Migration, Fosterage, and the Politics of Belonging in Ghana

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On October 14, 2008, an intriguing story was reprinted on the sports pages of the Daily Graphic, Ghana’s most widely distributed daily newspaper. The story focused on a talented soccer player, Mario Balotelli, a teenager of Ghanaian descent in Italy who had to wait until he was eighteen to become an Italian citizen and begin playing for an Italian soccer club. Mario’s national belonging—his citizenship—was complicated by the question of which family he belonged, as he had been informally adopted by an Italian family at the age of two, reported the paper. His Ghanaian biological mother Rose Barwuah explained why Mario had been put up for adoption:

We lived with another African family in a one-bedroom apartment full of damp. I went to the social services and pointed out I had a sick child. There were no houses for us, so they told me it would be better to hand Mario [then age two] to a local family for a while.

The father, Thomas Barwuah, added,

The social services put us in contact with the Balotelli family. I spoke to Mario often and took him home on the weekends so he could stay with his brothers. However, things changed as the years wore on. We do not care that he is now famous and we’re not after money. Thankfully, we have enough. All we want is that he remembers we are his parents, too. Tell the Inter [the name of the soccer club] Coach, Jose Morinho, to look after Mario like a son. It’s what he needs. We would like to tell Mario that we have always loved him and are enormously grateful to the Balotelli family for raising him. But we’d also want an emotional connection with our son. Above all, we wish to state that we didn’t ‘give away’ our child. Things happened in a way that probably even Mario doesn’t know about (Anon, Daily Graphic, October 14, 2008, p. 46).

I relate this story because it illustrates a moment of cross-cultural misunderstanding regarding a child’s belonging that seems to have resulted in pain on all sides. Mario, born and raised in Italy, and his Italian foster family might consider that his parents have given away their child and thereby renounce all claims to him. Another implication may be that one of the reasons they
gave him up is because they do not love him or do not love him enough; hence, Mr. Barwuah’s protestations that he and his wife “have always loved him.” Mario says that his parents abandoned him at the hospital and did not make efforts to contact him until he was sixteen (Anon, November 6, 2008). His current soccer stardom complicates the situation because he is so wealthy (Mario Balotelli’s website mentions that he sought a contract with Inter of 2.3 million pounds a year). Again, Mr. Barwuah’s mention of money shows that he fears that his son, his adoptive family, and members of the general public think they are only concerned about their son because of his fame and wealth. But what was Mr. and Mrs. Barwuah’s understanding of the informal adoption?

“Blood” may be the basis of a child’s belonging, as in many Western societies, such that a child belongs to his or her biological parents first and foremost (Schneider 1968). Or shared food and residence may create ties of kinship between people (Carsten 1997). In Ghana, children belong to multiple mothers and fathers (both biological and social) through practices of care. Care is conceptualised as material forms of support, such as feeding, clothing, providing medical care, and paying school fees for the child, but also refers to emotional bonds, since love creates the desire to care for another (Coe 2011). Anthropologists and demographers have long analyzed the way that childcare in Africa is distributed widely across many adults, as part of the flexibility and resilience of African social systems (e.g., Bledsoe 1990, Etienne 1979, Goody 1982, Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). These practices, which differ in their frequency and character, have been termed fosterage in the literature on Africa because of their difference from Western ideals in which the biological parents are the primary caregivers of children. Fostering as a concept makes more sense within the context of the nuclear family, than one in which childcare is broadly distributed. In the community of Ghana where I work, there is no local term for raising a child one has not given birth to, speaking to its usualness, lack of exceptionality, and normality. At the same time, however, the fact that there is no term for it does not mean that it is not discussed and people do not have feelings about it. In particular, people differentiate between four kinds of caregivers: 1) mothers; 2) fathers; 3) relatives on either the mother or father’s side, including the siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, and parents of the mother and father; and 4) non-relatives. All these people can give children a sense of belonging through their care and function as parents, supplementing rather than replacing the biological parents.
Belonging, as shown in Mario Balotelli’s situation, encompasses issues of national identity and citizenship status, naming, residence, and emotional connection, as well as financial obligations and expectations between parents and children. A child’s identity can become a site for parental tussling in contexts where multiple parenthood is supported and encouraged, even as people use ideologies of multiple parenthood to mitigate and shape the politics of a child’s belonging. Conflict between parents over the identity and belonging of a child is not a new phenomenon caused by international migration. Francis B. Nyamnjoh (2002) describes a similar situation to Mario Balotelli: in his youth in the Cameroonian Grassfields, his biological father and two social fathers each put pressure on him to change his name to reflect their connection to him. A young man I knew in southern Ghana also tried to balance his obligations to his father, who was beginning to show an interest in him now that he had completed secondary school, with his loyalty to his maternal family, who had supported him up so far. Such tussling may be most common with adolescent boys who show great promise.

The distribution of children to multiple parents has been intimately tied to the distribution of power and wealth within and between families in West Africa. Children need care, and wealthier and more powerful families are more likely to be able to provide the material forms of care that serve as the expressions and actualization of care. Through fostering, children can become attached to or belong to wealthier, more powerful, more connected, or more cosmopolitan households. The distribution of children to relatives and non-relatives became a mode by which lower-income parents in rural areas worked to increase their children’s social mobility through apprenticeship, domestic service, and living with more well-off kin and strangers in urban areas (Blanc and Lloyd 1994, Bledsoe 1990, Etienne 1979, Goody 1982, Moran 1992). While this literature has focused on cases in which the responsibility for child raising shifts from less wealthier and rural relatives to more urban and wealthier relatives or non-relatives, demographic studies in Ghana paint a wider variety of movement, in which children in rural areas are more likely to go to other rural areas than the cities, and that while children from urban areas were mainly living with other families in urban areas, a quarter were sent to rural areas (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985, Klomegah 2000; see also Vandermeesch 2002 for Senegal). These demographic studies also show that migrant mothers (whether to rural or urban areas) are slightly more involved in both taking in and sending out children, than those who have not migrated (Blanc and Lloyd 1994, Isiugo-Abanihe 1985, Twum-Baah et al 1995).
A critique of distributed care and multiple parenthood is particularly dominant among those who make identity claims to be cosmopolitan, educated, and modern (Ferguson 1999). Housing is provided for many middle-class workers, and the layout of the houses assumes that a nuclear family will live there, with smaller quarters for househelp. People in this social class accept children—both relatives and non-relatives—to live with them, but rarely distribute their children to live with other relatives (Ametefe 2001, Ardayfio-Schandorf and Amissah 1996, Bain 1974, Oppong 1979). These aspirations to cosmopolitanism and modernity are thus changing the politics of belonging in Ghana.

