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Prevalence and determinants of child fosterage in West Africa: relevance to demography

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Abstract
Ethnographic studies in West Africa show that the practice of sending children away to be raised by relatives and nonrelatives is widespread among many ethnic groups. This paper is an attempt to explore the demographic relevance of the practice. The fostering information is obtained from two sources: the responses given by women to the question on children away from home, and by linking all children to their mothers with the unmatched children being treated as fosters. The characteristics of these children, their surrogate mothers, and those of the biological mothers are explored, and the determinants of child fostering are discussed as correlates of these attributes. The results are indicative of high incidence of child fosterage in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria. Child fostering enhances female labor force participation, and may affect the fertility decisions of both natural and foster parents, mainly because it serves to reallocate the resources available for raising children within the society. It may also have consequences on child survival, depending partly on how the culture treats children outside of their maternal homes.

Keywords
Africa, West Africa, Ghana, Seirra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, child fostering, foster homes, children, fertility, mothers, child fostering, labor force, female labor force participation, maternal homes, surrogate mothers, ethnic groups, child rearing, surrogate parents, wet nurses, parental underinvestment, demographic consequences, foster parents, heads of households, biological parents

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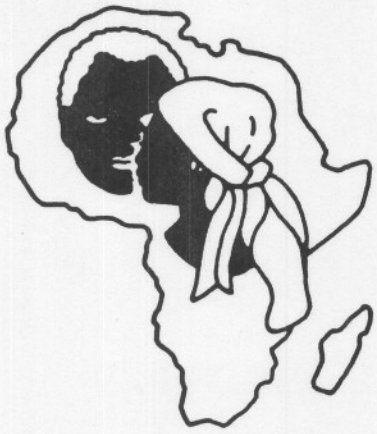

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Prevalence and Determinants of Child Fosterage in West Africa: Relevance to Demography

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November 1984

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Ethnographic studies in West Africa show that the practice of sending children away to be raised by relatives and nonrelatives is widespread among many ethnic groups. This paper is an attempt to explore the demographic relevance of the practice. The fostering information is obtained from two sources: the responses given by women to the question on children away from home, and by linking all children to their mothers, with the unmatched children being treated as fosters. The characteristics of these children, their surrogate mothers, and those of the biological mothers are explored, and the determinants of child fostering are discussed as correlates of these attributes. The results are indicative of high incidence of child fosterage in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria. Child fostering enhances female labor force participation, and may affect the fertility decisions of both natural and foster parents, mainly because it serves to reallocate the resources available for raising children within the society. It may also have consequences on child survival, depending partly on how the culture treats children outside of their maternal homes.

The practices adopted by mothers in raising their children or the ways children are brought up are vital in many respects. Whether it is the custom of hiring the services of paid wet nurses, the use of surrogate parents, parental under-investment and indifference in the welfare of some children who are unwanted, child abandonment, infanticide,[1] the nature and prevalence of such practices may have important demographic consequences.

The anthropological literature of West Africa points to numerous evidence of child relocation or the transfer, giving out or exchange of children among families (Fiawoo, 1978; Goody, 1978, 1975; Sinclair, 1972). These practices generally come under the term 'child fostering' or 'fosterage', defined here as the relocation or transfer of children from biological or natal homes to other homes where they are raised and cared for by surrogate parents or foster parents. In other words, fostered children are those raised or reared by people other than their natural parents. In this paper, the nature of the practice of child fosterage is examined, together with the factors leading to the practice in parts of West Africa.

This report is based mainly on the Ghanaian data, derived from the 1971 Supplementary Enquiry of the 1970 Census of Ghana. Where applicable, however, comparable figures are quoted from the results of previous analyses on other data sets - 1974 censuses of population in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and parts of projects 1 and 2 of the 1973 Changing African Family Study in Western Nigeria (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1983). The fosterage information is

derived from two sources: the responses given by women to the question on children away from home, and by linking all children in the household to their mothers, with the unmatched being those who are fostered-in. The attributes of the unmatched children, whose mothers are not in the household, are examined, together with those of the foster parents or child receivers. Finally, the determinants of fosterage are explored as correlates of maternal and household (i.e. sender's) characteristics.

Demographic Relevance

Child fostering is a topic that may appeal to an anthropologist; it is a novelty in demography. Yet the relocation of children is a type of migration, a phenomenon which is a major component of population change. Although demographers working in Africa have long collected data on the practice of sending children away, they have not taken full advantage of the analysis that could be done with such information. Fosterage data, in fact, are often the incidental by-product of more standard data on fertility. Because of gross inaccuracies characteristic of survey or census data based on questions as seemingly simple as: "How many children have you had?" research workers in Africa devised ways to minimize reporting errors based on memory lapse and outright misreporting of events. Thus for children ever born alive, at least three questions are asked: the number of children living at home, the number dead, and the number away from home, the summation equating the total number of live births to a respondent.

Probably because the inclusion of the question on children away from home is incidental, the question has as a rule been discarded once the total children ever born are derived. In fact, it is not coded at all by some researchers. Such information, however, might help explain certain demographic interrelationships in a developing society involving such phenomena as child care and rearing, fertility decisions, childhood mortality experience, child education, and work participation of children and mothers. In the absence of direct information on child fostering, the use of secondary data on children away from natal family or household, commonly available in census data, can provide useful insight into the practice of child fostering, or sending children out to be raised by surrogate parents.

In Western societies children are generally raised by their own parents in the nuclear family. Only in rather abnormal circumstances do adoption and fostering take place, usually because of some disabilities or crisis situations. From this viewpoint, the kinship term ‚mothering' or ‚parenting' is an idealized combination of behavioral roles expected to be assumed or performed by a single person, biologically related to the child.[2] On the other hand, in some West African societies where child fostering is normal and widespread, to know the real or biological mother of a child, one would often have to ask both "Who bore you?" and "Who reared you?" (Goody, 1973:182).

