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*Erasmus*

**Structural violence in intercountry adoption to the Netherlands:  
Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka and their search for belonging**

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## List of Acronyms

COIA	Commissie onderzoek interlandelijke adoptie (Committee on the Investigation of Intercountry Adoption)
FLASH	Foundation, Life, Adoption Services and Happiness
INEA	Identiteit, Nazorg, Erkenning en Adoptievraagstukken (Identity, Aftercare, Recognition and Adoption Issues)
VOC	De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (The Dutch East India Company)

## **Abstract**

In recent years, there has been a reckoning about the narrative of rescue that long accompanied intercountry adoptions, most prominently in the Netherlands where the government acknowledged its role in widespread and endemic systemic abuse following an investigation and imposed a permanent ban on the practice. Against this backdrop, this research seeks to understand the lived experiences of Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka, focusing on how they engage with the knowledge of abuse, the emotional and identity impacts of their search for origins, and their perceptions of justice. Through qualitative interviews, review of archival research, and a broad socio-historical analysis, this paper uses the lens of coloniality of power to argue that colonial legacies of racial hierarchies and unequal resource distribution are embedded in intercountry adoptions and the Dutch society which manifest as structural violence in the lives of adoptees. The research underscores the profound impact and limits placed on adoptees' experiences of belonging and justice under such structures and raises questions about the difficulty of addressing such injustices in the face of colonial amnesia in Dutch society and its insistence on innocence.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Intercountry adoption of children from the Global South to the Global North is one of the ways in which structural inequalities, racial hierarchies, and power dynamics have determined how the welfare of people in the context of conflict and poverty is addressed within public policy, governance, and international human rights frameworks. In the Netherlands, it is a topical issue which affects thousands of adoptees, including those who came here decades ago. Therefore, it becomes relevant to development studies to study the experience of adoptees so it could contribute to the formulation of protection mechanisms, policies, and programs that center their voices and help ensure that the same patterns aren't repeated. By highlighting illegal adoptions which took place in the context of the Sri Lankan civil war as a manifestation and continuation of structural violence, the research could also contribute knowledge that is relevant for social justice.

## **Key words**

Intercountry adoptions, Sri Lanka, Netherlands, Belonging, Coloniality, Structural Violence

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“It was there in the news and the title was the Dutch government...finally gives back stolen goods to Sri Lanka. And then among my group of Sri Lankan adopted friends, we shared it as a sort of meme, ‘oh, when are they going to give us back?’ But that’s a joke only adoptees really understand. If I send it to my Dutch friends, they don’t get it. So that also shows the difference.”*

– Aanya, a Dutch adoptee from Sri Lanka.

In the last few years, the Netherlands has taken a few steps to confront its colonial past: King Willem-Alexander sought forgiveness for the country’s 250-year-long participation in the slave trade, and its museums returned almost 500 stolen artefacts to Sri Lanka and Indonesia (Di Sario, 2023; Nowakowski, 2023). However, the legacy of this colonial past has continued to shape the experiences of people in the modern day, which includes over 3,400 Sri Lankan children adopted by Dutch parents and brought to the Netherlands from the 1970s to the late 1990s, many of whom are realizing as adults that they were “stolen”, and are returning to their birth countries themselves in search of answers about their origins (Committee on the Investigation of Intercountry Adoption, 2021; Dore, 2022).

Their experience is emblematic of the global inequalities perpetuated by colonialism that are deeply embedded in the intercountry adoption process which began as a relief effort following the Second World War and the Korean War but then came to be increasingly pitched as humanitarian and in the “best interest of the child” (Balk, et al. 2022; Loibl, 2019). This shift concealed the broader reality wherein vulnerable families, particularly mothers, in varying contexts of social stigma, conflict, and poverty in mainly Global South countries came to fill a demand for children created by decreasing birth rates in western countries (Balk, et al. 2022; Loibl, 2019; Ahluwalia, 2007; Cheney, 2014). As former ISS professor Cheney (2014) writes, the narrative of “rescue” over other local solutions reinforces a neocolonial dynamic which renders not just families, but entire nations unfit for children. In the mid-1980s, when Sri Lanka entered a tumultuous period of civil war, for instance, it was also the source country with the highest number of adoptions overall, but recent investigations have found that many children adopted to Western Europe were neither orphaned nor affected by war (Selman, 2009; Bereth & Falk, 2022). Until recently, this humanitarian pitch went undisputed within Western societies, including the Netherlands.

In 2021, media investigations culminated in a government-led inquiry, which looked into the Netherlands’ role in possible abuses in intercountry adoptions from the 1950s focusing on five countries, and found in the case of Sri Lanka that abuses “ranged from the infamous baby farms<sup>1</sup>, child trafficking, theft of children, forcibly relinquishing a child, forging documents, to legalizing incorrect documents, concealment of status, corruption and bribery and improper payments”,

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<sup>1</sup> The COIA defined baby farms as “places where women gave birth (whether or not against their will, and/or for a fee), after which the child was given up for adoption” (Committee on the Investigation of Intercountry Adoption, 2021, p. 88).

much of which the Dutch government was aware of but did nothing to stop (COIA, 2021, p. 106). Crucially, the investigation highlighted that the image of “doing good” was central to the continuation of intercountry adoption in spite of illegalities, and that abuse is so deeply embedded in this system, which thrives on structural disparities between and within the Global South and North countries, that it has continued to the present day. (Balk, et al. 2022). In the last few years, investigations into adoptions from Sri Lanka in Switzerland and from Chile in Denmark have led to similar findings of abuse and they highlight a pattern of complicity of Western European governments, agencies, and parents in the abusive system. (Bitter, et al. 2020; Bereth & Falk, 2022; Ankestyrelsen, 2021).

The Dutch government apologized for its role in these abuses and in May 2024, it decided to stop all intercountry adoptions immediately. However, the Netherlands has yet to address how the entrenched structural inequalities rooted in race and access to resources continue to shape and limit the experiences of thousands of adoptees in the country who have now come to understand the adoption system as deeply unjust and colonial. What does the Dutch government’s acknowledgment of harm mean for their responsibility to adoptees who have been long denied not just the truth about their pasts but also their sense of belonging and the horizons of their futurity?

In recent years, a number of adoptees from Sri Lanka have been at the forefront demanding justice from the very systems that systemically erased their origins: they’re suing the Dutch government, seeking compensation and restitution, taking their voices to the UN, and in the absence of other solutions they are actively returning to Sri Lanka to look for their first families<sup>2</sup> through community-led initiatives using DNA banks (Dore, 2022; Long, 2020). A few researchers have highlighted both the complexity and the continued indifference towards redressing human rights abuses in the case of intercountry adoptions as they’re intertwined with ideas of race, identity, and power (Liobl, 2021; Fronek, et al. 2021).

This research paper delves further into that complexity by centering the experiences of Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka since they’re a community that has played a crucial role in recent developments and yet their voices have been largely missing from academic work. Following the frameworks of coloniality and structural violence (Quijano, 2007, 2020; Galtung, 1969, 1990), I shed light on how historical and socio-economic forces, including the Dutch society’s colonial amnesia as well as its self-perception of innocence and benevolence (Ghorashi, 2014; Wekker, 2020), shape the experiences of these “stolen” adoptees who went through the intercountry adoption process decades ago and have been arguably shaped by it forever.

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<sup>2</sup> In recent years, scholars have advocated for the use of the term “first mothers” or “first families” so as to refrain from causing further stigma, reducing their role to biological, and to “more fully recognize the primacy of the relationship that these parents have in the lives of their children” (Baden, 2016; Jayarathne, 2024). This paper will therefore use these terms except when the term “birth mothers” appears in participants’ or scholars’ quotes.

## **1.1. Research Objective**

The objective of the research paper is to understand how Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka navigate the search for their origins in the light of systemic abuse and how that process shapes their experience of justice, community, and belonging. By analyzing how they negotiate these experiences across temporalities, transnational and cultural spaces, and against the force of colonial and violent institutions, this research seeks to understand the legacies and impact of the adoption process but also adoptees' acts of solidarity and resistance against it. A broader objective of this study is to also contribute to the recent contentious debates on restorative justice for structural violence and historic injustices by centering the voices of those who've been harmed the most in this process.

## **1.2. Research Question(s)**

In the light of systemic abuse in intercountry adoptions, how do Dutch adoptees who were brought to the Netherlands during Sri Lanka's civil war navigate the search for answers about their origins?

*Sub-questions:*

- How do Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka respond to the findings of systemic abuse in the(ir) intercountry adoption process?
  
- How does the search for origins impact identifications and emotional attachments to family and community among Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka?
  
- How do Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka perceive the idea of restitution or justice in addressing the harms they experienced through their adoption process?

## **1.3. Methodology**

### **1.3.1 Approach and Data Collection**

Since the objective of this research is to understand the experiences of adoptees, I use qualitative methods for data collection. I conducted semi-structured, open-ended, and recorded interviews that centered the lived realities and perspectives of participants.

To select the respondents for this research paper, I used purposive sampling strategy which Patton describes as “information-rich cases...from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” and which can provide “insights and

in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (Patton, 1990, p. 230).

Initially, my plan was to reach out to Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka who have been prominently featured in the media and have been at the forefront in drawing attention to the issue, particularly those who administer Facebook groups dedicated to the community. I aimed to begin interviews with them and then request introduction to others in the network. However, I quickly realized that these same set of people frequently received interview requests in the last few years and were understandably experiencing fatigue from these repeated engagements. Consequently, only two individuals from this group accepted my request to participate in the research. To broaden my sample, I began to search Facebook and LinkedIn for other adoptees who had publicly shared their experiences or searches for their first families, or those who had been mentioned in public discussions in regards to their search. I sent detailed information about my research to these individuals and was able to recruit several participants this way. In addition, I employed a snowball purposive sampling strategy, wherein some initial participants (and even someone who had declined to participate) suggested others from the community. Notably, out of all the participants, only one approached me directly after seeing a post shared by the administrator of a private adoptee Facebook group who had agreed to circulate my research request.

As a result, this strategy, while purposive, was done without much prior information about the participants and a broad criterion was applied. The 12 research participants live in different parts of the Netherlands and Belgium and have a wide range of educational backgrounds and careers – academics, analysts, and development practitioners, among others. Nine of them were born and adopted between 1984 and early 1990, two of them in late 1970s, and one of them in mid 1990s. All of them have searched for their origins, and only two of them did so without taking trips to Sri Lanka for this purpose. Initially, I considered exploring whether Sinhalese and Tamil participants had experienced their adoption process or searches differently, given the relevance of this social faultline to Sri Lanka’s civil war. However, during interviews it became clear that participants continued to have several questions about their origins and were focused on discovering any information at all. Most of them referenced Sinhalese roots, so I ultimately did not filter them based on these identities and could not analyse this aspect.

