

## BEYOND NORMATIVE DISCOURSE: ADOPTION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN NEW CALEDONIA

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Formal and informal transfers of children remain a widespread phenomenon in the Kanak community today, although these transfers are somewhat influenced by the French legal system. This paper, which focuses on the intersection of gender-based violence and adoption among Kanak women, combines ethnographic data with findings from a questionnaire-based survey about violence against women in New Caledonia. The strong link between adoption and mistreatment, especially rape in childhood and adolescence, is a disturbing contradiction of generally accepted opinion regarding adoption in Oceania. Some effects on adult life also deserve attention, most notably the increased rates of intimate partner violence and lifetime substance abuse. These adverse events seem much more common than acknowledged so far and suggest a crisis in foster care, related to persistent imbalanced gender relations and social change in families that we try to better understand in the postcolonial setting of New Caledonia.

THIS ARTICLE COMBINES ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA with the findings of a questionnaire survey on violence against women in New Caledonia; we compare the answers by Kanak women who were transferred as children with the responses from those who were not. While establishing that adoption and foster care remain a large-scale, open, and common practice in contemporary Kanak societies, the analysis underlines a clear link to mistreatment and reveals an especially disturbing aspect: its co-occurrence with early rape of girls. Our intention in this paper is to contribute to the understanding of a social reality and not to defend a moral point of view on transfers of children,

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which can be the topic of highly normative discourses (see Modell 1998) and the focus of considerable institutional and political attention (see Fonseca 2004). For this purpose and to contextualize such violence, we felt it was necessary to provide enough historical and social background to convey the scale of the relevant family and societal changes, some long-standing and others linked to the country's recent political history, which impact on the practices and representations associated with transfers of children today.

Over more than 150 years of French colonization, the family structures and social networks of the indigenous Melanesians, the Kanaks, have been disrupted by colonial land conquest, forced relocation, mandatory work for the settlers and, until the 1950s, restrictions on their rights under the "Native Regime"—that is, the French administrative system for indigenous peoples. The imbalance in land distribution has continued since then, together with economic and social inequalities. Lack of political will, failure to integrate the Kanaks into the economic mainstream, and the rise of Kanak nationalism resulted in several years of near-civil war during the 1980s. Because neither side could impose its preferred solution, a first settlement, presented by the Matignon Accord of 1988 as decolonization within the framework of French institutions, initiated greater Kanak participation in the government and public service and in the modern economic sector. A decade later, the Nouméa Accord of 1998 took further steps toward a form of independence-in-association, although perceptions of where this arrangement should lead remain contradictory.

As of 2004, the indigenous population of New Caledonia accounts for slightly less than half of the total population of 230,000 (Census 2004, see Rivoilan 2007). The social world of the Kanaks today—both its material conditions and its social constructions—has been strongly influenced by interactions with the West, and there is a growing amount of cultural mixing, especially in Nouméa, the only real urban area. Even there, however, permeability between communities seems not to be a general feature of life: distinct cultural settings and separate sets of social characteristics still exist. Despite two decades of rapid social change, disparities persist. Europeans remain more advantageously placed in terms of education, employment, and access to economic resources, while Kanaks are still on the bottom rung of the social ladder, the victims of structural violence, that is, "the invisible social machinery of inequality that reproduces social relations of exclusion and marginalization" (Scheper-Hughes 2004). Social problems, unemployment, housing difficulties, and institutionalized racism all rebound onto and affect children. According to the current Director of the Association for Protection of Childhood and Youth (*Association pour la Protection de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse*) in New Caledonia, two-thirds of those under

eighteen who have been reported as neglected or abused belong to the Kanak community.<sup>1</sup> For girls and women, violence stemming from poverty and inequality is combined with gender-based violence, which is also much higher among Kanaks than among other communities in New Caledonia.

Our previous ethnographic studies have shed light on violence in Kanak women's lives (Salomon 1998, 2000a, 2000b) and drawn attention to trends during and since the 1990s: the increase in reported rapes (accounting for up to 80 percent of criminal court cases) and women's recent gravitation toward French law to seek redress after sexual violence against them and their children, mostly girls. We have also noted a connection between adoption and victimization in fieldwork observations and interviews as well as in court records (Salomon 2003, 2005). This link should be confirmed by the activities of *SOS Violences Sexuelles* cofounded in 1992 by Marie Claude Tjibaou, the widow of the assassinated Kanak leader; this association focuses on identifying sexual abuse of children and giving legal support to young victims. These victims are often adopted, while the perpetrator is frequently an adoptive relative or a legal guardian, generally the mother's new partner or a male relative in whose house the girl lives. Accordingly, when in 2002 we decided to measure the extent of violence by conducting a general population survey of women from all communities throughout New Caledonia, one of our research theories was that adoption could be a risk factor for exposure. Data were anonymously collected using a standardized questionnaire in face-to-face interviews lasting one hour on average and related to a random sample selected from the electoral rolls of 1,012 women aged eighteen to fifty-four, including 441 Kanak women.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that the interviews were to be applied to women from the various communities and to be synoptic enough to enable statistical processing, requiring a certain number of responses to each question, we broke down the question on transfers of children according to the categories generally used in French as spoken locally and understood by all communities in New Caledonia.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, all women were asked (in French): Were you adopted? Were you given into foster care (by someone other than your birth parents)? Of course, these statistical categories merge situations that may differ substantially at a micro-social level: they mask a complexity that is accessible only through ethnography. Their limits must be determined, but to accurately describe events on a larger—population-wide—scale, anthropologists cannot ignore their value.

