Fosterage in Cameroon:
A different social construction of motherhood

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Doing anthropological research in Cameroon, I have always been fascinated by the way mothers educate their children. On the one hand, there is a very close, warm and intimate relationship between mothers and children, and on the other hand, mothers easily send their children away to other parents. Even very young, children are allowed to leave their parents' household and to enjoy a part of their education elsewhere. This mobility of children, their moving in and out from different compounds, and the way women attempt to be good mothers by delegating tasks to other educators, is interesting because it differs so much from our western perception of good motherhood and good education.

In the Netherlands, like in many other western societies, a particular definition of mothering is dominant:

> In this model the responsibility for mothering, rests almost exclusively on one woman, that is the biological mother, for whom it constitutes the primary if not sole mission during the child's formative years. The corollary view of children is that they require constant care and attention from one caretaker (that is), the biological mother.
> (Glenn 1994:3)

In Dutch society, the only reason why children have to leave their parents and to join other educators, is that the biological parents are incapable of educating their children themselves, for example, since they have psychological problems or are addicted to drugs. The perception of the biological mother as the only good mother is so dominant that both the mother as her children are supposed to suffer deeply when separated: Women would suffer from being seen as inadequate mothers, and children would suffer from lack of maternal care and love.

Recent studies that confirm the normative view that children are better of as long as they stay with their biological parents are Wegar (1997), and South, Crowder, and Trent (1998). Wegar (1997) explores representations of adoptive mothers in the United States from the 1940s to the 1990s and states that adoptive mothers have been depicted as deviants who fail to conform to dominant definitions of true womanhood and good mothering. South et all (1998) state that parental divorce sharply increases the probability that children will move out of their neighbourhood and that this mobility decreases the well-being of children. Both studies consider biological parenthood and the stable, nuclear family as necessary for children's best educational environment.

The western normative discourse on good mothering has so dominated popular media representations as well as academic discourse that the existence of alternative beliefs and practices among other societies has gone unnoticed or misunderstood (Glenn 1994:2-3). In this article I want to challenge dominant western representations of motherhood by presenting a different construction of mothering, that is *fosterage.* The existence of such a social variation confirms that mothering, like other relationships and institutions, is socially

constructed and context-dependent. It warns us not to take the western representation of motherhood as a universal one. By exploring the social and cultural context of mothering and fosterage in Cameroon, I also want to show that fosterage in the local African context can be a strategy for women to be good mothers.

Fosterage

Fosterage is a custom that is frequently practised in West Africa. It refers to the custom of fostering children *out* to other families as well as to fostering children *in* from other families. Because women in West Africa are children's most important educators, fosterage can be seen as mainly a female strategy. Especially in Cameroon, large numbers of children live during long periods of time separated from their mother, as fosterchildren in other households: 30% of the children between ten and fourteen years of age, do not live with their biological mother (Page 1989: 413). This high percentage of children not living at home indicates that the upbringing of children is not a task for the biological parents only, but is shared with many other educators.

Fosterage was a main topic in anthropological research, especially in the 1970's and 1980's. Anthropological discourse however, has also been influenced by western normative discourse. In anglophone literature for example, researchers mostly present economic reasons to explain the fosterage-practice in West Africa (Goody 1978, 1982, Isaac and Conrad 1982, Isiugo-Abanihe 1984). They often presume that parents sent their children to other parents because they lack the financial means to maintain their children themselves. They suppose that poverty would force parents to choose richer educators who will pay food, school fees, and medical care for their children, who in turn will help their foster parents with domestic tasks. In the so-called 'value of children approach' in which the costs and benefits of children are studied, a lot of attention is paid to fosterage (Ainsworth 1992, Isaac and Conrad 1982, Oppong and Bleek 1982). Here, fosterage is explained as a social security strategy to share these costs and benefits and financial responsibilities with a large group of educators. Another domain of interest in fosterage is the fertility-debate about women in West Africa. In this debate fosterage is explained as a strategy, women make use of, to keep their fertility high, even when financial means do not allow them to have as many children as they would like to have (Isiugo-Abanihe 1984, Oppong en Bleek 1982, Page 1989, Pennington 1991). It is supposed that women, by sending an older child to another household, create the possibility to give birth to another one.

Although these different debates emphasise important aspects of the fosterage-practice, they are part of an ethnocentric, exterior discourse because it is mostly in western societies that children are considered a financial burden. In West Africa parents also worry about the financial care of their children but they see them mainly as a sign of wealth and prosperity. Everybody loves them, everybody wants them. Women who give their child to others are generally seen as generous mothers since they separate from someone who is very important for them. Children are good company, especially in polygynous societies where husbands often leave the household for long periods of time. Children also frequently help their mother with small tasks as fetching water, washing the dishes, going to the market or transferring messages to neighbours or relatives. In anthropological literature, this close and warm relationship between mothers and children is not considered as a reason to foster children out, even though it can be one of the reasons. In anthropological theory on fosterage, women are mainly represented as mothers who do not succeed in raising their children themselves, or being too young, or not being married, or lacking the means to support them financially. These circumstances would force them to send their children to other educators.

