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Mirroring gender discourses: *Migrants as development broker and gender equity*

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DRAFT

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Exploring a co-development project that involved Ghanaian migrants to Italy, this paper attempts to reveal the hiatus between gender narratives and practices that these new brokers perform within the development arena.

Ghanacoop, which is the name of the co-development initiative, was a cooperative company trading in fruits and so-called 'ethnic products' between Ghana and Italy and was managed by Ghanaian transmigrants. The company was also involved in two development projects that dealt with health and education in Ghana, becoming an important broker of development between Italy and Ghana. Due to its entrepreneurial features and idiom, *Ghanacoop* succeeded in opening a new space of political negotiation with Italian and Ghanaian State institutions, being driven by principles and rules that appear to be informed by good governance and gender equity. However, a closer look indicates that the reality is more complicated.

Based on an ethnographic research, this paper analyses how *Ghanacoop* mirrors and translates the diaspora discourse on gender equity and women's empowerment. Inspired by Stuart Hall, the paper presents the discrepancies and the encoding and decoding processes that reveal a contradictory space of negotiation and agency for women.

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Introduction

A plurality of representations concerning development, identity belonging, and political action is produced and played by co-development². It also replicates languages and practices concerning participation, social and gender relations, and cultural differences. In its conceptualisation, it seems to be based on a strong political commitment in the name of social justice and on the idea of national community that, through diaspora, appears reinforced and redefined in its borders.

Several different subjects engage within co-development: local state institutions, civil society groups, international organisation bodies, migrants' associations and collectives. In this regard, co-development actions are a privileged research object insofar as they not only allow to reflect on the migration-development nexus (Nyberg Sørensen 2007), but also to see how discourses on development and cooperation policies are acted, represented and/or recodified by the promoting associations, the migrants' collectives and the individuals operating within the project (Olivier de Sardan 1995). Taking a closer look at a co-development project, named *Ghanacoop*, which involved Ghanaian migrants to Italy, through an anthropological analysis this paper aims to show how *Ghanacoop* mirrors and translates diaspora's discourses concerning gender equity and women's empowerment.

Ethnographic materials will be explored trying to knit together discourses, practices, and eventually discrepancies between these observing local cultural representations and contexts, social codes and complex processes of recodification of gender discourses and good governance.

The first part of the paper briefly outlines the framework of analysis by presenting some data on Ghanaian migration to Italy and by illustrating the co-development and MIDA Programme. The second part illustrates how new actors and brokers perform on the stage of development. Following Hall's conceptualisation of encoding and decoding (1980), I will reveal how *Ghanacoop*, utilising development language and market practices, and embodying the new role of diaspora, became a broker of material and immaterial resources, acquiring a new status and political role in Italy. Thus as a development broker it mirrored, translated, and performed the development language concerning gender identities, women empowerment and good

² With the term co-development I refer to policies and practices of aid that involve actors and institutions below the State level, in French referred to as *coopération décentralisée* or *co-développement*. A detailed account of the terminology dispute can be found in Grillo and Riccio (2004).

governance. Finally it will be argued that the recodification processes of gender relations aim to strengthen subordinating identities and *habitus*³ rather than to generate empowerment, as claimed by development politics and rhetoric.

Drawing the scenario

Significant numbers of Ghanaian immigrants arrived in Italy during the 1980s and 1990s. In the early stages, migrants came mostly from urban centres and held high school diplomas or university degrees, while in the later stages, especially from the late 1990s, they mostly came from rural areas, were unschooled, and tended to be younger as a consequence of family members reuniting with migrated relatives.

With the exception of a small enclave in Sicily and an important settlement in the region of Campania, most Ghanaians settled in northern Italy. Among Italian regions, Emilia Romagna has the fourth largest number of residents who are foreign citizens⁴, and the highest percentage of foreign residents among its population⁵. There are slightly over eight thousand⁶ Ghanaians residing in Emilia Romagna, demographically balanced in terms of gender following family reunifications; just over half⁷ of the total number of Ghanaian citizens residing in the region live in the province of Modena, the city where the project analyzed here was born.

