Translations in Kinscripts: Child Circulation Among Ghanaians Abroad

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Article begins on next page
Chapter 1

Translations in Kinscripts: Child Circulation Among Ghanaians Abroad

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The soccer star Mario Balotelli is a particularly famous and interesting case of how affective circuits can be broken and remade as Ghanaians translate and adapt practices of child circulation taken from Ghana to the cultural kinscripts underpinning social institutions and legal structures in Western countries. Born to Ghanaian immigrants in Italy, from the age of three Mario Balotelli was raised by a white, Italian family. Since his adolescence, he has claimed Italian citizenship, disowned his Ghanaian family, and refused to play for Ghana in international tournaments, causing much consternation among Ghanaian soccer fans (Williamson and Pisa 2010). Mario’s circulation into the Balotellis’ household gave him a sense of belonging to the Balotelli family and through them, a public identification with Italy.

Balotelli’s case is an unusual one, because of his talent, visibility, and wealth, but it illustrates several points that I wish to make in this paper, although I focus primarily on the experiences and dilemmas of more ordinary Ghanaian transnational migrants and their children. Ghanaians use practices of child circulation familiar to them from their own childhoods and adulthoods to support their transnational migrations. These practices have been central to how previous and contemporary generations of women who migrate within Ghana and elsewhere in West Africa balance work and reproduction and provide care across generations, which Cole (this volume) terms family regeneration. Children’s circulation into new households, where non-parental adults care for them, creates new affective circuits – that is, flows of love, words, moral
support, advice, goods, money, and services produced in social networks (Cole and Groes introduction; Feldman-Savelsberg chapter in this volume). They also produce new ties of belonging and attachment, including attachment to national identities.

In Ghana, as elsewhere in West Africa (e.g. Alber 2003; Notermans 2004), children’s circulation into new households is not meant to break their connections with their biological parents. Rather, the aim is to create a more complex and broader array of social connections, along which material opportunities and emotional feelings will flow. Parents seek to add (rather than replace) new identities, including giving children new, more desirable social class positions and urban/rural connections. In fact, child circulation connects not only children to new caregivers, but also creates deeper connections between the biological parents and the fostering caregiver (Bledsoe 1990; Etienne 1979). Similar to the ways that electrical currents are really electrons jumping from atom to atom, new affective circuits between parents, caregivers, and children can be enabled and rerouted by placing children in the care of new caregivers.

When Ghanaian migrants go abroad, they often seek to place their children in other households. Children tend to circulate to three kinds of households: those of non-kin, citizen families in the country of migration; those of kin in Ghana; and those of kin migrants abroad. Parents and children alike work to maintain affective circuits despite physical distance, in part by maintaining flows of communication and material goods. However, as Balotelli’s personal history dramatically illustrates, Ghanaian practices of child circulation translate imperfectly and unevenly into the scripts of family life that Ghanaians encounter in Europe and other Western countries. We see a similar dynamic occurring with marriage in the chapter by Groes-Green (this volume), in which women reject becoming “locked-in” housewives in Europe, in favor of continuing “sponsorship” relationships, similar to what they initiated in Mozambique. Cultural
narratives about kin relations, or kinscripts, shape the institutional and legal practices that “delineate and regulate kinship relations,” including the family reunification routes by which Africans are allowed to immigrate into Europe (Boehm 2012, 60). Consequently, they also structure how social services provide help and how child circulation is legally regulated through fostering and adoption. The term “kinscripts” comes from Carol Stack and Linda Burton (1994), but I use it in a more narrow way than they do, to illuminate culturally patterned family narratives which shape conflict, care within families, and policy about family life.¹

This chapter examines how cultural narratives about parenting, kinship, and care shape the maintenance and expansion – and contraction and breakage – of the affective circuits that Ghanaians create through transnational migration and child circulation. As the electrical metaphor of circuit evokes, these flows can be blocked, slowed, dropped, and picked up again. Cultural kinscripts are key to interpreting the meaning of these flows, as well as to deciding whether such circuits should remain open or be shut down. The cultural frameworks that undergird the regulation of family life in Western countries resignify West African practices of child circulation, generating potentially new familial and national attachments. The fact that European law recognizes Western definitions of family and not African ones becomes a major factor in the short-circuiting of affective and material flows between African migrants and the children in their extended families. European laws’ lack of awareness and understanding of African kinscripts raises questions about legal pluralism, an issue I return to in the conclusion.

Ideologies Underpinning Ghanaian Child Circulation: Multiple Parenthood

In southern Ghana, children come to belong to multiple mothers and fathers (both biological and social) through practices of care.² Care takes the form of material forms of
support, such as feeding, clothing, providing medical attention, and paying school fees for the child. It also refers to emotional bonds, since love creates the desire to care for another in material ways (Coe 2011). Parenting can be distributed across many people, without the child belonging to any one of them (E. Goody 1982). A Presbyterian minister from Ghana explained to me:

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 [his 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.

In part because the exchange of resources defines care (Thelen et al. 2013), multiple people can provide care during a person’s lifecourse, including older siblings and cousins. Furthermore, the child is expected to reciprocate this care whether in the present – by helping with household chores cheerfully – or in the future, by contributing financially to the caregiver’s well-being.

This cultural kinscript has been termed fosterage in the literature on Africa because of its distinction from what is ideologically idealized in Western society – the co-residence of a biologically-constituted nuclear family. However, fosterage is not always highlighted in contexts where the care of children is broadly distributed. In the town of Akropong where I have done my fieldwork, there is no local term for raising a child one has not given birth to, speaking to its usualness, lack of exceptionality, and normality. After all, the child belongs primarily to the

Coe, p. 55
lineage and kinship group, not to the parents. Because care is distributed broadly, the ties to the biological parents are not severed, unlike in Western adoption. The parents’ own parents or siblings are the most likely caregivers to whom care will be distributed and the child’s relationship with the parent is likely to continue.

