



THE EMOTIONAL WORLD OF KINSHIP

Children's experiences of fosterage in East Cameroon

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This article focuses on children's narrated experiences of fosterage in East Cameroon. It seeks to complement the predominantly adult approaches to fosterage with children's views of the intimate, emotional and competitive aspects of kinship in everyday life. As kinship evolves in homes through sharing food and intimacy, children directly experience how kinship is created, disputed and defined and how lived kinship is inextricably linked with mobility, flexibility and power dynamics. It is argued that children's multiple and changing experiences of fosterage depend on three interconnected factors: changing household compositions, power dynamics in the homes and the changes in women's life histories.

In the course of several periods of fieldwork in East Cameroon, I frequently listened to women's negotiations about fosterage. 'Which child would you like to have?', one woman asked a kinswoman while waiting for transport at the bus station. 'Do you want to have one of my boys or one of my girls, the youngest who is 6 or the eldest who is 12?' 'What age do you prefer? You can choose whatever age you want.' When the other woman opted for the youngest one, a boy, as it was easier to mould a young child to her habits than a mature child, I wondered about the opinion of the child concerned. How would he react to his mother's decision to entrust him to a woman who had married his late father's younger brother? Would he complain or readily accept it? Should the mother not consult him anyway? Should he be able to change these women's agreement?

Although fosterage – the practice that children frequently reside in a household other than that of their biological parents and circulate between different social parents – and the ideals of plural parenthood in African kinship have been thoroughly studied in anthropology, they have rarely been researched from the children's point of view. Mainstream theories consider fosterage principally an adult practice; they see children as passive objects to be moved and decided upon and hardly pay attention to their stories (Goody, 1982; Lallemand, 1992). In this article, I join the theoretical and methodological debate on the anthropology of childhood, claiming that in anthropological

research children have often been neglected as independent and reliable informants about social life, and have not been given voices to recount their ideas and experiences (Caputo, 1995; Christensen and James, 2000; Corsaro, 1997; Frønes, 1994; Hardman, 1973; James, 1998; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1996; Panter-Brick and Smith, 2000; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Tonkin, 1982; Toren, 1999).

In East Cameroon, children have to deal with plural parenthood right through their childhood as a result of local kin naming systems and high frequencies of both polygyny and fosterage. In the local context, fosterage refers to the practice of entrusting a child to a parent other than the biological mother. A high percentage of foster children in the country – with 20 percent of the children being between 0 and 14 years of age – indicates that child-raising is not only the task of the biological mother, but is shared with many other educators (Page, 1989: 414). I focus on children as active social beings in both fosterage and anthropological fieldwork, arguing that we need their information, not only to understand children's life worlds and get a more differentiated view of fosterage, but also to reach a more complete and refined understanding of everyday kinship in Africa. Whereas adults often describe fosterage as an ideal manifestation of African kinship, children never do. They express how kinship is felt, what emotions are involved, how hurt they feel when leaving their mother's home or seeing their mothers leave, and being tired of running errands for foster parents. Thus children articulate a more critical and emotional view of fosterage than has been obtained in predominantly system- and adult-oriented approaches to African kinship.

My approach links up with Carsten's (2004) recent work and criticism of the anthropological study of kinship. In reaction to classical system-oriented approaches found in British functionalism and French structuralism, Carsten argues for a focus on persons rather than groups, on homes rather than systems, and on everyday relations rather than structural principles. 'From early on,' she writes, 'the comparative study of kinship was explicitly defined as not being about intimate domestic arrangements and the behaviour and emotions associated with them' (Carsten, 2004: 11). To disclose the intimate and emotional side of kinship, she argues in favour of the home as a locus of everyday conceptions and practices of family life (Carsten, 2004: 36).

The study of children's experiences of fosterage not only complements the predominantly adult approaches to the phenomenon, but also enables us to go right to the heart of kinship, the home where kinship is made, remade, maintained, contested or broken up. As children regularly move between different homes and closely experience fluid household compositions, they readily inform us in which home, in which place and with which relatives they feel kinship and solidarity, and where and with whom they do not. Anthropological studies, based on cultural ideals of African kinship, generally do not differentiate between the various members of the extended kinship network. By contrast, children do, and challenge the notion that parents

care equally for all children in the kin network. By analysing children's experiences of movement, homes and kin relationships, I try to represent African kinship as a mobile, dynamic and creative practice of relationship.

To analyse children's perspectives, I focus on their narratives and answer the following questions: how do they experience fosterage and kinship, how do they evaluate these experiences, what solidarities and power conflicts do they encounter, what emotions are involved in the private intimacy of different homes, and what do their stories add to adults' information on fosterage and kinship? Before answering these questions, I first elaborate on a dominant theoretical perspective on African kinship in order to explain what a children's perspective on the emotional world of kinship can add to the picture. Second, I describe the context of marriage, kinship, childhood and fosterage in a small urban society in East Cameroon. Third, I discuss some methodological aspects of fieldwork with children. Finally, I present and analyse children's stories about fosterage.

The emotional world of kinship

Since the 1970s and 1980s, anthropologists and demographers have studied fosterage to explain its social functions in the local context, and its effects on women's fertility and on children's health, mortality and schooling (Antoine and Guillaume, 1986; Bledsoe, 1990; Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe, 1989; Dupire, 1988; Etienne, 1979; Fiawoo, 1978; Goody, 1978, 1982; Jonckers, 1997; Lallemand, 1992, 1994; Lloyd and Blanc, 1995; Oppong et al., 1978; Pennington, 1991; Schildkrout, 1973; Shell-Duncan, 1994). These studies emphasize that 'the exchange of children between kin forms a network of obligations and alliances and strengthens affective ties between family members' (Shell-Duncan, 1994: 147). In addition, it is often said that fosterage provides a mechanism for spreading wealth and resources throughout the family, and that it benefits children by transferring them to relatives who offer discipline, practical training or school fees in return for companionship and assistance with domestic labour (Shell-Duncan, 1994: 147). Thus system-oriented approaches to fosterage and kinship tend to adopt cultural ideals and to emphasize bonds of solidarity, mutual help and harmony in the African family.

