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Adoption Across Cultures

Adoption and fosterage are social practices, spread widely across the globe and throughout different historical periods. What is the significance of understanding adoption in different societies and historical moments? One reason to look at a variety of cultural and social systems is to understand the degree of human variation in the forms of families. In the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century, adoptions are not as shrouded in secrecy as they were even 50 years ago, yet many North Americans still assume that natural or biological parents should raise their children. In contrast, in many societies throughout the world, the nuclear family is not the ideal or even the typical configuration in which people live and interact, and birth parents are not the only individuals assumed to be responsible for the care, nurturance, socialization, or education of children. Bringing attention to the range of practices and ideologies around the circulation of children reminds us that what is habitual for any particular group is not necessarily natural for all human beings nor even normal in all societies. Comparing adoption and fostering in a variety of social and historical contexts points to the ways in which *all* families are socially and culturally constructed.

Moreover, the practices, ideals, and forms that appear most natural to us are often embedded in particular relationships of power. In addition to highlighting the various ways in which families are constituted, comparing adoption and fostering in different cultures also forefronts the ways in which these practices are constrained by social, political, and economic relationships and hierarchies. Adoption tends to occur along a differential gradient of power within any given society; children tend to move from the care of

those with less status and power to the care of those with more status and power. Local political-economic relationships and social relationships are thus crucial to understanding adoption, but local arenas are always embedded in broader sets of relationships including a global balance of power. As much as adoption may be framed as personal and intensely emotional, analyzing child circulation encourages an attentiveness to the ways in which the movement of children is culturally and socially constituted and embedded in broader contexts of politics and power.

In this chapter, we describe a range of fostering and adoption practices by focusing on three settings: one in which fostering and adoption are prevalent and preferred (here using the west African countries of Benin and Cameroon as our examples), a second in which child circulation is frequent but not necessarily preferred (using the Andean South American countries of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru as our examples), and a third in which formal adoption is discouraged and infrequent but the care of orphans is valued (using the Middle Eastern countries of Egypt and Lebanon as our examples). We then draw on these examples to examine three assumptions held by many Americans: that sexual reproduction is the natural basis for family, that birth/genetic parents are solely responsible for children or the most appropriate people to raise children, and that fostering and adoption are simply individual choices made outside of any social and historical context. Each case gives a snapshot of the particular configurations of practices and ideologies around child circulation, and family more generally, at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Ethnographic Cases

The Preference for Fostering in West Africa

Although fostering is often thought of as a response to unusual circumstances or as a last resort for dealing with poverty or infertility, fostering and adoption in some societies are desired, expected, and a significant part of an array of practices through which most children are raised. Throughout most regions of west Africa, people have considered fostering to be the best way of raising children. Much of the scholarship on the circulation of children in west Africa has focused on fostering, which exists outside of any state-controlled transfer of children (as in adoption), and on the highly structured local understandings of who has rights to and responsibilities for raising children. We focus on the case of the Baatombu, French-speaking peasants in the multiethnic region of Borgu in northeastern Benin and northwestern Nigeria, who have until

very recently downplayed the importance of biological parenthood and celebrated social parenthood. We also integrate information from other regions in western Africa, including the multiethnic Christian community of Mbondossi in east Cameroon and the Mende ethnic group of Sierra Leone, to provide a portrait of cultural groups in which fostering has been not only quite common but also preferred.

By the end of the twentieth century, about 30 percent of Baatombu children were raised outside of their birth or natal families, but in the recent

Figure 1.1   In some western African nations (such as Sierra Leone, Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, and Cameroon), child fosterage is a frequent and accepted practice. In parts of northern Africa and the Middle East (such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey), child fosterage and adoption are not common.
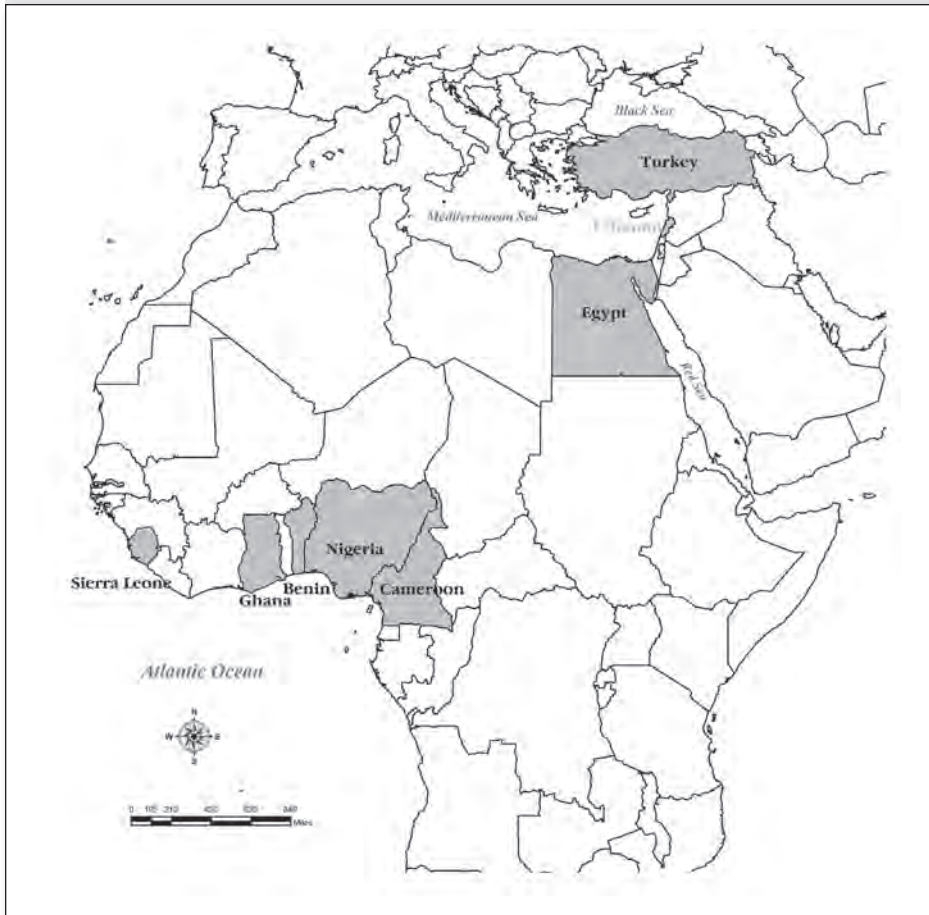
past, nearly all children circulated to homes other than those of their natal families. In fact, the Baatombu do not have a term that distinguishes between biological and social parents; thus, the distinction between foster or social parents and biological or birth parents is an analytical one used by scholars, not by the Baatombu themselves. Of the 150 people in the older generation whom anthropologist Erdmute Alber interviewed in the 1990s, only 2 had lived exclusively with their birth parents (2004b:36). Although the rates of fosterage are falling, as we discuss further below, the Baatombu continue to circulate children far more frequently than do people in the contemporary United States.

