Morals and maladies: Life histories of socially distributed care among Aaumbo women in Namibia, Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

The African cultural complex of socially distributed childcare (Weisner Bradley & Kilbride 1997) is a unique example of a culturally specific practice with its own emic logic. The tradition of child fosterage in Africa,_ or care for a child other than one's own biological child, is a normative practice. Western research on child fosterage has debated the cost/benefits to children with disparities found that they favor biological children (Bledsoe 1990; Goody 1973; Isugihue-Abanihe, 1991). My own previous work among Aaumbo speakers in Namibia revealed that in 2000 children in fostered arrangements were disadvantaged in height, weight, and education compared to biological children living in the same household (Brown 2009; 2011). Research has not addressed, however, the lived experience of these children as few studies have examined fosterage from the perspective of the child. The current study analyzes 11 life history interviews of Aaumbo women in Namibia who were fostered as children, remembering their childhoods with their biological parents and with their foster parents. Several themes emerged from the interviews that describe the complexity of the losses and gains of fostering relationships and the relative position of children within them. Reasons and motivations to foster were revealed as were protective factors like preserving sibling groups and cultural scripts regarding the arrangement.

Adoption is one of Western societies best kept secrets (Bowie, 2004). Many people in the West know someone who is adopted or have a personal experience with adoption, but the practice remains private and nearly invisible. John Bowlby (1971) argued in the precursor to his attachment theory that human primates have the set goal of remaining in contact with their mother and that infants need a warm, intimate and continuous attachment in order to develop normally. This was envisioned by Bowlby as occurring between a mother and infant

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in the context of a nuclear household and particularly in the context of the 'western industrialized family. This preference in the West for the nuclear family is so self-evident in our schemas of family that it comes as a surprise to learn that this is not the case in large parts of the world. A handful of anthropologists and psychologists like Patricia Draper, Tom Weisner, and Barry Hewlett, and others have challenged the exclusivity of the mother/infant unit through observations in Africa, understanding that mothers were embedded in a wider social network, family life was more variable and dynamic and infants often were cared for by *alloparents*, group members other than the parent who cared for the infants. There are societies in which adoption in not only common, but an essential and often preferred means of raising children.

In fact, the use of alloparents is normative in many communities in Africa through the culturally specific child care practice and tradition of child fosterage. Child fosterage has been defined several ways. Accounts in Africa describe fosterage as a social welfare system revolving around kinship and is defined as the rearing of a child by someone other than the biological parent (Bledsoe 1990). What makes fosterage unique is the semi-permanent yet adjustable nature of the relationship, one of the most distinct elements of African families (Isiugo-Abanihe 1991). In contrast to Western societies, fosterage is additive, not substitutive. Adoption in the West is conventionally used for the transference of full parental rights from birth to social parents. In fosterage, only partial transfer occurs. One dynamic in Western adoption is the 'either/or' premise on which adoption is based. The full power of the law is used to persuade adoptive parents that they do indeed become the legal mother and father of the child and to ensure that adopted children are treated as if they were biologically born into their substitutive family, (Bowie, 2004). Other societies handle the biological/social distinction differently by removing the 'either/or' part of the equation. By constructing an additive model, both biological and social relatives are in the frame simultaneously. Adoptive parents can be real without replacing the biological parent. Open adoptions in the West are beginning to include elements of this system but full legal rights are still a prerequisite. In non-western societies this practice is widespread. Ester Goody (1973) was one of the first to describe the practice among the Gonja of Cameroon. She remembers her first entries in her field notes was the Ganja word [kabitha] "a girl given to someone" and [kaiyeribi] "a boy given to someone". Understanding the nuances of fosterage still proves to be a complex task.