With one exception wherein the participant could only send written answers to my questionnaires with no opportunity for a verbal follow up, all the interviews lasted for around 1.5-2 hours and took place both online and in-person in the month of August. In some cases, participants have continued to keep in touch, update me on their search, and share additional information in the weeks since the interviews.

Following the interviews, I used a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach wherein I familiarized myself with the interview data, and then came up with themes and patterns through extensive note making and coding of the transcripts. This analysis was both inductive and deductive such that while the themes emerged naturally from the data, they were also informed by my theoretical framework. This approach allowed for a flexible and nuanced understanding such that participants’ experiences can be connected to broader socio-political contexts while being grounded in their lived realities. Further, I flexibly used a critical discourse

analysis framework to look at how the micro and macro accounts are connected and interact – participants’ personal experiences were examined as being shaped by and/or resisting broader discourses, narratives and power dynamics in society that are rooted in colonial histories (Van Dijk, 1993). Therefore, in addition to theorizing the data, I place these experiences alongside a review of archival research conducted in the Netherlands and Western Europe on intercountry adoption, racism, and the practices of adoption during Dutch colonial rule.

### **1.3.2. Ethical considerations and Reflexivity**

In her work on intercountry adoption, Cheney (2014) referred to the importance of decentering “development studies’ tendency to reduce development to problems in the Global South” (p. 247). It is this perspective that drove me to choose this research topic. Having found myself in the Netherlands at a rather crucial time, I was struck by the complexities of exclusion and resistance around me — the rise of right-wing populism, debates on the right response to the refugee crisis and genocide, evolving discussions on colonial history, and Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka taking the government to court over systemic abuse. As a South Asian woman of color, I see my role as a student-researcher here as an opportunity to contribute to knowledge production about how these adoptees — a community whose origins are so closely entangled with development — navigate this system and society. However, I am reminded of my own position within global academic structures that often shape and reinforce the narratives of racialized communities through a western lens. Additionally, I approach this research as an outsider: neither Dutch, nor Sri Lankan, nor a part of the adoptee community. I acknowledge that my institutional affiliations as well my outsider perspective create a cultural and epistemic distance that might both inform and limit my insights.

As Scott writes, “experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted” (Scott as cited in Willemse, 2014), reminding me that even though I aim to center the experiences of adoptees in this research, my own biases, assumptions, worldview, and analytical tools do influence my academic interpretation of them. My perspective of the topic is influenced by the growing investigations and media coverage that shed light on systemic abuse in intercountry adoptions, and I recognize that in some ways, they might also influence how participants perceive their own embodied experiences in this moment in time. One way I’d hoped to navigate this is by focusing on community aspects of their experience, but I quickly realized that those efforts were fragmented and largely online, causing me to shift my attention to aspects of commodification and belonging that came up more often during interviews. I strived to actively question any preconceptions throughout the process by staying open to participants’ varied experiences without reinforcing a singular narrative of resistance or struggle to them.

Given the sensitive nature of the participants’ experiences, I prioritized a trauma-informed approach which meant ensuring participants felt safe, respected, and empowered throughout the research process by providing them clear and detailed information, seeking informed consent, engaging in active listening, and being mindful of their emotional and cultural needs at each stage (Alessi & Khan, 2023). In line with this approach, while some participants did briefly mention their experience of sexual abuse, I believed that I could not do justice to this crucial information within

the scope and space of this research. As such, to minimize further harm, I did not specifically ask them for additional details on the subject and have also refrained from analysing the information in depth. Lastly, their identities have been kept confidential and pseudonyms have been used throughout.

### **1.3.3. Limitations**

In addition to general constraints like time and resource, this study has a few other limitations which I acknowledge here. Although most participants I interviewed were fluent in English, certain terms and phrases lost nuance in translations, as they themselves sometimes noted. Similarly, while I referred to a few Dutch texts for this research, I read and included them here with the limits of translation in mind. However, as one of the participants mentioned during our chats: much of the emerging research on intercountry adoption in Western Europe is published in local languages of each country which makes it inaccessible for many adoptees who could benefit from reading them. So, seen from that perspective, the fact that this research has been conducted and written in English could also serve as an advantage and help with wider dissemination and awareness on the issue.

As an outsider to Dutch culture and context, I acknowledge that some of the nuances may be beyond my grasp. For instance, a number of participants mentioned the Dutch programme, Spoorloos, which I did read about, but as an outsider, I don't have a complete sense of its appeal, how its content is perceived by different audiences etc. The same could be said of the socio-political and historical information used in the research paper, which I did research to the best of my ability (within the limitation of time and space) but might lack the observations and perceptions that someone raised in the Netherlands might bring to the table. Additionally, while a number of gendered aspects came up during analysis, I could not do them full justice within the scope of this research.

A more considerable limitation lies in the fact that research of this scale cannot adequately capture the full breadth and depth of the participants' experiences related to their search for their origins. While there were many similarities in their experiences, which reflects the broader systemic abuse within the process of intercountry adoption, it is unlikely that my time-bound interviews touched upon all the various factors that may have shaped their personal journeys. As such, while this research provides valuable insight into the lived experiences of a select group of adoptees, it should be seen as a starting point and not as a generalization of the full spectrum of experiences of the broader adoptee community.

## **1.4. Structure of the Paper**

In this first chapter, I laid out the introductory elements of the research paper. I started with the research problem, followed by research objectives, research questions, and a more detailed methodology section which includes my data approach and collection method, ethical consideration and reflexivity, and limitations. Chapter 2 delves into a literature review focused on

three primary conceptualizations that the research touches upon: market and race dynamics of intercountry adoption, adoptees' experiences of belonging in-between, and justice in the context of intercountry adoptions. This is followed by a section on theoretical framework wherein I propose the different lens that I'll use for my data analysis: coloniality of power and being, and structural violence. In Chapter 3, I present the findings and analysis for the first research sub-question which is concerned with how participants relate or respond to the findings of systemic abuse in intercountry adoption through their own experience. Chapter 4 builds on this to understand how participants' search for their origins in the face of experiencing illegality or systemic abuse affects their sense of belonging. Lastly, Chapter 5 delves into participants' perception of justice and their opinion on the role of the Dutch government in addressing the harms they experienced in their adoption process. Chapter 6 concludes the research paper with the main takeaways. In the end, a list of references is presented.

## Chapter 2: Contextualization & Theoretical Framework

### 2.1.1. Market and race dynamics of Intercountry Adoptions

Since the end of the Second World War and the Korean War, at least one million intercountry adoptions have taken place globally, beginning first in the United States and soon followed by Western Europe, which have been “shaped by the forces of colonialism, the Cold War, and globalization”, drawing on historic power dynamics and disparities between and within nations and communities (Selman, 2017; Marre & Briggs, 2009, p. 1-2). Marre & Briggs highlight that Evangelical Christians, then strong allies of anti-communist politics in the United States, were initially the biggest proponents of the permanent removal of children affected by conflicts during the Cold War, most prominently mixed-race children in Korea, through a message of saviourism (Marre & Briggs, 2009). This draws parallels to the child welfare programs which led to the forcible removal of indigenous children in the United States and Australia from parents who were considered “unfit” to care for them, echoing patterns of child displacement during slavery (Marre & Briggs, 2009; Sharron & Weil, 2013). Over time, these foundational dynamics evolved into a system that facilitated the “rescue” of children from particularly Global South countries for western families and countries which were facing declining domestic adoptions as well as falling birth and fertility rates and whose interventions were seen as both necessary and humanitarian.

Several scholars have critiqued this narrative of humanitarian rescue which has served to overshadow the marketization of intercountry adoptions and the resulting exploitation of vulnerable populations (Smolin, 2006; Cheney, 2014). It’s now well documented that since the 1970s and 80s, the number of adoptions rose in response to a demand created by adoptive parents and adoption agencies, and countries in varying states of economic, social, and political turmoil — for instance, Latin American countries facing “dirty wars”, Sri Lankan unwed mothers facing social stigma while also living in light of poverty and civil war, and China with its one child policy — with vulnerable children in need of care stepped up to meet this demand (Selman, 2017; Cheney, 2014; Marre & Briggs, 2009). Smolin (2006) introduced the concept of “child laundering” to highlight the impact of this demand and supply in an extremely unequal world. He found that much like money laundering, children are frequently illicitly taken from first families through coercion, fraud, stealing or kidnapping and then “laundered” through the official adoption systems to appear as legitimate orphans (Smolin, 2006). Most of these children are not entirely bereft of a family environment to meet the criteria of adoptability. He argues that the way the system is organized provides incentives for these illegalities to happen, with huge sums of money exchanged between intermediaries and simultaneous pressure put on original families as a result, in the process of creation of “paper orphans” (Smolin, 2006, p. 116).

Dutch scholar Liobl (2019) drew similar conclusions in the context of the Netherlands and Germany where she found that Western values and perceptions about themselves and the countries they adopt from – at the center of which lay the “Western myth of the “global orphan crisis” that needed their intervention – had played a significant role in child trafficking and other illegalities in

intercountry adoptions (p. 442) and had not been adequately addressed by international legal instruments like the Hague Adoption Convention. Moreover, while children were sought to be loved and cared for, they also served as “objects of desire and consumption” to adopters, many of whom often sought “suitable” children with specific features for the exchange of a higher fee (Liobl, 2019, p. 430). This shows that racial classifications were always a factor in the process. Additionally, in his historical research looking at the period 1900-1995, Schrover (2021) found how “Dutch adoption agencies very actively looked for adoptable children, moving from one country to the next” depending on how complaints of abuse or bans affected supply (Schrover, 2021, p. 104). This mobility reflects that the system worked flexibility to respond to the demands of prospective parents and not always the needs of vulnerable children.

This recent research in the Netherlands, most importantly by scholars of applied history who constituted the government-led *Commissie onderzoek interlandelijke adoptie* (COIA) or Committee on the Investigation of Intercountry Adoption in the Netherlands, has been crucial to dispelling the narrative that illegal adoptions were merely occasional scandals. They defined the concept of abuse to mean legislative and regulatory lapses and ethically irresponsible actions – including “the abuse of poverty or other social and cultural circumstances of the birth mothers such as war, disasters and social taboos” — while analyzing cases of intercountry adoptions from the 1950s to the present day (COIA, 2021, p. 14). They found that such abuses were, in fact, “severe, systemic and widespread” in the practice which was marked by “structural inequalities and commodification” (Balk, et al. 2022). Sri Lanka was one of the focus countries of the study, and they found that the Dutch Ministries of Justice & Foreign Affairs were repeatedly made aware of child trafficking, baby farms, and thefts of babies from Sri Lanka from the 1980s but did not intervene (COIA, 2021). For instance, a Commission of Inquiry in Sri Lanka had concluded that most intercountry adoptions from the country (to all receiving countries and not just to the Netherlands) were illegal: of the 1,670 cases in 1986, only 37 would have gone through official channels (COIA, 2021). When adoptions from Sri Lanka reduced and eventually stopped, it was because of actions of the Sri Lankan government and not the Netherlands which continued to center the idea that it was “doing good” (Balk, et al. 2022).

