

Scattered Families
Transnational Family Life of Afghan Refugees
in the Netherlands in the Light of the Human
Rights-Based Protection of the Family

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Scattered Families
Transnational Family Life of Afghan Refugees
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Rights-Based Protection of the Family

Paulien Muller



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Paulien Muller

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*Beshnaw az nai (Listen to the nai)*¹

*Listen to the nai that complains about the separation:
‘I have been cut off from the reed bed and humans
complain about my sound
The one who is cut off from his roots
seeks throughout his life to recover them.’*

Author: Mawlânâ Djalâl Od-Dîn Balkhi

Composer: Fazel Ahmad Naynawâz

Sung by the famous Afghan singer Mahwash on the CD Radio Kaboul (2003)

1 Nai: this word means both reed and flute.

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Shortly after the birth of my second son I started writing this preface. While I wrote down the first lines, my partner was taking care of our little one while his parents looked after the eldest during the weekend. Besides making a start with the thesis again, I was occupied with organizing the yearly reunion of my paternal family members, 23 persons in total, including my aunts and uncles, my cousins and their children. I was particularly looking forward to welcoming my aunt and uncle from the United States who would be present this time. This family gathering formed a nice opportunity to introduce our newborn to the people that were at the basis of my life, simply because they had been there from the start; in person, through long-distance communication, or in the stories that I heard. And once again I was aware of the pervasiveness and importance of family ties in my own life.

Unsurprisingly, the first contacts that I had as a child with refugees in the Netherlands were also through family members: through my mother who taught the Dutch language to newcomers in the Netherlands and through my father whose organization offered assistance to asylum seekers. I sometimes accompanied my parents to noisy and strangely smelling boarding houses and asylum seekers' centres where we were received hospitably in cramped rooms. A recurring ritual during these visits was being shown pictures of family members in far-away countries by people who often radiated an immense loneliness. These contacts, followed by study and research experiences on migration and refugee issues, have prevented me from taking family life for granted, and have finally resulted in this study on scattered refugee families.

There is almost nothing more private than talking about one's own family life, yet this is what I asked my respondents to do. My first and deep thanks go to the Afghan refugees who not only received me in their homes with generous hospitality but also shared part of their life stories with me. The resilience that many of these stories reflected never ceased to impress me.

I conducted my study at the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights (SIM) of the Utrecht University. There I got the academic space to explore what I believe to be an important topic and to do it my own way, taking a social science and bottom up perspective. It was challenging, and at times lonely, to take a rather different approach from most of my direct colleagues, but this process also made me much more aware of my own academic interests, weaknesses and strengths. I want to thank my successive directors Professor Cees Flinterman and Professor Jenny Goldschmidt for giving me the opportunity to do this research and for their support at difficult moments.

The pleasant and constructive spirit of my team of supervisors has been crucial for bringing this research to a good end. I want to thank Professor Bas de Gaay Fortman

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I commenced this preface with my family, and I will end with it too. Doing a research on scattered family life only intensified my gratitude for having a warm and wide circle of family members around me that will even be there 'if all else fails' (Finch, 1989). In particular, I want to thank my sister Ank Robinson-Muller because she helped me through difficult moments with her commonsensical and practical view on academic research. I want to thank my parents Meindert Muller and Mariet Muller-Rijs because their unconditional love and support have made me strong. I want to thank Frans Vastenhoud and Hennie Vastenhoud-Frans: without their generous help and presence it would have been impossible to bring a thesis and three children into this world in the same period of time. I want to thank my beautiful sons, Jacob and Simon, for coming into my life, turning everything upside down, and teaching me what family life is really about. I also want to thank our third little one on his way for providing the perfect motivation to finish the book. And finally I want to thank Eric Vastenhoud for encouraging me to take up the challenge of doing a doctoral research, for his never-failing love and support along the way, and for his courage to start our own family together in the meantime.

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