

Review article

Knowing adoption and adopting knowledge

Orphans of Islam: Family, Abandonment, and Secret Adoption in Morocco. *Jamila Bargach*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. xvii + 304 pp., bibliography, index.

A Sealed and Secret Kinship: The Culture of Policies and Practices in American Adoption. *Judith Modell*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2002. vi + 220 pp., bibliography, index.

Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule. *Ann Laura Stoler*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. ix + 335 pp., photographs, notes, bibliography, index.

In the 1960s, the descent versus alliance debate dominated kinship studies—anthropologists wanted to determine what relationship offered the best analytic lens for understanding how social groups were formed. Those who favored descent felt that the most relevant question to ask was how groups constituted and reconstituted themselves across generations. From the perspective of descent theorists, existential facts—death and generational shifts—ensured that all social groups had to resolve the problem of maintaining themselves as continuous units. Alliance theorists took issue with this emphasis, believing that constructing group boundaries was an equally important task and one that required a focus on marriage as the beginning point for analysis. This debate was more than an argument about which type of relationship was more important. Those involved were questioning how best to understand the ways groups were constituted through kinship. In this review article, I ask a “what if” question: What would have happened in kinship studies if kinship theorists had taken a third relationship—adoption—as a starting point? Had anthropologists followed Jack Goody’s (1969) initiative in focusing on adoption, would this have led to a new perspective on relatedness?

Adoption is an intriguing third term in the context of the debate because it contains the conundrums of both descent and alliance. Adopting can be seen as one of the ways that groups constitute themselves over time, and thus, it can easily be understood as a supplement to descent. Adoption can also be a way of exchanging people across groups and rendering group boundaries visible. Thus, adopting can be used to form alliances between different groups as anthropologists, such as Bradd Shore (1976), have noted. Given that adoption can be both descent and alliance, scholars advancing either perspective in the debate figure it as a secondary (and also *fictive*) term. Yet, as the authors under review demonstrate, adoption can be treated as more than a derivative relationship, that is, as a case of descent or alliance with a difference. To do so, however, requires that kinship theorists reject the logic behind labeling adoption *fictive*.

I am not suggesting that adoption can act as a bridge between previous competing approaches to kinship. Rather, I am suggesting that in some cultures the anxieties anthropologists’ interlocutors have about adoption could—if taken seriously—lead scholars to ask different and new questions about families. After all, adoption, unlike either descent or marriage, can form a relationship that is widely accepted and yet is secret at the same time. The tension inherent in such a relationship can prompt anthropologists to think about how knowledge and circulation of knowledge are integral components of how families fashion themselves.

In this article, I argue that using adoption as a starting point can initiate conversations about kinship as an arena in which people intertwine sociality with cultural knowledge (in this case, the kinds of knowledge one must have to be accepted as a member of a community, be it of languages, etiquette, implicit social cues, and so on). Fredrik Barth has recently encouraged anthropologists to ground their investigations into others’ perspectives in analyses of knowledge, to explore “how bodies of knowledge are produced in persons and populations in the context of the social relations they sustain” (2002:1). As Barth points out, studying knowledge and its circulation leads anthropologists to understand others’ epistemological assumptions about how and why

people are interconnected. Of the ways in which people practice kinship, adoption turns out to be a productive site to ask these questions because studying adoption reveals people's understandings of the interconnections between one's origin, assumptions about the nature of origins, unevenly disseminated knowledge of origins, and family or cultural membership. Concretely, studying adoption can introduce questions about how biological relatedness and cultural knowledge are linked, about how knowledge circulation plays a part in the process of making people kin, and even about how families respond to other perspectives they encounter on the ways kin and kin-like relations are fashioned (including bureaucratic perspectives).