The motivations of the recipient family and the donor family are often multifarious (Brown 2011) and encompass the desire to teach discipline (Bledose 1990) to provide a better

education for a child (Isiugo-Abanihe 1991) gifting and sharing between families (Madhavan 2004), establishment of social bonds (Bledsoe 1990), enhancement of fertility (Isiugo-Abanihe 1991; Pennington, 1991), the need to be childless when entering a new relationship with a man (Pennington 1991; Vandermeersch 2002) and times of crisis, like sickness and famine (Madhavan 2004). Payne-Price (1981) sampled 45 cultures using the Human Resource Area File (HRAF) that reported adoption practices. Of the 45, 35 reported adoption or fosterage practices. The three primary motives for fostering in a child were the need for a helper, either short or long term; the need for an heir; and tokens of friendship. The need for a helper was identified as the primary motivation. Motivations to foster out a child included illegitimacy, poverty, too many children, death of one parent, and death of both parents.

The Namibian fostering system is a recognizable variant of the more general customs that surround fostering throughout Africa. In fact, northern Namibia represents a unique case with the highest rates of fosterage in all of Africa. Up to 36% of children in Namibia report having their birth parents alive but residing with someone else (Brown, 2009).

The predictions regarding child fosterage conducted by most researchers trained in western paradigms of developmental psychology usually question how this practice could not harm 'nonbiological children'. Disparities do exist between fosterees and biological children. Oni (1995) sampled 1,538 Yoruba households in Nigeria in order to understand the effects of fosterage from both the foster parents and the child's perspective. Her findings reveal differential treatment of foster and non-fostered children. The mother was the first person to notice a child's illness 89% of the time if it was her biological child but only 42% of the time for foster children. Foster children reportedly complained in 29% of cases, compared to 4% for biological children, before an illness was noticed. The mean duration of time between awareness of illness and treatment also favored biological children. In follow up case studies, adults who were fostered out as children overwhelmingly describe the experience as one filled with pain and favoritism (Oni 1995).

Similarly, Bledsoe and Brandon (1992) found children fostered were at greater risk for death and fell sick more than their biologically related counterparts. The authors conclude that this may be due to discrimination and deprivation in times of food shortages. Anderson (2005) utilized a demographic survey to examine whether the coefficient of relatedness predicts greater household expenditures on food and education for 11,211 black South African children. Controlling for characteristics that might vary between households, he found that the more closely related a child is to the household, the less likely he/she is to be

behind in school. Similarly, being more related to the household is a positive predictor of expenditures on food, on health care, and on clothing. In rural samples, however, increased relatedness was associated with reduced expenditures on food and health care. The nature of the relationship between families plays a role in the treatment of children (Brown 2011; Verhoff & Moreli, 2007). The cultural script of 'all children are treated equal' is found throughout parental accounts of fostering in Africa (Brown 2011).

But longitudinal data that takes into consideration the ecological implications of child care practices is missing in studies of child fosterage and normal development has often been characterized through a western lens. This western hegemonic view of development leaves little room to do anything but critique fosterage as only child labor and 'of course' harmful to African children. What appears missing in the literature is a deeper understanding of the lived experience of children in the fosterage system and the tensions between the 'equality' cultural script and personal experience.

Life history is one place to begin, not with families that are at the breaking point but with women in their everyday recollections of this practice. To understand the normative cultural rules of this practice may eventually help in times of crisis. I have chosen to take a somewhat different angle on fostering in comparison with approaches taken by other researchers. I attempt to emphasize the fosterees by asking women to recollect, as adult informants, about their own experience of being fostered as a child. This study explored the central question of what was the experience of living as a fostered child among Aaumbo women in Namibia.

The Aaumbo Context

The Aaumbo people live primarily in two regions in Namibia. Their traditional homeland is located in the North of the country and is home to the majority of the 400,000+ Aaumbo speakers in Namibia. Traditionally, the Aaumbos are agro-pastoralists having both subsistence plots of millet [omahango] and herds of cattle [eengobe] and goats [eekombo]. A large number of Aaumbos have migrated to Windhoek, the capital, in search of work and education and live primarily in Katatura, the settlement created on the outskirts of Windhoek during the apartheid era.

