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THE CONCEPT OF "FAMILY" IN SOMALIS' IMMIGRATION TO FINLAND
Views from Immigration Officials and NGOs

Outi Fingerroos, University of Jyväskylä

In Addis Ababa one can see dozens of Somali families waiting daily in front of the Embassy of Finland to be interviewed. The interview represents a means of entering Finland, since those waiting presumably have a so-called family re-unifier in Finland, a relative who has often already received a residence permit and sometimes even citizenship. This article examines the family reunification process of Somalis who travel from Ethiopia to Finland. Drawing on the experiences related by Finnish immigration officials, it focuses on the fact that they do not share the same definition of "family" as the Somali asylum applicants. Using extensive interviews and observations, this article aims to elucidate the complex cultural understandings involved in the Somalis' process of immigration to Finland.

Keywords: migration, Somalis, Finland, family, family reunification

At the beginning of 2009 and the end of 2010, I worked as a visiting professor at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia for two months. During my stay, I visited the Embassy of Finland several times and saw dozens of Somali men, women and children in front of the Embassy waiting to be allowed inside for their turn to attend family reunification interviews. During this first visit to Ethiopia, I also interviewed the officials of the Embassy of Finland regarding the immigration of Somalis to Finland. I learned that it is a complicated process, particularly with regard to the reunification of families. In recent years, the Embassy has processed a considerable number of cases in which Somali citizens sought to reunify with their families already living in Finland. The Finnish Immigration Service (Migri), for its part, is the agency that decides on matters related to immigration, residence, refugee issues and Finnish nationality. Migri, which operates under the Finnish Ministry of the Interior, also implements Finland's migration policy.[1]

After my first stay in Addis, I wrote a short review for the journal *Tiedonjyvä* published by the University of Jyväskylä. I briefly described my findings and feelings as follows:

> For Somalis, departure into the wide world is a leap into the unknown. The fact that Finland is a good, peaceful and safe country is almost the only thing, albeit a cliché, that Somalis know when they try to get into the country. Jaana Kaukonen [name changed], the Finnish consul, relates that she wonders whether the people that she inter-

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> views are happy in Finland. Few of them have any education, and many are illiterate. None of them knows Finnish. How can they adapt? It must be difficult, especially for older people, who cannot necessarily learn a new language any longer and thus end up on their own in high-rise flats. (Fingerroos 2010: 17)

Somali Immigration, Officials and NGOs

The aim of my ethnological research project is to better understand the process involved in Somalis' ongoing family reunification in Finland, particularly from the perspective of immigration officials and NGOs. The importance of this research lies in the lack of information regarding the human and cultural side of official immigration practices. In this paper, I concentrate on interviews conducted with Finnish officials working at the Embassy of Finland in Addis Ababa and in Migri. In addition, I have interviewed employees of the Finnish Red Cross[2] and two Finnish non-governmental organizations. These are the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre[3] and the Finnish Refugee Council.[4]

In Finland, family reunification is a very current topic but only a small group of researchers has found it interesting.[5] Instead, much research has been carried out on Somali families in transnational contexts,[6] and the Somali diaspora has remained a focus of transnational migration research. In Europe, Somali immigrant minorities have thus far been studied mostly as religious and cultural minorities, and as targets of racism. A variety of new perspectives (on their wellbeing, employment, education, health, transnational political engagement, organizations, and gender roles) have also been adopted.[7] But the official aspects of Somali immigration (asylum seeking, citizenship and family reunification processes) still need to be further explored.

Because family reunification processes are central to Somali immigration to Europe, in this paper I focus on the conception of "family" among Finnish immigration officials and how this affects the process through which Somalis receive or do not receive permission to migrate and join their families in Finland. As an ethnologist, I agree with Jonas Frykman that postmodern (social) theory has led ethnological research to focus on discourses, verbal representations and cultural processes at the local level. The ethnological approach is therefore a valuable tool for understanding a number of issues pertinent to how social solidarity and trust are built in a changing society (Frykman et al. 2008: 7).[8] I focus on the following questions: How do Finnish immigration officials and NGO workers view the family reunification interview process for Somalis, and what are the Finnish officials' understandings regarding family, children, and human rights that affect this process? The interviews[9] I carried out with immigration workers illustrate the complicated reality of transnational family migration and can serve as an effective tool for building an ethnological understanding of these processes in Finland.