The very structure of adoption encourages researchers and their interlocutors to be reflexive about how kin relations are formed and sustained. Both Jamila Bargach and Judith Modell examine how each member of an adopting triad (birth parents, adopting parents, and adoptees) thinks about constructing family—Bargach in Morocco and Modell in the United States.¹ Ann Laura Stoler asks strikingly similar questions but at a different level of scale. She is concerned with the difficulties Dutch colonial officials experienced while attempting to form a colony in Indonesia. The officials struggled to ascertain when children, of both mixed and European parentage, demonstrated the right knowledge to be considered white Europeans. Juxtaposing Stoler's account of colonialism with ethnographies of adoption brings to light implicit concerns addressed in all three books. At stake in both Modell's and Bargach's accounts is not just a question of the cultural assumptions underlying how non-kin can be transformed into kin. Both authors also discuss the kinds of cultural and familial knowledge one is supposed to be able to exhibit to be part of a family. All three accounts show that belonging emerges from the ways in which people know who they and others are, making such knowledge central to cultural identity. Before I continue with overarching comparisons, I lay some common groundwork by discussing each author's ethnographic and theoretical stakes in her respective project.

A sealed and secret kinship

Two themes run through *A Sealed and Secret Kinship*, Judith Modell's most recent ethnography of U.S. adoption practices. Modell starts by delineating how a shift from adoption legislated as closed to adoption legislated as potentially open has affected the adoption triad. In 2000, the Oregon state government granted adult adoptees access to records that had previously been sealed. Other states are considering similar legislation. Modell discusses what led up to this change in some public U.S. attitudes toward adoption. She begins with origin stories, not of biological births but, rather, of activism, discussing how two U. S. support groups emerged in the mid-1970s—one for birth parents and one

for adoptees. The actors in her accounts are uneasy participants in contexts where their needs always seem to be thwarted—be it an adoptee's need for his or her family medical history or a mother's need to be recognized as such. Activism is a response to these vexations. These and other unanswered needs all center on how and when certain knowledges circulate, producing recognitions and identities (either official or other). As Modell persuasively argues (p. 69), the shifts in adoption are not creating new forms of families, just new ways people can gain knowledge about their own families.

Modell's second, related theme concerns the social and institutional consequences of addressing adoption as a site in which the parent-child relationship can self-consciously be created by birth parents, adopting parents, social workers, judges, legislators, and others. She begins her analysis of U.S. adoption by looking at how legislation ensuring its secrecy impacted adoptees, birth parents, and adopting parents. Modell traces the ways in which people involved in adoption shaped their identities in connection to a silenced origin story, and she describes the highly charged feelings both adoptees and birth parents attached to having knowledge of each other. Having laid out the ways in which people responded to knowledge that was not meant to circulate, she turns to consider the other participants involved in shaping the current shifting forms of U.S. adoption. Here she offers (as does Bargach) an important analytic service by refusing to characterize families as existing independent of or even codependently with government bureaucracies. Rather, she portrays how families, social workers, policy analysts, and others together construct the possibilities of U.S. adoption.

Modell discusses how choice becomes a central motif for thinking through U.S. adoption when families are seen as products of conscious legislative, bureaucratic, and personal decisions. This element of choice at the heart of adoption is problematic. In a U.S. context, once choice steps into the picture, anxieties related to figuring it as consumer choice are immediately present in the background.

The metaphor of a market and of *preferences* for particular items lurk at the sidelines of discussions of adoption, and becomes an effective strategy for condemning adoptions that do not go through agencies. To breathe a word of selling and buying babies is enough, in American culture at any period, to damn the transaction in parenthood. [p. 137]

The problem for Americans becomes how to couch a family created by choice in terms that do not place a price on a human being. Adoption has become a site that Modell's interlocutors find both useful and difficult for thinking through ways to distinguish between value generated by capital and value generated by love. This dilemma has structured legislation as well as the language and practices surrounding the act of matching parents and children.

