

The Parallels between International Adoption and Slavery

By

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“There is no greater sorrow on Earth than the loss of one’s native land.”¹

International adoption is a type of adoption in which parents adopt a child who is a national of a different country. Since 1990, close to a quarter million foreign children have been brought to the United States on orphan visas for the purposes of adoption. This is the greatest relocation of children in America since the Orphan Trains of 1855-1929.

My position in writing this essay is that international adoption is cruel and immoral. Specifically, international adoption is a system filled with documented and on-going patterns of baby stealing, child trafficking, adoption agency corruption, re-homing, coercion of natural parents into giving up their child and legal violations. Corruption and abuse are so vast that, between 1995-2008, nearly half the 40 countries listed by the U.S. State Department as the top sources for international adoption temporarily halted adoptions or were prevented from sending children to the United States (Graff 2008).

Daniel Ibn Zayd was born in Lebanon and adopted by Americans. In *The New Abolition: Ending Adoption in Our Time* (2012), he summarizes the political, economic and social immoralities embedded in international adoption saying that:

“Adoption is, in and of itself, a violence based in inequality. It is candy-coated, marketed, and packaged to seemingly concerned families and children, but it is an economically and politically incentivized crime. It stems culturally and historically from the “peculiar institution” of Anglo-Saxon indentured servitude and not family creation. It is not universal and is not considered valid by most communal cultures. It is a treating of symptoms and not of disease. It is a negation of families and an annihilation of communities not imbued with any notion of humanity due to the adoptive culture’s inscribed bias concerning race, class, and human relevancy.”

Children in orphanages are highly likely to have one or even both parents alive. Many of these children -- 80 percent or more in some countries -- have at least one surviving parent (Global Facts About Orphanages 2009). Removing a child from their homeland via international adoption results in the breakup of

¹Euripides, *Meda*, v. 650-651.

families and communities, inflicting profound grief and suffering on the adopted child, her mother and father, brothers and sisters.

International adoption creates a set of irretraceable harms, particularly the tragic problem of children who suffer the loss of being separated not only from their natural parent(s), but also being separated from their ancestral homeland, culture, and language -- their entire heritage. So Yung Kim who was adopted into the U.S. from her native Korea writes, "In my experience international adoption is one of the most thorough and brutal forms of forced assimilation" (Kim 2009). Attachment disorder and identity struggles are but two of the long lasting side-effects that haunt foreign-born adoptees.

"International adoption has many parallels to the Atlantic slave trade. Both are driven by insatiable consumer demand, utilize a system of pricing and dependent on intermediaries in the form of slave hunters and adoption agencies," states Dr. Tobias Hubinette (2006) who was exported from Korea to Sweden via the adoption market.

Both systems exchange human beings for cash. The Dark Continent birthed the African who was snatched by the slave trader, marketed on the auction block then sold to an eager slave owner. Today, a natural mother in a distant land births a child who is snatched by an adoption agency, marketed on the Internet then sold to eager adopting parents. Today's adoption agency is yesterday's slave trader.

Today, many people consider international adoption to be a "normal social institution" just as many southerners in the 18th and 19th centuries considered slavery a "normal social institution." From America's beginnings the institution of slavery was woven into its social fabric. Slavery was protected with ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1788 and, its legal status upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1857

Dred Scott Decision. Between 1801 and 1861, only president opposed slavery--John Quincy Adams. In the book *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery*, the antebellum attorney Thomas Cobb wrote that slavery was a positive good for blacks because slavery advanced the negro race (Finkelman 2003: 143). In 1837, Senator John C. Calhoun spoke on the floor of the U.S. Senate saying slavery was, "good—a positive good," for slave, master, and civilization (Finkelman 2003: 59). An essay defending slavery published in the September 1850 issue of *De Bow's Review* stated that slavery is, "good and moral" (Finkelman 2003: 113).

Those who took part in the legal institution of slavery believed they were doing good works and saving blacks from an inferior culture, filling the need for labor and acting according to Biblical principle. As with the supporters of international adoption, supporters of slavery responded to the cultural and religious forces of their time, callous of the emotional and psychological suffering they inflicted upon others.

The parallels between slavery and international adoption are disturbingly similar and nowhere is this comparison more striking than in the duplicate justifications employed by each institutions' defenders. The institutions share three identical arguments:

1. Both are responses to a need.
2. The slave and foreign-born adoptee are better off as compared to those left behind.
3. God ordained both slavery and international adoption. Yesterday's Christian was called to save the African; today's Christian is called to save the foreign child.

1. Filling a Need

Slavery existed to fill the need for labor. Slaves provided the muscle needed to operate the South's cotton economy while the North's textile industry was dependent on Southern plantations and its slave

laborers. International adoption exists to fill the needs of prospective parents who desire to create or build a family, fulfill a savior/rescuer role or fulfill their need to comply with Biblical directive.

Blacks were commodities during slavery. Today, international adoption agencies turn children into articles of trade to be consumed on a commercial market. The African Child Policy Forum was created in response to baby stealing, child trafficking and agency corruption. This independent, not-for-profit, pan-African institution consists of Africa's leading scholars, child welfare experts and government officials. The report, *Intercountry Adoption: An African Perception* (2012), states its anti-international adoption stance in the following quote: "Children (*are turned*) into commodities in the graying and increasingly amoral world of intercountry adoption."

Profit motives of adoption agencies are an embedded problem. The UNICEF position on intercountry adoption, "... lack of regulation and oversight coupled with the potential for financial gain, has spurred the growth of an industry around adoption, where profit, rather than the best interests of children, takes centre stage. Abuses include the sale and abduction of children, coercion of parents, and bribery" (UNICEF Guidance Note on Intercountry Adoption in the CEE/CIS Region 2009).

