

KINNING: THE CREATION OF LIFE TRAJECTORIES IN TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

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With empirical material obtained from a study of transnational adoption in Norway, an argument is made for the concept of kinning. By this is meant a process by which a foetus, new-born child, or any previously unconnected person, is brought into a significant and permanent relationship that is expressed in a kin idiom. Through a focus on adoption within a cultural setting that emphasizes the flesh and blood metaphor as central for kinship, the ambiguities and contradictions embedded in the relationship between biological and social relatedness are thrown into sharp relief. Questions of race and ethnicity also become pertinent to the kinning drama of adoptive parents which involves, it is argued, a process of transubstantiation of the adopted child.

Despite the strong desire to be a 'normal family', families with transnationally adopted children always remain different in some sense. To obtain a child, and to create a family, is so demanding that those who succeed learn a lot about themselves in the process.

(Norwegian mother of a daughter adopted from Colombia)

Due to a sharp decline in the number of Norwegian-born babies being made available for adoption, transnational adoption has become, since the late 1960s, an increasingly popular means for involuntarily infertile couples to create a family. Despite advances in new reproductive technologies, the volume of adoption of children from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and former Soviet bloc countries is steadily growing. As a social practice, adoption has received surprisingly little attention from anthropologists, yet it goes to the very root of what we take to be kinship, and can throw new light on established questions concerning the nature of relatedness. For the past four years, I have been studying transnational adoption in Norway, using a number of different sources and networks.¹ My main interest has been to treat adoption as a means to throw new light on cultural values concerning procreation, reproduction, family, kinship, children, and the perceived relationship between biogenetic and social relatedness. On the basis of this, I argue in this article for an unexplored aspect of kinship studies which I call 'kinning'. By kinning, I mean the process by which a foetus or new-born child (or a previously unconnected person) is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people that is expressed in a kin idiom. I wish to suggest that to kin is a universal process, marked in all societies by various rites of passage

that ensure kinned subjectivation (see below), but that it has not generally been recognized as such. Because transnational adoption in Norway today is such a public practice, taking place in a cultural climate that predicates kinship on biogenetic connectedness, and because adoptive parents engage so deliberately in transcending the fact that they are not biologically connected to their children, my attention was led towards this previously 'hidden' aspect of kinship. Through a process of kinning, which, I shall argue, involves what I call a transubstantiation of the children's essence, adoptive parents enrol their adopted children into a kinned trajectory that overlaps their own. Issues pertaining to time and place as well as bodies become central in this process. It is a process which, in most cases, is fraught with tensions, ambiguities, ambivalences, and contradictions, not least because the parents are faced with the dilemma of incorporating the child into their own kin group at the same time as they must acknowledge the existence of unknown biological relatives.

I am concerned here primarily with the efforts engaged in by adoptive parents to make their adopted child into a relative. I do not focus directly upon the processes through which adoptees make themselves into persons that take account of their radically changed circumstances. However, it is clear that kinning affects all parties involved. The adoptees certainly undergo very radical changes to their former selves, and the parents also emerge affected. In fact, I wish to suggest that adoptive parents and their children recreate each other intersubjectively. Through being kinned, the adoptees qualify their personhood through their relations to others (primarily their adoptive parents), just as the adoptive parents, through kinning, adjust their personhood through their relations to others (primarily their adopted children). Moreover, they all become fixed as kinned persons by virtue of their particular relationship (cf. Faubion 2001: 11-12).

Norwegians' perceptions about their own personal belonging in the contemporary social world are contrived through personal trajectories worked out in an idiom of kinship. The idiom of kinship, moreover, is one that is grounded in a biological connectedness of shared substance. Understanding of substance in these contexts is not only material, but includes the insubstantial (invisible essence, see below) elements carried in the substantive ones. What is important, however, is not so much what substance is, but what it does (cf. Carsten 2001). Blood, for example, is a substance, but the significance of its meaning in contexts of kinship is the relational quality of blood as shared between defined categories of kin. To share the same blood means to share certain physical resemblances as well as insubstantial qualities, such as personality, interests, and abilities inherent in, for example, 'being an Andersen'. This may be said to provide the social dimension of kinship, which creates continuity over time, and gives people a sense of belonging to 'a life', to something bigger than the individual (Roalkvam 2001). A kinship system implies certain necessary relationships, some of which are asymmetrical and carry asymmetrical expectations of sociality. Thus a mother without a child is by definition an impossibility; a son or daughter without a mother is not. For its development of personhood, a child needs to be fixed in relation to others and, through its relatedness to them, to society at large. Plotting their identities, the adoptees have to negotiate two sets of significant interlocutors in their

kinning drama: biological and adoptive parents. Whereas the adoptive parents are active partners in this drama, the biological parents are, in most cases, silent and insubstantial interlocutors – but in Norwegian discourses on kinship, where a constituting emphasis is placed on the blood-tie metaphor, no less important for that.

Biology – a universal signifier?

In a fascinating study of adoption practices among an indigenous community in the highlands of Ecuador, Weismantel (1995) attacks what she regards as a persistent dichotomy between nature and culture in kinship studies, and argues that the Zumbagao make no such distinction in their understanding of parent-child relationships. Rather, while

The physical act of intercourse, pregnancy, and birth can establish a strong bond between two adults ... other adults, by taking a child into their family and nurturing its physical needs through the same substances as those eaten by the rest of the social group, can make of that child a son or daughter *who is physically as well as jurally their own* (Weismantel 1995: 695, emphasis added).

