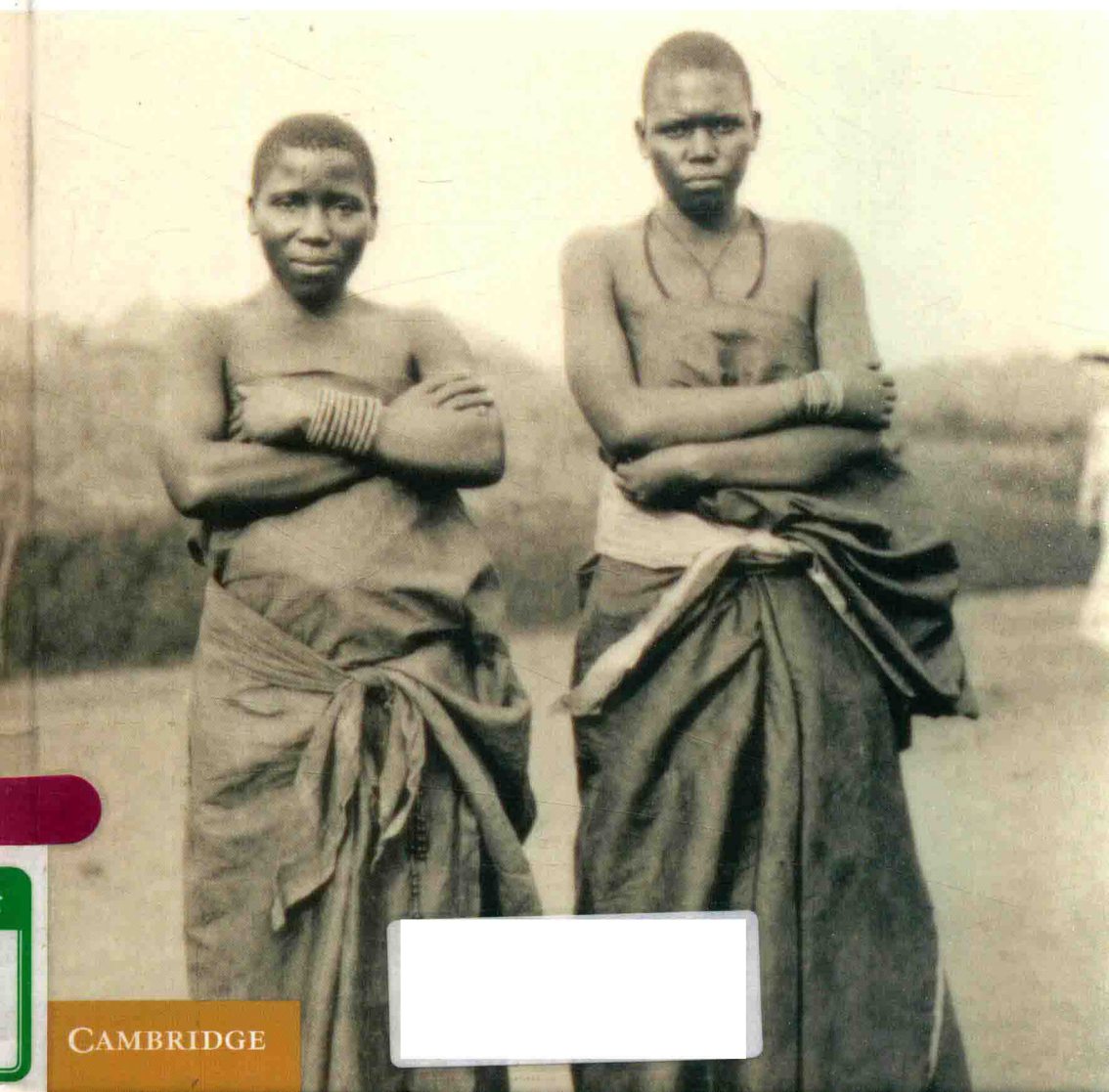


AFRICAN
STUDIES

A HISTORY OF AFRICAN MOTHERHOOD

The Case of Uganda, 700–1900

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RHIANNON STEPHENS



CAMBRIDGE

A History of African Motherhood

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Columbia University



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A History of African Motherhood

