Child Fostering in West Africa
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This book has its own birth story to tell. The initial idea of producing a new empirically and theoretically inspired book on child fostering started during our individual field researches somewhere in Africa. It was then fostered and crystallized when we met at conferences on childhood and realized that we had similar ideas in mind. This led to the organization of a workshop on child fostering in 2007 in Thurnau near Bayreuth, Germany, and finally to this publication. Although the genesis and birth of our book took a long time, we have finally brought it into the world with the help of several individuals and institutions. Our thanks go to all of them: first of all, to the ‘grandes dames’ of research on child fostering, Esther Goody and Suzanne Lallemand, for accepting our invitation to be part of this project; to the contributors to this book for their patience and cooperation during the long editorial process; to Caroline Bledsoe for her critical comments on our project and to the Collaborative Research Centre 560 at Bayreuth University for financing the workshop; to Robert Parkin and Ruth Schubert for their careful reading of the texts and their most efficient help in improving the language; to “TraductionExpress” for translating Suzanne Lallemand’s article from French into English; and to Cambridge University Press and the Editors of “Anthropologie et Sociétés” for their permission to republish the texts by Esther Goody and Suzanne Lallemand respectively. Special thanks go to Sabine Leupold, Heike Schwankl, Jakob Treige and Carsten Mildner for their support in proofreading the book and to the staff at Brill, especially Franca de Kort, for their advice and practical support. Our deepest gratitude is extended to all those children and parents who shared their experiences and parts of their lives with us.

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The revision of the census after some years means that we have to do the census all over again. No population changes its place of residence so easily as these people do in the interior of the country. After someone’s death many people move to another place. Moreover, the family, as we understand it, is very widespread. The majority of the small children do not live with their parents, but are raised by their aunts or uncles, whom they call father or mothers. This frequently causes errors in our census. Another cause of error: the villages and the people often change their names or they have three or four different ones! The man who is called Bio Yerima in his father’s village is called Chabi Bagou in his mother’s village and even differently by his friends. This is why the census requires a lot of time, and a high degree of attention and patience. (National Archives of Benin, trimestrial report, 1E30, March 1918)

The colonial officer who wrote this report in 1918 summarizes some of the obstacles in the nearly impossible task of counting the population in the north of the then French colony of Dahomey. The population he tried to count was always on the move, changing identities when changing places and sending their children to live with people who were not their biological parents. This report, found in the colonial archives in Porto-Novo (Republic of Benin), is one of the earliest written documents in the former colony of Dahomey that refers to the local practice of child fostering. It illustrates the discrepancy between local notions of parenthood and mobility in a particular West African region and the cultural notions of a Western state officer at that time. Moreover, the report proves that child fostering in West Africa was everyday practice a hundred years ago, and probably long before that.

One century and many colonial and post-colonial population surveys later, we know that the fostering of children in West Africa is still an everyday practice. Up until today, many children grow up with people who are not their biological parents, whether (classificatory) uncles or aunts, (classificatory) grandparents, elder siblings, or non-kin such as friends of

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1 There may be similar archival documents referring to other former colonies, as Coe’s chapter in this volume suggests for the British colony of the Gold Coast.
their parents. Fostering is a widespread practice in many African societies and is well described for West Africa, from Senegal in the west (e.g. Vandermeersch 2002) to Cameroon in the east (e.g. Notermans 2004). The results of quantitative studies based on census data show that in the late eighties of the twentieth century, in Ghana’s Southeast Volta region 27% of all children and 40% of children aged 10 to 14 were not living with their biological mothers (Page 1989, 414). In the Ivory Coast, 40% of all children living in the forest zone and 35% of children in the savannah region used to live with foster parents (Page 1989, 414). In Sierra Leone, incidences of between 39% and 44% have been reported (Bledsoe and Isingo-Abanihe 1989, Isaac 1982). However, these figures are based on national census data and may be misleading, as they depend on assumptions of stability and predictability.

Despite the high frequency and widespread distribution of child fostering in West Africa, the practice has only recently been examined. It was not until the seventies of the twentieth century that the phenomenon started to be described and analysed by social scientists, who have mostly been of Western origin. In West Africa, two female anthropologists, Esther Goody and Suzanne Lallemand, came across child fostering during their first periods of long-term fieldwork in Ghana and Togo respectively (Goody 1973, Lallemand 1976), and both made in-depth studies of this practice in supplementary studies (Goody 1982, Lallemand 1994). Like the colonial officer, both researchers ran into child fostering unexpectedly and realized that the practice, though largely unknown to Europeans at that time, appeared to be very meaningful to Africans, who felt that leaving one’s children with others was good for the children as it would give them better discipline and stronger characters, as well as strengthening the bonds between dispersed kin.

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2 Not only in West Africa is the upbringing of children by people other than the biological parents a widespread phenomenon. There is ethnographic evidence of such practices from other parts of Africa (Shell-Duncan 1994, Talle 2004), as well as from many other world regions. Ethnographic studies show that fostering is also a common way of bringing up children in Hawai’i (Modell 1998), Alaska (Bodenhorn 2000), China (Jack Goody 1996, 66f.), Oceania (Carroll 1970, Brady 1976, Donner 1999), Papua New Guinea (Demian 2004), Peru (Leinaweaver 2007), Ecuador (Weismantel 1995), Brazil (de Matos Viegas 2003, Fonseca 1985), Amazonia (Halbmayer 2004) and Jamaica (Wardle 2004). Historical studies prove that in many parts of Western Europe, too, child fostering was widespread in times before the nuclear family became the predominant model of parenthood (Jack Goody 1983, Niederberger 1997).

3 Personal information from Esther Goody and Suzanne Lallemand sent to the editors.
Although both authors did extensive research on child fostering, providing many empirical and theoretical insights (see Chapters 1–3), their work has rarely been synthesized. Their studies represent different theoretical traditions, localized in different countries. Goody, a scholar from the United Kingdom, worked in the theoretical tradition of structural functionalism and focused her empirical research on former British colonies in West Africa. Lallemand, a scholar from France, worked in the theoretical tradition of structuralism and focused her empirical research on the former French colonies in West Africa. Differing paradigms and also language barriers may have contributed to the fact that their work has rarely been used in an integrated way in new studies of fostering.

The lack of theoretical interest in this issue in recent decades is also related to the declining popularity of kinship studies in anthropology generally. After Schneider’s (1984) fundamental criticism of the assumptions of Western anthropological notions of kinship and the raison d’être of kinship as a subdiscipline in anthropology, many scholars lost interest in kinship as a field of anthropological enquiry (Carsten 2004, Holy 1996). New approaches to kinship, which arose at the turn of the 21st century and were more interested in the everydayness of kinship than in formal kinship structures, resulted in a revival of interest in kinship in general, and especially in new forms of social and non-biological relatedness, although mainly in Western societies (Carsten 2004, 23, Strathern 1992a). While classical approaches to kinship associated social kinship and fictive relationships with non-Western societies and biological kinship and blood ties with Western societies, scholars now contested this dichotomy and examined forms of non-biological kinship in the West, resulting from international adoption (Bowie 2004, Howell 2006, Volkman 2005, Yngveson 2010), new reproductive technologies (Edwards 2000, Franklin 1997, Strathern 1992b) including commercial surrogacy (Pande 2009, Ragoné 1994), newly composed families following divorce and remarriage (Simpson 1994, 1998), homosexual families (Weston 1997) and organ donation (Carsten 2011). Child fostering, which is often associated with old-fashioned, classical approaches to social kinship in non-Western societies, was not given much attention in this revival (with some important exceptions, such as Weismantel 1995 and Carsten 1995). It has probably been considered too unspectacular, too ‘local’ or ‘traditional’ and too closely connected with ‘just’ child-raising practices to attract more attention in the new, Western-oriented and postmodern studies of kinship.

Since the first decade of the 21st century, the growing popularity of migration studies has brought child fostering and children’s mobility back
on to the social scientists’ agenda, though mainly as a subtopic in studying transnational family lives (Coe 2008, 2011, Kamga 2011, Mazzucato 2011). While at first the relevance of kinship relations was thought to have diminished with modernity and globalization, scholars then realized that modern and global migration movements cannot be understood without considering people’s transnational kinship networks. In West Africa, migration decisions, trajectories and dilemmas are often influenced by one’s kin (Barten 2009, Fleischer 2007). Transnational and transcontinental mobilities often depend on people’s mobile practices during childhood and adolescence. The ways in which people in and from this region create or maintain kinship relations between different countries and continents, and the way they connect to or disconnect from close relatives, cannot be understood without considering how people move between the houses of scattered family members within their West African homelands (see also Drothoehm, this volume). The aim of the present book is to revitalize the study of child fostering as an important research topic in its own right, to reconnect recent studies on fostering to the classical studies of Goody and Lallemand, and to study fostering with all its local, national and international dimensions and complexities. By doing so, we also understand this volume as a contribution to overcoming the dichotomy between “the West and the rest” (Carsten 2004, 25) by looking at social kinship in Africa in a comparative and interconnected way.

We do this in three different parts. In the first part, we present two classical texts in which child fostering is theorized (Chapters 1 and 2). Both Esther Goody and Suzanne Lallemand agreed to republish these sections of their previous works (Goody 1982, Lallemand 1988, the latter in a translated version). This is followed by a theoretical chapter by Erdmute Alber (Chapter 3) that seeks to synthesize and further develop both approaches. After discussing British structural-functionalist and French structuralist approaches, she combines them with actor-oriented approaches, as well as with insights from the new kinship studies. On this basis, Alber argues in favour of a theoretical approach that sees fostering as a transfer of imagined belonging.

In the second part of the book we present new empirical research in which both classical and new anthropological approaches to kinship are considered. In four ethnographic case studies (Chapters 4 to 7), situated respectively in Benin, Ghana, Cameroon and Cape Verde, child fostering is studied in a wide range of ecological, social and cultural contexts within the region of West Africa: in Sahelian, rain forest and marine environments, in rural and urban settings, in patrilineal and matrilineal kinship
structures, and in differing contexts with regard to the importance of international migration and transnational family ties. In these four case studies, local notions and norms of child fostering are considered, as are people’s experiences with such rules and norms and the ways in which they interpret, use and sometimes bypass them.

The third part of the book is dedicated to the aspect of law, which we consider important for understanding fostering in West Africa. Two empirical chapters (8 and 9), which adopt respectively a historical approach focussing on the beginning of the twentieth century, and a legal approach concentrating on recent times, emphasize the importance of the legal framework within which child fostering takes place. They show that the law not only provides a taken-for-granted legal background to fostering relations, but also that the actors involved in the negotiations on children’s belonging actively refer to these informal and formal rules and laws.

**Etic and Emic Interpretations of Child Fostering**

Though different scholars have recognized the practice of child fostering in different West African contexts, there is no agreement over how to define this practice. This is due not only to the varying ways in which people practise child fostering, but also to the fact that the people involved in the practice, and scholars who try to understand it, refer to it in different and changing ways. Goody uses the term ‘child fostering’ and defines it as the institutionalized delegation of the nurturance and/or educational elements of the parental role, considering fostering as a highly functional way of raising children for both parents and societies (Goody 1982). Lallemand speaks about ‘child circulation’ and considers it to be a form of gift exchange, whereby the gift of a child creates an exchange relationship between the biological and foster parent(s) (Lallemand 1988). Some authors prefer the term ‘social parenthood’ (Alber 2003, Roost Vischer 1998), while others speak of ‘adoption’ (Bowie 2004), ‘the exchange of children’ (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985) or ‘child relocation’ (Einarsdóttir 2006). When children are regarded as social actors and not only as the passive recipients of education, or as objects of exchange, fostering is also described as children’s mobility (Notermans 2008).

In this book, we refer to child fostering as a social practice allowing or obliging children to move to a household other than that of their biological parent(s) and to stay there for long periods of time. Such a broad
definition enables us to capture the variety of forms in which child fostering is practised. Nevertheless, we emphasize that ‘child fostering’ as an etic concept does not always reflect emic categories. In certain contexts parents do not label their biological and foster children differently, and accordingly children do not always differentiate between biological parents and foster parents (Alber 2003). In hardly any society in West Africa do people use a particular local term for child fostering as a specific form of parenthood, child-raising practice or pattern of mobility. In some areas, there are specific expressions for children raised by people who are not their biological parents (Drotbohm and Martin, this volume), while in other areas there are no such expressions. In some contexts fostering may refer to the practice of claiming other people’s children (Goody 1982, Martin, Meier and Notermans, all this volume), while in other contexts it means sending children out and entrusting them to others (Drotbohm, this volume). Sometimes fostering is seen as the delegation of parental tasks to foster parents and the withdrawal of the biological parents from the children’s upbringing (Alber 2003, Martin and Notermans, this volume), while in other contexts it is seen as co-mothering, a sharing of tasks requiring well-balanced cooperation between the biological and the foster mother (Drotbohm, this volume, Verhoef 2005). Children who live under the authority of their biological fathers but are cared for by their mother’s co-wives or paternal grandmothers, are seen as foster children in some contexts (Drotbohm and Notermans, this volume, Page 1989), but in others they are not. In northern Ghana, while a girl living with her father’s married sister may be referred to as a potential co-wife (Meier, this volume), she would be classified as a foster child in other regions.

In using the umbrella term ‘child fostering’, we are imposing a Western concept on culturally diverse local concepts and practices. As mentioned before, the notion of ‘child fostering’ with reference to the African context emerged in the West in the 1970s, in contrast to modern Euro-American notions of children’s upbringing which suggest that a child's well-being is best guaranteed when it is raised by its biological parents, and in particular by its biological mother. Such notions, which were strongly shaped by modern ideas of Western child development psychology, sharply contrasted with people’s notions in African societies, where leaving children with people other than the biological parents was and still is an often accepted, sometimes even preferred way of bringing up children. Furthermore, the concept emerged against the backdrop of modern Western notions of parenthood, where birth parents are seen as autonomous individuals, deciding if and how many children they would like to have, and assuming that these children belong to them as individuals. In contrast, in
most West African contexts, birth parents were, and partly still are, seen as bearing children not for themselves, but for the whole family: people should share their children as they should share their food, and not refuse people's claims on their children. We take this general attitude of sharing children among kin as the foundation for the diverse manifestations of child fostering throughout West Africa, while seeking to identify particular features and transformations of this practice in different social and cultural contexts.

With regard to terminology, we prefer the term child ‘fostering’ to ‘fosterage’ because the first points to a process, to incompleteness and to a coming-into-being, while the second refers rather to a static system or a state of being. This terminological choice reflects our argument that child fostering is a fluid, flexible and negotiable social practice rather than a rigid institution. In West Africa, child fostering was and is most often an informal practice in which children's belonging is negotiated between different actors and at different times, while always leaving room for re-negotiation and change. But since the end of the nineteenth century, when colonial statehood came into being, children's belonging has also been negotiated within the framework of state law and legal institutions (see Coe and Wanitzek, this volume).

**Lived Everyday Practice**

To provide new empirical and theoretical insights for the study of child fostering, we consider it important to pay more attention to people's lived experiences. We suggest four important foci of analysis when investigating the everyday practices in this field: the multiple positions from which people act; the conflicts that (may) arise when fostering arrangements start, evolve or end; the emotions of the different actors that may influence people's actions; and, finally, the changes that may occur in both personal lifetime and historical time. As will be seen, these foci are deeply intertwined.

**Multiple Positions**

Persons of different ages, families, generations, kinship roles and economic, social and legal positions are usually involved in child fostering. Not only do adults occupy different kinship positions—as biological parents, foster parents, spouses or in-laws of foster parents, household heads, or the first or second wives of a polygynous husband—but children, too, act from different positions, such as daughters or sons, children or grandchildren,
biological children receiving foster children in their homes, foster children moving to other people’s homes, young children who have no say and older ones who have the right to make decisions themselves. To understand the complexities and ongoing negotiations that occur in child fostering, we argue that we need to analyse the practice from a multitude of perspectives, rather than trying to describe it in a generalizing manner as a single, seemingly homogeneous ‘cultural’ practice.

How changes in fostering arrangements are perceived and interpreted by different actors in their different social positions is revealed in Notermans’ case study. The material comes from a provincial urban society in east Cameroon. In this society, matrilineal kinship, a high frequency of polygyny, divorce and informal conjugal relationships mean high numbers of foster children, who mostly live with women other than their biological mothers. Notermans focuses on the perspective of foster mothers and their relationship with the first mothers of the children. At the outset of a foster arrangement both first mothers and foster mothers may feel they are being helped by the arrangement, but in the long run they may compete with each other if the child decides to return to its biological mother. Notermans argues that women not only occupy different positions, but also change social position during their lifetime, and thus their stance towards the practice, too.

How women act from different kin positions—as brother’s sisters, ‘female fathers’, wives and later as co-wives—is also shown by Meier’s contribution (Chapter 5) on Bulsa society in northern Ghana. Within this patrilineal society, a man’s sister, through special rituals, is regarded as of vital importance for his wife’s successful reproduction. Also, a man’s daughter may be fostered by his sister, who will raise her and might later on give her to her husband as a second wife. In this way, a foster child may eventually become a co-wife.

Drotbohm’s case study (Chapter 7) focuses on the different positions of foster children in Cape Verde. She differentiates between children who live with foster mothers while their biological mothers live nearby, and children living with a relative in Cape Verde, while their biological mother has migrated overseas. While Drotbohm considers children’s different social positions, Martin (Chapter 4) examines the implications of children’s different kin positions with regard to their experience of being fostered. All these case studies, in their different ways, show how particular actors in their diverse and changing positions perceive and shape the practice of child fostering.
Analysing the practice from a multitude of perspectives shows that in any empirical case of child fostering, different voices and interests are involved. This helps us to overcome the somewhat generalizing manner of structuralist and structural-functionalist approaches. Having different actors with their various perspectives and strategies in mind, it is no longer possible to talk about the functionality of child fostering in general. A concrete fostering arrangement might be functional for a grandmother, but not necessarily for the child involved. Fostering a child in exchange for the marriage of a woman can be wise from the perspective of the woman’s mother, but not necessarily from the perspective of the father of the child.

Conflicts

Children’s belonging is a highly negotiated social terrain, and the ethnographic cases presented in this book show that, due to different interests, these negotiations often go along with tensions. Indeed, conflicts are a vital element of kinship life in general. In West Africa this is especially the case in polygynous households, where several wives and their children are competing for scarce resources. Here, the everyday realities often differ quite considerably from the prevailing ideal of the harmonious African family dominated by strong family ties and bonds of solidarity. By focusing on the everyday practice of kin relationships, it soon becomes clear that social tensions, conflicts and crises are as inherent to kinship life as intimacy, solidarity and emotional warmth.

Therefore, to do justice to people’s experience, we need to focus not only on how people enjoy and feel helped and supported by child fostering, but also on how people feel frustrated, disappointed or maltreated by it. This, however, is not meant as a criticism of the practice as such, but as an attempt to understand it better. Conflicts become eminently visible when the focus turns from the adults to the foster children. Martin’s case study, situated in a rural area in northern Benin, focuses on the narrated experiences of foster children in different kin positions. In a society where marriage is seen as an important part of coming of age, where polygynous relations are widespread, and where marital relations are regarded as less stable than siblings’ relations, many children grow up with relatives other than their biological parents. Martin’s material reveals that conflicts often result from perceived discrepancies between the norm of equal treatment for all children living in a household and children’s experiences of
inequality and discrimination, while such conflicts are more often narrated by children who grow up with a sibling of their father.

In Notermans’ case study (Chapter 6) conflicts between foster mothers and biological mothers take centre stage. While at the outset of a fostering arrangement both the biological mother and the foster mother may accept the arrangement, their opinions may change as their life circumstances change. Biological mothers who have out-fostered their children to rescue them from co-wife rivalry, or to enhance their own chances of remarrying after a divorce, often fall back on these children when a first or second marriage ends. By reclaiming their children after long periods of time, they may cause conflict with the foster mother who has cared for the child for a long time.

In Drotbohm’s case study conflicts arise when children’s expectations of their biological mothers are not met. When Cape Verdean mothers leave the country in search of ‘greener pastures’ abroad, they often leave their children with female relatives. The difference between the ideal of a temporary, short-term separation and the perceived long-term absence of the mother may cause strains and conflicts for the mothers as well as for their children, although they are rarely shown openly.

**Emotions**

Although Bronislaw Malinowski pointed out eight decades ago that “after all, kinship is a matter of flesh and blood, the result of sexual passion and maternal affection, of long and intimate daily life, and of a host of personal interests” (1930, 19), emotions have been widely neglected as a topic of inquiry in kinship studies.

The reasons why emotions deserve more attention, especially in the study of child fostering, are manifold. First, people’s everyday lives are full of emotions, which, to a greater or lesser degree, influence how they interpret the world and act within it. By paying attention to emotion, we are able to present a fuller view of what is at stake for people in their everyday lives (ibid.). Emotions offer us as anthropologists important insights into people’s unequal power positions and the daily struggles they experience. Focussing on emotions enables us, as Abu-Lughod (1993) puts it, not only to tell stories about lived lives, but also to write against generalizations that produce structures or typifications, and to apply a ‘tactical humanism’, including in the study of child fostering. Besides, it can ‘reanimate the sometimes robotic image of humans which social science has purveyed’ (Lutz and White 1986, 431). We are in agreement with Carsten’s argument that we need a close up, experiential view of kinship that is too often
excluded from anthropological accounts (2004, 9), as such a perspective allows us to understand better what kinship is all about. When looking at people occupying different social and power positions, having different truths, suffering from conflicts, and sometimes fighting with one another, we cannot exclude emotions from our accounts. Emotions are also an integral part of the dialogical nature of anthropological fieldwork and are thus implicated in the production of knowledge (Monchamp 2007). Therefore, instead of trying to cleanse ethnographic writing of emotions, we argue for their deliberate integration.

In our case studies in West Africa, emotions are often deeply intertwined with forms and processes of material exchange. Drotbohm’s chapter shows that the gifts sent from abroad to children in Cape Verde are a way of showing a mother’s love. Martin’s chapter shows that the refusal of food, clothing or a dowry may cause foster children to feel disappointed, maltreated or exploited. Although Malinowski seems to have had couples and mothers particularly in mind when talking about the emotional side of kinship life, we think that—at least as far as child fostering is concerned—emotions play a crucial role for all the actors involved, though the perspectives and the related emotions of these actors may differ widely.

The importance of emotions becomes evident when we include the perspective of the children being fostered. Foster children’s views concerning their situation often do not correspond to the views of their (biological or foster) fathers and/or mothers in many respects (see Notermans 2008, Martin, this volume). This is also the case in respect of parents and children in transnational Ghanaian and Cape Verdean families, where absent parents and the children they have left behind with relatives show different emotional responses to the situation caused by the transnational migration structures (Coe 2008, Drotbohm, this volume). As Drotbohm puts it, Cape Verdean foster children whose mothers live abroad have to negotiate their emotional bonds in an often unpredictable social context. In the same way, foster mothers in Cameroon have to negotiate their emotions when they are confronted with the painful reality of their foster children suddenly leaving the house to return to their biological parent(s) and never coming back (Notermans, this volume).

_Lifetimes and Historical Change_

Changing phases in peoples’ life-courses usually go along with changes in their social positioning. Such changes often make people change their attitudes towards child fostering. Leaving a child with another relative
might be seen as useful and desirable by an unmarried girl with an unwanted pregnancy, but it might be seen as undesirable by a married woman who wants to keep the child in her home. As one's personal life experiences change, so one's role expectations, codes of conduct and economic positions may change over one's life-course. The relevance of people's changing social positions during their life-course with regard to fostering decisions is demonstrated in Meier's case study of the 'doglientiri' relationship in Ghana (this volume). When a woman carries out life-cycle rituals on the belly of her brother's pregnant wife, she may later claim the baby girl, the 'doglie', incorporate her in her marital household and—ideally—marry her off to her husband or one of his clan mates when the child has reached marriageable age. This particular relationship shows how women's matrimonial itineraries and the life-courses of foster children are intertwined in this rural society.

From a different perspective, this is also at stake in Notermans' study (this volume). Women experience vital life events during their life-course, such as becoming pregnant, losing a biological or foster child, accepting marriage, finding a co-wife, being divorced or falling ill. During these periods of uncertainty, women have to revise their situation, re-orient themselves and make new choices. These choices may affect the way fostering arrangements develop over time and how they are seen by the different actors involved.

Child fostering is embedded not only in individual life-courses, but also in specific social contexts and historical times. In addition to structural-functionalist and structuralist studies, new approaches have shown that changes in child fostering are bound up with wider social transformations (e.g. Martin 2007, Alber et al. 2010). For instance, Martin argues that changes in the local economy in northern Benin, the introduction of the plough and the entry of women into agricultural production have had an impact on the local practice of child fostering (2007, 243f.). Similarly, Alber (2010) shows that the spread of schooling would never have been possible in colonial northern Dahomey if new forms of fostering had not been developed, especially for rural children who needed a place to stay in urban areas.

Drotbohm (this volume) reveals that social changes and changes in women's life-courses may influence practices of child fostering. In Cape Verde, the feminization of migration has led to new forms of child fostering. Thus, biological mothers select close kin, their sisters and mothers, as foster mothers, and they maintain close contact with their children.
Co-mothering is central to these new fostering arrangements between the biological mother, her child and the foster mother, which Drotbohm calls ‘foster triangles’. These new fostering arrangements go along with new ideologies of ‘good’ (transnational) mothering, emphasizing the emotional and material commitment of the biological mother towards both her child and the co-mother.

**Law**

In order to understand child fostering in West Africa, the lived everyday practices cannot be seen in isolation from the broader legal frames in which people’s lives are embedded.

Framed within structural-functionalist kinship studies, research on child fostering in West Africa initially placed a lot of emphasis on the legal aspects. Jack and Esther Goody’s definition of child fostering entails that the legal responsibility for a child remains with the birth parents, whereas its nurture, training and sponsoring might be transferred to foster parents. In this approach fostering was regarded solely from the perspective of the parents, and it was seen first and foremost as a matter of claiming rights to other people’s children (Goody 1982).

With the new approaches to kinship, the legal aspects of fostering disappeared from sight. Now, the central themes were everyday negotiations in respect of children’s belonging, conflicts and the sharing of property. Though we appreciate these new ways of thinking about fostering, we nevertheless think that legal questions and other normative aspects should not be neglected but discussed within the framework of a globalized and rapidly changing world. Today, statehood and international law are globalized ‘givens’ in any part of the world and influence people’s everyday lives. Children are not only fostered in accordance with local norms and codes of conduct (see especially Meier and Martin, this volume): the fostering arrangements are also embedded in a wider framework of national family laws, such as laws on citizenship and globalized child protection rules (see the articles by Coe and Wanitzek in this volume). Even if the people who negotiate child fostering arrangements do not refer to national laws, or seek to determine how they relate to their behaviour, such laws exist and can become relevant in cases of dispute. Coe (Chapter 8) shows that in the Gold Coast this was the case at the beginning of the twentieth century.
Early research described child fostering as a local practice, emphasizing local notions and norms which could be described as customary or ‘traditional’ law. But since the UN convention on the rights of the child became law in 1990, researchers have more often reflected on interactions and conflicts between ‘written’ norms and rules and people’s lived practices.

Ulrike Wanitzek’s article in this collection (Chapter 9) describes the local, national and international legal frameworks in respect of fostering and adoption transactions in the Republic of Ghana against the background of increasing international migration. By analysing two court cases regarding children adopted by close relatives living in Europe or the US, she shows how locally embedded fostering practices have to be adapted to national laws on adoption. Additionally, she argues that in the light of the case studies presented, in which Ghanaians adopt their relatives in order to get a permit for them to live abroad, a clear-cut separation between national and international adoption cannot be drawn.

This and other chapters demonstrate that legal aspects play a decisive role, especially in international fostering arrangements. African children whose parents have migrated stay with relatives in their home country, while the parents plan to take the children to the county of migration later on, as soon as their own legal status becomes more stable (Drotbohm, this volume). When people migrate from West Africa to Western countries and acquire a permit to stay, they are usually not allowed to bring their foster children with them, as these are not considered as being their own children under European state laws. Wanitzek’s chapter (this volume) shows that adoption is used as a legal solution for such children, even if this involves unintended consequences. By taking a legal perspective, her approach provides an important complementary view of the issues considered in the anthropological chapters of this book.

Different, partly overlapping and sometimes opposing norms and legal regulations provide the legal framework in which concrete cases of child fostering were and still are negotiated. Today, informal local norms and codes of conduct coexist with national and international rules and legal regulations, albeit sometimes quite unrelated to each other (Alber 2011). In negotiating children’s belonging people may refer to different norms and rules. And in some areas this was already the case in the early colonial period. Coe (this volume) discusses fostering from the angle of history, with colonial law as a central issue. Her analysis of records of trials reveals how people discussed concrete cases of children who had been entrusted to others by their parents and how the actors argued that different concrete cases should be labelled either ‘child fostering’, ‘child pawning’ or
‘child slavery’. Coe’s material shows that all concepts can become a matter of negotiation and that actors act strategically when trying to convince the court of a specific interpretation of the arrangement. A further historical approach is Alber’s discussion of recent discourses on child fostering and child trafficking in Benin (Alber 2011). All these studies demonstrate the co-existence of informal local norms (customary law) with formal national and international legal regulations as part of the complex legal realities in West African countries in the twentieth century.

Fostering goes along with other mobilities in a progressively globalizing world, such as schooling, international migration and national or international child adoption. Each of these mobilities has legal implications: school education has become a norm in West Africa, even though not all children go to school. This is, inter alia, an effect of the work of the numerous international organizations operating as local actors in West Africa. These organizations, which are committed to child protection, fight to send children to school and argue against child labour, while referring to international children’s rights conventions. The impact of their activities on local forms of child fostering is twofold. On the one hand, people who foster children are increasingly having to defend themselves for pursuing this practice, as they are often criticized by such organizations, which regard the biological parents to be the best people to raise children. On the other hand, child fostering arrangements have become more and more important, as they are often decisive in permitting children to attend school or to engage in professional training (see Alber 2010). Thus, interventions based on children’s rights conventions can condemn and strengthen local forms of child fostering at the same time.

FROM COLONIAL OFFICER TO STATE ADMINISTRATOR

Child fostering in West Africa, as everywhere else in the world, is a socially and historically embedded practice performed in different and changing contexts of statehood and state regulations. The story of the colonial officer in Dahomey from the beginning of the twentieth century illustrates this for a particular place and historical moment. At that time, child fostering was seen a problem for colonial population surveys, which were the basis for taxation policies and the recruitment of soldiers, but it was not regarded as a practice inimical to the colonial power’s administrative work. Today, state regulation procedures affect matters of kinship and family life to a greater extent than ever before in Benin, as elsewhere in West Africa.
The high number of children moving between different households still causes problems for state administrations that take people living in fixed and determined places as the norm and as a pre-condition for clear-cut and non-negotiable constructions of national citizenship. Personal identity documents have become much more important, especially in transnational contexts. In a context of modern statehood, questions of the legal custody of children have become more pertinent, and also become more complex when people move between countries, as different state regulations become involved. In times when people, including children, move between households, villages, regions, states and even continents, locally anchored and embedded practices of child fostering raise new practical, political and also ethical questions. What should be done with regard to children in Western Europe who, according to local law in West Africa, belong to a foster parent, but according to state law in Europe do not? Should laws be altered in order to integrate and respect foreign notions and practices of children’s belonging?

Colonialism was the beginning of the modern state-building process in West Africa and beyond. The colonial officer and his view of child fostering stood at the beginning of an irreversible process in which the state, global institutions and non-governmental organizations have increasingly intervened in matters of kinship, family and childhood.

In West Africa and other parts of the world, people continue to use different names for similar practices, children continue to be raised by people who are not their biological parents, and state administrators continue to ignore this in their national population surveys. People from West Africa carry their notions regarding children’s belonging and foster practices with them when moving to other world regions, sometimes unaware that there might be different notions of children’s belonging in the countries of destination. With such problems in mind, we argue for greater sensitivity in the face of different notions of children’s belonging and different upbringing practices. We hope for a future in which informed lawyers, politicians and development workers in their respective institutions will contribute to the formation of national and international regulations in which local fostering practices, instead of being simply ignored or opposed, will find an appropriate place.


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PART ONE

PERSPECTIVES ON THEORIES
CHAPTER ONE

A FRAMEWORK FOR THE ANALYSIS OF PARENT ROLES

Esther Goody

Anthropological accounts of parenthood have tended either to concentrate on formal institutions—the transfer of bridewealth as securing rights in children, initiation rituals—or to concern the character of early emotional and ‘caretaking’ relationships and the learning of impulse control. Not only are these areas of special interest to the psychologist but, clearly, with the learning of language and the basic cultural repertoire of custom, gesture, and idiom, this period is a vital one for the formation of adult character in a given society. If, however, we are concerned with the technical skills and role structure of this same society, we must give more emphasis to the context of learning in later childhood and adolescence. Moreover, it seems clear that the pattern of expectations governing interpersonal relationships is not established once and for all during early childhood. In later years relations between parents and children are no longer dominated by physical dependency; these and the relations with peers only then begin to take the form which they will retain in adulthood. And it is during adolescence, with emerging self-awareness, that the individual’s position in the wider kin group and the community comes to take shape.

All these elements must be included in any framework for analysing the nature of parent roles in West Africa. The difficulty in finding such a framework is to agree on a suitable theoretical basis for its derivation. I propose to resolve this by asking simply: ‘What are the critical tasks which have to be dealt with in producing a society’s new members, and rearing them so that they can effectively assume adult roles in society?’ What, in very broad terms, must parents do? It is immediately obvious that there are many tasks which have to be done, but which in our society are carried out not by parents but by nurseries, schools, industry, the state, or even by the new recruits themselves. And it could be argued that tasks

which are not performed by parents in our own society are not properly parental tasks. Logically this is a perfectly correct position, but I think it more fruitful theoretically to take the opposite view, and consider that the full range of problems involved in reproducing a new generation be treated together. If we find that in certain societies some of these tasks are carried out in the family, while others are the concern of wider groups or are left to the maturing individual, then this tells us something important about the society concerned. In short, we must see parenthood as divisible into several different roles, each concerned with a different prerequisite for social replacement. It then becomes possible to see how these tasks are linked or distributed in different societies. What is of particular theoretical interest is the ways in which institutions external to the kinship system itself affect the allocation of parent roles.

Parent Roles

Anthropologists have traditionally defined roles in terms of the rights and duties associated with them. This has the clear advantage of focussing attention on the interactive aspect of roles, for one person's rights are another's obligations. There have been some attempts to see parenthood in these terms, notably a paper, ‘Transactions in parenthood’, in which W.H. Goodenough acknowledges that physiological parenthood and what he calls ‘psychic parenthood’ have some significance, but proceeds to outline a framework for analysis which is limited to ‘transactions in the rights, duties, privileges and powers of jural parenthood’ (1970a, 398). He suggests that an analysis must deal with succession to jural parenthood as a result of incapacity or death of parents; with exercise by others of overriding rights in the child; with delegation without actual surrender of jural rights; and with arrangements by the jural parents for sharing of some or all of their rights; and outright transfer of rights in the child (1970a, 409). However, Goodenough considers that it is not possible to discuss the content of parental rights comparatively; this can only be meaningful in the context of a particular culture. In order to construct a definition of jural ‘father’ and ‘mother’ which will be applicable in all societies he defines motherhood in physiological terms (the jural mother is the woman who bore the child) while the jural father is the man married to the jural mother. The limitation of this approach, apart from its formality,2 is that it

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2 And incompleteness. For one is left to define for oneself the difference between members of the transactional series. Further, while one appreciates Goodenough’s wish
seems to leave aside certain important features of parenthood. While jural rights in, and duties with respect to, children are clearly important, the affective ties between parents and their children, parents’ role in socialization and education, and the claims which can be made in the name of morality are also highly significant, and they are certainly subject to a wide range of transactions.

I therefore suggest that content be restored to the relationship between parents and children by seeing parenthood as concerned with fulfilling the tasks involved in bearing and rearing children, and establishing them in their turn as effective adults. Parenthood is about social replacement. Such an approach includes transactions in jural rights, but is not limited to these. Viewed in this way we need not expect to find that a single distinctive feature (physiological paternity, marriage to the mother, jural authority) will always coincide with a particular relationship. The tasks of parenthood must be carried out somehow, but not necessarily by a single set of ‘parents’. Significantly, what I have called the tasks of parenthood appear to receive social recognition, as well as a patterned, institutionalized response, in all societies. For the present the clear candidates for universal problems of social replacement appear to be: i. bearing and begetting, ii. endowment with civil and kinship status, iii. nurturance, iv. training and v. sponsorship into adulthood. Each of these aspects of parenthood can, individually, be split off from the rest and made the object of one or more of Goodenough’s transactions—delegation, sharing, succession, pre-emption and transfer. Such familiar institutions as ritual Godparenthood (compadrazgo), the wet nurse, the nanny, Roman adrogation, and fosterage can all be seen as institutionalized transactions concerning one or other responsibility usually associated with the parent role; as institutionalized transactions which may, but need not, concern jural rights and duties with respect to the children.

If we do look at the various tasks suggested as underlying parent roles, the question of how to define rights and duties, and how to decide whether they are shared, delegated or transferred is also simplified. For it is immediately apparent that it makes no sense to speak of all five areas to establish definitions which are applicable cross-culturally, the refusal to consider content of parental roles, but to deal only with transactions (succession, delegation, sharing, pre-emption) when each of these transactions can concern ‘some or all’ of the undefined rights linked in some way to mothers and their husbands, leaves the reader with very little idea of what is meant by parenthood. Attempts to apply this paradigm have not proved very successful (see Schildkrout 1973).
as subject to the same kinds of rights and duties, which will become clear as each of the tasks of parenthood is considered in turn.

**Bearing and Begetting**

Bearing and begetting are physiological facts which may be culturally endowed with different meanings, but which always seem to carry an irreducible connotation. While it is possible to transact about the consequences of bearing and begetting by defining birth-status identity separately, or allocating responsibilities of rearing to others, the fact of physiological parenthood cannot be altered once conception has taken place. In most societies the correspondence of physical paternity and birth-status identity is considered desirable, and often a lack of correspondence affects assumption of full birth-status rights in adulthood. But begetting and bearing as physiological acts seem to have a significance of their own. Among the Tallensi of northern Ghana, for whom birth-status identity depends on the transfer of bridewealth cattle, there is no formal disability or stigma attached to a child begotten by another man before the mother's marriage, and subsequently legitimised as the child of the husband by the transfer of bridewealth. But still, Fortes writes, the Tallensi feel that the child's genitor ought to bring the cow of rearing to the step-father and the cow of redemption to the mother's lineage elders in order to secure social paternity of his child so that begetting and birth-status identity coincide (Fortes 1949, 27, 136). The transaction cannot be run the other way. That is, it is impossible to transfer the role of begetter to the mother's husband. In this sense there is no way to transact about—to socially manipulate—begetting and bearing. They are once-and-for-all physiological facts. The best that can be done is to transact about the socially constructed rights and duties linked to birth-status identity, to bring these into line with the physiological facts.

Some societies, like the Gonja and the Lozi, refuse to see any distinction between physiological paternity (which they perceive as an obvious process) and social paternity (which conveys full birth-status identity to

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3 The limiting case seems to be that where the social identity of ‘siblings’ is so strong that physiological as well as social paternity is merged, as in fraternal polyandry or the unusual, but recognized, Tallensi institution of deputing a lineage member to beget a child for an impotent man. Even a Trobriand man, who is believed to have no physiological relationship to the children he begets, treats children born to his wife while he is her sexual partner differently from those she bears while with someone else. For he has a special relationship with those children for whom he ‘opened the womb’. 
the child). Thus the civic and kinship status of a Gonja child derives from his genitor and never from a mother’s husband who did not beget him. However under certain circumstances the mother’s husband could insist on retaining control over the person and labour of his wife’s adulterine child. He justifies this by his prescriptive rights in the mother’s sexuality (as his wife) and as his due for rearing the child. This situation is seriously out of balance from the child’s point of view (he must accept the authority of the mother’s husband, and work for him, but receives in return no civil identity or rights through him and indeed would always occupy a disadvantaged status in the household); it was recognized to depend on the superior power of the mother’s husband. That is, it was chiefs and other powerful men who could succeed in controlling an adulterine child in this way. The son, on the other hand, was expected to abscond to his genitor as soon as he was old enough to escape, and could expect to be welcomed and receive full birth-status rights once recognized by him. Although defended by the proverb ‘A thief does not own the thing he steals’, the control of the mother’s husband over an adulterine child was likened to a form of slavery, as both depended on force. The problem arises in Gonja because jural rights depend on physiological paternity, and there is no way that this can be socially manipulated.

It is of course possible to construct special meanings for the physiological facts of bearing and begetting, in the realm of ideas. The Ashanti say that a mother and her children are ‘of one blood’ while the father and his offspring share a spiritual force, the ntoro. The Gonja share with many other peoples the conviction that the child is built up from the father’s semen, while the mother holds and feeds the foetus, but does not contribute directly to its physical formation. The Trobrianders take an extreme view in recognizing the possibility of resemblance between father and child but denying that it could be due to any physical link between them. In nearly all societies there are culturally elaborated expressions of the physical link between parents and children. It is particularly interesting that despite the intimacy of the link between mother and infant, there are cultures in which the physiological nature of this link is not given ideological recognition. The Zulu, who liken the mother to a field in which seed is planted by the father, are strongly patrilineal, and it might be supposed that such a denial of the mother’s physiological role was an expression of patrilineal ideology. However the Gonja, who describe the mother as ‘like a basket, simply holding the baby’, are not strongly patrilineal, and indeed have certain beliefs and institutions which are characteristic of matrilineal societies, such as the over-right of the mother’s brother to
sell a child into slavery, regardless of the father’s wishes. However estate membership, and with it rights to political and ritual office, is transmitted from a genitor to his children, and perhaps it is this fact that is reflected in the way conception is perceived. It seems more likely that the conceptualization of the mother’s contribution to creating an infant in terms of holding it safely, and feeding it, are drawn from two other sources; on the one hand, the foetus grows within her and emerges linked by a chord to the placenta, which is often likened to congealed menses; and on the other hand, her role during infancy and childhood is that of nurse and source of nurturance. (And indeed a woman’s continued role is as preparer—and often provider—of food.) The social structure is clearly one source of models for explaining how babies are created; but observation of parent roles also can play a part, as can observation of animals. And, as the Gonja ideas indicate, the resulting models can conflict with other aspects of the social structure.

A number of societies seem to have split beliefs about paternity into beliefs about spiritual and physical paternity, the former being the task of gods or spirits, and the latter the province of human males (e.g. the Murngin of Arnhemland).Significantly, when this happens it is usually civic and kinship statuses that are determined by (or determine) spirit paternity, with the rights and obligations of physiological paternity being linked to the rearing relationship. Occasionally spirit paternity is reserved for rare cases of beings that are wholly or in part supernatural, as in the theologies of ancient Greece, Christianity and Hinduism. In these cases, in order to validate the supernatural character of the offspring—their difference from normal human beings—physiological paternity by a human father is denied.

In attempting to tease apart the component elements of parenthood it is analytically preferable to treat begetting and bearing as physiological facts which may be given different social recognition (denied, linked with spirits, linked exclusively to the genitor). Once conception has occurred, transactions concerning bearing and begetting are limited to the realm of ideas; they are essentially cultural rather than social. In terms of Goodenough’s transaction series, it is impossible to delegate, share, succeed to, or transfer physiological parenthood, for this is an accomplished
fact. It is of course possible to manipulate socially the consequences of this fact, that is, to transact about rights and duties held by and in respect to the child. The distinction may seem an unnecessarily fine one, but it is nevertheless of great significance, as shown by the strenuous efforts made by adopted children in Western societies to discover their ‘real’ (i.e. physiological) parents, despite having full jural status through adoption.

**Status Entitlements and Rearing Reciprocities**

The remaining four aspects of parenthood can be divided into two sets. On the one hand are those in which reciprocal rights and duties are conditional on or arise from performance of the role obligation (nurturance, training and sponsorship). Of an entirely different nature is endowment with civil status which in all societies is defined in terms of rights and duties conveyed by birth under specified conditions. Gough (1959) uses the concept of ‘birth status identity’ to mean ‘all the social relationships, property-rights, etc. which a child acquires at birth by virtue of his legitimacy, whether through the father or through the mother’ (1959, 32). Usually, but with significant exceptions, this means birth to parents who are recognized as married. There are a few societies, mainly matrilineal systems and a few cognatic ones, in which these rights are based on physiological parenthood (i.e. no distinction is made between physical and social paternity), and they do not depend on the parents’ marriage. They are, nonetheless, defined in terms of who the parents, genitor and genetrix, are. It is the designation of adult status rights in terms of the parents’ position in the social system which I refer to as birth-status identity or civil/kinship identity.

In a matrilineal system, birth status identifies the child with the lineage of its mother, and through this identity conveys entitlement to rights of inheritance and succession. Typically, bestowal of birth-status identity follows from the formal identification of the mother’s genetrical powers with her lineage in an ‘initiation’ or ‘puberty’ rite and may not depend on her marriage. Occasionally this mechanism is utilized by a patrilineal group which thus provides for a daughter to be kept, unmarried, at home for contributing to the support of an illegitimate child. It is significant that such examples as one can find are either deviant within the society where they occur or else are very rare (see also note 2 [3] above).

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5 The significance of girls’ puberty rites in matrilineal systems is further discussed in Chapter 6.
to bear children to perpetuate her father’s descent group, as among the Krobo (Huber 1963).

In a patrilineal system birth status identifies one with the lineage of the man who fulfills the conditions of social fatherhood, however these may be defined in relation to rights in generetorem over women, and in relation to ideas about paternity. In a cognatic or bilateral system birth-status identity either may be linked to the kin groups of one or both parent or may simply be specified in relation to the parents themselves. In either case it is a matter of filiation—of direct links with individual parents—and of rights and duties in respect of those parents and their estates. Where cognatic kin groups hold significant resources, rights to membership must be established by virtue of links of filiation to the parent concerned.

However a given society defines the conditions of its transmission, full birth-status identity carries with it rights and obligations (a share in, or management of property, worship of shrines, often involving the burial and worship of the previous status-holder) which may be termed status reciprocities. These rights and obligations pertain to a status in a system of statuses; as such they are critical in placing the individual in the status system of his society. In contemporary Western society the significance of parental status placement has greatly diminished. It can be argued that the clearly demonstrable difference in opportunities associated with parents’ class and occupation are a function of material resources rather than status placement per se. However I believe this to be only partially true, since attributed status affects the opportunities open to a person as well as a person’s perception of these opportunities. In addition, birth-status identity is still critical for the establishment of citizenship which in turn controls freedom to move between countries and the right to hold a job. Recent legislation in England has linked birth-status identity to the right of a woman to bring a foreign spouse into the country. It should also be noted that some hunting and gathering systems may represent exceptions to the general rule that birth-status identity is critical in determining adult status.

In many societies the stress on legitimacy underlines the function of endowment with birth-status identity in bestowing on the child a recognized position in the socially constructed world into which it has been born. If not born ‘according to the rules’, then it cannot participate as a full member. There are two kinds of reasons why these rules are so often expressed in terms of the recognition of the parents’ marriage. In the first place, in the vast majority of societies rights to property, office and citizenship are vested in kin, and rules about marriage control recruitment
of new members. It is surely significant that where there are sub-groups within a society which appear not to care about the rules for marriage and legitimacy, these groups lack resources and indeed often have limited civil status.\(^6\) In Western folk usage legitimacy is a condition of an individual, based on the legal relationship between his or her parents. But it takes its meaning from the power of kin and community to acknowledge membership rights of new recruits. That this is still partly effective is shown by the inclusion until very recently of evidence of legitimacy on the birth certificate needed for entry into jobs and for passports (dependent on citizenship) throughout life. Further, while an illegitimate child can be given full jural status in an adopting family, he cannot ‘create’ such a status by himself.

The other reason for the close link between parents’ marriage and full civil and kinship status arises from the tasks of parenthood themselves. While it is possible to separate these analytically into several parent roles, it is empirically the case that all, or nearly all, of them are usually filled by the biological parents. Social recognition of the parents’ conjugal union acts as a sanction on their meeting these obligations of parenthood. Both marriage and parenthood are, as it were, being played on the public stage.

*The Reciprocities of Rearing*

In the remaining three aspects of parenthood, reciprocal rights and duties are not conveyed at birth, but are generated in the performance of the role, and take quite different forms in each case. Nurturance in infancy and early childhood creates close affective bonds between caretaker and child. The child is totally dependent for survival on the caretaker, and able to do very little in return. It is of course difficult to separate the rights and duties arising from nurturance in distinction to, say, civil status or training. But where this is possible, as for instance where custody over children changes on legitimization by the subsequent marriage of their

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\(^6\) For example, in Ceylon (Yalman 1967), in black communities in the Caribbean (R.T. Smith 1956; Clarke 1966), and in slum communities in the United States (Hannerz 1969, Stack 1974) and Mexico (O. Lewis 1961). There are some interesting exceptions to the restriction of lack of concern privileged groups. Illegitimate children of the nobility in England asserted their paternity by prefacing their biological father’s surname with ‘Fitz...’ which was understood to mean ‘the illegitimate child of...’. These strategies, institutionalized in varying degree, seek to secure the advantages of physiological kinship which the rules of the society would replace with rights derived from ‘legitimate parentage’.
parents, there is typically a recognition made of the work of nurturance. Fortes notes the inclusion of the ‘cow of rearing’ as part of the payment made if an adult man wishes to transfer his civil status from the lineage of his mother’s husband to that of his genitor (1949b, 27, 136), and Ruth Goodenough reports that on Truk, if the real parents wish to take back a child which has been reared by others, they must reimburse the adoptive parents for the care they have given (1970, 328). These rules make clear the recognition of the work done in nurturance. By making a payment, the parents can be seen to cancel any claims on the child by the foster-parents built on a sense of obligation to them. It is even more difficult to isolate the reciprocal obligations which the nurtured child is felt to incur, but typically they concern care in old age. The Gonja are beautifully explicit about this; they say: ‘In infancy your mother and father feed you and clear up your messes; when they grow old, you must feed them and keep them clean.’ Significantly, the main sanctions for these rearing reciprocities are informal, and are based on the very affective ties which the close relationship engendered. I know of two cases of middle-aged Cambridge people, a man and a woman, who for several years regularly visited and helped to support an elderly nurse—not because of any legal obligation, but out of a sense of affection and obligation based on the care given to them in early childhood.

