Fosterage, Kinship, and Legend: When Milk Was Thicker than Blood?

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“Le lait va aussi loin que le sang!” dit un vieux proverbe Ossétien (Kovalevsky 1893: 213).

“Milk is more significant that rod [agnation] . . . it lasts forever” (Filipović 1982:131–33).

“Fostering is two-thirds of a child’s nature” (Irish proverb, cited in Gwynn 1913:106–7).

When social ties are put to the test, proverbs affirm, those of consanguinity usually prevail: “Blood is thicker than water”; or as Arabs put it, “Blood is thicker than milk” (Lane 1893:1097). These enigmatic adages refer to former institutions of adoptive kinship in western Eurasia, contrasting the blood of natal kinship with the water of baptism or “spiritual kinship” in Christendom, and with infant fosterage or “milk kinship” in Islam. Other sayings, cited as epigraphs above, argue that the nurture of such adoptive kinship may match or supersede natal kinship, just as baptismal sponsorship was supposed to create a spiritual cognition superior to that of mere flesh and blood (Gudeman 1972; Guerreau-Jalabert 1995).

Ritual kinship and milk kinship have comparable and connected social histories in western Eurasia, which were examined in earlier essays in this journal (Parkes 2001; 2003). But while Christian godparenthood has been well explored in symbolic ethnography (Fine 1994; Héritier-Augé and Copet-Rougier 1995), the significance of infant fosterage seems poorly documented (cf. Khat-

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1 On this broad (non-jural) usage of adoptive kinship for familial relations created by pro-parenthood, see Parkes (2003: 744). Reference to christening water in the English proverb is recorded from the eighteenth century, although the saying has obscure (possibly Gaelic) origins before its mention in John Ray’s English Proverbs of 1670. On Arab milk kinship counterposed with ritual or sacrificial blood-kinship, see Robertson Smith (1885: 48).
Its ethnographic neglect may be due to its widespread modern demise as an institution of clientage. But its former significance may be retrieved from accounts of peripheral regions of western Eurasia where allegiance fosterage persisted until recent times.² Legendary narratives also indicate its former prevalence as a tributary relationship, highlighting its moral predicaments as a politically entangled construction of kinship.

**Cuckold kinship**

In his social history of child abandonment and fostering, John Boswell (1988: 84f.) alluded to a common disparaging metaphor for such adoptive kinship: the cuckoo’s alien nesting of its eggs. From antiquity, the cuckoo became emblematic of a perverted kind of parentage, elaborated in allegorical bestiaries (Mannhardt 1858) and riddling verse about abuses of fosterage as “cuckold kinship” (Crawford 1999:124–25). Notoriously, the “ingrate cuckoo” was supposed ultimately to devour its attendant nurse and adoptive siblings (Hardy 1879:64–65; see, e.g., Shakespeare’s King Lear I, iv, 1. 235). Colonial disparagements of allegiance fosterage recurrently evoked this ancient avian imagery of perverted parentage. Gerald of Wales, whose twelfth-century diatribes against the evils of Irish and Welsh fostering are well known (Parkes 2003: 755), thus decried “the cuckoo who would devour his foster-parents when fully grown” (Speculum duorum, ed. Richter 1974:6), doubtless alluding to Welsh customary inheritance of peasant farmholdings by noble fosterlings (Smith 1992:21). Eight centuries later, Colonel Reginald Schomberg wryly observed how, in the Hindu Kush, “foster-parents continually show great devotion and abnegation to this cuckoo [sc. princely fosterling] in their nest, and their own children suffer” (1938:226; cf. Parkes 2001:12, 26).

Colonial abhorrence of cliental fosterage and its “unnatural ties” of cuckold kinship was vividly expressed in a royal report submitted to James I by the Attorney-General of Ireland, Sir John Davies (1612). Fosterage, together with gossipred or spiritual kinship, was one of “two customs proper and peculiar to the Irishry, which being the cause of many strong combinations and factions, do tend to the utter ruin of a commonwealth”:

[T]hey put away all their children to fosterers, the potent and the rich men selling, the meaner sort buying the alterage [fostering, Irish altram] of their children. And the reason is because in the opinion of this people fostering hath always been a stronger alliance than blood, and the foster-children do love and are beloved of their foster-fathers and their sept more than of their own natural parents and kindred, and do participate of their means more frankly, and do adhere unto them in all fortunes with more affection and constancy . . . The like may be said of gossipred or compaternity (Davies 1612 in Morley, 1890:296–97).

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² On such allegiance fosterage, distinguishable from the “crisis fostering” of orphans by close kin, see Parkes (2003: 743f., after E. Goody 1982 on “alliance fosterage”).
Like Gerald of Wales, Sir John Davies recognized the anarchic implications of adoptive kinship in instigating factional coalitions and conspiracies:

Now, these two customs [fostering and gossipred] become exceedingly evil and full of mischief in this realm . . . For they made strong parties and factions, whereby the great men were enabled to oppress their inferiors and to oppose their equals; and their followers were borne out and countenanced in all their lewd and wicked actions. For fosterers and gossips, by the common custom of Ireland, were to maintain one another in all causes lawful and unlawful, which, as it is in a combination and confederacy punishable in all well-governed commonweals, so was it not one of the least causes of the common misery of this kingdom (Ibid.).

Sir John Davies was one of the main architects of the English juridical dismantling of Irish traditional states in the seventeenth century (Pawlisch 1988). His denigration of their “barbarous” and “unnatural” customs was therefore designed to justify his own radical plans for Ireland’s imperial reformation, just as Gerald of Wales had earlier staked moral claims to colonization with an identical disparagement of Celtic fosterage (cf. Gillingham 1992). But despite their ideological motivation, these colonial opinions were not ungrounded in observation (Fitzsimons 2001). Tributary factions of adoptive kin did seem to have an affinity with instabilities of dynastic succession in segmentary states, albeit consolidating power once succession was secured (Parkes 2003:760). Nor was such fosterage invariably condemned in colonial imagination. Some English observers, such as Edmund Campion in the sixteenth century, rather admired how the Irish “love tenderly their fosterchildren, and bequeathe to them a childes portion whereby they nourish sure friendshippe, so beneficial in every way, that commonly five hundredth kyne and better are given in reward to winne a noblemen’s childe to foster” (“A History of Ireland” [1571] in Ware 1809:19).

Colonial denigration of fosterage may also be matched by its troubled indigenous evaluation. Surveying its legendary representations in this essay, we shall observe a recurrent moral ambivalence surrounding its challenges to contrary claims of consanguinity. Allegiances of foster-kinship might be romantically valorized as emblems of secure trust in segmentary states of episodically violent animosities, “whereby they nourish sure friendshippe.” Yet these delegated parental ties, like similar bonds of spiritual kinship, were recognized to be compacts of a somewhat fictitious filiation between disparate ranks. They might even encourage exploitative social parasitism and treachery towards one’s natal kind, when “preferring their foster-children and milk-siblings (alumnos et collactaneos), they would persecute their own brothers and cognate kin (fratres et cognatos)” (Gerald of Wales, Topographia Hibernica Dist. III, c. 23; ed. Dimock 1867:167–68). Fealty and treachery, natural sociality and unnatural allegiance, incest and kin-slaying—these emerge as recurrent motifs in the narrative symbolism of tributary fosterage:

All who have suck’d the same breasts are very kind and loving, and confide more in each other than if they were natural brothers, so that they will have an aversion even to their
own brothers for the sake of these (William Good “Descriptions and Customs of the Wild Irish” in Camden 1722, ii:1418).

