PACIFIC STUDIES

SPECIAL ISSUE
RELATIVE POWER
Changing Interpretations of Fosterage and Adoption in Pacific Island Societies

Vol. 31, Nos. 3/4 Sept./Dec. 2008

PREFACE

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Until at least 1980, it was considered de rigeur for sociocultural anthropologists to report on kinship systems and practices in the communities where they studied. In large measure, this was because kinship provided the fundamental organizational framework for most of the societies under investigation, but it was also because in those years the topic of kinship provided the primary "battleground" for debating anthropological theory. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that when anthropologists wrote about kinship in the Pacific Islands they endeavored to describe Oceanic kinship systems in detail and to focus on particular practices that stood out as relatively unusual in comparison to their own societies. One such practice was the apparently easy and frequent movement or transfer of children among related households, variously labeled as adoption or fosterage.

Perhaps the earliest article that specifically treated this subject in the Pacific Islands was published in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* by H. C. Maude and H. E. Maude (1931). They noted that a study of this "custom" served "as an excellent introduction to the social organization of the Islanders, cutting, as it does, across their social structure and affecting in turn each of their social groupings" (1931, 225). Not long thereafter, Ian Hogbin (1935–1936) wrote about adoption on Wogeo Island off the north coast of New Guinea, and like the Maudes, he also noted how this practice highlighted important aspects of social structure. However, although other

discussions of adoption and fosterage appeared occasionally in the pages of published ethnographies during the first half of the twentieth century (e.g., Firth 1936: 203–06, 588–96), the subject languished as a particular focus of anthropological attention until the 1950s and 1960s when it began to receive renewed attention (e.g., Finney 1964; Kay 1963; Lambert 1964; Weckler 1953; see also Goody 1969). This resurgence of interest in child transfers coincided with the establishment of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO)[1] in the late 1960s, and adoption and fosterage provided the subject matter for the launch of the ASAO Monograph Series in 1970 (Carroll 1970a). Six years later, contributors to a second book—ASAO Monograph No. 4—which examined adoption and fosterage in Oceania as "transactions in kinship" (Brady 1976), stemming from of Ward Goodenough's (1970) concluding chapter title to the first volume where he discussed adoption and fosterage as "transactions in parenthood."

The twenty-seven chapters in these two publications more than doubled the number of specific chapters and articles on the topic for Oceania and extended the breadth of coverage to many other islands, although these were mainly in Polynesia and Micronesia. More or less concurrent with the appearance of these ASAO collections, two other discussions of adoption and fosterage in the Pacific Islands were published in leading disciplinary journals (Keesing 1970; Monberg 1970), and still others followed over the next decade (Baddeley 1982; Damas 1983; Donner 1987; Flinn 1985; Ritter 1981; Silk 1980), including a few studies from other areas of the world (e.g., Bledsoe and Isiugo-Abanihe 1989; Mandeville 1981).

This explosion of interest in adoption and fosterage occurred, at least in part, because of a major theoretical debate over "the nature of kinship" that occupied the attention of many anthropologists at that time, whether or not they conducted research in the Pacific (see Carroll 1970b). At the forefront of this debate was David Schneider. Schneider did his doctoral fieldwork in Yap, Micronesia, and there is no question but that the complexities of Yapese kinship influenced his position on "what kinship was all about." But it was in Schneider's ground-breaking 1968 book *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* that he mounted the argument that "the nature of kinship" was about much more than simply "blood" relations, or what he called biogenetic kinship. It was there that Schneider articulated his ideas that kinship should be studied as a system of meaningful symbols or what he called "a cultural account." Because adoption and fosterage often concern kinship ties constructed from something *other than* biogenetic substance, these kinds of kin relationship were of special importance to the Schneiderian approach.

Schneider's influence loomed large over ASAO Monograph No. 1—he chaired the symposium at the 1964 American Anthropological Association annual meeting out of which the volume grew, and he read and commented

upon other papers that were presented at a 1967 conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz, which were incorporated into the resultant book. These various contributions eventuated in the initial ASAO Monograph *Adoption in Eastern Oceania* (Carroll 1970a), edited by one of his first doctoral students at the University of Chicago.[2] That volume included six chapters on Polynesia, five on Micronesia, and two others (Rotuma and what is now northern Vanuatu). The book opened with an incisive introduction (Carroll 1970b) and concluded with a magisterial contribution on adoptions as "transactions in parenthood" (Goodenough 1970).

