

Holding On: Adoption, Kinship Tensions, and Pregnancy in the Marshall Islands

Elise Berman

ABSTRACT In the Marshall Islands, the idea that children belong to the kinship group as a whole exists in tension with an understanding of children as closely tied to their birth family. This tension is simultaneously created and overcome by linguistic and strategic practices in which adoptive and birth parents alike attempt to gain and keep children. Their efforts to “hold on” challenge recent trends in the anthropological study of kinship, specifically deconstructions of the importance of things—such as pregnancy—that appear biological. I argue that both criticisms and defenses of kinship as biology have overlooked how the physical process of reproduction creates interactional constraints on negotiations for children. These negotiations also create multiple potential parents as legitimate, thus producing the ambivalence and tensions that underlie Marshallese experiences of adoption. Rather than simply destructive, however, these tensions and ambivalences are also constructive—it is through their struggle to hold on that parents bind children to themselves. [*adoption, kinship, possession, pregnancy, interaction, Marshall Islands*]

ĻŌMŊAK EO IN BEBA IN Ilo Mājel, ewōr ruo wāween kōlmānłokjeŋ ikijjien ajiri jiddik ro. Kōlmānłokjeŋ kein kajuon ej bwe armej ro rej lōmŋak bwe ajiri ro rej nejin aolep nukuer. Kōlmānłokjeŋ eo kein karuo, ej bwe armej ro rej lōmŋak bwe ajiri ro rej nejin wōt moolin jineer im jemeer. Ełap aer atebār armej ro in Mājel bwe ruo kein wāween kōlmānłokjeŋ ikijjien ajiri jiddik ro. Moolin jinen im jemen ajiri ro akō ro raar kokaajiririki ro jimor ełap aer kajjioŋ in dāpijir bwe er wōt ren bok kuŋaer ajiri jiddik ro. Jet ien, mākūtkūt in lale ajiri ak ajeŋ ajiri emaroŋ bar kōmŋman bok ikōtaan baamle ko, einwōt ilo aer leto-letak kōn won eo lukkuun moolin nejin ajiri eo, ro moolin jinen ak jemen ke ak ro rekar kokaajiriri im karūttolok ajiri eo. Bok im inepata ko ikōtaan baamle ko kake kokaajiriri im karūttolok ajiri eo ej juon katak eo ekāal an Anthropology ro – ke biology im bōrōro reaurōk im rejjab maroŋ bar aurōk. Rebōd ilo aer jab melele ke ilo tōre eo juon ajiri ej ļotak, rej bar kwałok kakien im mālim ŋan kōnono ko. Ŋe armej ro rekōŋaan bōk ajiri jiddik ro rej aikuj ba naan ko me rejimwe. Akō jet ien rūtto ro me rekōŋaan kokaajiririki rejjab maroŋ ba naan kein. Pepe ko lōmŋaki bwe emaroŋ jabrewōt emaroŋ kokaajiririki ajiri eo ekōmŋman bwe en bar einwōt wōr bok im kota kōn won eo enaj kokaajiriri ajiri eo. Bōtaab bok kein rejjab nana wōt bwe rej kajjioŋ in dāpij ajiri eo bwe bok in ej bwe rūtto ro rej kōmŋman bwe ren lukkuun einwōt nejier. [*Kaajiriri, nukwi, mweiwuk, bōrōro, bwebwenato, Mājel*]

RESUMEN En las Islas Marshall, la idea que los niños pertenecen al grupo de parentesco en su conjunto existe en tensión con un entendimiento que los niños están estrechamente unidos a su familia de nacimiento. Esta tensión es simultáneamente creada y superada a través de prácticas lingüísticas y estratégicas en las cuales padres adoptivos y biológicos por igual intentan ganar y retener los hijos. Sus esfuerzos de “retener” retan recientes tendencias en el estudio antropológico del parentesco, especialmente deconstrucciones de la importancia de las cosas—tales como embarazo—que parecen biológicas. Argumento que tanto criticismos como defensas del parentesco como

biología han ignorado cómo el proceso físico de reproducción crea restricciones interaccionales en las negociaciones por los hijos. Estas negociaciones también crean múltiples padres potenciales como legítimos, produciendo así la ambivalencia y tensiones que subyacen en las experiencias marshalesas de adopción. Más que simplemente destructivas, sin embargo, estas tensiones y ambivalencias son también constructivas—es a través de su lucha por retener los hijos que los padres crean lazos con ellos. [*adopción, parentesco, posesión, embarazo, interacción, Islas Marshall*]

Lena was adopted (*kaajiriri* or *kōkajiriri*).¹ She was not unusual. In Jajikon—a small, 250-person village on an outer atoll in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI)—26 percent of children under 15 years old are adopted, and 90 percent of households include someone adopted in or out.² Three of the nine infants born in a 12-month period were adopted away from their birth mother. A fourth infant was adopted into a Jajikonian family from a different village.

Like many, Lena was adopted as a baby by kin: her father's brother and his wife. I suspect that her story is similar to that of an infant girl adopted during my stay. As with Lena, the infant's potential adoptive mother, Maraji, was the birth mother's brother's wife. Maraji approached the birth mother, Temu, while she was pregnant. 'I said,' Maraji later told me, 'Would it be okay if you give me my child?' (field notes, October 22, 2009)?

'I said,' Temu told me, 'okay' (field notes, October 18, 2009).³

When the infant was around two months old, she moved to her adoptive mother's home two houses away. Though I suspect that food and baby clothes changed hands, no papers were signed or birth certificates altered. With a few exceptions, the state plays no role in these exchanges.⁴

Lena lived a little farther away from her birth family—it took five minutes to walk between the two houses. One day when Lena was around nine years old, a story circulated that her adoptive mother, angry with her, had cut her hand with a knife. Lena's birth mother stormed over to her house, angrily confronted her adoptive mother, and took Lena away. Commenting on this incident, many adults in the village severely censured the adoptive mother for her behavior (although she denied it). Some women told me that while the adoptive mother frequently physically punished Lena, she did not hit her birth children. 'Maybe,' a woman said, she hit Lena 'because Lena did not appear [in her stomach]' (field notes, November 4, 2009).

