

The social construction of adoption

After seeing a fascinating documentary on television about the Moso people and their culture, I wanted to learn more. I found a book called *Leaving Mother Lake – A Girlhood at the Edge of the World* by Yang Erche Namu & Christine Mathieu (published in 2003 by Little, Brown & Company). The book is written as a memoir by Namu, a young woman who was born and raised in a Moso village in southern China, near the Tibetan border. Namu is now twenty-seven years old and lives in San Francisco. Namu was assisted to write the book by Christine, who is a lecturer in anthropology at St Mary's College in California. Christine completed her doctoral studies in anthropology among the Moso people. Namu told Christine her story and together they created this book.

The Chinese call the isolated area where the Moso people live 'The Country of Daughters'. The Moso people live a simple, agricultural life and their family structure is matriarchal. There is a written history of this matriarchal society which goes back to the sixth century, although it may well have been in existence for much longer. The Moso people still practise their ancient traditions today, in spite of the fact that their ways may seem unusual to the rest of the world. Although Namu grew up on the shores of Lake Lugu ('Mother Lake') in the Himalayas, she left her home there as a teenager, when her singing ability was recognised. Reading of Namu's experience made the information presented in the television documentary much more real.

Mothers are the head of the family unit among the Moso people. Adult males and females remain in the family home with their mothers. Children are raised with their mothers in an extended family situation which includes their aunts and uncles, cousins and, of course, their grandmother. Children take their names from their mothers and they inherit from their mothers. The Moso are a peaceful, polite people. There is no marriage among the Moso people and their language has no word for 'father', as we define it. In their community there are no expressions of sexual jealousy and no murders. The Moso believe that women carry the seeds of their children within them from the time of their birth and that (as stated by one Moso grandmother in the television documentary) 'it doesn't matter who waters the seed'.

When Moso girls reach puberty, the whole village celebrates their Skirt Ceremony. This is a joyful occasion, involving eating, drinking and the giving of gifts. The Skirt Ceremony signifies to the community that the young woman is now ready to take lovers. Once a daughter has become a woman in this way, she is given her own room in the family home, in which she entertains her lovers by firelight.

The Moso are a modest people and sexual behaviour is expected to be conducted in private. A potential lover knocks on the window of the room belonging to a young woman who appeals to him, late in the evening, after the family has retired. If the young woman is willing, she opens her door to him. They spend the night together and he leaves in the morning before the family rises. In this way love affairs are undertaken in a way that does not interfere with the family, which is the foundation of the Moso community.

Moso women usually have many lovers and may have many children. Their families are proud of this behaviour, as it is in accordance with Moso tradition and so they are fulfilling the expectations with which they have been raised. In contrast to most Western societies, there is no shame or guilt attached to such sexual conduct. In fact, the behaviour which gains approval in Moso culture, has traditionally produced disapproval in most other cultures. The only relationships which are forbidden among the Moso, as they are in most cultures, are relationships between siblings. The Moso have no concept of marriage or illegitimacy. Every baby born is welcomed, cherished and celebrated with pride, as a joyful addition to the family.

Learning about the Moso people has reinforced for me the fact that the practice of adoption is truly a social construction, linked to the guilt and shame which attaches to certain sexual behaviour in some societies. The stigma attached to ex-nuptial births, which led to so many adoptions in the second half of the twentieth century, existed in particular places in the world and at a particular time in history. While Moso traditions have remained the same for hundreds of years, attitudes in our society have altered significantly in recent decades. If those

of us who lost children through adoption had become mothers in another geographical location or at a time when our society's expectations were less rigid, the outcome for us and for our children might have been radically different. Our children could have been welcomed and accepted and, instead of being separated from them, we could have been honoured and celebrated as their proud mothers.

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