They also contrast African with western foster practices, stating that 'unlike patterns of fostering in Western societies, fosterage in Africa is not always precipitated by a crisis in the household of the biological parents, rather, it is a common and accepted means of child rearing' (Shell-Duncan, 1994: 146). By situating African child fosterage primarily in the kinship network, it is generally assumed that conflicts and crises are rarely associated with foster practice. A strict distinction is made between 'kinship fosterage' and 'crisis fosterage', only the latter referring to fosterage as a result of divorce, co-wife rivalry, witchcraft fears and extramarital relationships (Fiawoo, 1978; Goody, 1982; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985). In my view, these 'crises' in African

kinship have to be seen as common aspects of everyday family life. They have to be situated in the kinship domain rather than outside it.

The dominant harmonious model of African kinship – emphasizing bonds of solidarity, mutual help and the strength of family ties – can only be upheld if one does not look into the practice of everyday family life. Here persons experience harmony as well as conflict, happiness as well as trouble, solidarity as well as inequality and safety as well as danger. By concentrating on persons and homes rather than social rules and institutions as foci of kinship (Carsten, 2004), one may discover that social tensions and crises are often at the heart of the everyday intimacy and practices of kinship. Given the dominant idealized view of African kinship, this interest in the everyday emotional world of kinship may easily be interpreted as criticism or disapproval. My aim, however, is not to criticize the institution of fosterage or African kinship, but to do justice to its everyday reality and to represent it as a human practice involving persons who may or may not experience kinship as harmonious, depending on the changing composition of the household.¹

Unlike most kinship studies, studies of witchcraft and violence explicitly refer to crises that may occur in the domestic sphere and reveal that there is a consistent close link between witchcraft and kinship in many parts of Africa (Geschiere and Fisiy, 1994: 325). Geschiere (2003: 43) qualifies witchcraft as ‘the dark side of kinship’ and mentions that ‘anthropologists (or anthropologically minded social scientists) tend to easily equate kinship with solidarity’. He even argues that ‘witchcraft of the home’ is the most dangerous variety (Geschiere, 2003: 43). Other Cameroonian studies also present witchcraft as the dark side of kinship, since it reflects the frightening notion that there is hidden aggression and violence where trust and solidarity should prevail (Copet-Rougier, 1986; Geschiere and Fisiy, 1994; Pradelles de Latour, 1995). The closer people are in space and time, the greater the potential for the invisible violence of witchcraft (Copet-Rougier, 1986: 63).

Though witchcraft is not the main focus of this article, in the children’s narratives it certainly emerges as a way to express tensions and conflicts in homes. Conjugal troubles, divorce, co-wife competition, illness, death and other stressful situations fraught with painful sorrow and feelings of insecurity can be articulated and recognized in the idiom of witchcraft. The frequent evidence of witchcraft in African family life makes it improbable that kinship is without crises. My aim is not so much to uncover a ‘dark side of kinship’ but to ‘redo kinship’, as Carsten (2004: 6) proposes, to disclose its human side and the private world of the family by paying attention to ‘the intense, often too intense, emotional experiences that embody family relations’ (Carsten, 2004: 6).

In a recent article on foster arrangements in northwestern Cameroon, Verhoef (2005) challenges the dominant cultural ideals of shared motherhood by juxtaposing these ideals with the foster arrangements made in daily practice. Though Verhoef (2005: 383) also highlights that certain foster

arrangements are characterized by 'ongoing power struggles, open conflicts, and family feuds', she does not explore children's views of fosterage. Her analysis concentrates on three profiles of adult fostering arrangements in order to illustrate intracultural variations in fostering practice. By focusing on these three profiles that are 'somewhat "artificial" categories' (Verhoef, 2005: 375), the fluidity of household compositions does not explicitly emerge. In this article, I follow Verhoef's critical analysis of child fostering practices in the context of cultural ideals of mutual help and solidarity in the family, and supplement her focus on adults' choices and fostering types with a focus on children and changing household compositions.

Children may offer anthropologists a suitable access point to what Carsten (2004: 9) has called the neglected, 'close-up, intimate and experiential dimension of kinship'. Children are closely involved in the everyday practice of making kinship that occurs through fosterage and the sharing of intimacy, space and food in homes. Consequently, they clarify the emotionally charged social relationships of close kinship by informing us about what goes on in the homes: how space is divided, what rituals are shared, how people live together, how kinship is felt, what emotions are expressed, and last but not least, how mothers deal with kinship, what goals they pursue and how they relate to different categories of children. Thus children, as persons moving between homes, offer us a way of grasping the significance of kinship from the inside by exploring the everyday intimacies that occur there (Carsten, 2004: 56).

Social life and everyday relations in Batouri

Since 1992, I have been doing fieldwork in Batouri, first on polygyny and more recently on women's and children's experience of fosterage.² Batouri is a small provincial town with 25,000 inhabitants in the savannah area in East Cameroon, 500 km from the capital Yaoundé. My fieldwork focused on a part of town called Mbondossi, inhabited by about 1500 people.³ Most are Kako, but members of other ethnic groups in Cameroon's eastern province also consider Mbondossi their home. For most people, urban life remains linked to family life in the native villages, largely through food production and distribution and through children who move between the homes of kin in town and in the surrounding villages.

Social life in Mbondossi is characterized by practices of both matrilineal and patrilineal descent, a high frequency of polygyny, high marital flexibility and high mobility of both mothers and children. Women enjoy social respect and considerable independence from men by monopolizing the production, marketing and preparation of food. Being mothers, wives, sisters or mistresses, they offer men their food. For women, food and its sharing are vital elements in maintaining and creating kinship. It is through the sharing of mother's food that children learn to know who their 'real' parents and siblings are. Only

children who have shared the same womb and/or still 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. As Carsten (2004: 35) argues, 'kinship is made in the homes, through the intimate sharing of space, food, and nurturance that goes on in domestic space'.

