

*The Influence of AIDS and the Slave Trade on
Adoption and Fosterage in Africa*

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The purposes of this paper are to 1) establish the primary functions of adoption and fosterage in African societies while emphasizing traditional and current incorporation and 2) compare some of the impacts of slavery on African social, economic, and kinship systems with the impact of AIDS currently. There is very little literature on the effects of either event upon African fosterage and adoption and the conclusions offered here are largely speculative. I believe the two events can provide insight about one another because they altered Africa's demography in similar ways. I understand that labeling any phenomenon "African" fails to do justice to the enormous cultural differences present there. Here, when fosterage and other institutions of kinship and society are referred to as "African" I do not mean to suggest that they are exactly the same throughout the continent, I mean only that they occur with some frequency in Africa. This paper is limited in scope and should be read accordingly.

The addition of a child to a family has traditionally been referred to as "fosterage" within Africa and "adoption" elsewhere. Adoptions generally involve a transfer of legal rights from biological parents to fictive ones while African systems of fosterage traditionally have not involved legal institutions. Foster relationships are socially acknowledged but do involve "rights" over others in the Western, jural, sense (Goody 1971).

Fosterage has deep roots with many African cultures. At times, fosterage is practiced as a matter of tradition and the exchange of children between households serves to strengthen bonds between them. At other times, fostering becomes necessary because of the death of a child's parents. In these cases, kin generally take orphans as foster children. The spread of AIDS has made this form of fosterage common today.

AIDS is killing not only a generation of parents, but also the aunts, uncles, and cousins who would have traditionally taken a parentless child in. No longer can children rely on lateral kin for support - they are simply not there. Foster and adoptive relationships are being forced to follow lineal ties instead with grandparents playing an ever greater role as foster parents (Subbarao and Coury 2004).

This is not the first time Africa has witnessed the disappearance of entire generations of young, strong men and women in their reproductive prime. The slave trade had similar effects on the continent. Within the following pages, comparisons will be made between what happened to families and fosterage during the time of slavery to what is happening now because of AIDS.

Adoption has been quite common throughout historical times in all types of cultural settings. The practice allows people to actively manage their household size. Where optimal family size is a product of environmental limitations, this ability can be extremely important. In her classic paper *Adoption and Kinship in Oceania* Joan Silk (1980) discusses why people adopt and the costs and benefits of adoption through an evolutionary framework. Adoption is extremely common in Oceania.

According to Silk (1980), "The proportion of households in which at least one individual is involved in an adoption transaction ranges from 12% in Tonga to 83% in a community of the Ellice Islands (Tuvalu)." For adoption to occur with such frequency, Silk points out that the practice must benefit both adoptive and biological parents. Adoption is most likely to occur when the sets of parents face different economic circumstances. For example, adoption can occur when the birth of a child puts demands on the resources of its household which cannot be met (1980). Children born into such situations may adversely affect their siblings by diverting resources from them. From the

perspective of the family, placing the child for adoption relieves the resource stress imposed by the new child and therefore helps the remaining children who remain. In this situation, the sole motivation for adopting is likely to be kin selection. Adoptive families stand to gain nothing economically by increasing their family size and the addition of another child may even harm the household economically.

Silk notes that some subsistence methods, such as intensive agriculture, require a “critical” family size in order to for the family to “function as a viable economic unit” (Silk 1980). Families who are either too large or too small may suffer based on their size. Her second hypothesis is based on the empirical observation that adopting a child out decreases the economic viability of a household if the adoption causes the household size to fall below the critical family size. Alternatively, if a family is larger than the critical size, adopting a child out can be beneficial by bringing the family size closer to the optimum.

Silk hypothesizes that families that place and those that adopt can benefit in this scenario. It follows that kinship ties between the birth and adoptive households are unnecessary in this latter scenario because both the birth and adoptive families benefit through the exchange. Silk found support for both hypotheses using ethnographic data from Oceania. Parents who adopted generally had no children or fewer children than they wished and parents who adopted children out often did so because they felt they could not stand the burden of another child. In addition, adoption was significantly more likely to occur between kin than non-kin.

Adoption has also been used as a means to regulate family size and composition elsewhere in the world. Jack Goody (1977) describes the three primary functions of adoption in Western Europe:

- 1) to provide homes for orphans, bastards, foundlings and the children of impaired families;
- 2) to provide childless couples with social progeny;
- 3) to provide an individual or couple with an heir to their property.

