

# Cape Verdean womanhood in the age of female migration: towards transnational matrifocality

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## **Introduction**

This essay draws on long-term multi-sited fieldwork conducted in Italy (from 2003 to 2005) and Cape Verde, specifically the small fishing village of Ponta do Sol on the westernmost tip of Santo Antão Island (from 2001 to 2003). It explores how female migration has posed a threat to the long-standing patriarchal model of male authority that is interwoven with widespread informal polygamy<sup>1</sup> in Cape Verde, ultimately affecting gender relationships and forms of familial organization.

Santo Antão Island was once part of a migration model in which the majority of emigrants were men, while women stayed home to take care of their families and manage their households.

In fact, travel was a male predominantly domain for centuries before the archipelago gained independence, with men going abroad to be sold as slaves, act as go-betweens for the other Portuguese colonies or work as sailors, occupations that kept them away from home for long periods (Giuffrè 2007a; Sobrero 1998). Notwithstanding notable exceptions such as a period of government-mandated migration to São Tomè in which women played an important role (Carreira 1983) and episodes of internal migration from one island to another, in most cases women remained on the islands to handle domestic affairs and had limited opportunities to work in either public jobs, subsistence agriculture or small businesses (Giuffrè 2007a; Andall 1999; Finan & Henderson 1988)<sup>2</sup>.

Cape Verdean female migration has gained traction since the seventies (Carling 2002), however, particularly from the islands of Boa Vista and Santo Antão and to a lesser extent from São Nicolau island as well<sup>3</sup>. Cape

Verdean women most frequently chose Portugal, Italy and Spain as migration destinations, countries that have seen a dramatic increase in demand for domestic help (Macioti & Pugliese 2004; Carling 2002; De Lourdes Jesus 1996; OMCVI 1989).

In Ponta do Sol my research participants included women from different ages and social classes. Absent from this group – as my interlocutors have stressed – is a large portion of the generation of women in their thirties and forties, because these women have emigrated<sup>4</sup>.

This model of female migration soon became characterized with specific practices and patterns; by examining these, we can investigate in more depth the relationship between gender and migration<sup>5</sup>. In the case of Cape Verdean women, the demand for female labour has obviously affected the overall sexual division of labour as well as mobility, gender relations, reproduction and concepts of motherhood and womanhood. Women who migrate change their expectations about gender roles, intimacy and child care as well as reconfiguring the mother-child relationship. Whereas the traditional model of male emigration was often characterized as a “cyclical-temporary” process in that many of these men were employed on U.S. or Dutch sailing vessels or traded goods in West Africa before returning to Cape Verde, female emigration instead quickly became “permanent migration”. Although in many cases the women who migrate do not set out with the plan of relocating permanently to the host society, they do become part of the new social context, learn the language, form families and quite often end up settling down in these countries. The new country thereby becomes one of two points of reference for these women, the other being the place of origin, and their material, social and emotional lives unfold between these two points.

This essay focuses in particular on independent female migration as it has developed in Santo Antão, exploring the way this migration has affected life in the place of origin. As a matter of fact, this “feminine” migration process has brought about important changes in Cape Verdean society. These changes are economic, in that a large part of the formal and informal economy (remittances, goods to resell in Cape Verde, tourist facilities and businesses started by returning migrants) passes through these women. By entailing the renegotiation of gender relations, relations between women who migrate and women who stay, and pre-existing forms of social organization, this migration also gives rise to changes in social and cultural identity. As they return to their places of origin, migrant women put forward new values and alternative ways of being women: indeed, women who travel introduce forms of “innovation”. Bringing or sending home novelties, introducing new technologies, trends and models of womanhood, they become mediators between the place of origin and

the outside world. Mobility thus confers prestige, economic power and the power to “innovate”.

The relations engendered between migrant women and those who remain in the place of origin are complex and ambivalent. When migrant women return home on holidays, they enact a kind of womanhood that is particularly attractive to women who have stayed. Indeed, the latter see the former as embodying an ideal model of femininity. The women who stay want to emulate female migrants but cannot achieve this ambition, which gives rise to conflicting feelings toward those who have left: jealousy, envy, pride, and inferiority complexes. For their part, migrant women perceive this ambiguous attitude on the part of those who stay: they feel they are treated differently, sometimes even like strangers, even while being burdened with obligations and expectations. In short, they take on the complex role of insider/outsider.

At the same time, the women who stay gain new economic and social power as a result of the remittances they receive from migrant women: in fact, they are the ones who take care of the migrant women’s children and become “surrogate” family heads, reinforcing – as I will show – the matrifocal family structure already present in Cape Verde and giving rise to new, all-female transnational households. Female migration has also posed a threat to Cape Verde’s longstanding patriarchal model of male authority interwoven with widespread informal polygamy, ultimately affecting gender relationships and forms of familial organization.

### **Place and Methodology**

The research underlying this article was multi-sited (Rome and Cape Verde) but developed for the most part in Cape Verde. The primary and most intensive component, three years of continuous fieldwork, took place in the village of Ponta do Sol on Santo Antão Island in the Cape Verde archipelago. Santo Antão has a population of 47,000 located in three municipalities: Paul, Porto Novo and Ribeira Grande. The economy of Santo Antão is based mainly on fishing and agriculture, with tourism gaining importance in recent years. Last but not least, migrants’ remittances also represent an important part of the island’s income.

