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The smell of origins: traces, processes and practices in transnational adoption

Iosune Fernández-Centeno

Abstract

Based on ongoing anthropological research that studies transnational adoption, this article analyses the importance of the senses, especially smell, in the context of the first moments of the encounter between adoptive mothers and/or fathers and adoptive children. The smell transmitted by the newly adopted child is the evidence of a past, leaving a trace on his/her body and on the objects he/she carries with him/her, such as clothes or shoes. The management of this trace and the "strangeness" it produces in the adopting families makes the processes and practices through which we become a family more complex, involving not only administrative, legal, emotional and corporal aspects but also appealing to the senses.

Sometimes in ethnographic fieldwork, tiny flashes spark our interest, capture our attention, touch, and move us: a moment that changes our perception of what we have encountered, but without knowing what it means; something that speaks to us, affects us, has meaning, and resonates with us (Rosa, 2019). It is almost a physical sensation, a driving energy. The text below is about such a resonance—one I experienced during my fieldwork—and is part of my ongoing research into the bonding processes and practices in families that are constituted or defined by transnational adoption.

I have spoken with the family that I take as an ethnographic example for this text on numerous occasions, sitting with them in their living room. Sometimes with the whole family, other times with the mother and father or just the daughter. During many of these conversations, they showed me family videos or personal objects (Rodríguez and Garrigós, 2017) that were related to the adoption.

Below is a fragment from my field diary that relates how the mother and father tell me the story of when they met their adoptive daughter, as we watch the video recording of that moment, and then show me the clothing the little girl was wearing that day.

The smell of origins

Nahia^[1] was born in a country in Asia. Her mother recounts how, when she was only a few days old and still had a clamp on her umbilical cord, she was left in a cardboard box in the alley next to the house of a woman who took care of children in an orphanage. The woman found her and took her

inside. She called the orphanage, took her to a medical centre for a preliminary check-up, and then took her to the orphanage so she could be registered as abandoned. The orphanage took the baby in and put an announcement in the newspaper about having found the little girl, but nobody claimed her, and so she went back home with the childminder, where she lived until she was adopted by a couple from another country.

When Nahia was six months old, her adoptive father and mother travelled to her country of origin, along with other families who were involved in the same process of formalising an adoption. The meeting between the girls and their future families took place in the lobby of the hotel where the adoptive families were staying. Officials and caregivers from the orphanage brought the girls who were to be adopted and handed them to their future mothers and fathers. They had two hours to be alone with them and get to know them.

When they got back to their hotel room, they laid Nahia on the bed, face up. In the family video, we see she's wearing several layers of clothing, her face is red with heat, her eyes are open and she's a little fidgety. An ID card with her photo and personal information is pinned to her clothing, on her chest. She's also wearing a necklace, a tiny light green stone dragon hanging from a red thread. They told me that the director of the orphanage put the necklace on her when she was in the arms of her adoptive mother. For them, the dragon is *"a symbol of strength and power that comes from the emperors of China"*.

On the screen, I saw that the father was video recording the little girl on the bed as the mother removed the layers of clothing. They joked about the amount of clothing she had on. Their emotion and nervousness were palpable. The mother removed the little girl's socks and three layers of bottoms: a pair of thick corduroy trousers, a pair of cotton joggers and the last pair, the one in contact with her skin, seemed to be pyjama bottoms. On her torso, she had a parka, a padded jacket, a wool jumper and a long-sleeved t-shirt that was plastered against her skin. They removed her clothing and dressed her in the clothing they had brought. They didn't bathe her.

They told me they took clothes for their daughter, following the advice given by families that had already adopted and who were members of the online group they were in. They bought everything they had thought to be essential, like bodysuits, trousers, and sweatpants, and there were other items that they had borrowed, like a winter sleepsuit, in case it was very cold. They also took medicines, diapers, and milk for bottles.

After we watched the video, they showed me the clothes that the little girl—now an adolescent—had been wearing when they met her and that they kept in a box in her bedroom. As they spread out the items on the table, I noticed a small piece of paper with a code written on it stapled to one of the socks. They explained it was because:

"We sent it off to be washed while we were there (...) it smelled like [smoke]... well, I suppose from drying the socks, the clothing, at home, by the fire. So what we did was have the hotel wash them, and when they returned the laundered clothing, there was a label showing that it had been washed."

Life as a palimpsest: the erasing of traces in transnational adoption

Inevitably, smell can be a source of tension. We can speak of the presence of certain smells as being anomalous because they respond to social categories and reinforce normativities (Synnott, 2003; Howes, 2014). In this case, the smell of smoke in the baby's clothing collided with the seemingly deodorized Western society (Mata-Codesal, 2018) that the mother and father belonged to. Nevertheless, it is a culture subject to the logics of commoditization, which also include smells. It is

commonly held that babies, and the objects that surround them, smell good, in a way that is sweet and soft—an idea that comes to us from visual media like advertising and films. However, the everyday experience of many caregivers is that they are not exempt from the sour smell of milk and dirty diapers mixed in with the lotions, soaps, fabric softeners, fragrances and wet wipes that surround infant hygiene and care. Various studies (Lundström et al., 2013) have supported the idea that the components that make up a baby's body odour are unknown, but its ultimate function may be responsible for eliciting a series of responses that stimulate or support the psycho-bio-emotional processes that guide the parent-infant bond.

Nahia's clothing, laced with the smell of smoke, was not perceived as having a smell that fostered the family bond; on the contrary, it was perceived as a bad smell, one bothersome enough to strip her of her clothes and send them to be laundered in the hotel instead of waiting until they arrived home. In contrast to the dragon necklace that was gifted to their daughter and which tied her to an “ancient culture”, the smell of smoke functioned as a mechanism of class differentiation. The smell not only signalled the physical conditions in which she had lived but also the imagined low social status, which led to an unconscious rejection, a strangeness.

Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom's graphic novel *Palimpsest* (2019) uses the metaphor of the palimpsest—“a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing”^[2]—to explain the erasure, sometimes symbolic, that adopted persons are subject to, for example by stripping them of their history prior to being adopted. Adoptees are bodies constructed elsewhere and bring with them smells that carry, into the present, a past that sometimes needs erasing. The erasure of smell is carried out in a context of power relations and social reclassification, with the aim of aiding the bonding process: smell as a form of otherness, related to place, memory, and embodied experience (Del Valle, 1997; Esteban, 2013). Erasing Nahia's past by washing away and changing her smell helped them incorporate her into their family, making her theirs and resituating her in the new social order that was assigned to her.

Will Nahia carry in her body's memory the smell of smoke that might perhaps awaken in the future?

Notes

^[1] Not her real name.

^[2] Definition taken from Lexico.com, Oxford University Press.

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