This ethnography, and that of others who have studied societies where adoption represents no challenge to epistemology (Bowie forthcoming; Meigs 1986), clearly defies any attempt at universalizing a biogenetic understanding of procreation and kinship. They provide a useful corrective to those societies where the dominant discourse is one that privileges biological connectedness. Weismantel's argument is that, through eating the same food over time, a child may be made one's own physically, and not just jurally. She contrasts this with the Euro-American insistence 'upon a strictly genetic notion to physical relatedness ... [which] denies the impact of history on the physical self, the regimes of diet and exercise ... through which societies produce specific human bodies at specific times' (1995: 697). I find this extremely suggestive because it highlights notions I have encountered among many Norwegian adoptive parents. To Weismantel's list of kin-constituting factors – ingesting food, sharing emotional states, being in close physical proximity to people and objects – (1995: 694), I would add a shared creation of the family's destiny. All these factors reflect Norwegian adoptive parents' understanding of the relationship between themselves and their children. But this understanding is not one shared by society at large; here, biogenetics occupies a dominant explanatory position. Adoptive parents have to take this into account when they kin their children. Their task is thus much more challenging and complex than is that of the Andeans. I have suggested elsewhere (Howell 2001) that the adoptive families do not operate a form of either/or as regards the constitutive and defining role of biology and sociality, but that in different contexts they foreground one at the expense of the other. They thus employ a dynamic model of kinship. This is, moreover, a model that allows for conceptual, semantic, and moral space for both genitor and pater and genetrix and mater.

If kinship is regarded as an institutionalized means for enacting a process of effectuating enduring relationships – through a process of kinning and subjectivation (cf. Faubion 2001: 13) – then I suggest that it must also be regarded

as something that is necessarily achieved in and through relationships with others. Categories are filled with meaning by all the partners concerned. In the case of adoption, this becomes very clear. Because a doxic premise of biological connectedness is challenged, that very assumption is thrown into self-conscious relief. What my material shows is that the path of adoptive kinning is a bumpy one, but that where it is successful, it ends by privileging the social – the social quality of kinship – at the expense of the biogenetic.

Temporal practices of kinning

In what follows, I wish to explore some of the social and temporal practices of kinship – and of kinning – as commonly practised in Norwegian adoptive families. My main focus is on the ways in which a sense of belonging is transmitted to the adopted children after they have been allocated to their new parents. I suggest that this may be analysed as transubstantiation. In order to achieve this, parents must take account of the children's different biological, geographical, and cultural origins, as well as of their former relationships, and at the same time fix them permanently not only into the present, but also into the past of their new family and kin. Only then may the children become integral partners in the shaping of the familial future. It is a process that I have characterized elsewhere as one of self-conscious kinship (Howell 2001) rather than, as has been suggested by Modell (1994: 238), a situation of artificial or fictive kinship – terms which seem to privilege biology. After a brief consideration of the stages of the 'kinning work' that adoptive parents engage in with regard to their adopted children, I discuss some implications of 'return visits' or 'motherland tours' – sometimes called 'roots tours' – wherein families with adopted teenagers or young adults travel to visit the child's country of origin. Such trips are increasingly popular in Norway, and may be regarded as an expression of the increased attention being paid to issues of 'roots'.

Examination of the media, parliamentary debates concerned with amendments to various family laws, and the research of several graduate students involved in the project (Howell & Melhuus 2001) demonstrated very clearly that family values are highly emphasized in Norwegian social life today. Despite a national divorce rate approaching 50 per cent, the nuclear family still remains the ideal. A large proportion of Norwegian adults engages in serial monogamy, often marking each such relationship with a child. What most adult couples seem to visualize for themselves is a kind of idealized family life based on a unit of father and mother, two to three children, a house with a garden and a cabin in the countryside, and a great deal of close contact with grandparents and adult siblings. This is endorsed politically, and Norwegian birth leave is amongst the most generous in the world. There is a strong normative encouragement, backed by financial incentives, for fathers to participate actively in the bringing-up of their children, and many fathers today take a minimum of one month's birth leave once the mother returns to work.² The ideal of the heterosexual nuclear family is thus not challenged by Norway's high divorce rate; it is just that the partners comprising a couple relationship may change at fairly frequent intervals.

To my open-ended question, 'Why did you want to have children?', almost every adoptive parent answered that they wished to become 'a normal family'. Comparatively speaking, a large proportion of Norwegian women give birth. By the time they have reached the age of 40, approximately 92 per cent of them have given birth to a child (Sundby and Schei 1996). This fact, taken together with a cultural emphasis on the desirability of children and family life, means that, for most adults between the age of 25 and 45, much of their social life is centred round having and bringing up children. For those couples who fail to give birth, the pressure becomes great indeed. Again and again, I have been told by adoptive parents how much they longed to be engaged in the wider social life around them, but that without children, without being a 'normal family', they were unable to do so and therefore thought of themselves as permanently excluded from the social world surrounding them. The changing gender models are such that childlessness may be as painful for men as it is for women. Once failure to conceive is faced, however, and is then followed by the failure of assisted conception, adoption becomes a joint venture of the involuntarily infertile couple. Indeed, many couples argue retrospectively that through adoption they have both contributed equally to the 'birth' and subsequent kinning of the child. This is regarded as a positive aspect of the practice. There is a noticeable change in the adopting couples' attitudes during this time, as they shift from seeking to produce children from their own bodies to seeking children produced by other, and unknown, bodies. They become unequivocal in praising adoption as a desirable procreative method. 'To adopt is the natural way for us to have children,' a father told me. At the same time, it cannot be disputed that other bodies produced their children. Not only other bodies, but also, usually, bodies who have appearances which are different from the Norwegian norm and who therefore have given birth to children who do not look like their new parents. Moreover, these children were born in distant lands whose traditions and culture are alien. Not surprisingly, these facts give rise to ambivalent attitudes in the adoptive parents. There is no way in which they can hide from them, and they are obliged somehow to deal with them in their relationship with their children and with the world at large. I have argued elsewhere that they handle this through a process of biologizing or de-biologizing the quality of the relationship according to particular contexts, and according to the stages of the child-parent relationship. Thus, in certain contexts they will foreground the biological nature of the relationship while 'backgrounding' the social; in other contexts they will reverse the order. Parents create cognitive boundaries between the contexts and handle what appear to the anthropologist as contradictory positions with apparent ease (Howell 2001).

Transubstantiation of selves: from foreign to Norwegian

Blood is a common metaphor for descent and kin relatedness in Norway as much as it is amongst the Americans studied by Schneider (1968). Relatedness predicated on blood-constituted categories carries an automatic expectation of meaningful sociality. Previously unknown persons alter the quality of their interaction upon learning that they are related (*i slekt*), however distantly.