Until twenty years ago, Ponta do Sol was a small fishing village. Most of the houses had no electricity; there were no cars and no public transportation. In the last few years the village has faced serious challenges: some new hotels have been built, many family-owned guest houses have opened and groups of foreigners come to take sightseeing tours of the island every week. The Shell corporation opened retail shops in the neighbouring town of Povoação and a large, modern ship complete with all

the amenities recently joined the old, dilapidated boats running the São Vicente – Santo Antão route. Today many Cape Verdeans work in commercial and tourist activities as well as the service industry. Moreover, due to challenges brought about by emigration, class differences have become more deeply engrained than in the past.

The methodology I employed during my three-year fieldwork in Ponta do Sol is ethnographic in nature: I conducted semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant observation, collected life stories and took field notes. Thanks to my knowledge of the creole spoken in Santo Antão and a high degree of integration into the community, I was able to collect a large body of ethnographic data. This article is based on my interpretation of these data.

### **The patriarchal Cape Verdean model and its historical roots**

Although Cape Verdean society is matrifocal, gender relations have historically been structured according to a deeply patriarchal model characterized by marked male chauvinism. “Matrifocality” refers to a familial pattern in which mothers play a central role in the cultural structure and emotional life of the family and the mother-child dyad takes priority over married life (Tanner 1974). Some authors define it as “women-centred kin networks” (Cole 1991; Yanagisako 1977). Cape Verdean society thus revolves around a matrifocal core in which the mother-child dyad constitutes the primary framework of familial relations and mothers are responsible for the inner unity of their homes whether or not fathers are present. Cape Verdeans also view the parent-child bond as taking precedence over the marital bond. Women are responsible for caring for children and managing the household, while fathers are not seen as having any “duty” to support their children; their role is limited to that of authority figure (Lobo 2006; Giuffrè 2007a; Åkesson, Carling & Drotbohm 2012)<sup>6</sup>.

This social institution consists of a domestic unit in which the head of the family is a “single mother”. According to Finan and Henderson (1988), this institution derives from the fact that the only way most Cape Verdean women are able to access the labour market is through subsistence farming and the small-scale service industry; no other options are open to them. In fact, single mothers often occupy the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder. Their main resources are their children, both to contribute labour and provide assistance in their old age. It is for this reason that many women agree to have children outside of marriage.

Stephanie Urdang, who observed the national liberation movement of the women of Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau, notes that women in these countries have suffered tri-fold oppression comprising colonialism,

racism and male chauvinism (Lobban 1995). These different forms of oppression have converged into a unified structure of male domination. The roots of this multi-faceted male domination can be found in the complex web of historical processes that combined to form Cape Verdean society. In order to uncover these roots, it is necessary to analyse the relationships between the intersecting elements of gender, class, “race” and ethnicity. More recently, processes of globalization in Cape Verde that give rise to alternative ways of enacting womanhood and introduce new models of gender relations have also exacerbated this historical gender inequality.

To begin, I analyse how class, “race”, gender and ethnicity have been incorporated into the process of forging Cape Verdean society. According to the anthropologist Deirdre Meintel, the reality of Portuguese colonialism did not reflect the racial democracy its rhetoric celebrated: on the contrary, there was a strong racial ideology legitimizing a social hierarchy in which class and “race” were closely associated (Meintel 1984; see also Lobban 1995). The specificity of Cape Verde lies in the fact that it does not have a bipolar system of *branco/preto* (white/black) as found in other contexts such as the United States. Instead a new, mixed population emerged, the Creoles, in which racial differences were closely intertwined with social class. Indeed, changes in social class in Cape Verde have the power to “whiten” the individuals in question. Besides representing a linguistic and cultural category, “Creole” is thus a new, fluid racial category that can swing from one pole to the other (*preto* or *branco*) depending on the individual’s social class.

In this context, “black white men” (see Lobban 1995) are subject to marked socio-economic stratification and, at the same time, often simultaneously occupy subordinate and dominant positions as both slaves and slavers. As a matter of fact, the Portuguese used Cape Verdeans as intermediaries in other Lusophone colonies, often in the role of colonial administrators. The Portuguese colonial strategy therefore involved transmuting racial issues into cultural issues, positioning Cape Verdeans as both colonized and intermediators (Meintel 1984). Cape Verdeans are considered almost Portuguese, but at the same time inferior. The definition of “race” in this case is based on status. In the absence of a legalized racial hierarchy, status-specific behaviours also indirectly serve to maintain colour boundaries. Until independence in 1975, Cape Verde society reproduced a slavery-based model with strict social hierarchies; locals suffered violence at the hands of the authorities and were expected to behave with deference. These racial categories were quite fluid, varying according to the social context, and in addition to the categories of white, black and mulatto, racial identifications depended on classificatory criteria such as hair type, eye colour, ancestry and status.

