

Traditional Fostering Reconsidered: A Quantitative Assessment of *Fa'a'amu* Kinship Care in French Polynesia

Ka Whakaarotia Anō te Whāngai Tamariki: He Aromatawai Inerahi o te Tiaki Whānaungatanga *Fa'a'amu* i Poronīhia Wīwī

CELIO SIERRA-PAYCHA* AND ÉVA LELIEVRE†

Abstract

In French Polynesia, *fa'a'amura'a* is the traditional practice of adoption. Studies using small, specific samples have often framed this practice as problematic, with foster children considered subject to endangerment. However, quantitative analysis based on census and family survey data tells a mitigating story. We find that the practice of *fa'a'amura'a* remains widespread and has been stable over the past few decades. Our analyses also show that *fa'a'amu* children are no less close to or feel less supported by their *fa'a'amu* families than birth children. Despite this, children who grew up in *fa'a'amu* families had poorer education and employment outcomes. The results reveal that these differences are explained by the socio-economic characteristics of families practising *fa'a'amu* compared with those who do not.

Keywords: *fa'a'amura'a*, child fostering, French Polynesia, family surveys, adoption

* Célio Sierra-Paycha is an assistant professor at the University Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne and associate researcher at *Institut National d'Études Démographiques* (INED).

† Éva Lelièvre is a senior researcher at *Institut National d'Études Démographiques* (INED). Corresponding author: eva.lelievre@ined.fr

Whakarāpopotonga

Kei Porinīhia Wīwī, ko te *fa'a'amura'a* te tikanga whāngai tamariki taketake. Kitea ai tēnei ritenga e ngā taurira iti, tauwhāiti anō hoki hei mea whai raru, me te whakaaro ka whakamōreareatia pea ngā tamariki whāngai. Heoi anō, ka whakaputaina e te tātari inerahi e pūtakea ana i ngā raraunga tatauranga me te rangahau whānau he kōrero whakamauru kē. Kua kite mātou e whānui tonu ana te tikanga *fa'a'amura'a*, ā, kua tūwhena tonu i ēnei tekau tau kua hipa nei. Kei te whakaatu anō hoki ā mātou tātāritanga ehara i te iti iho te piringa o ngā tamariki *fa'a'amu* ki ō rātou whānau *fa'a'amu*, ehara hoki i te iho iho o te rongo i te tautoko mai i ō rātou whānau *fa'a'amu*, tēnā i ngā tamariki whānau tūturu. Ahakoa tērā, mō ērā tamariki i tipu i ngā whānau *fa'a'amu* he kino ake ō rātou putanga mātauranga, whiwhi mahi anō hoki. Kei te whakaatu ngā kitenga ka taea aua rerekētanga te whakamahuki mā ngā āhuatanga ohapori o ngā whānau e mahi *fa'a'amu* ana ina whakatairitea ki ērā kāore i te pērā.

Ngā kupu matua: mate tauroa, hunga mātāpuputu, putanga whānau, raraunga whāiti ā-tangata takitahi

In Tahitian, *fa'a'amura'a* refers to the traditional type of child fostering commonly practised in Eastern Oceania, particularly in Polynesia. While there is general agreement that this practice remains widespread in French Polynesia and has been well documented by anthropologists (Brady, 1976; Carroll, 1970; Ottino, 1972) and, more recently, by psychologists (Benjamin, 2021; Benjamin et al., 2019), its quantification has remained somewhat ad hoc (Ho Wan, 1992).

The circulation of children in Oceania appears as an emblematic case in comparative works on kinship and adoption (Bowie, 2004; Leblic, 2004). The practice is often contrasted with adoption in Western societies (Carroll, 1970; Fine, 2008). Indeed, when describing adoption in Oceania, anthropologists often use the concept of *fosterage* to distinguish it from adoption, which implies the permanent replacement of the birth parents by adoptive ones. The circulation of children was part of a logic of alliance that served to strengthen social bonds within the wider community. In some regions, such as Hawai'i (McGlone, 2009) and Aotearoa New Zealand (McRae & Nikora, 2006), fostered children are considered carriers of symbolic family heritage and are, therefore, privileged with respect to non-fostered children. In French Polynesia, *fa'a'amura'a* refers to the practice of *fa'a'amu*, or 'to feed'. Historically, it involved entrusting a child to close family members, who then became the child's foster parents. Both

birth parents and foster carers could initiate this practice (Dickerson-Putman, 2008). It is assumed that the reasons for entrusting children have changed over time, and that its social and political impact has diminished in the wake of colonisation and the rapid modernisation of Polynesian society.

Other studies, however, have pointed to a different pattern, especially when inheritance issues are at stake (Silk, 1980). These studies also emphasise the social role of *fa'a'amura'a*, which redistributes children from those who have 'too many' to those who no longer have any (Silk, 1980). Nevertheless, contemporary *fa'a'amura'a* tends to be associated with situations conducive to vulnerability and deviance (Bastide, 2023). Recent research highlights significant differences between the lived experiences of *fa'a'amu* children and those of birth children. The childhood conditions of *fa'a'amu* children are most often described as "problematic", with some considered "endangered" or in need of "social care" (Charles, 1992, as cited in Bambridge, 2018). In some cases, foster parents have been accused of treating the entrusted children as 'walking sticks' for grandparents, or even turning them into sexual and domestic slaves (Benjamin et al., 2019; Nadaud, 1992), and of having coerced birth parents into relinquishing children. However, this predominantly negative framing warrants nuance (Benjamin et al., 2019).

To this end, we present a quantitative overview of contemporary *fa'a'amu* kinship care in French Polynesia, drawing on data from large general population sociodemographic surveys. Unlike studies based on specialised qualitative samples, population-level data allow all individuals who have been involved in a *fa'a'amura'a* relationship, either as a *fa'a'amu* child or as donors or recipients of entrusted children, to be identified. We begin by presenting survey sources, to quantify the prevalence of the phenomenon for each of these positions in the *fa'a'amura'a* process. We then explore the relationships involved: who entrusts children, and to whom are they entrusted? Finally, we examine whether being raised in a *fa'a'amu* setting – rather than with birth parents – has long-term effects, by analysing outcomes related to education, employment, integration, intergenerational support and emotional ties to parents.