Ghanaian practices of child circulation deliberately seek to manage the affective circuits that connect parents and children. Children who are being fostered visit their parents on weekends or over school vacations, and their parents also visit them. Even when children are fostered from a very young age, as in grandmother fosterage, and may not know that the person they call a mother is in fact a grandmother or aunt, when they reach the age of ten or so, people in the neighborhood or other relatives will begin telling them that the person raising them is not their mother, as they thought. Some people feel that this information will change how the child feels 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 satisfactory, it will not trouble the child to suddenly learn that his or her mother is in fact someone else. Parents and children use the cultural scripts available to them to manage their affective belonging when children circulate between households, particularly for those raised in a social parent’s household from a young age, so that they can maintain relationships with multiple caregivers, including their biological parents.

Ghanaian Migrations: Past and Present

Transnational migration has been a known and valued phenomenon in Ghana since the colonial era, as Ghanaians traveled for work elsewhere in West Africa and for education in Britain, processes that continued after independence.³ International migration from Ghana to Britain was once a sign of elite status, particularly when it accompanied a high-status education.
The dream of being educated abroad to become an important person in Ghana continues to animate many Ghanaians. Most international migrants have gone to other West African countries or elsewhere in Africa (Benneh 2004; International Organization for Migration 2009), but the United Kingdom and the United States each receive five to seven percent of Ghana’s emigrants, with migrants usually using an initial migration to another country in Africa to fund a migration to a more developed country (International Organization for Migration 2009).

However, as international migration increased in the 1980s and 1990s, the opportunity to travel became democratized (Manuh 2006, 24). A broader swathe of the population, including students, teachers, lower-level civil servants, and skilled blue-collar workers like mechanics and electricians, has become increasingly involved in transnational migration. Still, international migrants from Ghana tend to be from the more developed southern part of the country and living in urban areas prior to their migration (Adeku 1995; Anarfi et al. 2003). What was once an educational migration – perhaps only as a thin veneer (E. Goody and Groothues 1982) – is now clearly a labor migration.

As international migration has expanded beyond the educated elite, it has become more characterized by struggle. The fruits of migration have shrunk for migrants, both because the cost of living has increased in Ghana and because of the kinds of jobs that these more unskilled migrants do abroad. Moreover, since Ghanaians are relatively recent migrants to Europe, with the exception of the United Kingdom, they usually do not have an extensive family network to help with childcare and housing. In response, they have developed fictive kinship networks, particularly through churches (van Dijk 2002) and hometown associations. Many work long hours in difficult and low-paying jobs, making their ability to contribute to and benefit from these organizations precarious. They often hope to return to Ghana once they have earned
enough money to build a house, start a business, or pay for their children’s education, but they find that their time abroad can stretch to decades, as some make the decision to remain abroad until retirement.³

Historically, the circulation of people through migration stimulated two different kinds of child circulation, which had occurred before but became more prevalent during extensive urban migration in the 1960s or 1970s. One was known as grandmother fosterage, in which young women traveled to urban areas for further education or work, leaving their young children with their mothers.⁴ Migrant women who used grandmother fostering in my survey were more likely to be young, unmarried, or remarried. For example, Belinda, a fifty-three year-old woman, described how she lived with her grandmother in Akropong as a child in the 1960s because her mother was working in a nearby market town and had remarried, while her brother went to live with their father. Grandmother fostering was also common among women who were transferred every few years because of their or their husbands’ civil service employment, because they wanted their children to have a more stable living situation. Elizabeth, a forty-seven-year-old nurse (born c. 1961) described how her mother, then a young, unmarried woman, gave her to her grandmother after her birth. She stayed with her grandmother because her mother worked for the social welfare department in Kumasi and was often sent to different stations across the country. She never knew her father, and in fact, her grandmother treated her as if she were her youngest, last-born child. Such arrangements ideally provided care across the generations – to the mother, who could work and rest assured that her child was not being neglected; to the child, who was lovingly cared for; and to the grandmother, who was assured of her daughter’s remittances and received household labor as the child grew older. Relations between grandchild and grandmother strengthened the affective circuits between the migrant and her family at home, because they
ensured frequent visits and communication. Grandmother fosterage is one musical note on which transnational migrants improvise, providing the model for Mario Balotelli’s parents fostering their two-year-old out, and to those Ghanaian migrants who send their infants and young children to live with relatives back in Ghana.

Another kind of child circulation made more prevalent by the migration of adults was the movement of older children into urban areas, particularly into higher-status and more educated households, for the purposes of their education, exposure to urban life, and discipline, in exchange for their labor contributions to the household. As I witnessed during my fieldwork, this strategy of bringing relatives into the household was more common among educated and married women who were formally employed and among women married to men in formal employment, but was also important for women who were traders, who appreciated having an assistant to hawk goods around town (see also Schildkrout 1973). This kind of child circulation has been extended to justify adolescents’ domestic servitude among non-kin or more extended kin, but it usually takes place between relatives, in which more wealthy, educated and stable siblings of the biological parent or of the child provide care to the child in exchange for the child’s domestic labor, perhaps including childcare of younger children in the household. For example, Matilda, a forty-eight-year-old woman (born c. 1960), went to live with her older sister, a nurse, for twelve years, finishing middle and secondary school while staying with her. Describing her sister’s reliance on her in the household, because of her sister’s employment, she said that she helped prepare the meals of her sister’s husband, something husbands usually insist that only their wives cook. Young and teenage women often helped their older and adult sisters or the sisters of their parents juggle their work and their household responsibilities, at the same time as their older, more educated sisters helped them go to school.
In this scenario, the hierarchy of social class accompanies a geographic hierarchy. In other words, parents see children as moving from not only a poorer household to a richer one, but from the village to the city, 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, better educational facilities, as well as habits regarding cleanliness and disciplined behavior. Thus, children from farming families in the villages are considered to have moved up in the world socially and economically simply by going to live in a town or city. It is this second kind of child circulation that transnational migrants are imagining when they attempt to bring their adolescent nephews and nieces or younger siblings to live with them abroad.