Men generally do not assist in food production but strive for jobs to earn money to maintain 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 of these marriages include on average two co-wives. People point out that polygyny is more common than official statistics reveal, because monogamous marriages appear to be informally polygynous. Men prefer to marry one woman formally and combine this marriage with a number of mistresses or 'outside wives', since such informal polygynous relationships are considered cheaper than assuming full responsibility for several wives and their children. Women for their part 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 take it for granted as women take polygyny for granted.

Women do not value marriage highly: they easily divorce or leave their husbands for a while. Marriage and husbands do not appear to be high on their list of priorities. The French anthropologist Copet-Rougier (Copet-Rougier, 1985, 1987) maintains that this attitude towards marriage emerged in the 1970s, when women began to challenge male structures of dominance and gradually changed stable marriages into 'trial marriages'. Most women's life trajectories are not directed towards just one marriage, since their aim is to secure independence and marital flexibility rather than to have a stable marriage. High marital flexibility is possible due to low bride wealth. Nowadays, bride wealth is often not even paid. Women's relatives rarely insist on receiving bride wealth, because this would give the father a claim to the children. This results in a high frequency of informal marital relationships, for both men and women, that are said to be marriages but have not been confirmed by bride wealth or a marriage certificate. If a sexual relationship lasts for more than a year and includes exchange of food, money and sex, people define it as marriage, since this reciprocity is the core of a marital relationship too.

It is not shameful for women to give birth to children in different marriages. On the contrary, it seems to be their aim. Even when women themselves do not strive for it intentionally, their mothers may urge them to have some children from informal relationships in order to claim the children. This attitude towards marriage and children should be seen in the context of the descent system. Though in the anthropological literature, Kako society has always been characterized as male dominated, polygynous and patrilineal

(Copet-Rougier, 1977, 1985, 1987), there are matrilineages as well as patrilineages. Women's contributions to their matrilineages are closely linked with extramarital and polyandrous relationships.

When all women's different trajectories and relationships are taken into account, matrilineal descent appears to predominate. Men can occasionally claim children through such practices as paying bride wealth and signing birth certificates, but they often use these possibilities to provide their sisters (divorced or barren) with children. Rather than making a family together, the spouses compete with each other in making their own matrilineal family alongside their marriage. It is in this context of everyday marriage and kinship practice that the high mobility of children and children's experiences of fosterage should be situated.

Children frequently reside in a household other than that of their biological mother. A survey in Mbondossi district reveals that 31 percent of the children live with foster parents. Surveys at schools show even higher percentages: 49 percent of primary schoolchildren between 9 and 15 years old and 94 percent of secondary schoolchildren between 13 and 18 years old live with foster parents. Even children who actually stay with their first parents have usually already experienced living with a foster family. Primary schoolchildren, for example, have resided for long periods in on average 2.5 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.

Apart from fosterage related to schooling, children often reside with foster parents for reasons associated with marriage and kinship. First, children can be fostered to escape co-wife rivalry and dangerous witchcraft practices in their parents' polygynous households. Second, the considerable flexibility of the polygynous system results in high rates of foster children, since mothers easily divorce or temporarily leave their husbands. Their children either stay with the father and a stepmother or are entrusted to their maternal grandmother, mother's brothers or mother's sisters. Third, children often move between the homes of brothers and sisters 'from the same womb' to express solidarity and strengthen matrilineal family ties.

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 direct siblings are considered good and reliable foster parents: siblings who are born from the same womb. In particular, a mother's mother, mother's brother and father's sister are favoured and are commonly chosen as foster parents.

Close kinship ties explain why children mostly have no difficulty adapting to foster families, as they are used to frequent contact with them from birth. Children consider their father's brothers to be their fathers and their mother's and father's sisters to be their mothers. A very special parent is a mother's brother. In *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 fathers, relationships with these 'male mothers' are warm and intimate.

A child's relationship with the biological or first foster mother is very close in the first 2 years after birth: then the child is in direct physical contact with the 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 where she or he can have a good cry and accustom her- or himself to separation from the mother. At this age (about 2 years old), children can already walk and speak, and mothers no longer consider them infants in need of help. They see them as independent persons who only need supervision and have to be given commissions to carry out. There is no play, no talk, no cuddling; the relationship is one of authority and obedience. In this way, children learn to be emotionally independent of the mother and to move between different homes in a wider kinship network where many parents have the right and duty to raise them.

Children get used to fosterage not only when breastfeeding stops and during short visits to other households; they also adapt to it in later stages of life. School holidays – in all they take up 5 months each year – are especially used to strengthen kinship bonds by fostering. The mother's mother and brothers in the villages regularly invite the children of their daughter or sister that lives in town. They like their company but they also want to share in the child's upbringing. They teach the children about family life, tell them stories about nature and animals, 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 deal with plural parenthood and this creates a wide range of choices. By the age of 10, children are already allowed to choose their foster parents themselves.

As long as fosterage takes place at the parents' initiative, children lack influence when they are small. Both mother and child have to accept separation when a relative claims a child. People see it as a moral obligation to comply with the request. Parents hardly 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 to the foster parents. In contrast to Verhoef's (2005: 367–79) descriptions of child fosterage in Northwest Cameroon, no agreements are made between the first mother and the foster parent, as they do not aim at jointly raising the child. First parents are not allowed to interfere actively in matters of upbringing and education, since foster parents want to take full responsibility for raising the child. It is 'a matter of confidence'. However, for a child's well-being, it is important that the first mother should not shirk her parenting responsibilities but keep an eye on the child by regularly sending messengers with gifts of food. 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 are not expected to leave their foster mothers, as these mothers have to be considered the ‘real’ ones. Real mothers are those who ‘suffered’ most for their children by spending time with them, caring for them, paying for medicines and sharing food and intimacy.