The foster-brothers—I mean the children of the nurse and strangers that have sucked her milk—love one another better than natural brothers, and hate them in respect of the other . . . and some oppose their own brothers to death that they might save their foster-brothers from dangers thereof (Fynes Moryson’s “Itinerary” [1592] in Falkiner 1904: 318).

**Milk and Blood: Atalyk Fosterage in Abkhazia**

Infant fosterage in premodern Eurasia was commonly identified with consanguineal kinship created by suckling breastmilk, as is still recognized in Islamic law. Although pre-Christian milk kinship was supplanted by later child fosterage in medieval western Europe (Strauch 1980), its traditional idiom of infant nourishment long persisted, as did the original institution of cliental infant fostering and milk kinship in southeast Europe (Parkes n.d.b). Its social and symbolic significance is well documented in historical ethnographies of the Caucasus (Parkes 2003:751–53). In the Christian statelet of Abkhazia, on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, an exceptionally detailed ethnography was compiled by Shalva Inal-Ipa (1956), documenting personal testimonies of atalyk milk kinship and foster-tutelage, which survived as a traditional institution into the early decades of the twentieth century.

Abkhazians considered kinship created by delegated suckling fully equivalent to consanguinity. As Aristotle and Galen had supposed, breastmilk was thought to be a purified refinement of a woman’s uterine blood. Breastmilk and natal blood were therefore conceptually equated as consubstantial; but they were also symbolically counterposed. Abkhazians declared, “There is no power stronger than mother’s milk,” which could “wash clean” enmities of blood-feud. Village exogamy was even thought to safeguard communities against “profaning the breastmilk,” reminiscent of Aristotle’s notion of natural communities (koinonia) being constituted by common milk kinship (homogalaktes). Moral obligations were sanctified in this ritual idiom of “sacred breast-

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3 On Islamic milk kinship, see references in Parkes (2003: 746–51) and Parkes (n.d.a; also Ensel 2002). Cf. Dixon (1999: 221) on ancient Roman fosterage: “The root meaning of fostering inheres in the relation of feeding at the breast of someone other than the mother . . . The relationship was generally one of patronage, but cast in terms of quasi-kinship between people of unequal social standing.”

4 Aristotle *De generatione animalium* IV.viii. Milk’s derivation from a woman’s uterine blood, conveyed by veins linking the womb to the breasts, was a widespread Eurasian notion, also found in Arab medicine (Giladi 1999), thus underpinning both Islamic and eastern Christian canonical reckonings of milk kinship (Parkes n.d.a; Benkheira 2001). Its implications for breastfeeding and delegated nursing are detailed in the *Gynecology* of Soranus of Ephesus (Temkin, ed. 1956: 88–101).

5 Aristotle *Politics* I: 1252. Attic homogalaktes was plausibly interpreted as an archaic term of milk kinship by Wilamowitz (1889: 57, n.16). For further discussion, including its gloss by Philochorus and Pollux, see Jacoby (1954 I: 321–23, II: 231), Hammond (1961: 79–80), and Derks
milk,” by which oaths of loyalty were sworn. Fostered wards were expected to give lifelong protection to their atalyk fosterers, who conversely offered their lives in prosecuting the internecine feuds of their noble milk-brothers and milksons (Inal-Ipa 1956:80–86, 107–111; Benet 1974:57–58).

This ideal collaboration among milk kin was, however, subject to ambivalent reflection. Abkhazian oral histories recounted tragic treacheries among milk-brothers, as well as gross abuses of trust, including incestuous “profanation of the breast” committed by fostered lords on their kinswomen by milk. Inal-Ipa comments: “With this so-called ‘mutual assistance’ [of milk kin] in bloodfeuds, as in all similar affairs, the side of the good old atalyk fosterer, being peasantry, suffered incomparably more, as one might expect” (1956:102). Blood debts of vengeance among nobility could be exacted on their peasant foster-kin as proxy victims. Yet disparities of rank entailed disparities of vengeance and compensation among milk kin, belying a supposed reciprocity of mutual obligation created by sacred breastmilk: “If a prince killed a peasant, then the kin of the latter had no rights of blood vengeance; for as they said, ‘The blood of a peasant is not worth the blood of a prince.’ And so, in place of a murderous prince, his atalyk fosterer had to answer for the blood he had spilled” (ibid.). Just as Schomberg had reported grumbling resentments of vassal fosterers in the Hindu Kush—where “foster-brothers have spent all their substance on some useless brat of the aristocratic class, and in return have received no recompense, no gratitude, and no protection” (1938:225)—it may be indicative that the Abkhazian term akhupka for a fostered ward was proverbial for an overindulged ingrate. An obnoxious visitor would be told: “You allow yourself a lot of liberties, just as if you were our akhupka [fosterling]” (Benet 1974:58).

Abkhazian milk kinship could be extended by symbolic suckling at the breast, incorporating adults as well as infants, with identical moral obligations and impediments on marriage to those created through infant fosterage. Ritual adoption by token suckling or “breast-biting” (ak’ukatshara) was employed to defuse suspicions of adultery or to create conciliatory milk kinship after bloodfeud. It was also used to create reciprocal bond-partnerships, with a mutual “biting of the breast” of one or both of the adoptive brothers’ mothers, and occasionally of their own male nipples, as also occurred in the Hindu Kush (Inal-Ipa 1956:72f.; cf. Parkes 2000:276). But such symbolic adoption was primarily deployed as a performative rite of fealty between peasant and lord, the latter assuming the role of akhupka fosterling, and so receiving “his share” of tribute and labor services in a kinship idiom of foster-prestations. Collective vassalage by “breast-biting” adoption would be undertaken by whole village communities with regional bailiffs, allied by real or symbolic milk kinship to feudatory overlords, who were allied in turn as fosterers and milk kin to ruling princes (1995). Modern Greek omoghalaktes is noted by Kenna (2001: 89) as an extant term for milk-siblingship by co-suckling in island Greece, where it is still treated as an impediment to marriage.
Caucasian atalyk fosterage thus comprised a pervasive feudatory network of tributary allegiances, similar to milk-kinship chains of dynastic fealty in the Hindu Kush (Parkes 2001). In both regions, milk-kinship ties were perpetuated by reiterated contracts of fosterage in each generation, treated as social “heirlooms” of hereditary vassalage or tenant service (Inal-Ipa 1956:18).

