

# Children's mobility and immobility in Cape Verdean transnational families

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## Preface

This paper is based on research within the three-year project *Informal Child Migration in Europe*, hosted by the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oslo. The project includes fieldwork in seven countries in Europe and Africa. My own background is in human geography and interdisciplinary migration studies. My work within the project seeks to use children and motherhood as prisms for a deepened understanding of transnationalism, mobility and immobility. This paper is written at an early stage in the research process, immediately after fieldwork. It is therefore short and exploratory, sketching themes that will later be developed through analysis of interviews and field notes.

## Cape Verdean families

Kinship networks are fundamental in shaping Cape Verdean migration flows. Furthermore, relations between family members are conduits for transnational activities that link the homeland and the diaspora (Åkesson 2004, Carling in press, Dias 2000). The nature of transnational motherhood and children's experiences of separation can only be understood in relation to the specific of Cape Verdean kinship.<sup>1</sup>

Three interrelated characteristics are particularly important in this respect. First, conjugal relations are often unstable. Relationships can be transitory and clearly come to an end, or they can last over many years but be somewhat undefined and non-exclusive. The commonly used term *pai-de-fidj* (literally 'father of child') as opposed to 'husband' is open to such ambiguity. Second, the mother-child dyad is the backbone of Cape Verdean kinship. It is common for women to have children with several men, and many children do not grow up with their biological father. The nature of the father-child relation is highly context dependent, and relies heavily upon material and social manifestations in addition to the biological fact of fatherhood. Third, women devise strategies to support themselves and their children. This may involve efforts to hold on to a man who gives material support (for instance by having a child with him), or creating a livelihood independent of a male partner. More often than not, women pursue several such strategies simultaneously.

<sup>1</sup> There is substantial variation between the nine inhabited islands of Cape Verde in terms of family patterns and values. The research presented here is concerned with migration from the Barlavento islands, especially São Nicolau and São Vicente.

In this research project, I have chosen to focus exclusively on migrant *mothers* and their children. In a Cape Verdean context, a mother's emigration without her children is a distinct experience for both parties, fundamentally different from the separation of fathers and children through migration. Working abroad is more compatible with the traditional content of fatherhood, with its emphasis on material care, than it is with the notion of motherhood. Furthermore, the typical fragility of father–child ties in Cape Verde means that emigration is just one aspect of the more general phenomenon of absent fathers.

Closely related to the nature of Cape Verdean families, household organization is also central to understanding transnational motherhood and childhood. Households in São Vicente and São Nicolau are relatively small by West African standards, with 4 people on average according to census data (Instituto Nacional de Estatística 2002). Household composition varies greatly, often changes frequently, and may be ambiguous. Many households are 'nuclear family' households composed of an adult couple and their children — that is, the woman's children, who may or may not be fathered by her present partner. Other constellations may include several generations and more distant kinship relations, even without being particularly large households. Young men often have loose household affiliations. They may, for instance, rent a room on their own, but eat in their mother's house and often stay the night at their girlfriend's house.

Child fostering is an important element in the flexible household composition (Åkesson 2004). There are many reasons why many Cape Verdean children spend part of their childhood away from their maternal household. Emigration by the mother is obviously a case in point, but it may also be motivated by the child's need for schooling in an urban centre. In addition, children may move to another household nearby if it is seen to redistribute the costs and benefits of child-rearing in a beneficial way. Poor women with many children may seek to relieve themselves of the responsibility for feeding and clothing all of them, while others would welcome the presence of an (additional) child in the house. For instance, elderly women or couples may seek the company and help of a girl if their own children have grown up and left the household.

### **Cape Verdean migration**

Cape Verde has a long and multi-faceted history of migration (Carling 2004, Carreira 1983, Góis 2006). The transnational families described here are primarily shaped by migration to Europe since the 1960s. Migration of women to work as domestic workers in Italy has been particularly important in relation to transnational motherhood. This migration flow was initiated by Italian Capuchin friars in the 1960s and gained pace in the 1970s (Andall 1998, Monteiro 1997). In parallel with the female migration flow to Italy, there was a predominately male migration flow to the Netherlands, where Cape Verdeans found work as seafarers in Rotterdam (Andall 1999, Carling 2007). These gender-segregated flows gave rise to transnational families that were not only split between Cape Verde and Europe, but also between several European countries. Female migration to Italy continues, albeit at a reduced pace. In addition, Cape Verdean women have migrated as domestic workers to Portugal, Spain, France and Belgium.

The tightening of European immigration policy over the past decades has also changed the family dynamics of migration. Today, family formation with a permanent resident in Europe is the only available option for most prospective migrants in Cape Verde. For women, this often entails leaving their children behind with the hope of sending for them at a later stage.

