Formal and informal child placements: Some considerations from a cross-cultural prospection on their frequency and motivations[1]

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Abstract

This paper refines and extends previous cross-cultural research on circulation of children by taking into consideration some appointed shortages stated in previous studies –not only from Anthropology but also from other related disciplines. Though some studies have pointed out the relevance of formal and informal child placements in many different societies across the world, a systematic research of the cross-cultural dimension of the circulation of children (term that comprises both formal and informal social practices) is yet to be fully developed. Thus, I try to overcome specific methodological constrictions in that field by exploring the extension, frequency and motivations of child circulation according to the extracted ethnographic records

Introduction

The evident increase in academic research on adoption, significantly on international adoption, in recent decades, has grown in parallel with perceptible political and social concerns on the matter. Social and Cultural Anthropologists have largely focused on different issues regarding contemporary traits and dimensions of (mostly international) adoption of

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children, and also –though on a relatively minor degree– of the broader phenomenon of the circulation of children in particular geographical or cultural settings. Despite the reluctance that this term arises in other related academic fields, mainly due to its negative folk semantic connotations, it is fairly common within our discipline to evoke the groundbreaking uses of *circulation* in the classical works of Marcel Mauss (1968 [1924]) or Lévi-Strauss (1949), where such notion becomes the social backbone of human relationality. More specifically concerning children, in recent times Lallemand (1993) mentioned their "circulation" in her study of child placements in *traditional* societies, and even lately, Jessaca B. Leinaweaver (2008) or Marre and Briggs (2009) have also dealt with it in that sense.

Likewise, it must be explicited that I will detach *circulation* from any exclusive connection with particular forms of migratory movements (Weil, 1984; Volkman, 2003 or Lovelock, 2000) or with its reduction to a transnational extension of care and fosterage (Øien, 2006). By the same token, I will also transcend the folk association of *circulation* to illegal practices of child abduction, child laundering or even enforced prostitution of children (Campion-Vincent, 1996; Smolin, 2006; Scheper-Hughes, 1996). Plainly, I am referring here to the *circulation of children* as the temporal or enduring transfer, which is potentially reversible, of children between adult people who may be previously bound by familial ties and who may share responsibilities over the child's care as well as the authority over the child's behaviour. Such transfer, often managed in 'informal' ways, does usually entail for the child the change of his/her residence and it may have major effects upon his/her adscription, inheritance and succession at the bosom of receiving groups and families.

But, as I will address in the next section, we face several constrictions in the study of informal placements, not the least of which has to do with the Western legal-based ideological notion of *adoption*, which may (and indeed

does) induce a theoretical bias. Such dominant understanding of legally full constituted transfers have led to an overwhelming use of *adoption* to label similar (but sometimes not alike at all) ways of placing children out of their natal households or groups. Thus, largely dealing with *our* known explicit formal transfers, we may find a plethora of academic approaches tackling with many different dimensions of such phenomenon, sometimes closely connected with further or parallel developments. For example the perception and conformation of identity(ies) among adoptees (Noy-Sharav, 2005) has led to explore the role of the racial and ethnic identity concerning the relationships between adoptive parents and their non-biological offspring, especially in transracial adoption (Dorow, 2006; Grice, 2005; Briggs, 2003; Westhues & Cohen, 1998; Silverman, 1993). Moreover, such studies have launched the interest on the perception and experiences of ethnic, national and familiar identities in different –though complementary– contexts (i.e. reconceptualizations of substance, kinning and transubstantiation –Howell, 2006–), which openly revealed the limit of biological or culturalist essentialisms and the intentional relationship that bridges identity –specially national and ethnic identities– with the circulation of economic flows and their political implications (Yngvesson, 2002; Kim, 2007).

However, the ethnographic inquiry into the cross-cultural dimension of the circulation of children (be it considered under formalized ways of child transferring or on more informal –though structured– basis) is still in need of a wider and more profound development. Hence, Signe Howell condenses many claims for the need of further investigation into the reactions to adoptive processes "in the non-Western Countries that send children to the West, for adoption; that is, to what extend they adopt, adapt, resist and reject Western values" (2006, p.8). Such urgency is also shared by psychologists –as well as by other practitioners and academics from other related disciplines–, who overtly claim for the evolution of scholar insights into research dimensions that

remains hitherto far from a satisfactory analytical and theoretical development, as for example the need of better understanding of the:

> […] contextual nature of adoption […] Given that the meaning of adoption is socially constructed […] it is reasonable to expect that the experience of being adopted may well be different in different countries. Yet, there has been virtually no research examining the cross-cultural impact of adoption on children, teenagers of adults (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010, p.279).

