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Author:

Henry Kam Kah – University of Buea, Cameroon

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University of Hradec Králové
Philosophical Faculty

FROM FOSTER CARE TO ENSLAVEMENT: WHAT FUTURE FOR AFRICA'S SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM?

Henry Kam Kah

Abstract: Foster care, an age-old tradition of social security in Africa has unfortunately been abused, bastardised and turned into an evil practice of enslavement with consequences for families, communities and countries. In different parts of the continent, this socio-cultural practice has been criticised by human rights groups; non-governmental organisations, competent government departments and religious groups and structures have been set up to educate parents and society about the evils associated with it. In spite of this, the practice has continued in different forms. This paper probes into the motivations for and evolution of this cultural practice. The practice was well intentioned in Africa's past and resulted in the emergence of some elite or important personalities through fosterage. Unfortunately, this beneficial socio-cultural practice is now more or less an economic enterprise benefitting a network of government officials and other dubious individuals who pass for good Samaritans or pretend to fight it. From the look of things, the future of the practice spells greater enslavement if effective measures are not taken by relevant stakeholders to curb the excesses. The methodology in this study includes personal observation and discussion, discussion with children of foster parents, foster parents, and workers of NGOs dealing with such cases, church leaders, community leaders, newspaper reports and written texts.

Keywords: *Foster care, Enslavement, Social security, Tradition, Africa*

Introduction

Foster care takes place in different forms and degrees in different countries of the world. In the United States for example, African-American children form the bulk in the country's foster care system

(Wulczyn and Lery 2007: 1). This is probably because of the low income levels of many African-Americans compared to other Americans. In Africa, the informal systems are characterised by broad familial links, the practice of adoption, fosterage and raising grandchildren. This is intended to widen the support base in African societies. The African informal support system is also based on kinship, community and tribal support (Messkoub 2008: 16). The extended family systems handle socio-economic inequality in different African societies through the fosterage of children across nuclear family units. This system, which was very strong and supported in the past, is however being affected by globalisation and the recent world economic quagmire with negative consequences on the African continent (Eloundou-Enyegue and Shapiro n.d.: 1).

The practice of foster care is based on the provision of social security for families and communities. In traditional African communities in the past, the practice was encouraged, and promoted as a way of social stability and security for all members because the wealthy took care of the children of the less wealthy. Fosterage was also built on the culture of establishing strong kinship and social bonds among the people of a given area. The inability of the extended family system to continue to provide fosterage today without abuse is a result of several factors key among which is the penetration of global capita and the development of individualistic attitudes over the communal spirit. Since a certain degree of social security is expected to be provided either by the government or by family members and friends, fosterage now takes on different forms, which was the case in the past and which have had dire consequences.

In this study we have employed the methodology of personal observation and discussion, discussion with children in fosterage, foster parents, workers of human rights groups, community leaders, a content analysis of literature in books and journals, and personal experiences and observations. Many of the people interviewed in Cameroon did not want their names mentioned, especially because of the current outcry against the maltreatment of Cameroonian girls in Kuwait and other parts of the Middle East. Many of them were lured into travelling to this region on the promise of good jobs but were shocked to see that they had been more or less sold into slavery. Individuals like Beatrice Titanji, a lecturer in the Department of

English at the University of Buea, and faith-based organisations like the Catholic Church are involved in the rehabilitation and education of the public against domestic servitude and the culture of sending people to others for fosterage. Parents from poor homes in the rural areas are encouraged to empower and care for their children. This is because many friends and relatives are today enslaving children who were given to them for fosterage. The discussion on fosterage needs to be contextualised in this study.

Definition and Contextualisation of Fosterage

Foster care or fosterage and associated phenomena have been variously defined in the existing literature on Africa and other parts of the world. The substitute family care for children, who are not adequately maintained and cared for at their home of origin, is referred to as foster care or fosterage (De Vos 1998: 23; Richter n.d.: 17; Brown n.d.: 60-1; Brown 2009: 5; Bledsoe 1990). These children are often placed with members of the community, outside their own family, for a stated period of time. They can be taken care of by a member of the family like an aunt or a grandmother, a social worker, the police, a private agency or a government official. This practice takes place in many different ways and can be done in the short-term, in a matter of days or throughout a child's entire childhood. Fosterage is both formal and informal and in Africa fosterage is more informal than formal but for a few countries that include South Africa and Uganda where formal fosterage has been developed, the challenges notwithstanding (Johnson 2005: 4-6).