Inal-Ipa’s ethnography of Abkhazian milk kinship also elucidates the narrative symbolism of infant fosterage elsewhere in western Eurasia. In an Old Irish tale of *Fergus Mac Léitì*, for example, this legendary king of Ulster was said to be instructed by leprechauns in their custom of “sucking at the nipple” as a token of submission (Binchy 1952:41–42). This rite is evinced in Old Irish sayings treated by O’Brien (1938), which explain why cích “breast, nipple” became synonymous for “peace-treaty” and “friendship,” and why “breast-sucking” (*sugere mammellas*) refers to sworn loyalty in the *Confession of St Patrick*. Gricourt (1957) noticed other allusions to such symbolic suckling recurring in Irish hagiographies, suggesting that Celtic fosterage, like Norse *fóstr*-kinship, may have been once instituted as a form of tributary milk kinship comparable with atalyk fosterage in the Caucasus.6

**Fosterage and Legend**

Over seventy years ago, the French classicist Louis Gernet published an erudite essay, “Fosterage et légende” (1932), examining numerous instances of such infant fosterage in the Homeric epics. A recurrent motif was that of the hero, such as Theseus, sent away at birth to be nursed and raised by maternal kin. Infant nursing of princes might be undertaken for their protection, as was Nestor, fostered at Gerenia before his return to rule at Pylos. Sometimes a legacy of heirlooms was deposited for the child to retrieve on maturity, such as the sword and boots deposited under a rock for Theseus. In legends of Attic kings, fostering by maternal kin might be concluded by epiklerate in-marriage, securing succession from an avuncular fosterer and father-in-law (cf. Bremmer 1983). Other Greek myths and legends simply related the “carrying” of heroes at birth to their appointed nurses, whose husbands would serve as the child’s pedagogue: the mythical prototype of such foster-tutelage was the centaur Cheiron, who successively raised such heroes as Achilles as warrior, Actaeon as

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6 This is confirmed by Maier (1999). Provision for crib-clothes in the *Cáin Íarraith* laws indicates that early Irish fosterage was commonly inaugurated by infant nursing (Ó hlnse 1943:8f.; Kelly 1988:87), as is also attested in a late Elizabethan tract reported by Fitzsimons (2001; see n. 21 below). Cf. Smith (1992: 11–12) on “placing upon the breast” in medieval Welsh fosterage; also Schultze (1936) and Strauch (1980) on early Germanic *Milchbrüderschaft*. On comparable milk-kinship allegiance and dynastic fosterage in medieval Armenia, see Bedrosian (1984) and Gadzhieva (1995) on atalyk fosterage and milk kinship in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Daghestan.
hunter, and Asclepios as healer (Fig. 1). Gernet concluded that infant fosterage must have been institutionalized in archaic Greece.

Epigraphic analyses of funerary epitaphs—particularly among Greeks of Asia Minor (Cameron 1939)—corroborate such delegation of infants to subordinate fosterers, creating ties of adoptive kinship (threptós, syntrophoi) apparently similar to those of Caucasian atalyk fosterage (cf. Nani 1944; Levick et al. 1988:xliv–lvi). Etruscan depictions of the mythical adoption by suckling of an adult Hercules by the goddess Hera or Juno (Fig. 2) suggest milk kinship symbolically underpinning such fosterage, as was adduced by Josef Kohler (1905; cf. Deonna 1954:250–55; Renard 1964). Diodorus of Sicily, alluding to this myth in the first century B.C., already supposed it to be an archaic Greek rite of adoptive parentage, noting that it was “a ceremony still in use among barbarians when they want to adopt a child” (Diodorus IV ch. 39.2).7 Gernet’s conclusions about infant fosterage in ancient Greece are also confirmed in a further narrative survey of legendary threptós fostering by Jan Bremmer (1999).

7 Identical rites of symbolic adoption by suckling, typically associated with milk kinship, have been observed throughout the eastern Mediterranean: e.g., Baddeley (1940, I: 263) for Caucasians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Kurds; Granqvist (1947: 114) for Palestinian Arabs; Ciszewski (1897: 104–5) for Bulgarians; and Sant Cassia and Bada (1997: 147) for modern Greeks. Cf. Leclant (1951) and Roehrig (1990) on similar dynastic rites of suckling and milk kinship in ancient Egypt.
Oedipus Threptós: Foster-Kinship in Ancient Greek Legend

Gernet showed that ancient Greek legends of infant fosterage were preoccupied with predicaments of succession and alliance among ruling descent lines. Building on earlier scholarship that had focused on symbols of exposure and fosterage in legends relating to Oedipus (Comparetti 1867; Constans 1881; Robert 1915; cf. Nilsson 1922), Gernet suggested that fostering and adoptive kinship might have served as an effective strategy of heirship (cf. J. Goody 1973), often securing succession by uterine filiation. Repeated allegiances of combined fosterage and marriage between royal descent lines were notable in Attic as well as Theban dynastic legends, and Gernet discerned related motifs of ambivalent hostility between mother’s father and daughter’s child. The latter was typically exposed at birth—like Oedipus—before being accepted for

Figure 2. The ritual suckling of Hercules (Hercle) by Hera or Juno (Uni), establishing the mortal hero’s apotheosis within the Olympian pantheon by milk kinship. Etruscan bronze mirror engraving from Volterra in the Museo Archeologico, Florence (72740; see Monaco 1933). Illustration from Deonna (1954:153, Planche VI, Fig. 9).
fosterage and succession, sometimes achieved by the fosterling’s ominously predicted murder of his mother’s father. For Gernet, such legends reflected ancient rites of royal initiation and investiture by foster-adoption. A similar scheme of archetypal myths of fostering had been proposed by Luria (1927), subsequently elaborated in Vladimir Propp’s (1944) formulaic analysis of Oedipal myths and their medieval legacy in tales of Judas, Pope Gregory, and Andrew of Crete. Various kinds of incest and kin-slaying were motivated by the fated child’s exposure at birth—typically due to his own incestuous conception—followed by his suckling and fosterage by animals, monsters, or social outcasts, his achievement of sovereignty by regicide, and his apotheosis as a miraculous god or repentant saint buried deep within the earth.8

Whatever the merits of Gernet and Propp’s reconstructions of former uterine succession (or matriliny), infant fosterage in ancient Greek legends did seem to be associated with myths and rites of foundational sovereignty. It was also regularly associated with morally ambivalent predicaments of incest and kin-slaying, equally attested in Roman legends of Romulus (Bremmer 1987b:26–30). Propp’s prototypical Oedipal motifs—the infant exposure and fosterage of a future ruler, often raised by humble shepherds or blacksmiths, as by supernatural spirits or animals—have since been shown to comprise a widespread Eurasian mythology of divine sovereignty, as exhaustively demonstrated in The Sargon Legend by Brian Lewis (1980).9 As one might expect, these Oedipal predicaments also recur in heroic legends of Abkhazians and their neighbors in the Caucasus, who similarly practiced atalyk fosterage and milk kinship.