### **Transfers of Children in New Caledonia: Which Categories to Use?**

Child transfer is a long-standing practice in all Kanak societies, as documented in oral tradition. It is still very common, as its current scale shows

(see following section, “The Scale of the Practice Today”). The situations in which it occurs and the issues related to it, however, both differ. When we appraise actual situations, it can be difficult to determine whether it is indeed a permanent transfer or a temporary one. Cases of supposedly permanent transfers assigned to the adoption category have been more extensively described (see Leblic 2000, 2004). In reciprocal marital exchanges, when there is no woman available to be given back in marriage, an infant girl can be offered instead. This is the most valued form of adoption for a girl because it has a place in the alliances between social groups. The gift of a child—more often a boy—can also be a means of strengthening a political alliance between groups henceforth supposed to act as kin (with subsequent marriage prohibition) or of providing a descendant to a lineage that would otherwise die out. In the latter case, adoption is most often accompanied by ceremonial exchanges in which the biological roots of the child are said to be cut in order to integrate the child completely into its adoptive patrilineage. The adoptee takes the name of this new lineage, for Kanak societies are patrilineal.

Less formal transfers, without ceremonial exchanges, occur and can also be seen as permanent. A child may be given to a childless sibling, either to balance the sex ratio of a relative’s offspring (for ideally every individual should have both brothers and sisters), or more often to be a caretaker for an elderly person whose own children have grown up and moved away. Such gifts of children take place within the agnatic group but can also occur outside it, going to allies. In the Kanak languages we know (specifically, A’jië and Päicî, spoken in two adjoining northern zones of the main island), the parents who give a child for adoption use two different terms, depending on the ties they have with the adopting parents. One—*nââ* (identical in the two languages)—means to give, to leave, to place, and it is used whenever a ceremonial exchange takes place; the other term—*viëi* in A’jië and *mêai-ri* in Päicî—instead means to offer, to give out of a sense of generosity, and it is used when the arrangement is informal, for example, between siblings or close relatives. Kanak languages thus underline the kind of gift and the kind of social bond between the birth parents—or birth mother—and those who adopt.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to these long-established rules, adoption also appears today to be a response to the increased number of unplanned births among teenage girls or young women without a recognized companion. In reviewing the configurations for child circulation in one of the indigenous societies of New Caledonia, the Päicî of the main island, and providing a detailed census of adopted children through genealogical data, Isabelle Leblic indicates that more than half of the adoptees (178 of 341) were born to single mothers (2004). She also shows that children born to single mothers are largely (up to

81 percent) adopted, in most cases by their maternal grandfather or uncle. They thus remain in their mother's patrilineage. Because Leblic's analysis does not distinguish the various genealogical levels, it cannot measure the increase in the proportion of such children in later generations.

Generally, regardless of the type of transfer concerned, there is no secret and the identity of the parents or the birth mother is not concealed. Neither is the temporary or permanent nature of the transfer (which is designed to distinguish between adoption and fosterage) necessarily established at the outset. There certainly are children whose birth parents hand over custody temporarily to someone else, usually from the same kinship group, for a variety of reasons. But there are also children placed by their parents at birth under the symbolic patronage of someone else (in local French this is called "to give morally to someone"), without the child necessarily leaving the parental home and going to live with that person, although the bond created opens the prospect of living for a time with this guardian, who then becomes a foster parent. In contrast with adopted children who supposedly have the same rights and obligations as all other members of the adoptive lineage, fostered children retain their rights in their birth patrilineage and in principle have none in that of their foster father. The latter—in agreement with his brothers—can however sometimes also grant them rights in his own lineage.

Coming and going not only between birth parents and foster parents, but also between birth parents and adoptive parents is quite often observed, especially during adolescence. On the other hand, temporary fosterage can become permanent and foster children may never in fact return to their birth parents. The adoption and fosterage processes should therefore be considered as extended trajectories.

A child fostered young can subsequently return to and grow up with its birth parents. But it may also stay with those who raised it until adult age while still keeping its birth name or even end up being adopted by the latter and taking their name. As a result of conflicts with members of its adoptive kin, an adopted child, even if the transfer has been sealed with a ceremonial exchange, may also come back later on and take up its place in its birth lineage, while keeping the name of its adopted lineage. In this way, the adoption and foster categories, like those within adoption that distinguish between transfers formalized by ceremonial exchanges and those not so formalized, are insufficient to express the complex trajectories of transferred children and the possible kinds of interaction between their parents, whether birth, adoption, or foster.<sup>5</sup>

In contemporary Kanak societies the issue of whether the child's custody status has legally been changed under French law also arises. The two

categories commonly used in French by Kanak language-speakers to describe a transferred child, “adopted” or “given into (someone else’s) care” (*donné à garder*), also include this aspect. “Given into (someone else’s) care” here generally means that the child has the surname of the adoptive parents and is registered as adopted in official civil status records. This service was introduced in the 1930s, but only became operational in the 1950s in rural areas. There are, however, two separate civil registration systems in New Caledonia, one for French civil law and the other one dealing with Kanak affairs. The Kanak registry—recording personal customary status (*statut coutumier*) since the recent Nouméa Accord (1998), which was previously known as “special legal status”—is the one that most Kanaks<sup>6</sup> have kept and that differentiates them from other citizens to whom general civil law (*statut de droit commun*) applies; it governs adoption and more generally family law, plus property law (but not penal law). Whereas under general law, adoption is a long process requiring an enquiry and a court decision, which in some cases extinguishes the original filiation, under customary status the original filiation remains and only the agreement recorded between the parties is necessary for the change in the adoptee’s name to be recorded by the civil status documents. Today the emphasis on the child’s patronymic to define adoption, even for the Kanaks who have kept their customary status, thus seems to be borrowed from the French system. The change of surname, however, does not necessarily mean that the child was transferred according to ancient Kanak practices, and the failure to change names does not exclude a transfer formalized by ceremonial exchanges.