Goody frames these functions in historical context by explaining how each applied from ancient to recent times in Greece, Rome, and China where land was often scarce. According to Goody, the first function of adoption mentioned above was “rarely found” anywhere until recently because families lacked the surplus necessary to add children at will (1977: 81). Until recently, very few people had the ability to support children who were not “their own.” Elsewhere I have used the terms “altruistic adoption” when describing adoptions serving Goody’s first function and “ego-centered adoption” when referring to those serving the second and third (Gibson 2004).

In Asia and Europe, it was often land, not labor, that was in short supply. The need for large families did not drive adoption as in Oceania. The second and third functions of adoption Goody presents allowed childless families to bequeath land and other resources to an entity other than the church or state. Today, adoption is still used as a means of heir procurement and to provide couples with “social progeny.” Additionally, many people in industrialized nations can now “afford” to adopt because of 1) the increased average economic wellbeing households and 2) the decreased number of biological offspring in the same households (Gibson 2004).

Fosterage is widely practiced in Africa. Unlike adoption, fosterage does not involve the transfer of legal rights over an adoptee. According to Goody, (1977) fosterage is more common than adoption in Africa because land is abundant and, when necessary, “brothers and nephews” can inherit property (depending upon local rules). Polygyny also eliminates the need for couples to adopt because of female infertility. If a woman cannot have children, the addition of a co-wife can remedy the situation (Goody 1969; Goody 1977).

African economic and subsistence systems do not mandate adoption but there are times when children are taken in and fostered. This is likely done at some expense to other children in the foster household. Why is this the case? Goody briefly addresses the cause for function of African fosterage saying that it can “take care of crisis situations by providing proxy or foster parents” (Goody 1977). Silk goes one step further and defines crisis situations as those which involve the loss of one or both parents (Silk 1980; Silk 1987). There are African cultures where fosterage has traditionally been commonplace even in non-crisis situations. Several West African groups (Gonja, Mossi, and Hausa) encourage fostering between non-kin in order to strengthen bonds between families (Goody 1971; Goody 1982; Silk 1987). In these cases, fosterage is optional but it may be that those who participate benefit by establishing larger social networks than those who do not. This hypothesis has not been explicitly tested to my knowledge.

I have provided several reasons for which adoption and fosterage occur. Adoption allows people to consciously manipulate the size and make-up of families. Outside of Africa, economics issues have motivated adoption. Adoption has 1) allowed people to either better exploit their land through the increased labor it provides; 2) provided a means other than infanticide of alleviating pressure on households with too

many children; 3) more recently allowed people to act philanthropically toward those in need; 4) given “social progeny” to those who are incapable of conceiving naturally; 5) served as a means of heir production. Fosterage is generally not motivated by economics but by necessity in crisis situations. Certain cultures may practice fosterage in order to form and maintain large social networks which are important where formal insurance is nonexistent.

The spread of AIDS in Africa has made fosterage and adoption especially important. As an entire generation of Africans die, children are left in the care of relatives so long as they are alive. Similar circumstances existed during the African slave trade (1440 AD - 1870 AD). During this period, it has been estimated that 15-20 million Africans were taken from their homes and put to work as slaves (Clark 1988). When that figure is compared to recent estimates placing the number of *sub-Saharan* Africans with HIV at 24.5 million (Barnett and Whiteside 2002), the scale of the problem becomes strikingly evident especially when one factors in the fact that the epidemic is scarcely 25 years old.

Slavery had long-lasting effects on the Africa’s demographic, economic, and social structure. The slave trade removed the most physically able Africans from their homes. This drained the continent of power, production, and reproduction. Slavery upset the sex ratio in many areas because men were preferentially chosen over women. Paul Lovejoy (1989) estimates that men were taken as slaves at rates of 181:100 compared to women from the 16th-19th centuries. Eventually, in some areas of Western Africa, the adult sex ratio reached 80:100 (Manning 1993). The practice of polygyny requires older men to develop systems which keep young men from marrying women their own age. This creates a pool of young women whom older men marry polygynously. Slavery may

have “managed” groups of young men by removing them physically much as older men manage them socially today. Slavery also brought population growth in Africa to a standstill (Manning 1993). This contributed to the production drain discussed above. Slavery broke the psychological identities of those it touched. The institution emasculated men by making them subordinate to Europeans in every conceivable way. Slavery also contributed to inter-African warfare and violence because it transformed human life into a commodity easily procured with guns introduced from Europe (Clark 1988). Finally, slavery broke the traditional kinship networks which form the backbone of all traditional societies.