International migrants are considered wealthy and cosmopolitan, even more so than urban residents, by their relatives in their home countries, even when international migrants struggle abroad to find employment and adequate housing, like the Barwuahs. In this paper, I will explore whether patterns in the care and distribution of children have shifted in the case of international migrants, focusing not on the children sent to live with non-Ghananian families in the host country like Mario Balotelli but on the children left behind or sent back to live with relatives in Ghana. Ghanaian migrant parents have long used foster families in the host country to balance childcare and their labour or education in the same way that they would in Ghana (see Goody 1982 on the UK). But now, as part of the explosion of families living transnationally around the world (Dreby 2006, Parrenas 2004, Schmaultzbauer 2004), Ghanaians are more likely to have their children raised by relatives or non-relatives back in Ghana than sending them to live with non-Ghananian families in the host country, as the Barwuahs did.

At the risk of some simplification, I am going to argue that there are two trends in the distribution of children in terms of social class in the town in southern Ghana where I have done my research. The dominant trend is that more educated relatives or non-relatives with more lucrative work foster children from relatively more needy relatives, a pattern which is well-represented in the literature on fosterage in West Africa as noted above. The hierarchy of social class is accompanied by the hierarchy of place. In other words, children are seen as moving from not only a poorer household to a richer one, but usually also from a place that is less well-regarded in terms of “civilization” (the translation of anibuei, to use the local parlance) to one that is better. “Civilization” is denoted by material conditions such as piped water, electricity, better schools, cars and roads, as well as habits regarding cleanliness. Thus, because wealthier people are more likely to be living in towns and cities, children from farming families in the
villages are considered to have moved up in the world socially and economically simply by going to live with them.

The second, more minor pattern, relates to migration not of the child, but of the parent. As young people, particularly women, travel for work—whether tailoring or trading or farming—to the larger cities or rural communities, they leave behind their children in their family homes, with the elderly or late-middle-aged women staying there, in order to balance the demands of work and childcare at the height of their productive and reproductive lives (see also Etienne 1979 regarding Côte d’Ivoire and Brydon 1979 for Ghana). The older women who care for these children are supported by remittances from a range of people, not just the parents of the children in their care, but also from their brothers or other children. The parents of the children and other relatives may visit often and bring what they can; they may also help those in the house cook or perform other household chores when they come.

Based on my interviews with women and men about their own childhoods (ranging in age from twenty-two to eighty-one) in the town, both of these trends have some historical depth; they are not new phenomena. Both patterns are about migration, in which people in different places remain connected to one another, distributing resources and care within and between families across far-flung locales and creating ties of belonging.

Does international migration by Ghanaian parents and children change these two patterns of child fosterage in Ghana? If so, how and why?

First, it is important to note that many international migrants from Ghana were first part of the middle-class or elite in Ghana, with high education levels, urban residence, and employment in the public sector or large private businesses interconnected with international markets. Historically, international migrants were part of the educated elite: educated abroad, they returned home to take up prestigious government positions. Currently, international migrants are broader in their social class, encompassing both this educated elite and other skilled but less formally educated people, such as electricians, seamstresses, and mechanics. Prior to their international migration, like other urban residents, they tended to live in conjugal units, fostering in nieces and nephews of less well-off relatives or non-kin as househelps or commercial labour to help balance reproduction and production (Bartle 1981, Oppong 1979).

Immigration laws in developed countries sharply constrain the movement of people. It becomes difficult for migrants to bring over their own biological children, much less those they
might foster: their nieces, nephews, or younger siblings. Filing papers for one’s children requires a birth certificate and increasingly a DNA test; other children require formal adoption papers. While fosterage is common, adoption is extremely rare; several people in the town told me that Ghanaians do not adopt. Because immigration laws in Western countries accept ties of belonging based on “blood” (or DNA) but not based on shared ties or care, transnational migrants are much less involved in taking care of children than they would be prior to their migration, when many were living in urban areas and working in stable positions. They are also much more involved in sending out their own children than those of comparable social status in Ghana: as they wait five or ten years for their children to acquire the papers to join them abroad, their children live with relatives or non-relatives in Ghana. Prior to their migration, the parents were likely to be taking in less wealthy relatives and not inclined to let their own children go live elsewhere. By virtue of their migration, the parents may be wealthier than their kin and thus, if they were in a comparable situation in Ghana, they would be taking on the burdens of raising children in the family. Remittances on the part of transnational migrants substitute for taking in children. Furthermore, abroad is considered to be “high” in the hierarchy of place, and during focus group discussions with me, children drew pictures of life abroad and described life abroad as full of beautiful plants and flowers, cars and airplanes, buildings with many storeys, and schools with many resources. Thus, the dominant pattern of wealthier relatives living in a better place taking in children from needier households living in poorer communities declines with transnational migrants. On the other hand, the more minor pattern of older women helping working, migrant mothers raise their children and being supported by their remittances increases with transnational migration.