By making such a global and policy level conclusion, the COIA report marked a critical shift. For a long time and even today, a large section of the academic debate about international adoption centers around deconstructing what is in the best interest of the child from a western perspective, which includes research pointing out the harms of institutionalization on orphaned children or the developmental benefits of adoption for them (van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2022). However, recent findings of widespread systemic abuse drive home the point that the aforementioned evidence cannot be seen in a silo bereft of the context within which adoptions take place.

This research paper approaches systemic abuse in intercountry adoption to the Netherlands – around which the research questions and objectives are based – from this perspective of commodification in the context of global inequality. This is why, building on the market reality of intercountry adoption, it becomes crucial to also understand how these dynamics are rooted in colonial histories and racial hierarchies. While American scholarship often leads this

conversation, researchers like Wesseling have stressed the importance of similar research into the movement of children in Dutch colonies (Balk, et al. 2022; Hübinette, 2007; Homans, et al. 2018). Some of this work has been done, as I will lay out further in my analysis in the following chapters, but it has not been linked to the experience of adoptees in the modern day. These connections remain unexplored in much of the recent literature on intercountry adoption especially in the Dutch context, and this is a gap that I aim to fill.

### **2.1.2. Adoptees' experience of belonging "in-between"**

Scholars have written about belonging for a long time and in many different contexts, often defining it as "emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home'" and "safe", and as Yuval-Davis notes, a naturalized state "that becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way" (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Ignatief as cited in Yuval-Davis, 2006). However, this research complements studies that stress the need to situate intercountry adoptees' experiences, especially their self-identification and search for origins, within broader systemic and historical structures. This means to begin from a place of acceptance that their belonging is threatened and politicized from the very start, rendering a state of liminality.

Dorow (2006) argues that adoptees face "impossible contradictions of belonging" due to the fact that they find their identities intertwined not just with the dynamics of race and economic structures in the societies that they've been adopted to and from but also with the "trans-Pacific practices of exchange" (p.8). Ahluwalia (2007) places adoptees' journeys to their home countries alongside the trips that many African Americans take to the Goree islands, a site at the center of the transatlantic Slave trade, to make sense of their origins and the past and thereby their identity, signifying the "ethical ramification of the commodification of human bodies" (p. 56). Adoptees, he adds, are often reduced to being understood as either abandoned or needing to return to their origins (Ahluwalia, 2007). This imposition of an identity that is tied either to a singular geography or culture betrays the lived experiences of adoptees which, often shaped by "vicious racism", finds them navigating an in-between space: one "where they constantly have to invent and reinvent identity" in their daily life "so that they can transcend borders that are erected to contain them" (p. 65).

The most significant example of this internal conflict has been written about in the case of Korean adoptees, who became part of a government-led initiative in the midst of economic sanctions in the late 1990s, which evoked the narrative of "motherland" and provided legal rights to encourage adoptees' return and investment in the country (Kim, 2007, p.507). However, for many adoptees, this served as a confrontation with their fragmented reality: their lack of agency in the way their histories continued to govern their future, the disconnect between family and nation, and the inability to belong in a way that an ethno-nationalist state demands (Kim, 2007). Hübinette (2007), echoing Ahluwalia, stressed that most Korean adoptees end up occupying a liminal, "third space" as far as their experience of belonging is concerned.

In my perspective, findings of illegality or systemic abuse add another layer of complexity to adoptees' sense of belonging, a reality that remains under researched. In a recent study on the psychosocial impact of experiencing malpractice in their intercountry adoption, Belgian adoptees noted that in addition to a persistent conflict in establishing their identity which affected them at multiple levels, they also faced “disregard” and “denial” of their lived realities of malpractices from the societies they lived in (Villanueva O'Driscoll, Jaspers & Vanspauwen, 2023).

Additionally, while critical adoption studies, a multidisciplinary field, has evolved as mindful of the role of colonial relations and of identities being intersectional, relational, and dynamic, (Homans, et al. 2018), it is important to note that most scholars in the field are adoptive parents from the Global North themselves (Balk, et al. 2021; Homans, et al. 2018). This might mean the introduction of personal biases, the reproduction of power dynamics through their positionality, and a risk of overshadowing the voices of adoptees and first families. In exception to scholarship by Korean adoptees themselves, there is very little literature on the subject by Global South scholars (Hübinette, 2021). Recent adoptee-led searches for origins and justice in the Netherlands against the findings of systemic abuse underscore the need for more research that reflects the current realities of adoptees' lived experiences.

### **2.1.3. Justice in the context of intercountry adoptions**

As Dixon (2017) notes, labelling an issue as a matter of justice is rarely simple, and this difficulty becomes even more pronounced as the focus moves away from “the more traditional and limited areas of concern, like physical violence and criminal prosecutions” to include broader societal and structural issues (p. 161). It is this thinking about justice beyond punitive measures that has led to ongoing scholarship and debates about how societies can address or “transition from large scale abuses of human rights” (Quinn, 2017, p. 15), including the impact of colonial legacies. More traditional frameworks of such a transitional justice, Dixon (2017) highlights, have often refrained from including economic impacts and acts of violence like corruption and theft as well as the “structural drivers of violence like inequality, poverty and inclusion” (163).

In recent years, however, some scholars have increasingly argued about the importance of reparations for colonial injustice alongside the idea that these reparations should not simply address a direct, historical harm for victims but address two fundamental concerns: the admission of said harm, and a “forward-looking” approach which takes consideration of broader structural injustices that perpetuate inequalities (Waligore, 2018; Evans & Wilkins, 2017). In many instances, this means addressing the role of institutions and those in positions of power. Additionally, as momentum grows around the return of stolen cultural artifacts and properties to former colonies (van Beurden, 2024), it raises important questions about how restitution could apply to the lives of those who were subject to forced and fraudulent separations by the same colonial nations in the modern day. This broadened view of restitution allows us to look at restitution beyond the loss of tangible objects to that of culture and identity in permanent, intangible ways – and ask if justice is possible at all.

According to Smolin (2024), reframing illegal intercountry adoptions as illegal separations (I interchangeably use the term forced separations in this paper) from their original families might be a good step to formulating remedies for the same, which have been hard to come by, especially for adult adoptees. This is important when considering the growing momentum wherein adult intercountry adoptees are demanding compensation, restitution, and justice from receiving countries, including the Netherlands, for their part in facilitating illegal adoptions (Long, 2020). In response, a joint statement by United Nations Human Rights Treaties Bodies echoed their demands by stressing the state's obligation to set up truth mechanisms, provide assistance to "victims" of illegal adoptions in "reestablishing their identity" and origins as well as to provide reparations which could include "restitution to the original situation of the victim before the illegal intercountry adoption occurred" (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022; Long, 2023). This can be placed in the broader context of transitional justice for historic wrongdoings.

As Smolin (2024) writes, because adoption is a permanent, legal separation of a child from their original families, it "involves a modification of identity" and "a significant loss" (p. 15) of identity for every child who goes through that process, but perhaps more so for those who are realizing as adults that they were "stolen". The focus on identity here is therefore crucial, and shows that systemic abuse, belonging, and justice are closely entangled. However, there remains a crucial gap in literature that connects these dots within a broader socio-political context, especially in countries like the Netherlands that have acknowledged the harm they caused. By understanding the experiences and perceptions of Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka, including those who are fighting legal battles and engaging in DNA searches, this research paper attempts to fill that gap and contribute to a deeper understanding of how systemic abuse in intercountry adoption intersects with broader discussions of justice and restorative practices in the case of colonial and structural violence.

## **2.2. Theoretical Framework**

To address the research gaps outlined above, I analyse the findings using Anibal Quijano and Nelson Maldonado-Torres' concepts of coloniality of power and being, and Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence. Together they provide an integrated framework to analyse the historical, social, and economic conditions sustaining these abuses both in the global (between Netherlands and Sri Lanka) and national (within Netherlands) contexts, shaping the experiences of adoptees, including their identities, belonging, and sense of justice. Below is a brief description and rationale for the same.

### **2.2.1. Coloniality of Power and Being**

Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano conceptualized coloniality to refer to the enduring pattern of power that was first established with the colonization of America and continues to determine global structures of political, social, economic, and cultural relations today. This coloniality of power had

two central axes: the production of a new category called “race” which was hierarchical in nature between the “dominant and dominated”, and the restructuring of various forms of labor and exploitation around a system centered on capital and the world market (Quijano, 2000, p. 216). According to Quijano, this led to the reorganization of the world around race and “racial classifications” in a way that justified the domination of Europeans over “others” (2000, pp. 215-218). Simultaneously, these racial classifications came to determine who held positions of power in the division of labor and how the “control of resources of production” was allocated (Quijano, 2000, p. 216). There on, the idea of Europe or the “West” was based on its relation to other cultures which were deemed not just different but inferior, and since then, as Quijano (2007) states, this order “has been maintained, as a relation between ‘subject’ and ‘object’” (p. 174). The modern world as we know it today has been shaped and built around these classifications (which later took the form of nations, ethnicities, and other geo identities) and has cemented global inequality in a way that those most exploited are the very people who were first categorized as subordinate during the colonial era (Quijano, 2007, p. 169).

Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) reflects further on the dehumanization inflicted by this racial world order as the process of coloniality of being “in which exceptions to ethical relationships become the norm” (p. 259) so that the “other” is denied full personhood, agency, and belonging. In this way, the embedded logic of dehumanization leaves the “other” in a state of liminality and in the margins of recognized moral and social spaces (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Recently scholars have explored how this coloniality has produced a standardized, Eurocentric knowledge and understanding of childhood in the modern world — which “dates from the sixteenth century and stresses the innocence, frailty, and dependence of children” — alongside ascribing a moral and political superiority to the West (Franklin as cited in Liebel, 2020, p. 11; Rabello de Castro, 2021; Marre & Briggs, 2009). This meant that children in non-Western countries came to be perceived as needing to be rescued from their unlivable, unhealthy situations through development interventions and policies (Rabello de Castro, 2021; Marre & Briggs, 2009). These interventions in the guise of the “best interest of the child”, Rabello de Castro (2021) writes, serve to appropriate local cultures and identities, “homogenizing subjectivities in accordance with the requirements of production and consumption” (p. 2496).

