Visiting the Issue of Uncertainty in Contemporary African Lives: An Introduction

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This special issue of the *African Sociological Review* contains papers from the Conference on Uncertainty in Contemporary African Lives that Liv Haram, affiliated to the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, convened in Arusha, 9-11 April 2003. Participants from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, as well as from England, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, presented papers, twenty-four in all, in the three-day conference. The conference had its origins in Haram's project at the Nordic Africa Institute, entitled 'Modernisation and Stress in Men's and Woman's Lives: African Experiences', initiated in January 2000. The project deals with societies in transformation under rapid change brought about by forces such as modernisation and globalisation, which, one would assume, increase stress and uncertainties in the lives of young men and women. The central theme of the conference was uncertainty. The meeting, inevitably, sought to explore and understand how people in contemporary Africa experience situations of great upheaval, stress and uncertainty in their everyday lives. Our approach was grounded in the awareness that it is important to see people not merely as victims of inauspicious circumstances, but rather as agents actively responding to their life situation, however adverse, in an increasingly troubled world. Professor Sandra Wallman, University of London, Professor Susan Reynolds Whyte, University of Copenhagen, and Dr Todd Sanders, then at the University of Cambridge (currently at the University of Toronto), were specially invited as resource persons and also chaired sessions and presented their own papers. Other persons chairing sessions included Professor Francis Nyamnjoh, then at the University of Botswana (currently acting head at the Department of Publications and Communications at CODESRIA), and Bawa Yamba, then at the Nordic Africa Institute, and co-editor of this volume (currently associate professor at Diakonhjemmet University College, Oslo). We wish to thank the editors of the journal for their encouragement and support in producing the issue. Very special thanks to Inga-Britt Isaksson Faris (the Nordic Africa Institute) for her meticulous assistance with the format as well as constructive comments concerning language, and to Elaine Almén for checking the language.

Dealing with Uncertainty in Africa

While one cannot hold that uncertainty is something specific to Africa, the impact of various kinds of upheavals and catastrophes on the continent has been disproportionably large during a great part of the past century, and so it is even today. In recent years, Africa has undergone profound political, economic, and social changes, resulting from a contingent set of internal as well as external forces. Examples of the former are legion, but one might mention such recurrent phenomena across the continent as civil war, drought, and famine that have resulted in wide-scale displacements of people and, consequently, led to a weakening of the social fabrics and traditional support networks. The latter kind are constituted in the phenomena, often glossed as modernisation and globalisation, which, while sometimes equated with progress, have also contributed to an increase in social distress, insecurity and, thus, compounded the uncertainties in the daily lives of people. In addition, poverty and associated conditions such as

unemployment and social deprivation have also taken their toll on people's health and general well-being.

A prerequisite to understanding how people in Africa cope and live in such difficult conditions, is to carefully scrutinise the factors that impinge on present-day African social life; how people draw on their various support systems to manage. Such an approach inevitably covers a range of themes. Many of the papers addressed themes such as risk and agency (Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, Blystad, Moland, Yamba), the ramifications of gendered inequalities (Besendahl, Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, Moland, Mookodi, Ringsted, Nymabedha), the inevitable consequences of ultimate despair (Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, Blystad, Moland, Yamba), the consequences of coping and living with HIV/AIDS (Blystad, Moland, Mookodi, Ringsted, Nyambedha, Yamba), as well as the theme of seeking solace and relief in religion (Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, Ringsted, Nyambedha). However, the recurrent leitmotif that runs through all the papers, more or less explicitly, is that of uncertainty and misfortune derived from modern life.

Uncertainty, though a common do-it-all concept in the social sciences, needs some unpacking to highlight its appropriateness and limited sense in which it is applied in this context. We realise that we cannot sufficiently expound all the connotations of this vital concept in this brief introduction, but a few clarifying statements are necessary. What we mean by uncertainty here has, of course, nothing to do with economic predictions on the likelihood of healthy returns from an investment, or anything resembling indeterminacy in physics. What we are interested in on the one hand is how the idea of uncertainty is operationalised in the studies of the contributors to this volume and, on the other, how the people under study deal with problems of uncertainty. With regard to the former, anthropologists and social scientists generally have treated uncertainty as a concept denoting non-recurrent and unpredictable phenomena that are intrinsically difficult to counteract but affect the lives of individuals or a given group of people. The fathers of social science may have felt comfortable in suggesting that we could predict some elements in the likely social action of social collectivities and human populations - cf. Comte (1869). Durkheim's notion of 'collective representations' and statistically based extrapolations on the likely number of suicides to be expected in a given population were of this kind (Durkheim, 1930, 1938). However, it would appear that problems arise when we attempt to predict the consequences of the actions of individuals.