While in many societies fathers spend considerable time playing with infants and young children, and may assist in looking after them, there is to my knowledge no society in which the role of the father is so defined as to include the major responsibility for care, feeding, cleanliness and perpetual attention which is essential for rearing young children. Nor is any other man expected to do this. Nurturance is everywhere seen as the primary responsibility of women; and there are always rules specifying which woman has responsibility for a given child. This task may be shared, delegated or transferred to someone else, but primary responsibility is recognized as belonging to one particular woman. An obvious but often overlooked consequence is that both boys and girls are initially reared by, and dependent on, women, which contrasts strongly with the sex-role patterning in the rearing of older children.

As a child matures, its abilities and needs change, as does its participation in the world outside the family. The training which accompanies nurturance in early childhood is, roughly speaking, the same for boys and girls: the learning of language, impulse control, and cultural gesture and idiom is broadly similar for children of both sexes. But older children become increasingly conscious of sex roles, and are increasingly expected
to develop according to the norms appropriate for members of their own sex. This empirical observation is entirely consistent with the process of social replacement which requires that two kinds of adults, men and women, are needed to reproduce the social system. In preliterate societies the consequence is that the training of boys is undertaken by men, and the training of girls falls to women. This allocation is not the result of conscious arrangement so much as of the intimate link between training for adult roles and increasing participation in the domestic and subsistence economy. While young boys may be given women’s tasks to do, as they grow older, larger and stronger they are pulled into the male economic sphere. There their role models are men, and the tasks which they learn are central to adult male roles. Girls begin very young to help their mothers and the other women of the household with both domestic chores and childcare. As they approach maturity they may take over some of these tasks entirely so that on marriage they are already skilled and confident in these core aspects of a woman’s adult role. In systems where the domestic group is not divorced from productive activity, older children of both sexes are expected to contribute substantially. At the same time, if the child’s contribution is to be useful, it will have to be guided and disciplined. It is this aspect of the process of social replacement that makes the parental task of later childhood focus on training or education. Both in order to make effective use of the child’s increasing contribution to the labour force, and in order that he or she later be able to perform adult roles, especially occupational roles, effectively, the young girl or boy must be trained, however informally. The consequence of the sexual division of labour in pre-industrial societies is that it is the mother, or other women, who train girls, and the father, or other men, who train boys.

Many, probably all, societies consider that one of the major responsibilities of parents is the moral education of their children. Training in adult economic role skills is important, but it is not sufficient. Moral education is based on precept, parable and proverb which specify how a ‘good Gonja/Ashanti/…man/woman’ ought to behave. Here both parents play a part, though the parent of the same sex is seen as having the major responsibility.

Whether training occurs within kinship roles or outside them, it involves constraint, authority and discipline which are irksome to the child. This control is balanced to a varying degree by the child’s growing sense of competence in adult skills. The training relationship inevitably is characterized by ambivalence, and how this is handled depends very much on how the teacher-pupil role is related to the other parent roles. If it is
part of a multiplex parent role, then there are constraints of affect built up in the nurturance relationship, as well as the constraints arising from the control the parent has over access to critical resources, which may be linked either to birth-status entitlement (but controlled by the parent) or to sponsorship. If training is delegated and thus separated from the other parent roles, then as in many formal schools discipline may become a dominant feature; it is striking how regularly discipline is a central aspect of the teacher’s role. Where training is delegated, the labour of the child is sometimes seen as reciprocating the teacher’s efforts. In other systems the child is not considered as capable of, or himself responsible for, compensating his teacher. In societies of the latter sort, it is the parents who must reciprocate, usually financially, if they delegate the training of the child.

Sponsorship is the most variable of all the parental tasks, since it is concerned with providing the resources and ‘certification’ necessary to take up a full adult role in a given society. Exactly what resources are required varies extremely widely, and hence sponsorship takes a range of different forms. In some systems birth-status identity itself is the major requirement for full participation. One thinks here of Australian multi-section systems in which marriage depends on section identity, though here initiation combines education with certification that is, a youth who has successfully passed through circumcision (and often sub-incision) and the related ritual is held to be fully adult, ready to marry and to take a place in community affairs. In this process it appears usual for an Australian youth to have a specific ritual sponsor, not necessarily his father.

Initiation often carries the dual function of training and sponsorship, a linking of knowledge and readiness for adult roles that is found in many societies, including, of course, our own. Indeed, sponsorship in modern society often takes the form of provision for advanced education which in turn provides the young person with both occupational qualifications and access to middle-class status. Sponsorship is perhaps sociologically the most interesting aspect of parenthood since it provides a control mechanism by which adults may limit access to occupational and status positions. Typically the return exacted for sponsorship is the allegiance of the young adult to his sponsor, which may have economic and political implications for both. This control function is very clear in situations where the sponsor must provide basic resources from his own reserve

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7 See E. Goody (1978) for a discussion of some of the implications for learning.
to establish the youth. Bridewealth cattle and farm land are perhaps the most common examples, but marriage and full adult occupational role are often linked. Where the establishment of an individual depends on his sponsor relinquishing some resources, as in the traditional pattern of marriage and farm inheritance linked with the retirement of the father in rural Ireland, sponsorship into full adult status may be delayed by the parents as long as possible (Arensberg 1959).  

The protégé in return is usually expected to acknowledge himself subordinate to his sponsor, perhaps expressing this by living with him, or by contributing economic assistance. Or it may suffice that he serve his sponsor by granting him public respect or political allegiance. As this suggests, the sponsor-protégé relationship not only provides for the transition between minority and adulthood, but extends the filial relationship into the adult world, into the external system. For the protégé enters the wider social system by making use of a share of his sponsor's resources and position in it.

It is very often the case that the status identity conveyed through the pater carries with it the rights to position and resources needed to achieve full adulthood. Here the role of sponsor and pater are merged. But there are a number of societies where this is not so, usually because birth status is narrowly defined. In Euro-American society, for instance, the training received in adolescence determines to a large extent the position to be occupied in adulthood, and the intervention of a well-to-do sponsor, whether an individual or the state, can completely transform the opportunities available to a working-class youth by providing for a good education. This same phenomenon is seen in present-day Ashanti where either the father or the mother's brother may pay for secondary schooling and university which enables a man to enter the educated elite. Significantly, in Ashanti, the protégé incurs an obligation to support other members of the family later on. Or to take a somewhat different case, a Yako youth who lives with his mother and her kin has the right to farmland which enables him to marry, despite the fact that land is usually reserved for agnates. But he may use this land only so long as he lives with and assists his matrikin (Forde, 1963). Perhaps the Tallensi case is the clearest of all. Here too a man can live with his maternal kin, and farm on their land.

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8 There are a great many examples of this type of delay, for example, in Nadel's discussion of witchcraft accusations between men and their sister's sons (1952), and La Fontaine's analysis of Gisu male initiation (1960).
But so firmly is status identity tied to social paternity that he may never ‘own’ this land nor serve the ancestors of his mother’s lineage. He has these rights only in patrilineal land and ancestors. Matrikin can sponsor him socially and economically, but they are unable to make him fully one of themselves (Fortes, 1949).

The nurturance, training, and sponsorship aspects of parenthood, then, generate characteristic patterns of reciprocal obligations, and transactions about these aspects of parenthood are about the right to enter into a relationship which implies more-or-less self-enforcing reciprocities. It is quite a different situation with transactions about status entitlements. The distinction between sharing or delegation on the one hand, and outright transfer on the other applies differently to the parent roles characterized by status entitlements than to those which generate reciprocities within the rearing relationship. Birth-status identity may be subject to outright transfer, as in adoption and adrogation, but not to sharing or delegation outside the group. Rights based on the provision of rearing services, on the other hand, are directly linked to these services. If more than one person provides a given service, then both will share in the resulting rights; similarly, the performance of a given parental task may be delegated to a non-parent, and by the performance of that task, the pro-parent establishes the associated claim—to support, labour or allegiance. In other words, sharing and delegation of parental role tasks which are characterized by performance-linked rights can occur independently of any alteration in civil status, since what is at issue is specific behaviour linked to a particular task of parenthood, and relevant to a given stage of the child’s maturation.

The Definition of Parenthood

If parenthood consists of the tasks of bearing and begetting, nurturance, training, sponsorship and endowment with civil birth status, how then are we to define parents? For, clearly, who carries out these tasks varies from one society to another, and often several people are responsible for different aspects of rearing the same child. Goodenough suggests that in order to have a universally applicable definition it is necessary to combine biological and social criteria: maternity being defined biologically, and paternity as depending on marriage to the mother. Quite apart from the inelegance of combining classes of criteria in this way, this sort of definition doesn’t seem to work, either in fitting the empirical data or in focussing on the
critical issues. The difficulty in finding a universally applicable definition of parents seems to have obvious parallels with the celebrated difficulty in defining marriage and the ‘family’. In both cases several sets of rights and obligations are associated with the institution. For marriage these are linked with sexuality, reproductive capacities, domestic services, economic services and the legitimation of children. For parenthood there are the ‘tasks of parenthood’ as outlined above. But in each case they can be combined in different ways according to the institutions and ideology of the given society. Leach (1961) has proposed that rather than continuing with unsuccessful attempts to find a single criterion for defining marriage (with each proposal eliciting at least the necessary single contradictory case) we accept that there is a small, specifiable, set of criteria among which societies select one or more. For the Nayar exclusive sexual rights are not relevant, but the tali ritual and a high caste genitor are; for the Gonja, marriage does not convey rights of paternity over all the wife’s children, but it is linked to her exclusive sexual and economic services; for the Nuer, marriage conveys prescriptive rights of social paternity, but domestic and sexual services may be withdrawn or waived. Marriage is about the holding of some kind of exclusive rights, but which rights are critical varies between societies.

If parenthood is best considered as a set of roles which may be allocated to different people, how are we to define the ‘real’ parents? It is significant that such a question should even arise. Why should one feel the need to be able to say of a child ‘These are his “real” parents’? This question is partly anchored in our own cultural experience. For us it means ‘Who are the physiological parents?’ While this aspect of parenthood carries very different weight in different societies, I doubt that there is any society in which it is impossible to ask the question in a meaningful way. But ‘real’ parenthood may be linked to different combinations of parental roles in different societies. Very often it is defined in physiological terms. But in many societies the ‘real’ parents are seen as those through whom civil/kinship status is transmitted. And there are a few societies, like the Tununermuit Eskimo (Rousseau 1970) and at least some poor urban black communities in the United States (Stack 1974) in which ‘real’ parents are defined by the rearing relationship itself. It would be analytically elegant to be able to

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10 No exhaustive systematic comparison has to my knowledge been carried out, but these systems which link ‘real’ parenthood to rearing seem to be limited to societies in
say that in every society ‘real’ parents are defined as the adults through whom a new member of the society receives social identity, social placement. But the well-known cases of matrilineal systems highlight the fact that such a definition will exclude the physiological father in a significant number of societies, including those like the Ashanti and the Trobriands in which he is considered to have a special and important relationship to the child which we immediately recognize as characteristically paternal.

We are left in the position of having to recognize that there are ‘kinds’ of parenthood—physiological, jural, educational—which are differently weighted in different societies. This weighting is not arbitrary, but a response to a balance of cultural and institutional features in a given social system. In any particular society there are terms for male and female parent, and there are rules about how these terms should be used. These ‘father’ and ‘mother’ terms are very often used in a classificatory manner. Where this happens there is usually (perhaps always) a special way of addressing and referring to one’s own parents. That is, it is felt to be important to be able to distinguish between one’s ‘real’ and classificatory parents.\(^\text{11}\) Pragmatically it is not difficult in actual practice to discover whom a person treats as his or her parents. The difficulty is an analytic one arising from attempts at comparison across societies, since different societies have grouped the parental roles in different ways.

Rather than selecting one of the constituent parental roles as the basis of ‘real’ parenthood, it seems preferable to retain a dual approach to the problem of a universally applicable definition of parenthood. On the one hand, we must take very seriously indeed the emic definition of parenthood in any given society. It provides critical information about the structure and values of the kinship system. At the same time we need to be

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\(^{11}\) The classificatory use of parent terms may be extended not only to close kin of the parents, but to other members of the descent group and their spouses. The parent terms are also the most widely used of all kin terms for the purpose of metaphorical manipulation. Male authority figures are often referred to, and even addressed, as ‘father’, and political authorities tend to be termed the ‘father’ of their people. The use of the terms ‘mother’ and ‘father’ probably carry a unique affective load. Perhaps this is why, in Gonja, it is considered a declaration of hostility to fail to use the term for ‘mother’ to a mother’s co-wife. She has a residual responsibility for the children of her husband’s other wives, and a right to be addressed as, and treated as, a mother. Gonja children often resolve the conflict this arouses by adding her name to the word for mother: \textit{niu Hawa}, mother Hawa. Another distinction is made by using a baby term, \textit{mma}, for one’s own mother, and the formal term \textit{niu} for classificatory mothers.
able to compare the way parental roles are managed across societies. This can be done by mapping the distribution of parental roles. The notation proposed makes it possible to show how the five parental-role tasks are allocated in any particular system. The anchoring of the notation on P (Parents) is based on the physiological bonds of bearing and begetting. This reflects the empirical fact that this bond is everywhere given some form of recognition and is not subject to transfer or abolition. In most societies it is normal for a woman to nurture the children she bears. The correspondence between physiological paternity and the other parental roles is more variable, but, as Goodenough points out, the emic definition of fatherhood tends to link it to the husband of the physiological mother because of his preemptive sexual rights over her. However, by mapping the allocation of parental roles, the anchoring of Parents on physiological parenthood does not distort the analysis, since for any given society the model shows which of the other roles, if any, are also filled by the genitor or genitrix. It is also perfectly possible to produce an emic model of parenthood using the same notation, but anchoring the Parents on the particular constellation of parental roles significant in that society.

In most societies, most parental roles coincide for most children most of the time. This overlapping of the analytically separable parent roles constitutes an overdetermination of parenthood, such that the resulting multiplex role is culturally distinctive, though not always including exactly the same component elements. It is this clustering of parent roles which tends to attract distinctive ‘father’ and ‘mother’ terms, particularly when it includes physiological parenthood and the role which conveys civil/kinship-status identity.

The factoring of parenthood into the five roles associated with the tasks of social reproduction has been the result of my attempts to find an analytical framework within which a wide range of child-rearing institutions made sense. However it is more than an analytical exercise. It suggests one kind of solution to the problem of a universally applicable definition of parenthood. And it also suggests certain substantive properties which differentiate the several parental roles. For it seems that for each of these there is a characteristic kind of relationship, and a particular type of reciprocity which binds the members of the role dyad: the bonds of bearing and begetting, status reciprocities, and the reciprocities of rearing.

In the final section of this chapter the focus is shifted from the identification of the tasks of parenthood which together provide for social replacement, to a consideration of some of the implications of the divisibility of parenthood. I want to look very briefly at a number of institutions
which build on the allocation or delegation of parent roles to more than one set of parents. I use ‘allocation’ of parent roles to describe the culturally normative distribution of these roles in a particular society. The term ‘delegation’ implies that rights and roles originally vested in one set of parents are, by them, transferred to another set. This in turn implies a norm that assigns these roles initially to a single set of parents. The burden of my argument has been that there is no necessity for all the tasks of parenthood to be dealt with by the same parental figures. But I have also made the point that in fact, in any given society, parent roles tend to cluster, though exactly which tasks go together may vary. Nevertheless it would be wrong to suggest that genitor and genetrix ‘normally’ hold all the other roles and delegate them according to social or cultural arrangement. Thus while allocation refers to the culturally prescribed distribution of parent roles, delegation is used to describe the transfer of one or more roles to pro-parents when this is not culturally pre-empted, but occurs in culturally standardized ways. For example, a matrilineal society allocates the endowment of birth-status identity to the genetrix and her matrilineal kin; in Latin America and many Mediterranean societies ritual sponsorship is allocated to god-parents. On the other hand, in Gonja the genitor and genetrix are also mater and pater (conveyors of birth-status identity) and they normally also nurture, train and sponsor their children. At the same time there is a norm which specifies that one or more children of a union should be reared by other kin. In this case the genitor and genetrix, who are also pater and mater, agree to the transfer—i.e. they delegate—the rearing roles which they would otherwise fill themselves.

**Allocation and Delegation of Parent Roles**

The most common situation is for all five of the parent roles to be played by the same persons. When this happens the bonds of bearing and begetting between genitor/genetrix and biological offspring are combined with the status reciprocities linking pater and filius, with the reciprocities of rearing which unite child with nurse, and, later, with his/her tutor, and finally, with the ongoing obligations of subordination and assistance required by the sponsor of his protégé.

This is the ‘ordinary’ parent-child relationship, and it is very strongly cemented indeed (Figure 1.1). It is probably the very over determination of the ordinary parent-child relationship which accounts for the widespread occurrence of pro-parental institutions. For one or more elements of the
A framework for the analysis of parent roles

The complete set of parent-role tasks vested in one pair of parents: analytical model

Where P = parents
C = child

- - - - = birth-status identity
- - - - = nurturance reciprocities
- - - - - - = training reciprocities
- - - - - - - - = sponsorship reciprocities

* For some purposes it is necessary to differentiate between parents and/or children by sex. Where this is not critical no distinction is made for the sake of clarity of presentation.

Figure 1.1. The complete set of parent-role tasks vested in one pair of parents: analytical model

Total set can be split off and used to create a supplementary parent-child tie without dissolving the remaining links between original parent and child; And indeed, in many of these institutions it is the continued existence of the links between original parent and child which give meaning to the reassignment of other parent roles. Which of the possible roles is transferred and which retained will determine the type of links between original parent and child, and between pro-parent and child. Together with other factors, such as their respective positions in the wider social system, the distribution of parent roles will also determine the relationship between original parent and pro-parent themselves.

The fundamental question here is ‘Why should the allocation or delegation of a given parent role come to be institutionalized in a society?’ This question underlies many of the studies which are presented in this book, and I do not wish to anticipate their conclusions here. In the accounts of ritual sponsorship and adrogation in the latter part of this chapter, and of Gonja fosterage in Chapter 2, these institutions are taken as ‘given’ in that they are culturally defined and enjoined in their respective societies. I am not here concerned with how this came about but rather with these as examples of how the allocation and delegation of parent roles can vary and how these variations work in practice. However it is clear that at some level the participants find role delegation advantageous. The model of the
parent-role set can be used to describe the transactions which manifestly accompany the various sorts of institutionalized role delegation. This is relevant because these transactions can be shown to depend in part on the particular character of the reciprocities associated with the different parent roles. The notation of the Parent/Child/Pro-parent model is a convenient way of representing the allocation and delegation of parent roles in these examples. It is also useful later (Chapter 12) as a means of translating several functionally specific West African pro-parental institutions into the more general terms proposed in this framework. Transactional process is only one of the important levels of analysis, but because it recurs in the actors' descriptions of these institutions it is important to make it explicit.

**Balancing Transactions**

The theory of transactions derives in part from games theory, and requires that either all parties to the transaction consider that the gains at least outweigh the costs, or (an often ignored alternative) that there be a power imbalance such that one party is forced against his will to accept a situation in which costs outweigh gains. Another possibility is that the calculus is based on different time scales for the various participants, such that one party is willing to accept a temporary deficit in hopes of a larger deferred reward. There is no need for all parties to base their accounting on the same 'currency'. One may ‘pay’ in labour and receive as recompense a wife, while another ‘pays’ with deference, for political advantage. And so on.

I have described thus far a model of parental roles which would allow consideration of allocation and delegation, and sharing of the rearing reciprocities and transfer of status entitlements, that is civil status. And it has been suggested that these roles represent rights and obligations involved in meeting a series of problems encountered in the bearing and rearing of children, in social replacement. While from the analyst’s point of view these problems of social replacement can be seen as problems for the society, from the actors' point of view they are problems for those directly responsible for the child. If the pro-parent sees his function as helping the parents to meet their obligations, this must be a special case, due to some commitment to the parents' welfare, or that of the child, the most usual reason being common kinship. Normally, the pro-parent's motivation will be different from that of the parent, though complementary to it.
Pro-parents may balance their efforts in nurturing, training or sponsoring a child against the rearing reciprocities which they create—for instance, against the obligation of the child to return care in their old age, or against the labour which the child contributes to the domestic unit, subsistence agriculture, petty-commodity production or trade, or against the political support of the child in adulthood, or of his parents in the present. Cohen has given us an elegant description of a training and sponsorship arrangement among the Hausa of Ibadan in which a long-distance trader may place his son as a foster-child with his Ibadan landlord, thereby ensuring his credit and securing future opportunities for the youth in the Ibadan trading world. For the landlord the foster-son provides a hard-working assistant who can be trusted (he has his way to make) and who, unlike his own sons, is not contesting his control over business resources (A. Cohen 1969). The point is that the model must reflect the transactions from the point of view of the parent, the child and the pro-parent.

In the example of the Hausa child placed with his father’s Ibadan landlord, the distribution of parental roles would be as shown in Figure 1.2. Cohen describes the relationship between parent and pro-parent (the Ibadan landlord) as one of long-term business association and mutual trust. If the fostered son gets on well with the landlord and proves adept in the business, he may be married to a daughter of the landlord, converting a rearing relationship into one based on the more permanent tie of affinity, and ultimately of kinship through the grandchildren. The parent and
pro-parent then become co-parents-in-law, thus giving formal recognition in kinship terms to the long-standing relationship between them.

Hausa fostering, of which the Ibadan example provides one type, is a relatively complex institution (see Chapter 5). Both training and sponsorship are sought from an unrelated business colleague in a position to assist both father and son. While in this form it is advantageous to each of those concerned, it is not culturally enjoined. Among the Gonja of northern Ghana it is expected that one or two children of each marriage will be sent to be reared by kin. Here the rearing task, and the reciprocities arising from it, are defined as the right and the responsibility of kin of both parents.

Fosterage

The verb ‘to foster’ is derived from the Old English root *fod*, for food. To foster is ‘to nourish, feed, or support; to cherish; to bring up with parental care’ (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary*); another early meaning of ‘nourish’ was ‘to educate’. In the present context fosterage can be defined as the institutionalized delegation of the nurturance and/or educational elements of the parental role. Thus we would expect the ties which link foster-parent and foster-child to be essentially affective and moral in character, based as they are on the reciprocities of rearing.

For some purposes it is also convenient to distinguish between fostering which is initiated of necessity (crisis fostering), typically because the natal family of orientation is unable to fulfil these roles due to illness, death or divorce, and fostering entered into voluntarily. Such a distinction has nothing to do with which parental-role elements are delegated, but is only concerned with the basis on which the original decision to foster was made.12

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12 At different times I have used both ‘purposive’ and ‘voluntary’ to describe fostering which is arranged in accordance with the general norm that kin of both parents have a right to rear children of a union. Both terms are appropriate, but each emphasizes a different aspect of the Gonja institution. As implied by the term ‘purposive’, the Gonja view fostering arrangements as fulfilling certain useful functions for those concerned. However I shall argue that these manifest functions—companionship, labour, character building—are not those which caused fostering to become institutionalized among the Gonja. So in one sense ‘purposive’ is a misleading term, since on another level fostering is culturally enjoined. The same reservation applies to the term ‘voluntary’ which was initially used to emphasize the contrast with crisis fostering arising from demographic constraints. Having
A further distinction turns on the difference in nurturance requirements of infants and young children on the one hand and older children and adolescents on the other. In the first case rearing means providing food and care and early socialization in control of impulses and bodily functions. This can conveniently be termed nurturant fosterage. The older child also requires food and shelter, but the primary task of foster-parents at this later period is training in adult role skills and the values of the society. Here the terms educational or apprentice fostering are appropriate, depending on the emphasis given to the institution in a given situation. The institution of the wet-nurse in medieval Europe is a type-instance of nurturant fosterage; while apprenticeship as commonly practised in the same period provides an illustration of educational fosterage which merges in many cases with sponsorship in the way I have defined it.

Equally important in defining fosterage is the designation of what it is not. As used here, fosterage does not affect the status identity of the child, nor the jural rights and obligations this entails. Fosterage concerns the process of rearing, not the jural definition of status or relationships.

The Wet-nurse in Europe: Fourteenth to Eighteenth Centuries

While references to wet-nurses occur in very early written sources such as the code of Hammurabi, it is impossible to tell from this type of source whether the use of a wet-nurse was common, or mainly in response to crises when the mother’s death or illness prevented her from feeding her own infant. However recent studies of infancy in Italy in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries (Ross 1974, 184ff.), England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Tucker 1974, 243) and seventeenth century (Illick 1974, 308ff.), and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Marvick 1974, 263ff.; Flandrin 1976, 201–6, 216–17; Donzelot 1980, 10ff., 28) describe the frequent employment of wet-nurses by healthy mothers. Their use was apparently very common among the upper classes and the urban elite in

noted these problems, I shall continue to use the two terms interchangeably. Because moral and legal rights and obligations seldom coincide exactly, the individuals who act voluntarily and those who come forward in a crisis may not be identical. In Gonja there is a high correspondence, and the institutional charter is the same for purposive and crisis fosterage.
all three countries. At least in France it had spread to the urban working class by the middle of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{13}

In Europe at this period the wet-nurse commonly took the child home with her, often into the country, where it stayed until around the age of two. Payment was usually by the month. Reasons for placing an infant with a wet-nurse were complex. It was believed that a nursing mother could not have sexual relations without endangering the infant; yet Flandrin shows clearly from the French material that the Church held that it was a wife’s duty to ‘pay her conjugal dues’ to her husband (1976, 206). Thus delegation of maternal nurturance was seen as ‘necessary’ if a woman was to fulfil her sexual duties as a wife. This choice also enabled a woman of quality—i.e. of noble birth or wealth—to avoid the tiring and demanding care of young children, thereby also preserving her figure and youthful looks. It is unlikely that these reasons weighed very heavily with the small shopkeepers and silk weavers of Lyon, nearly half of whom lived and worked in one room (M. Garden 1970, 408, quoted in Flandrin 1976, 95). A contemporary observer describes the misery of wives of working men who were forced to place their children with wet-nurses ‘because they really must begin to feed themselves’ (quoted in Flandrin 1976, 205), either by serving in the family shop or as textile workers. Significantly, another contemporary

\textsuperscript{13}Marvick 1974, 266 and note 35; Flandrin 1979, 204–5. Ariès concludes that there were virtually no infants left in Paris (Ariès 1962, 374).
French writer said of the attitudes of parents employing wet-nurses ‘They regard themselves as justified on the grounds of example and custom’ (Moheau, quoted in Flandrin 1976, 204). Here a pattern of parental-role delegation has become customary among the elite in response to one set of pressures, and has been adopted as legitimate partly on their example by another segment of society impelled by a different set of constraints.14

Whatever the rationale, the use of wet-nurses was very common in Italy, England and France at this time. The children who survived infancy returned to their natal families, usually around the age of two, on the conclusion of this initial period of nurturant fosterage. Contemporary commentators, particularly doctors and midwives, discuss the importance of the wet-nurse’s influence on the child, but characteristically this is seen as passing through her milk, whether it is a matter of physical health or of character and temperament. The relationship is defined as highly functionally specific. On the other hand there are also accounts of the affection felt by nurses for their foster-children, and by adults for the woman who nursed them in infancy. The rearing relationship, even in infancy, creates affective ties in both nurse and infant.15

In the context of the divisibility of parent roles it is striking to see that none of these studies describes the integration of the returned two-year-old as a problem. While such difficulties may well have occurred, but not been recorded for the twentieth-century analyst, it would appear that this was not seen as a problem at the time.16

**Kinship Fosterage in Gonja**

The fostering of children by kin is very common in Gonja, and this institution is described in detail in Chapter 2. For purposes of comparison

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14 There was a further set of constraints related to the very high level of infant mortality, especially in cities where sewage disposal and pure water were serious problems. Marvick (1974, 65) cites infant-mortality rates of between 25 per cent and 75 per cent for the first year of life. Despite the equally high death rates of French infants placed with wet-nurses in the country, the distress of an infant’s death must have been lessened if she died away from home, a relative stranger.

15 L. Lambert (1608: 418), quoted in Marvick (1974, 264); P. Coustel (1687, I, 68).

16 Ross speculates that ‘The child returning from the babia [wet-nurse] therefore [i.e. because the family was apt to be large and complicated] might have to compete for the attention of his mother’ (Ross 1974, 197). But he offers no actual evidence that this was a problem.
with other forms of parental-role distribution the model is presented here (Figure 1.4).

**Ritual Sponsorship**

The historical development of ritual co-parenthood (*compadrazgo*) has been well documented by Mintz and Wolf (1950) who also consider the various functions of this institution in Europe and Latin America. They see co-parenthood as the creation (by ritual and legal fictions) of obligations similar to those imposed by parenthood. Essentially these involve the conversion of non-kin relationships into quasi-kin ties complete with constraints on marriage and sexual relations, the prohibition of quarrels and the obligation to provide economic assistance. The selection of ritual co-parents from among existing kin serves to impose specific obligations where previously diffuse ones obtained. Mintz and Wolf point out that co-parenthood can be based on lateral ties within a single social stratum in such a way that cohesion within the group is reinforced. But it can also be used to create a lien on a member of an adjacent stratum. The latter form allows the development of links between otherwise independent elements farmer and shopkeeper, field-hand and foreman. Here an element of status imbalance is involved, deference being traded for social and economic advantage.

A second characteristic of ritual co-parenthood is that the effective ties are between parent and co-parent, with their common child a relatively passive member of the triad. This illustrates well the manipulative
aspect of the institution. Ostensibly its purpose is to ensure the ritual well-being of a child. Yet it has repeatedly been elaborated in such a way that the child is the least important person involved. What element of the parental-role complex is being used here? Clearly there is no alteration of the identity status of the child, and the central status reciprocities are not affected. Similarly, unless the parents cease to be able to care for the child, neither the nurse nor the tutor element is delegated. The child remains with the biological/social parents who raise it, and with whom the affective and moral obligations of the rearing reciprocities are generated. There remains the role of sponsor. The special characteristic of this role is its mediation between the child and the external system. Originally meant to mediate between the child and the supernatural, there appears to be a recurrent tendency for the link between ritual co-parent, the child, and its own parents to be extended into other spheres. Economic cooperation is common between co-parents, and so also are claims to respect, importance and assistance. Here the prominence of the co-parents and the passivity of the child become more understandable, for children cannot operate effectively in the external system, although others can and do so, on their behalf.

Like fosterage, co-parenthood seems designed for working in the gaps between the formal elements of the system. Neither institution affects jurally defined status identity, yet both make use of elements of the parental role to create reciprocities which form the basis of links between individuals and groups.

**Ritual Sponsorship in the Balkans: Komstvo**

A recent analysis of ritual sponsorship in the Balkans (*komstvo*) by Hammel (1968) provides an illustration of how the links based on sponsorship can be institutionalized to form continuing links between families. As Hammel describes it, *komstvo* has significance in determining the relative status of local kin groups, in that a sponsor is sought from an equal or higher status group, never one of lower position. Further, the ‘giving’ of *komstvo*, that is, the offering of the sponsorship role, conveys prestige; at each occasion on which the sponsor is present, he is greatly deferred to and given precedence in ceremonies (especially in southern and eastern Serbia). Hammel is further able to show that *komstvo* links tend to be repeated in successive generations and are seen as affecting relations between kin groups in the same sort of way as ties of marriage.
and of descent. However, in komstvo, as with the compadrazgo complex, sponsorship, and indeed only ritual sponsorship, is the single parental-role element to be transferred to the pro-parent; only by means of this link are joint interests created and maintained between the two sets of parents.

And even more clearly than with compadrazgo, komstvo relations are extra-domestic, affecting as they do the relative statuses of local kin groups (Figure 1.5).

**Adrogation**

The final parental-role element to be discussed is the provision of status identity. In order to avoid confusion, I suggest that the Roman term *adrogation* be used where the main purpose of delegating parenthood is the substitution of a new status identity in place of that which was acquired at birth. An extreme, and a very clear, example of this sort of delegation of the status-bestowing aspect of parenthood occurs in the ‘adoptions by will’ which were accepted practice among the Roman nobility. It was in this way that Augustus became the ‘son’ of Julius Caesar. Technically this may have been considered as ‘inheritance on condition of taking the testator’s name’ (Crook 1967, 112). But in any case it illustrates how status identity can be altered without affecting the other elements of the role set.
‘Adoption’ in Republican and Imperial Rome was basically a legal and ritual transaction by which a person passed from one *potestas* (legal authority) to another. ‘It had nothing to do with the welfare of children’ says Crook, but was ‘the characteristic remedy for a family in danger of dying out’ and ‘those adopted were often adults’ (1967, 111). Elsewhere it has been argued that “mainly the institution [adoption] was one whereby the great families provided themselves with heirs to their property and worship, successors to office or a political following” (J. Goody 1969, 60). The evidence for ‘adoption’ in ancient Rome concerns the nobility almost exclusively. They had not only vast fortunes to transmit, but also the splendid reputations of their ancestors, whose wax effigies were celebrated at each new funeral and to whose descendants the consulship was effectively restricted. Under such circumstances it is hardly surprising that there were fathers willing to lose their sons in adoption. That it was a loss is indicated by the fact that the son ceased to be a legal member of his natal family and, should the other members all die, the ‘adopted’ son could not return to save it from extinction.

Yet there were advantages. In a study of party politics at the end of the Republic, Taylor writes:

To unite families, adoptions were as important as internarriages… By such adoptions the two (noble) houses were brought closely together, and the man adopted was thought to belong to both families. Thus the younger Scipio Africanus, son of Aemilius Paullus… speaks of both his fathers, and is proud of the family tradition of both his houses (1966, 34).

There is an apparent contradiction in these accounts, for on the one hand both Taylor and Crook speak of the fact that the ‘adopted’ son must renounce any legal or religious link with his natal family, and yet both refer to the use of ‘adoption’ to create an alliance between two noble houses. The key to the problem lies in the fact that, as both writers again note, ‘adoption’ often concerned adult men rather than children. In terms of the distinctions we have been using, the reciprocities of rearing, and of course the bond of begetting, are already firmly forged between the son and his natal kin. There remains the transfer of status identity so explicitly arranged by the Romans, and in some cases the sponsorship of the young adult.17

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17 The *peculium* was a sum of money placed by his pater at the disposal of the adult who was still under *potestas* and thus unable legally to own property on his own account.
The bonds of parenthood are again split between two families, in this case in line with the distinction we have made between jural and moral reciprocities. Significantly, the adopting father did not seek an infant or young child with whom he might expect to fill a complete set of paternal roles. Instead he often appears to have preferred a son for whom, since he was already adult, the nurturant and educational aspects of parenthood were closed. Such a son combines in his person loyalties to two great families; his adoption secures the basis for a lasting alliance as well as an heir to name, traditions and estate.

The characteristic feature of Roman ‘adoption’, then, is the concern to substitute one legal status for another. ‘Adoption’ of a jurally independent person, one whose father and father’s father were dead, was referred to as adrogation. For adrogation meant the disappearance of the separate identity of the adrogee and his descendants, and each instance apparently required a special law (Taylor 1966, 88, 91). There was not a direct correspondence between adrogation and the physical adulthood of the new son in ancient Rome, since children might be orphaned.

However the term does correctly emphasize the substitution of status identity independently of the reassignment of other parental roles. In addition, in Roman usage, it was commonly adults who were ‘adopted’, and their persisting ties of affection and duty towards their natal kin were

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It fits the functions we have indicated for sponsorship, allowing the young man to establish his own household and thus to gain a measure of independence even though legally a jural minor.
utilized to forge alliances central to political life, while their recruitment to the adopting family insured the legal continuity of its reputation and estate.

Because of this quite explicit splitting of parental roles between natal and ‘adoptive’ family, adoption as here defined is an inappropriate term for the Roman transfer of civil status in adulthood. This becomes clearer if we consider the nature of ‘true’ adoption.

Adoption

Adrogation is seldom institutionalized, as the special conditions which render it advantageous are relatively rare. It is far more often the case that where an heir to office, property or shrine is needed, those concerned hope also to find a child whom they may rear and train, and who will love and respect them as well as observe the legal formalities of status reciprocities. While the bond of begetting is not transferable, we have seen that the remaining parental tasks may be filled by others besides the biological parents. I suggest it is where the complete set of available parental-role elements is transferred from natal to pro-parents, that the term adoption is best employed. This has the advantage of consistency with popular usage. But more than that, it allows us to distinguish institutions which depend for their effectiveness on the sharing of parental-role elements, from the case where ‘total parenthood’ is renounced by one couple and assumed by another, i.e. adoption.

The adoption of a young girl as a future bride for a son in the Taiwanese institution of sumpoa provides a fascinating example of what I would see as true adoption (Wolf and Huang 1980). The girl, often from the age of 2 or 3, is reared by the pro-parents, takes their name, and observes formal mourning as for true parents. If, for whatever reason, she does not eventually marry a son of the pro-parents, they arrange her marriage as they would for a daughter born to them. In other words, the pro-parents take over the remaining tasks of nurturance training and sponsorship as well as becoming the locus of civil and ritual status identity.

The incidence of adopted daughter-in-law marriage found in the Taiwan study was high, ranging from 44 per cent to 25 per cent, for the women born between 1891 and 1920 (Wolf and Huang 1980, 125). As such it must be seen, not simply as a cultural option, but also as a response to significant structural constraints. What were these? Two factors stand out. The high rate of adopted daughter-in-law marriage may initially have been a
response to the imbalanced sex ratio of the pioneer period of settlement from the Chinese mainland when it was difficult to find a girl to marry. Although the sex ratio has since evened out, poverty is widespread, and makes it a worrying expense to rear daughters only to then marry them off. At the same time, parents of a boy face the difficult problem of raising the necessary money for marriage expenses for their son. The adoption of a daughter/daughter-in-law resolves the problem for both sets of parents. For while a girl cannot marry her own brother, she may marry an adoptive brother. Thus the adoption of a daughter-in-law relieves her parents of the expense of rearing a daughter, and at the same time allows her adoptive parents to avoid the expense of bringing in a bride from outside the family.

The second constraint to which this institution is a response is the friction between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Quarrels between the two women are frequent and serious in this patrilineal, virilocal society. The new wife is subject to close daily control by her mother-in-law and finds that, if there is a dispute between them, her husband invariably takes his mother's side. The mother-in-law fears that her son's wife will alienate his affections for her, and even threaten the filial piety he owes her by persuading him to establish a separate household elsewhere. The interests of the two women are clearly opposed. However where the bride was adopted as a child, and reared by her future mother-in-law, their relationship is very different. It is based on affective bonds built up through nurturance and dependency, and later the adopted daughter's training in and growing contribution to the domestic economy. Wolf and Huang report
that there is much less friction between a son’s wife and her mother-in-law when the wife was raised as a daughter. Indeed, the wife may receive from her adoptive mother/mother-in-law support and companionship that Chinese women often fail to get from their husbands.

In the institution of *sumpoa*, the reciprocities of rearing have been manipulated so as to provide a counter-balance to the tensions built into the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship by a strongly patrilineal, viriloclal system. The transfer of the jural identity of the future bride to the family of the future husband, by her adoption in her childhood, replaces the transfer of potestas over her at marriage which, altering as it does an established adult identity, must be elaborate, public and expensive.

Of course ‘total parenthood’ is not transferable. For the fact of physiological parenthood is not open to social manipulation. But the desire for a total transfer can be inferred with respect to adoption in Western society from the efforts made to keep the identity of real parents secret. Writing about contemporary America, Carroll remarks on the concern with secrecy lest the natural parents try to reclaim their child from its adoptive parents (1970, 4). But he goes on to speak of the lengthy jural processes which, once completed, render such an attempt illegal. The adoptive parents appear to fear that the bonds of bearing and begetting may prove stronger than both the moral and affective ties arising out of child-rearing on the one hand and the legal claims of status reciprocities on the other. Thus adoption, as it is practised in our society, provides no basis for the sharing of parental-role elements, just because adoptive parents are seeking to fill all these roles themselves. They want a whole child, not part of one.

Adoption among the Tununermuit Eskimo provides another instance of an institutionalized preference for the total transfer of parental roles. Despite the difficulties of rearing an infant apart from its mother, adoptions were ideally arranged during the pregnancy and completed shortly after the child’s birth. When, as sometimes happened, an older child was orphaned, even close relatives were reluctant to adopt it (Rousseau 1970, 5, 40). As with Western parents, the Eskimo make every effort to secure rights to the adopted child in infancy, thus preventing the development of affective ties between natural parents and their child which might later weaken the attachment to the adoptive parents.

It is not always necessary to avoid or break off relations between own and adoptive parents. When a brother’s child is adopted in order to continue the direct line of descent, as in China and India, the links between
the brothers remain in force, as do any affective bonds already forged between the adopted son and his own parents. However, where in China a man assigns a son to continue the line of a dead brother, it is clearly adrogation of civil status only which is taking place (Wolf and Huang 1980).

**The Care of Orphans and Destitute Children**

The definition of who is obligated to care for whom is a function of both legal and moral norms, and these in turn are based on rights in property and in persons. But, inevitably, the definition of what should be done to care for deprived children is related to the existing modes of delegating parental roles. Thus, in Gonja, where fostering by kin is voluntarily arranged, fostering is also used as a way of caring for children if their natal family of orientation disperses. Kin who have a *right* to claim a child in purposive fosterage, have a *duty* to accept the role of foster-parent in a crisis. But in both cases it is the roles of nurse, tutor and often sponsor which are assumed. Since these roles are separated from that of pater/genitor in voluntary fostering, there is no reason to redefine the child’s jural identity when fostering is necessitated by family crisis. In Gonja, rearing children has no effect on who they are.

A similar situation typically obtains where one finds institutionalized co-parenthood. The privilege of being a ritual sponsor carries with it the obligation to provide assistance in crisis if this becomes necessary. Ordinarily the co-parent is concerned only with partial sponsorship, and not with either jural status or rearing. Should the protégé be orphaned the sponsor may take over his care and full sponsorship obligations if kin are not available to fill these roles. But the main function of the sponsor in crisis is to be an interested party, to see that suitable arrangements are made, and to ratify these as being appropriate. Again there need be no question of redefining the jural identity of the orphan, although this may be done for other reasons: for example, if the role of pater is vacant and the sponsor would like to fill it.

Where jural status only is altered, adrogation does not serve to provide for the care and training of an orphaned child. Selection of an orphaned adult for adrogation does, however, mean that there will be no persisting affective ties to parents to act as the basis for claims on the adrogated son.

We have defined adoption as the transfer of all available parental roles. As such it is clearly an effective way of providing for the various needs of destitute children. But there is a special sense in which adoption is
appropriate in such cases. For, by definition, where the parents are dead or have actively rejected the child, they present less of a threat to the adoptive parents' monopolization of parental roles. Adoption brings together those who need parents and those who need children. But, more than this, adoption of orphans and illegitimate children brings together those who lack someone to fill key parental roles, and those who wish to pre-empt these roles completely. Potential conflict between natural and adoptive parent is thus eliminated or minimized. Such a rigid separation of natural and adoptive parents is the antithesis of the pattern found in the institutions of kinship fosterage, ritual sponsorship and adrogation, which depend upon the continuity of prior bonds to create a link between parents and pro-parents.

Because in our own society parental roles are largely concentrated and are regarded as most appropriately filled by the biological parents within the nuclear family, we tend to see this constellation as both right and necessary. Yet these roles are potentially available for sharing not only among kin but even with unrelated neighbours, with friends or with the state. Sharing is one way of spreading the task of caring for deprived children. But it is also an effective way of forging links between adults—parent and pro-parent—and between generations child and parent, child and pro-parent. Where sharing of parental roles is institutionalized, as in the giving of foster-children and in ritual sponsorship, such links are systematically created. To understand these simply as ways of coping with crisis situations, or of arranging to cope with them should they occur, is to fail to recognize the way in which many societies make use of the unique strength of the bonds between parent and child.

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The title requires explanation. Anglo-Saxons have two terms for talking about the circulation of children: adoption and fosterage. However, as according to Mauss (1969, 343) the latter is an old French word, we are justified [habilités] in using it. In principle, since J. Goody's article (1969, 55–78), we can contrast these two notions: adoption implies the permanent substitution of parents by guardians, fosterage a temporary replacement; one assumes a change of identity for the child, the other the preservation of his or her initial status.2

It seems, however, that in traditional societies these differences are often more polar than real. Thus, Brady (1976, 16) shows the continuum that exists between these two notions: in fact, he distinguishes ‘ambiguous fosterage’, ‘explicit fosterage’, ‘inclusive adoption’ and ‘exclusive adoption’, and he notes that adoption can be considered ‘inclusive’ in some of its aspects and ‘exclusive’ in others within the same society (for example, concerning inheritance, the authority of the guardian, the prohibition on incest, etc.). In addition, it seems that many of the movements that Goody would call fosterage are permanent in Oceania; thus, Ottino (1972) mentions that half the children who were transferred were permanently placed with their guardian. Concerning the Baule in Africa, Etienne (1979) notes a blurring of the initial contract, meaning that one does not know whether the child has been entrusted or given. Also, while these two notions must be distinguished as much as possible, it seems that we can often consider them together.

Another, less explored contrast concerns the concept of transferring children: is this a simulation of kinship or a form of marriage? Typically,
the first perspective is implicitly adopted: in many articles, the authors focus on knowing whether or not the displaced child is treated as a true descendant, whether he or she is pampered, whether or not he or she is addressed using the same terms as an offspring, whether or not he or she is an heir, etc. The issue always envisages the ordinary parent-child relationship as the obligatory model for the adoptive relationship and the ultimate goal behind its constitution.

Other authors suggest another research direction: first, because displacements of children not only serve to find fathers for orphans or children for sterile couples; and secondly, because there are lines of consanguinity that often exist prior to loans and gifts of progeny between adult partners. Specialists also subscribe to Sahlins’ (1980, 87) statement that “adoption is, like marriage, a form of alliance between groups.” But while some, such as Shore (1976), speak of the parallels between adoption and marriage, others, such as Miles (1972), believe that adoption is a substitute for marriage, or even, according to Massard (1983), that adoption is an alternative to marriage. Therefore, it is important to examine the heuristic potentialities of this hypothesis to determine any potential resemblances, as well as the forms of articulation of these two processes.

In collective practices, it is also important to examine the various types of links that affect the matrimonial ensemble and the fosterage-adoption ensemble, even if—and especially if—they seem to contradict each other: 1) movements of children may lead to marriages at a later date; 2) conversely, the first may be substituted for the second; 3) movements of children may be listed in the marriage contract, either as requirements or as compensation in case of failure to comply with the contract; 4) in a different perspective, one that no longer envisages the juvenile transfer as temporarily or logically linked to the matrimonial event, we can explore whether or not this transfer even has formal points in common with marriage; in other words, one can ask whether or not child displacement networks are specific or analogous to those proposed for wives by Lévi-Strauss.

**Soft Relationship of Involvement, of Temporary Succession:**

**Adoption/Fosterage—Marriage**

*Adoption/Fosterage Facilitates a Later Marriage whose Subject is not Necessarily the Spouse: Indirect Relationship*

An example of this type of relationship can be seen in a population described by Fortune (1935). Among the Manus, the rule for the first
marriage is set out as follows: a sister’s son who has a son has the right to ask a brother’s son who has a daughter to give the daughter to his son or to himself. Now, adoption is frequent here:

…approximately three quarters of the population can claim a dual parent group, and does so. A majority of these three quarters can show more than one adoption and claim more than one double set of brothers’ sons. Moreover, mothers by birth and adoption also have brothers by birth and adoption who have children by birth and adoption. Mothers and mothers’ brothers can be dead, but the sisters’ children must claim their rights from brothers’ children, whether the latter are adoptive sons of adoptive brothers of the adoptive mother, or the biological children of adoptive brothers of the adoptive mother, and they can proceed similarly with people linked to their birth mother… It should be noted that either the father or mother of the son for which one is seeking a spouse can act as the ‘sister’s child’. The category above doubles because we have only considered men (Fortune 1935, 92).

Figure 1 offers a partial representation of these possibilities.

The adopted child is transformed into a uterine nephew, who seeks to be transformed into a father-in-law. Adoption opens up the field for marriage and positions the individual who was the object less favourably than the individual succeeding him. Therefore, the link between these two institutions is complex and mediated, with the first facilitating the second.

A second example can be found among the Maat in the New Hebrides. According to Tonkinson (1976), this population practised the exchange of sisters. In this society, which lacked women, boys and girls were subject to heavy circulation. The former were valued more highly, but girls were also in demand because they compensated for the lack of ‘sisters to be
exchanged.' Residence with the guardian was almost never permanent, and fathers, concerned to establish their sons, were especially worried about holding matrimonial rights in their wards; thus, these constituted a sort of 'marriage insurance' for the male descendants of an adoptive parent. In fact, after adoption, the latter might produce girls, or his offspring might marry independently. It did happen that a guardian never exercised his rights over his ward and also that, in this latter case, the parent had to be consulted when the ward married.

Therefore, the relationship between adoption and marriage implied changes and uncertainties in its execution: the adopted girl had to be transformed into a spouse outside the patrilineage in order to permit the arrival of another woman for the son of the guardian. This network assumed no unique relationship between a condition and its execution, but a series of successive implications (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image)

*Adoption/Fosterage Leads to a Later Marriage: Direct Relationship*

Other societies have attempted to tighten the links between the child transfer and marriage processes. Thus the Chinese, in Taiwan and in mainland China, practised the circulation of girl children, babies and little girls. The 'little adopted daughters-in-law' escape the adoption-fosterage dichotomy since their educators have expanded parental rights over them; on the other hand—and for good reason—they keep their initial identity. The widespread nature of this phenomenon was witnessed both by Fei (1946) for the Yang-tse region and by Wolf and Huang (1980) in insular northern China in the first part of the [twentieth] century.

The relationship of involvement between the adoption of a girl and her later marriage at her guardians' home is illustrated by some of the genealogies listed in the appendix by Wolf and Huang, in particular the one for the Tan family, reproduced below:
It is also obvious in the description given by Wolf (1970, 204) in an article devoted to family funeral rituals: upon the death of guardians or sons, a ‘little adopted daughter’ wears not the funeral outfit of descendants, but that of a daughter-in-law or widow, even if the marriage has not yet been consummated. In addition, the author states that the ordinary behavioural code of the guardian towards this type of little girl is not that of a father to his child, marked by a certain familiarity, but rather one with the distance observed with a son’s wife. However, we should note the limits of this relationship of involvement: Wolf and Huang’s analysis (1980) shows that ‘little adopted daughters-in-law’ may be used for many other purposes than marriage with the sons of guardians, and that in some cases this union is not carried out.

**Relationships of Substitution: Adoption Takes the Place of Marriage**

This type of process has the advantage of showing the profound analogy between a woman who marries and a child who has been transferred. In the following case, the child is explicitly sent in the absence of a wife.