Beyond describing phenotypic characteristics, “black” and “white” therefore comprise a specific racial ideology in which individuals’ skin colour is linked to their place of origin, moral behaviour and character. Racial barriers are subtly but constantly reaffirmed through social practices, especially on occasions such as festivities, marriages and legal trials (Meintel 1984). Indeed, there are a series of behavioural codes for maintaining the barriers between people of different statuses. This type of attitude is still very common in Ponta do Sol today. Here, it is very rare for a high-status woman to maintain an intimate friendship with a lower-status one. This is true in part for men as well, but mingling seems to be much more tolerated among men. Many people repeatedly told me: «It is not very nice that you embrace the women of the street», referring to my physical contact with certain women. According to Meintel (1984), marriage is the *par excellence* in which racial divisions have become explicit. According to cultural codes, marriage should only take place between women and men of the same social class; the bride must also be “pure” in terms of both skin colour and background, while *mães de filhos* are free to have sexual relationships with anyone (Meintel 1984). Indeed, Cape Verdeans on the islands continue to make an important distinction between a man’s *mulher* (wife) and his *mãe de filhos* (Giuffrè 2007a) that also reflects an important differentiation in status. While the *mulher* is the “official woman” or wife, a man can have many *mães de filhos* outside of marriage. These are women who do not live with him and often occupy a lower social status than his wife. Moreover, achieving the status of *mulher* leads to a significant rise in social standing (Giuffrè 2007a; Meintel 1984).

Pre-marital virginity represents an important value because it is through this feminine virtue that a woman’s status remains intact. Pre-marital sex, as evidenced by the birth of a child, lowers a woman’s status, making it difficult for her to find a husband in her own social class. The class/colour hierarchy therefore manifests explicitly in gender relations, in keeping with models developed during slavery. Slavery and semi-slavery, in fact, undermined and even prevented family stability, and the harsh conditions of survival and precariousness of slave life affected women most of all in that they were the ones who physically brought children into the world and had to take care of them in the event of forced separation from their husbands (Davidson 1989).

As sources from the colonial period indicate, colonists frequently had intimate relations with their slaves, with the result that the dominant group’s sexual power and economic power converged into a single form of power (Lobban 1995). At the same time, strong Catholic values were woven into the colonial ideology with the result that both married and unmarried women were expected to be “respectable” and “advanced” as

well as “Christianized”, norms that contrasted sharply with actual practices. In various documents from the colonial era, governors and Church officials denounced the permissive atmosphere in Cape Verde, harshly condemning «the black women who love their masters». In reality, despite these condemnations, the clergy and political rulers did not behave any differently than those they condemned: if anything, they were the first to “break the rules”. Women, not men, were therefore blamed for this “excessively permissive” atmosphere, specifically women who had sex with men who were not their legitimate husbands. It was therefore common in this colonial to scapegoat women while letting men off the hook. Authorities blamed women for “*vicio horrendo*”, corrupting men (Sobrero 1998). As Sobrero writes in relation to a 1871 document: «Mothers are women who one cannot marry, you can enjoy them for eight days or more but then you must leave them» (Sobrero 1998: 294). Moreover, especially in Santo Antão the type of slavery practiced was largely domestic, with female slaves preferred for looking after the home and children. The fact that most white people in the area were men also meant that the *branco/preto* dynamic as a relationship of power in a sphere of intimacy was historically formed as a male/female relationship.

In this context, informal polygamy was a prerogative of rich and powerful men, a sign of both economic and sexual power.

The story of Jon Serra, the colonial administrator of the island of Santo Antão, offers a clear example of this; as many of my interlocutors told me, Serra had a number of illegitimate children with multiple different women. According to Alfredo Allemão, an Austrian man who has lived in Santo Antão for many years and worked in the tourism industry, the main point is that, in the past, few men were suited to the role of *pais de filho*: indeed, in Cape Verdean society fathers were expected to be well-off men, and it was therefore normal for the wealthiest men to have children with multiple different women. Although a *mãe de filhos* had no specific rights comparable to those of a *mulher*, in many cases she received support from the man or even his wife. The *mães de filhos*, aware that their “lower” social condition prevented them from being wives, used to look for well-off men who could help them raise their children. There were also certain codes of conduct that husbands normally respected in relation to these women: for example, they were expected to not be affectionate with a *mãe de filho* in public or spend the entire night at her house.

Alfredo provided me with an account of what many elderly inhabitants of the island told him:

That relationship used to be like this: when a woman wants to have a child... “Ah what? That one is a man, that one has power”, and then she is happy because

every day he sends a litre of goat's milk, cassava, inhamé, potato, vegetables, sim senhor, huh, huh, and occasionally buys a lot of sugar, clothing, he does not give her money but he does help with clothes... and his wife is not jealous... women at that time, but even now, were chefe of the home, the man was never at home, and the woman had some knowledge, they had the trapiche<sup>7</sup> with oxen, they could prepare food for twenty or thirty people, the catchupa<sup>8</sup>, and they had no problems with that little girl in that little house who had children with her husband, also, there was no comparison with her... Between the old and the new generation there is a big difference (Alfredo).