The Sasruquo Complex: Legendary Milk Kinship in the Caucasus

Legends of the Caucasus primarily concern the heroic exploits of the Narts, a mythical generation of divine brothers born to the goddess Satanay (Dumézil 1930; 1965; Colarusso 2002). Most admired was the lastborn Nart, Sasruquo. Miraculously conceived from a rock—by an incestuous union of Satanay with her paternal cousin Bataraz—Sasruquo was shortly sent into fosterage:

Unable to be nursed by his appointed foster-mothers due to his preternatural heat, Sasruquo was nourished on molten iron by the divine blacksmith Aynar, who thence becomes the hero’s foster-father and initiator. He is even tempered in the smith’s forge, rendering his body almost invincible. Later mocked as a bastard by his Nart brothers (or

8 On these Oedipal legends, see Edmunds (1985) and Bremmer (1987a), together with the articles collected in Edmunds and Dundes (1983). On “fosterage and avunculate,” see Bremmer (1976; 1983), who makes a plausible case for fostering by matrilateral kin as a common Indo-European institution (cf. Jaski 1999: 28–30), entailing clientage and/or succession by favored offspring of female agnates. See also n. 21 below.

foster-brothers), Sasruquo sets out to seek his true father. This quest instigates his heroic adventures, whereby he retrieves millet seeds and fire stolen by giants. Their defeat is enabled by the treachery of a giantess, who adopts Sasruquo as her milk-son after his suckling at her breast. With the help of this giant milk-mother, Sasruquo “the milk-sucker” recaptures the stolen millet seeds and fire from the giants, later engaging in mortal combat those of his Nart brothers who had tyrannically oppressed their peasants. But Sasruquo is defeated when his Nart brothers ally themselves with the angry giants. They obtain from an old sorceress his one vincible secret: his knees or heel, originally grasped by the tongs of the fostering smith Aynar, which they cut through with a discus. Sasruquo is then dismembered and buried alive beneath a tumulus, awarding his miraculous powers to wild animals who refused to drink his blood.10

These legends of Sasruquo exemplify the plot motifs of proto-Oedipal fostering myths reconstructed by Propp, together with those of related Greek hero myths of Achilles, Prometheus and Perseus discussed by Gernet (cf. Tuite 1998). Born of an incestuous union, and fated to slay his own sons by impetuous accident, only incest committed by Sasruquo seems missing from Propp’s archetypal schema (although this may be intimated in Abkhazian accounts of his physical incorporation of a devoted sister; see Dumézil 1968:563–67). Incest occurs in other Caucasian legends linking infant fosterage and exposure with tributary rule. An Abkhazian tradition of the origin of its princely dynasty thus derived it by “breast-profaning” descent from an only daughter of a former emperor of the Caucasus, Awbla, reminiscent of Danae and Perseus (Apollodorus II iv.i, Frazer, ed. 1921 I:155; Binder 1981):

Sinfully ravished by her trusted atalyk milk-father, his fearful kin put the princess in a chest cast upon the waters. Subsequently discovered by a handsome youth, who marries her, the princess was again assaulted by the milk-brother of this husband. She then fled with her newborn child to the protection of a shepherd, before being reunited with her father at a feast given by the shepherd’s lord. There she recognizes her old atalyk foster-father, who was executed together with the “breast-profaning” milk-brother of her husband. Her son Apsha [=Abkhaz] was then installed by Awbla as the first ruler of Abkhazia (Inal-Ipa 1956:26–27).

Another Jocasta-tale, “Father and Son from the Same Womb,” related as a true story by Abkhazians, told of the unwitting marriage of a woman with her own abducted son, resulting in tragic suicide.11 Abkhazian legends also relate the common suckling of abandoned heroes by wild animals—such as wolves, mountain goats, and deer (like Telephus)—as well as their ritual adoption by

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suckling at the breasts of female giants, affording them supernatural assistance like the fostering giantess of Sasruquo (Inal-Ipa 1956:43–47).

The Keloghlan Boy: Fostering by Giants
Tales of the suckling adoption of legendary heroes by female giants have an extraordinarily wide distribution throughout Eurasia, as was revealed in Emmanuel Cosquin’s essay, “Le lait de la mère et le coffre flottant” (1908). Examining a Malay legend about the introduction of Islam to Java, Cosquin noticed its ubiquitous Eurasian parallels. These included classic motifs of the infant exposure of a hero in a box cast upon the waters, followed by his divine suckling and child fostering. But another widely diffused tale about milk kinship was discerned by Cosquin (1908:398–400). This was a familiar “Jack and the Beanstalk” fable of an orphaned or fostered boy entering the castle of a giant and stealing magic regalia or treasure, enabling him to marry a princess and become king. But his ambitions are crucially realized by a cunning suckling at the breast of an ogress, forcing her to adopt him as her son by milk kinship, and thereby to reveal vulnerable secrets of her giant husband’s soul, typically located in an animal or inanimate object. The tale’s prototype seems best attested in Turkish legends of the “Keloghlan Boy,” a destitute and mange-ridden or bald (kel) orphan. Entering a giant’s castle, this improbable boy-hero encounters an ogress kneading dough in a gigantic wooden trough, her pendulous breasts thrown hideously back over her shoulders. Seizing a breast from behind, he cunningly suckles at her nipple, declaring himself her adoptive son by milk kinship. This obliges the ogress, as his “milk-mother” (Turkish süt ana), to assist the hero in defeating her giant husband or brothers, to steal their treasure, and so succeed in his quest to marry a princess and become king.

Cosquin discovered that this story of milk-kinship adoption by a giantess was told throughout Turkic Central Asia and the Caucasus (cf. Roux 1967:52; Dumézil 1931:127–31; Grigolia 1962:159). It was found in Iranian oral traditions about comparable dev ogresses; and it has been documented throughout the Hindu Kush (Jettmar 1975:228–29, 436). It recurs—with the ogress var-

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12 On this coffre flottant motif, see Krappe (1927: 12, n. 43) and Holley (1949). A parallel legend to Cosquin’s Indonesian myth, recounting a similar introduction of Islam to Madagascar, is treated by Ottino (1984). Segmentary-tributary regimes of cliental milk kinship were characteristic of traditional states in both Indonesia and Madagascar.


14 As readers of my earlier essay on milk kinship in the Hindu Kush (Parkes 2001) would expect, motifs of exposure and infant fosterage also typified its dynastic legends: e.g., the founding of the Trakhane ruling house of Gilgit by the princely offspring of a tyrant king, cast in a box onto the river, whose lowly fosterers from the outlying village of Chilas thence become hereditary milk kin counselors to rulers of Gilgit (Ghulam Muhammad 1904: 124–25; cf. Lewis 1980: 183). This coffre flottant motif, combined with suckling-adoption by a giantess, also occurred in the mythology of the non-Muslim Kafirs of the Hindu Kush (Jettmar 1975: 75–76).
iously grinding flour at a huge quernstone, or herbs in a pestle, or kneading bread again—among Arabs and Berbers throughout northern Africa (Földessy 1996: 72), and among South Slavs in the Balkans. A Mongolian variant, equally prevalent among northern Slavs, entailed an indirect means of effecting milk kinship: by the hero’s feeding a cannibal-giant with loaves of bread baked with his mother’s or nurse’s breastmilk (Cosquin 1908:408–13). The geographical distribution of these tales thus corresponds with regions of western Eurasia where milk kinship was formerly instituted by infant fosterage (Parkes 2003), whose social asymmetries appear fabulously reflected.

“Fostering by Giants” reappears in Old Norse sagas examined by Hilda Ellis (1941). As she curiously noted, “the relationship of the man to the supernatural woman is rather a peculiar one; it is as foster-mother rather than as wife or mistress that he seems to regard her . . . the giantess becomes the protector and guardian of the hero for the rest of his life; he is often told to call upon her in time of need, when she will come to his assistance” (Ellis 1941:71). Her giant husband, if not dispatched by the hero, becomes his foster-father, male nurse (nutritor), and initiator (pedagogus). Ellis finally noted parallels with medieval Celtic legends, such as the fostering of the Irish child-hero Cú Chulainn by the shape-shifting amazon Scáthach. In fact, there are many more pertinent Celtic parallels to Cosquin’s archetypal foster-fable (e.g. Christiansen 1959), including an ancient tale of Cú Chulainn’s killing of the giant-king Cú Rói (Baudisˇ 1914). But Ellis properly alluded to more focal themes of delegated suckling and childcare in early Irish legends of Cú Chulainn, which also problematize entangled relations of natal kinship and fosterage already encountered in legends of Oedipus and Sasruquo.