Somalis in Finland

Today the Somalis are the fourth largest foreign group living in Finland after the Estonians, Russians and Swedes. Somali immigrants therefore comprise a major category of immigrants in the country. According to Statistics Finland's data on the population structure, the official total population of Finland at the end of 2014 was 5,471,753, of whom altogether 16,721 spoke Somali as their mother tongue.[10] The Somali population consists primarily of Sunni Muslims,[11] while Finland is a country in which the majority of the population is nominally Christian (Alitolppa-Niitamo 2000, 2004: 23–25; Martikainen 2004: 118, 126–128).[12]

Historically, Finland has been described as a geographical borderland between Eastern and Western Europe; for centuries it was part of Sweden, then an autonomous grand duchy within the Russian Empire some hundred years before gaining complete independence due to the Empire's fall in 1917 (see Lavery 2006). During Russian rule, Finland was open to migration from other parts of the Empire, and consequently other eastern minorities have impacted Finland's religious composition. For example, the history of a permanently settled Muslim minority (mostly Tatars) dates back to this period. This situation of openness to immigration persisted

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until the late 1920s. Then came a period of low immigration to Finland from the 1930s to the 1960s. The country was practically closed to new immigrants, while previous immigrants were integrated into Finnish society and granted citizenship. Before the 1980s there was also relatively little labour immigration to Finland. The number of foreign immigrant groups did not begin to increase until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 (Martikainen 2004: 116–118, 2014: 88–89).

From the early 1990s onwards, Finland began to take in new refugee groups on a larger scale. The arrivals were mostly UNHCR[13] quota refugees or independent asylum seekers from the conflict-ridden countries of Somalia, former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan (Martikainen 2014: 89). The Somalis arriving in Finland in the early 1990s were for the most part young and relatively well-educated men who had left Somalia voluntarily or had been sent, with financial support from their families, to seek safety and better living conditions abroad. Since then, the number of Somali immigrants has steadily grown each year, and the number of Somali women, families, and persons with little education has multiplied. One of the Finnish Red Cross workers I interviewed described the situation in Finland in the 1990s as follows:

> The Finnish Red Cross was actively involved in this reception of asylum seekers because naturally there hadn't been any experience of receiving asylum seekers in Finland, so no one really knew [what to do]. But since we had the capability anyway, we had these structures that permitted rapid actions that allowed us to set up this kind of reception activity in a short time. (NGO2/2012)

This example suggests how complicated the situation in Finland was in the early 1990s, when new refugee groups, who were mostly independent Somali asylum seekers, began arriving in the country on a larger scale. The Finnish press even started to speak of this new situation in terms of a "Somali shock" and an "immigration boom" (see Aallas 1990). In the early 1990s, immigration authorities did not know who the refugees were or why they had come specifically to Finland. It was not at all clear how they should deal with the immigration boom. It was therefore essential to involve the Finnish Red Cross and various other NGOs:

> Then the asylum seekers gradually began receiving residence permits, and they settled in municipalities. Then came the integration. And then it was realized that now the Red Cross also had to be involved in it: in what way could the Finnish Red Cross support that integration? (NGO2/2012)

In the 1990s, new immigrant groups often remained exotic strangers in the eyes of many Finns. Especially the arrival of the Somalis took many Finns by surprise, and their cultural, societal and religious background received much attention in the press and other media. The new situation caused a panic reaction and the Somalis came to be regarded as constituting a clearly distinct category onto which many Finns projected all that was inherently frightening. The Finnish press wrote about Somali immigrants in a negative tone using ill-founded arguments, and the debate sparked by the media is still ongoing (Alitolppa-Niitamo & Addullahi 2001: 1–2):

> All the journalists were terribly interested, and they had to get quick permission to come and make interviews, and the information [they gave] was completely confused. This kind of thing remained in people's minds, and for example somewhere it was calculated in Finnish markka[14] that an asylum seeker cost a bit over 8,000 per month, which included housing costs, subsistence, health care and all such expenses. So, in the opinion of the people, the asylum seekers got paid a lot more than those Finns who were living on government welfare, and this caused an awful [controversy]. [...] That misconception then lived on, and couldn't be stamped out [later]. (NGO2/2012)

Many Somalis now live in Finland's southern cities such as Helsinki, Turku and Tampere. For the Somalis, the road to Europe has not meant an easy life.

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The journey has been a long one, both geographically and culturally. The Somalis' cultural background and daily life practices together with a non-European language have created difficulties for them. Prejudice, racism and downright hostility undermine the integration of Somali families in Finland.[15] Particularly in times of recession, people seek scapegoats, and there have been many incidents in which Somalis have been accused of consuming taxpayers' money and giving nothing back to Finnish society. Various racist acts have become a more direct and visible phenomenon in Finnish society. As a result of attitudes based on prejudice and ignorance, the role of various NGOs and the Finnish Red Cross in connection with Somali immigration has increased, as one of my informants explained:

> Recently a lot has been said out loud, people have taken stances about this family reunification situation of the Somalis because perhaps it's been quite a unique situation, because there have been so many of these applications ... on the political side the question of family reunification of Somalis has been specifically raised as this kind of big problem; so, sure, we, when we've reacted to it, we've perhaps talked relatively more about the Somalis' questions than about the family reunification of Iraqis, for example. (NGO1/2012)

The Somali Family

In Somalia, families are often large because of a traditional polygynous structure (a maximum of four wives according to Islamic code) and broad and flexible family ties and configurations. Living in an extended family organization is common, and very often grandparents, the parents' siblings, foster children and even very close friends are regarded as family members living in the same household. Belonging to a Somali family functions like social insurance; it supports a family member in times of crisis and provides help and welfare when needed (Fingerroos 2014: 17–18; Lewis 2008: 11–12). In a transnational diaspora context, this type of family connection means responsibility: global communication networks encourage more people from Somalia to move to the West, and almost all who have resettled in Western countries send money to their relatives who have been left behind in far worse conditions. Cindy Horst has even stated that their life choices to a certain extent are determined by these familial responsibilities and pressures. Therefore, the transnational links between emigrants and those who stay behind should not necessarily be viewed as entirely voluntary (Horst 2006: 7–12, 18).

In addition to their identification with the religion of Islam and the nation of Somalia, Somalis can also identify strongly with their own clan. Genealogy forms a web, which holds Somali families together, and underpins political life. There are six major clans in Somalia and many sub-clans, sub-sub-clans, as well as different clan coalitions and clan families. Clan identity is strongly based and defined by belonging to a patrilineal genealogical line, which is visible in the Somali naming system. For example, if the name of a Somali man is Abdul Ali Mohammad, the first name is his own, the second is his father's and the third is his grandfather's given name. The learned and some elderly people can recount their patrilineal lineages as far back as twenty or more generations. In the context of diaspora, genealogy is still important but is at the same time undergoing transformation. Some younger persons in this situation reject the idea of clan altogether and emphasize instead Somali national unity and Islamic tradition (Elmi 2010: 29–30; Luling 2006: 473–475, 483).

Nevertheless, Somali marriage is traditionally perceived first and foremost as a relationship between two families and two clans, and marriage is viewed as the moment when the young spouses will move away from their parent's household and begin a new family unit. On the other hand, elderly parents never retire from family management, and adult children of both sexes are expected to care for them in their old age. Therefore, families are highly involved in what happens when young men make known their plans to marry (Abdullahi 2001: 119, 130–132; Lewis 2008: 14–16; Tiilikainen 2003: 33–34).

Millions of Somalis participate in families and kinship networks that have spread to different nation states across the world. Multifaceted social re-

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lations and different cross-border connections are important characteristics of Somali transnational family practices today. Finnish researcher Mulki Al-Sharmani has stated that family members and relatives in diaspora contexts make decisions about who will migrate, where they will go and how they will manage it all. Decisions, arrangements and financial support regarding the marriage of individual Somalis are thus collective choices (Al-Sharmani 2010: 504).

In Western countries, the right to family reunification is laid down in Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), and it relates to the protection of the family in these Articles (see Cholewinski 2002; Huddleston 2011; Jastram & Newland 2003; Schibel 2004). In Finland, provisions and policies on family reunion are ranked very high in comparison with other industrialized countries, but family migration is a polarized topic in local media and political debate (Heinemann, Naue & Tapaninen 2013: 185–186, 192). In Finland, the state decides whether somebody is eligible to enter the country on family grounds, and defines both what is a real family and who is a family member.

The Process of Family Reunification

For the Somali families waiting in front of the Finnish Embassy in Ethiopia to be interviewed, the interview represents a means of entering Finland, since the family presumably has a relative, a so-called *family re-unifier* or *sponsor* in Finland. The family re-unifier is a person who has been in Finland for some time, and on the basis of a family relationship with him or her, a person from abroad can apply for a residence permit to live in Finland. The family re-unifier is often a former asylum seeker who has him- or herself received a residence permit and sometimes even citizenship. He or she may also have moved to Finland in the 1990s as a child with his or her family and is seeking a residence permit for a compatriot spouse (see Walldén 2012).

Families from northern Somalia (including Somaliland) applying for permits to enter Finland through the family reunification process mostly come across the border from Somalia to Ethiopia and Addis Ababa. Living conditions in many parts of Somalia are poor: the political situation is unstable, and there are numerous paramilitary groups with large weapon arsenals operating in the country. Consequently, the stream of refugees to neighbouring countries has continued year by year. Most Somali emigrants dream of educational opportunities and a better life. They also have a support network provided by fellow countrymen and women already living in Finland or other parts of Europe, the Middle East or the USA (Alitolppa-Niitamo 2004: 51).