The second category “given into (someone else’s) care” is not uniform either and covers at least two different situations. It may be a kind of symbolic patronage, also described as being “morally” given to someone (see above), where the gift takes place at birth, to reinforce bonds between allies by marriage or between different patrilineages, but where the child does not take the adopter’s patronymic and often does not even live with them. On the other hand, it may be a much looser transfer of children, where they are left with other relatives for varying lengths of time and different reasons, as circumstances require. These situations occur much later than formal transfers, for example when the child has to go to school, which is compulsory in New Caledonia at the age of six, and when it is easier to stay with a family member who lives closer by.

### **The Scale of the Practice Today**

The results of the survey indicate that more than one in four Kanak women were transferred as children, which findings are quite consistent with Leblic’s

among the Païcî (2004), where the genealogies collected showed that one child in four had been adopted. Of our 441 Kanak respondents, 126 (28.5 percent) reported some form of adoption or fosterage.<sup>7</sup> The two situations are equally distributed: 14 percent (sixty women) said they had been adopted, and 14.5 percent (sixty-six women) that they were given into someone else's care.

Wondering if a generation effect might underlie the scale of the practice, we also looked more closely at the different age groups in our sample: there were equal numbers of transferred girls in all age groups. The transfer of children thus does not appear to be declining in the Kanak community. We counted many more adoptions among those younger than twenty-five years than among their elders: the rate was twice as high in women aged eighteen to twenty-four years than with those aged thirty-five to fifty-four. On the other hand, more thirty-five to fifty-four-year-old women than younger women had been given into the care of someone other than their birth parents: the trend is thus reversed. Regardless of the kind of transfer, it took place before the age of six in 80 percent of cases. Adoption, however, was more likely to occur at birth or before the age of two (73 percent) than the other form of transfer: 54 percent occurred before the age of two and nearly all of the rest between the ages of two and six years. Another important difference is that adoptive parents were more often both the mother's kin and the child's actual caregivers, while foster parents were most often relatives of the birth father, and the children less frequently spent their entire childhood with them. Several theories may explain these findings.

Over the past two decades and with the identity renaissance, the influence of the various churches over young people's upbringing has weakened considerably: no one any longer purports to eradicate teenage sexuality. The falling age at first pregnancy,<sup>8</sup> the trend toward less and later marriage and the fact that unions are less stable than in previous generations, when lifestyles were more influenced by the missions, are all factors favoring short-term and informal couple relationships and higher percentages of children born out of wedlock or whose parents separate. This social environment may explain the high rate of adoptees among young women born in the late 1970s or early 1980s. As abortion is still somewhat stigmatized and thus difficult to obtain, especially for young girls,<sup>9</sup> and since Kanak social norms also make it hard for young single mothers to keep their babies, giving up the infant for intrafamily adoption has become the most common response to unplanned pregnancies in teenage girls and single young women. This form of adoption was used in the past, as the oral literature shows, to regulate the situation of children born out of wedlock or from adultery or incest. The girl's parents often make the decision during her pregnancy, and infants are adopted at

birth or very soon after by either a relative of the young mother, often a brother, or her parents themselves. The boyfriend's parents may offer child-wealth during pregnancy or at birth and ask that the child bear their name, but unless they prove ready to give bridewealth as well as childwealth, they are frequently refused. The child is thus *de facto* appropriated by the birth mother's patrilineage, sometimes against her will. Although adoption is generally viewed as beneficial to adoptive kin, the relative chosen by the mother's parents to adopt the child may not be prepared and may also be somewhat reluctant. When the grandparents adopt the child and the mother continues to live with them, the child will often call her "Mum," while calling her mother "Grandma" and her father "Dad." The child's situation in this family configuration can be abruptly disturbed if the mother gets married and leaves to live elsewhere, with her new partner, as demonstrated by this interview recorded in French by C. Salomon (June 25, 1990) with a thirty-five-year-old woman:

My mother was a single mother. She had me very young, at the age of about 15 or 16. It was at school that I was told who my real father was, but I always avoided him. We lived with my grandfather and my grandmother (maternal). When I was young—about six years old—I used to sleep with my mother. This period is vague, but I remember that when I woke up in the night, sometimes there was a man sleeping with us. I would push him away, try and make him fall out of the bed—I didn't like him. Then my mother would beg me not to make any noise so as not to wake grandfather, who did not know. When I turned seven, my mother married this fellow and went to live in the next village with him. I stayed with my grandfather, who had adopted me, but I was very unhappy. I ran away all the time to see my mother, and my grandfather hit me when I got back for going to see my mother, and he said, "You don't go over there. It's not your house." I always resented my mother and father-in-law, her husband, for that, and I always felt unrelated to my sisters (half-sisters). The person I see as my real mother is my mother's elder sister, who works in Nouméa. She bought my clothes and everything I needed.

Contemporary forms of grandparental caregiving and adoption may differ from traditional adoption patterns. They also overlap in important respects with information from elsewhere in the Pacific, e.g., for the Dani in Papua see L. Butt (2008), in Raivavae French Polynesia see J. Dickerson-Putman (2008), and for the Maori of urban New Zealand, see J. Armstrong (2005).