Quantitative data sources for the study of *fa'a'amu* adoption in French Polynesia

The advantage of the quantitative data used in this study lies in its representativeness: the data are drawn from the general population, in contrast to many qualitative studies that rely on samples of vulnerable individuals identified through social services (Asselin, 2020; Bastide, 2022), legal services (Gagné, 2023), or psychological and hospital services (Benjamin et al., 2019). The first data source is the French Polynesian census, which documents the characteristics of all residents in French Polynesia and has been conducted approximatively every five years, in August, since 1996. The second is the *Feti'i e fenua* (the first Family Survey in French Polynesia) (ISPF–INED, 2020), which collected information from 1 in 10 families across French Polynesia. The third source is the *Le Collège et Moi* survey (INED–DGEE–ISPF, 2019), which interviewed all final-year students (Grade 9) in lower secondary schools (*collèges*) just before they transitioned to upper secondary or vocational education.

While these surveys lack the depth of detailed qualitative interviews, particularly since their questions were not designed to explore the *fa'a'amura'a* process, they nevertheless offer valuable comparative insights. Specifically, they allow comparison between individuals involved in *fa'a'amura'a* and those who are not. Table 1 summarises the questions and information available in each data set. Most importantly, the following sources allow us to quantify the process and provide a broader framework within which detailed qualitative studies can be contextualised.

Census (1996–2017)

Since 1996, the census has included questions for women aged 14 and over, asking first whether they have ever “entrusted any children as *fa'a'amu*” and if yes, how many”; and second, whether they “currently have *fa'a'amu* children, and if yes, how many” (Sierra-Paycha et al. 2018).¹ The latest available census (2017) also collected information on all permanent household members, including the household member to whom the respondent has the closest ties. These data can be used to study children under the age of 18 living with adults who are not their biological parents (Fardeau et al., 2024). By drawing on five successive census waves, we can track changes in *fa'a'amura'a* across over time and across birth cohorts.

Table 1: Quantitative survey information on *fa'a'amura'a* in French Polynesia

Data sources	Sampling frame	Questions ¹	Collected by	Target population	Sample size
Population Census 1996 ²	All women and girls aged 14 and over	Have you ever entrusted a child as <i>fa'a'amu</i> ? If yes, how many?	Statistical Institute of French Polynesia (ISPF)	All residents	219,521
Population Census 2002		Do you currently foster any <i>fa'a'amu</i> children? If yes, how many?			245,516
Population Census 2007					264,736
Population Census 2012					274,217
Population Census 2017		+ description of relationships between household members			281,674

Table 1 continued on the next page...

Data sources	Sampling frame	Questions ¹	Collected by	Target population	Sample size
<i>Le Collège et Moi</i> survey 2019 ³	All middle school students in Grade 9 (the last form before upper secondary school; mean age = 14)	Are you a <i>fa'a'amu</i> child? Who are your <i>fa'a'amu</i> parents?	ISPF French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED)	All <i>collège</i> students	3,365
<i>Feti'i e fenua</i> survey 2019–2020 ⁴	Household with at least one member aged 40–59 (the respondent)	Respondent -Are you <i>fa'a'amu</i> ? -Who are your <i>fa'a'amu</i> parents? Description of: -Own birth children - <i>Fa'a'amu</i> children (taken and given) -Respondents' birth parents - Respondents' <i>fa'a'amu</i> parents		Sample (1 in 10 families in French Polynesia)	5,139

- Notes:
1. See Note 1 at the end of this paper for the French wording of these questions.
 2. Documentation on French Polynesia censuses can be found at <https://www.ispf.pf/ispf/enquete/RP>.
 3. <https://www.ined.fr/fr/publications/editions/document-travail/etre-collegien-en-classe-de-troisieme-en-polynesie-francaise>
 4. <https://www.ispf.pf/publication/id/1276>

Family Survey (Feti'i e fenua, ISPF–INED, 2020)

The first *Feti'i e fenua* (FEF; Family Survey) in French Polynesia was designed by the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and organised in collaboration with the Statistical Institute of French Polynesia (ISPF), with financial support from both the regional and national governments. The survey aimed to shed light on family organisation and solidarity, with a focus on family relationships (collectively, the respondents described over 90,000 ties). Data collection started in October 2019 and was completed in April 2020. The survey interviewed a sample of 5139 individuals aged 40–59, representative of all residents in French Polynesia in this age group. This group was targeted because it comprises cohorts who are still active and because they are the best informants about both their ageing parents, their sisters and brothers, and their young adult children. They are pivotal adults,² positioned temporally between ageing parents and children on the cusp of leaving the household. The families surveyed, therefore, span three generations. The survey describes the composition of each family, its territory through the places of residence of their members, the frequency of contact within this family space, and the occupations of its members. All five archipelagos were surveyed (31 islands), and the responses directly covered almost 1 in 10 families in French Polynesia.³

What emerges is a broad picture of Polynesian family structures and organisation, both on the islands and beyond (Fardeau et al., 2021). Information about *fa'a'amura'a* was collected throughout the survey questionnaire. Respondents first self-identified whether they had been *fa'a'amu* (children), and if so, specified their biological relationship to their *fa'a'amu* mother and father, choosing from categories such as maternal or paternal grandparent, aunt or uncle, other maternal or paternal relative, or other non-family relation. They then described their current relationship with those who had raised them, including co-residence, frequency of contact if living apart, and support with daily chores. In a module about their children, the respondents reported on biological children, fostered *fa'a'amu* children, and children they had entrusted to others as *fa'a'amu*. Information collected included their children's current activity status (student, employed or inactive) and educational attainment, as well as the respondents' ongoing interactions with both their biological and *fa'a'amu* children, covering co-residence, emotional closeness, contact frequency and economic support.

Le Collège et Moi (ISPF–INED, 2019)

The *Le Collège et Moi* (LCEM) survey was carried out in 2019 by the ISPF and INED, in collaboration with the French Polynesian Ministry of Education (the Direction Générale de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement, or DGEE) (Lelièvre et al., 2020). All Grade 9 students – the final year of lower secondary schooling, or *collège* – were invited to participate. Only five schools out of 41 did not participate,⁴ resulting in a response rate of 86 per cent. The four-page self-administered questionnaire focused on students' educational trajectories from nursery through secondary school, as well as their living environments and socio-economic backgrounds. Students could self-identify as *fa'a'amu*, and indicate their biological relationship to their foster parents, selecting multiple responses if applicable: grandparents, uncles and aunts, other family members, or other people.