In this area of western Africa, both birth parents and foster parents are part of a broad kinship system. Birth relationships are recognized and used to determine who has a claim to the child. Because patrilineality, or tracing relationships through the father's male ancestors, is the guiding principle that separates people into different social groups, a child is seen as belonging to his or her biological father's patrilineal clan—and this association is maintained throughout life. But in addition to this kin relationship, others are usually established as well, and fostering is particularly important in this kinship system. Indeed, fosterage is emphasized as the best way to raise children, and it is this belief that results in the relatively high rates of fostering among the Baatombu.

The foster parent is expected to teach a child how to be a good person: to respect elders and to have shame but also to have confidence (Alber 2004a:41). Fostering is preferred partly because Baatombu believe that birth parents act too leniently with their own children and thus are less capable than foster parents of educating children. Usually, a single individual takes on the duties and rights of foster parenting: A man fosters a boy, and a woman fosters a girl (Alber 2003:492–93). The foster parent takes on the rearing and education of the child, including gender-specific tasks, when the child is 3 to 6 years old. Although a foster parent often enables a child to attend school, a more important responsibility is to ensure that the child eventually marries an appropriate partner. Girls usually leave fosterage at marriage, whereas boys leave at around age 16 when they migrate to a city for wage labor. Thus, it is foster parents who are primarily responsible for moving a child into adulthood.

Foster parents are usually related to the child, and the process of establishing a foster parent relationship draws from both paternal and maternal kin ties and determines the roles and connections of both biological and social kin networks. When she is about to give birth, a woman goes to her natal family's household. Once the child is born, her husband's family visits her and the child. Usually the husband's sister brings gifts and declares that

the child is of the husband's clan. The child is then considered the property of his or her paternal aunt, who has the right to foster the child or to allow someone else to foster him or her. Baatombu parents do not offer their children to others, but they traditionally do not have the right to refuse requests for one of their children. In most cases, a close relative requests a child and is understood to have certain rights to the child. At least in rural communities, for a birth parent to deny a request is antisocial and dishonorable for the birth parents and for the adult who is turned down.

Thus, the circulation of children is quite common and socially valued, and the role of biological parents in the lives of children is not always straightforward. As in many other parts of west Africa, the Baatombu often deny or hide birth relationships rather than celebrating them, emphasizing instead the (social) mother or (social) father as the most significant person in the life of the child. At the same time, some birth parents express ambivalence about relinquishing their children. In Baatombu, children are not told who their biological parents are, and people must deny their birth relationships in public. The appropriate behavior between biological parents and children is shame, distance, and avoidance (Alber 2004b:44). Ideally, even a few hours after birth, biological parents express emotional distance from a child. In spite of this, people see biological parenthood "as something especially valuable" (Alber 2004b:42). Alber acknowledges, "Many people told me very emotional stories about how and when they came to learn the names and identities of their biological parents. I was told numerous stories about little gestures or little gifts offered secretly by biological parents to their children" (2004b:42). Baatombu say that children adapt easily to their foster parents, and people give attention to demonstrating that the foster parents are the "real, potent, and preferred parents" (Alber 2004b:34). But birth parents may not always completely give up their children. Thus, a child fostered by his or her father's brother, and living in the same compound or village, may receive food, attention, and little gifts from two sets of parents.

The Baatombu describe fostering as simply the best way of raising a child, and scholars have long interpreted fostering as a way to lessen the financial burden of raising children. More recently, scholars have analyzed fostering in west Africa as a way for women to access crucial emotional and economic support, to maintain the balance of power within a marriage, and to enhance the mother's lineal ties (Alber 2004a; Notermans 2004). Women move to their husbands' households after marriage, but they are still considered part of their own clans. Because women usually relinquish the first few children to whom they give birth, they must build social and emotional connections with members of their own clan through other means. Even though a woman gives up many of her birth children, she may foster the children of

her brothers. Her foster children accompany her and "belong" to her in a way that her birth children do not. Catrien Notermans (2004:50) argues, moreover, that among the Mbondossi in east Cameroon, a married woman tries to balance the number of foster children from her own lineage with the number of foster children from her husband's lineage. Madeleine, a 29-year-old woman who cares for seven children (three birth boys and four foster daughters), states,

> Since all the children I got are boys, I asked my brother to give me a girl. Since the other girls are from my husband's side, I wanted to have a girl of my own. I needed a child from my own side to keep balance in marriage. I do not like to work only for my husband's family. I also want my family to eat from the pot. My brother accepted and he gave me a girl. (Notermans 2004:58–59)

In this culture, a lack of solidarity and emotional support characterizes spousal relationships, in contrast to the intimacy between brothers and sisters. Patterns of fostering reflect these differences.

