Fosterage in Oceania

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Fosterage refers to rearing or having children through social rather than biological relationships. Oceania refers to the island societies of the Pacific Ocean, including the large island of Papua New Guinea and West Papua (the latter also known as Irian Jaya)[1]. Oceanic fostering is a continuum of child sharing and giving arrangements that reflect behavioral aspects of kinship, including kindness and love. Fostering demonstrates mutual generosity, where, ideally, all participants benefit and community harmony is ensured. Unlike European, American, and Canadian societies, sharing a child is not a sign of parental inadequacy nor the result of tragedy.

While Western societies separate fostering from adoption, in Oceania, the distinction is often irrelevant [2]. Fosterage has been differentiated from adoption (for analytic purposes only) by how permanent the arrangement was intended to be. When arrangements are intended to be permanent, jural rights, including access to land, food, titles and other heritable assets, are formally transferred. This type of arrangement has been labelled adoption by Western analysts, and less formalized or temporary situations where transfer of rights is not automatic have been labeled fostering. This distinction is useful mostly for Western audiences, but is not reflective of Oceanic categories. Regardless of the permanence of the arrangement, both sets of parents retain interests in the welfare of the fostered child and acknowledge their relationships to each other and the child.

Sharing children among kin is a longstanding cultural practice that predates Christian and colonial influences. Even as economic and ecological circumstances create urbanized and wage-labored populations, fostering persists. Explanations for the prevalence and persistence of fostering include social and environmental adaptations. Liliuokalani, the late Queen of Hawai'i, explained: "alliance by adoption cemented the ties of friendship ... and has doubtless fostered a community of interest and harmony." Among the Baining of Papua New Guinea, adopted children are favored

over birth children, specifically because their kinship results from social rather than natural relations. Others have noted that fostering protects against community destruction after natural and political disasters such as droughts and colonization. In normal times, sharing helps redistribute children from large families, and ensure community survival, but it can also help resolve tensions that can result from personality conflicts between household members.

The majority of fosterage relationships are organized between people who are kin, by blood or by a previous fosterage. Legal or state involvement in fosterage is infrequent. Current statistics for all Oceania are unavailable, but ethnographic literature indicates between 20 percent and 100 percent of households sampled (depending on location) have at least one adopted or fostered child, a rate far higher than in Western societies. On the Polynesian island of Taku'u for example, "everyone is adopted at birth, and individuals are under great pressure to honor adoptive relationships over natural ones" (B. Moir in Howard and Kirkpatrick 1989:77). The most common form of fosterage is probably that of infant or toddler grandchildren by their grandparents; the next is the sharing of children between siblings. Fosterage of one sibling by another appears in the historical literature, but less in contemporary practice. Children or young adults may precipitate a fosterage themselves. Tongans commonly ask toddlers "would you like to sleep at my house?" a teasing question which indicates the option for fosterage. Sex of the fostering adult or child is not generally a factor, except in cases where there is a desire to balance gender ratios in a household, or ensure the continuation of a matrilineage or patrilineage.

Recent data for the entirety of Oceania on the sexes of either fostering adults or children is not available. While many Oceanic societies more generally associate women with child care, this does not mean that men are precluded from nurturing children, even small children. In many Oceanic societies, young boys and male adults alike are regularly seen engaged in and enjoying child care duties, without being considered effeminate. Indeed, to do otherwise is to be abnormal. Certain roles and behaviors are gendered as masculine or feminine, but child caring, in and of itself, is not necessarily nor universally one of them. Generally, therefore, whether one is a woman or a man, is a less important factor than the particular kinship relationships that are prioritized in the specific Oceanic community. In Tonga, for example, where sisters rank over brothers and fathers rank over mothers, a sister has the cultural responsibility to dictate family actions and the freedom to

request anything of her brother's and her brother's children. A sister, and especially a father's sister, is therefore free to request a child for fosterage, and very difficult (emotionally) to refuse. However, grandparents are most likely to foster a child. Again, kinship may influence the choice of grandchild for fosterage: because father's side of the family has authority, and mother's side is associated with nurturance, maternal grandparents may be more likely to end up fostering a child. While in North American settings, adoption is often considered traumatic for the birth mother, and hence a women's issue, Oceanic kinship and caring expectations mean that both fathers and mothers miss the child who is fostered out. They will, however, take comfort in the extension of their kinship bonds through the sharing of a child. Thus, for Oceania in general, sex is not likely to be a prime factor in fostering, except in cases where there is a desire to balance personnel ratios in a household, or, in keeping with local principles of kinship, to ensure the continuation of a matrilineage or patrilineage.

Throughout Oceania, feeding constructs and signifies kinship identity. 'Feeding' is a euphemism for 'adoption' in both Tahiti and Tuamotu. People who intend to foster an unborn child may provide a pregnant woman with food. This ensures her well being, but also establishes a kinship connection between unborn infant and fostering parents. Birth parents often continue to provide food to both child and fostering adults, partly to maintain their own relationship with that child.