Migration studies have explained the increase of migratory fluxes toward Emilia Romagna as the outcome of different factors - the activation of efficient migratory chains, the implementation of new legislation, the opportunities presented by a growing employment market, as well as the perception, on the part of local institutions, of immigration as a resource for economic development rather than as an emergency phenomenon. Following this analytical perspective, this Italian region - with its implementation of measures and policies favouring integration - is in countertendency with the rest of the country. While operating within a repertory of practices, policies and processes that have national scope, local administrations in Italy have acquired and

³ Bourdieu's theorization on *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 2001) identifies the dispositions, modes and representations of masculinity and femininity, and related roles and spheres of social action. *Habitus*'s notion also includes a generative capacity, integrating the biographical history. In this paper, *habitus* describes roles' identification and reconstruction, gender representation and practices within the migration processes.

⁴ According to a census, as of 31 December, 2007, there were 365,687 foreign citizens residing in Emilia Romagna. Source: Caritas Migrantes *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2008 XVIII Rapporto*.

⁵ Foreign residents account for 8.6% of the total population.

⁶ There are 8,248 recorded Ghanaian residents in Emilia Romagna as of 1 January, 2008, of which 43.67% are women.

⁷ There are 4,236 Ghanaians reportedly residing in Modena, of which 1,809 (42.7%) are women.

still maintain some degree of independence as well as of control of social resources on their territory (Caponio 2005): services and policies relating to immigration provide an example of this. As a consequence, most of the administrative institutions mentioned in the case treated here are in fact local ones, which have played an important role in the co-development project by guaranteeing visibility to this group and introducing it to local economic and social actors that played a crucial role in the project's growth. Co-development activates social relations, creating new chances of network between migrant's groups and associations with local political authorities, civil society subjects, and eventually economic actors.

Co-development, sometimes defined as translocal development (Grillo and Riccio 2004), is based on the idea that migrants can be development actors, insofar as they belong to several social contexts and are capable of transforming their social capital for development (Daum 1998). As already mentioned, it is characterised by its involvement with a variety of institutions and local actors such as NGOs, municipal authorities, village associations and local communities, both in the sending and receiving countries. Co-development (Daum 1998; Ceschi and Stocchiero 2007; Riccio 2011) can be seen as a space in which to observe leader consensus and capability, cultural identities, representation of development needs as well as social and power dynamics in the contexts of both sending and receiving countries. International organisations and OECD countries are celebrating migrants' associations and remittances with enthusiasm as significant agents of development, underlining the presumed corresponding interest and needs between these collective actors and the beneficiaries' community (Faist 2008). Nonetheless, it has already been argued that translocal development, notwithstanding its potentialities, is far from a trouble-free form of development (Grillo and Riccio 2004).

In 2002, IOM (International Organization for Migration), with the support of the Italian Cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), launched a programme involving Ghanaians and Senegalese migrants to Italy and denominated MIDA Ghana/Senegal⁸. Within the MIDA (Migration for Development in Africa) strategy to transfer skills and resources of the African diaspora to the countries of origin, the programme aimed to contribute to socio-economic development of the countries of origin implementing new income-generating enterprises as well as rural and sustainable development. Also, MIDA provided an

⁸ Concerning the MIDA programme, see A. Stocchiero (2008), *Learning by doing: Migrant transnationalism for local development in MIDA Italy-Ghana/Senegal programme*. Working Paper n. 48, Rome: CeSPI. http://www.cespi.it/WP/WP-48_eng%20mida%20stocchiero.pdf.

opportunity to create and strengthen migrants' groups and associations in several regions of central and northern Italy. Following the evaluation process, of the twelve projects that were selected, the *Ghanacoop* project was the most publicised and well-known, if not the most relevant.