Methodology

This paper is based on a household survey conducted in a small town in southern Ghana, Akropong, a district capital of about 9,000 people, located in the Eastern Region of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service 2002). Aiming for ninety interviews with caregivers of children who had a parent abroad or a parent elsewhere in Ghana, my research assistant Kweku Aryeh and I visited 220 houses randomly across five different neighbourhoods. Based on satellite maps of the town, available from the District Assembly, the town had approximately 1712 houses (not necessarily households), so we visited approximately one in eight houses in the town. Because
children with international migrant parents represented only 5% of the children in local schools (based on a school survey I conducted in 2006 among 1182 children aged 6-14), the sampling was not completely random, as we had to ask the households we encountered whether they knew any child with a parent abroad in the neighbourhood to obtain our goal of thirty such caregivers. Ultimately, this effort resulted in interviews with ninety-three caregivers and with eighty of the children they were looking after. About a third of the caregivers were looking after children who had a parent abroad and were a grandmother, aunt, uncle, or mother to that child (30 caregivers), about a third of the caregivers were relatives to children whose parents were living elsewhere in Ghana (33 caregivers), and the remaining third were either taking care of a child who was not a relative (17 caregivers), were taking care of a child who was a relative and had moved to live in the town from elsewhere in Ghana (6 caregivers), or were a mother living alone with her children whose father lived elsewhere in Ghana (7 caregivers). We interviewed the children under the care of those caregivers who were between the ages of eight and twenty-two years. Forty-five of these same children also came to focus group discussions which were organised in their neighbourhoods. This mode of data collection resulted in adult and children discourse about family life and migration; the random nature of the survey ensured that these discourses were elicited from a range of people, particularly in terms of social class and hometown origin within Ghana.

This data is supplemented by data collected over the past three years, from interviews with Ghanaians who had migrated to the US, some of whom were raising children back in Ghana; and with caregivers and children in Akropong and in some of the larger cities in Ghana: the capital city Accra and the regional capitals Koforidua and Kumasi.

Rapidly becoming an outer suburb of the capital city Accra, Akropong has a teacher training college, a small campus of the recently founded Presbyterian university, and two secondary schools. The business of the town—education—has attracted migrants to the town, but young people from the town seek greener pastures in the larger cities of southern Ghana or abroad. Working men and women tend to leave the town, returning to their family houses in their old age or when they are out of work, taking up farming foodstuffs on small plots. It seems as if almost every house in Akropong has a family member abroad, although many relatives are abroad with their own children and visit their hometowns infrequently. Migrants from Akropong also tend to want to raise their children with relatives living in Accra or another large city, where
there are more educational opportunities—particularly more private schools—than are present in Akropong.

**The Distribution of Care for Children**

Ghanaian parents feel that parenting can be distributed across many people, without the child belonging to any one of them. In a preliminary interview, one retired teacher expressed his thoughts about fosterage by quoting a local proverb,

*ęnyɛ ɛbaakofo na ɛyɛn mmofra. Not one person, one family, takes care of the total education of a child.*

It is not one person who raises a child. It is not one person or one family that takes care of the total education of a child.

He continued by explaining how in school, there were many different teachers who taught different subjects. A Presbyterian minister spoke similarly. He was taking care of his wife’s brother’s son; the wife’s brother, the father of the child, had died.

*Onipa baako biara no, nnipa bebre na ɛebo na ansa na watumi anyin. . . . Enți se obi pe se yeboa no a, ye ñwe a, ye ñwe yen síkasɛm na yebe wumi aboa no a, na yebo no akosi baabi, na obi nso atoa so aboa no. Na ṣno nso baa a, na wabo obi. Saar ara na nkakrakakra. . . . Tesse efie a yɛmɔ mi yi, mmofra nkete waa yɛmɔ mi ne ade, ṣno sua ade wie a, na wadan ne ho teacher na ɛne wɔn atena ase na wakyere wɔn ade. ṣno nso osua ade ne ɛnte ase a, ɛwɔ problem a, na ñde aba na yeakyere no.*

Many people help each individual to grow up. . . . So if someone wants us to help them, we look at our financial situation and if we can help, then we help them to a certain place, and then someone else continues to help them. When that person grows up, he will also help someone. That’s how we do things. Little by little, - [we help one another]. . . . Like in this house, with the little children here, when he [the wife’s nephew] finishes studying, he changes into a teacher and they sit together and he teaches them. Or if he has a problem understanding his studies, he brings it to us and we teach him.

Because help is distributed across many adults and family members, caregivers can do their share before turning the work of raising a child to someone else when things become difficult for them as well. One woman was taking care of her sister’s child, now fifteen years old, in Ghana. She had supported her younger sister in raising her son from the time he was a year and a half, both when the sister was in Ghana, when she was studying sewing, and then when her sister
travelled abroad to the UK with her new husband nine years ago. She wanted the boy to join his mother in the UK because

Na ṣno nso tumi boa no, efise seisei me nso maye bi. Enti ṣno nso pẹ se ṣno nso oboa nea aka no kakakakra.

Then she [her sister] can help him, because I have done my bit. And she also wants to help him with what is left [of his growing up], little by little.

Children who are fostered can thus be passed on to another person when the foster parent finds it too difficult to take care of a child. The circumstances which change someone’s ability to care for a child can be sickness, the need to take care of someone else who is sick or aged, a change in one’s work or education, or migration. One fourteen-year-old girl had been taken care of by her mother’s brother’s friend, a woman, because her mother had no money, but when the woman migrated to South Africa five years ago, the girl came to live with the woman’s mother. Another twelve-year-old girl was being taken care of by her grandmother but when the grandmother went to Accra to look after her daughter (not the girl’s mother) after she gave birth a year ago, the grandmother left the girl behind in the family house to be looked after by her adult cousin.