Where fostering is prevalent, the maternal home is but one of the possible homes for the child. Yet most demographic

research in such societies tend to ignore this fact and often equate the number of children born by a woman to her household or family size. Also, demographic studies in these societies have commonly examined events, such as child mortality, as correlates of parental characteristics with little realization that children away from natural parents may be scarcely affected by such characteristics. The relationship between child mortality and parents' income or education, for instance, may give misleading results unless the analyst is able to ascertain the child's place of residence at death, and hence, know whether the characteristics of the household of orientation (i.e., parent's) or those of the household of residence (i.e., surrogate's) apply. Without such a distinction, the high child mortality experience of an educated urban white-collar couple whose children are residing with an illiterate grandmother in a rural dwelling could produce a puzzling constrast with the low child mortality experience of a poor, rural peasant whose children live with wealthier relatives in the city.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the expected relations are often not supported by most survey data hastily collected in developing societies (based on Western notions of where children should be raised), and subjected to elegant analytical models. It is important to take cognizance of particular culture-specific behavioral patterns that may influence family decisions and events of interest in demography. With regard to fostering, it is important to note that the situation in the natural family

or household where a child was born may be irrelevant to a child's vital experience. A network of kin, with the claims and obligations they exchange, may be more crucial to the child's present and future experience and achievement. Furthermore, the leeway provided to both the natural and foster parents by child fostering may affect their demographic decisions in various ways, especially female labor force participation and fertility.

A woman with ten children, for instance, while achieving prestige and recognition in most traditional West African societies, does not necessarily raise all those children herself. On the contrary, she may live with only a few, while others are brought up by surrogate parents. A pertinent issue here is whether this woman had ten children because she was hoping to board them out or whether her high fertility necessitated the fostering-out of some children. Whichever is the case, attempts to answer these types of probing questions are needed for a better understanding and explanation of demographic events in developing societies.

It follows then that where the practice of child fosterage is widespread, parental resource stock, income or ability to take care of children, etc., may not adequately explain fertility levels. The economic cost of children to parents is lowered by fostering them out while their potential value and benefits are raised leading to a positive inter-generational wealth flow from children to parents. The extended family, on which child fostering is buttressed, usually acts to alleviate the hardships

of large family size. The delegation of parental roles by fostering-out children means the sharing of child-rearing responsibilities, and the removal of some of the burdens and constraints of prolific childbearing. This also implies that the limitation of fertility by the educated elite does not, ipso facto, guarantee them a small family size. On the contrary, they often 'inherit' large families because they constitute the role model to which many related and unrelated parents want to send their children, some being 'dumped' to the disapproval of one or both partners. If indeed child fosterage is an adaptive mechanism in a society of high fertility or if it is effective in minimizing the burden of having many children, then it certainly weakens the arguments of the policy maker pushing for a nationwide family planning campaign aimed at limiting family size.

The migration aspect of child fostering is evident on at least two counts. On the one hand, fosterage is a type of migration, on the other, it tends to ease some of the constraints of migration to parents contemplating to move. Often parents who migrate (internally or internationally) leave children behind with relatives, either temporarily or permanently. The practice also provides this type of convenience to women returning to school or entering the labor force after a period of nursing. It is my contention that child fostering is a demographically relevant practice wherever it is prevalent. If it affects the major issues or concerns in demography (or is affected by them), then demographers working in these societies should explore its significance.

2. Types and Motivations of Child Fostering

Although the practice of sending children away at various ages is reported in many parts of the world (Ainsworth, 1967, in Uganda; Kay, 1963; and, Keesing, 1970, in Oceania; Rawson and Berggren, 1973, in Haiti; Sanford, 1975, in West Indies), perhaps nowhere is it as instituionalized as in parts of West Africa. West African fostering has been a valued traditional practice among many ethnic groups; the practice has probably become more prevalent or taken new dimensions as societies become more complex and diversified. What seem extraordinary in West African fostering are its prevalence, the very young age of children not living with natural parents and the early age at which children are boarded out. Furthermore, because fostering here is rooted in kinship arrangements, children are sent out not only in the event of some family crisis or when one or both natural parents cannot, for some reasons, manage to bring them up. Rather, the sending out of children or the delegation of parental child raising functions is often practised by both stable and unstable families, married and single mothers, healthy and handicapped parents, rural and urban homes,and wealthy and poor parents. In this section the various types of child fostering arrangements are presented, together with the different functions and motivations for the practice.

A. Kinship Fostering

This is the predominant type of child fostering among many ethnic groups in West Africa. At various ages, children are

sent to live with relatives of either parent, or exchanged among kinsmen who mutually share kinship obligations and assistance. Among the Gonja of Ghana, for instance, Goody (1973) found that male children usually went to the mothers' brothers in whose homes they were raised, while female children were claimed by the fathers' sisters at infancy or early childhood. Also, in matrilineal societies, children were commonly raised by maternal kin with claims and responsibilities over children.

Grandparents are perhaps the most important recipients of foster children, especially at weaning. Sending children out at this time facilitates the weaning process and frees the mother's time. Because mothers often resume work shortly after childbirth, or go to market regularly, children are commonly sent to live with grandparents whose experience in child rearing is thought to be beneficial for children. Usually Grandmothers are willing to raise grandchildren, who sometimes might be taken away from their parents to remind them that it is time to have another. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, it is prestigious for a woman to have her grandchildren living with her; it is regarded as a blessing when a woman starts building around her a small 'army' of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. This arrangement always has an in-built support system because the occasional visits and gifts of money, foodstuff and clothing by parents to grandparents form an important part of their resource accumulation. Wealth flow from parents to grandparents takes place in the absence of fosters, but their presence guarantees the

regularity of such visits and the size and assortment of goods brought in.

