Politics of Kinship: Child Fostering in Dahomey/ Benin

Politiques de la parenté. Placement d'enfants au Dahomey/Bénin

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Politics of Kinship: Child Fostering in Dahomey/Benin*

In April 1918, in his obligatory monthly report to the governor of the colony of Dahomey, the *commandant de cercle du Moyen-Niger*¹ wrote:

La révision du recensement après quelques années équivaut à un remaniement complet. Nulle peuplade ne change de place aussi facilement dans l'intérieur du pays. Presque chaque décès entraîne le changement de domicile de plusieurs personnes. De plus la famille telle que nous la comprenons est extrêmement dispersée. La plupart des jeunes enfants ne sont pas avec les parents, mais sont élevés par des tantes ou des oncles qu'ils appellent père et mère, ce qui entraîne des erreurs fréquentes. Autre cause d'erreur : les villages et les hommes changent des noms ou en ont 3 ou 4 différents ! Tel qui s'appelle Bio-Yerima dans le village de son père se nomme Chabi Bagou dans le village de sa mère et encore autrement pour ses amis. Le recensement demande donc ici, particulièrement, un temps, une attention et une patience considérable.

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* This article is based on field research I have conducted since 1992 in the Borgu region in Northern Benin, as well as among migrants from the north in the city of Cotonou. Additionally, I conducted archival research in Porto-Novo and Aix-en-Provence. I have also published parts of the empirical material in my monograph (ALBER 2018). Beyond that, I am here developing arguments from my theoretical work in the research group "Kinship and Politics" at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld University (Bielefeld, Germany), where I presented a first version of this article in January 2017. I thank my co-convenors David Sabean, Simon Teuscher and Tatjana Thelen for insightful comments and thoughts as well as Jeannett Martin for continuous critique of my theoretical framing of child fostering. Thanks as well go to the very helpful anonymous reviewers and to Marie Brossier for her patience with me. Furthermore, I am grateful to all my friends and conversation partners in Benin.

1. The name of the commandant du Cercle du Moyen Niger is, unfortunately, impossible for me to identify from this source at the Archives nationales du Bénin (ANB) since it is partially illegible due to his handwritten signature.

Updating the census after a few years is equivalent to redoing it completely. No population moves around so easily in the interior of the country. Almost every death brings about a change in residence for several people. Moreover, the family as we understand it is extremely dispersed. Most small children are not with their parents, but are brought up by aunts or uncles whom they call father and mother, and this leads to frequent errors. Another source of errors: villages and men change their names, or they have three or four different ones! Someone who is called Bio Yerima in his father's village names himself Chabi Bagou in his mother's village, and still otherwise among his friends. The census, here in particular, thus requires considerable time, attentiveness and patience.²

Finding this remarkable document in the National Archives in Porto-Novo was a real boon for my research on child fostering in Dahomey/Benin.³ First, a contemporary witness here confirms what Baatonum-speaking informants in northern Benin⁴ have repeatedly told me: at the beginning of the twentieth century, most children in the region were raised not by their parents but by other kin. Child fostering continued to be seen as a very normal and appropriate way of parenting well into the twentieth century, but since this practice was largely overlooked by colonial officials, colonial and post-colonial lawmakers and, later on, by development agencies and government officials, it was very rarely mentioned in official documents.

The report is also unusual because the concrete problems of colonial administration it mentions are, similarly, rare themes and because it is one of only a very few reports by *commandants de cercle* (the lowest level of colonial magistrates) in the colony of Dahomey to explicitly refer to local practices of kinship and parenting. In colonial reports, references to local norms and practices almost always concern questions of political authority, such as local chieftainship or conflicts between the chiefs and the colonial administration. The colonial officers who had to report monthly had little interest in kinship as such and even less in parenting or childhood. The document cited above is different. Here, a contemporary witness confirms that most children did not grow up in the homes of their birth parents at the time, but with aunts and uncles. The report is credible precisely because it does not focus on child fostering. Instead, the *commandant* was concerned because the local population was hard to count and therefore hard to rule, a basic problem of colonial governance.