Parents often seek to extend such practices of child circulation, long pivotal to women’s mobility in Ghana, to transnational migration. A woman had begun taking care of her sister’s child, Philip, when he was one and a half years old, when his mother was an apprentice seamstress in Accra. When Philip was six years old, his mother traveled abroad to the United Kingdom with her new husband, and Philip remained behind with his aunt. Now that Philip was fifteen, his aunt wanted him to join his mother in the United Kingdom despite her emotional connection to him, because:

> Then she [the mother] 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.

However, they soon find that building affective circuits and extending kinship links in Europe is far more difficult than they expect.

_Ghanaian Families Encounter Western Family Law_
Part of the difficulty results from the fact that the European states where Ghanaian migrants go to live and work take a very different approach to child circulation. Western cultural notions of the family undergird adoption and fostering laws as well as the state’s provision of social services. Blood and birth are primary in establishing a child’s rights and identity (Schachter 2009; Schneider 1968). Western understandings of parent-child relationships are encoded in legal mechanisms governing immigration, welfare, and social protection and are available discursively in everyday conversations and media representations. The legal and institutional mechanism that does exist for the exceptional substitution of biological parents – aka adoption – is also premised on an “as-if-begotten” model (Schachter 2009).

One consequence of the “as-if-begotten” model is that the parent-child relationship is seen as dyadic, rather than multidimensional (a child having multiple connections to many different kinds of caregivers who provide different kind of care at different points in the child’s life). In order for a child to acquire new parents, relations with the original ones have to be dissolved. Another consequence is that adoption is intended to be permanent. And finally, lacking the biological bond of blood and nature, the relationship between parent and child needs to be established by a formal contract between the adopting parent(s) and biological parent(s), or the organization which brokers the arrangement (Schachter 2009). These measures illustrate adoption’s deviance from the normal model of biological parenting even as they seek to make adoption invisible by making it as close as possible to a biological model.

This view of kinship leads to plenary adoption which severs the biological parents’ legal rights and emotional connections to the child, replacing them with a connection to social parents. Adoption in Western countries takes for granted that children will assume their adoptive parents’ way of life socially, religiously, and nationally, privileging the bond between adopting parent
and adopted child (Briggs and Marre 2009). Since “adoption radically alters the adoptee’s filiation, it involves the transmission of key markers of identity over time: name, kinship ties (such as siblings and grandparents), language, and nationality, as well as social, cultural, and ethnic affiliations” (Ouellette 2009, 76). In part, this restriction on multiple parenthood results from the historical legacy of adoption in Europe in which it functioned to provide people with heirs to their property (J. Goody 1969). That “the child becomes. . . a full member of the adoptive family, as if born into it” is predicated on the child becoming “a legal stranger to his or her birth parents and other birth relatives” (Ouellette 2009, 69). Adoption is thus predicated on the severing of one affective circuit to replace it with another, rather than viewing multiple affective circuits (between child and social parent, child and biological parent, social and biological parent) as enhancing and strengthening the others.

However, other practices of circulating children co-exist with this model. In France and Belgium, courts occasionally authorize a simple adoption, in which the child acquires an additional family without losing his or her original kinship bonds (Ouellette 2009). Fostering, as a less permanent arrangement, privileges the bond between birth parent and child over that of foster parent and child by maintaining the child’s birth identity. However, fosterage often occurs coercively, under the supervision of social service agencies and child protection services, due to a mother’s imprisonment, “neglect,” or poverty, promoting the transfer of poor children to working-class and middle-class households or to foster-care institutions. Adoption can occur after a period of fostering, and many adoptions in the United Kingdom and the United States are not between strangers, but are adoptions of children co-resident with a biological parent and an adopting step-parent (Bowie 2004). More recent movement towards open adoption would seem to undercut plenary adoption and recognize multiple parenthood. However, based on her research
in Québec, Ouellette (2009) argues that the adopted child’s medical need for genetic information drives the open adoption movement, rather than the belief that children can benefit from affective and filial bonds with multiple adults.

These Western understandings of family not only regulate family relations within national borders, but are also encoded in international agreements, like the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. In order to prevent the trafficking and exploitation of children, the Hague Convention conceives adoption as a contractual agreement drawn between entities who possess full knowledge of the agreement (Schachter 2009). Relations between birth parent and adoptive parent are expected to be non-existent; they are anonymous to one another and strangers (Schachter 2009). The Hague Convention considers international adoption “preferable only to orphanage care” (Yngvesson 2009, 109). However, international adoption, particularly of children who appear racially different from their parents, has complicated some of the notions about blood and birth that normally make adoption invisible, as we see in the case of Mario Balotelli. In these contexts, complex processes of kinning adoptive children are necessary to incorporate them into both the family and the nation (Howell 2004; Leinaweaver 2013; Stryker 2011). Despite a greater recognition of the pasts that children bring with them, adoptive parents find an adopted child’s relationship with birth parents emotionally threatening, as if only one set of parents and affective circuits can exist (Yngvesson 2004).

When Ghanaians go to Europe, they encounter these legal and social frameworks of fostering, domestic adoption, and international adoption. They draw on these laws and scripts to try to further their own ends of raising their biological children and the children of their siblings. I will discuss, in turn, three strategies: fostering-out a child to non-Ghanaians in the country of migration (a translation to Western fostering), fostering-out a child to relatives in Ghana (an
extension of child circulation in internal migration, which does not need translation and goes un-detected), and fostering-in a child of siblings (a translation to Western international adoption). These strategies create different kinds of affective circuits – between biological parents, social parents, and children. They also have implications for the child’s social class position and sense of national belonging, as I explore below.

The Balotellis and the Barwuahs: Translating Multiple Parenthood into Fostering in Italy

The story of Mario Balotelli’s parents illustrates how the children of Ghanaians abroad sometimes circulate to the care of citizen families in “foster” arrangements when Ghanaians have trouble balancing work and family life abroad in the absence of relatives who can help them. Initially perceived as temporary, these arrangements can become a source of tension, as foster parents and child emotionally connect to one another. In some cases, they can threaten the relationship between parent and child, particularly when social services and the legal apparatus sees the merits of the fostering arrangement for the child, in terms of social class and/or national identity. This story is told from what is publicly available in English-language media from Europe and Ghana, in which the parents were much more vocal than Mario Balotelli, who prefers to not speak about these issues. I have not personally interviewed any of the principals.