This story reveals some apparent contradictions in practices of child circulation in Jajikon. On the one hand, people often ask their kin for children, and birth parents regularly give, reflecting a general idea that children belong to the kin group as a whole. At the same time, people frequently construct children as more connected to their family of birth than to other kin. Women, many say, often have closer bonds with children who come out of their stomachs than those who do not and are inclined to "harm or destroy" the latter.

These contradictory forces create tensions between birth and adoptive kin that pull children back and forth between potential parents.

In this article, I will show how these tensions are simultaneously created and overcome by strategic practices in which adoptive and birth parents alike attempt to gain and "hold on (*dāpdep*)" to children. Scholars have documented in detail the high rates of child circulation in some regions of the world: Oceania, West Africa, the North American Arctic, and parts of indigenous Latin America (e.g., Carroll 1970c; Goody 1982; Guemple 1979; Leinaweaver 2007). But there has been little analysis of if—and even less analysis of how—people try to hold on to children in these systems in which kin are constantly pulling children away.

Such an analysis challenges recent trends in the anthropological study of kinship, specifically deconstructions of the importance of things such as pregnancy and childbirth (e.g., Sahlins 2013). As we will see, high rates of child circulation in Oceania and other areas played a central role not only in David Schneider's (1984) critique of kinship but also in many studies that extended his work. Indeed, nonsexual modes of reproduction frequently serve as prototypical examples of how kinship is not "biological"—a term I use in this context to refer to bonds viewed as given by heterosexual reproduction (Yanagisako and Collier 1987). Building on the work of Manuel Rauchholz (2009), my data show that accounts of kinship in places such as the RMI often inaccurately downplay or outright reject the relevance of pregnancy and childbirth and the presence of tensions and ambivalences about adoption, forcing us to reconsider the theoretical conclusions that such accounts support.

I argue not that kinship is determined by biology but, rather, that both criticisms and defenses of kinship as biology have overlooked how the physical process of reproduction creates interactional constraints on negotiations for children. The physical control a birth mother—and the people with whom she lives—has over her child affects what forms of speech and silence are possible. These constraints in turn affect who succeeds in claiming a child and the parent-child bonds that grow. In other words, parenthood is a form of possession and is contingent on mundane material and verbal aspects of interaction—who lives near whom, in whose house a child was born, what words people do or do not speak. Parenthood is also contested because birth mothers are not the only ones who can use speech and space to claim

an infant. This competition for children creates multiple people as potential parents and multiple types of bonds as legitimate, revealing a source of people's ambivalence, something that Michael Peletz (2001:435) argues is central to kinship but undertheorized. Rather than simply being destructive, however, these tensions and ambivalences are also constructive: it is through their struggle to hold on that parents bind children to themselves.

I begin with a review of child circulation in Oceania, a theoretical analysis of kinship theory, and a discussion of the relationship among pregnancy, childbirth, and interaction. After introducing my methods, I analyze the tensions between birth and adoptive kin. Finally, I examine how parents of all types strategically use different forms of speech, silence, and movement to enhance their power to hold on to their children and keep them close.

OCEANIA, ADOPTION, AND KINSHIP THEORY

Oceania and kinship theory have long been intertwined. From W. H. R. Rivers (1914) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1927) to Ward Goodenough (1956), David Schneider (1984), and Marilyn Strathern (1988), many theoretical revolutions in the study of kinship were built on the bedrock of Pacific ethnography and thus have had to deal with or ignore the high rate of child circulation in most Oceanic societies. Although Oceania is by no means homogeneous, several themes reoccur (Brady 1976; Carroll 1970c; Dickerson-Putnam and Schachter 2008). First, children are overwhelmingly adopted by kin, often by their birth parents' siblings or parents (as they are locally defined), with whom, because of the Hawaiian kinship systems employed, they are already in child–parent or grandchild–grandparent relationships. Second, adoption is often initiated by a request or demand on the part of kin and thus occurs not because parents cannot care for their children but, rather, because other kin want children. Third, adopted children maintain connections to their birth families. Relationships are additive as opposed to substitutive (Thomas 1978). Fourth, although adoption does often serve to provide childless adults with children or to distribute children evenly across a kin group, many argue that such functions are not sufficient explanations of the phenomenon. In many places (including the RMI), people adopt who are able to bear children themselves, others adopt who already have children themselves, and parents are often required to give away their first-born child (Carroll 1970c).

Scholars have proposed many different explanations of Oceanic child-sharing practices: to provide heirs, to create economically or socially beneficial ties between families, to help out struggling birth parents, to combat fertility problems, to manipulate land ownership, to provide laborers to families, to serve as a psychological message that kinship ties are temporary or that lost kin are replaceable, and to consolidate kinship obligations for sharing resources (Brady 1976; Carroll 1970c). Most, however, ultimately agree to a certain extent with Vern Carroll's (1970a) and

Mac Marshall's (1976:40) explanation of child circulation as "an integral part of the pervasive pattern of sharing among close relatives." The give and take of children is part of the idea that children (and everything) belong not to an individual but to the kin group, and so the children for whom people ask are not other people's children but their own.

Such analyses clearly lead into debates about whether kinship is socially constructed or given by the biological facts of heterosexual reproduction—debates in which discussions of child circulation in Oceania played an overlooked but central role (Marshall 2008). For example, Schneider worked in Micronesia. While writing *American Kinship* (1968), he chaired a session that led to the first volume on adoption in Oceania edited by one of his graduate students (Marshall 2008). Schneider's later argument that the *tabinau* in Yap is a group of people tied together through a relationship to land relies heavily on Yapese practices of adoption, which led him to claim that "birth . . . is not taken as a precondition for membership" (1984:22). Similarly, his argument that anthropological models of kinship are based on ethnocentric assumptions builds on a biting critique of Malinowski's claim that biological kinship is primary because adoption is rare (Schneider 1984:171–172).⁵

Many other later critiques of the biological basis of kinship also build on ethnographic data concerning non-sexual modes of reproduction such as new reproductive technologies, gay and lesbian kinship, and adoption in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East (e.g., Franklin and Ragone 1998; Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmeli 2008; Modell 1994; Strathern 1992; Thompson 2001; Weston 1991). Just as in work on Oceania, these studies provide examples of how families are made in the absence of acts such as sex and childbirth, how biological processes or materials get disconnected from kinship, how multiple parents can be positioned as "biological" parents for different reasons, and the significant amount of social work that goes into creating eggs, sperm, and other "biological" things as markers of relationships. Some studies argue that the idea of a dichotomy between biological and social kinship is also a specific result of U.S. and European preoccupations with biology (e.g., Carsten 2004).