Having a foster child gives a man or woman access to that child's labor, but fostering a child is not simply about being able to ask the child to help with any of the innumerable jobs around a rural household, such as carrying water, helping with agricultural tasks, and cooking food. A greater advantage—perhaps especially for a young wife, living among her husband's clan—is that a child offers an intimacy of connection with her own clan. All of a woman's birth children belong to another clan, that of her husband, and most of her children are fostered by others, but her foster children are from her own clan and belong exclusively to her (Alber 2003:494, 2004b:37–38). Fostering is thus tied into a wide array of gender and generational relationships and is at once assumed as normative and is used to navigate social relationships. At least in west Africa, fostering may be more about bringing a child *into* a household or kin group than about sending a child out of one (Notermans 2004:50).

At the same time, social, political, and economic shifts within society as a whole have affected fostering practices and ideals. Children are still transferred from rural villages to towns, but urban children generally are no longer fostered, and are not demanded, by their relatives living in rural areas of east Cameroon. Moreover, when children from rural areas are fostered in cities, social parents may provide food and shelter without taking care of all expenses or may fund a child's formal education in compensation for their labor in the household. In short, children are no longer seen as "belonging" to the foster parents in urban contexts (Alber 2004a:43). As alternative ideals concerning the relationship between biological parents and children become

more popular and as shifting social, economic, and political circumstances value urban occupations more highly than rural agricultural pursuits, parents in rural areas may not always follow the traditional system either. Although birth parents "do not dare deny the demand for a child" (Alber 2004a:43), they may send their biological children to school and integrate foster children into agricultural or household labor regimes, as we discuss further below.

The Commonality of Child Circulation in the Andes

In the Andes (see Figure 1.2), fostering is not preferred, but it is an accepted practice widely distributed among rural and urban populations. Fosterage, and more generally the production of relatedness among people, is discussed by several anthropologists (Leinaweaver 2007, 2008; Van Vleet 2002, 2008; Walmsley 2008; Weismantel 1995). As Weismantel (1995:694–95) suggests, for the people of Zumbagua, Ecuador, kinship is created through "ingesting food and drink, sharing emotional states with individuals or spirits, being in close physical proximity to people or objects." An adult can produce relatedness by raising or caring for a child over the course of many months or years. For many native Andeans, including the Quechua-speaking peasants with whom Van Vleet has conducted research in the region of Sullk'ata, Bolivia, the question of who is related to whom is determined by everyday activities such as eating the same food, working on the same plot of land, or sharing the same living space. About 10 percent of families in the rural communities of Sullk'ata were in some way engaged in the circulation of children, giving a child or lending a child to another person. Very few of those involved in fostering enter into a legal or contractual agreement or go through a state or private adoption agency.

Sullk'atas often distinguish between what they see as a more permanent transfer, "to give" (*quy*, Quechua) a child, and a more temporary transfer, "to lend" (*mañay*, Quechua) a child (Van Vleet 2008:64–65). Giving a child may take various forms, but in most cases, the birth parents no longer perform the practices, such as feeding a child, that establish and maintain relatedness. Sometimes giving a child occurs because of extreme circumstances such as the death or injury of a parent. In contrast, a child may be lent to his or her grandparents once they no longer have their own children at home to help with the household chores and to bring liveliness into the household. Although sometimes glossed as "adoption" (*adoptar*, Spanish), Sullk'atas use the Quechua term *wawachakuy* (literally, "to make a child into a son or daughter") to describe the processes through which adults care for a child and make the child into kin. Wawachakuy results in both material and social relatedness. A child who is not raised by a birth parent nevertheless becomes a daughter or

Figure 1.2   In the Andes (of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia), children may be cared for by adults who are not their birth parents. In these informal fostering arrangements, children often recognize both birth parents and foster parents as related.

son by receiving food from another adult. Sometimes, lending a child is temporary, but the relationship that is established through wawachakuy may last far longer than the child's residence in a particular household.

For example, Teresa has been cared for, fed, and clothed by Antonia and her husband Faustino since she was an infant. Antonia and Faustino were unable to have a child of their own and so were very willing to take on the task of raising Teresa when her birth mother (Antonia's sister Leonarda) fell ill. Leonarda remained in the hospital for several weeks; she was too sick to care for her five older children, much less an infant. She gave her infant daughter to her sister Antonia. Leonarda said, at least in retrospect, that she gave the baby to her sister in hopes that Antonia and Faustino would stop fighting over their inability of have children and remain together. Raised primarily in the city of Cochabamba, Teresa recognizes Antonia and Faustino as her parents by addressing them as "Mother" and "Father." Although she knows that Leonarda gave birth to her, Teresa calls Leonarda "Aunt" and Nelson "Uncle." Teresa lives with Antonia and Faustino and helps Antonia sell sodas and other refreshments after school. When Teresa misbehaves, Antonia and Faustino are the adults who reprimand her. For Antonia and Faustino, providing Teresa with clothing and her school supplies, feeding her every day, and caring for her when she is ill—experiencing the joys and trials of life together—made her into their daughter (Van Vleet 2008:65–66).