Family members seeking entry to Finland are interviewed at the Embassy in Addis Ababa or Nairobi, after which they may be granted a visa and a residence permit, in other words permission to enter and reside in Finland.[16] At the moment, there are four officials dealing with immigration issues at the Embassy in Addis Ababa. They interview all the Somali families and also the individuals who wish to enter Finland on the grounds of marriage. When Somalis arrive at the Embassy in Addis Ababa for an interview, they are often already aware of the process and have also discussed it with the interpreter, who is always present in the interview situation. Interviews at the Embassy are conducted with each family member, including children, and last between two and four hours per family member. The interviewers attempt to ascertain the family relations of the Somalis, and in unclear cases resort to a DNA analysis[17] carried out by the Department of Forensic Medicine at the University of Helsinki (Fingerroos 2014: 19).

Getting to the actual interview is a difficult and expensive process for the applicants. The family member resident in Finland (i.e. the family re-unifier) must have sufficient income (employment, private enterprise, own capital or pensions) to fund his or her family's stay in Finland. The family member's income is calculated from the income that remains after taxes, and pension and insurance contributions.[18] Today a residence permit application on the basis of family ties can only be submitted by the applicant living abroad. The family re-unifier cannot make an application on behalf of his or her rela-

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tives. Processing fees are also charged at the Embassies, and valid passports or other travel documents needed to enter Ethiopia or Kenya, where the nearest Finnish Embassies are located, are expensive for many applicants. Applicants must also be legally residing in the country from which they submit their residence permit applications, which can create difficulties for refugees without papers who have fled to Ethiopia from Somalia, for instance.[19]

Even after they secure the possibility for an interview, the interview situation at the Embassy is not an easy experience for Somali applicants. Nor is the situation an easy one for the interviewing officials, fraught as it is with numerous unpredictable cultural and linguistic problems. Many Somalis associate authorities with violence and fear, and an interview in a closed room sometimes causes them to experience panic reactions. Somalis generally do not have any experience of discussing their lives with non-Somalis, and they do not always know how to behave according to the expectations of officials:

> [The interview situation is affected] in a way by a kind of fear of authorities: Do you dare to speak, and what can you say?
>
> Then sometimes there are the kind of clients who […] have certainly never been in any office before. First they put their feet up on the chair when they sit down; then they pull their trousers up over their knees, spit into their hand and start to wipe them on their leg. We were sitting then in the same room, and I told the client to pull his trousers down and sit properly, otherwise the interview would be over there and then, that I can't bear to watch him spitting around here. (RA4/2011)

Such descriptions of interview encounters offer concrete examples of the difficult situations that can arise in the context of official processes linked to immigration.

The executor of the family reunification process is Migri, which also makes the final decision after a long process of deliberation. According to Finnish law, the time from the submission of a residence permit application to a decision should be at most nine months. In practice, it often takes much longer because the resources of the Embassy and Migri are insufficient to deal with the number of applications that need to be processed. Once a positive judgement is made by Migri, the visa and residence permit for persons travelling to Finland are prepared at the Embassy. The practical arrangements for the journey such as ordering flight tickets and escorting travellers to the plane are handled in Ethiopia by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Representatives from the Finnish Red Cross meet (if necessary) the arriving Somalis at Helsinki Airport and transfer them to the municipalities in which they are to be located (RA4/2011; Walldén 2012).

The family re-unifier is always the key person when an individual Somali attempts to enter Finland through the family reunification process. Finnish law (Section 37 of the Aliens Act) defines a family member as a person who is in an officially recognized conjugal relationship with or is the guardian or ward of the person in question. Other relatives, such as grandparents, grandchildren, adult siblings, cousins, foster children and others who may co-reside in multi-generational or fraternally extended households, are not included in this definition:

> When applying this Act, the spouse of a person residing in Finland, and unmarried children under 18 years of age over whom the person residing in Finland or his or her spouse had guardianship are considered family members. If the person residing in Finland is a minor, his or her guardian is considered a family member. A person of the same sex in a nationally registered partnership is also considered a family member. (Finlex 380/2006 [online])

It is evident that the family constitutes perhaps the most central unit in the migration process. The decision for migration is made within a family and is based on networks within it. Somali families often do not have enough money to send the whole family abroad, and therefore, quite often only one family member is sent abroad (for example a young child

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under 18 years of age) to gain residence and then act as a re-unifier for other family members; this person is not actually emigrating alone but as an agent for the family (Abdullahi 2001: 119–132; Alitolppa-Niitamo 2004: 51–52). Thus, families seem to be utilizing some knowledge of the immigration processes in Finland to make their migration projects for the entire family possible.[20]

However, general views held by Somalis on what constitutes a family or family members do not correspond to those stipulated by Finnish law (Walldén 2012). In the case of family reunification involving Somali immigrants to Finland, the process often centres around children who arrive in Finland before their other family members. In many cases, Somali families applying to come to Finland do not realize or know the meaning of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) nor how the CRC is applied in decision-making on applications for residence permits of family members. The permit can be granted only on the basis of family ties, and this determination is always made according to Finnish law. Moreover, the Finnish definition of "family" is always connected with the concept of the nuclear family consisting of an adult couple and their children. This is an example of how the state (Finland) in practice acts as a moral gatekeeper and decides who can enter the country. In this process, it is up to immigration officials to determine what a "real family" is.