Thus, the historical, geographical and cultural extension of this phenomenon yet remains under a relatively blurred atmosphere, all the more so as we move towards the ethnographic grounds of cross-cultural comparison. Despite some highly interesting and well-documented research outcomes on *adoption*, the broader phenomenon of child placement, as I propose to consider it, is, in my opinion, worthy of a more exhaustive and systematic cross-cultural exercise within anthropological studies.

Notwithstanding the current extension of child transfers and the many diverse professional, intellectual and ethical concerns throughout the different angles and steps of these placements, several prominent voices have noticed the troublesome lack of monographic research on this phenomenon thus far (Modell, 1994; Howell, 2001). However, some remarkable exceptions must be mentioned in recent times, as Bowie (2004), Howell (2006), or Leinaweaver (2007, 2008), among others. Such substantial contributions have not only palliated the abovementioned shortage; they have also provided crucial path-breaking insights into different subjects concerning formal and informal child placements that deserve urgent consideration. Also, since the 1960s we can find seminal ethnographic approaches (Goody & Goody, 1967; Goody, 1969; Carrol, 1970 or Brady, 1976) that developed and extended more punctual –though significant– previous strides by addressing this issue to a greater or

lesser extend (Maine, 1861; Firth, 1936; Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Fortes, 1949; among others). However, many of the latter contributions had commingled the folk and theoretical dimensions of 'adoption' and 'circulation', muddling their common social usage with their distinctive heuristic value as theoretical terms.

Therefore, if we combine this paucity in academic monographic outcomes with the urge of exploring different dimensions of these phenomena within the origin milieu and in accordance with local customs and assumptions, we face the critical need of a better understanding of the anthropological usage of such terms all over the ethnographic record in order to more properly address their cross-cultural dimension as well as related theoretical implications. Hence, I propose to focus and set light on the ethnographic repertoire by enquiring about the prevalence of a specific (though remarkably diverse) cultural trait: the intentional placement of children. The extension of its different patterns across the world would many times lead us to ways of circulating children considered as "informal" if contrasted to the Western notion of legal adoption. Nonetheless, every and each one of these ways, no matter how less formalized they may seem to us in comparison to our own legal practices, do entail a wide social consensus as well as the acquiescence of all individuals involved. Once established the extension of this practice, I will dive into a more qualitative dimension by aiming at the frequency of these placements as well as the reasons to transfer minors within every specific culture.

It is my intention to provide some ethnographic evidence about the geographical widespread of intentional patterns of child circulation, the frequency with which such patterns are carried out and, finally, some major reasons for such mobility according to the examined ethnographic reports. Consequently, I mainly based my search on already existent anthropological references (along with various academic publications and research outcomes from other social sciences). Given the shortages in the cross-cultural

coverage of the collected data, I decided to expand the query into a particular ethnographic archive: the *ehraf World Cultures*, which provided substantial and reliable data on the prospected subjects over the time span covered in the database for a total amount of 190 cultures. By so doing, I tried to prevent the risk of downgrading this issue to a mere ethnographic snapshot only suitable for a particular historical frame or valid for an enclosed ethnographic context, since that might had prevented me from considering valuable bygone reports on relatively ancient practices concerning formal and informal child placements.

Methodology.

Preliminary considerations

However, before specifically addressing these core questions, I should first get down to the focus on some methodological considerations. First of all, we face a terminological constriction. In the 5th edition of the *Outline of Cultural Materials* (Murdock et al. 2004), there is no specific entrance for "circulation of children" (actually, "circulation" appears only in reference to disparaging rumours, within the "political movements" label –OCM 668–). Likewise, if we search into the online database, the expression "circulation of children" does only come into view in 1 paragraph from 1 document regarding African Americans: "By such informal circulation of children in The Flats, the poor facilitated the distribution and exchange of the limited resources available to them." (Stack, 1997, p.29). However, notions of "giving the child away" for rearing purposes other than adoption may be found among several cultures – as African Americans (Powdermaker, 1968, p. 201), Kapauku (Pospisil, 1958, p. 136) or Navajo (Chisholm, 1983, p. 57), for example–.