I take this understanding of coloniality as a foundation in my research to examine how colonial structures continue to shape modern institutions and practices, including intercountry adoption. These practices reproduce forms of systemic abuse, exploitation, and dehumanization that I argue manifest as structural violence.

### **2.2.2. Structural Violence**

In his seminal work in peace studies, Johan Galtung (1969) conceptualized structural violence as violence that is “built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (p. 171). It manifests in society in the form of disproportionate and inequitable access to resources and opportunities, making it essential to address violence that is

meant to be “unintended” (Galtung, 1969, p. 172). In his later work, Galtung (1990) places exploitation at the center of structural violence and argues that deep cultural and structural faultlines (in the form of race, religion, caste, and ideology, among others) either originate from direct violence or feed each other to produce it. One such example, he adds, is when the “massive direct violence” inflicted through the trans-Atlantic slave trade “over centuries seeps down and sediments as massive structural violence” that established the superiority of White people while also “producing and reproducing massive cultural violence with racist ideas everywhere” (Galtung, 1990, p. 295).

In engaging with the concept of structural violence, Yves Winter (2012) notes its ability to reveal forms of violence that do not meet conventional definitions and therefore tend to be unrecognized as such. What makes these forms of violence or injury structural, he adds, is not just because one cannot simply hold a singular agent accountable for it, but also because of its “recurrent and iterative temporality” (Winter et al. 2012, p. 202). This “reproduction and reproducibility” of violence is intrinsic to the functioning of modern systems of power, forming a fundamental aspect of how societies and economies operate (Winter, 2012, p. 202).

Coloniality operates as both structural and epistemic power (Quijano, 2000, 2007), where the invention of race and the reorganization of the modern world around it did not just perpetuate inequality but also ways of knowing the world that justify this inequality. I argue that coloniality manifests as structural violence in the way that it reproduces the violence of its institutions, systems, and practices on those it considers as inferior (Galtung, 1969; Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Winter, 2014). These racial hierarchies and historical power relations are closely intertwined with citizenship, socio-economic contexts, knowledge and discourse production. Together, the violence these structures inflict on ‘the Other’ determine their coloniality of being and belonging. (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Navigating these injuries is not just a structural reality but also an epistemic one since the violence of their experience is erased or reframed by knowledge systems that uphold the power of the dominant. Scholars have further argued that such recurring and unaddressed historic violence manifests as intergenerational and embodied trauma (Avalos, 2021). Thus, coloniality operates through structural, epistemic, and even embodied forms and perpetuates violence in the lived realities and identities of the oppressed.

In the following chapters, I analyse how this framework closely shapes the experiences of adoptees.

## Chapter 3: Confronting an abusive system

In the previous chapter, I provided contextualization to show how market dynamics, racial hierarchies, and Western values and demands have played a central role in incentivizing widespread illegalities and abuse in intercountry adoptions. It is within this context that adoptees experience belonging and justice, or the lack of both. In this chapter, I start presenting my findings and analysis. My interviews with participants aimed to understand the three research sub-questions I specified in Chapter 1, and upon analysis of the interviews, three main themes and five sub-themes emerged which are spread over three chapters.

This chapter addresses the first sub-question: How do Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka respond to the findings of systemic abuse in the(ir) intercountry adoption process? The first section lays out the different experiences of illegal and unethical acts in participants' own intercountry adoption process. It sets the groundwork for the second section – which focuses on how participants themselves perceive the knowledge and impact of this systemic abuse – as well as the other chapters that follow. I analyse their experiences through the theoretical frameworks of coloniality and structural violence I outlined earlier and complement them with secondary data, including archival research about child-separation projects in Dutch colonies.

### 3.1. Of missing paper trails and commodification

In their report, the COIA noted several serious abuses in intercountry adoptions from Sri Lanka to the Netherlands starting from the 1970s. To reiterate, these illegal and unethical acts “ranged from the infamous baby farms, child trafficking, theft of children, forcibly relinquishing a child, forging documents, to legalizing incorrect documents, concealment of status, corruption and bribery and improper payments” (COIA, 2021, p. 106). My interviews highlighted the importance of contextualizing these abuses within adoptees' lived experiences to truly understand their profound and ongoing impact.

A common thread among participants was that they were all familiar with these findings and most of them considered their individual experience of adoption as part of the broader system that perpetuated deceit, stealing, and corruption to meet the demand of babies in the Global North. In line with findings by Smolin (2018) and Liobl (2019), many of them identified as victims of child trafficking. The COIA report and investigations by Zembla<sup>3</sup>, a Dutch current affairs programme, did play a role in them drawing these conclusions. However, their conclusions were also often shaped by the fact that once they began to search for their first families, the process revealed that their adoption to the Netherlands had effectively concealed and erased their origins in a way that

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<sup>3</sup> In 2017 Zembla, aired an investigation wherein Sri Lanka's minister of Health Rajitha Senarathne acknowledged the existence of “baby farms” in the 1980s, and also revealed illegalities by Dutch adoption agency Flash (Zembla, 2023). It forced a number of governments, including Sri Lanka and the Netherlands to respond to allegations, led to further media investigations and attention on the issue, and led a number of adoptees to file information requests with the government about their illegal adoptions which ultimately led to the formation of the COIA.

they had not anticipated to be a feature of the system. As such, the recent findings of systemic abuse only confirmed the scale, extent and structural nature of what some of them had already personally experienced.

More than half the participants described their experience with falsified documents and incorrect details. In some cases, they found several different birth dates, names of mother, or places of birth across different documents in their adoption files. This meant that they could not confirm which of the details was correct, if at all, and this made their search for their first families extremely difficult. Participants went through different intermediaries to conduct searches in Sri Lanka, some of them travelled there multiple times, and encountered several people who they learnt were part of their illegal adoption.

For instance, Tess, who was adopted in 1984 when she was around 13 months old, discovered that her documented first mother was in fact unrelated to her and was a name that appeared in several other people's adoption documents. Additionally, she found that a paid "acting mother" had posed as her first mother during the adoption process, but when approached, was hesitant to divulge any information about how she had come to play that role all those years ago. According to Tess, this was probably due to fear or stigma, and she decided not to pursue the woman or the search any further. Similarly, Sajeev realized that his adoption was illegal when he was 18, six years after an intermediary introduced someone as his mother – and whom his adoptive family helped financially – even though she never acknowledged that role herself. Following DNA tests, his adoptive twin sisters from Sri Lanka learnt that they weren't related to each other, and Sajeev learnt that the woman wasn't related to him either. For almost two decades, Sajeev's search was made difficult due to the lack of a birth certificate in Sri Lanka and another deliberate act: the information about his birthplace, the name of the hospital where he was born, had been concealed with a white corrector and written over to say home delivery.

In these cases, the fabricated identities and manipulated documents reveal a pattern wherein children were not just relocated from Sri Lanka to the Netherlands, but their histories and origins were deliberately erased and reconstructed so they could become "paper orphans" and thereby adoptable as per a Western-centric framework (Smolin, 2018; Liobl, 2019; Gondouin & Thapar-Bjökert, 2022). It underscores the presence of a system which prioritized the adoptability of children at all costs.

This is evident in the fact that even for participants who did not have incorrect details in their files or were able to trace their first families, there still remained questions about the context or ways in which their adoptions took place. Some of them have learnt that their mothers were sexually abused and even when not, in most cases, a convent member or a hospital staff suggested adoption while their first mothers were in a vulnerable state – poor, pregnant, unmarried, and young. As Vidusha put it:

*"That's also the thing, she can't even read or write so how does she know what she was signing for?"*

In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, first mothers were often unwed pregnant women who were subject to social stigma in their societies (COIA, 2021; Gondouin & Thapar-Bjökert, 2022). As Jayarathne (2024) highlights in her research with Sri Lankan mothers, following a colonial era law, abortions continue to be criminalized except in life-threatening situations, and this often left women with no option but to carry the pregnancy to term. Religious and cultural norms, however, created hurdles as well as an environment of shame and secrecy which left unmarried mothers, who were often economically disadvantaged and living in a country ravaged by civil war, unable to nurture their children for themselves. Together, these circumstances came to be exploited by corrupt intermediaries to create a supply for intercountry adoptions (Committee on the Investigation of Intercountry Adoption, 2021; Jayarathne, 2024). At the same time, the western idea of the “global orphan crisis” meant that the availability of these children for intercountry adoptions was “presented as the result of the faulty motherhood of the first mother, formulated in terms of lack of modernity and structured by a logic of abandonment” which stripped the situation of both its local context as well as the broader historical context of racial and gender hierarchies inherent in this practice of rescue (Gondouin & Thapar-Bjökert, 2022, p. 17; Liobl, 2019).

Even in the lack of complete knowledge about their origins, this disparity was not lost on adoptees like Praveen, who felt that his “was not an adoption” and instead he “was more or less sold” because of the way in which his adoption was conducted. As has now been highlighted in some government-led investigations (Bitter, et al. 2020), he learnt earlier on that the whole process was organized like a “packaged tourism deal” for his Dutch adoptive parents who travelled to Sri Lanka in a group with other prospective couples, went around the country while the legalities were arranged, and paid a large sum of money to adopt him.

This detail is especially problematic when considering the fact that a lawyer facilitating illegal adoptions would earn the equivalent of two year’s salary of a Sri Lankan teacher for a single child, while first mothers were often “paid just a few dollars, and sometimes also given a thermos flask and a second hand dress” as was documented in intercountry adoptions from Sri Lanka to Switzerland (Bitter, et al. 2020). The only benefit of these adoptions for first families was the prevention of “some other horror” while it served economic and social benefits “to a long chain of wealthy intermediaries, including governments” (Marre & Briggs, 2009, p. 19).

