There are relatively few West Africans in London in comparison with several other immigrant groups, and they are not found in the same residential concentrations. Most people are probably not aware of them as a distinct group at all. However from the early sixties, they have come increasingly to the attention of social workers because of the frequency with which West African parents were making use of private fostering arrangements for their children.* They almost certainly constitute the largest single group employing this form of care, which for various reasons is often considered less than satisfactory.

Our own attention was drawn to this situation by a letter in the weekly *West Africa* in December 1965. The correspondent, a Nigerian, was concerned about the failure of the Nigerian authorities in London to arrange for Christmas parties where parents, their children, and the fostering parents could all celebrate together. There were, the letter claimed, some 2,700 Nigerian children then being fostered in and around London. One of us was at that time just completing a field study in Ghana of traditional fostering practices, together with a pilot study of the variations occurring in the more urban areas. In West Africa children are quite often sent to grow up with relatives, and occasionally to non-kin. So it was not surprising to find that when West Africans went to England, this long-established institution went with them.

Both traditional forms of fostering and their modern adaptations provide a means of educating children outside their own families. Apprentice fostering and pedagogical fostering serve in addition as avenues of social mobility by providing access to new skills and a new style of life. While traditional African societies had minimal class...
stratification, differences in styles of life are beginning to form around the emerging educated group which has a monopoly of the skills necessary for professional and civil service occupations. When they are in West Africa, parents in this group do not, as a rule, foster their children, though they may receive the children of their kin. They feel that they themselves are best able to teach them, although when the children are old enough they are often sent to a boarding school.

How does the fostering of children by West Africans living in London link up with the home situation? In an attempt to find out, a household census was made of selected enumeration districts in four central London boroughs, and 295 West African couples who were here with at least one of their children were interviewed. We were looking for several kinds of information. First, we wanted to find out just how common the use of private fostering was. Were the impressions of social workers and others substantially correct? Then we hoped to learn more about who were the West Africans in London, why they had come, and what they were seeking here. In particular, we wanted to discover how the mothers fitted into the picture, and what kinds of responsibility and commitment competed with their children for their time and energy. In short, we sought an answer to the question, 'Why do West Africans foster their children while in England?' But in doing so we wanted to take into account both the effect of traditions of fostering at home and the circumstances in which the parents found themselves while living in London.

Originally we had hoped to be able to locate lists of West Africans living in London from which we could draw a representative sample for interview. However this proved impossible as all available lists were either clearly incomplete or seriously biased. In the end we decided on the following pragmatic approach: four central London boroughs known to contain concentrations of West Africans were selected for study. Using the results of the 1966 10 per cent sample census we were able to rank order the enumeration districts within each borough in terms of the proportion of residents born in Africa. All enumeration districts with 5 per cent or more African-born population were taken as the universe of the study. The interviewers then went to each address in these enumeration districts and listed the country of origin of the heads of all households. The sample consists of all households in this census which met our criteria of two West African parents who had at least one child with them in this country. We were finally able to interview about 70 per cent of this sample. There are obvious limitations to the selection of a sample in this way and generalizations beyond residents of the four boroughs studied can only be tentative.

The popular conception here of West Africans in England, and one which is also held in West Africa, is that they are students. Our sample certainly supports this view. Ninety-six per cent of the men came in order to obtain professional or technical qualifications, either
through straight academic study (41 per cent) or through on-the-job training combined with part-time study (55 per cent). Of these men, only 2 per cent intend to remain permanently in the United Kingdom. For almost all, the purpose of obtaining a degree or technical qualification is to enable them to secure a professional or white collar job back in West Africa.

Despite these intentions, we found that three-quarters of the men had been here for six years or more, and over 40 per cent for at least eight years. Why should it take so long to finish their training? While the particular circumstances differ for each couple, there are certain patterns that seem fairly clear.