Aaumbo societies during the pre-colonial and colonial periods were predominantly matrilineal agro-pastoralist societies demarcated from each other by large areas of forest and savanna in the North of the country (Salokowski 1998). Until 1840, these areas had remained

almost totally free from European influence. When the first Finnish Missionaries arrived in 1870, the majority of Aaumbo societies were headed by "kings."

German South West Africa was the name given to Namibia when the northern Europeans arrived in the territory in the early 1880's. In 1948 the Afrikaner led National Party gained power in South Africa. Namibia exchanged one colonial experience for another. During the apartheid era, blacks were relegated into traditional homelands. For the Aaumbos, this was the north of the country where the majority still live today. Aaumbos not living within the boundaries of the newly created 'Ovamboland' were relocated and required to carry a work pass when leaving Ovamboland. Namibia gained its independence in 1990 after more than a century of colonial rule, first by Germany and then by South Africa. Much of the struggle for independence between 1966-1988 was carried out in Ovamboland. English is the official language with several other indigenous languages spoken. Aaumbo speaking people represent the largest portion of Namibia's population, nearly 50% (CIA Factbook 2006).

Kinship is an organizing principle in Namibia holding more importance than class and playing a critical role in decisions regarding socially distributed child rearing (Hayes 1998). What class does in advanced capitalistic societies like the U.S., kinship does in Namibia—shaping peer relationships, choices about marriage, and with whom one could be raised. Matrilineal descent systems are found among Aaumbo speakers (Hayes 1998).

Children traditionally belong to their mother's family and men do not pass on their matrilineal membership to children. The mother's brother often plays a pivotal role in the care of the children, including providing care through fosterage. Even within this system, however, there is significant variation and complexity. In the matrilineal inheritance system the husband's matrilineal kin traditionally have rights to all of the wife's possessions after his death. This has changed in recent years as widows have been seen as primary caregivers to many orphans. The rising number of orphans has forced both paternal and maternal kin to raise children. The Oshikwanyama word for raising of a child other than your own is [oluteka]. The cultural script of fostering among Aaumbo caregivers includes the unfaltering belief by caregivers that all children are treated equal in their house (Brown 2011). Fostering children elevates women to more respected status within families and communities. It is also a normative child rearing practice.

Data and Methods

The data from this study came from 11 life-history interviews collected in Namibia from September-November 2006. The women were selected from two sites, one rural and one urban. The women in the rural sample (n=6) all resided in the Ohangwena region in the North of Namibia. The urban sample (n=5) all resided in the capital city of Windhoek, specifically in the township of Katatura, however, all were raised in the rural North and several had kinship connections kinship or social connections to the women interviewed in the North. All but one participant was Kwanyama, one tribe of the Aaumbo people whose homeland extends into Angola. The sampling was done intentionally to look deeply at the experiences of one specific cultural group and to avoid complicating the issue of understanding the meaning of fosterage among different Aaumbo peoples. The one participant that was not Kwanyama was Ndonga, another Aaumbo group.

I have been conducting field work in the North of Namibia since 2000. I first became acquainted with some of the women in the study when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the North between November 1996 and January 1999. In fact, I resided in the family house of Cece, a participant, for my entire Peace Corps tour. While not a researcher at the time, my involvement in the family life of Cece's family was the impetus for my most recent research into child care practices in Namibia. I have made several return trips to the community, most recently in 2009

The women were sampled through a snowball technique starting with Cece in the rural North and by referrals of other women in the study. Women from a wide age range were interviewed. This was also intentional as the motivations to foster children are complex and often change as women stop having children of their own to foster to others. Participants ranged from 25-67 years of age. Table 1 provides demographic information about each participant. The goal of the sampling was to include a diversity of experiences with fosterage.