The passage of time, geographical distance, and absence of interaction are not in themselves barriers to an experience of being related once the blood connection is established. Meaningful belonging in the present is contingent in Norwegian thinking upon a demonstrable belonging to the past. Of course, the future becomes predicated upon such continuity, and the reproduction of continuity is anchored in kinned relationships and kinned places. This is the opposite to the adoptive situation. Where blood is the dominant metaphor for expressing kinned relationships, adoptive families have a problem. Temporal and spatial closeness of the moment do not in themselves compensate for the absence of shared flesh, blood, and history. Adoptive parents somehow have to compensate for this absence in order to achieve kinning, I suggest that much of the work adoptive parents engage in, before and after the arrival of their adopted child, may be interpreted in terms of the transubstantiation of the child.

According to the *Shorter Oxford English dictionary*, transubstantiation means, first, 'the changing of one substance into another', and, secondly, in the case of the Eucharist, the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, as a result of which 'only the appearances (and other "accidents") of bread and wine remain' (my emphasis). I find this suggestive in trying to understand the processes that the adoptive parents engage in. Unlike transformation, which changes the form as well as possible content, transubstantiation effects a fundamental change while the appearance remains simultaneously unaltered. In the case of transnationally adopted children, their incorporation into their parents' kin transcends the constraints of the blood tie, while the outward appearance remains unchanged. The substance (biological body) remains; the social essence (being, self) is changed. I therefore argue that transubstantiation is effected over time and that it is illuminating to divide the temporal process into four main stages: pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, birth, and daily life. The terms 'pregnancy' and 'birth' are employed by the people concerned. (For a more detailed exposition of these stages, see Howell 2001.)

The kinning of adopted children

The 'pre-pregnancy' stage begins when a couple decides that they want to have a child. The persistent failure to conceive leads to a round of medical check-ups, which may, or may not, include the use of new reproductive technology. The process that leads to a decision to adopt can be a long and painful one. 'Almost everything in our lives centred around a wish that was never granted,' I was told by an adoptive father. Once they have decided on adoption, however, most couples put the grief of infertility behind them and focus on the hope and expectation of becoming a family. The criteria for acceptance as adoptive parents are restrictive and normative. Couples register with an adoption agency through which children are allocated, and choose a country. When the national adoption bureau gives the go-ahead, a formal application is sent to the country in question. This is a time when couples are still adjusting their expectations from that of having their own 'home-

made' child, as the jargon runs in adoptive circles, to adopting a stranger. Most engage in a fair amount of self-examination during this period. Starting from an unreflective focus upon biology, they end up with a rather assertive culturalist approach favouring adoption. This is the time when they create the mental and emotional space for a non-biological child, born of unknown biological parents in a foreign country, and looking quite different from themselves.

Pregnancy may be said to start the moment the couple is approved by the Norwegian authorities. However, unlike biological pregnancy, the duration of the pregnancy is uncertain. The prospective parents must wait until a child is made available to them in the country concerned. Depending on the donor country, this can take from six months to three years. During this time, the agencies put much effort into preparing them for the event. They provide prospective parents with journals, pamphlets, and books that deal with many different issues pertaining to transnational adoption. They also organize preparatory courses in which prospective adoptive parents meet to discuss relevant literature and talk together about individual hopes and fears. The agencies are thus a major force in shaping attitudes. In such communal settings parents are made to face some possible implications of their choice.³ The pregnancy period is a time of hybrid discourses and rapid shifts between biology and sociality as constituting reference points. It is also a period during which the as-yet-unidentified child is being incorporated into its adopters' sense of their own identity as expecting parents.

When a child is allocated to a couple, I suggest that the birth may be said to begin. It extends through the time following allocation, arrival, and the initial period after arrival. Upon allocation, expecting parents are sent a photograph of the child and its personal details. From this time onwards, the kinning of the distant and unseen child is actively pursued. The photograph is duplicated and widely distributed and the child's room made ready. The following statement by an adoptive mother is typical. 'From the moment of the telephone call [from the agency] that boy, Savran, was our son. We had not seen him, not even in a photo, not held him, but I felt so strongly that this boy was our son' (Beheim Karlsen 2002: 15). However, it may still take several months before parents may collect their child. The emotional investment that expecting parents put into their identified, but as-yet-unencountered child was well illustrated in a report about a couple whose allocated child had died before they had collected her. The parents organized a memorial service in the local church in which they publicly mourned their daughter in the company of family and friends (*Adopsjonsforum* April 1999: 21).

On their arrival in Norway, adopted children are treated as *tabulae rasae*. Indeed, they undergo something akin to a rebirth. The main actors in this process are the parents, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary, all of whom are concerned with the transubstantiation of the child. Each child is given a new name, new citizenship, new birth certificate, new kin and home, new social and cultural expectations, and new relationships beyond the family. This is a time characterized by an extreme effort to de-biologize origins and to transubstantiate the child's essence. The ultimate aim is to kin the adopted child into his or her parents' network.

Planting the child in the ancestral land

Kinship relates people together in a shared temporal and spatial universe. Belonging to a place plays an integral part in personal narratives that are constituent in the make-up of Norwegian identity. Until recently, the Norwegian population consisted largely of small freehold farmers whose land was passed patrilineally from generation to generation. Kinned personal relatedness to others is linked to kinned places and is a constituent factor in the formation of identity and personhood. In the light of this, the question for adoptive parents and their children becomes one of how to compensate for the absence of a shared history. To acknowledge and handle the fact of a past that occurred in a foreign land and with unknown foreign people, and at the same time to render this irrelevant for their child's emerging Norwegianness, becomes a challenging project. Placing the child in localities that are associated with kin, and dressing him or her in Norwegian regional costumes (*bunad*, see below), is a common way to facilitate this transubstantiation.

Having examined a number of reports which parents have to send to donor institutions in the countries of origin for some years after the arrival of their child, it is clear to me that attempts are made to distance adoptees from their origins and to incorporate them into their new social environment. In the reports, the parents stress how well received their child has been by its grandparents, uncles, and aunts, how happily he or she plays with cousins, and how easily she or he adapts to the new home. The accompanying photographs confirm and elaborate this message. The children are photographed in places that epitomize the ideals of Norwegian family life and kinned relatedness: in the company of grandparents and other relatives in ancestral places; at home on the ceremonial occasions of Christmas and major family anniversaries; taking part in celebrations of the Norwegian National Day; in the country cottage in the mountains, in the forest, or by the sea, engaging in typical outdoor activities. In these photographs little or no concession is made to the child's country of origin. The clothing is relentlessly Norwegian, ranging from national costume on important occasions to standard children's outdoor clothing. The message of these reports to the donor countries is that the child, despite its non-Norwegian appearance, is nevertheless changing into a typical Norwegian child.