The combined data from the three surveys enable the description of *fa'a'amura'a* situations and their evolution over time, as seen from different perspectives (parents or children) and at different stages of life, from childhood to adulthood. The data also allow for comparisons between individuals raised in their birth family and those raised by *fa'a'amu* parents.

Consent and ethics

The surveys on which this study is based were conducted under the auspices of a national statistical institute and are governed by its ethical charter on data collection. All data were collected anonymously. While census participation is mandatory, informed consent was obtained prior to data collection for the FEF and LCEM surveys, which both had response rates of 86 per cent. The individuals targeted by these two surveys had the opportunity to decline participation entirely or to discontinue the questionnaire at any point. They were also not required to answer any questions they considered intrusive. For the FEF survey, particular attention was given to interviewer training, with an emphasis on safeguarding confidentiality, especially in small island communities where interviewers and interviewees were likely to know each other. After data collection, all data sets were anonymised.

Results

Fa'a'amura'a: a stable practice

This section assesses the evolution of *fa'a'amura'a*, by measuring the proportions of *fa'a'amu* children in successive cohorts, of adults who have entrusted children, and of parents fostering *fa'a'amu* children in different periods and for different age groups.⁵

Stability in the proportion of fa'a'amu children

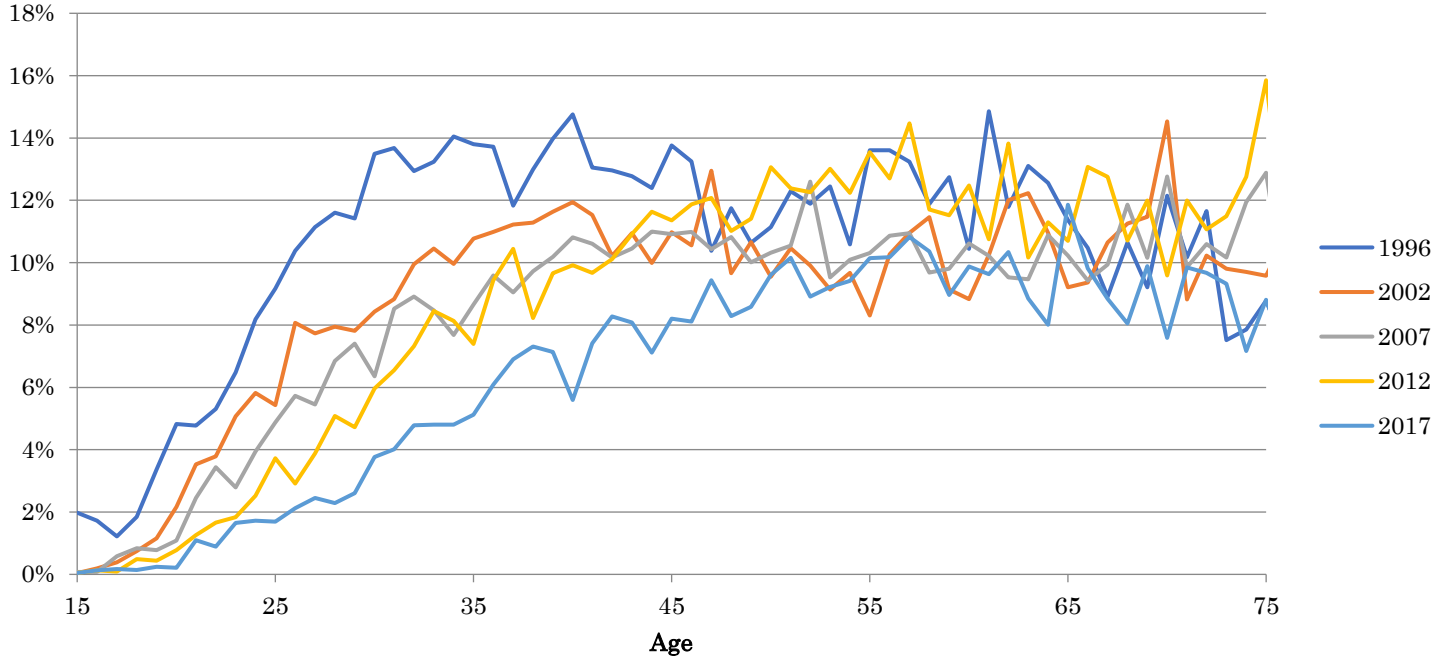
In the FEF survey, 14.0 per cent of respondents born between 1960 and 1979 (11.4 per cent of men and 15.8 per cent of women) self-identified as having been *fa'a'amu* children. In the LCEM survey, 13.5 per cent of Grade 9 students – most born in 2005 and 2006 – self-identified as *fa'a'amu* children (12.5 per cent of girls and 14.5 per cent of boys). Despite a gap of over 25 years between these cohorts, the proportion of individuals describing themselves as *fa'a'amu* remains extraordinarily stable, at around 14 per cent.

Women who have entrusted children as fa'a'amu

By age 50, women have typically completed their fertility. The observed proportions of women at this age who report having entrusted one or more children as *fa'a'amu* are thus comparable across censuses. According to the 1996 Census, approximately 11 per cent of women aged 50 (born in 1946) reported having entrusted at least one child as *fa'a'amu*. Twenty-one years later, in the 2017 census, 10 per cent of women aged 50 (born in 1967) reported the same.