I approached all participants and asked them if they would share with me some memories and stories about childhood, specifically, about living away from their biological parents. I explained to the participants that my interest in their childhood stemmed from my own experiences of being adopted in the US, a similar yet different system of raising a child that is not biologically your own. I was accompanied to six of the interviews by an Aaumbo woman who had referred me to the participant. This happened when I was not well acquainted with the women to be interviewed. All interviews were conducted in English with excerpts in

Table 1. Characteristics of Aaumbo women					
Participant	Age when Fostered	Relationship with foster family	Reason (primary arrangement when multiple)	Number of arrange-ments	Years in Fosterage (out of 18)
Melia	3 months	Relative of paternal grandmother	Namesake, childless woman	1	12
Katarina	6 months	Maternal great aunt	Mother working couldn't afford childcare	2	17
Emelia	1	Maternal grandmother	Young mother	1	17
Silka	1 ½	Non-kin	Mother went into exhile due to war	7	13
Cece	3	Maternal grandmother	Help mat. Grandmother pound mahangu	1	15
Mona	5	Maternal aunt	Orphan	2	18
Francina	7	Maternal aunt	Mother died, went to childless woman	1	8
Lina	7	Paternal aunt	Namesake	1	11
Kavenna	7	Maternal grandmother	Education	1	6
Ndapewa	13	Maternal cousin	Wedding gift	1	5
Berta	Young (before school)	Paternal relative	namesake	1	2

Oshiwambo when the women felt it was easier to explain a concept. These excerpts were later translated into English by a native Aaumbo speaker, a student at the Polytechnic College in Windhoek. A core set of questions were gathered that inquired about their experience as children, their relationships with their foster and biological parents, and how these experiences may or may not have influenced their own choices about the care of their children. For example, "What was the very first day and night like after you moved to your new house?" was one of the questions. The interviews lasted on average one and a half to two hours.

Transcripts were then analyzed by myself and a research assistant using qualitative data analysis techniques (Creswell 2007). Coders initially read the transcripts in their entirety in

order to familiarize themselves with the questions and the overall flow and content of the interviews. Both coders then identified units of the text that were pertinent to the central question. Coders met to discuss and resolve discrepancies in their identification of pertinent textual units.

As part of this first step, coders worked independently to label the textual units identified above and collapsed synonymous codes. Coders then discussed their codes and resolved discrepancies. This step was done repeatedly until codes could no longer be collapsed. This iterative process resulted in refinement of codes. The second step involved linking the coded units into broader categories that better capture the phenomenon of interest. In this step, codes identified in the first step were examined together with the intent of looking for underlying themes or broader categories into which the codes might be subsumed. A total of five themes were identified. In the final step, relations among themes were discussed and positioned within a theoretical model. A larger story was developed from the interconnections among themes and compared across interviews based on the women's discussions regarding the relations among those issues. Validation of this final phase was done by searching for confirmation and disconfirmation in the transcripts (Strauss & Corbin1998). Coders continued discussion and comparison of their procedures through these final steps. I will present three of the themes here.

Life histories are just what they say: a history of a life, chronicled by an individual, not hard data, but memories. In this study I utilized a discursive psychological perspective (Edwards 1997) that treats the accounts not as definitive facts about peoples' lives and past events but places importance on the context of telling the story. The interviews were not only focused on gathering accounts of fostering but also on the consequences of the women's participation in the fostering system. In some cases women were fostered 55 years ago. I am interested in what the women 'did' with living away from their biological parents. The issue here is not to judge whether it was a good or bad experience, or whether the women are 'normal' in their adult attachment patterns, but rather to uncover the texture of how this experience fit into the broader context of their lives.

The Women

I intentionally interviewed women of different ages at different developmental stages of their life and their reproductive careers. This created a richness of themes and many avenues in

which to begin to describe and extrapolate meaning from this group the women. Not only did women remember their own childhoods but the study was able to explore linkages between the women's childhood and their later choices for their own children. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the participants. Ndapwea, Kavenna, Lina, and Cece (not real names) are all post-menopausal and all were fostered from their biological family between 38-55 years ago. They have subsequently fostered out some of their own children, fostered in their grandchildren as well as additional children. In comparison, Mona and Emelia are in their mid-twenties and fostered as infants only 20-22 years ago.