## **Methods**

The research is based on three months of fieldwork in Italy and Cape Verde in 2007. It also draws upon previous fieldwork in the Netherlands and Cape Verde (cf Carling 2002, 2004, in press). During fieldwork semi-structured, recorded interviews were conducted with people who had one or more of the following experiences:

- Being left behind in Cape Verde by a migrant mother
- Leaving a child behind in Cape Verde as a migrant mother
- Fostering a child in Cape Verde for a migrant mother

Several of the interviewees who had been left behind as children later migrated and left their own children behind, or fostered the children of others. In other words, the three key experiences did not produce three separate categories of informants. Some of the children 'left behind' were, in fact, born abroad and sent back to Cape Verde as infants. As a general rule, I have not distinguished between these two forms of separation.

Past versus present experiences were an important distinction in the interviews. Some migrant mothers were currently caring for their minor children from afar, while others had already seen them grow up and become independent adults. Similarly, I interviewed children in Cape Verde whose mothers were currently abroad as well as adults who had been left behind as children and related their experience retrospectively. The current age of interviewees who had been left behind by their mothers ranged from 10 to 38 years.

## **Trajectories and transitions**

Focusing on children elucidates the more general point that transnational practices take place between individuals who stand in particular and changing relations to each other. Motherhood is a unique relation, but also one that is clearly transformed over time with the ageing of the child. Children can also be central to transnational relationships between adults, such as between the parents or between the mother and the foster mother.

In light of these observations, I have structured the data collection around family migration histories. Even when only one individual in a family is interviewed, an overview of the family's trajectories helps understand his or her experiences. The histories contextualize the major transitions in an interviewee's life. In this context, 'transitions' refer to the separation from, or (re)unification with significant persons and environments. These transitions inspire three sets of questions: first, about how they came to occur, and about the relative influence of the persons who were implicated; second, about the experience and effects of the transitions once they occurred; and third, about the nature of relationships between transitions. Since each transition typically creates a new constellation of proximity and distance, the time periods in between are characterized by different transnational relationships.

## Denise's family migration history

I will use the experiences of one family to illustrate the concepts outlined above. Figure 1 displays the trajectories of 35-year-old Denise and her closest family members in a family migration history chart.<sup>2</sup> The grey columns represent different locations; the vertical scale shows the time period, and the lines correspond to the paths of individuals through time and space. In 1974, when Denise was two years old, her mother Joana migrated to Italy as a domestic worker. Denise and her older sister Helena were sent to live with their grandmother Bia on the neighbouring island, São Nicolau. Their father had migrated to the Netherlands while Joana was pregnant with Denise. He worked at sea for many years, and did not play any significant part in his daughters' lives. After a failed marriage with a Dutch woman, he moved to Portugal upon retirement.

Denise lived with her grandmother in São Nicolau until she was 11 years old and the grandmother died. When Joana first emigrated, the obvious solution, as for so many migrant mothers, was to leave the children with her own mother. When Helena and Denise's grandmother unexpectedly passed away, Joana had to find an alternative fostering arrangement. It was not possible to find somebody who would take both girls in; Denise was sent to São Vicente to stay with her maternal uncle's family and Helena remained in São Nicolau with other relatives. Joana considered the option of bringing the girls to Italy, but soon ruled it out. She was a live-in domestic worker and would either have to place the girls in a children's home (*collegio*), or try to arrange independent housing and work as a daytime maid. Neither would be feasible in economic terms.

When Helena was 23 years old, she moved to São Vicente in search of work, and the sisters were reunited. This was a turbulent time in Denise's life. A couple of years after Helena's arrival, she got pregnant with an occasional boyfriend who refused to acknowledge fatherhood. Denise had made several failed attempts at getting a visa to go to Europe, but when her daughter Ariete was five years old, she succeeded. Like many others she obtained a visa for a family visit to the Netherlands, and later made her way to Italy. Her father had left the Netherlands by this time, but Denise's paternal uncle was there and sponsored the application.