Bateson (1932) very clearly described “The yatmul case” in a note, as did Korn (1977, 89). Two maxims justify matrimonial practices: “the girl goes and serves as payment for the mother”, and this other, more vivid, one: “a woman must climb the same ladder as the sister of the father’s father”, although Bateson (1932, 266, note 5) specifies,

... among the Yatmul, this type of exchange is not strictly confined to structuring marriage. In some cases, when the progeny are male, one of the boys is sent, while still a child, to be adopted by the family, and the clan of the man who gave his sister to the father, which is to say the boy is adopted by his mother’s brother, to whom he serves as payment for his mother (see Figure 4).
Thus, despite the existence of a significant dowry paid by the husband to the wife's brothers, the obligation to provide a wife—or a young male equivalent—remains. However, we note that the Yatmul alternative—a wife or a boy child—is only second best: the claimants will accept a boy if and only if a wife is not available.

‘The Malay case’ is much more flexible. Djamour (1959) and Massard (1983) briefly described the kinship system. Various other authors, such as Maeda (1975) and Firth (1943), spoke of various adoption formulas that exist among this population. Filiation seems undifferentiated; marriage privileges cross and parallel cousins, actual and classificatory. Marriage is uxorilocal (although it is changing rather rapidly today under the influence of Islam); also, the presence of a girl, biological or adoptive, makes the arrival of a son-in-law in the mother's household possible. Loans and gifts of children are frequent, and especially, according to Massard, the circulation of little girls among related women, mother and direct female descendants, as well as sisters.

The progeny of the latter are precisely those involved in one of the most popular matrimonial models. Also, according to this author, when birth-rate data run counter to forming a union between the offspring of sisters, they may transfer a little girl from one to the other. Thus, we have a less systematized equivalent of the Yatmul system, where, in the absence of a woman, a little boy is sent to the matrimonial partners; here, in the absence of a husband, a little girl will sometimes be transferred. However, the symmetry is not complete since the child will go not to a sister needing a son-in-law, but to one without issue (see Figure 5).
The Gonja model in Ghana: In her work on adoption in Africa (as well as in a previous article written with her husband), E. Goody (1982, J. Goody & E. Goody 1966) also alludes to the possibility of substituting fosterage for marriage between cross cousins.

The Gonja, who have cognatic filiation, practise a wide range of child exchanges, in particular among opposite-sex siblings, since the following norms for loaning offspring exist: the first girl goes to the father's sister, the second or third boy to the mother's brother. Now, the Goodys confirm that brothers and sisters who are seeking to perpetuate bonds threatened by the geographical separation of their respective matrimonial residences may organize the union of their offspring but often prefer simply to send the children to be educated by the distant sibling (see Figure 6).

In the latter case, it seems that we are observing an inversion of the values attached respectively to marriage and fosterage in relation to the previous cases. According to the Goodys, the Gonja now favour the latter, accounting for the functional equivalence they attribute to it in maintaining family bonds that distance threatens to break.
Metonymical Relationships, Relationships of Inclusion:
Fosterage or Adoption Are Integral Parts of the
Terms of the Marriage

Depending upon the Type of Filiation, Fosterage, or the Definitive Transfer of the Child to a Relative other than the Parent, is Implicitly Part of All Marriage Services and Clauses

Some relatives of spouses have rights to the progeny of the latter. These rights are typically not mentioned to the anthropologist when listing the various matrimonial negotiations for two reasons: because they may take effect a long time after the union (among the Gonja, the mother's mother receives the 'bosom child', the couple's third child, to raise); and because it is accepted that exercising this right depends on both the reproductive capacities of the 'debtor' partners and the desire of the 'creditors' to claim their due. Thus this is a special type, and it occurs in the form of a virtual obligation, as likely to be actualized as not.

Among patrilineal groups, such as the Mossi, the wife's parents may ask to care for the first child temporarily, especially the first son (Lallemand 1977, 212).

Among the Kotokoli in Togo (Lallemand 1984), while ancestors may refuse to loan an offspring to various members of their extended family, it is in good taste for the father 'to offer' one of his daughters—preferably the eldest—to his wife's mother to assist her with household chores, as his wife had done before he took her away.

Among the Mende in Sierra Leone, also patrilineal, nearly fifty percent of children are involved in fosterage; while virilocal, the Mende allow their wives to leave to give birth at their parents' home and to stay there for one year after the birth. When they return, they leave either their baby girl or a young older daughter who had accompanied them at their original home (Isaac and Conrad 1982).

All the more, among matrilineal groups, it does not seem that a maternal uncle has much difficulty in procuring his sister's child. In Africa, at least, according to Richards (1953), who examined the 'matrilineal belt', it seems that the uncle's rights to the presence of the nephew can particularly be exercised starting at adolescence. However, especially concerning the Mayombe, this author notes that,

...while the father acts imperiously toward his children, the biological mother reminds him that they do not belong to him and that they will immediately leave him to go to their maternal uncle's house. If the child
goes to this uncle’s house, the father must send a formal request to get him to return (1953, 87).

Certain Types of Unions Exclude the Appropriation of the Child by the Biological Father, not Authorized by the Guardian

In the Gouin-Tyerma case—where, before 1962, women were required to contract two successive unions, one with a lover-husband or ‘doron’, the other with a permanent spouse or ‘bolo’—the children of the first partner were given to the second, or sometimes returned to the wife’s parents (Dacher and Lallemand 1985).

Among the Bijogo of Guinea-Bissau, there are also two types of union: that contracted by an uninitiated person (‘isuni’), and that of the initiated (‘koneo’) (Henry 1987). If children are born from the first type of marriage the father, once initiated, may not speak to them and they will be sent from mother to mother (the Bijogo are matrilineal) until a woman is found from a ‘koneo’ marriage, whose father will be the guardian of the child. If this man is dead, the rights to the child will fall to his uterine heir, who will make the child work on his land and hand it down to the child.

Adoption is Included in the Terms of Marriage as a Potential Sanction against Partners who do not Comply with the Rules

When the husband’s family or the husband do not pay the total of the matrimonial services, his children are taken from him. Recovery of progeny is the punishment for non-payment.

Concerning the people of the high Nigerian plateau, Muller (1981) writes that, among the Katab, Kagoro, Kje, and Kachichere patrilineal groups, various services must be carried out by the husband-biological father if he wants to appropriate his progeny upon birth and keep them with him. Thus we have an especially fractured method for the acquisition of marital and paternal rights, which highlights the equivalence between services to the wife’s group and appropriation by the husband’s group—and on the contrary, circulation of the child and refusal to pay.

Even clearer is the example of the Bgu of West Irian (Koentjaraningrat 1966): among these people, the price of a fiancée is high and requires sending the wife’s family a large quantity of modern items. Contrary to Africa, where the gift of goods takes place before or at the time of the nuptial ceremonies, it could take place between one month and one year afterwards. But if these deadlines are not met, the first-born must be given up for adoption to the wife’s blood relations. Around 1966, as a consequence
of the fathers being unable to pay or greatly delayed in paying their debt, the term for maternal uncle became a synonym for ‘foster father’; additionally, the author examines the influence of this phenomenon on the filiation system, which seems to have abandoned some of its patrilineal characteristics.

Some analogies, although crude, can be outlined from this inclusive fosterage and adoption relationship within the matrimonial ensemble (whether these are thought of as normal or enter in as sanctions): wife—price of engagement—child transferred. But since their content too is ostensibly heterogeneous, we can say that the displaced child stands in for the wife where the matrimonial transaction was normal, and stands in for the material services if it was not. We should also note that the relationship of substitution examined above also implied the relative equivalence of a promised wife and a displaced child (Yatmul). As for the relationships of involvement illustrated by the Chinese ‘little adopted daughter-in-law’, even the name of the child displaced for later matrimonial purposes strongly suggests equivalence between child circulation and female circulation.

**Woman-displaced Child Analogy and Research on Circulation Diagrams**

Various authors cited above feel that there is an equivalence between a wife and an adopted or fostered child, and tend to use a common vocabulary when speaking of them. Because of this, in some cases, it is possible to speak of adoptive prohibitions; thus, in the Bellona Islands, according to Monberg (1970), brothers and sisters cannot adopt each other’s children; others would suspect the children of being the product of incest. The researcher also covered adoptive compensation, a theme covered at some length by other authors, especially Gorer (1938); the latter specified that, for the Lepchas, marriage presents and adoption presents are absolutely similar (a pig, two baskets of rice, beer, etc.), and additionally, that they are designated by the same term, *asek*. Concerning the Pulap in Oceania, Flinn (1985) speaks of preferential adoption structures: in a matrilineal filiation system, these are carried out overwhelmingly (up to 84% of the population) for ego with a patrilateral blood relative: a child is given (inclusive adoption) to the father’s sister.

One could ask whether or not it is possible to go further and whether or not recurring adoption or fosterage networks exist, such that one could speak of direct, deferred, or generalized exchanges: in short, whether the
arrangements that we observe at a certain generational level have been reproduced or inverted, or not carried out in the following generation.

Concrete Data

On this subject there is a lack of material. Few authors provide genealogies for examination. We can, however, mention Rynkiewich (1976), who has five diagrams concerning adoption in the Marshall Islands, with two to three distinct lines or family segments over three generations. These diagrams, accounting for the situations encountered by the author, tend to suggest that the position of the donors may either be reproduced in the second generation or be inverted in favour of the recipient position among this matrilineal group.

Ottino’s more detailed study of the Tuamotu on Rangiroa Atoll offers genealogies with four generational levels among these undifferentiated people. The adoptive practices lead to the same conclusions as in the previous society, namely that the children of guardians may become guardians in turn, or may send their offspring to the children of the donors. Nevertheless, Ottino emphasizes an important point: “adoptions are linked to pre-existing adoptive bonds and are carried out on this basis rather than on bonds of consanguinity” (1970, 96). Thus, while the direction of circulation varies over time, the principle according to which there exists a privileged set of partners with whom to exchange children remains. The author speaks of networks created, in his words, “by the desire to extend adoptive links”. Thus, one has the feeling that, given the frequency of child displacement, the Tuamotu people maintain three types of relationships: with blood relations, marriage partners (the family is exogamous) and adoptive partners (recruited especially from blood relatives).

Directions of Exchanges Noted by Authors, without Specific Case Studies

These are more typical data for this situation. In this case, the authors often emphasize the recurrence of certain fosterage or adoption paths and their identity from one generation to another.

Baule case: among this group with cognatic filiation, women owe their own mothers a daughter (as among the Agni-bona), but this duty is not rigorous. On the other hand, formerly adopted women have an absolute requirement to give their own daughters to those who raised them. Also, Etienne (1979, 86) writes: “among very old women, one can find intensification of adoption, repeats that end by constituting veritable lineages related to an elder by adoption” (see Figure 7).
It remains to be seen—and here, the author does not give any information—whether or not the children of the foster mother inherit this right of placement with respect to the little girls of a lineage, and this is not certain.

The Makhuwa case: this population in northern Mozambique was described by Geffray; matrilineal and matrilocal, it makes sons-in-law work for their mother-in-law for fifteen years. But how does she fill her granary after that time?

The inevitability of this precarious situation was in some way foreseen fifteen years earlier; the first granddaughter to be born to each young married girl was in effect adopted upon weaning by her grandmother, at whose house she was nursed, where she worked…and especially where she was later married […] The grandmother—soon to be a great grandmother—is again at the centre of the work and food redistribution (Geffray 1985, 508) (see Figure 8).

In this network, which is specifically a fosterage network (while in some areas, it seems like that of the ‘pogsuire’ Mossi: received wife, eventually given by a chief, who keeps his matrimonial rights to the first-born daughter of this woman and transmits this prerogative to his heir) we should note the role of the ally: through the granddaughter, it is the latter’s allegiance that is targeted (which here again reminds us of the objectives of the ‘pogsuire’ institution).

Fosterage in the Gilbert Islands: up to the present gifts were unilateral, always carried out in the same direction, but they could be assimilated into a generalized, circular exchange, creating a synchronic relationship between various groups. Now, there are phenomena of this type: Lambert (1954) explains that Gilbertian society consists of various social groups, aristocrats, commoners and emigrants; the first give their children to the second to be raised, who give their own descendants to the third.
This system is similar, according to the author, to the prescriptive matrilateral marriage among the Kachin, described by Leach. This ‘asymmetrical fosterage’ consists, diachronically, of the following rules: foster grandparents have the right and duty to raise one of the children of their foster children. If the foster child has no progeny, he replaces them with a sibling’s child given to the parents who raised him. If the foster parent dies, his child will take the foster child’s offspring. Gifts of land to foster parents support the family positions of lenders and recipients over time.

Lastly, we should note that these three groups do not intermarry. Also, Lambert suggests that the cohesion sought by the Gilbertian society, which may be obtained through matrimonial alliance, is actually achieved primarily through this fosterage network (see Figure 9).

**Conclusion**

In its own way, fosterage-adoption renews the old debate between kinship supporters, who minimize the marriage alliance, and advocates of
the latter, for whom the matrimonial structure models the kinship organization. The richness and complexity of fosterage-adoption and marriage bonds tend to show that the perspective initially adopted by researchers, making the transfer of children an operation centred around the manipulation of filiation bonds alone, is actually highly insufficient.

More precisely, we note that the circulation of children, while frequently related to marriage, is rarely univocal. Certainly there is a ‘positive’ interdependence between the placement of a young girl in Taiwan and her later marriage into her guardian’s family. But there is a ‘negative’ interdependence in the Yatmul example, where, in the absence of a required wife, one is content to take a child. Similarly, next to the cases where implicitly ‘positive’ marriage clauses facilitate the giving of offspring to certain grandparents, other, more ‘negative’ cases only require this if the group or person receiving the wife cannot complete its ordinary obligations.

Thus we see that, among trading partners, between ‘decision makers’ in the marriage, child circulation seems to have two apparently opposite roles: sometimes it is an add-on to the marriage, which it facilitates, contributes to determining and intensifies through its trading obligations. Sometimes it is present as a guardrail, as protection for the donors against
any potential failure by the recipients; in short, as an elementary security measure or even as a last resort for those who agree to the departure of a female member of the group.

The circulation of children thus shows two different aspects depending on the society: either a function that expands matrimonial exchange; or elsewhere, a function that guarantees a minimum of material equality within it. In this sense, while child mobility certainly does not have the same usage in these two sets of societies, we cannot pretend that they are violently contradictory.

Moreover, an examination of fosterage and adoption networks, by themselves, shows that trading partners can sometimes practise a deferred exchange and sometimes repeat loans or gifts. Among the latter, adults in the Gilbert Islands have given themselves over to a ‘generalized exchange’ of children, this time interlinked with a type of endogamous marriage for which it buys back the social goods. From this latter inventory, we have the impression—from a lack of more specific and abundant documents—that, where it is envisaged in isolation, the circulation of children constitutes an ensemble as normative in its rules for reproduction over time as marriage can be in traditional societies. In terms of a generalization broader than that derived from the examination of the first points in this paper, one could also suggest that these specific paths, travelled by the children, still have some connection with marriage: they can also, as before, compensate for it (where donors and recipients are blood relatives matrimonially prohibited, or adults of the same sex, or even people of different social strata and endogamous) or extend it; but unfortunately, our materials are insufficiently explicit on this latter point.

In addition, it would be important to consider cases where the overwhelming nature of juvenile displacements related to marriage (the Bgu example discussed above) contribute to modifying filiation data, and those where they tend to transform matrimonial data (the Manu example). Perhaps, as some historians do, it is necessary to insert the adoption-fosterage dimension into the definition of the family.

References


CHAPTER THREE

THE TRANSFER OF BELONGING: THEORIES ON CHILD FOSTERING IN WEST AFRICA REVIEWED

Erdmute Alber

INTRODUCTION

Since Esther Goody’s pioneering work, scholarly attention has been paid to different kinds of child fosterage in West Africa. Compared to other regions in the world, the existence and different functions of child fosterage in Africa are well documented. While Goody and her pupils set the tone for English-speaking structural-functionalist debates well into the 1990s, scholars from France, especially Suzanne Lallemand, developed a structuralist approach to the subject of fosterage and adoption. To this day, not least because of the language barriers, there has been no attempt to bring these different approaches together.

In this chapter, I discuss both approaches, ‘British’ and ‘French’, as well as some new impulses from recent kinship studies. The first aim of this chapter is to summarize and reflect on the already existing debates on the topic. My second aim is, by combining key elements of the existing approaches, to outline some aspects of a new theoretic thinking that regards fosterage as a transfer of childrens’ belonging that involves the relations between children and different kinds of parents. By doing so, I would like to contribute to the creation of a new theoretical framework in studies of child fosterage. I also discuss some research desiderata and future research questions.

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1 Beside West Africa, another regional focus on fosterage has been Oceania. Here, Brady 1976 and Carroll 1970 seem to be among the pioneers of the debate. For a recent work, see Bovensiepen (2010). Only very recently have foster practices in Latin America also been described (Weismantel 1995 and Leinaweaver 2008). A very recent focus appeared with globalization studies, emphasizing transnational fosterage and adoption (Howell 2006, Øien 2006 among others).

2 Although this chapter has a theoretical aim, my standpoint is based on my own field research carried out among the Baatombu in northern Benin (Alber 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2010, 2011).
The question of how marriage, descent, inheritance and reproduction are regulated in Africa has always been of interest to anthropologists. Since the 1940s, when the British structural-functionalists produced the first monographs and collections of articles on kinship in West Africa,\(^3\) we have been able to refer to descriptions of kinship from this region that are based on field research and direct observation. Although the interest of the British structural-functionalists focused on descent, little attention was paid to the question of how and where children grow up in concrete practice.\(^4\) This situation changed only much later. In 1982 Esther Goody published the first book on these questions, “Parenthood and Social Reproduction”, which has become a classic in the field. Especially because of its illuminating theoretical chapter (see the reprint in this volume) it is still a key reference for studies on child fosterage in Africa and elsewhere. Goody’s empirical starting point was the observation that not only in Gonja in northern Ghana, where she had done fieldwork, but also in other West African societies, many children do not grow up with their birth parents. One aim of her book is to justify this practice as functional and therefore reasonable.

Every society, she argues, is faced with the task of guaranteeing not only physical reproduction—the begetting and bearing of children—but also the rearing of a new generation of adults. This is what she calls parenthood. Her central argument is that the burden of parenthood can be shared if the various parental roles are assumed by different people. Parenthood consists of five parental roles: (1) Bearing and begetting, the biological processes of conception and birth, (2) Status entitlement, the acquisition of family affiliation and family rights of and in respect of children, (3) Nurturance, caring for children and providing them with food and clothing, (4) Training, or the teaching of skills to children, and (5) Sponsorship, or material support (Goody 1982, 6–34, 7–16).

In many societies, all five of these parental roles are assumed by the biological parents, but, as Goody points out (1982, 20), this often puts a strain on the parent-child relationship. For this reason, modern societies have developed so-called pro-parental institutions, institutions of

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\(^3\) Fortes 1949, Evans-Pritchard 1945 and 1951, Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1950.

\(^4\) This subject was touched on only occasionally, for instance when Meyer Fortes (1949) said that children were often given to a maternal uncle.
substitute parenthood, such as schools and kindergartens, which basically have a similar function to the sharing by different people of the burdens of parenthood in Africa.

At first sight, and especially for the purpose of cross-cultural comparison of how parenthood is organized, Goody’s definition of the five parental roles provides a useful ideal typology. However, three decades later and in the light of recent kinship studies, there are some points which can no longer be taken for granted. In particular, I would argue that all the parental roles Goody mentions may be much more plural than she suggests.

To start with bearing and begetting, i.e. biological parenthood. In Goody’s view this parental role is not transferable to pro-parents, neither can it be plural. Goody relativizes this only in so far as she argues that as the procreative act is not recognized everywhere as the father’s contribution to reproduction (1982, 8f.), biological fatherhood cannot be regarded as a universal category. For this reason, and, of course, being aware of more than 30 years of gender debates in the social sciences, I argue that a sharper division between father- and motherhood has to be made. This would also make it easier to reflect on breast-feeding as a part of biological motherhood, and on its forms of delegation. If a woman other than the birth mother suckles a child, and taking into consideration the meaning of milk and breast-feeding for motherhood in many settings, especially in Africa, it would make sense to consider wet nursing practices as one way of sharing or delegating biological motherhood between the biological mother and another mother.

Goody takes a different path by conceptualizing the European tradition of wet nursing in the fourteenth to eighteens centuries as a temporary transfer of the parental role of nurturance. Thus, she reduces breast-feeding to its nurturing function, without taking into account the meaning that people, including the actors involved, give to it as a behaviour that constitutes biological motherhood. Her perspective is an emic one, so that the way people interpret a social practice like fostering is of minor importance to her. Her assumption that biological parenthood is unambiguous has to be understood in the light of the West African case, and of the

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5 Goody uses the terms bearing and begetting to refer to the role of the birth parents. Different authors have called them the physical parents (as she did herself), biological (Carsten 2004), biotic (Müller 1997), or natural parents (as in the old conception of kinship at the interface of nature and culture, criticized by Marilyn Strathern (1992) for instance). I prefer the term biological parents and will use it here.
time at which her book was written. The enormous progress made with respect to new reproduction technologies, and the resulting discussions in anthropological kinship theory⁶ have led to the assumption that biological motherhood today can no longer be seen as being so clear and unambiguous as it used to be. The debates around surrogacy or in vitro fertilization have shown that it is necessary to admit the possibility of plural forms of biological motherhood as well as biological fatherhood.

In a similar way as in the case of biological parenthood, I would argue that status entitlement, Goody’s second parental role, may also be conceptualized in a more pluralist way. Goody emphasizes that parenthood means giving a child a legal status which includes belonging to particular parents, a kin-group and a lineage or clan, having rights of inheritance and belonging to a generation class. However, she only refers to “traditional” forms of legal belonging, like belonging to a lineage or a chieftainship. Considering the legal problems of modern statehood, other forms of belonging and status entitlement are becoming more important. Especially in the context of migration and global mobility, questions of status entitlement and legal belonging are becoming of increasing importance, since they determine whether a frontier may easily be passed or not.

If citizenship and nationality have to be negotiated for a child, for example in cases of transnational migration, as discussed in Heike Drotbohm’s chapter in this volume, the ways of claiming access to nationality may be plural. Of course, in order to get access to citizenship, one may refer to different fathers and/or mothers. The frequent case of possessing double citizenship proves that status entitlement itself is often much more plural than Goody conceptualizes.

In the light of this diversity of expressions of status entitlement, it has to be questioned, if all these forms of belonging necessarily depend on only one (pair of) parent(s). The fact that children can get their citizenship from father or mother makes it necessary to distinguish between the two.⁷


⁷ Clearly, status entitlement should not be linked to marriage as closely as Goody does. She insists that in almost all societies status is acquired through fatherhood, where the father is assumed to be the mother’s husband, which is why in almost all societies marriage is regarded as a basic condition for processes of status entitlement or legal fatherhood. There are cases from Africa in which parents encourage their unmarried daughters to have children before marriage, in order to get round the rule of patrilinearity and to obtain children of their ‘own’, belonging to their own lineage (Notermans 2004a, Shell-Duncan 1994).
But beyond distinguishing between father and mother, different aspects of status entitlement can be connected to different kinds of parents. In the case of the Baatombu in northern Benin, for example, my own region of research, certain aspects of the children’s legal position, such as name giving and clan identity, are determined by the biological parents, and others, such as inheritance rights, by the foster parents. Therefore I would argue that the parental role of giving status entitlement can be played by several kinds of parents in a plural way. This, however, would mean that Goody’s central distinction between fosterage and adoption, which I will discuss below, cannot in all cases be drawn as sharply as she suggests.

A further objection is that although the issues relating to status entitlement are settled ideally on the birth of a child, in practice many years may pass before they are really settled. As long ago as 1980, in her paper “The manipulation of Kpelle social fatherhood”, Caroline Bledsoe showed that the question of fatherhood in respect of children born outside marriage, and in some cases also within marriage, especially in urban contexts, is decided through negotiation processes that can go on for several years, and in which the mothers have a special power to name the father of their children. Even a kinship relation such as fatherhood that is apparently biologically fixed through the procreative act with all its consequent legal implications, is, to follow Bledsoe, a result of negotiation processes that might continue, in extreme cases, during the whole life-course (see also Notermans, this volume).

The remaining three parental roles Goody mentions, nurturance, training and sponsorship, are discussed by Goody together. Nurturance can be understood as that form of parenthood which in everyday language we would most likely refer to as social parenthood. It means the person who feeds, clothes and cares for a child in its day-to-day life. Training on the other hand, especially in Euro-America, is frequently organized in institutions such as schools, music schools or sports clubs, in addition to parental training. The degree to which they resemble a family, and thus the degree to which they might be called pro-parental institutions, varies. In respect of nurturance, training and sponsorship, therefore, it is no longer

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8 On this distinction and its implications for comparative social studies, see also the theoretical paper by Jack Goody (1969).

9 Bledsoe explicitly criticizes the structural-functionalist legal conception of kinship, according to which social behaviour and social relations can be derived from the kinship system (1980: 29). Rather, she assumes that although in every society kinship provides a system of rules that prescribe behaviour norms, at the same time kinship can be seen as an idiom that is used by people in order to manipulate their relations.
the demarcation between different parental roles that is important, but
the question whether they can always be called parenthood. Here, again,
Goody’s perception of kinship and fosterage is completely orientated
towards the model of what in her time was called traditional societies.
How statehood and kinship intertwine, for example with regard to child
care or schooling (Haukanes and Thelen, 2010), or how institutional care
and kin-based care may intermingle, were issues that had no relevance in
her way of thinking.

Like Bledsoe, Goody uses the term ‘social father’ in a very broad sense
to include the legal father. She attributes social fatherhood to any man
who gives the child status entitlement, this being as a rule the mother’s
husband (1982, 11). She then makes no further terminological distinction
between the ‘father’ who gives the child its status entitlement and the one
who provides the child with nurturance.

Unlike Goody and Bledsoe, I consider a threefold distinction to be
indispensable in respect of the terminology concerning parental roles. I
will call parents in the sense of the first role, begetting and bearing, the
biological parents. The persons on whom processes of status entitlement
depend I will refer to as the legal parents. Those who house, feed, train
and finance the children and are responsible for their daily welfare would
accordingly be called the social parents. Thus, unlike Bledsoe and Goody,
I do not include legal parenthood in social parenthood, but see them as
being separate, even if in many cases the social father or mother is also
the legal one. Like biological and legal parenthood, but to a far greater
extent, social parenthood can be practised simultaneously by several
people.10 In practice, all three types of mother- and fatherhood may be
shared between several people.

Concerning social parenthood, Esther Goody distinguishes three types:
fosterage, adoption, and ritual sponsorship. The most important distinc-
tion is that between adoption and fosterage. Goody distinguishes them in
so far as she calls those cases adoption, in which only biological paren-
thood remains with the biological parents, while all other parental roles,
and especially legal parenthood, which for Goody is non-divisible, are
transferred to the pro-parents. Fosterage, on the other hand, is defined by
Goody as a kind of social parenthood, where not only biological but also

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10 This is also where I do not agree with Lilo Roost Vischer’s (1998) use of the term
social parenthood, because she extends the term to all interactions with children, however
temporary they may be.
legal parenthood remain with the biological parents, and only the other roles are transferred.

In the case of ritual sponsorship, for which Goody selects godparenthood in South America, in the Mediterranean area and in Eastern Europe as examples, all parental roles, including nurturance and training remain with the parents; only sponsorship is transferred to the pro-parents, the sponsors. Adoption, fosterage and ritual sponsorship are further divided into subtypes, apprentice fosterage, wet nursing,11 and thirdly kinship fosterage, which is of special relevance for West Africa.

My ideas concerning the definition of kinship fosterage have been discussed above. Constructing a clear-cut division between fosterage and adoption requires firstly the assumption of unambiguousness in respect of status entitlement. However, if a child who has migrated to another country acquires double citizenship, for example by referring to the nationality of its biological father on the one hand, and to that of its mother's husband, who has legally adopted it, on the other hand, Goody's definition would make it difficult to call this case adoption, since some legal aspects would still remain with the man who gave birth to the child.

Secondly, her clear-cut division between fostering and adoption does not take into account that a relationship could be interpreted in different ways by the actors involved. As already mentioned, among the Baatombu, where I did my research, some aspects of legal parenthood remain with the biological parents if children grow up with foster parents, such as access to chieftaincy or clan identity. Other aspects, such as the right to inherit, are perceived as depending on the foster parents. Moreover, rural Baatombu foster parents would always confirm that the children are completely ‘theirs’, that they belong in every sense to them, who are the true parents. Others, however, would see the biological parents as being the true parents, even if the children grow up with others. Which person would be named as being the true parent would also depend on the context of the question. For analytical purposes, it is important not to ignore these different perceptions of the relationship by the various actors, since the dynamics of these different interpretations are an important part of the negotiations concerning the question to whom the child belongs.

11 I have already mentioned that there are good reasons for regarding wet nursing as the partial transfer of biological parenthood. This would also explain why in many societies where motherhood is seen as symbolized by the substance of the milk, it is practically unthinkable that any person other than the mother should breastfeed the child.
Esther Goody’s approach in which the focus is on the functionality of fostering children has left traces in most studies of social parenthood in Africa. Even if her descriptions are somewhat mechanistic, due to the underlying paradigm of structural functionalism, she outlines several reasons for fostering children which have been taken up by others. To this day, the benefits of social parenthood and its importance for solving certain problems (as for instance the HIV/AIDS crisis, see Nyamukapa, Geoff and Simon 2003) or achieving certain aims (such as schooling, see Alber 2010) are still prominent research topics. Even before Goody’s book came out, there had been some publications on the subject. Common to these studies, mainly by anthropologists trained in Britain, is the insistence that fosterage in Ghana and in West Africa not only makes sense for the people involved, but is done for specific reasons, and, of even more importance, in order to achieve certain purposes. Since Goody gives a typology of different “functions” of fostering, I will follow her classification, but I will discuss the reasons for and tasks to be achieved by foster relations, and add literature and case studies that confirm these ideas.

Firstly, fosterage is seen as providing an opportunity to change the size of the household. This goes hand in hand with the second most frequently mentioned reason for fostering a child, the supply of labour. The two are closely related. In the literature, however, we often find references to an ‘equalization’ of the labour force among the households, but I have doubts about this. For by taking in more children, large and wealthy households can become even larger and wealthier, and in consequence, economic differences between households can increase through fostering. Fostering children in order to influence the amount of available labour in households does not necessarily lead to equalization; it may contribute to reducing existing differences, but it may also increase and aggravate them.

Changing the size of households through fosterage, and thus controlling the distribution of labour, is not restricted to farming households alone; it has also been observed in urban West Africa (Fiawoo 1978, Issac and Shelby 1983). Bledsoe and Brandon (1992, 279) indicate that the acquiring of labour and other forms of assistance in urban contexts may be planned as a long-term investment; adults, even if they have enough children of their own, may take in foster children in order to create networks of future adults for themselves on a long-term basis.
Taking in children in urban households to help with the work can assume various forms. Thus, children of relatives in rural areas may be brought to help in the house and at the same time be sent to school. However, there is no very clear dividing line between this and the employing of domestic labour; detailed discussions of the latter can be found for example in the studies by Ursula Atto (1996) or Lilo Roost Vischer (1997, 180ff.). It is hard to say empirically how fluid the transition really is between supporting relatives and partially monetarized domestic work; this seems to differ from place to place (Alber 2004b).

Labour needs are a very important aspect of fosterage in nomadic herding societies. According to Shell-Duncan (1994), Turkana families take in children not only to help with the herding work, but also to assist with women’s work.

Closely connected with labour is what Goody would call a third function of fostering the fact that foster children provide care for old people. This is also frequently mentioned in the literature. Since state pension schemes in West Africa provide old age pensions for only a fraction of the population, even today, family forms of old age provision are essential. Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe (1989) use the term granny fosterage for kinds of fosterage that serve to provide care for elder people, and they illustrate this with a study of grandmothers in rural Sierra Leone who take in granddaughters or great nieces.

It is undisputed that certain types of child fostering involving older people in both urban and rural contexts are widespread. For example, Notermans (2004a and 2004b) describes the fostering of children by their grandmothers in Cameroon. Rather than providing care for the grandmothers, these foster practices have to do with the aim of the grandmothers to create a powerful matrilinear family. Recent studies on changes in family structures due to international migration show that this has also led to forms of transnational granny fosterage. As Valentina Mazzucato (2008) has shown, many labour migrants from Ghana who are working in the Netherlands place their children in the care of the grandparents in Africa, whom they support by sending money (see also Drotbohm, this volume). Here, old age provision is only one aspect of the arrangement. It also serves to solve the problem of caring for the children following the emigration of the parents, as well as ensuring that those left behind do not become isolated, even if they are capable of providing for themselves.

However, some cases, in which rural grandmothers in West Africa take in their granddaughters from the city, can also be interpreted as evidence
of a fourth reason for fosterage: crisis management. Poor families or those in distress may give their children away in order to help them to survive. This can happen during long periods of food shortage affecting poor people in urban areas, as noted by Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe (1989), or in times of acute drought with a subsequent period of famine. Fostering may also be seen as a form of crisis management when children are placed in foster care by single mothers, for instance following a divorce (Fiawoo 1978, 283).

Crisis fostering has taken on a new importance in those parts of Africa with high HIV/AIDS infection rates. If foster practices had not already been widespread before the crisis, countless AIDS orphans would not have found places among their relatives so easily (Nyamukapa et al. 2003). Here, grandparents are playing an increasingly important role, and, according to relevant studies, in many areas they are scarcely able to cope with the growing burden of providing for their grandchildren. We see here a shift in intergenerational relations, similar to that observed in the case of fostering due to transnational migration, but for very different reasons: in this case, the fostering of children has nothing to do with old age provision for the grandparents, but is practiced in order to care for the children in the face of the disappearance of the parent generation (Dilger 2005, Grassly 2004, Guest 2001, Ingstad, Bruun and Tlou 1997, Wolf 2004).

A fifth reason for foster arrangements, which has become of increasing importance with the emergence of modern schooling and vocational training, is to enable children to attend school, an arrangement which Goody calls schooling or apprentice fosterage. Children from rural areas are sent to urban households to enable them to attend primary or secondary school, or to learn a trade. Apprentices are accommodated either in the households of their masters or with relatives who live nearby. In rural areas, Koran school pupils live in the households of their teachers, or apprentice drummers move in with praise singers for their training. These cases show that in some cases (as with Koran schools) foster arrangements provide alternatives to state-organized forms of child care and education, such as boarding schools. However, these foster practices could also be perceived as enabling people to get access to state-organized institutions like schools, and not as alternatives. Therefore, practices of social parenthood which involve sending children to school should not be perceived merely as kinship-based solutions to the task of nurturing, training and sponsoring a child, without any connection with modern statehood, as in Goody’s perception. Rather, both can be seen as being combined and influencing each other mutually (Alber 2010).
As a sixth reason for social parenthood in West Africa, Goody mentioned that it could reinforce kinship relations. Especially in areas where family members do not live close to each other, relations can be upheld by fostering each others’ children. Jacques Lombard (1965, 56ff.) has shown in respect of the Baatombu that this function may also be important following armed conflicts that threaten to weaken kinship relations.

When discussing the reasons for child fostering, one distinction should be made which is rarely discussed, but which is emphasized by the economist Renata Serra (1996): what is reasonable for a group or society is not necessarily reasonable for an individual or a family. These two aspects need to be distinguished, for the dynamics of negotiating a foster relation and the conflict potential it entails could be due to differing interests, logics and calculations.

For instance, even if it seems to be good for a society to create opportunities for equalizing the availability of labour between households, or if it is possible to provide care for old people by giving children to them, this does not necessarily mean that this act is in the interests of the concrete people that give their biological children away to be brought up by others. Thus, although fostering can help to solve problems in different and constantly changing situations, the different views of the individual actors, their interpretations and manipulations of existing rules, and their conflicting interests, for instance regarding the decision under whose authority a child should actually live, have to be taken seriously.

THE CIRCULATION OF CHILDREN AS A GENERALIZED EXCHANGE—
A FRENCH APPROACH

The difference between British descent theory and French alliance theory is basic to the development of anthropological kinship studies in the mid twentieth century. British scholars were interested in kinship as the regulation of descent. Descent meant clans and lineages, which, according to the British view, formed the backbone of political action in stateless societies. For them, marriage was essentially the legal institution of filiation, the production of legitimate descendants.

For the French, ever since Claude Lévi-Strauss, alliance has been the central element of kinship. Through marriage people could form alliances, or enter into relations with other people who were strangers or at least non-relatives. Kinship was thus the art of venturing into new territory and taking on new alliance partners, with whom gifts were exchanged. In this
theory marriage was interesting not as an institution for the production of legitimate descendants, but as an opportunity for forming alliances. Through the gift of a woman, it was argued, alliances are formed between families; not only a man and a woman but whole families become allied to each other. Reciprocal gifts of women create exchange relations which affect all areas of human life.

However, Marcel Mauss, to whom Lévi-Strauss referred in his theory of the exchange of women, had developed the notion of exchange much further. He emphasized that anything to which people attach importance can be exchanged, and gave a list of examples: “anything—food, women, children, goods, talismans, land, labour, services, priestly offices and ranks” (1968, 39). In the attempt to specify his emphatic “anything”, he mentioned children in third place, directly after food and women. This became the starting point for a French study of child adoption. Suzanne Lallemand’s books “La circulation des enfants en société traditionnelle: Prêt, don, échange” published in 1993, and “Adoption et mariage—les Kotokoli du centre du Togo” (1994) constitute the largest and most inspiring theoretical and empirical French body of work on this subject.

For the reasons I have mentioned, Lallemand is not very interested in the terminological difference between adoption and fostering. But she does mention the difference and proposes that the term fosterage should be used to refer to cases of taking in other people’s children in Africa. However, she is mainly concerned with another concept, borrowed in its turn from Levi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss: the circulation of children as a form of gift exchange.

In order to see fostering as gift exchange, it is necessary to consider the relationship between parents and foster parents. Lallemand argues that the gift of a child creates an exchange relationship between parents and foster parents and that this is the real moving power behind fostering. Structurally it is similar to marriage. While marriage creates alliances between families through the gift of women, alliances may also be formed through the gift of children between the givers and recipients of the children, in other words the parents and foster parents (Lallemand 1993, 34ff.).

Suzanne Lallemand sees the circulation of children as the second greatest form of gift exchange after the circulation of women. After the first step of interpreting fosterage as a form of gift exchange, the second great theme of her book is to show in what ways they are interconnected. The simplest connection is that the fostering of a child may serve as preparation for a later marriage, which she calls a “rapport indirect” (1993: 144).
Among the Manus in Oceania this is the case when children are exchanged in order to smooth the path for possible subsequent marriage relations. She sees a second type of interconnectedness in the “rapport direct”, when a child is given away, as in China, in order that it should be married later on to a son of the adoptive family (Lallemand 1993, 147, see Wolf and Huang 1980).

I will not go into all the possible forms of interconnectedness created by the circulation of women and children, but I would like to mention a few, all of them being related to aspects of alliance. Fosterage can serve as a sanction in cases of divorce and thus render a divorce more difficult (Lallemand 1993, 154ff.). It can also serve as a substitute for a marriage that has failed to take place (160ff.), and finally, according to Lallemand, it is excluded in certain kinds of marriage relations.

Lallemand distinguishes between different types and directions of exchange, such as direct exchange between two reciprocal givers and receivers of children (196ff.), delayed exchange—when foster children as adults take in a child of their foster parents, and asymmetrical gift giving, where for instance wealthy groups take in children from poorer groups (but not the other way round) (197ff.). When more than two groups are involved in the exchange, she again follows Levi-Strauss’ theory of the exchange of women and speaks of generalized exchange, in which one group gives children to another, which in turn passes its children to a third group, and so on (198ff.).

However, the question remains open as to whether the circulation of children is always connected to the circulation of women and therefore to other alliance circles, or whether there are other forms of circulation of children which remain completely untouched by it. Lallemand makes no comment on this in her book.

Lallemand questions functional and, in her own words, “socio-economic” (1993, 21) explanations of the circulation of children. She insists that there must be a fundamental willingness to give children away that precedes these factors. This seems to me to be an important ‘French’ objection to the functionalist ‘British’ interpretation. The idea of regarding the giving away of children as a form of gift exchange and a means of creating social relations between adults also appears to me to be convincing. The insistence of many of my Baatombu interview partners that children are given to relatives for no other reason than that this helps to create closer bonds within the family, also seems to justify these considerations. One aspect that seems to me to be important is that giving a child can be understood as a second and complementary way of creating alliances,
whereas marriage can be considered as the other or first way of doing so. As Lallemand mentions, the difference between the two in West Africa is that fostering is seen as taking place within relations that are perceived as being kinship relations, whereas marriage is seen as an institution that links people or groups that are not perceived as being related through kinship. Therefore if people want to establish exchange relations, marriage and fosterage provide two ways of acting, depending on whom they wish to form alliance relations with. Of course, and as we will discuss later, fostering a child can be seen as an opportunity to build a kinship relation. But this is not considered in Lallemand’s approach; she takes kin and non-kin relations for granted, and she does not pay any attention to the possibilities of negotiating and constructing relations through practices of making and doing kinship.

However, it remains highly doubtful whether all cases of fostering can be thought of as exchange relations that are in some way connected to marriage relations. And I would doubt whether the aspect of exchange between the involved adults plays a key role in all cases of fostering children. For instance, in many cases where the foster family lives near a school, the main reason may simply be to provide the child with access to schooling. My own researches have shown that the foster parents in such cases are often not so keen on having close relations with the child’s biological parents, since there is a greater chance that they will not have to pay the school fees if the relationship is a more distant one.

It seems that Lallemand’s explanation of fostering as a means of gift giving and exchange can explain some, but not all cases. Her approach puts emphasis on the fact that something happens between those who give a child away and those who receive it; that it is a social and meaningful process that can produce closeness and mutuality (but often also mistrust and conflict).

Despite all their differences, the structuralist and the structural-functionalist approaches have far more in common than might at first appear. Both are interested in describing fundamental institutions and structures which are immanent in societies and which determine concrete actions. Both allow the comparison of societies and consider general structures and not the behaviour of individuals. They share an a-historical perspective which does not ask how social parenthood developed and how it changes in concrete situations. They do not question kinship at all, taking kinship roles especially with respect to parents and children to a great extent for granted. Both are not interested in source criticism, and do not ask how others have arrived at the results they use for their comparative
accounts of different cultures. And finally, they ignore the dynamics of
the involved actors’ different viewpoints, the conflicts and contradictions,
conflicting interests and strategies in coping with the norms of kinship.
Here new approaches have emerged, which I will now discuss.

**Turning to the Actors’ Perspective**

Many articles on social parenthood in Africa published after Goody and
Lallemand, with their structural-functionalist and structuralist approaches,
started paying attention to the actors’ perspective. Caroline Bledsoe dem-
onstrated the importance of this perspective in 1980. She showed that in
their interactions with their children mothers are motivated by interests
different from those of fathers. Kinship categories such as fatherhood are
granted, and also denied, to the involved persons through processes of
social negotiation. The differing interests of men and women also render
it necessary to discuss the question of social parenthood from the point
of view of gender (Bledsoe 1980).

Mona Etienne took up this concern as early as 1979. In her study of
fosterage among the Baule in the Ivory Coast, she combines the French
theory of alliance and exchange with a gender perspective. While the
circulation of women through marriage is a matter that essentially con-
cerns men, children are given mainly by women. Even when men give
children, this is always with the agreement of the women. Here, Etienne
explicitly interprets the circulation of children as an opportunity and a
strategy used by women to build up social networks. With this argument,
she underlines structuralist thinking about child circulation as a means of
creating social relations and exchange. This is possible only because chil-
dren are never given or received by couples but by individuals (Etienne
1979a and 1979b).

Etienne is not alone in pointing out that anyone who seriously wants
to consider the perspective of the persons involved must distinguish
between the different perspectives of men and women. Bledsoe and
Uche Isiugo-Abanihe (1989), as well as Notermans (2004b), also underline
this by explicitly examining the perspective of older foster mothers. In
both cases, the grandmothers’ own children are relatively young, so that
often they could qualify as the parents of the grandchildren. The most
important motive for taking in a grandchild seems to be that grandmoth-
ers only attain their full status as grandmothers by fostering a grandchild.
In the case described by Bledsoe and Isingo-Abanihe, fosterage entitles
grandmothers to certain actions, such as extensive requests for support, even including begging. The grandmothers Notermans (2004b) has spoken with are eager to obtain the status of an old woman when they are relieved of the obligations of reproduction and are able to extend their matrilineal power through claiming the children of their unmarried daughters and married sons.

In addition to knowledge about the actors’ motives, this emphasis on the actor perspective provides important theoretical insights. Bledsoe’s (1980) observation that even a biological category such as fatherhood is not completely unambiguous and can be extended to other categories such as grandparenthood. By fostering a grandchild women become grandmothers, they give up their status as a mother and married woman, and assume the status of a new phase of life. Within the framework of available kinship categories and the arsenal of normative expectations bound up with their particular position, people have choices and opportunities for manipulation. These are neither infinite nor gratuitous. The shared and therefore relatively binding normative expectations associated with the different positions form the basis of the opportunities for choice and manipulation.

Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe (1989) also look closely at the high degree of ambivalence parents feel when giving their children to their grandmothers. Many parents are happy to foster out their children, because this relieves them of the obligation to provide for them, perhaps because they are working and unable to care for their children themselves. However, in most cases observed by them it is the grandmothers who take the initiative and insist on their right to take their grandchild. The parents are not always happy about this, since they fear that they may never get their children back. They also know that fostering gives the grandmothers a legitimation to ask for support. Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe’s paper shows clearly that the decision to place a child in foster care can depend on many factors in the case of both parents and foster parents, and that the decision for or against fostering is by no means conflict-free.

Another aspect which is clearly brought out by Notermans’ and Bledsoe’s work on grandmothers, but also mentioned in other studies, is the importance of food and beds for the establishment of foster relations. Grandmothers who live in close proximity to their children become foster mothers to their grandchildren by giving them food and letting them sleep with them. In Notermans’ account of practices in a provincial town in Cameroon, this is linked to the notion that men, whether husbands or lovers, may no longer sleep in the grandmothers’ beds. According to
Notermans, attaining the status of grandmother means giving up sexual activities, and that from now on their bed will be shared only with their grandchildren.

Sleeping with their grandmothers is seen as being favourable for the children because there is no sharing of sexuality.\textsuperscript{12} Food and eating are also discussed as being a way of sharing. In recent research relating to kinship, it has often been argued that the sharing of “substances” constitutes kinship.\textsuperscript{13} In a study of practices of social parenthood in Ecuador, Mary Weismantel (1995) has shown that the giving of food is a decisive factor in the constitution of foster relations. In addition to the undeniable blood relationship that is created through birth, and that is recognized as such by the people, the kinship relations she is looking at in Ecuador also have a temporal component. The relationship resulting from birth and biology is preserved only if it is consolidated over the years by the sharing of food. Children who share food with other people for many years are said to gradually take on their physical constitution and their substances.\textsuperscript{14}

Another aspect which again stresses the perspective of women, and explicitly contains a critique of the male bias in kinship anthropology, is thematized in Barbara Meier’s work on Bulsa women in northern Ghana (Meier 1993 and 1999). According to Meier, previous anthropological kinship research on the Bulsa has almost exclusively concentrated on male institutions, and has therefore failed to see the important role played by Bulsa women as sisters, grandmothers and aunts within their own clans. As “female fathers”, Bulsa women are important ritual figures at the birth of their brothers’ children. This is the origin of the institution of ‘doglientiri’, which permits married women to take their brothers’ daughters and bring them up in their conjugal compounds. Thus women gain a certain freedom to act in their own interest within marriage (see also Meier’s chapter in this volume).

Taking into account the perspective of the children themselves is another aspect that has been made possible by actor-oriented anthropological

\textsuperscript{12} This connotation also plays an important role among the Baatombo. Older children are not expected to share their parents’ beds. If there is no free hut or room available in the compound, children and adolescents in a Baatombo village are often housed by the grandparents. In the grandparents’ home, the otherwise strict rule that girls belong in the company of women and boys with men is also relaxed. The beds of grandparents—especially those of grandmothers—are considered as places without sexual activity and on the whole as sexually neutral.

\textsuperscript{13} For a summary, see Carsten (2004, 109ff.), who at the same time criticizes this idea.

\textsuperscript{14} For a similar example, see Jeudi-Ballini (1998).
studies. Firstly, this has been done by recording what former foster children remember of their past. Meier (1993, 186ff.) finds ambivalences here. Many former ‘doglie’, or children fostered by their father’s sisters, stress that their childhood was hard. Yet at the same time they say that they owe it to their aunts that they are able to cope well with life as adults. Bledsoe (1990) presents similar arguments in a paper dealing explicitly with educational concepts in Sierra Leone in connection with fosterage. A hard childhood is perceived as being more likely to bring success in the long term than a spoiled childhood. For this reason, many parents have a very positive attitude to fostering, because it teaches their children about the hard side of life. Former foster children also share this view and argue that being fostered has helped them in their subsequent lives.\footnote{Atto (1996) reports similar results.}

More recently, some scholars have started to work directly with the children themselves and thus to find out their viewpoints while they are still living in foster homes. Notermans (2008) and Coe (2008) put emphasis on the fact that the children’s perspectives differ considerably from those of the involved adults.\footnote{In other continents, Matos Viegas (2003) and Bodenhorn (2000) have also worked in this area.} Whereas adults often refer to the normative conception of fostering, for instance its value for kinship relations or the benefit it brings for the children’s futures, the children themselves talk much more explicitly about hardship and suffering when living in the households of foster parents. They talk about rivalry between biological and foster children, and about their suffering because of conflicts between co-wives (Notermans 2008). Or they lament about their suffering due to a family break-up caused by transnational migration (Coe 2008). These findings underline not only the necessity of listening to the different voices involved in concrete foster arrangements, but also the necessity of paying attention to the difference between norms and normative discourses about an ideal way of fostering on the one hand, and lived practice on the other. Here, the interviewed parents attached much more importance to the norms and reasons for fostering, whereas the children, if interviewed in a confidential setting, mentioned suffering and the hardships of growing up as foster children.

By shifting the perspective to the actors’ different viewpoints, recent studies have revealed some important aspects. Above all, they have made
clear that fostering cannot be reduced to the fulfilling of important purposes for a society, but that it involves concrete individuals with particular interests. They shape fosterage within their own limited means, under conditions of unequally distributed power. Actor-oriented foster studies have contributed in several ways to a new theoretical understanding. This includes indications that existing kinship concepts and fostering traditions may be of advantage for individual actors. Thus, the normative concept that women have a special right to their brothers’ children can help them to improve their position in the conjugal compound by taking in a child, as shown by Meier (this volume) and Notermans (2004b).

