



# Irregular adoptions in the Ethiopian-Spanish context: Strategies to redress the adoption triad

Childhood

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## Abstract

In 2018, the Ethiopian government banned intercountry adoptions due to detected irregularities. This paper draws from the experiences of Spanish adoptive families, providing evidence of these irregularities and other abuses substantiated by adoptive families during their “search for origins” or reconnection with their children’s birth families. We argue that these searches and contacts within the adoptive triad represent informal reparative initiatives among Spanish adoptive families.

## Keywords

Ethiopia, Spain, irregularities, reparation, open intercountry adoption

## Introduction

The encounter between Author1 and Itziar, an adoptive mother to a boy born in Ethiopia, was deeply moving. One impactful moment arose when Itziar expressed, “My son demands to see his family.” Itziar’s words highlighted the challenge of balancing her son’s past with this present. She described, “There is always a longing that I can’t ignore. It’s tough, but it’s a journey worth taking - for him, for his identity.” Itziar and Authors 1’s

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conversation delved into complexities of adoption, identity, and the profound parent-child bond. Author1 recognized the depth of Itziar's love and courage in pursuing truth and connection. This encounter, filled with strength and acknowledging children's agency, led to profound exploration of adoptive families to search for their children's origins.

The need to uncover the truth about aspects such as orphanhood, previous family situation, exact age, and other details becomes an essential matter, especially when the stories told by the children themselves differ radically from the provided reports. This discrepancy, identified by some experts as the gap between "concern narratives" and the "reference narrative" (Steenrod, 2021), drives some adoptive families in Spain to seek answers.

This article aims to shed light on the irregularities and abuses within the framework of transnational adoption in the Spanish-Ethiopian context. Some Spanish adoptive families discovered such practices during their search for their children's origins and contact with their birth families. We consider the search for origins or reconnecting with the birth family of adoptees as a promising practice of redress (Baglietto et al., 2016). Specifically, we analyze why, how, and in what context different reparation strategies are undertaken in the adoption triad and whether they contribute to the restitution for illicit practices.

Following a brief overview of the international evidence on irregular adoptions, we present the conceptual framework and describe the research methodology. In the empirical section, as an example of reparation for the "victims", we present the main narrative themes in the accounts of the adoption triad that challenge hegemonic discourses around intercountry adoption. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the international lines of action being promoted.

## Intercountry adoptions in the Spanish-Ethiopian context

A growing body of academic and policy-related research has analyzed irregular procedures, practices and violations of the rights of children and their families of origin. The strong pressure to "obtain" children has "produced" intermediaries or so-called "children finders" exploiting the vulnerability of birth families from the Global South to supply the intercountry adoption business (Cantwell, 2003; Clemente-Martínez, 2022). Although these fraudulent and illicit practices are widespread worldwide, we focus on the Ethiopian context, inspired by the research of Bunkers et al. (2012), Rotabi (2010), Mezmur (2010, 2015), Gallego (2014), Hailu (2017), San Román and Rotabi (2017), Loibl (2021), Steenrod (2021), Cheney (2023), Loibl and McKenzie (2023). They have exposed illicit adoption practices, including cases of false orphans, false promises, and other types of deception, coercion, and intentional manipulation to convince Ethiopian birth families to give their children up for adoption.

Ethiopia has one of the highest numbers of intercountry adoption cases (HCCH, 1997–2022). This is partly due to the ethnocentric belief in the Global North that perpetuates the myth that many orphaned and homeless children are starving in the country. Ethiopia's short adoption processing times further contribute to its high numbers (Rotabi, 2010). When a family decides to adopt, these mythified beliefs take precedence over other critical issues, such as the child's condition and adoptability, principles of subsidiarity, required

preparation, or the implications involved in interracial adoption (San Román and Rotabi, 2017; Steenrod, 2021).

In Spain, the number of adoptions rapidly increased from the mid-1990s onwards. In absolute numbers of intercountry adoptions, Spain ranked second only behind the United States (Selman, 2009). The data for Spain on adoptions of Ethiopian-born children from 2002 to 2018 are shown below (Table 1).

The data in the table indicated that 4498 Ethiopian-born children were adopted in Spain. This so-called intercountry adoption “baby boom” in the first decade of the 21st century began to gradually decline worldwide from 2005 onwards, except for Africa (Selman, 2009). Ethiopia has been one of the main sending countries of Africa for Spanish adopters, despite alarms raised following the publication in the Spanish national newspaper *El País* of a controversial report which informed how the increase of people wanting to adopt boosted illicit practices (De Cózar, 2007). Although the article exposed cases of abuse, theft, and baby buying in Ethiopia, the existence of irregularities and corruption in intercountry adoption processes has received little attention in Spain. Moreover, the Spanish bodies responsible<sup>1</sup> for overseeing adoptions from abroad have ignored the complaints filed by some of the adoptive parents interviewed for this work, since such irregularities are considered “collateral effects” of intercountry adoption processes.