Cú Chulainn’s Conundrum: Celtic Kinship Interlace

The Irish hero Cú Chulainn (see Fig. 3) had a similarly disputed paternity and supernatural birth as the Caucasian Nart hero Sasruquo.

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16 Fosterage and warrior training in the wilderness by fénnid sorceresses recurs in legends of the famous Fenian hero Finn, including his suckling by a druidess milk-mother who is later transformed into a monster (Nagy 1984; 1985: 99–123). Cosquin’s classic fable of suckling-adoption by a giantess also occurs in a Scottish Gaelic tradition (Carmichael 1954: 282) noted by Maier (1999: 155 n. 14).

17 See Guyonvarc’h and Le Roux (1965). This correspondence is noted by Colarusso (2002: 335; cf. Tuite 1998). The parallel initiation of Sasruquo and Cú Chulainn by blacksmiths seems uncannily matched by a similar slaying of their own sons with magical weapons forged by these smiths (cf. Ó hUiggin 1996 with Colarusso 2002: 352–55). On filial slaughter, often associated with Oedipal incest and parricide, see de Vries (1957); also Róheim’s (1925) contrived but perhaps inspired comparison of Cú Chulainn with Oedipus. For comparison with Achilles (and hence again with Sasruquo), see Sergent (1999).
Cú Chulainn, named Sétanta at birth, was supposed to be the offspring of a miraculous union between the god Lug and his mother Deichtine, variably represented as an alienated sister or daughter of King Conchobar of Ulster. On his birth, he is immediately given in fosterage to Cet mac Mágach, an exiled vassal of the Irish over-king, who in turn hands him over to his own foster-parents, Srian and Gabur, for nursing. The infant Sétanta thus becomes a milk-brother of their son Lóeg, who is taken from his mother’s breast to nourish the hero, and who will afterwards serve as his devoted charioteer (Hollo 1998:16, after Thurneysen 1912:43-48).

Sétanta is later taken into childcare by the blacksmith Culann, referred to as his aite “foster-father,” from whom he is renamed Cú Chulainn, the hound of Culann, after impetuously killing the smith’s watchdog. Prior to this, after leaving his parents and infant fosterers, he commends himself as a five-year-old vassal to King Conchobar of Ulster, seating himself upon the king’s knee as a sign of his adoptive affiliation (cf. Thurneysen 1930). Conchobar then appoints his sister Finnchóem as the hero’s new foster-mother. Other prominent Ulstermen compete for the honour of further fostering the heroic child, who is subsequently raised and trained in martial arts by the amazon druidess Scáthach together with other noble youths, who thereby become his comaltai “foster-brothers-in-arms” (Synopsis from van Hamel 1933:1–8, 39).

Cú Chulainn’s multiple fosterage (Fig. 3) thus provided him with widespread adoptive linkages throughout Ulster (Jaski 1999:24–28; Boll 2002:46–54). As he later boasted to his beloved Emer: “Well have I been brought up by my dear foster-father, Conchobar. . . . Among chariot chiefs and champions, among jesters and druids, among poets and learned men, among the nobles and lords of Ulster have I been reared, so that I have all their manners and gifts” (Cross and Slover 1936:158f.). Joseph Nagy pertinently commented on the narrative and symbolic functions of these adoptive linkages within the ranked segmentary order of Irish kingdoms: “Cú Chulainn is fostered by representatives of all segments of society, high and low. He is thus recreated in the image of society and is obligated to defend it in its entirety as payment for his fosterage” (1984:28). But such plural fosterage was not uncommon in medieval Ireland: it was normal for a child of high status to be appointed a principal fosterer at birth, who would then subcontract the child’s nursing and training to sub-fosterers, variously skilled in educational arts (Charles-Edwards 1993:79). Fostering was thereby “used by great dynasts, particularly in the form of multiple fosterage,
to acquire a political following of lesser nobles” (Ó Córrain 1977:77). For Cú Chulainn, however, these plural fostering relations also play fundamental moral roles in juxtaposition with other ties of kinship and contract.

An ingenious essay on “The Sister’s Son in Early Irish Literature” by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (1986) shows how these juxtaposed allegiances of Cú Chulainn replay an ancient morality play of primordial kinship obligations, recasting a mythical drama already enacted in an earlier legend of The Second Battle of Mag Tuired (Gray 1982). Its relational predicaments concerned the divided paternal and maternal kinship loyalties of the cross-cousins Lug and Bres, respectively fostered offspring of the maritally allied Túatha Dé Danann gods and the Fomoiri demons:

After the divine king Núada is maimed in battle, the Túatha Dé Danann women plead for his replacement by Bres, their gormac “dutiful son” or adopted sister’s child. This deviation from agnatic succession proves disastrous: Bres was a hopeless king for the Túatha Dé Danann, treacherously allowing his Fomoiri agnatic kinsmen to impose excessive taxes on his subjects, and ultimately to invade them. His counterpart cross-cousin Lug then rallies the Túatha Dé Danann against the Fomoiri, whom he defeats by slinging a stone at his own mother’s father—the giant-king Balor—so powerful that the giant’s evil eye is cast back through his head to rout his own Fomoiri army. Lug then wrests from his defeated cousin Bres the secrets of regular cereal cultivation, allowing him to succeed as a prosperous divine king (Synopsis from Oosten 1985:116–33 and Ó Cathasaigh 1986:146–51).

Here we again witness the fated killing of a tyrant sovereign by his fostered daughter’s son, as identified by Gernet and Propp in archaic Oedipal legends. Yet this Irish myth is unquestionably a morality tale about the propriety of agnatic succession, counter-posed with infidelities of misplaced “nepotistic” allegiance to “alien” uterine kin. Far from being a reflection of adoptive matrilineal succession, as Gernet and Propp might have supposed, these legends dramatize moral precepts about basic principles of contract (folad) intrinsic to Irish clientship and clan lordship (Ó Cathasaigh 1986:131; cf. Patterson 1994: 316f.). The ultimate message of the tale is that a gormac, “adoptive sister’s son,” should never be elected to kingship: his bilateral allegiances engender a cumulative breakdown of all social contracts in the kingdom, only reversed by Lug’s heroic assertions of agnatic loyalty.