Through photographing the adopted child in places of parental descent or belonging, the child is being symbolically planted in them. During this process, hardly a single reference is made to the child's place of origin. As the children learn to speak Norwegian, they also learn to like Norwegian food and engage in Norwegian activities. From the point of view of adoptive parents, their new child has 'come home'. This is the jargon employed by all the agencies. In their annual reports, they provide figures for how many children have 'come home' from the various countries from which they adopt. By 'coming home', they seem to be saying that the child has finally arrived where it was meant to have been all the time, thus 'backgrounding' biological and national origins. By means of a linguistic sleight of hand, the biological parents in the country of origin are transformed into temporary caretakers.

Thus, one way to kin the adopted children is by effecting their transubstantiation through a series of measures that symbolically plant them in the

soil of one's ancestors. They are thereby incorporated into parents' kin, and biology is rendered irrelevant. Another way is to create an origin narrative that involves a discourse of fate.⁴ Many parents I have talked to believe that the orphanage directors put a great deal of effort into choosing a child that will be most compatible with themselves – if not in looks, then in personality traits or interests. Parents rarely feel that the choice of a particular child is a matter of mere chance. Somehow they 'are meant for each other'. Commenting on the sturdy physique of his newly allocated Ethiopian son, the burly, muscular father told me that, of course, this 6-month-old baby was his son. Not only were they built alike but, just like his father, the little boy was clearly made for the outdoor life of farming, fishing, and hunting.

In certain contexts, however, the fact of the child's different origins is emphasized. Adoptive families gather at annual social get-togethers of the India Association, the Columbia Association, and so on. They eat food and decorate the venue with artefacts from the children's country of origin; they may also dress the children in costumes from their birth country. On such occasions, the very fact of being different constitutes the families as 'normal'. The special quality of their shared situation in itself creates a sense of community between adoptive parents (Howell 2002). Furthermore, those who travelled and lived together when they collected their children often develop a common history. The strange town, orphanage, or hotel become shared places of origin for them. Those who met during the preparatory period may also forge close bonds with each other. Such couples visit each other during holidays and they send Christmas and birthday cards to each other's children. They talk of each other as being kin (*i slekt*). In maintaining these relationships, parents seek a resolution to the paradox of their special situation by engaging in Norwegian sociality in the name of Korean (or whichever) origin. Everyone knows that they are not real kin, but they interact in ways that are recognizably kin-like and the get-togethers of adoptive parents can be interpreted as family reunions. Despite appearances to the contrary, what is celebrated on these occasions is not, I would argue, Koreanness, but Norwegianness.

A Norwegian mind in a Pakistani body?

Closely linked to an increased interest in genealogical knowledge in Norway is an increased interest in acquiring national costumes (*bunad*). The *bunad* is worn on occasions of rites of passage within the kin group, including baptism, confirmation, weddings, and birthdays, and also at Christmas. They are also worn on Norwegian National Day, an occasion which is also widely known as 'Children's Day' (*barnas dag*). There are many different styles of *bunad* and each style is associated with a particular region of the country. For girls and women, the *bunad* consists of an embroidered woollen skirt and bodice worn with a white blouse, apron, and head-dress, together with a variety of silver brooches. Each region also has a male variant: woollen breeches, an embroidered waistcoat with silver buttons, and a peaked felt hat. In theory, only those who can put forward a legitimate claim of descent from a particular region may wear the national costume associated with it. The *bunad* is

largely a product of the mid-nineteenth-century romanticism which found its inspiration in nature and life in the countryside, and, as such, is an example of the invention of tradition. Nevertheless, it has taken root in Norwegian imagination and is incorporated into a sense of national identity (Witoszek 1998).

An interesting incident occurred recently in connection with the celebration of Norwegian National Day in Oslo, which exemplifies the significant links between birth, blood, place, and nationality.⁵ It involved Rubina Rana, a woman immigrant born in Pakistan of Pakistani parents, who arrived in Norway as a young girl. She subsequently obtained Norwegian citizenship and is one of the very few immigrant members of Oslo City Council. She had been appointed to head the planning committee for the celebration of the 2000 National Day celebrations. This position involves leading the huge procession of school children who wind their way through the centre of the city. Waving Norwegian flags and singing national songs accompanied by numerous school bands, the procession reaches its culmination in front of the Royal Palace where the royal family greets its whole Norwegian 'family.' The appointment of 'a Pakistani' to lead this procession provoked heated debates in the media. She received anonymous letters urging her to stand down; some contained death threats. The question arose as to what she should wear on the day. Other Norwegians would, as a matter of course, wear a *bunad*. In contradistinction to ethnic Norwegians, however, the woman councillor could lay no claims to the Norwegian fjords and valleys. She was therefore not entitled to wear a *bunad*; yet if she had chosen to wear some form of South Asian national dress – a *salwar kameez* or *sari* – many would have found this also to be provocative.

As it happened, the city of Oslo, which had not hitherto had a *bunad*, had commissioned one to be designed for the city's thousand-year jubilee the following year. Rubina Rana was invited to inaugurate this on the occasion of the National Day. This was much less controversial. The Oslo *bunad*, like this Pakistani-born woman politician, is without history in Oslo and Norway. Or rather, together they initiated an historical trajectory. Both Rubina Rana and the Oslo *bunad* are linked to Oslo the place. Yet they are both newcomers in terms of Norwegian identity and do not fit into the larger order of things. Symbolically, the event marks a new fact of Norwegian social life. A previously homogeneous and mainly rural population must give way to a heterogeneous and increasingly urban one. Wearing a *bunad* – the ultimate symbol of belonging to a place, although one without tradition – she signals the advent of a different future. The event marks a future where immigrants have come to stay and to participate in Norwegian social and cultural life: a population who share place, but not history. What the incident demonstrates is the strong associations made in Norwegian cultural life between place of origin, kin relatedness, and identity. Time is of the essence. That is, claims to Norwegianness can be put forward only within a discourse that privileges a temporal kin-based connectedness extending back in time and linked to a place. Personhood is achieved through both shared substance and shared essence. Only the idiom of kinship can provide such a connection. The new Oslo *bunad*, however, provides an opening for accommodating new citizens both to the city of Oslo and to the nation-state of Norway. In situations where

one cannot claim kinship on the basis of genealogy, attachment to a place can serve as a substitute. In an oblique sort of way, the example highlights the problem faced by adoptive families.