At an ideological level, both mothers and children agree that fosterage is a common and accepted form of child-rearing that is meant to strengthen family ties. At the level of everyday practice and the emotions involved, both women and children may experience difficulties. One woman, pregnant for the third time, told me that she had respected the cultural ideals of collective child-rearing 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. ‘Every woman knows’, she said, ‘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 the child in her belly] will stay with me, that I do not have to give it away, that this suffering [pregnancy] will be in my favour.’ Just as mothers’ private feelings may differ from public discourse on fosterage, children’s feelings and emotions about fosterage may differ from what they are expected to feel and to say about this rearing practice. In the ensuing sections, I focus on the emotional and conflicting aspects of fosterage, as this is what children mainly talk about when discussing fosterage.

Fieldwork with children

To study fosterage from the children’s point of view, I conducted research with children – both boys and girls – between the ages of 7 and 16. I used various typically anthropological methods: surveys at a primary school and a secondary school, semi-structured interviews with children at home and participant observation. I intensified my observation by making video recordings of the daily activities and interactions of the children of my key informants, who cared for both biological and foster children.

In the literature, it is often emphasized that anthropological fieldwork, including the method of participant observation, is particularly suitable for doing research with children. Participating in children’s activities and informal talks are said to be more fruitful than formal interviews and to yield a lot of information about their life worlds. Graue and Walsh (1998: 112) maintain that ‘the typical sit-down research interview is difficult to conduct with children; the younger the children are, the more difficult it is as they most likely have not had any experience with this particular form of interaction’. For this reason, I wanted to experiment with more child-friendly methods, such as playing games and drawing pictures, in addition to the classical anthropological method of participant observation. These alternative methods, however, did not work. Children were not used to drawing pictures of their personal

situation and felt even more uneasy about playing games with adults. Even in informal talk, they did not disclose their personal experience and opinions.

Mainly through methodological experiments, I gained much insight into children's interactions with adult supervisors. In the course of my fieldwork, I gradually discovered the division that existed between the worlds of adults and children. Informal conversations and games did not produce results, since these forms of interaction between adults and children appeared to be highly unusual. They imply a sense of equality and partnership in the parent-child relationship, which is in fact very hierarchical in Cameroon. Adults hardly play games with older children and when I tried to do so, I noticed that the children were surprised and embarrassed. In the same way, Watson-Gegeo (2001: 150) found in her fieldwork with children in the Pacific Islands that 'work rather than play is the intersection of child and adult worlds'. She argues that children's play with other children and children's work with adults are two different frames of performance that cannot function simultaneously. When an adult speaks to or physically intrudes on a group of playing children, she says, 'the frame may be destroyed and the children may giggle in embarrassment' (Watson-Gegeo, 2001: 148). This also happened in my fieldwork when I tried to join in children's play. The children were obviously not at ease with an adult not observing the right protocol. They did not know how to handle my intention to play and I felt uncomfortable too.

Ultimately, I gained access to 30 children – 20 boys and 10 girls, varying in age between 7 and 16 years – with the help of one of my key informants, Marie-Lucie. Marie-Lucie is mother to four biological and six foster children and works as a kindergarten teacher. As a respected mother in the district, she enjoyed the confidence of many children and knew how to put them at ease with the researcher. The children informed us that free talk at their parents' homes would be impossible, since they ran the risk of being supervised and punished for talking about experiences at home. We therefore invited the children to come to Marie-Lucie's home and created a place where they felt free to speak about their personal experiences. Contrary to the argument of Graue and Walsh (1998), the venue of the interview had to be unusual and out of the daily context to make the children speak freely, since in regular communication contexts children are not supposed and accustomed to inform adults about their personal experiences, joys, problems and disappointments. Thus, surprisingly, the most successful method turned out to be semi-structured interviews, sitting at a table, with me at the head of it making field notes. Though naturally the children were not used to such an interview situation, they seemed to be at ease with it. It was formal, it was planned, and our relationship was clear: I asked the questions and they answered me, just as they did in daily interactions with adults. The questions focused on reconstructing the children's foster experiences and were meant to make them reflect on these.

Recently, Hirschfeld (2002: 612) offered several explanations for children's marginalization in anthropological texts and theories. I would like

to add that this marginalization should not be attributed only to an anthropological tendency to overlook children, but also to the inaccessibility of children's life worlds to adults. Especially in Africa, where adults do not create child-friendly environments but expect their children to serve the adult world, children create and inhabit their own cultural environment, independent of and distant from the adult world. While recording children's daily activities on videotape, I was able to create a kind of liminal space between the adult world and that of the children where I was free to observe the children, uninhibited by both adults' and children's expectations of my behaviour.

Anthropologists are not the only ones to have predominantly kept aloof from children's life worlds; adults in East Cameroon generally seem to ignore children's voices, inner feelings and subjective experiences. Marie-Lucie, who assisted me in my fieldwork, repeatedly said how the children's articulations and stories surprised her. 'We never ask them,' she said, 'we do not look for what happens in the hearts of our children.' As a mother, she was used to adopting an authoritarian manner with children, who, as a result of the dominant age hierarchy, always have to subordinate themselves and obey adults. After weaning, children gradually come to participate fully in the adult world and what they experience among themselves is said to be 'none of their parents' business'. The stories of children reproduced in the following section show that they readily discuss personal experiences, pain and emotions, but in daily life they are used to sharing these with peers, not with adults.

Children's stories about everyday practices of kinship and fosterage

Children's stories about everyday practices of kinship and fosterage reveal a great diversity of experiences. Throughout childhood they experience fosterage from different perspectives and therefore describe it differently in changing contexts. Stories of children who, at the time of the interview, lived with an unmarried mother differ from stories of children with different mothers in polygynous households and those of children whose parents were divorced or deceased. Since marriage and kinship practices are so flexible and household compositions so temporary and changeable, most children frequently move between different homes and constantly have to deal with changing household compositions. Rather than proposing different types of fosterage, as Verhoef (2005) recently did, my aim is to give an impression of the changing household compositions and the variety of foster situations that children have to handle. To give insight into this variety of foster situations and children's experiences, I reproduce three stories – those of Bobo, Nadia and Serge.