Foster care is generally defined differently in various countries, and within countries, depending on the cultural values of the people involved. In the United Kingdom, for example, foster care is "a way of providing a family life for children who cannot live with their own parents." Meanwhile in South Africa foster care is "the placement of child, who needs to be removed from the parental home, into custody of a suitable family or person willing to be a foster parent. This is done by order of the Children's Court." The definition of fosterage in Australia emphasises "out-of-home care for children and young people up to eighteen years of age, who are unable to live with their families generally because the children have been maltreated. It involves the placement of a young person with care-givers who then

look after the young person in their own homes on a short or long term basis.” In Uganda, the Ugandan Children Act defines foster care as “the placement of a child with a person who is not his or her parent or relative and who is willing to undertake the care and maintenance of the child.” The formal foster care system in Tanzania relies on people coming forward voluntarily and asking the Social Welfare Office whether they could be considered to foster a child (Johnson 2005: 7-9, 19).

There is also informal foster care, which is called “family and friends” or “kinship” fostering. This involves aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters or grandparents without outside involvement (Johnson 2005: 16). Informal foster care is in fact a cultural practice where children are given to relatives and friends to bring them up as useful members of the community. Informal care does not demand the sanction of an administrative or judicial authority or any duly accredited body (Abubakari and Yahaya 2013: 64; Roby 2011: 10). Rather, it is based on the good will of relatives and friends. The informal foster care system is very common in many African countries. It has expanded to involve people who are neither relatives nor friends. Children are given to them for foster care because of their status and also because of the socio-economic motivations of their parents. This is where there is a problem because some of these children are literally sold and bought and then turned into slaves.

Fosterage as a practice is based on the nature and philosophy behind the African social security system. It could best be understood within the context of what social security means. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines social security as:

... the protection which society provides for its members, through a series of public measures, against the economic and social distress that otherwise would be caused by the stoppage or substantial reduction of earnings resulting from sickness, maternity, employment in jury, unemployment, invalidity, old age and death; the provision of medical care and the provision of subsidies for families with children (Tostensen 2008: 4).

It was and still is the protection in some cases where in traditional Africa the solidarity of extended family members and the ethnic group

provided and provides income and other basic needs for them. These collective, community-based social security arrangements have been built on mutual dependence or reciprocity. It was and still is this philosophy of life that has contributed to the persistence of informal or traditional foster care in Africa (Joe Koi, personal communication 2015). The modern social security system in Africa today is problematic because of serious budgetary constraints (Social Security 2008: 3). Many governments cannot provide social security for their citizens.

There is often confusion in the definition of foster care, fostering, fosterage, adoption, child relocation and transfer, child circulation, child migration and child rearing delegation (Pilon 2003: 6). While there is a link between them, there are slight differences in what each of them stands for. Adoption, for example, is different from foster care. Formal adoption, both domestic and international, is a legal act of transfer of rights over a child. Unlike fosterage, an adopted child is moved permanently and assimilated into the culture and tradition of the adopting parents (Kandiwa n.d.: 9). Fosterage involves the partial transfer of rights and duties in care taking. This does not involve rights to inheritance but to food and shelter among others (Sommerfelt n.d.: 21; Silk n.d.: 40).

Foster care has also been given a greater definition and meaning by international organisations, which are concerned with child upbringing and improvement of the social security system. According to the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) in article 20, foster care is:

A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.

State Parties shall, in accordance with their national laws, ensure alternative care for such a child. Such care could include, inter alia, foster placement, kafala of Islamic law, adoption, or if necessary, placement in suitable institutions for the care of children. When considering solutions, due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background (Johnson 2005: 4).

The issues highlighted in this convention, which inform what foster care is include deprivation from the family environment, assistance of the state, foster placement and upbringing. This definition is, however, about formal foster care, which is the responsibility of the relevant and competent state parties. It does not address the bulk of foster care, which is informal and very common in Africa. It also talks about adoption but this is not similar to foster care in that adoption involves the legal sanctioning of the transfer of a child from the biological parents to new parents for eternity. Foster care does not involve the complete transfer of a child to a new parent.

Similarly, in the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children as defined by the United Nations in 2009 in Article 28, foster care is:

Situations where children are placed by a competent authority for the purpose of alternative care in the domestic environment of a family other than the children's own family that has been selected, qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care.

The same Guidelines, Article 28, also defines informal care as:

Any private arrangement provided in a family environment whereby the child is looked after by relatives or friends ... or by others in their individual capacity, at the initiative of the child, his/her parents or other person without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body.