Most fostering in West Africa takes place within the kinship framework, because children are generally thought of as belonging not only to biological parents but also to the lineage or the kinship group. Kinship fostering is largely a consequence of the need to reallocate resources within the extended family or the kin group, ensuring maximum survival for the unit and strengthening kinship ties.[3]

B. Crisis Fostering

Child relocation resulting from the dissolution of the family of orientation by divorce, separation or death of a spouse may be termed crisis fostering. Children boarded out as a result of being born out of wedlock also belong to this group, especially in a culture where such children are stigmatized. In most remarriages following the break up of marital unions, the welfare of the child is thought to be better maintained by the father's kin because of the characteristic fear of child neglect or even poisoning by a stepmother. Also to be categorized as a type of crisis fostering is the sending out of a child necessitated by apprehension over its survival. The fear of witchcraft by a neighboring old woman or a cowife, for example, or of reprisals by the spirits of unappeased dead kinsmen or ancestor could result in boarding a child out, while the supposed cause of the crisis is being ameliorated. Closely related to such fears is sending out a child because of previous or repeated experience

with infant or early childhood deaths by a mother. Crisis fostering is generally thought to improve the survival chance of children by removing them from the source of a crisis, real or imagined.

C. Wardship and Alliance Fostering

In many West African societies, there is a specific emphasis on the use of fostering to establish and strengthen social, economic, or political alliances (Goody, 1978; Sinclair, 1972). Children are sent out as wards to the homes of nonrelatives, friends, and people of certain social standing. In the Muslim culture, children, especially boys, are often sent at young ages to live with influential religious or political leaders or landlords to receive care, training and instruction in the Koran.

Because alliance fostering or wardship often combines the responsibilities of training and sponsoring of young children, it goes hand in hand with apprentice fostering. Children could be sent out at very early age to homes where they are disciplined or where they learn a trade. Some parents are thought to spoil their children by not being firm on them, so sending them away is supposed to help them develop useful traits. It is generally believed, in many parts of Africa, that thrashing makes a child wise and helps it to learn quickly. In this regard, a surrogate parent is believed to be in a better position to inculcate acceptable forms of social behavior, and spank a child, or inflict punishment, until it learns to perform useful functions. Clearly, the motivation for this type of fostering is social mobility and it is commonly

believed that wards or children raised under the supervision of surrogate parents, especially those socialized in superior or prestigious homes, are more progressive than those raised by their own parents.

D. Domestic Fostering

In Africa, children are an important part of the domestic labor force and are thus needed for the various household tasks and small services they perform. Children, therefore, may be fostered to redistribute their domestic importance especially between households with many children and those with few. Female children particularly are sent to experienced women where they are expected to learn the domestic roles they would perform in their future homes (Fiawoo, 1978; Goody, 1973, 1975). Little girls are often sent to the homes of a new mother, especially a young mother, to help `carry' the baby and to act as a little baby minder, in return for their training and maintenance.

Not only are children sent away to redistribute their domestic services in a tangible way, they are also sent out for their emotional support. They could be sent to elderly women or women without their own children for companionship; childless couples are often given children to rear so that they do not become `discouraged.'[4] Fostering of children for domestic tasks may have taken a new dimension in present day urban areas of West Africa, where many working families take in children as domestic servants, maids, and baby tenders in exchange for their maintenance, training and token wages. Most `housemaids' in the urban homes,

however, are not considered fostered because of their fairly advanced age and experience. On the other hand, small children sent out young, but who remained to provide these services as they mature, are being fostered.

E. Educational Fostering

Most present-day child fostering is commonly thought to be associated with formal education, as education is increasingly viewed as the sure means of social mobility.[5] However, sending children out for schooling is perhaps common in many parts of the world, and clearly not all African school children living away from their parents are being fostered, especially at older ages. Children are often boarded out with relatives, who are expected to provide formal education to the younger ones as a compensation for their own education. They may be sent to nonrelatives where there are few relatives living near to schools or where relatives are no longer willing to honor the kinship claims of distant relatives. For instance, Goody (1975) has observed, in Ghana, a shift in the choice of foster parents, from the traditional kin group to nonrelatives. She contends that the critical factor is the balance between child fostering as a reflection of rights vested in kinship roles and fostering as a means to education, an end to which almost all parents now aspire for their children as the major source of social mobility.[6]

3. Selection of Fosters from Relationship to Heads of Household Variable

The Ghana data provide detailed information on relationship to the head of household. However, such information is still not sufficient for a straightforward determination of who is or is not a fostered child. The head of the household, generally the person responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the household, is the first person to be identified on the questionnaire. All other persons in the household are defined with respect to him or her. The relationship to household head classification adopted in the Ghana study avoids the use of the conventional relationship titles such as uncle/aunt, nephew/niece, or cousins, because of the ambiguity and imprecision commonly associated with such a classification, especially in a predominantly illiterate society. Instead, a detailed and specific description of relationship was used, such as: mother's brother for uncle, brother's son for nephew, father's sister's daughter for cousin, and head's son's daughter for granddaughter. These are obviously cumbersome descriptions but they ensure an unambiguous and uniform application of the relationship classification. More importantly, such a classification enables us to link the children in a household to their parents, so that those whose parents are absent in the household are assumed fostered.

To determine fosters among children 10 years and younger, a process of downward elimination is adopted. First, all children

belonging to the head of household and/or spouse are eliminated. Then, by going through the relationship code, all children whose parents are found in the household are also eliminated. Those whose parents are not in the household are assigned a foster code if certain conditions apply. For instance, a child classified as 'head's child's son or daughter' (i.e., grandchild) is fostered if there is no adult (over 14 years old) classified as head's child in the household. Similarly, a child classified as 'other relative' or 'nonrelative' to household head is fostered if there are no adults in the household identically classified. Children selected in this step are termed 'unambiguous' fosters.

Children not selected in this stage consist of those whose parentage and fosterage status are more difficult to determine because of insufficient information or very complex relationship pattern. By looking at the number of children reported living in the household by each woman who had ever had a live birth, it is easy to ascertain the number of children whose mothers are not present in that household. Thus, for example, if the head's daughter reported two children in the home (i.e., two grandchildren to the head), but there are four grandchildren in the home, logically then two of them are being fostered. However, we do not know which of the four children actually belong to the woman. The problem then becomes that of assigning two of the four grandchildren to their mother (the head's daughter present) and determining the two being fostered.