Aanya, who was able to find her first mother quite promptly when she was 15, put it this way:

*“This is also a difficult thing for me and I think for many adoptees, because even though my personal story is, within adoption terms, quite positive in many ways...especially in countries like Sri Lanka, but also Indonesia, Colombia, Korea and where many adoptees come from, I think you cannot see any adoption separate from this whole corrupt adoption system that used to be there, and I would argue it is still there even though it has transformed in many ways and the form is different.”*

The difficulty that Aanya described was especially evident in the case of participants who see their adoptions as outside the context of systemic abuse because of their knowledge or belief that it was legally conducted. In one of those cases, the adoption was facilitated with the involvement of the church in the late 1970s and in the other, it took place through the Sri Lankan

consulate in Jordan in the 1990s, which the COIA report and several archival media reports specifically mention as a route for illegal adoptions and abuse since the consulate there was not authorized to facilitate them (COIA, 2021). This is relevant because the involvement of these institutions served to legitimize the process on the outside and invisibilize the layers of abuse that lay underneath, especially in terms of exploiting the vulnerability of first mothers to meet the familial needs of Western parents, as described above. But for a long time, the refusal in Western societies to acknowledge the harms of the practice meant that some participants continued to believe that as long as their documents were correct, the systemic abuse outlined by the COIA did not apply to them. It also underscores Aanya's point about needing to shift the discourse from binaries – of looking at adoptions as either good or bad, as positive or negative experiences – to instead look at the structures that underpin it.

For Dinesh, who was adopted by Dutch parents in late 1970s, a whole year after he was separated from his then 18-year-old first mother just three days after he was born and put up in an orphanage home run by the Salvation Army, a Protestant Christian Church and charity organization, he sees his adoption as tied closely to religion and a continuation of the abusive practices perpetuated by the church and VOC or Dutch East India Company from the 16th century.

Using Quijano's concept of coloniality of power is useful here in understanding how colonial structures of racial, cultural, and social hierarchies have continued to shape modern institutions and practices, including intercountry adoption. As researchers Geertje Mak, Marit Monteiro and Elisabeth Wesseling (2020) note, to limit the history of intercountry adoptions as beginning from the 1950s is “indicative of widespread cultural amnesia concerning colonial child separation projects in continental European empires” (p. 24). They highlight that in the context of Dutch and Belgian colonial history, children were separated from their parents in all kinds of forms, objectified, and served as key to “controlling, influencing and disciplining the colonized population” (Mark, Monteiro & Wesseling, 2020, p. 4).

As Carla van Wamelen (2014) writes in her book, one such form of separation during the VOC period in the East Indies was adoption, in which the Church played a central role by setting conditions for it and it was often tied to the baptism of Eurasian (born to local women and European men) or mixed-race children, and sometimes also children born to slaves. The primary motivation was to ensure the Christian upbringing of these children – as evident by the fact that baptism was only allowed when birth or adoptive parents committed to raising them in the Christian faith, thereby “adopting” them into their family structures – and preventing them from returning to their original cultures or religious environments (van Wamelen, 2014). According to Zaal (1996), adoption served another purpose for the Dutch colonists – a mechanism to navigate the social complexities arising from trans-racial unions, which were not allowed to be legitimized through marriage, by providing limited benefits of European status to their “relatively light-skinned mixed-race child” (p. 43). In Sri Lanka, the adoption of such “illegitimate” children by Dutch colonists occurred so often that the VOC “opened a special register” for this purpose (Zaal, 1996, p. 43). While the Roman Dutch law from that time did not legally recognize adoption as it exists today, it came to be formalized through an Adoption Resolution of 1769 that was tied to

inheritance rights of “illegitimate” children and is reflective of a desire to maintain racial and religious hierarchy (van Wamelen, 2014). Two things are worth noting here. Firstly, it became customary in the eighteenth century for birth mothers to renounce all claims over these children as part of the adoption deed (van Wamelen, 2014). Secondly, the resolution only concerned adoption of non-European children since adoption of a child from a European woman was not allowed but “the children of non-Christian women could be adopted, also by Europeans” (van Wamelen, 2014, p. 492). In a separate account, Rosen Jacobson (2018) also writes about how colonial authorities and missionaries in Dutch East Indies considered it important to separate Eurasian children, who had been abandoned by their European father, from their native mothers who weren’t considered fit and civilized enough to raise them and move them to orphanages instead. Eventually, rules and mechanisms like these led to the VOC laying the “foundations for racially compartmentalized societies in many parts of the world” (Zaal, 48).

While it is only possible to provide a small glimpse of a vast and complex colonial history here, and unlike the current practice (and also unlike the Belgium and French colonies), only a small number of Eurasian children are known to have been brought to Holland (Heynssens, 2016), the practice of adoption in Dutch colonies is relevant in connecting the threads to later findings — including the role of the state and the church — of systemic abuse. It ties into the context within which intercountry adoption, or the separation of children eventually became acceptable in the Netherlands in the modern times. As Schrover (2021) writes, in the post- World War era, children were made adoptable at “three levels: by emphasizing that their family, community and country of birth failed them” (p. 2). This meant the construction of an imagery through the Dutch press and Parliamentary debates of ‘good parents’ “who were bringing ‘their’ children ‘home’, and the ‘home’ of the adopter was middle-class, White, Christian, and ‘stable’: everything the household of the ‘bad parent’ was believed not to be” (Schrover, 2021, p.14).

The result was that certain western-centric ideas of family, citizenship, and child protection came to become acceptable and enshrined in international human rights framework and policies as intercountry adoption at the cost of racialized “others” and a universalized understanding of humanity and solidarity was enforced through this practice. We also find echoes of the past in the erasure of adoptees’ ties to their origins. As the findings of the Swiss-government led investigation into intercountry adoptions from Sri Lanka highlighted, even when children were adopted from state-run orphanages or hospitals, intermediaries stepped in and “falsified birth certificates so that no one would be able to trace them back to their birth parents” (Bitter, et al. 2020, p. 6). This “unequal power” was cemented as “unequal life chances” (Galtung, 1969) that went beyond just physical separation of children from their biological families in the past to the presence of a loss or violence that reproduces itself for participants with each trip to Sri Lanka, each new piece of information, in emotional attachments, and in daily interactions, as I’ll lay out in subsequent sections and chapters. At the same time, for decades, this violence was written over through the widely peddled and accepted humanitarian narrative of “doing good” which prioritized the needs of Western families and countries over that of the very people it was claiming to do the good for.

As Dinesh put it:

*“They only saw the good part of the family in Holland with the child. They did not see the bad part of the mother with a loss, and the child with a loss.”*

### **3.2. The weight of colonial wounds**

In following the work of Cawayu and De Greave (2020), I use the term “colonial wounds” here which Mignolo (2005) described as physical and/or psychological injury as a “consequence of racism, the hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of all those who do not belong to the locus of enunciation (and the geo-politics of knowledge) of those who assign the standards of classification and assign to themselves the right to classify” (p. 8). In their research with Bolivian-Belgian adoptees, Cawayu and De Greave (2020) suggest that using the lens of colonial wounds to understand the experiences of adoptees as part of the colonial reality of intercountry adoption is an important step in ceasing to pathologize their struggles as psychological as has been done for a long time. Their suggestion is in line with my argument about the structural violence of intercountry adoptions in forcefully separating children from their origins and subsequently erasing those origins by not just fabricating their identities and documents but also by justifying the separation as being in their best interest, as described in the previous section. In the following paragraphs, I lay out how participants themselves understand and articulate this wound or violence.

During interviews, most participants described their emotional difficulties as being rooted in systemic abuse. While some of them did refer to diagnosis for PTSD and the fact that they had been in long-term therapy, they understood and expressed this psychological impact as a manifestation of the harm caused by institutions and socio-political structures which had commodified them and in doing so, also denied them answers about their origins.

For instance, Leona went through her adoption files following the Zemblia investigation in 2017 to find a total of seven or eight different places of birth for her and her first mother across documents. Upon starting a search last year, she began to learn that none of the details except her birth year were correct and that there was a strong likelihood she *“came from one of the baby farms and which would mean that they would never know who I am. And that was something I found to be, I think, the hardest part...is that you were, you know, made for trade. That’s how I feel.”*

Roos, who was adopted as a twin and learnt a few years ago that she was not in fact related to her adoptive brother, has been searching for her first mother for several years and is finding traces that lead her to a baby farm as well. Not so long ago, she recalled, the search had taken over her life. She barely slept, ran searches on Facebook with the possible name of her first mother, and kept looking for clues in a way that she now found “crazy”: *“I was showing my husband pictures of people from Sri Lanka (and asking him), ‘do I look like him or her?’ I’m that desperate.”*

Esmee, who found her first family only to learn that her mother had already passed away and that her older sibling and grandmother were not privy to the fact that she was being

permanently taken away as a child, described her experience of adoption as abuse:

*“I feel abused not only by my adopted father who sexually abused me, but also by the government. They abused me to gain money...I wasn’t an orphan. I had my own family. They took me from my family... Yes, I have a good life because I built it myself... But it is not my life. It shouldn’t have been my life.”*

Esmee’s description underscores the layers of structural violence adoptees often face. By enabling the commodification of their bodies through adoption in the first place, the system only served to reinforce further vulnerabilities and exploitation later in their lives, which, in this case, resulted in personal abuse. Additionally, participants’ repeated recognition as being “sold”, “abused”, “made for trade” and as victims of child trafficking brings to light the reality of how intercountry adoption required the dehumanization of the very people that the system was seeking to rescue or save. It also highlights the structural violence embedded in the process which assigned a hierarchy of value to Western families without regard for the long-term impact of such deliberate commodification on adoptees. The fact of the baby farm was especially painful for participants because it signified such a brazen form of commodification. Participants referred to the lack of vocabulary and resources to address the weight and impact of this kind of information and erasure on their lives.

Additionally, some participants found themselves struggling not just with the lack of information about their adoption or their first families but also other missing or incorrect details that were crucial to their identity. For instance, Esmee found it emotionally confronting that she needed to mention her birthdate so often for every single activity, registration or purchase in the Netherlands with the knowledge now that it wasn’t the date she was born on. Similarly, Leona wondered that her kids *“when I pass (away)...they will never have the correct dates of when I was born to put on my obituary.”*

As van Wachelen (2019) writes, while there has been a greater focus and acceptability, including in human rights frameworks, on return journeys and adoptees’ “right to know,” for many adoptees today this knowledge is not simply about their biological or cultural origins but includes information about “‘exchangeability’ that is deeply racialized and gendered” (p. 348). As we see in the participants’ description of their colonial wounds, when adoptees encounter new information about their origins that contradicts their documented histories in their files and reveals how they became adoptable through simultaneous erasure and adjustments, it has what Strathern calls a “constitutive effect” (van Wachelen, 2019, pp. 350- 351). It refers to the power this knowledge has to reshape adoptees’ understanding of the self. This knowledge is not neutral because of the power dynamics and hierarchies between who gets to conceal or reveal the information and for what purpose. This parallels colonial record keeping, which scholars have argued was done obsessively, serving as a “form of violent control” (Gikandi as quoted in Jurgens & Karabinos, 2020) in the way that it “constructed a selective image of the social order” and produced “nonknowledge” through deliberate concealment and erasure (Jurgens & Karabino, 2020). Modern bureaucratic and legal systems, especially in the context of intercountry adoptions, have followed this very pattern and logic.