Ghanacoop project

Ghanacoop was formerly a cooperative⁹ import-export enterprise that used to market Ghanaian and Italian fruit and local products. Ghanaian products were sold in the "African shops" of central and northern Italy mostly to Ghanaian immigrants, while Italian products were sold in Ghana through new distribution chains to the new elites and to foreigners residing in the country. Thanks to funding from a MIDA grant, *Ghanacoop* was founded in 2004 within the Ghana National Association of Modena and it operated until 2010.

The first promoters of the *Ghanacoop* project were local institutions and an independent research agency. On the Italian side, through the years, *Ghanacoop* developed a range of relations with important national and regional economic actors, including a bank, some large distribution chains, a consortium of local cooperatives and a social cooperative that, acting as a sort of NGO, turned out to be a crucial partner during the entire lifecycle of the organization, including its closure. *Ghanacoop* was thus born within the local Ghanaian association; the association's leadership taking on the responsibility and management of the cooperative. The fact that management of the two organizations was, at least in an initial phase, one and the same, public institutions considered it as a guarantee that it truly represented the interests of the Ghanaian component of Modena's citizens. The members of the association deemed it to be appropriate and fitting, since the cooperative enterprise belonged to the community and would work not only toward the economic integration of citizens who emigrated to Italy, but also toward development in Ghana. *Ghanacoop's* international network and entrepreneurial 'idiom' and activities allowed the Ghanaian Modena association to acquire new visibility as a diasporic group, both at the local community and institutional level, forming close contact with civil servants, diplomats and members of the Ghanaian government. The Ghanaian Modena association gained access to negotiate on

⁹ The cooperative enterprise, which is based on mutuality between its members, social investment of profits and a formal democratic decision-making process, has a long history as well as a strong impact on the regional economic system.

development needs and projects with local authorities through *Ghanacoop*, criss-crossing leaders' personal and social networks, kinship ties as well as IOM and Italian NGO relations.

The cooperation activities initiated by this new subject involved not only the launching of the enterprise itself but also several projects in the sectors of education, health care and sustainable development. The projects were all carried out in the Apam district of Greater Accra, where *Ghanacoop* was also granted some land and set up a small plantation of spices to be sold on the Ghanaian market. The cooperative comprised individual members and members with juridical person. In 2009, *Ghanacoop* underwent various changes in its organizational and social and financial structure. In 2010, *Ghanacoop* closed down.

The entrepreneurial nature of *Ghanacoop* favoured and allowed access of this Ghanaian association into the public sphere of both countries because being engaged in development did not appear to be political, quite the contrary. The engagement toward the country of origin, which mobilizes the "moral community" of diasporic actors (Werbner 2002; Kleist 2008), was moulded through an entrepreneurial idiom that meets the interests and rhetoric of both Italians and Ghanaians, and embodied the collective images of success and upward social mobility that are projected on entrepreneurial figures in both countries. In addition, *Ghanacoop's* project was supported by international organizations because it used the language of *co-development* and *diasporic community*, embodying the neo-liberal idea that assigns to individuals and communities - which have been suitably and changeably invented or constructed - the responsibility to initiate development actions (Faist 2008, Mohan 2008).

In the case of *Ghanacoop*, their sense of "being the diaspora" strongly shares diaspora's discursive representations, promoted by the national institutions in both the country of origin and of destination. The diaspora definition confers to the Ghanaian group a role and certain characteristics that it acts within the social and political context, setting itself apart from other groups and bearing witness to its commitment toward social and economic inclusion in Italy, and toward development in Ghana. *Ghanacoop* made a strategic and situational use of a range of identity representations: Modena's Ghanaian community, the community of Ghanaians in Italy, the diaspora of development and finally the entrepreneurial diaspora. The use of a wide range of identity representations, due in part to the very composition of *Ghanacoop* - an enterprise formed within an association of Ghanaian migrants having among its members

the leaders of COGNAI (Council of Ghana National Association in Italy) - favours in turn the use of different social identities in the relations with external interlocutors: State institutions, actors in the market, civil society groups, migrants, and the expatriate community. In Italy in particular, this capacity to mould itself and acquire multiple forms of representation guaranteed *Ghanacoop* access to a series of diverse relations with various political subjects, with civilian and Catholic organizations, as well as with groups related to political parties across the political spectrum.