Because care is distributed broadly, as many anthropologists have described, the ties to the biological parents are not severed, unlike Western adoption. The parents’ own parents or siblings are the most likely caregivers to whom care will be distributed and thus, the relationship with the parent is likely to continue. Children who are being fostered visit their parents on weekends or over school vacations, as Mario Balotelli’s father claimed Mario did, and their parents also visit them. Even when children are raised by people from a very young age (like Mario) and may not remember their mothers or fathers, when they reach the age of ten or so, people in the neighbourhood or other relatives will begin telling them that the person raising them is not their mother, as they thought. Some people feel that this will change how the child feels about his or her caregivers, and make the child worry about why their parents gave him or her up; others feel that so long as the care that the child is receiving is good, it will not trouble the child to suddenly learn that his or her mother is in fact someone else. When the caregiver dies, other family members may also remember that the child does not come from that person’s womb and not allow the child to inherit, which will put the child in terrible straits. Thus, a child can experience multiple and different forms of belonging, and ideologies which support a complex web of identification for children.
It is important to note that sometimes the distribution of care within families does not work out and can result in a child being neglected, or no single person taking responsibility for a child. One woman takes care of her brother’s child because her brother, living elsewhere in Ghana, does not look after him well. The boy was living with her and her grandmother, and when the grandmother went to Accra to look after her daughter who had given birth, she took the boy with her. But the grandmother found she could not take him to school in Accra and she herself was sick, so she brought him back to town and his aunt when she came to her sibling’s funeral. Now, it seems as if no one is responsible for the boy’s schooling and he is being allowed to roam about rather than going to school.

Although the distribution of children is common in the town, most people interviewed believe that it is better for the two parents to raise their own children. But circumstances may make that ideal parenting situation impossible to attain. The retired teacher quoted above talked about some of the reasons why children go to live with other relatives,

Na stɔ da bi a, na there are problems, problems in marriage, enti na mmoa ebi kɔ ha. Afei ye ebia, m’advuma asee. Me wife nso ɔŋ retirement. Yeŋ last born wɔ SSS [senior secondary school]. Yeŋ pension entumi mmoa yeŋ, enti se yeɔɔ onua bi a, yeɔɔ wo ɔɔ a, yese kɔtena wo ɔɔ ɛh. At least woprapra ne dan mu anɔpa biara a na ɔŋ nso wahwe wo

Once in a while, there are problems, such as problems in marriages, so that is why children are scattered. Maybe, I have lost my work, and my wife is retired, and our last born is in senior secondary school. Our pensions don’t go far enough, so if we have a sibling or an uncle, we can say, go stay with your uncle, so at least if you sweep his room [symbolic of all household chores] every morning, he will look after you.

Cati: Wobedidi.
You will eat.

Teacher: Afei ye ebia. These are helping hands, enti na ɔŋma yeŋ mma kɔtena baabi foi fofo, na ɔŋmom anka, ne totally no, ɔye se parents baanu beyen abofra no, the way they want the child to grow. It is the most perfect way of rearing, caring for children.

Maybe so [in response to my comment]. These are helping hands, and so we let our children live elsewhere, but otherwise, really, it is better for the two parents to raise the child, the way they want the child to grow. It is the most perfect way of rearing or caring for children.

A woman who sold used clothes had a similar perspective:

ɛfa kɛse no ye ahokyere na ɔŋma obi de ne ba kɔma obi se me no tena. Se anka enye ahokyere de a, ɛye me se obiara nni hɔ a, ɔŋwo ne ba se womfa no nkɔntena. . . .
A large cause which makes someone send his or her child to live with someone else is poverty. If there was no poverty, it seems to me that no one would send a child he or she has given birth to away to live [elsewhere].

Just as this woman later commented, many cases of fostering in the town occurred because the parents did not have work or because one parent had died. This means that the distribution of children shifts from poorer to richer people and from those more in crisis to those less in crisis. The crisis may be the death of a parent, a protracted sickness of a parent or a child, or a divorce (or separation, since many couples in the town do not formally marry). This does not mean that the woman who takes in a child is rich or does not have any troubles, just that she is slightly better off than the parent. One woman exemplifies this. Her younger brother has many children and does not have a lot of money. Her own children have grown, and she sells provisions off a table in the courtyard of her house, receiving some assistance from a good friend and neighbour who is supported by her children’s remittances. As a result, this woman feels she is in a slightly better situation than her brother and took in one of her brother’s children, a ten-year-old boy, to help her brother with the task of raising his many children.

An old woman took in one of her grandchildren because her daughter also had a lot of children:

While it is possible for someone to help a relative with the expenses of childcare by just giving the person money, taking the child into one’s household ensures that the caregiver will give more continuous support to the child, since the child will be eating and working in that household. The child's presence in the caregiver’s life will continuously remind the caregiver of the child’s needs and thus the support for that child will be greater than if the child lived with the actual
parent. The child belongs more to a foster parent than they would to someone who just gives the parent money for the child’s support (although such a person can eventually become a foster parent).

Probably the most major crisis that results in fostering is the death of both parents. When the parents of children die, relatives divide up the children amongst them, because none of them can afford to take care of all the siblings. In the childhood of the woman quoted above, her mother died early and the relatives came to divide the children amongst them.

**Na s kayere sê, obiara fa wo bi. Ose, “bêtena me nkyen” na òbeyè wo papa. Na wokòtena ne nkyen, na ònyè wo papa, esiane sê, wonye den? Wonni maame a obeyi biribi de akyekye wo nsam.**

Then everyone took turns in asking a child to come. This one says, come live with me, and he or she will treat you well. But you go to live with them, and he or she doesn’t treat you well, because—why? Because you don’t have a mother who will provide for your needs [lit. put something in your hands].

This also occurs when a parent, particularly a mother, is mentally ill. People will have compassion for the children living in such miserable circumstances and take a child. Siblings from poor households or households in crisis are therefore separated from one another and are scattered into different households. Children’s multiple belonging thus serves as a safety net and a route to access other resources for their later success.