This history of African motherhood over the *longue durée* demonstrates that it was, ideologically and practically, central to social, economic, cultural, and political life. The book explores how people in the North Nyanzan societies of Uganda used an ideology of motherhood to shape their communities. More than biology, motherhood created essential social and political connections that cut across patrilineal and cultural-linguistic divides. The importance of motherhood as an ideology and a social institution meant that in chiefdoms and kingdoms, queen mothers were powerful officials who legitimated the power of kings. This was the case in Buganda, the many kingdoms of Busoga, and the polities of Bugwere. By taking a long-term perspective from c. 700 to 1900 CE and using an interdisciplinary approach – drawing on historical linguistics, comparative ethnography, and oral traditions and literature, as well as archival sources – this book shows the durability, mutability, and complexity of ideologies of motherhood in this region.

Rhiannon Stephens is Assistant Professor of African History at Columbia University. Her work has been published in scholarly journals such as *Past and Present* and the *Journal of African History*. She received her PhD in history from Northwestern University.

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In memory of my father, Dafydd ap Glyn
Son of Doris Keturah Harry

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Unfortunately this book will appear a few months too late for my father Dafydd to read it in print, but it remains inspired by his enthusiasm for studying the past, for dusty books, and for travel to faraway places. My mother Janig's passion for linguistics infected me a long time ago and helped make this research possible, while her encouragement helped get the book done. Jarod Roll has accompanied me since before this project began and while I am grateful to him for all manner of reasons, with regards to this book I am especially grateful that he has been willing to read seemingly countless drafts and always find ways to improve what was written. Finally, Menna's awe that her mother might actually write a book that she could find on a library shelf has inspired me to get it finished.

Note on Language

This book, for the most part, tells the story of people who spoke Bantu languages. In these languages nouns have prefixes that change the meaning of the stem. For nouns describing people, the places they live, and the languages they speak, I have retained those prefixes. So Bagwere, Basoga, Bashana, and Baganda are people who live in Bugwere, Busoga, Bushana, and Buganda and who speak Lugwere, Lusoga, Rushana, and Luganda. Elsewhere, for adjectival purposes, I use only the stem: Gwere, Soga, Shana, and Ganda. But these people did not inhabit a land bereft of people speaking other languages. Some of those they lived alongside spoke Nilotic languages. Where I discuss people from non-Bantu groups, I have retained the forms in those languages as spoken in modern times: Iteso people speak Ateso, Joluo people speak Dholuo, and so on.

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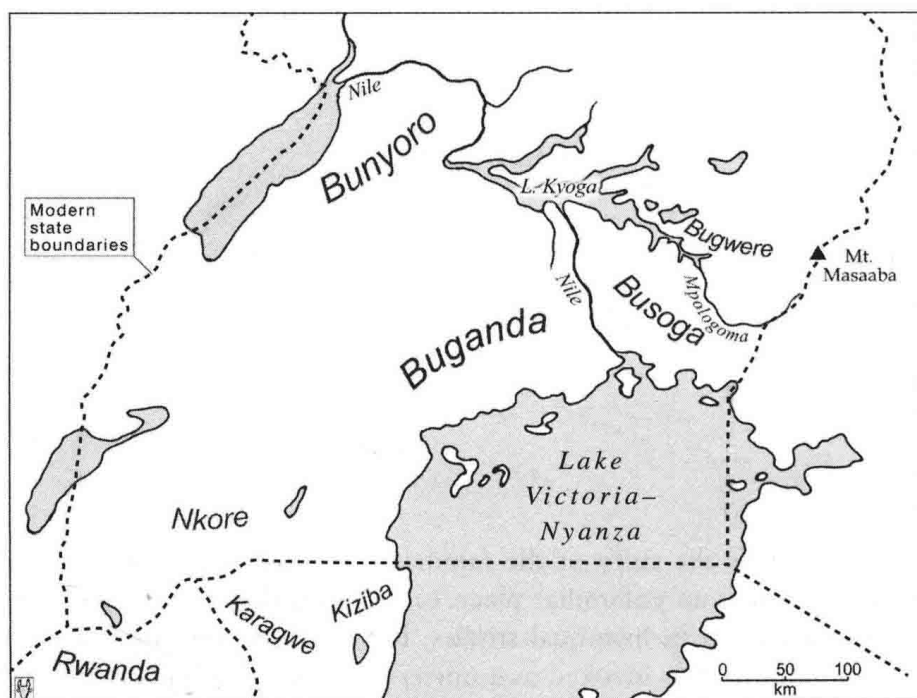
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Introduction