Now, Cú Chulainn was supposed to be the divinely conceived son of Lug. He therefore performs a similar heroic role in the Táin Bó Cúailnge, where the Great Cattle Raid of the Connachta replays the treacherous invasion of the Fomoiri demons on the Túatha Dé Danann gods:

Like Bres, Cú Chulainn is the purported sister’s son of an alien ruler, King Conchobar of Ulster. Yet unlike Bres, Cú Chulainn re-contracts undivided allegiance to Conchobar, his foster-adoption superseding his supposed natal tie as Conchobar’s gormac (his adopt-
tive sister’s son or daughter’s son), reconfirmed through fosterage by Conchobar’s sister Finnchóem in Ulster. Cú Chulainn’s non-agnatic status evidently disqualified him from royal succession; but it perfectly qualified him for his heroic role as war champion of Ulster. As a client of Conchobar, Cú Chulainn would never have dreamed of replacing or succeeding his combined maternal uncle (or mother’s father), foster-father, and lord. He therefore resists Queen Medb’s attempts to inveigle him in treachery—unlike his foster-father Fergus and several foster-brothers, seduced by Medb to turn against their clan-lord and king, who thus replicate in an agnatic key the uterine treachery of Bres. The pathos of the battle scenes concerns Cú Chulainn’s confrontation with his former aite fosterer-father Fergus—obliged by duties of adoptive kinship secretly to assist his dalta fosterling—counterposed with his former comaltai “foster-brothers-in-arms,” who fight and are regrettably slain on the battlefield.19

Foster-brotherhood here scarcely proved thicker than blood kinship—once all social ties had been corrupted by betrayals to Conchobar as Ulster’s elected tribal king. Only Cú Chulainn, the devoted gormac or fostered “sister’s child” of the kingdom, manages to reverse disorder, like Lug, by exemplifying his duties of contractual allegiance. Ó Cathasaigh concludes: “[T]he relationship between sister’s son and maternal kin . . . can be greatly beneficial to society, or greatly destructive of social order; the sister’s son must be integrated into society by means of a solemn contract; and the social good will be served only if the obligations imposed by that contract are duly discharged by both sides. The social order of the sister’s son can be summed up in the word goire [filial devotion], and this is reflected in gormac, which came to replace the inherited [Indo-European term] nia as the designation of ‘sister’s son’” (1986:160).

Bart Jaski (1999), however, indicated that the hypocoristic gormac, or “dutiful child,” was not a regular synonym for sister’s son: it was a specific adoptive term, typically for the offspring of a female agnate taken into endowed fosterage and hence quasi-adoption by an heirless maternal relative.20 Jaski therefore proposed that these legends more particularly comprised a morality play about duties of foster-kinship, highlighted by the hero’s ambivalent outsider status, whereby “a clear message is conveyed: bonds of foster-kinship are beneficial if they are honoured, but lead to destruction if they are neglected,

19 See Wong (1993) and Boll (2002: 158–63) on the complex emotional ties of foster-kinship and family vengeance in these tragic conflicts manipulated by Medb; also O’Rahilly (1976: 94–95, verses 3106–42, trans., pp. 206–7) for Cú Chulainn’s poetic lament on killing his comalta foster-brother Fer Diad, “loved comrade, my kith and kin.” Entangled ties of foster-kinship also surround the death and avenging of Cú Chulainn: in a version of the Aided Chon Culainn, vengeance is taken by his primary foster-brother Conall Cernach, son of Conchobar’s sister Finnchóem, on the Connachta champion, Cet mac Mágach—that is, the foster-father who had originally arranged the hero’s suckling with his own wet-nurse Gabur according to a Compert Chon Culainn tradition (see Fig. 2; Thurneysen 1912: 43–48; cf. Guyonvarc’h and Le Roux 1965–1966)—who is also sometimes represented as Conall Cernach’s maternal uncle.

even if honour is at stake” (1999:27). Jaski’s focus on foster-kinship in these legends thus complements Ó Cathasaigh’s discernment of their moral juxtapositions of agnatic and matrilateral kinship, with which fosterage was entwined. Indeed, they dramatically apprehend problematic configurations of Eugene Hammel’s (1968) “alternative social structures” of variously combined and opposed ties of descent, alliance and adoptive allegiance (Parkes 2003:760), which were not always easily reconciled.

THE MORAL AMBIVALENCE OF FOSTER-KINSHIP

As Jaski indicated, the poignancy of foster-ties persisting through political enmities was portrayed by the primary narrator of the Táin Bó Cúailnge: Cú Chulainn’s aite foster-father Fergus, beguiled by queen Medb to join her Connacht forces against Ulster, yet who secretly assists his fosterling and demands fair play in his combat. But other foster-kin of the hero, similarly seduced by Medb’s promises of conquered land, or espousal of her daughter, agree to fight him: “Cú Chulainn regrets that they seek him out for combat, and appeals to their bond as foster-brothers and to their mutual affection. However, none of them retreats, and all share the same fate. Their deaths highlight the destructiveness of warfare, which rips through bonds of brotherhood and comradeship” (Jaski 1999:26–27).

Yet these were Cú Chulainn’s “foster-brothers-in-arms”: adoptive conscripts and sworn companions raised together in warrior training under Scáthach (cf. Wong 1993). Their disloyalty is therefore understandably contrasted with the firmer loyalty of aite foster-fathers like Fergus, contractually obliged to protect his dalta fosterling; or of Cú Chulainn’s devoted milk-brother Lóeg, his ever faithful charioteer, taken away from the breast of his own mother so that the infant hero could be nursed in his place (Hollo 1998:16; cf. Nagy 1999:216, 219, 223–26 on their symbolic “twinning”); or, indeed, of his co-raised foster-brother Conall Cernach, who ultimately avenges the hero’s death. Although infant suckling, nursing, and child fosterage were lexically conflated by this time, medieval Irish legends seem to have retained a moral partitioning of differential degrees of adoptive kinship through altram fosterage, where nurturant duties of adoptive parenthood and cliental allegiances of milk kinship remained fundamental. But remoter ties of foster-kinship might tragically buckle under the

strain of alternative loyalties; their legendary idealization may even have pro-
moted their dissatisfaction, and hence their disparagement.

In a concise three-page article, Colin Ireland alerted precise attention to this
hitherto neglected “Ambiguous Attitude toward Fosterage in Early Irish Litera-
ture” (1997). One maxim bluntly declared that “Fosterage should be impugned!”
Another counseled, “Better a small kindred than a great deal of fosterage.” As
Ireland comments, “By stressing the fine ‘kin, family group’ over the concept of
altramm [fosterage] it appears to favour blood relationships to contractual ones.”
An Old Irish triad cynically condemned all such precarious contracts: “Three
dark things of the world: giving a thing into keeping, guaranteeing, fostering.”
A treatise on princely education observed that “Every indecorous person is a fos-
terer,” and “Everyone is tranquil until it comes to fosterage.” Colin Ireland fi-
nally remarks that “this last statement suggests that keeping all parties involved
in a fosterage contract satisfied was not an easy task” (1997:95).