An enhancement and radicalization of this possibility consists in actually creating kinship relations by fostering children. This has been vividly described by Kosack (2004), who relates how she, as an anthropologist, became a relative of the people she was studying by taking in a foster child. Taking a child from others or offering one’s child to somebody should, thus, be seen not only as confirming an existing kin relationship, but also as a possibility to create a new kin relationship, or, in Howell’s words (2006), a process of active *kinning*.

It is obvious that studying foster practices can contribute in many ways to questioning the common understanding of kinship and belonging. The arguments centre on the relations between norm and action, or (kinship) system and lived practice, as well as the question of what it concretely means to be related to somebody in the light of foster relationships. And, finally, they contribute to the question of how kinship itself is constructed, manipulated, made, maintained and even broken.

One desideratum in research that deals with different actors’ viewpoints is, however, the male perspective. While there are a number of studies concerned with the perspectives of women, whether grandmothers or married women, it was only recently that Jeannett Martin (2007) discussed what motivates some men in rural northern Benin to foster boys and how this was perceived by a foster boy. According to her, in rural northern Benin the aspect of labour is of great importance for men when accepting a foster son. However, besides Martin’s study, practically nothing has been written about what motivates men to give their children away, or which strategies they follow in discussions with their wives regarding the acceptance or refusal of foster children (see also Martin, this volume).
Transferring Imagined Belonging—A New Approach

Each of the above-mentioned theories for explaining foster relations revealed new aspects. The British structural-functionalists, in addition to describing the functionality of social parenthood and providing general terminology, attached particular importance to the possibility of transferring rights and duties through fostering, and discussed the issue of changes in respect of belonging. The French structuralist approach of Suzanne Lallemand laid special emphasis on the circulation of children as a form of exchange, and the possibility of building alliances between adults through fostering children.

Common to these approaches is a relatively static conception of the kinship system, which is thought of as the basis of and a set of rules for the behaviour of the members of a particular society. In contrast there are other approaches which consider people as actors, stressing their ability to assert their own interests within the framework of the kinship system, and in some cases to manipulate the system. Is it necessary to choose one or the other approach, or are the three approaches, the British, the French and the actor-oriented one, each capable of explaining different cases which have little in common with each other?

I suggest using a perspective which takes insights from all three positions and brings them together with ideas arising from recent studies in the anthropology of kinship, which since about ten years ago have been labelled as the ‘new kinship studies’ (Carsten 2000a). It is no coincidence that the most important exponents of this trend are British, for this approach can be read as a further development of the position that regards kinship as the legal regulation of belonging. In my reading, the ‘new kinship studies’ are thus a more recent British tradition of kinship thought. New and different, however, is that emphasis is laid not so much on the formal legal aspects as on actually lived and perceived practices of relatedness or belonging with their normative implications.

Janet Carsten (2000b), one of the important exponents of ‘new kinship’, defines kinship as ‘relatedness’ or ‘being related’, as a way of expressing the actual relations that are acted out between people in their everyday lives. Crucial to this approach is the insight that kinship cannot be regarded as something that is fixed and given—as is the case in the studies of the structural-functionalists and structuralists—but rather it is necessary to show in each case what ‘relatedness’ means in a particular context.

What we consider in Europe today to be a biological fact, the idea that persons who carry the same genes are related to each other, would,
according to this perception, correspond to the idea of shared substances, a conception that has changed in content over the centuries. In this sense, the connection between biological facts and conceptions of kinship is seen by the exponents of ‘new kinship studies’ as a connection based on an imagination (or construction) of natural facts, which is accepted as being true in that particular society or at that particular time, and not as a natural, indissoluble, and self-legitimating connection. However, Euro-American notions of kinship are based on the idea that this connection is indissoluble and independent of space and time. For the ‘new kinship studies’, this means that if one assumes that nature can no longer be taken for granted, it would be necessary to ask what conceptions and imaginations of nature people have in a particular society. Therefore, research has to deal with ideas in respect of kin relationships, and with the substances, materials or metaphors through which they are materialized or imagined.

In addition to Carsten’s concept of ‘relatedness’, Marilyn Strathern and Jeannette Edwards have introduced the term ‘belonging’ into the discussion (Edwards and Strathern 2000). They stressed that ‘belonging’ is a broad concept which covers both the idea of ownership in respect of things, as in “my car” or “my house”, and the idea that people belong to each other, as in “my child” or “my wife”. The second includes the emotional aspect of belonging as a feeling that also has a material side with mutual expectations. I myself also prefer the term ‘belonging’ to that of ‘relatedness’, for it has a much more explicit legal connotation, but also includes material and emotional aspects, as well as the expected behaviour in a relationship. Decisive here is the insight, already formulated by Strathern and Edwards, that ‘belonging’ does not necessarily have to be exclusive.

The idea that a woman belongs to one man may be modified not only by forms of polyandry, but also by other forms of belonging, for instance to her parents, her home town, her religious community, or her children. Since different relations of belonging can and almost always do exist side by side, ‘belonging’ must be conceived of not as being a ‘zero-sum game’, in which one kind of belonging limits the others, but as relationships between persons where plurality is regular. Whether and to what extent plurality is permitted or excluded will depend on the normative expectations of the particular place and time.

What does this mean for conceptualizing fostering in West Africa? If we understand kinship relations as a means of time- and space-specific shared notions and practices of ‘belonging’, and not as something that is bound to a fixed and indissoluble chain of a single, biologically conceived
substance, then it is possible to take different forms of child fosterage as different kinds of belonging. The decisive point here is that belonging can be plural—something which the comparatively rigid ‘British’ notion of the transfer of rights of belonging between ‘parents’ and ‘pro-parents’ has not sufficiently recognized. It is true that Esther Goody admitted a plurality of five parental roles which could be performed by different people, but the plurality of different kinds of belonging I am referring to is much broader, for instance including plural forms of legal parenthood or even plural forms of biological parenthood.

Belonging, whether plural or not, is in principle an imagined belonging and not based on biological or natural factors. In his inspiring book “Imagined Communities”, Benedict Anderson (1983) has shown for the “imagined community” of nationalism that this is not derived per se from a nation’s shared history or a people’s common origin, but from shared communication spaces, which are created for instance by the spread of newspapers or the communication space of government officials.

Similarly to the imagined belonging of people to a national community, the imagined belonging of kinship is not derived from blood or any other ‘natural’ substances, but it requires symbols, actions and emotions in terms of which the belonging is conceived. These have frequently been discussed in the literature, in particular the sharing of substances such as blood, genes, milk, sperm or food, or places, such as the house or the bed. They also include practices of giving and taking, as for example clothes.

Among the Baatombu in northern Benin, for instance, a foster parent has the obligation to provide a child with new clothes at the moment of taking him or her away from the biological parents. This is a practice necessary for showing the seriousness of a foster relation that starts from the moment when the child wears the clothes the foster mother or father has bought. But it also has a symbolic meaning, since the new clothes the foster parent gives to the child symbolize the new belonging that bonds the child together with his or her new foster parent. It is these acts that create an imagined bond of belonging which, however, does not necessarily sever the existing and imagined bond of belonging between the child and its biological parent.

Like the imagined community, kinship as imagined belonging also needs a social space of shared norms and ideas, an everyday practice confirming the norms, and a space of communication in which the norms are shared and contested.

It is in accordance with these shared, but always re-negotiated norms that people practise kinship. For example, only if people share the idea
that children do not belong to their biological parents but to foster parents, will they easily agree that a child shall belong to the aunt or the uncle, if she or he asks for it, and if she or he comes with new clothes for the child. If people do not share this idea, as in Euro-America, they will not easily agree to let their child grow up with foster parents, or they will consider foster practices as a response to crises or social problems. The fact of unquestioningly accepting a shared idea, for example that children do not belong exclusively to their biological parents, means that people do not need to make up the rules for the transfer in a concrete case, its normative implications, and the obligations which the receiving person assumes by taking the child. Rather, they follow or agree on shared ideas without any further need for discussion. I think this is what Suzanne Lallemand meant when she insisted that there must be a fundamental shared willingness to give children away. However, Lallemand explained this general willingness, that must be there prior to all functional reasons for giving a child to others, exclusively in terms of her approach of interpreting the circulation of children as a means of communication and the creation of relations of exchange and mutuality between adults. Thus, she is more interested in the effects of fostering, and less in the material and practical aspects that accompany the transfer of a child’s belonging.

By referring to these shared norms of belonging, people can negotiate where and under what conditions a child shall actually grow up. The handing over of the child to its uncle or aunt is a further confirmation of the shared idea that children do not belong exclusively to their biological parents. That these negotiation processes may take place from unequal positions of power is frequently accepted as a matter of course.

My definition of kinship as imagined belonging, concretized in symbols, actions and expected emotions, does not only apply to social parenthood. It also applies to the transfer of the belonging of a child, normally from the biological to the social parents. The French structuralists have referred to this transfer as ‘circulation’ and have pointed out that it constitutes an exchange of gifts and a new quality of the relation between the involved adults. However, they talked about the ‘circulation’ of children and not of the children’s ‘belonging’. They did not pay much attention to the act of transfer itself and the ritual and social actions related to it, nor to the rationale in concrete cases. However, they put emphasis on the transfer or the gift and its potential to create bonds of exchange and reciprocity between the givers and the recipients of the gift.

With regard to this idea from the tradition of French structuralism, I would firstly prefer to speak about a transfer and not circulation, because
not all the transfers of children happen in a circular way. There are foster parents who take children to live with them without giving their own children to foster parents. Secondly, and more importantly, I prefer the interpretation that it is a transfer of children’s belonging, rather than just a transfer of children. In many cases the physical circulation of children is not the decisive factor for creating foster parenthood, for instance when a West African child is taken in by a grandmother who lives in the same compound. In this case the place of residence of the child does not change, the child is not circulating or being transferred, but there is a change in the person who is responsible for the child, who gives him or her clothes and food, or takes decisions regarding the child’s schooling. And maybe there will be changes in the expectations made of the child and its behaviour, such as how the child should speak about and address his or her grandmother, who has now become the foster mother.

Speaking of the transfer of the (imagined) belonging of children, instead of the transfer of children, also makes it easier to distinguish fosterage from migration, in which children change their place of residence but not necessarily their belonging to specific parents.

And finally the wind is taken out of the sails of the feminist criticism that Claude Lévi-Strauss’ exchange theory objectifies humans. In my reading we are not dealing with the transfer of people, who then become gifts, but with the transfer of the belonging of these people, which means that not the people themselves are the objects of transfer, but their belonging or being related. This makes a real difference, since the belonging of a person can also change voluntarily, for instance at the moment of marriage after free choice of a marriage partner.

Unlike in the work of Esther Goody and the British structural-functionalists, the transfer of belonging is a matter of transferring not just the rights of and to children, but also the emotional perception of belonging, which is not necessarily the same thing. However, there is still at least one problem that I would like to mention: If I argue that the belonging of a child is transferred to the foster parents, this should not be understood as meaning that the foster parents take this belonging away completely from the biological parents. I have already mentioned that in many cases the biological parents remain related to the child and in some ways the child may still belong to them. For instance, in the case of the death of a parent, a biological child must go to the funeral, even if it has grown up completely in the house of foster parents. Or the child may return to the biological parents at a later time (see Notermans, this volume), thus expressing that it has always seen its biological parents as its true parents.
Fostering a child is one way of creating a new, sometimes additional, in other cases substitute form of belonging, which may be expressed in many forms without completely extinguishing the other kinds of belonging that existed earlier. It is in this sense that fostering may also be seen as a process of ‘kinning’ (Howell 2006), of making, constructing and living a new relation of belonging.

**Conclusion and Future Research Questions**

My definition of social parenthood as the transfer of imagined belonging combines ‘British’ and ‘French’ elements. From the former is taken the concept of belonging, which was still called descent among the structural-functionalists, and which is now understood in a broader sense. From the latter I take the idea of circulation or transfer, and thus the importance of the act of handing over the belonging of a child, and the effects of this on further relations of belonging and/or exchange. This act can have the character of gift giving and can therefore create relations by initiating mutual obligations between givers and receivers of a child. And finally my definition is a response to recent discussions in kinship studies that take kinship relations as constructed and re-negotiable agreements about belonging. Here also the actors’ perspective is emphasized, because it is the people involved, their contradictory perceptions and interests that have to be seen in order to understand what a transfer of belonging means.

However, my definition requires new and more exact studies and a careful look at the empirical material.

If belonging is not simply equated with descent or ‘status entitlement’, there is a need to clarify empirically and much more exactly what actually moves when a child is taken by another person. Is it the right of inheritance? Is it emotional closeness and the promise of old age provision? Is it the obligation to feed a child, or even the idea of an immaterial but, as with blood relationships, indissoluble bond between parents and child? To what extent are existing forms of belonging substituted for each other, and to what extent are new ones added? What remains with the biological parents? And: is there always something that moves? And finally this definition opens up a new view of the historical processes of change, which have to date been very rarely discussed in the literature. Ideas concerning belonging and the transfer of belonging can and do change. Not only does people’s behaviour change but also, related to this behaviour, the norms and conceptions on which the behaviour is based.
My empirical studies of the Baatombu have shown that over the course of the past one hundred years, ideas about to whom children belong and the obligations relating to these ideas have changed (Alber 2010). Fifty years ago fostering a child meant that its biological parents did not have the right to communicate with the foster parents about the decisions to be taken concerning the child, for instance its education or its marriage partner. Today, many foster parents consult the biological parents about whether the child should go to school. Urban foster parents tell the rural parents to send money for the school fees, which in earlier times would have been unthinkable. These changes in everyday conduct are connected with radical changes in the norm, which are both the cause and at the same time a consequence of the changes in conduct. Historicizing and contextualizing concrete cases of foster practice, and relating them to work on a new theory seems to be the right pathway for future research.

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References


PART TWO

NEGOTIATING STRUCTURE:
PERSPECTIVES FROM ANTHROPOLOGY, HISTORY AND LAW
CHAPTER FOUR

EXPERIENCING FATHER’S KIN AND MOTHER’S KIN:
KINSHIP NORMS AND PRACTICES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN NORTHERN BENIN

Jeannett Martin

INTRODUCTION

Kinship anthropologists inspired by descent theory have analysed relations of kinship between children and their parents from the mother’s and the father’s side in patrilineal societies at different times and in different regions, e.g. Radcliffe-Brown (1971) in Southern Africa, E. Goody (2005) in Northern Ghana, Roth (2004) in Burkina Faso. Despite the diversity of cultural contexts, theoretical approaches and research questions, these authors have produced similar ethnographic accounts of patrilineal societies: matrilateral relations, or those between a child, its mother and her siblings are generally described as being affective and shaped by tolerance, confidence and protection. In contrast, relations between a child, its father and its father’s siblings are described as being shaped by authority, rivalry, conflict and insecurity.

In this chapter I examine the meaning of these kinship relations for foster children in a society which may be characterized as patrilineal. Do persons in Fée society in rural northern Benin who are (or were) raised in a household belonging to their mother’s side report different experiences of fostering than persons who are (or were) raised in a household belonging to relatives on their father’s side? In answering this question, I have analysed the biographical narratives of 29 persons living in Fée villages, between the ages of about eleven and seventy, who either were in the past, or are today fostered by relatives. I have compared the narratives of all persons who grew up or are growing up with a relative from the mother’s side and generation (that is, with maternal uncles or aunts) with the narratives of all those who grew up or are growing up with a relative from the father’s side and generation (that is, with paternal uncles or aunts). My empirical data were collected in the context of the research projects “Social parenthood in West Africa” (headed by Erdmute Alber
and concluded in 2007), and “Child fostering in the context of ethnic heterogeneity” (headed by myself since June 2009). Besides biographical interviews, my data also come from thematic interviews, everyday conversations, case-studies, surveys and participant observation.

I will show that those fostered by matrikin do in fact describe experiences that are different from those of children fostered by members of their patrilineage. Using some elements from descent theory in combination with Daniel Miller’s dialectical approach to kinship (Miller 2007), I aim at showing how normative kinship notions and personal narratives with regard to the experience of fostering are interrelated. I will argue that, despite important social transformations, lineage affiliation and what Fortes (1949) calls ‘complementary filiation’ continue to exert a strong influence on people in contemporary Fée society.

Daniel Miller (2007) argues that a person’s social relationships with other persons may be approached from at least two sides. On the one hand, there are culturally defined normative roles and expectations attached to particular social relationships. Miller states that “being a parent or sibling or husband includes a whole series of expectations and idealisations of what the person who occupies that role should be like and how they should behave towards us” (2007, 551). On the other hand, there are people’s lives and lived experiences, that is, the ways in which social actors experience the social relations in question, how specific individuals act them out and negotiate them. In practice, concrete persons may fulfil and confirm such expectations or they may not; they may sometimes respect them, and sometimes neglect, avoid or undermine them. As Henrietta Moore suggests, norms or conventions may be regarded as resources that people draw on in their negotiations, rather than as something that determines their negotiations (Moore 1992). This can be applied not only to culturally constructed meanings of gender but also to kinship relationships and the attached negotiations between persons related as kin. Besides, culturally constructed meanings, norms and rules with regard to particular kinship relations are not only negotiated and sometimes contested, they may also change over time.

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1 I am grateful to the German Research Foundation (DFG) for its financial support of both projects. I further thank Erdmute Alber, Caroline Bledsoe and Catrien Notermans for their comments on this text.
A. R. Radcliffe-Brown describes the relationship in patrilineal societies in South Africa between mother’s brother and sister’s son as being characterized by special care and indulgence on the part of the mother’s brother. This caring and relatively free relationship, in which the nephews are allowed more liberties than the mother’s brother’s own sons, is said to stand in contrast to the accepted character of a child’s relationship with his father and its brothers, which is mainly characterized by authority, respect and submission (Radcliffe-Brown 1971 [1952], 20). Such differences are also described by Claudia Roth for kinship relations among the Zara in Bobo-Dioulasso, an urban setting in Burkina Faso. According to her informants, “the relations with mother’s kin [are] affective, closer, more caring and therefore more reassuring than those with father’s kin, which are more distanced” (Roth 2004, 117, own translation). Esther Goody also found that there were different notions of the relationships with ego’s father’s brothers/sisters and ego’s mother’s brothers/sisters in the context of kinship fostering in Central Gonja. While the mother’s brother, she wrote, tended to prefer his sister’s sons, “often to the detriment of the mother’s brothers own sons”, the father and his brothers were more authoritarian (2005 [1975], 185).

In order to explain the phenomenon of opposing characteristics in ego’s relationships with father’s kin and mother’s kin, these authors offer very different explanations: Radcliffe-Brown starts from the children’s perspective and sees it in terms of his ‘extension of sentiments’ hypothesis: the child transfers its expectations and its behaviour with regard to its biological mother and father on to their respective kin, under the assumption that the mother-child relationship stands at the heart of the child’s behaviour and the allegedly warm relationship between a child and its maternal relatives: “The pattern of behaviour towards the mother… is extended…to the mother’s sister and to the mother’s brother…” (ibid., 27).2 Claudia Roth (2004) starts from the mother’s perspective in explaining the different characteristics attached to father’s kin and mother’s kin. In the case of close ties between maternal kin, she regards

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2 This perspective has also been applied by other scholars, e.g. by Jacques Lombard in his analysis of societies in the Borgu region in northern Benin (1965, 166f.).
them as being a result of the strategy of mothers to transfer their own emotional attachment to to their own children (ibid., 119). Esther Goody explains the opposing characteristics with reference to the unequal jural positions of the child's father and mother within the patrilineal kinship system of the Gonja (Goody 2005, 188f.). While also considering the adults' perspective, albeit focusing on male kin, she emphasizes the different rights of the father's brother and mother's brother to assume control over their nephews. Following Fortes (1949) she makes a terminological distinction between ‘proxy father’ and ‘foster father’, the difference being that a ‘foster father’ cannot legally replace a boy's biological father in the same way as a ‘proxy father’ can (2005, 195). From such jural differences Goody concludes that boys will feel closer to their fathers and the latter's brothers (as representatives of the patrilineage) than to their maternal uncles: “fathers and sons alike accept the fact that a man’s place is ultimately in the compound of his father” (ibid., 185).

Although on-going empirical observations have been made concerning differences in children’s relationships with mother’s kin and father's kin (Verhoef and Morelli 2007, with reference to Ali 1998, Adato et al. 2005, Foster et al. 1995; Urassa et al. 1997), there have been very few explicit attempts to link children's experiences in fostering to kinship. Only Notermans’ (2008) analysis of experiences narrated by fostered children in eastern Cameroon is something of an exception. In a context of matrifocal kinship relations, children distinguish between caring relatives (their mothers, mothers’ brothers and maternal grandmothers) and those who regard them with hostility (their mothers’ co-wives and the in-laws of their mother's brothers). Notermans interprets the special role of the maternal uncle in this society, and children's preference for him, entirely in line with Radcliffe-Brown’s extension of sentiments hypothesis: “A mother's brother is so closely identified with the biological or first mother that in his home an atmosphere of solidarity, support and protection can be expected” (2008, 366). Here, I will first examine the social and cultural embeddedness of children’s experiences of fostering in rural Fée society by describing some normative features and patterns of Fée kinship practice. I follow Radcliffe-Brown and Notermans in so far as I focus on the perspective of children. But unlike Radcliffe-Brown, I follow Notermans in citing concrete individuals and showing how they describe living with mother's kin and father’s kin. Like Roth, I pay particular attention to the role of the biological mother in respect of child fostering. And finally, I refer to Esther Goody's approach to child fostering, in that she emphasizes
the role of descent and of claims in children derived from descent, and also to Fortes' concept of complementary filiation.

**Some Features of Fée Kinship Practice**

The Fée are a group of mainly peasant people settled in the northeastern part of Benin, probably since the seventeenth century (Kuba 1996, 323). Their area of settlement currently comprises about thirty villages, while parts of the population live in the nearby town of Kandi or have migrated further away. The villages are places of multiple identities, with kinship being the central principle of social organization and the most important type of social relations in terms of access to resources, care, and social progress.

For some time, Islam has been the dominant religion in most of the villages. The whole of the Borgu region was an area of important political, economic and social transformations during the last century (e.g. Alber 2010, Bierschenk 1987, Brüntrup and Brüntrup-Seidemann 1997).

In 2005–2006, and again in 2010, I spent seven months doing fieldwork in the Fée villages of Angaradebou and Fouet. The first village, Angaradebou, with around five thousand inhabitants (République du Bénin 2004, 14), is situated on the main road which links the south to the north of the country. It is the administrative centre of the Arrondissement d'Angaradebou, with a communal health centre, two primary schools, one secondary school, different Koranic schools, several mosques and a comparatively large weekly market. The second is a smaller and more remote village of about 1800 people (République du Bénin 2004, 14), located eighteen kilometres from the main road, with a small communal health station, a mosque, a weekly market and one primary school with about a hundred pupils. The Fée, who form the majority in both villages, live mainly from rain-fed farming, though many of them follow other activities such as gardening, petty trading or animal husbandry. Other residents, mostly non-Fée, are occupied with trading and handicrafts, besides a very few wage earners (especially teachers and health staff). For some decades, Fée women have had their own independent control over income generated by cultivating land, land cultivation before this time having been exclusively under male authority (Martin 2007, 243). Fée identity is closely linked to clan land, to which access is regulated by earth priests and village chiefs. The Fée see themselves as belonging to different genealogical groups (clans and lineages)
that overlap with socio-economic status groups: peasants, butchers, smiths, hunters, griots and nobles (‘wasangari’). They distinguish themselves from later settlers, though marriage and child fostering have always been ways of incorporating foreigners. Clan identity and lineage membership are passed on through the paternal line, and property is handed down from father to sons, although local Islamic scholars (‘alfa’) today often seem to favour biological sons when distributing a dead person’s property.

The Fée recognize the importance of social links with relatives who do not belong to their descent group, that is, with their maternal relatives. This complementary filiation (Fortes 1949) is often described as being important for one’s well-being in terms of affection and care. Maternal grandparents and the mother’s brother are described as playing a particular role in this respect. Sibling relations in Fée society, especially those between siblings of the same sex, are moulded by the notion of status difference based on birth order. Gender specific names for children according to their birth positions, and kin terms that differentiate between elder and younger siblings allude to this principle. A child’s senior sibling (Fée: igbà) is seen as enjoying rights over his or her junior sibling of the same sex (Fée: ‘ifo’), including the latter’s children. Therefore, to cede one’s parental rights over a child to one’s senior sibling is considered a sign of respect.

Marriage and reproduction are regarded as necessary steps in a person’s social coming of age. A standardized bride price paid by the groom’s family is seen as a precondition for the completion of (at least first) marriages. Usually, a trousseau is given to the bride by her own family, its value being seen as representing the bride’s (and her families’) social status. There is a majority of polygynous marriages alongside some long-standing monogamous marriages. Most people engage in more than one marriage during

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3 Wasangari are the descendants of nobles who ruled in this area in pre-colonial times. The Fée villages were integrated into this political system (see Lombard 1965, Alber 2000, Kuba 1996, 322–324).

4 The first-born son of a woman is traditionally called Woru, the second son Sabi. Further sons are called Bio (third), Baye (fourth), Gouda (fifth) and Masi (sixth-born son). A similar naming pattern applies to girls, the corresponding names being Njo, Bana, Bake, Bio, Goni and Kantou respectively. However, these days Islamic and, more seldom, Christian names are often given in addition. In general, children’s names are not seen as something exclusive: a person’s name may change according to social context, place and time.

5 In a survey of 181 persons older than fifty, 24% of the men (n = 92) and 44% of the women (m = 89) had had only one marriage partner up to the present time.
their lifetimes, most having two or three marriage partners. Polyandry is not practised, but many women have children from different marriage partners. After marrying, they join their husband’s household. Some leave their husbands (usually to return to their father’s household), and many remarry as long as they are still in their reproductive phase. Married women are expected to live in their husband’s compound (virilocal residence). Some elder women of high status live outside the compound of their polygynous husbands in their own homesteads. Marital separation is a frequent reason for the splitting up of children born to one woman. As children are thought of as belonging to the father’s lineage, women who leave the marital compound are only expected to take breast-fed infants with them. After leaving her husband, a woman usually returns to her parents’ household or is placed under the authority of a brother. Later on she might re-marry, join her new husband in his household and bear further children. The high degree of children’s mobility in Fée society is therefore deeply interwoven with women’s mobility and is an outcome of the described patterns of marriage and residence.

Although children are seen as belonging to their biological father’s lineage, the principle of patrilineality does not mean that children always grow up with patrikin. In practice, many children, if not most, may be raised by matrikin. This is suggested by the results of a survey which I conducted of ninety persons older than fifty, who were fostered as children, living in three Fée villages. The majority of these persons (57%) stated that they grew up exclusively or mainly with matrikin, as against 41% who were raised mainly or exclusively by patrikin, and 2% who were raised by persons indicated as non-kin.7

Fostered children are referred to using a specific term: ‘ama ku biiri’ (Fée; ‘ama’: child, ‘biiri’: to raise, to educate). As child fostering is not seen as anything unusual or problematic, this term has no negative or ambiguous connotations. The issue of biological parenthood is barely broached in communication between parents and children. While fostering with relatives is seen as an accepted way of bringing up children, leaving a child with non-kin is viewed negatively and is uncommon. Many Fée

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6 27% of the men interviewed and 42% of the women interviewed have had two marriage partners, 40% of the men and 15% of the women three, and 10% of the men and none of the women have had four or more marriage partners.

7 A similar pattern applies to the generation of their biological children. Out of the 145 foster children within this generation, 58% grew up with matrikin, 38% with patrikin and 4% with non-kin.
children move within and between households, just as they move within and between villages. Girls are most often raised under the authority of a female relative and boys, especially older boys, under the authority of a male relative; grandmothers often care for their grandchildren—girls as well as young boys.

To understand Fée children’s reported experiences of being fostered, it is important to have knowledge of certain codes of conduct that shape the social interactions between men and women, adults and children, biological parents and foster parents in Fée society. One of these codes of conduct is that parents should behave with restraint with respect to their biological children. This norm is closely connected with a basic ethical attitude, ‘anyi’, which implies showing respect towards one’s social seniors, but also towards one’s husband and his relatives. My empirical data suggest that ‘anyi’ also contains the connotation of a fear of sanctions. Several women told me, for example, that a mother who plays with her baby in the presence of older persons, or who looks at her baby’s face while breast-feeding it in the presence of her social seniors, is regarded as having no ‘anyi’ and must expect to be rebuked by the social seniors (especially by higher ranking female relatives) verbally or physically, such as through public vilification or through a slap on the head. In public situations, parents should avoid openly displaying their feelings towards their biological children. It is also an aspect of ‘anyi’ that parents should not refuse when a relative asks for one of their children and that they should behave with restraint towards out-fostered children. As foster parents usually do not reveal the identity of their foster children’s biological parents, this can mean that, for some children who have been fostered at an early age, their biological fathers and mothers can remain ‘invisible’ for years.

Two further codes of conduct are important in this respect. First, if a child is placed with a foster parent, it is expected to remain there until it is married. The relative under whose authority the child or adolescent lives and works is considered responsible for its nurture and education and for arranging the marriage, as well as for the name-giving ceremony of the foster child’s first offspring. Reciprocally, the social parents are seen as having authority over the child, including its labour, for as long as it

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8 ‘Anyi’ is often rendered in French by ‘honte’ (shame, disgrace). On translation problems regarding a similar concept in Mossi society, see Roost Vischer (1997, 87).

9 I met some people who had found out the identity of their biological parents only when they were more than twenty and already married. However, today, most children know their biological parents’ identity, even if contact with them might be rare.
lives with them, and they may have claims over the foster child’s first child. After marriage, girls leave the foster mother’s household and move to their new husband’s compound, while boys, ‘liberated’ from their foster father’s authority, may now work under the authority of their biological father, or that of an elder brother, or they may work on their own.

Secondly, there is a norm according to which foster children should be treated equally with biological children, independently of where they grow up. This norm is in some ways opposed to the different meanings that people in the Fée villages attach to their mother’s and father’s relatives, especially the maternal and paternal relatives of the parents’ generation. A mother and her sisters (all called ‘iye’) and brothers (called ‘asi’) are considered benign and affectionate towards their nieces and nephews. It is said that children feel comfortable with their maternal relatives, as they may act freely and are hardly sanctioned. They are said to be allowed to eat in their uncle’s or aunt’s house, even without asking, and that they may stay there as long as they wish. In contrast, a child’s father and the father’s brothers (all called ‘baa’) and the father’s sisters (‘dasi’) are considered to be authoritarian, stricter and more hierarchical in their thinking than the mother and her relatives. While the relatives representing complementary filiation stand for warmth, cordialness, pleasure, freedom and solidarity, the representatives of one’s descent group, especially the father and his siblings, stand for stern and unsmiling relatives, severity, and competition between siblings.

Narrated Experiences

After considering these normative aspects of kinship, I will now look at people’s narrated experiences; the experiences of persons who have grown up or are growing up with a foster parent from the mother’s side or from the father’s side. As multiple lived experiences are hard to observe over long periods, I opted for a secondary analysis of biographical narratives focusing on people’s foster experiences. Instead of asking people directly about their experiences with respect to different kinds of kinship relations, such an indirect approach seemed a good way to avoid normative answers. In order to facilitate comparison of the biographical narratives, I analysed them by asking three questions: (1) How do those involved describe their fostering arrangements and how these came about? (2) What do they say about their relations with their foster parents and their lives in the foster household? (3) How do they describe their relations with their biological parent(s) (assuming they were aware of the latter’s identity)?
Growing Up with a Mother’s Sibling

The following section considers twelve biographical narratives from persons who were brought up by one or more relatives from their mother’s kin group (complementary filiation). The narratives were collected from four females: Mujiba (19), Mem (about 35), Abo Baba (44) and Safia (45), and eight males: Mustafa and Luhaimu (both 12), Lawali (18), Husseini (19), Woru (21), Wahidou (23), Suaibu (26) and Gobi (42). Two of the women (Abo Baba and Mem) were brought up by maternal aunts, one woman, Safia, by a maternal grandmother, and one girl, Mujiba, was still living with a maternal uncle. Most of the men or boys (had) lived under the authority of one or more maternal uncles. The only exception was Gobi, who had lived first with his maternal grandfather and later, for a short period, with a paternal aunt in order to attend school, before staying with a maternal aunt. All of these individuals had lived with relatives for several years, usually together with the foster parents’ biological children and/or with other foster children. Four of the twelve (Mujiba, Woru, Gobi and Safia) had attended or were still attending school: two had secondary school education and two had gone to university. At the time of my study, Mujiba was attending the fourth year of secondary school, Safia had abandoned secondary school after delivering her first child and had worked for many years as a salaried health worker in her home village of Angaradebou, and Woru was studying law at university and staying with his childless uncle Gobi. Gobi had completed a Master’s degree course at university and was working for an international NGO.

The Fostering Arrangements

Most people in this group were sent to (rather than claimed by) their foster parents. This often happened at the insistence of the person’s mother or maternal grandmother. However, such ‘sendings’ usually went along with a need on the side of the foster parent, and in some cases, the relative’s need for the child’s labour played a crucial role in concluding the fostering arrangements. Luhaimu (twelve) explained that he was sent to stay with his maternal uncle at the age of seven, as his father was on good terms with the uncle, and the latter needed someone to herd his cattle. Luhaimu was sent to replace his elder brother, who had lived with the maternal uncle for several years before being claimed back by his father.

The separation of marriage partners was also a frequent reason for fostering arrangements to be concluded: four out of the twelve persons (Lawali, Husseini, Mustafa and Woru; all of them four years or older at
the time) ended up with matrikin when their parents separated. This happened despite the custom that children belong to their father’s lineage.

In Lawali’s case, his father, a leatherworker, who spent most of his time at markets in the region, did not claim him (he was ten at the time). Husseini’s father, a taxi driver, only rarely stopped in the village, and from the beginning did not show any interest in Husseini or his twin brother Hassan. Mustafa’s father had chased his mother out of his compound, together with Mustafa (he was four at the time) and his younger brother (one). Later he tried to reclaim Mustafa, but did not succeed. Finally, Woru’s father (who had several wives and numerous children) did not show a great interest in keeping him, when Woru’s mother left him. These examples suggest that maternal kin are sometimes more supportive, not because of the character of matrilateral relations, but simply because the fathers neglect the children.

None of these persons talked of being lied to or forced to agree to the fostering arrangements. In contrast, several of them had taken the initiative of entering into fostering arrangements themselves, usually because they wanted to attend school somewhere or due to a conflict. Mujiba, Gobi and Woru wanted to attend school or continue their school education, and therefore successfully approached relatives on their mother’s side in search of support. Lawali went to stay with his mother’s classificatory brother at the age of fifteen, after a conflict with his biological father.

Relations with Foster Parents and Experiences in Foster Households
Life in the household of their matrikin was described by most people in this group as being relatively pleasant and easy-going. They did not mention any tense relationships or regular conflicts (although in a few cases problems with their foster father’s wives were reported), and with one exception there were no reports of attempts to run away. Some of the men even decided to stay with their maternal uncle after their first marriage, instead of returning to their father’s household, in accordance with the cultural norm, even though their biological fathers were alive. Wahidou (married, one child) explained his decision by referring to the long-standing support he had experienced from his mother’s brother: “I have lived here since I was a child. My uncle found me a wife and he paid for my wedding. He also paid for the name-giving ceremony of my first child. This is why I have stayed with him.” Suaibu (married, three children) added that his foster father had even bought him a motorbike and had paid the school fees for two of his children. In these cases, kinship belonging appears as a form of reciprocal exchange between members of different
generations and kin groups, where work and loyalty are exchanged for protection and material support. From the perspective of Wahidou and Suaibu, these aspects are more important to them than their formal patri-lineal affiliation (at least at present).

Since the massive spread of schools in francophone West Africa and also in northern Benin in recent decades (see Bierschenk 2007, Alber 2010), schooling has become an important issue in parental decision-making with regard to their children’s life courses, as well as a factor structuring children’s everyday life (Alber 2012, Martin 2012). Today, growing up with matrikin seems to increase the chances of fostered children being sent to school. But it is important to note that in the four cases in the sample where the children attended school, this resulted from a combination of the mothers’ efforts to enrol their children, the supportive interventions of some of her relatives, and the children’s own interest in going to school. If one of these conditions was not fulfilled, the children were not enrolled, as in the case of Mustafa (twelve). When he was six he desperately wanted to attend school. But as his mother depended on her brother’s support (after leaving her husband) and he needed help on his fields and somebody to look after his oxen, the mother seems to have had no choice. According to Mustafa, his mother first told him that he was too young to attend school, and when he asked her again two years later she told him that he was now too old to be enrolled. To illustrate how foster children see their relations with matrikin and how such a fostering arrangement can promote a child’s education, I will briefly present the story of Woru.10

Woru, aged 29 and still unmarried, has lived for several years under the authority of his mother’s brother, Gobi. He was born as the youngest of four surviving children of his mother and his polygynous father. Woru first lived in his paternal grandfather’s compound, but he also spent a lot of time in the compound of his mother’s relatives during his early childhood. There he got to know Gobi who regularly spent his school holidays there. When Woru was old enough to go to school and was interested in doing so, Gobi insisted on enrolling his nephew in primary school. When he was ten, his mother divorced his father. Woru and his two brothers were subsequently split up among various relatives. His elder brother went to live with a maternal uncle in a neighbouring village; he went to school there,

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10 This account is based on interviews which I conducted in 2005 and 2006 in the capital, Cotonou, and in the village of Lolo with Woru, his maternal uncle Gobi and Gobi’s mother.
but soon gave it up and returned as an adolescent to the compound of his biological father. His younger brother was brought up by a paternal uncle, who did not send him to school. Woru himself at first stayed with his mother, who had returned to her parental compound. When she remarried, Woru was sent to stay with an uncle of his mother. But contrary to the image of the warm and supporting matrikin, this uncle took him out of school, against his will. “I had to work in the fields of this uncle for two years, without being able to go to school. […] Working in the fields was hard and I would have preferred to go to school.” In this situation he turned to his mother’s younger brother, Gobi, who at this time was a pupil at secondary school (‘collège’). When Woru repeatedly expressed his interest in going to school, Gobi agreed to support him. Gobi explained his decision in this way:

The boy was clever and wanted to go to school. When I was staying in Lolo [his mother’s village] during the holidays, he came to me. He hung around and asked me for books. […] He loved going to school. His father had not cared for him, and the other men with whom he lived all thought only of the work in the fields. Then I arranged that he should continue his schooling.

With the support of his maternal uncle, Woru successfully completed primary school. Later on he lived with another relative of his mother in the regional capital of Kandi to attend secondary school, going to school during the week and working in his foster father’s fields at the weekend, while Woru’s mother paid for his board and school expenses. After some time, Woru decided to leave his ‘tuteur’\(^\text{11}\) for another maternal relative, “because the conditions were too difficult to allow me to learn properly. There was not always enough to eat, and I had too little time to study because I often had to work.” At the new place, the conditions were more favourable. “I always had enough to eat. I only went to the fields if I wanted to. I was even allowed to grow some vegetables in his garden, so that I could earn some money for myself.” Two years later Woru joined the household of his mother’s brother Gobi, who was then living in Cotonou, the economic capital, where he was working for an international NGO. This move came about after Gobi’s mother (Woru’s maternal grandmother) had approached Gobi and asked him to take Woru with him. Gobi complied with his mother’s request. He took the boy and arranged for him

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\(^{11}\) The French term ‘tuteur’ is used to refer to a person (related or unrelated) who assumes responsibility for a child’s education and to whom the child is answerable during this time.
to continue his schooling. In 2005, Woru was in his second year of law studies at the university.

Children’s Relations with Their Biological Parents
The biographical narratives suggest that growing up with a maternal aunt or uncle does not necessarily mean being avoided by one’s biological parents. Eleven of the twelve persons in this group reported that they were always aware of the identity of their biological parents. Only one woman, Safia, had found out at the end of her primary school days that the beloved woman she took for her mother was actually her maternal grandmother. Apart from her, the persons in this group all reported having had more or less regular contact with their biological mothers while living with one of her relatives.12 All in all, the majority of persons in this group described a relationship with their parents, especially with their biological mothers, where the rules of avoidance seemed to be followed less strictly.

I now come to the experiences described by those who grew up with relatives from their own kin group: with a father's brother or a paternal aunt.

Growing Up with a Father’s Sibling
My information in this respect is based on biographical interviews and everyday conversations with nineteen persons aged between eleven and seventy. The eleven female informants in this group were Hindu (11), Umhailu (14), Samsia (17), Rahina, Halimatou and Afiruwa (all 18), Lukaya (19), Umu (22), Mariam (33), Awele (about 40), and Bana (about 60). The nine male informants were Ousmanu (12), Abdul Aziz (14), Lawali (18), Yakuba (22), Sabi (40), Kadri and Oru (both about 50), and Bube (about 70). They had all lived for several years in the households of one or several of their father’s siblings, often together with the biological children of the foster parent, and sometimes with other foster children. Some of the men grew up with an elder and some with a younger brother of their fathers. This shows that seniority is not always a decisive criterion for fostering decisions. Only three of the nineteen in this group (Hindu, Abdul Aziz and

12 When a women with a child or children returns to her father’s household after a divorce, she sometimes leaves the child(ren) with (a) brother(s), who usually also live(s) in the paternal household. As mother and child continue to live in the same household (at least, as long the mother remains unmarried), it is easier to circumvent the rules of avoidance between mother and child.
Gobi) were or had been enrolled in school. Hindu was attending the third year of primary school and Abdul Aziz had attended the second year of secondary school before leaving Angaradebou in 2010.

The Fostering Arrangements
As patrikin are in a position to claim children, most persons in this group had been claimed by their foster parents (instead of being given to them), and in almost all cases, these children did not have a say in the decision to foster them. Afiruwa, for example, now eighteen, remembers how, at the age of five, she came to live with her ‘dasi’ (paternal aunt):

A: One evening, a man, Moko Kpasi, and a woman, Gudu, came by motorcycle. They took me with them. With this woman I grew up.
J: How was this arranged? Had you been informed in advance or had anyone asked you?
A: My father informed me. Gudu had come to visit us previously. She had informed my mother. My mother disagreed to her taking me. But my father said: ‘It is not your child. You cannot decide about it. She is my sister, and she will get the child!’ (…) My mother told me to run away if the relatives from Tia came. (…) But they came at night, when it was dark. So I could not run away.

As in Afiruwa’s case, fostering in this group most often appears to be a matter of adults making claims to their siblings’ children, the power relations between siblings and those between marriage partners playing a crucial role.

Different, sometimes overlapping reasons for the conclusion of these fostering arrangements were also evident in this group. Five persons (Bube, Kadri, Yakuba, Lawali and Ousmanu) said that their uncles had needed male labour. Awele explained that her ‘dasi’ had claimed her because she needed a girl to help with the household chores, as her own daughters had been fostered out. Afiruwa, Umu, Rahina and Lukaya mentioned similar reasons. There were also some cases of crisis fostering (Goody 1982, 23): in five cases, the parents’ separation was said to be the basis for the fostering arrangement, and in two other cases it was the death of a fostering grandparent. Finally, Abdul Aziz, whose father had grown up in Ghana as the son of a Fée migrant worker, was fostered by his paternal uncle in Angaradebou. His uncle took him without telling him that he would be staying in a village unknown to him in a French-speaking country, because he, the uncle, wanted to strengthen kinship ties between his dispersed blood relatives.
Relations with Foster Parents and Experiences in Foster Households

For most persons in this group, growing up with patrikin was described as being a hard experience. Many of them talked of tense relations, harsh treatment and frequent conflicts with the foster parent and the other members of the foster parent’s household. The case of Oru, a man of around fifty, illustrates this. As a young child, Oru lived in the compound of his maternal grandmother, a time of his life he describes as “very happy”. At the age of five he was taken to the compound of his father’s younger brother, before his father’s eldest brother claimed him when he was about eight because he needed somebody to graze his sheep and to help him in his fields. In his account of this part of his life, Oru mentions excessively hard work, frequent beatings, hunger and fear. “My uncle also refused to send me to school. He told my parents that they should wait for my younger brother to send him to school.” Following his descriptions, Oru felt helpless for many years, exposed to the arbitrary power of his paternal uncle and his wives.

Another example of such a narrative is Ousmanu (twelve). He feels unhappy in his ‘baa’s’ household, not because of hunger, but due to the perceived relationship with his paternal uncle and the young men in the compound, which he describes as authoritarian and severe. “I could never ask my uncle for anything.” He says that he is not allowed to ask him for anything, for example a bicycle or even small amounts of money. “He will know if I need something.” Because of this atmosphere of extreme subordination, he dreams of leaving the household one day. “If I had the choice, I would prefer to stay with my mother and her new husband.” Further frequent issues in the narratives of the people in this group are complaints about regular discrimination in favour of the foster parents’ biological children, and stories of running away or of attempts to do so. Seven of the nine male informants and seven of the eleven female informants in this group had tried at least once to run away from their foster parents. In doing so, they usually tried to return to their biological parents, albeit often without success. Others, like Bube (about seventy), joined matrikin, specifically a maternal aunt, after running away because

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13 Ousmanu is the best friend of Luhaimu (twelve), mentioned in the previous paragraph. The two boys grew up in neighbouring compounds. They usually spend the days together when herding their foster fathers’ oxen. As far as I could see, their general living conditions did not differ much: both lived in large, polygynous peasant households under the authority of a male parent. They were dressed and fed in similar ways, and neither was enrolled in school. In light of these similarities, it was striking that the boys described their lives in their foster households in radically different ways.
his father’s brother had beaten him yet again while he was an adolescent. The aunt took him in, bought him new clothes and told him about his biological father. Bube had not been aware until then of his existence.

“My aunt told me: ‘He treats you like this because he is not your real father. These are the consequences if children are fostered!’ It was after this that I took courage to ask her who my real father was.”

The quote suggests that, in the generation of Bube’s parents, lived practice differed from the shared norm according to which the ‘real’ parent is the foster parent. After some time Bube was taken back to his foster father, but finally he joined his biological father. Unlike in other narratives, he succeeded in staying here because his brothers protected him and because a friend of his father’s convinced the latter to take him into his house.

Conflicts and quarrels with a foster parent, or with his or her children or spouse was or still is an integral part of daily life for most persons in this group. The conflicts described range from everyday quarrels and insults to accusations of theft to attempted poisonings. Rahina, Umu and Afiruwa tell of discrimination between biological and fostered children in terms of access to food, money and clothes, as well as in terms of punishment. Others complain about not being sent to school or not being given (gender-)appropriate work. Kadri complains that as a boy he had to do most of the household work in his uncle’s household, including pounding, washing dishes and doing laundry, “although my uncle had four [biological] daughters!” Afiruwa had to herd the cows belonging to the eldest son of her paternal aunt, while the aunt’s sons attended school. She had to do this for years, besides the daily household chores.14 Yakuba and others complained of being underprivileged in life as they had not been sent to school and were thus not able to speak French.

The story of Lukaya may serve to illustrate the general pattern of narratives in this group. This young women (nineteen) grew up with her paternal aunt, who had three biological children and three foster daughters. In the beginning, Lukaya felt she was being well treated by her aunt, although she was taken to live with her against her will at the age of eight. But as she grew older Lukaya experienced regular conflicts with her aunt, and especially with the latter’s biological children. While these, two boys and a girl, attended school and only occasionally helped with the household

14 The aunt, whom I also interviewed, denied this, though the information was confirmed by others.
chores, Lukaya and the other fostered girls were sent to sell soap and fabrics, were responsible for preparing the meals for all the members of the household, and were obliged to perform most of the household chores. According to Lukaya, the fostered girls were frequently treated violently by the aunt and her children and had only very few rights. Lukaya says that when her aunt once lost some money she accused her foster daughters of having stolen it. Subsequently, the biological sons and another man from the compound came and beat the girls severely. Afterwards, one of the girls planned to flee from the compound, but Lukaya's aunt noticed and stopped her from running away. Subsequently, all three fostered girls got another whipping. As a consequence of such experiences, Lukaya herself ran away several times to her father. She could not join her mother, as the latter had left her father and was re-married elsewhere. However, her father, who lived with three other wives and their children, sent her back, arguing (in Lukaya's words) that “his wives would not take good care of me.” Afterwards, she ran away once more and finally refused to return to her aunt. Thereupon a family gathering took place at which her aunt promised in the presence of her brother (Lukaya's father) that she would buy fabrics and bowls for Lukaya's dowry if she returned. At this promise Lukaya agreed to return, but the quarrels continued. Finally, the girl was brought to her mother at the age of seventeen and quickly married in Angaradebou. To Lukaya's great disappointment and annoyance, she did not receive any dowry from her aunt when she was married. Similar stories of harsh treatment, punishment, disappointment and frustration were reported by Bana, Rahina, Awele, Afriuwa and Umu.

While the general picture of life painted by those who were brought up by paternal uncles or aunts is one of “abuse” or “exploitation” and of “missed chances in life” (expressions which often appeared in their stories), this picture is nuanced by four cases, all women or girls. Umhailu (14), Samsia (17), Halimatou (18) and Awele (about 40) felt they had been properly treated and maintained in their paternal aunt’s household. They describe comparatively harmonious relationships, and consider their lives in their foster mothers' households as having been more or less satisfying. None of them had run away or had the intention of leaving their foster mothers before getting married. One of the reasons for these rather exceptional experiences seems to be the foster mother's social situation and her residence. In the case of Awele, the foster mother had no children of her own and therefore treated her three foster daughters well. In the cases of Umhailu, Halimatou and Samsia (they all live with the same woman), their foster mother lives outside her husband’s compound, thus
avoiding rivalries with co-wives and their children. Besides, she is supported by a relatively wealthy brother and thus profits from his support and social prestige. As a consequence, life in this household is strikingly harmonious.

Relations with Biological Parents
Fostered individuals’ relations with their biological parents while living with the paternal foster parent were shaped by distance and avoidance—and this also applies to the four ‘exceptional’ cases. Umhailu, Halimatou and Samsia have had hardly any contact with their biological mothers in recent years, as the latter did not want to interfere with or even question the parental authority of the girls’ foster mother. Three informants (Kadri, Sabi and Bube) found out the identity of their biological fathers relatively late. Sabi had lived under the authority of his father’s elder brother in the same compound as his biological father. Nevertheless, it was years before he realized that the man living in the house next door was his biological father:

My [biological] father never approached me in the compound. He never asked me to do anything. [...] I always went to the field together with my father’s brother and worked with him. He made me work, but I was often allowed to rest in the shade. One day I had to go to the field with the man I now know is my father, although I did not know this then. He didn’t allow me to rest, and he beat me if I tried to stop working.