In Sullk'ata as well as elsewhere in the Andes, in practical and conceptual ways, a person becomes integrated into a family by living in the same household, sharing corn and potatoes from communal bowls, and enjoying the warmth generated by the close physical proximity of many people in a tiny kitchen, working together in the same fields, traveling together whenever possible, and making libations to the same forces of the earth. These practices are crucial for birth parents to undertake to re-create and reconsolidate the intimacies, and the hierarchies, of relatedness as much as they are necessary for adoptive parents.

Once given or lent, children also make decisions on their own about where to go or stay and the degree to which they have been able to "get accustomed" to living in someone else's home (Leinaweaver 2007:169). Fostering is thus an important way in which children and youth, as well as adults, negotiate their circumstances. In Ayacucho, Peru, as elsewhere in the Andean region, people may recruit a child to live in their household to provide company to an aging parent or help with domestic tasks, and parents may transfer a child to relieve economic pressures or maintain social ties. In addition, especially older children may see living in another household as a path toward socioeconomic

progress, a way of moving beyond mere subsistence, a way to "overcome" (*superar,* Spanish) one's circumstances (Leinaweaver 2005:164). The circumstances in which children in the Andes or in west Africa circulate between households may include practicalities of making sure care is available to each child, but at the same time, people have diverse understandings of what it means to foster or adopt.

The Stigma of Adoption in the Middle East

Egypt and some other Islamic-influenced states stand as contrasts to the widespread fostering in some west African societies and the notion that families are made through everyday practices in the Andes (see Figure 1.1 for a map that includes Egypt and Lebanon). Here, formal adoption is infrequent, and fostering is often done in secret because of beliefs in the essential significance of blood ties in Egypt. Although caring for orphans is valued and religiously prescribed in Islam, formal adoption, in which a child becomes a permanent member of a family, is prohibited and a socially problematic form of familial relationship. In urban Egypt, particularly important is the belief that family members have and should have blood connections. Without a clear genealogical relationship, Egyptians worry that parent-child relations will be strained. Similarly, in a recent discussion of men's understandings of in vitro fertilization and adoption based on over 200 interviews with Shi'a and Sunni men in Lebanon, Inhorn notes that most men "could not accept the idea of social fatherhood—arguing that an adopted or donor child 'won't be my son'" (2006:98). One Sunni Muslim man tells Inhorn (2006:105):

> If we adopt, we wouldn't really feel comfortable looking at this child, given that he's not our biological child. When he grows up, we would have to tell him honestly that he's not our child. Then his psychology would be affected. He wouldn't feel that hopeful. There would be a "gap" because he's not our child. If you have your own biological child, you will feel differently. He is your own child, so you feel attached.

According to Islamic scripture, children who are taken in by another family cannot inherit from their adoptive parents, under most circumstances cannot take their adopted fathers' names, and cannot be acknowledged as the children of their adoptive parents. Moreover, adoption makes other moral prescriptions complicated. Although a woman does not usually have to veil herself within her own household or in front of close male relatives, she would have to veil herself in front of her adopted son—because he is technically not a male relative. A man would not be able to touch his adopted daughter when she gets older because of explicit moral codes

(Inhorn 2006:108). Thus, the concern that the child would be adversely affected is very much tied to the belief that direct genealogical ties both cause and require different feelings and actions.

Moreover, although the Islamic scriptures encourage the care of orphans, most orphans are considered to be the illegitimate offspring of unmarried persons—and thus morally tainted (Inhorn 2006:103–104). As one woman explained to Inhorn, "if you bring a child from the orphanage, you don't know its origins. And no matter how good of an environment it grows up in, it still has its parents' blood. And if they're bad, it can go back to its origins [be bad too]" (Inhorn 1996:191). Many Egyptians believe that adopting a child raises serious problems within the adopting family because of the ways moral character is linked to blood and because of the more general emphasis on blood as determining the construction of Muslim families and social place and relationships more generally.

In spite of these issues, either because of admonishments about the importance of taking care of orphans, because some Egyptians are not aware of the prohibitions against formal adoption, or because of an intense desire to raise a child as one's own, families do sometimes foster children who are not related to them. Many of these foster care arrangements become permanent. Women who are infertile sometimes find that having a child in the home, even if not through a formal adoption, eases the strain of the stigma of childlessness. Inhorn (1996:195ff) relates the story of a woman who, unable to have a biological child and mourning her lack of children, agrees to consider adopting a boy from the orphanage. For the child to be accepted by her husband's family, she pretends that she herself has given birth to the boy. The acceptance of the boy by her relatives might have come from their willingness to overlook the improbability that the adopting mother had given birth to the child (as the child was a year old at the time of adoption). Nevertheless, as Inhorn reported, the outcome was positive for both the child, who was unlikely to be otherwise adopted out of the orphanage, and the parents, who had so desperately longed for a child.

Although many people sponsor children within orphanages, some may express a willingness to adopt children. Inhorn also relates the story of a Palestinian man, living in Lebanon, who married late in life. He and his wife were having difficulty conceiving a child, and he expresses his opinion that he would rather adopt than live without a child.

> As for adoption, yes, why not?... So even though you raise a kid who is not originally your kid, with time, he'll get used to you and you to him, and he will be like your kid. . . . A human being is a human being. And I love children—any child. I can, I think, feel pleasure to have any child. Sometimes I feel myself a father of any child. (Inhorn 2006:109)

Inhorn suggests that this man's experience in refugee camps and his knowledge of the number of orphaned and needy children shaped his somewhat unusual attitude toward adoption.