The age at which these women were fostered varied. Melia, Katarina, Emelia, Mona, Cece and Silka were all fostered as infants or toddlers. The other women were fostered in middle and late childhood. Much is known about the cognitive, social and emotional development of children and one would also expect that the developmental stage in which the foster arrangement happens might affect how one remembers growing up as well as how one processes the emotional implications of leaving one's birth family.

The literature on child fosterage has not explored multiple arrangements for a child. It is often assumed because of the nature of the field work that children are only fostered once and remain in the recipient household. Among the women interviewed, eight of 11 were only in one foster arrangement. However, Katarina and Mona were fostered twice, and Silka was fostered seven times. Remembering across experiences made for extended interviews and often qualifying the memories with phrases like "this isn't always the case" or "it was very different with the next family." Women who had been in more than one foster situation often distinguished among the different arrangements and made comparisons between the households.

The interviews could also be examined according to the kinship relationship the child had to the foster family. Seven women were fostered to the maternal kin; of these women Kavenna, Cece and Emelia were fostered to maternal grandmothers. Three women (Melia, Berta, and Lina) were fostered to paternal relatives. Silka was fostered to non-kin. Some research has pointed to the implication of being fostered in culturally inappropriate ways (Nyambedha Wandibba & Aagaard-Hanse 2003). For example, within a matrilineal decent system like Aaumbos what are the consequences and experiences of people fostered to paternal kin? Finally, the reason that children are fostered varied among the women's accounts. Mona and Francia were fostered because of being orphaned. Lina and Berta were fostered to their namesakes which is a common practice among Aaumbos. Melia was also given to her

namesake who was childless. Ndapewa was given to the family as a wedding gift and Kavenna remembered being fostered to be closer to a school. Katarina and Silka were fostered for economic and political reasons.

Thematic Analysis

The San in Namibia have a saying that other people's children are like dried mucus: useless and a bit disgusting. Among the Aaumbo's however, raising other people's children is a complex social phenomenon. Several motivations exist to explain these foster arrangements. It has been noted in the literature regarding child care in Africa that discipline is imperative (Whiting & Edwards 1998). In fact, it is one of the most important characteristics that a good child would possess. Childcare in Africa has been described as a socially distributed cultural complex (Weisner Bradley & Kilbride 1997). One particular aspect that Weisner notes is that there is little negotiation between child and parent. Goody (1973) also accentuates the absolute obedience that Gonja children display. She notes that she never heard a child speak back to an adult.

In line with past accounts of childrearing in Africa, all the participants explained that as a child you are unable to communicate your treatment to your biological families. If a child chooses to, it often falls on deaf ears. Kavenna acknowledges that "you know, as Africans, we do not listen to our kids." She remembers living with her grandmother who 'treated her like someone she didn't know". She recalls that she received less food, and didn't have blankets to sleep under while the other children had both food and blankets. She did not tell her biological mother out of fear of her grandmother and fear of the older children in the house.

> So when we go for holiday at Christmas I am together with my parents and they treat us nicely and every time we want to talk to our mother and father about our problems, like I have this problem and that problem, I had to keep it inside myself. Even the bad treatment I get from my grandmother I have to keep it strictly to myself.

Keeping it strictly to herself, however, meant the only people she could tell was her biological siblings who were still living in her natal home. She remembers,

> when I came back to visit it was only my sister who would listen. We would stay up late and when it was time for me to gather my things and hike back to my grandmothers, you couldn't pull us apart.

Fostering relationships between families, however, were maintained and honored. Silka remembers that the relationship between her foster mother and her biological mother was most important.

> Aaumbo children do not have choices. I remember in that year she [biological mother] came for holiday to visit myself and my brother and we were both crying to her because we were hurt and mistreated but she couldn't move us and I remember asking her and begging her to take me to my grandmother's but she couldn't move us and she always said, it is just a few more months and I will come and get you.