This proportion varied relatively little in the meantime as well: 10 per cent in 2002 and 2007, and 13 per cent in 2012. These census data thus suggest a remarkably stable pattern, with roughly 1 in 10 women in this age group entrusting a child as *fa'a'amu* (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of women in French Polynesia having entrusted children as *fa'a'amu* across five censuses, 1996–2017



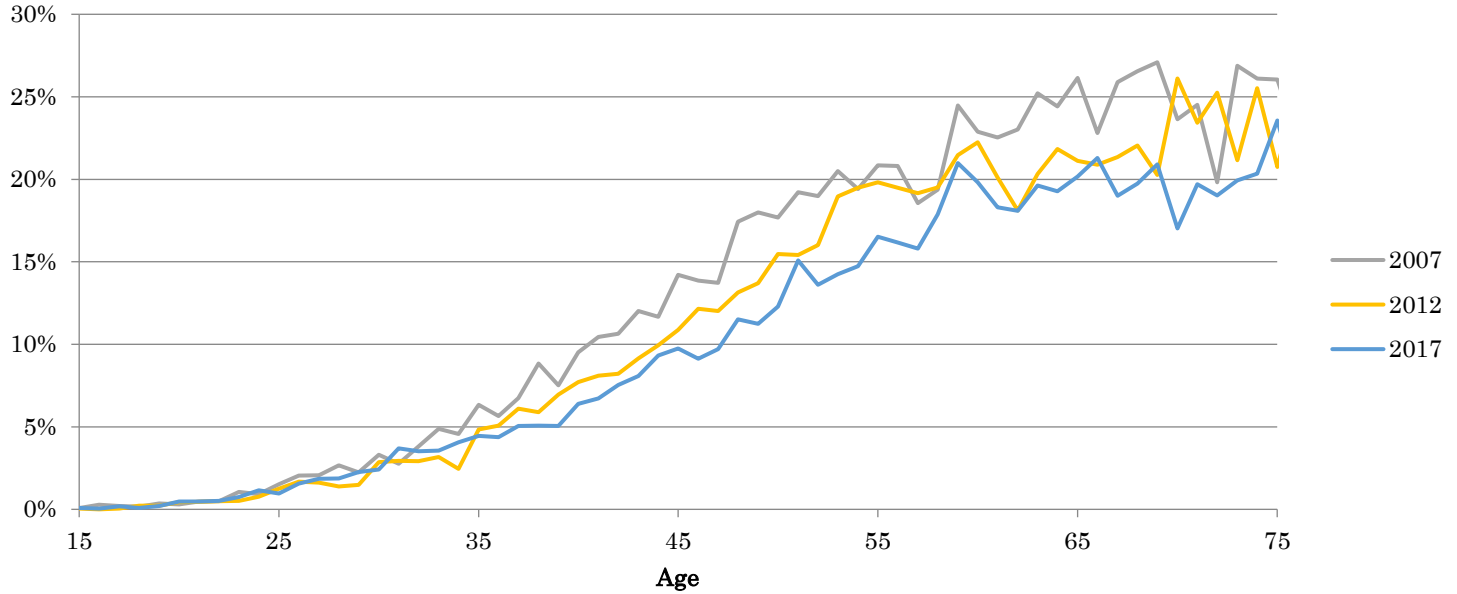
Differences observed at younger ages in the proportion of women who have already entrusted a child result from the increase in the average age at childbirth, and a decline in overall fertility. A consistent postponement of *fa'a'amura'a* is observed since 1996: around 14 per cent of women born in 1960 had entrusted a child as *fa'a'amu* by age 35 (1996 Census) compared with 9 per cent of those born in 1970 (2007 census) and less than 7 per cent of those born in 1980 at the same age (2017 census). The proportions reached by age 50, however, remain comparable over time. Average age at childbirth rose by almost four years between the 1980s and the 2020s. These women from more recent cohorts gave birth to their children later than their elders, delaying the age at which they might entrust a child to *fa'a'amu* parents.

Women who foster fa'a'amu children

At first glance, census data on parents currently fostering *fa'a'amu* children suggest a postponement of the practice. The proportion of women aged 50 who were fostering a *fa'a'amu* child was 18 per cent in 2007, 15 per cent in 2012, and 12 per cent in 2017 (Figure 2). This decline, which is also confirmed by FEF survey data, can be attributed to two key factors: first, some women may go on to foster *fa'a'amu* children later, when they become grandmothers; secondly, there are currently fewer children to be entrusted. As fertility rates fall and the age of childbearing rises, prospective *fa'a'amu* parents must wait longer until women in their network of potential donors bear (fewer) children. Vital statistics show that in the 1980s, the total fertility rate in French Polynesia exceeded 3.6 children per woman; today, it has fallen below 1.8. In the same period, annual births fell from 5000 births in the 1980s to fewer than 3700 since 2018.

Data on the proportion of an age group involved in *fa'a'amura'a* in French Polynesia – whether as *fa'a'amu* children, as women who have entrusted children, or as foster mothers – show that the practice remains fairly widespread, with no evidence to conclude that it is disappearing. The observed decrease, mainly in the proportion of women fostering *fa'a'amu* children, is largely attributable to structural demographic changes: declining fertility and birth rates, and rising ages at childbearing (Sierra-Paycha et al., 2022).

Figure 2: Percentage of women in French Polynesia currently fostering *fa'a'amu* children across three censuses, 2007–2017



Who is involved in fa'a'amura'a?

In order to better grasp the interactions at stake and their evolution in contemporary Polynesia, we explore the ties between the people most centrally involved in *fa'a'amura'a*: the child, the birth parents and the foster parents. We examine the fostering family's connection to the child, be it through the maternal or paternal line, as well as the parental and partnership characteristics of both the birth and *fa'a'amu* parents. We also examine the situation of *fa'a'amu* children with respect to their adoptive sibship.