However, unlike the Pakistani immigrant who could not make any claims to a temporal or spatial link to Norway beyond her own personal history of arrival, adopted children from overseas are 'sponsored' into existing kin-based networks and histories by their adoptive parents, who employ whatever measures are available to them to transubstantiate their children's subjectivity. To this end it is very common to give adopted children a *bunad*. Photos of them wearing the *bunad* that has its origins in their mother's or father's ancestral place are frequently published in magazines published by the adoption agencies and are also sent to the donor countries. Framed photos of them in *bunad* adorn their relatives' homes. In contrast to the Rubina Rana case, it is unlikely that anyone would regard the wearing of the *bunad* by adopted children as illegitimate. Being adopted, kinned, and transubstantiated, they are, from a formal as well as an emotional point of view, equal to biological children. This further highlights a question of sameness and otherness. With regard to adopted children, otherness is negated and an 'imagined sameness' (Gullestad 2000: 45) is achieved, something which is not achieved by other immigrants. In this case, kinship may usefully be thought of as 'a regime of subjectivation' (Faubion 2001; see below). Through the processes of transubstantiation and kinning, adoptive parents negate the separation between the 'social' and the 'biological' which is encountered elsewhere in society. This enables the children to develop their sense of self and personhood as an integral part of their relatedness to non-biological relatives.

Paradoxes inherent in the kinning of transnationally adopted children

Successful transubstantiation of the transnationally adopted child involves fixing it in a wider set of relationships expressed in a kin idiom. This is a process that adoptive parents actively engage in from the moment of their child's arrival. As stated above, the overriding motivation for adopting a child is to create a family, to live out normal family life, and to establish new forms of relatedness with existing kin, for couples that are unable to do this themselves. While not being able to create one's own family is, in some profound sense, to reduce one's value as a man/husband and a woman/wife, once a child has arrived the parents put much effort into ensuring that the child becomes involved in a wider kin network. Indeed, studies have shown that adopted children spend more time with their grandparents than biological children do (Botvar 1994: 18). This may be interpreted as a deliberate way to incorporate the child into its parents' kinned trajectory, thereby ensuring them a kinned future. Through frequent social interaction with their own kin, the lack of biogenetic relatedness is rendered irrelevant.

As was noted above, adoptive parents are very concerned with being 'good parents'. They are helped in this by the number of activities organized for them, primarily under the auspices of the adoption agencies. The mere fact of being adoptive parents in Norway makes them both highly self-conscious

and reflexive about their status. It also leads to an anxious and continuous examination of the child's development. Undoubtedly, the kinning of adopted children requires much more effort than does that of biological children. I suggest that adoptive parents are torn between wanting to be a 'normal family' on the one hand, and taking account of the special circumstances of becoming a family on the other. This leads, in most cases, to ignoring (except in superficial ways) the special origins of their child and putting their trust in the efforts made at transubstantiating it. But they also pay attention to the increasing demands from outside forces (adoption agencies, psychologists, and other experts) that they take full account of the child's difference and thus teach him or her to take pride in their 'original culture'. Implied in this and similar expressions is an assumed natural desire to know one's roots, something which finds its counterpart in discussions both in the media and in the national Parliament. One of the most popular television programmes in Norway is called 'Tore tracks them down' (*Tore på sporet*). The programme presenter, Tore Strømøy, has won Norway's 'Television Personality of the Year' award several years running. The format is simple: members of the public request Tore's help in finding a long-lost family member, and the climax of each programme is the reunion between them. Several people adopted from overseas have featured in the programme, and this makes for particularly dramatic and emotional viewing. Many adoptees have told me that following one such screening, they were urged by friends and acquaintances to undertake the same kind of search. It is very common to believe that all adoptees experience a desire to meet their biological relatives. When those sections of Norway's 2002 Bio-Technology Act that dealt with assisted procreation – especially sperm and egg donation – were debated in Parliament, the politicians repeatedly demonstrated their unquestioned assumptions that, in order to grow up into harmonious adults, people need to know the identity of their biological progenitors. They therefore voted against anonymous donation. The Adoption Act of 1986, which, together with some minor amendments of 1999, regulates current adoption practices, gives a rather ambiguous message. On the one hand, it states unequivocally that adopted and biological children are legally and socially equal. At the same time, it states that, upon reaching the age of maturity, adoptees have the right to know the identity of their biological parents. According to my research and that of others (Botvar 1999; Brottveit 1999), only a small minority of transnationally adopted people experience a strong desire to know this. Those that do, however, receive much publicity and confirm a widespread cultural belief (see below).

In keeping with a growing focus on biological relatedness in Norwegian society at large, it is noticeable that the adoption agencies have increasingly encouraged adoptive parents to learn about the donor country and to familiarize their children with its culture. However, the conceptualization of 'culture' is here both reified and superficial, confined to certain cultural markers such as food, dress, and artefacts that are easily consumed. More significant social and cultural differences are rarely, if ever, confronted. In their handouts to prospective parents, the agencies provide virtually no serious information about social, economic, or political institutions and conditions in the donor countries, and few parents interviewed expressed much interest in matters of this kind.

As the children grow up, many parents seem to be more open in acknowledging the non-biological quality of the relationship; perhaps because they feel secure in having successfully effected a transubstantiation. Now parents may begin to foreground the fact that the child has a biological and ethnic origin that they do not share. I wish to suggest that one solution to what may be called the adoptive parents' dilemma (handling the socio-cultural and emotional challenges of taking account of the biological origins of the child in the kinning process) is found in family return visits to the child's country of origin. It is a solution that more and more families are taking advantage of.