Bobo

Bobo is a 13-year-old boy and his mother's third child. She gave birth to four children in four different 'marriages' and did not recognize the fathers. On the

birth certificates, she declared her own father to be her children's father in order to keep them 'on her side'. She stayed unmarried; sometimes she tried to live with her 'husband', but she always returned to her mother's home. At the time of the interview, Bobo was living with a maternal uncle. While visiting his mother's home, he told me about two foster experiences in his life:

The first time I left my mother I was 10 years old. I decided to leave home and told my mother that I wanted to join *koko* in Bertoua [a provincial town 60 km from Batouri]. She agreed and I left because I wanted to get on at school. Here in Batouri I have too many friends. When classes finish in the afternoon I feel I have to visit my friends and have no more time to do my homework. It's better to go far away and to forget my friends. My maternal uncle in Bertoua received me very well and wanted me to stay. I stayed for 2 years and finally came back because of competition problems in my uncle's home. The first year I lived with my uncle, his wife and their six children, they cared for me very well. There was no problem and I felt at ease.

Then, after a year, my uncle's in-laws began to express jealousy. First the mother of my uncle's wife came to the house. When she noticed that her daughter's husband was fostering a child from his family, she told her daughter to solicit some children from her side and to foster them in the household too. Then two younger brothers of my uncle's wife came to stay with us. They did not like me. They wanted everything my uncle paid for me. They even demanded the food my mother regularly sent me. They were older than I was, so I felt helpless. They took my belongings away and accused me of theft. My uncle's wife did not like me anymore. That's why I came back to my mother.

Six months ago, I decided to leave my mother again and join another maternal uncle in Belabo [a town 140 km from Batouri]. I wanted to leave Batouri for the same reason as before. My mother accepted this, so I left. My uncle also agreed to take me in. He shares his home only with his son since his wife has left him. With them I feel at ease. My uncle cares for me and gives me time to do my homework. I don't know till when I will stay. For the moment I am here and I regularly go back to my mother in the school holidays.

Bobo's case illustrates children's agency in the foster practice. Bobo left his mother on his own initiative and for his own purposes when he was 10 years old. He also actively ended his stay with his maternal uncle when rivalry with his uncle's in-laws began to seriously affect his position in the household. He returned to his mother and looked for another foster parent. He learned from his first experience and went to an unmarried uncle who only had one son to care for. This search and selection of foster parents was done without consulting his mother. His mother only had to agree to the change of homes. As his mother was caring for five younger children of her deceased brothers (together with two of her biological children), she welcomed her brother's kindness to pay her son's school fees.

Bobo's story also illustrates children's preference for *koko*, the maternal uncle, when choosing their own favourable foster circumstances. 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. Children's wish to do their homework quietly has to do with this atmosphere of kinship and unity. When children reside in a home where family troubles

hinder concentration and 'make their hearts restless', as is often said, they will not be able to develop in life and succeed at school. Though Bobo did not leave his mother's home because of family trouble, he deliberately looked for a home of close kin where personal progress would be facilitated. To join their favourite male mothers (*koko*), children like Bobo are prepared to move a considerable distance away.

Bobo's case also indicates that kinship solidarity is only part of foster practice. Children may experience both kinship and rivalry in the same home. Bobo's uncle accepted the foster situation because of his affection and commitment to his sister. He fully accepted responsibility for taking care of his foster child and paying for food, school fees and medicines. However, he was not the only person on whom the foster child depended. His in-laws influenced the foster situation as well; they interfered and created trouble in order to frustrate his good intentions towards his maternal family. The in-laws criticized the presence of his foster child and interpreted the foster situation as a loss of income, respect and power. This rivalry of different lineages can turn fosterage into a painful experience. Children are clear in their relation of these experiences because the tensions in the home directly affect their well-being.

Relationships of struggle and rivalry between foster children from the husband's side and foster children from his wife's side may be compared with relationships between half-siblings in polygynous households. In both situations, adults incite their children to fight those with whom they do not want to share the same domestic space. Mothers strongly identify with their children and consider them powerful backups in situations of social inequality. Hence, they may ask for foster children from their maternal family to strengthen their position in their husband's home and counterbalance power inequalities. In this way, competition problems between spouses or their families are transformed into competition problems between the children. When Bobo narrates that the other foster boys demanded the food his mother sent him, he indicates the most painful aspect of their aggression, as his mother's food represents her feelings of affection and solidarity with him. In a context where food is plentiful and sharing of food symbolizes kinship ties, not being allowed to eat one's mother's food symbolizes being deprived of tasting kinship.

Children like Bobo vividly describe that in most foster situations either the wife or the husband, not both of them, care for foster children. Children who move to a mother's brother complain about his wife's behaviour; and children who move to a father's sister complain about her husband's attitudes. They find both situations uncomfortable, since a mother's brother's wife rules the household and has to shelter and feed the children; and a father's sister's husband brings in the money and decides on which children to spend his money on and which children will get nothing. Children have to operate between the solidarity of siblings – mothers and brothers, fathers and sisters – and the power politics of spouses. By initiating, ending and reinitiating fosterage, children actively construct their life between different competing kin groups.

In cultural ideals and anthropological representations of fosterage, it is generally suggested that African parents care for other people's children as if they were their own (Goody, 1982). The outcome of equal treatment of biological and foster children would be that the children would never know who their 'real' (biological) parents are. Though adults never publicly admit that they discriminate between their children, the children openly say that parents show favouritism. Indeed, parents do not discriminate between biological children and foster children. But they do between foster children from their own lineage and foster children from their spouse's lineage. It is this conflict in the home between members of the different spouses' lineages that is inconsistent with common representations of fosterage and African family unity. A foster parent who is directly related to one of the foster child's biological parents will provide good foster conditions as long as the in-laws do not interfere. Children say that neither a mother's brother nor a father's sister is able to control or to change the situation when in-laws intervene with opposing claims.