Indeed, despite complaints by some Spanish adoptive families and evidence presented in articles, videos, and various reports (Against Child Trafficking, 2009) showing serious procedural irregularities, Spanish adoption agencies have denied any wrongdoing, and Spanish authorities have shown no intention of implementing corrective measures to address these irregularities. The analysis of San Román and Rotabi (2017) on attitudes toward intercountry adoption in Spain illustrates this situation. As the authors explain, although adoptive parents in Spain had firsthand knowledge of the stories of families who had discovered evidence of fraud and activities related to “child laundering,” they accused the parents who denounced these abuses of a lack of solidarity and denied any negligence by the Spanish adoption agencies and institutions in charge of supervising the processes.

In June 2011 illicit adoption practices led to the closure of orphanages and transitional houses often sponsored by the adoption agencies of the receiving countries. The closure of intercountry adoptions occurred gradually. In January 2018, the Ethiopian Parliament passed a law prohibiting intercountry adoptions after detecting irregularities. The country, which is not a signatory to The Hague Adoption Convention (Hague Conference on Private International Law [HCCH], 1993), recognizes and is deeply concerned about corruption, and failure to send post-placement monitoring reports on adopted children,

**Table 1.** Intercountry adoptions in Spain: children from Ethiopia, 2002 to 2018. Absolute numbers.

2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
12	107	220	227	304	481	629	722	508	441	302	260	80	123	28	53	1

HCCH (1997-2022). Source: Intercountry Adoption Section. Permanent Bureau of The Hague Conference.

and the breakdown of cultural ties and family relations, all of which are contrary to the concept of “simple adoption” as regulated under Ethiopian law. It is noteworthy that the meaning of “adoption” in non-Western countries, such as Ethiopia, differs from the prevalent understanding in Western countries, in that for birth families, it does not imply a complete rupture of social and cultural ties. This may reflect a lack of awareness or misunderstanding that intercountry adoptions are closed adoptions (Clemente-Martínez, 2022; Högbacka, 2016).

Adoption studies from a postcolonial approach, such as Högbacka’s (2017) work on South Africa, demonstrate how intercountry adoption practices contribute to the creation of child abandonment scenarios among those born to impoverished and distressed biological mothers, who might have opted for temporary childcare solutions if given a choice. This is particularly relevant in the Ethiopian context, one of the poorest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a Human Development Index ranking of 175 among 189 countries (PNUD, 2021). In Ethiopia, an increasing number of children were declared as abandoned to expedite the bureaucratic and judicial process of placing children with adoptive families, unlike the more complex procedures involved in direct relinquishment by birth families, which tend to slow down the adoption process (Hailu, 2017; Rotabi, 2010; Rotabi and Bromfield, 2017).

In the social imaginary of the Global North, the term “intercountry adoption” is not only associated with the notion of abandoned children, orphans, and those with no families (even though it is widely known that the majority of adopted children are not orphans), but also with the concept of social orphans (Rotabi and Bunkers, 2008). This constructed narrative about orphans and abandoned children is conditioned by discourses portraying adoption as a rescue mission, allowing children to live with better-off middle-class families from the Global North. In adopting them, these families are seen as performing an act of love and generosity (Högbacka, 2017).

Contrary to the common assumption, not all children adopted from Ethiopia have been abandoned (Gallego, 2014). In Africa, the birth family plays a crucial role in childcare, alongside the extended family and the community to which they belong (Mezmur, 2010). According to Duressa (2002), cultural practices like *guddifachaa* foster mutual support in child-rearing without severing ties from the biological family. *Guddifachaa* is grounded in solidarity, mutual aid, and the preservation of cultural and social bonds, highlighting the significance of community cohesion and child welfare in Oromo communities. Therefore, the essentialist conception of the “abandoned child” needs deconstruction because it denies children the knowledge of their origins, erases them, and deprives them of the fundamental right to build one’s own identity (De Lorenzi et al., 2019).

The study of intercountry adoptions must dismantle such unidirectional ethnocentric reductionism and recognize that there is no single adoptive reality. Unlike the Global North, in most African countries, and particularly in Ethiopia, adoption is not conceived of as a complete rupture of filiation ties with the family of origin. Ethiopia recognizes simple adoption, allowing the adopted child to maintain ties with the birth family (Revised Family Code, Article 183, Chapter 10) and allows the coexistence of two parallel filiations: simple and full (ISS/IRC, 2006).