As Modell delineates the changing roles that government actors and family members are beginning to play vis-à-vis one another, she is able to demonstrate how adoption has increasingly become an ideal for families formed in cases like foster care—situations in which both governments and families are acknowledged by all to be involved deliberately in fashioning families. This is not to say that the model of the family formed through familiar biological events is any less the ideal for which all are supposed to strive. Those in the business of producing hegemonic viewpoints are clearly still interpreting adoption as the second-best road to family—the path taken when nature does not provide. But in the spaces where government officials and families join together to form families, adoption is held as the central paradigm. Modell writes,

At the beginning of the twenty-first century in the United States, adoption dominates not only child welfare but also other policy arenas: the war on drugs, the fight to uphold family values, and the struggle to cut federal government spending. The transaction has come to bear many burdens on a national level, replacing weak social welfare systems and upholding an ideology of the family. [p. 107]

Modell then turns to the dilemmas created for foster care families when adoption becomes such a powerful model for evaluating all other forms of family.

Modell convincingly discusses how the tensions in U.S. adoption surrounding choice and affection have become the dominant framework for addressing foster care. She points out that state officials create problems for foster parents when they simultaneously evaluate these parents by the idealized adoptive standard and view them as state employees. Foster parents are expected to parent with a difference, to parent with detachable and impermanent love (pp. 92–95). Because the state initially bought their parenting, government officials often do not consider foster parents acceptable adopting parents for those in their care (p. 83). Modell eloquently argues that the dilemmas facing foster parents can be found in the answer to the question “How has foster care become a *system* while adoption is a version of *family*” (p. 81)? Foster parents do not confront the paradoxes adoption poses for Americans surrounding issues of secrecy, the biological basis for love, or choice. Yet, ironically, the paradoxes they do face are created because they operate in the shadow cast by adoption—they are being paid to care.

Modell concludes with a rhetorical move that will be familiar to many readers comfortable with anthropological comparisons—she asks what Polynesian adoptions can reveal about U.S. ones. Here Modell puts to good use her earlier work on Hawaiian adoption, by discussing how people might practice adoption when biological origin does not determine the person or the relation (pp. 185–186). She points

out how unnecessary secrecy becomes in this framework and she briefly sketches the ways families form when children can move fluidly from one household to another without guilt or blame.² In short, Modell adeptly reveals ways of responding to adoption that would establish relationships that might contain fewer of the paradoxes that confront those currently dealing with U.S. adoption.

Orphans of Islam

In *Orphans of Islam*, Jamila Bargach discusses the paradoxes surrounding adoption in Morocco, focusing on her Moroccan interlocutors' perspective of adoption as a marginalized activity experienced by marginalized people. From her first sentence, Bargach responds with anguish to the ways in which her interlocutors in the field conflated being adopted with being illegitimate, creating a treacherous liminality. From an anthropological perspective, adoption encapsulates some of the central conflicts inherent in fashioning families according to Moroccan (or, more generally, Islamic) principles. These conflicts emerge when people managing the exigencies of how children circulate among families confront prescriptive cultural models of family built on the assumption that true parental love must have a biological basis. As a Moroccan herself, Bargach writes uneasily from the interstices of the anthropological perspective and the ethnographic interlocutor's perspective.³ At its best, her discomfort inspires her political outrage. At its worst, her disquiet perhaps produces her convoluted sentences.

Bargach, like Modell, focuses on adoptions between strangers in her book, particularly when the state plays a part. She discusses in broad terms three possible forms of adoption or fosterage in Morocco—first, informal, between close kin (p. 27); second, secret, when a mother gives the child to an intermediary who places the child with the adopting parents (pp. 27–28); and, third, “legal guardianship of a minor” (p. 28). She concentrates on adoption that is secret or legal, reserving her discussion of informal adoption for an article published elsewhere (Bargach 2001). In laying out her analysis, Bargach chooses to illuminate her points with poignant case studies, an evocative technique. She refuses, however, to generalize from her case studies, which has created some difficulties for me as a reviewer.⁴ Bargach does not provide answers to the following questions: How does class impinge on decisions made by the adopting parents or the birth mothers?⁵ Do different classes practice some forms of adoption more often than other forms? Who is instrumental in the decision to adopt? Do adopting parents usually know the birth mother despite their use of an intermediary? How old are children usually when they are adopted? When and how do they find out typically that they are adopted? In short, Bargach is an analyst who eschews making broad claims, choosing instead to focus on particulars.