Thus children's stories indicate a need for correction of the undifferentiated notion of African parenthood. This view is supported by Verhoef's (2005: 370) study, which shows from an adult perspective that not all parents are equally acceptable foster parents to a child. Only by differentiating between kin members and recognizing marital conflicts, power dynamics and fluid household compositions can one understand the everyday relations in kin homes.

Bobo's story illustrates children's agency in the foster practice. When we come to Nadia's story, we find that foster children do not always have the same freedom to initiate or end a foster situation. A mere 2 years younger than Bobo, Nadia occupies a more dependent position in adult foster agreements.

Nadia

Nadia is an 8-year-old girl and was born in a polygynous family. Her mother was her father's second wife. When she was a year old, her father died and his two wives decided to stay together in his house, as neither of them wanted to leave the husband's property to the other. Because of competition problems, Nadia's mother decided to send Nadia back to her maternal family to protect her from the co-wife's ill treatment. She accused her co-wife of having killed her husband with witchcraft. For fear of losing her daughter through witchcraft as well, she decided that Nadia should receive foster care in her family. At the time of our interview, Nadia had been back for 5 months with her mother, who, at that time, no longer lived with her co-wife but shared a home with her older sons and their wives and children. Nadia told me what happened in the period between leaving her mother and rejoining her at the age of 8:

At the moment I live with my mother, but I did not grow up by her side. When my father died, my mother sent me to her younger sister, who raised me. I felt at ease with her till she married. Her husband did not want her to look after me well. She

started to give me less food when I was hungry. When she left home on Sundays to attend church meetings her husband beat me, he pulled my cheeks and punished me by making me kneel for hours. When my aunt came back he did not allow me to talk to her and complain about him. Finally my mother's sister called her brother to come to her house and take me away. She did not explain anything to me but I think she decided to send me to her brother because she knew her husband had bad habits and did not care for me.

This happened when I was about 5 years old. My mother's brother came to take me away and brought me to his home far away from here. In the beginning it was good to stay with him. We were only the two of us, because his wife had left him after a period of discord. She took the children with her and went back to her family. My uncle cared for me very well. He gave me food, he drew water from the well, he paid the fees and sent me to school, he washed the dishes and asked me for nothing. My maternal uncle loved me very much. After a while he wrote a letter to his wife and asked her to come back to him.

When she came back, she was surprised to see me. As soon as she noticed me she pulled a face and let me know that she did not like me. She came back during the night when we were asleep. When her children saw me, they asked my uncle who I was. He answered, 'That is my elder sister's child.' His wife got a nasty surprise, she was very angry that my uncle had received me into his home. She had five children, three daughters and two sons, and from that time neither she nor her children spoke to me. They treated me unfairly. Before I left for school they made my clothes all dirty. When I came back from school she gave her children a lot of food and I was given only a little bit to let me know that I was not one of them. She beat me and her children beat me. We slept together in the same room and when we went to bed they kicked me and beat me. They told me that the house was not mine and that I had to leave.

I went to my uncle to complain about their behaviour. He only looked at me and ordered me to go to sleep. When he talked to his wife she asked him why he criticized her children and supported the other one (me). She asked him for whose benefit had he received me in the house. Did he foster me to help her and her children? My uncle remained unmoved and instructed them not to mistreat me anymore, but they did not listen to him. When they told me to leave the house, my uncle asked them if they had built the house. Then the children told him that he would be left with the house, since they all wanted to leave him with their mother.

My uncle could not change anything at all. He only looked at me desperately. He finally told his wife that she was free to go back to her family but that she had to leave her children with him. Then his wife left without the children. My uncle took the children to his mother in Batouri and I stayed with him and his girlfriend. Even before his wife left him, I regularly spent time with my uncle's girlfriend. That made his wife angry.

Then, I don't know the reason why, my uncle also sent me to his parents, my maternal grandparents. Here my uncles' wives and their children and grandchildren mistreated me like my uncle's wife and her children did before. There was no food for me. Then my grandfather wanted to protect me and sent me back to my mother.

Nadia's story illustrates strikingly the complexity and temporariness of children's residences. Only 2 years younger than Bobo, Nadia is more dependent on others to find favourable foster situations and to defend her in emotionally painful situations. Unlike 10-year-old Bobo, it is not Nadia who initiates the changes of home but her relatives, often without explaining anything to her. This case shows that as long as children do not initiate fosterage

themselves, adults do not involve them in the decision-making. As long as adults entrust their children to siblings 'from the same womb', they can count on good foster care. Just like Bobo's story, Nadia's reveals the powerlessness of foster parents when in-laws interfere in the foster situation and start to make trouble. They may, however, protect their foster child by entrusting him or her to other foster parents.

All Nadia's relocations were induced by conflicts and tensions in everyday relations. First Nadia's mother acts to protect Nadia from her co-wife and sends her to her sister. Second, her mother's sister wants to protect Nadia from her husband and sends her to a maternal uncle. Then this uncle has to protect her from his wife and his children and sends her to his parents. Finally, her maternal grandfather acts to protect her from her mother's brother's wives and sends her back to her first mother. In all these foster situations, both solidarity with close kin and conflicts with in-laws occur simultaneously in the same home.

By the age of 8, Nadia has already experienced four different, oppressive foster situations. She clearly explains that the times when she felt at home and felt kinship were when she felt secure because she was given food. Like Bobo and many other children, she uses the metaphor of food to express kinship ties: with food there is kinship, warmth and solidarity, without food there is hostility, rivalry and insecurity. Here too starvation does not refer to missing food but to missing kinship.

Nadia's story also vividly indicates the warm, close relationship she experienced with her maternal uncle. Their warm feelings and loving behaviour towards each other sharply contrast with the feelings Nadia's uncle expresses towards his biological children and they to him. These biological children even behave in a hostile way towards their father and, together with their mother, they gang up against him. It is also striking that Nadia's uncle decides to share the home with his sister's child and send his biological children to his mother for foster care. He feels deeper kinship with the foster child from his maternal family than with his biological children.