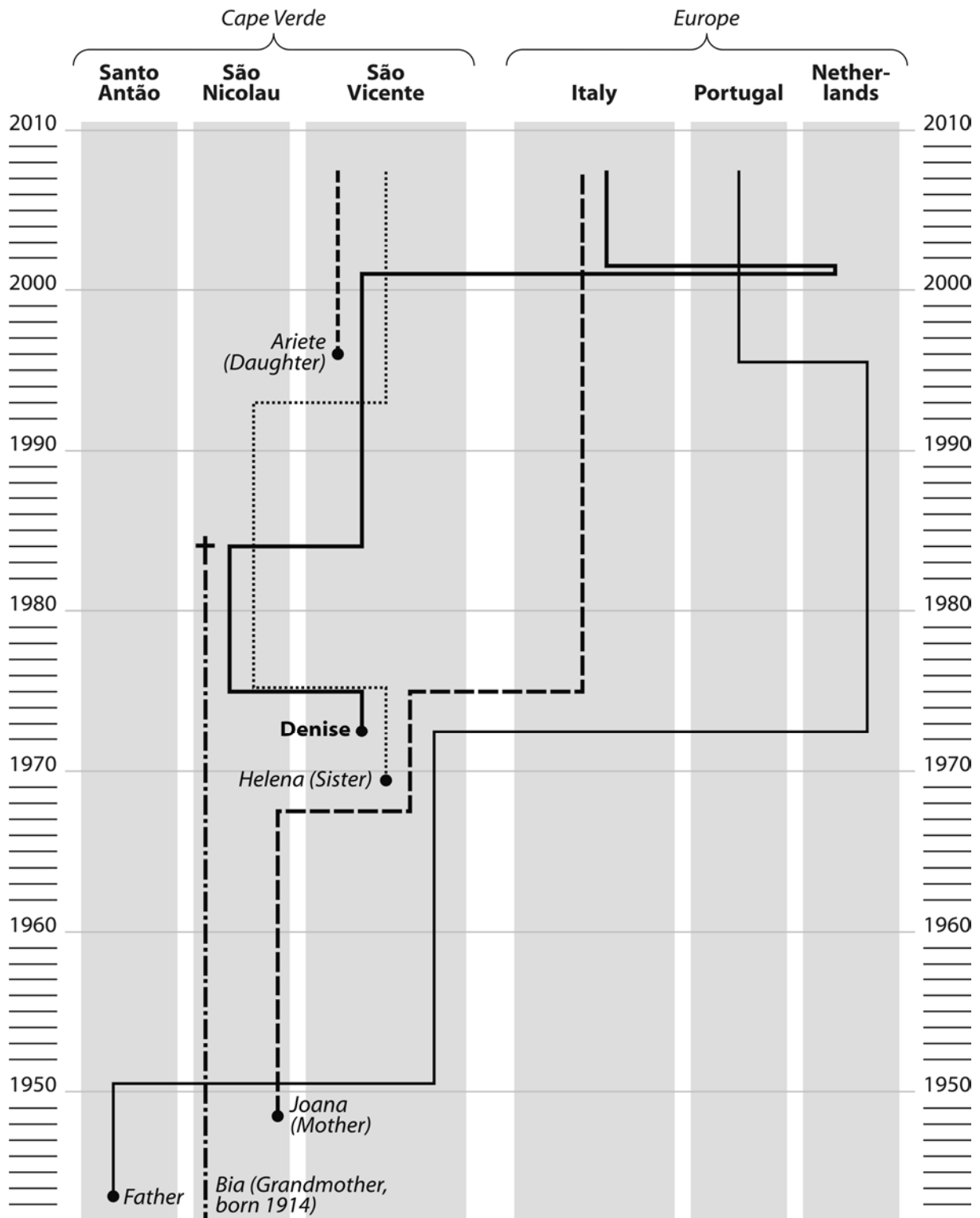
Denise left Ariete, somewhat hesitantly, with Helena. The two sisters had been living together on the ground floor of the house that their mother was building — little by little — in São Vicente. Denise hesitated because Helena had several children of her own to care for, and might be the only adult in the house after Denise left. Still, Helena was the obvious choice. Helena was motivated to help her sister out, now that a visa application had finally succeeded. It was also obvious that remittances from Denise would be a welcome contribution to her strained finances.

When Denise settled in Italy, she lived close to her mother for the first time since she was two years old. Joana had returned to Cape Verde on holiday more or less every second year, but they had never been particularly close.

After six years in Europe, Denise has not yet been able to return to Cape Verde on Holiday. Unstable employment and a slow-grinding Italian bureaucracy have made it difficult for her to

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms; fieldwork data has been substantially modified in order to preserve anonymity. A separate article on the use of family migration history charts is under preparation.

obtain a residence permit. Without one, she cannot leave the country and return, and she would not have been able to send for Ariete even if they had a place to live. Ariete no longer stays with Helena, but with another relative nearby. Denise thinks Ariete is better off there, but is frustrated by the lengthy separation. She is particularly worried about the future, when Ariete will enter puberty and ‘all sorts of things can happen’, as she says.