The latter argument depends on ethnographic contrasts between anxieties concerning "real" and "non-real" parents in the West and the apparently free and effortless child circulation on places such as the Marshall Islands. Laurence Carucci (2008:43) contrasts Marshallese open adoptions, in which multiple parents easily interact, with U.S. adoptions, in which relationships between adoptive and birth parents are "fraught with feelings of unease." Jeanette Edwards and Marilyn Strathern (2000:159) declare that Barbara Bodenhorn's (2000) study of the Iñupiat reveals that in the Arctic "there is no tension here between birth and nurture" of the sort apparent in England (see also Carsten 2000:28). Zumbagua residents of the Andes lack "those anxieties over natural and unnatural parents that loom so large" in the United States (Weismantel 1995:686). In other words, the

conflicts that those in Europe and the United States face over exactly who is the “real” parent and which processes create parent–child bonds are supposedly absent in “traditional” places, where high rates of child circulation reflect local ideas that seem to reject ideas of kinship as biology.

KINSHIP TENSIONS AND THE INTERACTIONAL ADVANTAGE OF PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH

The Marshallese data that I present reveal tensions between birth and adoptive kin and a concern with processes such as pregnancy, thus challenging the above critiques. Here, I build on Goodenough (2001) and other Oceanists who have commented on the importance of pregnancy and childbirth (particularly in the largely matrilineal societies of Micronesia), the coexistence of practices of adoption with genealogical ideas, and the fact that adoption in Oceania almost always takes place between kin (Carroll 1970a; Marshall 2008; Rauchholz 2009; Thomas 1978). Manuel Rauchholz (2008, 2009, 2012) has documented in detail the conflicts that adopted Chuukese children face, as well as patterns of asking and giving similar to those in the RMI. Other recent work shows that adoption can be correlated with abuse and that birth parents frequently find the act of giving up their children distressing (Butt 2008; Dickerson-Putnam 2008; Salamone and Hamelin 2008). Such discussions are not limited to Oceania. For example, Jessaca Leinaweaver (2007:172) discusses Andean children’s frequent refrain that living with their relatives is “not the same” as living in their natal home.

But Marshallese tensions and ambivalences are no more indications of a biological basis for kinship than are U.S. tensions; Marshallese tensions are also, as I will show, at least partly ideologically, historically, and interactionally produced (see also Franklin 2001). Marshallese ideas of how birth and pregnancy create bonds also cannot be translated as “biological.” The key process in the RMI is not the transfer of genes and blood through heterosexual reproduction but the physical act of carrying a child in one’s belly and nourishing it through the umbilical cord (McArthur 1996), a process that overlaps with Western ideas of social as much as biological kinship.

Thus, the problem with the critiques of kinship as biological is not necessarily that kinship actually is biological. Rather, the critiques, in addition to recreating a divide between Western and “traditional” populations (Rauchholz 2009), have had the inadvertent side effect of overlooking how processes that seem biological—such as childbirth and pregnancy—may play a central role in parent–child relationships in a simultaneously unbiological and unideological way. As work on participation and situated activity has shown, the ways in which speech and action attach people to social identities are dependent on how people are materially organized in space—on how the physical environment, including the human body, places constraints on who can say or do what and on what their speech or action means

(Duranti 1994; Farnell 1999; Goodwin 2000). Extending this idea of interaction beyond the immediate speech event to lengthy negotiations for children (or other possessions) over time, such interactions are dependent on where that infant typically lives, to whom he or she must eventually return—such as to a birth mother to breastfeed—and who else lives close enough to put face-to-face pressure on people to give. In other words, physical control gives people an advantage in negotiations for things, be they children or food. Pregnancy is an extreme form of this control.

Of course, there are other ways of gaining physical control beyond pregnancy, and other ways of using speech and space to gain the upper hand in interactions. As people make use of the tools at their disposal to claim a child, they pull children (adoptive or birth) in multiple directions, establish multiple people as potential parents, and create sometimes contradictory ideologies about what kinship is, who parents are, and to whom a child belongs. In other words, ambivalences about adoption and kinship arise not from Western-imposed discourses about biology but from the very nature of exchange.

Such an argument complicates, rather than negates, discussions of Oceanic persons as individuals, of possession as diffuse, and of parenthood as partible (Carucci 2008; Strathern 1988; Sykes 2007). All of the latter is, to a certain extent, accurate. However, exchange brings with it constraints that place limits on such diffuse conceptions of possession and kinship. The material world is limited and so are kinship bonds. Hence, both pigs and children have to live somewhere. He or she who gives them, moreover, must in turn be seen as able to give—that is, positioned at least momentarily as more of a possessor than others. Hence, while children in the RMI do indeed have many mothers in a way that people in some other places do not, not all of those mothers are viewed as equal. The result, of course, is not that children belong either to their birth mothers or to the kin group but that both ideas of kinship simultaneously coexist and strain against each other, creating ambivalence about adoption and kinship.

This ambivalence, however, should be seen not as a destructive force but as a constructive one, one central to the creation of parent–child bonds in the RMI and to kinship as a whole. As we have seen, many ethnographers tend to treat any tensions between different types of bonds—such as biological and social kinship or birth and adoption—as unnecessary and harmful products of Western obsessions with biology. But kinship is not merely a diffuse and enduring solidarity but also “a kind of theft or hoarding, of something kept to or for oneself, at the betrayal or expulsion of the other” (Lambek 2011:2). Creating bonds between some people necessarily requires truncating other bonds. It is only by pushing away potential adoptive parents that birth mothers in the RMI solidify themselves as “real” mothers of their children; and it is only by holding their adoptive children close that adoptive parents do the same.