Both my interlocutors' accounts and colonial sources indicate that, in colonial times, de facto polygamy was the prerogative of the rich and powerful. It has gradually been established as a model precisely as a result of the colonial legacy and its associated class ideology: these practices persisted even while their function changed. Today, in Santo Antão at least, the practice of fathering multiple children is not limited to rich men and, despite new laws and greater control over paternity, men appear to bear much less responsibility for supporting their children, leaving this task entirely to women. Carreira has pointed out that «All the mulattoes and blacks, regardless of social position, imitated the behaviour of the upper classes, certain in the belief that this was correct» (Carreira 1977: 28). As a matter of fact, male infidelity was largely tolerated as long as the man supported his family economically (Meintel 1984). Today, this support is no longer common and there is increasing tension between men and women in relation to gender roles. Furthermore, migration has created greater differentiation and social mobility, leading to a gap between those who profit from remittances sent by family members and those who are denied this opportunity. It seems that, as a result of this process, the black/white symbolic relationship is now occupied instead by rich Creole/poor Creole people, with associated conflict in terms of gender relations. In contemporary Cape Verde, the old racial/class hierarchy is thus mainly replicated through gender: men are completely disempowered and no longer support their *mães de filhos*, while the women in question are obliged to provide for themselves and their children. The Cape Verdean case would seem to confirm Stuart Hall's observation that race is lived through gender (Hall 1990, 1991; see also Gilroy 2003)<sup>9</sup>. Female migration has brought further and deep changes to this model of gender relations deeply rooted in Cape Verdean society, resulting in a dramatic process of renegotiation.

### **Female migration on Santo Antão Island**

Cape Verde has been undergoing a feminization of migration since the 1970s as part of a global context (Castles & Miller 1998) in which women



play such an independent role in migration processes that it makes sense to speak of so-called “independent female migration” (King 2003).

In the case of Cape Verde, this phenomenon is mainly due to an increase in demand for female employment in the countries of immigration.

In addition to being a relatively new phenomenon for Cape Verdean society, contemporary female migration displays characteristics that differ from the previous cyclical-temporary male migration model (Giuffrè 2007a, 2007b, 2013). From the beginning, it was characterized as permanent: Cape Verdean women migrate as domestic workers and insert themselves in the context of the destination country, learning the language and raising families; in short, their lives unfold in the place of immigration or, at best, in the middle between two worlds: the place of origin and that of immigration. Many of these women are single mothers, but they also include young women such as Nita that migrated to Rome when she was 15 years old to work and join her mother, who had emigrated when Nita was three and a half. In other cases, the women migrate to provide a livelihood for their entire families of origin. This was the case with Joana’s sister, who migrated to Holland in order to support her whole family, composed of her mother and several brothers and sisters. In a similar case, Vitoria and her children are supported by her sister who migrated to Italy and Arminda’s sister sends packages, dresses, goods and money from America for Arminda, her children and their mother. Almost all of the Cape Verdean women I spoke with dream of migrating one day, hoping that it would allow them to improve the quality of their lives and that of their children and family, establish a professional future for themselves, ensure personal fulfilment and allow them to save up to buy a house.

Female migration has profoundly affected Cape Verdean society economically, socially and in terms of cultural identity. On Santo Antão island and especially in Ponta do Sol, migrant women contribute to reinforcing a social model based on matrifocality that shapes Cape Verdean society in two specific ways. The new economic power that migrant women gain from sending home remittances leads them to take on the role of household heads. At the same time, however, their children are raised not by their fathers but by aunts, grandmothers or even female friends or neighbours who remained in Cape Verde, giving rise to a specific type of family structure some authors define as a “transnational triangle” (Åkesson, Carling & Drotbohm 2012) in which the biological mother, putative mother and children interact.

The main role of surrogate mother in this triangle is assumed, however, by so-called “grandma-moms”. Many of my interlocutors spoke about this figure:

My mother emigrated in 1974... I was three and a half... I grew up with my grandmother, she is my mother, and that is why I don't call my mother "mom" like my grandmother... I don't call her "grandma"... I still haven't found myself a grandma (Nita).

This model, which predates the trend toward female migration, was so common in Cape Verdean society that the majority of my interlocutors had grown up with *pais de criação* (foster parents) (Giuffrè 2007a)<sup>10</sup>. In fact, children from the poorest families often participated in a kind of "temporary adoption" in which they went to live with relatives or wealthier neighbours for a few years in order to learn a trade.

This was the case with Maria Giulia, who began her life story like this:

I... when I was young, my life was like a novel, I did not grow up with my parents, but with old people... but old people who were worth it... they didn't send me to school, but they did raise me... so well that even now I can still use what they taught me, and they taught me domestic work, they taught me how to live with other people, that's why I pray for them every day, because they raised me.

Obviously female migration has benefited greatly from the ease with which children are relocated from one home to another and the fact that growing up with several foster parents is a normal part of the socialization process in Cape Verde. Furthermore, the idea that women should be the ones to provide financial support for their children has contributed to the fact that women currently view emigration as their only chance to be good mothers and give their children a better future. Compared to other contexts in which it is deemed immoral for mothers to leave home, Cape Verde is different than other contexts in that transnational motherhood is considered socially normal and acceptable (Åkesson, Carling & Drotbohm 2012; Giuffrè 2013, 2012, 2007a, 2007b)<sup>11</sup>. The experience of female mobility is not free of ambiguity, however: although the "good mothering" of migrant women is not called into question, relationships between women are – as we shall see – subject to renegotiation. From an economic point of view, female migration is similar to male migration in that the remittances involved have had a powerful impact on Cape Verdean society.