In Italy, *Ghanacoop* apparently emerged as a political actor, through the type of projects it implemented and the typology of communication surrounding the organisation. *Ghanacoop* operated in the context of development using the characteristic language of development and in some cases its representations on the relations between donor and beneficiary. It did so without a bureaucratic approach, on the contrary, following a line of entrepreneurial pragmatism and a vision of charitable development activity.

In Ghana, *Ghanacoop* received recognition for its engagement by being considered an emergent political authority in the “traditional” political arena: for example, the leader of the Ghanaian side of the project was asked to become a member of the Council of the Elders where the development projects were implemented. In addition, *Ghanacoop* interacted with Ghanaian political institutions not only as mediator but also as decision-maker, choosing what type of projects to carry out and where, offering blocked negotiations to the traditional political authorities involved.

Nonetheless, the political authority being awarded, in the practices and especially in the representations proposed by the group, is constantly played down. The cooperative, founded within Modena’s Ghanaian association, was in fact built around what is called “diasporic ritual charity” (Nieswand 2008), its image, identity and social action, not only in Italy but in Ghana as well. Its entrepreneurial nature further characterized these activities as initiatives of “corporate social responsibility”. The connotation offered by *Ghanacoop* of its interventions as falling under the umbrella of social responsibility, while hinting at the building of relations and opportunities to promote social and economic justice for those who remained in the homeland, in reality, not only it does not have the strength to disrupt certain power relations between social classes and groups, but it also reaffirms a moral stance according to which the enterprise, in the discourses at least, becomes ethical agent. And yet this mimetic capacity of policies - or rather of the discursive actions promoted by

international bodies and social scientists working in development - and of entrepreneurial languages and rhetorics that act in an ethical field, reconfiguring capitalism, clearly reveal *Ghanacoop's* polymorphous nature. The latter, indeed, acts as an enterprise, as a civil society group, as a representative of a minority, as a delocalized elite, and moves within a market-based approach as well as within practices in which the State, weaving its connection with diasporas, also redefines its own roles.

The boundary between market and society is blurred, because, in the reconfiguration of contemporary capitalism, both are part of the same ethical-moral order (O'Laughlin 2008). In the name of this moral order, even the migrants on Italian soil - who are hardly considered and defined as citizens - seem to acquire a new role and embody a positive social model in which the entrepreneurial capacity and the responsibility of wellbeing are increasingly delegated to the benevolence of individual market players.

On an international level, *Ghanacoop* bore witness to its commitment as a broker of material and immaterial resources by participating in important international conferences¹⁰, demonstrating its communicational effectiveness, and its skill in establishing stratified relations between subjects and actors, and in initiating new relationships - owing to their visibility as a group - with other Ghanaian groups and collectives based in Europe.

In the Italian context, *Ghanacoop's* political action was more articulated. Given their visibility on a national scale, they were invited to present their project to the Italian houses of parliament and to bear witness of their commitment toward development at various events promoted by civil society. Italian political institutions consistently proposed *Ghanacoop's* mediation to the different actors involved in activities promoting the internationalization of enterprises, or even in cooperation projects to be implemented in Ghana and, by extension, in Africa. The visibility obtained by this group in the national media further eased the creation of relations between social actors that are quite heterogeneous. Thus, *Ghanacoop* appeared to be a trustworthy interlocutor, a sort of migrants' representative. Finally, the leader of *Ghanacoop* was asked to run in regional administrative elections and to play a role in

¹⁰ Examples are the Conference on Migration and Development held in Brussels in 2006 and the workshop "Key Migration Issues Workshop Series: Contributions of Diasporas" held in New York and organized by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), or political events in Italy such as the Venice Forum in 2008.

national politics on behalf of a centre-left party; it should be noted here that in Italy it is still rare for an immigrant or an individual with double citizenship to hold a public political office.