2. Rapport mensuel trimestriel du commandant de cercle de Moyen-Niger, April 1918, Archives Nationales du Bénin, série 1E30. Original French followed by my English translation.
3. The French colony of Dahomey was established in 1894, gained independence in 1960 as the Republic of Dahomey and was renamed Benin in 1975. I therefore use both terms, depending on the relevant timeframe.
4. Baatonum-speakers have mainly settled in the departments of Borgu and Alibori. The latter was called Moyen-Niger in the early 20th century and is situated in the far north of the country.

The three local practices the report mentions—the prevalence of child fostering, the high degree of mobility with concurrent constant changes of residence and the plurality of names—are all confirmed by memories and all persist in modified ways today. The *commandant*'s problem was that these phenomena hindered fundamental methods of colonial control: counting and measuring the population for fiscal and labour purposes. These technologies were based on European assumptions about identity and kinship such as unambiguous naming, relatively stable places of residence, and children being reared by their birth parents.

The report's date is significant: it was written by a new *commandant du cercle* who had been appointed to reestablish order and stability in the region after World War I and the suppression of the biggest and most violent local uprisings against colonial rule at the end of 1916 and beginning of 1917 (Crowder 1978; Bio Bigou 1992; Gotie n.d.). While the colonial administration had crushed these uprisings—which had started as a protest movement against high taxes and aggressive and often arbitrary recruiting of soldiers for the war—relatively quickly, they had taken it by surprise and made it uncomfortably aware of the fact that it knew very little about the activities of the local people. In the following years, the colonial administration saw restoring order as its most important task. This required a census as counting the population was the basis upon which soldiers were recruited and taxes were collected.

The theme of this special issue concerns entanglements and mutual co-productions of kinship and politics in Africa and this colonial report tells us, exceptionally, that local kinship practices of parenting, naming and housing were undermining political ordering in the region. The ways in which people organised and experienced their everyday lives and relationships (Carsten 2000) did not fit into the categories of naming, counting and, consequently, governing the region in the form of a colonial state.

The extract from the report of a colonial officer quoted above, which describes people who do not seem to fit into the categories of governance, can thus be read as an indication that everyday kinship practices in the north of the colony of Dahomey may have influenced colonial rule more often than colonial documents and local memories suggest. In this article, I intend to follow the multiple entanglements between kinship and politics in the region by recounting a twentieth-century political history of the region through the lens of changing practices of child fostering. These were largely underestimated or even overlooked by not only colonial officers but also anthropologists⁵

5. For instance, J. LOMBARD (1965: 56ff.), the most famous "classical" ethnographer of the region, mentions the phenomenon of child fostering in passing while completely missing its overwhelming significance.

and, later, development workers active in the region. Only recently, at the beginning of the new millennium, were practices of giving away children suddenly taken up and sanctioned by the normative political discourses of human rights and children's rights movements (Alber 2011; Howard 2012).

By recounting the political history of northern Benin through the lens of changing practices of child fostering, I aim to contribute to a more general argument that transcends the separation of kinship and politics normally made not only in contemporary everyday understandings of kinship, but also a great deal of anthropological theory.⁶ I argue that both changing patterns of fostering are deeply influenced by political change in the region, and also the converse: understanding the political history of the region requires acknowledging the important influences of child fostering practices. The colonial officer's report shows one aspect of this story: the ways in which the fostering of children complicated colonial biopolitics (to borrow a Foucauldian term). However, I am not arguing that traditional kinship practice is incompatible with modern statehood but, on the contrary, following the argument of Susan McKinnon and Fenella Cannell (2013), that kinship and modernity should not be seen as excluding but rather co-producing each other. Tatjana Thelen and I (2017) have argued in favour of a reconnection of statehood and kinship that goes far beyond understanding allegedly traditional societies as characterised by either kinship-based or stateless forms of political organisation and as opposed to a "modern" state that is envisioned as political order without kinship and as epitomising the Weberian notion of rationalised bureaucracy. We argue that this juxtaposition of kinship and the (modern) state as mutually exclusive is deeply ingrained in the Western worldview and in processes of anthropological knowledge production and that it is thus necessary to overcome the conceptual and geographical distinction—or even opposition—between a supposedly modern Western state and a premodern political organization elsewhere, a distinction that is often mapped onto scalar and temporal axes (Thelen & Alber 2017: 2f.)