In newspaper reports, Thomas Barwuah explained how his son came to be fostered.\(^5\) Mr. Barwuah was a metal worker working far away from his family, and “shuttled back and forth every weekend on a twelve-hour overnight train,” while Rose Barwuah was alone looking after their two young children, Mario and his younger sister (Williamson and Pisa 2010). At this time, Mario was very sick and “in and out of the hospital as a baby” (Williamson and Pisa 2010). Mario’s condition fortunately improved, and the family moved from Palermo to Brescia,
industrial city where there were more employment opportunities for Mr. Barwuah.

In Brescia, as Rose Barwuah explained, “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” (Daily Graphic 2008). Although they might have preferred to foster their son with a relative, there was no one available within their kinship or social network, and so they turned to the Italian social services. It is striking that social services, rather than helping this family stay together by giving them adequate housing, brokered the circulation of Mario to another family (see Feldman-Savelsberg, this volume, on the role of the state in making and breaking affective circuits). In this way, what happened to the Barwuahs is similar to dominant patterns of fostering in the West, in which children are transferred from more impoverished families, living in conditions deemed unfit for raising children or unable to balance their work with childcare, to more stable and resource-rich households which can afford to live up to the ideals of childhood (Andersen and Fallesen 2010). The Balotellis were a wealthy Italian family with three children of their own who lived in an affluent town six miles north of Brescia (Williamson and Pisa 2010). Mr. Barwuah said they initially agreed to a one-year foster placement, which was later extended by another twelve months (Williamson and Pisa 2010).

Mr. Barwuah described a kind of joint parenting arrangement between the two families, although the affective connections to their son became increasingly tenuous over time:

At first we were not sure [about the arrangement] but we decided it was probably best for Mario. We saw him every week and we all got on really well. We thought that at some point, once things had sorted out, Mario would come back to us. But
instead, every time we tried to get him back, the Balotellis kept extending the foster time. We couldn’t afford lawyers to fight for us, so Mario grew more and more distant. He would come and visit and play with his brothers and sisters but he just didn’t seem to have any time for us, his mother and father. We wanted him back for more than ten years but, every time we tried, the courts blocked it and as the years passed he became colder towards us. The Balotellis know people and are influential and we could do nothing. (Williamson and Pisa 2010)

Mr. Barwuah suggests that the fostering was intended to be temporary, but turned into a more permanent arrangement due to the Balotellis’ social status and influence. The more permanent arrangement led to Mario’s increasing emotional closeness to his foster family, including his adoption of the surname of his foster family. At the same time, the Barwuahs’ reluctance to completely sever their relationship with their son meant that the Balotellis could not adopt Mario as they, and probably he, would have liked. The dyadic understanding of Western parenting worked against the Barwuahs’ maintaining a strong relationship with Mario, but the contractual emphasis of obtaining their agreement to release their child enabled them to continue their kinscript of the situation, because they would have had to agree to give up their identity as Mario’s parents in order for the Balotellis to take their place. As a result, due to his fostering, his national identity continued to be inherited from his birth parents, and Mario had to wait until he was eighteen before he could become an Italian citizen and play on the Italian national team (Italy Magazine 2008).

Mario Balotelli’s public version of events differs from his father’s narrative of continued visits and contact. Instead, he tells a story of emotional and physical abandonment. Balotelli’s emotional response to his situation seems to have been framed by a narrative in which he was
“adopted.” This shapes his understanding that the Balotellis replaced the Barwuahs as his parents. Secondly, given this kinscript, he asks the painful question of why his parents gave him up (Yngvesson 2004). His answer to this question (as for many adoptive children) is that they did not care about him. In a television interview in 2008, when he joined the Inter Milan team, he said that his biological parents abandoned him at the hospital at the age of two and did not make efforts to contact him until he was sixteen and a rising young soccer star (Italy Magazine 2008). Because of this unloving act, the Barwuahs are no longer legitimately his parents: they have no claim on him, and he has no obligations to them. “There is no bond between us and in my eyes they are just strangers,” he has said (Modern Ghana Web 2008). To draw on Kea’s analysis (this volume), he did not feel his birth parents had given a convincing parenting “performance.”

Furthermore, he has accused his biological parents of wanting to be involved in his life due to his fame and fortune (Davies 2008; Williamson and Pisa 2010). It is the plight of celebrities to gain hangers-on, and Balotelli has slotted his biological parents into the category of false intimates. The Barwuahs’ photos of Mario’s childhood visits to their apartment and his romping with his younger brother on their bed corroborate their story of continued involvement (Williamson and Pisa 2010). Nevertheless, his narrative speaks to another kind of emotional truth—of abandonment and lack of love—with which many adopted children grapple.

Mr. Barwuah responded to Balotelli’s accusations by envisioning a way in which multiple parents could be involved in his life to different degrees of intimacy and care. Among Balotelli’s social parents, he includes Balotelli’s coach José Morinho, with whom Balotelli was then having public confrontations that were affecting his playing on the Inter Milan team. Ghana’s major daily newspaper, The Daily Graphic, reported Mr. Barwuah saying,

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 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. (*Daily Graphic* 2008)

Based on these testimonies, the Barwuahs seem to feel that another family helped them in an hour of crisis – when their son was sick, they were new immigrants, and they could not find or afford 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. Balotelli’s belonging could be multiple, rather than 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 adults who function as his social parents, both his foster parents and the coach of the Inter club. Their actions thus seem consistent with a premise that the care of a child can be distributed across many people without destroying the affective circuit between biological parents and their child.

On public comments sections of news websites, Ghanaians deployed scripts of multiple parenting and gratitude for care to encourage Mario to reunite with his biological parents. “Jo Boateng” in Bracknell, U.K., for instance, told Mario to “Be grateful to both your adopted parents and your biological parents” because if his biological parents had not given him up, he might not be as famous or successful (in response to the story of Williamson and Pisa 2010).
“Dogo” writes, “The fact that he was raised by foster parents does not mean he should deny his biological parents when they are still leaving [living]. . . . Yes the white couple did a great job in raising him and he cannot deny them either but he should not be ashamed of his biological parents” (in response to Ghana Soccer Net 2013). Here, the commentators invoke frameworks that might enable affective circuits to biological parents to be maintained despite the potential ruptures caused by a sense of emotional abandonment or geographical distance.