The papers in this volume focus broadly on instances of uncertainty, by describing certain defined situations in the lives of the people they have studied. They do not problematise uncertainty as an epistemological concept, although such issues were addressed and discussed in some of the papers at the conference.[1] The main focus of the papers here is on concrete social situations where some contingent set of factors coincided to cause uncertainty and suffering in everyday life. The next step is then, to paraphrase Sandra Wallman (Haram forthcoming), how the people concerned manage their uncertainty.

Commonly what we refer to as uncertainties, are exemplified with and manifest in phenomena such as accidents, sudden death, and other events that cannot be predicted, and, which, even if they were predictable, would involve certain aspects and details that a careful retrodiction might not have arrived at or even envisaged. The contingent notion of providence or the perception of an event as the result of God's will may suffice for those who are religiously inclined, as explanations of random and unpredictable phenomena. But this is not enough, even when such models are not explicitly cited, people sometimes still resort to words such as *accident* and *chance* in accordance to our common human effort to make sense of such events. Occasionally, uncertainty is also perceived as the outcome of the agency that is believed to have *caused* a

situation. Accidents and occurrences that we attribute to chance come out of the blue and, as it were, strike at random; they are part of people's everyday life. People do not completely surrender to chance, but instead often take a pragmatic approach to their problems by trying to deal with uncertainty and contingency (Whyte 1997). However, the impact of the unpredictable always shakes the very foundations of human existence. Regularities are what we prefer, be they something we infer from nature, as, for example, the inevitable sequences of the seasons; or something we impose on nature and other phenomena through a simple activity as the assigning of names to things that would appear to comprise intimations of such order. We need to explain unpredictable occurrences, in an effort to manage or control them, or, perhaps we even hope thereby to be able to prevent their future occurrence. In less complex societies of the kind that used to be the happy hunting ground of anthropologists, many kinds of ritual were performed to prevent uncertainty and thereby to minimise risk. Classical anthropology abounds with examples of enactments of such anxiety-reducing rituals before activities are perceived as precarious. Thus Malinowski's Trobianders felt no need for performing precautionary rituals before embarking on fishing in the lagoon; conditions here were to be perceived familiar and predictable (Malinowski 1935, 1961). They, however, resorted to performed ritual when they were going out to fish in the open sea, the wide unknown where unpredictable weather changes needed to be faced. The Azande oracles, as Evans-Pritchard has shown (1976), sought not only to explain unfortunate events through the assigning of agency to particular malevolent witches, but also conducted rituals to prevent their future occurrence. In other words, they too sought to minimise uncertainty. A fairly recent study (Roalkvam 1997) dealt with a range of precautionary rituals including those performed to ensure that the sun would rise tomorrow; something that they did not take for granted as most other people would do.

The imposition of regularities fails when something out of the ordinary happens, usually events that we perceive as bad. We then assign agency to some person or persons believed to have 'caused' those occurrences. The perpetrators are identified and duly punished; witchcraft accusations are the prime example here. Identifying the source of a malevolent event, and assigning agency to that particular source, appears to be one way of ensuring certainty and thereby minimising risk.

Agency may be seen as a parallel concept to risk and uncertainty, but it could also be argued that agency is, in effect, the counterpart of these concepts. It is through agency that a person makes choices (rational or irrational, depending on the particular type of logic we apply to others' choices) in order to minimise uncertainty in everyday life. This, too, appears to be one of the basic assumptions of some of the global messages that HIV/AIDS control organisations apply across contexts with disastrous consequences. This point is clearly underscored in the contributions by Blystad, Moland, and Yamba in this issue. As clearly illustrated in these papers, what the proponents of these global messages appear to ignore is the fact that different knowledge systems and local discourses inform and shape the type of choice a person is likely to make in attempting to do something about the situation. The cultural understandings of messages emanating from outside the local context, be it on HIV/AIDS prevention or something gleaned from globally transmitted information, are important in any attempt to understand the action of people in local contexts.