Thus, religious rules about adoption and an individual's or a couple's desire to adopt a child might find compromise and allow abandoned or orphaned children to be taken into new families. In Sudan, Islamic law has similarly influenced attitudes about adoption. Because formal adoption is not a widely accepted practice among Muslims in that country, the orphanages, full of orphaned and abandoned children, have in the past been dismal places where children's lives were cut short through neglect and disease. Recently, at least one orphanage in Khartoum has been working to change the fate of children who end up there. With contributions from UNICEF and local aid agencies, the orphanage itself has seen vast improvement. Children are now well taken care of, with much better medical care and daily care by the caregivers. In addition, more children are being adopted from the orphanage. Drawing from the Islamic tenets about the responsibility of Muslims to take care of orphans, officials in the country have promoted the fosterage of these children. In 2004, the government ruled that whenever possible, children should be raised not in institutions but in families. A 2006 fatwa declared that these institutionalized children are the responsibility of all society. While some families are still reluctant to adopt children, these new national and religious laws have begun to influence the lives of orphaned and abandoned children, giving them some hope of living normal family lives (Polgreen 2008).

Exploring the Significance of Cases

In the following pages we explore the similarities and differences among the cases to disrupt our own assumptions about adoption in the United States. One of the most prevalent distinctions made in the United States in discussions of adoption is that between birth and adoptive parents. Although the stigma around adoption is lessening, this dichotomy reinforces the normalcy of parenting one's own birth children. But just as in the Middle East or the Andes, in the United States the boundaries around what is natural (and the emphasis on birth, biology, or genetics) are culturally and socially constructed. As anthropologist Carole Vance notes, "identical . . . acts may have varying social significance and subjective meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and historical periods" (Vance [1991] 2005:20). In other words, it is not simply that familial attitudes, ideals, and relationships and adoption practices vary but that these very practices *constitute* family. In each instance, the practices, forms, and

ideologies of family are based on beliefs and practices that appear normal and natural but that are also in process—embedded in changing social, economic, and political circumstances. A comparative perspective illuminates some of these.

Debunking the Opposition
Between Natural and Adoptive Parents

Understanding the ways in which families—however they are configured—are "naturalized" (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995:1) illuminates both the different social practices that individuals in various societies exhibit and their evaluations of those practices. Contrasting notions of blood bring this point home quite well. In some ways, the Egyptian emphasis on blood or genealogical ties and the significance placed on birth relationships mirrors the assumptions in the United States that the best and most natural parents are the birth parents. Most Muslims do not, however, conceptualize genealogy in terms of a sperm and egg joining and sharing relatively equal amounts of genetic material. Rather, as Delaney (1991) demonstrates in her discussion of procreation and Islam, in rural Turkey people "know" that reproduction happens in people as in agriculture: Men plant seeds in women, who are like soil, and the seed determines what actually grows. In this way, men are viewed as having the ability to create life.

> In the villagers' theory only men are able to transmit the spark of life, and it is theoretically eternal as long as men continue to produce sons to carry it down the generations. From father to son, father to son, this spark is transmitted. The importance of sons is not therefore something separate from the ideology of procreation but an integral part of it, as is the notion of lineage. . . . The man who has produced children, especially sons, shows that he is a "true" man, that he has the power to call things into being. (Delaney 1991:37)

This metaphor of procreation is linked to Islamic scripture and everyday religious observance: "The creative, life-giving ability of men is felt to be godlike; villagers say the father is the second god after Allah" (Delaney 1991:33). The notion that a man's finite procreative ability reflects God's infinite ability to create the world is extended so that religious value is placed on having children, moral tenets closely tie "purity of lineage" to family formation and morality, and a father's "authority symbolizes that of God in the world" (Nasr [1966] 1985:110, cited in Delaney 1991:33).

In the Andes, people also mark or set apart their "true kin" (*parientes legítimos,* Spanish) from others and naturalize the relationships among true

kin through birth. Like the Islamic Turkish peasants with whom Delaney worked, they most often naturalize the relatedness between parents and children by linking the processes of pregnancy and birth with those of agriculture and herding. Sullk'ata women say, however, that a man plants a seed in a woman and the woman's body "grabs" the seed. A child ripens during pregnancy through the actions of the woman who nourishes her child, just as *Pacha Mama,* the Earth Mother, nourishes the seeds of corn or potatoes, allowing them to ripen. In particular, the blood of the woman is necessary for the production and ripening (*puquy,* Quechua) of the child, who is like a plant. During pregnancy, the baby grows in the belly of the woman and nourishes him- or herself from the blood that is inside the belly. The "food that is served to the mother passes directly to the baby 'through the blood,' and . . . the baby turns into a person 'with the blood'" (Arnold and Yapita 1996:317; our translation). Before birth, a child is fed directly by his or her mother through the mother's blood. Sullk'atas metaphorically link the mother's blood, circulating within her body and creating the body of the fetus, with the life force that cycles throughout the universe allowing for the growth and regeneration of plants, animals, and human beings (Van Vleet 2008:59).

After a child is born, the circulation of food and energy is maintained through the intake of food. Whoever feeds the child over a sustained period of time is credited with constituting the material body of the child, and this process then creates bonds of relatedness. Sharing substances, emotional states, and physical proximity creates a shared corporeality among kin, as Weismantel (1995) shows for native Andeans in Ecuador. Significantly, even those who are true kin, related by the circulation of food and blood before birth, must, through everyday feeding and caring for the child after he or she is born, continue to create relatedness after birth. Nevertheless, as the example of Teresa (whose story is described earlier in this chapter) demonstrates, giving a child to another person dilutes, but does not completely erase, the relationship of kinship, especially for the mother whose blood circulated through and formed the child before birth.