This definition of foster care, as outlined in the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, is somehow comprehensive because it recognises formal and informal foster care as social security for people all over the world. In Africa fosterage is both formal and informal. A greater proportion of the population of the continent are involved in foster care, a social security measure for vulnerable families, the difficulties and shortcomings notwithstanding. This is similar to what prevails in much of Asia (Fostering Better Care 2011: 11). Foster care has continued to be a socio-cultural practice based on certain motivations for the parties involved.

Justification for Foster Care in Africa

There was and still is a justification for informal and formal foster care as a social security measure in many African societies. There are two basic patterns of fosterage and these include voluntary and crisis-led fostering. Voluntary fosterage follows an arrangement between biological parents and foster care-givers to raise a child while crisis-led fostering is usually a response to the death of a biological parent or a major shock (Gillespie 2005: 4). Throughout most regions of West Africa people have considered fostering as the best way of raising children. This is the case in Sierra Leone, Ghana, Benin, Nigeria and Cameroon where child fosterage is a frequent and accepted practice. Among the Baatombu of the northern Benin Republic, for example, fosterage is emphasised as the best way to raise children. It is this strong belief that results in the relatively high rates of fosterage. Within this ethnic group, the foster parent teaches a child how to be a good person; to respect elders and to have shame but also to have confidence. Among the Mbondessi of 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 (Adoption 2012: 17-20). This is to avoid being criticised for taking care only of her family members. This practice is generally encouraged in Cameroon by the fact that marriage is a union of families and not just those getting married (Lucas Aseh, personal communication Bomaka 2015). A woman will therefore want children from both families in order to be seen to encourage them to become responsible people tomorrow.

In the South African formal child-care system, foster care has been justified on the basis of the absence of opportunities for the adoption of children (Pitso et al. 2014: 644). This means that children who are not adopted are placed under a formal foster-care system in South Africa. Other justifications for the foster care for children are the need to take care of their psycho-social problems, such as those of them who are left parentless due to AIDS (Ashton 2009; Ngwenya 2011: 3). Other factors accounting for the emergence of foster care include the parenting style of some parents, the dysfunctional family, early parenthood and socio-economic factors. The dysfunctional family is that where one or more of the individuals are not having their needs met. This might be a result of parental alcoholism, mental illness,

child abuse or extreme parental rigidity and control. Other factors that provide the enabling environment for foster care to thrive is the death of parents, divorce, parents' separation, strengthening of family ties and group belonging, socialisation, infertility, child neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Pitso et al. 2014: 645-6; Pilon 2003: 6 and 14; Alber 2003; Alber 2004; Alberet al. 2010: 46-7; Abubakari and Yahaya 2013: 64-8; Bigombe and Khadiagala 2004:164-5; Rolleston 2011: viii). Today, families and next of kin are encouraged to take care of children in South Africa at no cost to the state (Mokgosi 1997: 21). In this way, informal foster care has continued to thrive in African countries, even in those that have developed a fairly successful formal foster care system.

Furthermore, the heightening of societal expectations and standards for acceptable family functioning has contributed to justify the prevalence of formal and informal foster care in Africa and other parts of the world like the United States (Barbell and Freundlich 2001: v). This shift began in the 1960s and is compounded by increasing poverty, homelessness, death of real parents, substance abuse, discrimination and declining informal and extended family support (Freundlich 1997; Nagasaka 1998: 82-4). Increasingly in the African urban space, there are children who are without homes and the drive for materialism has contributed towards weakening the bond of the extended family in Africa, although in some areas this extended family is still playing an important role in social security for the disadvantaged members of the family. Foster care is also becoming the norm for children and young people, who previously would have been handled by mental health programmes or would have been placed under correctional facilities. Poverty has severely limited the ability of some families to provide basic necessities for their children, including food, shelter, clothing, health care, and transportation to school and needed services (Barbell and Freundlich 2001: 9). The way out of this dilemma is to place children into foster care and be saved from the headache of looking for food, clothing and shelter for this child.

From a professional point of view, foster care in the 21st century is made possible by a number of factors. These include the increasing reliance on kin as care givers for children, the use of concurrent planning, the use of an expanded array of permanency options and increases in the use of specialised foster care placements, foster care accountability

and in the attention being given to the development and retention of qualified professional staff (Barbell and Freundlich 2001: 19). Although some of these factors are not as well developed in Africa as in Europe and America, there is a developing formal foster care system in Africa in countries like Uganda, South Africa and Tanzania, which still retain many values of the informal foster care system.