First of all, only 11 per cent of the families depend mainly on grants, loans, or help from relatives. As we were interested in families, we did not arrange to include student hostels in our survey; there the proportion of government-sponsored students is almost certainly higher. A further 6 per cent receive some supplementary help from these sources. The remaining four-fifths have no outside support at all. Relatives at home, although a potential source of help, are rarely able to support a student once over here, even if they have been largely responsible for financing the trip itself and expenses during the first few months. Only 5 per cent of our sample listed relatives as a major source of financial support, though many mentioned that they had sent money at first and still occasionally sent small amounts. Particularly since the war in Nigeria has impoverished many families there, the flow of money seems to be more often in the other direction. Relatives tend to think that money is easily found in England, and they expect to see something of it, even before the migrant returns.

For just under half the families, the husband himself provided the only income. In another 41 per cent of the sample families the wife carried either the whole burden or a substantial part of it.

With such a high proportion having to be self-supporting, it is not surprising to find that two-thirds of the men in our sample were currently working, nearly all of these full time. Only one-quarter were devoting all their time to studies. But the picture is yet more complicated. The typical pattern is alternating periods of full-time study with periods of work-plus-study when a shortage of funds makes full—or part-time employment necessary. While 43 per cent were both working and studying at the time we talked to them, an additional 34 per cent had done both at once at some stage of their residence in Britain. Less than one-quarter had never tried to combine work and study.

Given this pattern of part-time and interrupted education, a man often finds his stay in England lasting far longer than he originally planned. Loneliness, together with the prospect of a long delay before he is ready to return, may lead him to send for the wife he left behind in West Africa. Among the families we interviewed, there was a mean difference of two years between the length of time the
husband and wife had been in this country. From the husband's point of view there are probably two main reasons for asking his wife to join him. One, obviously, is to relieve the loneliness and provide a few home comforts in a land where food, climate, and language are all foreign. Another reason is that by getting a job in this country, she may enable him to give up working, or to work only part-time, and thus to give more concentration to his studies.

Just under one-third of the wives gave one of these reasons for coming to England, but the great majority said they themselves intended to gain technical or professional qualifications. Like their husbands, many planned to combine work and study. This is relatively easy to arrange in fields like catering, dressmaking, hairdressing, and secretarial work in which the majority of women are interested. Half of the wives were currently undergoing some form of training, though only 12 per cent were studying full-time and not working at all. Nor is such training merely a pastime while keeping house for the family. One-third have actually completed formal qualifications of some kind, and we interviewed seven women who had remained behind to complete a course after their husbands had returned to West Africa.

So the pattern is for both husband and wife to be strongly committed to obtaining a professional or technical qualification of some kind. In addition, the husband and, very often, his wife also must work to provide food and shelter for the family and to pay for their own training. And on top of all these responsibilities, there are the children. We should emphasize that our sample was chosen to include only families who did have children, and who had lived with them in this country at some time. However the census of households on which the sample is based indicates that between 80 and 85 per cent of the West African couples in these four boroughs had children. So our sample families seem typical in this respect.

Broadly speaking, these West African families are of two kinds. One kind is the recently married, where the couple either met in this country or where the wife came over as a new bride. The second kind of family was already established when the husband-father decided to study in the United Kingdom. The wife remained behind at first, but later joined him. A common arrangement is for children who are already in school to stay behind with relatives in West Africa. If there are younger children, they may accompany their mother when she comes to join her husband, or they may remain with a grandmother or other relative. One-third of the families in our sample had left at least one child behind, while another 13 per cent had sent one or more children home from England, usually when they reached school age. In contrast, only 6 per cent of the families had brought a child to join them after both parents were settled here.

Such a pattern is confirmed by the age distribution of the children of West Africans in this country. The largest group is in the infant
and pre-school category, while the primary and secondary school age
groups are relatively small. This is the sort of distribution one would
expect from a young married population. Yet 80 per cent of the
husbands are over 35 years old, while only 14 per cent of the wives
are under 25 years of age, usually the most fertile period for
women. As this distribution of child ages suggests, there are strong
pressures on both kinds of family to have children while still in
England. In the newly-established families the relatives back home
are naturally anxious to be assured that the marriage will be a fertile
one, and the partners themselves share this concern. While many
couples are fully aware of the difficulties involved in raising small
children while trying to work and study, they are also anxious to
begin a family before they are any older. Ironically, the tradition
that a West African woman should be able to rear a large family
while pulling her full weight either on the farm or in trading leads
these women to feel that they ought to be able to manage even under
the changed circumstances. It is expected of them, and they expect
it of themselves. The pressures on an established family to continue
having children may be only slightly less severe. As the years go on
and the date of a return home is still unsettled, so the couple grows
older, and the remaining years of childbearing dwindle. Where there
is a strong commitment to Christianity, or to monogamy for its own
sake, the husband’s effective procreative phase is no longer than that
of his wife (unlike the situation in many rural families). If they are
to have even a moderate size family, they cannot just miss out six or
eight years during which they could be having children.