'Roots': return visits (or 'motherland tours')

The importance attributed to origins, descent, and genealogy is widespread in a number of different Western discourses on personhood and identity. Increasingly linked to this discourse is the notion of roots, which has found a place among the shapers of opinion in Norwegian transnational adoption circles. Until recently, a transnationally adopted child was regarded as *tabula rasa*, but today such children are talked of in terms of arriving with a 'backpack' full of unknown experiences and genes (Howell forthcoming). As the children grow up, some of the contradictions of their situation often become unavoidable, and parents, together with their adopted children, have to find some kind of solution. Current thinking in adoptive circles focuses on 'roots', which have become a key symbol, giving rise to a key scenario (cf. Ortner 1973) that includes 'return', 'motherland', or 'roots' visits to the adoptees' country of origin. In what follows, I argue that adoptive parents increasingly make such visits a key feature of their understanding of being adoptive parents. This, too, can be traced to what I see as a growing Western cultural emphasis on roots, as expressed, for example, in the increasing preoccupation among Norwegians and other Euro-Americans with genealogies, and also in the high value attached to individuals' place of origin, and in an increasing focus on genetics in the media. Motherland tours demonstrate the confusions that exist in discourses about race, nature, and culture.

Although a widespread concern with 'roots' has emerged only recently, the adoption agencies have been organizing return (or motherland) tours to the adoptees' country of origin for some time.⁶ To go on a family tour to the adopted child's country of origin is increasingly recommended by the agencies. Everyone who took part in the parenthood preparatory courses that I attended said that it was not only important for their children to develop a sense of pride in their country of origin, but also that it was essential for the children to see their birth country for themselves. Contrary to popular belief, the stated purpose of these tours is not to find biological relatives, but to enable the adopted child to acknowledge the dual source of its identity. I shall suggest, however, that an underlying motive is the confirmation of the child as a kinned Norwegian person.

Reports of 'motherland tours' appear regularly in the agencies' journals. There are also articles about individual adoptees who set out on a quest in search of some biological relatives (usually the mother). Only success stories

are reported; I have not yet seen a story about a return visit being a failure. A recent article in one of the journals exemplifies this interest. The title reads, 'Adult and transnationally adopted: found her "roots" amongst the street children of Bogota'. It tells the story of a girl who came to her Norwegian family as a 3-year-old from an orphanage in Colombia. Although she never lived on the streets, she is portrayed as having narrowly escaped this fate. She says that she understands herself much better as a result of the trip, although she did not meet (or want to meet) any biological relatives (*Adopsjonsforum* September 1999: 17).

The demand for organized return visits is increasing. Given the new-found interest in the contents of adoptive children's 'backpacks', parents wish to give their children (and themselves) an opportunity to open the backpack and look inside. Not only do they wish to find out about the children's 'cultural roots', but they also hope to fill gaps in their personal histories. Parents on the Korea tour were constantly exclaiming that yet another piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. But the motivations of both parents and children for undertaking such return visits are complex. As so much else within the world of transnational adoption, attitudes towards these return visits emerge as full of ambivalences and ambiguity. There would appear to be a real possibility that parents are not primarily interested in finding out about their children's birth country or individual pasts, and that their overriding concern is to confirm the reality of the new family they have made.

A 'motherland' tour to South Korea

Blood Is Thicker Than Water is not only axiomatic in studies of kinship, it is a fundamental axiom of European culture. Even if this axiom were true as a biological fact, even if the most extensive scientifically acquired evidence showed it to be true ... the point remains that culture, even were it to do no more than recognize biological facts, still adds something to those facts. The problem remains of just what the socio-cultural aspects are, of what meaning is added, of where and how that meaning, as a meaning rather than as a biological fact, articulates with other meanings ... But the axiom ... does not hold water even for the sociobiologists ... They only claim to account for *some* aspects of *some* of the relations between very close kin. This leaves a good deal to be accounted for (Schneider 1984: 199).

These observations by Schneider are helpful in interpreting the reactions to the Korea visit of the thirteen families that made up the return visit to South Korea in which I also took part. I interviewed them all before departure. The children ranged in age from 13 to 30; the majority were between 15 and 17 years of age. Most had arrived in Norway at the age of 2 or less. The adoptees expressed a vague wish to 'see for themselves' their 'country of origin'. Some said that they wanted to see the orphanage where they had lived before coming to Norway, others that they wanted to visit the town in which they were born. The tour seemed, however, to be more important to the parents than to the children, an impression that was confirmed during and after the tour. In all cases, it was the parents rather than the children who had taken the initiative in arranging to go on the tour. The parents' active role in undertaking the journey and the fact that they evaluated the trip more positively than their children did were confirmed by a questionnaire survey undertaken

with families who have been on similar visits to India (Howell & Hermansen 2001). All Korean adoptees in Norway have come via one organization, Holt, which was started by an American in the wake of the Korean War. Its headquarters are in Seoul, where they maintain several institutions, including an orphanage for handicapped children who have been deemed unadoptable, and a short-stay orphanage for children from the whole country who have been released for adoption by the Korean authorities. Temporary foster-mothers look after them until they move to their new families abroad. The return visit to South Korea was centred on this organization, and one of their employees accompanied the families on the week-long coach trip to many parts of the country.

In Korea, it was the parents who insisted upon the significance of the moment when first arriving at the orphanage, when inspecting the child's file, when visiting the hospital of birth, or when standing at the steps of the town hall where the basket containing their child had been left. The children went along with all this quite happily but, on the surface at any rate, were less engaged in the events and were if anything more interested in the shops and the food. On one occasion, however, they seemed to experience the significance of the special quality of their own pasts. Visiting the rooms where babies were lying in rows of cots awaiting the arrival of their adoptive parents, the adoptees were impressed. They were told that the dormitories had not been changed for about twenty years. This meant that even the paint on the walls was the same as when they themselves had been there. This information provoked exclamations from them, such as, 'Just imagine, I might have laid in this cot', or 'I can't remember anything of this room, but it is strange to think that I was here'. Even though the personal files contained little or no information that was new to them, it seemed to be important for them simply to make direct contact with these documents. Reading the documentary details of their early lives in their original form and holding the photographs taken on their arrival at the orphanage gave them tangible confirmation of their existence. One boy of 17 told me, 'I now feel that I have a past'. The materiality of the dormitory and the files gave the past substance.