Thus, the most common reason for fosterage in the town today has to do with the relative financial strength or the social stability of the caregiver in comparison to the parent. The one exception in this regard are some grandmothers or great-grandmothers who are taking care of small children. By taking care of these children, they are helping the children’s mother—their daughter or grand-daughter—to work elsewhere. They may take in all the children of the mother or just one or two to help her out; generally, the youngest child will stay with the mother. One woman in her seventies taking care of five grandchildren explained why:

**See wahu se yen ha no, Akuapem ha no, se, sebe, see mewo hâ a mewo ahôden yi de, na wo ba no wo a, ese se wutumi boa no kakra na uno nso, se òkayè adwuma bi wô baabi koraa na watumi aye biribi saa, na se mmofra no wô ne-nkyen a, ebia aban adwuma, ôsò adwuma, enti òbaasere, ôbehe mmofra no ne ade no, na waye late, enti òkô koraa adwuma no onnya no se nea ese se onya no. Me nso seisei, Onyame adom, menyee aberewa yi enti na ese se meboa mmofra no kakra, na uno nso tumi nya na kakra a, obenya no na òde abo.**

As you have seen here in Akuapem, I will have done wrong if I am here and I am able to do so, and your child has given birth, you have to help her a little so that
she can go out to work or find something to do. If the children are with her, then if she is going to work, perhaps government work, then she will get up, get the children ready, and she will be late, and so even if she makes it to work, she will be stressed out and rushed [she will not have found it easy]. By God’s grace, I haven’t become an old lady yet [in terms of her strength and health] and so I should help with the children a little and she also can get something small to bring home.

These grandmothers are reliant on the remittances of these and other working children for their sustenance, and they would be whether or not they were raising their grandchildren. Thus, one could say that they are poorer than the child’s actual parents, but this consideration seems less primary in inter-generational fosterage than in the more lateral movements of children between siblings or adults of working age. In one case of intergenerational fosterage, a grandmother took care of a grandchild whose father and mother had died, and her other children supported the grandmother financially to take care of the child.

Based on my conversations with people about their own childhoods, and another study from the 1960s based in the same area (Brokensha 1966), in previous generations, the reasons for fosterage seemed less concentrated on the economic circumstances or the inability of the parent to care for the child because of death or mental illness, but were more varied, such as for the child’s training, discipline, or education. The reasons seemed less negative—based on what the parent lacked—than on what an alternative caregiver or household could provide. Educational fosterage seems to have declined currently, although teachers and nurses continue to attract children (particularly non-relatives) to live with them. One aunt who was taking care of her brother’s son explained:

_Though, sɛ kan no de, wode—wo nua bi wɔ ha, wose, kɔ ne nkyɛn, kɔ sukuu wɔ hɔ, kɔtena ne nkyɛn, ebia boa no adwuma ye. Na seisei no, sɛ abofra no ne ne papa—Mprempren asetena yi de, sɛ abofra no ne ne papa ye adwuma na ne maame ye adwuma a, wɔremma wɔn ba no bekɔ baabi. Wɔpe sɛ wɔn ankasa ara be-train wɔn ba, sɛ wote ase? Seisei de, education enti, emma ne ba no nkɔ baabi, efise ɛkɔ baabi a, ebia, onipa baako beye no, ɛno ɛrenye ne ba saa. Although, at first, if your sibling was alive, you would say to your child, Go live with him, go to school there, maybe help in his work. But nowadays, if the child’s father—The way things are now, if the child’s father and mother work, they don’t want their child to go live elsewhere. They want to train the child themselves, you see? Nowadays, because of education, one doesn’t let one’s child go live elsewhere, because maybe if he goes there, the way that person would treat the child is not the way the parent would do so._
Some people did feel that there were other reasons for a child to live with someone else other than their biological parents. One woman in her sixties commented,

My thought is that, perhaps, the mother wants her child to go somewhere and experience different things, you see? Like learning housework, very well, or perhaps she wants the child to be educated. So perhaps she goes to live with a teacher, and when she finishes her chores, she has a scheduled time to study. In some cases, a child living with her mother doesn’t study, doesn’t do anything, just goes out in the street to play. But if she lives with someone else, she will learn to do the right thing, she will learn how to do household work, and she will also study. She has a schedule to do these things, but if she is living with the mother, she doesn’t respond to the mother, she is not scared of the mother, she doesn’t do anything for the mother, so if the mother tells her to stop this or do that, she won’t do it. But if she is living with someone else, because she is scared of the person, she will do it!

However, the only case from the ninety-three caregivers in which we saw this situation was with a boy who was truant from school. He was sent to live with his father’s sister: because he would be more frightened or shy with her, he would be more likely to obey her commands to go to:

As for me, we haven’t lived together, so he will be a little shy with me. As for his mother and father, they will be too close or comfortable with him. But as for me, we haven’t lived together in the same house, so he will be a little shy with me.

In interviewing caregivers about their own childhoods, another reason to live with a relative had to do with the hierarchy of location: their parents were farmers in a village, and their relatives lived in town where there was a good school. One fifty-eight-year-old grandmother said that she had lived with her mother’s older sister in town to go to school; her mother was a farmer in a village elsewhere in the Eastern Region. On some vacations, she went to stay with her mother
and help her farm. In this case, her childless aunt had a store in town and paid her school fees and all the costs of her care, although in other cases, where farmers could help with school fees, particularly in the time of cocoa when farmers were wealthier, the parents were the ones to pay their children’s school fees.

In the past, children also went to live with other relatives, for the relatives’ benefit rather than their own, such as an elderly person needing a young person to go on errands or fetch water. We did see a few cases of this in the town as well, with a seventy-four year-old woman bringing a distant relative, a ten-year-old boy, to live with her to run errands.

I would suggest that these interviews from Akropong help us make sense of the Barwuahs’ understanding of their son’s fosterage or adoption by the Balotelli family. I make two caveats in this interpretation, however. One is that the Barwuahs are not from Akropong. Rather, their name suggests that they are Asante, another Akan group from elsewhere in southern Ghana. Furthermore, I have not spoken to the Barwuahs, Mario, or the Balotellis, but am only relying on what is available in the public media. However, based on the newspaper accounts, they seem to feel that another family helped them in an hour of crisis, when their son was sick and they could not find adequate housing, and that the care of a child can be distributed across many people without losing the emotional and legal bonds between parents and the child. Mario’s belonging could be multiple, rather than being transferred from biological parents to foster parents. The Barwuahs do not claim to be Mario’s sole parents, but rather want him to remember “we are his parents, too.” He could live with the Balotellis and visit the Barwuahs on weekends. The Barwuahs express appreciation to other people who function as his parents, both his foster parents and the coach of the Inter soccer club. Their actions thus seem consistent with a premise that care of a child can be distributed across many people without destroying the sense of belonging between the biological parents and their child. Furthermore, fostering a child with other caregivers is particularly appropriate and understandable when the child is chronically sick, as the Barwuahs were, or in other times of crisis or need.