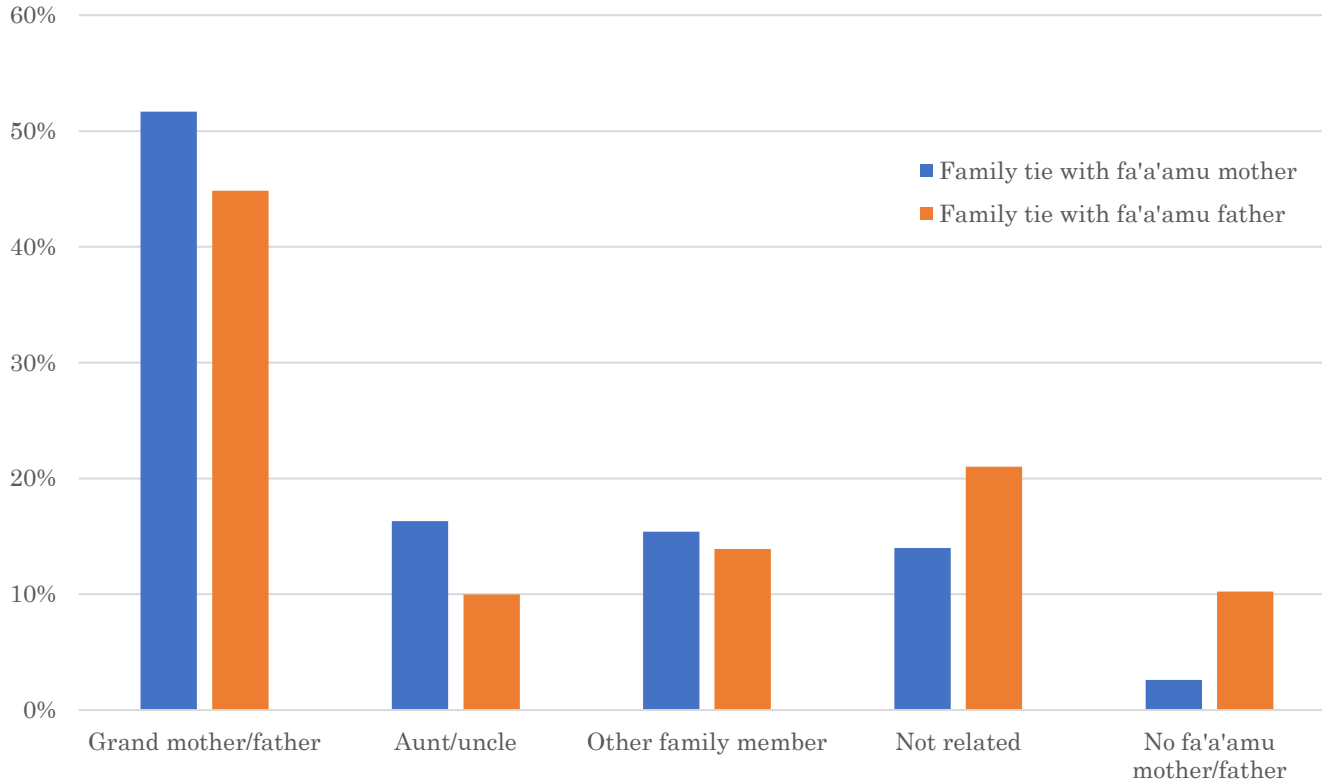
Fa'a'amura'a: a kinship care arrangement

FEF survey data (Figure 3) show that *fa'a'amu* foster care placements are predominately intra-familial rather than extra-familial, as can be the case with formal adoption. Among the respondents born between 1960 and 1979 who reported having been *fa'a'amu* children, 90.6 per cent were entrusted to one or more family members – most commonly a grandmother (52 per cent), grandfather (45 per cent), aunt (16 per cent) or uncle (10 per cent).

Among the FEF survey respondents, 82.8 per cent of the *fa'a'amu* children they foster came from within the family. These children are more often a niece or nephew (48 per cent) than a grandchild (8 per cent). Given the respondents' relatively young age (40–59 years), the 'available' children are primarily those of their siblings. Additionally, 28 per cent of fostered children came from other family members and 17 per cent from friends and unrelated birth parents.

When respondents reported having entrusted their own birth children as *fa'a'amu*, only 59.7 per cent of those children were placed with family members. The high proportion of non-family *fa'a'amu* parents seen in the FEF data may be explained by two factors. First, some cases may involve extra-territorial adoption, where children are entrusted to non-family members living outside French Polynesia.⁶ Secondly, unlike other data sources used here, the FEF survey collected information on family members irrespective of their place of residence, including those living abroad. To avoid asking intrusive or sensitive questions about birth children placed as *fa'a'amu*, the survey did not ask for details on their place of residence. The data thus do not allow us to investigate the children entrusted abroad.

Figure 3: Family ties between *fa'a'amu* respondents (generations born 1960–1979) and both their *fa'a'amu* mother and father (FEF 2020)



The LCEM survey data confirm the intra-familial nature of *fa'a'amura'a* for the youngest generations. Among *fa'a'amu* respondents aged around 13–14 (born around 2005–2006), only 7 per cent were in the care of non-family members. Within family-based placements, grandparents were the most common caregivers (42 per cent), followed by aunts and uncles (25 per cent). These observations align fairly closely with the those in the FEF data for respondents born between 1960 and 1979, suggesting strong continuity in the familial foundations of *fa'a'amura'a* across generations.

Fa'a'amura'a: A maternal kinship arrangement

To further specify the family perimeter of *fa'a'amura'a*, we examined the characteristics of the foster parent(s). FEF respondents who had been *fa'a'amu* were more likely to report having a *fa'a'amu* mother than a *fa'a'amu* father. In 10.1 per cent of cases, they reported having a *fa'a'amu* mother without mentioning a *fa'a'amu* father, while only 2.5 per cent reported having a *fa'a'amu* father without a *fa'a'amu* mother.

Two-thirds of *fa'a'amu* respondents were entrusted to maternal kin: 62 per cent of the female relatives and 63 per cent of the male relatives who fostered them belonged to the respondent's mother's family.

Finally, an analysis of the fertility characteristics of *fa'a'amu* mothers, using both FEF and 2012 Census data,⁷ reveals that these women were predominantly “biographically available” to raise children; that is, they were childless (aunts) or had already raised their own children (grandparents) (Sierra-Paycha et al., 2018). In 2012, 29 per cent of childless women were *fa'a'amu* mothers, compared with 16 per cent of women with one biological child and 11 per cent of those with two.

The gift of the eldest, but no more

Traditionally in Polynesia, kinship adoption was practised to promote social cohesion and strengthen family ties. Today, as shown by Bastide (2023), some grandparents still acknowledge that they requested their first grandchild as a *fa'a'amu* child, an act understood as both a gift and an obligation for the birth parents, even as kinship adoption can also respond to hardship, parental separation, family violence, etc.