The interview material suggests that as a group these couples are
very ambivalent about having children while in England. Only 10
per cent would advise a friend to bring his children with him. But
whatever the balance of motivations involved, the resulting pattern of
behaviour is clear. Once a wife joins her husband in this country,
and regardless of the fact that she is probably needed as a wage-
earner and very often herself wishes to train, the couple are likely to
have additional children. With infants to care for, the couple have
more responsibilities, and the roles of mother and father are added
to those of student and bread-winner. Inevitably this means longer
periods of working between periods of full-time study, or the sub-
stituting of full-time employment for a previous part-time job.

We have described this situation in which West African couples so
often find themselves as the ‘delay-companionship-responsibility’
cycle. It is a pattern of interrelated role conflicts involving husband
and wife which ultimately affects the children. When the husband
finds his training will take several years, he sends for his wife, or
arranges to marry. The wife comes to join her husband in England
to help, both as companion and wage-earner, but she brings along
her own set of needs and ambitions. Now there are two people try-
ing to combine work and study. At the same time, the creation, or
reunion, of the conjugal couple leads to the birth of children which
makes still more difficult the balance between work and study, and
greatly increases the difficulty of finding suitable accommodation.
The added difficulties mean further delays in completing courses and
training programmes. This is likely to mean another child, more
responsibilities, and yet more delays.

An English student couple confronted with a similar set of role
conflicts will almost certainly resolve them by the wife giving up
her studies to care for the children, while a combination of parental
support and government grants provides the necessary finances so
that the husband may continue to study full time. If they are par-
ticularly fortunate, there may be a grandmother or aunt near enough
to look after the children so that the wife can continue to study, at
least on a part-time basis. But the wife is expected to be ready to give
up her career for her children’s sake if there is any conflict between the
requirements of the two.

A very different situation confronts West African student couples.
Both spouses are older than their English counterparts. This is not
a matter of their being academically slower. Rather the time per-
pective for gaining an education is much longer where entry to school
is often delayed, and the first years occupied in learning a new
language in which all further instruction is given. Frequently the
possibility of post-secondary school studies is not even appreciated
until after adolescence. Then, as we have seen, few can depend on
relatives or government grants for the money necessary to support the
husband in full-time study. Even fewer have a kinswoman in England
who can take over the care of children. If the wife gives up her studies
while the children are small, it may well be for good. She cannot be
sure that the family will still be in England by the time the children
no longer need her. And if her earnings are needed to help the
husband with his studies, then she will still have to find work of some
kind. There is no advantage in moving from a training-oriented
occupation to one which offers only wages, but no new skills.
Furthermore, there are complex reasons why both husband and wife
feel strongly that the wife should obtain qualifications in her chosen
field. Education in itself is highly prized, and an educated woman is a
fitting wife for a member of the business or professional élite, and a
better mother for his children. In addition it is thought right for
women to be able to contribute to their own and their family’s
livelihood. Traditionally as farmers and traders, and now in urban
situations as traders, secretaries, teachers, and nurses, they expect to
work outside the home. Once in England, therefore, they are under-
standably anxious to take advantage of opportunities for further
training.