Assuming the polymorphous characteristic of this subject, which dialogues with external interlocutors such as State institutions, international organization bodies, and civil society groups, it is important to look at the practices and representations that *Ghanacoop* acted and displayed. Exclusively representations and negotiations on gender identities and relations as well as women's empowerment will be illustrated and analyzed in this paper.

Gendering discourses and practising subordination

On the international stages as well as on the national political arenas, *Ghanacoop* has been presented as a winning project. It was supposed, almost in the diffusion of narrations and representations, to realize gender equity. However, ethnography revealed several different images, behaviours and narratives on gender relations.

Although *Ghanacoop* as a social and economic organization had had several women members, all were tied to men members within kinship and conjugal relationships. Nonetheless, external observers, economic partners or local State institution officers considered the women's presence within *Ghanacoop* as a positive starting point to allow their empowerment through access to public spaces, through the construction of new social relations and potentially through the creation of new jobs. Also, the organization's leaders replicated this argument in several occasions in front of different audiences. Women's membership and the active participation of promotional events were considered as the first and potential step toward their empowerment as well as toward their integration to Italy. However, interviewing women within the association and the *Ghanacoop* revealed a different point of view; they stated their engagement toward development and integration in Italy as a moral and concrete duty toward their husbands or uncles (brother's mother¹¹). The majority were wives of male members, wives of a newly and dislocated elite of diaspora.

Participant observation to public events, business conventions, and civil society's meetings allows an understanding of how men and women involved with *Ghanacoop* performed their role on the scene. While *Ghanacoop* men, particularly the leaders, in

¹¹ Within the matrilineage, a fundamental role is played by the mother's brother. The emotional relationship between the niece and the uncle is signed by respect, diligence and submissiveness.

the public space of conventions, conferences and meetings, where they talked on behalf of the Ghanaian community in Italy or of the diaspora, adorned themselves in western attire with suit and tie, Ghanaian women of the organization bedecked themselves as magnificently Other. It is they who provided the shimmering appearance of Ghanaianess by their clothing and haircuts.

“In so doing, the women as bearers of the appearance of Tradition as embodiment of the Nation define their space of action, bearing authenticity and alterity signs in their markedly Other clothing” (Taussig 1993: 154).

The hierarchical complementarities of tasks between men and women in public events, where women are deputed to represent and embody the Ghanaianess of smiling and selling products, as well as the capability of men to re-produce discourses on empowerment and market practice show the cleverness to grasp and combine social and cultural skills, not only to match local expectations but also to hide power asymmetry naturalizing and gendering behaviors, tasks, and attitudes.

Nevertheless, the leaders' wives thought their commitment to conjugal relationships to be peculiar, such as that learned in the Italian context, where reciprocal help and support to the husband seems to be essential to the idea of Italian family, to *their* idea of Italian family. Public space, in the women's words, became, in the eyes of Ghanaian community in Italy, the place to show their closeness as a married couple. These events gave the chance to renew their husband's authority, a theatre where to perform conjugal relationships and consequently gender relations.

While women defined their engagement and participation in the social code of marriage, a new social code perceived as acquired in the context of immigration, the men, including the Italian interlocutors and observers addressed female participation to co-development as potentially empowering. Particularly, *Ghanacoop* male leaders' discourses, emphasized, almost in front of a certain audience, the potential of women's empowerment and good governance as an assumed principle of the organization. These statements, in front of a heterogeneous audience sensitive to migration and development issues, confirmed discourses and representations spread by other social actors involved in the project, and demonstrated the strength of this initiative conquering appreciation, if not consensus.

Women's engagement in operative and concrete tasks, on the male leader's call, rather than an effective participation to decision making processes revealed a polysemic participation, described and represented by the leading and supporting social actors in a different perspective. Nonetheless, I do not aim to demonstrate the women's passive role and/or to show the Ghanaian women as trapped in kinship relationships. However, at the moment, the fieldwork data reveal that the women's agency might be intuitively located only within the domestic space, within the family relationship. Confirmation of this may be derived from new ethnographic research. Instead, looking at the elaborated fieldwork materials on co-development as a public space, attempting to reveal the plurality of discourses, reasons, and perspectives, I might argue that a recodification of gender asymmetries was played within the organization rather than a portrayal of women's empowerment.