Conflicting Conceptions of the Family

In modern Finnish, the word for family (*perhe*) means "a group of people living together usually comprising two persons living in wedlock or a common law marriage or who are registered as a couple and their children, or a single parent with his or her children or a childless couple" (MOT [online]). This terminological definition of the Finnish word includes the main characteristics attributed to "the family" in popular understanding, census statistics, and legislation. The Finnish family is thus understood in both common parlance and in information issued by the authorities to be a unit that is most typically composed of adult spouses or partners and, if applicable, also their children. Single-parent families and blended families, which include children born of an earlier relationship of one of the spouses, also belong to the category of typical families (SVT [online]). Other family compositions are exceptional and are defined and limited by different criteria.

It is interesting that the present conception of the Finnish family took shape only after the Second World War. In the nineteenth century, the word *perhe* was rarely used in Finland. The socio-cultural unit which served as the hub of everyday life for both rural commoners and elites was the "household" rather than the "family" per se, and before the twentieth century a more common designation for persons who lived and ate together in the same household was *ruokakunta* (literally 'food community'). Among rural commoners in the nineteenth century who formed the majority of the population, households often consisted of several generations, hired hands and maidservants as well as other workers and dependents who were not necessarily related by blood or marriage to the male head of the household. Finnish rural households up until the Second World War can best be characterized as economically adaptive communities of persons who pooled their labour and possible wage earnings, shared food, and ate, lived and slept in close proximity (although not necessarily under the same roof) (Häggman 1994: 135–43; Forsberg 2003: 10–11; Stark-Arola 1998: 78–86; Vuori 2003: 41–43).

The Finnish word *perhe* was established in its present sense at the end of the nineteenth century and in practice, the nuclear family consisting of a mother, father and children was conceptualized as the "natural" form of the family in Finland only in the 1950s; later it became a self-evident unit in both social life and social policy (Häggman 1994: 135–143, 215–216; Nätkin 2003: 37; Pöllänen 2005: 2). According to Finnish family researcher Katja Yesilova, today the Finnish family is regarded as the heart of society, with the welfare and happiness of the Finnish people being dependent on its wellbeing. Families are therefore given state guidance and financial support. In particular, Yesilova has criticized the idea that the nuclear family is essentialized and families

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that do not conform to this concept such as divorced families, single parent families, childless families, blended families and adoptive families are pathologized as *anomalies*: problematic exceptions, lacking and incomplete. Any changes to the structure of the nuclear family are seen as a threat to the welfare of individuals and society as a whole (Yesilova 2009: 11–12, 17; Vuori 2003: 44).

This problem-centred way of thinking and the essentialization of the nuclear family come into play unnoticed when new kinds of family combinations are created in Finland or are introduced through immigration. Particularly when a family comprising other members in addition to a mother, father, and their biological children attempts to enter Finland from abroad, a cumbersome official process drawing upon Finnish law is initiated to define the members of the family and to identify and exclude those persons who are categorized as being outside of it (Fingerroos 2014). Both interviews to determine family ties and the decision-making processes of Migri are thus affected by normative Finnish conceptions of family composition, which allow no room for alternative interpretations. One of the NGO workers I interviewed in Finland described problems connected to the conduct of family reunification interviews as follows:

> Well, certainly people very often think that they're talking [in the interview situation] about the same thing, but they're not. How does someone understand the concept of a foster child, or a guardian, or co-habitation? Does somebody live with you? Well, even if someone has been staying for a year, for example, in one person's mind they haven't been living [in the family], but in another person's mind they have. And if people live together, what does living together mean? Does it mean that you live in the same house or in adjacent houses? The way these concepts are used can mean quite different things [in different cultures and between different people]. (NGO3/2014)

An investigation recently conducted in Finland shows that the apparent bias inherent in the practises by the Finnish immigration authorities is directed particularly at persons coming from non-Western countries outside the EU, and that a more determined effort needs to be made to achieve equality and impartiality in decisions affecting immigration (Oivo 2013: 54). The twenty-first-century immigration of Somali families in particular has been framed in the media as such a significant problem that it continues to give rise to strong opinions. Anthropologist Marja Tiilikainen who has studied Somalis in Finland is justifiably concerned about the hostility directed towards Somalis and Muslims in Finland. When Somalis in media discourse are linked to terrorism and threats to the security of the state, it is difficult to achieve constructive debate about the welfare of immigrant families. According to Tiilikainen, Finland should now strive to ensure that resources are directed towards promoting the welfare and personal security of Somali immigrant families. Resources should also be allocated to eradicating factors that give rise to social inequality and exclusion (Tiilikainen 2013).