Thus, I start by searching information under the closest related OCM code: 597 ("Adoption") –classified within the broader term "Family" (OCM 590). The

OCM descriptor states that such term refers to the: "Extent to which children are adopted or exchanged; motives and procedure; status of adopted children; reciprocal relations of adoptive parents and adopted children; relations between adoptive siblings; special types of adoption (e.g., adoption of adults, posthumous adoption; ceremonial adoption); etc." (Murdock et al op.cit). In the *Outline*, "informal" is explicitly found in association with certain subjects, as in-group justice (627), verbal transmission (203), means (208), eating (264), gambling (535), friendships (572) or social control (626). However, it does not appear in connection with child transferring or temporary placements.

Second, we may be aware of a subsequent twofold limitation concerning this subject matter once we have selected the proper OCM. Therefore, whereas the coding procedure may ascribe (substantial) different cultural practices to the same coded label, the very consideration of *adoption* appears to be very differently addressed among ethnographic sources. Hence, sometimes there are ways of incorporating a child other than adoption, as it happens among the Bengali (Davies 1983). Likewise, the Shluh do also assimilate children, but the author prefers to use the native term to label it: "Since no legal procedures exist for adoption in the Western sense" (Hatt 1974[1993 copy], p. 384). More conclusively, Jacques Amyot (1920) claimed that the adoption of children is infrequent in some Central Thai villages, while Jane Richardson Hanks remarked that it was fairly common "though not always of lasting satisfaction" (1963: 16). Therefore, we deal with different cultural procedures grouped under the same term; even when similar practices are not always defined in the same way. Similarly, Suárez and Muirden report how easily was to adopt orphaned children among the Warao (1968: 99), whereas Wilbert refers to the rare practice of adoption within this culture, which even was "not personally confirmed" (1958:3).

Third, the geographical allocation of some cultures may experience some changes at different moments (e.g. the Kapauku were listed in Asia in the 2007 classification while in 2012 are considered Oceanic). Such movements would have a slight statistical incidence if we were interested in approaching the cultural distribution of a given practice according to the HRAF classification by geographical regions, but it becomes, to a certain extent, unimportant if we rather focus our attention on cultural traits or practices, regardless of the particular allocation of the reported societies.

Finally, we may still face a fourth question, which refers to the search process itself. Given the broad extension of the circulation of children, I was interested not only in the final number of cultures that do show traces of this phenomenon but also in certain cultural traits about such cultures. Consequently, prior to the data gathering process I established some variables that would help to draw a general delineation about major cultural features. Also, I decided not to limit the enquiry to the particular "Adoption" OCM, as some potentially relevant information could be extracted from other major OCM subjects.

Data-Gathering Strategy

Hence, after retrieving a list of cultures with information concerning "Adoption" (OCM 597), I extracted information about each culture based on 5 principal variables: (a) subsistence type, (b) descent system, (c) household/family type, (d) pattern of residence and (e) form of marriage. As the subsistence type list is already provided by the *ehraf World Cultures* database, I entirely relied on their classification and typologies without further considerations. As for the other 4 major items, I sought for information from the corresponding cultural summaries in addition to data educed from the following OCMs:

1. Descent system: the main source of information was the OCM 611 (Rule of Descent), but the information was completed with data from 612 (Kindreds and ramages), 613 (Lineages), 614 (Clans), 615 (Phratries), 616 (Moieties), 617 (Bilineal kin groups) and 618 (Localized kin groups).

2. Household/family type: the main references were under the codes 590 (Family) and 592 (Household), but information was also obtained from OCMs 162 (Composition of population), 591 (Residence), 593 (Family relationships), 594 (Nuclear family) and 596 (Extended families).

3. Pattern of residence: The main source here was the OCM 591 (Residence), with additional information from 594 (Nuclear family) and 596 (Extended families).

4. Form of marriage: Here, I surveyed the entry 582 (Regulation of Marriage), but other codes as 583 (Mode of Marriage), 586 (Termination of Marriage), 587 (Secondary marriages) and Polygamy (595) were also considered.