**Figure 1.** Migration trajectories of Denise's family.

**Table 1.** Major transitions in Denise's life.

<i>Denise's age</i>	<i>Persons</i>		<i>Environments</i>	
	<b>Separation</b>	<b>(Re)unification</b>	<b>Separation</b>	<b>(Re)unification</b>
28 years	Daughter (Ariete)	Mother (Joana)	São Vicente	Italy
11 years	Grandmother Sister (Helena)	Uncle Aunt Cousins	São Nicolau	São Vicente
2 years	Mother (Joana)	Grandmother (Bia)	São Vicente	São Nicolau

Denise's life is punctuated by three major transitions, summarized in Table 1. Importantly, each transition is a 'package' of separations and (re)unifications with persons and environments. At the age of two, her mother left for Italy. The mother's departure may be seen as the defining event of this transition, but it was compounded by Denise's change of environment and entry into her grandmother Bia's household. She had only seen her grandmother once or twice before, but with time grew much closer to Bia than to her mother. Denise's life from age 2 to 11 was typical of many children of emigrant women. Her grandmother provided the physical and emotional care that could have been expected from a mother, and her mother's remittances and packages from Italy ensured a decent standard of living.

The second transition occurred when Denise was 11 years old and Bia died. Again, it was a composite experience of loss, and readjustment. First, she lost her grandmother, the adult she was most attached to. Second, she was separated from her sister Helena for the first time since birth. Third, she was separated from the social and physical environment she considered home. Forth, she entered the relatively unfamiliar household of her uncle, his wife and their children. Fifth, she had to adjust to a new social and physical environment in urban São Vicente. She had lived in a rural area and spoke a distinct dialect, which did not make the introduction to city life any easier.

During her teenage years, Denise made several moves between households in São Vicente. However, since she never re-attached to an adult in any way that resembled her relationship with her grandmother, it was a process of drifting rather than a series of critical breaks. The third major transition in Denise's life came with her migration to Italy. Like the previous two transitions, it was a multipart experience. Leaving her new home environment in São Vicente was the least challenging aspect of it. The separation from Ariete, however, was hard at the beginning and did not grow easier with time. Entering Italian society and managing daily life was another trial. Finally, reunification with her mother was not what Denise had expected. The mother's holidays in Cape Verde seemed were somehow exceptional time which did not fully test their relationship.

As noted earlier, this frame of analysis leads to questions about how major transitions come to occur, how they are experienced, and how relations are managed in between transitions. The final sections of the paper will elaborate on these questions.

## Shaping transitions

It is basically the mother who decides to emigrate, and who decides where here children shall stay, within the limitations of available options. However, when emigration is a scarce and coveted opportunity, as it is in Cape Verde, it often takes precedence over other considerations once a chance appears. Furthermore, if the prospect of separation from one's children dampens the wish to emigrate, the need to sustain the children often constitutes a strong motivation for leaving.

The imperative of migrating was lucidly expressed to me by Helena. She had struggled to make ends meet with her mother's remittances for many years, and was keen to leave Cape Verde. After two failed attempts, she had meagre hopes of being given a visa, much less a work permit. Still, I asked her what she would do with her children if she were give a visa:

*Helena:* I'll leave them! Didn't my mum leave me? My mum left me when I was little, right? Didn't I grow up? Here I am, grown up, so I'll leave them too and go work. Here you don't find work. You see how many people are unemployed in this country, without work? If you get a chance to get out, go work, you don't go? Of course I'll go! You can't imagine how much I want to go.

*Jørgen:* So, do you have anyone to look after the kids?

*Helena:* No, not yet, because they still didn't sort out the papers for me. But when they're ready, somebody will appear. I'm not going to think that there won't be anybody! 'Cause if I think like that I won't get to go, right? So' Ill have to think that somebody will appear, that a good person will appear to take them for me.

Negotiating fostering arrangements is something that the mother can influence, but not control. Helena said that if she were to go, she might hire a apartment and pay somebody to live with her children, rather than sending them to different families. When she and Denise were children, their mother found it necessary to separate her two daughters because she could not find a joint fostering arrangement.

Many women who leave their children behind hope that they will be able to bring their children to Europe at a later stage. This may be impossible for several reasons. First, those who lack residence permit, like Denise, have no right to family reunification. Second' many live-in-domestic workers, like Joana, cannot afford to move out, and cannot take have the children live with them in the employer' house.

