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'Whenever mom hands over the phone, then we talk': Transnational ties to the country of descent among Canadian Somali youth

Marja Tiilikainen[±]

Abstract

This article focuses on the transnational experiences of second-generation Canadian Somalis, in particular their social ties to Somalia. It sheds light on the transnational family relations and practices of the second generation as well as the meanings, emotions and identifications that they attach to such relations and practices. The concepts of transnational ways of being and belonging are employed as analytical tools. In their everyday life, the youth engaged in family practices (communication, remittances, visits) related to Somalia, which was mostly nurtured by their parents' transnationalism. The youth did not often identify with transnational kin beyond such practices. However, they did combine transnational ways of being and belonging in a dynamic and complex manner. The article is based on 19 interviews with second-generation youth, which were conducted as part of a larger study on transnational Somali families.

Keywords: Canadian Somalis; second generation; transnational family; transnational ways of being; transnational ways of belonging.

Introduction

In a globalized world, everyday life is increasingly linked to transnational social fields that transcend the boundaries of nation-states (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). Likewise, many families are often transnational because family members cross borders and settle down outside the country of origin for various reasons, such as asylum, education, employment or marriage. In a transnational family, members maintain a sense of 'familyhood' and strive for the wellbeing of the family across national borders (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002: 3). Transnational connectedness often entails visits, phone calls and sending remittances to a country of origin or to relatives in other countries, but transnationalism may also be symbolic and appear as memories, nostalgia or an imaginary 'home' (Espiritu and Tran, 2002).

Transnationalism has been an emerging field of study since the 1990s (e.g. Glick Schiller et al., 1992), producing numerous studies on migrant transnationalism in particular. Recently, research on the life of the children of migrants, or the so-called

[±] Marja Tiilikainen (Ph.D. Docent) is Academy Research Fellow at the Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki, Finland. E-mail: marja.tiilikainen@helsinki.fi.

second generation, in transnational contexts has also emerged and is rapidly increasing (e.g. Levitt and Waters, 2002; Wessendorf, 2007; Levitt, 2009; King and Christou, 2010; Haikkola, 2011; King et al., 2011; Moehme, 2014). Some studies argue that the transnational ties of the second generation are much weaker than those of their parents (Lee, 2008: 11), whereas other studies contend that transnationalism among the second generation takes different forms and fulfils different purposes than among the migrants (e.g. Kelly, 2015: 284). For example, some studies have reported that the second generation prefers transnational contacts across the diaspora to contacts with the homeland (Lee, 2011: 303−304). Also, being engaged transnationally does not require transnational mobility, which is particularly important to consider with the children of migrants, who are not likely to be connected to their parents' homeland as intensively as are their parents. Nevertheless, they are often raised in a transnational social field and acquire skills to manage different cultural repertoires (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Levitt, 2009; Lee, 2011: 297). Transnationalism also impacts their development of multi-layered identities, and emotions such as pride and shame connected to the homeland may even play a role in this generation's self-esteem, sense of place in society, future aspirations and social mobility (Kelly, 2015).

This article investigates the social ties of Canadian Somali youth to Somalia, the country of their descent. It examines the transnational family relations and practices of the second generation as well as the meanings, emotions and identifications that they attach to such relations and practices.

The concepts of transnational *ways of being* and *belonging,* developed by Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (see Glick Schiller, 2004: 458–459; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004: 1010−1011), are employed as analytical tools. Levitt and Glick Schiller developed the two concepts to capture the practices and identity formations of transnational migrants. They define transnational *ways of being* as 'the social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than to the identities associated to their actions' (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004: 1010). In contrast, *ways of belonging* refers to 'practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group' (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004: 1010). Migrants may experience ways of being and belonging differently: some may have transnational social ties, without any conscious claims to particular identities and attachments in relation to these ties; others may have strong attachments to kin and communities elsewhere even without partaking in any transnational practices; while others still may engage in transnational practices with a strong awareness of particular identities. Migrants' transnational ways of being and belonging may also change at different junctures in their lives. (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004: 1009–1011.)