Full adoption, as envisaged in hegemonic international laws (HCCH, 1993), imposes European and American cultural models of reproduction based on the principle of exclusive

filiation (Cadoret, 2004). These models do not consider the unique contexts and cultural dynamics of sending countries. Some Spanish adoptive families are challenging this adoption paradigm by reconnecting with the children's origins through contacts and relationships with birth relatives, thereby transforming closed adoption into open adoption. However, official open adoption arrangements in Spain are currently only applicable to domestic adoptions. Fronek and colleagues (2021) observe that while some adoptive families are more open to communication or contact with birth families in domestic adoptions, such openness is not prevalent in intercountry adoptions, where contacts often hinge on the attitudes and resourcefulness of adoptive parents. Nonetheless, some adoptive families are receptive to maintaining contact with the children's birth relatives and respecting the cultural conception of adoption in Ethiopia. This highlights the evolving landscape of adoption, particularly in the context of European and American cultural models. It underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting the unique dynamics and cultural contexts of sending countries.

### Politics of reparation and intercountry adoptions

Numerous studies have highlighted the entrenched inequalities within intercountry adoption systems, encompassing aspects of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and geography (Högbacka, 2016; Marre and Briggs, 2009). Increasingly, social and political research has scrutinized intercountry adoptions as practices that may entail serious irregularities and violations of the fundamental rights of children and their families. Specifically, in recent years, "irregular adoptions" have garnered significant attention from both academics and international organizations (Baglietto et al., 2016). According to HCCH, 'illegal adoption' is defined as "resulting from abuses such as abduction, sale trafficking, and other illegal or illicit activities against children" (HCCH, 2008: 16). In other words, "irregularities" or "irregular adoptions" refer to processes in which the determination of adoptability is obtained through deception or coercion (San Román and Rotabi, 2017). The "making" of available babies is ingrained in a global market system defined by a geography of inequality (Marre and Briggs, 2009). These practices have given rise to what Cheney describes as the "orphan industrial complex" (Cheney, 2023; Cheney and Rotabi, 2017; Cheney and Ucembe, 2019), a system characterized by the commodification of "orphans" as objects of charity. Cheney's research suggests that activities such as orphanage tourism, volunteering in orphanages, and donor support to these establishments are key factors driving the unnecessary separation of children from their families and the harmful institutionalization of children.

Against these flagrant violations of rights, a call emerges that demands the necessity of repairing the damages caused by illicit practices in intercountry adoptions. The term "reparation" encompasses various meanings in international law, and its contemporary usage within human rights is relatively recent (Torpey, 2015). In the realm of human rights, the concept of reparation refers to the obligation of states and other responsible entities to address and remedy human rights violations that have occurred. Reparation seeks to restore, to the extent possible, the dignity, integrity, and rights of the victims of human rights violations. It is an integral component of the transitional justice process, a theoretical framework that can be applicable to irregular practices as long as it takes into account the social and political context in which the separations occurred (Patrizi, 2021).

The UN definition of “reparation”, adopted in 2005, stipulates that victims<sup>2</sup> of wrongful acts should be entitled to “reparation”, which can manifest in several forms: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition (Loibl, 2021; Torpey, 2015; UN, 2005). Reparation can include a range of measures, from economic compensation to rehabilitation, restitution, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition. It may also entail addressing the damages, and emotional and psychological consequences suffered by victims, alongside obtaining truth and apologies in various forms. Additionally, it encompasses actions aimed at preventing and avoiding the recurrence of illegal acts (UN, 2005). Altogether, reparations serve a dual purpose: to compensate victims for the harm endured and to acknowledge their suffering, while also fostering accountability and preventing future human rights violations. As Wenar (2006) posits, reparations are not solely justified by addressing past events; they must also consider prospective factors. Wenar contends that the emphasis on restoring individuals to their original state is both limited and challenging. Instead, he advocates for a forward-looking approach, which guarantees actions to enhance living conditions. This approach allows for the exploration and implementation of innovative reparative strategies, such as those pioneered by the families central to our research.

Our starting point is that, for the possibility of reparation to be opened, the recognition of irregular practices is fundamental. This recognition is hindered by the prevailing culture of silence and denial within States (Gallego and Clemente-Martínez, 2021; Marre and Clemente-Martínez, 2022). State initiatives toward reparative measures are scarce and often disrupted by populist political interests (Fronek et al., 2021). Additionally, frameworks like the Hague Convention, although holding potential for Restorative Justice, have faltered due to the absence of legislative support to address damages and establish preventive mechanisms against illegal practices (Quiroz, 2011: 14–16). Despite existing reparative efforts worldwide (Table 2), in the case at hand, neither the Spanish and Ethiopian governments nor Spanish adoption agencies in Ethiopia have taken action to aid victims of illegal adoptions in this case. Consequently, post-adoption services remain limited, and there is a lack of robust institutional collaboration with Ethiopian authorities (Medina Rodríguez, Gallego Molinero and Clemente-Martínez, 2024).

