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JUKKA JOUHKI, Ph. D.
 DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND ETHNOLOGY
 UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ
 jukka.jouhki@jyu.fi

IMMIGRANT GAMBLING IN FINLAND

• PERPETUAL CRENTSIL •

An anthropological study of gambling among immigrant groups in Finland can reveal much about how the society organizes its way of life in categories relevant for the economist, sociologist, political scientist and the historian. Anthropological studies of other aspects of immigrants' lives—remittance giving, socio-economic status, and development issues in origin countries—usually present immigrants as ethnographic subjects. These lives are situated in specific historical and social conditions that represent particular images based on certain cultural values in their native homelands and in the place of settlement. Immigrant gambling has every potential to add to this corpus of knowledge.

Scholars who have studied gambling in European societies and elsewhere have tended to focus on problem gambling, which they see as an individual rather than a social issue (Lalander 2006: 73); they also concentrate on indigenous populations (e.g., Orford and

McCartney 1999; Falk and Mäenpää 1999; Turner et al. 2008) and little attention is given to immigrant gambling. As a result, discourses about immigrant gambling are largely missing in gambling studies. The few existing studies have been on the prevalence or participation of immigrants in gambling (e.g., Momper et al. 2008; Petry et al. 2003 in the USA).

In Finland, in-depth studies of gambling focus on native Finns (e.g., Falk and Mäenpää 1999). There is a strong need to address immigrant gambling, because paying attention only to native Finns presents a misleading understanding of immigrants as well as of Finnish culture and society. Immigrants are now an integral part of the traditionally homogeneous native Finnish society; they have their own distinctive ethnic or cultural characteristics. Moreover, immigrant gambling is a new topic and many of its areas are unexplored (if not ignored). I will look briefly at what anthropologists can contribute, through in-depth ethnographic analysis, to contemporary gambling studies. I express these opinions informed by my own anthropological research into gambling among African and Asian immigrants in Finland (Crentsil 2009, 2011). We do not need to travel across the world looking for 'the exotic' when we can find distinctive cultural change and difference close at hand (among immigrants).

Of course, researching immigrant gambling is not easy since the researcher comes face-to-face with problems such as access to informants, the trust of the people being studied, the avoidance of harm to the subjects and other ethical issues. But careful data collection and analyzing the material through the interpretation of the meanings, functions and consequences of human action or institutional practices will reveal how they are implicated in local or wider contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Immigrant gambling illustrates aspects of Finnish society and culture, migration flows, the economy, labor-market and economic opportunities, as well as peculiar characteristics in regards to values, human agency, kinship ties, social relations and attitudes toward gambling. An elucidation of some of these categories can throw more light on the point I am making here.

Let me start with attitudes toward gambling. The cultural and social context of African and Asian immigrants' gambling behavior and other life events differ from that of native Finns. Like native Finns (Falk and Mäenpää 1999), immigrants may gamble for fun and relaxation, but have a uniquely positive view of the activity because it allows them to avoid marginalization and to send money to relatives in their home countries when they win, a practice that reflects the general notion that it is common for winners to give money as gifts to relatives (Binde 2007: 149). Moreover, African immigrants are under considerable pressure to act *in loco parentis* for deprived relatives in their homelands (Parish 2005; Crentsil 2011), and so are their Asian counterparts. Such engagements are closely tied to migration, ethnicity and kinship or family dynamics, which provide the context for investigating immigrant gambling.

As Armstrong (2003: 2) has pointed out, kinship is a classical question that has been at the centre of anthropological research for many decades. It is still important. 'With the advent of globalization and a perceived post-modern fragmentation of the social world, the study of kinship seemed old-fashioned and stodgy. Kinship remains central to understanding the contemporary world', she argues. For, globalization has indeed 'generated awareness about local culture and its particular characteristics, rather

than creating a feeling of similarity' (Armstrong 2003:2). Studies of migration and family dynamics involving immigrants always aim at gaining a better sense of kinship and immigrants' perception of it. Kinship is symptomatic of a wider range of forms of networking and transnational families. Thus, the study of the narrow topic of immigrant gambling can bring fascinating new insights into much broader categories such as migration, ethnicity, diaspora, kinship and social relations in modern society. The categories surrounding immigrants' lives are never fixed to a single place, for 'they are informed by experiences of Diaspora and therefore articulated as in-between places' (Retsikas 2007: 971).

My findings suggest that immigrant gambling in Finland is peculiarly marked by situational and structural characteristics concerning status and difference (e.g. Crentsil 2009). That there is the marking of status and simultaneous difference-making concerning work, gender, and social standing also makes it essential to study the phenomenon. Gender, for example, as an integral part of personhood and identity, of physical differences between men and women and a master code for talking about sameness and difference is also a way to classify domains of action in a society (Armstrong 1999: 12). That more African and Asian male immigrants gamble than their female counterparts signifies that gambling is a male-dominated activity among immigrants. But this also calls for questions about the larger Finnish society.

Another area of interest is superstitious beliefs about gambling among immigrants. In an article examining gambling behaviors of West African immigrants in Britain, Parish (2005) lays bare the social and cultural processes relating to their perceptions (including witchcraft and other superstitious beliefs) in which occult objects are perceived as invested with powers, put there by diviners, which would bring luck and success (Parish 2005: 117). In Finland, African gamblers likewise associate their wins with luck and good omens. Parish (2005) showed that Ghanaian gamblers were especially eager to manipulate unseen forces and even buy charms, both in Britain and from Ghana, because they believed talismans would protect them and their games from witchcraft by their relatives back in Africa. Relevant here is the observation that 'far from being a homeostatic feature of pre-colonial societies, the signs and practices of witchcraft are integral to the experience of the contemporary world' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxv). Immigrants in Western societies take ideas of witchcraft and the occult in totally new directions; in-depth inquiries into the phenomenon in immigrant gambling can make interesting revelations.

In sum, a focus on immigrant gambling as a social and cultural phenomenon (Binde 2007) can contribute immensely to the understanding of the role of cultural meanings in gambling studies. Immigrant gambling contains its own operations and interpretations. The social researcher has only to know how to gain access to the relevant information.

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PERPETUAL CRENTSIL, Ph. D.
 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
 DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL RESEARCH
 UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
 perpetual.crentsil@helsinki.fi

THE SOCIAL REWARDS OF ONLINE GAMBLING

• JANI KINNUNEN •

Gambling games have been played around the world in most cultures where money has been in use (Binde 2005). The games and the ways of playing them have varied over time and space, but the core of gambling is always the same: players place a monetary bet on a possible outcome of some event. It is thus clear that money matters in gambling, but it is not the priority. More bluntly: gambling is not about money.

The economic rewards of gambling are relevant, but social rewards are more important to most gamblers than winning money. Gambling games always carry socio-cultural values and meanings, which affect their popularity. Gambling and related activities never take place in a vacuum nor are they ever disconnected from more general social interaction.