His account shows the importance of the codes of conduct mentioned earlier for biological parents to behave in a restrained fashion towards their fostered children and also the associated meaning of the age hierarchy between blood-related brothers. Because Sabi’s biological father owes respect to his senior brother, he did not reveal his identity to his biological son. Instead he treated him particularly harshly. Sabi emphasizes the notion of men having rights of control over others when he reflects on the conduct of his father in retrospect: “I am sure that my father liked me, but he respected his brother’s property. In order not to compete for me with his brother, he hid his identity from me.”

Some informants, despite knowing their biological mother, described their relationship with her as weak. This was especially the case when the mother had left the father and remarried, which is, as mentioned above, a recurrent pattern. Rahina, who had been sent to live with her father’s sister, did not meet her biological mother again for more than ten years. After returning to the paternal household, Rahina was informed that her mother had left her father and had returned to her village of origin several
years previously. She met her biological mother again only once, after she had married and a few months before her mother died. After all these years, her mother had become a stranger for Rahina, and communication between them was clearly not easy.

R: I travelled with others to D. [the mother’s village]. I did not know her any more. She offered us something to eat when we arrived, but we did not talk.
J: Would you have liked to talk with her?
R: I would have liked to talk with her. (...) But I was not at liberty to ask questions. She ought to have asked me how I got on, [when I stayed with my paternal aunt], but she did not say anything.

In some cases, the foster children met their biological mothers—in opposition to the norms of avoidance—occasionally or even regularly. This was easier when the mothers did not live in their husband’s compounds. Yakuba often stopped by his mother’s house before going to herd his paternal uncle’s cattle. Like some other married women in Angaradebou, she lived outside her polygynous husband’s compound, earning her own money by cultivating corn and selling small portions of tomato concentrate. In her house, protected from the eyes of co-wives and others, his mother often slipped him something to eat or gave him some coins. This habit eventually encouraged Yakuba to run away from his father’s brother (see Martin 2007, 235ff.). Like this woman, some parents evade the parental norm of avoiding contact with their fostered children. However, fathers seem to comply more often with the norm that a child who has been given to one of his siblings should no longer have contact with its biological parents. One example of this rigid attitude is given by Afiruwa (eighteen). She grew up in her paternal aunt’s household. Once she had run away from her aunt and stole into the house of her mother, who was living in her husband’s compound in a neighbouring village. Her father whipped her severely when he found the girl in his house and chased her away. A similar strong reaction by a father was reported by Kadri. At the age of about fifteen he had tried to return to his biological father’s compound. His father, out of respect for the norms, immediately sent him back: “If I went to his compound, he chased me away like a dog. [...] He hit me with a stick to make me go away. When I arrived, he didn’t allow me to speak. The first thing he did was to look for a stick and start beating me.” In all these cases, the relationship with the biological parents was ambiguous: some fostered children accepted that the ‘real’ parent was their foster parent and thus did not want to meet their biological parents, while others, such as Kadri, wanted to communicate with them but felt rejected by
them, while yet others enjoyed meeting their biological parents, but felt obliged to do this only in secret.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined patterns of kinship norms and practice, and the meanings of growing up with matrikin and patrikin, from the perspective of former and present foster children in a rural context in northern Benin. I have shown that patterns of kinship norms and ideas about one’s relations with mother’s kin and father’s kin are reflected in people’s narratives of their personal experiences of child fostering. Persons who were brought up, or are being brought up by matrikin (in particular by a mother’s sibling) tend to speak of harmonious relationships with their foster parents and other members of the household; they only rarely left their foster parents and were in relatively close contact with their biological parents. In contrast, those raised by members of their patrikin (in particular by brothers or sisters of the father) describe relations in their foster parents’ households as rather distanced, authoritarian and tense. Everyday life in these households is remembered as being fraught with quarrels. In accordance with the cultural norm, many of my informants had hardly any influence on the fostering arrangements.

This empirical study shows that kinship norms regarding lineage affiliation and complementary affiliation continue to exert a strong influence on people’s lives in contemporary Fée society, despite the social and economic changes which have taken place within the region.

To understand Fée people’s narratives regarding their personal experience of fostering, elements of descent theory still offer a helpful tool. If a father’s elder brother or a father’s sister successfully claims a child from his or her sibling, he or she refers to the norm that children legally belong to the patrilineage and that the father must respect his (elder) sibling’s claim. Thus, a child who is claimed by a paternal uncle or aunt is directly affected by expectations of subordination and respect towards a social senior. In contrast, a child that is sent to a mother’s sibling arrives in a legal and social context which for the child, due to its position in the kinship structure, is less shaped by power and hierarchy. Here, it may indeed feel (and later remember) the emotional warmth ascribed to this relationship. Nevertheless, the stories leave us with the epistemological question whether adult persons remember the experience of being raised by father’s kin or mother’s kin as bad or good respectively, because these relations are expected to be so.
At the same time, my empirical material makes clear that people in their multiple and varying kinship roles are far from always complying with kinship norms and associated expectations: maternal uncles may be unsupportive of a boy who wants to attend school, just as paternal aunts may be quite generous and affectionate towards a foster daughter. Besides, foster children themselves may act in opposition to particular norms, for example, by running away from a foster parent before they are ‘liberated’ by the latter.15 People interpret and use kinship norms and ideas in a flexible and changing manner; they may avoid, ignore or undermine particular norms in particular circumstances. Here, innovations and ensuing social and economic changes during recent decades, such as the implementation and growing influence of formal schooling, the introduction of cash crop production, and women generating personal income may influence individual people’s interpretations of kinship norms and their ways of fulfilling culturally prescribed roles. The negotiating and managing of relations of kinship in people’s everyday lives may in the long run lead to changes in kinship structures (Schnegg and Pauli 2010, 308).

The material also makes it clear that we cannot limit our analysis to the dyadic relationship between a child and its paternal or maternal foster parent and her or his legal position within the kinship system. Aspects like whether the (foster) father lives in a polygynous marriage or not, whether a foster parent is barren, whether a child’s biological mother has dissolved her marriage with the child’s father, or whether a married (foster-)mother lives inside or outside the compound of her polygynous husband may be more important for understanding people’s narratives of foster experiences. A person’s narrative can be profoundly shaped by the household’s actual size and composition, its wealth (in persons as in things) and the actual power relations between its members. As Gillian Hart puts it, households must be seen as political arenas in which material and cultural struggles and negotiations “cannot be understood in isolation from the ways in which both men and women are engaged in other arenas and networks of relationships” (Hart 1997, 22). This not only applies to women and men, but also to the children living in the households.

What are the implications of these empirical insights for further kinship studies? Anthropologists interested in kinship should see here a fresh challenge to search for ways of analysing the complex interrelations

15 What this can mean for foster mothers is shown in Notermans’ chapter (this volume).
between (1) meaningful kinship ideals or norms, (2) people’s ways of acting in kinship relations, and (3) narratives of their lived kinship life, against the backdrop of social, economic and political changes. It should be possible to fruitfully combine approaches from “classic” kinship studies, such as descent theory or theory of alliance, with approaches from the so-called “new kinship studies” in the field of child fostering.

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CHAPTER FIVE

RELATING AFFILIATION AND DESCENT:
BROTHERS’ DAUGHTERS AS CO-WIVES AMONG
THE BULSA IN NORTHERN GHANA

Barbara Meier

This article considers the various approaches that may be applied in analysing the ‘doglientiri’ relationship among the Bulsa, which allows a woman to raise her brother’s daughter (her ‘doglie’) in her household and to marry her off to a man of her choice by virtue of life-cycle rituals. By exploring the specific underlying cultural and religious concepts, the article seeks to show that ‘classical’ approaches to kinship complement each other in the case of ‘doglientiri’. The analysis of ‘doglientiri’ as practised by the Bulsa and their neighbours (the Kasena, Frafra and Tallensi) encompasses the Bulsa marriage and descent systems, as well as fundamental concepts of personhood. To comprehend ‘doglientiri’ in its entirety it is necessary to combine both the French structuralist approach to kinship, which focuses on affiliation, and the British structural-functionalist approach, which stresses descent.

Among the Bulsa, a segmentary ethnic group in the north-east of Ghana, a ‘doglientiri’ relationship allows a woman to raise her brother’s daughter (her ‘doglie’) in her household and to marry her off to a man of her choice, preferably to her own husband.1 Though the practice of fosterage in West Africa has been thoroughly studied from both a functionalist and a structuralist perspective, neither of these classical approaches has been able to explain fully the phenomenon of ‘doglientiri’, a relationship that does not fit easily into categories determined by European concepts of fosterage. In a ‘doglientiri’ relationship an older woman takes on the role of a ‘female father’, including the (male) right to give away a younger woman in marriage. The older woman may ideally be training her own future junior co-wife—another aspect that cannot easily be accommodated by the term

1 The data for this article were gathered during field research in 1988/89, 1990/1991 (in Sandema, Bulsa District), and in 1994/95 and 1997/98 among Bulsa migrants in Accra. These projects were financed by the German Research Association (DFG).
fosterage,\textsuperscript{2} which implies a parent-child relationship. Moreover, fostering has generally been studied from either a conjugal or a descent perspective exclusively. The conjugal perspective lays emphasis on the wife-husband relationship as the core relationship. Insufficient attention has been paid to the sister-brother relationship in matters of descent and reproduction. While focusing on the kinship system as a distinct domain of social life, the cosmological and ritual aspects of claiming children or ‘doglieba’ (sg. ‘doglie’) have been overlooked. It is crucial for the understanding of this practice to ask on what grounds a woman acquires ‘ownership’ over specific children. This requires basic information on how life is transferred—issues that are usually subsumed as concepts of personhood—as well as empirical data on how these concepts are enacted, whether they are non-negotiable principles or are being flexibly adapted to or contested by modern life-styles.

In this article I explore the cultural and cosmological background to the ‘doglientiri’ relationship to shed light on its implications for both marriage and descent. ‘Doglientiri’ qualifies as a ‘total social fact’ in the Maussian sense, as it simultaneously cuts across religious, social, economic and legal domains and actions (cf. Gofman 1998, Lallemand 1988). To comprehend ‘doglientiri’ in its entirety, whether in the savannah villages or the coastal urban centres, one has to combine both the French structuralist approach that focuses on affiliation and the British structural-functionalist approach that stresses descent. The aspects relevant to the relationship between a married woman and a younger woman or girl from her patrilineal family that I would like to discuss in this article are the following: (1) the sibling relationship between Bula women and their brothers, which requires more attention than it has received to date; (2) the ritual and cosmological foundations of women’s rights over their brothers’ off-spring; and (3) ‘doglientiri’ as polygynous marriage.

\textbf{Classical Approaches Reviewed}

One of the major approaches to relationships between related females, which had an impact on my earlier work on this topic (Meier 1993a), is certainly Esther Goody’s (and Jack Goody’s) structural-functionalist

\textsuperscript{2} While the editors of this volume prefer the term ‘fostering’ to ‘fosterage’ due to their focus on negotiated relationships, I prefer the term ‘fosterage’ despite other reservations because of its emphasis on the institutionalized aspect of the relationship.
approach. The rights and obligations of the women, men and children involved, the pros and cons of transferring parental roles to others and the formation of networks among women in patrilineal societies, as well as attempts to identify aspects of change, are the major themes of the structural-functionalist line of thought. It suggests a sibling relationship as the core idea underlying the foster relationship, or perhaps a means of counterbalancing the dominance of the patrilineage by strengthening wives who can form allegiances and networks by bringing in related co-wives (cf. E. Goody 1975; 1984; J. Goody 1959; 1962).

Influenced by Suzanne Lallemand’s (1993, 1994) convincing extension of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ theory of the exchange of women, in which she regards the circulation of children as an exchange of gifts, I suggest that the exchange of children among the Bulsa (as well as some of their neighbours) represents only one side of the coin. Entirely in line with Lallemand, or rather Lévi-Strauss, the crucial point of the foster system is the exchange of women, as this is the core idea behind transferring a female child from her natal home to the place where she assumes the position of a wife.

As stated half a century or more ago by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1963), Jack Goody (1959), Rüdiger Schott (1970) and others, paternal aunts, as members of the patrilineal kin group, are ‘fathers’ just like any male member of the same generation of that group. Although the term is normally not used in addressing the patrilateral aunt, equivalence between the siblings is clearly implied.3 The earlier anthropological consensus was that, in religious and legal matters, women remain under the guardianship of their fathers, brothers or husbands. J. Goody concluded that women are jural minors, as they are debarred not only from holding full rights in the major resources of the descent group, but also from acting as agents through which such rights are transmitted (J. Goody 1959, 85f.). Thus Goody, like many others, neglected the social equivalence among the sibling group implied by the term ‘female father’. Rather, Goody focussed on the mother’s brother-sister’s son (MB-ZS) relationship in northern Ghana. The joking relationship between a sister’s son and his mother’s brother that involves ‘ritual stealing’ is based on what he called the ‘residual claims’ (1959, 82) of the sister or mother. Sisters’ sons among the Bulsa also have the right to steal from their mothers’ brothers on behalf of the sibling

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3 Another instance where the ‘sameness’ of sister and brother is acted out is when she assumes the role of a husband vis-à-vis her brother’s wife during certain rituals.
relationship of the mother and her brother, but it would be misleading to consider this ritual right a ‘residual’ claim, nor would I agree that the sister can be regarded as the ‘residual’ sibling. A look at the opposite relationship between a father’s sister and her brother’s daughter (the ‘doglientiri’ relationship) reveals that the society actually depends on out-married daughters to support the clan in having children.

The aim of this article is not to favour one approach (British or French) over the other, but rather to demonstrate how descent and marriage, as well as religious concepts of personhood and procreation, all need to be carefully examined in order to understand ‘doglientiri’ fully. The ritual foundation of ‘doglientiri’ in northern Ghana clearly shows that the maintenance of social relationships in this region depends on the relationship between groups and individuals and the cosmological order represented by ancestors and other supernatural agents. Within the socio-cosmological universe of the patrilineal Bulsa, a distant Sky-God (‘Naa-wen’), the Earth (‘teng’), the ancestors and other transcendent agents such as bush spirits (‘kikita’), ghosts (‘kokta’) and witches (‘sakpaksa’) play a vital role in peoples’ lives. Each individual depends on the maintenance of his or her relationship with these forces, which is embodied in his or her personal ‘wen’ (personal divinity or alter ego). ‘Wen’ is provided by ‘Naa-wen’ and must return to this origin after a person’s death. Every marriage relationship requires the consent of the ancestors in order to successfully reproduce, receive ‘wen’ and contribute to the endless exchange between humans and the cosmological domain. This means each and every human being owes his or her life to ‘Naa-wen’, whose gift of life is mediated through the ancestors and a female member of the respective lineage. Applied to the case of ‘doglientiri’, this explains why this notion of belonging is not an alternative, but rather a constitutive element of kinship relations in northern Ghana.

British social anthropology has informed us well about clan and lineage structures and household compositions, fissions and fusions. Yet, the important social relationship between brothers and sisters has been almost completely neglected. One aspect of this relationship is the further relationship between out-married women and their brothers’ daughters. Social reproduction is one of the central values of this ethnic group, and childlessness threatens not merely the economic foundations of the people, it also ends all exchange with the ancestors because descendants are responsible for all sacrificial activities, and they are the ones who have the duty of transforming their dead parents and grandparents into ancestors by performing the necessary rituals. Most anthropological accounts
of this particular region (as elsewhere, no doubt) portray women as wives who give birth to the descendants of their husbands’ lineages. What has been neglected is the fact that, although women are unable to transmit their clan membership, they are ritually responsible for the continued existence of their own lineages out life-cycle rituals without which pregnancies and births are not believed to be possible. This is why fathers’ sisters are among the most highly respected persons in this region: they are mediators between lineages and their ancestors when it comes to receiving the gift of life from ‘Naa-wen’. Even today the prominent position of the father’s sister is uncontested by most Bulsa.

**Bulsa Women and Their Brothers’ Daughters**

Among the Bulsa the relationship sketched out below is known by the term ‘doglientiri’ or ‘doglieni’. The partners are a girl ‘doglie’ (pl. ‘doglieba’, literally ‘room daughter’) and her patrilateral aunt (FZ) or ‘doglie-nyono’ (literally ‘owner of the doglie’).4

The classical ‘doglientiri’ set-up implies that the older woman may claim one or several daughters of her brothers, incorporate them into her household and ideally marry them off to her own husband or one of his clan mates as soon as the girl has reached marriageable age. The ‘doglientiri’

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4 Ownership in the sense of the girl belonging to the father’s sister (FZ), but also in the sense that the FZ is responsible for the well-being of her ward. Ownership in the sense of ‘mere’ possession is a concept traditionally unknown in Bulsa thought. Ownership, as in ‘yeri-nyono’, literally ‘house-owner’, always implies the duty to care and protect, in this case not only the house, but all the people, their welfare and health, as well as the animals and the land.
relationship can be extended to numerous other relationships. The term may also refer to the relationship between a father’s father’s sister (FFZ) and her brother’s son’s daughter (BSD) or to a father’s father’s brother’s daughter (FFBD) and her father’s brother’s son’s daughter (FBSD), and even be applied to sisters of the same mother and father, or to sisters of the same father with different mothers (Meier 1993a, 37ff.). The position of the father’s sister (FZ), however, is unique among the female relatives of an individual and requires more attention, since it is the model for all other modifications.

When asked about the out-married women of a house or lineage (in Meyer Fortes’ terms), people may declare that “your father’s sister is your father”. The father’s sister takes on the role of the father, which includes authority over marriage affairs. The status of ‘female fathers’, which is based on the socio-cosmological principle of sibling equality, is embedded in the kinship structure and enacted in all the rituals that deal with human fertility and procreation. The unique position of women in this kinship system becomes evident in the fact that they are responsible for the transmission of fertility to their brothers’ wives, which means they play a role as life-givers in their own lineage and—via the ‘doglientiri’ setup—as wife-givers in respect of their husband’s lineage. The father’s sister-brother’s daughter (FZ-BD) relationship clearly demonstrates that, far from being ‘residual’ group members, women do act and hold rights over major resources, namely over their brothers’ offspring. Alongside the clear-cut kinship position, which is apparently not a matter of negotiation, there is another level in this relationship that is subject to a great amount of personal inclination and preference in sibling relationships. Thus, a woman would hardly claim her brother’s daughter (even if cosmologically entitled to do so) if she were not on good terms with him. What is necessary for the practice of the relationship is not only an ascribed position (and ritual obligation) but a well-maintained relationship, mutual trust and a feeling of closeness between the persons involved. While the patrilineal relationship already provides a strong link between a woman and her family of origin, the matrilineal relationship with her brother forms an indissoluble emotional bond to his children. Formal kinship analysis is not easily able to accommodate such a lived experience of relatedness.

**Ritual Foundation for ‘doglientiri’**

As several rituals that deal with procreation legitimize the practice of ‘doglientiri’, it is necessary to consider the cosmological frame of the
relationship (Meier 1999, 87ff.). The various social spheres of Bulsa cosmology are defined by the exchange of the living, the transcendental world and the environment. The social community that occupies these domains includes the living, the dead and the yet to be born children.

In traditional Bulsa conceptions, and given a context of high infant-mortality rates, occurrences such as miscarriages and stillbirths, as well as illness and misfortune, are ascribed to transcendent forces such as the ancestors (‘kpilima’), witches (‘sakpaksa’), ghosts (‘kokta’), the earth (‘teng’) or wild bush spirits (‘kikita’). This calls for numerous rituals and practices to safeguard a new life. As parts of the Bulsa semi- and non-social domain, these spiritual beings require good relationships with the human community. Fertility and barrenness, as well as timely rainfall and droughts, or rich harvests and famines, are ultimately the outcome of ongoing exchange relationships. A diviner (‘baanoa’) specialized in the analysis of difficult situations can discover what exactly has disturbed or interrupted a specific exchange relationship and will tell what needs to be done to restore it. Fertility and subsequent pregnancies—especially first ones—are particularly endangered and therefore call for careful attention.

A young bride who suspects that she may be pregnant will inform her mother-in-law, who will in turn inform the compound head. A diviner will then be consulted to verify the situation by communicating with the ancestors. The diviner may disclose potentially harmful relationships and instruct the pregnant woman to take certain precautions. During this session the diviner will also determine which of the many out-married house daughters is the right one to perform the ritual of ‘logi nyatika’ (literally ‘seeing the belly’), the ritual confirmation of the pregnancy that also serves as public announcement of it.6 Any out-married daughter of that lineage who is well established as a wife and mother in her husband’s family may be chosen, though usually the choice is a direct elder sister of the expectant father.

On the appointed day the chosen woman will come before dawn and fetch water from a well or a nearby river. She may fetch it only once and must take care not to spill any of it on her way to the compound. When she arrives at her parental home she will first inform the ancestors of the

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5 Women who have had as many as sixteen pregnancies but only a few surviving children are not uncommon.
6 To talk about a pregnancy before it has been officially announced to the ancestors and the public would cause miscarriage or complications during the birth.
pregnancy, together with the compound head. She then approaches the sleeping couple and sprinkles water on to her pregnant sister-in-law's stomach, saying: “N nyati fi puuka” (“I have seen your pregnancy”, literally ‘stomach’) (Kröger 1978, 39). Eye-contact at this stage of the ritual must be avoided as this would endanger the baby’s life,7 so the house daughter will rush out of the room and hide until the sun has risen. She may then return and call her sister-in-law out by addressing her as her ‘wife’. The ritual is terminated when she has tied coloured strings around the pregnant woman’s neck and waist. The husband’s sister may use abusive language on this occasion or make fun of her ‘wife’s’ big belly or call her an ‘old woman’. This is the appropriate time for a married woman and her husband’s sister to enact their joking relationship publicly by referring to each other as ‘(female) husband’ and ‘wife’. The wife may blame her ‘female husband’ for not having taken care of her properly and lament the other’s misery. Her counterpart will question her ‘wife’s’ fertility and beauty, and complain about the taste of her cooking. The husband’s sister or rather the ‘male part’ might say, “You and your swollen belly, get up and let’s go to the market together, and then we shall see which of us will have suitors!” Sabine Luning has drawn my attention to the gender issue in joking relationships, and the Bulsa material confirms that ‘sisters and brothers of the wife, as well as sisters and brothers of the husband identify with their respective sibling’, transferring aspects of the marital relationship on to the in-law relationship (1996, 3).

The ceremony of the announcement of a wife’s first pregnancy, however, is not merely the stage for the performance of social relationships between ‘spouses’, but also clearly expresses the patrilineage’s claim to the expected child. But what is crucial in view of the ‘doglientiri’ system is that it is not a male member who takes ritual precautions for the unborn family members but women. In other words, it is those who have been epitomized by social anthropologists as political and ritual minors who are responsible for the continued existence of the lineage. This purely female duty entitles women alone to claim their brothers’ children (girls as well as boys!) as their ‘slaves’. The social structure restricts boys’ mobility, as they are meant to remain for life in the compound of their fathers and cannot be incorporated into the family of the father’s sister’s husband.

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7 I have recorded a case in which a young woman had been pushed into an unwanted marriage. When the ‘logi-nyatika’ was being carried out she deliberately looked at the water-sprinkling HZ in order to abort the foetus. Her behaviour was considered scandalous and was talked about for years.
So, despite calling her brother’s son her ‘slave’, she cannot take him with her to the compound where she lives. Boys and men who have been born by virtue of their father’s sisters maintain a close tie to these. The female ‘slaves’ however, may easily be called to serve their ‘owner’ and eventually become ‘little wives’ when they are married to the husbands of the older women.

Another set of rituals that strongly establishes a claim on brothers’ daughters is related to miscarriages. When several miscarriages, stillbirths and infant deaths occur in a row, this will be taken as a sign of a disturbed relationship between the living and the supernatural world. The interpretation is that either an offended or neglected ancestor is causing the trouble and demanding retribution, or that a wild bush creature (‘kikiruk’) is playing a practical joke on a family by repeatedly entering a woman’s womb, only to return later to its place of origin leaving behind a dead child’s body. Once the root cause has been revealed by diviners, steps are taken to ensure the survival of the next baby, which also involves the ritual of tying strings (‘miisa bobika’) around the pregnant woman’s belly and resembles the announcement of the first pregnancy. Again the ‘biak-kaasung’ ritual (literally ‘broken birth’) is carried out by a married daughter of the lineage. Later, when the baby is born, the same daughter may come again and claim her ‘slave’. She deceives the malevolent spirit by rolling the baby about on the ash heap in front of the compound. This action has been interpreted as a symbolic funeral for the child that will mislead the evil agents into thinking that the child has actually died (Meier 1993b, 120). The Bulsa insult the child publicly, implying that it is not a valued living being and hence deceiving the spirits into thinking that it is not worth taking away.

Subsequently, the child is called a ‘slave’, and slave marks are cut into its cheeks. In addition the child is given an abusive name like ‘Ayoma’, ‘Ayombiik’, ‘Ayompok’ (‘Slave’, ‘Slave-child’, ‘Slave-woman’), ‘Ayaata’ (‘Rubbish’), ‘Achivie’ (‘Shame’) or ‘Azong’ (‘Goats’-pen’) (cf. Kröger 1978, 105f.). It is also common in northern Ghana to give such children strangers’ names like ‘Jamedu’ (‘Fulani’), ‘Jambilli’ (‘Mossi’) or ‘Bawa’ (‘Hausa’), for these children symbolically belong to strangers whose ownership will bind them to this world (Haaf 1967, 88).

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8 A father’s sister (FZ) may give her brother’s son (BS) a little bow and arrow as a symbol of his future male duties, and she may have a say in the choice of his wife.
All these ritual actions serve the single aim of saving the child from malevolent forces through public allusion that it is not a worthy person, but a ‘stranger’, a ‘thing’ or a ‘slave’ (cf. Benson 2006, 177ff.). Although this naming practice may appear cruel or derogative to outsiders, one should not make the mistake of judging the relationships involved on the basis of these attributes. These names are extremely common among the Bulsa and their neighbours, and nobody pays any attention to such a ‘slave’ name, which is no more than an indication of the conditions under which this person or his older siblings were born.

Although the descriptions of these rituals have had to be kept to a minimum here, they are fundamental because they are existential for the reproduction of the society. Either a father’s sister has announced the first pregnancy or—an even stronger motive for carrying out the rituals—she has warded off supernatural malevolent forces by restoring a relationship between humans and their cosmological world. Thus every single person is aware that he or she owes his or her life to the ritual service of the father’s sister, which may also account for a feeling of closeness or belonging beyond normative kinship categories. For girls, birth rituals legitimize the future that prescribes moving into the older woman’s household, or, if the claim is not made, her involvement in marriage negotiations and a share in the gifts given by the prospective groom. Moreover, as a first successful pregnancy ‘opens the door’ for all successive children, literally everybody has a ‘female father’ with whom to associate in the prescribed way.

‘Doglientiri’ as Marriage

The patrilineal clan sections in the Bulsa area are classified according to their marriage relations with other sections or sub-clans. These units are exogamous in the sense that marriage with the daughter of anyone from one’s own section is prohibited. A sexual relationship with any wife of a lineage member is considered ‘kabong’, ‘the only mortal sin we Bulsa

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9 Nor do such names reflect any kind of prejudice towards the relationship between a child and her or his FZ.
10 I have recorded a case where a woman married without her FZ’s knowledge and without giving her a share in the suitor’s gifts. The FZ decided to claim the young female, and the marriage was dissolved. Although this was regarded as an extreme reaction on the part of the FZ, the parents had to give in helplessly to the woman’s rights over her BD. Complications like this usually lead to the couple migrating to the south, where relatives’ demands can be ‘ignored’ (at least for some time).
know’ (Kröger 1978, 252) for as long as the husband is alive. In addition to the prohibition against marrying a classificatory ‘sister’ or ‘mother’, marriage with any female from the mother’s lineage is forbidden. There seems to be some confusion about how many generations back this prohibition is applied, but after a considerable number of generations marriage becomes possible (cf. Kröger 1978, 244ff.); yet it is the aim of each section to repeat a marriage alliance in order to maintain the status of wife-giver. Apart from marriage restrictions due to the nearness of kinship relations, Bulsa differentiate between lineages whose daughters are marriageable and those whose wives (from a third lineage) one may marry, the latter revealing a friendly, the former a hostile relationship. According to these principles, any young woman in a compound who does not have the status of a relative is considered a wife. And this is also valid for ‘doglieba’, no matter at what age they are brought into the household. They may, in fact, be as young as four years or so, but they are usually ten to twelve years old.

The life-giving capacity of women is of very great value, and so the prospect of acquiring women is the strongest motive for a wife of the house to bring a young relative into the compound, where she has to be fed out of the family’s supplies and looked after by all other members of the household, as well as by their ancestors. Today this reasoning cannot be taken for granted any more. Men frequently discourage their wives from bringing in ‘doglieba’ because the economic burden is becoming too much or, perhaps—and this would constitute a fundamental change to established value hierarchies—they prefer to concentrate their resources on the welfare of fewer persons. Nevertheless, a ‘doglie’ relationship that is derived from rituals cannot be rejected by any of the persons involved, nor can it be dissolved. However, today in many cases it may not be enacted through the actual transfer of a girl to her FZ, or it may be postponed endlessly, evaded or transferred to other contexts. This requires considerable social flexibility and negotiating skills, especially in the context of urban migration, where the demand for household helpers outweighs the expectations of a future co-wife.

A number of social anthropologists have written about the notion and practice that childrearing is not necessarily regarded as solely a motherly duty and that young girls ought to be trained early by a variety of persons in what they need to know to become good housewives (e.g. Steinbrich 1987). Older Bulsa women reminisce about the hardships they endured in the years when they were in their father’s sisters’ households. In contrast to present ‘doglieba’, older women are full of lengthy reports of how they
were beaten and otherwise maltreated by the daughters of the house and how they still have pains in their backs as a result. These narratives often contain stories of beatings for letting sweat and tears drop into the millet flour, or of having to regrind the millet flour many times until it was fine enough. But all these women are grateful to their father’s sisters because in retrospect “she has made me what I am today”, as many say. Women take pride in having learned thoroughly ‘from scratch’ how to behave in the right way, about child care, how to grind millet into flour, to prepare shea-nut butter, to cook, trade, brew and sow millet. But it is also very common for adolescent girls to leave their fathers’ sisters when they feel they are being treated unkindly or pushed into an unwanted marriage. It depends on the individual case how the parents of a girl will react when she comes running home accusing her FZ of maltreating her. Some are sent back immediately, some are left for some time and then returned, others remain with their parents or join another female relative. Some may be beaten by their own parents for disobedience towards the FZ, and in other cases mothers and fathers oppose the senior women and support their daughters. In principle a run-away ‘doglie’ is a run-away wife, and lineages are not likely to give up their claim to a wife easily. Although ‘doglieba’ may bring their case before the court at the chief’s palace, much will depend on the relationship between the FZ and the respective ‘doglie’ as to whether the case is pursued with much force or left alone. Although it is difficult to interview girls at the age of about twelve to fifteen years (the most common age for a ‘doglie’) due to their shyness and traditionally reserved attitude towards visitors, some have been able to tell me about their sentiments towards their FZ. Most of the girls complained of their age-mates in the compound, girls who are in the position of daughters, who they deem to be lazy. Participant observation, however, revealed that ‘doglieba’ are treated much the same as the daughters of the compound and that many may be repeating stereotypes of ‘doglieba’ hardships. Generally, all Bulsa girls, ‘doglieba’ and daughters, work hard and are encouraged to learn to deal with unjust treatment. Yet a difference in status remains. Although hardly ever put into words, ‘doglieba’ take pride in the fact that they are ‘wives’, no matter whether they have actually been given to a man or not. Yet the number of young

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11 Ulrike Wanitzek has recorded numerous cases from the archives in which cases of divorce turned out to involve run-away ‘doglieba’ (U. Wanitzek, unpublished notes and photocopies, mainly from chiefly court archives).
girls who are willing to fulfil the duties of a ‘real’ wife when it comes to being given to a man is decreasing.

On the whole one may conclude that the widespread custom of raising BDs as ‘doglieba’ is declining, while the ritual relationship is still being maintained. Paternal aunts continue to be greatly respected and are often feared by their nieces and nephews. Many girls spend some time in their FZs’ compounds as visitors (with the idea of a possible extension) before returning to their respective homes, especially if they are attending secondary school. While it is hardly common for secondary school girls to be ‘doglieba’ in their FZs’ compounds, it is quite common for the FZ to help pay the girl’s school fees.

The circumstances of bringing a brother’s daughter into their husbands’ houses to help with household chores has been analysed in detail by other contributors to this book (see Notermans, this volume). What I would like to emphasize here is the aspect of giving a wife rather than fostering children as the core idea behind ‘doglientiri’. This becomes evident when looking at marriage norms and rituals.

Courting a woman is usually a lengthy procedure among the Bulsa that involves frequent visits, greetings, gift-giving and inviting. Successful arrangements are then followed up by the transfer of the woman from her natal home to that of her husband. As soon as the bride has crossed the border of the groom’s lineage’s land, the relatives of the groom will usually break into loud cheers, for they have, as they put it, ‘eaten a woman’. Traditionally a young bride will stay in her mother-in-law’s room for several nights before she is united with her husband. The mother-in-law will also give the bride a new name. The ritual of ‘nansiung ligka’ (literally ‘closing the gate’) officially marks the completion of a wedding. A messenger is sent to the bride’s parents with a chicken to ‘close the gate’ and to deliver the message “do not look for her, for she is with me”. Until this ritual has been carried out, children cannot rightly be claimed by the fathers’ patri-lineage (Kröger 1978, 274ff.). After some weeks have passed, the bride’s mother will visit her newlywed daughter and return home laden with gifts of smoked guinea fowl, salt, ‘dawa-dawa’ seeds, etc. The bride’s brothers also come to visit their new brothers-in-law and are traditionally served a meal of dog-meat. The wife-takers will from then on be required to work in their in-law’s fields upon request. These marriage rituals are performed

12 Fermented seeds from the so-called ‘dawa-dawa’ tree, an important spice for many Bulsa dishes.
for every wife in a compound unless her marriage is a repetition of an existing alliance. If a father’s sister is already a wife in the family, none of these rituals are carried out for her brother’s sister when she is married into the same lineage because the rituals of the first alliance between the two families are valid for all subsequent marriages. In addition, should a wife die and her funeral be performed by her husband’s family (for their ‘mother’), none of her co-wives from the same lineage are entitled to separate funerals.

The idea of a woman supplementing an existing marital relationship is also visible in the way the children of these women are considered to be more closely related (‘ma-bisa’) than children by the same father but by mothers from different places (‘ko-bisa’). This principle applies to an even greater extent to ‘doglieba’ (pl.). Courting and giving gifts to the mother-in-law is not done by a prospective son-in-law but by the ‘doglie-nyono’ (doglie owner) herself. Working parties at the in-laws, as well as obligations regarding ritual contributions, are conducted once and for all. Wife-takers acknowledge that marrying (classificatory) ‘sisters’ or ‘doglieba’ facilitates the rather formal courting procedure. However, apart from short-term practical advantages to such polygynous marriage alliances, there is a silent appreciation of the strengthening of an established relationship that has already been cosmologically confirmed.\textsuperscript{13} Despite not acquiring an additional in-law-relationship, the wife-givers respect a well-established relationship by confirming an existing marital union that is known to be blessed.

Numerous sororal polygynous marriages are modelled on ‘doglientiri’ but lack any form of ritual obligation. In such cases the relationship serves to compensate for individual social needs (too many or too few children, the absence of parent, etc.), a form that has been referred to as ‘purpose’ and/or ‘crisis fostering’ by numerous anthropologists since E. Goody. A wife may encourage any younger female from her own family, preferably her (classificatory) sisters, to follow her as a co-wife.\textsuperscript{14} Frequently women who have not had any children look out for a younger co-wife from their own family to bear children. These children will be regarded as her own,

\textsuperscript{13} Most young girls reject being married to a FZ’s husband and frequently convince the older woman to allow them to marry somebody else.

\textsuperscript{14} Sisters of the same mother and father who have been born directly after each other may not marry the same man. There must be an intermediate sibling (Kröger 1978, 251).
thus sparing her the sad fate of childlessness. A woman may wish to improve her social standing as a wife within the compound by bringing in young women, or a woman whose husband intends to look for another wife prefers to have a related co-wife over whom she will have some command, rather than having to deal with a stranger. The personal motives in initiating such a ‘doglie’ relationship vary widely. Some are due to crisis situations (childlessness, death, sickness, etc.), some arise from the specific domestic situation (e.g. there are only boys in the household) and some may have individual, purely emotional reasons. A girl who likes a certain female relative may convince her parents to let her go. Or a woman may feel close to a girl and persuade her and the parents to let her join her.

With reference to their common descent, married women from the same extended family call each other ‘father’s daughters’ (‘ko-lieba’) and can rely on each other for support when a lot of work needs to be done or problems arise. Apart from this practical aspect, the presence of related women close by provides psychological, emotional and social security, which is openly appreciated. As wives are always strangers in their husbands’ lineages, the presence of a related older or younger female provides emotional and psychological support. A related younger female is also a source of additional social security in old age. Social prestige is acquired with age, as almost anywhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, but for older Bulsa women it also comes with the number of ‘doglieba’ one has taken in the course of one’s life. Also, old women take comfort in the idea of having many ‘doglieba’ who have in turn produced children, as this guarantees that they will eventually be given a grand funeral. The powerful status of a woman may also become evident in cases where one of the wives from the same lineage (‘ko-lieba’) faces marital problems and her ‘doglieba’ take her part, and together they are not to be ignored by the husband and his entire section. Sabine Steinbrich and Doris Bonnet have observed among the Lyela and Mossi in Burkina Faso that such women have

15 Anthropological studies of African societies usually conclude that barrenness goes along with the stigmatization of these women. In the Bulsa case the cause of childlessness is to be found in the relationship between the spouses or the two families (which includes their respective ancestors). Childlessness is dealt with by a change of partner (perhaps only for the sake of becoming pregnant), sacrifices to a certain ancestor or the Earth or dissolution of the marriage.

16 They may not all have been brought into the lineage as wives by the same woman. A well-established marital union will be expected to generate a kind of chain marriage in which every following wife from a lineage can be considered a ‘doglie’ of any previously married FZ or classificatory sister.
threatened their husbands with collective departure (Steinbrich 1987, 140, Bonnet 1988, 54). Apart from ameliorating their social position as strangers in their husbands’ families, women who can look upon several married ‘doglieba’ gain influence in the lineage’s affairs.

The Bulsa data on ‘doglieba’ does not support the notion of sharing children that appears to apply to other cases of fosterage in West Africa. Rearing ‘doglieba’ has little to do with a culturally designed regard for childhood. A Bulsa woman will hardly bring into her household a ‘doglie’ because she wants her as a daughter. Women rather regard their wards as young co-wives. In cases of barrenness, women bring in ‘doglieba’ to bear the children they are lacking. Nor do young ‘doglieba’ regard their paternal aunts as substitutes for their biological parents. They are fully aware of their status as wives and do not expect the father’s sisters to be anything like their own mothers. The daughters of a compound—even if they are age mates—will not assume the roles of sisters. The boys within that setting are not brothers but potential husbands. In order to attain an open perspective on ‘doglientiri’, therefore, care is needed in use of the term ‘fosterage’.

While retaining the difference between social and biological parenthood, Erdmute Alber has solved the problem regarding the term ‘fosterage’ by raising awareness of emic categories. “…I use the term ‘fosterage’ exclusively as an analytic term, one which does not express the specific way Baatombu talk and think about parenthood” (2003, 489f.). It is difficult to analyse the relationship between girls and related older women in northern Ghana as long as the term ‘fosterage’, which originates from completely different circumstances, is applied. Fostering as defined for West African settings by Christine Oppong (1973, 44) and E. Goody (1975, 137) involves the relationship between a child and an adult that is similar to or takes the (temporary) place of a (foster) child-(foster) parent relationship. The idea of raising a child is closely associated with the ‘parental’ roles of (proxy) mothers or fathers. Fostering in times of crisis (e.g. the loss of one’s parents) does occur among the Bulsa. Children may be taken care of by other relatives, such as the maternal grandparents. Fostering is also practised to some extent in the ‘doglientiri’ case. But the relationship between the ‘doglie’-owner and the ‘doglie’ is not that of foster mother and foster daughter, as one may suppose, but that of a senior wife to her younger co-wife, reflecting a notion of ‘ownership’ that is cosmologically bestowed on the senior woman. Although the specific personal and emotional content of a given ‘doglie’-‘doglie’-owner relationship may vary widely, Bulsa differentiate between such a relationship and that between
daughter and mother. One expects a girl to respect her father’s sister as she respects her father, while one’s relationship with one’s mother is one of closeness and unconditional love. The father’s sister thus has a dual role vis-à-vis her brother’s daughter: she is in the position both of a ‘father’, because she has the power to select the future groom, and of a senior co-wife who has authority over her junior co-wives.

The status of ‘doglieba’ as wives also becomes evident if they should happen to die in the compound of the paternal aunt’s husband before actually becoming any particular man’s wife. In this case, a wife’s funeral will be performed, which means the girl is buried outside the compound beside the path leading to her paternal home. Also, if the girl returns to her parents because she does not like to be with her father’s sister, or if she refuses to be the wife of a certain man, her case is treated as one of divorce. If she is still very young, her parents may not try to send her back against her will, though she is not free to marry any other man of that particular lineage later on, because she is already considered somebody’s wife.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Reviewing the data on and interpretations of the ‘doglientiri’ relationship has shown that different anthropological approaches not only complement each other but are essential for a full understanding of ‘doglientiri’ among the Bulsa. It has become evident that the kinship structure analyses of British structural functionalism and the alliance theory of French structuralism form the backbone of any analysis of ‘doglientiri’. The aspect of sibling equality stresses a structural-functional interpretation, whereas ‘doglientiri’ as an institutionalized way of forming alliances between lineages can be better approached by applying structuralist models. The ritual dimension of ‘doglientiri’ needs to be approached from both perspectives, as it touches both descent and marriage and explains the fundamental concepts at the root of the relationship. The concept of the ‘transfer of imagined belonging(s)’ proposed by Alber (this volume) to this book certainly has the potential to open up a theoretical debate, as it

17 I fully agree with James, who mentions in a footnote the problem of the continuing tradition of structuralism in French anthropology: “the problem is that of the difficulty in accommodating ‘modern’ times into structuralism” (James 1998, 246, footnote 10). This ‘problem’ applies to British structural-functionalism as well.
allows some of the flaws of the somewhat outmoded concept of fosterage in bringing in ‘ownership’ and a plurality of ‘belongings’ to be addressed. As long as ‘doglientiri’ is regarded as the transfer of the belonging of a girl to her FZ and the relationship of the persons involved in the arrangement, Alber’s concept will remain useful. However, it is difficult to apply the notion of ‘imagined belongings’ to the rather firmly cast cosmological aspect of the relationship implied in the classical form of ‘doglientiri’. Bulsa cosmology does not alter belonging, but rather brings out the core aspect of relationships and serves as a backdrop against which people can design, adjust, and create their modes of life.

I have shown that the relationship between an out-married daughter and her brother’s daughter is based on her ritual services, in exchange for which she is given ‘her slave’. Ultimately, however, she confirms her own marriage by repeating the transfer of a woman from her lineage to that of her husband. Thus the society depends for social reproduction on women as mothers, but also on women as sisters, with their ritual duties towards the ancestors. Bulsa wives who bring their brothers’ daughters into their households have a dual position towards their wards: as ‘female fathers’ and as future co-wives. Thus Bulsa women have the roles of life-givers and wife-givers at the same time.

It has become very clear that kinship and cosmology are not independent domains of social life but are inseparably connected among the Bulsa. Further research on the topic of ‘doglientiri’ from the perspective of Alber’s concept of ‘transferred imagined belongings’, as well as Carsten’s notion of kinship as relatedness (2000, 2004), might widen the field, revealing more dynamic and processual dimensions of kinship. A detailed examination and comparison of individual case studies in both rural and urban contexts from various theoretical perspectives is required to show how and under what circumstances imagined belongings and negotiated relatedness assume a priority over formal kinship and socio-cosmological structures, and vice versa.

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CHAPTER SIX

CHILDREN COMING AND GOING:
FOSTERING AND LIFETIME MOBILITY IN EAST CAMEROON

Catrien Notermans

When my child left, I was desperate. I nervously walked around. It felt as if I was naked. I silently cried and did not show my emotions and my grief to others. I only tried to stay calm.

This expression of distress was not voiced by a mother recalling the time she entrusted her biological child to a foster parent. It was a foster mother who had raised her foster daughter for fourteen years and who felt so unhappy when the girl unexpectedly left her to join her biological mother. In this chapter, I will focus on the experiences of mothers who are left behind by their foster children, in order to study the consequences of foster transactions, and how child mobility connects to other forms of mobility in women's lives.

In East Cameroon, large numbers of children live for long periods of time as foster children in other households, separated from their biological mothers. The upbringing of children is not only a task to be performed by the biological parents, but is shared with other relatives. A survey carried out during fieldwork in 1999 in one of the districts of Batouri, a small provincial town of about 25,000 inhabitants, revealed that 31 per cent of the children lived with foster parents. Surveys of schools showed even higher percentages, with 49 per cent of the primary school children between nine and 15 years old, and 94 per cent of secondary school children between 13 and 18 years old, living with foster parents. Even the children who were living with their biological parents had already had the experience of living with a foster family. Primary school children, for example, had resided for long periods of time in an average number of two and a half households. These statistics reveal that it is not a case of one category of children who are fostered and another category of children who are not. All children, rich and poor, are involved in child fostering during childhood in one way or another.

Child fostering in East Cameroon is not only related to schooling as the statistics may suggest. Both the kinship system (matrilineal descent)
and the marriage system (characterized by formal and informal polygyny, informal polyandry, flexibility of marriage and almost non-existent bride prices) contribute to the high frequency of children’s mobility between kin households in Batouri. Children may be fostered to escape co-wife rivalry and dangerous witchcraft practices in their parents’ polygynous households; children may be fostered when their mothers divorce or temporarily leave their husbands; and children often move between the homes of brothers and sisters ‘from the same womb’ to share meals, household tasks and each other’s company in order to express solidarity and strengthen matrilineal family ties.

Regardless of the causes of children’s moves, local norms prescribe that biological parents are not allowed to reclaim their out-fostered children. The ending of a foster arrangement can only be initiated either by the child if it feels mistreated, or by the foster parent if he or she wants to protect the child from co-wife rivalry, witchcraft, or the jealousy of in-laws. However, when I revisited my research area in 2006 to study the current situation of the families that I had been following for fifteen years, I noticed that many of my informant friends, now in their late thirties and forties, had had some sore experiences in connection with their foster children. After having raised them for a good many years, they had been confronted with the painful reality that some of their foster children (teenagers now) suddenly left the house and did not come back. Whereas in previous periods of fieldwork these parents had narrated how they received the foster children in their house and cared for them, they now spoke of the ruptures that followed. While kinship-related problems easily tend to result in publicly expressed complaints or witchcraft accusations, these problems surprisingly did not.

All these observations made me wonder how foster mothers’ experiences of child fostering change in the course of their lifetime. Is it easier to foster small children than to watch over them when they grow up? How can foster arrangements suddenly end when it is the rule that biological or first parents are not allowed to reclaim their children? The central theoretical question is how this continual process of making and breaking kin ties can be explained and how it links to a wider culture of movement.

To answer these questions, I elaborate on the perspective of foster mothers who are faced with foster children leaving the house against their wishes.¹ In doing this, I emphasize how important it is not only to

¹ This chapter proceeds from previous publications which focus on foster parents taking foster children into their homes (Notermans 2004a, 2004b) and on family
consider the beginning of foster arrangements but also to analyse the way these arrangements develop during people’s life course. System-oriented approaches to fosterage (both British functionalist and French structuralist) tend to be based on cultural rules and ideals and consider kinship structures to be stable and predictable, with fixed outcomes. Accordingly, fosterage studies tend to primarily focus on the rules regarding who determines foster arrangements in the beginning, and they assume that what is said or negotiated at the beginning of an arrangement will remain stable over time (Goody 1982, Lallemand 1994).

To understand children’s mobility in kin networks, I refer to recent anthropological kinship literature in which it is argued that kinship, as an everyday creative practice, has to be understood in processual rather than structural terms (Bouquet 2001; Franklin and McKinnon 2001; Johnson-Hanks 2002). A processual approach to kinship reckons with flexibility and unpredictability, and anticipates that no kinship arrangement and no one’s path of life is necessarily clear in its direction or fixed in respect of its outcome. Through focussing on changes in experiences over time, this chapter investigates the continuous process of making and remaking kinship that goes with people’s mobility in kin networks.

Carsten (1997, 2004) emphasizes that kinship is a process of becoming, not a fixed state. She argues that this process of becoming kin is brought about through living together, having children, feeding, fostering, and marriage (1997, 12, see also Notermans 2004b). Child fostering, indeed, is at the heart of the everyday practice of making kinship but it is more than that. Fostering cannot be seen as a one-time event, moving people from one place to another and staying there. Whereas Carsten emphasizes the process of incorporating kin (1997, 286), this chapter pays attention to the counter forces at work in family homes by focusing on the dynamics of making and breaking relations, of children moving in and out of such homes. In a context where people can incorporate kin through fostering, they also have to deal with kin who gradually or suddenly become less kin by moving away or not maintaining their kin ties. Howell (2006), studying practices of international adoption, states that such a process of de-kinning is the counter-process of kinning. The movement of kin out of family homes in Cameroon, however, does not refer (in Howell’s sense) to a process of transforming kin to non-kin but to an ongoing process of moving between different levels of being kin, ranging from being very conflicts influencing the dynamics of child fostering and children’s experiences of fostering (Notermans 2008).
close kin to being more distant kin, according to the time, money, food and intimacy invested in the relationship.

Considering the ongoing mobility of children in the context of changing life stages and changing marital relationships, I will argue that kinship arrangements in East Cameroon are very unstable and unpredictable due to the plurality of actors involved in the whole process. Because of this, children keep moving between different places and foster parents. Fostering cannot be isolated and seen as just one aspect of African kinship that is about plural parenthood. African kinship entails that both children and adults move and both movements influence each other.