The article sheds light on second-generation Canadian Somalis' transnational ways of being by examining young people's social interactions, practices and connections with their country of descent and transnational kin. In addition, it

investigates if and how participants' transnational ways of being are connected to ways of belonging and, hence, reflect on their emotional attachments or identifications with transnational family and Somalia. I argue that the young people in this study experience transnational ways of being and belonging in a dynamic and complex manner. For them, the main sphere of engagement with Somalia is at the level of household and extended family rather than, for example, at the level of community activism (see Liberatore, 2015). Therefore, it is important to understand how they conceptualise (transnational) family, what the extended family means for them and, furthermore, what kinds of factors impact the creation of a sense of closeness and belonging between them and their transnational kin.

The article is based on interviews conducted in Toronto and Metropolitan Helsinki.[1] Nine families in each city participated in the research, and hence, the total number of families was 18, comprising two generations. In addition, I interviewed members of some of the participating families in Northern Somalia (in Somaliland and Puntland).[2] Furthermore, I conducted additional individual and focus-group interviews in each place.[3] For this article, I mainly draw from the interviews done with young people in Toronto. The total number of Canadian Somali youth from the participating families was 19 (11 girls and 8 boys). In some families, only some of the children participated. Eight participants were interviewed individually, while the remaining eleven were interviewed in groups of two or three, sisters or brothers only. Their age range was 16−31 years. Four participants had been born in Somalia and moved to Canada when they were 2–9 years old, nine had been born in Canada and six in Europe, the Middle East or the United States. Regardless, I refer to all of them as second generation.[4] Ten of the participants were either university or high school students, seven were employed and two were unemployed. The interviews were conducted in English, tape-recorded and transcribed.

All of the interviewed parents originally moved to North America to seek asylum from the civil war and instability in Somalia. Most of them had arrived in Canada in the late 1980s or the beginning of the 1990s. The majority of Canadian Somalis live

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[1] The data have been collected as part of a research project funded by the Academy of Finland entitled 'Islam and Security Revisited: Transnational Somali Families in Finland, Canada and Somalia (2012−2017)', which looks at the larger questions of everyday security.

[2] Among the participants in the study, there are also families whose roots and closest kin are in Southern Somalia, but due to security reasons I only travelled to Northern Somalia. In this article, I mostly refer to 'Somalia' without making a distinction between different political regions, unless a participant specifically refers to a certain region. This is done to protect the anonymity of the participants.

[3] The other data comprise focus group interviews with young women, young men, mothers and fathers; interviews with some NGO representatives, authorities and imams; and interviews with some parents and young people whose families were not part of the project but whose experiences have provided valuable additional information.

[4] I adopt a broad definition of the second generation as referring to children who were brought to the country of resettlement before 12 years of age (Portes and Rumbaut, 2005: 987).

in Toronto. According to informal estimates, the size of the population of Somali descent in the country is over 100,000.[5] Canadian Somalis have faced a number of challenges, including racism, islamophobia and a bad media image. (For more on Somalis in Canada, see Berns McGown, 1999, 2013; Tiilikainen, 2015.) The families in this study were diverse in their socio-economic backgrounds and residential areas. Some families were in a reasonably good financial position and thus could afford to pay for a university education for their children and/or buy property, whereas two single-mother families faced large challenges in covering daily expenses.

Next, I discuss three transnational practices that the studied youth engaged in, either directly or indirectly, through their parents and everyday family life, namely communication and relations with relatives, remittances and visits to Somalia. I also examine the meanings that the youth attach to these practices and the extent to which these practices are also connected to a conscious sense of identity and belonging among the youth. Finally, I draw some conclusions based on the findings.

Communication and Relations with Transnational Kin: *Family by Blood, Family by Heart*

The studied youths' connections with relatives in Somalia were primarily linked with the transnational ties and practices of their parents. Most parents stayed closely connected to their family members in Somalia and elsewhere, in particular to parents and siblings. Moreover, parents actively followed the politics and conditions in Somalia. The children, however, were not necessarily equally connected to relatives of the mother and father: in the case of a divorced or widowed mother, connections to the father's relatives might be non-existent or limited. Also, parents might not be equally active in maintaining family contacts; mostly the mothers served as a bridge between young people and relatives in Somalia. The mother was described as the one who stayed in regular contact with the transnational family, and once she handed over the phone, the children said 'hi' to relatives. However, telephone discussions with distant relatives were often experienced as formal and superficial and not something that a real relationship could be built on. A female student related the following:

> *I find speaking on the phone very awkward. … Like I spoke to my grandmother yesterday, and she just gave me duco [blessing] and then she just says, 'I love you, bye'. But we never talk. … This is not the relationship that I have with the people while I'm there with them.*

[5] The official population figures are significantly lower: according to Statistics Canada (2016), in 2011 there were approximately 45,000 Somalis living in Canada. This discrepancy has been explained by the fact that the census does not seem to reach out to ethnic minority populations in a reliable manner (Berns McGown, 2013: 26).