In addition, changing constructions of parenting have led some young single mothers to keep their children with them when they move in with



a man, even if the grandparents have adopted the children. In the past, if the mother went to live with a new companion, as in the example above, her children never went with her, but remained within the mother's patrilineage (unless they were adopted by the mother's spouse at the time of the wedding exchanges). These relatively recent situations show that many adoptions by maternal grandparents, although legal insofar as surname and registrar's office requirements are concerned, are intended to deal with circumstances as they occur. In our group of sixty adopted women, twenty-nine (49 percent) reported they had been adopted by a mother's relative, twenty-six (43 percent) by a father's relative, while five (8 percent) had been adopted by others. Most were adopted as infants or in very early childhood, before the age of two. The questionnaire did not ask about the marital situation of the respondent's mother, but ethnographic knowledge suggests that a high proportion of women adopted by a mother's relative were born to single mothers. Among those adopted before the age of two, only 61 percent grew up with their adoptive parents. Of those who did not, the largest proportion reported that their grandparents brought them up.

The extent of change over the past two decades may also explain the decrease among the younger women, compared with their elders, in the proportion given to someone else's care. New policies about school infrastructure and school bussing in rural areas have led to a decline in the number of children sent to live with relatives in a European township to maximize their educational opportunities. In our sample, no woman given into someone else's care between the age of five and seven (the age primary school begins) was younger than twenty-five. Moreover, while school, beginning at the age of two and a half, is promoted as the best way to socialize children, the French educational system puts harsh pressure on Kanak parents and judges them for their children's failure in school (see Salaün 2006). It also puts forward parenting standards that, in accordance with Western views, implicitly consider that only birth parents can be good parents. The new norms are reinforced by economic measures that encourage couples to keep their children with them and caregivers or foster parents to become adoptive parents or legal guardians. For example, foster or temporary parents cannot receive the family allowances available to birth parents and to legally recognized guardians or adoptive parents. Nor can they receive other social services, such as scholarships (unless they produce evidence of a court-approved transfer of parental rights). Of the sixty-six women in our survey who reported they were given into someone else's care in childhood, 64 percent went to a paternal relative, 30 percent to a maternal relative and 6 percent to someone else. Interestingly, among the women given into someone's care before the age of seven, very few (only 1 in 5) were actually raised by these

foster parents. The same proportion remained with the birth parents, but the largest group stayed with their grandparents who were not those to whom they had originally been given. Thus, grandparents remain potential caregivers in all situations, with very special bonds of affection and closeness to their grandchildren, socially expressed by demonstrations of fondness and normative teasing behavior.

Women in the survey were also asked whether they had themselves “adopted” one or more children, without specifying the kind of transfer involved. We presume that the answers concern mostly adoption and may exclude temporary transfers. Regardless of age, almost 1 Kanak woman in 5 (eighty-two women, 18.5 percent) reported adopting at least one child.<sup>10</sup> This proportion is undoubtedly an underestimation because it is calculated from a sample including young women with no partner or no stable partner at the time of the survey, but who may well adopt a child in the future, if they marry. Among those aged forty-five to fifty-four years, the group least likely to adopt in the future, the rate of adoptive mothers reached 40 percent, with no differences between these women and the others regarding education and resources. Rates were much higher in rural areas. They were also three times higher in the Loyalty Islands and twice as high in the Northern as they were in the Southern Province, where Nouméa is located and where cultural intermingling among communities is greatest. Not surprisingly, adoptive mothers are also overrepresented among women whose unions were formally approved by the families through bridewealth exchange, compared with those whose marriage or cohabitation was not so formalized (33 percent vs. 10 percent).

Among the adoptive mothers, only 18 percent have no other child and would otherwise be considered childless. Most adoptive mothers have also given birth and raised their children. They differ from their nonadoptive counterparts in the number of children they have borne: an average of five for adoptive mothers compared with three-and-a-half for the others. This result shows that, in most cases, adoption is not intended as an alternative to sterility or insufficient child numbers, these being contexts in which parents yearn for children, and women escape the stigmatized status of childlessness by becoming adoptive mothers (see Salomon 2002). Adoptees are rather supernumerary children in already large families, where the parents struggle to make do, although they cannot refuse to take in another child for a relative. This is an environment that may be conducive to lack of attention and possible neglect. Our data do not show significant economic differences between the households of cohabiting Kanak women who have adopted and those of women who have not (for the same marital status and age). But they do show the inadequacy of resources in Kanak households in general, because

in women with partners, whether or not they are adoptive parents, 63 percent of those with five children at home live in poverty (40 percent in great poverty). Thus we cannot rule out the possibility that economic deprivation is one factor contributing to the unfavorable treatment of some unwanted adopted children, who are thus considered a supplementary burden in this context.

Interestingly, women who were themselves transferred during childhood adopted half as often as women who were not. Further enquiry would be needed to know why there is this disparity, which may well differ according to circumstances. The thirty-five year-old woman adopted by her grandfather who related her childhood memories in our first interview (see p. 138), explained in a second interview her reluctance to adopt, even though after ten years of marriage she still had no children, which in the Kanak world is a problem.<sup>11</sup>

Personally, I would prefer not to adopt. I would prefer to have my own child. I don't know about other people, but for me that's how it is. It would be hard for me to bring up a child who was not mine. I know there are always problems when you adopt a child. Sometimes it's the child who causes problems, sometimes it's the parents, the adoptive parents, or the real parents. It never really works—there are always issues with it. What I've seen is that it never works when you adopt a child. Well, that's my opinion. Someone always has to go and say that the child is adopted, and I don't like that. It irritates me. That's why I was saying that at one time, my husband and I said that if we couldn't have children we would adopt. That was when I started thinking about it, wondering what I would do, whether it would work. No, no, for me it doesn't work—I don't want to. And also, you can't say no. The child is given to us or to my husband. In custom, I have no choice but to agree, to make sure I keep the child. It's stupid, but that's the way it is because the child is given to us, and we can't say no. I don't mind being given a child. I have no objection. But I don't want to go and see someone and ask them to give me their child. I don't want to ask. If the family has thought of us to give us a child, I would readily agree. But if we go and ask, then the real parents, they will give, but reluctantly, and later, there will be problems. The mother will say [to the father], "You agreed to give away the child, but I didn't want to." Or the mother agrees to give the child away, but the father says, "I'm going to take it back." They give, but not wholeheartedly. And that's why there are always problems. There are squabbles—there are problems with adoption.  
(in French; recorded by C. Salomon, August 9, 1990)