Bargach has a difficult story to tell, largely because hers is a context with too many villains and too few heroes with the efficacy to right wrongs. Bargach analyzes a context in which state bureaucracy—a familiar villain for many anthropologists—intervenes negatively in a process that is in itself so flawed as to make most of the people involved unhappy. Bargach's analysis unfolds in three parts. In the first part, she uses evocative case studies to reveal how new state policies only serve to exacerbate an already painful process. Put bluntly, in Morocco, mothers cannot offer children for adoption legally without bringing down moral condemnation both on themselves and on the children (families can circulate children—but exchange between families occurs without state sanction [p. 27]). As a consequence, both mothers and adopting parents want to keep adoptions secret. Since 1962, Moroccan state policies have curtailed the degree to which people can create such secrecy. All adoptions must now be sanctioned by the state, and the state stands in as guardian for all abandoned children (pp. 41–42). Forcing the adoptive triad to engage with state bureaucracy hampers prior ways of circulating people and knowledge. But the state decrees go further—insisting that adopted children cannot assume their new families' names. The state thus has attempted to eradicate the secrecy necessary to make adoption tolerable for all involved. Bargach portrays state officials and the policies they implement as the kind of villain common in recent tales of colonial and postcolonial governance—well meaning but grounded in assumptions disruptively antagonistic to any escape routes already in place between families.

The state is not the only villain in the Moroccan adoption setting—culture is, too. In part 2 of her book, Bargach must lay out a difficult analysis: determining how the state and culture both render adoption difficult. Social analysts are comfortably familiar with exploring how government, however well meaning, imposes a nuclear family ideal that can only create harm when implementing rigid patriarchal models. It is much more difficult to turn then to people's cultural assumptions and find them equally destructive. This is poignantly apparent when an interviewee (the administrator of a hospital) asks Bargach point-blank for a solution to adoption problems in Morocco. Bargach answers that it would be best to change people's cultural beliefs about adoption (p. 205), although she couches her reply in more diplomatic terms. She is trapped in a situation where the tools of her analysis reveal only the harmful limitations of both of the traditional loci of transformation or salvation—liberating government policies and liberating cultural practices. This drives Bargach to conclude with a ringing manifesto (pp. 216–217)—the conundrums she uncovers drive her to employ the rhetoric of a revolutionary.

So what are the cultural assumptions that trap people engaged with adoption in Morocco? I have already touched on one of the core entrapping assumptions in discussing

how true familial love must have a biological root. Here let me draw out some of the consequences of this assumption that Bargach discusses. First, the adopting parents are always waiting for the children they are raising to leave in search of their biological parents. Bargach explains, "In other words, the love of adopting parents is overwhelming, but cannot emulate that of the natural parents since it is not based in physical commonality, or rather, extension" (p. 142). To adopt a child is always to risk losing the child. Fear of such loss encourages adopting parents to keep the adoption a secret. In addition, adopted children are expected to enact the bad behavior that they have inherited from their biological parents (most often, their mother) (p. 87). In short, the ways in which Bargach's interlocutors imagined people to have been born social means that adopted children are always on the verge of undermining familial or social order.

In the third part of her analysis, Bargach examines abandoned children and how they encapsulate the traumas of what she terms *modernity*. In doing so, she turns to media portrayals, commentators in the public sphere, and non-governmental organization (NGO) workers dealing with these children. Bargach believes that abandoned children have become an embodiment of the failures of the state and of families to respond adequately to the paradoxes of modernity (she uses the term *modernity* to stand for the "crisis of contemporary Moroccan society" [p. 165]). When neither state nor family can adequately respond to a created surplus of children, the analyst will ask what other entities will intervene? For Bargach, these entities are civil society—as represented by social workers in NGOs—and the public sphere—represented by filmmakers, authors, and journalists. She describes the work of NGOs both foreign and Moroccan based, such as the League for the Protection of Children, the Committee of Support to UNICEF, Moroccan Solidarité Féminine, Terre des Hommes, and l'Entraide Nationale, among others. These NGOs for the most part run orphanages, providing health care, education, and shelter to abandoned children. Civil society is the hero of this analysis; Bargach argues

that fundamental change can only originate from all constituents of civil society (conservative and liberal alike) since through their mere being, the passive acceptance of the status quo or the culture of victimization is questioned for a possibility, and, at times, a reality of discussion and dialogue, in addition to forcing the state to assume its responsibility. [pp. 212–213]