Education and urbanisation also explain foster care in several parts of Africa. The massive increase in fosterage in places like Borgu in Northern Ghana and among the Mokolle and Baatombu in Northern Benin is due to the need to attend school and also to diversify fosterage due to urbanisation respectively. In the Borgu area, many boys are sent to school in the urban areas to live with relatives and further their education. In the case of the Mokolle and Baatombu, developments in urbanisation have made households to diversify forms of fosterage, which is a combination of traditional and neo-traditional arrangements. The main distinction here is that whereas in traditional arrangements all rights and obligations regarding the children are transferred to the foster parents, this is no longer the case when a child is fostered for the purpose of attending school (Alber et al. 2010: 51; Abubakari and Yahaya 2013: 65). Many families without resources to educate their children often send them to live with family members and friends so that they can assist them in their education.

Others factors for fosterage in some African communities are superstition, witchcraft and the need to appease the ancestors. Among the Dagomba of Northern Ghana people believe that foster parents, especially the aunts, have some kind of supernatural powers that can be invoked on any fostered child whose parents want to take her or him away without their consent. This belief among the Dagomba has made it difficult for fostered children to break away from these circumstances, even if they are not properly treated (Abubakari and Yahaya 2013: 73). In many African communities the ancestors are an intermediary between the living and the dead and are venerated. Witchcraft is a common belief and people are not usually willing to expose their children or members of the family to witches and wizards. Some of the foster children may actually be fostered out because of the need to prevent witches and wizards from inflicting pain on them. Other people will also willingly give up their children to members of the kin group in order not to anger them and cause harm to these

children. This is a deeply entrenched belief among African Christians and non-Christians alike (Sylvester Njaah, personal communication 2015).

In addition, fosterage has been justified on the basis of the financial benefits to those who send out their children for fosterage. A key component of this practice is that remittances are channelled from the urban workers to rural areas in order to support them especially in the education of other members of the family. This generally mitigates inequalities in resource endowment among children, because they benefit from the resources of the smaller and wealthier members of the family resident in the urban areas (Bigombe and Khadiagala 2004: 165). Akresh (2009) observed a similar phenomenon during research in Burkina Faso. The difficult economic climate notwithstanding, many family members continue to impress upon family members, friends and others living in the towns and cities to foster their children so that they can benefit from them by way of the education of their children and the sending of money and other items to support the family back home. In some cases, these other persons are experts in a profession and are expected to teach the foster child in that profession (Mahama 2004; Goody 1982). When foster care takes place based on this principle, it reduces the cost of children to parents and promotes high fertility. It may also benefit the children by reducing the number of dependent children in the household, thereby enhancing resource allocation per child (Amey n.d.: 76).

In various traditional African societies, foster care was justified on the basis of redistributing children and also providing room for the discipline of the child. A couple that was blessed with several children could see the family of the women asking to foster one of the children, who was either male or female (Rolleston 2011: 7). This was in line with the African philosophy that a child belongs to the parents only when still in the womb but once this child is born s/he becomes that of any other member of the society. This explains why, when this child goes wayward, any member of the community can correct him/her through advice or beating, as the case may be. The redistribution of children would certainly have been and continues to be a way of assisting those members of the society with especially close family relations to have someone who can assist them in the household and other daily activities. Bledsoe (1985) has also noted that among the

Gonja, a commonly cited motive for fosterage was that parents could not effectively discipline their own offspring and needed to give them out to foster care-givers to discipline them. Whether this remains a key motivation for foster care today is debatable, because some people in Cameroon for example believe that children from foster care homes are even more wayward than those raised by their parents (Jonathan Ndong, personal communication 2015). This is not always the case, because some of these children have remained shining examples of well brought up children and are successful in whatever they do.

The reasons for foster care notwithstanding, Isiugo-Abanihe (1985) outlines four major factors responsible for fostering children in West Africa. These included a wish to improve a child's social mobility and opportunity, to manage an economic shock to the biological home, such as death, to satisfy the labour needs of the recipient household and to meet kinship obligations and rights. From these four factors, one can infer that the promotion of foster care in West Africa, like other parts of Africa, has socio-economic and political motivations for the families fostering out and those fostering in children. Brown (n.d.: 61-2) has also examined the motivations for foster care among the Aaumbo of Namibia, which is also tenable in other parts of Africa. According to Brown, Weisner et al. (1997), Ankrah, 1993), Andres (2009) and Fleischer (Fleischer 2006: 6) these motivations are multifarious and encompass the desire to teach discipline, fulfil cultural norms, provide a better education for a child, gifting, sharing between families, establishment of social bonds, enhancement of fertility, the need to be childless when entering a new relationship with a man and times of crisis, such as sickness and famine, and the firm belief that all children are treated equal in their house (Brown 2011). Other justifiable reasons for this practice discussed by Brown, based on research in Namibia, include the need for a helper either in the short or long term, the need for an heir, and tokens of friendship. Some of these issues have been discussed already, but it suffices to state that foster care for children has moved from a purely social responsibility to have economic considerations with political implications.