Once I concluded this extractive stage, I proceeded with the qualitative analysis in combination with a basic quantitative examination of cultures and regions according to the abovementioned variables. Consequently, the inclusion of these 4 items into the analytical scope did not merely allow me to assign certain cultures to the presence or absence of the requested practice upon the basis of the collected information, but it did also concede me the opportunity of enhancing the scrutiny upon specific cultural traits concerning organization between the listed societies. Otherwise, the extent of the cross-cultural comparison would have to be limited to a single-trait list of cultures without further analytical connections.

There were, in all, 190 cultures with some kind of reference to adoption. The regional distribution is as follows: Africa (41), Asia (42), Europe (8), Middle

America and the Caribbean (9), Middle East (4), North America (45), Oceania (21) and South America (20).

Finally it should be noticed that cultures listed under a specific region do not necessarily coexist within the same time interval (for example, in Europe we find Greeks together with Imperial Romans, or the South American area comprises from the former Inka empire to late-1980s Yanoama), nor the ethnography and other literature are collected in the same period. As my purpose was not to undertake a detailed comparison between historical periods or between geographical areas at a given time, this diversity has not really been a problem here. Nevertheless, it would certainly become a severe inconvenient under other sort of qualitative insights where such dispersion should be seriously considered.

Findings

Cultures overview

Having considered all these constrictions, it is now time to provide an overall account of the considered cultures.

Regarding the subsistence type, we may appreciate a remarkable variety among cultures and regions. Hence, 23% are labelled as intensive agriculturalists, 19% horticulturalists, 16% foragers, 7% are pastoral/agriculturalists, another 7% are considered foragers/food producers 6% practice commercial economy, 3% have not been assigned so far and up to 14% fall under the "other" box (ehraf [n.a]).

Shifting the focus to the descent types, I proceeded to classify the prospected cultures according to 9 different options: (a) patrilineal, (b) matrilineal, (c) cognatic/bilateral, (d) ambilinial, (e) double descent, (f) parallel, (g) without reported descent groups, (h) without available data and (i) with references to

more than one sort of descent. I used this option when different sources mentioned different forms of tracing descent ——due to, for example, different historical times (being this difference sometimes reckoned traditionally or described to have happened in pre-contact times, instead of in contemporary contexts).

Hence, nearly 47,4% of the 190 societies are reported to be patrilineal, while 25,8% are cognatic bilateral and 16,3% matrilineal. Only 2'6% of all these societies are supposedly not structured upon some kind of descent groups. However, sometimes, as among North American Mik'maqs, we face a considerable divergence in the information gathered from different ethnographic accounts. Thus, whereas Bock states that: "Descent and inheritance are regulated by the Indian Act, which meshes fairly well with the general patrilineal tendency of the society" (1966, p.74), Prins (1996) says that: "Likewise, Mi'kmaq kinship terminology suggests that they reckoned descent bilaterally. Bilocal residence and bilateral kinship linkages provided the social flexibility that Mi'kmaqs needed to continually readjust themselves to fit the shifting resource availability on which they built their economy" (pp.32-33). Likewise, sometimes we may find different descent rules statements at the bosom of different groups or subgroups within the same culture –i.e. Jacobs reports that: "The Tewa of New Mexico reckon kinship bilaterally, while the Hopi-Tewa of Arizona are matrilineal" (2010, p.5).

As far as the domestic unit is concerned, 48,4% of all societies arranges their domestic units upon the basis of extended families, while 35,8% are mostly or predominantly nuclear. 14,7% of societies show a diverse pattern and only 1% are structured in stem families.

In terms of marriage, polygamy is allowed in 73,7% of societies (with an overwhelming dominance of polygyny –128 societies– over polyandry –2 societies–, and in 10 cases polygyny and polyandry may simultaneously take

place, though one of this varieties is usually reported as uncommon or rare). Slightly over 26% of prospected cultures show a nuclear family organization. Nevertheless, we must notice that the possibility of arranging polygamous marriages does not exclude the fact that most marriages are, as a matter of fact, monogamous. That is the case among the Dogon (where polygyny is closely bound to social status), the San (who confine it to the wealthier men), the Garifuna (a privilege left to some high-ranked individuals), the Seminole or the Kogi, among many others.