Six years later, those who contributed to the volume edited by Ivan Brady had the advantage of drawing upon the chapters in the Carroll volume and on the several other journal articles that had appeared by that time. As with the earlier ASAO Monograph, this one also was focused largely on Polynesian ($N=4$) and Micronesian ($N=5$) case studies, with but a single chapter on a Melanesian community (in Vanuatu). Once again, David Schneider's influence was considerable. He was acknowledged for assistance by several of the authors: a great abundance of his published work is cited in the volume; two of the chapter authors were his PhD students at the University of Chicago; and a third might be thought of as one of his "grand-students," having been supervised by Vern Carroll (see Marshall 1999, 419).

Why have I made so much of David Schneider's roles in stimulating and sustaining these two volumes about adoption and fosterage in Oceania? I have done so because these studies greatly contributed to the germination of his ideas about whether what anthropologists confidently called "kinship" deserved to hold the special and central position it did for so many years. Schneider brought these ideas to fruition and into print in 1984 with publication of *A Critique of the Study of Kinship.* It was in that book in which he framed the following dilemma:

> The question can now be rephrased; why has kinship been defined in terms of the relations that arise out of the processes of human sexual reproduction?
>
> I suggest that it has been so defined because there is an assumption that is more often than not implicit. . . . It is the single most important assumption on which the premise of the privileged nature of kinship and the presumed Genealogical Unity of Mankind rests. It is the assumption that Blood Is Thicker Than Water. (Schneider 1984, 165)

Farther along in his argument, Schneider confronted Malinowski's ideas on this matter, and he avered that "a note on adoption is in order" (1984, 171). In that "note" he wrote the following:

> The problem that Malinowski points to is this. If the blood relationship is presumed to have inherent qualities of its own which "are" and which "exist" and are so strong and take such precedence, then adoption ought not to be possible, or at most it should be unusual and rarely practiced. For adoption creates "kinship" where none in fact exists, that is, no real blood relationship exists. Hence, there ought to be a clear cultural distinction between true kinship and all other kinds of relationship.
>
> This is in fact the preponderant view. What is confusing is that adoption is confounded with the blood relationship by being called or treated as it if were the same kind of relationship. But in fact anthropologists have consistently treated adoption as something quite different from true kinship. (Schneider 1984: 171–72)

I might note that, in mounting the argument above, Schneider may have ignored one of the cardinal facts about adoption and fosterage in the Pacific, namely that the overwhelming majority of such transactions occur among people *who are related by blood*, whether the adoptees are the nieces and nephews or the grandchildren of the adopters. This point comes out very clearly in the contributions to the present volume.

Schneider's work, perhaps more than that of anyone else at the time, stimulated a reappraisal of comparative studies of kinship and a redirection of the focus of anthropological theory away from kinship per se and toward power, hegemony, gender and the new reproductive technologies (in this regard, see Carsten 2004; Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Feinberg 2001; Franklin and McKinnon 2001). As I've noted above, the focus on adoption and fosterage, especially in Oceania, was fundamentally important to Schneider's efforts to challenge the biological presuppositions that underlay anthropological studies of kinship, and derivatively, anthropological theory. Even as he and other contributors to the volume he co-edited with Martin Ottenheimer mounted a critique of Schneider's work, Feinberg pointed out its importance for anthropological theory: "in addition to freeing kinship studies from their biogenetic underpinnings and thereby laying the groundwork for much subsequent work by feminist, gay, and lesbian scholars, Schneider's writings have helped to generate a renewed interest in adoption . . ." (2001, 25).

Judith Modell Schachter has been a central player in this resurgence of interest in anthropological studies of adoption (e.g., Modell 1994, 2000; Terrell and Modell 1994), and her interest in this topic grew at least in part from her doctoral research on Hawaiian families and the frequency of *hanai* relationships there (cf. Schachter, 2008). But Schachter is by no means the only one who has given renewed attention to adoption in the twenty-first

century as recent volumes by Bowie (2004), Dorow (2006), Howell (2006) and Volkman (2005) attest. And beyond those papers included in the present volume, a number of new studies of the topic have appeared for the Pacific Islands area as well (see Anderson 2004; Bauer et al. 1992; Demian 2004; Pameh et al. 2002; Peters et al. 2000; Treide 2004; Young Leslie 2000). That adoption and fosterage continue to have "legs" in contemporary anthropology is evidenced by a recent outpouring of new journal articles on the topic (e.g., Kim 2007; Leinaweaver 2007; Verhoef and Morelli 2007; Yngvesson 2007). Therefore, the contributors to the current volume on "Relative Power" find themselves in good company.

