



## THE 'AFSTAMMINGSCENTRUM', WHAT IS THAT ALL ABOUT?

"Until recently, I never had any questions about my first parents. Now that I am pregnant myself, however, it is happening more and more often. Why was I abandoned? Did I have any brothers or sisters? What is actually in that adoption file of mine?"

"My many freckles were clearly not given to me by my parents. Is there somewhere I can find out from whom my parents received donor material?"

"I ended up in Belgium as a metis when I was 5 years old. Only a few years ago, I realised that I must have a brother here somewhere. Can you help me in my search?"



## 1 HOW IT ALL STARTED

For many years, adoptees, donor children and metis<sup>1</sup> have been advocating for their right to have access to information on their origins, for their right to know who they are descended from. Not knowing where you come from, having questions about the exact circumstances of your birth, not having complete information about your original family, being in the dark about your donor... It all touches on fundamental questions, the core of a person's identity. For some people, these issues cause serious problems, possibly trauma. Who am I? Where do I really come from? Why was I told about my adoption so late? Why was I abandoned? Questions about unknown origins, confusion about one's background, unresolved issues from an earlier search, questions about possible half-brothers or sisters, or medical questions...All questions that people can struggle with.

The Flemish government wanted to respond to this need and therefore established the '*Afstammingscentrum*', literally translated as the 'Filiation' centre. The strategy chosen was to embed this new centre in an existing welfare service, to provide the needed practical support for the start-up. The various target groups, mentioned above, then joined forces with the Flemish Foster Care Knowledge Centre, and applied for the grant to set up the centre. On August 24<sup>th</sup> 2021 the Foster Care Knowledge Centre was officially appointed to organise the '*Afstammingscentrum*'. From the very beginning, the target groups have taken control and continue to be actively involved in the operation of the '*Afstammingscentrum*'.

## 2 VISION AND MISSION

The '*Afstammingscentrum*' is based on the fundamental right of having access to information about one's origins and guarantees custom-made professional guidance in anyone's search in this context.

The starting point are fundamental human rights as laid down in, for example, Article 7 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Knowledge of one's own filiation or origin, is a right that has gained more and more attention in recent years. The importance of access to this kind of information is also increasingly recognised in its importance for one's own well-being and sense of identity.

The Court considers that the right to identity, which includes the right to know and have one's ancestry recognized, is an integral part of the concept of private life (*Pascaud v F*, June 2011, Court of Strasbourg, freely translated)

The '*Afstammingscentrum*' wants to be the point of reference for questions about filiation, descent and kinship. It will continuously develop and gather expertise, raises awareness and formulate policy recommendations on these topics. The centre serves a rather broad range of target groups: anyone whose legal kinship does not correspond to the biological, genetic and/or social kinship and anyone with questions about their own context of descent.

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<sup>1</sup> The metis of the Belgian colonisation are a very specific group of descendants of most often white men (colonists) with black women, usually Congolese, during the time that Congo was a Belgian colony. After the independence (1960), many of these children were taken away from their mothers, put into homes in Congo and Rwanda and later on deported to Belgium. There they were adopted by Belgians or put into foster homes.

### 3 LEGAL MISSION

#### 3.1 Informing and raising awareness

The *'Afstammingscentrum'* acts as the point of reference for all those with questions about their own filiation and parentage. This is a rather vague description and allows for a wide variety of questions. This has already been demonstrated by the many questions that were received at the centre. The centre handles both general, informative questions and more specific, individual questions. Questions may relate to DNA research, search and consultation of an adoption dossier or further research into this, the search for relatives (in Belgium or elsewhere), the search for documents, the clarification of family secrets, etc.

"By allowing anonymous donorship, Belgium violates the rights of children."  
(Prof. Frederik Swennen, de Standaard, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016)

Based on the cases and growing expertise, the *'Afstammingscentrum'* will also inform the government and formulate recommendations on issues related to filiation, search for origins.

#### 3.2 Psychosocial support in searches and parentage issues - mediation

The *'Afstammingscentrum'* offers practical guidance and psychosocial support in searches for (information about) one's origins and genetic relatives. This includes, for example, assistance in accessing an adoption file, preparatory talks in the context of a search question which may or may not be linked to a rootstravel, the process of searching for a donor via DNA, processing the possible results, but also.... the lack thereof. Not finding a match is often yet another disappointment and the case managers assist the client in coming to terms with this. Also, when results on one's origin are found, we often see new questions that arise...

The centre's case managers guide the client step by step through the whole searching process and respect the pace of the client very step of the way. Nothing will be done without the client's explicit permission.

This guidance and support is what constitutes the added value of the *'Afstammingscentrum'*. Now and in the past, people have already been searching for information on their origins but often had no support in this. E.g. adoptees have been going to their countries of origin, looking for their first parent(s), donor children quite frequently consult the international DNA-databases, which are becoming increasingly successful as more DNA info is being stored. But the *'Afstammingscentrum'* can offer them more tailored support, so that people do not have to go through this process all by themselves.

For DNA-research, the *'Afstammingscentrum'* cooperates with the Centre of Human Genetics (Leuven), which will be responsible for developing the DNA-database, file DNA-samples and search for matches.