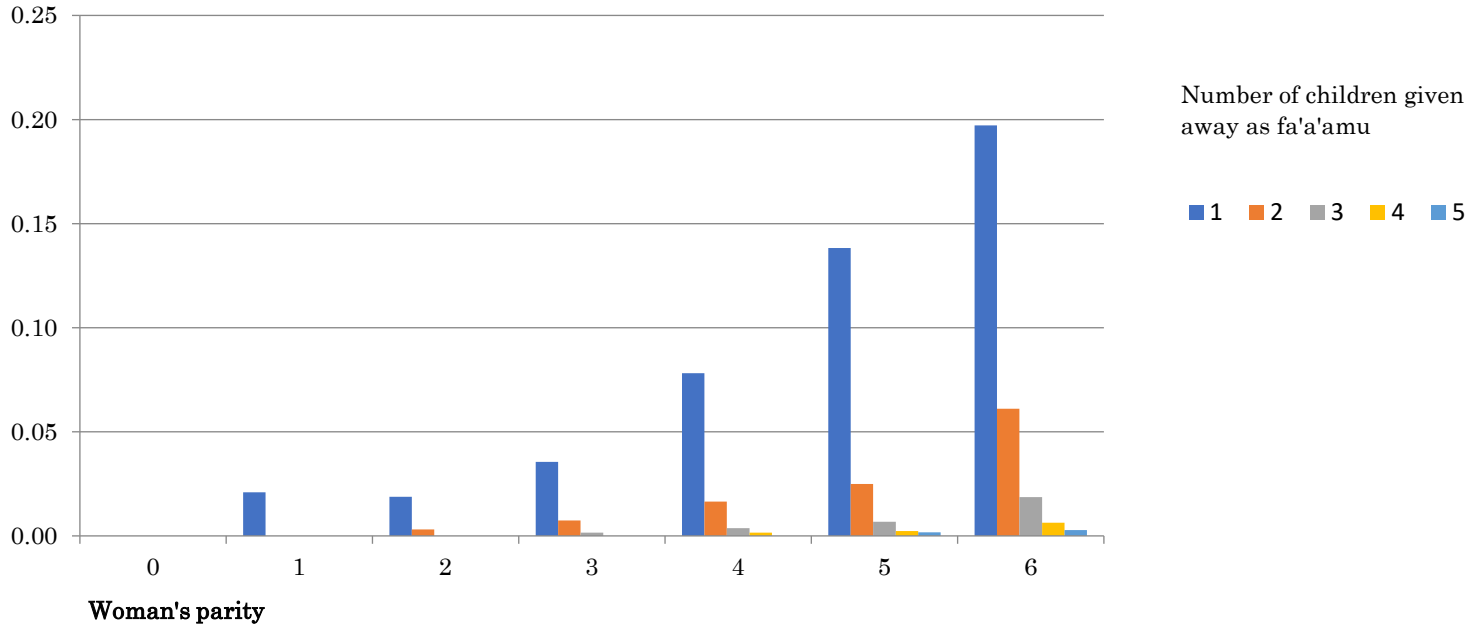
The 2012 Census provides information on the number of children

that women have given birth to and, if applicable, the number they have entrusted as *fa'a'amu* (Figure 4). These data show that women with the highest completed fertility (by age 50) are most likely to have entrusted a child: nearly 30 per cent of women with six children had placed at least one child in *fa'a'amu* foster care, compared with only 2 per cent of women with two children and 4 per cent of women with three children. By contrast, the *number* of children a mother entrusts does not appear to vary substantially with her total number of biological children (Sierra-Paycha et al., 2018).

Quantitative data from general population surveys indicate that entrusting more than one child as *fa'a'amu* is rare, even in large families. The 2012 Census data show that, among women with six children, the probability of having entrusted one child was 20 per cent, compared with 6 per cent who had entrusted two, and 2 per cent who had entrusted three. The number of children entrusted is, therefore, clearly not proportional to the total number of offspring, corroborating the existence of a sociocultural 'contract' that underpins the practice over and above a purely economic mechanism (Ho Wan, 1992).

Another notable result is the chronological sequencing that can be deduced from FEF data: *fa'a'amu* children tend to be older than their birth siblings, but younger than their *fa'a'amu* siblings. In other words, birth parents often entrust their first-born child within the family, then raise their subsequent children themselves. Later, once their own children have left the household, they may foster a child as *fa'a'amu*. In this regard, our quantitative findings closely align with the anthropological literature (Ottino, 1972).

Figure 4: Probability of entrusting child(ren) as *fa'a'amu* by woman's parity by age 50 (2012 Census)



Note: The conditional probability of entrusting one child as *fa'a'amu* increases with women's completed fertility at age 50, reaching 20 per cent for those with six children. Entrusting more than one child is rare, occurring in only 11 per cent in cases among women with a completed parity of seven.

Fa'a'amu children and their birth parents

FEF data also provide insight into the relationship between the respondents and the children they have entrusted to kin as *fa'a'amu*. As qualitative research suggests, these ties are generally maintained: 71.9 per cent of *fa'a'amu* children as are still in contact with their birth parents, compared with more than 97 per cent of the biological children raised by the respondents themselves. This shows that *fa'a'amu* children generally maintain a relationship with their birth parents. However, the frequency of contact differs markedly: only 24.4 per cent of the respondents reported being in touch with their *fa'a'amu* children at least once a week, compared with 68.3 per cent saying they were in touch with their birth children at least once a week.

Differences between *fa'a'amu* raised individuals and others

In order to better understand the specificities of *fa'a'amura'a* adoptive parent–child relations, in comparison with those between birth parents and their children (Table 2), we here analyse differences in co-residence, emotional proximity, economic solidarity, the frequency and continuity of contact, and the children's educational attainment and employment status. We focus on adult children (age 18 and older), for whom these dimensions are most meaningful. By contrast, younger children typically still live with their parents, have not completed their education, and, generally, are neither employed nor in a position to provide financial support.

*The strength of the relationship between *fa'a'amu* parents and children*

To measure the strength of the parental bond and study differences between *fa'a'amu* and non-*fa'a'amu* children, the FEF survey documented some aspects of the relationship between children and their parents: residential proximity, emotional ties and economic support. The results show striking consistencies between the two groups. As adults, *fa'a'amu* children are just as likely to live with their *fa'a'amu* parents as birth children are to live with their birth parents (44.7 and 45.0 per cent, respectively). The respondents were also just as likely to report a high level of emotional closeness to *fa'a'amu* children as they were to report a high level of emotional closeness

to their birth children (95.7 per cent compared with 96.9 per cent). As for economic support, once again, the bonds between *fa'a'amu* children and parents appear as strong as those between birth children and parents, in both directions. The adult *fa'a'amu* children are as likely to be economically dependent on their parents as birth children (49.3 per cent compared with 45.8 per cent), and when they are already earning a living, they are as likely to help their parents financially as non-*fa'a'amu* children help theirs (32.0 per cent compared with 30.2 per cent). The only notable difference observed is in everyday interactions with fathers: *fa'a'amu* children are more likely to report regular contact with their *fa'a'amu* father than birth children are with their biological father (38.5 per cent compared with 27.4 per cent; not shown in Table 2).