**Suffering and Violence among Transferred Children:  
The Darker Side**

“Adoption problems” are not only related to the reluctance of birth parents. Their frequency and possible occurrence even in the most favorable adoption circumstances reveal a fragility and uncertainty inherent to the adoptee status. An illustration of this is the concern felt by an adoptive mother aged over seventy years, a widow and sole survivor of her patrilineage, to whom her sister’s son has just given a small boy, aged only three years, so as to perpetuate this group’s name:

We were only two daughters, and the other one, my sister who married out, is already dead. Now I am the only one left in my clan. That is why I am bringing up this young boy so that he can be in my clan. He is mine and also belongs to the woman who married over there [the deceased sister]. He is our grandson, and our grandson is our reflection. I took this young boy for him to be the tree which will go on when I die. If not, when I die, the Joa and Karanorê lineage will die out. His father thought of me. Like my sister, his grandmother was dead and only we two [the two daughters] were left in our clan. He thought that if there was another boy, he would give him to me, for that boy to come into my clan. But it wasn’t my idea. It was his idea. He took pity on me. He gave me one of his sons for my clan. But I cannot pass on my medicine<sup>12</sup> to this boy immediately; he has to grow up first. If I die soon, what will I do? I don’t know. It worries me. I have to find someone who will continue to bring him up, and I need to show that person the medicine before my death for him or her to pass it on to the boy when he grows up. I will give everything to do with my land and that protects it for it to be shown to my son when he grows up, because I do not have long to live. My problem now is that I do not trust the two couples who are down there [the only neighbors who are relatives]. But we had a talk the other day to work out who would get what, and I went down to see the gendarmes for the child to be given my name, for him to inherit my land, my medicine.

(in A’jië; recorded by C. Salomon on September 20, 1991)

Subsequent visits to this region did enable us to note that this interviewee’s fears were founded: she passed away five years after the interview, and the adopted child was given to one of the neighboring couples (in which his adoptive mother had no confidence), who neglected him. He

underperformed at school and ended up a few years later returning to live with his birth parents who lived in a different area from the one where the land he could claim was located. Over this period, enjoyment of the land reverted to the neighboring relatives. Although the adoptive mother had taken the precaution of registering the adoption at the civil status office (with the gendarmes representing the French Government) so there was a written record, the recovery of the land by the young man would imply that those who were working it would have to be displaced, which could lead to a serious dispute. In August 2007, therefore, at the age of nineteen, he had still not claimed the property.

Although we lack first-hand information on this topic from adopted males, ethnographic observation of land disputes is relevant. Even in the most harmonious forms of adoption, adopted boys often lose their male prerogatives to land (women have no land ownership rights, except if they are the only survivor of their patrilineage, with no male alive). They have forfeited their rights in their birth patrilineage and may be further deprived of some privileges where they have been adopted. Moreover, male adoptees seldom inherit their adopted father's political power if he is a chief.

When male children are adopted within their birth mother's patrilineage, their legitimacy to inherit land appears even further reduced: during disputes with the sons of the maternal uncle—and land disputes are frequent in view of the scarcity induced by colonial despoliation—it will be pointed out that the adopted son is but “the woman's son,” a social status inferior to that of the man's son. In societies structured by patrilineal descent, where children are metaphorically called “the fruit and flowers of the [marriage] alliance” and where a single mother may be called a “roadside spouse” (an expression also used for prostitutes), children born to unmarried mothers and most often adopted within the mother's patrilineage are vulnerable in very specific ways. In intimate conversations (voice lowered) or during arguments (voice raised), they may be called a “product made in blindness,” that is, a bastard. The term is a major insult. To be so considered dramatically lowers one's social position. The highly charged category of the illegitimate child and the stigma attached to it imply an obvious association with social vulnerability. It can cause great psychological injury. In this way, an adopted young woman, herself having in foster care the born-out-of-wedlock daughter of one of her sisters, refers to the affront done her by her partner in calling the girl a bastard, such an offensive term that she could not say it during the interview:

We had an argument [my partner and I]. I can't remember what it was over. He called me that name, both the little girl and me, and it

hurt me. I cried when he came out with that. I said, “You’re the first person to have ever said that to me, because my adoptive parents never spoke to me like that. They may have told me off, but they never treated me like you have.” Anyway, I didn’t tell him, but I wanted to find my [birth] father. When I met him—it was not long ago—my partner was no longer living with us [her and her daughter] for me to be able to tell him, “You see the things you said to me were wrong, because I am not what you said I was.” That’s a shame. I would have liked to throw that back in his face, that I’m not a whatever, I’ve got my father!  
(in French; recorded by C. Salomon on July 9, 2000)

Today, the maternal family members—grandparents in particular—who adopt in the cases of children born to single mothers may express some ambivalence with respect to these adoptions, which are no longer perceived and presented as a benefit but rather sometimes as a burden. Although there are still grandparents who demand that one of their daughter’s or son’s children, usually the first-born grandchild, must be given to them to be brought up (without necessarily adopting it), an opposing trend is now emerging: elderly grandparents, often with no resources (with tiny pensions) complain that their opinion is no longer requested and end up with a “herd” of children on their hands.<sup>13</sup>

Physical and sexual violence does not appear totally uncommon among transferred children. A few years ago, in one of the areas we were familiar with because we had been working there for fifteen years, a case of extreme physical mistreatment—torture—of a twelve-year-old boy by his adoptive parents and his elder adoptive brother was discovered by staff at his boarding school and reported to the courts. The parents stated during the trial that they had reluctantly adopted the boy, born to a single mother, when he was three years old. Although the defense lawyer argued it was a simple matter of corporal punishment, they were sentenced to a two-year jail term (*Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, October 2 and 5, 2000). During the court proceedings however the parents received the unconditional support of their respective lineages. The mistreated child, who had been born out of wedlock, seemed to count for even less as his mother lived far from the residence group of the adoptive parents and did not belong to a high-ranking lineage. The trial showed a profound misunderstanding between the judges on one hand and the accused and their extended lineages on the other. Thus legal considerations seem to be able to excuse a degree of negligence or even mistreatment. Kanak oral literature also refers to situations in which children are the victims of hierarchy issues and physical violence (see Bensa and Rivierre 1983).