There is a common saying that '*children are not people, they are children'*. In Aaumbo tradition if you come to a house and only find that children are home you return and say that you didn't find anyone home. But it is not to say that children are of little value, quite the contrary. A woman without children is looked upon with sadness and it is only the arrival of children that will alleviate the feeling of despair. This tension is found throughout the memories of the women, especially as they move from children themselves to adults bearing and raising their own children.

Fosterage is often thought of as a semi-permanent arrangement (Goody 1973). This is exemplified in the accounts that women tell of running away from or revealing abuse. Silka says, "When I went home and told my mother that they do this to me and they do that to me, my mother tells me 'hush, that is your home. Live with it. Here you are just a visitor."

Families trust that children will be raised as they wish under the governance of the new family; however, they do not use children's assessment of their treatment to judge. Katarina explains that "You must trust the family, but you don't have power over it. Even if the child is telling me about the treatment, we are the adults and we do not listen. To adults it is just talk."

The necessity that these women felt to keep their maltreatment a secret might translate into the resiliency and perseverance that many thought was born from fostering arrangement.

Sisters and Brothers over Others: Dissolution and Preservation of Sibling Groups

Talk of siblings dominated women's recollections of childhood. Women placed a large emphasis on the preservation of the relationships between themselves and their biological siblings after being fostered. When fostered children were able to maintain healthy and stable relationships with their biological siblings, the transition into the new family occurred without problems. The direction of this finding, however, is questionable. Often times it was more difficult for siblings to uphold their relationship as a result of the distance placed between them. Some, however, were able to maintain relationships despite the distance between them both physically and psychologically as a result of fosterage.

Cecilia was able to maintain a positive relationship with her biological siblings because she lived in very close proximity to them. Cecilia said that the relationship with her birth siblings was not affected in any way because they were able to see one another each day. They lived only 0.5 km from each other. She says:

> We played together. The time we are fetching water we can yell for each other. 'Come on Olivia 'let's go'. The time we go to pick up omauni [fruit] or evanda [spinach] in the bush we are together. We go to church together. And we go to Sunday school together. It was very good.

In addition to the sustained relationship with her birth siblings, Cecilia is also able to note the difference between herself and her biological siblings who did not grow up in the care of her grandparents as she did. She says:

> I feel I am lucky being raised by my grandparents because my attitude compared to my brothers and sisters who were raised by their own parents is quite, quite different. I can't say that I am better than them but I have different ideas. I think I am stronger in the mind.

Franscina, though not able to keep consistent contact with her biological siblings because they lived farther apart from one another, remembers staying deeply attached to them from afar. She did have the opportunity to visit on holidays and said that when she stays there that they are still "loving each other, playing and so on." Although all of her other siblings remained with her biological mother, she felt no resentment and still feels close to her siblings.

Katarina who was fostered as an infant notes how her relationship with her siblings is there but lacks the love found in other sibling relationships. She was not able to see them often

growing up and says, “We know each other just by looking at each other but to really love each other like sisters, it is a bit more tough. Regret is what I have about that.”

The complexity of maintaining sibling relationships was also noted. Emelia was fostered to her grandmother in a rural village in the North while her mother schooled in Windhoek. She remembers meeting her sister for the first time when she was 18 years old.

> At first it was very difficult. I am oshivele (firstborn) and it is difficult because the one that came after me, I saw her when she was grown up. I wasn’t even thinking she is my sister. They said, yeah this is your sister, but it didn’t feel like it. I was happy to meet her but it didn’t feel like she was my sister.

Emelia is now fostering this sister’s 1 year old baby and believes her sister asked her so they can also become closer, thus strengthening a sibling relationship that was weakened in fosterage. Lina remembers how she was separated from her family for 11 years and finally reunited with them at age 18; after having a baby of her own. She returned home to the North and recalls approaching her homestead.

> When I came up to the gate I see someone from the house fetching water. When I go there I said, ‘hello’. She [my biological sister] just looked at me and threw the pale and ran away to home. My sister, the one born after me, was scared of me.