Using an indirect procedure it is possible, approximately, to identify the child or children belonging to a given mother. The procedure is based on the assumption that the age specific fertility rate for a woman of a certain age x years ago is proportional to the probability that she is the mother of a child x years old in the household. In other words, for each 'ambiguous' child aged x years in the household we calculate the probability that a woman in the household gave birth to a child x years ago. That probability is:

$$F(k - x) = F(a)$$

where F stands for fertility rate

k is age of woman

x is age of child, and

F(a) is the age-specific fertility schedule of women.

Thus, given the fertility schedule in the population x years ago, it is possible to predict whether or not a woman is the mother of a child depending on when she started having babies. We know a woman's duration in the child-bearing state, that is, the difference between her current age and her age at first live birth, both of which are given in the data. This is compared with a child's age; a child whose age is higher than the difference between the woman's current age and her age at first live birth is definitely not borne by that woman.

Operationally, the current fertility schedule, not that x years ago, is calculated and assigned to each child aged x (where x ranges from 0 to 10 years) based on the applicable

(k-x) factor to ascertain the probability that it was born by a given woman when she was (k-x) years old. Having assigned the probabilities to all children 0-10 years, those with high probabilities are assumed to belong to the woman, while children with lowest values are less likely to be hers. This procedure is repeated for all likely mothers in the household. The process runs into difficulty when the selection involves two or more children of the same age. Some judgemental restrictions were imposed, such as assigning to a woman who has had only one child the one whose record appears next to her, or treating the child next to the one already assigned to a woman as a foster. Because of the indirect or reverse selection process involved in this step, the fosters thus selected, about 19% of all fosters aged 0-10 years, are classified as 'ambiguous fosters' to distinguish them from the relatively unambiguous ones already selected in the first step.

Generally, the linking procedure seems to work well when tested both manually and mechanically on selected household records. When compared, the two categories of fosters do not seem to show significantly different characteristics. Percentage shares of fosters by sex and by relation to the heads of household are the same, though ambiguous fosters tend to be younger (mean age of 5.1 years) than the unambiguous ones (mean age 5.9 years).

The indirect assignment of children to their mothers attempted here is far from perfect. In the first place, the use of current age specific fertility rates to represent past fertility may

bias the selection. However, a major source of bias in the entire linking exercise is that the selection of fosters is based only on information given by mothers which is not correspondingly gotten from fathers. Thus, some of the fostered grandchildren, for example, may well belong to the head's son who was present in the household but who was not asked the question on the number of own children. It would have been possible to calculate a paternity schedule and apply it to children also, though an already complicated selection process would have become even more complex. It is hoped that the number of instances where children are staying with their fathers, in cases of divorce, separation, or extramarital parentage, is not high because at ages below 11, children are naturally more likely to be living with their mothers than their fathers, or else with a surrogate mother. Be that as it may, this is best possible linking of children to parents we could accomplish, given the available information. It hardly needs stressing that only a study directly seeking information on child fostering could give accurate and precise information on the status of children.

4. Prevalence of Child Fosterage: Evidence from Mothers' Response on Children Away

From the process of linking children to their parents carried out on the Ghanaian data, it is estimated that nearly 20% of all children under 11 years were not living with their natural parents. This might somewhat overstate the number of fostered children since the matching of children is with respect to their

mothers only. However, from responses by mothers to the question on children away from home, about one in three Ghanaian women aged 15-34 years (one in five at 20-24 years), with at least one surviving child, reported a child living away from home. The corresponding figure from the 1974 Liberian census was nearly 40% of all mothers 15-34 years old. About 32% of all males and 24% of all female respondents in the Western Nigerian (Ibadan) data reported some children (under 15 years) away. The Ibadan respondents were also asked whether they have other children living with them, to which 37% of males and nearly 33% of females replied in the affirmative (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1983).

The incidence of child relocation is even more prevalent in Sierra Leone. The 1974 census data reveal that about 29% of Sierra Leonean children whose mothers were aged between 15 and 19 years were not living with their mothers. Thirty-six percent of children born to mothers 20-24 years of age were also living away from home. For older women aged 25-29 and 30-34 years, the proportions of children away increase to 40% and 46% respectively. These figures are indicative of high rates of `out-migration' of children, at relatively young ages.

The data point to considerable geographic and ethnic variations in the incidence of child fostering. In Sierra Leone, the practice seems more widespread in the southern and eastern chiefdoms, while the chiefdoms in the northern province show low incidence of fostering (see Table 1). In Ghana, fostering seems to be more prevalent among the Eastern, Upper, Volta, Central and

Northern regions, in that order. Ethnic differential in the incidence of child fostering is quite modest due probably to the very broad ethnic groupings adopted. However, Ga-Adangbe, Grusi, Mole-Dagbani and Akan peoples tend to practice fostering more than other ethnic groups. When smaller tribal groups are examined, substantial variations in fostering are evident. Thus among the Nzema, Ada, Nkoya, Dagomba, Krobo, and Sisala tribes, for instance, 20 to 30% of all children aged 0-10 years are fostered-out. The low fostering tribes include Sefwi, Ahafo, Telensi, Frafra, Pilapila and KonKonba, where only one in ten children are fostered out. Fante, Twi, Asente, Ga, Gonja, among others, fall in the middle, with 15 to 19 percent of all children boarding out of natal homes. The ethnic variation in child relocation is hardly surprising since child fostering is, in part, culturally determined, and certainly there is substantial cultural heterogeneity among the ethnic groups.

TABLE 1

PROPORTION OF CHILDREN AWAY BY THE AGE OF MOTHERS, SELECTED CHIEFDOMS, SIERRA LEONE, 1974

PROVINCE	CHIEFDOM	AGE OF MOTHERS 15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34
N. Province	Mongo	.16	.17	.22	.29
	Sengbe	.17	.19	.23	.31
	Sulima	.12	.16	.19	.25
E. Province	Malema	.41	.50	.48	.55
	Kandu Leppiama	.47	.50	.53	.59
	Mono	.52	.61	.54	.72
S. Province	Wunde	.47	.51	.61	.70
	Barri	.48	.54	.56	.63
	Mongoba Bullom	.49	.49	.57	.59
All Sierra Leone		.29	.36	.40	.46

Source: Unpublished data from the 1974 Census of Population in Sierra Leone.