Other obstacles may also prevent mothers from bringing their children to Europe. An unexpected but common situation is that the children's father fails to sign the necessary authorization. Children cannot leave Cape Verde and be admitted under family reunification regulations to live with the mother without the father's consent. This may involve some paperwork, especially if the father is an emigrant in another country. The father's authorization is required as long as his name is on the birth certificate, regardless of the extent to which he has assumed any responsibilities of fatherhood. When a father fails to give his permission for the children to go, it is often motivated by bitterness towards the mother rather than by any wish to assume responsibility for the children.

Another barrier to reunification applies only to the Netherlands so far, but is being extended to other European countries. Since March 2006, non-Western immigrants to the Netherlands have been required to take the so-called Civic Integration Abroad Examination before

being allowed to enter the country. This is a basic test in Dutch language and society that is mandatory for prospective immigrants in the age group 16-65. The challenge of learning the material, and the cost and hassle of taking the exam may delay the process significantly and add to the stress level when children approach the age of 18 and stand to lose their right to reunification.

### **Experiencing transitions**

Denise's story illustrates the multiple elements of transitions in a transnational family. Several analytical points can be made. First, the experience of separation from the mother is influenced by concurrent separations, which have different significance at different ages. For two-year-old Denise, who was becoming increasingly mobile and confident in her immediate surroundings, the total change of physical environment may have been stressful. When she was eleven, the move from a rural to an urban environment and youth culture was a challenge. Second, it is not only separation, but also unification, adjustment and expectations of attachment that can be demanding, if not traumatic. Third, growing up as part of a transnational family may encompass transitions that do not involve the parents, but are nevertheless momentous. In Denise's case, it was her experiences at the age of 11 which appear to have been the most taxing and influential.

While Denise's transitions were all multi-dimensional, elements of stability may lessen the impact of separation from the mother in other cases. Denise's own daughter Ariete is a case in point. When Denise left for Europe, Ariete remained in the same physical environment, and maintained her close relations with Helena and her children. In households with several adult women, the tasks of mothering are often shared, so Ariete was used to being fed, clothed and disciplined by Helena. Admittedly, Ariete later moved to another household, but the elements of stability may have helped her around the time of Denise's departure.

Since many Cape Verdean households are multi-generational, children who are left in their grandmother's custody have often been raised in part by their grandmother even before the mother migrated. Furthermore, the flexibility of household affiliation means that children often grow up feeling at home in more than one household. These characteristics of Cape Verdean family and household structure probably contribute to lessening the impact of separation on the children left behind.

### **Managing relations**

Transnational motherhood may involve complicated triangular relations between the mother, the child and the foster mother. Emigrant mothers may find it hard to ascertain motherhood while the child is becoming increasingly attached to the foster mother. It is common for foster mothers to actively promote the child's awareness of their mother, for instance by asking not to be called mummy, and by pointing out from an early age all the things and clothes that have been sent by the mother. I did not get to know any cases where the right to social motherhood was an issue of conflict between the mother and the foster mother. I did, however, come to know of tensions between potential foster mothers who competed for a child. Relations between mothers and foster mothers were more likely to be strained by financial matters, also in the case of fostering by a grandmother.



## Hardships and vulnerabilities

Most of the existing research on transnational parenthood has addresses the potentially harmful effects on children of separation from their parents (Artico 2003, Parreñas 2001, 2005, Suarez-Orozco *et al.* 2002). It is not possible for me to draw any conclusions on this at present, but I wish to end the paper by pointing to some of the unexpected ways in which children may come to suffer in the process.

First, as mentioned above, children may become the victims of conflicts between their parents when the father refuses to authorize reunification with the mother. Second, the delicate relationship between the biological mother and the foster mother can make children vulnerable. Social workers and teachers in Cape Verde explained that it was often difficult to work with foster families. When a child is having severe problems and some form of intervention is required, two possible scenarios are potentially harmful to the child. First, the foster family may ignore, or actively downplay or deny the problems out of fear that the mother may say that the child was not properly cared for. This has social implications for the foster family, and could entail a large loss of income if the child is removed from their care. Also, the division of labour between the mother and the foster mother can make it hard to give children at risk the necessary attention. While the foster mother provides daily care, all major decisions about the child are typically left to the mother. Third, children are vulnerable to their own expectations. As noted, it is common for a mother to leave with the intention of sending for the children. However, it often proves more difficult than expected to do this. Children who spend years on end awaiting their imminent departure run the risk of disengaging from their surroundings in Cape Verde. They may lose respect for teachers or the foster parents, and lose the motivation to study. A primary school teacher said of one such girl that 'when she finally got to join her mother after many years, she entered Europe as an illiterate teenager'.

*Comments on the paper or suggestions for the analysis are welcome. (jorgen@prio.no). Be cautious if quoting this paper, since the findings are preliminary.*

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