*The Changes Transnational Migration Brings to Fosterage Practices in Akropong*

As Ghanaians travel around the world, they take this understanding of a child’s belonging with them. But, like the Barwuahs, they encounter legal systems and ideologies which make it difficult to put this understanding of childcare into practice, or which result in their actions based
on this understanding causing conflict and pain in unexpected ways. Rather than focusing on those like the Barwuahs who foster their children with families in the host country, I will focus on the caregivers and children left behind in Ghana. Because care is distributed across many family members, they too are affected by legal systems and social understandings of belonging in the country of migration. Is transnational migration changing fosterage practices in Akropong?

Transnational migrants are far more likely to send out their own children to other people than to take in other relatives’ children in their own households. As discussed above, immigration regimes in the countries of migration make it difficult to bring over biological children legally, and the process of applying for their papers can take five to ten years before it is successful, such that their own children may grow up in Ghana before they can join them. This results in international migrants not living with their own biological children. Furthermore, they have difficulty fostering their nephews, nieces, and grandchildren, children whom if they were back in Ghana they may have taken in. Fostered children are not recognised legally by the host countries, unless they are formally adopted, which is itself an arduous and bureaucratic process, and under suspicion by immigration officials when it is between kin. Not all the factors depend on host country restrictions, however. Another factor is that the primary reason why Ghanaians migrate—to work—and the expectations for both husbands and wives to send home remittances to their families mean that migrants, in the prime of their working and reproductive lives, find it difficult to balance work with childcare. Some further seek to balance work and education, making their time even more constricted. The high cost of childcare in comparison to migrants’ ability to pay for many hours of daycare on their wages makes formal daycare prohibitive, and they have concerns about the quality of informal daycare. All these factors put pressure on Ghanaian migrants to ask relatives back in Ghana to help with raising their own children, whether for several years when children are young (when they would be in long hours of daycare) or for many years as they attempt to get permits and papers for them, and simultaneously make it difficult for them to help raise their relatives’ children. They thus have difficulty creating ties of belonging with the children of their extended families, even as the children of migrants create multiple ties of belonging, to their parents abroad and to the kin taking care of them in Ghana.

Although migrants may have difficult lives abroad, of struggle and loneliness, long hours of work, and poor housing conditions, particularly if they are there illegally, they are relatively
wealthy in comparison to family members back in Ghana, because of the exchange rate between currencies and the differences in wages and the cost of living. Thus, even if migrants can save the equivalent of $100 a month to send home to their families, this is generally far more than someone in Ghana could remit to a relative in a month. It is important to note that as Ghana’s economy has improved over the past ten years, the cost of living in Ghana has increased, such that the power of small sums of remittances from abroad has declined. This has occurred at the same time as wages for many but the most wealthy in the West have remained stagnant, such that migrants seem to be struggling harder to send money home than they were ten or fifteen years ago. That being said, for the most part, the remittances that people receive from migrants abroad is in general more than what they receive from relatives in Ghana, and it is on this basis that I would argue that migrants abroad are generally richer than their relatives in Ghana.

Thus, the dominant trend of richer relatives raising the children of poorer relatives is reversed through transnational migration. Instead, what used to be the more minor trend—of grandmothers raising children to support working, migrant mothers and fathers and supported by remittances—has become more significant. Finally, I would say that while there are general trends towards parents’ raising their own children and a critique of sending out one’s children, transnational migrants’ reliance on fostering out their children marks a reversal of that trend. This is particularly so if they were in the professional and educated class of government workers prior to their migration, which many were.

Grandmothers who have raised grandchildren, some of whose parents are abroad and some of whose parents live in Ghana, find clear continuities in fosterage patterns and no changes introduced by migration abroad. One grandmother who was taking care of her infant granddaughter whose mother and father were abroad commented that all her children were providing for her, both those abroad and those in Ghana:

\[\text{Wɔn nyinaa bɔ mmɔden, wɔn a wɔwɔ Aburokyiri no, wɔmena, wɔn a wɔwɔ ha nso wɔmena, enti ne nyinaa eey the same.} \]

They all do well: those abroad remit money, those here in Ghana also remit, and so they are all the same.

The only difference is that those in Ghana remit every week or every other week when they visit her, while those abroad remit monthly. Her son and his wife are nurses in the UK and so they have the financial resources and the documents to travel back and forth between Ghana and the UK to look after their children every three months or so.
One grandmother was taking care of her grand-daughter whose mother was studying sewing and then working as a seamstress in Accra. The mother visited on the weekends, bringing provisions and money to support her mother and daughter. When the mother migrated to South Africa to join other members of her family, there was no change in the grand-daughter’s living situation, then, as she continued to live with her grandmother. Remittances did drop while the mother established herself in South Africa as a hairdresser, but three years later, things had improved. Thus, the pattern of grandmothers taking care of grandchildren to support their children in balancing work, education, and childcare has been strengthened by Ghanaians’ international migration.

Children vary in their response to staying behind while their parent or parents migrate. Some, similarly to those in Ernestina’s Tetteh’s study of the children of migrant parents in Accra (2008), were happy that their parents were able to send money and clothes home, allowing them to continue their schooling. They had strong emotional attachments to their caregivers. One fifteen-year-old boy whose mother was abroad said that, although day-to-day care was provided by his aunt, his mother’s elder sister, he was happy his mother was in the UK because

Obetumi de nnesma abre yen ne ade. shënom asetena no ye kakra sën ehanom de no, enti së onya biribi a na anka watumi de abre yen.
She is able to bring me and my aunt things. Life there is better than life here, so if she gets some money, she can bring it to us.