Moreover, for Cape Verde and the small community of Ponta do Sol, emigration has certainly represented a key factor of economic development and social change, fuelling a rise in investment capacity, consumption, and social mobility; at the same time, it has also constituted the residents' best chance for acquiring prestige and climbing the social ladder, and has meant a substantial improvement in quality of life for both migrants and their relatives in the places of origin (Carling 2003). The migrant family members sending remittances and presents are mainly wo-

men, and they introduce new goods (appliances, electronics, clothing and cosmetics) into Cape Verdean life and act as trendsetters, influencing the habits and tastes of the Ponta do Sol community. The community in the place of origin recognizes contact with the outside world – the “power” of mobility denied to those who stay – as an added value that also lends prestige to the families of those who have it<sup>12</sup>. The place of origin represents highly symbolically important site for all of the women I interviewed, both as a privileged point of reference and in their perceptions of their own migration experiences. Summer visits, which generally occur every other year and last about a month, are therefore events of utmost importance both for the migrant women, who spend months preparing (mainly by purchasing gifts) and for the relatives who stayed on in the place of origin. For these locals, the arrival of a family member from abroad entails gifts and news as well as a chance to be together again<sup>13</sup>.

Migrant women – moving between two different “worlds” as they return cyclically to their places of origin – become the fulcrum on which all social ties between those who leave and those who stay behind depend, as migrants are often asked to take objects, letters and money overseas and, at the same time, their arrival in the place of origin or residence often represents an important opportunity to update their countrymen on both sides of the ocean with news from relatives and friends.

It might seem that the relationship between women who leave and women who stay could not be anything but positive. On careful analysis, however, the relationship appears to be fairly complex, intricate and deeply ambiguous.

### **Comparative models of womanhood: women who leave and women who stay**

As previously noted, a certain amount of ambiguity in relationships between migrants and those who stay in the place of origin seems to be part of the migration process in many different migration contexts (Giuffrè 2010, 2007b; Di Carlo & Di Carlo 1986; Catani 1983a, 1983b; Huber 1977). My interlocutors frequently told me that they never felt at home: they felt like “foreign” strangers in the new countries but were often treated like strangers in their places of origin, too, given nicknames denoting their foreignness such as “the Dutchwoman,” “the American”, “the Italian”.

The migrant embodies “success” or novelty, which is why having a migrant family member – with the image of migratory “success” it brings – represents a privilege that allows the family to acquire greater standing and respectability within the community. This in turn entails a number of obligations and behaviours the migrant must meet and enact in order

to satisfy the expectations of those who stay. Finally, it is important that we not underestimate the fact that, while remittances are undoubtedly an important factor of development in the place of origin, they also cause tensions stemming from the asymmetrical and mutually dependent relationships that ultimately develop between those who leave and those who stay (Drotbohm 2010; Åkesson 2009; Carling 2008). The relationships between those who leave and those who stay are therefore caught up in a web of debit and credit, duties and expectations that give rise to further ambiguity. This “ambiguity”, in a sense inherent to the migration process, seems to be exacerbated in the case of female migration. Although male migrants bring innovation and change during their periodic returns, they do not call into question existing gender relations; rather, they strengthen these relations by re-enacting the well-established model in which women stay home to care for the children and men travel for work.

Migrant women, on the contrary, radically call into question gender identities and the very role of women within Cape Verdean society by proposing a new model of femininity. On their return to the place of origin, these migrants enact a model of womanhood that clashes in some ways with the model aspired to by the women who stay. The new model is simultaneously criticized and longed for by the women who do not migrate. In this culture of female migration that seems to have emerged, leaving represents above all the chance to become a different woman. All of the women I spoke with who had stayed in Cape Verde dream of migrating, but in most cases it would be impossible. As a result, the model of travelling women proposed by these migrants contrasts with that of women who would like to leave but are forced to stay. In this case migration also involves “identity fantasies” (see Pinelli 2011; Salih 2003), not only for those who leave but also for the women who stay and imagine potential new and different lifestyles, horizons and ways of being. Female migration processes fuel such fantasies but, at the same time, often produce frustration among the women who are not able to achieve them.

One of the numerous interlocutors I engaged with who manifested this desire described it in this way:

My greatest dream, for example, is getting on a ship and asking God to give me a chance to buy a house, because all of my dreams are about buying a house... In every dream I have there's a house, all I want is a house, even a small one, but a house (Zinha).

As this quote suggests, women generally emigrate in order to save money to buy houses and help their families financially. Initially, as many of these interviews show, they intend to come back, but in most cases they end up staying because they find stability in the place of migration. And yet

some women's freedom to migrate is based on the immobility of other women, those who manage the households and raise the children of the ones who migrate. Besides creating collaborative relationships, this also causes tensions and ambiguity. The feeling explicitly expressed by many of the women who stayed was frustration at having to stay in the place of origin in order to enable those who migrate to "make lives of their own". At the same time, however, these women benefit from the remittances of the migrants and acquire new economic power as a result. The issue of remittances itself causes tension, as well, because the migrant women often wonder whether the money they send to the foster mothers is being well spent and going to benefit their children. Feelings about the women who have emigrated are thus mixed: admiration, jealousy, envy, pride and a sense of inferiority.

In a sense, as Salih (2003) points out, it is common for migration to give rise to certain contradictions inherent in dual form of social belonging, such as when migrants belong to one social class in the place of origin and a different one in the place of migration. In these cases Cape Verdean women effectively occupy different social roles and identities in their places of destination and places of origin, during summer visits.