Like slave traders of the past, adoption agencies reel in huge sums of cash. In Romania, 30,000 children were adopted internationally from 1989-2000 representing \$900 million in business transactions (Schuler 2010). Most of the children adopted were not orphans, they were placed for intercountry adoption to meet adult demand, from legitimate adopters to paedophiles (See, for example, Post, Koelewijn, et al 2007).

The natural mother is victimized and exploited in international adoption. Poverty is a leading reason mothers relinquish their children and adoption agencies

prey on these destitute, vulnerable women. In 2011, the U.S. Bureau of Consular Affairs reported adoption agencies charged prospective parents up to \$64,357 for processing an intercountry adoption (*Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption* 2011). In Ethiopia, the total monthly outgoings which would allow a mother and child to stay together as a family were \$15 per month (William-Harrop 2012).

Holt International Children's Services is one of the largest international adoption agencies. The agency used this slogan in a marketing effort aimed at prospective adopting parents, "Holt believes finances should not stop a child from having a loving family" (*Adoption Fees Overview* 2012). Meanwhile, poverty forces natural mothers around the world to give up their children (William-Harrop 2012).

2. Both the Slave and Foreign Adoptee are Better Off than those Left Behind

Although international adoption exists to meet the needs of prospective parents, it is marketed as a system that improves the lives of foreign children. From the U.S. Bureau of Consular Affairs, "...intercountry adoption opens another pathway to children to receive the care, security, and love that a permanent family can provide" (*Why Adoption* 2013). International adopters believe they are doing good, rescuing a child and providing a better life with more opportunity than they would know in their homeland.

Likewise, Southerner slave owners believed they did good and improved the lives of their slaves. They took on the burden of caring for the interests of their slaves, seeing that they were fed, clothed and given religious instruction. They believed their slaves were better off than blacks in Africa per this line from the poem *The Hireling and the Slave*, "In this new home, whate'er the negro's fate --- More bless'd his life than in his native state!" (Finkelman 2003: 177). In *Sociology for the South*, George Fitzhugh wrote in 1854, "Slavery relieves him

from a far more cruel slavery in Africa, or from idolatry or cannibalism, and every brutal vice and crime that can disgrace humanity; and it Christianizes, protects and civilizes him” (Finkelman 2003:190).

3. A Common Christian Calling

Christianity became one of the most important tools for defending slavery and Christianity has become one of the most important tools for justifying international adoption. Slavery defenders used quotes from Genesis, Leviticus, Exodus and Paul’s Epistle’s to demonstrate Old and New Testament support for slavery. Similarly, international adopters quote the Bible to support their trade. Both claim God ordains their work. In *The Duties of Christian Masters*, Reverend A.T. Holmes wrote that the Bible supports slavery, slavery is a vehicle for bringing the Gospel to blacks and slave owners should be praised for their devotion to religion and their fulfillment of their Christian duty (Finkelman 2003:97). Thornton Stringfellow was a Baptist minister and his *The Bible Argument: Or, Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation* reveals his belief that the slave owner was called, as a Christian duty, to convert and baptize his slaves (Finkelman 2003: 123-128).

Echoing yesterday’s slave defending clergy, today’s Evangelical Christian Orphan Movement employs similar religious arguments to support international adoption. Dan Cruver, a leader in the evangelical adoption movement, wrote in his 2012 book, *Reclaiming Adoption*, “The ultimate purpose of human adoption by Christians, is not to give orphans parents, as important as that is. It is to place them in a Christian home so they are positioned to receive the gospel” (15). Lifeline Children’s Services is a Christian international adoption agency whose 2014 Annual Report states that they’ve been called by God to adopt orphans into families where they can experience the love of Christ and be taught the Gospel.

Racism and Nationalism

Pro-slavery arguments were ultimately based on racism, the belief whites were superior to blacks, and this cemented the arguments of slavery defenders. Pro-international adoption arguments are ultimately based on nationalism, a sense of national consciousness exalting the United States above all others. Nationalism binds the arguments of international adoption defenders. American nationalism provides a moral justification for a system that extracts children from their homelands, places them on the adoption market where they are sold to American parents and raised under the Christian banner. In my opinion, White Supremacy has given way to Adoption Imperialism.

Africa the New Frontier of Intercountry Adoption (2012) is a report that states, “Intercountry adoption as one of the significant responses to addressing the problem of children deprived of their family environments is neither sustainable nor feasible” (vii). There is little evidence demonstrating intercountry adoption significantly enhances the development of child welfare services in sending nations. It is not in the best interest of the totality of children in these countries and works to the detriment of the many U.S. foster care children available for adoption.

The parallels between international adoption and slavery are lengthy and disturbing. Both enjoy legal status. Large swaths of the American populace consider each institution a normal and “good” part of the social fabric. Each system is an industry where human beings are extracted from their native lands, commodified, put to market and sold. Supporters employ three identical arguments to justify international adoption and slavery.

In conclusion, it is my hope there will be one additional parallel—that international adoption meets the identical fate as slavery in the United States and is abolished. As with the successful Abolition movement

to end slavery, growing numbers of people are speaking out against the practice of removing children from their homelands for the purpose of adoption. Human rights activists, foreign adoptees, social workers, mental health providers, natural families, government officials and others understand the harms of the system and are taking action to reform or abolition international adoption. Time will tell.

“There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because conscience tells him it is right.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. (February 6, 1968).²

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