While Balotelli’s stardom makes his case particularly spectacular and public, it nevertheless shares some characteristics with a study done of West African educational migrants in London in the early 1970s by Esther Goody and Christine Muir Groothues (1982). Goody and Groothues present a court case from December 1972 in which the judge decided that the Ghanaian parents of a nine-year-old girl (“Ann”) could not take her on their planned return to Ghana because she had been fostered since the age of three months with a white professional English couple. These two families engaged in negotiations over joint parenting similar to those of the Barwuahs and Balotellis:

Two months later, when it became clear that the foster-parents assumed they would adopt her, Ann’s parents took her home. After reassurances they allowed her to return to the foster-parents, but when she was four the foster-parents again pressed for adoption, and Ann was again removed by her parents. . . . Later an agreement was reached and the foster-parents understood that Ann was to stay with them until she was 18, and finish her education. When Ann’s parents later decided to return to Ghana and wanted to take her with them, the foster-parents took action to retain custody over the child. (E. Goody and Groothues 1982, 217-218)
In part, the judge ruled in the foster parents’ favor because he saw many West Africans fostering their children with English couples. Through these arrangements, “a strong bond of attachment and love has been forged between the children and the foster parents” and “the children are brought up in and learn our British ways of life” (cited in E. Goody and Groothues 1982, 217). Although I have no specific information about the authorities’ reasoning in Balotelli’s case, similar notions of what would be in Balotelli’s best interest – based on his emotional connection to his foster parents, the implied superiority of learning Italian ways of life, and growing up in a wealthier family – may have persuaded Italian authorities to allow him to remain with his foster parents, despite his biological parents’ desire that the stay be temporary.

Fostering to non-kin citizen families in the country of migration can thus lead to struggles over a child’s belonging, in which Western legal understanding of fosterage, adoption, and kinship can be brought to bear, shaping young people’s narratives of their situation. 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. It is also affected by social status, including social class and citizenship, as read by the law and social services. However, it is important to note that different kinscripts of parenthood and child circulation do not necessarily cause the struggle over a child’s belonging; it has long happened within African contexts as well. Francis B. Nyamnjoh (2002), for example, describes a similar situation to Mario Balotelli. In his youth in the Cameroonian Grassfields, Nyamnjoh’s biological father and two social fathers each put pressure on him to change his name to reflect their connection to him. Similarly, my research assistant for this project, a young man, was simultaneously pleased and frustrated that his father was beginning to show an interest in him once he had completed secondary school, because he
primarily felt loyal to his mother and her siblings, who had supported him thus far. Such parental tussling may be most common with adolescent boys who show great promise. Therefore, conflict between parents over the identity and belonging of a child in the context of distributed parenting is not a new phenomenon caused by international migration (see also Fonseca 2009), but Western normative scripts of parenting and their encoding in the laws of states in Europe and elsewhere have affected how these conflicts are resolved and which affective circuits are strengthened.

Goody and Groothues wanted to find out how common this phenomenon of fostering-out was among West African migrant parents. One study they cited found that sixty percent of the children in a sample of 143 private foster homes in Birmingham were West African, far more than would be anticipated given the relatively small population of West Africans at that time. In their own interviews of 296 West African parents in London, they found that a third had left one or more children behind in the home country, thirteen percent had sent one or more children home from England, and half had placed one or more children with English foster parents at some point, although only a quarter had a child currently being fostered by an English family. Thus, while fostering a child with a local family was one option for West African migrants in England, as it was for the Barwuahs in Italy, fostering one’s child “back to Africa” was even more common.

**Fostering from Italy to Ghana: Felicia, Her Grandmother, and Her Parents**

Another strategy that Ghanaian migrants use, facing the same situation, is to foster their children with a mother or sister in Ghana, similar to urban migrants in Ghana whose children are fostered with the children’s grandmothers or aunts. These transnational migrants describe a
broader array of reasons prompting out-fostering than the crisis faced by the Barwuahs: among other issues, they want their children to learn their family’s mother tongue, to know their relatives, and to receive proper training and discipline which they feel are harder to obtain in the country of migration. The practice of sending children back to the home country is quite common among West Africans, and is not unique to Ghanaians living in Italy (Coe 2013; Kea this volume; Whitehouse 2012). Out-fostering to relatives can create breaks in affective circuits between parents and children similar to what occurred between Mario Balotelli and the Barwuahs. However, because the foster parents to whom the child has become attached often want to maintain the child’s relation to the biological parents, and they may have also experienced distributed parenting in their own lives, the foster parents, unlike the Balotellis or Ann’s foster parents, help the child expand his or her affective circuits to include unknown or unfamiliar parents, as exemplified in the story of a child of Ghanaian migrants to Italy.

I met Felicia in her secondary school in Ghana during a group discussion among the children of international migrants. A willowy sixteen-year old, she described her experience as a child of migrants in Italy. Felicia had been born in Italy and was sent back to Ghana as a three-year-old child to live with her grandmother. Like Mr. Barwuah, Felicia’s mother worked in a factory in Italy. In English, which secondary-school students preferred to use in the group conversations, Felicia described her mother’s reasons for sending her to Ghana as driven by language concerns, so that Felicia could learn English and Twi:

She asked my Dad to take me to Ghana because she wanted me to learn the language, English rather than Italian. So she wanted to take me [i.e. she could have taken me] to any other country apart from Ghana to learn English, but she preferred to bring me to our homeland because she wanted me to learn our
culture. She brought me to my grandmother, deliberately. To speak the mother
tongue.

Her circulation to live with her grandmother shaped her attachment to Ghana (“our homeland”) and her fluency in her “mother tongue” and English, rather than Italian.