Representations change, however, and in the current context the positions taken by some Kanak leaders in strongly condemning violence toward adopted children and attributing it to the erosion of social structures and a regression in moral principles shows a form of interpretation closer to a model put forward as universal. During his lecture on childhood in Kanak society held at the Tjibaou Cultural Center on May 15, 2001 (transcript published in 2004), Joseph Streeter, a prominent Kanak teacher, mentioned specific acts, especially toward children of single mothers and subsequently adopted, by more or less unwilling adoptive parents; Streeter qualified these as far beyond standards of acceptable conduct:

Today we see the rejection of children adopted by the clan, especially children of unmarried mothers. A young girl who has a child and is not married can have her child adopted by her clan, by an uncle, for example. Often the child is mistreated when it grows a little older, it can even be disowned, because uncles have today somewhat lost the sense of blood. They would rather give preference to their own son to the detriment of the child they adopted . . . Today many children are rejected because, it is said, they are children from the street. (2004, 21)

Adoption is also a gendered practice: even in the most favorable social conditions for the child, when the adoptive parents are clearly seeking to adopt, “taking” a girl and “taking” a boy are not accompanied by the same expectations. Adopting a girl is seen as a means of securing household labor and services, while adopting a boy is presented rather as a means of perpetuating a lineage. The text below, collected in the Bwatoo language (spoken in one area of the northwest of Grande Terre), clearly expresses a gender construction that can in some cases veer for girls toward a certain amount of harshness and overwork.

I had two sons, the first was nine years old and the second six, I would have enjoyed having a daughter, but without any hope of another child, I decided to take (i.e., adopt) a girl. And a girl happened to be born at a cousin's. I heard of it half a day after the birth. So I asked my wife to come and I told her about my intention. She agreed because it was her wish too. When I told her what I had decided, she agreed and she added: a young girl can wash the dishes, she does things to help her mother, she sweeps up and so she learns many things. (Raymond Diela, in Rivierre and Ehrhardt 2006)

In the questionnaire study, comparison of the responses between adopted Kanak women and those given into someone's care during their childhood with those from women who had not been so treated revealed contrasts, notably where exposure to violence was concerned. For the purposes of statistical analysis, we grouped together the women who said they had been adopted and those who said they had been given into someone's care. When we use the general term adoption in the section hereafter, without further qualification, it refers to both categories of child transfer. (Data from the questionnaire are in the Table.) Although we observe no significant difference in educational level<sup>14</sup> or personal income between Kanak women who were and who were not adopted, one of the most striking results lies in the frequency of sexual abuse in childhood among adopted women, vastly more common than recognized or acknowledged: roughly one-quarter of adopted Kanak women (23 percent) reported some kind of sexual abuse before the age of eighteen (fondling, attempted rape or rape, by a relative), a proportion higher than among nonadopted women (17 percent). If we consider rape alone, the gap is still wider: 12 percent of adopted Kanak women reported one or more rapes, compared with 5 percent among nonadopted women.<sup>15</sup> Of the twenty-nine women adopted in their childhood and victims of sexual violence then, twelve declared that they had been formally adopted and seventeen given into care. This distribution indicates that the latter category is slightly overrepresented among victims, and the situation was worst for those given for care to someone in their father's patrilineage (fifteen). Age at transfer did not differ between victims and nonvictims, nor did the category of relative with whom the woman actually spent her childhood. The only noticeable difference is that, of the twelve formally adopted victims of sexual violence, nine were adopted by a maternal relative. This finding supports our hypothesis that girls born to single mothers and thus adopted by a maternal relative are overexposed to violence.

Early sexual violence is known to be related to subsequent sexual health problems,<sup>16</sup> and among adopted women we observed a tendency to report higher rates of forced first intercourse (15 percent vs. 10 percent), teenage pregnancy (19 percent vs. 12 percent), and sexually transmitted infection (STI) during the past year (10 percent vs. 5 percent of those with any sexual activity). Our data also show that adopted women were more likely to have left the family home before the age of sixteen years (6 percent vs. 3 percent).

Further, intrafamily violence is not limited to childhood and adolescence but persists later on. Overall, adoptees older than eighteen continue to suffer much higher rates of violence perpetrated by a relative (other than their intimate partner) than do nonadopted women, including sexual violence (4 percent vs. 2.6 percent). In the survey, 1 adopted Kanak woman in



TABLE. Differences between adopted ( $n = 126$ ) and nonadopted ( $n = 315$ ) Kanak women.