METHODS

People in the RMI do not ask for children in front of others; hence, I do not have any recordings of such requests. I do, however, have conversations with people in which they recounted their adoption negotiations shortly after those negotiations took place. For 14 out of my 26 months in the RMI, I lived with a family and was taken in as kin. Members of my family were adopted while I was in the field, and people often talked to me frankly about their negotiations. Because it is not only through the actual acts of asking or avoiding giving but also through reports of these acts to others that people make a claim to children, such discussions can be analyzed not as accurate representations of the past but as strategic efforts to hold on. In addition, I have numerous recordings of people asking for and avoiding giving other things (Berman 2012). These recordings help me evaluate people's reports of their negotiations and make some generalizations about how people typically ask and refuse.

CHILD CIRCULATION IN THE RMI

Kokajiriri or *kaajiriri* means “cause to be a child” as well as “feed” or “nurture” (Carucci 2008; Rynkiewicz 1976). Hence, *kaajiriri* can refer to caring for any child for any amount of time as well as to taking anyone in as family—as parent, sibling, or child (Carucci 2008; Rynkiewicz 1976:33). In this article, however, I focus on what people tend to talk about when they use the word *kaajiriri*: adoptions of children that people imagine as permanent. These always happen before the age of two (Berman 2012). Such exchanges—with the exception of adoption by grandparents—also typically involve a change of address—namely, use of the vocatives “mama” or “papa” that children tend not to use even with classificatory parents. As a woman said, when parents take children in as infants, they take them as their “real children.” Some adults also made distinctions between children who they said that they were “watching over” and those whom they “adopted” (*kaajiriri*). Therefore, I refer to the form of *kaajiriri* imagined as permanent as “adoption” and to more temporary circulations as “fosterage.”

People invariably explain why they adopted by saying that the infant is the child of kin. One man said that he adopted a boy “because he is the son of [my wife’s] younger brother.” Others also say that they adopted because they want “to be close” to the child’s birth family, while some mentioned that ties with wealthy families can be profitable. Beyond such reasons, however, people really want children. Economically, households depend on children’s labor, and children serve as social security and comfort in old age and illness. Affectively, people love children. They crowd around newborns. Young single women adopt, people who already have children but want another or one of a particular gender adopt, and older parents whose children have moved into middle childhood start looking for the next addition to their household. Here, as Carroll (1970b:12) argued,

childlessness “is . . . a frame of mind caused by many factors, of which physiological incapacity for children is only one.” Finally, in the RMI when people want children they view as equally valid two routes to getting those children: birth and adoption.

Some aspects of adoption have changed over time. According to Carucci (2008), the rate of adoption on one atoll dropped from between 50 and 80 percent before World War II to around 20 percent afterward. He also argues that fosterage has taken the place of adoption as migration has increased (see also Hezel 2001:28–32). Transnational adoption of Marshallese children by parents in the United States has grown exponentially in recent years (Roby and Matsumura 2002; Walsh 1999). These changes make some parents quite nervous and may have an impact on ideologies of adoption as potentially harmful.

At the same time, however, at least on outer islands such as Jajikon, practices of adoption show a remarkable amount of continuity. Alexander Spoehr (1949:210–211) and Michael Rynkiewicz (1976) could have been describing Jajikon as I found it in 2009 with the exception that parents used to wait until after the first birthday to give a child away. In 1969 Rynkiewicz (1976) observed an adoption rate of 26 percent, similar to what I observed. Hence, if ambivalences about adoption are indeed recent, they have had little effect on the rate of adoption in Jajikon, at least not since 1969. Such a finding suggests that ambivalences about adoption are not solely products of modernity, transnational adoption, and urbanization but, rather, are embedded in the practice of exchange.

EXCHANGE AND TENSIONS BETWEEN BIRTH AND ADOPTIVE KIN

The circulation of children reflects the general importance of exchange in Marshallese life. People expect each other to share almost everything—food and water, labor and hospitality, clothes and money, vehicles and infants—not only with kin but also with people higher in status to whom they defer and people lower in status for whom they should care (Berman 2012). By giving—a child or food—people produce themselves as moral and generous kin.

In practice, this diffuse form of possession in which things belong to everyone must simultaneously coexist with a more concentrated form in which things—including children—belong more to some people and less to others. Exchange is an act of moving material goods in space. This physical nature of exchange is encoded in the Marshallese language, where the word for *give* (*le-*) includes a spatial deictic that marks movement in space toward or away from a person; *holding on* (*dāpdep*) is also used to talk about physically grasping things in one’s hands (Abo et al. 2013). To physically transfer something to someone else, a person must be able to give, that is, be positioned as a possessor who at least in that moment is in control of a good or a child. Indeed, because one cannot give something that one does not

have, it is partly through giving that people mark themselves as having been a possessor in the first place.

This status as a possessor who is able and obligated to give is marked not only by giving but also by physical control over an object's (or person's) movement. For example, a woman carrying breadfruit, like a man who catches fish, is in control of that food and the person who must give it away. Control, however, depends not only on actual physical contact but also on relationships of power. Hence, people—specifically landowners, chiefs, and elders—have control over things that rest in their space or things held by others who defer to them (Berman 2012).

Even with the above caveats, however, actual physical control does give even relatively powerless people certain powers of possession. A child transporting his mother's bread is capable of running into the woods and eating it; a younger sibling who borrows an iPod has to decide to give it back. Of course, children may be punished for such behavior (Berman 2012), but children can often avoid such punishment by running away and sleeping with a relative for a couple of days. In other words, commands must be spoken and heard if they are to be obeyed, and such speech can only occur if people are in the appropriate physical spaces. Moreover, adults in the RMI often avoid direct forms of speech when speaking to other adults and view requests as shameful (Berman 2012). The more difficult the exchange, the more difficult the request, making requests for children particularly difficult because everyone knows that parents feel "sad" when they give their children away.