This situation places families in a position where, informally and sometimes unconsciously, they take the initiative on their own to address the repercussions of these irregular adoptions. This self-initiated action by some families can be seen as a form of reparation, even if it is not recognized as such within the legal or institutional framework. Some authors, such as Fronek et al. (2021), consider these individual and familial actions as forms of reparation, even when carried out outside official structures. Fronek explores how these actions can contribute to repairing the harms caused by irregular intercountry adoptions, offering an alternative perspective on how these situations can be addressed and repaired from the grassroots level and through the initiative of the involved families. In this article, we highlight an initiative of a group of adoptive families who express concern regarding the “origins” of their adopted children. They seek to understand the circumstances of the adoption and the background of their children’s birth families. Through their efforts, they transform this quest for origins into a strategy for reparation to all parties of the adoptive triad. This initiative represents an underexplored topic in Spain.

**Table 2.** Examples of reparative initiatives worldwide.

Countries	Domestic adoption	Transnational adoption	Forced circulation
Ireland	Public apologies		
Australia	Public apologies		
The Netherlands		Independent scholar research and reports	
Sweden		Truth-seeking commission	
Switzerland			Expulsion and forced circulation: Compensation (symbolic and monetary)
Canada/ Australia			Politics of removal of native children: Elaboration of a reparation plan, symbolic and material reparation
The United States		Deportation of Korean adoptees: Adoptee rights campaign; Petition of the adoptee citizenship Act of 2019	
Denmark			Removal of Inuit children: Public apologies
Ethiopia	Adoptive parents' informal initiatives		
Argentina and others	Reparation fund: tracing of origins, reunion with birth relatives. Counseling and assistance to victims Criminal and judicial measures Awareness raising Community narrative/individual narrative		

Source: The authors.

## Research methodology

This article is part of a larger qualitative study on intercountry adoptions. Qualitative methods are deemed suitable for investigating illicit adoptions as they provide a nuanced understanding of the perspectives and narratives of the various actors of the adoption triad. Specifically, we aim to explore the experiences of Spanish adoptive families concerning the search for origins in Ethiopia.

The data described and analyzed in this article draws on the fieldwork conducted by Author 1 in Spain and Ethiopia. The first sample consisted of seven adoptive families who were part of Asociación Etiopía Viva. Subsequently, through the “snowball” method and connections established with the scope of two competitive projects (2016–2019/2021–

2025) funded by the Government of Spain and involving all three authors, access to additional adoptive families were facilitated. Thirteen interviews were conducted during the first project, with an additional six interviews conducted during the second project. Therefore, the results presented here are based on interviews conducted with 19 Spanish adoptive families, whose characteristics are shown in Table 3. All adoptive families undertook a search for origins; nevertheless, not all came across with irregularities during the process. The selection of the families to interview adhered to two criteria: first, the relevance of the families to the research topic; and second, their accessibility and willingness to engage in a meaningful dialogue.

The interview guide was developed based on the insights gathered through participant observation with the seven families from the Asociación Etiopía Viva by Author 1 in 2012, the study's objectives, existing literature, and reflections by the authors. Interviews were structured in a progression from general to specific topics. Initially, information was gathered on personal and family backgrounds. Subsequently, the focus shifted to the interviewees' experiences, including motivations for searching the origins, preparing for

**Table 3.** Adoptive families' profile.

Adoptive mother/father	Children in the family/Age at the moment of the interview	Adoptive parent's Civil Status	Residence
Marta	1 girl/6 years old	Single mother	Granada
Laura	1 girl/5 years old	Single mother	Madrid
Pedro	2 twins/6 years old	Heterosexual couple	Valencia
Montse	1 girl/6(7) <sup>3</sup> years old	Heterosexual couple	Valencia
Carmen	2 brothers/11 and 12 years old	Single mother	Alicante
Irene	2 sisters/4 and 6 years old	Heterosexual couple	Málaga
Itziar	2 biological children and 1 adopted boy/5 years old	Heterosexual couple	Guipúzcoa
Guillermo	2 biological children and 1 adopted girl/5 years old	Heterosexual couple	Sevilla
Olga	1 biological child and 1 adopted girl/4 years old	Heterosexual couple	Murcia
Manuel	1 boy/5 years old	Single mother	Córdoba
Lucía	1 boy/5 years old	Single mother	Murcia
Lucrecia	2 biological children and 2 adopted children (China and Ethiopia)	Heterosexual couple	Mallorca
Martina	1 girl/4 years old	Single mother	Barcelona
Alejandra	2 siblings	Heterosexual couple	Gran canaria
Roser	1 girl/8 years old	Single mother	País Vasco
Eleni	1 girl/5 years old	Single mother	Madrid
Alma	1 boy/6 years old	Single mother	Murcia
Ángeles	1 boy/5 years old	Single mother	Alicante
Agustina	1 girl/8 years old	Homosexual couple	País Vasco



the search, information gathering, contacting and meeting with the family of origin and, finally, informing the children about their story and their family of origin.