Through these return visits, the children in a sense return to their original identities. The transubstantiation is temporarily suspended. By analogy, they are – at least for a while – merely wine and bread. Or are they? This neutralization of their Norwegian identity is assisted by the attitude of the Korean adoption organization which emphasizes the children's Koreanness. Everywhere we went there were welcoming banners proclaiming 'Welcome to Korea. 1999 Holt [the organization's name] Family & Motherland Tour'. Parents bought their daughters expensive silk Korean national costumes which they wore on the last evening. Parents commissioned calligraphers to draw the children's original Korean names. Yet the messages transmitted to the adoptees are contradictory. Numerous actions and utterances from the Norwegian adults also told them that they are Norwegian. They are Korean and not Korean at the same time. They may look Korean in the midst of millions of other Koreans, but most do not feel Korean.⁷ They cannot speak the language and hence have no means to communicate with the people they meet. They know little or nothing about Korean history, customs, institutions, or moral values. In this respect, they are as ignorant as their adoptive parents. All were

unfamiliar with the food, and parents and children were equally inept in the use of their chopsticks. More importantly, there are no persons here to whom they felt that they were related. I have been told by many transnationally adopted people that whenever they look in the mirror and see a non-Norwegian face they are reminded that they are different and in a minority. This can provoke disorientation. When in Korea, they conveyed to me that, contrary to expectations, they failed to feel empathy with the people whose looks resembled theirs. They said that this produced a sense of confusion, which was even more strongly experienced by the young people born in India whom I interviewed after their return visit. In the course of these interviews with Indian-born adoptees, I was repeatedly struck by their sense of being among people whose way of dressing, moving, and behaving was even more alien to them than was the case for the Korean-born adoptees.

Thus, during the visit to Korea, the Norwegian families chose to focus on place and objects rather than on persons. They apparently desired history without people – or rather without kinned people. Any person who might have looked after the child after its abandonment, such as paid foster-parents or nurses at the orphanage, was always of interest, whereas the identity of biological relatives was hardly mentioned. The politics of memory, the ‘selective character of familial stories’ (Youngblood 2001: 64) is clearly at work here. When actually in the country of origin, roots became synonymous with place, food, costume, and so on, and with people who were non-significant from a biogenetic point of view. For those involved in these searches for the child’s personal history, the first identifiable place of significance was the orphanage. The second was the place where the child was born or had been found. Similar findings emerged from the survey of those who had visited India and from conversations with people who had visited different countries of origin. Many parents have told me that their returning children were ‘more Norwegian’ after the motherland tour than before it. In this sense ‘filling in the gaps in the jigsaw puzzle’ may have served a purpose, even though at first sight the new-found pieces might seem insignificant. By and large, they do not threaten the integrity of the family while they acknowledge the different origin of its members. The transubstantiated identity of the child is not seriously challenged. In fact, pursuing the child’s past together becomes a family adventure, and the events become incorporated into subsequent family history.

Most ‘roots’ or ‘motherland’ tours do not in fact live up to their names. In most cases, the adoptees confirm their Norwegian identity, rather than embrace their origins. This may be attributed to an effective transubstantiation of the adoptees’ essence. The children have obtained their personal and social personae by virtue of their sociality within a Norwegian kinned context. Nevertheless, there is, I suggest, an ambivalence in parents and children alike regarding what they really want from the visit.⁸ One might argue that the parents take a risk. What if the transubstantiation had been unsuccessful? What if their children turned away from Norway and from them? I never met anyone who voiced such fears. Rather, the journey was described in glowing terms – perhaps because they did not have their worst fears confirmed? The point often made is that the trips strengthened family bonds, and that travelling in groups with other families made the experience all the more

valuable. Indeed, the trips might even be interpreted as a kind of extended family adventure. Certainly, the feeling expressed by many adoptees was that they had much more in common with the other adoptees than with the Indian or Korean youths whom they met in their birth countries.

Some adoptees do express a desire to locate biological relatives – and some do succeed. The reasons for wanting to do this are complex and I can allude only briefly to some of them. By and large, those who actively search are a small minority who, for a number of different reasons, have failed to settle in Norway and find the fact of adoption difficult to live with. They may seek a solution to their personal problems in the country of their origin and in biological relatives. However, from conversations and interviews, a much more common reason for wishing to meet biological relatives is a desire to see who one looks like. Babies and children in Norway, as elsewhere in northern Europe, are always being compared to their relatives: ‘she has grandfather’s nose, her mother’s eyes’, and so on. Through such preoccupations the continuity of the bloodline is marked – and voiced. For obvious reasons, this is never said of adoptees (although common personality traits or physical type are often emphasized), and many experience this as a loss. They are deprived of the opportunity to situate their own physiological make-up in relation to that of others whose biogenetic substance they share. Meeting biological relatives often satisfies this need. However, when actually faced with them, the fact of shared natural substance often seems to lose its significance. There is so little else that the adoptees and their biological relatives have in common.⁹ One may therefore conclude that relationship of nature by itself is no basis for significant sociality.

Conclusion

Unlike immigrants who cannot make any claims to a socially embedded spatial or temporal link to Norway beyond their own personal history of arrival and residence, adopted children from overseas are ‘sponsored’ into existing kin-based networks and histories by their adoptive parents. In the introduction to *The ethics of kinship: ethnographic enquiries*, Faubion develops an argument for regarding kinship ‘as a system – or array of systems – of subjectivation, if perhaps many other things as well’ (2001: 13). With this reference to subjectivation, he follows Foucault and suggests that the term has a double meaning, ‘all those processes through which individuals are labelled or made into subjects of one or another kind’ and ‘all those processes through which individuals make themselves into subjects of one or another kind’ (2001: 12). This notion of subjectivation complements my analysis of parents’ attempts to make their children into Norwegian persons (subjects). The attempt to transubstantiate the transnationally adopted child into a person whose identity is constituted through relationships with kinned Norwegian people can be regarded as a process which may have the effect of fixing the child on a path of subjectivation. The result of this is that manifestations of difference may be glossed over and, by and large, the biological parents emerge only as minor characters in the adoptees’ personal trajectory.