These examples highlight two similar, but different, ways of conceptualizing procreation through agricultural metaphors and blood symbolism; yet the differences in understandings of birth and blood intertwined with different social practices have very different consequences for how Egyptians or native Andeans understand adoption and fostering. Thus, for many people in Egypt, one's relationship to a known biological mother and father is "considered not only an ideal . . . but a moral imperative" (Inhorn 2006:95). In her research with Egyptians and Lebanese men and women, Inhorn found that preserving *nasab,* or lineage (or relations by blood), is considered to be a gift of God and is also believed to prevent personal and social immorality

that might lead to economic and financial dislocation. Blood ties are thus crucial to the maintenance of society as a whole as well as the safeguarding of a family (Inhorn 2006:95). Adoption in which an orphan takes the legal name of the adoptive parents, lives in the same household, acquires inheritance rights, and has ongoing affective relations is explicitly forbidden in Islam because it contradicts this understanding of how life is transmitted and how (patrilineal) families are protected. As we have seen, fostering or raising an orphan within one's home is allowed but is rare and often done in secret because this kind of "mixing relations," many Muslims argue, creates impure and uncertain family lines and causes confusion for all concerned.

Native Andeans rely on a different set of assumptions and conceptually ground their understandings of family in the cycles of giving and receiving that happen before and after birth (between parents and children) and more generally in the universe. Although parents, especially mothers, recognize a significant connection to the children to whom they give birth, families are not limited to birth relationships. From this perspective, nurturing, feeding, and caring for a child; teaching the child how to work and to contribute to the sustenance of the household; disciplining; and receiving respect are practices that create and maintain family. When an adult raises a child who is not his or her true kin, the very practices of feeding and caring for the child constitute bonds of relatedness, and children may recognize more than one set of adults as parents, performing and negotiating relatedness with each.

What is natural about sexual reproduction, birth, family, or adoption in Egypt is not what is natural in Bolivia. More than simple variations among societies, these examples suggest that we take seriously the question of how naturalness is produced. What counts as natural is culturally constituted, yet our assumptions about the naturalness of certain kinds of family forms or relationships have profound implications for how we do or do not create distinctions between birth and adoptive parents. Policy makers, scholars, and parents in the United States and elsewhere often rely on a distinction between natural and adoptive parents and children. In Egypt, such a distinction would be meaningless because an adult raising and caring for an orphan cannot be recognized as a parent at all, and in Bolivia, such a distinction is potentially irrelevant because more emphasis is placed on the everyday practices of raising a child than on genealogy. Using the distinction between natural and adoptive family members is part of how we "do family" in the United States, and in the following chapters we will examine the historical relationships, cultural logics, and social practices that underlie the distinction between birth and adoption in the United States. First, we turn to a second set of assumptions about rights to and responsibilities for children in the Andes, Egypt, and west Africa and what we can learn from these practices.

Who Is Responsible for Raising Children?

In addition to symbolic understandings of birth and blood, in many societies adoption and fostering are linked to different presuppositions about the form of families, in particular the concentration or dispersal of rights to and responsibilities for children. As we will address more fully in Chapter 3, in the United States, both individuals and the state take the perspective that parents are solely responsible for children and have rights to children (Grubb and Lazerson [1982] 1988). In many parts of the world, these assumptions do not hold; birth parents are not the only individuals with rights to children, as is clear from examples of Benin and Cameroon, and birth parents are not solely responsible for raising children. Esther Goody (1982), an anthropologist who focuses on social parenthood in Ghana, has used research she conducted in the 1970s to argue that many societies share tasks between "biological parents" and "social parents": Nurturing, educating, training, sponsoring, and conferring a name, inheritance, or status were some of the tasks in addition to "bearing and begetting" that could be distributed among many people (Alber 2003:487; Goody 1982:7ff).

In fact, child fosterage in west Africa "works" in part, because biological parents do not have rights to their children. As Alber (2004b:39-40) notes:

> The practice of child fosterage is based upon the idea that biological parents do not "own" their children and make decisions about their lives. Rather, other people have these rights, to some extent. . . . When a child is born people congratulate the relatives, but rarely the biological parents, on the birth of "their" child.

Although getting married and having children are linked in the minds of many North Americans, in many parts of Africa women do not marry to "have" children. As we already noted, the child's paternal aunt usually claims a Baatombu woman's first child. The paternal aunt can give the child to another person in the paternal family, or someone else may claim the child as his or her own. A woman's second and third children are also understood to "belong" to others. A woman's second child belongs to her own (social) mother, the woman who fostered her, in compensation for the care and education she gave her and so that the older woman will have a child to live with her as she ages. Either maternal or paternal siblings usually make claims to a third child. The fourth child "belongs" to the birth parents; however, a birth mother does not have "rights" over children. Her husband does, and he may give the child to another person.

In a slightly different way, Notermans (2004) points out the ways in which people other than the birth parents have rights and responsibilities toward children in east Cameroon. Women usually have one marriage that is formal: They live in their husbands' households and give up rights to the children they bear in exchange for financial benefit and social status. In addition to a formal marriage, which women "will resolutely bring . . . to an end when reciprocity fails" (Notermans 2004:55), women also have several informal conjugal relationships over the course of their lifetimes. Women thus may have children from a number of fathers. Moreover, a woman's mother may claim her daughter's children by preventing the child's father from signing a birth certificate or from transferring the traditional goods or payment (bride-price) to formalize a marriage. "Fathers offer little or no resistance to maternal grandmothers who make a claim, their decisions have to be respected. Grandmothers' claims also release a father from paying for cloth and medicine and from paying fees in the future" (Notermans 2004:54). Bledsoe (1990b) suggests that a father actively considers the productive demands on the household when determining whether he will fight to keep a child.

