

Shafic Ssentume is more than a filmmaker or a single father. Through the chaos and calm, he is proving that fatherhood is not defined solely by paying school fees or delivering stern talks, but can also be woven from the gentle, daily threads of care, threads traditionally held by women.

# Man using YouTube to raise baby alone



The 24-year-old filmmaker and photographer, has spent the last two years packing toddler snacks and bottles of formula, learning to braid hair from YouTube tutorials. PHOTOS/ANGELA NAKIYUKA

BY ANGELA NAKIYUKA

In Uganda, where family is traditionally seen as the domain of women, and where a man's worth is often measured by his ability to provide in conventional terms, Shafic Ssentume's journey is the anomaly. The 24-year-old filmmaker and photographer, has spent the last two years packing toddler snacks and bottles of formula, learning to braid hair from YouTube tutorials. Ssentume spends each morning planning feedings, nap schedules, and film edits.

#### Clashing with custom

Ssentume's journey into parenthood began in what felt like a scene from one of his films. While covering a school graduation ceremony, he met the woman he believed he would build a life with.

"I fell in love with a beautiful girl and immediately knew we belonged together," he recalls.

Their relationship grew in the glow of shared dreams, but it soon met the firm structures of Ugandan tradition. When she became pregnant, Ssentume, young but earnest, hoped to build a peaceful and stable home. He did the *kwanjula* and bride price negotiations, to affirm his readiness and get the family's blessing.

When her family learnt of his intention, they questioned his ability to provide, against the backdrop of what a "real" man should do. "They said I was joking around and needed a serious career to marry their daughter," Ssentume explains. In a society where careers such as law, medicine, or business are prized, filmmaking is often viewed as idleness or a young man's pastime. Even his partner, swayed by the powerful voice of the clan urged him to find a "decent" job. But Ssentume held his ground.

#### The day everything changed

Three months after their daughter was born, his partner left. In Uganda, when a relationship fails, children, especially infants, almost automatically remain with the mother or her family. Ssentume did not fight her departure, but he made one unusual request:

"I told her to leave the child with me and go." And just like that, she left, forcing him to step into a role few Ugandan men fully inhabit; the primary, solo caregiver.

The first nights were a struggle with me trying to fight fatigue and making endless feeding bottles," he recounts. He turned to the only source he was familiar with; YouTube for guidance.

#### Juggling diapers and deadlines

Balancing work and parenthood required Ssentume to organise his life with precision,

but it also means doing so under the

gaze of a curious community. When he is on location, he relies on trusted friends, a chosen family replacing the traditional kinship network.

When they are unavailable, he does what many Ugandan mothers do; he carries his daughter on his back. But on a film set, this image causes concern. A man with a baby secured snugly against his spine, directing a shoot or adjusting a lens, is a powerful visual disruption. It draws comments; some encouraging, many questioning. He has had to develop a thick skin against the whispers of "why can't he hire a nanny?" In a culture where fatherhood is often expressed through provision and discipline from a slight distance, his hands-on, public caregiving is unusual.

#### Facing the critics

Society's judgment is a steady undercurrent. "People around me think I should give my child back to her mother," Ssentume shares. This advice is rooted in a deep-seated belief in the proper, orderly way of doing things. In this order, a child belongs with the mother, especially when she is breastfeeding.

A man raising an infant alone is seen as going against nature and culture. He encounters this at the clinic, where nurses always ask, "Maama w'omwana aliwa?" ("Where is the child's mother?"), where elders gently suggest he send the baby to the maternal grandmother.

But Ssentume remains steadfast. To him, his daughter is his responsibility. "If her mother had wanted her, all she would have done was to take her but she did not. She just walked away from all of us," he shares.

#### Redefining fatherhood

This is not merely a story of a father raising his daughter alone. It is a quiet manifesto, written not in ink, but in the lived language of daily rituals—a testament to love's ability to create its own world. His deepest anxiety is not a personal failing, but a social phantom: the unspoken pity his daughter might one day face for being "motherless" in a society that sanctifies motherhood. "They do not know our story," he says, a simple statement that holds within it both a wound and a shield. His defiance against this silent judgment is not found in argument, but in action; his resistance is built in the solace of new, deliberate traditions.

These traditions are the architecture of their unique universe. The evening walks that trace the same paths, the silly, improvised songs that become their anthems, the way he chronicles her life not just in photographs, but in the very texture of his art, each a brick in a home built for two. He is not filling an absence, but founding a new lineage. This daily, deliberate practice is the essence of redefining fatherhood. Through the mundane chaos and the fragile calm, he demonstrates that the role of a parent transcends the old binaries of provider and nurturer. He proves that fatherhood can be as much about the soft hum of a lullaby as it is about paying school fees, that it can be woven just as authentically from the gentle threads of emotional attunement, threads a culture often reserves for mothers.

His camera, once a tool for telling others' stories, has become a diary of this quiet revolution. It captures the intimate narrative of a Ugandan man learning, day by day, to be both father and mother, not as a performance, but as an expansion of the heart. He navigates the weight of stigma with love as his only compass, transforming potential pity into a private language of strength.