The insight Nadia's story gives into the way kinship is lived and felt in homes indicates the relevance of a processual approach to kinship. An emphasis on 'lived' kinship reveals domestic processes rather than static structures. This focus highlights, as Carsten (2004: 36) argues, 'the importance of the house as a locus of everyday understandings and practices of kinship', as well as the emotional qualities of kinship that have too often been ignored. Feelings and emotions about kinship change when household compositions change. In line with Carsten (2004) and Spiegel (1986), I underline the importance of abandoning the static notion of household compositions that has been used too often. To understand children's experiences in kin homes one has to recognize the movement of individuals between homes, the fluid household compositions and the power dynamics that are involved.

It is meaningful that Nadia was finally able to go back to her biological mother. As long as her mother stays unmarried and does not have to compete

with co-wives or in-laws, Nadia's security and happiness is assured. I include the story of Serge to illustrate a child's experience of not being able to rejoin the first mother. Though a biological or first mother surely is not the only one who may offer a child safety and happiness, it is important for children to have a first mother to whom they can turn in case of trouble and who keeps an eye on the child and maintains an affectionate relationship by sending gifts of food.

Serge

Serge is a 14-year-old boy. His father married two wives, of whom his mother was the first. Like many other children, he suffered from co-wife rivalry in his father's household. In his story, he tells how his emotional life swung from unconditional solidarity with his biological mother to a rupture in their relationship:

I have grown up with two mothers because my father married his second wife when I was still a small boy. His second wife always ill-treated me. Before giving me food I had to work hard. She didn't respect me at all because she considered me to be her slave. She always punished me for the least little thing. When she behaved like that my mother got angry at her. The two mothers were always fighting. When my father talked to his second wife and told her to treat us [Serge and his mother's other children] well she refused to give us food when we came back from school. She respected neither us nor our mother. When she became violent with our mother we were ready to fight her. Together with our mother we battled against her. Our mother told us not to respect her co-wife, not to work for her and to refuse her food. Our mother was afraid that she would kill us with poisoned food, with witchcraft. My mother gave us food every day, even when it was her co-wife's duty to cook for the whole family. My mother and her co-wife never shared meals together because the co-wife once said: 'I will try to kill the mother, but in case I don't succeed, I will kill her children.'

Now I live with my maternal grandmother. My mother escaped the problems 5 years ago. She made another marriage and fostered us with our maternal grandmother. She never explained this to us and I still don't understand it. Five years passed by without seeing her. She lives very far away from us and her husband does not accept us in his home. He doesn't welcome the children my mother gave birth to before marrying him. After she left my father, she gave birth to another seven children with her new husband. When I think of her I feel pain. I still don't understand why she abandoned us. I often think of her and then I need to see her but she never passes by to visit us. I have no money to pay the bus fare to go and see her.

I feel at ease at my grandmother's place. Nobody wishes to harm us here, nobody is fighting, nobody threatens us with witchcraft. It is a calm and safe place. We no longer need to be afraid that somebody is going to poison us. Our grandmother does not discriminate between the children, we are all equal in being her grandchildren.

Like the stories of Bobo and Nadia, Serge's story reveals that children experience both solidarity and rivalry in the same home. The rivalries they are involved in are between the lineages of the spouses and between co-wives in polygynous households. Serge also mentions how the distribution and sharing of food is essential to the creation and feeling of kinship. Like Nadia, he tells that he did not have a say in his move from his father's to his grandmother's

home. His mother did not consult him when she decided to leave her husband and marry someone else.

Because throughout their childhood many children occasionally live in a polygynous household, they are often caught up in co-wife rivalry. Most of them describe the home where co-wives are fighting each other as an unsafe environment where they endure violent quarrels, where food can be poisoned and where they fear the threat of witchcraft to their health. In general, children experience all this as threatening and painful. Because mothers strongly identify with their children, the latter are often the targets of their mother's co-wife's wickedness. In spite of the general ideology of shared motherhood in polygynous households, children hardly ever see their mother's co-wife as a mother but call her 'the other one' or 'stepmother'. Despite the rule that co-wives have to cook for each other and share the meals, children are not allowed to eat with their mother's co-wife and her children because of the risk of poisoning through witchcraft. Rather than sharing homes, kitchens, meals and daily activities, children have to pick their way between fighting mothers and siblings.

The accusations of witchcraft that co-wives frequently make to each other and each other's children confirm that the 'witchcraft of the home' (Geschiere, 2003: 43) is very real and painful. Though Pradelles de Latour (1995: 608) states that witchcraft provides a way to settle everyday conflicts without resorting to physical violence, the articulation of the conflicts and intimidation may be as painful as physical violence and is part of the conflicts that have to be resolved.

To save their children from the co-wife's intimidation and threats of witchcraft, mothers often decide to send their children to close relatives for foster care. This is what Nadia's mother did when she entrusted Nadia to her younger sister. Serge's mother, however, involved her children in her conflict with her co-wife and required them to join forces with her in the fight against the co-wife. The more the children backed her, the more powerful she felt in her husband's house. The children's solidarity that his mother counted on in her struggle against the co-wife troubled Serge, especially in later childhood. Then his mother left her husband's house and co-wife and sent the children to her mother for fosterage. From Serge's mother's perspective, she has chosen a safe, warm place for her children, as her mother certainly cares for them well. For Serge, however, it feels like 'abandonment'. Whereas his mother previously required absolute solidarity from her children and encouraged them to take her side, it feels as if she does not reciprocate this solidarity.

