

Excerpt from “From the Indian Adoption Project to the Indian Child Welfare Act: the resistance of Native American communities,” written by Claire Palmiste, pp. 1-4.

I- The Indian Adoption Project

The Indian Adoption Project is a contract which operated from February 1959 until 1967. It was officially adopted in order to lift the obstacles which prevented Native children from eligible adoption and to allow them to have a better life. The project director, Arnold Lyslo, claimed it aimed at removing administrative and racial barriers, at a time when “matching” was an overall practice in the field of adoption.

What triggered the adoption of Native children by white families?

It seems that various factors contributed to the success of the project. Six major ones can be highlighted: the high demand for adoption by white couples, the media coverage, the living conditions in some reservations, the high fees for adoption, the covert assimilation policy adopted by the BIA and the benefits of an efficient structure: the Adoption Resource Exchanges.

The 1950s experienced a dwindling number of white, blue-eyed babies available for adoption due to wide use of contraceptive materials amongst white women, the possibility of abortion in some states, and a fading stigma towards unwed mothers. United States society, after World War II, valued the existence of the nucleus family.

The media coverage also accounted for the large impact of the project. It ... induced white couples to adopt Native children. ... Arnold Lyslo listed the main newspaper articles which contributed to stimulate the desire of white couples to adopt a Native child. [For example,] Arlene Gilberman’s article, “My forty-five Indian godchildren” issued in the review, Good Housekeeping. Eight hundred couples favourably responded to it. Other articles such as “God forgotten Children”, “Indian children find homes” and “Interracial Adoption” also encouraged white couples to adopt a Native child. David Fanshel explained the reasons why white couples were willing to adopt Native children. It seems that the good experiences of white couples with Korean adoptees, as the media highly publicized cases of good adaptation, motivated them to choose a Native child rather than an African American child.

The Indian Adoption Project was also seen as a means to solve what was considered as “the Indian problem”. In a message to Congress on March 6, 1968, President Lyndon Johnson underlined the dire conditions of living of Native communities with
“fifty thousand Indian families [living] in unsanitary dilapidated dwellings: many in huts, shanties, even abandoned automobiles. The unemployment rate among Indian [being] nearly 40 percent, more than

ten times the national average. (...) Indian literacy rates [being] among the lowest in the nation; the rates of sickness and poverty [being] among the highest.”

Native parents were regarded as incapable of taking care of their children and of offering them a better life.

During the second half of the [20th] century, the American Indian population increased drastically from 357,499 in 1950 and 523,591 in 1960 to 792,730 in 1970. This demographical increase meant for the federal government to allocate more federal funds to the tribes. In order to cut down the expenses, reducing the members of tribes through adoption appeared as a good solution.... The Child Welfare League of America set criteria to select Native children. The child had to be one-fourth or more degree Indian blood, considered adoptable physically and emotionally, be released by his parents after good counselling and have court protection to assure his adoptability. [T]he BIA’s selection can be seen as a means to reduce the number of tribal members.

These adoptions were made within the particular context of the “termination policy” era. Some experts asserted that this area of finalization of the federal government responsibilities towards Native tribes roughly took place between 1949 and 1962. The report of the Hoover Commission (1949) recommended that Native people be integrated progressively into the mainstream, and to transfer social and medical programs to States. It also suggested that the tribes pay states and federal taxes, that the Bureau of Indian Affairs be dismantled and that young Native people be prompted to move to the city.

The adoption of Native children by white families participated into the process of cultural genocide. It means for the tribes to be deprived of their children, the ones who could pass on the traditions and permit tribes to be distinct from the mainstream culture.