By tracing the multiple shifts in child fostering practices in northern Benin over the course of the twentieth century, I will show that various changes in state formation and state politics not only deeply affected fostering practices, but also that changing patterns of fostering children in the region reflected processes of state formation and change.

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6. For a broader discussion, see THELEN & ALBER (2017).

Child Fostering in Northern Benin

In West Africa, and especially in northern Benin where I conducted my research, it is a widespread practice to give children to relatives who are subsequently regarded as their parents. In the anthropological literature, this practice is referred to as “social parenthood,” based on terminology proposed by Esther Goody (1982). The term “child fostering” is also common (Alber, Martin & Notermans 2013). Both terms suggest a somewhat misleading binary opposition between *birth* or *biological* parents, on the one hand, and *social* or *foster* parents on the other. In my research region, this opposition is not always made or conceived of as such, which means that from the perspective of the people in the region, there is not always a sharp line drawn between biological and foster parents. This manifests linguistically in how kinship terms like father and mother are expressed. For example, *baa*, which is usually translated as father, refers to the biological father of a child as well as to the mother’s husband. The same term is, however, also used for the father’s brother. This is true for other expressions, such as the verb *mara* which is usually translated as meaning to bear or to give birth. However this term is used not only by mothers describing their relation to a son or daughter, but also by mothers’ sisters.⁷

Although this language might suggest that people do not conceptualise a sharp and unambiguous distinction between biological and social parents, there is no doubt that everyone knows which woman gave birth to a particular child and which man is recognized to have the right of being seen and mentioned as the child’s father (usually, the mother’s husband). These people determine important aspects of the child’s place in the community, within local society, such as to which clan the child belongs, whether he or she will be entitled to certain offices, and many—but not all—of his/her family ties and obligations. At the same time, people always insist that a child belongs to those parents who raise, nurture and educate him/her. These parents are the ones who make important decisions affecting the child, such as choosing a spouse and hosting the wedding ceremonies. They are also the ones who decide whether the child should be sent to school. Thus, if I continue to speak of child fostering despite the reservations mentioned above, this is not because I want to insist on a duality between biological and foster parents. Rather, a comprehensible term is needed to denominate ways of parenting which does not imply unambiguousness and exclusivity, as do the Euro-American notions of “mother” and “father.” Generally, parenting is constituted as a

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7. Classical kinship anthropology would describe these findings as an Iroquois system.

social practice within concrete social configurations and is experienced in the context of a reservoir of shared, but changeable, knowledge. In my research region, in any case, parenting is seen as a plurality of norms and, quite often, as a plurality of involved persons.

This complex of norms includes a shared understanding that children do not belong to those people who sired and gave birth to them.⁸ Instead, different people and groups of people have rights over them, first of all relatives of both lines and especially siblings of the parents and members of the grandparents' generation. It is considered very inappropriate for birth parents to keep their children for themselves as this would contradict basic obligations of exchange and sharing that confirm a person's relatedness in webs of kinship as well as principles of social hierarchy.

Due to these normative conceptions, children are regarded as an eminently suitable medium of exchange and an excellent way of creating special social relationships based on the taking and giving of a child.⁹ Those who are seen as a child's birth mother and father will not acknowledge their relationship to him or her in public, while others will claim the child as their own (Alber 2003). This finds expression in the fact that relatives may speak of a child as "their child" and may ask the birth parents to give them "their child," a request which the birth parents cannot refuse. When a child is handed over, this is not only the beginning of a new parent-child relationship, but also—and above all—the confirmation of a social relationship between those who receive the child and are henceforth regarded as his/her parents, and those who have given the child. These hierarchical norms, and the idea that children are members of a larger group to which the social parents belong, are shored up by a quasi-pedagogical argument: it is generally accepted that social parents will bring the children up more strictly and more "objectively" than the birth parents would, better preparing them for the hardships of agricultural life.

These ideas have survived to this day, despite—or alongside—the globally circulating idea, originating from Europe, that children belong to their "biological" parents. Today, competing models of parenthood contribute to influencing decisions about how and with whom children should grow up.