All findings in this chapter are based on my long-term relationships with different families (woman-headed households, nuclear families and extended families) in Batouri. I first went to this area in 1991; I returned in 1993 and lived there for one year. Since then I have kept in contact with the people, by phoning, sending letters, pictures and gifts, and by re-visiting them several times (1996, 1999, 2000, 2006). Sometimes I stayed a long time, sometimes just a short time, sometimes with my husband and children, sometimes alone. My first research project was on marriage and polygyny (Notermans 1999, 2002), the second on fostering and descent (Notermans 2004a, 2004b, 2008). Throughout the years I followed the people I met at the beginning; we became involved in each other’s lives and all of us grew older. Those who were still children when I lived in Batouri in 1993 now have children of their own. Many mothers I worked with have become grandmothers, trying to control their daughters’ reproduction. Some women have left their husbands and now live alone; other have changed their husband or their position in a polygynous household. Some people have fallen ill, others have died. This long-term involvement with the people has shown me how practices of fostering change over the course of people’s lives.

In the first two sections I describe the context of marriage, descent, and fostering in the urban society of Batouri. In the third section, I present a reconstruction of (parts of) two fostering histories. Then I focus on fostering as just one element in a system of persistent and interrelated mobilities. I will close with some conclusions concerning kinship mobility in East Cameroon.

**Kinship Mobility in Batouri, East Cameroon**

Batouri is a provincial town with 25,000 inhabitants in the savannah area of East Cameroon, 500 kilometres from the capital Yaoundé. My
fieldwork focused on a part of town called Mbondossi, inhabited by about 1500 people. Most are Kako, but members of other ethnic groups in Cameroon’s Eastern Province (e.g. Gbaya, Yangéré, Byemo) who have migrated to Batouri from nearby villages also count themselves among the autochthones. For most people urban life remains linked to family life in their native villages, as people, and children in particular, regularly move between the homes of kin in town and the surrounding villages.

Movement and resettlement are central features of these people’s history. In the early 19th century, Kako people were forest dwellers in search of hunting grounds and land for slash and burn agriculture in the upper Sangha area, a region in what is now part of the Central African Republic (Copet-Rougier 1998). Continuous movement toward opportunities (trade routes, new consumer goods, new foods) and away from threats (conflict and witchcraft accusations in the family, Fulani slave raids, French and German colonial administrators) has characterized at least two centuries of their history (Giles-Vernick 1999). Kako people migrated to Cameroon in the first half of the nineteenth century but they did not settle till the first half of the twentieth century, when colonial administration forced them to live in sedentary settlements in order to control their labour, food and taxes (Copet-Rougier 1990, 199).

A mobile life style still characterizes social life in East Cameroon. Being fixed in one place is considered imprudent and even life threatening. People generally say that when one stays in one place for a long time, social relationships will get worse and eventually result in violent conflicts, illness or death. To make progress in life and to keep social relationships and physical bodies healthy, one has to keep moving. Therefore people move between their houses and their fields in the surrounding area, between Batouri and their home villages, and between Batouri and the larger provincial town of Bertoua and the capital, Yaoundé. All these movements go together with temporarily resettlements with relatives.

Mobility also characterizes family life. Neither marriage nor descent are considered to be one-time agreements fixing people in one place: each agreement may change or become re-negotiated. These revisions make people constantly move between different spouses, parents and other kin. Women may relocate when (re)marrying, and children may relocate when claims on them are made. Disputes over rights in children are at the heart of many conjugal arguments, as both parents want to claim children for their own lineage. Family life is characterized by matrilineal descent (the socially procreative link is between brother and sister and not between husband and wife), high frequency of polygyny, high marital flexibility
and high mobility of mothers and children. Men also relocate but this is mostly due to the search for fertile fields, short-term contracts, or job transfers.

Women enjoy social respect and considerable independence from men by monopolizing the production, marketing and preparation of food. For women food and its sharing are vital elements in maintaining and creating kinship. It is through the sharing of food that children learn who their ‘real’ parents and siblings are. Only children who have shared the same womb or share the same kitchen, food and cooking pot ‘taste’ that they are ‘real’ or close siblings. In the same way they also learn that women and children who are excluded from the sharing of food are to be distrusted. Men, considered breadwinners, generally do not assist in food production but strive for jobs to earn money for maintaining their families. They rarely succeed, however, due to high unemployment rates in Cameroon.

In spite of financial constraints men often marry several wives: one quarter of the households in the district are formally polygynous and almost all these marriages involve two co-wives. Polygyny is more common than official statistics reveal, because officially monogamous marriages are informally polygynous. Men prefer to marry one woman formally and to combine this marriage with a number of outside wives, since this is considered cheaper than assuming full responsibility for several wives and their children. Though men need a formal marriage in order to claim the children, they are generally not interested in claiming children who are born in extra-marital relationships, as this responsibility is considered too expensive.

At least once in their lifetime women accept a formal marriage, because of the social status and respect that this brings, and because of the financial support that can be expected from the husband. Mainly for reasons of financial neglect, women also combine formal marriage with a number of informal conjugal relationships. They feel free to have different sexual relationships simultaneously and/or successively, and men accept this, just as women also accept polygyny (despite feelings of jealousy and rivalry). Women do not value marriage highly but easily divorce their husbands or leave them for a while. Unlike men, they do not need a formal marriage to claim their children. On the contrary, wives have no right to claim their children, but as unmarried mothers they can do so. Most women’s life trajectories are not aimed at having just one marriage, since their aim is to have their own children (children belonging to their matrilineal family), rather than to have a stable marriage in which they have a subordinate position and run the risk of losing their children to their
husband and his sisters. Women often have one or more informal marriage (of which the duration may range from one to several years) before accepting a formal marriage. When an informal marital relationship lasts for more than a year and includes the exchange of food, money and sex, people define it as marriage, since this reciprocity is the core of a formal marital relationship, too.

An average formal marriage lasts about three or four years. After the dissolution of such a marriage, women may opt to go back to their mother’s or their brother’s house or they may accept another (informal) marriage. Women often change between different polygynous households by leaving a husband to whom they are married as a second wife, marrying another husband as his first wife (or vice versa), or becoming the outside wife of a married man. This attitude shows that both women and men do not settle when they marry: women move between the houses of their mother, brothers and different husbands, and men move between the bedrooms of co-wives (at home) and between wives at home and outside wives elsewhere in Batouri or other parts of Cameroon.

High marital flexibility is possible due to low bride wealth. Though bride wealth mainly consists of beer and food and thus has little economic value, it ritually marks the bride’s move from her mother’s to her husband’s home and formally gives the groom a claim to his children. Nowadays bride wealth is often not even paid. Women’s relatives rarely insist on receiving bride wealth, because this would tend to make the women immobile and deprive her of her offspring. Rights in children are not fixed at birth but have to be reconsidered in the course of a child’s lifetime.

It is not shameful for women to give birth to children in different marriages. Even if young women are unwilling, their mothers may urge them to have some children from informal relationships before accepting a formal marriage, in order to be able to claim the children (Notermans 2004b). Children are valued for their company, intimacy and support in daily activities, but even more importantly, children symbolize wealth and power. One has to be a mother of many (biological and foster) children to be a respected adult. The more children a mother has, the more weight she carries in society. Because women often run the risk of losing children through illness, death, divorce or foster claims, they consider it critical to have as many as children as they can feed and shelter.

Women, together with their brothers, ensure the survival of their kin group by organizing the continuity of the group in a matrilineal way. Women’s contributions to their matrineal kin group are closely linked with informal and polyandrous relationships, since the children born in
these relationships can be claimed by the mother, the mother's mother or the mother's brothers. Men can claim children through such practices as paying bride wealth and signing birth certificates, and often use these possibilities to provide their (divorced or barren) sisters with children. Rather than making a family together, spouses compete with each other in making their own matrilineal kin group alongside their marriage.

**Mobility of Children**

When leaving their mother’s home, children generally go to close relatives. Though kinship networks are large and people in a polygynous society have numerous (half-)sisters and (half) brothers, only the parents’ direct siblings are considered good and reliable foster parents: siblings who are born from the same womb. Especially a mother’s mother, mother’s brother and father’s sister are favoured foster parents. Mothers who foster their children to close relatives are always anxious to keep the children in their own family and not to let them go away with the in-laws of the foster parent. As soon as a child risks being sent to the village of a mother’s brother’s wife or a father’s sister’s husband in order to spend his/her holidays there, the child is thought to be ‘at risk’ and the first mother will immediately act and call it back home. Rigid family boundaries are thus drawn between relatives ‘from the same womb’ and their affines.

Close kinship ties between first parents and foster parents explain why children as a rule have no difficulty adapting to their foster families, as they are used to frequent contact with them from birth. A very special parent is a mother’s brother. In the Kako language he alone is accorded the exclusive title of ‘koko’, a special name for a very beloved maternal uncle. Children love their ‘koko’ because, as they put it, ‘he is like a mother’. Unlike their authoritarian, reserved relationship with their (biological) fathers, relationships with these male mothers are warm and intimate (see Martin, this volume, for children’s relationships with their paternal and maternal kin).

A child’s relationship with the biological or first mother is very close in the first two years after birth: the child is in direct physical contact with its mother, constantly feeling her warmth and able to claim her breast at every moment of the day. This intimacy ends abruptly when breastfeeding stops. To mark this new phase of life the child is sent to a relative for several months, where it can have a good cry and accustom itself to the separation. At this age (about two) children can walk and are starting to
Fostering and lifetime mobility

Children get used to fostering not only when breastfeeding stops and during short visits to other households; they also adapt to it in later stages of life. Especially school holidays—in all they take up five months of each year—are used to strengthen kinship bonds. The mother’s mother and brothers in the villages regularly invite the children of their daughter or sister who lives in town. They like their company but they also want to share in the child’s upbringing and introduce them to skills like fishing, hunting, gathering, and cultivating the fields. Children generally enjoy their stay in the villages. At the same time they learn to cope with fostering which creates a wide range of choices. By the age of ten children are allowed to choose their foster parents themselves. Most of them choose to stay with their mother’s brothers (for children’s views on fostering, see Notermans 2008).

As long as fostering takes place at the (foster) parents’ initiative, children lack influence when they are small. Both mother and child have to accept separation when a close relative claims a child. People see it as a moral obligation to comply with the request. Fostering is not a matter of giving children away, or asking relatives to care for one’s children, but a matter of accepting someone else’s claim on a child. Parents do not negotiate the foster transaction: the child leaves the parental home and nobody knows how long the absence will last. Biological or first parents have to leave their child completely in the hands of the foster parents: they are not allowed to intervene in matters of upbringing, to support the child financially, or to initiate contact with it. In contrast to Verhoef’s (2005, 367–379) descriptions of child fostering in north western Cameroon, no agreement is made between the first mother and the foster parent, as they do not aim at jointly raising the child. First parents may not interfere actively in matters of upbringing and education, since by tradition foster parents take full responsibility for raising the child. However, for a child’s well-being it is important that the first mother should not forget her child but keep an eye on it by regularly sending messengers with gifts of food. As almost all children have had some years of education, they also regularly write short letters to their mothers, telling them how they are. During most school holidays children are free to join their first parents and then it is up to them—the children—to decide whether or not to end the foster situation. Children who have been given to a close relative at an early age do not normally leave their foster mother after school holidays, since their
foster mother is the person they consider to be their ‘real’ mother. ‘Real’
mothers are those who have suffered most for their children by spending
time with them, caring for them, paying for medicines and school fees and
sharing food and intimacy.

At an ideological level both mothers and children agree that foster-
ing is a common and accepted form of child mobility that is meant to
strengthen family ties. But at the level of everyday practice both women
and children may experience difficulties. One woman, pregnant for the
third time, told me that she had respected foster claims when she allowed
her husband to entrust her first two children to his barren sisters. It was
obvious, she said, that she had to do this because “every woman knows
that you never give birth to a child for yourself, but that your child belongs
to the whole family.” After a pause she added: “But I hope that this one
[pointing at her belly] will stay with me, that this suffering [pregnancy]
will be in my favour.” Just as mothers’ feelings about the fostering of their
biological children may differ from public discourses on fostering, their
feelings when their foster children leave them may also differ from what
they are expected to feel. The same is also true of children: though it is
said that they benefit from fostering, in daily practice they may feel mis-
treated by the in-laws of their foster parents, or may become the victims
of power politics between spouses (Notermans 2008).

At different points during their lifetime both children and women have
to become used to fostering, as it serves many ends: barren women may
claim their brother’s children to enter into full motherhood; mothers can
claim their brother’s children to empower themselves in their conjugal
household; mothers can claim their brothers’ daughters in order to have
girls when they themselves have only boys, or vice versa. Grandmothers
can claim their unmarried daughters’ children and their married sons’
children to enlarge their matrilineal kin group. Married women can resort
to fostering to safeguard their children from co-wife rivalry and witch-
craft practices, or to be able to move on and look for another marriage.
Women’s mobility between different husbands and places almost always
implies their children’s mobility.

**Two Fostering Histories**

To come back to the dynamics of children moving in and out of different
homes, I will now focus on two fostering histories: that of Madame Yaro
and that of Madame Akomba. In these stories the joys and advantages
as well as the disappointments and disadvantages of fostering will be
narrated. They represent the experiences of the 15 women aged between 35 and 55 I spoke with during a short period of fieldwork in 2006 (June till July). The stories are reconstructed from the material collected through in-depth interviews and build on the information I collected in previous periods of extensive fieldwork from 1993 onwards. The original narrations were in French; I have translated them into English.

The Fostering History of Madame Yaro

Madame Yaro is a married woman in her forties and manager of a nursery school in Batouri. Madame Yaro has no difficulty in confessing to her infertility and frankly explains that she has never given birth to a child. Her home, however, has always been filled with children. Some of them have stayed, others have left. As she is supposed to forget the pain of children leaving, she prefers to start by talking about the eight children currently living in her home:

First of all, I keep the four children of my younger brother. We have the same mother and the same father. This brother was born just after me. He married and got four children. When he and his wife died, I accepted the responsibility of taking care of their children. I also keep two children of another younger brother. We also have the same mother and the same father. This brother married and I asked him for his children. They came at an early age. I always take my children when they are small. The children left my brother for an indefinite period of time. We never negotiated about the duration of the foster situation but we silently agreed that the children are mine. Recently, one of the children fell ill. Though I did not communicate this to my brother, he heard it from others. The way he reacted means a lot to me. People told me that he said he considered the child’s illness “not to be his problem”, that the child “was not his child any more”. By saying this he declared that the whole responsibility for the child is mine. It felt good that he reacted like this, it assures me that he is not likely to claim the child one day. Now and then I send the children to their father to share some time with him and not to forget him. He always sends them back before sunset so they can sleep with me at night.

I have also raised my mother’s brother’s daughter. In my house, she gave birth to a child, who is one year old. I keep them both. My maternal uncle died in a road accident. This uncle also had a maid. This maid had a child but the mother of the child died. I immediately claimed the child and raised it as if it was my own child. The father ran away and no longer send us any message. I do not think that this child will join his father one day.

Madame Yaro’s infertility did not prevent her from having several children as she was able to claim children from two younger brothers, a maternal uncle and this uncle’s maid. One of the main norms of foster practice is
the entire transfer of rights and responsibilities from the biological parents to the foster parents. This does not imply that a foster child totally breaks with its biological parents. The foster parents even have the duty to see that the child has regular contact with the biological parents, but the latter are supposed to behave in such a way that the children will not want to return to them (see Drotbohm, this volume, for a comparative case on the continuing importance of the biological mother). The only parent who may claim the child is the parent who makes kinship by sharing home, food and bed with the child and making financial sacrifices for it. In this context, paying for medicine would have been interpreted as a sign of reclaiming the child. That is the reason why Madame Yaro interprets her brother's refusal to pay for medicine not as an act of indifference or opposition but as an act of respect for her and her bond with the child.

Brothers are not the only important actors in foster arrangements, as their wives may influence them. Madame Yaro's brothers' wives make no claim on the children as either they have been divorced (and thus have no rights to claim) or they are dead. This facilitates the claim Madame Yaro makes on her brothers' children as the biological mothers do not stand in the way (as will be shown in the second fostering history).

Though the social norms do not allow biological parents to reclaim their children, the story shows us that there still is a great deal of uncertainty about the way a foster situation will develop. In the follow-up of her story, Madame Yaro narrates the foster arrangements that caused a lot of pain and trouble in her life:

I also kept two children of my cousin, a daughter of my paternal aunt. This cousin had given birth to the children without being married to their father. That's why I claimed the children. As soon as my cousin stopped breastfeeding, the children, a girl and a boy, came to my house. The rule is that a girl may only permanently leave the house of her foster mother to join her husband, but this girl left me to join her biological mother. When she left, she was about fourteen years old and she said that she wanted to stay with her mother during summer holidays. I had never hidden from her who her biological mother was. She even came to see the children once in a while. So, in the beginning, I did not suspect my daughter of leaving me. However, when the summer holidays were over, she did not come back. Ever since, she has never sent me a message. Even her mother has never made a telephone call to say that my girl was staying with her. It happened ten years ago and I have never seen her again. I expected at least a telephone call, a letter, or a visit to explain her move. It was me who raised the child. It was me who fed her, washed her clothes, paid her school fees. The mother has never paid anything. But nobody contacted me and I had to handle it on my own. When my child left, I was desperate. I nervously walked around. It
felt as if I was naked. I silently cried and did not show my emotions and my grief to others. I only tried to stay calm. 

When the girl left, her brother stayed with me at first. After a couple of years, his mother phoned him. I do not know what they talked about. He came to my bed and asked me for permission to travel. He said he wanted to go to Bertoua [a town 60 kilometres from Batouri], but afterwards I understood that he had also gone to join his mother in Douala [Cameroon’s largest city, 700 kilometres from Batouri]. If he wants to join me again, he is welcome. My door is always open. But I do not have much hope. My girl has already given birth to a baby and both of them are staying with the mother. I do not blame the children, it is the mother who has not acted correctly. The mother should have said to the children: “Go back to your mother, I am not your mother, I am not the one who suffered for you.” But she did not act in this way. Now they have grown up and all sufferings are finished, she wrongly claims the children for herself.

This story reveals how distressed a foster mother can be when she suddenly loses a child she has raised. Even though women are used to the cultural rule that they never can claim a child for themselves, they feel hurt when intimacy with foster children suddenly comes to an end. Emotional and financial investments then come to nothing. Though children may decide to leave their mother from the age of ten, they are supposed to keep in contact with her and to recognize her as their mother. The pain in these cases is that the child breaks with the foster mother permanently, and does not recognize her as their mother anymore.

From the perspective of the biological mother, it may be understandable that she gladly welcomed her eldest daughter. It often happens that after a divorce women fall back on the children they have from premarital relationships. The biological mother of Madame Yaro’s foster children apparently left her marriage, as well as the children she gave birth to in this marriage, and turned to the children she gave birth to before marriage. When the girl suddenly appeared as a fully grown woman, who even soon got pregnant, the biological mother seized the opportunity to get her child back and to claim a grandchild. This case not only shows the desperate feelings of foster mothers facing the loss of foster children, but also women’s interdependent agency and their changing needs at different stages of life. This can also be seen in the next case.

\textit{The Fostering History of Madame Akomba}

Madame Akomba is a married woman in her mid-thirties, a housewife and farmer, and mother of four biological children. From the very beginning of her married life, she raised foster children in her husband’s house.
These foster children came from both her husband’s and her own family. When I last saw her, all the foster children had left the house. She told me about two painful experiences:

When one of my husband’s younger brothers died, he left behind his wife and three children, one boy and two girls. We claimed the boy, as I had only given birth to girls. He entered the house when he was about 5 years old. His two sisters went to my brothers-in-law. The mother of the children accepted another marriage and moved to the village of her second husband. Now and then, our boy went to the village to see her but he always came back. Then, after a couple of years, the mother left her second husband and started to look for the children of her late husband. One summer time, the boy was about ten years old; he wanted to spend the summer holidays with his mother in the village. When the holidays were over, his mother did not send him back. Whenever we went to the village to look for him, his mother hid him or quickly sent him away into the woods. We finally had to accept that he would stay with his mother. Then the mother, together with her children, had a car accident and they were nursed in the municipal hospital in town. When we paid for their hospitalization, the mother admitted that she had acted wrongly and agreed to let the boy came back to our home. Shortly after, she also moved from the village to Batouri. She settled down just next to the compound of her in-laws (the family of her first husband who died, CN). She took all her children away from her brothers-in-law, one by one. Ever since, the children live with her, sleep with her, and eat with her. The boy rarely visit us, though he was raised by us. Recently, the children left Batouri to spend their summer holidays in the village, but none of the children came to inform us or to say goodbye. Because the boy himself wants to stay with his mother, we do not intervene.

The same now is happening with our foster girl, who was given to us by my (classificatory, CN) brother. She is also about to leave us because her mother is influencing her. She joined us when she was four years old. Her parents were living in the village. I asked my brother for this child as all our foster children had come from my husband’s side and I also wanted to foster a child from my side. When she came to live with us in town, she was able to attend school. In the meantime, her parents have moved from the village to Batouri. The girl has grown up and is twelve years old now. She hardly spends time with us anymore. After school, she goes to her mother to help her with all kinds of household chores. Her mother is spoiling her in order to make her stay. Our girl is her eldest child and only daughter. Regularly, our girl comes home late in the evening because she always goes to her mother first. From time to time, she even spends two or more days with her. Step by step, she has carried her possessions, her clothes and her exercise books to her mother’s house. In fact, I have had enough of it. In our house, she doesn’t feel at home any more. The mother is even accusing me of ill-treating her daughter. When mothers start behaving like that, it is clear that they want to reclaim their child. Once, I put all her clothes in a bag and sent her back to her mother. Normally, the mother should have sent
her back and asked me why I acted in this way. But instead she welcomed
her daughter and told her to stay. My brother, however, got very angry and
told his wife to send her back. He said: “I entrusted her to my sister because
I love my sister. She will stay with my sister till the moment she joins her
husband.” Though this is how biological parents ought to react, I doubt if
she will come back to our home.

It is easy to place a small child with foster parents, because a small child
only needs care and is not yet helpful in the household. However, for the
foster parents it is hard to care for small children. It often happens that
biological mothers start to reclaim their children when they reach the age of
being useful in the household. From ten years onwards, children are able to
do all kind of chores: fetching water, washing the dishes, sweeping the yard,
going to the market and so on. Then it becomes easy to care for your foster
children, but that is also the moment that many biological mothers start to
show interest in their children. They forget the suffering of the foster parents
and the pains they took for the children when they were small. If they want
to have their child back, they have to come to see the foster parents at least,
to thank them and to explain their behaviour.

This story also shows that despite the cultural rule prohibiting parents to
reclaim their children, grown-up foster children often return to their bio-
logical mother. What stands out in both cases is that the girls had reached
the reproductive age when they left their foster mother. Rather than leaving
the house to join a husband, or staying in the foster mother’s house
to raise their future children at her place, they left the house to join their
biological mother. Womb-ties appeared to be stronger than foster-ties.

This is also evident in the case of the biological mother of Madame
Akomba’s foster boy. As the biological mother, she was not in a position
to reclaim her son. As the wife of her deceased husband, she could not
do so either, because her husband had paid bride wealth and thus shared
with his brothers and sisters the right to claim the children. The mother’s
action, however, did not cause public conflict, as the problem was solved
in a culturally accepted way: the mother re-activated her womb-ties with
the children by moving close to them and sharing place, food and inti-
macy. Thus, a process of kinning was taking place, reversing the previous
process of de-kinning.

Kinship Mobility

The experiences narrated in these two fostering histories represent the
experiences of many more parents in East Cameroon. In this society,
almost all children live at some time with foster parents, leave them again,
and go to live with other people, but ideally they never break completely
with any of them. Among these other people are also the foster children’s biological mothers. This indicates that womb-ties and children’s bonds with their biological mothers may be more important than suggested in previous studies on fostering. Anthropological studies on the plurality of parenthood and marriage in African societies have stressed the ‘otherness’ of these people to such an extent that the crucial positions and emotional meanings of biological mothers seem to be considerably undervalued. While structuralist and functionalist studies on fostering and polygyny generally emphasize that children grow up in families where different mothers care for them equally, so that they often do not know who their biological mother is, the children themselves often state the opposite: most often, they do know from which womb they were born and on which mother they can count most. How important children’s bonds with their biological mother are, has also come to the fore in the two fostering histories given above, which show that children, even when fostered for years, finally long to go back to their biological mother (on the continuous bond between child and biological mother, see also Drotbohm, this volume).

For the parents these plural ‘imagined belongings’ (Alber, this volume) imply the continuous coming and going of children in family homes. Foster parents who have raised children from babyhood, generally feel hurt and angry about the (presumably definitive) separation. They emphasize the sacrifices they have made to raise a foster child and the unconditional love they have given. The kinship in which they have invested over long periods of time is attacked and ignored. Nevertheless, the departure of a foster child does not provoke open conflict nor does it result in witchcraft accusations, as is often the case in family conflicts. Foster mothers recognize that in the course of their life they sometimes feel helped and sometimes feel hurt by fostering. No agreement is made ‘forever’, as life circumstances change over time and keep people moving on.

The experiences narrated in the two fostering histories reveal that fostering cannot be considered in isolation from other forms of kinship mobility. Children often change their place of residence because their (biological) mothers do so, and people in general never remain fixed in one place. The two fostering histories, though narrated by individuals, reveal that the people in the background are as important as agents as the narrators of the story, and that all agents are connected in a system of mobile kinship. In this section I will try to answer the theoretical question as to how the continual making and breaking kin ties can be explained by focussing on the plurality of kinship rules, women’s life courses, and people’s interdependent agency.
Fostering and Lifetime Mobility

Plurality of Kinship Rules

People's mobile life style is based upon and supported by various cultural rules which are differently applied by different people at different life stages. Social practice is not determined by a fixed set of rules, as is often suggested in system-oriented approaches to fostering. Rather, a diversity of rules enables people to apply the rule that suits them. In some situations different rules support each other, in other situations one rule may be subverted by applying another one. Together they facilitate and activate the ongoing dynamics of family life and keep people from engaging in public disputes when one of the rules has not been followed.

One important kinship rule, which says that biological parents cannot reclaim their out-fostered children, co-exists with another important rule saying that kinship is not a fixed state but has to be made through sharing place, food and intimacy. By applying this rule, de-activated kin relationships can become re-established and re-activated through sharing space and substances. A biological mother who intensifies the relationship with her children by coming physically closer to them, feeding them, housing them, and 'suffering' for them (giving them clothes and doing the washing, and paying for medical treatment and schooling) will gradually become qualified to assert her rights to these children.

Another kinship rule says that from the age of ten children may choose the parents they want to live with. Children residing with their biological mother may join a foster parent, and according to the same rule, foster children may feel free to join their first mother. When mothers decide to divorce, their fostered-out children from pre-marital relationships have often reached the age of choice and are free to make their own moves. These moves do not cause any problem as long as the children keep in contact with the foster mother and do not deny the love and anguish she has felt for them.

Another important rule that often subverts another one is the rule that children have to be present at healing rituals. In the case of family trouble, local healers usually call together all close family members (relatives who have shared space, food and intimacy for a long time), as the cause of a relative's illness can only be revealed with all members present (see de Rosny 2004). The need to call back a child for ritual healing in the family is culturally accepted and cannot be denied by foster parents. Afterwards, however, foster parents often have to face the fact that their foster child will probably not return. Foster parents often mention that when biological parents have no 'legitimate' reason to reclaim their children, they will
call them ‘under false pretences’, saying that a foster child is needed in the healing process of a sick relative.

Two more rules which may subvert other kinship rules are the rule allowing children to spend school holidays with their first parents, and the rule that the most trustful kin relationships are built upon womb-ties, allowing mothers to create their family through matrilineal ties and to reclaim daughters who may bear children for them. This plurality of rules, which is not organized in any hierarchical way, meets the varying needs of people who have to do with constantly changing relational contexts.

**Women’s Life Courses**

Women’s matrimonial itineraries strongly influence the way women respond to and select from different rules. Women’s lives are not organized into stages that follow one another in a definite sequence from birth to puberty, marriage and death, known as the life cycle (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 878). Rather than stages, women experience vital life events, such as becoming pregnant, losing a biological or foster child, accepting marriage, getting a co-wife, being divorced, or falling ill. During these periods of uncertainty women have to revise their situation, to re-orient themselves and to make new choices. These choices affect the way fostering arrangements develop over time.

Motherhood, as Johnson-Hanks (2002, 865–6) states, is not a stable but a fluid status. Women who have borne children are not necessarily mothers and women who are mothers perform motherhood in different ways. Motherhood very much constitutes an agent position that is under constant revision and can be expressed in various forms of social action. The different choices women make during their life course—accepting formal marriage, staying unmarried, fighting or accepting polygyny, changing positions in polygynous households—make them move about and influence the way they fulfil their motherhood.

A young woman who bears children but is still attending school can be helped by giving in to a mother’s or brother’s claim to foster her child(ren). It enables her to stay free and mobile and to select a proper husband later on. When they are married, women feel helped by fostering in many different ways. They may claim their brothers’ children if they are infertile. Even if they have biological children, women may claim foster children from their maternal family to balance the number of children their husband fosters in the household, thus strengthening their power position in the conjugal household. Married women may also accept the claims
made by kin members in order to save their children from co-wife rivalry or other violent conflicts in the household. After a divorce or their husband's death, women often give in to foster claims as it enables them to go back to their maternal family or to join another husband. At this stage of their lives, they may also feel relieved by contact with the children they had fostered out before their marriage. Though they are not allowed to directly re-claim these children, they are free to meet them, care for them and re-activate their womb ties with them at any time.

Although in particular foster situations the needs of the biological mother and the foster mother may conflict (as was the case in the two fostering histories), in the context of women’s life courses, fostering may serve women's interests which vary according to their different life circumstances. Fostering facilitates women’s freedom to revise their future, to take alternative routes during their life course and to move between different husbands or relationships. Since the life circumstances and thus the interests of both the foster mother and the biological mother change during the foster period, it is necessary to consider women’s life trajectories in order to understand how fostering develops from moving in to moving out, from incorporating kin to distancing from kin.

*Interdependent Agency*

Though a mobile kinship system allows, and even requires women's agency, one cannot conclude that women design their life trajectories on their own. Their choices and trajectories are also determined by their kin. At some moments and in some contexts women can make decisions for themselves; at other moments their actions are determined by the agency of their relatives. To understand people’s movements, one has to consider that all parties involved have agency and that other people’s agency, at specific moments, can be dominant and powerful enough to alter established situations. Women’s agency thus has to be seen as interdependent and relational (cf. Piot 1999). All kin relationships that form the social context of a foster arrangement have to be considered in order to understand how experiences of fostering change over time.

Women’s motherhood, for example, may change when children move from positions in which they have to accept adults' decisions to positions in which they can take powerful action. This change often has to do with growing older: when still young they do not have much power, but from the age of ten they are allowed to decide where they want to live. Some children then decide to leave their biological mother, while others may
join their biological mother, as in the cases presented above. The fact that children’s voices, strategies and feelings have often been neglected in classical fostering studies may have also contributed to the fact that the importance of the biological mother has been neglected.

When people’s lives interlock, one person’s choice may be a constraint for another person. Such a situation, however, never remains fixed as the advantages and constraints of certain rules and agreements change with time. This has to do not only with women’s changing circumstances, but also with the power dialectics in society. Power in this East Cameroonian society is not a matter of one group dominating other groups. On an ideological political level, Kako society can been characterized as egalitarian: there is no central political power and no lineage is accorded permanent leadership through hereditary rules (Copet-Rougier 1990, 197). Powerful positions are not prescribed from above but actively sought by keeping on the move, splitting up and joining together. People persistently move as power can be obtained by moving from positions that have become less powerful to more powerful positions. This is also the case in family homes: power is not bound to either the position of the foster mother or that of the biological mother. Power circulates according to the changes in women’s life histories and the different positions they occupy.

Conclusions

This chapter has taken a processual approach to fostering in order to show how foster mothers experience fostering in the course of their lifetime. It considers fostering not primarily as a child rearing practice but, more broadly, as part of a mobile lifestyle: one settles at those places and with those kin where the circumstances are most advantageous, and one resettles when these circumstances change and become less advantageous. To understand the practice of child fostering, we need to understand that we are dealing here not only with mobile children and mobile mothers but also with mobile populations who consider mobility beneficial and sedentary life as a threat to health, family, and life in general. The dynamics of fostering thus cannot be isolated from the overarching dynamics of movement and (re-)settlement that characterize this mobile kinship system.

It is also argued that fostering means not only the incorporation of kin but also the departure of kin. In the same way as Carsten (1997; 2004) who has emphasized kinship as a process of becoming and incorporation, this chapter has stressed the process of making, breaking and remaking
relations within the kin network. A processual approach to fostering must not only consider the way fostering arrangements start, but also the processes of ongoing mobility in the kinship domain. Kinship is not made forever but only for the time being. When life circumstances change—people die, women divorce, couples move from one place to another, children grow older—women re-evaluate the foster situation and try to bend the situation to suit their needs.

As women feel helped by mobility and flexibility, they are reluctant to make formal foster agreements in which the rights and duties of foster and biological mothers are determined. They prefer to secure the flexibility of the system as this serves their interests when they move successively between different relationships. During their lifetime, mothers may lose biological children through foster claims, may welcome foster children, may be reunited with their biological children and separated from their foster children. The incorporation of kin and the releasing of kin are structural elements of these fostering practices in which women occupy different and changing positions. While in one position the foster practices may hurt, in another position they may be advantageous.

References


During my fieldwork on transnational family practices in Cape Verde, I was confronted with a peculiar discrepancy. On the one hand, I realized that many Cape Verdean children do not live with their biological mother but with a foster mother. The practice of moving children between different households apparently is perceived as an established and, under certain circumstances, appreciated element of Cape Verdean social life. On the other hand, it was interesting to note that transnational foster arrangements caused by the absence of a biological mother who had migrated to another country and left her child or children behind with another carer was judged in a more ambivalent manner. For instance, some people associated the rising crime rates in Cape Verde with the feminization of international labour migration, the absence of Cape Verdean mothers and the emotional trauma of their ‘fidj disorientadu’, their confused offspring.

To analyse this judgment in its cultural setting, I will compare ideas and practices of child fostering within Cape Verde with fostering practices that transcend national borders. Transnational mothering has proliferated worldwide and has attracted the attention of several scholars (Dreby 2007, Erel 2002, Fog Olwig 1999, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, Levitt 2001, 74–83, Øien 2006, Parreñas 2005). While the majority of these studies analyse transnational child care in the context of migration, I argue that cross-border fosterage practices need to be examined within the context of historically grown local fosterage practices. Øien, working on transnational fostering between Angola and Portugal, tellingly writes:

The changing contexts within which child circulation, upbringing and social relations have to be negotiated are changing rapidly both in Africa […] and in the rest of the world (2006, 114).

In line with this, I examine confluences, parallels and the most significant differences between both local and transnational dynamics of fostering,
with the aim of exploring how the feminization of migration affects ideologies of motherhood, the bond between co-mothers and the perspectives of fostered children.

My argument is organized in accordance with three main sets of questions. First, what are the key defining features of fostering and co-mothering in the local context? Second, under what circumstances is transnational mothering judged positively, and what are the local discourses and practices of ‘good’ transnational mothering? How do children perceive the absence of their mother and the particularity of their relationship, also with regard to their foster mother? And finally, can we identify certain risks or deficiencies which have given rise to a more sceptical attitude towards transnational fostering as reflected in contemporary public discourse in Cape Verde?

In this chapter I mainly use the term ‘fostering’ instead of ‘child circulation’.¹ In Cape Verde both terms are valid, as they indicate, contrary to the term ‘adoption’, different versions of informal and non-legalized childcare practices. In my approach, ‘fostering’ denominates the (permanent or temporary) transfer of parental roles and a child’s belonging to a foster parent (see introduction to this book). In contrast to this, ‘child circulation’ refers rather to a continuing practice of moving children and sharing parenthood between different households.

In my account I draw on a larger project on changing social relations in this Cape Verdean cultural space that is particularly characterized by mobility and relatedness across space. Between 2006 and 2008 I carried out twelve months of anthropological fieldwork in Fogo and Brava, two small islands in the south-west of the Cape Verdean archipelago, where emigration is predominantly directed towards the USA and Portugal, but also to other places within Europe.² I worked with households where one parent or both were absent, starting with introductory conversations, and followed by regular visits and semi-structured or open interviews with

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¹ A brief overview of fosterage-related literature suggests that ‘fostering’ is mainly used in the West African context (see the contributions in this book), while ‘child circulation’ dominates in literature on Latin America or the Caribbean (Fonseca 2002, 2003, Leinaweaver 2007, Walmsley 2008). Cape Verde has features of both regions, belonging politically to West Africa, but sharing many cultural traits with other Creole societies, for instance, those along the Atlantic rim.

² Each of the nine Cape Verdean islands has a tendency to prefer certain migration destination(s), which is the result of historical migration patterns (Carling 2001, 7). In the USA, larger Cape Verdean migrant communities can be found in the areas of Massachusetts and Rhode Island (Halter 1993, Sanchez Gibau 2005).
foster parents, children and other household members. I concentrated on those children and adolescents who were able to express their experiences and to reflect upon them. I interviewed girls and boys aged between 7 and 17 years old, observed the situation of younger children, and listened to the memories of adults who had been fostered during their childhood. Furthermore, interviews with ‘absent’ mothers were included whom I met while they were visiting their families in Cape Verde and during short trips I made to the Cape Verdean diaspora in Boston (USA) or Lisbon (Portugal).³

**Doing Family in Mobile Life Worlds**

Historically, social life in Cape Verde has always been based on the dispersal of family members. Since the ‘discovery’ of the ten previously uninhabited islands and their settlement by Portuguese traders, the Cape Verdiean archipelago has served as a hub between Africa, Europe and the Americas for trafficking in slaves and consumer goods. Hence, departure, travel and return became inscribed in the identity and the everyday social life of this island nation, its population not only being scattered over the ten islands, but also between different locations in the Cape Verdiean diaspora in three different continents. From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, the end of slavery implied a drastic loss of economic and political power, and at the same time frequent droughts and the increasing overpopulation of the archipelago caused dramatic famines (Bigman 1993), which forced many Cape Verdeans, especially men, to migrate and search for a better life in North America or a number of European destinations. In the course of history Cape Verde became a migration-dominated society, and the emigration of individual family members, as well as the support of family members from overseas, early turned out to be the predominant economic strategy within the archipelago (Carreira 1982).

Parallel to this, after an era of slavery and cultural miscegenation, a Creole society emerged in Cape Verde with a strong perception of class differences, which are commonly also reflected in discourses on ‘race’ as a marker of social belonging. Moreover, the continuation of interclass dependencies is reflected in patronage arrangements between the

³ All personal names in this chapter have been replaced by common Cape Verdiean names in order to protect the identities of the people involved. I have also translated the quotations from Cape Verdiean ‘Kriolu’ into English.
wealthier and poorer social strata (Lobban 1995, Meintel 1984). Like other Creole societies, for instance in the Caribbean, life in Cape Verde is deeply shaped by this history of human mobility, as well as by the colonial legacy. Cape Verdean kinship reflects these historical asymmetries and antagonisms. On the one hand, a patriarchal family model has been taken over from the Portuguese, which centres on the ideologies of Catholicism and the authority of the father. On the other hand, and irrespective of this ideological background, conjugal relations tend to be weak, and fathers are frequently absent and hardly contribute to their children’s well-being, if at all (Rodrigues 2003, 2007). During their journeys Portuguese travellers and landowners left their children with the mothers, who mostly stayed on the islands (Grassi 2007). Since mothers, but also other female relatives, were responsible for caring for the children as well as elderly household members, Cape Verde shows features of kinship comparable to other Creole societies, where the bond between mothers and children is considered society’s backbone (Åkesson et al. 2012).

The social network that connects the people living on the islands with the Cape Verdean diaspora stretches across some particularly important migration destinations. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Cape Verdeans crossed the Atlantic to find a new life in North America, particularly in the area of New England, and this movement was particularly strong at the beginning of the twentieth century. After political independence from Portugal there have been strong flows of labour migration to Portugal, as well as to the Netherlands and to France. Parallel to this, a considerable number of Cape Verdeans can be found in the other ex-Portuguese colonies, such as Guinea Bissau, São Tomé/Príncipe, Angola and Mozambique. Following these two centuries of Cape Verdean migration, the diaspora population now outnumbers the 510,000 inhabitants of the ten islands (Carling and Åkesson 2009, Carling and Batalha 2008, Halter 1993, Sanchez Gibau 2005).

In our days, the Cape Verdean notion of ‘a família’ (the family) reflects this history of mobility. Reliable and stable relations between men and women are rare to this day, and the majority of couples do not legalize their relationship by marriage (Rodrigues 2007, 133). A (married) man usually has several relationships at the same time, dividing his material, financial and social resources among different households (Rodrigues 2007). At the same time, most women have children by more than one man, and the children usually stay with their mother in the case of a separation. Hence, a woman’s house usually shelters several children who share the (biological) and who at the same time have different fathers. No
Local and transnational child fostering in Cape Verde

Terminology is used to differentiate between these full and half siblings. Mutual support not only exists between mothers and their children but includes all persons living together under one roof (Drotbohm 2009). Any clear categorization of the Cape Veredian kinship system has proved difficult, since patriarchal discourses and ideologies strongly contradict social practices and everyday life. Grassi (2007) and Meintel (1984) have classified Cape Veredian kinship as matrilineal, arguing against the reductionist approach of formalistic kinship theories, which mainly concentrate on descent and the transmission of legal rights and goods. Other scholars focus on the particularity of the Cape Veredian household structure, which might be called ‘matrifocal’ or ‘female-headed’ (e.g. Drotbohm 2009).

Moving Children in Times of Need

The rationale for fosterage practices as they are enacted at the local level is related to notions of motherhood in Cape Verde. As in many other societies, children are seen as a woman’s wealth, and fostering is a cultural pattern that binds women and their children together across generations. When men foster children, they often foster their spouses’ children. Children generally move between households, not only within one neighbourhood, but also between the houses of different kin who may live in distant localities or on different islands. This is similar to the situation described by Walmsley (2008) in northwest Ecuador, Leinaweaver (2007) in Peru or Fonseca (2002, 2003) in northeast Brazil, regions historically and structurally similar to Cape Verde, where household units are fluid, conjugal relations change frequently, and children are supposed to move, either voluntarily or due to changing family compositions. Besides the daily, regular mobility of children, fostering, as the informal placing of a child into another home, may be motivated by poverty or by a lack of practical assistance in the household.

When I met Pepito for the first time he was a clever little seven-year old boy, growing up in a relatively wealthy household consisting of Luísa, his foster mother (‘mãe d’kriason’), João, her husband, and her six biological

4 The terms in Cape Veredian Creole for fostering, i.e. ‘fidj d’kriason’ and ‘kriadu’, come from Portuguese ‘criar’, in English ‘to create, produce, fabricate’. These terms place emphasis on the educational aspect, but also the coming-into-being of a fosterage relationship, as described, for instance, in Mary Weismantel’s analysis of adoption in the highlands of Ecuador (1995). The two terms are used with slightly different emphases on the different islands. Especially on the northern islands the term ‘kriadu’ can refer to a foster child who
children, who were between 14 and 26 years old. Luísa told me that her ‘kriadu’ (foster child), Pepito, had grown up in an extremely poor household together with eleven sisters and brothers, who were desperately competing for food, shelter and care. Pepito already started coming to her house at the age of three:

I remember when he came here the first time. He was so dirty. Incredible! I took him, gave him a bath, and cut his hair because he had so many lice. He screamed like a little pig [laughing]. Micky [one of her sons, H.D.] went to the shop and bought a new T-shirt, new shorts and new ‘chinelos’ [plastic sandals, H.D.]. That day, he stayed. He had a meal, like all the others do. And the next day he came back. I don’t think he went back to his mother’s house. He stayed the entire week. After one week his mother came for the first time. She told me how naughty Pepito had always been and that he never helped in the house. Then she complained about her difficult situation. She took Pepito with her, but the boy cried a lot. You see, in our house he’s the youngest one. Here he gets everything, clothes, food, ‘carinho’ [caressing, tenderness]. The next day he came again, and then he stayed.

Pepito indeed made a good choice. Luísa’s household is one of the most respected in the village, and her husband is the head of the ‘concelho’ (district). Additionally, the youngest of their own children is already fourteen years old and does not need much care and attention anymore. Pepito’s biological mother knew that the conditions in his new home would be the best for her son and accepted this situation. Poverty-related child neglect is a constant topic in Cape Verdean public discourse and is associated directly with a family’s capacity to care. Therefore, it is not only accepted, but also expected that the precarious life conditions in poor families should be compensated by members of the upper social strata by means of accepting a child into their house. Hence, giving away a child is also an expression of poverty, in the wider sense of the term, and establishes or confirms an asymmetric relationship between the giver and the receiver of the child. While the child-giver is supposed to demonstrate gratitude, modesty and respect towards the child-receiver, the child-receiver is able to display her affluent life conditions and social capacities by welcoming a foster child into her house.

Here, we find strong similarities with the cultures of the Caribbean, as well as with Brazil, where strong local perceptions of class differences can supposedly carry out domestic work. I thank both Andréa Lobo and Lisa Åkesson for discussing this point with me. I also heard some Cape Verdeans working in state-related organizations use the Portuguese term ‘tutela’ (custodianship, tutelage).
be compensated by placing children from poor families in richer households (Cadet 1993, Fog Olwig 1999, Fonseca 2002, 2003, Soto 1987, Wardle 2004). The presence of multiple children in a house is desirable both for the emotional companionship they provide and for their ability to assist in the household economy. Wealthy Cape Verdean landowners usually need many workers in the fields to cultivate and store corn, legumes and other kind of crops. We find analogous data in the literature on Creole West African societies, for instance, in Sierra Leone and Liberia, where children from poor families are placed in rich Creole families in order to provide them with the benefits of education and ‘civilization’ (Goody 1982, 206–213).

In addition to the relationship between biological mother and foster mother, Pepito’s active role within the fostering triangle also needs to be considered. Wardle describes a comparable practice in Jamaica, where children’s preferences are encouraged (2004, 199). This corresponds to a general Cape Verdean ideology of fostering, which implies that the wishes of the child should, if possible, be taken into consideration. When a child is reluctant to move to a new foster home, this will be noted, discussed and possibly accepted.

Besides this response to poverty, fostering is also a part of long-term reciprocities between allied Cape Verdean families. I will illustrate this with the example of the relationship between 74-year-old Dona Maria and 12-year-old Vanessa, who had arrived recently in Maria’s household. Her arrival was justified by the fact that Maria’s own daughter spent five years in Vanessa’s grandmother’s house many years ago. Today Dona Maria is old and all her own children live outside the country, so accepting a foster girl in her house seems the perfect option. Vanessa will learn to cook, clean and care for an elderly woman before she eventually has her own children, which, by and large, will be seen as an appropriate moment to leave her foster home. While the foster mother, in this case of apprenticeship or service fostering, certainly has the right to make use of the child’s labour in her household, the possible exploitation of foster children is a constant issue in public discourses. However, the Cape Verdean situation cannot be compared to the situation in other countries, for instance, that described for Haiti by Cadet (1993), who stresses the exploitative character of child fostering. In the Cape Verdean case Vanessa’s mother knows Dona Maria well, and she is sure that in this house her daughter will receive a strict but fair education. She is expected to visit her daughter regularly, and Vanessa is supposed to spend at least every second weekend in her mother’s house.
In both of the cases described above, fostering is seen as a response to certain needs. While in Pepito’s case poverty, the child’s vulnerability and class differences are in the foreground, Vanessa’s case reflects the interest of the accepting adult and the long-standing collaboration between the two families involved. While in the second case the relationship between the co-mothers already existed and was confirmed by the transfer of the child, in the first case the two mothers managed to establish a bond between two families.

Besides these two typical foster constellations, a great variety of fostering agreements exists. Individual life crises such as being orphaned or domestic violence may necessitate placing a child in fosterage. Furthermore, especially in Cape Verdean history, heavy droughts and supply crises or, in the case of Fogo island, the eruption of the volcano have led to family members being placed with foster families until the crisis is over. In such cases, many children have stayed with their foster families longer than initially planned, some of them permanently (Carreira 1982, 119, Ribeiro 1997). Finally, educational fostering often plays a role for families living in the countryside, where children are obliged to make long bus journeys to town in order to attend the secondary school. To avoid these costly and tiring journeys a child can be placed in a foster home situated closer to the school, where the child is not only supposed to get food and shelter, but also to contribute to reducing the household’s workload.

Overall, different theoretical approaches can be applied to Cape Verdean fostering practices, focussing either on the functions of the shared burden of parenthood, as described earlier by Goody (1982), or on the structural aspect of alliances between families, as described by Lallemand (1993). After all, fostering is not only related to poverty, survival in times of crisis, collaboration between kin, or status differences and education, but is about all these things and more. Evidently, there are multiple and also overlapping reasons, and those listed here should not be seen as exclusive.

Before continuing to reflect on the changes and transformations in fosterage relations in the transnational context, I want to highlight the Cape Verdean ideology of co-mothering. By and large, in accordance with the open and mobile social structure in Cape Verde identified above, the perception of fostering is less one of giving and receiving a child than of an emerging or existing fosterage triangle between the biological mother, the foster child (‘fidj d’kriason’, ‘kriadu’) and the foster mother (‘mâe d’kriason’) (Åkesson et al. 2012). The fact that, after moving into the new home, the child will develop new emotional bonds and ways of relatedness based
on shared food, space and time is usually seen as a disadvantageous or even threatening moment for the bond between the biological mother and her child. Hence, it is expected that their contact is actively maintained and that even poor people continue to express their relationship with the child who has gone away. This also applies to the child, who will always be encouraged or urged to stay in touch and to periodically renew his or her bond with the biological mother. All the foster mothers I talked to expressed their desire that contact between their foster child and his or her biological mother should be maintained. If the latter wished to take the child back, they said they would always let it go (see also Lobo 2008; for a contrary case, see Notermans, this volume). While the children treat both mothers differently, usually they are not played off against each other. ‘Sempre mãe’ (‘always a mother’) is a common Cape Verdean expression, indicating that whatever may happen between a child and its biological mother, she will always be a mother, and nobody should deny her significance. Usually, all three persons involved are expected to have periodic or regular contact, an option which might become difficult in the constellations described below.