Besides this, in nearly all societies (97%) is possible to dissolve the conjugal bond up to a certain extent, and under different conditions, though nearly 13% of these societies label divorce as rare o very rare (as among the Bambara, the Maasai, the Turkana, the Betsileo or the Abkhazians). Obviously, there is a vast diversity in the nature and conditions of the termination of marriage. Hence, in some cases, the divorce rate is considerably high, as among the hausa, where: "nearly 50 percent of the women are divorced at some point" (Pellow & Beierle, 1997:4), or the kanuri, where: "The rate of divorce is extremely high, approaching 80 percent of all marriages" (Malone & Skoggard, 1998, p.5), while in others is considered as a rarity or it shows a low incidence (as among the Sea Islanders –Jones-Jackson, 1987: 23– or the Highland Scots –Thompson, 1973, p.167–).

Furthermore, divorce is sometimes confined to certain situations (barrenness, for example, as among the Chagga or the Gikuyu) and the arrival and spreading of Christianism has tended to eradicate the polygamy and the divorce (as among the Chagga, the Ganda or the Western Woods Cree, for example). On other cases, Islam allows up to 4 wives, although monogamy is the prevalent practice (as among the Pashtun).

Yet, other societies have experienced deep changes in the family organization from common situation in the past to a neatly scarcity in the present (like

polygyny among the Rwandans) though the opposite is also possible (as divorce among the Yoruba). Jural and legal frameworks have also transformed traditional marriage patterns, as it happens with the Vietnamese where formerly practiced polygyny has been declared officially illegal (Jamieson & Beierle, 2009, p.5).

In terms of rules of residence after marriage, we should notice that many cultures follow different residence patterns for different reasons or do present a given model during the first year or so, and then shift it into a different arrangement. Sometimes, a certain group may even experience substantial transformations in its residence pattern along time (from dependent households towards neolocal settings, for example). Taking a general overview, only 11% of the 190 cultures do present a preferred neolocal pattern. Among the rest, we find a 37,9% of patrilocal/virilocal societies, another 13,7% with matrilocal/uxorilocal residence and a 31% shows a varied or combined residence pattern (e.g. the shift from transient patrilineality to neolocality among newly wed couples –as the Igbo case–, the general patrilocal pattern with temporary avunculocal residence –among the Wolof–, or even the "flexibility" that may be observed among the Ulithi, where: "Residence is patrilocal, but the residence rule is somewhat elastic, especially because a husband spends long stretches of time helping in his wife's gardens if the land assigned for her use by the prevailing system of land tenure is on another islet. In actuality there is some matrilocal, avunculocal, and neolocal residence" –Lessa & Beierle, 2009, p.4–).

Frequency of children placements

After having sketched these basic social traits, I move towards establishing the incidence of child circulation in every society. To start with, I will sort the information extracted according to 4 different options: (a) nonexistent, (b) possible but rare or infrequent, (c) common/frequent, and (d) not enough data

about frequency (i.e. very few allusions or nearly no text –very few paragraphs– recorded in the retrieved information). However, it should be noticed that albeit it is not infrequent to find only 1 paragraph in one document for some cultures, the adoption of children is nevertheless inferred as possible –though the scarcity of data does not properly allow further conclusions. Yet, sometimes adoption or informal placements are mentioned as feasible, but with no additional statements about how often they may happen. Actually, I found allusions to adoption practices without clear statements of its recurrence in 34,2% of societies with positive matches for the 597 OCM.

For all the rest, more than half of all societies do regard adoption as a common or frequent practice (52%), while 11 percent consider it possible but actually infrequent or rare. Only 2,6% of societies does not apparently envisage or allow adoptive practices at all.

These data clearly reveal that informal circulation of children is, in its broader sense, far from unknown in several societies, even when a more Westernized conception of formal placements may not be prevalent, as we realize among the Javanese: "While fostering is not as prevalent as in some Polynesian societies, and full legal adoption is rare, the transfer of children among ideologically different homes is fairly common" (Beatty, 2002, p.475). Furthermore: "The distinction between "borrowing" and "adoption" of a kinsman's child is rather artificial, and not distinctly verbalized by the Javanese. "Adoption" (*pupon*; *anak pupon* "adopted child") is quite clearly defined as the more or less formal relinquishment of all claims on the child by the real parents either by legal statement before witnesses or by their death. What I have called "borrowing" has no precise Javanese translation" (Geertz, 1961: 38). Moreover, children among the Mapuche are seemingly not formally adopted, but it was not uncommon to find children reared in some way by close relatives (Hilger, 1957, p.281).