Birth Mothers: Pregnancy and the Power of Birth

Pregnancy is an extreme form of physical control that gives birth mothers an advantage in negotiations for children. Symbolically, during pregnancy nourishment flows from the mother to her child through the *bwijen* (the umbilical cord). Inheritance as well as nourishment pass along the umbilical cord, which is also the semantic root and the symbolic basis of the matrilineage *bwij* (McArthur 1996; Rynkiewicz 1976:122). "Birthing" children, numerous people told me, creates both political and affective bonds. As mentioned, some women explained Lena's mistreatment by referring to the fact that her adoptive mother did not carry her in her stomach.

Interactionally, birth mothers' ability to lay claim to their infants lies in the fact that when the fetus is enclosed in a mother's stomach the mother cannot give her child away. The unborn child is, like a person's hand or foot, literally inalienable. Consequently, birth mothers—assuming they want their child as many do—are content with the status quo and need not speak. Others have to ask, requests that reinforce birth mothers' claims because only possessors can be asked to give. Moreover, those kin must ask for a future gift rather than an immediate one.

Birth mothers almost always say that they will give or, at the least, do not directly refuse. Adults avoid direct refusals even more assiduously than they avoid direct

requests because refusing marks people as stingy and immoral (Berman 2012). People such as Maraji, the potential adoptive mother mentioned earlier, know this and tend to be suspicious of agreements to give. "Maybe," Maraji told me, Temu's agreement to give her child was a "lie" (field notes, October 22, 2009). The classification and evaluation of such speech depends on one's perspective. Moral words are those that create positive social relationships, and adults expect speech to be not sincere but efficacious (Keane 2007; Robbins 2007). Agreeing to give, because Temu could not immediately do so, allowed her both to maintain a relationship with Maraji and to keep her baby. Hence, if Maraji really wanted the child, she would again have to gain the courage to ask Temu directly, thus again marking Temu as the possessor.⁶ Being pregnant gave Temu an advantage in these negotiations because it forced Maraji to engage in dangerous forms of speech to change the status quo.

This relationship of possession and kinship, created partly through physical control, never entirely goes away regardless of how far children might roam or who might take them (Mauss 1923; Weiner 1992). First, adoptive children—particularly when they are older—tend to spend time with their birth parents as well. A ten-year-old girl's adoptive family lived right next door to her birth mother. She was constantly running back and forth between the households, often given chores to do by her birth mother that the birth mother did not regularly give to other nonresident children who passed by her house. Sometimes adoptive children return to their birth parents permanently when both families mutually agree on the change of residence, such as when an infant was sick and went back to his birth mother or when a woman on Jajikon returned to her birth family in her early 20s when her adoptive family moved away.

Second, birth kin can reclaim their children, although they typically only do so in cases of inadequate care because such reclamations damage relationships between the parties. When Lena's birth mother reclaimed her, the two mothers (adoptive and birth) stopped speaking to each other. Although adoptive parents may object, such reclamations are the prerogative of birth parents (and some grandparents), a prerogative afforded to them by the connection forged by their original relationships of possession.

The Pull of Kin

A relationship of possession is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is through forms of physical possession such as pregnancy that people gain the power to lay claim to infants and make them their own. On the other hand, at least in Jajikon, possession also entails a responsibility to give to kin. The physical bond formed by pregnancy threatens a birth mother's connection to her child even as it creates that connection because the bond spirals out to touch other kin. These kin are many because the Marshallese reckon kinship bilaterally. They classify parents' siblings as parents, grandparents' siblings as grandparents, parallel cousins as siblings,

and sibling's children as offspring (Spoehr 1949:155–160, 192).

Fathers often, although not always, live with mothers, feeding them and their child. They also contribute *bōtōktōk* (blood or sperm), something that the mother takes and channels to the child (McArthur 1996:126–127). Grandmothers and grandfathers are often more closely connected to children than fathers. They cared for their children for a generation—a process that, as we will see, is a way of creating kin.

Consequently, in the RMI grandparental adoption is quite common (Carucci 2007; Rynkiewicz 1976). Every older couple I knew had at least one grandchild living with them. As with mothers, however, grandparents' claim to children comes not only from symbolic connections but also from the interactional advantage afforded by age and physical control. Because multigenerational homes are normal and elders are the landowners and the ones in charge, many elders control the space in which children live. These elders can exercise their power over space by keeping their grandchildren with them when a multigenerational household breaks up. For example, two grandparents in Jajikon who moved to the United States took with them their granddaughter, who had been born while I was in the field.

Non-co-resident grandparents may lack the advantage afforded by physical control, but they still have the power that comes with age and history, a history of having cared for the new parents when they were themselves children. It is this authority—in addition to their close kin ties—that gives them the courage to ask for children—and they constantly ask. One infant was requested by his maternal grandmother and two of his paternal grandmothers.

Such requests mark not only the birth parents as possessors but also those who ask as people with a legitimate claim: people who are not close enough kin do not ask. In addition, because requests are difficult to refuse, asking places temporary limits on the advantage afforded by physical control by forcing birth parents to engage in dangerous speech if they are to keep their children (Berman 2012). Thus, many people cannot avoid their parents' requests. For example, one woman claimed that she gave her child to her mother because she could not go against her mother's wishes.

Siblings' requests for children also position them as people with a legitimate claim and limit to a certain extent the power of physical control. Moreover, as with grandparents, children already belong to siblings before they ask. All four adopted infants born while I was in the field were in a child or grandchild relationship with those who adopted them even before they changed families. Siblings' requests merely make this relationship explicit: if they were not already parents of the child, they would have been too ashamed or afraid to ask.

The form of siblings' requests—or at least their reports of them—further reinforce their right to the child and thus further limit birth parents' power of possession. “Give me my daughter (*nejū leddik*),” Siana reported she said when

she asked to adopt her infant. “Give me my child (*nejū*),” Maraji reported that she said to Temu. Both women present themselves as having used the first-person possessive, a use of speech that marks the item as belonging not to the person who has it but the person who asks for it. Such a grammatical construction is the only correct way of possessing something in a request in Marshallese (Berman 2012).⁷ Children constantly say to each other, “Give me my food!” But this is not the only way of asking: one could avoid marking possession entirely by saying “give me a child (*juon ajri*).” Therefore, choosing to mark possession is also an act of reinforcing one's claim.