For each question or each step, the service is offered in consultation with and tailored to the client's needs.

When necessary, the *'Afstammingscentrum'* will refer clients to more specialised therapists or appropriate assistance as the *'Afstammingscentrum'* itself is not really equipped for this.

The *'Afstammingscentrum'* will also act as a mediator in cases where clients are also interested in establishing contact with found relatives. These persons, have no clue, being unaware of this search and the message that a 'relative' wants to get in touch with them, can come as quite a shock. The *'Afstammingscentrum'* must act very diligently here and be sensitive to this side of the story as well.

"When I was forty, I started looking, not for a mother, because I had one, but for the WHY." (Marleen van Minnebruggen in De Vondelingen, p. 416)

For the *'Afstammingscentrum'*, it is obvious that in the provision of services the rules concerning deontology, professional secrecy and GDPR are always fully respected. Each individual file is kept in a specially developed and secured system. All DNA-samples are anonymised as set in procedures. The service as such is free of charge; only for specific or exceptional additional expenses (e.g. translation) the client may be requested to pay for this expense.

### 3.3 Developing expertise

The *'Afstammingscentrum'* monitors policy developments, scientific insights and literature relating to the right to origin and kinship and continuously expands its own documentation in this area. There is a close cooperation with various partners and the *'Afstammingscentrum'* can rely on the input of experts from various disciplines.

"To deny (a child) knowledge of his or her origins, is to remove a part of him or her" (Geraldine Mathieu, 2016)

It goes without saying that the *'Afstammingscentrum'* cannot achieve all this with a small team and limited budget. The *'Afstammingscentrum'* needs to acquire a place in an existing work field and will also gradually develop cooperation with various partners, such as The Flemish Central Authority Adoption, advocacy groups of the various target groups, fertility centres, adoption services, the Adoption Support Centre and the State Archives, and with organisations abroad, such as FIO (NL) or NGOs like International Social Service or Child Identity Protection. For more concrete search questions, contacts are also established with people or organisations with experience in this area or who have networks in the countries of origin. All these collaborations need to be systematically develop in time.

## 4 PRACTICAL INFORMATION

### 4.1 Organisation

The *'Afstammingscentrum'* receives a budget from the Flemish government and is accountable to the the Board of Directors of the Foster Care Knowledge Centre, which also provides the centre with valuable support in the areas of human resources and financial management.

The *'Afstammingscentrum'* also has a steering committee of members of the target groups: domestic and transnational adoptees, a metis, an expert on donation.

In addition to the steering committee, the *'Afstammingscentrum'* can also count on ad hoc assistance from experts from various disciplines (e.g. history, genetics, law, psychology...).

In December 2020, Ankie Vandekerckhove was appointed coordinator (80%) and, together with the steering committee, she put together a first team of case managers. We wanted to focus all efforts on the guidance of concrete search and filiation questions, as this had been long awaited.

After several months of preparatory work, the *'Afstammingscentrum'* was open for the public in the beginning of April 2021.

Ankie Vandekerckhove has years of experience in children's rights and was, for example, the first Children's Rights Commissioner in Flanders. She also worked for a short period at the Flemish Adoption Authority.

The team further consists of 3 case managers. Benoît Vermeerbergen (50%) and Joyce Bex bring, besides their professional input, their experience as adoptees into the team. Benoît, born 'sous X' in France and then adopted in Belgium, has been a genealogist for years and has guided many adoptees in their searches. Joyce, adopted from China, just graduated in gender and diversity studies after

getting a bachelor in family sciences. Katrien Govaert (80%) is a psychologist with years of experience in mediation, family counselling as well as screening adoptive parents.

## 4.2 Cases

From day one, the questions came in, from all target groups and about the most diverse issues. The very first phone call came from a donor, who now questions the system of donor anonymity (Belgian law) and supports the quest of donor children and their searches for their donors. Questions at times come from afar, as we were already contacted by an Ethiopian first mother, looking for her adopted daughter (and are now working on establishing contact....).

The '*Afstammingscentrum*' receives about 4-5 new questions a week. After 10 months, more than 150 questions have been registered, and that without any publicity campaign. Most questions come from adoptees (transnational, domestic sous X and foundlings), followed by metis and donor children. But, as stated, donors themselves also get in touch.

Some questions are fairly easy and quick to answer; others require a more delicate approach and in-depth research. Filiation questions often touch a nerve and must be handled with the necessary discretion and tact. While we can already speak of success in some cases, this is unfortunately not the case for all requests. The '*Afstammingscentrum*' encounters obstacles of all kinds. Sometimes the regulations are against it (e.g. restrictions in DNA-testing limited to the first degree, the legally guaranteed anonymity of donors), sometimes other issues come into play (such as the taboo on giving a child up for adoption), sometimes relevant documents miraculously 'disappear'...

The '*Afstammingscentrum*' obviously must find its way in this, develop and finetune searching methods and proceedings and keep learning from its own experiences and from cooperation with relevant partners.

In addition to the individual dossiers, presentations have already been given in the field, a policy recommendation has been written on the necessary adjustments to DNA research, and team members of the '*Afstammingscentrum*' have participated in various training sessions and colloquia.

For more information, please feel free to contact us or visit the website of the '*Afstammingscentrum*'.