In the place of origin, migrant women enjoy rights and privileges acquired thanks to the prestige, newly-achieved status and economic and symbolic power gained through mobility, including the increased well-being they are able to secure for their families, the added value of knowing different parts of the world and the ability to introduce the "latest" trends from "outside". When a migrant woman returns to Ponta do Sol, her relatives welcome her with lavish celebrations, prepare the best room in the house for her and give her the utmost respect. Just as she spends months preparing for her return, all those in the place of origin – as I observed – engage in large-scale preparations for "their migrant" to come home. Amid this hustle and bustle, perhaps the desire to properly welcome the guest gets mixed up with a desire to demonstrate that they are not so "backward" after all, or to show that they have made good use of the remittance money. During her stay, the migrant woman becomes the centre of her whole family's social life. Not even her relatives treat her the same as before. Although they may have mixed feelings about it, even relatives come to see those who migrate as "different". The rift between those who have stayed and those who have left is caused by the event of migration itself, rendering those who have left irreversibly different. And yet this process of becoming different is built on the ambiguity of the new models of womanhood enacted by migrant women even while simultaneously complying with the public narrative about what it means to be a "good mother" by supporting their children. The breakdown between different

feminine models hinges entirely on femininity: migrant women seem to be “good mothers”, and yet they are also “ambiguous women” whose way of being plunges existing gender relations into a state of crisis.

### “Good mothers” or “ambiguous women”?

Within the dynamics of female mobility, the “difference” embodied by migrant women is viewed with ambivalence because it not only displays their economic success but also entails a new, different way of being women that women who have stayed find particularly attractive in that it appears to represent a female ideal that they aspire to but cannot attain. As I have shown, emigration by Cape Verdean mothers is considered socially normal and acceptable. The distinction is not between “good mothers” and “immoral mothers”, therefore, but rather between two somewhat antithetical models of womanhood. Indeed, this form of diversity brings together two apparently contrasting elements. On one hand, there is a rupture with the pre-existing patriarchal model of marked male authority that confines women to subordinate roles. Migrant women demonstrate independence, they are enterprising, they earn money, they improve their families’ quality of life, they travel and dress in a way that those who have stayed perceive as “fashionable”. When migrant women return to their places of origin, they are treated almost like tourists in the sense that they are allowed to engage in certain behaviours – such as going out alone at night or frequenting bars – without causing a scandal, whereas the same behaviours would entail extremely negative judgment and social stigma if enacted by a female resident. On the other hand, migrant women are paradoxically the only ones able to achieve certain goals that the women who stay consider essential to embodying the definition of a fully accomplished woman according to “traditional” standards: namely celebrating a “traditional wedding”, which is viewed as a crowning achievement dreamed of by all women but only attained by a select few<sup>14</sup>.

Having a child out of wedlock or becoming a teenage mother implies powerful social stigma (Grassi 2004; Finan & Henderson 1988), so achieving this feminine ideal requires Cape Verdean women to find companions and get married. The male model, as I have shown, is strongly opposed to this aspiration, and clashes inevitably ensue. Masculinity in Cape Verde is strongly tied to sexuality and fatherhood, but also to fathers’ freedom to leave the home and delegate domestic and childrearing duties to mothers even when they do live under the same roof (Giuffrè 2013, 2007a; 2007b; Åkesson, Carling & Drotbohm 2012). As a result, women must contend with a paradoxical situation that is completely different from the ideal they had hoped for. They often wind up as single *mães de filhos* trapped

in relations of *de facto* or “informal polygamy” in which fathers do not provide any child support (Giuffrè 2007; Grassi 2003; Finan & Henderson 1988).

Despite these challenges, the ultimate goal of celebrating a “traditional” wedding remains a priority for many women, and in contemporary contexts it takes on different and new connotations in the case of migrant women.

Migrant women maintain strong ties with their places of origin and what they see as the traditions of their homelands. In particular, a wedding celebrated “according to tradition” represents the most important moment in their lives, the triumph of their self-fulfilment as women. Thus migrant women often return to their places of origin to get married, with a lavish display and the full participation of the whole community. In so doing they simultaneously enact the achievement of both the ideal Cape Verdean model of femininity and their aspirations as migrants, with the subsequent opportunity to buy a house for themselves and their children, which – as I have noted – is the main ambition of most female migrants. At the same time, by using European clothing and objects from their migration places in the wedding to make the celebration even more magnificent, these women renegotiate “traditional” ceremonies in new, transnational ways (Giuffrè 2007a)<sup>15</sup>.

In this sense, marriage is no longer a means of achieving higher status; it instead becomes a way of sanctioning the status shift that has already taken place and celebrating the women’s migratory success.

It is precisely this capacity to overcome the paradox of the feminine model in Cape Verde, and to combine “tradition” and “modernity,” local and global elements that makes this new way of being a woman particularly attractive to those who have stayed. While on the one hand celebrating a “traditional wedding” allows migrant women to be recognized in Cape Verdean society as accomplished women, rupturing the male pattern of behaviour that hinders the achievement of such a goal, on the other hand the independence, mobility and power attained by migrant women model a way for women to liberate themselves from male domination. This has powerful repercussions on pre-existing gender relationships for the women who have stayed in the place of origin.

During my field research, I witnessed a panorama of particularly discordant male-female relationships, so difficult they might aptly be described as a “crisis in gender relationships”. Indeed, many of my female interlocutors appeared to question their subservience to male authority yet men, for their part, did not appear to accept these women’s new awareness.