Hence, telephone communication between parents and their close relatives had different meanings than between young people and the same relatives. Even when parents tried to build a sense of closeness between their children and relatives in far-away places by asking their children to speak to them on the phone, without affective ties these relationships remained distant, and telephone contacts were not enough to create a sense of belonging. In addition to the lack of face-to-face contact, language skills also impacted the formation and maintenance of transnational relationships. About half of the young Canadian Somali participants felt they did not know the Somali language well enough to speak with relatives. Therefore, the children were dependent on their parents in their contacts with relatives, in particular with the older generation. One girl explained:

> *It's easier to keep in contact with mom's family because … they live in places where English is an option, like I can speak with them in English and … I can communicate with dad's youngest brother's family because they also know English. Um, but I can't communicate with the others, so it's harder to keep in touch. And even the ones in Somaliland … the ones I can keep in touch with the most, especially via Facebook, are the ones who can speak English.*

The second generation interacted most with relatives living outside Somalia (see also Lee, 2011: 303–304). Relatives living in places such as North America or Europe were more likely to speak English, and moreover, as they had valid travel documents, it was also possible to create social bonds via mutual visits. In addition, age impacted these transnational ties: young people often related that they mostly stayed in contact with cousins and other relatives of approximately the same age, with whom they shared similar interests and who were also comfortable with e-mail, Facebook and other social media applications. The parental generation, however, often relied on telephones in their contacts with Somalia.

For the young people, a 'family' meant, first of all, the close relationships pertaining to home and immediate family – immediate family here did not mean nuclear family, but rather people with whom they had lived or grown up, and with whom they had a meaningful relationship. For example, a young man described how he calls some family friends 'aunts', 'uncles' or 'cousins' because they had regular and close relationships with his parents and the family, and his parents used kinship terms when speaking of them regardless of the actual relationship. Usually, though, such friends belonged to the same clan as the parent(s).[6] These youth also conceptualized the family as an extended unit consisting of blood relatives from both parental sides living in different countries. Some of the distinctions that the youth made between these different types of families were captured by the terms

[6] In Somali society, belonging to a patrilineal lineage provides the basis for social identity. These lineages are further grouped into sub-clans, clans and clan families (e.g. Mohamed, 1997).

family by blood and *family by heart,* which were explained by a young woman as follows:

> *There's a lot of family that is sort of blood related to you, you know that you can rely on less than family that you've been close to, that you've known forever. That may as well be your uncle, your cousin or your first cousin, your first uncle. … I think it really is, it's about your connection to them versus any kind of anatomy or any kind of blood relation. But at the same time blood relation means a lot, it means that there's automatically a feeling of affection towards your blood relatives. You know, like when I was in Somaliland I didn't know any of my blood relatives there, that was the first time I met them, but again they welcomed me with open arms and that kind of rubs off on you … and there's already that build-in affection, you know, whereas if it's family by heart it's a process.*

For most of the youth, a blood relationship on its own was not enough to create a sense of belonging. They also understood a family to extend beyond the immediate one, encompassing more distant clan relationships as well. According to some participants, the whole Somali community was seen as a kind of family because community members help one another, and one of the boys specifically mentioned that for him, the Muslim community was an important family, too.

Remittances

Sending remittances is often seen as one of the key elements of transnationalism.[7] The remittance flows to Somalia have been crucial for the economy of the country and survival of the households, in particular after the civil war: it is estimated that approximately 40 per cent of the households receive remittances from abroad. In addition to the monetary value, remittances are important symbolically, as they are the 'glue' that help maintain and recreate social relationships (Sheikh and Healy, 2009: 19; Hammond, 2010; Lindley, 2010).

The parents in the study tried to send remittances when requested to do so, regardless of the financial challenges. Among the second generation, the willingness to send remittances was primarily motivated by respect for their parents: they were ready to help their relatives financially if their parents asked them to contribute and if they had money. For example, one young employed woman paid monthly around 1000 CAD to her parents to help them pay the mortgage and for monthly remittances, in addition to other living costs. One of the young men was planning to take over the job of sending remittances from his parents because he felt gratitude for the relatives back home who had raised his

[7] The existing literature on different types of remittances is extensive; see, e.g. Levitt, 2008; Boccagni and Decimo, 2013; Tabar, 2014.

father when he became orphaned as a small child. Hence, the young man felt obligated to help his kin in Africa, even though he did not know them.