	Adopted women (%)	Nonadopted women (%)	$p^\dagger$
Childhood and adolescence			
All sexual abuse before age eighteen (fondling, attempted rape, and rape)	23	17	ns‡
Rape only	12	5	*
Coercion for first sexual intercourse	15	10	ns
Teenage pregnancy (before age eighteen)	19	12	*
Early departure from the family (before age sixteen)	6	3	ns
Adulthood—events during the past year			
Intimate partner violence			
Physical abuse	41	28.5	**
Sexual abuse	17	12.5	ns
Psychological harassment	16	12.5	ns
Intrafamily violence (by a relative other than the partner)			
Physical abuse	14	8	*
Sexual abuse	4	2.6	ns
Verbal abuse	21	12	*
STI during the past twelve months	10	5	ns
Substance abuse			
Cannabis users	14	6	**
Tobacco smokers	42	35	ns
Kava drinkers	12	8	ns
Simultaneous consumption of alcohol and either kava or cannabis	14	9	ns
Has herself adopted at least one child	7	15	ns

† Chi-square test.

‡ The difference is not statistically significant.

\* The difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ( $p < .05$ ). There is less than 5 percent probability that the difference found in our sample occurred by chance.

\*\* The difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level ( $p < .01$ ). There is less than 1 percent probability that the difference found in our sample occurred by chance.

5 reported insults and death threats (21 percent vs. 12 percent) and 1 in 7 reported physical violence (14 percent vs. 8 percent) during the past year. We note that verbal and physical violence by women within the family against adopted women is more than twice as likely as violence against nonadopted victims (13 percent vs. 6 percent). Female perpetrators were more often adoptive mothers and older sisters than mothers-in-law (who are entitled by Kanak norms to discipline their daughters-in-law), a point that reflects the inferior status of many adoptees within their own family.

In terms of the couple, adopted Kanak women with an intimate partner and their nonadopted counterparts did not differ substantially in their marital status or in the gift of bridewealth used to formalize the cohabitation or the marriage, but the adopted women were—all else being equal—markedly more exposed to physical violence than their nonadopted counterparts (41 percent vs. 28 percent).<sup>17</sup> They also suffered higher incidence rates of psychological and sexual violence.

Finally, another important difference should be stressed. Drug use in adult life was correlated with adoption in childhood. Among adopted women, all else being equal, there was a significantly higher proportion of current cannabis users (14 percent vs. 6 percent). Adoptees also tended more frequently to smoke tobacco (42 percent vs. 35 percent), drink kava<sup>18</sup> (12 percent vs. 8 percent), and combine alcohol with cannabis and/or kava (14 percent vs. 9 percent). They also used psychotropic drugs much more frequently than nonadopted women (5 percent vs. 1 percent). Drug use here may be viewed as a coping device that these women use to deal with problems that social convention requires to be concealed. The powerful relationship between adoption and adult drug use indicates that time does not heal the adverse experiences common in the childhoods of many adopted Kanak woman. These data suggest how difficult it is to “just get over” some events and situations and show that they tend to lead to self-damaging behavior.

Similar observations about a crisis in adoption and foster care have been made elsewhere in the Pacific. In Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Solomon Islands, it has been suggested that “loose” transfers of children create an environment conducive to mistreatment and abuse (Cox 2001). In the 2006 United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) report (Fiji, Kiribati, PNG, Solomons, and Vanuatu), most of the studies indicate the same unfortunate trend with informally adopted children. The Vanuatu study similarly drew attention to government concerns around the “mistreatment” of traditionally adopted children, particularly the sexual abuse of girls by males in the family. Both the Fiji and PNG studies also expressed these concerns, noting that in some families the adopted child is treated differently, subjected to discrimination and ridicule, or considered a burden on the adopting family. Epidemiologic studies of children admitted to Port Moresby and Mt Hagen Hospitals have recognized adoption as having the potential for severe adverse effects on the child’s well-being (Peters, Kemiki, and Vince 2000; Pameh et al. 2002). In Tahiti, French Polynesia, a link between adoption (*fa’a’amu*), maltreatment and incest has also been established (Chollet 2001). In Chuuk, Micronesia, Manuel Rauchholz (2008) mentions, in addition to the frequency of negative emotions among adoptees them-

selves, a “Cinderella overtone” and the existence of abuse that may not be able to be explained away as the exception.

All this requires reconsideration of the previous dominant anthropological discourse about adoption in Oceania as “a loving and generous transaction, not a response to need or crisis” (Terrell and Modell 1994). Attention to issues such as child abuse and the relationship between adoption and violence has long been constrained, it appears, by the same considerations that limit the anthropology of violence more generally, especially when it occurs in dominated minorities or colonial situations. It is certainly difficult to report everyday family violence, without a risk of stigmatizing the dominated social group under study. The political use by the Australian Federal Government of the Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (2007) is ample demonstration. But should fear of giving weapons to racism prompt us to continue to conceal this kind of fact, on the grounds that any disclosure is doomed to contribute to a pornography of violence that reinforces negative perceptions in the eyes of unsympathetic readers, or at least may nourish and arm racism (Bourdieu 1998; Bourgois 2001)? While we agree that the presentation of these issues deserves careful weighing up, we do not think that knowledge of violence, objectified in facts and figures, should be hidden. Moreover, we think it important to describe the complex linkages that produce such facts, to reach a better understanding of their social significance.

In an article on suffering and structural violence, Paul Farmer asks if we can identify those most at risk of greater suffering and if certain “event” assaults, such as rape or torture, are more likely to lead to late sequelae than are sustained and insidious suffering, such as the pain born of deep poverty or of racism (Farmer 1997). Our findings of course do not answer his question. But they do show that among Kanak women suffering from the same poverty, racism, and sexism, those who have been adopted are at risk of greater suffering through more frequent early abuse, especially rape; subsequent intimate partner violence; and drug use. The constraints on Kanaks as a community are strong and tend to be cumulative. The postcolonial situation gives them neither the same economic autonomy nor the same educational and employment benefits as most Europeans in New Caledonia have. Moreover, within Kanak societies, these constraints are added to the gender norms and gender violence still often legitimized by men (Salomon and Hamelin, 2008). This vulnerability is doubled in women who are statutorily made inferior as adoptees in unfavorable family situations.