In the rural areas where child fostering continues to be practiced, there are two groups of people who are most likely to take children from their relatives: the siblings, cousins and classificatory grandparents (including great-aunts and

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8. Beside my own research, see also the work of J. MARTIN (2007, 2013).

9. My understanding of children as a means of exchange is influenced by S. LALLEMAND (1993, 1994) and her insightful, structuralist theoretical frame. She understands adoption and fostering as processes of gift giving that develop parallel to the giving and taking of women.

great-uncles) of a child's parents, and the child's grandparents. The fostering of a child is not initiated by the birth parents but by the future foster parents, who go to the birth parents and demand "their" child. It is widely accepted that this request cannot be refused and the child must be given to those entitled to make such a request.

If we are to believe the tales told by elderly men and women in this region, before the arrival of the French almost all children grew up with foster parents. Local oral sources all agree that in the course of the twentieth century the practice of social parenthood has sharply declined, but it has never disappeared.

I started to follow the processes of transformation at the beginning of the 1990s and can confirm this decline from my own observations, but child fostering is still practiced to this day. On the basis of quantitative data, I have been able to show that more than half of the people who were born before 1950 (that is in the late colonial period) grew up with foster parents. In rural areas today, the rate is between 10 and 40 percent, depending on the village (Alber 2018: 213ff.).

Historical Change

In order to show how changes in child fostering have paralleled political changes in northern Benin, I will begin by looking briefly at the precolonial period before 1900, a period about which comparatively little is known due to the scarcity of written accounts by contemporary witnesses. However, locally-transmitted stories about disputes over succession to chiefly positions, as well as a few eyewitness accounts, confirm that growing up with social parents undoubtedly played a significant role with respect to local power structures. Constant feuds in the region resulted from brothers competing for local positions. The key factor in these sometimes violent disputes was the fact that, in every recorded case, the brothers had grown up with different parents and were therefore supported by different groups of relatives. Almost all local tales of conflicts over succession to a throne or the establishment of a new chiefly office mention such disputes. A significant pattern is that the contenders for a village chieftaincy had not, as a rule, grown up in the village concerned, but somewhere else. Due primarily to the practice of social parenthood, chiefs were thus not well integrated within the networks of a village when they assumed office.¹⁰

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10. Concerning the pre-colonial political history of the Borgu region see LOMBARD (1965), KUBA (1996), ALBER (2003).

However, child fostering seems to have been significant for precolonial political structures in the nineteenth century in ways besides competition for positions and offices. This is because it was a means of creating and constantly renewing social cohesion in an unstable local setting characterised by violent conflicts.

With the arrival of the French and the establishment of colonial rule, previously interethnic, decentralised power structures underwent fundamental modifications. Among the most immediate changes in the first decade of the twentieth century was the pacification of the region through disarming the local warlords and establishing a state monopoly on violence.

This induced many other changes, such as the gradual decline of slavery and the end of interethnic power relations. While the colonial records document this in detail, they do not mention something that is talked about to this day in the region: namely, that as a result of the declining violence, people increasingly began to give their children not to relatives who lived at a great distance but to those who lived nearby. I was told that the reason for this change was that it was no longer important to use the exchange of children as a means of creating widely scattered alliances and supra-local kinship obligations. Rather, people preferred to concentrate on consolidating their local networks, since they no longer felt threatened by violence.

At the same time, colonisers introduced new concepts of childhood and parenthood in the region which gradually began to be accepted in rural communities. The colonial administrators imposed regulations based on these new concepts, without noticing that they did not always correspond to local practices. For instance, most colonial *commandants* simply assumed that deceased chiefs would be succeeded by their sons. Politically savvy people who were familiar with the colonial officers' ideas could use this knowledge to their advantage without changing their own practices. This can be illustrated by the story of Sero Toro Tuunku's journey to Porto-Novo with his foster son, which I heard in various versions (Alber 2018: 158 ff.).

Sero Toro Tuunku and his Foster Son

Sero Toro Tuunku was a powerful man in the village of Tɛbɔ. He was *chef de canton* of Tɛbɔ until 1920 and then ruled as the *sinaboko*, or *chef supérieur*, in Nikki until his death in 1928. In the colonial records, he is mentioned under the name of Krissi Yerima. He belonged to a family of former warlords in Tɛbɔ which came to terms with the French in the early colonial period, obviously very successfully.