In line with van Wichelen's (2019) findings, I also observe that this knowledge of manipulation or commodification "bring precarity to one's subjective constitution", often creating feelings of devaluation, alienation or abandonment in participants as it "unsettles or intervenes in the construction of identity" (p. 351). By uncovering these layers, participants are forced to confront how institutions have held the power to shape their personal histories, reflecting a form of structural violence that reinforced the colonial pattern of control and subordination. At the same time, this manipulation and erasure is also epistemic violence since it denies them the agency for a complete understanding of their origins and the formation of a full identity, leaving gaps and wounds that may not completely recover.

While this "constitutive effect" strengthens some participants' resolve to find answers about their origins, for others like Tess and Praveen, it means that while they would always have questions, they were choosing not to let the circumstances of their adoption dictate their present lives and identities. As Tess stressed, while intermediaries did benefit economically from the adoptions, she refused to believe that they had no good intentions and therefore did not see herself as a "victim". Similarly, reflecting on the life she had in the Netherlands and the hardships many people, including her first family in Sri Lanka had to endure, Mannon emphasized: "*we are victims of the lack of information and not really of adoption itself.*" Like I outlined above, this withheld or manipulated information is not neutral and serves as a mechanism of power that reinforces powerlessness and marginalization in participants' lives.

Tess and Praveen's perspectives are also relevant in understanding how participants navigate the colonial wound in different ways. Their response is shaped by the need to preserve stability and agency in their lives – for some, this meant reframing their experiences of commodification to focus on the lives they've built over nearly four decades in the Netherlands, while for others, it involved seeking answers as a way of addressing the sense of injustice. For those who do engage with the search and the questions they raise, however, the knowledge of systemic abuse often has a profound impact on how participants relate to their adoptive families, cultures, and the society they live in. The next chapter will explore this in more depth.

In conclusion, this chapter showed that participants' experiences are shaped by colonial ideas of rescue and erasure which continue to be embedded in modern day practices like intercountry adoption and reveal themselves as colonial wounds and structural violence in a world still marked by racial and cultural hierarchies.

## Chapter 4: Liminal state of being

This chapter builds on participants' personal experiences of systemic abuse in their intercountry adoption and the structural violence that emerge from them to understand the impact of this knowledge on their connections and estrangements with their adoptive families, cultures, and society. It addresses the second sub-question: How does the search for origins impact identifications and emotional attachments to family and community among Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka? The first section delves into their sense of belonging broadly while the next section zooms into their relationships with their adoptive parents.

### 4.1. Belonging in a “twilight zone”

As I described in Chapter 2, since the turn of the millennium scholars have been writing about the “impossible contradictions of belongings” that intercountry adoptees face as a result of their identities being constantly influenced by the racial and economic dynamics of the two cultures and nations they're forced to navigate owing to the fact of their “exchange” (Dorow, 2007). Ahluwalia (2007) uses Bhabha's concept of “mimicry” to highlight the contradictions and instability inherent in the extension of colonial relations in this process such that intercountry adoptees find themselves “in societies that problematize their very difference – these children grow up thinking and trying to be the same as everyone else, only to be confronted by racism which challenges their conception of self” (p. 61). This exemplifies the structural violence of colonial mechanisms which require that people adopt the values and norms of the dominant society while simultaneously “othering” them, with the result being that “these adoptees are the same but not quite” (Ahluwalia, 2007, p. 61),

For participants of this research, this conflict formed a crucial base for their sense of belonging. Most of them described growing up in Dutch neighborhoods or villages where they (and often their adopted siblings as well) were usually the only people of color and they always stood out as being part of a White family. Several of them described experiences of racism accompanied with this pressure to fit in. In analysing published Swedish adoptee narratives, Wyver (2021) finds similar experiences of this “hyper-visibility” which often means “constantly being on public display as a body for consumption” because of “the notion of adoption as a national project” (p. 403). This contradicts the very idea of family formation through adoption as a private, intimate affair since it is always intertwined with the public realm (Wyver, 2021).

During my interviews, not everyone recounted this as a problem. A few participants said they felt a sense of belonging with their adoptive families and in the Netherlands, and in two cases, this was facilitated by the fact that they grew up with friends who were also adopted from Sri Lanka. Most others, however, struggled with the idea of belonging. A number of them expressed a sense of conflict brought on by the fact that they did not feel like they fully belonged in the Netherlands but their search trips to Sri Lanka had made them realize that they did not belong there either.

While many intercountry adoptees have described similar experiences in Sweden, United States, and Belgium ( Hübinette, 2007; Cawayu & De Greave; 2020; Wyver, 2021), I found that participants' knowledge of systemic abuse in intercountry adoptions deepens this challenge of negotiating a stable identity and their state of in-betweenness. The lack of answers and clarity about their origins and/or the fact that their adoption was illegal or forced, made some of them feel further disconnected from the very society they had grown up in, and brought their experiences of racism to the fore. As Esmee put it, "...it's just one big mystery. So that (affects) my feeling of belonging as well... What happened? Am I allowed to be here? What's my story?"

In the past, scholars like Howell (2009) have written about the "social nakedness" of a child that adoptability requires: on paper, they're abandoned and devoid of kin in their home countries and are then re-kinned through adoption. This is the baseline against which Howell (2009) critiques the hyperfixation on return journeys, search for origins, and the essentialization of biological ties given that adoptees have no real connections with the countries they come from and therefore these searches or any new knowledge about biological families fails to give them the fulfillment they believe it could. However, this perspective overlooks the critical implications of coerced, fraudulent, and illegal adoptions from families in vulnerable situations which challenge the conventional notion of abandonment by revealing that these children were not devoid of kin and in many cases, not in need of rescue (COIA, 2021; Smolin, 2006; Liobl, 2019). Instead, much like the colonial practice of exploiting individuals by dispossessing them of their existing culture, resources, and humanity (Rahman, Clarke & Byrne, 2017), this blank state was manufactured as a result of racial hierarchies and global inequalities to facilitate adoptions. As participants grapple with the understanding that their circumstances were shaped by systemic abuse and not lack of kinship, their desire for answers about their origins becomes paramount to their identity and impacts how they perceive belonging. For Leona, with the realization that she was "made for trade", she felt like she had lost a sense of herself:

*"When I was a teen, I firmly believed that I was born in Negombo and Negombo has this big fish market, so I was always joking about the fish market and how I hate fish. There's all parts of your identity that you made for yourself because you're not sure of your identity."*

With her ongoing search, however, Leona knew for sure now that she was not born in Negombo and it made her feel like she was "stuck in some kind of twilight zone":

*"I'm not Sri Lankan, I'm not Dutch, I don't exist on paper...I don't know when I was born...I don't know who my parents are...I don't know, well, what my given names are, I just don't know anything...So I feel like...some kind of shadow I think, not really existing...So that is the big difference that everything that I thought I am is gone...And of course you can say I'm a mother and I am living here...But my basic facts and pieces of identity are missing and they do form you a lot."*

As Aanya learnt more about her origins through communications with her birth family, she, too, described finding herself in a similar "twilight zone" where her sense of belonging is "a complete question mark".

The above descriptions should be seen alongside the fact that Esme, Leona, and Aanya are all mothers who described a sense of belonging with the family they've created for themselves now in addition to having fulfilling friendships or work, and yet, they often found themselves feeling like they did not truly belong anywhere or in "any group". In fact, Roos, also a mother, added that she found herself connecting more to immigrants and refugees because they were being seen as "*different*" by European citizens and if belonging was determined by papers, then she too was "*illegal*" here.

One way to understand participants' experience of liminality, I argue, is as coloniality of being (Mignolo, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Initially, colonial frameworks imposed rigid categories to maintain racial hierarchies and assert power, assigning individuals to fabricated classifications that defined their social position and value (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000). Through these initial classifications which have endured over time, colonization established a matrix of power that eventually determined who would be exchanged through adoption and who got to do the rescuing, thereby creating a power imbalance that reverberates through participants' experiences today. Their knowledge and experience of systemic abuse brings this inequality into sharp focus and leads to a state of liminality because they continue to be parts of societies and systems that still uphold definitive social classifications and categories which they no longer fit. As Maldonado-Torres elaborates (2007), the coloniality of being emerges in these "historical projects and ideas of civilization" which uphold colonial frameworks and racial divisions (p. 257). It takes form in the presence of "liminal subjects" or those at the edge of recognized "being" where existence itself is distorted by systems that dehumanize and obscure one's origins and lived experiences (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 257).

Another factor that contributes to this existence is the common narrative around most participants that they were supposed to feel grateful for "being saved", even though their adoptive parents did not explicitly say this themselves. This made many of them feel alienated and vulnerable, develop a fierce loyalty towards their adoptive kins which complicated their search for their first families, and left them feeling like they weren't allowed to be troubled by the context of their adoptions. This expectation of gratitude reflects a broader characteristic of Dutch society which views itself as being charitable, open, and tolerant and frames these as "gifts" that those it supports, accepts or "saves" should be grateful for (Ghorashi, 2014). As Ghorashi (2014) writes, this view is embedded in a "categorical thinking" about the superiority of Dutch culture that organizes "others" as not just different but to a lower status such that their inclusion becomes conditional to their showing gratitude or truly assimilating instead of it being their right. This means that the Dutch society also rejects claims of racism, like those described at the start of this section, and instead shifts the blame on anyone questioning power imbalances or racial hierarchies as the "ungrateful other" (Ghorashi, 2014).

In the face of such imposed alienation, many participants had built friendships with a few other Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka – some of them took Sinhalese language classes together, others cooked together or had attended personal development workshops for adoptees where being with other Sri Lankans felt like "*the closest I have come to having relatives.*"

At the same time, these friendships did not extend to a sense of or the presence of a community. Leading up to and following the Zembla investigations, a number of Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka created Facebook groups so there could be a space for discussions, to share findings of illegalities, and assist each other with searches for their origins, mainly through DNA tests. While many participants felt like they could connect or relate with each other, they described it as being merely a result of their shared trauma or “lack of belonging”. This connection was complicated by the fact that they found these online communities to be “vicious” and often filled with anger, resentment, and conflict. This made most of the participants stay away from these spaces and seldom or never attend events specifically for adoptees from Sri lankan, even though they felt like the community could be or had been helpful in their search for answers. According to Dinesh, when you had “400 traumatized people in a Facebook group” it was a “recipe for disaster” and yet it often felt like the only thing in the form of a solution. As he added:

*“the only thing to find mothers and to solve this injustice of human trafficking, there's a group of traumatized people on social media...”*

The dynamics within these online communities can be understood as the outpouring of embodied trauma as a result of unaddressed historic harms caused by violent systems (Avalos, 2021). While adoptees have come to increasingly use digital spaces to challenge and overcome “the fog of colorblind politics, White saviorism, and imperialism” in their intercountry adoption process, their own varied lived experiences, understanding, and positions on the subject can mean that these spaces often become hostile and contribute to further loneliness (Rossi, 2023, p. 5415). And yet, just as Dinesh described and Rossi (2023) found in her research of online communities of those adopted from El Salvador and Guatemala to the United States, they do provide a sense of identification and belonging that has otherwise been denied to them.