Her grandmother hid the fact that Felicia’s parents were abroad, instead telling her that they were in the capital Accra and they would be coming home soon, probably to lessen her feeling of abandonment. Yet, when Felicia was ten or eleven, she began to wonder why she had not met her parents. Because her grandmother would not tell her, she asked one of her aunts about the situation, and her aunt told her the truth. This is the age when children are seen as being able to absorb information about their true origins and can better establish relationships with multiple parents. The new information resulted in greater connection with her parents: she then visited her parents in Italy over a summer vacation.

Her parents returned from Italy to stay in Ghana permanently when Felicia was twelve years old. Felicia described how she attempted to revise her emotions in view of her interpretation of appropriate family relationships:

It is like when they [her parents] came back, I had rather more love for my grandmum. Although I liked them, but then, I was too close to my grandmum. I was uncomfortable with them. I tried to stay with them, but it wasn’t working.

Later, I had to decide: these are my parents and I have to stay with them. Now [at the age of 16] things are okay and I relate to them as a family.

She described how she consciously attempted to control her emotions to bring them in line with what she considered appropriate for “a family,” for instance, that she loved her parents and ought to live with them rather than being “too close” to her grandmother. As we saw with Balotelli,
Felicia’s family script shaped her emotions; in this case, she consciously worked on her own emotions, to create feeling for and familiarity with her parents (Hochschild 2003[1983]; Reddy 2001).

Unlike Balotelli, she identifies with Ghana, not Italy. She described her vacation to Italy: Going on a bus, going to board, and the bus comes, and you have to wait, you sit down, you’re Black, and they want you to stand because you don’t belong to the country. They can’t tell you to stand, because you paid to get in [the bus], but they are looking at you in a way you don’t feel comfortable. They try to move themselves so you know you are the only one [who is] Black. You feel like getting off.

In her story, the bus seems to function like a microcosm or symbol of Italy, prompting discomfort, a lack of belonging, and a desire to exit. Although she said she would like to visit Italy again, she was not enthusiastic about staying there permanently, influenced by her sense of how immigrants are treated in Italy, a perspective perhaps shaped not only by her own brief summer vacation but also by her parents’ stories of their lives there.

In comparison to Mario Balotelli, Felicia is attached to her biological parents and her social parents, including her grandmother and various aunts who help her maintain a relationship with her parents. Her multiple attachments are enabled by the fact that her foster parent was related to a biological parent. Relying on relatives at home to help care for the children of migrants seems to be more successful at maintaining multiple affective circuits than does foster care with non-kin citizens in the country of migration, although disruptions do occur. Some of the reason for this relative success is that Western social services and legal mechanisms do not become involved in the out-fosterage of the children of Ghanaian migrants; it does not come to
their attention nor do they see it as under their purview. This under-the-radar fosterage contrasts sharply with what happens when transnational migrants try to foster-in their relatives, when they run into legal obstacles quite directly.

Translating Fosterage into International Adoption in the US and UK:

Akua and Her Nephews

Recent migrants – by definition more unstable in their employment and housing – turn to out-fostering to enable their children’s care and growth. However, migrants who are secure in their employment and have good housing abroad, and thus are generally more likely to have migrated a long time ago, try to step in to help their relatives in crisis in Ghana by bringing a niece, nephew, or younger sibling to live with them. In doing so, some try to translate fosterage into international adoption, as the easiest way to bring a child who is not their biological child abroad.

As I noted above, the Hague Adoption Convention is an international agreement which establishes safeguards to protect the best interests of adopted children and prevent their abduction or sale across borders. In the case of non-Hague signatory countries, like Ghana, the United States requires a higher bar for intercountry adoption: adopted children must be orphans, in which either both parents are deceased or the sole remaining parent is “unable to care for the child and has, in writing, irrevocably released the child for emigration and adoption” (U.S. Department of State 2013). If the child is not an orphan, then the prospective parent must have lived with the adopted child for two years prior to requesting a visa for that child. Furthermore, the child cannot be “abandoned, relinquished, or released to a specific prospective adoptive parent for adoption” (U.S. Department of State 2013). In other words, the biological parent
cannot designate the adopting parent, but must have an orphanage or adoption agency seek out and screen prospective adoptive parents. Finally, the child being adopted must be under the age of sixteen. Although the laws on domestic adoption in the United States allow relatives to adopt, the procedure on international adoption assumes that the prospective adopting parent is working through a recognized adoption agency in the United States to adopt a stranger, rather than a relative’s child. This makes international adoption a difficult pathway for immigrants who wish to foster a sibling’s child.

Akua’s case illustrates tensions in translating practices of distributed parenting to a different legal regime (Coe 2013). In 2005, Akua was a forty-nine-year-old woman from Akropong working as a university administrator in the United States. In the wake of her mother’s death in Ghana, she wanted to bring her two adolescent nephews, then aged thirteen and fifteen, who had been living with her mother since they were very young, to come live with her. The nephews had been fostered by her mother because of their father’s alcoholism and divorce from the children’s mother, who had migrated to the United Kingdom. I did not meet any other Ghanaian who had tried to adopt a niece or nephew abroad, but Chantal Collard (2009) reports that family adoptions from African countries have soared in Québec since 2000.

Akua had wanted to adopt her nephews for a long time but realized that they were her mother’s main companions. Then, as her mother’s health began failing in February 2005, Akua began the process of getting approval to adopt from her state’s social services, including having a home study done by a social worker, and applying for visas for her nephews. By November 2005, immigration services had denied her application to adopt, giving the explanation that her brother, her nephews’ father, had written a letter formally giving up his relationship with his sons. This objection was curious, because a living parent is required to write such a letter to
enable his or her children to be adopted by someone else. According to Akua, the immigration authorities said that the letter was a sign that the father was still attached to the boys, because he cared about putting them in the hands of a good person. Her brother’s designation of Akua as the adoptive parent was another problem, according to her lawyer. Akua did not mention that the boys had two living parents – one in the United Kingdom and one in Ghana – as a factor, although it may have been one. She approached another lawyer, who told her that she could only adopt if the children were in an orphanage or if she had lived with her nephews for two years before. She appealed the decision, but the appeal was denied in September 2006, by which time the oldest nephew had turned seventeen. Akua was upset because she felt that U.S. immigration laws were inconsistent: although she was allowed to live in the United States, she could not bring over the rest of her family. “It doesn’t make sense,” she said.