**Transnational Fostering as a Form of Temporary Mutual Support**

For centuries female traders (‘rabidantes’) have travelled between West Africa, Europe and Brazil and have managed to negotiate their family lives between these places (Grassi 2003). Besides this historical practice of cross-border mobility, several aspects of contemporary transnational family life are more recent and particularly concern the growing stream of female migration and hence, migrating mothers. The long-term separation of mothers from their children is linked to changing gender ideologies and the feminization of migration (Batalha 2004, 144–150, Grassi 2007, Lobo 2008). As is known from studies of transnational families in other parts of the world, one of the main reasons for going abroad is to support those family members who stay behind in the home country (Baldassar et al. 2007, Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, 7, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, 562, Parreñas 2005). Especially single Cape Verdean women, who cannot count on the help of others to support their children, do not leave the country despite having children but because they have them.

Although many Cape Verdean mothers may feel a desire to take their children with them, they know that their duty to work and earn money
will prevent them from spending time with their children. In addition, the great majority cannot expect to find a well-paid job immediately after their arrival; they know they will have to work in insecure and underpaid conditions, and will not be able to afford a babysitter. Therefore, most mothers opt to leave their children behind and plan to fetch them later, when their financial situation is more secure. This arrangement also allows the child to grow up in a familiar social and cultural environment, where the dangers and challenges of life are not as great as in North American or European cities. Against this background, fostering is seen as being in the interests of the child, and a mother who decides to travel with her child might even be considered selfish.

However, in order to remain respected by society, transnational mothers still have to find adequate means to prove they are a ‘good’ mother and to display their love, care and sense of responsibility. First, a migrating mother needs to find a reliable carer. Unlike local fostering arrangements, a non-related person would not be considered appropriate. In the transnational context a mother may rely on various women to care for her children after her departure, but she will usually prefer either one of her sisters or her own mother. The godmother of the child, a ‘madrinha’, would also be a suitable option. Nearly all the women interviewed stated a preference for their own female kin, and neither the father nor female relatives on the father’s side are perceived as a good option (although, in rare cases, this option is chosen). Transnational child care usually involves women belonging to the same kin group. Men almost never participate in these fosterage arrangements.

In order to illustrate the practice of shared mothering at a distance, I will describe the fostering triangle between Joana, who is nineteen years old and has been living in the US city of Boston for nearly a year, Joana’s younger sister Fatinha, and Joana’s son Benjamin, currently two years old and staying with Fatinha on the island of Fogo in Cape Verde. Joana and Fatinha have different fathers, and while Fatinha’s father lives on one of the neighbouring islands, Joana’s father has already been living in the US for more than ten years. The fact that Joana would one day be able to follow him and continue her life in the diaspora had an impact on the sister’s life prospects and their mutual understanding while they were growing up together in their mother’s house in Cape Verde. For several reasons Joana felt it was her duty to leave Cape Verde and to leave her child behind. First, her father had promised her a well-paid job in a Cape Verdean restaurant, which would enable her to support her family in Cape Verde, who, at the time, were still living under extreme conditions of poverty. The second reason is connected with the legal prerequisites
for following family members into the diaspora. In the US context, family-based migration requires a child to be of minor and single status if he or she intends to follow his or her family into the diaspora. During her pregnancy, when she was still of the appropriate age, Joana knew that she had to hide her growing womb from the embassy employees, since being officially recorded as a mother might have hampered her visa application, and probably would have brought her migrations aspirations to an end (see Drotbohm 2011).

The day Joana left was not an easy one. Little four-month-old Benjamin was still being breastfed, and Fatinha, Joana’s sister and Benjamin’s foster mother, knew that the next couple of nights would be short ones. Since her sister’s departure, Fatinha gets up early each day, wakes the boy, dresses him, prepares his breakfast, washes his clothes and diapers, prepares his lunch, watches him during his afternoon adventures, and kisses him before he falls asleep. Fatinha does what she is expected to do as a caring mother, she feels like a mother and enjoys having her own responsibilities. Unlike her sister, she left school quite early and never had great plans for her personal future. Of course, she had always dreamt of leaving the islands and going to ‘Merka’ (‘America’ in Kriolu), as every young Cape Verdean does. But unlike her five older siblings, whose fathers live in the diaspora, she does not have a father abroad to bring her out of the country one day. Those family members remaining in Cape Verde usually accept the foster child willingly in their houses, which is not perceived as a burden or challenge, but rather as a part of mutual female solidarity within transnational families. From Fatinha’s perspective Benjamin’s care is perceived as a chance to become part of a transnational network and to express relatedness with those staying abroad, while fostering itself is understood as an income-generating strategy. For many Cape Verdean families the remittances that are sent home constitute the only regular financial income. Her sister Joana calls her once a week. Joana appreciates the fact that her son lives in a household she is familiar with. Contrary to local modes of fostering, absent mothers cannot simply go to the new home of their child to keep in touch. Hence, by choosing their own home as a foster home, travelling Cape Verdean mothers ensure access

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5 Fog Olwig describes positive but also highly problematic aspects of such child-oriented remittances as an income-generating strategy for family members who stay behind. While some children realize their particular position within the household and can use it as a powerful tool to express distance, including financial distance, others feel ‘materialized’ as a financial source. See Fog Olwig (1999: 268, 272). Similarly, Parreñas (2005) describes the commodification of the mother-child bond in the Philippines, where migrating mothers have to remind their children of their financial provision for them.
to information about the well-being of their child. If she had any doubts about Benjamin’s well-being, Joana could always get in touch with her own mother, who lives with Fatinha, or with other relatives living in the same neighborhood.

Every Sunday afternoon she asks Fatinha for details about Benjamin’s health, his mood, his food and his smile, and Fatinha helps her bear the pain of separation by holding the telephone close to the little boy, tickling him and making him laugh loudly, so that his mother can hear him. She tells Joana about his recent physical developments, like his first steps, and avoids any mention of illness or bruises. Joana sends money, $50 or $100, on a monthly basis, which is mainly used for buying food and diapers. Three to four times a year the household receives a couple of ‘bidões’ (old oil drums used by migrants for sending things from abroad), sent by Joana from the US, which are filled with clothes and shoes, but also cosmetics, such as hair colour and nail polish, decorations for the house, little lamps, tins of cake, biscuits, soups and vegetables, as well as toys for the children and some well-chosen perfume for Fatinha. By calling once a week, talking and listening with patience, and sending money and personal items in oil drums, Joana fulfils what is expected of her as a ‘good’ absent mother.

This fostering triangle linking Joana, Fatinha and Benjamin across national borders captures some characteristics that are typical of migration-related fostering, as well as the image of appropriate transnational co-mothering. On a more general level, transnational foster relations are one option among many used to express mutual relatedness and loyalty between kin who live in different countries. The continuing practice of staying in touch and re-affirming cross-border ties is considered the most important part of ‘doing’ family at a distance (Drotbohm 2009, Parreñas 2005, 103–108). In Cape Verde, this aspect is particularly important with regard to the emerging or confirmed relationships between co-mothers. In the context of an established transnational kinship structure, they assure themselves that this particular relationship will be maintained despite the physical distance. Usually, the distinctiveness of their relationship will last a whole lifetime, even beyond the expected reunification between the biological mother and her child.

In contrast to this strong relationship between both co-mothers, which is usually made more intense by child fostering, the bond between the foster mother and the child is expected to be only temporary, as the fostered child is expected to rejoin his or her biological mother at a later stage. This perspective places a specific responsibility on the foster mother: because she is able to share time, place, meals and intimacy with the child, her position is seen as advantageous in comparison to that of
her co-mother. In order to avoid the child becoming too attached to her, she is expected to strengthen the position of her absent counterpart, the biological mother, and hence contribute to compensating for the physical distance. While some foster mothers described a tricky balancing act between the duty to care emotionally on the one hand and the idea of a later departure of the child on the other, they all confirmed the duty not to out-play their co-mothers, but rather to strengthen the latter’s social presence in the household.

Certain differences can be noted between the local versions of child fostering described above and transnational fostering. In transnational foster constellations, while the placing of a child in another household is still seen as a solution to certain inconveniences, in this case the physical absence of the biological mother, the child only stays with female kin for an undefined period of time and will not be readily handed over to a non-related household. Furthermore, transnational co-mothering does not necessarily imply a structural hierarchy between the two mothers, one woman being poorer or in any other sense disadvantaged, but is mainly seen as a collaboration between two equal partners, both of whom will profit from the arrangement. The crisis aspect in the local version of fostering is hardly recognizable in transnational co-mothering. In addition, most migration-related fosterage relations are planned to be temporary, as most migrating mothers assume they will be able to come back or to take their child with them in the following months or years. Therefore, both mothers are constantly concerned to balance their diverse means of social presence and their different modes of influence on the child. While the foster mother has to demonstrate emotional closeness, she nonetheless should not play up her physical presence, but rather promote the bond between the child and its biological mother. This also applies to the legal aspects of transnational fostering: unlike local fostering, all important child-related decisions will be taken either by the biological mother or in a dialogue between the co-mothers. Finally, and this will be described in more detail in the following section, transnational mothers, unlike local mothers, manage to develop a sophisticated set of social practices to articulate and reaffirm their motherhood and thus to correspond to the moral ideal of a ‘good’ mother, despite their physical absence.

The Foster Child’s Perspective: Translating Signs of Co-presence

Research into the perspectives of children left behind in diverse regions of the world has created a complex image of simultaneous disadvantages
and vulnerabilities, but also empowerment and status advancement (Dreby 2007, Fog Olwig 1999, Notermans 2008, Verhoef and Morelli 2007). The great majority of the children included in my study in Cape Verde knew their ‘mãe d’kriason’ well before their mother’s departure. Many of them even did not have to change households, since their mother, as in the case described above, had already been living together with the chosen foster parent before her departure. Usually, Cape Verdeans anticipate that the foster child will suffer for a few days after its mother’s departure. ‘Acostumar-se’, the current term for expressing this process of adaptation, semantically contains the idea of ‘adjusting’ as well as of ‘calming down’. During these days the newly bereft child will be treated particularly well by all members of the household, and it will receive a lot of attention and affection. After this special treatment during the very first days or weeks after their mothers’ departure, all the children living in the house should receive equal treatment, and the adults seek to adjust their relationship with their ‘fid jd’kriason’, as well as those between the foster child and the other children living in the same household.

Yet, this pattern does not always work. In daily practice one often sees the contrary: many foster children are highly aware of their different situation and they often reflect on the question of whether they are being treated as equals or not. Generally, the children of absent mothers have to negotiate their position within their foster home not only as outsiders, but also as temporary members of the household. In some cases, this can result in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, a foster child has to overcome the social gap that distinguishes him or her from the foster mother’s biological children. On the other hand, the often articulated expectation of being reunified with one’s biological mother at a later point in time reinforces feelings of social difference. Especially the fact that this child might sooner or later migrate and hence have access to ‘uma vida midjo’ (a better life) can cause jealousies and rivalries among the children living in one household and complicate the position of the foster child.

This situation explains the fact that most of the foster children in my study saw their relationship with their biological mother as the most important in their lives. Comparable to observations made by Parreñas with regard to Philippine children (Parreñas 2005, 65), these children perceived their biological mothers’ absence as being for their own benefit. Some even considered their mother a very close and reliable companion, providing emotional care and material comfort. Interestingly, despite their spatial proximity to other close relatives, as well as to their fathers, who often lived in the same street or town, these children saw their contact
with their absent mothers as being more intensive. On the everyday level, this emotional proximity was often made possible by regular telephone conversations in which affection was exchanged and their interest in each other’s experiences expressed. I can illustrate this with the following conversation with Emily, eleven years old, whose mother left the islands four years ago to take up a scholarship to study in New York:

Emily: It was normal right from the beginning. My mum calls every Sunday afternoon, and since she has left there has not been one Sunday that she did not call. I save everything that happens during the week in order to discuss it with her on Sunday.
Heike: What kinds of things?
Emily: Like, what happens in school, who I meet, what happens in the house.
Heike: So, it’s like being very close to each other?
Emily: Sure. I tell her more than I tell my good friends here in Bila Baixo [her neighbourhood in Sao Filipe, Fogo island, H.D.]. The good thing with her is that it will stay with her, she won’t tell anybody.

Emily feels well integrated into her aunt’s household, where she shares space and emotional support with her four cousins. Besides communicating everyday activities and feelings, a considerable part of the information that crosses between the USA and Cape Verde concerns the details of material support sent by her mother. Apparently, most of the children left behind know quite well how to articulate their needs and formulate precise ideas about what they want, which colour, which size, which brand. Frequently I heard children exchanging strategies on how to make their mothers or other relatives buy a particular object, where it can be found, how much it costs and in which store. This is even more amazing, given that they have never left the islands. While these demands on those residing abroad can constitute the more stressful aspect of keeping in touch across the Atlantic, they probably should not be reduced to mere materialism. The children understand the remittances and all the gifts sent by their mothers as a sign of their existence and as some sort of direct involvement and reaching into their individual life-worlds. Most of the children are proud of the toys they receive and place them beside their mother’s picture, close to their beds. In return the mothers require detailed information on how the remittances have been spent and on how clothes, toys and other gifts are used. Here is Emily again on this point:

When she calls she usually wants to know whether I am wearing the shirt or the skirt she sent at that particular moment. She tells me again and again
that I am not supposed to wear these things during the week, that I should keep them for Sundays. And she wants to see all the things she sent when she comes to see me next time.

In this type of ‘mother-away-household’ (Parreñas 2005), where the mother manages to build up a constant dialogue and establishes relatedness via material signs, many children regard their absent mothers as an integral part of their households. When I studied household compositions and the number of people living together, I noticed that absent mothers were regularly included in the survey.

In addition, as already indicated above, absent mothers manage to receive the necessary information about their children, not only via direct communication, but first and foremost via third persons. For instance, Emily’s mother regularly gets in touch with her ‘co-mãe’, as well as with a couple of her friends on the island in order to find out about her daughter’s whereabouts. Obviously the children are aware of these well-functioning webs of transnational control, but they can hardly escape these observations or refuse submission.

All in all absent mothers manage to establish a close presence in their children’s social environment, as it is important for the children not to forget them. Compared with the locally confined version of fostering, co-mothering across national borders requires a sophisticated set of practices and communication, in which transnational mothers articulate their continuing attachment and hence correspond to an ideal of transnational fostering to be evaluated positively by their social environment. In the next section I will concentrate on the problematic aspects inherent in transnational mother-child relations and refer to those households in which the mother is not able to correspond to this ideal of long-distance intimacies.

LEAVING LIVES BEHIND: EXPERIENCES OF PROLONGED SEPARATION AND FEARS OF ABANDONMENT

Though most Cape Verdean mothers leave the country with the idea of coming back and taking their children with them, mothers usually stay longer than expected. Their separation from their children may then last many years. During my stay on the islands of Fogo and Brava I came across an unexpectedly high number of households in which the biological mother had stayed away much longer than initially announced. In some cases she had even cut all contact with her children as well as with their foster mother and did not show up anymore. As indicated in
the introduction, these cases, although quantitatively the minority, are fervently debated in daily public discourses, and contribute to a distinctly ambivalent attitude towards migrating mothers.

During my fieldwork the issues of the corrosion of contact between mother and child and eventual child neglect were never easy to address, since the ideologies of transnational family life call for solidarity and mutual care on both sides of the Atlantic. Evidently, a mother’s lack of responsibility towards her children contradicts local norms of maternal behaviour, and it also constitutes a heavy burden for the carer. Up to a certain point, most children are expected to downplay their disappointments, open questions or fears and will usually do so, especially in the presence of an unfamiliar person. However, foster mothers and other community members constantly reflect on the behaviour and reliability of travelling mothers and are willing to alter the idealized image of them. In the following I will distinguish between irritations that are ‘normal’ in transnational family lives and aspects that severely contradict the basic principles of arranging child care across national borders.

While most Cape Verdean children tolerate their mother’s absence as long as she is able to establish the expected social presence within the child’s environment, feelings of neglect can still occur. Not only when the migrating mother does not do what is expected of her, but also in moments of personal crisis, times of particular need or feelings of exclusion, a child may react with frustration and anger towards his or her mother’s absence. While some children cry on the phone and beg their mothers to return, others may articulate or feign indifference about their mother in moments when they feel mistreated or neglected. Again others refuse to use the word ‘mother’, but instead start calling their mother by her first name or refuse to talk to her on the phone in order to articulate their disappointment. Adolescents react differently when coping with feelings of neglect. They can behave disobediently or rebelliously in order to attract their mother’s attention and force her to come back. In some cases, after a longer period of separation, children refused to migrate when their mother returned and wanted to take them abroad.

One type of frustration, which is very common in transnational care arrangements, is the unexpected prolongation of the separation between biological mother and her child. Foster mothers in particular reflected on the widespread experience of the period of the child’s stay being repeatedly extended. There can be many reasons for this, like unexpected financial difficulties, changing jobs and working schedules in the diaspora, and long processing times on the part of the visa authorities (Åkesson et al. 2012).
In my interviews it became apparent that many children were aware of the fact that the conditions framing their mother’s life abroad were crucial for the manner of their relationship. Asked about their most important worries, all of them feared the unpredictability and uncertainty of living conditions abroad, which might influence their contact with their mothers or families abroad. For instance, Quinzim, a boy of seventeen whose mother Sonia left for Boston when he was seven, told me:

The first years were not so hard. I remember that she called regularly, and when I heard her voice she seemed very close. But then she had to go for another job, and calling was getting more complicated, and then she called only rarely, and then she also stopped sending money. Sometimes I think that she has forgotten us.

In this case, changing economic conditions apparently were decisive for the mother’s ability to keep in touch and express emotional closeness. In Fogo, Quinzim lives together with his mother’s sister and his mother’s mother. Together with them he occasionally discusses his future options, and they know that getting in touch with his mother is one of his most important dreams. Evidently, the two women also worry about their sister and daughter and try to obtain information from those who have managed to go to the USA and look for her. For Quinzim, not obtaining the necessary information, being stuck in Cape Verde and having to rely on those who manage to travel is hard to endure.

Many disconnected children in Cape Verde struggle not only with the lack of information, but also with their own immobility, social stagnation and the fear of total abandonment. If migrants break contact and refuse to travel back home, those at the other end of the connection will need both the necessary information and the legal means to cross the border individually. Without the support of their family members living abroad, many Cape Verdeans will never have any chance of migrating. Quinzim, for instance, did not finish school, nor has he received any professional training, nor found a job, and therefore family-based migration will be his only option for obtaining a visa to go abroad. In addition, unlike what he and his aunt expected, he was transferred to her household permanently, despite the fact that his mother was living abroad. This involuntary transfer complicates practices of relatedness in a Creole setting, which is built on notions of spatial and social permeability.

Generally, children left behind constantly have to renegotiate their position in the social triangle between their absent mother, their ‘mãe d’kriason’ and themselves. While most of them consider the emotional
and social aspect of mothering, like their mothers’ calls, as being much more important than money or material things, a possible end to the flow of financial remittances not only questions the established mode of expressing emotional proximity, but can also complicate the legitimate foundations of their stay in their foster household on the islands. Under these conditions, abandoned children, after a period of stress and unease, decide to leave their foster homes and look for their own accommodation. This contributes to the growing number of child-headed households in Cape Verde (Rodrigues 2007, 130).

When I travelled to Boston and the wider area of Massachusetts in the USA in September 2008, I managed to follow up the trails of changed addresses, lost telephone numbers and rumours of the whereabouts of some Cape Verdan mothers who had not been in touch with their children and co-mothers for several years. When I called and introduced myself and explained my special interest, most of them at first reacted reluctantly, but in the end none of them refused to meet me and discuss these very sensitive issues.

Quinzim’s mother Sonia was living under precarious conditions in Dorchester, on the outskirts of Boston, where she shared a two-room apartment with her partner and three children born in the USA in the course of the last ten years. Mainly because she had never managed to legalize her stay, she feared to travel back to Cape Verde to visit her son, her sister and her mother, whom she knew were desperately waiting for her. She described her situation in the USA as a vicious circle of undocumented work, underpayment and a lack of social security, and felt ashamed of her failure to accumulate enough money to send any back to the family she had left behind. Under these conditions, feelings of guilt were the main reason for cutting contact and trying to forget those waiting in Cape Verde. During my journeys across the Cape Verdan diaspora, I came to realize that many more women like Sonia had started new relationships in the foreign country, which resulted in new family relations, new obligations and responsibilities. Often, a second family had been created within a very few years, which also needed love and material support.

In my account, the perspectives of transnational mothers have inevitably not been reflected as thoroughly as those of family members staying behind in Cape Verde. Nonetheless, my brief visits to the diaspora helped me to gain a more nuanced picture of contradictions and emerging vulnerabilities, which could be complemented by a reflection on the legal constraints, the burden of establishing and continuing a coherent life in more than one place, as well as the powerful forces of social control that
penetrate the transnational social field by means of moral pressures and articulated entitlements.

Conclusions

My comparison of local and transnational modes of fostering in Cape Verde has shown that Cape Verdean children belong to a series of different households and caring adults. While sharing child-care obligations is a well-established way of expressing mutual support and solidarity between different families or between family members, my account has shown that the increasing feminization of Cape Verdean migration can complicate a fostering triangle. Contrary to local versions of fosterage, the observed flexibility and permeability of co-mothering changes under the circumstances of migration and reaches a condition of local fixity, which might hamper an unrestricted contact between the three individuals involved.

Especially due to the expected temporary nature of transnational child fostering, absent mothers are obliged to find a way of making themselves present in Cape Verde and constantly displaying their caring qualities. Likewise, foster mothers are expected to promote the bond between the absent co-mother and her child and to control their own emotional attachment. In addition to this, the fact that co-mothers live separate lives and often have limited access to what is going on ‘at home’ or ‘over there’ can erode the level of trust required to support each other comfortably.

The expected temporality of the arrangement also affects the perspectives of the foster children left behind. On the one hand, they have to be aware of the fact that their biological, not their foster mother will probably be decisive in their personal futures. On the other hand, they have to negotiate their emotional bonds in a social context that remains rather unpredictable. While they are obliged to keep the temporary nature of their current social environment in mind, the contingencies of transnational livelihoods can eventually force them to stay where they are. Strict international migration regimes reproduce the boundaries of the nation state within the realm of the family and act against the desired permeability of social belonging and the agency of fostered children, as articulated in the local version of Cape Verdean fostering.

Therefore, in contrast to the local form of child fostering, which is seen as an appreciated strategy of mutual aid, involuntary immobility and the loss of contact between a migrating mother and her child are highlighted
as central to Cape Verdean perceptions of the pitfalls of living a transnational family life. In my reading this disempowering effect for fostered children is one crucial reason for the deep ambivalences regarding transnational fostering among the islands’ population, as reflected in public discourses on ‘fidj disorientadu’—the confusion of children left behind.

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In her chapter in this volume, Erdmute Alber proposes a new way of thinking about fosterage as the transfer of imagined belonging, drawing on the work of Suzanne Lallemand (1993), Esther Goody (1982), and Janet Carsten (2004), as well as Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as an imagined community (1983). Building on Alber’s theoretical discussion, this chapter examines how forms of belonging were imagined and conceptualized in the southeastern Gold Coast (now Ghana), in the late nineteenth century. In particular, I look at how fosterage was imagined in connection to a relationship to which it was considered similar: debt pawning. In debt pawning, a pawn went to live with another person known to his or her family in exchange for a loan; the child or older person would return to his or her family when the loan was repaid. I consider fostering and pawning relationships to have been adjacent or contiguous relationships (Demian 2004) in the southeastern Gold Coast in the nineteenth century, because people described a situation under dispute through these different relationships: they were similar enough in some of their shared rules and norms that people could argue that a particular situation was one or the other. At the same time, it mattered that a situation was defined in one way or another; these relationships were conceived as similar in some aspects but unlike in others. This chapter highlights how people in the colonial Gold Coast imagined fosterage to be both distinct from and similar to pawning.

Looking at relations of belonging under dispute focuses attention on three points. One is that belonging can be imagined in a variety of ways, and therefore the degree of belonging-ness in various relations of belonging differs. As Alber notes, “there is a need to clarify empirically and much more exactly what is, in concrete, moving, when a child is taken by another person” (p. 103). Looking at situations under dispute highlights how different relations of belonging imply different kinds of obligations and rights, and that these relations can have legal and economic implications, along with social and emotional ones.
This point about what is at stake in these relationships relies on the insights of those working in the ‘English tradition’ described by Alber. Those studies analysed fosterage and adoption in terms of the transfer, sharing, delegation, surrender, and circulation of parental rights—as these were culturally defined—to other persons according to culturally specific rules (Goodenough 1970, Goody 1982). In analysing fosterage in this way, they highlighted how

people's labour, companionship, and allegiance are in effect commodities, and access to them, as to other valued commodities, is universally subject to social regulation. Although we do not ordinarily think of it in this way, the rights people have in regard to these things are a form of property. Adoption and fosterage are transactions in parenthood as a form of property. (Goodenough 1970, 398–9)

Newer approaches to kinship have downplayed the notion of rights in favour of concern for how overlapping relationships develop over time, through everyday processes, and create feelings of relatedness, as well as persons of a particular identity. However, Jeanette Edwards and Marilyn Strathern (2000) re-introduced the concept of relations with persons being a kind of property through the term ‘belonging,’ which they use to describe the sense of kinship among people in a small town in the north of England. This term has connotations of ownership, “of alienable possessions and inalienable possessiveness”, as well as of affect, as in “a feeling of belonging” (153). While at least one scholar of fosterage criticizes rights-based kinship theories as derived from Western economistic thinking (Demian 2004), a focus on belonging helps elucidate West African conceptions of kin as a form of wealth and of social relationships as being bound up in economic ones (Bledsoe 1980, Coe 2011).

In her discussion of fostering as the transfer of parenthood, based on research done in Ghana, Goody considers pawning to be close to fosterage and calls it ‘debt fosterage’ because, as with fostered children, the jural identity of the pawns remained linked to the lineage. What Goody finds significant in both pawning and fosterage is that parental and lineage rights to rearing, training and labour could be separated from their rights to the jural identity of the pawn who was still connected to his or her kin. Pawning highlights the benefit of the child’s labour to the new household, whereas fosterage emphasizes the benefit to the child through the sponsorship and training the new household provides in return for the child’s labour. In considering pawning as another form of parental role delegation, Goody thus highlights the similarities between these two kinds of
transfer of parental rights and responsibilities.\textsuperscript{1} Elisha Renne (2005) draws a similar conclusion from her work on Yoruba fostering and pawning in the early twentieth century: while both practices transferred the child's daily care, labour, and training to another household, because the child's jural identity with the birth lineage was not severed, the lineage might eventually receive some of the benefits of the child's training and care.

However, as the cases I discuss below show, we need to examine more closely what exactly is transferred from one person to another through fosterage, in comparison to pawning. I argue that, although fosterage and pawning are transfers of imagined belonging, the kinds of belonging associated with these relationships do not seem to be modelled on parenting \textit{per se}. Parents may transfer children to another's care or household, but may not always transfer roles, rights, or responsibilities associated exclusively with parents. Rather, parenthood seems to be a kind of adjacent relationship, with which fosterage and pawning can be contrasted and compared.

Secondly, we need to distinguish between the rights to transfer belonging on the one hand, and the nature of the belonging that is transferred on the other. Pawning in particular highlights lineage rather than parental rights to transfer the belonging of a child: a parent may pawn a child only because he or she is a member of the lineage to which the child belongs. In some cases, but not always, the form of belonging may include the right to transfer that belonging to a third party, and this is part of what is at stake in the imagined belonging that is under dispute in the cases I describe.

Thirdly, disputes highlight the degree to which social understandings of relationships are shared or not shared. The transfer of rights and responsibilities implies that the parties involved have a clear understanding of what is being transferred. What the disputes I discuss reveal is that at one moment—the moment of transfer perhaps—there may be enough of a shared understanding of the relationship for events to proceed smoothly and various actions to be coordinated, but as circumstances change, understandings that may have overlapped enough at one point may diverge, resulting in a dispute. Furthermore, as Catrien Notermans points out in her chapter in this volume, people may prize flexibility.

\textsuperscript{1} However, Goody (1982) also says that debt fosterage was closer to the modern institution of the housemaid than to fostering.
The court cases I discuss show people making use of a certain indeterminacy in relationships as their own situation changes. Furthermore, new people may enter the situation, or people who were involved may no longer be present, resulting in fewer shared understandings and greater opportunities to create new meanings.

Here I find the insights of the new kinship studies very useful. Janet Carsten has emphasized how kinship is “a process of becoming, not a fixed state”, and how it consists of “the many small actions, exchanges, friendships, and enmities that people themselves create in their everyday lives” (1997, 12 and 23). Relatedness is never “a finished reality” (1997, 281) but is instead “an area of life in which people invest their emotions, their creative energy, and their new imaginings” (2004, 9). Examining relationships under dispute reveals how the nature of belonging can continue to be negotiated and the transfer of belonging re-imagined over long periods of time, despite and through shared understandings.

This chapter examines these points in relation to the movement of children through different households in the southeastern Gold Coast in the 1870s. This period was one in which urban areas on the coast were becoming more prominent as prime commercial centres: export agriculture in palm oil, rubber, and cocoa and commerce was expanding, and the British colonial government was superseding other authorities. As a result of the Basel Mission abolishing slave-holding among Christian converts in 1861, Accra slave-holders began discussing the ideology and mechanics of slavery, even though very few were members of the Basel Mission Church: “The question of slavery is the current topic among the educated community of this place”, wrote a wealthy cotton exporter in Accra in 1867 (quoted in Parker 2000, 84). Only in 1874 did the British colonial government suddenly and formally outlaw slave-dealing within the Gold Coast Colony through the Emancipation Ordinance, stipulating that the children of slaves were born free and allowing slaves to buy their own freedom. Pawning was treated as a form of slavery by colonial officials, but cases of both slavery and pawning were dealt with inconsistently and ambivalently in colonial courts (Dumett and Johnson 1988). As a result, in the 1870s and 1880s many cases involving slavery and pawning were brought before the colonial courts in Accra, constituting a set of characteristic “trouble cases” or “a body of disputes that clustered around specific fault lines of social and economic change” (Roberts 2005, 2). Some people tried to rescue their slave relatives from bondage, and masters tried to force slaves who had run away to return. Both before and after the Emancipation Ordinance, the colonial courts treated slaves’ bids for freedom with ambivalence, only pushing for it in cases of outright cruelty,
because they were worried that banning slavery itself would lead to social and economic unrest, impoverishing a class of merchants on whom trade depended (Haenger 2000, Dumett and Johnson 1988). In my reading, decisions in cases where the slave-dealing or pawn transaction had recently happened were more likely to go against the creditor or slave-owner than in cases in which people had been slaves or pawns for many years. There were no widespread revolts or rebellions by slaves after the Emancipation Ordinance; rather, slaves re-negotiated their terms of service from a stronger position (Parker 2000, Haenger 2000).

It may seem strange for an anthropologist to write a piece based on historical and archival research. I became interested in the history of fosterage in the southern Gold Coast through my research on contemporary transnational families from Ghana. Like other migrant parents from the Philippines or Honduras (Parreñas 2005, Schmalzbauer 2004), many Ghanaian parents who are living in the United States leave or send their children to stay with sisters and grandmothers in Ghana. Much of the literature on transnational families treats fosterage as something new for these families, but from my previous ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana and the prevalence of fosterage in the community where I worked, this seemed not to be the case for Ghanaian families. I became interested in how fosterage changed over time, as people in contemporary transnational families used repertoires of parenting developed during an earlier period of migration in the early twentieth century.

Drawing on records from court cases in the 1870s in Accra, I argue that people associated different kinds of belonging with relationships of fosterage and pawning. In particular, these relationships conferred different rights in controlling a child’s residence, accessing his or her labour, and transferring those rights to a third party. However, the nature of belonging could be contested because these relationships looked similar on a day-to-day level in terms of living arrangements, were used as euphemisms for one another, and could generate a sense of belonging in an emotional sense. Furthermore, exchanges of money took place alongside the movement of a child, signalling the multi-faceted nature of adult alliances. In part due to negotiations over the nature of belonging, the kind of belonging associated with these relationships changed over time.

**Courts in the Gold Coast in the 1870s**

As was the case elsewhere in colonial Africa, there were multiple court systems operating simultaneously, British courts drawing on English
common law and chiefly courts using ‘customary law.’ Each chief had his own tribunal, and there were often disputes over who had jurisdiction in a case. Both the chiefs and the colonial government used court fees to raise money. In chiefly courts, the local chief and his elders regularly heard cases that could not be resolved by a lineage head, the first line of recourse for many disputes. The record of previous decisions was in the memories of the participants, and the language of the court was the local language. In the colonial courts, cases were heard before the Commandant or a person delegated by him to be magistrate, and there were detailed records of court proceedings, including questioning of witnesses. However, because the verbal exchange was usually in local languages and the written account is in English, the written account is an approximation or summary of what was said in Ga (the language of Accra and its environs), Fante, or Twi. Accra and Cape Coast had the best judicial records (Gocking 1991), and I draw on the Accra files extensively for this paper, particularly court transcripts of cases heard at the High Commandant’s Court in Accra (1866–1902). From the summaries of witnesses’ evidence, one can gain an idea of how people negotiated the terms of belonging in court.

Situations that came to court were situations of conflict, in which people had differing interests and conceptions of what ought to be. Courts were part of a process of contestation, some of which is visible to us and some of which is not. What is missing from the records are conflicts that never made it to court for practical reasons such as cost or the difficulty of travelling and getting witnesses to the court. It is evident from the Gold Coast archival records that those who lived closest to the colonial courts and were wealthier were most likely to use them, particularly in the earliest period. Some people hired lawyers to represent them, increasing the cost of bringing a case to court.

The Gold Coast of the 1870s was characterized by “a highly competitive free market in judicial service, with litigants moving freely between different African and European courts in order to secure a successful outcome to a particular dispute” (Parker 2000, 85). Litigants would use one court to appeal the judgment of another (Parker 2000). Furthermore, chiefs were sometimes called to the Commandant’s court as experts on ‘customary law’. Gocking (1997) has called this a “flexible and adaptive”

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2 There are a few summaries of cases heard by Akuapem chiefly tribunals from the 1860s in the Basel Mission Archives.
two-tier, linked judicial system”, in which the two systems affected one another over time (63, 64). As legal anthropologists and historians have argued, rather than opposing these two court systems—the ‘colonial’ and the ‘traditional’—they should be understood in relation to one another as a set of resources that people drew upon to resolve conflicts (Griffiths 1997, Roberts and Mann 1991). Although it is tempting to think of the court system as fixing fluid and flexible ways of imagining belonging and relatedness and making them static, we should rather see the courts as one element in a range of strategies that people were using to negotiate the terms of belonging.

**Disputes over Belonging**

I turn now to three court cases that hinge directly on the nature of a person’s belonging to others and come from the Civil Commandant’s Court in Ussher Town, Accra, in the early 1870s and were ruled on by various people appointed as magistrates or by the Commandant himself. All three court cases occurred before the formal abolition of slave-trading in 1874, at a time when the court only recognized ‘domestic slavery’ as an issue in situations of “maltreatment or cruelty in which case the slave will be manumitted”, as the court ruled in another case in 1869 (Arkee Barkallee vs. Ngorbee, 16 November 1869, SCT 2/4/7).

**Tawiah vs. Johanna, August 1871**

In the first case, Tawiah brought Johanna to court for pawning Tawiah’s daughter, Abbah (Tawiah vs. Johanna, 2 Aug. 1871, SCT 2/4/8). The court case begins with Tawiah’s testimony. “Tawiah states about four months ago, I gave my daughter to Johanna to teach her to work.” In Goody’s terms, this would seem to be a fostering relationship in which the parental responsibility for training Abbah was delegated to another woman outside of the family. What I want to highlight from this limited testimony, but is substantiated by other court cases, as well as by more contemporary interviews and conversations, is that there is no emic term for what anthropologists call ‘fosterage’, indicating, I suggest, that it was an unmarked, and unremarked upon, aspect of daily life. We do not know from the court records why Tawiah decided that Johanna would be a good person to teach Abbah to work. While I hesitate to extrapolate from the present into the past, I will note that contemporary reasons given for placing a young person with another woman for training are either that the
child can learn from an adult with a particular skill or business, or that the child might become a more disciplined person from living with someone who is not swayed by affection for the young person (Coe 2008; see also Bledsoe 1990 and Renne 2005). Contemporary ideology considers training to be a parental responsibility in the sense that a parent ensures it is provided, but the training itself is usually delegated to another institution (a school) or person (a skilled craftsperson). Regardless of the reasons why Johanna was chosen to teach Abbah or why Abbah needed training, Tawiah said that her intention in giving Abbah to Johanna was so that she would learn from her.

Tawiah continued her testimony, explaining the reason for the dispute: “She [Johanna] pawned my daughter, and I knew nothing about it.” Note that there are two aspects to this complaint: one is that Johanna pawned Tawiah’s daughter to a third party; the second is that Johanna did not seek Tawiah’s permission prior to doing so. Tawiah argued, implicitly, that her reason for giving her daughter to Johanna—to teach her to work—did not give Johanna the right to pawn Abbah to a third party without her permission. Thus, Tawiah argued, some aspects of Abbah’s belonging had been transferred to Johanna, although she did not specify which aspects. I assume that at a minimum Johanna was able to control Abbah’s daily labour and that Abbah moved in to live with Johanna, an assumption I make because Tawiah only got to know of the pawning after it happened. Johanna probably also disciplined Abbah and gave her food. Although Johanna was no doubt doing what Tawiah had previously done when Abbah had lived with her, calling this a transfer or delegation of parenthood seems an overstatement. Other kinds of belonging had not been transferred by giving Abbah to Johanna, Tawiah argued, including the right to transfer Abbah’s belonging to others. This illustrates Alber’s point that belonging can be plural, of many different kinds. Abbah belonged, in some ways, to both Tawiah and Johanna, but in different ways.

In her defence, Johanna claimed another definition of the relationship which gave her a greater degree of rights in Abbah’s belonging. The summary of her statement in the court record was, “I pawned this girl for twelve heads [of cowries] as I wanted the money. The mother of the girl owed me three heads.” Through her statement, Johanna suggested that she had the right to pawn Tawiah’s daughter Abbah because of a loan she had given Tawiah. I should note that both these sums—three heads and twelve heads of cowries—are low for child pawns. In twelve other court cases involving pawning in the five years prior to the Emancipation Ordinance of November 1874, the mean loan for a pawn, not counting
interest, was 44 heads of cowries, although there was great variation (the range was 6–170 heads). Although the debt was much less than the going rate for a pawn, Johanna seemed to be arguing that, because of Tawiah’s debt, Abbah was, in essence, her pawn, and she could transfer Abbah to another person in exchange for a loan in her own time of need. Based on data from Asante in 1874 and 1905, even if Abbah had been Johanna’s pawn, she did not have the right to re-pawn Abbah—to transfer her belonging—without informing Tawiah and giving her an opportunity to redeem Abbah first (Austin 2005, 144).

Another case in the same year involved a woman pawning a child to another woman: a woman, Abrocoo, pawned a man’s daughter to another woman, Korley, to whom Abrocoo owed money. “Korley testifies, I did receive Addaman’s daughter in pawn from a woman called Abrocoo for a debt she owed me.” How the first woman, Abrocoo, came into possession of the man’s daughter was not part of the court record. Korley had first summoned Addaman to a chiefly tribunal to force him to redeem his daughter and repay her loan, but later returned the girl to her father, and so the case was dismissed by the colonial court (Addaman of James Town, Accra vs. Korley of Ussher Town, Accra, 27 October 1871, SCT 2/4/8). In the case of Tawiah vs. Johanna, on the other hand, the third party was not so willing to return Abbah to Tawiah without having the loan repaid.

The colonial court decided against Johanna and in favour of Tawiah: Tawiah gained custody of her daughter, Johanna was fined twice what she was paid during the pawning transaction, and the third party to whom Johanna had pawned Abbah could bring Johanna to court for the twelve cowries she had exchanged for Abbah, who had now been taken away from her. Although the court’s judgment is somewhat surprising given their usual desire to honour economic transactions made according to local understandings, except in cases where cruelty could be proven, what interests me here is the argumentation of the two women in the dispute process.

The women presented different definitions of the situation, which implied different rights to Abbah. While their definitions varied, they did not seem to disagree on the rights that accrued to the parties as a result of those definitions of the relationships. In other words, Johanna did not tell the court that she had the right to pawn Abbah because Abbah had been given to her for training purposes. Instead, she proposed a different definition of the situation, in which Tawiah owed her money and she was in need of money, implying that Tawiah refused to or could not pay her back.
Their forms of argumentation imply that there was some shared understanding between Tawiah and Johanna about what kinds of imagined belonging are associated with fosterage and pawning. If these relationships entailed different kinds of belonging for the child, this raises the question of what made these relationships like one another. If Tawiah and Johanna seemed to share an understanding of what made fosterage and pawning unlike one another, how could they present the same situation differently? In other words, although the participants agreed on the difference between these kinds of relationships, in court they proposed an interpretation of the relationship that corresponded to their interests, suggesting that there was some negotiability in these categories.

In both fosterage and pawning relationships, as Esther Goody argued, a child changes residence and labours where he or she lives, but does not lose his or her ties to the birth parent. The foster parent or creditor feeds and clothes the child during the shared period of residence, and also disciplines the child. Pawns had less control over their residence and visits than other young people, in that a pawn running away caused the creditor to pursue the debtor for repayment of the debt or return of the pawn. There is some evidence that, while a fostered child could visit back and forth, a pawn could not. On the surface fosterage and pawning look similar in that a child is living with someone other than his or her mother and, as a member of that household, is contributing to its general welfare. When a pawn ran away or wanted to visit his or her family, the differences between pawning and fosterage become visible.

Furthermore, both kinds of belonging create a relationship not only between the child and the adult with whom he or she is staying, but also between the adults involved in the transfer of belonging. Both pawning and fosterage could entail social as well as economic aspects of alliance-making. Pawning was not simply an economic transaction but depended on personal networks between debtors and creditors. Debtors turned to people they knew—sometimes the friend of a friend—for credit. Pawning required trust on both sides: debtors did not want the creditors to mistreat their children, and creditors needed to trust that the debtor cared enough

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3 This point is illustrated by a court case from Berekuso in 1907 where a woman pawned her son to her niece’s husband, a man whom her son had helped on his farm before. “I used to farm for the accused”, the son told the court, and he continued to do so as a pawn. However, “formerly accused used to let me visit my mother but this time accused did not allow me to do so, because my mother pawned me” (Rex vs. Osaku, 15 January 1907, SCT 2/5/16).
about the pawn that he or she would redeem the pawn and repay the loan (Falola and Lovejoy 1994). Thus, in contrast to slavery, loans secured by a pawn were generally given between people known to one another, hence the wide range in the amount of the loan given for a pawn. Fostering could also have aspects of patronage, both social and economic, as argued in ‘the French tradition’ (Lallemand 1993, Etienne 1979; see also Bledsoe 1990). One interpretation of the dispute is that Tawiah had received a small loan from Johanna—although perhaps not at the time that she gave Abbah to Johanna, but subsequently or prior to Abbah’s transfer. She could have been in Johanna’s debt for the same reasons that she asked Johanna to train her child: hypothetically, because of Johanna’s social and economic standing in relation to Tawiah, and because they were involved in economic exchanges together (as fellow traders, for example).

For Esther Goody, the similarity between fosterage and pawning was that a parent’s responsibilities for training, rearing, and sponsorship could be transferred to another person. In contrast, in this case and in two others I will describe more briefly below, what makes fosterage and pawning similar to one another is that a child lives with and works for a non-relative and that they create an economic and social relationship between a birth parent and the sponsor of the child. This does not seem like a transfer of parenthood. Rather, parenthood exists alongside the kind of imagined belonging associated with fosterage and pawning. The plurality of belonging can easily cause the kind of conflict related above.

Johanna seemed to agree that fosterage was not pawning; it was on the basis of Tawiah’s debt that she could make her claim that she had a right to transfer Abbah’s belonging to a third party. Yet there is a slippery slope between them because of the similarities in the child’s living and labouring situation and the relationship between the adults—to take Tawiah’s view, a fostered child is in danger of changing status and becoming a pawn. We shall see further slipperiness of categories in the cases below.

Quamin Yaw vs. Mansah and Adooquaye Lydia vs. Lum Yoccor, 1873

In two other, more detailed court cases from 1873, a third form of belonging—slavery—is brought to bear in the dispute as a potential interpretation of the situation. Slavery entails even greater rights for the master than pawning, in which the child’s legal belonging is completely transferred from his or her lineage to the owner, and the master can transfer the belonging to another person with greater impunity. Through slavery, “the individual, usually a child, would now be totally at the disposal
of the recipient lineage, to which he would ‘belong’, and which could do
with him as it wished, just as it could with those born in the group” (Miers
and Kopytoff 1977, 10). This kind of belonging was inherited in that the
belonging of a slave’s children could also be transferred. Pawns, on the
other hand, expected to be redeemed by their relatives and did not lose
their identity as a member of their family of origin. However, in practice
slavery and pawnng were not so different in this regard because in the
Gold Coast in the 1870s, debtors generally paid high interest (up to fifty
per cent) on loans even when guaranteed by a pawn (‘Asante, Mohr and
Werner on Slave Emancipation Commission, dd 26 Jun 1875,’ Jenkins 1970;
see also Quamin Amissah vs. Orbarkoo Ya Yow, 9 November 1969, SCT
2/4/7 and William PappaFeo of Accra vs. Noye of Accra, 13 February 1872,
SCT 2/4/8). Thus, while some pawns were redeemed after a few months,4
the high interest rate generally made it difficult for debtors to reclaim
their relatives, and cases existed where pawns had lived with the creditors
for many years (twelve years in the case of Arkee Barkallee vs. Ngorbee,
16 November 1869, SCT 2/4/7 and nine years in the case Edward Repino
Pinto of Ningo vs. Appiadjaye of Ningo, 14 February 1872, SCT 2/4/10).
In both the cases discussed here, relatives of the woman or the woman
herself claimed that the relationship was that of just living with a distant
relation—a relation by marriage and not a member of her lineage—which
implied the freedom to come and go. Anthropologists would understand
this relationship to be one of fosterage. The distant relation, on the other
hand, claimed co-residence based on a debt or a sale. Both situations
involved an adult woman whose belonging was transferred much ear-
lier in her life, showing that people could re-negotiate the nature of the
belonging over time, as circumstances changed with births and deaths.
In the first case, Quamin Yaw said that his niece—to be precise, his
sister’s daughter—Larcoe and her three children had been living with her
‘aunt’ Mansah for the past thirty-eight years, but that Mansah was claim-
ing them all as her ‘slaves’ (Quamin Yaw vs. Mansah, 22 July 1873, SCT
2/4/10).5 The long story behind this case, which had gone to court before,
was revealed through the testimony of witnesses. One of the defence

4 Despite high interest rates, one debtor was able to redeem his granddaughter
after four months (Queen by Iyee Coffee vs. Takee Ammah of Akropong, 28 Mar. 1870,
SCT 2/4/7).

5 This case seemed to have been prompted by a court case two weeks earlier in which
Mansah successfully argued that Larcoe was her slave, taking her and her children back
from the father of two of her children.
witnesses testified that Mansah “used to be uneasy at being barren so she gave her husband $32 to buy a slave.” When her husband Akrong returned with a boy child, Mansah was annoyed, saying she had wanted a girl. Her husband then said that someone in the coastal town of Ada was in debt to him through trading, and so he went there and returned with Larcoe, thus implying that she was his debt pawn, given to him in lieu of repayment of the debt. The witness said, perhaps in response to a question from the court, that at the time Larcoe was pawned she could not yet walk (that is, she was under a year old) and “it is not usual to put a baby in pawn.” Most pawns were older because they were more useful for their labour, but in this case it seems that Mansah hoped to raise Larcoe as her daughter, essentially to adopt her, and perhaps this is why she wanted to purchase a young child, who would not only lose her legal identity as a member of her lineage but would also feel emotionally connected to Mansah.6

In the court case in 1873, Larcoe’s maternal uncle and Mansah argued about what kind of belonging best defined the relationship between Larcoe and Mansah. Quamin Yaw, her uncle, claimed strenuously that the relationship was one of fosterage. He said that Larcoe was living with Mansah’s husband, Akrong, because Akrong had been married to Larcoe’s aunt in addition to his marriage to Mansah: “Larcoe was delivered to Akrong because he was married to her aunt”, and “I never made any claim [to fetch Larcoe back home], as Akrong was my brother-in-law.” Because Akrong was a relation by marriage, according to Quamin Yaw, it was of no concern that Larcoe was living with him. Or, in the words of the Taki-Tawia, the Ga Mantse or ‘King of Accra’ as understood by colonial officials, reporting on the prior court case that had come before his tribunal: “He [Quamin Yaw] gave as his reason for not making any claim that as she was living with her aunt, he did not mind.” Quamin Yaw also said, “I never received any money on account of Larcoe, nor did either of my sisters”, and that he was travelling when Akrong took Larcoe. However, he did admit that he and Larcoe’s mother had been trading with Akrong, and a man whom he had delegated to deliver goods to Akrong had not done so, but had run away with them. He thus highlighted fostering with a brother-in-law as the dominant relationship, while the debt incurred through a trading relationship was a secondary and minor matter. Quamin

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6 This case undermines Jack Goody’s distinction between fostering and adopting societies (1969); as Lallemand (1993) suggests, adoption and fosterage can co-exist.
Yaw, as Larcoe’s maternal uncle, was functioning as a representative of her lineage in making a claim on her belonging.

For others in the court case, the money loomed larger in defining the relationship, and the relevant question was whether Larcoe was a pawn or a slave, and whose money—Akrong’s or Mansah’s—was used in the transaction. Husbands’ and wives’ finances and property are kept separate and go to their siblings or siblings’ children on their deaths. Thirteen or so years after Larcoe arrived in Mansah’s household, Akrong was killed in a Danish expedition near Keta, in what is now Volta Region. When his relatives inherited his property, they sold Larcoe, thus treating her as Akrong’s slave and her belonging as transferred to them by inheritance. Mansah brought Akrong’s relatives to the Ga Mantse’s court. There, Mansah argued successfully that Larcoe was her pawn; as a result, Larcoe could not be sold by her husband’s family. The Ga Mantse remembered his previous ruling when reporting to the colonial court in 1873, saying, “There is no law in the family by which a person pawned can become a slave after a certain time.” Yet, questioned by the court, he agreed that there was no evidence to support either the case for pawning or for slavery, as it was one person’s word against another’s.

Instead, the Ga Mantse seemed to base his decision against fostering on the fact that there was not much of a relationship between Quamin Yaw and Larcoe: “I asked the Plaintiff [Quamin Yaw] how it was that such a long time elapsed without making any claim. Larcoe was also asked if she ever visited her family. She said no.” As a result of these answers, he ruled in Mansah’s favour that Larcoe was her pawn. He seemed to assume that if Larcoe had been fostered, she would have had a chance to visit her family.