Also, we may consider this circulation as a voluntary action (all the more as it may result from mournful and undesired events), but the ethnographic record does also provide examples of enforced or imposed child transfers, as among North American Cherokee:

> In 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed into law. This legislation makes it difficult for non-Indians to adopt Indian children because priority is given to tribal governments to place Indian children in Indian adoptive or foster homes. Before the law many Indian children were annually adopted by white parents and were, from the Indians' point of view, lost to their own people and culture. In addition, Indian children removed from their parents' care by the courts were often placed in white foster homes. (Neely, 1992, p.36-37).

We should be cautious in ascribing the practice (or the lack of practice) within one particular ethnic group to the totality of local communities in this group, and less do so to the broader context of the nation in which they are enclosed or the religion they (or some of them) practice. That is the case of African Fellahin, where adoption is apparently nonexistent, but, according to Ayrout and Habib Waymen, it must also be noticed that: "Adoption is in Egypt an institution copied from abroad. In Upper Egypt it is still unknown even among Christians. Moslem law forbids it" (1945, p.165).

By the same token, even within a particular group the situation may overtly differ, as among the Asian Tamil, where the situation varies according to the caste: "Adoption is thus extremely rare in the low caste system; for although lower caste men desire children for the pleasures they bring in this life, they are not obliged to have sons who will propitiate their souls after death" (Gough, 1956, p.846).

Sometimes, as among the Miskito, the frequency is so high that: "Almost 40 percent of Kuri households in 1998 had half-siblings as members and 36 percent of the households included adopted children" (Herlify, 2007, p.140). Likewise, among the Ulithi: "Forty-five per cent of all Ulithian babies are adopted, usually before birth, and share in two nuclear families—that of their biological parents and that of their adoptive ones" (Lessa, 1961, p.202)".

Considering the distribution frequency among major geographical regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle America and the Caribbean, Middle East, North America, Oceania and South America), it is clearly within the oceanic environment where the highest rates of adoption are likely to be found: nearly 86% of cultures in Oceania do commonly or frequently adopt, while less than 5% consider adoption possible but it is rarely practiced. Hence, this is the region where, both proportionately and in absolute figures, a higher number of societies do ordinarily practice adoption. On the other side, no report on common adoptive transfers are reported in Middle East societies, according to the prospected sources, despite 50% of them envisage this possibility, which seems to be rather occasional (at least, under the qualitative description enclosed in this OCM). Over a 50% of African and Asian societies reveal regular practice of adoption (53,6% and 54,7%, respectively) with less than 5% of cultures with no hits in the literature. Finally, data from most South American Societies are rather scarce: there are only positive matches for 57 paragraphs in 35 documents in 20 cultures, while in Oceania we find information in 1405 paragraphs in 126 documents in 21 cultures.

Reasons to adopt / circulate children:

Despite the many different reasons to transfer a child found among the prospected ethnography, sometimes there is shortage of data on the particular motivations to do so. Conversely, there may be more than one purpose to circulate children within the same culture. In all, we may find very

diverse reasons to place offspring with persons other than biological parents. Some of them may seem tightly connected (as overcoming female infertility and granting children to the household/group), but in other circumstances the connection might not be so self-evident –since, for example, children may sometimes be transferred to households with already biological offspring of roughly the same age.

Among the most frequently reported basis for adoption, we could underline the desire to have progeny, the social burden of infertility and the inability to bear children. The former motive is reported in cultures from all geographical regions. However, we should also consider that the desire to have children does not necessarily entail the real chance of adopting any, since this may be restricted by sex (i.e. the Santal do overtly prefer male children while North American Hopi opt for girls) or other practical considerations (as among the Dogon, where: "Si des frères décident de se séparer après la mort du père et que l'aîné est sans enfant, alors que son cadet a été plus chanceux, le frère aîné est en droit de prendre le fils de son frère cadet" –Bouju, 1984, p.83–).

Inheritance needs may also lead some families to adopt children. Societies from all geographical regions share this goal, but it seems to be more frequent, though differently stressed, in Asiatic societies. Similarly, adoption may also become a possible way to secure an individual who will take care of his/her 'new' parents or grandparents at old age, and shall observe worship obligations.

Total orphanage or the death of a biological parent may also be a powerful reason to be adopted in many societies. Being diverse the kind of person who can take care of children in such circumstances, orphans and foundlings are preferred adoption targets in societies as different as Tallensi, Wolof, Alorese, Andaman, Cherokee, Garifuna or Aymara, among many others.