These conflicts in gender relations occupy a large part of young women’s lives and narratives. In the accounts I collected, women complai-

ned of pervasive incomprehension in their relationships with men due in part to their increased awareness of their rights and the fact that their expectations of men had risen. The women I interviewed described men as “irresponsible,” “violent”, “profiteers” and “womanizers”, “unfaithful”, “liars” and “alcoholics”, as well as pointing out that they were negligent in supporting and raising their children. Women in Ponta do Sol were very critical of these male behavioural patterns:

I think men beat women now more than they used to... could be... I think men used to be calmer, they had more respect for their women, but now they have none, now... I think men and women have the same rights (Filomena).

Men in Cape Verde, once you've had a baby with them, they leave you and go looking for another woman and leave you alone with the baby (Joana).

This situation reported by my female interlocutors, characterized by marked male authority and violence toward women, a high percentage of single mothers as family heads, informal polygamy and fathers failing to provide child support, is not new in Cape Verdean society (Åkesson, Carling, Drotbohm 2012; Giuffrè 2012, 2007a, 2007b; Grassi 2003; Finan & Henderson 1988). Nonetheless, although at one time most women accepted these conditions (Carreira 1977), the same cannot be said of women today. Gender relations appear to be in serious crisis and radical changes are taking place.

## Conclusion

What seems to have profoundly changed in Santo Antão is not so much gender relations themselves but people's perceptions of gender relations. While models of male-female relations in some ways represent an element of continuity with the past, the growing tension surrounding gender relations is a partially new phenomenon produced by changes in women's attitudes that demonstrate their new awareness of ambitions and possibilities as women. This change is obviously caused by a variety of factors ranging from globalization to increased tourism, the diffusion of television and the influence of Cape Verdean feminist intellectuals such as Vera Duarte, Fátima Bettencourt and Dina Salústio whose writings have long addressed the emancipation of women. And yet, as in the case of the women in Ponta do Sol, we cannot underestimate the role played by the process in which women who have stayed compare themselves to women who have migrated, especially in terms of the new models of womanhood these women enact.

Many women told me that their attitudes have changed in general and that they now act independently of their partners and the fathers of their



children, feeling supported in these choices by migrant women. Even when women are not yet in a position to effectively change the terms of their relationships, they no longer passively accept them; they do, however, often behave ambivalently, at times objecting to the “male chauvinist culture” in which they live and at other times justifying and reproducing it. What is certain is that their perceptions of these relationships have undergone a radical shift.

By enacting new models of womanhood, female migrants play an important role in the process through which the women who have stayed in Cape Verde creatively negotiate alternative ways of being and acting. Furthermore, migrants’ remittances enable the women who stay to become “family heads” in a system of transnational co-motherhood, reinforcing both the matrifocal model and their own economic power while simultaneously weakening male authority and the pre-existing patriarchal system (Giuffrè 2012). The fact that women are able to acquire power through emigration opens an opportunity for them to improve their social status through economic power in a way that bypasses men; marriage with men who have the power to transform them into *mulheres* (as opposed to *mães de filhos*) no longer represents the only channel of advancement. While previously women were able to improve their status through marriage, today they are able to advance due to the new power and prestige they have acquired through emigration (Giuffrè 2007a). Female migration thus puts highly articulated processes into play while radically redefining not only the relations between women who stay and women who leave, but also between men and women, thus initiating a shift from a matrifocal society characterized by male domination to a matrifocal one characterized by female independence.

## Notes

1. In relation to Cape Verde I use the definition of “informal polygamy” coined by Finan and Henderson (1988). This indicates an informal relationship that does not involve the cohabitation or the obligation for men to support their children economically. The two scholars consider the “informal polygamy” of Cape Verde to be very different from the “visiting union” described by Roberts and Sinclair (1978) in relation to the Caribbean in that visitor relationships in the Caribbean tend to stabilize over time while in Cape Verde, even if the man recognizes his child and may continue to maintain informal ties with the family over a long period, his relationship with the woman remains informal. Furthermore, in many cases the men in question are already married to other women. I prefer to use the term polygamy instead of polygyny because, while it is true that men often have multiple relationships with different women at the same time, it is also true that these women end up having more than one *pais de filhos* (fathers of sons) as well. See the distinction between *mae de filho* and *mulher* in the following sections.

2. In the case of Ponta do Sol, for instance, women have distinguished themselves in the fish, grocery, cigar and beverage retail markets.

3. As far as São Nicolau island is concerned, the consistent flow of female migrants is almost exclusively directed toward Italy, mostly in the first phase of migration (Andall 1999). It is worth noting that the first Cape Verdean woman to emigrate to Italy came from São Nicolau in 1962 (Altieri 1992). Maria de Lourdes Jesus's book, an account of her migration from São Nicolau island, holds some relevance to this study (De Lourdes Jesus 1996).

4. Note that the 2010 Santo Antão population census of all three municipalities on the island recorded a significant difference in male and female populations, with more men than women (20.803 women to 23.112 men) (The Cape Verde [National] Institute of Statistics report, [www.ine.cv](http://www.ine.cv)).

5. Regarding the relationship between gender and migration see, amongst others, Chant (1992); Boyle & Halfacree (1999); Salih (2003); Mahler & Pessar (2001, 2003, 2006); Lutz (2010), Giuffrè (2014).

