

THE INTERNACIONAL ADOPTION RELATED CHILDREN IN QUEBEC (CANADA)

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Abstract

Adoption is generally understood as kinship with strangers. My research, however, has to do with the statistically marginal cases of intercountry adoption where adoptee and adoptive parents are related prior to the adoption, usually to one adoptive parent through consanguinity and to the other through marriage. These adoptions are called in Québec "adoptions famille", "family adoptions".

Toby Volkman has argued that "Over the past ten years, transnational adoption has become both visible and vocal, and that contemporary practice of transnational adoption provoke new ways of imagining race, kinship, and culture in North America" (2003, 21-1:29). While I agree with her conclusions regarding the impact of transracial international adoptions on pluralistic societies such as Canada and the US, I would like to point out that there also exists a pull of another sort in these countries where immigration is significant- that of intraracial, intrafamilial transnational adoption (in addition to family reunions provided by immigration laws).

Quebec has a high rate of immigration, which creates a demand on the part of new immigrants to adopt children from their country of origin. Between 1990 and 2004 familial international adoptions represented between 5.2% and 7.2% of all international adoptions. Children adopted in this manner came from some 55 different countries. Nevertheless, 31.3% have come from Haiti, 11.4% from India, 10.6% from the Philippines and 5.5% from the Congo. If we find more intrafamilial transnational adoptions from the Philippines, India and Haiti, it is because this type of adoption is strongly favored by the culture of these countries of origin. Fosterage also is widespread in Haiti and Africa.

Family adoptions do not seem to be in competition with «regular» intercountry adoptions. In most instances the adopted children would not have been adopted otherwise. In term of age, these adoptions involve babies and young children but also older children – even adolescents.

The motivational forces behind family adoptions are situated at the intersection of several phenomena. These include the international circulation of children among kin (fostering), finding substitute parents in the case of orphans, as a humanitarian gesture towards related children in distress from countries that are excessively poor or experiencing war or an AIDS epidemic, and finally as a means of adoption which is closest to blood ties.

This particular form of adoption seems well suited to answer current preoccupations in intercountry adoption as expressed by international conventions. First the right of the child to know the identity of his/her birth parents whenever this is a possibility. Second the right to some continuity in the child's life. However there is also the danger, especially present in the culture of some countries of origin, such as India and the Philippines, of providing on demand a child who is not in need for a sterile kin member.

To qualify for transnational "adoption famille" in Quebec, the project have to concern the adoption of a brother, a sister, a nephew or a niece, a grand child, a cousin, a half-brother or sister, or those of spouse, including common spouse after three years of cohabitation. One should note that the category 'cousin' is not specified in terms of degree, which gives agents of the Secrétariat à l'adoption internationale a lot of discretionary power. This definition of the family is extensive.

A surprise here is that one can adopt siblings and half-siblings. The plenary adoption of a sibling or half-sibling is possible and indeed we did encounter in the course of interviews one such case. Clearly this law is designed to complement immigration laws and family reunion and does not take into consideration only the adoption law whose goal is to create a new filiation. As Peter Selman has argued, over its brief history legal adoption has come to serve a number of very different goals and that it has been seen as a cure for too many ills with various outcomes and rates of success (2004: 257).

Individuals involved in intrafamilial transnational adoptions may know each other quite well prior to the transfer of the child. For example, adoptive parents may have contributed to the costs of schooling and raising the child in its country of origin. But in other cases the parties involved are only kin members, aware of the existence of each other through mutual kin connections but not particularly close to each other's.

Family adoptions are always plenary. The paradox is that on one hand the inevitability of previous family ties and the possibility of keeping these adoption private is recognized by the Hague Convention on intercountry adoption (1993 and yet on the other hand these adoptions are kept confidential and a new birth certificate is provided (as it is the case for all adoptions).

Bob Simpson (1998) has argued that what is new in our society is not family recomposition, which always existed, but rather its extension and banalization.

In terms of family recomposition, two models seem to emerge from the few interviews I have been conducting (I will present ethnographic cases):

The first one indicates that even if new birth certificate is established, the continuity of old kinship ties prevails. The kinship terminology indicates this clearly. The terms of address for adoptive parents are for example that of uncle and aunt or alternatively of godmother and godfather. Another indication is the family name of the child, which is often a combination of two family names.

The second model is one of extreme family recomposition, one in which a half-sister has become a mother for her half-brother, where second cousin have become children, and so on. Beside the kinship terminology, the family name is another indication of that extreme form of family recomposition.