These concepts and these practices evoke prevailing concerns in the anthropology of kinship. Ever since Morgan (1870), it has been an anthropological truism to claim that kinship is a sphere where nature and culture meet in different ways in different societies. Nevertheless, a privileging of the natural as a point of reference has persisted in the discipline (Schneider 1984; Weismantel 1995). It was not until M. Strathern (1992) examined some implications of the new bio-medical research, including new reproductive technology, that 'nature' finally received its analytic death blow. This does not mean, however, that for many people the category of nature is irrelevant. Re-emerging in the guise of biology, genes, DNA, and related terms, nature is certainly meaningful to most adoptive families. As I have tried to show, it is precisely the juggling act of keeping both biology and sociality as meaningful, but not hopelessly contradictory, that is especially challenging for those involved.

The practice of transnational adoption highlights several aspects of the ambiguities of Norwegian notions and values of personhood and of kinned relatedness. The process of kinning in Norway, whether of biological or adoptive children, must take account of a perceived fusion between blood, flesh, land, place, and people which has a strong temporal dimension. The task for adoptive parents is to kin their adopted children as if they were biological children. The children are made to exist as social beings first and foremost by virtue of all their relationships within a Norwegian kinned context. In this case, then, kinship may usefully be thought of as a 'regime of subjectivation' in Faubion's terms. But a kinship system then becomes much more than 'our most secure safety net' for individuals 'whose project in the wider world is threatening, or under threat' (2001: 16). Although I agree with the adoptive mother quoted initially that 'families with transnational adopted children always remain different in some sense', we have seen that, through a process of kinning and transubstantiation, adoptive parents not only incorporate their children into their own kin but also transform themselves into parents, thereby negating the separation between the social and the biological that is encountered elsewhere in society.

NOTES

This project started in 1998 as part of a collaborative project with Marit Melhuus, 'The meaning of kinship in contemporary Norway', supported by the Norwegian Research Council. Generous co-operation has been offered throughout by the adoption agencies Verdens Barn and Adopsjonsforum. Earlier versions have been presented at the Departments of Anthropology at Goldsmiths' College, University of London, the University of Helsinki, and the University of Bergen. I am grateful for all their comments as well as for those of the two anonymous *JRAI* readers. Keith Hart also read a revised version and pointed to some remaining weaknesses of presentation.

¹The research has necessarily been multi-sited and wide-ranging. Serendipity has played a significant role and I have had to be imaginative in seeking alternative ethnographic strategies. While I have not been in personal touch with more than a proportion of the families with adopted children from overseas, I have participated in a wide range of relevant arenas and activities in different parts of the country, as well as abroad. The fact that I am the mother of a daughter adopted from Nepal has undoubtedly eased my access into such intimate parts of people's lives. I have spent time with adopted parents, families, and adoptees by joining groups at various social gatherings. I have participated in several courses for prospective adoptive parents, courses for parents whose adopted children approach puberty, and support groups for

parents whose children fail to settle down in their new lives. I have conducted informal interviews with 120 parents based on a questionnaire. I also accompanied a group of families on a return visit to South Korea and a group of prospective parents when they travelled to Ethiopia to collect their children. Fieldwork was conducted in one of the adoption agencies; I collected further material by means of interviews and informal conversations with a variety of individuals including civil servants, politicians, social workers, and psychologists.

² Provided the father takes a minimum of one month's leave, a year's birth leave may be claimed with 80 per cent income.

³ Earlier assumptions that adopted children would effortlessly become Norwegian have now been replaced by an (uneasy) emphasis on the importance of biological relationships and of the child's 'original culture'.

⁴ Prospective parents are required to send the orphanage a dossier about themselves, with photos. When a child is made available, a couple is sent pictures and a brief description of a child, and they are given a couple of days to decide whether they want to accept him or her. I have not yet met a couple who refused. One look at the picture and the report was enough to find some quality that somehow resonated within them. 'As-if' blood relations are created immediately and consolidated in different contexts during 'pregnancy' and 'birth', and through subsequent recapturing of the moment of 'birth'.

⁵ The same event was mentioned, for different interpretative purposes, by Gullestad in a recent article (2002: 55). Other important aspects of the practice of transnational adoption are, of course, those of race and nationhood. These will be dealt with in a future article.

⁶ Many adoptive families have made such visits on their own. In some cases, the adoptees have travelled without their families. The increased participation in organized tours indicates, I suggest, a desire to share the experience with others in the same situation. While such return visits are undertaken from most of the European countries that carry out transnational adoption, as well as from the USA, Norwegians are, according to an employee at the Korean adoption agency, the keenest.

⁷ I am referring to the majority. A small minority of adoptees have a profound desire to reunite with their original national identity. Some of them move to the country to study its language and history, and try to locate biological relatives. There are several adoptees whose meeting with biological relatives develops into a lasting relationship. My impression is that this applies only to a minority, although one that confirms a common perception about being adopted. Such stories receive a disproportionate amount of public attention.

⁸ The parents are faced with the dilemma of free will. The children must feel free to choose. Many adoptees may be torn between a curiosity actually to see biological relatives and find out the reason why they were abandoned and a conflicting sense of loyalty towards their parents.

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Création de liens de parenté et construction d'itinéraires de vie dans les familles adoptives transnationales

Résumé

À partir d'observations empiriques faites dans le cadre d'une étude de l'adoption transnationale en Norvège, l'auteur formule des arguments en faveur du concept de *kinning* (création de liens de parenté). Cette notion désigne le processus par lequel le fœtus, le nouveau-né ou toute personne non apparentée jusqu'alors entre dans une relation permanente et significative exprimée par l'idiome de la parenté. En se concentrant sur l'adoption dans un contexte culturel où la métaphore des «liens du sang» est fondamentale dans les relations de parenté, l'auteur pointe les ambiguïtés et les contradictions de la relation entre parentés biologique et sociale. Les questions de race et d'appartenance ethnique peuvent dès lors être posées au cheminement de création de liens de parenté que suivent les parents adoptifs, dont l'auteur pense qu'il implique une transsubstantiation de l'enfant adopté.

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