The important issue, then, is how people make sense of everyday afflictions which are perceived to promote uncertainty, since their perceptions and understanding of these issues shape their responses. These issues crystallise themselves when we see them as intrinsic aspects of trying to cope with the ontological insecurity (Giddens 1993, 1995) of modern life.

Some Consequences of Modern Life

Modern life in Africa has been a mixed blessing. It certainly brings with it much improvement in the lives of people: for example, access to education and improved health care. Even if these spheres have later been eroded by many unforeseen factors, the improvement in people's lives is incontrovertibly quite positive. However, modern life, rather than modernity, has also brought with it much that is not always positive. Modern life has brought (increased) urbanisation and migration. The latter has sometimes led to the large-scale movement of people for economic reasons, such as postings of those in state employment systems, or political unrest. One consequence of such migrations is explored in most of the papers, which show that whether these migrations occurred as movements within or across states, they usually resulted in a weakening or even the severing of traditional social relations. It would not be wide of the mark to assert that such movements have contributed to a weakening of some of the central premises upon which traditional African social life was based. Moving from one's village to live in town in another region or country results, to some degree, in a dissipation of one's resources; it leads to some loss in one's belongings, supportive kinsmen, and one's ethnic group as well. Movements of this kind are equivalent to abandoning a spatial and moral sphere where norms, obligations and duties are clearly specified, for another spatio-moral context where such structures are weak, non-specific or non-existent. Migration might very well be seen as entailing not only a physical displacement but a mental displacement as well.

Because migrations lead to the weakening of traditional ways of life, it also makes the transgressing of traditional norms easier than would have been the case with living in close proximity to relatives (Nyambedha, Ringsted, infra). Migration entails displacement and marginality. Thus the migrant often operates on the margins of what is the socially and morally acceptable. Little wonder then that stress, danger and risk appear to increase on the margins of urban space in Africa, where the transplanted migrants live. This means compounding situations of vulnerability and risk, even if such risk may also be regarded as culturally specific, as Douglas (1992) has shown. To recapitulate a key point; the individual who moves from one place to another risks not only severing his/her support ties but is also in danger of losing a grasp on other support systems as well. Three of the papers in this volume deal with some of the consequences of the weakening of the supportive, but also demanding, bonds of kinship, when a person moves into urban space (Besendahl, Nyambedha, Ringsted). Besendahl shows how in plural ethnic urban settings in Malawi, the traditional marriage brokers (*ankhoswe*) were no longer able to exert any influence once the couple had migrated to town. Previously the *ankhoswe* played an important role in marriage formations, by imbuing them with traditional authority, and thereby also safeguarding the rights of women in situations of domestic strife. Physical distances, as well as changing relations among and between generations, have all contributed to make the lives of young women negotiating marriage in Malawi today a very uncertain affair indeed.

Ringsted deals with the problems of pregnant girls, a third of them orphans. They are about to enter the role of parenthood before having reached adulthood, and have neither a supportive network of kin or the support of the boy who had impregnated them. Consequently, they have to forge all kinds of new relations in order to survive. Ringsted also deals with a situation where the social fabric and traditional support network are weakening. She illustrates how these pregnant girls and young unmarried mothers, deprived of their traditional support systems, are displaced socially, economically, and mentally. They not only find themselves rejected by their own natal

families because they have given birth out of wedlock. Ringsted shows how these young girls/mothers make or become part of new support networks - far beyond what we usually think of as traditional family/extended family and kin networks. Taking a critical look at what she considers outdated anthropological kinship theories, she shows how these girls/women, with the loss of support from their own (biological/blood/natal) kin, manage to get by in their everyday life by forging new relatives, albeit remaining vulnerable. The pregnant young girls in Ringsted's paper, like in many other papers, truly encapsulate the new troubled world of the children and youth in Africa, and in particular the horrendous vulnerability of young girls. Nyambedha's paper also shows that the weakening of extended kin networks, and transformations in traditional support structures, which in the past cared for weaker member of society, are not only a consequence of physical movement away from one's traditional clime, but also result from new structures and spaces created by NGO and Church groups, to whom widows and orphans can turn for support. These modern support groups have their own sets of demands in return for the help they provide. As these demands both empower women and make them independent, as it were, they are perceived as eroding the demands of the traditional ways of life. While this might not be held as something accentuating uncertainty in the lives of these women and children, it nonetheless compounds the situation and increases structural discord between the traditional identity and emergent modern forms of relatedness that are not kin based (cf., for instance, Carsten 2000).