Adults tend to use various forms of indirection when making dangerous requests (Berman 2012). I suspect that Siana and Maraji reproduced their requests for children as more direct than they actually were. But saying “my child” when speaking to others who are themselves kin also serves to construct Siana and Maraji as legitimate parents to the wider community. Siana further reinforced her claim by justifying her request, citing her lack of girls (she had two boys at the time). Whether or not this was her actual reason for wanting to adopt (Siana was pregnant when she adopted her girl), referencing a void or absence of something needed creates feelings of sadness and empathy (*būromōj*) that people say compels them to give.

The Agency of Children

Thus, both birth and adoptive kin have claims to children, claims that they reinforce through silence and through speech—through the act of bearing a child and the act of asking for one. Tensions between birth and adoptive kin come not only from these overlapping claims but also from the fact that children themselves can, ideally, choose with whom they want to live (see also Schrauwers 1999).

By the time that children can walk and talk, Marshallese adults talk about children as actors who determine their own fate. Such children, adults say, are too young to “want” or “know how” to work or obey. Hence, adults place few other limits on very young children besides keeping them out of danger (Berman 2012).

In practice, of course, adults control children in a variety of ways, but the general principle that eventually older children work and obey their elders because they want to as opposed to because they must reflects a substantial amount of child freedom, including freedom concerning where to sleep. Children circulate constantly between households (Carucci 2008). One ten-year-old boy lived for years with his grandparents because he “wanted to” sleep there. A ten-year-old girl chose to stay with her classificatory mother for a couple of weeks instead of returning to her grandparents with whom she normally lived. When the girl got in trouble with her classificatory mother for avoiding work, she picked up and walked back to her grandparents.

Children can also choose to leave permanently. For example, when 11-year-old Kiti, who was adopted, went to the capital to go to the hospital, she asked to visit her

birth grandparents, who also lived on the capital. Once she reunited with them, she never left. I visited Kiti and asked her why she fled. She responded, “You didn’t know that mother Aileen really hits me all the time?” (conversation with author, June 3, 2010). She chose her birth family over her adoptive family.

Children’s agency is not absolute. While technically children can run, in practice they fear to do so. Moreover, if they cannot physically reach the kin to whom they wish to run, they cannot get away. Hence, Kiti had to wait to flee until she had an excuse to go to the capital. Nonetheless, the discourse that children can leave, a discourse reinforced by some children’s threats and acts of leaving, creates uncertainty and tensions between different kin.

PRODUCING PARENT–CHILD BONDS

Parents find the possibility of their children physically leaving emotionally threatening. This tension and ambivalence extends to all parent–child relationships, not just adoptive ones (Levy 1970). Consequently, parents work to construct their particular form of contact as the most real by constructing other ties as not real. They use speech and silence to try to manipulate children’s options and keep them close, thereby solidifying both pregnancy and adoption as legitimate bases for kinship.

Discourse of Sadness and Poor Care

Through a discourse of saddened birth parents and adoptive parents who “harm” their children, people frame birth parents as legitimate parents and adoptive parents as potentially inadequate. With one exception, every parent who gave away a child claimed that they did not want to do so (Lutz 1988; Rauchholz 2009). One man who gave away his daughter “felt grief. . . . I cried, just cried and cried,” he said, using speech to mark himself as a legitimate father of the child from whom he was separated.

These proclamations of sadness contrast birth parents with adoptive parents who, people say, can feel the attachment that birth parents feel but often do not. Seventeen out of 22 adults said that adoptive parents are more likely to “care for [their children] poorly” than birth parents. Poor care includes forcing children to do too much work, failing to feed them adequately, and hitting them too much. Explained one woman, “they take them and hit them and, hit them, hit them, hit them” (conversation with author, February 7, 2010). People highlighted poor care by women, who, many added, do not mistreat their birth children because of the bonds created during pregnancy. As a woman explained, adoptive mothers harm their children “because they are not their children. There wasn’t anything in their stomachs.”

“Do they love them less?” I asked.

“Yes, they love them less because they are not their children, they were adopted. If they are true (*mool*) children, then they really love them.”

“But why do they take them if they won’t really love them?”

Another woman broke in, “They are deceitful. It is a lie” (conversation with author, February 2, 2010).

These contrasting constructions of birth and adoptive parents serve two purposes. First, they allow those who (presumably) find giving economically or pragmatically advantageous to give and yet still mark themselves as good parents. While it is clear that some parents who give truly do not want to, giving a child to a more prosperous family can be advantageous (Goody 1982; Leinaweaver 2007). However, people are supposed to give not for economic gain but because they are generous and feel empathy for their kin’s need for a child. Consequently, proclamations of sadness mark them as good parents even if they have reasons to want to give.

Second, such speech gives birth parents who do not want to give a justification to keep their children. Numerous adults said that the possibility of poor care was why they did not give their children away. As one woman said, she would not give her child to people who live far away because “I won’t know what they are doing to her” (conversation with author, December 30, 2009). This discursive link between mistreatment and adoption is also what gives birth parents—such as Lena’s birth mother—the ability to take their children back. People in Jajikon largely supported Lena’s reclamation because they believed the story about inadequate care. Finally, this discourse also encourages children to stay with or return to their birth parents. Kiti ran back to her birth family not only because her adoptive mother hit her but also because she believed that her birth family would not.

Birth parents’ matter-of-fact manner of talking about giving their children away might make their claims of sadness seem instrumental. But beyond the fact that adults are generally reserved, emotions in the RMI, as in many places in Oceania, are not necessarily references to inner states but, rather, statements about relationships and events (Lutz 1988). One feels shame when one does not give when one should, and one feels *būromōj* (sadness and empathy) when a kin member needs something and when one has lost someone such as a child to adoption. Hence giving a child by definition creates *būromōj*, and people’s discussions of their sadness serve to reassert their position as parents even as they give a child away.