After the eleven years that had passed, her sister’s reaction did not surprise her. Lina questioned if that was the house that she use to know as home or if her memory had faded.

> But then I saw my father, and the whole house is coming out. We are all crying. My brother and sisters say ‘we don’t know you, we just hear about you and when you came I was wondering, ‘who is this girl?

Morals, and Maladies: The Loss and Gain of Fosterage

What is gained by foster arrangements in the eyes of the women fostered? This study as well as past research has well documented the reasons and predictors of fostering from an adult perspective (Brown 2009; Vandeermesch 2002). Women, however, seemed to characterize what they personally gained by being fostered. Cece gained a sense of cohesion and specialness. She was fostered to her grandmother’s house which was full of people. She remembers,

> For grand, grand children, I was the only one. Memekulu [great grandmother] was alive. And I was feeling very special. Because we have a lot of aunties looking after me and my grandparents and god children. The house was so, so full of people but you didn't even know who was biological and who was not. I felt like we were all brothers and sisters. Very much it was wonderful.

Cece credits her moral strength and development to being fostered to her grandparents.

> I think about me myself. I am lucky when I compare my attitude to that of my brothers and sisters who were raised by my parents. It is quite, quite different. I can't say I am better but I have different ideas. I do think I am stronger in mind. It is true they are talented but poor in mind.

Many women reported that children suffer when not living with their biological parents. Women also hoped for their children to learn the lessons that fostering teaches. While Cece felt she did not suffer in her arrangement, for Ndapewa suffering was closely linked to moral development and a sense that suffering made you stronger. Ndapewa was fostered to maternal kin and remembers,

> My mother died earlier so I got that love but not too much let me say that if you are staying longer with your mother then you have to learn more, how to suffer, how to survive. That is what I used to tell my kids "don't think you will always stay with your biological parents.

Fosterage affords parents a culturally appropriate outlet to prepare children for the death of a parent or to acquire the emotional survival skills they need to face loss. Ndapewa reflects on her own parenting by saying:

> And I think it is good to not treat kids like more special because if you pass away they will suffer, always thinking "if only my mother was around." You can give them food as they wish but they have to work and they have to learn how to live in peace. It is how it was for me. I learned a lot about the world but not squeaky clean with real dirt and pain.

Loss constituted a major theme in women's stories but personal loss took on many facets. Silka spoke poignantly about her loss of trust in relationships. She had been fostered in 7 different arrangements during the war and reflects on her own relationships as an adult by saying,

> It really affects my relationships now. I mean I was talking to a friend who was also fostered in the way I was and we are not in healthy relationships. It has affected my trust. You trust and then you leave and it is out of your control as a child. What I have noticed is that lots of kids that came from exile are very unstable emotionally.

As children, the women found themselves at the mercy of their foster families' good will as they were the liaisons between themselves and their biological family. While some women maintained open relationships with their family, Lina lost all communication with her family in the North. She remembers "my namesake didn't want me to go home and visit my mother. Even I missed my family, my sister, my father but I was just stuck crying as a 9 year old, but nothing. She didn't even let me communicate with my oldest brothers who were in Windhoek with me." Both Lina and Katarina believe their foster families discouraged communication to hide their harsh treatment and child labor practices.

Cece spoke of loss on the other side of the familial coin. She has very warm loving memories of her experience being fostered to her grandmother and the fair treatment she received, however, when returning to her biological home, she received harsh treatment from her mother. "My mother was cruel. She always complained about me and not my brothers and sisters. When I came to the house she thought everything I was doing was wrong. Sometimes when I was to visit for a week, I could only last two days."