As Hübinette (2007) concludes in his writing about the experiences of Korean American adoptees, this liminal “existence as an Other among the Others is most often neither a self-chosen nor a pleasant state” (p. 155), and the same can be said of the participants I interviewed. In addition to this effect on their sense of belonging in society, the result and impact of this existence can be understood more deeply through their complicated relationships with their adoptive families, the very people whose demands and desires brought them to the Netherlands. I explore this in the next section.

## **4.2. Navigating guilt, gratitude, and denial in adoptive relationships**

In her research, Liobl finds that “parenthood and consumption, love and money” which are traditionally considered contradictory in western societies are deeply interlinked in intercountry adoptions and lead to a tension as adoptive parents engage in a process of justifying their choices in the face of this harsh reality (Liobl, 2019; p. 402). My interviews reveal that the findings of systemic abuse often heighten this tension.

Most participants described that they grew up having a good relationship with their adoptive parents and that they were largely supportive of their search for origins as adults. However, for several of them, their own journey as individuals, the search for their origins, and the findings of systemic abuse had strained or complicated some of these bonds. Most participants said they did not blame adoptive parents. Instead, they believed that they had acted purely out of either “ignorance” or “good intentions”, were themselves “victims of the system”, and empathized with how the findings of systemic abuse must also pain them. However, they still described feeling frustrated and hurt because of their parents’ inability or denial to understand the trauma that adoptees could be experiencing as a result of their illegal or unethical adoption – that this trauma often existed alongside and not in opposition to the love they had received from their families here. Majority of the participants said this was always a tough subject to broach.

As described in the previous section, even though not explicitly expressed by parents themselves, the narrative of benevolence and gratitude in Dutch society did inform participants’ relationships with them. For those participants who experienced sexual and emotional abuse at the hands of their adoptive parents, this societal expectation of gratitude often intensified feelings of isolation and alienation. Other intercountry adoptees have also written about the silence surrounding this experience in Western institutions and societies and the difficulty of speaking about it (Long, 2020).

For some participants, like Leona, who went through her adoption files after the Zembla investigation, it was hard to grapple with the fact that her adoptive parents never reviewed her documents which contained clear anomalies. She also learnt that they were provided contradictory information about her place of birth by different intermediaries at the time of adoption. It made her think:

*“But then they never asked questions and then you read the [COLA] reports and I was like, how can you not know? I just don’t get how they could all be so naive. And I feel like most adoptive parents don’t like to talk about that they may have done something that wasn’t really just. And even though they didn’t mean to, they did it. I would love to have a conversation with them so that they can understand us and I can understand them, but I feel like that’s not really possible.”*

This feeling is further complicated by observing similar dynamics in her marital family which opted for an intercountry adoption in the 2000s and still carries the belief that they saved the child – something Leona was also made to feel by her Dutch relatives. This perspective, she says, *“it’s still there. It hasn’t stopped and it’s still something Dutch people apparently think of us”*.

Leona was not alone in feeling this way. Aanya also described a number of realizations over the years that changed her relationship with her parents in significant ways. Her parents have always been overprotective of her and while she knew it came with good intentions, she began to see it in a different light:

*“if you have the idea that you save a poor orphan, yeah, well, I was not really an orphan, but if you have this, that you continued to treat this (person as an) orphan even if it grows up, becomes an adult, studies, becomes*

*financially independent...they always still see me as the same little baby that needs to be saved or something...And this is something I constantly notice in my whole life that this is an image they have of me that will never really change.”*

This, according to Aanya stood in the way of having an equal relationship. She also struggled with the contradictions that this situation presented, wherein the idea of adoption is that you become “*a real child of the family and this is what’s always being said but the reality is that from the start you’re very different*” and yet “*this is something nobody says out loud but it’s something I’ve always felt and asked*”. This lack of acceptance has kept their bond from growing and from a very young age, she felt like:

*“I can only be part of the family if I get rid of my Sri Lankan identity, if I’m just playing the role of the Dutch adoptive child and then I’m fine. But it’s not really possible to incorporate my full story within that family”.*

To understand this, it’s important to place Horeshi’s (2014) argument about Dutch society’s self-perception as charitable alongside their “colonial amnesia” about child separation projects as a tool of civilisation by the VOC (Mark, Monteiro & Wesseling, 2020). In her book *White Innocence*, Gloria Wekker (2020) highlights how the colonial past, specifically the Dutch role in slave trade, forms a massive blind spot among the Dutch people which informs and perpetuates their supposed superiority and keeps from realizing a true multiculturalism. This leads to the fact that people of color are presented with an “enormous paradox” wherein “the implicit and infernal message, the double bind we get presented with all the time is: ‘if you want to be equal to us, then don’t talk about differences; but if you are different, then you are not equal’” (Wekker, 2016, pp. 15-16).

This is in line with Aanya’s complicated relationship with her parents where she feels like she must give up her identity as a Sri Lankan adoptee to truly assimilate in the family even though that is not possible. Further, participants’ description of guilt, denial and repression expressed by their adoptive parents can be understood through Wekker’s concept of “innocence” which she states is the “dominant Dutch way of being in the world” and is characterized by “not knowing, but also not wanting to know.” This state of ignorance means that as a result of not confronting their colonial past and not understanding the imperial, racist world they occupy, Dutch people “are able to fully benefit from its racial hierarchies, ontologies and economies” (Sullivan and Tuna, as quoted in Wekker, 2016, p. 17).

This paradox often meant that many participants often had to shoulder the burden of coming to terms with the findings of systemic abuse while still trying to understand their adoptive parents’ actions as innocence. For Mannon, for instance, this meant never taking a search trip to Sri Lanka due to a fierce sense of loyalty for her adoptive parents only to later learn that they did not disclose crucial information about her first mother — who was actively searching for her and passed away before they could make contact — out of protectiveness. As Mannon said: “*my mother was never lost, just lying in the kitchen draw[er]*”.

Additionally, several participants shared that becoming mothers themselves in recent years gave them a renewed understanding of the pain and difficulty that their first mothers might

have endured in giving away their children — whether due to coercion, stigmatization, poverty, or deception about the permanency of adoption. It made them consider how vulnerable they might have been in the face of such a heart-wrenching situation. At the same time, the same participants also specified that their adoptive parents decided to adopt them because they could not have children of their own and found themselves empathizing with them as well.

For instance, Roos felt a certain empathy towards adoptive couples' desire for parenthood even though she believes that intercountry adoption isn't the right thing for a child in the long run:

*"I also understand because I've been there. If you really want to have a child, I mean it took us three years to get a son, we had a few miscarriages, and I know how it feels if you really, really want to be a mother or a father."*

Vidusha, whose parents had decided to not adopt her through the adoption agency FLASH after learning about possible illegalities, put it this way:

*"My adoptive mother, she told me, if I knew all the information I know now, I would never have adopted. But then I was thinking, back then you already knew there were some issues. So yeah, then the wish of becoming a parent is really really big that overcomes these things. It's complicated, it's really complicated. It's painful I think for them and that's why they are in denial."*

It's important to highlight here that FLASH was a unique agency in the fact that it was founded by "a number of dissatisfied (prospective) adoptive parents" in 1979 who were "irritated by the long waiting lists and complicated procedures with other intermediaries" (COIA, 2021, p. 97). The COIA found that Flash did not adequately follow the required rules, was considered unprofessional by other agencies, and enjoyed a favorable position with the Dutch government in spite of wrongdoings (COIA, 2021). Hundreds of Sri Lankan children — including several participants interviewed for this research — came to the Netherlands through Flash. This information adds another layer to the role of some Dutch adoptive parents in the systemic abuse in that period – they weren't simply creating the demand that led to abuses but also facilitating the abuse themselves.

Additionally, Roos' and Vidusha's perspectives are in line with Liobl's (2019) analysis of Dutch and German adoptive parents' published narratives about their intercountry adoption. Liobl (2019) highlights that even as birth rates declined in Western countries, owing in part to women's choice to delay pregnancy as they entered the workforce in larger numbers, parenting was still increasingly seen as pertinent to achieving the status of a "fully realized citizen" and crucial to women's identities (pp. 368-370). In the context of their individualistic capitalist societies, many affluent couples saw intercountry adoption as a viable economic solution for reinstating "the freedom of choice which has been taken from them through their infertility" (Liobl, 2019, p. 403). Most women, however, also saw this individualistic choice through the reasoning of what what Shome describes as "global motherhood" wherein we are constantly fed this imagery of White Western women as "saving, rescuing, or adopting international children from underprivileged parts of the world" which obscures the broader socio-historical context and the simultaneously erasure of first mothers (Shome as cited in Liobl, 2019, p.375).

As Lugones highlights, gender is “constituted by and constituting the coloniality of power”, where colonialism not only imposed hierarchies of race but also gender subordination (2024, p. 40). In deeming them unfit, a situation of shame and secrecy was created around unmarried mothers which simultaneously meant that the society decided adoption was the right choice for their situation irrespective of the pain it caused them (Jayarathne, 2024). As I highlighted in the previous chapter, this is very much a continuation of the view that persisted in Dutch colonies about native mothers and has reproduced gendered violence within their own societies against mothers who do not meet the “criteria” of social acceptability, often by being poor and unmarried (Gondouin & Thapar-Bjökert, 2022).

In conclusion, the coloniality of power in the intercountry adoption process did not just perpetuate structural violence for participants but also served to erase these experiences by centering the desires and presumed adequacy of adoptive parents as well as the benevolence of Dutch society. This left participants in a liminal state of being, and as the next chapter will show, also influenced their perspectives of justice for the harm they experienced.

## Chapter 5: The impossibility of Justice

This chapter delves into the last research sub-question: How do Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka perceive the idea of restitution or justice in addressing the harms they experienced through their adoption process?