Furthermore, one may incorporate a child as the first step towards a long-term marriage strategy, as is the case of some Asian Societies (although this practice is also known among the African Igbo and Ovimbundu, North American Pomo, or, at another level, we may find the "institutionalized adoption of a son-in-law" among the Montenegrins –as Boehm, 1983, p.24, reports–). Sometimes, as reported among Sherpas, affinal kinship, adoption and inheritance may compound a threefold reason since "Families without male heirs may take in an adoptive son-in-law as heir" (Paul, Skoggard & Beierle, 2004, p.5).

Bringing a new child into the household, especially when there is no previous biological offspring (or when it becomes necessary to add a new member regardless the number of children already born from its members) may also be aimed at securing care at old age. Among the prospected information I found explicit references to this strategy in thirteen geographically dispersed societies across Africa, Asia, North America, Oceania and South America. Hence, for example, if an Amhara man wishes to be taken cared of at old age he may opt for a full adoption of a child –'breast-parenthood'– (Messing 1985). A preference for a male child might also express a different level of support sought by men: "to gain a prop in his fading years" (Archer, 1984: 48). Likewise, Chipewyan old women may decide to incorporate a son: "to get her wood and water and to hunt for her, long after her natural sons (if any) have died or otherwise left her control" (Carter, 1975, p.11). Actually, in several cultures adult people beyond the age of childbearing may take a new child as his/her own, as it happens with the Bakairi, Hausa, San, Copper Inuit or the abovementioned Chypewyan.

Some cultures use adoption to strengthen social ties, sometimes involving people previously bounded by kinship or other sort of social ties. This is especially clear in the Oceanic environment, where the transfer of a child as a gift may be part of a long-term exchange strategy between families (as

Linnekin reports among the Hawaians –1985, p.186–). Also, the incorporation of a minor may serve both families to serve social and economic goals in present and future times (as the 'adhering child' practice among the Tikopia – Firth, 1936–). But we can find similar explanations to justify the circulation of a child in different societies placed in other parts of the globe, as Ganda or Kpelle (in Africa), Andamans or Southern Toraja (in Asia) or Tlingit (in North America). Thus, among the Hausa this appears to be a usual practice between households and the Aleut may extend the 'gift' of the child beyond this limit, reaching even other unrelated individuals.

Nonetheless, beyond the establishment of a new social bond, the reinforcement of already existing ties (however scarcely active they might yet be) rely also in other overt adoption's *raisons d'être* such as attracting future in-laws or even some forms of servanthood (except for captives, prisoners or previously abandoned children). Also, transferring a child in case of overcrowded households may become a resort for the instauration or fortification of social cooperation. Although this is traceable in different societies, the Oceanic context appears again as a paramount example of this practice, be it for the social pressure to 'share the wealth' (as Howard – 1968:92– report among Hawaians), to revert a demographic imbalance or to help relatives who already have a large number of children (both cases detailed by Goodenough –1970, p.315– among the Chuuk).

A slightly different reason to formally adopt a child is to provide him/her with a full legal or sanctioned status. For example, it is not unusual for Amish infertile couples to adopt illegitimate offspring of other Amish (Cross, 1967: 77) and Lau Fijians children born out-of-wedlock had to be formally adopted into their father's clan in order to gain full membership (Thompson, 1940: 55).

Sometimes, this membership may be also available to strangers or even alien individuals (as among the Nuer, where adopters opt for members of the Dinka

ethnic group, or the Iroquois; at a different level –alien clans or sibs–, among Chagga, Somali). Sometimes, as among the Yoruba, the incorporation of a stranger into the lineage of a man may be refused as such 'adoption' by the newcomer and in a few generations his descendants would be acknowledged as lineage members (Lloyd, 1955, p.241).

This has to do with the variety and kind of possible adoptees. While in most cases we find transfers of particular individuals, sometimes a whole group (a family or even a larger bunch of individuals) may be adopted into a lineage, a clan or a tribe. Such is the case of gentilitial adoption among the Somali (Cerulli, 1964), the welcoming of alien groups into Tukano phratries (Arhem, 1981), the adoption of tribal segments operated by Libyan Bedouins (Abu-Lughod, 1986) or the incorporation of fragments of tribes among the Iroquois (Morgan, 1901). By the same token, children and young individuals are preferred in many societies as prospective adoptees, but an adult person may also be adopted under certain circumstances, like the Massai, the Palestinians, the Iban or the Ona people, among others.