Discussion

The practice of child fosterage binds and strengthens families through socially distributed care and resource sharing (Brown 2011) but to view the practice alone does not fully capture the ecology of African family life. Child fosterage is one practice among many in the cultural complex of socially distributed caregiving (Weisner Bradley & Kilbride 1997). Through his research on sibling care giving in Kenya, Thomas Weisner delineates the core characteristics of socially distributed child care in terms of a cultural complex—a set of loosely interwoven ecological circumstances, beliefs and practices that coexist and contribute to one another. Socially distributed child care includes but is not limited to: (1) Child caretaking often occurs as a part of indirect chains of support in which one child assists another, who assists another. Support is not always immediate and not necessarily organized around exclusive relationships between parent and child. (2) Children look to other children for support as much or more than they look to adults. (3) Mothers provide support and

nurturance to children as much by securing that others will support their children as by supporting their children directly. Fostering and other forms of child sharing are common. (4) Care often occurs in the context of other domestic work. (5) Aggression, teasing, and dominance coincide with nurturance and support and come from the same people. Dominance increases with age.

The findings of this study reveal a richer understanding of the psychological realities of the tenets of socially distributed care. As Weisner delineates, in African families, "Elaborate verbal exchanges and question-framed discourse rarely accompany support and nurturance for children. Verbal bargaining and negotiations over rights, choices and privileges between the caretaker and child are infrequent (24)." Women remembered their lack of voice and choice in negotiating fosterage situations. Another tenet of socially distributed care is that "children look to other children for support as much or more than they look to adults (24)". The preservation of sibling groups was an emotionally protective factor for the participants as proximity and access to siblings was remembered fondly.

A set of complex memories of caregiver's motivations, painful and joyful interactions with both biological and fostered families, and a sense of meaning making about how the experience of fostering fit with their current sense of self emerged from the study. The morals and maladies of fosterage were interwoven; linked together is the idiom that 'suffering makes you stronger'. Perseverance was achieved through enduring living without your birth parents. This has not changed in a generation and many of the women believed it would be best for their children to also learn to live without their mother.

But does this study help clear up any of the disparate findings? Women spoke of painful memories. Others spoke of their childhood with fond recollections of care and trust. Most spoke about a mix of the two but attributed painful memories to being away from siblings and birth parents. To provide context to the memories of these women it is important to not overlook what we know about African child rearing. Africans are concerned with the welfare of their children. The mere practice of child fosterage does not challenge that fact. Adults are doing what they believe to be appropriate for their children both by keeping with traditions and adapting to the changes that education and modernity have brought. I do not know what the outcomes would have been for these women had they not been fostered as children and I did not interview eleven women who were raised by their biological parents. Perhaps they would have stories of childhood dissatisfaction similar to the women in the study.

The pragmatic debate in much of the child fosterage literature centers on whether the family in sub-Saharan Africa is past the tipping point of providing good care through indigenous systems of care (i.e. fosterage). This has been measured by looking at educational outcomes (Anderson 2005; Brown 2009), household expenditures (Anderson 2005) access to health services (Bledsoe Ewbank & Isiugo-Abanihe, 1988) child labor (Verhoff & Morelli 2008) and infant death (Oppong & Bleek 1975).But the texture and quality of the experiences that ultimately lead to disparate treatment of children has not been explored. Fotserage is embedded within a web of other socially distributed practices that in its entirety need to be better understood in order to address the needs of children in sub-Saharan Africa.

This study helps to questions the logic of western ideas of child rearing and attachment and universally appropriate. John Bowlby (1971) and other scholars of early childhood theorized that it is the quality of our relationships and the attachments we form that predict later psychological health. We know that children in child fosterage are taken from their primary attachments and placed in the home of another caregiver. Primary attachments are often broken and new attachments are hopefully formed. The experience of foster children has elucidated that sibling relationships, not just maternal, are often the one relationship that remains consistent and crucial to their psychological well-being while living away from their biological parents. Remembering siblings in the practice of fosterage is an important piece to the puzzle of how African families are maintaining care for over 10 million orphans through this system of fosterage (Sewpaul 2001). By understanding how fosterage is experienced by Aaumbo women and how it fits into the ecological niche of raising children to survive and thrive in Africa one truly extends hegemonic western views of development.

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