As in the case of Tawiah vs. Johanna, the participants seemed to agree about the non-convertibility between the states of slavery, debt pawning, and living with one’s ‘aunt’—the wife of one’s uncle by marriage—despite the slippage between these categories in practice. These states implied different rights in the person—who was then a middle-aged woman with three children of her own—and thus different views regarding the question to whom she and her children belonged. Because of the evidence of the various witnesses, the Ga Mantse’s testimony, and the previous rulings of his chiefly tribunal, the colonial court, after much deliberation, agreed

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Gareth Austin (2005) similarly shows slippage between categories in a case in which a pawned man in Asante was later claimed to have been sold (144).
with Mansah's definition of the situation—that Larcoe was her debt pawn and that her lineage, in the person of Larcoe's maternal uncle, Quamin Yaw, had little right to control the residence of Larcoe and her children unless he could repay the debt.

In the same year, there was another case about whether the relationship between two women, related to one another, was that of living with a foster parent or debt pawning (Adooquaye Lydia of Accra vs. Lum Yoccor of Accra, 11 Feb. 1873, SCT 2/4/10). Lydia Adooquaye took Lum Yoccor to court in order to force her either to work for her or to redeem herself. Lydia Adooquaye testified that Lum Yoccor's father had pawned her for 170 heads of cowries twenty-four years ago. Lum Yoccor told a different story: her father had gone to Sierra Leone and married there, returning to Accra with his wife. On his return, her father's niece, Lydia Adooquaye, asked Yoccor Lum's father for "one of his children to stop with her", and out of his children Lum Yoccor was chosen. This language of stopping or staying suggests fosterage. A previous case involving this family had been heard before the chief of Jamestown, who testified before the court that Lum Yoccor's father owed Lydia Adooquaye 140 heads and he had ruled that Yoccor should stay with her as a pawn until her father could repay his debts. Lum Yoccor reported that when her father died, Lydia Adooquaye told her that she was her slave and asked for repayment of the loan from Lum Yoccor's mother. Lum Yoccor reported to the colonial court, "I told my mother, I am not responsible for my father's debts." She added that her father had no right to pawn her as he was not a member of her lineage. Only if her mother had been her father's slave would he have had that right, and she said her mother had accompanied her father to the Gold Coast as his 'sweetheart', not his slave. However, as a stranger living with her husband far from her family in Sierra Leone, the mother may well have had fewer enforceable rights against her husband's claims to their children, since her lineage members were far away and could not protect her children. Although a previous case before Governor Ussher had been decided in Lydia Adooquaye's favour—to the effect that Lum Yoccor should reimburse Lydia Adooquaye for her father's debts or "stop [stay] with her"—the Civil Commandant decided to dismiss the case and ruled that Lydia Adooquaye could not claim Lum Yoccor's services.

In these two custody cases, the relationship of pawning/fosterage is between women but the court case is prompted by the death of a man whose role as a creditor or debtor needed to be investigated. The shared understanding of the situation may be more fragile because one of the parties involved in the transfer was no longer able to negotiate on his
own behalf. This suggests that a death allows for the possible re-definition or re-negotiation of a relationship that remains the same in terms of the everyday practices of co-residence, household service, food sharing, and discipline. It is also possible that the question of the nature of a person’s belonging can remain fluid until a major event occurs, like a death or the transfer of a child to a new household.

Changes in Belonging

Disputes were situations in which participants thought about definitions of reality, and what fitted commonsensical categories of imagined belonging and what did not. They were times when the differences between these kinds of belonging could be re-affirmed, as in the Ga Mantse’s statement that a pawn did not become a slave, but also where the distinctions between the categories seemed to grow fuzzy, since they could all be used to define a particular relationship. What these practices meant in relation to one another was argued out in ongoing conversations and arguments, some of which were made public in the courts.

Over time, the constellation of these relationships—how they were defined in relation to one another—shifted. In the early twentieth century, pawning moved away from fosterage and became increasingly associated with wage labour (the debt became wages), marriage (the debt became marriage payments), and fatherhood (the debt became care) (Allman and Tashjian 2000, Coe 2012). These changes are part of long-term changes in children’s belonging in West Africa, in which pawning and slavery seem to have both disappeared and been re-invigorated under these adjacent relationships. In Nicolas Argenti’s view, with respect to the Cameroon Grasslands (2010), slavery seems to have been reborn in the shape of fosterage, as rural children go to live with distant urban relatives or non-kin as house servants, relations which are often exploitative. Elisha Renne (2005) notes that among the Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria, even though fosterage is still common, fosterage, whether among kin or non-kin, is increasingly being recast in social memory as akin to slavery, as a practice where children are treated inhumanely, in contradistinction to parenting. Thus, fosterage seems to have taken on some of the meaning of slavery and pawning, which have otherwise disappeared.

In Akuapem in southeastern Ghana today, where I have done my research since 1998, slavery and pawning are, as among the Yoruba, associated with the dishonourable past and not considered relevant descriptions of relationships in the present. However, one person with whom
I spoke felt that there was an association between slavery and fosterage, while using slavery to refer exclusively to fosterage with non-kin, a form of fosterage associated with housemaids. As among the Yoruba, fosterage is becoming increasingly marked in contrast to parents raising their own children, with fosterage increasingly being criticized. The distinctions between parenthood and fosterage seem to be the kinds of imagined belonging under dispute in Akuapem today, as opposed to those between fosterage, pawning, and slavery that I have described from Accra in the 1870s. Thus, the relationships considered adjacent or contiguous—the relationships defined by their similarity to and differences from one another—have shifted, pointing to changes in how belonging is imagined.

Conclusion

In examining disputes over transfers of imagined belonging from Accra in the 1870s, I have proposed three arguments. As Alber suggests, belonging is plural, in the sense that it can be held by different people as well as entail different kinds of relationships. The plurality of belonging makes it subject to conflict and to being shaped according to people’s individual interests.

Parenthood is not transferred in fosterage or pawning. Although parents may be the actors who engage in the transfer, they are not necessarily transferring the kind of belonging associated with parenthood. In particular, they are not necessarily transferring the right to transfer a child’s belonging to someone else. Instead, different kinds of belonging exist alongside one another, as contiguous or adjacent relationships. These relationships may be misunderstood or mistaken for one another, as people act according to their own interests, revealing the slipperiness and similarities between these categories, even as people affirm the distinctions. In Accra in the 1870s, fosterage, slavery, and pawning appeared similar in many respects, all being situations in which a girl worked for the woman (non-kin or distant kin) with whom she was living and in which debts accrued between the people associated with her (whether parents or lineage members) and the woman with whom she stayed. However, in these disputes, people affirmed that fosterage, pawning, and slavery were different, and that fosterage gave far fewer rights to the woman with whom a young person stayed than did pawning and slavery, particularly in terms of the rights to transfer her belonging to someone else.

Disputes highlight how the actors involved had different interests and presented different imaginings of a person’s belonging. The last two cases
in particular show how negotiations can take place over a long period of time, raising questions about the degree of shared understanding. It seems that only when an event occurred that involved the re-negotiation of relationships—as when someone died or a child ran away—did people contest the terms of that belonging through the various courts, showing in their claims the instability and messiness of these cultural categories. The similarities between slavery, pawning, and fosterage when viewed from the outside meant that, despite their conceptual differences, the determination of actual belonging could be argued in court, attesting to the flexibility of belonging in West African contexts. Furthermore, because there were many different courts and kinds of courts available in Accra, actors clearly shopped around, seeking a favourable understanding of the kind of belonging which they wanted to defend.

One might expect that these categories of social belonging might merge or become more similar with time. There is some evidence that this has happened in other parts of West Africa. Argenti (2010) has argued that memories of slavery remain alive because of children’s experiences of contemporary fosterage in which they are exploited as housemaids, and Renne (2005) shows how people in Ekiti, Nigeria, no longer distinguish between pawning and slavery, or between fosterage and slavery. However, in Akuapem, the area of Ghana that I know best, slavery, pawning, and fosterage remain conceptually distinct, with slavery and pawning no longer being relevant categories for defining social relations. Instead, it is the adjacency of fosterage to parenthood which now makes children’s belonging fraught, signalling how belonging has changed over time due to people’s negotiations over its meaning.

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Chapter Nine

Child Adoption and Foster Care in the Context of Legal Pluralism: Case Studies from Ghana

Ulrike Wanitzek

Introduction

Cases of child fostering and adoption are frequently brought to Ghanaian courts. In one year alone (July 2007 to June 2008), 235 cases relating to the adoption of children were concluded by the High Courts of Ghana. In many of these cases the applicants were close relatives of the children and had been fostering them in one way or another. While the fostering took place through informal arrangements under customary law within the extended family, formal adoption orders were granted by the court under state law. The relevance of these two different legal systems, of customary law and of state law, in one and the same group of cases reflects the framework of legal pluralism in Ghana within which, as in other African countries, customary laws, religious laws and national state laws may play a role. Customary laws may be relevant either as part of the state legal system (‘lawyers’ customary law’) or as living law practised by the people (‘people’s customary law’). The term ‘deep’ legal pluralism has been coined to cover both (Woodman 1988, 2011). Moreover, international law in the form of human rights and other international treaties are of growing relevance. These diverse legal sub-systems and their individual elements interact with each other, influence each other’s content and merge with each other, resulting in new content. These may be described as processes of legal ‘syncretization’ (Wanitzek and Woodman 2004, 43ff.).

The questions whether, how and to what extent any of these laws becomes relevant in a particular case depends on the specific context in which the case arises. Thus, as long as Ghanaians foster their relatives’ children within the country, they may do so under their customary laws without the necessity of referring to Ghanaian national law. However, if

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they cross the state border and live abroad, they have to resort to Ghanaian state law if they want to foster their relatives’ children at their new place of residence. Under the immigration laws of many countries, they may only take a child to their foreign residence after formalizing the fostering relationship arranged under customary law as an adoptive relationship under state law (Wanitzek 2009, 465f.).

In this chapter, I examine the Ghanaian legal framework for child fostering and adoption in the context of international law. In particular, I will consider the genesis and regulations of two legal child-care concepts in the Ghanaian Children’s Act—child adoption and foster care—and show how these concepts are applied in concrete cases. I will argue that child fostering and adoption become considerably more complex when people transcend national borders in situations of intense international migration. By analysing two concrete cases of transborder child adoption, I will show how people adapt to and negotiate this legal framework.

Given my focus on the international and national legal frameworks relating to child adoption and foster care, my contribution complements the socio-anthropological perspectives on child fostering that predominate in this volume. My research is based on data I collected during three short research stays in Ghana in 2008, 2009 and 2010, during which I read and evaluated the court records of 84 child-adoption cases decided by the High Court of Ghana at Accra from 2004 to 2010.

**TWO CASES OF CHILD ADOPTION**

Out of the cases I evaluated, two have been selected as case studies to be discussed here. The information concerning them is based exclusively on the court records. In the following discussion of the cases, all the names have been replaced by fictional names, and no indications have been given which might reveal the identity of the persons involved in order to make sure that confidentiality is fully maintained.

In the first case (High Court of Ghana at Accra, Suits No. BADP 28 and 29/2008), the applicant, Mrs Yeboah, was a 44-year-old childless woman who was separated from her husband. She had been born and raised in Ghana and had attended a junior secondary school and a school of communication before she moved to the United Kingdom in 1986 for further studies and later became a deputy nursing manager. Although she had been living abroad for 22 years she had remained a Ghanaian citizen but had a British passport in addition. Mrs Yeboah applied to adopt
two siblings, namely her six-year-old nephew Kwasi and her eight-year-old niece Abena, whose maternal aunt she was. According to the court records their father had deserted them and their mother sometime in 2003. After he left, the mother took sole responsibility for the children until she passed away in 2005. After the funeral rites, Mrs Yeboah was appointed the customary successor to her deceased sister by the extended family. As she was living abroad, the children at first grew up under the guardianship of another sister of the deceased and her husband, while Mrs Yeboah supported the couple financially to help pay for the children’s upkeep. In the court records it was indicated that:

Due to the death of the [children’s] mother, the guardians who do not earn a lot out of employment, find it difficult to maintain the upbringing of the children and due to the situation at hand, applicant who has been remitting the children for so long, has therefore decided to take legal custody of the children.

In the second example (High Court of Ghana at Accra, Suit No. BADP 32/2008), the child to be adopted was a boy, Kofi, who at the time of application was sixteen and a half years old and attending secondary school in Ghana. Mrs Frimpong, the woman who applied to adopt him, was also his maternal aunt. She was a Ghanaian citizen and had been born in Ghana. After attending secondary school up to O-level, she pursued a course in catering and decoration. According to the court records, she left for the United States in 1984 and worked there as a caterer. Later she was admitted to training as a nurse in the United Kingdom, which she completed successfully with a diploma in nursing. At the time of the adoption application Mrs Frimpong was 46 years old, single, and had no children of her own. Kofi’s mother was unemployed and separated from his father, who had disappeared before the child’s birth without ever taking care of his son. For some periods after Kofi’s birth, in between her stays abroad, the applicant was apparently living with him in Ghana. In her affidavit, she said:

That . . . I . . . took care of the baby from birth. . . . That the juvenile lived with me all the time when I was in Ghana and I have been caring for him all his life. . . . That I believe it is in the greatest interest of the infant . . . that I am able to take him with me to the UK and continue looking after him.

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2 I cannot go into detail here on the meaning of this kinship position in the child’s ethnic group. On the meaning of such positions for children, see Martin’s contribution, this volume.
In the following section I describe the legal framework within which both cases were decided by the Ghanaian High Court. This includes a short reference to customary law, an outline of the genesis of legal concepts relevant in this respect in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) and an overview of the relevant national law. The UNCRC and the ACRWC have been ratified by Ghana and form the legal base for the Ghanaian Children’s Act.

**THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ITS GENESIS**

The current, legally pluralistic situation in Ghana governing the legal position of children draws on the historical and cultural contents of customary laws, religious laws, national state law and international law, including international treaties to which Ghana is a state party. Forms of the surrender of children in different variations are known in all the laws mentioned.

*Customary Law*

Child fostering is practised in Ghana as in many other communities in Africa under their respective customary laws (see, for instance, Kreager 1980, 7ff., Goody 1982, Page 1989, Meier, this volume). Although the local forms of child fostering may vary considerably, the general understanding under customary law is that kin take over the parental role or part of it, such as brothers and sisters of the birth father and birth mother, or a child’s grandparents. In this case, the existing kin relationship is not ended and replaced by another such relationship with a ‘third’ person (as it is in the case of child adoption under state law). Instead, the parental role or parts of it are shifted from one ‘parent’ to another. This concept of ‘shared parenthood’ partly differs from the concept of ‘individual parenthood’ on which international treaties on children’s rights and Ghanaian national law are largely but not exclusively based.

Apart from this understanding of fostering under customary law, for which sometimes the term adoption is used as well, there also exists an understanding of adoption under customary law in Ghana which actually means transfer of a person from one family to another (Daniels 2009, 169f.) and which is thus more similar to the concept of child adoption under state law. Family membership in this sense (referring to the family as a lineage) may be relevant in matters relating to property and inheritance.
rights in respect of family property which is not covered by the statutory law on intestate succession but by customary law alone. To take Fante customary law as an example, adoption was practised by persons who had no next of kin to succeed to their property (Daniels 2009, 170). Adoption under customary law must be done publicly and with the consent of the adoptee’s family (Sarbah 2004, 34; Mensa-Bonsu/Dowuona-Hammond 1994, 3f.; Ollenu 1968, 159–79).

Ghanaian state law recognizes customary law as one source of law besides other sources. This is expressed in Article 11 (1) (e), (2), (3) of the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana of 1992. As far as statutory provisions exist, such as those on child adoption and foster care in the Children’s Act, they have priority over those existing under customary law. Before examining the provisions of the Children’s Act, two international treaties on children’s rights will be looked at because they form the legal basis of the Ghanaian Children’s Act.

**International Law**

The most relevant international law conventions regulating children’s rights are the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). While the majority of provisions contained in the two treaties are similar and often even identical, a number of them differ quite considerably (Wanitzek 2007a, 283). In contrast to local forms of child fostering between kin, both international law conventions start from the notion that children’s ‘alternative care’ is to be secured by the state. Recently the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Resolution containing Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UN Guidelines) as a set of orientations to help inform policy and practice.

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Children who are temporarily or permanently “deprived of their family environment” are entitled to special protection and assistance from the state; states parties shall ensure ‘alternative care’ for such children (Articles 20 (1), (2) UNCRC and 25 (1), (2) (a) ACRWC). This may also apply to the more specific case of children who are parentless (Article 25 (2) (a) ACRWC) or deprived of parental care or at risk of being so (Section 1 UN Guidelines) and to children who, in their best interest, cannot be allowed to remain (Articles 20 (1) UNCRC and 25 (2) (a) ACRWC), or cannot be brought up (Article 25 (2) (a) ACRWC), in their family environment. Examples may be cases of the severe neglect or maltreatment of children.

The term ‘family environment’ in the UNCRC provisions referred to above covers variations in child care within families worldwide (Dorsch 1994, 199–203), including, for instance, in the African context, those practised within the extended family (Davel 2008, 257; on the meaning of extended family, see Rwezaura 1988, 169; Himonga 2008, 81). The term ‘deprivation’ in the UNCRC provisions is equally wide. Gabriele Dorsch even suggests that this expression should include runaway children who themselves give up their family environment. Her argument is that such children need protection in the same way as those who have lost their families in other ways (Dorsch 1994, 202f.).

The special protection and assistance which the state must provide in the form of ‘alternative care’ has to accord with national law and could include, *inter alia*, foster placement, the ‘kafalah’ of Islamic law (which may be understood as a specific type of long-term or permanent foster care with some similarities to adoption, see Bargach 2002), adoption or, if necessary, placement in suitable institutions for the care of children (Article 20 (2), (3) UNCRC). As the formulation ‘*inter alia*’ expresses, the list allows for other forms of care (see Dorsch 1994, 199–200). Article 25 (2) (a) ACRWC speaks more specifically of ‘alternative family care’. This could include, among other things, foster placement or placement in suitable institutions for the care of children. Adoption is regulated by Article 24 ACRWC.

Under Article 20 (3) UNCRC, alternative care by a substitute family should be preferred over alternative care by child-care institutions (see Detrick 1999, 336; van Bueren 1995, 94). This is expressed by the order of enumeration, which mentions foster placement, ‘kafalah’ and adoption first, all of them being forms of care by a family; and by the insertion of the formulation “or, if necessary” before mentioning the placement of the child in a suitable child-care institution (see Dorsch 1994, 201f.).
When considering alternative care solutions, Article 20 (3) UNCRC requires that due regard be paid to the desirability of “continuity” in a child’s upbringing and to the child’s “ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background”. Article 25 (3) ACRWC provides similarly, but does not mention the ‘cultural’ background. However, one may argue that the formulation “ethnic, religious or linguistic background” includes and specifies the cultural background, too.

Article 20 (3) UNCRC shows that the Convention tried to accommodate various cultural practices of substitute child care. The forms developed by Islamic law (‘kafalah’) and customary law (expressed in the mentioning of the cultural background and in the formulation ‘inter alia’) were considered to be “other valuable forms of alternative care” (Detrick 1992) and are therefore to be accommodated by the states parties according to this provision. The Convention did not give priority to solutions under state laws over solutions originating from local cultures (Dorsch 1994, 202). The UN Guidelines recognize that in most countries the majority of children without parental care are looked after informally by relatives or others (Section 18 UN Guidelines). The important role played by the extended family and the community in informal care arrangements for children is acknowledged (Section 27 UN Guidelines). But the UN Guidelines are applicable to informal care settings only where specifically indicated (Section 27 UN Guidelines), which is the case in only a few provisions (such as Sections 12, 18, 27, 29, 30, 76–79 UN Guidelines).

Having discussed the state’s obligation to arrange for alternative care for children who have been deprived of their family environment, I now look at the specific forms of alternative care provided for by the treaties, especially ‘foster placement’ and ‘adoption’. ‘Foster placement’ is one form of alternative care for children according to Articles 20 (3) UNCRC and 25 (2) (a) ACRWC. It is not regulated in any detail in the UNCRC and the ACRWC but by a United Nations Declaration on Foster Placement and Adoption (UN Declaration)5 and by the UN Guidelines (Sections 118–122) which define ‘foster care’ as

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situations where children are placed by a competent authority for the purpose of alternative care in the domestic environment of a family other than the children’s own family that has been selected, qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care. (Section 29 (c) (ii) UN Guidelines; cf. Cantwell 2007, 396)

‘Kinship care’ is defined as

family-based care within the child’s extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature. (Section 29 (c) (i) UN Guidelines)

Article 11 UN Declaration provides that foster family care, although temporary in nature, may continue if necessary until adulthood but should not preclude either prior return to the child’s own parents or adoption. According to Article 12 UN Declaration, the prospective foster parents and, as appropriate, the child and his or her own parents should be properly involved in all matters of foster family care, and a competent authority or agency should be responsible for supervision to ensure the welfare of the child. Therefore, foster placement exists “in stark contrast to the safeguards concerning adoption which are found in article 21” (van Bueren 1995, 103 and her fn. 232).

‘Child adoption’ is specifically regulated by the UNCRC and the ACRWC themselves, namely in Articles 21 UNCRC and 24 ACRWC. Both articles see child adoption as a legal instrument to protect, with absolute priority, the rights and interests of the children concerned. This was the first time that provisions relating to adoption, which are based on the child’s rights and viewed from the child’s perspective, became part of binding international human rights instruments (van Bueren 1995, 101; Dorsch 1994, 267).

According to the UN Declaration, adoption is only the second-best solution: the first priority should be to enable children to be cared for by their own parents (Article 1). Only when care by the biological parents is not available or is insufficient is care by relatives or by a substitute, which may be another family or an institution, to be considered (van Bueren 1995, 101). This is also stressed in the UN Guidelines: “Promoting parental care” is seen as a means of “Preventing the need for alternative care” (see the headings before Sections 32ff.). Depending on the breadth of the definition of ‘parent’, this may be a narrower approach than that of Articles 20 UNCRC and 25 (2) ACRWC, with their broad references to the ‘family environment’.

According to Article 21 (a) UNCRC, states parties shall ensure that the adoption of a child is authorized only by competent authorities; that these
authorities act in accordance with applicable laws and procedures, and on the basis of all pertinent and reliable information; that, on the basis of the above, adoption is permissible in view of the child’s status concerning parents, relatives and legal guardians; and that, if required, the persons concerned have given their informed consent to the adoption on the basis of such counselling as may be necessary (cf. Article 24 ACRWC).

The remaining clauses of Article 21 UNCRC refer to inter-country adoption (Article 21 (b)–(e) UNCRC), which is governed by the principle of subsidiarity (Article 21 (b) UNCRC), meaning that solutions in the child’s country of origin should have priority over solutions abroad, a principle expressed also in Article 17 UN Declaration and, giving it even more weight, in Article 24 (b) ACRW (inter-country adoption as “the last resort”).

Both international conventions have been ratified by Ghana⁶ and therefore are at the base of Ghanaian national law relating to children. This is now considered with regard to the two concepts of child adoption and foster care.

National Law

The domestication of international children’s rights in Ghanaian national law took place in two main steps (see Memorandum to the Children’s Bill 1997). The first step was the enactment of the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana of 1992, which entered into force on 7.1.1993, with Article 28 specifically protecting and guaranteeing children’s rights (Daniels 1996, 191; Woodman 2003, 203). The second step was the enactment of relevant statutes on children’s rights, the major statute being the Children’s Act (Act 560), which was enacted on 30.12.1998 and entered into force on 5.2.1999. Child adoption and foster placement are regulated in Part IV of the Children’s Act. An earlier statute providing for child adoption already existed, although, unlike some other African countries (for instance, Tanzania; Wanitzek 2009, 474), it does not date back to the colonial period. It was only several years after independence that the first statute on adoption was enacted, namely the Adoption Act of 1962 (Act 104). This Act remained in force until it was repealed in 1998 by the Children’s Act (Section 125 and Schedule) and replaced by Part IV of that Act on Fosterage and Adoption (see Daniels 2009, Part II Chapter 5;...

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⁶ Ghana ratified the UNCRC on 5.2.1990 and the ACRWC on 10.6.2005. The state’s obligations arising from both treaties to implement their provisions therefore apply to Ghana.
The legislature wanted to “substantially re-enact […] the provisions of the Adoption Act 1962 (Act 104) but with some reformatory aspects” (Memorandum to the Children’s Bill, at iv).

The Children’s Act provides exclusively for the adoption and foster care of children, that is, persons below the age of eighteen years (Section 1 Children’s Act). This is in accordance with Articles 1 UNCR and 2 ACRWC. Permission by Article 1 UNCR to restrict children’s rights by fixing an earlier age of majority was not made use of by the Ghanaian legislature.

As mentioned above, the Children’s Act has priority over customary law in respect of its own provisions, but otherwise fostering and adoption under customary law remain potentially relevant.

In line with the international law conventions mentioned above, the understanding of the notions of child adoption and foster care under the Children’s Act is mainly but not exclusively that of alternative care, that is, that ‘third’ persons, mainly non-parents, fully or partly, take over the parental role and thus replace the parents. This logic is in contrast to Ghanaian customary law and practice on child fostering as described above, despite some overlapping.

Formal foster care (“foster placement of children”) under statutory law (Sections 62–64 Children’s Act) means foster care under the supervision of the state authorities, especially the Social Welfare and Community Development Department of a district assembly. A ‘foster parent’ is defined in Section 63 Children’s Act as a person who is not the parent of a child but who is willing to undertake his or her care and maintenance. A person who can foster is a person above the age of 21 years who is of high moral character and proven integrity (Section 62 Children’s Act).

Where a child is being given temporary substitute care in a residential home for children, the committee in charge may place the child with a foster parent (Section 64 (1) Children’s Act with further details). An application to foster a child can be made to the Social Welfare and Community Development Department (Section 64 (2) Children’s Act). A foster parent in whose care a child is placed has the same responsibilities in respect of the child’s maintenance as the parent of the child while the child remains in the care of the foster parents (Section 64 (3) Children’s Act).

Child adoption is regulated in more detail. Ghana took over the English concept of ‘strong’ adoption, which means that the legal effect of adoption is to sever completely the existing legal relationship between the child and his or her birth parents and to create a new legal relationship between the child and the adoptive parents with all ensuing rights and duties (Daniels 2009, 169–74; Krause 1976, 86ff.; see Rwenzira and Wanitzek 1988, 124ff.)
and Wanitzek 2009, 47ff. on current adoption concepts in other European and African countries and their historical development). When an adoption order is made, the rights and duties, including those under customary law where relevant, of the child’s parents or of any other person connected with the child of any nature cease (Section 75 (1) (a) Children’s Act). The adopters assume parental rights and duties with respect to custody, maintenance and education as if the child had been born to them (Section 75 (1) (b) Children’s Act). If the adopter is subject to customary law, the adopted child is also subject to customary law as if he or she were the natural child of the adopter (Section 79 (1), (2) Children’s Act). A child below the age of sixteen years neither of whose birth parents is a Ghanaian citizen will become a Ghanaian citizen if adopted by a citizen (Section 80 (2) Children’s Act, Article 6 (4) Constitution). An adoptive parent should inform the adopted child of the fact that the child is adopted and of his or her parentage, but only if it is in the best interests of the child and if the child is at least fourteen years of age (Section 72 (1) Children’s Act). No one other than the adoptive parent should disclose the adoption to the adopted child, and an offence is committed by anyone who contravenes this provision (Section 72 (2), (3) Children’s Act). An adopter who wants to send the adopted child out of the country permanently should notify the Social Welfare and Community Development Department at the latest thirty days before the departure of the adopter and the adopted child from the country (Section 84 (1), (2) Children’s Act). A revocation of an adoption order is not provided for in the Act.

In adopting a child, several requirements have to be fulfilled. Age requirements for the adopters are contained in Section 67 (1) Children’s Act: the applicant, or in the case of a joint application one of the applicants, has to be at least 25 years of age, and he or she must be at least 21 years older than the child. In the case of a relative applying for adoption, he or she only has to be at least 21 years of age. Spouses may adopt jointly (Section 66 (1) Children’s Act). A parent may adopt his or her child solely or jointly with his or her spouse (Section 66 (2) Children’s Act). This provision originates from the time of the concept of ‘filius nullius’ in English law, under which a father and his illegitimate children were not legally related to each other (Krause 1976, 5, 12). In other cases joint adoption is not possible (Section 67 (4) Children’s Act). A single person who is not the child’s parent may adopt if he or she is a Ghanaian citizen (Section 66 (3) Children’s Act). This means that a non-citizen who is single cannot adopt. As the Memorandum to the Children’s Bill states (at v), “a single Ghanaian citizen may by clause 66 (3) adopt a child subject to the provisions of the Bill. Previously only married
people and a natural parent could adopt.” A man may adopt alone only if the child to be adopted is his own son or under special circumstances (Section 67 (2) Children’s Act). Adoption by a relative (other than a parent) is possible, but there are no special provisions for such cases except for a lower minimum age of the adopter(s) (see above).

A central requirement is the consent of the child’s parents or guardian (Sections 68 (1) and 70 (1) (a) Children’s Act). According to Section 124 Children’s Act, ‘parents’ include the natural parents and persons who act as parents. The latter part of this definition expresses a remarkably broad understanding of the term ‘parent’, apparently taking into consideration local social and cultural practices according to which other persons may act in loco parentis. The consenting parent or guardian must have understood the legal effect of adoption (Section 70 (1) (a) Children’s Act). The court may dispense with the consent of a parent or guardian (Section 68 (2), (3) Children’s Act) if the judge is satisfied that the parent or guardian has neglected or persistently ill-treated the child, or that he or she cannot be found or is incapable of giving consent or that consent has been unreasonably withheld (Section 68 (2) Children’s Act; see Yeboa 1994, 66, 74). The court may require the consent of another person who has rights or obligations in respect of the child, for instance, under an agreement, under a court order, or under customary law (Section 69 (1) Children’s Act). Where a married person is the sole applicant, the court may require the consent of the spouse of that person (Section 69 (2) Children’s Act). These provisions are in accordance with Articles 21 (a) UNCRC and 24 (a) ACRWC, which require the informed consent of the persons concerned, or of the appropriate persons.

Before an adoption order can be granted, the court must be satisfied that the adoption is in the best interests of the child (Section 70 (1) (b) Children’s Act). The child’s name may be changed (Section 70 (3) (b) Children’s Act; Daniels 2009, 176). The court may impose conditions when granting an adoption order (Section 70 (2) Children’s Act). The wishes of the child have to be considered if the child is capable of forming an opinion (Section 70 (1) (b) Children’s Act). The child’s consent to the adoption is required if the child is fourteen years of age or more and is able to express an opinion (Section 70 (1) (c) Children’s Act). Both these requirements are in accordance with the child’s rights to participate and the obligation to give due weight to his or her own views in accordance with his or her maturity under Article 12 UNCRC. An adoption order shall not be made for a child unless the child has been continuously in the care and possession of the applicant for at least three consecutive months.
immediately preceding the date of the order (Section 67 (3) (b) Children’s Act). Finally, the applicant must notify the Social Welfare and Community Development Department of his or her intention to apply for an adoption order for the child at least three months before the date of the order (Sections 67 (3) (c) and 124 Children’s Act), and he or she must not have received, or agreed to receive, any payment, and none may have made or agreed to make a payment or give or agree to give a reward to the applicant for the adoption except as the court may order (Sections 70 (1) (d) and 83 (1) Children’s Act). A person should not give any payment or reward in respect of an adoption order except with the approval of the court, nor should a person receive a payment or reward in respect of any arrangement that may or may not lead to an adoption (Section 83 (1), (2) Children’s Act). Anyone contravening this provision commits an offence (Section 83 (3) Children’s Act).

An application for an adoption order may be made to the High Court, the Circuit Court or a Family Tribunal within the jurisdiction where the applicant or the child resides at the date of the application (Section 65 Children’s Act). Jurisdiction of Family Tribunals for adoptions was newly introduced by the Children’s Act in 1998. These provisions can be related to Articles 21 (a) UNCRC and 24 (a) ACRWC regarding the requirement of competent authorities. The court may postpone the determination of the application and make an interim order giving custody of the child to the applicant for a period not exceeding two years by way of probation (Section 71 (1) Children’s Act). When making an interim order, the court should impose conditions to place the child under the supervision of a probation officer or a social welfare officer (Section 71 (2) (a) Children’s Act). During this period the child must not be taken out of the Republic without the court’s permission (Section 71 (2) (b) Children’s Act). An adoption order or an interim order may also be made for a child who has previously been adopted. In such a case, the adopter under the previous adoption, if alive, is considered to be the parent or guardian of the child for the purpose of the subsequent adoption (Section 74 Children’s Act). The Registrar-General has to maintain an adopted children’s register in which the particulars of adoption orders and interim orders are recorded (Section 82 (1) Children’s Act).

An adoption order should only be made if the applicant and the child reside in Ghana. However, in the case of an applicant who is a Ghanaian citizen resident abroad, he or she is not required to reside in Ghana (Section 67 (3) (a) Children’s Act). This was an important relaxation of the rule for Ghanaian applicants living abroad introduced by the Children’s Act.
In an application for adoption by a non-citizen, or by two applicants, one of whom is a non-citizen, the court can only make an interim order for a period of not less than two years and has to postpone the final determination of the application (Section 73 Children’s Act). Under the former Adoption Act of 1962, this period was shorter, that is, not less than six months. This was considered to be too short. According to the Memorandum to the Children’s Bill, now “there should be extra restrictions on foreigners adopting Ghanaian children to make it more difficult for this to occur” because the provisions of the ACRWC on inter-country adoption “advocate adoption by nationals within the country rather than the adoption of nationals by foreigners” (at v).

The Social Welfare and Community Development Department may investigate an application for inter-country adoption as an alternative means of child care if a child cannot be placed in a foster or an adoptive family in Ghana or cannot be cared for in a suitable manner in Ghana (Section 85 (1) Children’s Act). A court may grant an inter-country adoption order if this is in the best interests of the child (Section 85 (2) Children’s Act). This provision departs to some extent from the content of Articles 21 (b) UNCRC and 24 (b) ACRWC on the principle of subsidiarity in the case of inter-country adoption in national Ghanaian law. Unless the context requires otherwise, ‘inter-country adoption’ means the adoption of a child by a person who is not a citizen residing outside the Republic, and the removal of the adopted child from the jurisdiction (Section 124 Children’s Act).

The child does not need to be a citizen of Ghana to be adopted under the Children’s Act (Section 80 (1) Children’s Act). As the Memorandum to the Children’s Bill (at v) mentions, this also allows for the adoption of refugee children.

**BACK TO THE CASES: NEGOTIATING ADOPTIONS OF RELATED CHILDREN**

If relatives who care for children of the extended family under customary arrangements intend to move to a foreign country, or if relatives who are already living abroad intend to take over the care of a child of the extended family, they often can obtain the required residence permit for the child under their care only if they formalize the situation and adopt the child according to state law. Under many foreign immigration laws, it is easier for adults to immigrate with children who are legally their ‘own’, in the sense of being part of the adults’ nuclear family. “This would normally include children who have been formally adopted but it would
exclude children who are [only informally being] looked after by a relative under customary law” (Wanitzek 2009, 466).

Therefore people see themselves as ‘forced’ to adapt to state law by adopting their siblings’ or other relatives’ children under that law. The increase in international migration and the requirements of foreign immigration laws are effecting such changes.

In the two cases discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the High Court of Ghana at Accra had granted adoption orders as applied for. The cases are quite similar in several respects: the applicants were Ghanaian citizens who were living abroad and who wanted to adopt their relatives' children, whose maternal aunts they were. Both applicants had no children of their own, they were living alone, being separated from the husband in the first case and single in the second, and they were earning their living from paid employment. The children’s birth mothers had been left alone by the children’s fathers in both cases and had had to cope without them, but they were assisted by relatives in caring for the children. In both cases, the individuals involved made reference to particular aspects of the statutory law during the procedure in order to show that all the requirements were being fulfilled, such as the required consent or the child's best interests.

The major difference between the two cases is that in the first case the children’s mother had died nearly five years before the application, while in the second case the child’s mother was still alive. The question arises as to why a child whose mother is alive and available for his care should be adopted. It is therefore necessary to try to identify the motives for the adoption in the second case.

The applicant, Mrs Frimpong, referred to Kofi’s father’s neglect of his parental obligations as the main reason for her commitment to bring the boy up. As she stated in her affidavit:

That upon the conception of the baby the said B vanished, and has since not been supporting our sister in the care and upbringing of the child. That consequently the family and especially I, the applicant herein, cared for our elder sister and also took care of the baby from birth.

And in the report by the social welfare officer, it was stated:

The mother of the child is unemployed and therefore finds it difficult to adequately take care of the child so applicant has been assisting her.

Up to the time of the application, the child still had a mother who was not so well-off and could not offer her son the same opportunities as the applicant living abroad:
According to [the applicant] since she has no child of her own and the sister has two and is unable to support them it will be better to adopt the child so that she will bring him up as her own and provide him with a better opportunity in life.

The adoption was therefore intended to remove a burden from the child’s mother, to improve the child’s chances in life, and at the same time to provide a childless family member, the applicant, with a child.

Following the logic of the international laws, the child was not deprived of his family environment and was not in need of ‘alternative care’ in the sense of the UNCRCD and ACRCW. According to the understanding of the persons involved, all this was to be an arrangement between the child’s relatives, rather than a case of alternative care outside the family. They referred to customary law when Mrs Frimpong indicated in her “Statement in support of application by applicant” in the column “Relationship to the juvenile”: “Aunty customary mother”. According to this understanding she was already Kofi’s mother. Kofi’s birth mother stated that the child was actually already the applicant’s child:

That [the boy] has since then been living with [my sister C] who has been caring for him since infancy. That although [my sister C] has since gone abroad she still looks after her son . . . That I hereby wholeheartedly consent, and agree to my sister C adopting [the boy] which said adoption I hereby bless for ever as [the boy] is already [my sister’s] child.

On the other hand, according to the description of events by the persons involved, a customary act had already been necessary in order to transfer the child from one mother to the other, which the family had to consent to, as Mrs Frimpong stated:

That the family therefore gave the baby to me, applicant herein, and I accordingly proceeded to adopt the boy customarily with the consent of the whole family and his mother.

It is interesting to see the references to customary law and practice expressed by the terms “aunty customary mother” and “to adopt the boy customarily” in the records. Kofi’s mother was also referring to customary law when she cited the practice of child fostering while using the legal term ‘adoption’:

. . . as a result of the care and respect given by [my sister C] the boy . . . was given to her as her child in accordance with our custom. That my sister C then customarily adopted [the boy] with my consent and blessing and he has since been her child.
In the end the court granted the adoption order, accompanied by permission for the applicant “to take the child with her out of the jurisdiction”.

In the first case, the parental situation, the motives and the argumentation of the individuals involved were somewhat different. After the birth mother’s death, there were still two other ‘mothers’, both of them sisters to the deceased, who were available to replace her by taking over different roles. The applicant, Mrs Yeboah, had customarily been appointed the birth mother’s successor and thus became the ‘mother’ who was now responsible for the children, Abena and Kwasi. According to the guardian’s affidavit, the applicant “began taking care of them in 2005 and has been responsible for their feeding, clothing and schooling since”. However, as Mrs Yeboah could not fully perform this role because of her absence, she handed over part of it to the other sister (and children’s maternal aunt): “Since she does not reside in Ghana, she asked Mr and Mrs S. to take care of the child[ren] on her behalf while she decides what to do.”7 In the meantime Mrs Yeboah prepared herself for the next step, and according to the guardian’s affidavit, she “is now better able to fully cater for [the children] and will want them to come and live with her permanently”.

As shown above, an adoption order can be granted if all the formal and substantial requirements have been fulfilled.8 In both cases the age requirements for applicants under the Children’s Act as listed above were fulfilled. As they were Ghanaian citizens, the fact that the applicants were single and that they did not reside in Ghana did not disqualify them as potential adopters. Consent to the adoption was given by the child’s mother and by the children’s current guardian respectively. The father’s consent was given in the second case, and was apparently dispensed with by the court in the first case, presumably because his whereabouts were unknown. In the second case the sixteen-year-old Kofi had given his consent, while it was not required in the first case because of Abena’s and Kwasi’s young age.

The adoption orders did not contain specific reasons. It can therefore only be speculated from the content of the court records which criteria

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7 Similar constellations involving ‘interim mothers’ are discussed in the chapter by Heike Drotbohm (this volume).
8 A key person in the effort to achieve this is the advocate representing the applicants, as he or she helps them produce the applications and affidavits in the required form and advises them on the required legal steps within the highly formalized adoption procedure.
may have been considered by the judge, particularly in his or her assessment of the child’s best interests. From the fact that the existing customary relationships between the persons involved and the acts which had taken place earlier under customary law were mentioned and described in the records, it appears that the applicants had assumed that these relationships and acts would play a considerable role in the court’s assessment of these cases. However, it is not visible from the court records whether it was the applicants and other members of the family themselves who used the words and formulations referring to the concepts of customary child fostering and adoption cited above, or whether the advocate or a court clerk simply used common formulae when writing the affidavits and other documents.

Some contradictions arise in these cases between the customary concept of child fostering and adoption reflected in the statements cited above and the concept of child adoption under state law. State law relies more on a concept of ‘strong’ adoption which provides alternative care for a child who has been deprived of his or her family environment, although, as mentioned above, the Children’s Act has a broad understanding of ‘parent’ and does not exclude the adoption of a child by his or her parent. Customary law and practice relies mainly, but not exclusively, on a concept of child fostering and adoption which provides for the child to be cared for within his or her own family (Ms H. Obeng-Asamoah, National Coordinator, Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare, Accra, oral communication, 30.9.2010). One ‘mother’ replaces another ‘mother’ in caring for the child without affecting the legal mother-child relationship because under customary law a child may have several ‘mothers’.

The challenge of reconciling these two different concepts of child adoption appears to have been solved by the court in a pragmatic way. The concept of ‘strong adoption’ governing the child adoption provisions in the Children’s Act contradicts the customary law and practice relating to child fostering and adoption because the latter does not involve the same rigorous replacement of the original legal parent-child relationship by a new, artificial one. But this is apparently not seen as a problem by the

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9 Reports by an investigating officer of the Director of Social Welfare on the children’s and applicants’ family background and their educational and financial situation, as well as medical reports on the children’s and applicants’ health status, are provided to the court to help the judge assess whether an adoption order would be in the children’s best interests.
court. The best interests of the child appear to be seen in the child’s better chances in life when he or she lives with a relative abroad who is willing to take him or her along. However, deciding on the best interests of the children concerned can be a complex matter. The question arises how one should weigh up the possible loss of a culture against the acquisition of another culture, the culture acquired being perhaps that of a minority in the country of residence (Woodman, e-mail communication, 15.2.2011).

The cases discussed here do not fit within the legal categories of ‘deprivation of family environment’ and ‘alternative care’ as defined in international and national laws. The adopted children continued to be looked after by family members and were thus not deprived of their family environment. The adopter in each case did not represent a substitute family but the child’s family. The children were not given to an alternative family but remained within their own family. Thus these cases of child adoption are not cases of alternative care, but simply of care within the child’s family being continued. On the other hand, the formal adoption order by a state court has the effect of legally transferring the child from one parent to another, rather than just shifting parental roles within the child’s family, in line with the perception of fostering under customary law.

This contradiction is the product of a situation of legal pluralism. Considering cases such as those presented above, a clear distinction between state law and customary law, or between formal and informal arrangements, is not possible because these different arrangements are combined with each other and are not separable. Adoption under state law would not have been necessary in these cases if the children and their adopters had continued to live in Ghana. The only reason for the adoption in both cases was apparently that the adopters wanted to take the children abroad, hence the need for a formal act through which the children became the adopters’ legal children.

The United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children 2009 also reflect this contradiction. On the one hand, they provide that alternative care may take the form of ‘informal care’, that is:

any private arrangement provided in a family environment, whereby the child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis by relatives or friends (informal kinship care) or by others in their individual capacity, at the initiative of the child, his/her parents or other person without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body. (Section 29 (b) (i) UN Guidelines)

The Guidelines define ‘kinship care’ as “family-based care within the child’s extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child,
whether formal or informal in nature” (Section 29 (c) (i) UN Guidelines). On the other hand, this is subject to the provision that the scope of alternative care does not extend to “[i]nformal arrangements whereby a child voluntarily stays with relatives or friends for recreational purposes and reasons not connected with the parents’ general inability or unwillingness to provide adequate care” (Section 30 (c) UN Guidelines). Under these provisions it is difficult to draw a clear line between informal arrangements included in, and excluded from, alternative care, as required by these provisions. Although the provisions rightly allow for some overlap between formal and informal care (this phenomenon is also stressed by Roby 2011, 41 and Malinga and Ntshwarang 2011, 3f.), they still appear to support the view that it is probably impossible to distinguish between the different forms of care in situations of legal pluralism as described above because they have become inseparable components of one and the same case.

Moreover, the cases combine both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ elements within the constellation of child adoption: the ‘internal’ element lay in the children’s and the adopters’ citizenship, both being Ghanaians. This leads to a consistency between the home country of the children on the one hand and the home country of the adopters on the other: all of them were legally connected by citizenship. The ‘external’ element was represented by the adopters’ residence abroad while the children were residing in Ghana.

Section 124 Children’s Act defines ‘inter-country adoption’, unless the context otherwise requires, as adoption by a non-citizen resident abroad leading to the removal of the adopted child from Ghana. This means that adoption by a Ghanaian citizen resident abroad, as in the examples above, does not represent ‘inter-country adoption’ in the sense of the Ghanaian Children’s Act. In the definition of inter-country adoption in Ghana, the thinking was that the foreign citizenship should be the relevant criterion, not the foreign country of residence (Ms E. Appiah, Director, Legislative Drafting, Attorney-General’s Department, Ministry of Justice, Accra, oral communication, 29.9.2010). The goal was to facilitate child adoptions by Ghanaians living abroad.

The discussion of international or inter-country adoptions usually does not focus on cases such as those presented above but on cases in which adoptive parents from European and other industrialized countries look for adoptive children from poorer countries for various reasons, such as an unwanted childlessness, a lack of adoptable children in the prospective adopters’ home countries and the humanitarian motives of the
adopte(see Howell 2004, Yngvesson 2004, African Child Policy Forum 2012a). The Ghanaian cases considered in this chapter are different for two reasons: first, the adopters and the adopted children have a common origin, and secondly, the motives for the adoption have their roots in this common origin. Due to the growing international mobility of people, large numbers of Ghanaians are living and working abroad. The motives of some of them for adopting children in cases such as those discussed above must be seen in the Ghanaian cultural, political and specific historical contexts. Although they migrate to other countries, they remain members of their extended families and cultural communities back home, with the inherent communal ethics, duties, rights and responsibilities. These include both a responsibility for the children of the extended family and the right to claim a child from it. It may be assumed that a Ghanaian cultural background and the continuing connection with the home base in Ghana was the reason why the Ghanaian Children’s Act did not classify such cases as inter-country adoptions.

Conclusions

Using Ghana as an example, this article has discussed the practice of child fostering in the context of the intense international migration of Ghanaians and the emergence of international and national legal norms with regard to forms of parenthood and children’s upbringing. I have shown that the local practice of child fostering becomes considerably more complex as soon as the persons involved cross national borders, because then norms of national law interfere directly with family practices. Such norms are

10 Some of these studies also deal with inter-country adoption cases in which commercial interests dominate, such as African Child Policy Forum 2012b, iv and 20ff.
11 It must be conceded, however, that the two groups of cases may overlap, for instance in bi-national or intercultural families where a Ghanaian-European couple adopt a child related to the Ghanaian spouse, similar to the Tanzanian intercultural adoption cases discussed in Wanitzek 2009, 484–486. See also Goody (1984, 362ff.) on the relevance of the Ghanaian cultural background of children who were adopted by a British couple.
historically and socially embedded and are negotiated within legal practice by the actors involved.

As has been shown, the frequent cases of child adoption and fostering in Ghana take place within a normative framework in which customary law, national law and international law are deeply intertwined. To foster relatives’ children is a common and acknowledged practice in Ghanaian communities and is part of the living customary law of the people. Family members who are living abroad appear to be seen by their communities and by themselves as particularly suitable foster parents for relatives’ children, because of the potentially greater financial and educational opportunities for children that are presumed to exist abroad. The cases have shown how actors adapt to the framework of national law in order to be able to continue their local practice in an international context. This is necessary because foreign immigration laws often require a formal adoptive relationship in place of the customary fostering relationship.

These cases have further shown that the concepts of child fostering and adoption under customary law differ considerably from those under national and international law, despite some similarities and overlaps. Although the concepts of ‘parent’ and ‘family’ in the Ghanaian Children’s Act and the UNCRC and ACRWC are wide, child adoption and foster care are seen there as remedies for children deprived of their family environment by providing alternative care. Conversely, customary fostering and adoption in the cases under consideration are not seen as a remedy for a child having been deprived of his or her family environment but rather as a means to improve a child’s chances in life, even if the family environment is still available. Fostering is also perceived as care within the child’s own family and not as an ‘alternative’ to it.

These different and partly contradictory approaches in the various relevant legal sub-systems represent a challenge to the persons and families involved, to their advocates who have to lead them through the proceedings, and to the judges in their search for solutions which are supposed to safeguard children’s rights and serve the children’s best interests. But they are also a challenge for lawmakers and law reformers, as on the one hand laws should be equally applicable to all people without discrimination, but on the other hand the plural cultural norms relating to care for children need to be respected.

Looking at the current state of the law with regard to child adoption and fostering, much has already been achieved in recent law reforms in Ghana in an attempt to do justice to both sides. This includes the provision for children’s rights in the Constitution and in the Children’s Act.
The broad concept of 'parent' in the Children's Act and the possibility of child adoptions by Ghanaian citizens, even if they are single or do not reside in Ghana, appears to be an attempt by the legislature to respect cultural practices of child fostering in Ghana. However, the contradiction which still remains is that the concepts of 'alternative care' and 'strong adoption' under the Children's Act are applied by the court, while the practice of child fostering by relatives within the family under customary law still underlies and determines the actions and perceptions of those involved in the case both before and after the adoption order is granted by the court.

The challenge continues to be either to find legal categories which are suitable for dealing with this contradiction, or to adapt existing legal categories to the social and cultural realities on the ground. This refers on the one hand to the categories of child adoption and foster care as such, and on the other hand to the international context within which they take place and where categories such as inter-country and international adoption have to be determined.

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13 All internet addresses indicated in the bibliography and in the footnotes were last accessed on 11 June 2012.


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