Being in Moshi was a time to really practice conversing in Swahili; and it enhanced and solidified my understanding of the importance of learning language and culture.

As it is intertwined in the challenges and rewards, culture and language were constantly intertwined in my studying of adoption and child policy. While I expected this for my personal experience in an unfamiliar place, it was enhanced by the cultural influence on the policies and practices I was examining.

Tanzanian culture fiercely cares about and for the Tanzanian. The country's first president, Julius Nyerere, instilled deep values of unity and Tanzanian identity into the nation and his influence has trickled into seemingly all aspects of life in

Tanzania. The unity of Tanzanians is paralleled in the unity of the family and in the shared protection of community and national values. Throughout my experience, I was confronted with comments and remarks that echoed these values. The role of informal adoption is immense and manages to care for many single or double orphans; and I was told multiple times that, especially since the HIV crisis, almost every Tanzanian family cares for or raises children from their extended family. The importance of informal adoption is reverberated in an unsurprising weariness of institutionalization of children. It is in dissonance with Tanzanian values. However, these same values of community and national identity have also affected adoption in Tanzania. Formal adoptions, foreign or national, are not very frequent in Tanzania. Adoptions by Tanzanians with no relation to a child are uncommon because of the practice of informal adoption and the values of the family and community. Foreign adoptions are highly regulated with a three-year residency requirement, emphasizing the importance of Tanzanian children growing up within their own culture. Beyond these residency requirements, I was amazed by how culture affected Child Policy. Adoption policy emphasizes the primary role of any living relative, and seeks their permission before children—abandoned or orphaned—can be adopted. If international families adopt children, the government has to be informed of any intent to leave Tanzania. Within the Rights of the Child in Tanzania, children have an obligation to serve their family, community, and nation and to maintain cultural values. How ingrained cultural identity is in these policies, reflects how they are in reality.

Ultimately, these practices of informal adoption stress protection of children within Tanzania's values and a system has been established that, from my perception, effectively addresses the concerns of OVCs. Yet, because of the hesitancy towards adoption it may be that the children that do "slip through the cracks" end up in more vulnerable situations. Many children's homes in Tanzania take in children who have lost their mother for a few years and provide them with formula, which is very costly. These children are then to return to their father or relatives. At Upendo Children's Home, most children were in this situation; however, only half actually return to their families. This then leaves homes with unexpected expenses, and the children to grow up in an institution, never open for adoption. The other difficulty I witnessed was that children that were informally adopted may grow up with elderly grandparents, siblings, or other relatives that have the added burden of providing for more people. Many of the children at the Mahabusu Juvenile Center were in these situations and may have ended up as street children or never attended school and then had an incident with the law. Yet, as it is in many places throughout the world, the Juvenile Justice System lacks resources, protection, and rehabilitation for the children.

Though my impression of this is isolated to my location and the people I worked with, a defining aspect of my experience was viewing the role Tanzania's culture has on OVCs in Tanzania. These cultural values have developed a system that successfully cares for orphaned and vulnerable children; yet, the ones that it is unable to protect through informal adoption may be more vulnerable than if formal adoption was valued more favorably.