The interview script was centered around the core theme of the investigation: the search for origins among adoptive families with children born in Ethiopia. To ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant topics, Author 1 sought input from interviews on aspects they deemed important for the study. A pilot interview was conducted to refine and streamline the interview questions. Although the interviews were semi-structured, a set of supplementary questions was prepared to guide the discussion in the event of any deviation.

## Findings

### *An open secret: What story shall we tell?*

Some of the adoptive families were motivated to search for the origins and verify the pre-adoptive history of their adopted children out of fear that the information contained in their adoption file was falsified. This fear may arise from the children's own narrative of their history and the disclosure of irregular practices by other adoptive families. The following verbatim reflects a decision frequently made by certain adoptive families: they decide to contact and/or return to Ethiopia before their children reach adulthood, recognizing that delaying such action might jeopardize their ability to gather crucial information. As Marta, an adoptive mother, explained "I wanted to check the data in my daughter's adoption file that had been falsified, I also needed to verify them to be able to tell my daughter her real story. That's why I went back to her country." (Marta, adoptive mother). Likewise, other mothers expressed:

Those listed as their uncles are actually their parents. I remembered that this is another 'classic' of falsified reports: besides the 'dead/killed parents,' there are siblings turned into uncles or parents also turned into uncles (Laura, adoptive mother).

I had in the documents that her mother was dead (it came with a date of death and everything), and she was alive, so luckily my daughter was still young enough not to ask, otherwise, what a mess I would have told her. (Lucrecia, adoptive mother)

Although still few in number, the Spanish families who have inquired into their children's origins have done so without the support of the public entities responsible for overseeing post-adoption issues or the adoption agencies. These families are puzzled by the absence of administrative support and the failure of the adoption agencies to fulfill their duty to verify the information in the adopted child's file. At the time of adoption, most of these families were unaware of illicit and unethical adoption practices. Adoption agencies, despite being aware of such issues, either remained silent, refrained from reporting problems, denied their existence, or held Ethiopia responsible.

These discrepancies or concerns were also expressed by the adoptees themselves. Therefore, for the adoptive parents, the situation becomes more painful when the children grow concerned about their families, longing to see them and assure them of their well-being (Gallego, 2016).

My daughter also had the same need. She was 4 years old when she arrived (actually 5 biologically), and from the very beginning, she talked to me about her family. She mentioned her dad and mom (the name of her mother was not the one listed in the file). For a while, I was probing her, asking what she wanted (Montse, adoptive mother).

Sibling relationships are an important element in the adoption triad and can play an even more significant role than the figure of the birth parents. In our fieldwork, we have met with brothers and sisters who have very vivid memories of their adopted siblings, as well as with siblings who were separated upon adoption and are divided between several adoptive families either in the same country or in different ones. In the following account, one adoptive mother narrates how her adopted children expressed their suffering through crying and in nightmares, how they denied that they were orphans, and insisted that their mother was alive, and they had siblings:

[Their reactions] change a lot depending on the age at which the child is adopted; from day one of being in Spain mine demanded to tell their family that they were fine and that they had not ended up in organ trafficking. They were also very concerned about the situation of their siblings back home. At first, they did so timidly out of fear that we might reject them (crying for no reason, night terrors, etc.) and due to my insistence about which telling them, as their papers said, that their mother had died, which was not true they were very adamant. (Carmen, adoptive mother).

The search for origins is carried out to verify possible false information and to gather as much information as possible to aid in the construction of identity. This reality, as will be seen below, can be the starting point through which adoptive families will develop various strategies aimed at repairing the affected parties.