The image of the Finnish normative family clearly influences official decisions made by Finnish immigration authorities. Cultural differences in Somali family composition are interpreted negatively and rendered disadvantageous in the quest for family reunification. Families who seek entry to Finland become potential threats to an imagined Finnishness. Moreover, the situation and composition of Somali families are assumed on the basis of insufficient information, and in unclear interview cases, exclusion is almost automatic. At my request, the official whom I interviewed reflected on the questions that were asked in the interviews regarding family ties. Interviewers working at the Embassies must adhere to an extensive interview format, which they may supplement with further questions of their own. The answers given by Somali family members are during the actual interview situation entered into an electronic form, which is submitted to Migri for a decision (Fingerroos 2014: 25). In the opinion of the interviewed official,

> [i]t seems unfair ... that [the interview questions] are in a certain way constructed on the assump-

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> tion that people's lives have been such that they have lived in homes and that they have perhaps moved twice. No one has died, no one has been killed, no one has been lost. And no one has been fished out of a ditch [and adopted] into their family, and no one who doesn't belong to it lives in their family. And they don't wander here and there. And one of them doesn't go around searching for food all day long while the others squat inside because they can't go anywhere. [The interviews] are not based on that kind of world; instead they're based on the idea that people dwell in houses and they live and go to work and buy food and cook it and go to school. ... This, again, is my opinion. Depending on the interviewer, this aspect of the questions can be emphasized or deemphasized. (RA1/2013)

This depiction exemplifies the exclusionary processes of "moral gatekeeping" that are expressed at the geographical borders of Finland and the EU through various tacit practices and assumptions held by immigration officials (Iacovetta 2006; Myrdal 2010; Razack 2004; Schmidt 2011). Immigration procedures and regulations are founded on particular, morally charged understandings of how family members and a decent family life should be defined, and accompanying practices construe Muslim families as suspicious "others" not only in a religious sense but also racially and ethnically (Horsti & Pellander 2015: 6, 8; Pellander 2015).

My observations of family reunification interviews indicated that the behaviour of interviewers and, it can be assumed, senior inspectors of Migri, are influenced by a Finnish frame of reference regarding the family and children's best interests (RA1/2013; Fingerroos 2014; Koskela 2009). Immigration authorities base their activities on what they assume to be self-evident assumptions about a particular concept of the family, but which in fact is, historically, a rather recent development. The definition of family enshrined in Finnish law is narrower than in many other countries and it should not be reason enough for breaking up families or refusing to recognize, let alone accept, different family structures.

The Best for "the Child" Is Not the Best for All Children

In Western countries, the official stance is that human rights apply to all persons irrespective of their age. The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child was created in order to meet the special needs of children and secure their wellbeing. The Convention applies to all persons under the age of eighteen. Finland adopted this Convention in 1991, and it is binding on the state, the municipalities, the parents of children and other adults in Finland. Its contents can be condensed into three themes, according to which a child has the right 1) to special protection and care; 2) to partake of a sufficient share of the resources of society; and 3) to participate in making decisions concerning him- or herself in accordance with his or her age and level of development. This being so, all children should be equal, the good of the child should be the priority in all decision-making and a child should have the right to a decent life – even to the extent that the child's own views should be taken into account in society (Lapsiasia [online]).

The Finnish conception of the nuclear family and understanding of what is best for the child have become self-evident truths. These views have become axioms that justify limiting the circle of family members automatically and examining family ties from a single cultural and temporal perspective.[21] In Finland, the understanding of the rights of the child and of families as a global phenomenon tends to be quite narrow. For example, according to my data, when a Somali adolescent is sent out into the world at an age under eighteen, he is not a small boy who needs a mother's care, but is seen by other Somalis to be – and may experience himself as – a self-sufficient and successful Somali man, a *ninka reerka*,[22] who, even before he attains adulthood, is willing to bear responsibility for the family he has left behind (KSMA CD 13/10).