Aside from the difference in contact with father, none of the findings suggest that ties with *fa'a'amu* parents are any weaker or stronger than ties with birth parents. The only significant difference points to a closer relationship with *fa'a'amu* fathers than with biological fathers.

However, when educational attainment and employment outcomes are considered, the picture becomes more complex and supports the hypothesis that *fa'a'amu* and non-*fa'a'amu* children experience different trajectories. *Fa'a'amu* children tend to leave the school system earlier: only 16.1 per cent reach upper secondary school (*Lycée*, from Grade 10), compared with 23.6 per cent for other children. Additionally, a higher proportion of *fa'a'amu* children have never been to school (4.2 per cent compared with 2.8 per cent). And as adults, only 12.1 per cent of *fa'a'amu* children pursue higher education,⁸ compared with 17.9 per cent of other children.

In terms of socio-economic disadvantage, it is important to note, however, that according to the 2012 Census, 64 per cent of women aged 55 and older who are caring for *fa'a'amu* children have no educational qualifications, compared with 47.5 per cent of all women in the same age group in French Polynesia. At the other end of the educational spectrum, only 0.9 per cent of *fa'a'amu* mothers have completed some higher education, compared with 3.6 per cent of all women in this age group. This indicates that the differences between *fa'a'amu* and non-*fa'a'amu* children need to be studied in the light of other characteristics (particularly the socio-economic status of their adoptive families).

Table 2: Situation of *fa'a'amu* children and birth children among children aged 18 and over (FEF 2020)

Contact with parent	In contact at least once a week	In contact less frequently	Never in touch	<i>p</i> -value
Birth child	68.3%	29.0%	2.7%	
<i>Fa'a'amu</i> child	62.5%	35.2%	2.3%	0.047
Residential proximity with parent	Co-resident	Proximity	Elsewhere	
Birth child	45.0%	5.9%	49.1%	
<i>Fa'a'amu</i> child	44.7%	6.4%	48.9%	0.869
Emotional proximity with parent	Close or very close	Not close		
Birth child	95.7%	4.3%		
<i>Fa'a'amu</i> child	96.9%	3.1%		0.138
<i>Economic support</i>				
Depend on parents	Occasionally or regularly	Never		
Birth child	49.3%	50.7%		
<i>Fa'a'amu</i> child	45.8%	54.2%		0.091
Help parents	Occasionally or regularly	Never		
Birth child	32.0%	68.0%		
<i>Fa'a'amu</i> child	30.2%	69.8%		0.243
NEET¹ situation	In education or employment	Neither in education nor employment		
Birth child	68.9%	31.1%		
<i>Fa'a'amu</i> child	67.0%	33.0%		0.112

Note: 1. NEET = not in education, employment or training.

The socio-economic status of fa'a'amu children

Using FEF data, we examine the relationship between survey respondents (aged 40–59) and their adult children. The survey covers approximately 1 in 10 families in French Polynesia, and information on family members' location, occupation and general characteristics is reported by the respondents. To examine differences between adult *fa'a'amu* and non-*fa'a'amu* children, we estimate a series of logistic regressions (Table 3). These models estimate the probability of individuals in each group being either in education or in employment,¹⁰ based on a set of individual characteristics and proxies for family socio-economic status position, including respondents' educational attainment, place of residence, and number of children in the family.¹¹

The results of the first model confirm the trend observed above. *Fa'a'amu* children have higher odds (OR = 1.23) of not being in education or employment than non-*fa'a'amu* children, a difference that is moderately significant ($p < .10$). In subsequent models, we sequentially incorporated additional characteristics, including gender (which had a strong negative effect on the probability of being in education or employment for women), educational attainment of the respondent parent and sibship size (proxies for social position), and place of residence. This stepwise modelling strategy allows us to estimate the effect of the different variables on the probability of being in education or employment, all else being equal.

Introducing gender, in Model 2, confirms a well-documented pattern: men were significantly more likely than women to be in education or employment (OR = 0.56 for women), while the effect of being a *fa'a'amu* child remained unaltered. Model 3 adds an indicator of whether at least one parent has completed higher education. This variable had a remarkably strong positive effect (OR = 3.61) on a child's odds of being in education or employment. While the gender effect persists, the *fa'a'amura'a* effect was no longer statistically significant. Model 4 includes number of children in the family, showing a small but cumulative negative effect associated with being part of a large sibship (OR = 0.95 per additional sibling). Finally, in Model 5, place of residence did not alter the effects of the previously included variables, but shows that residing in the Marquesas Islands was associated with lower odds of being in education or employment.

Table 3: Logistic regression results for being either in education or in employment

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4			Model 5		
	OR ¹	95% CI		OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI	
Birth status															
<i>Fa'a'amu</i>	Ref.			Ref.			Ref.			Ref.			Ref.		
Non- <i>fa'a'amu</i>	1.23 ⁺	1.10	1.50	1.22 ⁺	0.99	1.50	1.18	0.96	1.46	1.16	0.93	1.42	1.19	0.96	1.46
Gender				Ref.			Ref.			Ref.			Ref.		
Male				0.56 ^{***}	0.52	0.61	0.56 ^{***}	0.51	0.61	0.56 ^{***}	0.51	0.61	0.56 ^{***}	0.51	0.61
Female															
Birth status															
<i>Fa'a'amu</i>	Ref.			Ref.			Ref.			Ref.			Ref.		
Non- <i>fa'a'amu</i>	1.23 ⁺	1.10	1.50	1.22 ⁺	0.99	1.50	1.18	0.96	1.46	1.16	0.93	1.42	1.19	0.96	1.46
Gender				Ref.			Ref.			Ref.			Ref.		
Male				0.56 ^{***}	0.52	0.61	0.56 ^{***}	0.51	0.61	0.56 ^{***}	0.51	0.61	0.56 ^{***}	0.51	0.61
Female															
Parents' education							Ref.			Ref.			Ref.		Ref.
No higher education							3.61 ^{***}	2.87	4.59	3.31 ^{***}	2.63	4.21	3.26 ^{***}	2.59	3.61 ^{***}
Higher education ²															
Number of children in the family										0.95 ^{***}	0.94	0.97	0.95 ^{***}	0.94	0.97
Parents' place of residence												Ref.			Ref.
Windward Islands												0.95	0.84	1.08	0.95
Leeward Islands												1.04	0.89	1.22	1.04
Austral Islands												0.77 ^{***}	0.67	0.89	0.77 ^{***}
Marquesas												1.01	0.90	1.13	1.01
Tuamotu-Gambier															
Pseudo R2 (Mcfadden)					1.48%			2.65%			2.90%			3.00%	