Analyses of the data suggest that child fostering may be related to female labor force participation. Generally, working women tend to send out children more frequently than nonworking women. For instance, while about 34% of working Ghanaian mothers 15-34 years old (22% of 20-24 year olds) had sent out some children, only 25% of homemakers of the same age (16% of 20-24 year old homemakers) reported children away. Among workers, there are significant variations by occupation and employment status. Nearly 33% of employees aged 20-24 sent out children, compared with 20% of self-employed mothers of the same age who reported children away.

The Nigerian data also show the same pattern of higher incidence of fostering children out among working mothers relative

to nonworking women. While 11% of Ibadan homemakers aged 20-29 sent out children, 19% of the working mothers of the same age had sent out children. Among workers, women in white-collar jobs are less likely to send out children (9% of white-collar mothers 15-34 years old) relative to women in some other paid employment (nearly 20% of them among 15-34 year olds). Because of their relative high socioeconomic status, the white-collar women are probably making alternative child-rearing arrangements, such as sending children to day-care centers or hiring the services of paid child minders and maids. That fostering out children is less prevalent among homemakers, followed by the self-employed women is partly explained by the compatibility between child raising and their informal activities.

With respect to the rural-urban differential in fostering out children, it seems that urban Ghanaian mothers are more likely to send out their children than rural women. Nearly 30% of rural mothers 15-34 years old (17% of 20-24 year olds) and 36% of all urban women of the same age (26% of 20-24 year olds) reported some children living away from home. The mean number of children away was also higher for urban women (.56) relative to rural women (.38). While 23% of urban children borne to mothers aged 15-34 years were away from home, only 17% of rural children to the same group of mothers were away. It could be that urban mothers, under various strains and stresses of the city, find it more difficult to adequately care for their children themselves. To many urban women, fostering children

out could be a response to poverty and other urban problems. Since many mothers in the urban area go out to work or trade, return to school after childbirth, have inadequate housing, and maintain tenuous or peripheral social relationships with the neighborhood, child fostering offers an alternative means of raising children until the family becomes more stable or settled. Faced with many urban difficulties, some women fall back on the extended family and send their children to be reared by rural kin. This also serves a socialization function for the children whose urban birthplace is often thought to limit their knowledge of culture and tradition.

However, that urban mothers appear more likely to send out their children for fostering than rural women is somewhat counterintuitive, especially if children (particularly older ones) are sent out mainly for schooling as has been argued by Sinclair (1972) and Fiawoo (1978). It goes without saying that the urban areas have more and better schools than the rural areas in all African countries. Therefore, we would expect a dominant flow of fosters from the rural areas to the cities, with a relatively weaker flow in the opposite direction. Evidence form Liberia shows this pattern. While about 42% of all rural Liberian mothers aged 14-34 reported children out, 36% of urban women of the same age did the same in 1974. There is no a priori reason why Ghanaian mothers should behave differently, except perhaps that the work participation rate among Ghanaian women is very high, especially in the towns and cities. Further,

because the matrilineal system is very strong among many Ghanaian ethnic groups, child fostering probably acts as an important link between urban women and their matrilineal kin in the countryside.

5. Characteristics of Fosters

The foster population is derived from the Ghanaian data by linking or matching children with their parents, as described above. Only fosters among children under eleven years representing some 20% of all children in this age group, are considered.

5. Age of Fosters

The Ghanaian data show that fostering starts early, even before the first birthday of many children. However, the age distribution of 0-10 year old fosters shows that fostering increases with age up to age 6, where the percentage share by age remains fairly constant to age 10 years where it experiences a slight increase (Table 2). Yet about 45% of all fostered children aged 0-10 were 0-5 years of age, indicating that children leave home at a relatively young age. It is rather striking that nearly one infant out of 10 is not living with its biological mother. Another indication of the young age is the finding that over 16% of all children aged 0-5 years were not living with their mothers. This figure is identical to the 16% average share of fosters among children 0-6 years of age found by Fiawoo (1978) in three Ghanaian communities.

TABLE 2

PROPORTION OF CHLDREN NOT LIVING WITH NATURAL PARENTS, GHANA 1971

AGE	ALL FOSTERS			URBAN		RURAL	
		MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
0	.096	.093	.103	.096	.104	.088	.102
1	.112	.104	.118	.105	.120	.097	.111
2	.127	.118	.133	.127	.139	.112	.125
3	.150	.140	.159	.148	.164	.132	.153
4	.177	.159	.191	.170	.193	.155	.184
5	.198	.164	.207	.189	.209	.158	.203
6	.213	.182	.221	.191	.243	.181	.205
7	.226	.193	.250	.197	.272	.187	.234
8	.241	.208	.272	.207	.303	.210	.253
9	.253	.219	.284	.216	.322	.219	.259
10	.260	.223	.297	.223	.353	.220	.267
Total	2.038	1.803	2.235	2.080	2.422	1.759	1.096

Note: The summation of each column represents the expected number of years lived away from home by a child of a given characteristic by age 11.

B. Sex Differences

The data show that nearly 17% of all male Ghanaian children 0-10 years of age and 21% of female children of the same age were not residing with their biological parents. This sex differential in the incidence of fosterage is also clear from the proportionate contribution of each sex in the pool of fostered children. Male children constitute 44.85% of all fosters, while the remainder were females, giving a sex ratio of 81 among 0 to 10 year old fosters. By contrast, the sex ratio in the population in the same age bracket is 100.

Table 2 shows that at every age, the proportion of female fosters is higher than the proportion of male fosters. Secondly, the net 'outmigration' of females between two adjacent ages is generally higher than that of males. Finally, the expected number of years lived away by a child between 0 and 10 years is higher for females (2.24 years) than males (1.8 years).

The excess of females over males among fosters was also observed by Fiawoo (1978) among the Ghanaian children he studied. This sex differential could suggest that parents are more willing to part with female children than males. It could be that a stronger emotional attachment to males delays their departure from home until older ages. It could also be indicative of the fact that girls are more helpful in performing menial tasks and chores and thus more valuable around the home as fosters.