The question of what is best for the child in the Finnish debate on the family is inevitably linked to the issue of how closely attached the primary caregiver is to the child. The tightness of the bond between relatives is the central criterion for defin-

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ing who belongs to the family in the eyes of Finnish authorities. In family reunification interviews, immigration authorities interrogate Somali caretakers on this subject. The question of how it is possible for parents to create and ensure the material wellbeing of a child in war conditions or in precarious economic circumstances is not considered to be important enough to fundamentally affect the decisions made by the lawyers at Migri. Somali caretakers who pay human traffickers to send their children out into the world are questioned about their actions, since, from a Finnish point of view, smuggling children out of Somalia is regarded as a morally questionable and neglectful act. For Finnish migration officials, the human trafficking of children from Somalia becomes an indication of the weakness of the family bond. The rights of Somali children are by no means always realized in family reunification because the "universal" rights of the child as conceived by Finnish authorities do not always apply in cultural contexts with vastly different socio-economic conditions and cultural understandings of familial relationships (Fingerroos 2014: 25–26). A certain NGO official described the Somali family reunification situation to me in somewhat critical terms:

> Interviewee: Well, it's quite simple: the good of the child is not realized. The rights of the child are violated.
> Interviewer: Yes, yes. In Finland?
> Interviewee: That is my opinion… (NGO3/2014)

In the course of my participant observation of family reunification interviews conducted in the Embassies, I noted that Somali caretakers are always asked why they have sent an underage child out into the world or what the family knows about Finland. The answer is without exception: "I don't know" or "I haven't asked." By contrast, the interviewers do not concentrate on trying to understand what the Somalis have left behind, what kind of past affects their narrative strategies, their ability to remember, or how they conceive of family and life in general (Fingerroos 2014: 25). This ignorance of the Somalis' background has, at its most extreme, led to what some NGO workers see as arbitrary decision-making:

> it's arbitrary just because there are no guidelines or criteria. It's a totally unregulated area. Even the fact that someone has received international protection is not enough to prove that the person has departed for compelling reasons. (NGO3/2014)

Interviewers and officials who make decisions about family reunification lack the special training or education that would furnish them with a deeper understanding of Somali culture and everyday life. It is not a question of officials being unwilling to learn, but of resources and opportunities: the information has thus far simply not been available to them. Another problem is the fact that decisions on family reunification in Finland are made without any real background work or extended dialogue with those families who are trying to enter the country. This lack of knowledge unfortunately affects both the planning and the conduct of reunification interviews and decision-making in Migri (RA1/2013; Fingerroos 2014: 25–27).

Conclusions

In public discourse surrounding immigration in Finland, both immigration authorities and Somali immigrants are often faceless. My discussions with the Finnish officials working at the Embassy of Finland, the Migri office, the Finnish Red Cross, and other Finnish NGO organizations have provided concrete evidence of the fact that not enough is known about the substance of the work they do. Moreover, our existing research-based knowledge is removed from the problems associated with practical immigration work.

In migration studies, it is common that the researcher concentrates on the (cultural) understandings of transnational families, asylum seekers and immigrants regarding the global diaspora, rather than the understandings of immigration officials. I agree with Frykman and colleagues' (2008) notion that contemporary research in the social sciences

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contains a vast array of postmodern clichés with regard to the placeless, nomadic, fragmented, and uncertain nature of society in general. Ethnology, on the contrary, can provide a useful counter-balance to such rhetoric because it calls for a return to empirical studies (Frykman et al. 2008: 41). In my case, interviews have been a tool for reaching these multifaceted interpretations of Finnish society and family-based immigration processes. My interpretation is based on immigrant workers' own experiences of the work they do. I have shown that for immigration authorities and NGOs, family reunification is a complex process involving personally gained tacit knowledge – knowledge that may not be sufficient to make decisions in the best interests of Somali children and families.

In Finland, the modern concept of the family as a small, tightly knit formation consisting of mother, father and their legally-recognized children is a relatively recent development. Despite the culturally and historically specific nature of this normative family concept, it is viewed as a self-evident universal when immigration authorities make official decisions regarding the reunification of Somali families, and its application leaves little room for alternative interpretations. Finland's current immigration policy is officially based on the idea of multiculturalism in which Finnish authorities attempt to support the cultural and religious aspirations of new immigrant groups. In practice, however, Finnish legislation after the Second World War regarding immigration has been very restrictive (Martikainen 2004: 118, 126–128). Features of Somali family composition and family-based practices that differ from the Finnish family norm are interpreted as evidence of weak or questionable family bonds and lead to a denial of permission to immigrate for family reunification purposes. At the same time, those immigration officials who might be open to alternative perspectives and who might want to promote multiculturalism in practice and not just its rhetoric suffer from a lack of resources and lack of opportunities to exert influence on decision-making criteria and official policy.