According to the story, while he served as *sinaboko* he once had to travel to Porto-Novo, the capital of the colony. He took along his very courageous foster son, Sero Kpera, who was actually his nephew. This young man (I was told) was brave enough to undertake the long journey with his foster father. After they arrived in Porto-Novo, Sero Toro Tuunku was repeatedly asked whether the boy was his son and, each time, he answered yes. The narrators of the story finish by saying that, as a result, Sero Kpera was later on appointed *chef supérieur* like his foster father despite the French officials' belief that a father's brother's son had no right to inherit the throne (even though according to local ideas he did). Other versions of this story say that Sero Toro Tuunku deliberately presented his foster son to the French as his own son in order to ensure him the chance of a career in the colonial administration.

This orally transmitted story, which was told to me several times and by several different people in the village of Tebo, can be interpreted to signify that Sero Toro Tuunku took into account the colonial administrators' belief that children had a right to succeed their birth fathers; deliberately presenting his foster son as his real son was to ensure that he would be given the chieftaincy while at the same time conform to the traditional norms. The story of how he took his foster son with him to Porto-Novo represents him as a man who heeded the old rule that foster children should be given preference over biological children and should be supported in every way possible. He did not choose one of his many biological children but rather his foster son to accompany him on this journey—an unusual undertaking at that time—and this event, preserved in the collective memory of his village, has been passed down to later generations in the form of a story.

This pattern is confirmed by the life histories of other men from northern Benin who were in close contact with the French in the 1920s. In their biographies, we can first see modifications to the practice of fostering nearly all children, without any fundamental questioning of the local norms. These early modifications included keeping some of one's children for oneself, usually in order to send them to school and thus help them obtain a career in the colonial administration.

New images and normative ideas of kinship, parenthood and childhood were introduced into the region by colonial institutions, especially by mission stations and schools. New jobs and career opportunities were opened up for the few children who were able to attend mission and later colonial schools (Alber 2018: 172 ff.).¹¹ However, despite these early signs of change, which were most salient in urban contexts, most children in the colonial period lived

11. For a more general overview on schooling in the colony of Dahomey, see ASIWAJU (1975a, b).

with relatives in village households where they were brought up according to the local concept by which children did not belong to their birth parents.

Postcolonial Changes

Following Dahomey's political independence, the process of transformation that had begun in urban contexts continued. In the villages, the practice of child fostering changed markedly from the 1970s and on. After the Marxist regime of Mathieu Kérékou came to power in 1972 and the growing state institutions became influential, even in the remote villages of the northern regions, the peasant economy changed. Market production developed alongside subsistence production, mainly through the introduction of cotton (Bierschenk 1987). In this period, the advice of agricultural technicians who were working all over the country induced women to begin cultivating their own fields. This led to changes in the labour organisation of households, as women's workload increased and girls now helped their social mothers work in the fields as well as in the household. This process accelerated after the introduction, in 1981, of a structural adjustment programme financed by the World Bank. Both male and female farmers were able and encouraged to accumulate capital by growing cotton. Women as well as men relied on the labour of the children living in their compounds, including foster children. Taking children—girls in particular now—from relatives was increasingly discussed in consideration of their additional labour power.

The question of who had the right to make decisions affecting the way children grew up increasingly gave rise to conflicts. Parents began to complain when they felt that their children were subjected to unequal treatment. Foster parents were accused of exploiting the labour power of the children they had been given when they were sending their own children to school. Such open criticism breached the old rule that the birth parents should never interfere with the way foster parents brought up their children.

Another change decolonization caused in the everyday practice of child fostering was that many government employees who had worked in other colonies in French West Africa returned to Dahomey. Most of the returnees settled in Cotonou, including those who originally came from the north of the colony. These were the first people from northern Benin to set up households in the country's biggest city. A new type of household consisting of urban middle-class Baatonum speakers grew up, the first in which all the children were sent to school. The heads of these households began to refuse to give their children to relatives in their home villages to be brought up there as

foster children. Therefore, exchanges between households in the form of taking and giving children became increasingly unidirectional. In fact, the rural households became child givers, whereas the urban households became only takers of children.