Bereft of their support systems people become very vulnerable. Vulnerability is thus one of the most common consequences of modern life, but it is also a consequence that is usually not equally distributed between the genders in society. This is particularly true in Africa and most of the papers in this volume highlight the specific vulnerable state of women in times of increased uncertainty. However, we find that Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, with the apt sub-title of 'Lessons from some "near miss" experiences of women', provides powerful testimony to the sad situation of women in many parts of Africa today. She deals with narrow escapes from death mainly due to gender specific conditions of reproductive health. In most African countries maternal morbidity and mortality are unacceptably high even though the medical means to prevent them exist. These occur not only because of poor health care facilities, transport deficiencies, but also because of gendered and culturally specific beliefs of how pregnant women should comport themselves. This has resulted in many women in labour attempting to tolerate pain, and to stoically delay seeking help in obstructed conditions. At worst, these women become part of the dismal statistics on increased maternal mortality, and, at best, they suffer a great deal of distress while risking their own lives and the lives of their unborn children. The stories of Bantebya-Kyomuhendo's six cases are powerful testimonies of personal tragedy in the everyday lives of women. They show that indigenous beliefs and local knowledge on child-birth practices are no longer assumed as safe or valid alternatives in any effort to improve the lives of women and reduce the suffering of pregnant women in Africa.

HIV as a Source of Increased Stress and Uncertainty

Apart from the theme we have discussed above, a number of problems stand out and receive careful examination in the papers. We must inevitably mention problems associated with HIV/AIDS and its horrendous impact on life in Africa. One of its less appreciated corollaries is troubled sexuality. The papers cover changing relations between men and women, and between spouses, and the need to grapple with the negotiation of safe and mutually acceptable sexual

encounters between the genders. Such problems are shown to be clearly part of the consequences of the impingement of modernity on the everyday life of people. Present day marriage and marital patterns, new gender roles and their association with gendered violence, and the unintended consequences of attempts to help local people live less risky and better lives, are some of the themes covered in the papers (Blystad, Moland, Mokoodi, Besendahl).

Blystad's paper deals with how the Datoga of Tanzania are grappling with globally constructed HIV/AIDS control and prevention messages. Old and well-known institutions and practices are - with the spread of HIV/AIDS - no longer valid knowledge or safe guidance for sexual and reproductive life, but have become dangerous and risky not only for the individual but for the reproduction of Datoga society as a whole. Blystad's analysis deals with the discord between Western/national Tanzanian notions of safe sex in an HIV/AIDS context and the Datoga notions of proper management of sexuality and fertility as well as the troubled effects of such dissonance. As she cautions, her analysis does not aim to map sexual conduct *per se*, but to explore how local concepts and practices of sexual conduct contrast with the national HIV/AIDS discourse. She then argues that such knowledge may enhance our understanding of why it may be difficult to accept the precepts of the HIV-prevention messages while also adhering to local African custom. Blystad's elegant analysis also shows that in exploring the dynamics in what are in effect asymmetrical encounters between local African context and (inter-) national/Tanzanian/global discourse on HIV/AIDS, the danger of reification of both sets of discourses is substantial. Yamba also castigates such global-to-local-context, 'we know better' discourses as well, and suggests that unless their perpetrators carefully examine the easy underlying assumptions and implied superiority of their activities, they end up contributing to more uncertainty than in the past.