Conclusion

It is well known the relevance of the HRAF and *ehraf World Cultures* archives for cross-cultural research and, specifically, to test hologeistic and far-reaching hypothesis concerning social traits and cultural organization. However, few systematic use of this information is yet undergone for cross-cultural purposes concerning adoptive practices, and its use to tackle with children informal circulation and placement is even scarcer. In that sense, this paper seeks to contribute to overcome this shortage by providing some substantial theoretical outcomes from an extensive cross-cultural research based on existing ethnography and ethnographic records.

Although the geographical and cultural extension of adoptive practices, mostly based on social understandings of family, childhood and kinship which are themselves instilled by contemporary Western ideological assumptions, political interests, economic implications and academic situated insights have been already emphasized (Howell, 2006), I have been mostly interested in extending such analytical insight into the broader practice of circulation of children for different reasons. First, local practices of child placement have been largely explored when carried out under Western-like legal procedures. However, in my opinion, such practices still are only tangentially considered as social cohesion strategies that do entail children transfers as part of their binding forces.

Second, and in close connection with the former statement, while "adoption" has often been used in ethnography as a sort of analogy for legal-based, highly formalized, placements of children, this same label has also subsumed diverse ways of operating *informal* transfers that showed significant differences with *our* legal adoption. So to say, local practices of circulation may resemble, but are not identical to, transnational frameworks of juridical procedures. Sometimes both practices collide and the consequences for local populations are often devastating (Fonseca, 1986) Thus, it is urgent to develop a better knowledge of culturally specific ways of dealing with the circulation of children in order to more properly proceed with local interventions or even translocal processes of foster care and social adscription.

Third, a cross-cultural examination of local practices of circulation may (and certainly does) fuel theoretical debates on different analytical grounds that may serve to expand and enrich our disciplinar knowledge. Hence, for example, the adequacy of *adoption* as theoretical term can be seriously discussed in a similar way as it has happened in the past with the consideration of "descent", "marriage" or "incest". Also, such debates are of

paramount help to refine our analytical tools to endure the anthropological quest of comparability by endowing researchers with more accurate and well-founded cross-cultural ethnographic data.

Specifically concerning the overall reach of the circulation of children, we face some methodological constrictions. Some of them are not constrained to this issue –as the cultural variability of folk assumptions and practices–, but others are worth considering before proceeding with further steps in the ethnographic prospection. Hence, if we are interested in exploring the broad and diverse ways of child circulation, we must address first the "adoption" OCM and combine it later with different entries. Then, by means of combining direct information retrieved from the specific OCM with cross-references already suggested under de code descriptor and some complementary information extracted from related items, we could get more detailed access to the particular target of the circulation of children.

After processing the gathered information, it becomes fairly evident that formal or informal transfers between households –as well as other larger social groups– are a well-known practice for a large number of cultures. There is neither specific descent patterns exclusive to such usage, nor we found it solely linked to certain forms of marriage or rules of residence. Rather, the circulation of children does take place among a substantial variety of cultural forms, including those where only informal placements have been reported – though Western-like legal counterparts are allegedly unknown. Accordingly, the frequency of giving children away or taken them into the family/group does also differ from one culture to another, but over half of the 190 examined societies do envisage it as a common or frequent practice. Conversely, less than 3 percent of societies do not show any sort of child placement away from their origin family. In between, we found different ranges of occurrence.

As for the main reasons to incorporate children to the already existing family/household, the lack of biological offspring is a common motivation but by no means the only one. To secure the provision of care at old age or to attract individuals to assure future marriages are also frequent purposes for incorporating young new members, as so is partial or total orphanage. In most cases, already existent social relationships between the involved adult parties become considerably strengthened by means of this strategy.

All in all, the circulation of children, be it formally or informally exercised, seems to point at a deeper and broader social tactic: the centrality of children for social cohesion purposes. Then, the social reproduction of human groups would not only take place via the mobility of adult members of each group (as Meillassoux, 1975 suggested), but also –voluntarily or not– from the point of view of the mobility of their youngest members.

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Número 1, Febrero 2013. Nº 02/01.

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