Thus, a new type of fosterage developed that was no longer based on the idea of generalised reciprocity and the mutual giving and taking of children, but on the need of the village people to find places to live for those children who managed to finish primary school and continued their studies in urban secondary schools. In these new cases of “schooling fosterage,” rural parents were often asked to contribute to the costs of school fees and other costs their children needed to live in the cities. In sum, compulsory schooling, although incompletely achieved, became a decisive motor of changes in the 1970s and 1980s in rural as well as urban areas. In the countryside, as mentioned, it caused the fraction of children who grew up as foster children to decrease; in the towns, schooling fosterage emerged as a new and growing phenomenon.

Some years later, both child fostering practices and the national perception of these changed, thus reflecting constitutional developments. Following a political realignment at the beginning of the 1990s, the government of Benin passed a new national family law in 2002 (*Loi n° 2002-07 du 14 juin 2004 portant Code des personnes et de la famille*) which emphasised Western European concepts and categories of family, as well as global human rights—especially the rights of women and children. This law privileges the birth parents and provides for the adoption of children only in exceptional cases, as in the family law of European countries (Médénouvo 2004). This perspective is reinforced by the many human rights and children’s rights organisations, whose campaigns against child trafficking emphasise the dangers of letting children live with people who are not their birth parents (Alber 2011).

Another development in the last decade of the twentieth century has had a major impact on child fostering practices: a major expansion of the primary school system financed mainly by Western donor organisations. For the first time in the history of Benin, primary schools were built in almost every village of the country. As a result (Bierschenk 2007; Fichtner 2012), instead of just a few Baatombu children going to primary school as was previously the case, now the majority of children were attending. The growth of educational institutions and general social transformations have created new opportunities for employment and advancement which confront rural families with difficult questions. Which children will be sent to the “French” school and who will pay for this? How can the resulting loss of the children’s labour be compensated? These are questions which continue to be discussed

and negotiated in various ways in village families, not only by adults but also by the young people concerned.

In the course of these multiple innovations and transformations, the rate of child fosterage in rural areas has been greatly reduced. This decline applies particularly to boys (Alber 2005: 143ff.; Martin 2007: 226f.) as people do still find it more important to send boys to school than girls. Therefore, it is not unusual for parents to try to keep their sons at home so that they can more easily influence their school careers. Meanwhile, schooling or apprentice fosterage continues to increase rapidly in urban areas.

Many women, in rural as well as in urban areas, are still interested in taking girls into fosterage. In urban households, this development has led to a diversification of forms of child fostering which have generated different status positions of children in these households. For instance, many middle-class urban households are today hosting foster girls who are doing domestic work in the household. These are occupying the status position in the household. A second category could be foster sons or girls who are attending public schools or universities, and who are better off than the domestic helpers. A third category, the “upper class position” among the children, are often the birth children of the household head who are often attending private schools and have many more privileges than the other two groups.

But the most remarkable thing about school fosterage is that implementing the political decision to establish compulsory schooling, which was intended as a form of modernisation, was possible only because people were able to adapt their long-established fostering patterns to the new conditions. In order to realise their ambitions for their children’s education, they placed them in the households of relatives in the city.

This has also led, very recently, to new developments in the rural areas. Since approximately 2010, many new secondary schools have been built in larger villages in the countryside. This has led to an increase in fostering practices even in some rural areas, because more and more children are now being sent to live with relatives in villages with secondary schools. In order to be able to stay in a rural environment, they live in these bigger villages as boarders.

This transformation process has led to many intra-familial conflicts over children. More than ever before, people argue about to whom children belong; who has what obligations concerning them; who has rights over them and, especially, over their labour power; who is entitled to make decisions about their schooling and who must pay the costs; and who is responsible for paying bridewealth or buying a trousseau. For the persons concerned, these can be very important issues: it is often not only the children’s needs that are at stake,

but also which of the parents they will be obliged to provide for when they are old. In negotiations over these matters, the actors often invoke different norms. In addition to the “old” and “new” concepts about to whom children belong, these include the idea, spread by development and human rights organisations, that every child has a right to attend school. This practice of invoking different social norms often leads to conflict-charged negotiation processes and, finally, to a situation where giving children to relatives is no longer seen today as a way of confirming kinship relationships, but as a source of trouble. For this reason, many people now do not ask their relatives to give them their children, or do not give their children to relatives, unless there are compelling reasons for doing so: enabling a child to go to school, if the parents separate or if one parent dies.