C. Rural-Urban Differences

With respect to rural-urban residence, nearly 20% of all urban children 0-10 years old and 18% of all rural children of the same age were not living at home. Urban residence seems to increase the dominance of female fosters over male fosters. While 15.4% of all urban male children were fostered, nearly 21% of all urban females 0-10 years were being fostered. In the rural area, for comparison, 15% of all male children 0-10 years, and 19% of female children were being fostered. While there are 100 girls to 100 boys in the general population 0-10 years, there are 133 girls to 100 boys among all fosters,

116 girls to 100 boys among rural fosters, and 142 girls to 100 boys among urban fosters.

On the origins and destinations of fosters (derived from the questions on place of birth and residence) we observed that about 63% of all fosters have moved within the rural area, 5% have moved from rural to urban areas, 8% were urban-rural movers, while 24% have been relocated in the urban areas. About 68% of all fosters were of rural origin while 32% originate in the urban areas. Of all fosters of rural origin, only 7.4% lived in the urban areas, while the rest (92.6%) were relocated within the rural areas. Similarly, of all fosters of urban origin, 26% went to rural homes, while 74% lived in the urban areas. It would appear from these patterns that, though children could be moved from one location to another over long distance, most fosterage takes place within a short distance.

D. Relationship to Foster Parent

Forty percent of all fostered Ghanaian children aged 0-10 years were grandchildren of their foster parents, the heads of household or their spouses. Nephews/nieces and 'other relatives' to the household heads came second and third, respectively, in the percentage share of fosters. The pattern holds when disaggregated by urban and rural residence. It is perhaps noteworthy that the percentage shares of fosters who were distant relatives and nonrelatives was higher in the urban areas than in the countryside. Because of the desire to raise children in the 'modern' cities, it could be that parents send out their children to

be raised by urban friends, village folks or even complete strangers. The predominance of female fosters over males in the non-relative category, especially in the urban areas, is perhaps indicative of the large number of girls who are sent out as maids and child tenders.

E. Fosters and Schooling

The Ghanaian data provide us with current school enrollment information with which to test the importance of schooling in West African fosterage. All respondents aged 6 years and over were asked the question on school attendance; the current school attendance status of fosters could thus be compared with that of nonfosters.

The data reveal that while 49% of fostered children 6-10 years old were enrolled in school, about 47% of nonfosters were attending school at the time of the survey. Age for age, school attendance rate is slightly higher for fosters than nonfosters, except at age 10 years where 59.4% of fosters were enrolled in school, compared with 61.2% school-going nonfosters.

As would be expected, female fosters are less likely to be in school than male fosters. About 54% of all male fosters were in school, compared with 46% of female fosters. It could be that fewer female fosters are sent out for formal education; even the ones enrolled in schools probably combine schooling with many activities around the home, and this may be associated with high drop-out rates and insufficient attention to studies.[7] Indeed, some fosters who are sent out for schooling in the urban

areas may end up as street hawkers or busy and overworked housemaids and child tenders in the homes of their educated, working-class foster parents, whose own children are promptly sent to school every morning.

When the schooling data are disaggregated by rural-urban residence, an interesting pattern emerges. Urban nonfosters clearly attended school more than urban fosters; 65% of the former are enrolled in school compared with 57% of the latter. The reverse is the case however in the rural areas where relatively more fosters (46%) were enrolled in school relative to nonfosters (40%). A wide disparity in school enrollment between urban and rural areas is evident, though this disparity is more between urban and rural nonfosters than between urban and rural fosters. It should also be pointed out that fostered children may not have had the same schooling opportunities as nonfosters in their place of origin, so even the same percentage attending school might imply a great deal of school-related fostering.

6. Maternal Factors Affecting Fosterage

Here the results of multivariate analysis on the Ghanaian data are summarized.[8] Ordinary least squares regression technique is used to analyze the response of ever-married mothers, 15-34 years old, to the question on children away from home as correlates of their socioeconomic attributes. The dependent variable is an index of child fostering, constructed for each woman with at least one surviving child. This index is defined as the actual number of children away to the expected number

of children away, and measures whether a mother is boarding out fewer or more children than the average woman of the same age. Each woman's observation is weighted by the number of surviving children. The independent variables are mainly in the form of dummies, so that the regression coefficients are interpreted as the effect of membership in a category of a given explanatory variable relative to being in the reference category, holding constant other variables in the regression.

The ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients are presented in Table 3 for two equations. Equation 1 contains the explanatory variables that pertain to the respondent's characteristics or that of her household. In addition to these variables, in Equation II ethnic groupings are introduced to see how the socioeconomic variables change when the pattern of the ethnic practice of child fostering is controlled. The table also shows the zero-order correlation between each of the explanatory variables and the dependent variable.

Woman's age is negatively related to fostering-out of children as shown by the coefficient of -.0348 in Equation I, significant at 1% level. This relationship essentially remains unchanged when the effect of belonging to different ethnic groups is considered in Equation II. We expected a positive relationship between a woman's age and fostering-out of children as shown by the bivariate relationship. However, the negative sign in the multivariate relationship is intuitively satisfying. That younger women, whose current number of children is lower than older

women, do send out more children implies that they are sent out at a young age. Among the reasons, younger women and more mobile and face considerable social adjustments and instability; they also are more likely to have had young children born out of union. Further, their relative inexperience, and perhaps disinclination, in child rearing could result in sending out children at young ages, especially to grandparents.