Whatever arguments there are for the promotion of foster care in Africa today, this practice has evolved over time and has taken on different dimensions. The motivations will continue to widen as African societies continue to undergo change. It is worth noting that fosterage did not

originate as a result of poverty and other contemporary motivations. It was, as Andres (2009: 3) argues, a matter of raising children in the best possible manner, towards adulthood, in relation to the resources that were available in a society. Several of the contemporary justifications for especially informal fosterage are simply based on expediency, while reciprocity has a limited relevance and, in some cases, does not even play a role. There are therefore several problems associated with the practice, which challenges the important social security role that it had and should continue to play. A lot of what goes on now is turning a good practice of the past into a form of enslavement, business and the trafficking of children.

The Evils of Foster Care Today

Foster care today in Africa is riddled with a lot of problems. The evils associated with formal and informal foster care are many and account for an outcry from several quarters on the *raison d'être* of this practice. The neglect of some children in foster care homes has made them develop a low level of positive adjustments, such as school achievements, social competence, personal achievement, physical health and psycho-social adjustments (Pitso et al. 2014: 645; Unrau et al. 2008: 1256; Halfon and Klee 1991; Courtney et al. 2007; Pecora et al. 2005; Dubowitz 1990; Wald and Carlsmith 1985; Pilon 2003: 19). Some of them provide unpaid labour services to their foster care-givers, who do not even care about their mental and physical well-being. This has led to some of them growing up lacking the confidence that is needed to propel them to greater achievements in life. Others have been turned into slaves, are victims of child trafficking and prostitution. These are all modern manifestations of enslavement for this category of children, who are not given adequate protection by those entrusted with giving them foster care (Pitso et al. 2014: 646).

According to Save the Children, children living in residential centres come under abuse in several ways (Johnson 2005: 5). The abuse of children's rights is a form of enslavement, which should not be the case. Such abuse in residential centres has often escaped international attention and explains the need for a good community-based child-care alternative, which governments, individuals and donors should give serious attention to. Another problem that exposes children under foster care to risks include the HIV/AIDS pandemic that has

claimed many lives and placed children under the care of extended families, which are unable to cope with the increasing responsibility of feeding many more mouths. In Tanzania, where the government has established a formal foster care system, for example, the problems are still overwhelming for the Social Welfare Office. It is stretched beyond its capacity and is not able to cope with large numbers of children leaving residential homes and being moved into fostering (Johnson 2005: 22). When a system is unable to handle the number of children, who need to be fostered, then these children are likely to fall into the hands of unscrupulous individuals who will enslave them and make a profit for themselves instead of preparing these children for a future that is assured for them. Social security is also compromised on the altar of exploitation of the vulnerable and helpless in society.

One other form of enslavement for children living in foster care is that the foster parent prefers to send his/her children to school, while leaving behind the foster children or forcing them to work too hard to attend to their studies (Goody 1973; Foster 2000; Bicego et al. 2003; Brown 2009: 5; Abubakari and Yahaya 2013: 68; Rolleston 2011: viii). In the Ivory Coast, the social dimensions of adjustment have shown that educational expenses, which are earmarked for foster children, are lower than those assigned to the children of the household. Under-enrolment is acute for girls in several African countries. Some of them, who are sent to the cities to attend school. like in West Africa. eventually drop out because of a lack of assistance and also primarily because of the household chores they are assigned to perform. Very often, the lower the level of involvement of the family of origin in giving financial and other support, the higher the risk that the foster child will suffer mistreatment in the host family. The host family also engages the child in several domestic tasks, which include the washing of dishes and clothes, carrying of water, helping out in the cooking and shopping and in some cases contributing to certain productive or commercial activities. In some cases, these children are not well-fed and work more than the others in the household usually under the pretext that this is giving them a good upbringing (Simon Anang, personal communication Douala 2015). In fact, the children who go through this ordeal are practically considered to be domestic servants. This has often had a negative influence on their school performance. Girls suffer the most, because they perform more domestic chores and in Burkina Faso, for example, female heads of households in cities

prefer to host especially girls as foster children because of the need to give them a lot of work (Vreyer de 1994; Pilon 2003: 15-19; Pilon 1995; Boursin 2009: 9; Vandermeersch 2000: 431).