It is not enough, however, to consider adoption per se as an injurious event or an adverse childhood experience, as physical or sexual abuse, lack of

affection, or growing up in a dysfunctional household all are. But these New Caledonian findings suggest that within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts, it may be linked to a risk of violence and abuse. Ethnographers who have highlighted the vast range of nonbiological forms of human kinship must now face the dark side of adoption as well. The emerging crisis may reveal a broader reorganization of family structures in a setting of rapid social change.

### Conclusion

Our description—grounded in facts and figures—and the questions it raises point to the need for ethnography based not on normative discourse, but on an analysis of contemporary shifts through the collection of life histories from adoptees themselves, as well as from their birth mothers, adopting parents, and the grandparents who often raise them. Such histories would let their voices be heard and provide insight on their perspectives. This approach could allow us to fully understand mistreatment situations by examining the role of individual, family, cultural, and socioeconomic factors and finding out how, in today's Kanak societies, adoption affects a person later in life. Childhood memories of some Kanak friends, although adopted by a sibling of their biological father in what is one of the more legitimate forms of adoption, report difficult emotional experiences, including the feeling of having been sacrificed for the good of the lineage. "It took me a long time to get used to it," recalled a man in his late forties, adopted at age six. A woman in her fifties mentioned her feelings of rejection when her biological father told her, during major arguments between him and her adopted father: "That's none of your business, you still go there [to your adoptive father's]." While grandmothers often complained about the burden of caring for their daughters' children, biological mothers too expressed guilt and grief, sometimes reporting that they had no other choice but to agree tearfully to an adoption request, for refusal might lead to an evil spell being cast on the baby. Adoptive parents in turn, anxious not to be seen as bad parents, explained that indeed they gave very special care to the adopted child so that it would not feel different from the others or that they loved it "still more because it's not from the family." Ethnographic data and quantitative results both suggest important shifts in the types and conditions of child transfers, a link between present-day conditions of adoption and families' changing social relationships in this postcolonial context, and a strong influence by the French legal and welfare systems on permissible forms of family and adoption among the Kanaks. These results raise still more questions about transformations in constructions of parenting and children's well-being and in ideals of child rearing and education.

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### NOTES

1. Personal communication from J.-F. Suas, Director of the Association for Protection of Childhood and Youth, which is informed whenever a case is reported by either the social services or the correctional institutions (2006; on the same point, see also Streeter 2004).

2. The total sample was representative of the general population of women in New Caledonia and included representative proportions of women from the different ethnic communities: 44 percent Kanaks, 33 percent Europeans, 13 percent Polynesians, 3 percent Asians, and 6 percent other. Finally, only 1 percent refused to answer the question about their ethnic group.

3. All Kanaks in New Caledonia speak French. Because of the sensitivity of the issues we studied and because of the number of languages, more than twenty, for a rather small indigenous population, conducting the interviews in local languages would have made confidentiality very difficult: interviewers and interviewees might have come from the same community and possibly have had family ties.

4. A child is usually given to a couple or cohabiting person (man or woman) but, less frequently, a child can be given to a man or a woman living alone.

5. In Kanak languages, the term that means to give birth, nurture, and raise children is applied equally to birth, adoptive, and foster parents and does not distinguish among them (Salomon 2002).

6. Some Kanaks have French civil law status, either because one of their ancestors did (for example the descendants of the sandalwood traders in the Loyalty Islands) or because they specifically requested a status change, which has become possible since the end of the "Native Regime," the French administrative system for indigenous peoples. This strategy is used by women especially to be able to divorce and benefit from the advantages French civil law provides for mothers in terms of child custody.

7. The rate of adopted women is only 12 percent among Polynesians living in New Caledonia and 9 percent among Europeans. Most of these were not adopted formally, but given into the care of someone other than the birth parents.

8. In the general population survey, more than one third of Kanak mothers first gave birth before turning twenty, a rate twice as high as among Europeans.

9. While traditional restrictive practices have declined substantially, the French law on voluntary termination of pregnancy (1975) was not applied in New Caledonia until twenty years after its enactment (1995) and until recently, there has been no real family planning policy (see Salomon 2005).

10. This proportion among Polynesian women living in New Caledonia is 4 percent and among Europeans 2 percent.

11. In the past childless women ran the risk of being repudiated, and today they continue to be vulnerable to labels such as “empty womb” or “dry coconut” and to accusations from their in-laws that they “eat for nothing” (Salomon 2005).

12. These are plants specific to a clan, whose healing power depends on ancestral forces that normally only a man from the group is allowed to use.

13. Any comparison with cattle is pejorative for the Kanaks of Grande Terre and refers back to the agricultural colonization when the settlers’ cattle were sent to trample the fields and displace the Kanak groups from the fertile land.

14. Among Europeans the difference is significant: only 24 percent of the adopted women had successfully completed secondary school, compared with 54 percent of their nonadopted counterparts. Significance is determined by the results of chi-square tests ( $p < 0.05$ ).

15. The very small proportion of rapes reported to the police, 10 percent, also deserves attention.

16. There is a wealth of epidemiologic and public health literature on this topic (see among others Felitti et al. 1998; Fleming et al. 1999; Dietz et al. 1999).

17. Multivariate analyses were conducted showing that adoption was a significant predictor of intimate partner physical violence. Analyses were checked for age, educational level, economic resources, and urban/rural living.

18. Kava is not native to New Caledonia but imported from Vanuatu two decades ago. In New Caledonia women as well as men drink it casually; it is not a male privilege during ceremonial occasions as it is in Vanuatu.

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