

# IMAGINED KIN, PLACE AND COMMUNITY: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN 'THE NAKED CHILD' AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PULL OF ORIGINS

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## Abstract

### Introduction

The Second International Gathering of Adult Korean Adoptees was held in Oslo in 2001 in order to establish a forum for sharing experiences, discuss common problems and establish an international network of Korean adoptees. This event serves as a frame for my deliberations. My overall preoccupation is to understand the background to, and *raison d'être* for, this event. Why is it assumed by 'experts' that to be brought up by parents who did not give birth to one, and to live in a different country from that of one's birth, are likely to give rise to a troubled sense of identity? And how does this effect those involved?

Any discussion about transnational adoption invariably gives rise to issues that spring out of the Euro-American distinction between biological and social kinship and lead to questions of identity, belonging, ethnicity, race. It is impossible for transnationally adopted persons in Norway today to avoid having to confront them. I shall examine some of these issues. I shall also contrast the situation of transnationally adopted persons, who are 'socially naked' as regards their country of origin, and that of other transnational immigrants whose diaspora communities are made up of socially significant others.

### Flesh, blood and place as identity constructors

I want reflect on ideas and values about identity and meaningful relatedness – not just in terms of kinship, but of belonging more generally - especially as this is focused upon place of origin. Most adoptees do not know the actual locality from which they originate within the country, nor the identity of any biological relatives. And yet, for many it is a place to which they attribute profound significance. They make the place an integral part of their identity and they fill it with imagined people who, to them, are their *real* mothers, fathers, siblings, etc. It is a powerful discourse which essentialises kinship and place of origin and makes these inseparable from biologically based genealogies.

The tendency in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe is to insist that knowledge about biological origin is necessary for a person's harmonious development and sense of self, clearly affects transnationally adopted persons as they reach adulthood, and is a contributing factor to the increase in demand for return visits to country of origin (Howell 2006).

### The Euro-American ontological status of the individual

I argue that there are two major components of relevance in contemporary Western thinking. Firstly, the metaphoric statement that 'blood is thicker than water' that Schneider (1980 [1968]) argued constitutes American kinship is also constituting kinship in Northern European countries. Schneider further characterises this belief as 'The Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind' (1984: 174). Secondly, the autonomous individual is a dominant value in Western traditions of identity and personhood. Western philosophical and ideological traditions have maintained the ontological and moral centrality of the autonomous individual. Twentieth-century discourses about identity and personhood occurred within a

cultural climate which 'has come to celebrate the values of autonomy and self-realizing' (Rose 1999: xv), giving rise to the constituting prevalence of what he terms the 'psy' discourse (op.cit.) This leads to everything social and cultural being made epiphenomenal to the existential centrality of the individual. The individual becomes his or her own reference point, the bearer of his or her destiny.

A paradox arises out of the situation. On the one hand, moral emphasis is placed on the autonomous individual; on the other, recognition is made of the fact that individuals are made by others, and that these others are highly significant to the individual. The question arises as to what the significance of the various others is thought to entail for the individual, and what 'made by' actually entails. The point for many at the Korea gathering seemed to be to know the 'truth' about those who made them, regardless of what had happened subsequently.

### **The socially naked child**

Despite the potential for disaster, transnational adoption has turned into an enterprise that, by and large, may be characterised as successful. I argue that part of the answer may be found in my suggestion that the abandoned child is a socially naked child, a child denuded of all kinship; denuded, that is, of meaningful relatedness. By abandoning the child anonymously, the biological parents are in effect de-kinning it. As such, the abandoned child is the example *par excellence* of the autonomous individual – so central in contemporary Western thinking. But this also, paradoxically, renders the child a non-person - in a sense non-human - in its birth country. By being abandoned by their relatives (whether biological or not is irrelevant in this context) they are at the same time de-kinned by them, removed from kinned sociality.

I suggest that this social nakedness makes adoption across national frontiers possible, makes it a morally acceptable act for donors as well as receivers. The birth country allows people from an alien country to remove such non-persons and to kin them to themselves. The child's de-kinned condition enables the state to relinquish a citizen and the new state to accept her because she will not be naked in her new country; she enters it fully clothed in new relatives. In this case, biology is rendered insignificant, sociality becomes all-important. However, this is what some adoptees cannot accept. To them the biogenetic connectedness becomes paramount, overshadowing all other relationships.

### **Naked places**

Diaspora communities throughout the world share a common attention focused on '... a specific place which plays a central role as a common source of identity in their global network of relations, but which may not be their place of residence' (Olwig 1997: 35).. Can we understand the transitionally adopted persons' preoccupation with their country of birth in a similar manner? I want to suggest not. Their situation is directly the reverse from that of the diaspora communities. The adoptees focus on place devoid of identified people, whereas the diaspora communities focus on place rendered meaningful by being linked through people. A global network of relations is not available to the transnationally adoptees. To network amongst themselves may become meaningful, but must necessarily be of a different order because for them their country of origin is a naked place. If you cannot name the place you were born and where your parents live(d), if you cannot name your parents or other relatives, then what does 'return' or 'roots' or 'motherland' tours mean? Just as biology on its own (naked biology) is not enough to feel connected, place on its own (naked place) is not enough either. Those adoptees who do not accept this create for themselves imagined kinship anchored in an imagined place, granting themselves imagined belonging.

## **Bibliography**

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