One of a spate of books that has sought to frame "the new kinship" in recent years is Carsten's (2004) interesting effort. In that slender volume, she devotes considerable attention to Schneider's work, particularly in her Chapter 5, "Uses and Abuses of Substance." The pertinence of her critique to the current discussion is a section of Chapter 5 entitled "Substance in Melanesia" wherein she draws heavily on work by Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner, and Annette Weiner. In that chapter segment, she notes that "In American kinship, Schneider had emphasized the immutability of *substance* as well as its distinction from *code*. . . . In Melanesia. . . . what is emphasized is the 'analogizing' capacity of *substance*—the way it can be substituted by detachable 'things,' such as meat, women, or pearl shells" (2004, 122). Carsten also draws on Strathern's (1988) notion of Melanesian persons as "partible" or "dividual," and although neither Carsten nor Strathern makes this connection, I suggest that the substitutability of substance in Melanesia, together with the partibility of persons may offer some insight into adoption and fosterage there (and perhaps by extension to other parts of the Pacific). Might it not be the case that adopted or fostered children in Oceania may be thought of as "analogous" to natural children (in the above "analogizing" sense) and further that adopted or fostered children may have nonexclusive identities shared partially with their natural parents and partially with their adoptive parents? If so this is quite different from the thinking that historically has surrounded adoption in the West.

If the above is so, then Laurence M. Carucci's (2008) discussion of Ujelang adoption-like practices as "relationship-making," with a host of possible connections that exist along a continuum of commitment and care with nurturance at its core, might be taken as a leitmotif of all such relationships in Oceania. Apropos Carsten's point following Marilyn Strathern, noted previously, concerning the "analogizing" capacity of substance, it is, I think, no accident that in nearly all ethnographic cases of Pacific adoption that we have, including the new ones below, food is a substitute for kinship substance, even as feeding symbolizes "taking care of" a child or anyone else

who is pulled into such a relationship. In this regard note Jeanette Dickerson-Putman's (2008) discussion of the Tahitian word *fa'a'amu*, which means to informally adopt a feeding child, and Judith Schachter's (2008) translation of hanai in Hawai'i as "nurture, sustain, feed." Similarly, Laurel Monnig notes that "the mutual sharing of food" is a key element of the Chamorro custom, culture, or values within which adoption (*poksai*) exists on Guam.

Leslie Butt (2008), Laurence M. Carucci (2008), Jeanette Dickerson-Putman (2008), and Thorgeir Kolshus (2008) all engage with the idea of *flexibility* in regard to adoption and fosterage in the societies where they do research. At the risk of stretching this supple idea too far, let me note that Emily Martin, in her influential book *Flexible Bodies* (1994), cites Gregory Bateson's equally influential book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) and writes as follows:

> With great prescience, Bateson aptly captured the notion of the flexible, constantly adjusting, constantly changing person, long before its appearance in ads for athletic shoes and temporary employment services. In subsequent chapters we will see how flexibility comes to play a role in our cultural ideas about who will be able to survive into the future at all. (Martin 1994: 158–59)

Insofar as flexibility has to do with survival, it seems appropriate that at least some of the contributors below have used the word "flexible" to talk about the *adaptation* of adoption and fosterage in the face of such changes as increased mobility, migration and movement to urban areas. Without wishing the word flexible to serve simply as a substitute for adapt, I believe that what Kolshus calls "the traditional flexibility of social relations" (2008, 57) in Oceania is an important survival mechanism and that adoption and fosterage figure into this (as Ward Goodenough [1955] argued years ago). To the extent that relationship-making is a built–in, inherent component of many (if not all) Oceanic kinship systems, then the contributors' concerns below with changes consequent on capitalist penetration, urban wage work, transnational migration, and the like give hope that Pacific Islanders' flexible kinship systems will assure that they are among those "who will be able to survive into the future."

Let me raise here an issue about a kind of relationship mentioned by every single contributor to this collection: "adoptions" of grandchildren by grandparents. I have purposefully placed adoptions in quotation marks so as to problematize it. It is commonly the case that such grandparental "adoptions" occur when a young woman bears a child out of wedlock and the baby is

taken and raised by her parents (see Butt 2008, Carucci 2008, Dickerson-Putman 2008, Kolshus 2008, Rauchholz 2008, Salomon and Hamelin 2008, and Schachter 2008). In such instances one might ask, "Is this *really* adoption? Or is it instead simply another demonstration of Radcliffe-Brown's famous 'solidarity of alternate generations'?" Put otherwise, are grandparents in these cases just doing what grandparents do, particularly if they reside next door to or even in the same house as the birth mother, or are they engaging in "relationship-making" the way other persons might?