In seeing civil society as the locus of change, Bargach places the problems of abandoned children squarely at the feet of people's cultural beliefs, despite her early forays into critiques of government policies. In her analysis, civil society contains the only actors devoted to educating or transforming people's attitudes, and thus it is the source of the adoptee's

salvation. Bargach acknowledges problems found in civil society—corruption, economic dependence on Western funding agencies, and competition between NGOs—but she mentions such problems only in passing; her ethnographic attention is devoted to the children, with the NGOs serving as the backdrop for circulating and raising children.

Bargach asks a question that preoccupies the other authors under review as well—what happens to families when the state determines the boundaries of the family? Adoption for Bargach becomes a site for examining the ways in which both the boundaries of the family and the boundaries between the state and the family are caught up in the same paradoxical process. They are both unstable boundaries, but, out of necessity, they are enacted as if they are stable. In Bargach's account, this stability exists at the cost of those who are adopted, and the moves toward legitimacy on the part of both the state and the families end up costing those people who most effectively symbolize the inherent instability. She concludes that, in Morocco, state assistance in forming family boundaries is destructive, both because of the rigidity of the state in its interventions and because of the cultural ramifications of adoption.

Carnal knowledge and imperial power

With Bargach's and Modell's accounts in mind, I turn now to the issues adoption raises as they are played out on an imperial rather than familial level. In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Ann Laura Stoler writes about how Europeans in various colonial regimes responded to a messiness in categories embodied by their own families and colleagues. Her larger argument continues her long-standing scholarly commitment to bringing Foucauldian insights to bear on colonial conceptions of race. In her latest book, she reviews familiar ground—discussing the contradictions that clung to the bodies of European women and the traps underpinning mixtures of colonial desires and colonial moralities—before exploring newer topics: children (both European and mixed), servants, and schools. It is particularly in the details, in Stoler's insights as she unfolds her archival findings, that her analysis illuminates how colonial constructs of race and desire were intertwined.

Foucault has provided Stoler with powerful analytical tools for turning dusty colonial records into vivid accounts of how colonial categories classified population in ineffective ways that simultaneously produced compelling paradoxes. She adeptly traces the tensions and debates surrounding classifications that went awry as a result of contradictory impulses. These contradictions were neither intrinsic to the *mélange* of categories themselves nor created by differences in how colonial regimes implemented their efforts to control populations. She specifically turns her investigative gaze to those figures whose very bodies could become magnets for the contradictions inherent in

European colonial classifications—European women, European children, and mixed children all living in colonies, especially in Dutch-controlled Indonesia. Stoler does an admirable job of revealing the uniqueness and commonalities underlying different colonial regimes' efforts to manage these figures made contradictory by colonial officials' own epistemological assumptions. Her primary focus is Deli (Sumatra) under the Indonesian regime, but she weaves in references to other colonial regimes to illustrate the degree to which scholars should interpret the Dutch colonial practices as unique or generalizable. She makes a strong argument in the early chapters that to paint colonialism as a uniform and systematic European project is to do an injustice to the fragmented and ad hoc colonial responses to specific contingencies in each location. She also argues adroitly for a historical perspective that takes into account transformations in colonial policy as the desires of politicians and colonial bureaucrats to foster certain kinds of colonies changed, and as they began trying to forge other types.

Stoler's focus is on how a particular form of classification (racial) was the basis for a colonial perspective that transformed people into anomalies, often ones that were hazardous to the colonial project as a whole. What I find captivating about Stoler's book is her convincing argument that the very spaces where Europeans might have felt the most comfortable asserting their cultural superiority—that is, in the colonies—were precisely the locations in which they were most conscious of losing their status, their whiteness. Whereas in many accounts of recent racial formations people invoke culture to dimly veil their racisms, in the colonial context people invoked race to veil their concerns about culture, particularly about losing cultural knowledge. Anxieties concerning children's racial identities were but a point on a continuum of colonial anxieties about the future of Dutch children raised in the Indies.