Consistent with the stories of Bobo and Nadia, Serge's story reveals that 'to a great extent shared cooking and consumption create the substance that is at the heart of kinship and co-residence' (Carsten, 1991: 427). Kinship involves the sharing of substance. Children feel related to people with whom they share consumption. This substance of kinship, Carsten (1991: 426) argues, is acquired in the course of childhood by developing social relations

in the home. It is the hearth rather than the home that symbolizes close kinship, solidarity and harmony. The children's stories suggest that when one home is linked to different hearths it may give rise to competing kin groups. The cases of Bobo, Nadia and Serge also stress that women are major actors in the process of creating kinship through nurturance, as they monopolize the production and cooking of food. When a women does not allow a child to eat from her cooking pot, she directly attacks the child by treating him or her as a non-kin member of the household. Hence to understand children's views of kinship, one not only has to adopt a processual approach to kinship and a fluid notion of household compositions, but one also has to recognize that homes may accommodate multiple hearths and conflicting units. In spite of the cultural ideals of sharing food to express kinship and solidarity, one has to study how, in daily practice, food is distributed in the home.

By comparing the stories of Serge and Bobo, we learn that children's experience of fosterage depends on the choices and life courses of their biological mothers. Neither Serge nor Bobo lives with his biological mother. Unlike Serge's mother, Bobo's mother rejects marriage, dedicates herself to her biological and foster children and, at times, sends Bobo gifts of food to make him feel comfortable. Bobo's mother, however, is much older than Serge's mother and already has the status of grandmother. Though she also switched between different relationships earlier on, she has now renounced sexual relationships and totally devotes herself to her children and grandchildren. Serge's mother is still in the reproductive stage of life, in which it is common to enter into 'marriages' and move between the homes of different husbands. The children born of her first marriage were sent to her mother for foster care and she decided to embark on a new marriage and bore seven more children. For her, fosterage is a strategy to gain and preserve autonomy from her children and husbands (Etienne, 1979). It is quite possible that Serge's mother will leave her second husband as well at some future date and will return to her mother's place to care for her children from both marriages.

These differences illustrate that children's experiences of fosterage depend not only on changing household compositions but also on changes in their mothers' life courses. As women's choices are never made 'forever', their life course may continually change. Co-wife competition, a husband failing to provide adequate financial support, threats of witchcraft, hostile in-laws and power conflicts can all be reasons to leave a husband's house and move to another one. Women's conjugal mobility directly leads to children's mobility, but they do not always move to the same place.

Conclusion

It has been shown that, historically, the anthropology of childhood has either overlooked or neglected children's worlds, which suggests a need to take an interest in children's voices and lived experiences (Holmes, 1998). In this

article, I have described children's experiences of fosterage in order to complement anthropological theories on African kinship that have mostly been grounded on cultural ideals and adults' information rather than children's experiences and accounts. Though fosterage is about children, it has never been studied from their perspective. By analysing children's narrated experiences, I have shown that their experiences of fosterage and kinship are incurred in and between different homes. As kinship is built in the home through the sharing of food and intimacy, children directly experience how it is created, disputed and defined, and how lived kinship is inextricably tied up with mobility, flexibility and power dynamics.

I followed Carsten (2004), who argues that the close-up, experiential dimension of kinship is too often excluded from anthropological accounts, as this lived experience often seems too mundane to be worthy of close analysis. Kinship involves not just rights and rules, ideals and obligations, but is an area of life in which people invest their emotions and their creative energy (Carsten, 2004: 9). In line with Carsten, I focus on everyday relations and intimacy, on children moving between different homes, and on the emotional qualities with which kinship relations are fraught (Carsten, 2004: 11). I concentrate on three stories in particular. The first, Bobo's story, accentuates children's agency in the foster practice and the power dynamics in the homes. Nadia's story highlights the multiple, temporary foster situations children experience throughout childhood. And finally, Serge's story reveals children's dependence on their mother's choices and life course. All three stories emphasize the emotional qualities of kinship, comprising both feelings of harmony and solidarity and feelings of distrust and conflict.

From children's perspective, conflict and competition are part of the daily experience of kinship. This 'dark side of kinship' has not yet been integrated sufficiently with African kinship theory. As a result 'crises', such as marital flexibility, divorce, lineage rivalry, co-wife rivalry and witchcraft, are assigned a place outside the kinship structure rather than in it. Children's stories, however, reveal that such 'crises' are inherent in kinship and are common in everyday family life. This view contrasts sharply with dominant kinship theory with its emphasis on stability, solidarity and unity. Taking children's perspective seriously affords fresh insight into lived kinship. Children's accounts of fosterage make us understand that in any extended or polygynous household tensions may arise between consanguine relatives and affines.

Children directly challenge dominant ideologies of shared motherhood and solidarity in the African family, as their stories confront us with family troubles and kinship suffering that normative views tend to hide. Adults regularly state that they do not discriminate between the children in the extended family and that children do not experience difficulties with fosterage, since everyone cares for a foster child as if it were their own. When mothers describe the ideals of being a good wife and mother, enduring all kinds of

suffering for their children's sake, they emphasize perseverance, suffering and self-sacrifice rather than conflict and caprice.

Children, on the other hand, emphasize how often they are faced with conflict and trouble. They clearly differentiate between parents, considering their mothers, mother's brothers and maternal grandmothers to be their most loving, close and reliable parents. Mother's sisters can also be good parents as long as they do not engage in marital relationships. Most distant and less reliable parents are, from the children's perspective, the mother's co-wife and the in-laws of a mother's brother. Both the mother's co-wife and the wives of her brothers are called 'stepmothers', indicating unfair treatment and competition. Though men, in the capacity of fathers, are not highly admired and rated as good parents, they are, certainly in the position of *koko*, male mothers. As such they combine the warm emotional qualities of a mother with the financial support of a father.

Finally, it was argued that children's multiple and changing experiences with fosterage depend on three interconnected factors: changing household compositions, power dynamics in the home and changes in women's life courses. All three factors must be understood in the context of local everyday practices of marriage and kinship, in which flexibility, temporariness and movement are of paramount importance.

Notes

1. Some authors who have adopted a comparably critical approach to fosterage are Alber (2004), Lallemand (1994) and Verhoef (2005).
2. These periods of fieldwork were financially supported by WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research), and by both the Department of Anthropology and the Institute of Gender Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands.
3. Ethnographic observations during several periods of fieldwork in Mbondossi are the main information base for this article on social life and everyday relations in Batouri.

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