Some similarities should be expected between what happened during the slave trade and what is happening now with AIDS in Africa and the events may tell us something about each other. As happened with slavery, AIDS is causing sweeping demographic changes which are disrupting the continent economically and socially (UNAIDS 2000). Africa is experiencing a labor drain because its most able workers are falling ill and many women are being forced into prostitution and sexual servitude as a means of survival (Grundfest Schoepf 1988). HIV is indiscriminate in who it infects so men, children, and women are all affected by it in high numbers. AIDS has not skewed the African sex ratio as dramatically as slavery nor has it yet brought population growth to a halt (UNAIDS 2000). However, AIDS has caused changes in African kinship functions. For example, the indiscriminate nature by which AIDS kills has had implications for the common African practice of leveratic marriage. According to Annabel Desgrees du Lou (1999), women whose husbands die have traditionally been married by his brother. Because of AIDS, men now practice the leverate less often. They are commonly warned against marrying their diseased brother's wife by doctors

aware of his HIV positive status. Desgrees du Lou reports that these same doctors often do not inform women that their husbands have died from AIDS. The loss of the leverate forces women to remarry outside their husband's lineage in patrilineal societies. This may spread the disease geographically.

Little has been written about the impact of slavery on adoption and fostering practices. As the slave trade progressed, the kidnapping and selling of children became more common. Women and children were often taken together as a package and it was not uncommon for them to be broken up later on (Manning 1993). It has been estimated that early on in the slave trade, about 20 percent of those taken were children, later on the number approached 70 percent (Manning 1993).

Slavery produced large numbers of orphans. If the AIDS epidemic can serve as a comparison, older members of society were surely important foster parents for children who were left behind. In present day Tanzania and Uganda, orphaned children are fostered by grandparents 43 percent of the time, in Zambia the number is 38 percent, in Uganda 32 percent and so on (Subbarao and Coury 2004). It seems reasonable to assume that grandparents were also called upon to foster children during slavery because the child's aunts and uncles would have been at the "right" age to be taken into slavery. HIV/AIDS has drastically changed the functions of kinship in Africa by orphaning 13.2 million children there (Barnett and Whiteside 2002). Orphaned children are being left with fewer and fewer lateral kin. They are being forced into their grandparents' hands. Fictive parents may behave differently when fostering or adopting a child because of need rather than want. Living with kin presents less physical and psychological risk to children than living with non-kin (Daly and Wilson 1981; Daly and Wilson 1985; Daly and Wilson 1996; Daly and Wilson 1981) but living with grandparents may present

problems in itself (Subbarao and Coury 2004). Grandparents may be physically less able to care for children than natal parents, they may not have the household resources of younger people, and they have a higher chance of dying while the child is in their care (Subbarao and Coury 2004). On the other hand, grandparents may be better able to teach cultural traditions because of their experience with them.

Adoptees and foster children experience higher rates of psychological maladies than biological children (Gibson 2004; Wierzbicki 1993). As fosterage becomes more common, greater numbers of African children will exhibit psychological problems stemming from childhood instability (Brodzinsky 1987; Brodzinsky, et al. 1998). Slavery also altered the psychological landscape of Africa, but slave owners were visible. The stealth of HIV/AIDS may contribute to some people's psychological problems. The number of African children orphaned by AIDS is expected to rise to nearly 45 million by 2010 (Subbarao and Coury 2004). As a current generation of grandparents ages and dies, who will be there to care for Africa's orphans? Already in some areas orphans are caring for one another at high rates (Subbarao and Coury 2004). Where will the traditions of the past go and what will take their place as increasing numbers of adults disappear?

I have provided a brief description of the functions of adoption and fosterage in Africa and elsewhere. Adoption differs from fosterage in that it transfers legal rights from one set of parents to another. Adoption is common where wealth is difficult to divide and/or heirs are necessary and polygyny is not practiced. Where fosterage is practiced infrequently, it is done to provide for children in crisis situations. Where it is practiced frequently, it strengthens kin ties between households.

The demographic changes introduced to Africa during slavery and by the AIDS epidemic have produced some similar outcomes. Both have depleted Africa of productive and reproductive adults and have left millions of children orphaned. It is often grandparents who take in children orphaned by AIDS, they possibly did the same for children orphaned by slavery. The number of AIDS orphans is projected to increase until 2010. Grandparents are sure to play an ever-increasing role in African fosterage throughout the next couple of decades. When they begin passing away along with their children, fewer people will be left to take care of the young. As this happens, a wider range of kin may be called upon to foster these children. A second or third cousin may be expected to take a child in where no one else is left. It will become increasingly important to maintain these long distance ties in this scenario. Alternatively, people may become more reliant upon fictive kinship ties. Where fosterage is currently commonplace, the framework for handling the coming AIDS-induced demographic shock already exists. These societies may provide useful case-studies for others interested in weathering the demographic storm without establishing institutional orphanages.

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