However, most young participants expressed scepticism about the idea of taking over the responsibility of sending remittances in the future. Some explained that they would not even know how the process of sending remittances even worked since their parents had taken care of it, and they doubted that relatives in Somalia would be able to contact them directly if their parents did not coordinate communication between them. Moreover, since they did not know the relatives in Somalia, they could not verify if a person really was in need of money or not. They also felt that continuously sending money to the same people was not feasible, as it would create a cycle of dependency. Instead, they wanted to think of other ways to support relatives and create income-generating opportunities for them because, as one young woman described it, 'money is not growing on trees in Canada.'

Some participants reasoned, however, that even if they did not have strong bonds with transnational family members in Africa, charity was desirable from a religious point of view. One young woman said:

> *My mom does it [remits money] because that's her family. You know, she has that attachment; these are kids that she grew up with. So obviously, there's a bigger reason, more than sadaqah [voluntary alms]. But for me, it would just be for sadaqah, because they're my family, but there's no relation between us. But if they're my family, my mom's brother, my uncle, asked me for money, even if you don't know them, if I had money, I'd give it, 'cause it's sadaqah, right?*

Somalia: Visits and Images

Ten of the nineteen youth had visited Somalia. In addition, in one of the families the children had visited their divorced father in another African country. The visits to Somalia were mostly for brief family holidays with one or two parents to see relatives, but some youth stayed for longer periods, for example due to a parent's work assignment or to do volunteer work or an internship.

According to Lotta Haikkola (2011), a visit to a parent's home country is often transformative because it enables physical encounters with the relatives and first-hand experiences in the country, i.e. the building of meaningful relationships. The participants in this study reported that they were glad to see the places where their parent(s) had grown up and meet relatives whom they had previously only known through telephone calls or stories told by their parents. Many spoke of how warmly their relatives had received them. During the visits, they had learnt more about their family histories and clan background, religion and culture. In addition, these visits were important for building the youth's identities: many recalled that during their stay in Somalia, they no longer experienced being an ethnic or religious minority, something which they found to be new and liberating.

A visit to Africa was often described as a culture shock or an eye-opener. Seeing poverty and conditions in a developing country helped the youth understand societal differences between Canada and Somalia, and some mentioned that after the trip they appreciated more the opportunities that they had in Canada. But in some cases, the material conditions were far better than the children had expected. One teen-age boy said that before the trip he had imagined people in Somalia living naked in a jungle. He had been surprised to see that local people lived in proper houses in towns and were not starving. In addition, he had not expected that his relatives would be doing that well financially: according to the boy, the family in Somalia had a better house than their own house in Toronto.

For some of the youth, especially those who had been born in Somalia, visiting their country of descent meant going back home. For example, one young woman who had spent her first five years in Somalia explained how she had decided to visit the country on her own while she was in high school:

> *I took six months off school, I was working nonstop and I decided I was gonna go back home for the summer, so I went back for two months. I visited my grandmother, I just felt like I wanted to go back home and just reconnect. … It is where I was born, it's where my family is. That's where I plan to go back and forth, like I've never forgotten it, I don't wanna forget it. Here [Toronto] is also my home. … I don't think I have to choose one home, right; I have multiple homes.*

For this young woman, reconnecting with relatives and Somali culture was very important for affirming her sense of identity. Another participant, who had moved to Canada at the age of nine, also described a similar kind of attachment to Somalia and a strong feeling of being 'Somali'. For both young women, nostalgia for Somalia was part of their identity as Canadian Somalis and they strongly felt that their roots were in Somalia (see Wessendorf, 2007). Similarly, a young man who had moved to Canada at the age of nine explained that home for him was both Canada and Somalia. He, however, did not feel any aspiration to visit Somalia any time soon, because he had established roots in Canada: as he phrased it, 'the minute I came in Canada … I settled and adapted to the country very quickly'.

The emotional as well as concrete ties that the second generation formed (or not) with the country of descent were also shaped by the language skills and cultural and social resources that they possessed. For example, some of the youth utilised their improved language skills to take advantage of internship opportunities in local and international organisations that they had found with the help of their transnational families to advance their careers. Somalia was also mentioned by some youth as representing an opportunity for them to participate in work-related projects in the future.