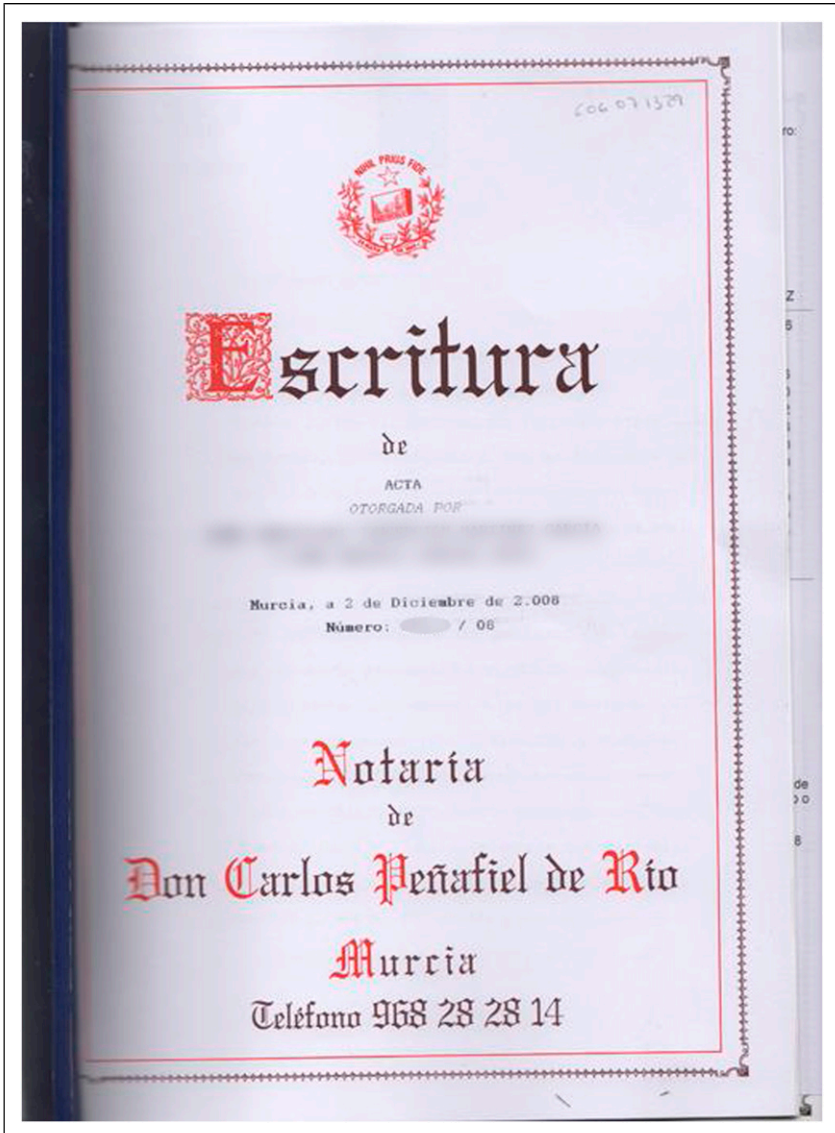
### *What now? Reparation strategies in the adoption triad*

The results from the fieldwork have revealed various strategies or actions that adoptive families have developed to address irregular situations. Adoptive families are often shocked to find that the information in the child's adoption file bears little resemblance to their actual history. Faced with this revelation, they feel deceived, and in response filed notarized complaints denouncing the malpractice of adoption agencies (Figure 1).

As Irene explained:

Despite the complaints from Spanish adopters and the numerous articles, videos, and various reports with irrefutable evidence of serious irregularities in the procedures, both the Spanish embassy in Addis Ababa and the Spanish authorities, and of course, the ECAs [International

Adoption Collaborating Entities] themselves, deny the evidence of corruption and issue statements solely aimed at ‘cleaning their honor,’ denying the facts without even questioning these irregularities or showing any intention to combat them, merely resorting to self-defense of their business (Irene, adoptive mother).



**Figure 1.** Complaint submitted by several families to the Spanish adoption agency.

Furthermore, the Spanish authorities responsible for overseeing intercountry adoptions have disregarded the complaints filed by some of the adoptive parents interviewed in this study. This dismissive stance arises from the perception that such irregularities are deemed as “collateral effects” to the intercountry adoption processes. The term “collateral effects,” suggests that these issues are to some extent inevitable to the primary objective of facilitating the adoption of children in need of homes. For instance, when adoptive parents who filed complaints sought explanations, they were told that “the end justifies the means”. Nonetheless, this approach has cast doubt on the trustworthiness and reputation of the ECAIs.

Another strategy followed by adoptive families involved initiating contact with members of the child’s birth family through exchanged letters or photographs, facilitated by intermediaries who assist in connecting with birth families, alongside other adoptive families who have traveled to the country. The families we interviewed with children who, because of their age, preserve memories from before their adoption, state that the children had sustained close affective relationships with their birth families (parents, siblings, grandparents, and other relatives). Another central concern for adoptive families is how to arrange encounters with the birth families respectfully and ensure that the encounter is in the best interests of the child. At the same time, they try to respect the right to privacy of the birth family by sending a letter that usually includes photographs of the child. The letter shown below is an example of how one adoptive mother was informed, via another adoptive family searching for their child’s origins, that her adopted daughter’s grandfather had asked the social worker about his granddaughter. Even though the adoptive mother knew the grandfather had inquired about her, she sent him a letter with photographs of his granddaughter to make sure that the relative consented to a possible encounter (Figure 2):