He told us that she brought clothes and shoes and money, and that he was not at all unhappy that she was far away. However, other children whose expectations were that family life would consist of parents and children living together, perhaps with other people living with them, were saddened by what they felt was a scattering of the family. These children, after expressing their feelings of missing their parents, reported how caregivers were not able to provide the love, affection, and provision of resources that parents would. Afua is the oldest of four siblings. When her mother and father went to the US, they left behind Afua and her two brothers in the care of the mother’s younger sister, taking the youngest daughter with them. She commented,

Living with my aunt is not like living with your parents, you know. I would say that it really had much effect on my brothers. . . . They lacked that parental love. Before, my mom really loved us. That was almost the only thing she could do, like, call us and talk. Almost every Sunday, she would call. We’ve been so attached to her than to my dad. My dad and [Emma, her youngest sister] are really pretty close, but with the rest of us, it’s like, [Emma] left when she was like
four and a half years, and lucky for her, she came with both of them [their mother and father], so she got all the love from both parents. . . . My aunt wasn’t so, so nice to us. We didn’t really get all the love from her. It was more like each one for himself. You do whatever you have to do to survive. That was really hard.

For her, the key damage for her and her brothers was that rather than thinking about the family as a unit—close, together, thinking and caring about each other—they became more individual, thinking only about themselves. As an example, she said that she would finish up the food, not leaving any for her brothers, because she had difficulty getting enough food in her aunt’s house. While the mother called regularly and visited once, it was not enough to protect them from the lack of affection from their caregiver, the mother’s sister.

In contrast to the continuation of grandmothers taking in their grandchildren to help the working parents, the pattern of successful migrants in places with greater infrastructure, allure, and educational reputation taking in children from poorer households and giving them access to new opportunities cannot be sustained under transnational migration. In general, this does not seem to bother those I talked to in the town. Remittances were considered an adequate substitute for migrants taking in their needy relatives or relatives in crisis. Complaints about transnational migrants ducking their family care responsibilities were directed at those migrants who did not remit and were not heard from again, not towards those who remitted and called, but did not take on the daily chores of caring for sick and elderly parents or needy children. And while those in Ghana can also avoid these family responsibilities, or can substitute funds for the daily labour of caring, people seem more upset about those abroad because they are also seen as being in a better position to provide help.

Thus, to the extent that transnational migrants remit to the child’s caregiver, that migrant is in the family’s good graces, even if the daily care responsibilities fall on someone else in the family or an in-law. I encountered two situations when the brother of an international migrant had died, leaving behind his children. This is a situation of dire crisis in which siblings should step in and offer to take in the children left behind, but because the international migrant is abroad, he cannot do so. In one case, the father’s brother had travelled abroad to the UK and was remitting money regularly to the children’s mother. Three of the four children stayed with their mother, while one stayed with the father’s sister and her husband, with whom I talked. The uncle abroad was seen as fulfilling his responsibilities by the son and his caregiver, the brother-in-law,
although the brother-in-law sometimes had to use his own money to take care of the child, when the money remitted was not sufficient or did not arrive at the right time. The sixteen-year-old son said about his relationship with his uncle abroad:

Kwame:  
*ɛyɛ fine.*  
It is okay.

Cati:  
*ɛyɛ fine.*  
It is okay.

Kwame:  
*It seems he is doing what is expected of him to do because, enti, yɛn ntɛm ye.*  
He is doing what is expected of him to do so our relationship is cordial.

He felt a stronger sense of belonging to the uncle with whom he lived (his mother’s sister’s husband) than to the uncle abroad who supported his education.

However, another uncle in a similar situation—a migrant abroad when his brother died—was seen to have absconded from his responsibilities. The man’s five children had been living with another brother and his wife. But when that second brother also died, his wife sent the children—her husband’s nieces and nephews—to live with their mother. But then the mother too became sick and died, and her relatives brought the children back to their father’s brother’s wife, saying that there was no one on the mother’s side to look after them. The brother’s wife then appealed to the last brother of her husband’s siblings still alive, the uncle who had migrated to the US:

> But ɛnɔ nso, mekyerɛw no se, anka ɛmmehɛw wɛn nso. ɛnna ɛnɔ nso se, seisi n’advuma asɛ. ɔnyɛ advuma na ne yere nso wo hɔnti, menkɔ so na owie a, na ɔse ɔba back a, na ɔba bɛhɛw wɛn so. Yɛnte ne nka bio.  
I wrote to him to look after them, and he said that he was out of work and he was married [he had his own family responsibilities] so I should continue [looking after the children], but if he returns to Ghana, then he will look after them. We haven’t heard from him since.

Because she feels that the children—not her relatives—were dumped on her, she feels bitter at both her husband’s relatives and the relatives of the mother of the children for not taking care of the children. She feels keenly that the migrant abroad is not helpful. But because she was worried that the children’s future and education would be ruined by neglect, she took some responsibility for them, distributing the three youngest children between her and her elder sister and letting the eldest two make their own way in the world. Both situations show that those in Ghana have to
shoulder more of the burdens of the costs of care, but those who remit are appreciated for their contribution and are seen as fulfilling their family responsibilities.

Some women were caring for children before they migrated abroad, but they could not take these children with them. Because of the informality of fosterage in Ghana, they had no documentation that they were taking care of them and needed to go through formal adoption proceedings to bring their children abroad. Ghanaian migrants who wish to bring their foster children abroad thus begin to pursue formal adoption proceedings, legal ways of demonstrating a child’s belonging that build on emotional and material connections made informally. None of these proceedings I heard about were successful, as immigration services are wary of child trafficking as well as of adults being able to easily bring over any child to whom they claim a fostering relationship. Two adolescent boys were being raised by their grandmother who was supported by her children abroad. When the grandmother died, one of her daughters in the US tried to bring over her nephews but could not persuade the American immigration services to allow them to come, despite hiring a lawyer. Her claims that the children belonged to her, and that she was responsible for them, were not successful. She thought about returning to Ghana simply to help with the children’s care, but could not figure out how to make a living there, and she then decided to go back to the UK where she had citizenship status, thinking she would have a better chance there at bringing them abroad. Some foster mothers continue to remit to their foster children after they migrate and pursue formal adoption proceedings to bring over such children, similarly unsuccessfully; others abandon the fosterage with their migration. Whether the relationship with the foster parent and child continues or not, the child usually goes back to stay with the biological parent who is either a sibling or a child to the foster parent. A child’s sense of belonging to a foster parent may therefore be severed or attenuated when the foster parent migrates abroad.