Moland's paper poignantly illustrates the social and moral dilemma of HIV-positive women, who have to grapple at once with cultural expectations of being a good mother and the risk of infecting the new-born child. The almost universal ambiguity about bodily fluids, which are regarded both as life giving and life threatening sources, and also as potential sources of death, is generally known. As anthropologists have shown, life-giving fluids such as semen, blood, and mother's milk, are now - because of the spread of HIV/AIDS - even more strongly associated with death. Of these, the mother's milk, the pure fountain of life, has become very problematic for women in Africa. Moland's carefully argued paper shows how breast-feeding one's infant informs the world that one is a good mother - perhaps the most important one of the expected roles of women and motherhood in Kilimanjaro - and thus behaving in a culturally appropriate manner. But for an HIV-positive mother to do so - and this is made abundantly clear in the messages on HIV preventions transmitted from the World Heath Organisation - the risk of transmitting the virus to the baby is high and might result in the death of the child. To follow the guidelines of WHO for a HIV positive mother - not to breast-feed - would be a flagrant breach of a much valued norm. Thus, such mothers find themselves in both a social and a moral dilemma, which compounds the situation. They are torn between the short-term need for the approval of the encapsulating society and the long-term consequence of, most likely, transmitting a fatal disease. Moland also shows how the uncertainties of choices are compounded by the AIDS preventions instructions, which are far from clear, and which ignore the cultural contexts within which they function. Perhaps we could add that the only 'option' left for the breastfeeding mother is simply to hope that her child, in spite of the likelihood that her infected milk will kill her child, will survive. More knowledge about prevailing options, or the wide range of possibilities one faces, may lead to a situation where one is unable to make an informed choice.

One may then become constrained by the sheer range of choices available, which accentuates uncertainty and stress in life.

As we have pointed out above, another consequence of modernity is that sexual and reproductive/procreative life has become increasingly troubled. The movement from one's natal place in order to look for a livelihood in another, which may not facilitate cohabitation, has resulted in increasing tension between the spouses. In many parts of Africa it was the men who migrated to look for jobs, leaving behind their wives and children in their homes elsewhere, occasionally returning to their homes to resume conjugal relations with their wives. Many of these men had sexual relationships with other women during their long absences. This pattern has been cited as one of the fundamental causes of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and, of course, one of the ultimate causes of the unprecedented spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa (Moland, Mookodi, Yamba and Blystad). Even in cases where spouses have been able to migrate together, the traditional bonds that regulated conflict in the domestic sphere appear to have weakened in the urban area. This problem is perhaps best illustrated in the case of Botswana, a country which has experienced the most rapid modernisation and urbanisation in Africa. Women themselves might see their quest for modern life and economic independence as empowering. Men however, perceive it as a threat to traditional and patrilineal structures that constitute proper male-female roles, with women being 'naturally' and traditionally subordinated to men. The new empowerment of women seems to lead to an increased resentment by men and is sometimes advanced as the cause of male violence against women. Indeed some researchers explain this as the fundamental cause of the 'crises in masculinity' (cf., for instance, Morrell 2001), which drive the frustrated male to batter women. It is tempting to see the rise of male violence against women in Botswana, although we do not believe this phenomenon is solely limited to that country, as being caused, above all, by the increase in female emancipation. From the powerfully argued paper by Mookodi in this issue, it is clear that such a hypothesis will not be easily rejected. Botswana, now generally classified as middle-income country, contains a rising middle class including many independent women with access to their own income and thus less dependent economically on their male partners. The very high numbers of single parenthoods in Botswana may well be correlated to the increase in domestic violence (Mokoodi, Besendahl, Ringsted). While rejecting what she perceives as the 'reductionist' propensity to see female battering by male as exemplifying patriarchal dominance, Mokoodi's paper does not perceive such a person in such a situation as a victim either. In doing so, of course, she neither condemns nor accepts the ethically and morally unacceptable violence again women, which is so graphically depicted in her study.

Our discussion so far may seems to have centred on the grave conditions that heighten uncertainty and difficulties in the lives of people in Africa. This is, of course, inevitable given the topic we have decided to grapple with. We also wish to point out that issues of agency arise when people act upon their situation trying to control it an effort to minimise the levels of uncertainty in their lives. The scope of their possibilities of making a difference through their action may be quite limited; the fact that they do act, however, is significant. All the papers in the present volume deal also with situations where people act, despite grave adverse situations, to manage and cope with life. In this short introduction we have only been able to touch tangentially on these vital themes, which we believe no researcher interested in present day African life can avoid. We hope our sweeping statements will spur the reader to explore the interesting contributions in the present volume carefully and find them engaging. We wager that the papers will not leave the reader untouched.

Notes

1. Papers presented by Professors Sandra Wallman, Susan Reynolds Whyte and Todd Sanders at the conference discussed some of the broad ontological issues intrinsic to the concept of uncertainty. These papers will appear in a forthcoming volume edited by Liv Haram.

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