Another new development also affects urban households. Under the pressure of human rights and children’s rights campaigns, the practice of employing domestic servants has declined. This gap in the market has been filled by a new type of child fostering, which can also be understood as a reaction to the growing economic inequality within kinship groups: relatively poor adolescent girls who have never been to school are sent to live with foster parents in the town, usually distant relatives, where they are expected to help with the household work. Instead of paying them a wage, their foster parents will, after a number of years, pay for them to learn a trade or for a trousseau.

These foster arrangements are often contested and give rise to conflicts between village and urban families over, for instance, how long the girl is to stay in the town and when she will return home, or over the amount of money which she (or her family) is to receive.

My review of the history of child fostering in northern Benin can also be seen as a review of the changing political economy of the region. Not only is the history of child fostering deeply influenced by the political economy of the region, but the reverse also is true: the political and economic history of northern Benin is made and shaped by changing ideas, norms and practices concerning child fostering. This was true at the beginning of colonialism, as the statement quoted above by the colonial official shows, but it still holds true today when state politics regarding schooling requires the efforts of households that take rural children into fostering. Indeed, a new inequality has emerged in which a rising middle class demands domestic labour in the cities which results in the intake of rural girls from related kin as a new form of child fostering.

This making and shaping of political governance through child fostering can represent a kind of everyday resistance, as described by James C. Scott (1985), or at least a tendency to undermine rule, as was the case in colonial times. In contrast, I have shown that it was only fostering practices that made the schooling campaigns in Benin a success. Here, fostering practices have supported and accelerated the efforts of the state and development institutions to enable access to schooling for all children. In any case, the impact of child fostering on political change, whether it is resistance or cooperation, is noteworthy in my research region but, up to now, has been widely ignored.

In social anthropological reflections on kinship, how political processes or state politics influence kinship has been widely discussed (McKinnon & Cannell 2013). However, the converse—kinship practices affecting political processes or political changes—is rarely mentioned. The complaint of the *commandant* that I discussed at the beginning of this paper is therefore a case in point: his political task of conducting the census was made difficult, if not impossible, due to the practice of social parenthood.

Anthropologists who are interested in studying such interconnections between politics and kinship need to question certain fundamental classifications. Above all, this requires challenging an epistemological distinction between kinship (which is still too often considered as the regulating principle of non-modern societies) and politics (which is regarded as the characteristic feature of modern states). It is surely time to promote a holistic perspective, not only in terms of field research methods, but also with respect to these fundamental categories.

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that not only changing kinship practices are deeply entangled with political change, but also processes of political ordering could be influenced by and engrained with kinship practices. The argument is exemplified with regard to the political history of child fostering in northern Benin. A common and widespread everyday practice already in pre-colonial times, child fostering has been overseen by colonial officers, but nevertheless contributed to means of resisting colonial ordering. After independence, foster practices underwent deep changes which were related to the changing political economy in the region.

Keywords: Benin, Baatombu, child fostering, colonial rule, national politics, resistance, schooling.

RÉSUMÉ

Politiques de la parenté. Placement d'enfants au Dahomey/Bénin.— Dans le présent article, l'auteur soutient que non seulement les évolutions des pratiques de parenté sont profondément liées au changement politique, mais aussi que les processus de la mise en ordre politique pourraient être influencés par ces pratiques et y être enchâssés. Cette thèse est illustrée par l'histoire politique du placement des enfants dans des familles d'accueil au nord du Bénin. Déjà à l'époque précoloniale, cette pratique courante était répandue, soumise au contrôle des officiers coloniaux tout en étant un moyen de résistance à l'ordre colonial. Après l'indépendance, les pratiques liées au placement des enfants ont connu des changements profonds liés à la transformation de l'économie politique de la région.

Mots-clés: Bénin, Baatombu, circulation des enfants, éducation, pouvoir colonial, politique nationale, résistance.