Increasingly, as Oceanic peoples search for education, work and experience overseas, children may be fostered in the home village while parents travel. This is thought to provide children with an environment that is culturally familiar, safer and kinder. Political-economic and racial factors are also considered in these cases: brown-skinned children who don't speak English are likely to be marked as racially different in Western societies. Migrants often work long hours, odd shifts, or stay in inferior housing, making it difficult to give children adequate attention. Sending children back to the parents' home country allows parents to work, study or travel, without the restrictions of child care, while saving the child from the stigma of racism and the contradictions of an ideologically foreign system of socialization. It also helps perpetuate kin-relations, so that the fostered child becomes the tie that binds migrants to their home and (sometimes) financially dependent kin. Fostering adults hope to prevent the loss of culture and identity in the next generation.

Fosterage can lead to its own set of problems. Children sent "home" while parents work

overseas may suffer from an anxiety state associated with separation and culture shock. An increased financial burden can result when fostering is taken for granted because of ideologies linking kinship with generosity. While high levels of fostering mean that there are multiple sources of kin and caring, and that lost individuals are replaceable, the psychological message of fostering may also be that relationships are contingent and interchangeable.

The broad range of societies represented under the rubric "Oceania" have provided North American and European feminists with important comparators for investigation and discussion of women's status in relation to social structure. There are matrilineal societies in Oceania (eg: Palau) and many bilateral descent societies which include strong structural roles for women, especially in their role as sisters (eg: Fiji, Pukapuka, Samoa, Tonga, Trobriands). Many anthropologists who have worked, or are working, in Oceania are women, and much ethnography has focused on Oceanic women's and children's lives. In general however, while work which is valuable for feminists does examine fostering in conjunction with other aspects of social structure, research which is generated by explicitly feminist perspectives *per se*, is still scarce. Contemporary Oceanic societies, and Oceanic people living overseas, are subject to economic, political, and social pressures that threaten the ideology of kinship, gender roles, and the practice of kin-based generosity, that underlay fosterage. These influences are precipitating changes in patterns and styles of child sharing. Work only recently completed and unpublished or currently in process (eg: on the Suau of Papua New Guinea, and Samoans), is likely to provide new insights on child sharing in the not too distant future.

Addendum [not included in the Encyclopedia version]:

1]

"Oceania" is a term coined in the early 20th century to refer to the societies of the Pacific basin. It excludes, for example, the Philippines and Japan. Oceania is generally categorized into three configurations: Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. The configurations are geographic, cultural and arbitary: there are islands, called Polynesian outliers, where language and culture are Polynesian, which are geographically located in Micronesia or Melanesia. Fiji and Tonga both exhibit combinations of stereotypical Melanesian and Polynesian patterns, but have until recently been labeled separately as Melanesia and Polynesia respectively (now it is more common to recognize that Fiji, Tonga and Samoa as the 'cradle of Polynesia').

Constellations of similar cultural practices, including child sharing, can be identified across the societies of Oceania and within each configuration. It is important to remember however, that similarities should not be assumed to exist. Ethnographic research shows a great diversity of cultural practices within the configurations of Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia.

2]

Oceanic kinship systems have been very important to anthropological theory (Firth 1929, 1936, Carroll 1970, Brady 1976) because they provide examples of alternatives to what has been called "American kinship" (the discussion here is based on Schneider 1968). People of western societies, such as found in Europe and North America, tend to think of 'kin' firstly as people who are relatives because of inalienable biogenetic ties. In-laws are a second order of relative, people who after divorce, cease to be kin. Biology is thus part of the cultural system for determining kinship in western societies.

Biology is also used to ascribe behaviors, or codes of conduct for kin. Relatives for example, avoid sexual relations with each other because of some assumed 'natural' (i.e.: biological) instinct which prevents incest. People who are related as siblings, offspring, parents or cousins love one another 'naturally. Indeed the best example of pure affection in American culture is based on the stereotype of a mother's love for her child, whom she loves because of their natural, biological and bodily connection.

A biologically based kinship system is one in which relatives are born, not made. Therefore,

one cannot become an ex-relative: even if a father disowns a son, the two are still considered to be related, as father and son. Under special, formalized arrangements, such as adoption or marriage, kin may be chosen in American kinship, but these ties are considered to be fragile and are accompanied by tension. Until very recently for example, adoption was considered to be something kept secret, even from the adopted child. This unquestioned part of popular culture drove the plot for a popular 1970's television program, "The Brady Bunch", where episodes revolved around the difficulties assumed in forging one (nuclear) family from two (biogenetically) different sets of parents and offspring.

In contrast to kinship in western societies, Oceanic kinship systems can be generalized as based more on behavior than biology. In many societies, one is determined to be 'kin' on the basis of birth, but *also* on the basis of performance of kinship. Biology alone is insufficient: Through eating, living, working and sharing of locality and local substances, by participating as a member of a particular group, one becomes and remains kin (see Linnekin and Poyer 1990). Patterns of child having and rearing therefore reflect local definitions of kinship and provide key examples of the differences between western or "American" and Oceanic kinship systems.

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