This book tells the story of the familiar – motherhood – in what, to many readers, is an unfamiliar place, east central Uganda. Motherhood appears regularly in historical studies, but is rarely itself the focus of analysis. Rather, it is invoked as a universal category imbued with relational and emotional significance: motherhood is usually about nurturing, caring, facilitating, and restraining. As such it can be used to explain women's position in society without challenging our ingrained concepts of essentialism and biology. But when the historical lens turns to motherhood itself, its universalism and eternality dissipate almost instantly; motherhood becomes unfamiliar. To write historically about motherhood, it is necessary to expand our understanding of it beyond biological reproduction and practices of nurture and caregiving and think instead about motherhood as a social institution and as ideology. In the area of Uganda that today encompasses the societies of Bugwere, Busoga, and Buganda – all descended from the common ancestral North Nyanza language community – such an approach opens up a wide and complicated history of motherhood that can be traced back to the first millennium and shows it to have been at the heart of most important historical developments in the area, from the organisation and reproduction of lineages and clans to the centralisation of political power into monarchical states (Map 1).

This project started, perhaps rather unfashionably, as a way of exploring women's history in precolonial Uganda. Motherhood is widely recognised as an essential aspect of women's lives in Africa, more important than marriage in terms of identity, social status, and political and



MAP 1. Great Lakes Region, including North Nyanza societies and major neighbouring states.

religious authority.¹ It seemed therefore the obvious starting point for a study charting developments in women's lives before the rapid changes of the modern era. Despite the project's initial focus, this book is an exploration of the roles motherhood has played in social organisation, economic activity, and political power rather than a history of mothers per se. To borrow a phrase so effectively used by the historian Lorelle Semley, it is a history of *public motherhood*: of motherhood as social institution and ideology.² As such this book speaks to historical research across the

¹ For example: "Although wifehood in many African societies has traditionally been regarded as functional and necessary it is at the same time seen as a transitional phase on the road to motherhood. *Mother* is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women." Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, "Family Bonds/Conceptual Binds: African Notes on Feminist Epistemologies," *Signs* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1096. Emphasis in original.

² Lorelle D. Semley, *Mother Is Gold, Father Is Glass: Gender and Colonialism in a Yoruba Town* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). Semley also uses the phrase 'public mothers,' which she in turn has borrowed from Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

premodern world, not because motherhood is a universal, but because a focus on public motherhood makes possible a fundamentally different way of viewing patrilineal and patriarchal societies.