The most common pattern that emerged during interviews was that most participants believed there could be no true justice for their experience of systemic abuse in the intercountry adoption process. For most of them, the harm caused cannot be quantified or addressed by conventional justice frameworks which fall short in addressing the intangible loss suffered as a result of such enforced separation. In line with Smolin's (2024) argument about the permanent loss of identity as a result of adoption, participant's articulation of the impossibility of justice had to do with the fact that the illegal or unethical nature of their intercountry adoption was intertwined with many different aspects of their lives. As Aanya put it:

*"I think it's also very important to realize that this irreversibility of an adoption is not only happening on the legal level, but also on the personal, the cultural, the social level, because all your ties as an adopted child are cut not only legally, but also you lose your language... You don't get a chance to grow up with your family. So even, and I can tell this from experience, even if later in life you are reunited with this family and you know what your name was, even if you learn your language, it's never a way to really reconnect as a child... and their parents or their family (would). This is something that nobody can undo anymore."*

This sentiment was further articulated by Sajeev, who while pursuing a case against the Dutch government, spoke of the pain and trauma caused by this irreversible process:

*There is no real justice in this matter, because too (many) women... also fathers in Sri Lanka went through so much pain and trauma... Children were taken away... Children were stolen... Children were being adopted without consent of one of the parents... That's not something you can make right... The only thing you can do is make things better for the future and recover what you can recover. And so just as there's no real justice here, there's only to do everything you can to make things better."*

In both their perspectives, Aanya and Sajeev focus on the unequal life chances meted out to Sri Lankans who became part of the intercountry adoption process. Sajeev's view highlights that genuine justice for such structural violence requires transformative shifts that acknowledge and amend deep-rooted historical injustices. Such a shift requires not only systemic accountability but also continued support for adoptees to address complex forms of loss that go beyond reparations (Long, 2023).

For some participants, this meant ambivalence in regards to who held responsibility for this loss: Tess expressed doubt about whether the Dutch government should be held accountable now for its actions decades ago, while Johan believed that the adoption agencies and intermediaries in Sri Lanka were criminally liable instead of the Netherlands. This ambivalence reflects the inherent characteristic of structural violence that Winter (2012) describes as the absence of a

singular, accountable agent which blurs clear lines of responsibility. Since structural violence is not defined by a one-time act but by its ongoing, systemic nature which iteratively reproduces harms and inequalities across generations (Winter, 2012), the diffusion of responsibility across intermediaries and institutions means that it makes genuine accountability seem complex and out of reach. Additionally, I argue that it is this very recurrent nature of such violence that necessitates actions by current governments even if a past harm occurred under different political and social circumstances.

Most other participants echoed the belief that while justice was not possible, the Dutch government held a responsibility towards adoptees, especially in regard to setting up a DNA bank to conduct searches for original families. However, the government's apology as well as measures like setting up INEA, a knowledge center allocated with large funds, had done little to address their traumas or assist with search for origins. They described having to deal with bureaucratic hurdles, exorbitant fees, and legal challenges to access their own files and get identification details changed or corrected — services that they believe should be made free.

According to Sajeev, while putting a price on what had happened to them didn't feel right:

*I feel that it's really unfair that I have to pay thousands of money and make trips to Sri Lanka to search, and all because of the fact that they didn't check if my adoption was legal. What was the use of their role?"*

It was this sense of unfairness that prompted Sajeev, Esme, and six other Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka to initiate legal proceedings holding the Dutch government liable for the pain they had incurred as a result of the abuse in their intercountry adoption process which obscured their identities and origins (NOS, 2023). The adoptees wanted the government to acknowledge its negligence and reimburse the costs that they had incurred in search trips for their origins. Esme thought it was fair for the government to continue to pay for trips to meet original families in Sri Lanka even after a search had been successful because of the role they had played in their being "trafficked". As Vidusha put it, money was not a small matter because it ties back to "the imbalance that the (Global) North has money and the (Global) South doesn't have or had money" in the same way.

In October 2024, the court ruled that the Dutch government cannot be held liable for abuses in intercountry adoptions from Sri Lanka because it had a limited supervisory role, and the files did not contain errors that could be easily recognized by the state (NOS, 2024). Another Dutch adoptee from Sri Lanka faced similar setbacks when the state appealed against a judgment holding it accountable for her illegal adoption (Prakken d'Oliveira, 2024). This led the Supreme Court to refer the case back for reassessment, leaving her pursuit of justice in continued legal uncertainty.

These rulings highlight a key paradox wherein adoptees are seeking restitution and reparation from the same colonial institutions that caused them harm. Adoptees' demands signify a pushback against the colonial structures that commodified and uprooted them from their homes and cultures for the benefit of Western families. While this re-engagement is a reclamation of agency, it also represents an ongoing tension between participants' holistic perspectives of justice

and the absence of mechanisms to actually pursue them. This is especially relevant because the structural violence of coloniality is reproduced through modern institutions and frameworks which control the boundaries of justice (Liobl, 2019; Quijano, 2007), as is most evident through the states and courts refusing to accept liability. There continues to be power asymmetry between what the Dutch government chose to do as a response to findings of systemic abuse versus what the participants really want. As such, there exists a wide gap between the state's actions in the form of an apology and ban on intercountry adoptions — while simultaneously pushing back against legal liability — and participants' continued sense of being wronged.

Additionally, in broadening the debate on the restitution of stolen goods to “stolen” or forcibly separated adoptees, one comes to see how “return” is complicated by the tragedy of neat classifications which evades this situation. As Smolin (2024) highlights, for most adults harmed by systemic abuse “restitution to the original situation of the victim before the illegal intercountry adoption occurred” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022) is almost impossible given the complexity of race, culture, citizenship as well as emotions involved in the lives that they have already lived in their adoptive countries, as has been highlighted through the experiences of Korean adoptees (Kim, 2007).

Once again, these contradictions were not lost on participants, most of whom lacked confidence that there would be any real redressal. Many of them believed that the government's pushback in court cases was a sign that the apology for its role in systemic abuse was a mere act of show because it had not been followed up with concrete measures. Leona, for instance, likened the Dutch government's response to “VOC mentality” alluding to the fact that colonial justifications of superiority and control continue to inform modern policies. This mentality underscores a denial to truly incorporate the needs and demands of those upon which it inflicted structural violence thereby undermining its own exercise of a truth mechanism in the form of COIA. As Dinesh further emphasized, human rights instruments like the Hague Convention which prioritized “trustworthy” adoption systems and “adoptable” children (Liobl, 2019) fail to account for the racialized and economic structures underpinning the intercountry adoption system anyway, and therefore could not be relied upon to deliver justice.

Both Vidusha and Dinesh felt that engagement with institutions only served to cause more pain and diverted energy from what they thought was the real task: searching for origins and finding answers and belonging for oneself and the future generation. A number of participants articulated these answers as something they owed to their children, as “their heritage”, and could be understood as them trying to break the cycle of violence within their means.

In a painful summation of the lasting effect of this structural violence, Dinesh expressed that the sense of injustice he felt from the country he had come to call home made him long for the one he had only discovered through his difficult search for his origins. Additionally, having grown up in a society that considers itself fair and just (Wekker, 2017), the situation was in painful contradiction to what they had come to expect. This longing and contradiction underscores coloniality of being as participants' complex relationship with their adoptive and birth countries reveal how colonial legacies continue to shape their experience in the present. As Dinesh put it:

*“I think as an adoptee in Holland I expected more from my government, if I can say that this is my government. I have a Dutch T-shirt upstairs that I always wear when they play football. I have it from the 88 European Championship when they won...I learned to ice skate when I was six years old. So, there is a lot of Dutch in every Dutch adoptee and the way the government is acting now for our better, that is not Dutch. That is very disappointing. It makes you lose faith in good things. And then maybe going back to Sri Lanka is not so bad.”*

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this research paper I have aimed to understand the lived experiences of Dutch adoptees from Sri Lanka who navigate a complex and often painful journey of searching for their origins against the backdrop of systemic abuse in their intercountry adoptions. I set out to answer three sub-questions: how they respond to the findings of systemic abuse in the(ir) intercountry adoption process, how the search for their origins impacts their identifications and emotional attachments, and how they perceive the idea of justice in addressing the harms they experienced through their adoption process. Drawing on qualitative interviews, review of archival research, and other literature, this paper situates their experiences within a broader socio-political and historic context to conclude that colonial legacies of racial hierarchy and resource inequality — entrenched in both the practice of intercountry adoptions and the Dutch society — continue to inflict structural and epistemic violence on adoptees.

Participants responded to the findings of systemic abuse by grappling with the reality of fabricated documents, commodification, and forceful separations in their intercountry adoption process. Many of them saw themselves as having been sold or trafficked while their first families were in vulnerable situations, echoing a history where child separation projects served to maintain racial and cultural hierarchies in Dutch colonies. This knowledge often heightened participants' feelings of alienation because it existed alongside the long-held narrative of "rescue" which, I argued, had served to erase not just their histories and identities but the structural violence they endured. However, many participants sought to reclaim agency by finding answers about their origins.

These searches for their origins and the knowledge of systemic abuse deepened a sense of liminality or the feeling of "belonging in a twilight zone", with participants feeling like they were neither fully Dutch nor Sri Lankan. This state of in-betweenness stemmed not just as a result of forceful separations from their first families but from the pervasive narrative of gratitude and innocence in Dutch society which had shaped their relationships with their adoptive parents, burdening them with a sense of loyalty and empathy towards them at the cost of their own traumas. Participants described the tension that arose from the pressure to assimilate without recognition of their differences, which was contradictory to their racialized realities and their desire to connect with their origins.

Lastly, there was a shared belief among participants that true justice was impossible given the many layers of loss that they as well as their first families had endured as a result of their illegal or unethical intercountry adoptions. They articulated this loss not just in terms of identity but culture, language, and a sense of belonging to their families and communities, which I argued could be summarized as unequal power and life chances or structural violence. Nevertheless, most of them believed the Dutch government held a responsibility towards following up the acknowledgment of systemic abuse with true redressal that removed bureaucratic barriers, supported searches, and provided long-term support. But their demand for reparative justice faced pushback from courts and the government and left

them untangled with the same colonial and violent systems with “VOC mentality” that caused them harm in the first place.

In summary, this research underscores the profound impact of colonial legacies which continue to shape and largely limit participants’ experiences of search for their origins, belonging, and justice. It echoes Aanya’s quote that introduced this paper: adoptees’ carry the knowledge of being “stolen” while being surrounded by people who do not understand the weight of this, and this impacts any efforts of resistance. It points towards a grand dilemma: can a society with such entrenched cultural and racial superiority truly engage in a process of reckoning and restitution? This research suggests that only by centering the voices and lived experiences of adoptees and their first families, while also critically interrogating and decentering the narratives that define them, and other racialized communities can meaningful change occur.

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