In all the cases studied where the adoptive family maintains a relationship with the birth family, the members of the triad find the arrangement beneficial because it permits the families to communicate and connect and lessens the grief associated with loss. Contact and, where appropriate, visits to Ethiopia provide the children with a sense of continuity rather than separation from their family of origin, with whom they maintained very meaningful emotional relationships. The following account tells of a visit to Ethiopia an adoptive grandmother made to her granddaughter’s biological family. As the adoptive mother explains, the visit had a very positive impact on her daughter as it alleviated her feelings of separation:

[. . .] since then, she sleeps peacefully and so do we, also in the knowledge that the bond has been created thanks to my mother’s journey to the south of this wonderful country. (Alejandra, Adoptive mother)

Some families equate these experiences with a type of open adoption. Open adoption refers to the way in which the adoptive family establishes or can maintain a certain relationship and degree of communication with the family of origin. This may involve infrequent exchanges of letters and photographs or regular visits to Ethiopia, but without compromising the stability of the child’s filiation with the adoptive family. Although adoption with contact entails very diverse practices that evolve over the course of the



family members' lives, it breaks with the dual hierarchical conviction in the social imaginary that full adoption is better or more important than simple adoption, when both types of adoption can coexist.

Since we met the biological family... for about a year now we've been showing them photos, exchanging drawings and letters with the parents and siblings. I've eaten at their house . . . and so what? . . . For our children it's a natural experience . . . they meet all their siblings [the family had already had an encounter with their two children and the biological family in Ethiopia]. Of course, neither my children nor are we going to have the "ghosts" or the fears caused by ignorance or uncertainty. (Pedro, adoptive father).

To these contacts, different strategies have been added which have led to a reparative effect. In addition to traveling to Ethiopia, some adoptive families attempt to bridge the geographical divide that separates them from the biological family through the figure of the intermediary. Intermediaries are usually trusted Ethiopians, some of whom have experience in adoptions, although some families have reported cases of fraud by private investigators on Internet forums. On other occasions, the adoptive families help each other by taking advantage of trips to Ethiopia to deliver photographs, letters, or money to the families of origin, while the birth families may also give the adoptive families gifts (Amharic calendars, coffee, etc.).

We have continuous contact through an intermediary. Currently, we have a family support project to improve their living conditions (housing, business, and support for the siblings' education) (Pedro, adoptive father).

In other cases, more formal organizational structures have been created in line with the recent child protection policy in Ethiopia, such as the Etiópia Viva Association founded by adoptive families with the aim of supporting the preservation of Ethiopian families, collaborating with community services and schools, among other initiatives (Bunkers et al., 2018; Kastro and Dullea, 2020).

At the beginning, we formed [the association] among several adoptive parents, all of whom adopted from the same region during the same trip. We founded it because all children lived in villages far from their own, and we created an association to 'sponsor' their siblings and carry out projects with the community (Pedro, adoptive father).

These contact strategies play a very important role in building affective ties with the birth family. In some cases, adoptive families may begin to perceive themselves as integral members of an extended family unit:

There's a *bio* family that is very, very present in our children's lives. We are [composed of] three parts: the adoption triad. And my daughter's mother has become, through adoption, part of my family. A remote, strange family that I don't know very much about, but, in a way, is my family. I understand there are people who don't think the way I do, but that's how I feel. I

don't mean that she's present every minute, not even every month, but . . . she's there. I know who she is, where she lives, and what she does. And she's the mother of my daughter. (Laura, adoptive mother)

Such helping practices serve as a source of material and emotional support for both families. However, far from being a romantic idealization of the adoption triad, these practices are marked by an asymmetric and unequal relationship in which the adoptive family enjoys a more privileged economic and social position and decides when and how they will occur:

The *bio* "families" say yes to everything when we ask them so as not to offend us, and because they tell us what they think we want to hear. How would they dare tell us, all-powerful white people, something we don't want to hear and even more so when we have come so far to where they live to see them? They would consider that very rude. They might also hide what they think out of fear if someone who has intervened in the process in some way or who knows someone who has intervened is present. (Eleni, Adoptive mother).

The search for origins and the establishment of connections within the adoptive triad have entailed strategies aimed at alleviating the harm experienced by those involved and seeking to restore it as much as possible. The search for origins and the open adoptions pursued by the interviewed adoptive families have involved informal, unorganized and unprecedented strategies, resulting in potential initiatives to repair the damage caused (such as disregarding the Ethiopian concept of simple adoption, separating children who were not orphans from their adoptive parents, and children who express a desire to reconnect with their birth parents and relatives), affecting both children and their birth families.