Motherhood in African history is traditionally seen as having a specifically African form although one that is both unchanging and uniform across different regions and times. The core framework of this depiction works as follows: women who were unable to have children, either through their own infertility or that of their husbands, were socially and economically vulnerable. At best, they faced poverty and, at worst, accusations of witchcraft. After death their spirits were not remembered, except as possible agents of misfortune, and children were not named after them.³ Although it is rarely explicitly stated, the inverse is thus held to be true: women who were able to reproduce biologically sought to have as many children as possible. Such women were socially included and valued and could look forward to an economically secure future.⁴ The high birth rate in twentieth century sub-Saharan Africa is thus generally depicted as a continuation of a subcontinent-wide, precolonial approach to motherhood. There are important exceptions to this generalised depiction, but the dominant vision is of a timeless, and therefore ahistorical, African motherhood.⁵

A History of African Motherhood argues that motherhood in precolonial Africa has a history that is complex and that motherhood is central to our understanding of African history more broadly. A historical perspective enables us to see motherhood as a social institution and as an ideology that both shaped and was shaped by the communities of which it formed such an important part. As those communities changed over time – expanding, diversifying, contracting – so the way in which they constructed motherhood also changed. There was no single trajectory or outcome of motherhood even within individual communities. Some African women may have found economic and social security through their maternity, but many others will not have done so, regardless of the

³ For a clear summary of this perspective, see Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meat and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 77.

⁴ My thanks to Anne Hugon of the Centre d'Études des Mondes Africains, Paris, for our discussion on this question which helped to clarify and sharpen my thinking.

⁵ For some of the exceptions, see Steven Feierman, "Struggles for Control: The Social Roots of Health and Healing in Modern Africa," *African Studies Review* 28, no. 2/3 (1985): 73–147; Nancy Rose Hunt, "'Le Bébé en Brousse': European Women, African Birth Spacing and Colonial Intervention in Breast Feeding in the Belgian Congo," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21, no. 3 (1988): 401–32.

number of children they had.⁶ Some women may have faced isolation and insecurity as a result of infertility, but others were able to acquire ritual authority as mediums precisely because of their infertility.⁷ Motherhood also enables us to explore the complexity of social and political organisation by bringing women into the analysis without excluding men. Mothers were wives to husbands, daughters of fathers, and mothers to boys as well as girls. And motherhood, in these societies, could not exist in the absence of fatherhood. As a fundamentally relational institution, all of these relationships shaped both the individual experience of motherhood and its public form. By viewing motherhood as diverse, as culturally specific and as subject to change over time, we can see how people drew on it, as social institution and as ideology, to shape their societies long before the changes wrought by entry into the modern era of long-distance trade, capitalist markets, and colonisation.

Over the past two decades or so, historians and theorists writing about motherhood in Europe and North America have demonstrated it to be both contingent and historical and have posed questions vital for studying motherhood in Africa. “Until quite recently, however,” notes the historian of medieval Christianity, Clarissa Atkinson, “motherhood had no history; it was too thoroughly identified with the private sphere and with the ‘changeless’ biological aspects of the human condition. Women’s lives were organized and their capacities defined by their status as mothers, potential mothers, and non-mothers, but motherhood itself was not perceived as an institution shaped by culture and subject to history.”⁸ To overcome our culturally constrained vision of motherhood as “biological and invariant” and write about it historically, we need to conceptualise motherhood as an institution with an ideology, as Heather Jon Maroney argues.⁹ Such an approach enables us to untangle “the social, historical, biological and psychological dimensions of maternity.”¹⁰ In viewing

⁶ Rhiannon Stephens, “Birthing Wealth? Motherhood and Poverty in East-Central Uganda, c. 700–1900,” *Past and Present* 215 (2012): 235–68.

⁷ See, for example, Iris Berger, “Fertility as Power: Spirit Mediums, Priestesses and the Precolonial State in Interlacustrine East Africa,” in *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History*, ed. David M. Anderson and Douglas H. Johnson (London: James Currey, 1995), 65–82.

⁸ Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 6.

⁹ Heather Jon Maroney, “Embracing Motherhood: New Feminist Theory,” in *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism*, ed. Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett (London: Verso, 1986), 405.

¹⁰ Maroney, “Embracing Motherhood,” 399.