6. See Grassi (2003) and Meintel (1984) for discussions of matrifocality in Cape Verde. Matrifocality is synonymous with neither matrilineality nor matrilocality, and may coexist with forms of male domination. The article by J. Brogger and D.D. Gilmore (1997) makes some relevant points about matrifocality in Spain and Portugal. The authors note that, in the Iberian peninsula, matrifocality is sometimes associated with greater female power and at other times not: for example, in the case of southern Spain matrifocality coexists with male dominance and machismo within an honour-and-shame value system. Some similarities can be found in what Belmonte (1989) calls the Neapolitan "mother-centred, father-ruled" family, that is, a familial system in which fathers are evanescent but not acquiescent.

7. The traditional mill or press that is currently powered by engines instead of oxen but continues to distil the renowned grogue, Cape Verde's typical aguardente.

8. A Cape Verdean dish made of beans, corn vegetables, meat or fish.

9. According to Gilroy (2003: 169), «you can argue that an amplified and exaggerated masculinity has become the central reference and demonstrative of a culture of compensation that (self) consciously soothes the pain of the powerless and subordinates. This masculinity and its complementary female counterpart have become special symbols with which race builds the gender difference. They have lived and naturalized within those precise models of family life on which it is supposed to be based playback of racial identity. These gender identity become the exemplification of cultural differences "immutable" apparently generated by the absolute ethnic difference».

10. Literally "parents for one's growth".

11. Studies on migrant women in Italy have highlighted two opposing models of motherhood among those who leave and those who stay. The old generation of Moldavian women, for instance, is highly critical of mothers who migrate to Italy and leave their children in the place of origin (Vietti 2010). The same sense of ambiguity applies to Romanian migrant women, whose role oscillates between "traitor" to their marital duties and "good mother" (Cingolani 2009); the same with Ecuadorian women, perceived according to a gamut of representations ranging from heroine-mothers, devoted to sacrifice because they had no choice, to mothers uninterested in having relationships with their children (Boccagni 2009). See also Giuffrè & Riccio (2012).

12. The power of mobility is even greater in the contemporary context, with the closure of borders and stricter controls on immigration (Carling 2003; Bauman 2000). According to Bauman, mobility has become a metaphor for social stratification and immobility; being confined to one place has become, on the contrary, the postmodern version of slavery (Bauman 2000).

13. Salih (2003; 2000) makes a series of particularly interesting observations about this topic, especially with regard to Moroccan women returning to their places of origin after emigrating to Italy.

14. “Traditional” here is used according to the perspective of my interlocutors and therefore indicates what they consider part of their *tradições da terra* (local traditions).

15. I personally attended many weddings for migrant women during my stay in Ponta do Sol and travelled from Italy with Lucia, a Cape Verdean woman returning to Ponta do Sol for her wedding. The quantity of objects that women brought from the various migration places for themselves and their relatives is impressive and reflects considerations of prestige rather than simple economic convenience: in Lucia’s case, the airline charges for the excess luggage cost much more than she would have spent had she bought the objects directly in Cape Verde.

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## Abstract

*This essay focuses on independent female migration as it has developed in Santo Antão (Cape Verde) and its effect on life in the place of origin, specifically both significant economic changes and shifts in social and cultural identity. Through an analysis of life histories and qualitative interviews, I highlight complex dynamics between migrant women and those who remain in the place of origin and explore the processes of renegotiating household organization and gender relations that have been generated by women's mobility. Relations between migrant and non-migrant women are complex and ambivalent in contemporary Cape Verde society, with migrants envied yet burdened with obligations and expectations, taking on the role of insider/outsider. For their part, the women who stay gain economic and social power, becoming "surrogate" family heads and thereby reinforcing the matrifocal family structure already present in Cape Verde even while giving rise to new, all-female transnational households. Female migration has also posed a threat to the long-standing patriarchal model of male authority interwoven with widespread informal polygamy in the area, ultimately affecting gender relationships and forms of family organization.*

*Key words:* Cape Verde, female migration, womanhood, identity, gender, matrifocality, Santo Antão.

## Riassunto

*Il presente saggio si focalizza sulla migrazione femminile indipendente a Santo Antão (Capo Verde) e sui rilevanti cambiamenti che tale processo ha determinato nel luogo d'origine, sia da un punto di vista economico che di identità socio-culturale. L'analisi delle storie di vita e delle interviste qualitative mette in luce complesse dinamiche relazionali tra le donne che migrano e quelle che restano nel luogo d'origine, nonché i processi di rinegoziazione dell'organizzazione familiare e delle relazioni di genere indotti dalla mobilità femminile. I rapporti tra donne che migrano e donne che restano nel luogo d'origine sono complessi e ambivalenti nella società capoverdiana contemporanea: le migranti infatti sono invidiate, ma anche gravate da obblighi e aspettative, assumendo il ruolo di insider/outsider. Le donne che restano, a loro volta, ottengono un potere economico e sociale diventando capi famiglia "surrogati", cosa che rinforza la struttura matrifocale già presente a Capo Verde, dando vita a una nuova famiglia transnazionale, tutta al femminile. La migrazione femminile in ultima analisi, influenzando le relazioni di genere e le forme di organizzazione familiare, ha anche messo in discussione il tradizionale modello patriarcale di autorità maschile intrecciata con una diffusa poligamia informale.*

*Parole chiave:* Capo Verde, migrazione femminile, femminilità, identità, genere, matrifocalità, Santo Antão.

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