

EXTENDED FORUM: TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS AND THE IDIOM OF KINSHIP

TRANSNATIONAL KINSHIP TIES AND WELFARE STATE RESISTANCE

• PETRI HAUTANIEMI •

In contemporary kinship studies, state and family appear to be closely related. This forceful affiliation is a result of complex historical and social contestation where reproduction, socialization and ties of affection are not only naturally intimate but also politically public. Anthropologists have much to comment on this; alas, their educated and comparative observations often go unnoticed. The speakers in this debate more often seem to represent the social policy professions, state bureaucracies and legal expertise.

European immigration politics generally are illustrative. The tightening of residence permits and the control of particular migration groups seem to be emergent trends. Though state policies and the rationales behind them are often promoted as protection against threats like human trafficking or terrorism, applications of this institutional thinking are largely interpreted as acts of discrimination by the migrants or family members involved. Furthermore, less attention has been paid to how the state classifies families and family members, something which is reproducing rather unrealistic ideals and norms for families and kin groups in general. In fact, the criteria of family relatedness for immigrant families differ from those very practices which are assumed to define family within most welfare states in Europe. In this context, I argue, more comparative, anthropologically-informed analysis would be useful.

My position is based on a long-term research interest in transnational mobility, in associated social encounters and aspects of inter-generational relations. Extensive ethnographic fieldwork among young Somalis in Helsinki in the late 1990s and observations in North-Western Russia and Nepal have made me think about state boundaries and global family ties as an interface of residential aspiration and welfare state resistance. The cultural meaning of family relations and the authenticity of claimed kin ties, in this context, have become controversial. The disagreements are largely derived from the different ways that bureaucracies and immigrants or other transnational communities themselves understand who is and who is not a family member to be taken care of. The case of Somali reunification in Finland is particularly illuminating.

Within Finnish juridical practices, as in most societies, the idea of family and kinship ties does not quite mirror actual family practices or the ways in which people relate to each other in their everyday lives. Finnish traditional kinship practices are also

continuously challenged by new family formations, such as single sex unions, divorces and remarriages and by rather liberal practices based on new reproductive technologies. There is a continuous tension between the spheres of public law and private law which tend to legitimate the significance of blood or social relatedness differently. From an anthropological perspective Finnish kinship practices themselves are ethnographically interesting and more comparative research remains to be conducted.

In Finland, many kinship practices and ways of governing them, such as adoption of children or cross-border family arrangements, rationalize forms of relatedness in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. For example, it is not such a long time ago that changes were introduced in inheritance laws relating to adopted children, refusing them the right to automatically inherit from their biological parents. In other legal contexts, such as reunification of refugee children with their parents, a lack of biological relatedness may in some cases remove a child's right to reunification.

However, despite the recent changes and despite various longer-standing dichotomizations of the biological and social within juridical and cultural kinship practices, there has been a relatively uniform cultural and economic understanding of 'a household' as a core metaphor for real family in Finland. This not only has economic implications, but it also tends to contribute to the idea of a physical and mentally constructed setting for a core kinship unit: home. The household also tends to reduce the number of family members to a maximum of two adults or spouses parenting a number of children, descending from (or adopted by) either or both of them. Due to changes in modes of subsistence in society, families of three or more generations have become rare. Polygamous marriages are forbidden regardless of sexual orientation. Within a complex welfare state system with extremely regulated taxation and inheritance systems, and in a context of modern individualized lifestyles, the family and household are strictly defined arenas for relatedness and reproduction.

However, in anthropological terms, households are diverse in nature and they have come to mean more than simple domestic residential groupings. They are in many cases sources for family identification beyond immediate residential units. Ties of affection, relations of care and other interdependencies bring forth complex and rich sets of cultural meanings and sentiments, and inform residential kinship habits. These, however, are not always acknowledged in the politics of the public sphere of welfare.

In Somalia, and among Somali migrants, family is defined in much broader terms than a single household with its one and only address. Being a part of a wide kinship network, a person's kinship identity does not necessarily exclude multigenerational housing or intimate reciprocal ties between several parents and many dependent children. Similarly, the physical and mental idea of home may have a different connotation from what Finns/bureaucrats assume. Thus in anthropology too, there has been an interest within Somali kinship studies to evaluate the impact of nomadic traditions in a strong patrilineal kinship system. There is agreement that this system regulates affiliation not only between individuals but also among larger kin groups called clans.

Compared with the strong state-centered agricultural traditions of Protestant North Europe, the significance of family and complex nomadic kinship networks of Somalia are clearly different. The Somali family provides the frame for a welfare system very different

from the state-run arrangement in Finland, for example. The functions of these Somali welfare networks were tragically proven in the political upheavals and following mass displacement in the Horn of Africa in the late twentieth century. Both near and distant family ties, albeit with varying success, were activated in wide networks of trust and reciprocity: very different from the practices of the modern Western nuclear households which are heavily dependent on welfare institutions.