In the United States and many western European nations, the belief that "biological parents are the best persons to educate a child, and that changes in parentage cause damage to a child's development, prevents people from thinking of giving a child away" (Alber 2003:488). The Baatombu of Benin are one example of many from western Africa in which fostering children is quite common but also takes on a diverse array of forms in which people assume that several responsibilities for children will be taken on by people other than their biological parents. It is not simply that parents are unable to provide for their children but that others have rights to their children. As we discuss in later chapters, the assumption in the United States that the (birth) parents have rights and responsibilities for the child clash with state policies that work against poor families. When struggling parents cannot care properly for children in the United States, they are seldom offered the financial and social support they need; instead, their children are removed from their care temporarily and sometimes permanently.

History Comes Up Behind Us: Fostering and Adoption as Shaped by Context

The circulation of children takes place in some form in almost every society, yet the practices through which children move from one caretaking household to another, the understandings people have of fostering or

adoption, and the ways informal and formal institutions articulate with each other vary by region, culture, and nation. As much as these cases of child circulation highlight the varying ways in which we all do family, the cases also require acknowledgment of the ways that even long-standing fostering and adoption practices might change in particular social and historical circumstances.

In each of these ethnographic cases, and in many others besides, the complex interplay of relationships among individuals, families (however constituted), other collectivities such as the clan or ethnic group, and large-scale institutions such as states or religions make fosterage and adoption a site to understand the shifting boundaries of family. Although in most cases the kind of circulation we have described in this chapter might be described as informal or extralegal, since the latter part of the twentieth century, most state systems have instituted laws and policies specifically regulating adoption, or the legal transferal of parental rights and duties. Moreover, how an individual navigates these relations is constrained by informal or local fosterage systems, formal state systems of fosterage and adoption, and broader social and political-economic transformations.

Although the practice of fostering is widespread in the Andes and west Africa, we have little information about the rates at which children are fostered; about the differences in fostering and adoption practices by ethnic group, class, or geographical location; and about the articulation of local norms and state restrictions at different historical moments. This lack of statistics reflects the ways these practices, although common, are informal rather than legal. However, it is clear that particular social and historical circumstances can exacerbate the circulation of children or change the meanings of fostering practices or the configuration of those practices. Leinaweaver (2007, 2008), for example, conducted her study of child circulation in the city of Ayacucho, Peru, in the aftermath of more than a decade of armed struggle between the Shining Path and the Peruvian military. The Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) initiated an insurgency in 1980 by burning ballot boxes in the town of Chuschi, Peru. A few years later the Peruvian military began waging an all-out scorched-earth campaign against the Shining Path, bringing several rural provinces and thousands of civilians under military control. Peasants, many of whom were Quechua speakers, were caught in the crossfire; the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission estimated in 2003 that 70,000 people were killed or disappeared in two decades of violence. The war also initiated massive migration to the urban areas of Lima and Cusco (Leinaweaver 2007:165). Many of the youth and adults whom Leinaweaver interviewed about their experiences with child circulation in the city of Ayacucho were directly affected by the insurgency and the economic and political hardship in the aftermath of the war.

For example, Milagros's father disappeared after being threatened by the Shining Path in 1990. Milagros traveled with her mother, sister, and brother to the home of her mother's sister, staying for three years until her mother participated in a mass land invasion to secure a plot of land. Three months after Milagros and her family moved into their small house, her aunt asked her mother if Milagros might return to her aunt's house to live. Although Leinaweaver stresses the various reasons a person might request a child, relinquish a child, or as a child, agree to move, she also has forefronted the circumscribed economic options that shape child circulation in Peru. Whereas Milagros might never have left her family had her father not disappeared, war created a context of instability and fear and exacerbated the poverty in an already-marginal region of Peru. Thus, the family had to balance competing interests: the potential positive outcome of allowing Milagros to leave the family (relief from the economic burdens of caring for children, a strengthening of ties between households that might be necessary for survival, and providing a child an opportunity to advance through education or living in the city) against the negatives (the loneliness of being without family or the desire to keep one's child nearby) (Leinaweaver 2007:166; see also Weismantel 1995:689).

Although Peruvians had probably fostered children informally before the war, and many continued to do so during and after the war, the informal fostering of children in Peru has changed in response to wider social and political transformations. In Ayacucho, the first orphanage opened in 1983 in the midst of the war—when thousands of children had lost mothers and fathers and when remaining relatives were fearful and desperate and "declined the responsibility of receiving a related child" (Leinaweaver 2007:174). The institutionalization of orphanages provides another strategy for Peruvians who, when desperate, might temporarily relinquish a child; however, within an orphanage no one takes on the kind of everyday care that is necessary to make a child into a family member. In addition, a social worker or psychologist may determine that the child has received too few visits from family members and may declare the child abandoned. Peru's Code of Children and Adolescents (passed in 1992 as Law 26102), which is derived from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, enables courts to declare a child abandoned even if his or her relatives make clear their intent to care for the child. As elsewhere in the Andes, native Andeans in Peru may view adoption as a way to create a family, not simply as an important strategy to overcome economic hardship. The historical and political-economic contexts as much as the symbolic and social relationships at hand are significant to the interpretation of the circulation of children in the region.

Similarly, in west Africa the system of child circulation continues but has shifted contours in response to broader economic and social transformations.