However, not all of the young people who had visited Somalia were keen on going back in the near future. For example, one young man explained that, 'I don't intend on going there anytime soon though, because I have so many other things I need to work on in my life'. Some participants mentioned that they might think of having a vacation home in Somalia or staying there once they had retired, or else they saw themselves visiting their parents in case they returned to Somalia. Otherwise, they envisioned their future mostly in Canada or some other country. However, some mentioned that they might work in Somalia temporarily to help develop it.

Among the second generation, there were also some who had no interest in travelling to Somalia: they were disappointed about Somali politics and the continued fighting; they did not regard the country as being safe for travel; their parents did not have close family ties in Somalia anymore; or they felt that their lifestyle and personality would not be accepted by the family and local community in Somalia. One boy explained:

> *The way country is now, I don't have any aspirations to go back … I don't really care. Just a lot of fighting and fighting – there is no real reason for me to go back. Other than curiosity, just to see where my mom came from; other than that, I don't think there is a real need.*

Conclusions: Transnational Ways of Being and Belonging

The focus of this article has been on the transnational kin-based practices of Canadian Somali youth and the attachments related to these practices. The youth in this study lived in a transnational social field. Their main sphere of engagement with Somalia was at the level of extended family (see Liberatore, 2015), and the connections to the country were mostly maintained through their parents, in particular the mother, who facilitated the connections between the children and relatives in Somalia. The youth's transnational ways of being entailed direct and indirect practices, such as communicating with relatives, sending remittances and visiting the Horn of Africa, all of which were part of their family life.

The meanings, emotions and identifications that the youth attached to these transnational practices and connections were complex and mixed. The youth distinguished between immediate family members, whom they knew through shared experiences and life together, and blood relatives, with whom they did not have personal relationships. Their sense of belonging was predominantly based on the closeness of (transnational) family connections. The young people maintained direct transnational contacts primarily with relatives of their own age, those who they knew personally and with whom they could communicate in English and access through social media.

Remitting to relatives was mostly done out of respect for parents, but there was also scepticism about the long-term sustenance of sending remittance and the concern that this practice would possibly create a cycle of dependency that would

be detrimental to the recipients. However, for some young people sending remittances made more sense after they got to know their needy relatives in Somalia and had developed personal relationships with them. Furthermore, in some cases identification with Muslim *umma* re-enforced transnational ways of belonging, and, thus motivated the sending remittances to relatives as religious charity.

Compared to some other second-generation groups, such as children of Greek migrants in Germany King et al., 2011) or Italian migrants in Switzerland (Wessendorf, 2007), second-generation Canadian Somali youth did not visit Somalia regularly because of the long distance, financial challenges and political instability in the country, and hence, they did not develop strong personal ties to the country of their descent. For those youth who had visited Somalia, the experience had been eye opening and it had often re-enforced their identities as Somalis and increased their knowledge of family roots and histories. Some of the youth were able to make the most of their connections to Somalia. For example, educated youth who knew the Somali language and were well connected to the country through family ties benefitted from such opportunities as doing internships in local institutions. Furthermore, for some participants, nostalgia and attachment to Somalia and their relatives became a central part of their identity. By spending time in Somalia, young people also developed personal social relationships, and the family by blood gradually became family by heart.

However, for those young people who were not able to communicate in the Somali language, building relationships with family members in Somalia was challenging. There were also those who were not that keen on returning to Somalia after the first visit, or visiting the country at all. In general, the participants saw their future in Canada or other Western countries. Thus, the transnational resources and family experiences of the youth varied greatly. Accordingly, for some their Somali descent was a source of cultural pride, while for others it was a source of shame and frustration that suppressed interest in the country (compare Kelly, 2015). On the one hand, the lack of a strong sense of belonging to Somalia among the majority of the studied youth suggests the weakening of transnational connections, including a clear decrease in the amount of remittances that will be flowing to Somalia in the future. On the other hand, the fact that they live in a transnational social field may also gradually lead to the development and strengthening of their ways of belonging.

To conclude, the studied second-generation Canadian Somali youth demonstrated transnational ways of being through their engagement with family practices that connected them to kin in multiple national contexts, including Somalia. However, for the most part these practices were not related to strong emotional attachment or identification with relatives in Somalia. Rather, the youth exhibited varied and mixed ways of belonging.

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