TABLE 3

MULTIPLE REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS, ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS WITH THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE (RATIO OF OBSERVED TO EXPECTED CHILDREN AWAY), GHANA 1971

Explanatory Variable	Equation I		Equation II		Zero-Order Corr. with Dep. Var.
	B	T-Ratio	B	T-Ratio	
Age of Woman	-.0348	-11.189	-.0329	-10.550	.039
Surviving Children	.0173	2.270	.0150	1.966	.066
Person-Room Ratio	.0334	7.610	.0273	6.095	.089
Educational Status:					
Primary + Middle	-.0279	-1.335	-.0025	-0.117	.057
Secondary +	-.1409	-2.143	-.1725	-2.623	.017
No Education[r]	-				
Marital Status:					
Monogamous	-.5639	-23.606	-.5420	-22.581	-.063
Polygynous	-.4725	-18.268	-.4411	-16.913	-.022
Sep. div. wid.[r]	-				
Place of Residence:					
Urban	.3042	17.003	.3002	16.642	.106
Rural[r]	-				
Work Status:					
Employee	.5462	12.822	.5227	12.240	.082
Self-employed	.0480	2.858	.0093	0.534	.019
Homemaker[r]	-				
Religious Affiliation:					
Christian	.1182	5.853	.0190	0.840	.100
Traditional	-.0802	-3.569	-.0796	-3.488	-.084
Muslim[r]	-				
Ethnic Group:					
Akan			.2194	5.635	.089
Ga-Adangbe			.2019	4.328	.032
Ewe			.2313	5.562	.011
Guan			.1409	2.568	.002
Central Togo			.2839	3.273	.011
Gurna/Tem			-.2334	-4.892	.077
Mole-Dagbani			.0376	0.978	.071
Grusi			.1070	1.887	.017
Others[r]			-		
Constant	1.5397		1.4381		
R^2	.0461		.0496		
F-value	173.580		115.911		

Note: Regression is based on 44942 ever-married women aged 15-34 years, with at least one surviving child. The dependent variable is an index of child fostering, defined as the ratio of observed to expected number of children away.

[r]Refers to the reference category.

*Significant at .01 level.

As expected, the number of surviving children is positively related to fostering out of children.[10] Since it is children who survive that are sent out, it follows that women with more children are more likely to send out children. In a culture where fostering is common, it is on such women that more requests or demands for children are often made. It could also be that women who have sent out children go ahead to have more, replacing those away or having more to be sent out. If the mechanism offered by the institution of child fostering is such that parents of larger families tend to relocate their young children with kin or nonkin when the cost of children is high, and have them back or benefit from them in later years when they are net contributors to the family, then child fostering is quite consistent with high fertility. Often these considerations might not be within the realm of parents' conscious calculus, however, they are aware that kinship obligation requires relatives to take care of other relatives' children as a part of sharing of responsibilities.

That household size could put considerable pressure and strain on the available household resources and space is perhaps shown by the significant positive association between fostering out of children and person-room ratio. The results indicate that households where the number of persons per room is high are more likely to send out children than where the person-room ratio is low. A similar observation has been made by Rawson

and Berggren (1973) in Haiti. The acute shortage of housing in urban centers (and hence high rental costs), but perhaps more importantly the inadequacy of whatever is available, probably leads to the relocation of many children. To most urban inhabitants 'home' is somewhere in the rural area, where family members still reside in the family home or compound, paying no rents. When available space and accommodation become smaller as household size gets larger, some children probably become foster-out candidates, the rural homes being their potential destination. This is not to deny possible accommodation problems in the rural areas as well, because of the small size of houses or huts in places and limitation in the number of rooms available.

Maternal educational attainment appears negatively associated with fostering-out of children; the relationship is emphasized by the inclusion of ethnic groups in Equation II. The coefficient for secondary educated women indicates that the index of child fostering for this group is below that of illiterate women by 17% in Equation II (14% in Equation I). There is virtually no difference between the less educated women and those with no education at all. It seems that a fairly high level of maternal education is necessary to reduce child relocation. Better educated women perhaps know that they are better equipped to raise their children than surrogates. They are also married to well educated, and hence high socioeconomic status husbands, who could afford other and expensive child rearing alternatives.

Currently being in a marital union decreases the practice of sending children out; however, women in polygynous unions tend to send out more children than those in monogamous marriages. In Equation II, for instance, being in monogamous union,as against separated, divorced or widowed, reduces fostering-out of children by 54%, while being in polygynous union decreases it by 44%. The pattern of these relationships is perhaps associated with marital instability and hardship consequent upon the absence, or ineffectual presence, of husbands.

Urban residence has a large positive effect on child out-fostering. The predicted index of child fostering is about 30% higher for urban women relative to rural women. It could be that many urban women left their children with rural relatives before migrating, or relocated them when burdened by many problems of urban living, not the least of which is inadequate housing. Urban women often send children to rural relatives as a tangible manifestation of social links or blood affinity.

With regard to work status, fostering-out of children increases with female work participation; however, only the employees are significantly different from the reference category in Equation II. The self-employed are essentially similar to the homemakers as indicated by the low t-ratio. Compared with other women, the employees do go out to work daily and probably work in formal settings inconvenient for both occasional breast feeding and child tending. Thus, child relocation could be a convenient means of minimizing the conflict between work and child raising.

No doubt, the provision of child day care centers, nursery schools and hostels will reduce the attractiveness to working mothers of sending out children to be fostered. Meanwhile, such facilities are scanty in the urban areas and non-existent in the countryside. Also, the use of such facilities entails a budget which may be well beyond the reach of most working but poorly paid women.

The regression results are indicative of significant differences among Muslims, Christians and traditional believers in the extent to which children are sent out, as revealed by the coefficients in Equation I. However, there is a considerable reduction in these differences when adjustment is made for ethnic groupings in Equation II. Women in traditional African religion still exhibit the lowest child fostering index, significant at 1% level. The positive coefficient on Christians is not significant. It is not clear why the religious categories behave the way they do. If anything, the relationship is somehow counterintuitive; probably religious affiliation here is a proxy for some other unmeasured social characteristics.

The ethnic dummies reveal considerable variations among the Ghanaian tribes in the practice of child fostering, even when the available socioeconomic variables are controlled for. This ethnic variation is hardly surprising since child fostering is culturally determined. It is important to point out that the inclusion of ethnic groups in the second model affected the magnitude of all the socioeconomic coefficients when compared with Equation I. The ethnic dummies serve to filter out the

noise and distortions in the relationship between these variables and the practice of child fostering. Although the addition of ethnic groupings affects all the variables in the model, its impact on education, marital status, work participation and religious affiliation is highest.