For officials and civilians of diverse political persuasion, the moral and physical contaminations to which European children were subject in the Indies served to measure how effectively domestic arrangements might confirm or undermine the moral tenets of European privilege and the security of rule. . . . A focus on children underscores which elements of difference were considered necessary to teach—and why agents of empire seemed so convinced that the lessons were hard to learn. [p. 112]

As Stoler points out, being white or being dominant can be fragile, and this was a colonial system in which that very fragility was the cause for great concern.

Whiteness's fragility in Stoler's account brings to the fore the tensions surrounding biological origins that both Bargach and Modell address. For Stoler, these tensions are writ large in the colonial archive—the Dutch colonial officials were

rivated by concerns over how and whether children raised outside of the Netherlands could successfully become white, especially if they had racially mixed parentage. From the colonial perspective, whiteness was the social potential that children might not achieve, and that they might turn instead to Malay sociality was too much of a risk.

Children are of course bearers of adult culture but . . . only in partial and imperfect ways. They learn certain normative conventions and not others and frequently defy the divisions that adults are wont to draw. In contrast to Elias's notion of an "automatically" channeled production of fear, European children in diverse colonial contexts seemed often to have gotten their categories "wrong." They chose Malay over Dutch, chose to sit on their haunches and not on chairs, and chose Indo and Javanese playmates. [pp. 119–120]

Stoler points out that raising children to be properly European in the colonial milieu was a daunting task that made visible Dutch officials' expectations about culture and class. In general, she draws out the contradictory assumptions colonial officials enacted concerning the ways in which socialization and race interact to produce specific identities, showing how, for the most part, the paradoxes produced were played out in ways that affirmed the elites in colonial hierarchies.

By raising the question of how racial identification and cultural belonging are interpolated, Stoler opens the door to asking questions that are perhaps familiar to kinship theorists but are framed from an unfamiliar vantage point. How do people from different cultural backgrounds (created through exogamy as well as colonialism) raise children who supposedly share a common cultural perspective? In what contexts do certain origin stories become determinate? And, most relevant in the context of this review, how does cultural knowledge shape people's membership in groups? By discussing Stoler in the context of analysts of families, I am reading her critique of colonial taxonomies as not only interrogating colonial encounters but also, more broadly, interrogating how people negotiate an emergent multiplicity of perspectives when people's origins and social potentials are at stake.

Joining families, joining cultures

The proliferation of common themes in these three texts—from anxieties about the import of biological origin to the significance and falsity of bureaucracies' involvement in producing family as visibly bounded entities—is, I suggest, not coincidental. Like Modell and Bargach, Stoler examines adoption, but at a different scale. She is asking not how people are accepted into families but how people are accepted into cultures. By this I mean that she is addressing the question that a perspective informed by adoption poses of social

belonging—how does one's performed cultural knowledge both reveal and create one's ties to groups, be they families, communities, or nations, and how do others evaluate these claims to belonging?

Biological relatedness looms large in the ethnographic material presented in all three books under review. Perhaps by beginning with adoption, anthropologists more explicitly put the onus on their interlocutors in the field to define when and how biological relatedness becomes relevant. This should seem a familiar and not very radical suggestion for many discussing kinship after Schneider's (1984) interventions (see contributors to *Cultures of Relatedness* [Carsten 2000] for similar suggestions). Anthropologists responding to Schneider have often posed the problem in the following manner: Given that biological relatedness is a universal component of people's lives that different cultures incorporate to varying degrees in their kinship practices, how do particular cultures evaluate biological relatedness (see Goodenough 2001:215–216)? To begin with adoption is to pose the problem differently, to see biological relatedness as constructed in the same way as other forms of relatedness, and most importantly, as produced as a form of cultural knowledge. It is to bring to bear the theoretical insights that an anthropology of science can offer to a study of families. In addition, beginning with adoption, as Modell and Bargach point out, enables kinship theorists to ask how relations of power underlie the ways people in their daily lives can make biological descent relevant.⁶