## Discussion and conclusions

Our research findings align with previous studies documenting fraudulent, unethical, and illegal practices in intercountry adoptions and emphasize the urge to implement effective reparations policies (Cheney, 2023; Fronck et al., 2021; Steenrod, 2021). One of the concerns highlighted by our work is the inadequate responses from countries and governments to address these issues. Even the Hague Convention has not significantly reduced such practices, with reports and scandals having a greater impact (Cheney, 2023; Denéchère and Macedo, 2023). The Convention has not developed legal mechanisms to prevent these practices or provide reparations (HCCCH, 2021; Quiroz, 2011). Closure of adoption in some countries has merely shifted intercountry adoption to countries with weaker regulations, such as Ethiopia, which only closed its doors to intercountry adoption in 2018 due to various factors (Steenrod, 2021).

On the contrary, it is local initiatives that are starting to address the effects of irregular adoptions, albeit with limited documentation, particularly in Ethiopia (Fronck et al., 2021; Steenrod, 2021). Our research, consistent with Steenrod (2021), reveals that families seeking their children's origins often encounter discrepancies between initial information

provided and subsequent findings. While initially motivated by curiosity rather than reparations, this quest often leads to informal strategies for obtaining information. Spanish adoptive families, as exemplified in our study, have embarked on such searches independently, driven by concerns about the accuracy of the information and the desire to reconnect with birth families, sometimes at the children's request (Gallego, 2016). These concerns are coupled with questions about the legality of the adoption and how to address the harm caused.

Restorative justice principles underpin these strategies, facilitating emotional healing for both adoptive and birth families (McCold and Wachtel, 2003). According to the adoptive families interviewed, their children gaining information has provided them with a sense of peace and contentment. Depending on individual circumstances, it has relieved them of feelings of sadness, pain, anger, or rage, and has assisted in overcoming grief, while strengthening their bond with the adoptive family (Grotevant et al., 2007). Both adoptive families and key informants informed Author 1 that, for birth families, knowing about their biological children eases the pain caused by the loss and separation. There is no intention known to reclaim these children, nor have there been any reports of adoption annulments or repatriation of children once the adoption's illegitimacy has been established. Through ongoing contact, solidarity practices may arise, including occasional financial support for medical expenses, education for siblings, assistance during setbacks such as loss of livestock or crops, entrepreneurship initiatives, or training courses. We acknowledge that various perspectives exist regarding the purpose and recipient of true reparation, sparking debate within the adoptee community. Some may legitimately view these practices as perpetuating colonial legacies and the privileges of 'White' individuals. However, we contend that many families, including those we interviewed, are also victims of a system that fails to uphold the fundamental rights it asserts. Thus, highlighting these examples serves as a call for protection systems to allocate resources for repairing the harm inflicted.

The informal and pioneering strategies of adoptive families represent steps towards repairing the damage caused by irregular adoptions. These actions include healing through the acknowledgment of injustices, restoring the identity of adopted individuals whose stories were falsified, reconnecting with biological families, and emotional repair. Furthermore, these initiatives raise awareness about the shortcomings in the adoption system and advocate for more ethical and transparent practices in the future (Fronek et al., 2021).

The reparation of the damage caused by irregular adoptions, even if undertaken informally by some adoptive families, does not replace the need for state action and formal institutional response to address the violation of human rights of both adopted individuals and the biological families, as well as the adoptive families who were deceived. Spain and Ethiopia have shared responsibilities and must recognize that the human rights of many adopted persons have been violated. Merely issuing a public apology is insufficient. While this work serves as a tentative example of reparative practice, its positive impact is limited due to its unofficial and informal nature. In response to our findings and requests from stakeholders, we advocate for regional-level programs, coordinated between Ethiopia and Spain, to support families in their search for birth relatives. Such programs



must prioritize the best interests of the adopted child, respecting their autonomy and right to decide on their own searches. As some adoptees have argued, it is legitimate to gather information, but conducting the search would exceed the desires of the children (Clemente-Martínez, 2022).

This article contributes to the reparative process and calls for action from policymakers and the academic community to ensure justice and dignity for all affected by irregular intercountry adoptions. The complexities of adoption, including cultural disconnection and new familial bonds, underscore the need for careful consideration of the child's rights and well-being.

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### Notes

1. These organisms refer to governmental and non-governmental institutions or entities in charge of regulating, supervising, and facilitating the process of intercountry adoptions in Spain. These may include International Adoption Collaborating Entities (ECAI) and Public Child Protection Entities of the Autonomous Communities.
2. We consider both adoptive parents and adoptees can be regarded as victims within the framework of adoption, due to systems shortcomings in ensuring adequate procedures. Adoptive parents recognizing potential harms to adoptees and birth families is crucial for addressing these issues.
3. The actual age differs from the age on the child's report.

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