Finally, a few comments on "new perspectives" that come out of this collection's contributions are in order. One such is a focus on the effects of adoption on the adoptees themselves and on the birth parents. Rauchholz, especially, writes about the mostly negative emotions, feelings, and sentiments that surround these relationships in contemporary Chuuk. Both Butt and Kolshus mention the "ambivalence" and "ambiguity" that surround Dani adoption, in the former case, and adoption on Mota, Vanuatu, in the latter instance. And Salomon and Hamelin, writing about New Caledonia, discuss examples of adoptees who felt rejected because they had been given away, or "sacrificed for the good of the lineage" (2008, 150). Since the pre-existing literature concentrated primarily on adoption's social structural implications, and on the ways that the exchange or circulation of children (and occasionally adults) link groups of kin and help bind the social order, this focus on the emotions surrounding adoption adds significantly to our cross-cultural understanding of such relationships both in the islands and more widely.

Another new perspective is to take a clear-eyed look at those situations in which adopted children are exploited, or even sexually abused in some cases. Salomon and Hamelin give this a good deal of attention for female adoptees in New Caledonia, and Butt addresses the Dani concern over the possible exploitation of adopted children in cases of out-group adoption by Indonesians. Rauchholz also mentions what he calls "Cinderella overtones" to adoptions in Chuuk.

The last new perspective these contributors examine is what adoption does or doesn't do to adoptees' sense of identity and belonging. Rauchholz explores this for Chuuk, as does Kolshus for Mota. Presaging Schachter's discussion (see following) of "belonging to the land" in Hawai'i, Kolshus states that a similar notion is to be found among Motese: "inheritance and use rights to land are decisive factors in establishing a person as Motese or not. In addition, notions of belonging are commonly expressed through the idiom of land" (2008, 71). Belonging appears in a somewhat different guise in Schachter's paper about contemporary Hawai'i:

> In Hawai'i, the social construction of kinship enacts an ideology of incorporativeness that merges family with assertions of cultural identity. . . . a historical process that began as soon as North Americans reconstructed the laws and the governance of the Hawaiian Islands. The decisions they made about their family, incorporating children into the 'ohana in multiple ways, constitutes an interpretation of *belonging* that connects intimately with contemporary Hawaiian notions of nationhood.
>
> Adoption in all its forms is a reminder, in practice as well as in interpretation, of the flexibility built into a concept of belonging, so that being a citizen of Hawai'i, belonging to the land, does not reduce to fealty to the United States or to an independent Hawaiian nation. (2008, 228)

Because adoption is all about belonging—to nuclear families, to extended families, and to kin groups such as lineages and clans where those are present but also to "the land," "a people," or even "a nation"—it possesses at least the possibility for transforming identity in fundamental ways.

The brief account I have provided above shows that the subject of adoption and fosterage—"relationship-making"—has captured anthropological interest in the Pacific Islands for at least the past seventy-five years, even though it came in for intensive scrutiny only a little over thirty-five years ago. That scrutiny contributed to a sea change in anthropological theory, a movement away from privileging kinship as the central arena for theoretical debate in the discipline and a rejection of the notion that kinship cross-culturally was based fundamentally on "blood" ties. In the resultant tumult from this reorientation of the anthropological gaze, a host of topics has replaced kinship per se as new basic foci of our attention. These have included power, hegemony, the person, and gender, and such varied subjects as gay and lesbian relationships and the new reproductive technologies. Amid these "hot topics" of the past quarter century, adoption has reasserted itself as a subject worthy of in-depth anthropological study, albeit viewed through rather different lenses than before. The set of papers in this collection employs some of these lenses to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of studies of relationship-making in Oceania and how and why such studies contribute to our greater understanding of the human condition.

NOTES

1. When it was first founded, the organization was named the Association for Social Anthropology in Eastern Oceania (ASAEO), with a specific focus on Polynesia and Micronesia and the exclusion of New Guinea. The name was changed to ASAO in 1970,

along with a formal decision to include New Guinea in the comparative studies that are the organization's *raison d'etre.*

2. Indeed, three of the thirteen ethnographic chapters in the Carroll volume were by Schneider's doctoral students (see Marshall 1999, 419).

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