Maintaining Physical Control

But parents never say to their relatives, “You cannot have my child because you might harm him/her.” Rather, people’s efforts to avoid giving hinge on maintaining physical control of their infants by using words to keep others away. Similarly, after they get infants, adoptive parents work to hold on and maintain physical control, but they do so by avoiding words rather than using them.

Avoiding Giving

Although people often claim that when relatives ask for their children they “have to give,” not giving occurs relatively frequently. One infant asked for by four different people

was ultimately given to none of them. Because people's obligation to give comes from their position as a possessor, their obligation simultaneously makes people feel as if some things, including children, are theirs. As a man explained, "If you say that you do not want [to give], you do not want [to give]" (conversation with author, January 21, 2010).

In practice, people never say no (Berman 2012). Rather, they avoid giving by using speech to emphasize and maintain their physical connection to infants. Lacy, for example, asked for an infant boy. But, Lacy reported, the infant's father said, "wait," a conventional method of refusing to give (Berman 2012:141). Here it was the birth father rather than the birth mother who used words to avoid giving. His ability to do so was dependent on the fact that the infant lived with him—he had physical control. In turn, this physical control was also dependent on the fact that he lived with the child's birth mother, who also had physical control. Finally, his reported use of the word *wait* constructed their newly born child as if he were still in the womb—as a child too young to be given and as intimately tied to his birth mother.

The importance of physical contact and control—both pregnancy and other forms of it—to the ability to claim a child is made clear by Pinla's failed effort to keep her daughter. Pinla had a difficult first pregnancy and spent the last three months of it in the capital, where she had access to a hospital. There she lived with her maternal classificatory adoptive grandfather Terij and his wife. Eventually Pinla gave birth to a girl. Terij had only one child, a boy. He wanted a girl. He asked for her.

Pinla was unable to refuse, so she said that Terij should ask her mother for permission. Her mother in turn referred the request to a still-higher authority, her own mother Imon, who was also Terij's older sister.

Imon tried to move the infant into her domain by arguing that before Terij took her, she needed to return to Jajikon to be washed. (Marshallese newborns are washed in Marshallese herbs occasionally for several months.) Instead of taking the hint, Terij responded that the baby could be washed on Majuro. Imon tried to insist, but in the end Terij won. The baby would be washed in the capital, in Terij's domain. Pinla stayed for two months washing her daughter and breastfeeding her. Then she left, and her daughter was Terij's.

Imon's attempt to avoid giving failed because she was not physically in a position to use words to her advantage, to be able to say "wait." Separated from the infant, she had to convince Terij to let her go. She lacked the ability to control the physical movements of her grandchild.

Hiding Adoption

Adoptive parents avoid words for the same reason that birth parents use them: to maintain their physical control over an infant. In some ways, adoption in the RMI is very open. Almost everyone knows who adopted whom, but adults tend to keep this information away from the adopted child him or herself (see also Goodenough 1970). Most people told me

that adoptive parents (with the exception of grandparents) do not tell their children that they are adopted because they do not want the child to run away—although they eventually talk about adoption after the child finds out on his or her own. An adoptive parent explained his silence by saying, "I adopted her and then she grows up and leaves me" (conversation with author, February 4, 2010).

Most children eventually find out that they are adopted, typically from peers. Indeed, it is possible that all adopted children know they are adopted but choose to speak and act as though they are not. Such speech is understandable because the very act of not speaking about adoption binds children and parents together. As one man said when asked why he would not tell his daughter that she was adopted:

It is not my place to say it . . . Because if I tell her, her feelings could get hurt. She might say, "Oh, why is he telling me this? Does he want to show me [that I am not his real child] or what?" . . . In Marshallese culture . . . the child grows up and by herself finds out. And she will say, "Oh, mama and papa did not tell me because they do not want to say it; they want to show that I am their real child . . . And they love me." [conversation with author, February 12, 2010]

As discussed, moral speech is efficacious. Here, speaking about adoption may be referentially accurate, but it is relationally inaccurate. Such speech creates a situation in which children feel as if they are not "real" children, not loved even when they are. Thus, by avoiding linguistically marking children's adopted status, adoptive parents both limit children's options and show that they care.

Feeding and Nurturing

Both secrecy and saying "wait" are successful ways of creating parent-child bonds because they delay the exchange or the return of a child until the child can develop enough agency and attachment such that he or she chooses to stay. These strategies also creating the potential for nurture through the exchange of food. Although most newborns breastfeed with their birth mothers for at least two months, all three adoptions that I observed involved infants adopted before the age of one (Rynkiewicz 1976:100). People say that they do not give older children because older children are attached to their parents and have the ability to express their preferences by refusing to leave. One mother told me that she put off giving her son to his adoptive parents until he was older. As a result, he never left because he would "sleep there [at the adoptive parents' house] one night and then come back. Two or three nights, and then come back. Because he was this age [she placed her hand at the height of a toddler] and I didn't give him when he was small" (conversation with author, January 29, 2010).

Children often do not want to leave whichever parents they live with because feeding and nurturing over time create bonds between people, including between children and whoever cares for them. Feeding is central to kinship throughout the Pacific and beyond (Carsten 1995; Dickerson-Putnam and Schachter 2008; Weismantel 1995). The importance of

feeding may explain the apparent historical shift in the RMI to adopting infants at a younger age, presumably made possible by the introduction of formula. Through giving food and other goods, the Marshallese bind not only children but anyone to themselves (Carucci 2008, 2011). For example, adults who care for elders and bring them food take those elders as their parents (Carucci 2008; Rynkiewich 1976). Similarly, good parents, many people told me, feed their children. One woman praised her father as “generous” because he gave her money and food when she asked for it. She contrasted her father with her mother who always said “wait” and did not give. Ultimately, it is this exchange of substances—both food and other goods—that creates kinship, but the ability to engage in this exchange is constrained by material limitations and people’s positions in space.