In Cameroon, where I have been doing fieldwork since 1993, I heard women discussing fosterage for other then only economic reasons. They emphasised for example the political function of fosterage: fosterage as a strategy to create kinship networks. To keep kinship ties vivid and solid, they suppose that children have to circulate because children can link different parents in a stable and continuous relationship. By using fosterage women can create firm and reciprocal alliances, not only because of the circulation of goods and gifts that often goes together with a circulation of children but also because of the emotional relationship that exists between a child and his caretaker. I want to take up this argument from inside discourse and to elaborate on it in the context of polygyny. In this context, women make use of wider networks to educate their children and to prove themselves as true mothers.

Polygyny in Batouri, east Cameroon

Batouri is a town of about 25000 inhabitants in east Cameroon. I conducted previous fieldwork in *Mbondossi*, one of this town's districts where 25% of the households are formal polygynous.[1] The autochthonous people in this district take up a low social and economic position.[2] In general, women have not had the advantage of a good education, which hinders them to find wage labour. Their main task is the agricultural work in the fields outside the town. Their harvest is sufficient to feed their families and to put a small part aside for trading. This informal trade yields them some cash to pay fish, meat or salt or other products the women do not produce themselves. The men in the district do not assist in producing food - as was the case in the villages before –. They are often trained to be a bricklayer, a carpenter or a car mechanic and they are searching for a job to gain the money to maintain their family. Due to the unemployment in Cameroon since 1987, men hardly succeed in finding a long-term job. In spite of this, women consider them as breadwinners and they hold them responsible for their wife's and their children's financial support. Men can not fulfil this appeal to pay fees, to pay medicine or to pay clothes and it even often makes them desperate. In spite of these financial shortcomings, however, they do not give up polygyny.

Women in the district, especially first wives, constantly discuss polygyny, not for the reason that they condemn it or that they want it to be defended, but because they want to have a formal polygynous marriage that has been organised according to the traditional rules. These rules mean that the first wife, being the principal wife, enjoys special respect from her husband and co-wife, and that the husband's wealth must be divided equally between the co-wives. The problem women are discussing in town, has to do with informal polygyny and a unequal division of money in formal polygynous marriages. Since men lack the money to maintain several wives, they prefer to marry one woman officially and combine this marriage with a number of mistresses in stead of assuming responsibility of several wives. By hiding their extramarital relationships, men prevent their first wife to control the outlay and to claim the same amount of money for herself. When men do decide to marry a second wife, they often try to save money by putting the first wife a side. They no longer sleep with the first wife, they do not give her money anymore and they give themselves totally to the new married second wife who often is much younger. This unequal division of money causes arguments and competition between the co-wives, since these women do the agricultural work and almost totally depend for money on their husband. In stead of helping each other to do the domestic tasks – as the local normative discourse prescribes-, co-wives frequently fight for the money and the sexual favours of their husband. Co-wives can express their disagreement

[1] See for more information: Notermans (1999).

[2] The autochthonous people are mainly Kako, but other ethnic groups from the eastern province in Cameroon, like the Baya, the Yangélé and the Mézimé, also consider themselves as native people from Batouri.

in different ways: they use sorcery, they insult each other, they nag each other constantly and they even attack the other woman's children.

Children in polygynous families

Competition between co-wives can have drastic consequences for the children who grow up in polygynous households. Officially these children have to judge all the different wives of their father as real mothers. Co-wives have to collaborate in such a harmonious way that their children do not notice which mother gave birth to them and which mother did not. Although the children have to behave towards their mothers without distinction, they often and easily complain of the behaviour of their mother's co-wife.

In Mbondossi I spoke with young people about their experience of being a child of polygynous parents. Sylvie was 22 years old when we discussed her childhood. She said:

> It is very bad to grow up in a polygynous family. There are always two mothers quarrelling. They started fighting at the least little thing. Each time they had a fight, I felt ill at ease. When quarrelling did not stop, my father sent the two of them back home to their family and we, the children got left behind, all alone.

Like other children who grew up in polygynous families, Sylvie distinguishes her biological mother's behaviour from that of her mothers' co-wife. She calls her mother's co-wife "stepmother" which she explains as "bad mother". She even accuses her of sorcery:

> My mother suffered a lot. The stepmother used sorcery to drive her away, to kill her and even to kill us. She has always been too jealous.

Sylvie further explains that the stepmother, who always gave preference to her own children, gave cause to arguments between the children in the compound. Sylvie explains that there is no sense of confidence or solidarity between half-brothers and half-sisters and that she can only trust her brothers and sisters who are born from the same womb. Sylvie's mother tells me that she took her daughter away from the stepmother and fostered her out to other parents in order to put her child away from this hostile atmosphere. The mother herself stayed behind with her husband and co-wife.