In Africa, like elsewhere, preparing to become independent and self-sufficient is difficult enough for a youth, who remains in the care of foster parents (Leigh et al. 2007: 3). This is most likely so, because not enough attention is given to many of them. They are not sufficiently empowered to live a life of fulfilment after foster care. The absence of attention, which was usually a characteristic of the past in informal foster care in Africa, shows that foster care has gradually turned into an enterprise where many of those involved in it are interested in nothing else than the use of free labour for the development of their enterprises (Victor Kechem, personal communication Bomaka 2015). This is where foster care no longer provides social security to the underprivileged and the downtrodden in society. It is being used to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. This is more or less a fulfilment of the biblical saying that for those who have, more shall be added unto them and for those who do not have, even the little that they have will be taken away and added to those who have. A clear indication that foster care homes have failed in their duty of bringing up children, who need their assistance, is seen in some children wanting to re-enter foster care a few months after they return home. Evidence suggests that these children may become gradually re-exposed to living conditions, which are below the minimum standard of care (The Reunification 1995: 2).

The enslavement of foster children has taken a new dimension today with women showing an increasing interest in fostering girls like in Mokolle and Baatombu in Northern Benin. The changes that were introduced in the agricultural sector by President Mathieu Kérékou increased the workload of farmers, including women. Cotton cultivation expanded and this gave farmers greater opportunities to accumulate capital. As a result of this, there was greater work for the female household. The girls living in the compounds, including fostered girls, were especially affected. Still in Benin, as elsewhere in Africa, biological parents started speaking out against the exploitation of the labour services of foster children (Alber et al. 2010: 49; Roby 2011: 24). These conflicts over children in Benin, as in other parts of Africa, is a clear indication of the degree to which foster children have been exploited, maltreated and enslaved by their foster parents

because of their craving to accumulate wealth. Among the Dagomba of Northern Ghana, the fostering of a child today is in part an opportunity for the acquisition of an asset, which involves domestic work, farming or petty trading (Rolleston 2011: 5). It is a fact that today many people want to foster children so that they can subject them to deplorable working conditions on their farms and other businesses in the towns and cities.

Fostering has also been found to negatively affect the education of the biological children of the fostered parent. This is because, like in Cameroon, fostering is a kinship obligation and not necessarily because host families are better able to care for the children they receive. The presence of the foster children in their household therefore contributes to tightening liquidity constraints and reducing the ability of the parents to pursue their biological children's education (Marazyan 2009; Andrew Ngong, personal communication Bamenda 2015). The presence of many children in the household, that is, both biological and foster children, goes a long way to compromise the chances of a decent education and even adequate feeding for members of this household (Elvis Kah, personal communication Yaounde 2015; Henry Nyenghe, personal communication Douala 2015). The situation becomes even more pre-occupying in the towns and cities where there is no other source of income than a monthly wage and some petty trading (Ebenezar Metche, personal communication Kumba 2015). Many Cameroonians are therefore placed in a precarious situation, since without adequate financial resources they are still expected to fulfil kinship responsibilities and be counted among the responsible members of the family.

The greatest form of enslavement today in Africa, which is linked to foster care, is the trafficking of children for domestic work under different guises, including child fosterage. This has been the practice in Nigeria for some time now. Today, child fosterage has been targeted by agents, who offer families false promises about fosterage, but instead engage in the trafficking of children for domestic work (Child Fosterage; Emeka Okereke, personal communication 2014). This is what has made a once cherished traditional practice for the purpose of strengthening social bonds to become bastardised and hated by organisations like church groups and other genuine Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working to save children from

enslavement or sale to unscrupulous individuals. Considering the challenges of fosterage, there is a need for effective measures to be taken to solve them. This therefore raises the question of the future of this practice.

The Future of Foster Care and Social Security

Considering the problems associated with formal and informal foster care in Africa, like elsewhere in the world, there is a compelling need to rethink this practice. It is also important to rethink how foster care can again be made a sustainable social security system for Africans at present and in the future. In South Africa, where formal foster care has been developed to an appreciable level, for example, the South African government still needs to design additional strategies to combat the problem of the intergenerational vicious cycle of children in need among the most disadvantaged communities of the country. The many ills associated with fosterage can also be tackled through additional educational programmes for members of the community offered by skilfully trained professionals such as psychologists, social workers and community-based workers. This is likely to help vulnerable children acquire the necessary skills to combat the daily psycho-social problems and equip those in foster care with self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-esteem (Pitso et al. 2014: 647). The greater involvement of community-based workers in foster care will help to facilitate the identification of family relations willing to provide foster care to their relations children. The care for relations will have a greater meaning when there is a willingness to do so, than when literally forced to do so. The government can also take up the additional responsibility of foster care for less privileged children and mould them for the service of humanity.