In Finland, as in so many other European countries, perceptions of this fluidity have made state institutions resist apparently threatening modes of kinship ties which are not rooted within state boundaries or in the legitimate 'household' sphere, but in informal transnational networks. Nomadic traditions have also historically generated nervousness in Finland, where Roma and indigenous nomadic Sami people have been under strong state screening and influence that has gradually changed their ways of life and rooted them in a 'national order of things'. Lately, in the case of Somalis, the bureaucracy has tried to deal with the difference in a very peculiar way, namely by increasingly deploying blood and DNA-testing for making certain aspects of kin ties transparent. Kinship also associates strongly with blood relations in the Somali community, but there blood relations are a more metaphoric and flexible notion, not neutral scientific fact as understood by Finnish civil servants.

The differences in how the two societies understand the cultural meaning of family membership brings forth issues pertaining to the authenticity of claimed family relations for purposes of reunification. As such, the central concern for Finnish immigration officers becomes one of determining who qualifies as a true family member in terms of Finnish understandings of family relatedness. Available data indicate, however, that the use of biotechnology as some kind of diagnostic has been successful neither in making kinship and family relations technologically apparent, nor in resolving immigration backlogs. On the contrary, fixing the focus on biological ties has created new problems. The number of applicants pursuing their claim to explicitly social family ties, such as those based on fostering or adoption, has increased. Moreover, in some of those family reunifications where a minor has received his/her parents to Finland on the basis of biological information, successful everyday family life together has proved unrealistic.

Kinship ties based on reciprocity and affection have not been key points for solving the disagreement over who is rightly a family member. The authorities appreciate cultural difference but in applying the DNA-based bureaucratic standard of difference, they are indifferent to what is really different: social relationships.

Understanding family relations at the intersection of civil war and globalised exile is obviously a complicated matter. It can create a challenge to an anthropologist both methodologically and conceptually. This conceptual and methodological complication occurs because many migration families live in exile and form kinds of transnational, open-ended networks. We do not talk of any static and bounded entity of a family type in this context. However, the common understanding of many anthropologists remains that an 'idiom of kinship' frames many activities that do not necessarily take place in the domestic sphere of the household. Activities with political, economic and religious intent are also part of family dynamics. But it seems that states with a strong ability to compartmentalize livelihood and even emotional spheres of life, resist transnational

kinship networks with goals that go beyond what bureaucracies acknowledge and accept. Anthropologists have much more to say on this.

PETRI HAUTANIEMI, Ph.D.
DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
petri.hautaniemi@helsinki.fi

KINSHIP, MIGRATIONS AND THE STATE

• CLAUDIA FONSECA AND DENISE F. JARDIM •

Anthropologists have long studied ‘exotic’ kinship patterns in distant places that differed from what was seen as the traditional nuclear family. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a number of changes (new patterns of birth and marriage, new reproductive technologies, the increased visibility of step- and adoptive relations) that changed scholars’ perceptions, convincing them that the traditional—even in Europe and North America—was no longer a helpful concept in understanding contemporary family dynamics. Accordingly, anthropologists reformulated their analytical tools to take stock of the variety of contemporary understandings of family life, placing the emphasis not on sexual procreation and blood connections, but on an enduring sentiment of diffuse solidarity: relatedness (Carsten 2000).

Transnational migration is another late twentieth-century phenomenon that has revolutionized the way people live their relationships, challenging researchers to think beyond terms of discrete cultural values. Whereas, in many instances, specific kinship dynamics continue to influence people’s moves, organizing their migrations in particular diasporic patterns (Jardim 2009), geographic mobility underlines widening possibilities for individual conduct (e.g. ‘mixed marriages’, transnational adoptions). At the same time, technological innovations have facilitated the articulation of transnational networks of sociability, often accompanied by financial remittances, creating daily household routines that span continents and cross oceans. Nation-states are forced to deal with the challenges of this bustling scenario, attempting to define citizenship and regulate residence within their borders.

Amidst the innumerable transnational flows of money, jobs, goods and people, the ‘family’ has remained a notion of continuing concern. Until the tightening of borders during the 1970s, migrant workers in Europe and North America tended to be men who were either single or who had left their wives and children in the homeland. As women joined the migrating labour force, mostly as nannies and maids, the problem of ‘transnational parenting’ began to gather attention (Mummert 2005). What was happening to the children these men and women left behind? The humanitarian concern that highlighted ‘family’ as a core value took on increasingly concrete form. Although just