The ethnic dummies modestly increased the R^2 from .046 to nearly .05, which means that the variables in the complete model explain only 5% of the variation in child fostering, though the equation is significant at 1% level as measured by f-statistic of 116. In a rather simplistic model as presented above, some important variables are inevitably missed, importantly here are variables pertaining to husbands; measurement errors are often large for the available ones; also, a phenomenon such as child fostering, that is strongly embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of a people, may prove intractable to even the best equipped social scientist.

7. Discussion

The prevalence, types and determinants of child fosterage in West Africa have been presented using secondary data. As might be expected from secondary data on which exploratory work is done, the study suffers from various technical and definitional problems. The main weakness, however, is the absence of explicit fosterage questions and consequently the imperfection of matching children with their parents or the assumption that children not residing with biological parents are apparently fostered-out. However, the study is essentially exploratory in nature;

the results are expected to kindle interest on the topic and give rise to more detailed and explicit examination of the phenomenon in different African populations.[11]

The practice of boarding out children is reported, under various names, in many parts of the world. Yet, West African child fostering is probably more than what is apparently widespread in many human societies: grandmothers participating in raising grandchildren, orphans being raised by relatives, students living with older siblings or urban acquaintances, parents getting rid of 'bad' or unwanted children, and apprentices moving in with their masters. West African child fostering, apart from being widespread, starts early in the life of a child. It is partly the consequence of a need to reallocate resources within the extended family or related kin group, ensuring maximum survival for the unit and strengthening the ties of kinship. West African child fostering is unlike Western fostering which, apart from not being very prevalent, usually takes place with the social welfare authority acting as an intermediary. It is also unlike West Indian or Latin American fostering which is more crisis-oriented (Goody, 1975). Here, to foster-out a child is not an acknowledgement of the parents' inferiority, or for that matter, that of the child. A fostered child could return to biological parents in anything from a couple of days to many years, and could be an important source of wealth transfer to both his parents and foster parents, or of social mobility for his clan or kin group, at an older age.

Child fosterage is simply an accepted means of raising children in many societies in West Africa. Even West African immigrants in America and Europe are reported to send their children to foster homes. Goody (1975) observed a high percentage of West African children boarding out with English foster parents in London (which she contrasts with the West Indian children usually sent to 'nannies' on daily basis). She suggested that the African parents, who are mostly students and workers, while trying to fill other roles as well, share a cultural view of parenthood (from home) which approves of delegating certain aspects of their parental child rearing roles.

The demographic implications of child fostering may not be within the conscious realization of many parents, and certainly have not been obvious to anthropologists who have long observed its prevalence in many parts of West Africa. Neither has it entered into the analytical tool of demographers working in the area. Yet, child fostering, by its very nature, could have consequences on a child's morbidity and survival, consequences that may be either positive or negative depending, partly, on how the culture treats children outside of their maternal homes. It could have some impact, directly or indirectly, on the fertility decisions of both natural parents and foster parents, mainly because it serves to reallocate the resources available for raising children within the society. Furthermore, child fostering could enhance female labor force participation by freeing mothers' time for work outside the home. It could also affect the entry

of children into the labor force, as well as family composition and household size.

The purpose of this paper is to call attention to the practice of child fosterage in West Africa as a demographic issue in the very midst of perhaps the highest childhood mortality and fertility in the world, coupled with gross demographic data deficiency. The inability of the commonly studied socioeconomic variables to adequately and satisfactorily explain observed demographic phenomena in these populations should lead to the search for more societal, community-level and behavioral practices and institutions which affects or shpae demographic decisions and events. Child fostering is but one such practice.

Notes

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1. Detailed discussion of paid wet nurses in Europe is provided by Edward Shorter (1975). For parental underinvestment on children, see Susan C.M. Scrimshaw, (1978). Esther Goody (1973) discussed the delegation of parental roles among the Gonja of Ghana.

2. John Sinclair, (1972) makes a strong case for the desirability of fostering in West Africa, which he contrasts with the Western social context, where it is "normal" for children to be brought up by their "real" parents.

3. Because of large family size norms in most West African societies, fostering, much like a welfare mechanism, is probably a means of rewarding or compensating those who have many children. As Okore (1977) notes, "within the family such mutual obligations are effective in minimizing the burdens of many children and making the burden (if any) of raising children independent of on one's own fertility."

4. Sinclair writes, "Families at the beginning and end of their reproductive cycle are particularly likely to lack children, and need to "import" them; but infertility is another cause of childlessness, and childless couples will be given children to rear so that they do not become 'discouraged,'" (Sinclair 1972:36).

5. Fiawoo, Goody, Sinclair, among others, have argued that schooling is the main motivation of modern West African child fostering. However, none presents any evidence of higher school enrollment by fosters relative to nonfosters.

6. It is Goody's (1975) contention that in the modern world, rights vested in kinship roles become less compelling than the need to help children make their way in the new skills required for full participation in an increasingly diversifying economy. Hence, children are increasingly being sent out to be raised by non-relative, such as school teachers, priests, God-parents, traders and strangers with the aim of giving them a good start in life through schooling.

7. Personal communication with Dr. Caroline Bledsoe, who recently completed a field work on child fosterage in Sierra Leone.

8. Only a summary is presented here; for methodological detail and analyses on other data sets, see Isiugo-Abanihe (1983).

9. Index of child fostering is used as the dependent variable because it seems to be a robust measure. The same regression analysis was carried out using a dummy variable construct in a logit-type model. Directions of relationships are similar to the ones reported here, but with very low and insignificant coefficients.

10. Large family size could result in sending out children. However, the acceptance of fostering could lead to high fertility. A simultaneous causality between fostering-out of children and fertility is suggested. Two stage least squares analysis was attempted in the original work. The results are plausible but need to be corroborated with better child fostering data.

11. Caroline Bledsoe has recently completed a detailed field research among the Mende of Sierra Leone, with whom she lived for fourteen months. Elaborate qualitative and quantitative data are collected and the results are expected to elucidate the nature and demographic significance of child fosterage. More research in this direction will be rewarding.

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