



October 22, 2008

Joint Council Policy Recommendation

Cultural Sensitivity Regarding Adoptions in Ethiopia

Every adoption is like a rollercoaster for the adoptive parents. There are always obstacles to overcome and hoops to jump through. But in every adoption there are also many highs. For most adoptive parents the biggest high is finally being able to travel, meet the child whose photo you fell in love with long ago, and holding them in your arms. It is the moment that every adoptive parent longs for and dreams of. Adoptive parents want to spend every moment with their new child, learning every little piece of their personality and spirit. Adoptive parents want to show their new child(ren) everything that the world has to offer them. This being said sometimes it is necessary for an adoptive family to be respectful of a country's local culture and hold off these magical moments for a few days. Joint Council feels that this is the case in Ethiopia.

Very often adoptive families stay at an international, national or local hotel in Addis Ababa. And fulfilling their long held desires, families often bring their newly adopted child to the hotel during their stay in Ethiopia. Many times the adoptive family also goes shopping or sightseeing in Addis Ababa or another local city or village.

This overriding desire, which is very normal and certainly understandable, often results in unintended cultural insensitivity to the Ethiopian government and citizens. With over 3,000 adoptions expected in Ethiopia this year, hotels and other common gathering places such as shopping areas often see relatively large numbers of families with their newly adopted Ethiopian child.

Given that the vast majority of American and European families adopting from Ethiopia are Caucasian or other non-black, the adoptive families and their Ethiopian child are easily distinguished and are often a point of curiosity among Ethiopian citizens. Understandably, due to misconceptions about adoption some Ethiopian citizens even look upon American and European adoptive families with suspicion. Cultural differences in parenting and child behavior are contributing to this suspicion.

The large number of adoptive families combined with the curiosity and suspicions of Ethiopian citizens and with cultural differences in parenting and child behavior, is unfortunately causing unintended yet very significant concerns among some Ethiopian citizens and the government. Subsequently these unintended consequences are weakening the work and services being provided in order to ensure permanent families

for the children of Ethiopia. Without exaggeration, this may lead to the elimination of intercountry adoption as an option for ensuring that every Ethiopian child has a safe, permanent and loving family.

During Joint Council's trips to Ethiopia in June and July, concerns regarding the large numbers of adoptive families, including the Ethiopian child, staying at hotels and traveling throughout the city were expressed repeatedly by the Ethiopian government. Significant numbers of Ethiopian citizens have contacted the government with questions and more significantly with complaints.

During a Joint Council presentation to adoption service providers from the United States, Italy and France, Joint Council addressed the very important issue of cultural sensitivities. All adoption service providers were strongly urged to refrain from utilizing hotels and restricting in-city travel for adoptive families. Supporting Joint Council's recommendation was the Network (a large association of adoption service providers in Ethiopia).

Most adoption service providers that recognized the issue of cultural sensitivity are following the recommendation. In fact some have instituted cultural sensitivity policies regarding lodging and in-city travel prior to the Joint Council recommendation. For example, increasing numbers of adoption service providers have established private guesthouses for adoptive families. Unfortunately not all adoption service providers have chosen to be proactive and implement cultural sensitivity policies. Just as unfortunately, many adoptive parents are insisting on staying at hotels and going shopping in Addis Ababa despite repeated requests from their adoption service provider, reputable advocates such as the Network and the Ethiopian government.

It is essential that adoptive parents and adoption service providers demonstrate respect for the country in which they are respectively adopting and working. Without demonstrating respect for the country and its people, the adoptive family is in turn disregarding the culture of their child(ren). Similarly the adoption service provider is disrespecting the children they seek to serve.

It is for these reasons and more that we urge adoption service providers to encourage adoptive parent to please refrain from staying in hotels and venturing out in public with their newly adoptive children. With respectful deference to cultural sensitivities in Ethiopia, to the Government of Ethiopia, and to the people of Ethiopia, Joint Council strongly urges all adoption service providers to immediately implement policies which incorporate the following principles. Adoptive parents are similarly requested to respect their child(ren), their birth country and culture and abide by the following principles and the policies of their adoption service provider.

Cultural Sensitivity Principles and Guidelines

Principles

1. All due care must be given to demonstrate cultural sensitivities towards the country, people and government of Ethiopia
2. Full recognition of the questions, concerns, curiosities and suspicions must be given to the Government of Ethiopia and its citizens
3. It is recognized that adopting an Ethiopian child is a 'privilege of giving' bestowed by the citizens and government of Ethiopia
4. It is recognized that every Ethiopian child has a right to a family - every family does not have an inherent right to an Ethiopian child
5. Actions and behaviors which may not appear to be offensive to U.S. adoptive parents, may in fact be extremely offensive to Ethiopian society
6. Actions and behaviors seen as culturally insensitive damage the institution of intercountry adoption and thereby limit opportunities for children in need to find a family
7. Actions and behaviors seen as culturally insensitive significantly contribute to the possible elimination of intercountry adoption in Ethiopia and thereby eliminate the right of every Ethiopian child to a safe, permanent and loving family

Guidelines

1. Adoption service providers will incorporate these principles and guidelines into their contractual or policy relationships with potential adoptive families
2. Adoption service providers will disclose the contractual or policy limitations related to cultural sensitivities to all prospective adoptive parents prior to approving an application from the prospective adoptive parents
3. Prior to taking custody of their adopted Ethiopian child, adoptive families may reside in a hotel during their stay
 - a. It is recommended that adoptive families utilize Ethiopian Guest Houses or a lodging facility operated by an adoption service provider during their entire stay in Ethiopia
 - b. Adoptive families who have not taken full custody of their adopted Ethiopian child may choose to utilize a hotel
 - i. In such cases the adoptive parents may visit their adopted Ethiopian child daily at the child care center
4. Upon taking custody of their adopted Ethiopian child, adoptive families will utilize Ethiopian Guest Houses or a lodging facility operated by an adoption service provider
5. Adoptive families will refrain from in-country travel with their adopted Ethiopian child
 - a. Exceptions to this guideline (#5) are limited to
 - i. The visa appointment at the U.S. Embassy
 - ii. Other adoption related events
 - iii. An emergency situation
6. Adoptive families will refrain from pressuring their adoption service provider or in-country staff to violate these principles, guidelines and/or agency policies representing these principles and guidelines