Another story, that of Viviane, show us that mothers who leave the compound of their husband, also want to protect their children from the co-wife. Viviane was twenty years old when we discussed her childhood and she was, like Sylvie, a daughter of her father's first wife. Her mother was pregnant of her second baby when her husband secretly married a second wife. This made her so angry that she decided to abandon him. Viviane was about two years old when her mother left the house:

> My mother entrusted me to my grandmother, the mother of my father. I always thought that she was my real mother. Every time my biological mother came to visit me, I thought that she belonged to my father's family. It was long after my separation that they told me that she was the woman who gave birth to me. When my grandmother died, I came back to my father who already married tree wives. The second took me as her child and cared for me very well. The other women didn't care at all, they said that I was not their child. The tree co-wives were always fighting, they never took their meal together. When I was eleven years old, I decided to join my mother because I was fed up.

Like many other women, Viviane's mother left the compound and did not take the child with her because she lacked the financial means to send her to school. By leaving her child with

her husband's family, she expected them to pay the fees and to offer her a better future than she was able to do. By sending her to her husband's mother, Viviane's mother could leave her husband and at the same time protect her daughter from her co-wife. They didn't separate forever, Viviane joined her mother after years of staying with other parents.

Co-wife rivalry and fosterage

These short stories of Sylvie and Viviane demonstrate that rivalry between co-wives can often be a reason for fosterage. A local saying is that children can not develop in the hands of their stepmother. Generally it is said that stepmothers delay their progress at school by using them as slaves who can be sent on an errand every moment a day or can be forced to do small jobs. The stepmother hinders progress at school because she does not want them to find a good job to be able to maintain their mother when she is old. Children also complain that the stepmother, especially when their own mother is not at home, does not feed them. Another general saying is that the stepmother does not pay medicine when a child of her co-wife falls ill, neither takes it to hospital in case of need. Moreover, both mothers and children fear that the stepmother will use sorcery to poison the child of her co-wife.
All these fears and accusations demonstrate that co-wives, who are fighting and competing for their husband's money, try to hurt each other by damaging each other's children. To express their contempt, they critic the co-wife's children, they insult them and bother them. Since children are very important for women and each co-wife considers them as her own body, children can easily be attacked and be used to humiliate their mother. This practice, or at least the fear that children will be ill-treated by their stepmother, urges mothers not to let their children grow up next to their co-wife. They prefer to foster their children out to other educators.

In this context of polygyny fosterage can not entirely be explained on the basis of economic reasons. Neither can it simply be explained as a mother's shortcoming or as an attitude of indifference towards her children. It can rather be seen as an expression of a mother's feeling of solidarity with her children, and especially her daughters. First wives in polygynous marriages frequently use fosterage to separate their children from the co-wife and to protect them from her. In this way, fosterage can be seen as a strategy to be competent mothers.

Conclusion

Polygyny and especially the competition between co-wives can cause high mobility of children and frequent use of fosterage in east Cameroon, like in other West African polygynous societies. Mothers employ fosterage to save their children from the co-wife and to offer them better educational circumstances. Studying the daily practices and experiences of women and children in polygynous marriages, it becomes clear that women not only send their children out to other parents because of financial shortcomings. They can also decide to foster their children out in order to give them better possibilities, even when they are capable of educating them themselves. In the polygynous context I described before, children are not considered as a financial burden but mainly as an extension of their mother. Mothers identify themselves largely with their children, which gives occasion to their co-wife to humiliate and attack them, through their children.

In the dominant western discourse on motherhood, mothers who do not educate their children themselves have often been portrayed as inadequate mothers who cause mental problems to their children. This dominant view of true motherhood impedes a good

understanding of fostering-practices in West African cultures because good motherhood is experienced differently in different countries. I have confronted western notions of motherhood with another view on motherhood and good education. In east Cameroon, the education of children is not the task and responsibility of the biological mother only but it is shared with a large group of educators. Mothers are considered bad mothers when they claim their children for themselves and when they do not allow them to go elsewhere where educational circumstances can be better. Mothers who offer their children fosterparents, for example, to escape the stepmother and her children, are considered true and responsible mothers.

Moreover, fosterage provides women with a strategy to obtain more autonomy. Not being the only one who is responsible for education, they can delegate a part of it to others. By sharing educational tasks, women are able to offer their children better conditions to grow up, and also to give themselves the opportunity to stay independent, even when married. Marriage is not the only social network in which women usually take part. They can appeal to other supporting networks or create them themselves, by sending children out to other parents. Divorce, for example, can also be a solution for women to escape from competition with co-wives. Women, who do not want to leave their children behind since they fear the co-wife's behaviour, can foster them out to other relatives or friends when they are not able to take them with them.

It is also interesting to note that mothers and children in Cameroon who often cooperate with a large group of educators, do not see them all as good substitutes. As shown in this presentation, especially the co-wife is not considered a good and competent mother. This view is against the rule that co-wives have to cooperate in educating their children and against the rule that children, born in polygynous families, have to respect all wives of their father as true mothers. The perception of the stepmother's education makes also clear that views from inside not only differ from western normative discourse but can also differ from local normative discourse.

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