As Alber (2003, 2004a, 2004b) notes, the growing importance of formal education has affected the traditional system of fosterage. Two trends seem particularly important. First, in some areas girls are fostered at a much greater rate than boys. In the older generation, approximately 63 percent of men and 67 percent of women experienced foster care as children, but in the younger generation 33 percent of boys and 48 percent of girls experienced foster care. In one village, 63 percent of girls and only 17 percent of boys in the younger generation had been fostered (Alber 2004a:31–32). Girls' higher fosterage rates are partly linked to the ways women navigate social and kinship relationships (as we discussed above) but also reflect the increasing importance placed on a Western-style education. Parents, especially fathers, see education as more important for boys than for girls because of the access it gives men to urban and government jobs. Although less lucrative than in the past, these jobs have become especially important with the downturn in the economy in west Africa in the 1980s and 1990s that accompanied a drop in agricultural subsidies and prices for export crops. In this changing economic environment, parents allow their daughters to be fostered to make it possible to educate their sons; birth children are more likely to go to school for a Western-style education, and foster children are more likely to work in the fields (Alber 2003:501).

A second and related transformation in fostering relationships is that children increasingly move only from rural to urban areas and not in the opposite direction. The reason is at least in part that urban families have been more influenced by the Euro-American notion that children belong to their biological parents. This idea has been promoted by Christian churches as well as the colonial and postcolonial state since the late nineteenth century.

> National laws of inheritance or succession in chieftaincy favor biological parenthood, as schoolbooks and media promote the image of the "normal" nuclear family of husband and wife and "their" biological children. This influence has left its marks especially on the urban Baatombu families which share today the conviction that in modern times "modern families" (as they say) have to take responsibility to their biological children themselves. (Alber 2003:501)

Although both rural and urban Baatombu maintain the idea that the transfer of a child does not cause any damage, psychological or otherwise, many urban families do not relinquish their children to be raised in rural villages. A rural family may ask to have one of their children fostered by an urban family, or an urban family may ask for a child from the village to come and live with them. But the expectations have changed: Usually the rights and

duties of the social parent are attenuated; they do not cover all the costs of education, food, and clothing of the child, and the child is not seen as a full member of the household. Grandparents living in rural villages in particular complain of this change, especially if most of their children live in the city, leaving few grandchildren available for them to foster.

At least implicitly, some of these changes indicate that foster children may be treated differently than birth children. Based on research in Sierra Leone, another west African country, Caroline Bledsoe (1990a) notes that people seem to believe harsh treatment of children is justified, saying that there is "no success without struggle." People still believe that a strict upbringing will benefit children as well as adults and that foster parents are better able to provide such an education. At the same time, as in Peru, traditional fostering practices are reshaped by contexts of political violence and economic hardship. It is estimated that 800,000 children are orphaned in Sierra Leone, a country that is recovering from a brutal civil war. Fostering was widespread before the violence to help a child receive formal education and to learn how to struggle, and during the war, fostering continued within refugee camps and when children were sent from refugee camps to relatives. But because families are finding it increasingly difficult to support birth and foster children, more children are institutionalized or travel larger distances to strangers or unfamiliar relatives. In addition, widespread informal fostering in a context wherein social relationships and norms have atrophied means that there are children at risk of being trafficked or otherwise exploited (Gale 2008). In sub-Saharan Africa, the AIDS epidemic has transformed the fostering system. It is estimated that in 1993 already 11 million children in sub-Saharan Africa had lost one or both parents to AIDS (UNICEF 2003:6). The fostering system has changed from one based on reciprocal relationships to one based on the care of AIDS orphans (Upton 2003:317). The large number of adult deaths from AIDS has meant that huge numbers of children are migrating, integrating into new communities and families, or transforming the very meanings of *parent* and *child* by becoming primary caregivers themselves.

Conclusions

For more than a century, anthropologists and sociologists have documented the wide variability in the ways people create, maintain, and dissolve social bonds, including those that we recognize as familial bonds. In this chapter we have explored different practices of fostering or circulating children to highlight the importance of cultural beliefs and norms. How an individual chooses to relinquish a child or to request a child, then, is understood only

through particular cultural lenses. Often the practices of family are so habitual that they are considered natural and universal. Even in contexts in which people emphasize the naturalness of birth, individuals through their words and actions "perform relatedness" or "do family" (Carsten 2000; Rothman 2005; Van Vleet 2008). When an Egyptian woman secretly adopts a one-year-old child and tells her family and friends that she gave birth to him, and when her relatives all play along, they are doing family. And when a childless native Andean couple takes in a stranger's child and carefully feeds her food grown in their fields, cooked in a single pot, and offered from their own bowls, they are also doing family. When a west African woman requests that her nephew give her his daughter to raise, and he refuses, they do family too.

At the same time, the beliefs and values, practices, and norms are embedded in broader social, economic, and political constraints. Although some of these background conditions shape norms and perceptions of fostering and adoption tangentially, in all cases, cultural and ethnic groups are embedded in large state structures. Depending on the particular case, the state may exercise more or less control over the circulation of children. State regulation interacts with local ideologies of family, leading to unique configurations of adoption and fostering.

The similarities and differences among these cases allow us to disrupt our own assumptions about adoption and to recognize that in each instance, these practices and ideologies are themselves changing as they are embedded in ongoing social, economic, and political circumstances. The circulation of children is not simply a private affair conditioned by individual desires. Fostering and adoption are imminently public processes, increasingly shaped and constrained by the state and by global economic and political forces, even though people may experience their individual relationships, desires, and possibilities as unmediated. Throughout the remaining chapters we will draw on this intentionally wide-ranging discussion to situate local visions of how people are related to broader discourses of identity and inequality, personhood and property, citizenship and the state.