Changing perspective and looking at the discourses of different social actors involved, explicitly interviewed on the gender equity within the project, can help to complete the picture. Local state officers, enumerating the women involved in the project as well as confirming their active participation, tend to show the potential empowerment for the women already involved and optimistically for the entire community, if not also for different migrants' collectives. In their view, the success of the project, and the economic and social investment allowed women to gain a new position in their community as well as in the Italian society. Yet, to look at gender equity within the project was rejected as a major issue, the importance and the value of the project concerned the migrants' engagement and capability as agents of their own development, and there was no sense in measuring gender equity in itself. In addition, when solicited to comment on the endogamous kinship relationship between organization's members, they replied by defining the Ghanaian family as coincident with the Italian nuclear family.

These different points of view, briefly sketched, present some overlaps as well as different explanations; gender equity seems to be downplayed, translated, and mirrored respectively by local state institution, by women and men within the organization.

Gender equity is affirmed, because it is part of a dominant development narrative, but each of the interlocutors and subjects had different ideas and decodifications of it. A clear example of the discursive production as well as the recodification process of gender is embodied in the representations of family organization and its ties. Aiming to deconstruct these different discourses and the idea

of Ghanaian family as adherent to the Euro-American model, few annotations on the representation of family and gender relation in Ghana need to be posed.

Historically, the Akan world is characterized by a matrilineal descent. The lineage, in opposition to Structural-Functionalist theories, is an organizational principle. Thus, the lineage adjusts its own frontiers by including or excluding members; the family and the household are not coincident. Yet, kinship idiom crosses the biological and social group, also defining work and production relations. Nonetheless, Italian social actors looking at Ghanaian collectives refer the family as coincident and identical to the household. This lack of knowledge allows the Italian institution to draw a simple but unrealistic image of Ghanaian family where members' cooperation is considered as pre-given. Negotiations between men, and women, and between generations in the transnational family are not considered part of the picture.

Ghanaian informers, when asked for a comment or definition of family, identify it as an extended family. Albeit in its narrative description, the transnational family has changed. Van Dijk (2002) suggests that religion and Pentecostal churches mould family ideas. Thus the family and the individual (van Dijk 1997) become modern, allowing Ghanaians a more favorable integration to European contexts. However, Pentecostal churches elaborate new ideas on marriage and wifely submission, and a large number of locally published marriage guidance pamphlets have been recorded in West Africa, particularly in Ghana and Nigeria (Newell 2005).

Several different factors and discourses impact on family within migration processes: opportunities and limits of national legislations and policies regarding family reunions, immigration country's historical and cultural representation of family's borders and essence that, especially in Italy, tends to be naturalized and universalized. These include stereotypes of alterity and gender relations, and finally access and exchange of material and symbolic resources.

In the Ghanaian case, kinship ideologies, Pentecostal discourses, and the stratification of kinship codes between the country of origin and the country of settlement mould family ideas, which are ambivalently narrated, at times as an extended family, and at other times as a nuclear family. Within the Ghanaian collective in Modena, we can observe, contemporarily, the ongoing process of the nuclearized, family, and the construction of transnational household that draws its frontiers and its members, moving symbolic and material resources without undermining family and kinship representations. Italian political institutions and interlocutors deny this historical

and cultural process of change concerning the family. According to Franklin and Mckinnon (2000), kinship ideologies by naturalization processes embody and signify power relations defining hierarchies and exclusions, and consequently, subordination and dependence. Nuclear family naturalization, the coincidence between family and household and the presumed cooperative redistribution of resources within it, are an obstacle to see, deny the existing ties and elaborate a social representation that Ghanaian collectives also embody and transmit as appropriate. Furthermore, through the process of decodification of family ideas and discourses, Ghanaian groups not only elaborate a new social form of identity, but also participate in the dominant discourse, becoming new actors in producing social meaning.