It is in the context of this objectively difficult situation that we
return to the problem of the frequency with which West African
couples make use of private fostering arrangements. This does in
fact seem to be common. Among the 295 families in our sample, one-
half had at some time made use of foster parents for their children,
and one-quarter were currently doing so. Almost exactly the same proportions had tried daily minders or were still using them. Both were nearly always found privately—'We advertised' was the common explanation. Others were lucky enough to take over someone recommended by friends who were leaving. The usual sequence seems to be to try foster parents first, and to change to a daily minder should the experiences with fostering prove disappointing. Both forms of care were often spoken of as unsatisfactory, but the advantage of the daily minders was that they could be more easily checked up on. This gain was balanced by the disadvantages of having to take the children out in the cold in the early morning, of having to make additional arrangements when the parents wanted to attend evening classes or had to study in one or two crowded rooms. Among those who had used foster parents there was a wide range of experience. Some had found 'wonderful' foster parents with whom the child had stayed for many years, and here relations between the families had often become close. At the other extreme there were children who had had to be moved several times and had suffered from neglect.

In traditional forms of fostering in West Africa, children usually remain with their own parents until the age of five or six when they are thought old enough to benefit from both precept and discipline in the foster home. Those who are sent as housemaids or apprentices tend to go at an even later age. The children in our London sample were sent to foster parents much earlier. Of those fostered, three-quarters went before their first birthday. This is the single most striking difference between fostering in West Africa and in England. It is due to a combination of factors: these families can find neither money nor space for someone to live in the home and care for infants, and are entirely isolated from older female relatives who might take over the care of the baby during the day; they are usually without older daughters, or the daughters of kin living with them as foster daughters, who could help with babies and small children; and they cannot take infants and children with them to work or to classes, where at home they would be able to take them to the farm or to market. The fostering of infants and young children is not traditional in West Africa. It is an adaptation to living apart from relatives, with little money, while trying to both work and study.

It is worth noting in passing that hardly any use had been made of local authority facilities. One illegitimate child of whom the mother was English had been put in a residential institution; and twenty families had managed to place their children in day nurseries. Many more would have liked to use local authority day nurseries but had been unable to do so.

It is tempting to see the widespread resort to foster parents and daily minders by West Africans in London as a response to the difficulties experienced in studying at home in very overcrowded conditions, and indeed to the near impossibility of maintaining a pleasant home where parents and young children are crowded into
one or two decrepit rooms. These conditions do often characterize
the kind of housing such families are forced to accept, and they are a
part, but only one part, of the problem.

Intolerable living conditions, like the incompatible role require-
ments already discussed, create strains which must either be endured
or resolved. Thus the important question, once the sources of strain
are known, is why one kind of resolution rather than another.
More specifically, why do West African couples so often attempt
to meet the conflicting demands of earning a living, training or
studying, and rearing a family, by seeking to secure help with child
care outside the home? English families do not see this as a solution,
nor do most other immigrant groups. Pakistani, Indian, Irish, and
Cypriot families all appear closely to resemble English families in this
respect. West Indian families do make considerable use of daily
minders, but seem rarely to send children to foster parents. It is here,
we suggest, that the existence of West African traditions of fostering
children come into play. While institutions of this kind are not found
in all West African societies, they are extremely widespread. Despite
considerable variation in form, several common features recur: (1)
Children are sent to learn—either to learn adult role skills and sound
moral values, or to learn specific skills as in apprentice-fostering, or to
learn 'city ways', or to get the most from a formal education by living
with a school teacher or similar educated person. (2) Children are
sent for preference to kin, but where kin are not available, they may
go to someone judged particularly suitable on other grounds. (3)
Fostering provides a means of sending children from rural areas to
towns (and sometimes from the city to live in the country) and offers
a way of placing children from families where there are few opportuni-
ties with those where there are many.

Some of these specific functions of fostering translate better than
others into the English context. But the underlying premise, that
parents are not necessarily the best people to rear children, and
certainly not the only ones likely to do so in the child's best interest,
fits very well indeed. Thus the West African parent sees private
fostering arrangements in a very different light than the English child
care officer well-versed in child psychology from Freud to Bowlby.
Too many West African parents are faced with crowded living
conditions, together with the demands of job and studies on both
parents' time and energy. Where a good home can be found, foster-
ing offers positive advantages that West African parents are anxious
to provide for their children; for them fostering is not only a way of
disposing of their children, but of educating them too, educating
them in the ways of their hosts as well as giving them the training
that all parents find so difficult.