Ambivalence is reflected in other Irish legends of fosterage (cf. Boll 2002:
ch. 4). In Esnada Tige Buchet, the once prosperous hospitaller Buchet is re-
duced to abject penury by the profligate visits of his royal fosterling’s brothers:
prodigal princes whose perpetual hosting drives Buchet into destitute exile. Yet
he is redeemed when his foster-daughter marries the king of Tara, rewarding
her foster-father with her maritally endowed property (Charles-Edwards 1993:
81–82). Social parasitism by fostered lords and their noble kin—recalling
those “ingrate cuckoos” of Gerald of Wales—is further evinced in a Welsh say-
ing that it was among the “curses of a cenedl kindred” to have the son of a chieft-
tain imposed upon it by coerced fosterage (Ellis 1982 I:385). Llinos Beverly
Smith (1992:21f.) also noted medieval Welsh legends treating “the theme of
jealousy and rivalry between natural brothers and the unholy alliance of foster-
brothers,” inciting fratricidal feuding, as in the opening passage of Breuddwyd
Rhonaby. While often sentimentally idealized, bonds of foster-kinship could
thus be vilified as topics of villainous treachery, or seigniorial manipulation

Norse and Icelandic sagas betray similar uneasiness about foster-kinship. Just as Irish law prescribed “avenging the foster-son of the kin” as one of “four
blameless killings” (Kelly 1988:89), Icelandic law prescribed rights of
vengeance for foster-kin equivalent to cognate kin (Laws of Early Iceland 1980:
154f.). But in saga literature underlying inequalities of status and power are of-
ten highlighted. In the Laxdaela saga, the central character Dórdr was thus
obliged to seek sanctuary from a powerful chieftain, Höskuldr, by abjectly tak-
ing his bastard son Oláfr into fosterage:
The fosterling Oláfr, sired illegitimately from a slave concubine, turns out to be the son
of a captured Irish princess, whose innate nobility wins his father’s heart over his legi-

in Parkes (2003:754f.), see Ó hInnse (1943) and dissertations by Bronagh Ní Chonaill (1996) and
Sheila Boll (2002).
imate sons and heirs. On Höskuldr’s death, being debarred from inheritance, Oláfr is bequeathed a treasured ring and sword that his father had been given by king Hákon of Norway. At Höskuldr’s funeral feast, the jealousy of his half-brother Dorleikr required Oláfr to repeat the act of deference that had initiated his own fosterage: he offers to raise Dorleikr’s son Bolli as his fosterling, since, as the Old Norse saying went, “he is called the lesser man who fosters another’s child.” But despite their childhood companionship, Bolli subsequently fell out with Oláf’s son Kjartan, when both woo fair and fickle Gudrún. Goaded by her to prove his devotion by attacking Kjartan, Bolli dealt his foster-brother a fatal sword-blow. Old Oláf, who had foreseen this family tragedy, refused to take blood vengeance on his fosterling; but his widow, who had lovingly nursed and raised Bolli, ultimately incited another son to slay him.  

This convoluted family saga again juxtaposes Hammel’s (1968) “alternative social structures” of kinship, alliance, and adoptive allegiance that we witnessed in Irish legends. The nurturant bond of foster-fatherhood persists in spite of enmities with natal kin; but ties of foster-brotherhood fail. In addition, the Icelandic saga-teller’s sympathies lie with the socially subordinate parties: the only paragons to emerge from this tragedy are lowly Dórdr, his bastard fosterling Oláfr, and the latter’s son Kjartan. It is therefore the weak clients or disinherited offspring who prove morally superior to their noble foster-kin. A peculiar fascination of these Irish and Icelandic family chronicles thus lies in their structural and emotional interlacing of alternative status alignments and obligations of natal kinship and fosterage.

Ambivalence surrounding allegiances of fosterage was equally evident in Inal-Ipa’s recorded recollections of the Abkhazian atalyk institution, as also portrayed in the Nart legends of the Caucasus. Heroic ideals of loyalty among milk kin were again highlighted by contrasted acts of horrifying treachery, “breast-profanning” rape, and other tyrannical abuses of status and power. Even popular fables of milk kinship with ogresses and cannibal giants evince this duplicity: subaltern child-heroes such as the Keloghlan Boy trick a supernatural being into treachery of her kind by a cunning performative act of symbolic adoption, furtively sucking her nipple from behind her back, or feeding a giant loaves secretly adulterated with breastmilk. This effectively fools these clumsy powers into complicity with the poor boy’s quest, as with the hero Sasruquo and his giantess. But such tricked adoption seemed scarcely a responsible social contract; it was rather portrayed as a cunningly twisted inversion of cuck-old kinship, a warped weapon of the weak.

James Scott’s (1990) Gramscian perspectives on folklore would indicate that these popular tales of peasant cunning might encrypt “hidden transcripts” of a

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23 The Faithless Foster-Brother is an indexed “type motif” characteristic of medieval Irish and Icelandic legends: see under Thompson Motif P273.2 in Boberg (1956) and Cross (1952) for its typical themes of treachery and quasi-incestuous adultery.
latently resistant political consciousness, ironically exposing the status inequalities disguised by foster kinship. Yet Inal-Ipa’s Abkhazian ethnography showed its heroic idealization at least equivalent to its cynical deprecation in collective memory. Such ambivalent evaluation, contrasting real and ideal allegiances of foster-kinship, was equally evident in Irish and Icelandic legends, also counterposing contractual ties of fosterage with natal ties of consanguinity. Fosterage and milk kinship were again acknowledged to be somewhat fictitious devices of familial allegiance to superior powers, variously represented in fables and legends as supernatural monsters or as temporal lords. Yet these admittedly manipulated kinship ties were validated in legend as legitimate means of empowerment: the fostering vassal exploited internecine animosities among ruling status groups, just as the fostered Keloghlan Boy exploited feuding rivalries in the fabulous world of giants and cannibal ogres. The Oedipal fostering, distributed as a child through all orders of society, thereby embraced these orders as his familial domain, albeit also often embracing their societal antinomies by his unnatural acts of familial incest and kin-slaying. As Scott (1976) originally argued, a traditional “moral economy” (or natural law) perforce respected reasonable reciprocities of contractual allegiance between innate status unequals: of patronal protection and of cliental support, as well as of communal solidarity in the face of tyranny, which ranked tributary polities even hegemonically demanded (cf. Reynolds 1984). The moral ambivalence of fosterage in this political context, troublesomely combining kinship loyalties with vassalic or villeinal duties, was therefore emblematic of an ambivalent political morality arguably inherent in segmentary-tributary polities (Parkes 2003: 768–71), which were integrated by means of such adoptive kinship.

CONCLUSION

“I give you milk to become the brother of my sons . . . Among us Berbers milk kinship is equivalent to heredity” (from The Bayan Legend, cited in Gautier 1927:251).

“Cette fille est ma soeur de lait, et ce lien qui nous en paraît pas un, n’est pas sans force pour les gens de cet état . . .” (Chodelas de Laclos, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, lettre LXXXI from La Marquise de Mertueil to Vicomte de Valmont).

This outline survey of narrative representations of allegiance fosterage appears to corroborate our earlier conjectures of its former prevalence and social significance in premodern Europe and Asia.24 Drawing on Gernet’s classic study fosterage, kinship, and legend 605

24 Yet I have scarcely discussed here the narrative symbolism of milk kinship in Islamic Asia, which I intend to treat separately (cf. Parkes n.d.a). Similar moral ambivalence surrounding asymmetric allegiances of milk kinship may be equally illustrated in Iranian, Arab, and Berber legends. But an additional Muslim emphasis is upon milk kinship as a tragically discovered jural barrier to intended marriage, which remains a stock motif in Arab romantic literature and soap opera. For a combination of this theme with that of the Keloghlan Boy, exemplifying other motifs of Turkish süt milk kinship, see Kamber and Arzu in the Uysal-Walker Archive of Turkish Oral Narrative (Uysal and Walker 2003, vol. 23, Story 723: 54–77).
of infant fosterage in ancient Greek legend, and Propp’s explorations of its archetypal Oedipal motifs of heroic exposure and fostering, I have indicated that similar moral predicaments surrounding tributary allegiances of adoptive kinship recur in legends throughout western Eurasia. Apart from their psychological play with alternative emotional loyalties of natal kinship and contractual duties of kingship and clientship—which Propp and subsequent scholars have well explored in comparative folklore, historical narrative, and classical drama (cf. Fox 1988; Huys 1995; Boll 2002)—these fostering legends point to an endemic ambivalence surrounding the political deployment of fosterage for securing succession and feudatory rule in traditional states.