In Ghana, family and gender relations have been key points of historical, anthropological and economic research. Indeed, economists have paid close attention to the introduction of cocoa production, and to land access for men and women, focusing on the existence and persistence of separate budgets between spouses. The separate budget and differential access to material resources, together with some economic spheres as trade, perceived as female typical activity, have been interpreted as women's material power within the family and the community. On the other hand, women traders have been stigmatized and even persecuted as destroyers of the national economy. Describing the historical continuities from colonialism to the structural adjustment implementation period, Clarke (2001) emphasizes how the widespread hostility to traders as women needs to be explained through gender identities and role changes. The author, particularly stresses how the wife's wealth, instead of the mother's or sister's wealth, is suspicious for men, because it gives her more personal independence from his control and it will finally go to her lineage, not his (Clarke 2001: 305). History, aiming to identify forms and practices of women's authority, identifies the colonial power, with its legislation on heritage and persecution of unmarried women (Roberts 1987, Allman 2001), as a crucial period for women's subordination.

Briefly, two tendencies can be identified in the complexity and heterogeneity of the discipline's perspectives. On the one hand, the complementarities and hierarchical solidarity between men and women has been underlined, within marriage and within labour division. On the other hand, differences in social status, differentiated spheres of social actions and between the matrilineal principle and patrilineal descent, have been exacerbated. A possible synthesis, between disciplines and different social scientists' approaches and theories can be realized thinking of the interdependent process of

qualifying properties concerning the conceptualization of the person in this social context: ancestry, seniority and gender. Thus gender relations are intertwined to lineage, seniority, and authority that are assigned and defined by the community through the recognition of a social or political role, through the ability to redistribute wealth and wellbeing. Assuming that gender is intertwined to authority and community, to lineage and belonging, what is the impact on it by emigration?

Emigration stretches beyond the borders and multiplies the relations with the community; it also performs new belonging practices, renewing their lineage affiliation and reinventing, almost partially, the sense of belonging to social contexts. Resources' redistribution, which is *a sine qua non* condition to acquire authority, can assume the form of development, and in turn, this can become a social, material and symbolic resource to redistribute within the community of origin as well as in the dislocated community in emigration.

Although a controversial configuration, gender relation within *Ghanacoop*, represents the women as being dependent on men. More precisely, the women, as wives of the newly dislocated elite, in the name of their conjugal role and minimizing their action in the public space, act and contribute to their husband's authority construction within the communities of origin and of immigration. Nonetheless, the recent Ghanaian history of women and political movements can shed the light on the relations between practices inscribed in conjugality and development rhetorics that claim women's empowerment. Moreover, the narratives on marriage and conjugal duties, such as those described by the Ghanaian group involved in co-development, can be traced in its genealogy looking at what Amina Mama (1995) defined "femocracy". In this work, the author analyzed a political movement which was founded in 1982 at the beginning of the Rawlings' government period, called the *31st December Movement*, that was later claimed to have involved 2.5 million women. The appropriation of gender concepts by the State under Rawlings was largely facilitated through his wife's leadership of the *31st December Women's Movement*, who later became the women's wing of the government. Although the *Movement* attracted funding from both external and internal sources, being funded by UN agencies because it appeared to be pro-woman, it did not achieve any substantial changes in the status of women. Mama showed how the movement that claimed to exist for the advancement of ordinary women was unable to do so, because it was ruled by a small clique of women whose authority was derived from being married to powerful men and as such, it upheld the patriarchal *status quo*.

Although I am not comparing the role of the 31st December Women's Movement to the role of women's participation in co-development, it is crucial to observe how gender empowerment has been bared and recodified in African terms. However, looking at postcolonial development in African gender politics, I want to underline the political use of the conjugal role in recent Ghanaian history, emphasizing how the *Ghanacoop* project and its members acted within a plurality of discourses and representations of marriage, of political action, and of gender empowerment, finding a complex idiom to represent the hierarchical solidarity (Sahlins 1985; Viti 2005) of marriage. In addition, underlining the women's political marginality (Prah 2005) in the postcolonial period, in political rhetoric the role of the wife has been commonly utilized.