Notes

1 See more at http://www.migri.fi/about_us.

2 The Finnish Red Cross is one of the largest civic organizations in Finland.

3 The Finnish Refugee Advice Centre is a non-governmental organization founded in 1988. It provides legal aid and advice to asylum seekers, refugees and other foreigners in Finland. Lawyers of the organization provide legal aid for asylum seekers at different stages of the asylum procedure.

4 The Finnish Refugee Council (FRC) was founded in 1965, and it is a religiously and politically independent development cooperation organization whose mission is to improve the basic rights of refugees and returnees in Finland and abroad. In Finland, the FRC's work is informational, educational and practical.

5 See Fingerroos (2014); Halme-Tuomisaari et al. (forthcoming); Helén (2014); Helén & Tapaninen (2013); Horsti & Pellander (2015); Leinonen & Pellander (2014); Pellander (2014); Tapaninen (2013); Tapaninen & Helén (2015).

6 See for example Al-Sharmani (2006, 2007, 2010, 2015); Ariza (2014); Bryceson & Vuorela (2002); Castrén & Högbacka (2014); Eastmond & Åkesson (2010); Gundel (2003); Luling (2015); Tiilikainen (2003, 2011, 2015).

7 Harinen, research paper (online).

8 My own tool for conducting ethnological research is oral history because it is ideologically and scientifically bound by its basic premise that memory, narration and experiences are keys to critical and new interpretations of society. (See Abrams 2010; Dunaway & Baum 2000; Grele 1991; Hoffman 1996; Perks 1995; Perks & Thomson 1998; Tonkin 1992.) *Oral history* is most often defined as a process of collecting data using tape-recorded interviews, reminiscences, and interpretations of events from the recent past that are of ideological or societal significance. But, oral history is also a *product of interviews*. Thus, oral history is both a research method and the product of research, and indeed of the writing process itself (Abrams 2010: 2, 88; Tonkin 1992).

9 I conducted my thematic interviews over a nearly four-year period in Finland and Ethiopia between 2010 and 2014. Additional source materials included participant observation of family reunification interviews conducted at the Embassy, and written field notes and photographs taken in Addis Ababa. The total number of semi-structured interviews of Finnish immigration officials and NGO workers exceeded 30, and some were interviewed several times. All interviews took place in work places, and recorded discussions were one to two hours long. I have changed the names and all other identifying information in my source material so as to protect my interviewees, and have made an official agreement on data protection with my informants and

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the official institutions they represent. All thematic interviews in my study closely reflect a natural storytelling situation in the sense that they were told to me in the context of a dialogue (Pool 1989: 26, 256–259; Portelli 1997: 52, 61).

10 Official Statistics of Finland (OSF): Population structure [e-publication]. Accessed January 8, 2015.

11 In terms of the four schools of jurisprudence, Somalis practice the Shaf'i school. Shi'ism rarely exists in Somalia today. Over the centuries, each Somali community has adopted slightly different versions of Islam corresponding to differences in traditional social organizations. Somalia's urban development has wrought great changes in religious practice, but Islam is still experienced as adding depth and coherence to common elements of traditional culture and provides the basis for the Somalis' strong national consciousness (Elmi 2010: 49–51; Lewis 2002: 16–17, 2008: 2).

12 The religious activity of Somalis in Finland has not been measured. What is clear is that religious organizations have assisted Somali immigrants in adapting to their new social environment. However, not all Somalis are religiously active and not all participate in Muslim organizations (see Martikainen 2004: 131–132).

13 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

14 The markka was the currency of Finland until March 2002. The value of the markka at the time Finland adopted the euro was 0.17 euros.

15 See Abdullahi (2001); Helander (2002); Niemelä (2006); Salmela (2004); Virtanen & Vilkama (2008).

16 Queues for applications based on family ties have been very long in the Migri office during the past years, but at the moment (2015) the situation is better. See more at http://www.migri.fi/services/processing_times/processing_times_residence_permits/1/0/queue_of_applications_based_on_family_ties_16582.

17 See Helén & Tapaninen (2013); Heinemann & Lemke (2012); Tapaninen (2013); Weiss (2011).

18 See more at http://www.migri.fi/moving_to_finland_to_be_with_a_family_member/income_requirement.

19 See more at http://www.migri.fi/services.

20 It has remained unclear (to me) how much knowledge Somali families really have of the Finnish law and rules. That is an interesting but very difficult question and it would be a topic for further study.

21 See Cheal (1991); Forsberg (2003); Gubrium & Holstein (1990); Nätkin (2003); Pöllänen (2005); Stacey (1996); Vuori (2003); Yesilova (2009: 13, 17).

22 In the Somali language *ninka reerka* means "the man of the household." When a boy grows up he has to be successful: to find work and to take care of his piece of land to ensure an income for his family unit. See Abdullahi (2001: 120–123); Niemelä (2006: 168–173).

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