Another way of improving fosterage is to give attention to the overburdened and frustrated social welfare providers in formal foster care systems. At present, many of them are not given attention and they are overburdened to the extent that they cannot offer their best. Giving them attention will motivate them to engage in fast quality service delivery to children desperately in need. Open communication should also be encouraged among and between social workers. Through this they will easily and quickly detect challenges in foster care and contribute to the well-being of their clients (Ngwenya 2011:

79). In countries like Uganda, South Africa and Tanzania, which are into formal foster care, efforts have been made in this direction but a lot more is needed to cushion the rising phenomenon of fosterage. Financial motivation is also needed for overburdened and frustrated service providers. This will encourage them to be dutiful and provide services to benefit foster children and, by extension, the larger society (Joshua Kwai, personal communication 2013). Negligence of these issues will affect foster care, and the social security system in Africa will be seriously affected, if not at present then in the future. The vulnerable groups will become a serious menace to the peace of their respective communities.

The suggestions of Dougherty (2001), on the improvement of foster care generally, may also apply to the future of fosterage in Africa. He argues that foster care must be responsive to the needs of children and families and must be shaped by five key principles, such as a family focus that views foster care as a service for the entire family as opposed to a service for the child or for the parents. It should have a child-centred orientation that places the needs of the individual child at the forefront of case planning, and the delivery of services from a community-based perspective so that children remain in contact with the important people in their lives and live in familiar environments. There is also a need for developmental appropriateness so that the child and services that a child receives are responsive to the child's age and physical, cognitive, behavioural and emotional status as well as cultural competence. This will result in strengths, respect and accommodation of all families. These suggestions may seem illusionary and high sounding in the present dispensation of child care in Africa, but these are a necessary and possible step to improve fosterage in Africa. As the continent's towns and cities become more cosmopolitan than before, there is a need for a serious rethinking of foster care as a reliable social security measure, especially in these areas. This is where the ideas of Dougherty about a better foster care system become relevant to the people of Africa in the urban and peri-urban areas.

In addition, it is important to recognise that biological families are better placed to at all times play a key role in children's lives, irrespective of the permanency outcomes that are planned for these children (Barbell and Freundlich 2001: 27). Programmes organised to enhance foster care in Africa in the future should lay emphasis on the

centrality of the biological families. These families can better address children's psychological problems, even when they are not with their own family members. Barbell and Freundlich, (2001: 27) argue that for the future of foster care, when children must enter foster care, a community-based approach must be taken into consideration that allows for the involvement of the many individuals who know and care about the children. Such people should include a child's extended family members, neighbours, friends, teachers, and others already involved in the family's life. They further contend that a family-focused, community-based approach to foster care is the basis on which people can build a fully responsive service system. Community partners should also play the critical role of providing children with temporary care on their way to permanency with a family. The family in Africa has over the centuries remained a strategic social unit in shaping society and providing for stability. It is therefore important that, whether in formal or informal child care, the family should continue to play a dominant role during and after child care. Adoption in many cases has not successfully detached children from their biological parents once it has been established that they live in the community.

Informal foster care in countries like Tanzania, which also runs a formal foster care programme, is necessary for the future of this institution. This is because informal carers are involved in great work and without any government or formal recognition. There is therefore a need to scale-up and further implement this because it may lead to wonderful results (Johnson 2005: 22-3). It has been emphasised earlier that children, who live with people they already know and are part of the community and have a stable family environment, is beneficial to them more than if they were fostered by neutral persons because they will always live with emotional and psychological problems. Experience has shown that fostering and parenting are difficult and emotionally draining activities. These are frequently made more difficult by a sense of isolation and/or lack of group support (The Reunification 1995: 4). It is on this basis that fosterage should not exclude the key role of foster carers in African countries outside government recognition. While this should be encouraged for the future there is a need to think of other permanent ways of handling foster care. This is because society is becoming more complex and the extended family is overstrained to breaking point. It will on its own

eventually face difficulties of handling foster care for social security in Africa in the future of the future.

Again, it would be a lofty ideal to invest a portion of the money spent on foster care and group homes to improve the chance of a family to successfully meet the needs of a child than to continue to tear families apart through foster care. Besides, when families have been separated, there is a need to assist them in addressing, counselling, housing, employment and day care issues while children are in foster care, not after they have been returned to their families (The Reunification 1995: 10). This can contribute towards stabilising the family and will prevent the situation of a child, who leaves foster care, re-entering it. Many cases have been reported of people, who left foster care, returned to their families but soon re-entered foster care (Eric Ndong, personal communication 2014). This may have partly been a result of the fact that the family was not given the necessary assistance to enable it to cope with a child, who eventually leaves a foster care home. Some of the children, who return home and find life very difficult, prefer to remain under fosterage, which was much better.