Adoptive parents use their history of feeding and caring for a child as a justification for the child remaining with them. For example, one adoptive mother was furious when her grown daughter’s birth mother claimed inadequate care and took her away. After refuting the charge of poor care, the adoptive mother added, ‘I fed her and fed her. And now that she is grown she takes her back?’ (field notes, December 9, 2009). The adoptive younger sister was also angry, asserting that the birth mother should not have taken her daughter because ‘she did not watch over her’ (field notes, December 26, 2009). Nurturing had over time made the daughter more a part of her adoptive than her birth family.

DEBATING THE “REALNESS” OF BONDS

With this multiplicity of competing ties, the question of which particular bonds are the most “real” is up for debate. Often people use the words *mool* (real or true), *riab* (false), *lukkuun* (really), and *naaj* (like) to distinguish birth mothers and fathers from other kin. A child referred to her birth mother’s sister as her mother and then qualified her statement, “my false (*riab*) mother” (field notes, September 22, 2009). A woman called her “true (*mool*) children” those who were not adopted. Some children asked me if my mother was my ‘real (*lukkuun*)’ mother (field notes, February 4, 2010). A woman once called her adoptive siblings “like (*naaj*) younger siblings” (field notes, October 9, 2009).

At the same time, adopted children often claim that their real parents are their adoptive parents, as did one grown woman who called her adoptive mother as opposed to birth mother “real.” Other offspring simply deny their adopted status, paralleling parents who use a lack of speech about adoption to construct the parent–child bond. Sirina, a ten-year-old adopted girl who definitely knew that she was adopted, refused to draw her birth mother when she was drawing her family. She said about the birth mother, “She is not my mother” (conversation with author, March 25, 2010).

By keeping silent about adoption, these children imitate their parents, who, through their silence, bind children to themselves and construct feeding as a form of attachment that truncates bonds created by pregnancy. Similarly, by

forcing kin to ask and by saying “wait,” as well as through a discourse of inadequate care, birth parents mark themselves as possessors. Eventually they, too, through feeding, claim their children as their own. Both efforts depend on using speech and silence to maintain physical contact with children. Both efforts achieve the interactional goal of “holding on” to children and forming real bonds between specific parents and children, while simultaneously constructing pregnancy, feeding, and physical contact as accepted bases for kinship in the Marshall Islands.

CONCLUSION

Marshallese struggles to keep their children are in some ways surprisingly similar to U.S. and European experiences with adoption and new reproductive technologies. As in infertility clinics in California, in the RMI “certain bases of kin differentiation are foregrounded and recrafted while others are minimized to make . . . [certain parents emerge] as the real parents” (Thompson 2001:175). As with U.S. adoptive parents, Marshallese adoptive parents “confront the dilemma” that their child is simultaneously “theirs” and “not theirs” (Modell 1994:201). As in England, different types of bonds, “each endlessly ramifying in themselves, serve equally to link and to truncate one another” (Edwards and Strathern 2000:159).

These Marshallese struggles arise from a variety of interactional pressures that simultaneously position an infant’s birth family as closely tied to that infant but also as obligated to give. These pressures include not only giving, asking, and other forms of speech but also material constraints, including the physical facts of pregnancy and childbirth. This interactional power of pregnancy and childbirth has been largely overlooked. On the one hand, critiques of kinship as biology often treat tensions between different types of bonds such as pregnancy and adoption as limited to the West. For example, Susan McKinnon (2008:240) interpreted Leslie Butt’s (2008) account of birth mothers’ ambivalence toward adoption in Papua as a result of a “historical change in which biologically-based individual proprietorship has emerged.” In contrast, I show that in the RMI birth mothers’ ambivalence is embedded in, not contrary to, an Oceanic and nonindividualistic approach to possession. At the same time, interactional powers should not be—as they easily could be—misinterpreted as biological. The act of carrying and birthing a child is a physical act that one could arguably call “biological” insofar as children everywhere come into being through birth. Nonetheless, in the RMI it carries power not because of genes or hormones but because pregnancy situates potential adoptive parents as spatially separated from the children they want.

Finally, the way in which people’s speech or silence serve their interactional goals of keeping, and in some cases giving, their children also reveals the constructive role of ambivalences and tensions and how kinship relationships and ideologies arise out of this struggle for children. It is the competition for children fueled by these tensions that

compels parents to keep their children close by hiding their children's status or saying "wait." This competition is also structured as partly responsible for the care that parents give to children that creates feelings of attachment. Children's threats and acts of leaving mean that, if parents are to keep children, they must "hold them (*dāpiji*)" close, care for them, and feed them, thereby solidifying parent-child bonds and Marshallese-particular bases of kinship.

Elise Berman *Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001; eberman@uncc.edu; <http://clas-pages.uncc.edu/elise-berman/>*

NOTES

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1. All people are real, but all names have been changed. Jajikon is also a pseudonym.
2. To arrive at my numbers, I counted all people who lived for more than three months on Jajikon during the year in which I was there.
3. Text in single quotations (‘. . .’) represents dialogue that I did not record but wrote down either at the moment or later in the day in my field notes. Text in double quotations (“. . .”) represents dialogue recorded by my audio or video recorder. All dialogue was in Marshallese.
4. People generally go to court years or decades after an adoption takes place and usually only when a child is moving to the United States or trying to get a social security inheritance. The occasional new parent on the capital may also go to court for official papers.
5. Exactly why Malinowski thought that adoption is rare is unclear. Adoption is quite common in the Trobriands today and was also common in the past (Michelle MacCarthy, personal communication, August 29, 2013).
6. Those who ask for children may also contribute food, clothes, and goods before and after the pregnancy to attempt to tie themselves to the child (Spoehr 1949:210).
7. People also refer to other classificatory kin with the first-person possessive. But people do not ask for mothers or fathers, so they never use the phrase “give me my mother.” Most kinship relationships in Marshallese are, like *mother*, possessed by a suffix

attached to the root of the word in question (*jin* (mother) + *ō* (my) = *jinō* (my mother)). In contrast, offspring in Marshallese are possessed by a separate possessive classifier *nej-*. This grammatical form makes asking for children similar in practice to asking for other things like food, which are also possessed by a classifier rather than a suffix. Perhaps this similar grammatical construction is tied to the fact that both are indeed asked for and given, while mothers, siblings, and grandparents are not.

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