Biological explanations are powerful in Bargach's Morocco, Modell's United States, and Stoler's Dutch colonial imagination, without the analyst offering a helping hand. Biological relatedness is framed by the authors' interlocutors as the normative relationship—the standard by which all other relations are valued. Both Bargach and Modell are concerned with how biological descent is viewed by each member of the adopting triad, as well as by intervening community-based organizations. Both address adoption as a relationship that is significant partially because it can lead people to think actively about the differences between chosen and biological parentage and, thus, about the nature of kinship. Stoler's target is how colonialists imagined race and how their assumptions affected their families. All three authors interrogate their interlocutors' reflexive stances on how biological relatedness determines who people can become.

Modell and Bargach view adoption as a topic that makes those whom anthropologists analyze into commentators on their own origins. In doing so, these authors open the way for raising a question that I see as running throughout the three books considered here—what prices do people pay when all of the ways they are born social are located precariously in biological origins? When I ask about how people are socially born, I am referring to one of Marilyn Strathern's (1988) interventions in kinship debates. Strathern explores

the notion of being born social, pointing out that it is a cultural or epistemological choice to view babies as asocial—as beings that must be socialized into relationships with others. She persuasively argues that, from a Melanesian perspective, it is possible to think of a child as a being whose social potentials are all present at birth, albeit inactive to varying degrees (depending on the specific Melanesian group). When sifting this insight through the books under review, it becomes possible to read the ethnographic interlocutors under discussion as troubled by how they imagine people are being born social, although the authors do not say so. All three analysts describe their interlocutors as conceiving of biological origin as strongly intertwined with social potential. People are born with social potentials, all of which have biological origins. For example, Bargach argues that a person born illegitimately can be expected to be “a harbinger of evil” (p. 3). By explaining some social things as having biological roots, the authors’ interlocutors in the field make charged the ways they attribute personality, futures, and potential behavior to those who are adopted.

As a consequence, all three accounts portray adoption as indexing an absence. Those who are adopted lack the right kind of connections to their social identities. Conversely, they are always potentially able to uncover a different identity, one that has the aura of greater authenticity. But adoption need not always be viewed as a lack. Jane Fajans offers a powerful counterexample in *They Make Themselves* (1997), her ethnography of the Baining of Papua New Guinea. She argues that the Baining see adoptive relationships as more authentic and more powerfully compelling for each party than relationships that emerge from biological origins. The children one adopts are the products of one’s active social labor—they are one’s children because of the constant effort to construct the relationship. The children one gives birth to are the children one acquires without consciously forging this relationship, and, as a result, for the Baining, the social relationship is potentially shameful.

With adopted children the parent-child bonds are entirely social. However, even with natural children, the Baining gradually transform the substance of the relationship. Newborn children are mere projections of their parents’ natural bodily substances, but over time they are fed and nurtured with increasing amounts of “social” food. While these children are never entirely transformed into social offspring—there is always a substratum of connectedness, and thus, of shame, between them and their parents—they increasingly add social nurturant connections on top of the biological ones. [p. 71]

The issue that Fajans raises is not whether the Baining believe that people can have biological bases for descent; rather, she is pointing out that not everyone shares the same assumptions about how people might be born social (see Bodenhorn 2000 for a comparable example among Inuit).

Sometimes, as illustrated by the Baining or Inuit, people configure the connections between social potential and heredity differently than Euro-Americans do.