As Thomas Trautmann (1981:425) has indicated, dispersed or “extensive” rules of marital alliance in western Eurasia precluded possibilities of regularly consolidating familial allegiances of tributary rule, characteristic of segmentary states able to deploy “intensive” strategies of marital alliance (such as Dravidian kingdoms of South India). Rules of dispersed marital alliance, on the other hand, “give no opportunity to place marriage at the center of the web of political alliances” (1981:426; cf. J. Goody 1983:31–33). Adoptive kinship through fosterage, however, did provide an alternative opportunity for creating and perpetuating “intensive” webs of tributary allegiance. It was capable of regularly replicating linkages between ruling descent lines, as Gernet discerned in archaic Greece, and of extending these linkages as feudatory chains of unilateral alliance, as exemplified in the Hindu Kush and the Caucasus.²⁵ Marriage might also be used on occasion to create such dynastic ties of fealty; but marriage could rarely be deployed so “intensively” to replicate allegiances in western Eurasia. Nor, with the exception of concubinage (or the rare Cinderella), did marital alliance normally straddle separate status groups, rather than gradations of tributary rank, as fosterage often did.²⁶ It was this “unnatural” connection between otherwise disparate status groups—unprecedented by normal conjugality—that seems to have tainted foster-kinship with its ambivalent evaluation. This was often clientelism dressed in a false plumage of kinship: cuckold consanguinity.

²⁵ Ó hInnse (1943: 159) indicates a similar perpetuation of cliental allegiances of fosterage in late medieval Ireland, where “the fostering of a chief’s son was usually given to one of his sub-families [sc. retainers or vassals], and the names of these families constantly recur in the State Papers . . . e.g., the O Donnelly’s as fosterers to the O Neills, and the O Gallaghers to the O Donnells.” Reiterated clan and family allegiances of fosterage, combined with contracts of “manrent” fealty, are also archivally documented for early modern Highland Scotland (Skene 1890: 321–23; Curle 1896; cf. Wormald 1985:205 no. 2, 206 no. 5, 255 no. 13, 392 no. 73).

Ambivalence surrounding former political deployments of fosterage might also explain its neglect in historical and ethnographic scholarship. Within Islamic Asia—as I can attest from my own fieldwork enquiries on this topic in the Hindu Kush—former allegiances of fosterage and milk kinship tend to be denied or dismissed nowadays as perverse relics of a properly forgotten feudal era (cf. Staley 1982:112). In nearby Baltistan, Richard Emerson similarly acknowledged that his account of dynastic ties of milk kinship “comes from informants who in every instance preferred to change the subject,” responding to his enquiries on this topic “with contempt and a little fear” (1984:118–19). Modern Abkhazians and other Caucasians may be equally dismissive of remembered evidence of atalyk fosterage, so scrupulously documented by Shalva Inal-Ipa barely fifty years ago (cf. Grigolia 1962). Not a few modern historians of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales appear to be just as amnesic about the persistence of child-fosterage in local clientage, surviving well into the seventeenth century in the western British Isles (O’Curry 1873 II:355; Skene 1890: 190–92, 321–23; Curle 1896; cf. Fitzsimons 2001:138f.).

The “unnaturalness” of these tributary foster-relations—delegating children to alien households for purposes of political allegiance—has therefore always been recognized. Foster-kinship might be dogmatically identified with consanguinity; for it thereby served as a means of substantively allying disparate status groups through clientelism disguised as kinship, with obvious benefits of secured protection and support for all parties in conditions of insecurity and episodic violence characteristic of segmentary-tributary polities. From a subaltern perspective, represented in popular fables, it was an allegiance that could be manipulated by cunning, as Sasruquo and other child heroes co-opted the powerful world of cannibal giants to their advantage by means of milk-kinship adoption. For dynastic rulers and local lords, it was a valuable mechanism of tributary control, mustering loyal support in their internecine struggles for supremacy, as Inal-Ipa amply documented in Abkhazia. For all parties, it could be an attractively romantic ideal of reciprocated allegiance and honorable comradeship, transcending status and rank, as nobly demonstrated by Cú Chulainn’s

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27 This former political significance of tributary fosterage was recognized by such foundational anthropologists and juristic historians as Sir Henry Maine, Josef Kohler, Max Pappenheim, and S. R. Steinmetz (referenced in Parkes 2003; cf. Gwynn 1913; Bühler 1962). While communal kinship fosterage and adoption among social equals is receiving increasing anthropological attention (e.g. Carsten 2000, and ethnographic cases referenced in the final paragraph below), more problematic asymmetric alignments of allegiance fosterage in socially ranked communities remain significantly neglected (see n. 29 below).

28 Cf. Ó Corráin (1977: 77): “Fosterage [in Ireland] was a solemn contractual relationship and formed a primary bond between families and individuals so related—a bond, for obvious reasons in a segmentary system, on occasion more reliable than the bonds of actual kinship since supporters acquired in this way could never become one’s rivals for office within one’s own lineage.” Cf. Parkes (2001: 9, 21–27) on such segmentary dynastic rivalries orchestrating milk-kinship allegiances in the Hindu Kush, which might be read as an appropriate ethnographic coda to this essay.
goire devotion and warrior services to King Conchobar of Ulster. But in practice, this adoptive kinship ideal could never be too satisfactorily realized as a relationship wholly comparable or compatible with natal kinship.

Nor was it ever wholeheartedly believed in popular opinion or proverbial wisdom. For unlike communal fostering among fellow kin—which may allow a full conflation of adoptive kinship with natal kinship (e.g. Marshall 1977; Guemple 1979; Carsten 1991; Weismantel 1995; Alber 2003)—*allegiance fostering*, by its unnatural insinuation of kinship with differential status and power, has always been hedged with moral uncertainties. As Arabs paradoxically put it, “blood is thicker than milk;” yet foster-kinship might match natal kinship as a strategic relationship “equivalent to heredity.” Maybe more so: as an ever adaptable kinship, whose inter-status allegiances through wet-nursing or child-raising persist in parts of Europe and Latin America, as in Islamic Asia.29 Seen through the symbolic lens of traditional narrative, maternal breastfeeding and pro-parental nurture do seem to have been ingeniously and even perhaps perversely deployed to serve as vital linkages of adoptive kinship in the social and imaginative construction of tributary polities throughout western Eurasia—however troubling these adoptive linkages proved in social practice, as in their legendary reflection.

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For example, Twine (1998) on *criação* fostering and spiritual sponsorship in Brazil; Sant Cassia and Bada (1996) on patronal fostering and godparental sponsorship of children taken into domestic service in Greece. Cliental allegiance through milk kinship survives vestigially in Central Asia (Verpaalen 1997), and in North Africa (Ensel 2002), and perhaps still in parts of the Balkans (Filipović 1982; Kaser 1995: 257ff.; Benovska-Sabkova 2001; Parkes n.d.b).


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