Many aspects of US law to protect birth families and children in intercountry adoption make international adoption policy incompatible with Ghanaian practices of child circulation within families, including the formal parental relinquishing of rights to the adoptive parent, the inability of the parent to designate the caregiver, and the adoption of only orphans or abandoned children. Another problem is that adoption is a highly legalistic and bureaucratic procedure, a contractual agreement dependent on signed documents, which is a culturally understood method of ensuring transparency, fairness, and ethical behavior in the United States. In contrast, Ghanaian practices and narratives of child circulation highlight flexibility, pragmatism, and informality to create a safety net at different stages of the life course. Flexibility and informality can come at the risk of exploitation of the child, as Ghanaians well recognize, but its lack of permanence means that unhappy fosterage arrangements can be altered under social pressure. Finally, in international adoption, co-residence, rather than material practices of care, like paying
for healthcare, clothing, and school fees, establish the bond between parent and child. Thus, the 
fact that Akua had not been living with her nephews prior to her adoption of them meant that she 
was not their adoptive parent, regardless of the fact that she was responding to a changing family 
situation (i.e., her mother’s death) and had been paying her nephews’ school fees for many years, 
thus committing herself to being one of their social parents.

As Judith Schachter notes, “Adoption in an international arena exposes the cultural 
imperialism that determines relationships within and across societies” (2009, 61). Ghanaian 
practices of child circulation did not fit available straightforward legal categories, dropping into a 
legal “space of nonexistence” (Coutin 2003, 179). Fair and transparent application of a Western 
kinship script to regulate African families is a sign of Western power, which works to 
“universalize the structure and meaning of the human condition” from a Western understanding 
of self, other, and family (Clarke 2009, 232). Despite Akua’s high level of education and 
familiarity with bureaucratic institutions, she responded to the straightforward and transparent 
application of these regulations with confusion and a sense of unfairness.

Feeling she had exhausted the legal possibilities of adoption in the United States, Akua 
ended up selling her house in the United States and moving to England in December 2006. 
However, when she tried to adopt her nephews in the United Kingdom, the British Embassy in 
Ghana asked why she was not living with her nephews. She wrote in response that United States 
immigration laws had not allowed them to live together! She was continuing to try to bring them 
with her to Britain, as sponsored relatives rather than adoptees, in December 2008, because her 
nephews were legally adults and no longer eligible for adoption.

Some Ghanaian parents seek to circumvent Western international adoption law by 
adopting nieces and nephews in Ghana, since the Ghanaian court system has been more open to
local understandings of fosterage and its conversion to adoption. Although I did not encounter this particular strategy in my own research, Ulrike Wanitzek (2013) describes two cases appearing before the High Court in 2008 in which a childless Ghanaian woman resident in the United Kingdom adopted her sister’s child or children. In the first case, a deputy nursing manager in the United Kingdom who had lived there for twenty-two years adopted her six-year-old nephew and her eight-year-old niece, after their father deserted them and their mother passed away in 2005. Since the mother’s death three years earlier, the children had been residing with their maternal aunts, while the migrant abroad, like Akua in relation to her nephews, had been financially supporting their care. The Ghanaian courts thus allowed the nursing manager to adopt her niece and nephew despite the fact that a parent was alive and that the children had not been living with the nursing manager since the mother’s death. Instead, her financial support was taken as a sign of her commitment to the children (as was not in the case of the American and British adoption proceedings for Akua). The maternal aunt was functioning as a social parent to these children through her remittances, not her co-residence.

In the second case, a nurse in the United Kingdom, resident there for twenty-four years, adopted her sixteen-year-old nephew, whose mother was unemployed and whose father had disappeared after his birth. In this latter case, in which the child had been living with his mother, Wanitzek comments, “following the logic of international laws, the child was not deprived of his family environment and was not in need of ‘alternative care’” (2013, 236). However, while the American and British courts followed international adoption law, the Ghanaian court did not. Instead, it drew upon local norms of child circulation and distributed parenthood, in which the aunt’s social parenthood had been established through the material practice of financially supporting the child. As Wanitzek notes, “the challenge of reconciling these two different
concepts of child adoption appears to have been solved by the court in a pragmatic way” (2013, 238).

Ghanaians abroad seek to translate practices of fosterage into the kinscript of international adoption, to enable their nieces and nephews to live with them. While American and British courts can thwart the circulation of children into the households of Ghanaians abroad, not recognizing parenting generated through care practices but only through more legal and formalized procedures, Ghanaian courts more willingly convert informal fosterage arrangements into formalized international adoption for Ghanaians living abroad. These different legal practices have immense significance for the ability of migrants to be social parents and generate affective circuits with the children of their siblings and their own younger siblings.

Conclusion: Kinscripts and the Circulation of Children

Kinscripts about parenting and care shape the physical circulation and affective circuits of children. Ghanaian migrants bring strategies of distributed parenting with them to support their international migration to Europe and find those strategies useful in the care of their own children and the children in their extended family, in providing a social safety net in cases of crisis and in promoting certain goals for their own children, particularly around language, discipline, and character. According to this script, differently positioned adults are best able to provide children with the different kinds of care they need at different points in their life course. However, relying on Western practices of foster care and adoption to support these goals has proved risky or impossible, even for Ghanaians who are successful cultural brokers in other areas of their lives. Ghanaian migrants who turn to social relations and institutions in Ghana to supplement and support the care of their children have been more successful, and those relations
and institutions have allowed them to sustain affective circuits with the children they seek to care for to a much greater extent.

Such practices highlight the power of Western states to short-circuit and encourage certain affective circuits through immigration, social services, and international adoption. Western social service policies and laws do not seem to be shifting in relation to Ghanaians’ needs; instead, it is Ghanaian courts and families which demonstrate flexibility and adaptation, for instance, in being willing to give the imprimatur of plenary “adoption” in cases of transnational child circulation.