To this point, I have focused on how studying adoption can shed light on people’s assumptions about the role biological origins might play in delimiting people’s social potential. As the authors under review reveal, the study of adoption should not be limited to addressing only this question. In both Modell’s and Bargach’s accounts, adoption was accompanied by secrets and revelations that shaped the ways in which people understood their identities in family contexts. Adoption served as a springboard for understanding how the circulation of certain information framed who people were. There are strong similarities in the kinds of agencies and impotencies attributed to parents, children, and cultures in all three ethnographic moments. For example, all three authors address the traps people experienced in relation to the ways their identities were perceived as unstable. In each context, adoption poses an irresolvable uncertainty, the potential for someone’s identity to be altered radically at an indefinite and indeterminate moment. After this transformation, the identity is then supposedly set. What Modell argues, and both Bargach’s and Stoler’s ethnographic materials support, is that this transformation is not leading toward a new form of family but most frequently is viewed by those involved as a way to sever previous social ties. Both Bargach and Stoler discuss how the moment of transformation isolates those who are changed. These transformations occur for two reasons: because of the ways a person is evaluated by others, based on their knowledge of who that individual is, and because of the kinds of information that that individual can control or access. People in these contexts invariably attributed changes to how information was managed, what was made secret and what was revealed. The agencies people express in each context are located in the control of knowledge they can exhibit about the kinds of selves and families that are and could be fashioned.

The authors under review show that to begin with adoption is to begin with the assumption that a person’s identity is not formed by biological kin relations. Instead, such an approach focuses attention on the way a group’s epistemological assumptions about how selves are fashioned determines the limits of whom one can be. Adoption is thus about cultural knowledge but not cultural knowledge as a mere possession. Rather, adoption makes visible that having an identity is more than possessing certain knowledges or knowing how to behave in particular contexts. One’s identity is determined by the epistemological assumptions that a group holds about the relationships one can have to cultural knowledge. This is apparent in the ways Bargach and Modell talk about how social knowledge is made biological, and it is apparent when Stoler discusses colonial anxieties about the hazards of acculturation, when biological origin can be corrupted by the ways people live.

For all three authors, this realization lies in tension with the bureaucracy their interlocutors in the field encountered as they attempted to navigate who they could be. And this is not surprising, given that many scholars have documented how bureaucratic ways of knowing are based on different principles than the principles governing the ways people circulate knowledge in other contexts (see, e.g., Bowker and Star 2000; Herzfeld 1992). As I mentioned earlier, these authors are also exploring the intersection between governments and families, investigating how families become distinct and bounded entities. All three authors provide ethnographic material showing that a primary way governments and families perform their labors of division is precisely through the tensions produced by trying to apply different principles to the circulation of knowledge. Both Modell and Bargach uncover this when they analyze the different ways in which governments try to structure the knowledge of adoption as a secret. The ways in which governments are effective in creating such secrecy turn out to be useful for revealing precisely the ways in which the boundaries between families and governments have been constructed as permeable. In short, analyzing adoption reveals that the government and family become distinct systems that then interact largely through the ways knowledge circulates according to different principles in each arena. It is the attempt to manage these different principles effectively that enables ethnographic interlocutors to understand the division between state and family as a particular division.

Examining kinship through the lens of adoption brings certain issues into sharp focus. First, scholars are enabled to address familiar debates about biological descent from a new angle, asking about the kinds of sociality that is supposed to be transmitted through heredity rather than asking about the relationship's authenticity. Second, the tension between the state and the family can be understood in a new light, as a tension actively produced rather than as the demarcation of an always already given boundary. Third, as the authors here demonstrate, belonging is located in knowledge, in the epistemological assumptions their interlocutors have that determine the ways one knows who one is. In short, examining kinship from the standpoint of adoption leads scholars to focus on families in terms of how knowledge circulates, not only in terms of secrets but also how the principles behind the circulation of knowledge in families and communities underlie the production of identities.

Notes

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1. In both accounts, the birth parents and adopting parents are not kin, for the most part.

2. As Modell points out here and in her previous work, the native Hawaiian approach to adoption often comes into conflict with the Hawaiian state bureaucracy.

3. Bargach, who currently works in Morocco, received her Ph.D. in anthropology from Rice University in Houston, Texas.

4. Bargach's brief discussion of families' preferences for light-skinned girls is an exception (pp. 97–99).

5. Bargach mentions in a footnote that several NGO surveys have shown that birth mothers tend to be first-generation immigrants from rural parts of Morocco and are often abandoned or divorced (p. 264 n. 2).

6. For an account of biological relatedness that does not require descent, see Françoise Héritier 1999.

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