- Notes:
1. An odds ratio greater than 1 indicates that the group is more likely to be in education or employment compared with the reference group, while an odds ratio less than 1 indicates the group is less likely to be in education or employment compared to the reference group. The statistical significance of the effect is indicated as: + $p < .10$ and *** $p < .001$.
 2. Post-*Baccalauréat* education.
 3. Coverage: FEF respondents' children aged 18 years or over (French Polynesia): $N = 13,064$.
 4. Original data for analysis from FEF (2020) and INED-ISPF.

These results indicate that, once socio-economic position is controlled for, the effect of *fa'a'amura'a* on the likelihood of being in education or employment disappears. In other words, when the sociodemographic characteristics of individuals and their families are taken into account, *fa'a'amu* and non-*fa'a'amu* children do not differ significantly in their odds of being neither in education nor in employment. The apparent over-representation of *fa'a'amu* children in this situation actually reflects a higher concentration of *fa'a'amura'a* practices in the less-advantaged segments of the population.

Conclusion

While the circulation of children in Oceania is generally part of a logic of alliance and mutual aid between families, including economic support, it takes on specific forms in each Oceanian society (for Aotearoa New Zealand, see Metge (1995) and McRae and Nikora (2006)). In Polynesia, the social and political dimensions of *fa'a'amura'a* have evolved alongside rapid modernisation and urbanisation. The practice is multifaceted, also responding to economic hardship in a context of substantial socio-economic inequalities. Qualitative studies further highlight the circumstances families are facing around the time of their children's conception and birth, such as family and sexual violence, parental marital difficulties, illness or death (Bastide, 2023; Benjamin, 2019).

This paper provides an overview of the Polynesian foster care practice known as *fa'a'amura'a* using available quantitative data sources for French Polynesia. Censuses from 1996 to 2017, the Family Survey (*Feti'i e fenua*) (INED-ISPF, 2020), and a comprehensive survey of Grade 9 students (*Le Collège et Moi*) (INED, ISPF-DGEE, 2019) are all general population surveys that included questions identifying adults and children involved in

fa'a'amura'a. The information available in these sources is less detailed than in previous qualitative sources, and the surveys are not specifically devoted to exploring *fa'a'amura'a*. Nevertheless, these data provide a valuable framework that situates and complements the findings of more specialised qualitative research.

The data reveal the remarkable stability of the practice, with a consistent 14 per cent of the French Polynesian population self-identifying as *fa'a'amu*, across cohorts born from the 1960s through to 2005–2006. However, structural demographic changes, such as later childbearing and declining fertility rates, have resulted in a decrease in the number of women fostering *fa'a'amu* children in recent decades.

Fa'a'amura'a is more common in the less-privileged strata of Polynesian society. An initial comparison between *fa'a'amu* and non-*fa'a'amu* children reveals disadvantages for the fostered children, who are less likely to be in education or employment. However, after taking family social background into account, this disparity disappears. In terms of economic support, residential proximity or emotional closeness, *fa'a'amu* children are similar to birth children: they neither receive nor provide substantially different financial support from their parents, they are equally likely to live with them, and they describe themselves as equally close.

The practice of *fa'a'amura'a* remains widespread and has been stable over recent decades. Children raised as *fa'a'amu* report emotional closeness and economic support from their *fa'a'amu* families similar to that of children brought up by their biological parents. Despite this, *fa'a'amu* children tend to have poorer education and employment outcomes. This disparity is largely explained by socio-economic differences between families practising *fa'a'amu* and families who did not, highlighting underlying inequities.

Our study demonstrates the importance of combining approaches to analyse *fa'a'amura'a*. In studies addressing vulnerability (i.e., family violence, homelessness, etc.), a significant over-representation of *fa'a'amura'a* children may indeed be observed. But in data from the general population, the apparent specificities fade away. This paper provides potentially valuable insights for qualitative research on the subject and encourages further in-depth studies on *fa'a'amura'a*.

Notes

- 1 The two questions (“*Avez-vous donné des enfants à fa’a’amu?*”) and (“*Avez-vous actuellement des enfants à fa’a’amu?*”) are not symmetrical: the first pertains to the respondent’s entire lifetime, while the second is limited to their current situation at the time of the census. In the 2022 Census, for which data are not yet available, the question was also asked of men.
- 2 We are referring to the generations born between 1960 and 1979; that is, at the height of the demographic transition. Their parents are potentially still alive, having benefitted from increased life expectancy. Their brothers and sisters outnumber their children because of their parents’ high fertility rates, in contrast to their own.
- 3 The supplementary notes have further survey details, such as sampling plan, response rates and weighting, and are available from the corresponding author on request.
- 4 The five missing schools are concentrated in the Marquises, and so the results (unweighted data) do not represent this archipelago.
- 5 Census information is unfortunately not reliable concerning the declared *fa’a’amu* status of individuals described in the household composition bulletin (see Fardeau et al., 2024). Due to the intra-familial nature of the practice, the kinship tie (nephew, grandchild, etc.) is declared, not the *fa’a’amu* status.
- 6 The number of applications for a ‘Delegation of parental authority’ (an instrument used in France to formalise *fa’a’amu* adoption) by individuals from mainland France fell from just over a hundred in the 1980s and 1990s, with a peak of 199 in 1993, to fewer than a hundred from 1996 (Ho Wan, 1992; Leblic, 2014).
- 7 The 2017 Census did not collect the respondents’ number of children.
- 8 Higher education is here defined by post-*Baccalauréat* education.
- 9 The proportion of students obtaining the *Baccalauréat* in French Polynesia is lower than in mainland France, and half as many pursue further education.
- 10 In the FEF data, situations other than being in education or employment are classified as looking for work, not working (inactive), or other.
- 11 Large families characterising the poorer families with more traditional values.

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