Judges in Ghana have been sensitive to child circulation not only because of shared cultural scripts about parenting and care but also because the court system in Ghana is itself a hybrid product, shaped by colonial norms and traditional authorities. In the colonial Gold Coast, there was a two-tier judicial system in which chiefly tribunals became courts of the first instance for specific offenses, and colonial courts functioning as appellate courts for chiefly tribunals. Roger Gocking (1997, 63) has described this situation as “flexible and adaptive,” in which chiefly tribunals were influenced by the practices of the colonial courts and vice versa. In colonial Africa, Kristin Mann and Richard Roberts note that the “law formed an area in which Africans and Europeans engaged one another – a battleground as it were on which they contested access to resources and labour, relationships of power and authority, and interpretations of morality and culture” (Mann and Roberts 1991, 3). Ghanaian courts, perhaps because of the history of colonialism, have been more willing to engage in cultural pluralism than European courts. Now, in the context of African migration to Europe, the law seems to be re-emerging as a central battleground, as a place where the affective circuits of African transnational migrations are broken and re-negotiated.
One of the consequences of the lack of recognition of Western institutions to West African practices of child circulation is that children are shifted out of the care of transnational migrants, whether they are the parents or aunts to such children, and into that of the children’s relatives (including their biological parents) in Ghana, or, more rarely, into the households of non-kin citizens in the country of migration. This distribution of children has important implications for the children’s sense of belonging, as Ghanaians and as members of their family. For many, rather than being raised in Italy or the United Kingdom by Ghanaian immigrants, they are raised in Ghana, denied the education and status associated with “abroad,” although they live transnationally, with an awareness of a social or biological parent abroad (Fouron and Glick-Schiller 2002). This means that even though they are the children of immigrants, many of the descriptions of second-generation immigrants do not apply to them. They are less likely than second-generation children to turn their backs on their country’s language and culture, described by Sargent and Larchanché (this volume), but rather be as moved by the smells, sounds, and language of their home country as their parents are. This habitus and sense of belonging as Ghanaian is intended by their parents. Should they migrate abroad as their parents did at a later date, 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 raised in Ghana are likely to remain Ghanaians in their hearts even if their citizenship status changes, rather than becoming, like Mario Balotelli, Italians in their hearts as well as in their legal status.
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Endnotes

1 Olwig (2007) and Súarez-Orozco et al. (2002) make similar arguments concerning the significance of cultural scripts in emotion work.

2 Because of the ways that Ghanaians use step-wise migrations between African countries and Europe, and often have relatives scattered across multiple nation-states, I do not distinguish strongly in this paper between migration to Europe and migration to other countries in Africa, Asia, and North America. I conducted focus-group interviews with seventy-nine children in private and secondary schools in a mid-size town and a large city in Ghana, children who had at least one parent abroad. Their parents were most likely to have migrated to the United Kingdom (28 out of 83 parents) or the United States (26), but also to Germany (12), Italy (6), and the Netherlands (4). The children to migrants to Canada, France, Israel, Japan, South Africa, Spain, and Switzerland were also represented (1 each). I followed up the focus group conversations with individual interviews with the children whose parents were in the United States, their
caregivers, and the parents themselves. From that research, I obtained a sense of the emotional issues among transnational families (Coe 2008). I followed up that research with a household survey in the town of Akropong, a district capital, with mainly Akan families, to understand how child circulation in transnational families different from that of internally migrant families, and to get a sense of change over time. Ultimately, this effort resulted in interviews with ninety-three caregivers and with eighty of the children they were looking after. The interviewed children were between the ages of eight and twenty-two years. The children under the age of eight in those households were not interviewed. We did not worry too much about the upper age limit of children: many of those in their twenties were unavailable because they were living and working elsewhere. Forty-five of these same children also came to focus group discussions which were organized in their neighborhoods, at which we also asked them to draw their images of life abroad. This research resulted in learning about the experiences of a cross-section of the town, including people of various social classes and ethnicities, reflecting the social and economic diversity of the town.

3 Though migration both within Ghana and to Europe is a longstanding practice, the payoff has shrunk in recent years. In the area of Ghana I know best (Akuapem, in the Eastern Region), people have traveled at least since the late nineteenth century to work on the railroads, to the cities on the coast and in the interior, to cocoa lands further to the west, or to other parts of West Africa as skilled craftsmen and traders (Hill 1963). Many men and women migrate within Ghana today, moving between different places over their lifespans, as they cope with the contraction and expansion of economic opportunities and, particularly for women, with changing social relationships, whether it be a marriage or a divorce, a birth, or the sickness or death of a parent.
(Apt 1993; van der Geest 1998). Professionals such as teachers, nurses, accountants, and ministers are transferred to postings all over Ghana; farmers seek fertile land; and traders travel long distances to buy and sell commodities.

4 Brydon (1979) saw this as a new form of child circulation in Amedzofe in the Volta Region of Ghana in the late 1970s, because such children were sent to live with the grandmother after weaning; they were much younger than the usual fostered children (see also Etienne 1979).

5 One caveat to this interpretation is that the Barwuahs are not from Akropong, but from Konongo, in the Ashanti Region.

6 Their practices of out-fostering are similar to what Whitehouse (2012) and Bledsoe and Sow (2011) describe for West African migrants in Congo and in Europe, respectively.

7 Ghana suspended intercountry adoptions “temporarily” in May 2013, until its policies could be reviewed by the Department of Social Welfare (http://travel.state.gov/content/adoptionsabroad/en/country-information/alerts-and-notices/ghan13-05-20.html). This follows a growing trend in which many countries have become more concerned about intercountry adoptions. Akua’s adoption proceedings happened in 2005-2006, long before the suspension of intercountry adoptions by the Ghanaian government.

8 Although Akua could have applied for them through family reunification, as her nephews, the situation in the United States is similar to that noted by Chantal Collard (2009) about Québec: “The definition of kinship enshrined in Canadian immigration law is too restrictive for many applicants, whose cultures recognize more extended kin relationships” (2009: 122). In the United States, while dependent children and legally-married spouses are given priority, more extended relatives like the children of siblings are low in priority and thus spend many years on the back-
logged waiting list (U.S. Department of State 2013).
References