Considering the arguments that have been raised against child maltreatment, the future of foster care will be affected by this, as is already the case. Many human rights and children's rights organisations today are opposed to parents sending their children to live with people who are not their biological parents. The Catholic Church in Cameroon and the National Commission on Human Rights, for example, are very vocal against this practice. Education and sensitisation campaigns against child-trafficking are also carried out. Child-trafficking has become a problem because parents allow their children to live with other people (Alber et al. 2010: 50). The influence of the global media, that transport images of family, upbringing and marriage among others, has also had an impact on the practice of foster care. These new images have been referred to as travelling models. In addition, the massive expansion of the primary school system since the beginning of the 1990s, financed and influenced mainly by western donor organisations, has had an impact on childhood fosterage as in the Northern Benin Republic. Many parents are now trying to keep their biological sons at home and directly influence their education (Alber et al. 2010: 50-1). The development of many pro-poor programmes to improve the lot of children will have

the likely effect of undermining foster care the way it is today with all its challenges and evil practices.

At the level of African countries in general, it is critical for governments to collect better data on informal care. When this has been collected, they should establish national policies regarding informal care. This will enable them to create an effective and coordinated policy with the aim of improving child-care practices. There is a need to know about the very real widespread phenomenon of informal alternative care (Roby 2011: 41). As long as very little is known about this informal alternative care system, which is the basis of the evolving foster care and social security system in Africa, the wrong policies will be enacted to organise it and this will make it less attractive as is the case now. There is no escape route from the reality of foster care for African governments, considering the increasing poverty of the population due to several factors including land grabbing by multinational companies and the political elite eager to invest money stolen from the public treasury. Foster care, which has been a social security measure for a long time in Africa, is largely informal. In spite of this, there is a deviation from this very foundation of and advantages of foster care to many a people.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was an evaluation of the evolution of foster care in Africa as a social security system from the informal to a combination of formal and informal foster care today. While some countries have established a formal framework for foster care for its vulnerable population, other countries are still heavily reliant on informal foster care, which rotates around kinship and friendship ties. Foster care as it is known and practiced today has developed and taken on wider meanings. In this paper, fosterage was defined and contextualised within the context of child care as defined by the United Nations Organisation and other organisations. This gave the study a clear focus in terms of what was considered as foster care within the context of the African continent and the different ethnic groups engaged in this practice.

The paper also examined diverse motivations for foster care in Africa. The justification for foster care has evolved from the past to the

present. Among many African ethnic groups in the past, foster care was essentially informal and involved mostly members of kin groups. Almost everyone saw in the practice, a broader social security system that was useful to the stability of the community because wealth was redistributed from the wealthy to poor family members and friends. Today, various reasons have been advanced for foster care. Unfortunately, many of them are mainly for labour, which, however, is often practised under the guise of humanitarianism. Similar evil practices were noticed in the past but were not as rampant as they are today in the towns, cities and villages. Besides, the foster child had the duty of assisting in the production of goods for the common good and not necessarily for the accumulation of wealth by foster parents. It is a sad thing that today, foster care in some countries like Nigeria is being used to traffic children from the rural areas to other African countries and other parts of the world.

The evils of foster care, such as child trafficking, labour exploitation, etc. have also been examined in this paper. These evils and associated problems point to the fact that foster care is no longer a form of social security for vulnerable children and families but a form of enslavement and bastardisation of the children placed under foster care, be it formal or informal foster care. The absence of motivation for social welfare workers, who work in foster care homes in some African countries, has in many ways made a mockery of the practice of foster care. Others have had a herculean task of coping with too many children who turn up for fosterage. In other cases, governments do not bother about the conditions of children under fosterage and this has made some of the foster parents or workers treat these children in ways that are not dignifying.

This paper has examined what is needed to make foster care a sustainable social security system in Africa as it used to be in the past, some challenges notwithstanding. The problems associated with foster care in many African countries today cannot guarantee a safe social security system for vulnerable children on the continent. Governments of different countries must rise up to the challenge, take some of the responsibilities of providing social security and organising the sector better than it is now. There is also a need for an effective partnership between the government and families since these families are at the centre of the foster care system rather than simply ignoring

the traditional foster care system for a western model that cannot adequately address the needs of fosterage as is presently the case.

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