One migrant abroad was managing to foster a child, albeit in Ghana. According to those left behind, she had migrated to the UK forty years ago, as a young woman, and came back and forth between the UK and Ghana regularly, supervising her businesses and building projects in Ghana every few months or so. She had taken in a great-nephew, age thirteen, from her home village. The boy’s mother had mental problems and had eight children, the five eldest of whom were all living with other people, relatives and non-relatives, as a result. The boy she was fostering was furthermore sick for many months with yaws, a bacterial infection of the skin,
bones, and joints causing painful sores. So a year ago, she had brought him to live in her house in Akropong, where some relatives were living. However, when the female relative living in her house died shortly after the boy arrived, the migrant hired her former driver, a thirty-two-year-old unmarried man, to stay in the house and look after her great-nephew. According to this caregiver, she was currently arranging for the boy’s adoption to a childless South Asian friend living in Britain; for instance, on her last visit to Ghana, she took photos of the boy to show to her friend.

Transnational migration thus shifts a child’s sense of belonging to poorer relatives “back home.” These relatives do not seem to mind very much, except in one case where a sister asked a woman to help take care of her children while she went to France for three months, but she ended up staying for three years. While such caregivers exist outside the context of international migration, in the form of grandmothers helping their daughter’s work, the distribution of children to richer relatives living in towns and cities ensured those relatives’ continued support of children in the family. Such claims of belonging cannot be made on transnational migrants. Rather, responsible transnational migrants send remittances to caregivers whereas in the past they might have or did take children into their own homes; others use the occasion of migration to wall themselves off from those claims of belonging, and they may be genuinely struggling abroad, both financially and in balancing work and childcare responsibilities themselves.

Conclusions

There are trends towards parents raising their own children, particularly in certain social classes which have historically been the most likely to go abroad. Whereas in the past, parents sent children to live with other people for a variety of reasons—ranging from the child’s ability to contribute to the household labour of the caregiver, to concern about the child becoming well-educated or well-trained—those reasons no longer have the same pull. Rather, it is poverty or crisis, such as the death or sickness or mental illness of the parent, by which people in the town explain why parents would let their children go to live with another relative and establish a complex web of belonging. International migration thus has re-invigorated fosterage at a time when fosterage is being critiqued and is regarded as a second-best option, a safety-net when what is perfect—belonging to a biological mother and father—cannot be obtained.
There are two common patterns of fosterage in the town: a less common one in which grandmothers support their working children who are living in nearby towns, cities, or villages by taking care of their children and are supported by their migration; and a more common one in which slightly more wealthy adults in a more stable position take on children from poorer households or one in crisis. Both patterns are connected to migration and the spatial distribution of resources and carework that affect a child’s belonging. International migration intensifies the first trend. Because people go abroad to work at the height of their productive and reproductive lives (aged twenty to forty), many find it difficult to combine their reproductive expectations with formally paid labour. Formal childcare is too expensive abroad; taking care of one’s own child interferes with one’s ability to work. Thus, grandmothers back home take care of their grandchildren, the children of children in Ghana and abroad, pooling remittances from all children to look after all the grandchildren under their care.

International migrants can easily send their children to be raised elsewhere and may be pushed to do so by host country immigration regimes, work conditions (which may require irregular hours), or the fact that the wages that they are paid may not sustain a family in the host country. They have difficulty taking in children, for the same reasons, despite the fact that they are perceived to be doing better than their relatives back in Ghana and are living in places which in Ghana would be considered beneficial for the children educationally and socially, in the same way that towns and cities are considered beneficial in comparison to villages in Ghana. Some support their former foster children’s education and livelihood through remittances; some pursue the route of formal adoption to try to bring their fostered children over; others give up their foster parent position and leave the children in the care of others, generally the biological parents, in Ghana. Travel abroad thus prevents migrants from being foster parents and creating multiple belonging for the children in their families back home.

This research thus suggests that while remittances are touted as a factor in development and an increasingly major source of revenue for African countries, we need to be cautious in evaluating their impact, because we need to take into account the resources which such relatives might provide had they stayed in Ghana. To the extent that remittances are substituting for the work of care which is being provided by those left behind in Ghana, the value of the remittances from abroad may be less than initially perceived.
Secondly, supporting other scholarship on the global distribution of carework (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002), international migration seems to be distributing carework more in the communities of migration, than in the host country; in other words, in Africa in comparison to the US or Europe. There is some indication of stresses and strains on those left behind, in situations when children have been “dumped” unexpectedly or for those middle-aged single women with children in Ghana who are also trying to balance work with childcare responsibilities. However, within this town, perhaps because there are not so many migrants that no able-bodied adults are left, so long as migrants send remittances, people are grateful and do not mind the migrants’ physical absence and inability to take children into their own households. However, to the extent that more and more migrants go abroad, the pressure on those left behind may increase, and what may be appreciated now may seem like a burden in future.

Finally, the distribution of migrants’ children to relatives in Ghana rather than to the migrants abroad increases their sense of identification to Ghana and to their family in Ghana. Rather than being raised in Italy or the United States, they are raised in Ghana, under the care of Ghanaian relatives. This means that even though they are the children of immigrants, many of the descriptions of second-generation immigrants do not apply to them, when they too migrate abroad as young adults, following in the path of their parents. They are less likely to turn their backs on their country’s language and culture than most second-generation children; they are as likely to be as moved by the smells and sounds of their home country as their parents are. Rather, they may function more like a first generation which is likely to maintain ties to the home country and to the caregivers who remain there. Through their multiple sense of identification, the children of migrants are likely to remain Ghanaians in their hearts even if their citizenship status changes, rather than becoming, like Mario Balotelli, singularly Italians (or Germans or British) in their hearts as well as in their identification documents.
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