In her chapter in this volume, Erdmure Alber proposes a new way of thinking about fosterage as the transfer of imagined belonging, drawing on the work of Suzanne Lallemand (1993), Esther Goody (1982), and Janet Carsten (2004), as well as Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as an imagined community (1983). Building on Alber’s theoretical discussion, this chapter examines how forms of belonging were imagined and conceptualized in the southeastern Gold Coast (now Ghana), in the late nineteenth century. In particular, I look at how fosterage was imagined in connection to a relationship to which it was considered similar: debt pawning. In debt pawning, a pawn went to live with another person known to his or her family in exchange for a loan; the child or older person would return to his or her family when the loan was repaid. I consider fostering and pawning relationships to have been adjacent or contiguous relationships (Demian 2004) in the southeastern Gold Coast in the nineteenth century, because people described a situation under dispute through these different relationships: they were similar enough in some of their shared rules and norms that people could argue that a particular situation was one or the other. At the same time, it mattered that a situation was defined in one way or another; these relationships were conceived as similar in some aspects but unlike in others. This chapter highlights how people in the colonial Gold Coast imagined fosterage to be both distinct from and similar to pawning.

Looking at relations of belonging under dispute focuses attention on three points. One is that belonging can be imagined in a variety of ways, and therefore the degree of belonging-ness in various relations of belonging differs. As Alber notes, “there is a need to clarify empirically and much more exactly what is, in concrete, moving, when a child is taken by another person” (p. 103). Looking at situations under dispute highlights how different relations of belonging imply different kinds of obligations and rights, and that these relations can have legal and economic implications, along with social and emotional ones.
This point about what is at stake in these relationships relies on the insights of those working in the 'English tradition' described by Alber. Those studies analysed fosterage and adoption in terms of the transfer, sharing, delegation, surrender, and circulation of parental rights—as these were culturally defined—to other persons according to culturally specific rules (Goodenough 1970, Goody 1982). In analysing fosterage in this way, they highlighted how people's labour, companionship, and allegiance are in effect commodities, and access to them, as to other valued commodities, is universally subject to social regulation. Although we do not ordinarily think of it in this way, the rights people have in regard to these things are a form of property. Adoption and fosterage are transactions in parenthood as a form of property. (Goodenough 1970, 398–9)

Newer approaches to kinship have downplayed the notion of rights in favour of concern for how overlapping relationships develop over time, through everyday processes, and create feelings of relatedness, as well as persons of a particular identity. However, Jeanette Edwards and Marilyn Strathern (2000) re-introduced the concept of relations with persons being a kind of property through the term ‘belonging,’ which they use to describe the sense of kinship among people in a small town in the north of England. This term has connotations of ownership, “of alienable possessions and inalienable possessiveness”, as well as of affect, as in “a feeling of belonging” (153). While at least one scholar of fosterage criticizes rights-based kinship theories as derived from Western economistic thinking (Demian 2004), a focus on belonging helps elucidate West African conceptions of kin as a form of wealth and of social relationships as being bound up in economic ones (Bledsoe 1980, Coe 2011).

In her discussion of fostering as the transfer of parenthood, based on research done in Ghana, Goody considers pawning to be close to fosterage and calls it ‘debt fosterage’ because, as with fostered children, the jural identity of the pawns remained linked to the lineage. What Goody finds significant in both pawning and fosterage is that parental and lineage rights to rearing, training and labour could be separated from their rights to the jural identity of the pawn who was still connected to his or her kin. Pawning highlights the benefit of the child’s labour to the new household, whereas fosterage emphasizes the benefit to the child through the sponsorship and training the new household provides in return for the child’s labour. In considering pawning as another form of parental role delegation, Goody thus highlights the similarities between these two kinds of