In conclusion, from an emic point of view, *Ghanacoop* describes the organization's gender relations as the embodiment of a typically Italian gender representation, and in doing so it legitimizes a subordinating pre-emigration *habitus*. Considering the other social actors involved in the project, but external to *Ghanacoop*, Ghanaian wives' involvement paradoxically demonstrates the women's active participation and a potential empowerment. Discourses emphasized gender equity and co-development as a concrete chance to demolish power asymmetries between genders. However, the practices, the plurality of the representations concerning gender relations, and lastly the history of 31st December movement revealed that gender equity is postulated, mirrored and narrated rather than practiced and acted.

Encoding and decoding gender roles

Considering this group's tremendous political and communicational skill in acquiring and re-signifying the discourses and rhetorics construed and forged by development organisations and political institutions, Stuart Hall's theory on the process of encoding and decoding messages on televisual discourse may help in defining cultural and social process that *Ghanacoop*, embedded in, translated and negotiated.

Although it can be hazardous to apply a semiotic argument on media discursive production to a small social organisation, I will attempt to argue that Hall's identifications of audience decoding process of messages can be useful to describe gender equity message translation without falling into the cultural essentialism's trap or a new sort of behaviourism within migration studies.

Hall's influential essay on message production and dissemination, albeit referring

particularly to television, opened the way to introduce a semiotic paradigm into social framework, also illustrating subsequent opportunities for both ethnographic and textualist research. He suggested a four-stage theory of communication: production, circulation, use (called distribution or consumption), and reproduction. Each stage is relatively autonomous and in the circuit it has its limits and possibilities. Furthermore, messages have a “complex structure of dominance” because at each stage, always assuming the entire circuit, they are moulded and imprinted by institutional power-relations. Yet, a message can be received at a particular stage only if it is appropriated and recognizable, reproducing through decoding, a pattern of domination.

In his essay, he also revealed the process of cultural naturalization for the encoding and decoding process: the signs, especially the visual signs, need a learned cultural code that appears to be unconstructed. Simple visual signs, as effect of the articulation between sign and referent, appear to have achieved a sort of ‘near universality’, the operation of naturalised codes reveals not only the transparency and naturalness of the language, but also the depth and habituation of the code in use. However, codes, in being effective and understood, need to be placed in a cultural framework. Any society or culture tends to impose its classification of the social, cultural and political world. These constitute a dominant cultural order, which is obviously neither univocal nor uncontested. Social life is mapped and organized into discursive domains, and hierarchically organized into dominant and preferred meanings.

Furthermore, Hall, confuting semiology’s approach to neglect interpretative work, emphasizes how communicative process consists not only of a set of prearranged codes but also of performative rules, which by identifying the appropriate set of meanings, seek to enforce one semantic domain over another (Hall 1980: 134) Considering the presence of social and cultural codes and the performative rules and dominant discourses, the process of encoding and decoding it is neither linear nor instantaneous. Hall identifies three hypothetical positions from which decoding of a discourse may be constructed: *dominant-hegemonic position*, *negotiated code*, and *oppositional code*. The first identifies a sort of ideal-typical communication in which meanings are transparent, perfectly adherent to hegemonic manner. The third position identifies a globally contrary decoding process by the “receiver”, when an oppositional reading of the message allows the receiver subject to struggle in discourse creating what is literally defined the “politics of recognition”.

Between these two positions, the author thinks of a complex process of encoding

and decoding in which we can grasp the negotiation of meanings and practices.

This *negotiation code* might be applied to gender discursive domain enacted by the *Ghanacoop* project, with the aim to illustrate the complexity of social and cultural processes' decoding. Hall suggests that dominant definitions, given as hegemonic, "connect events, not always explicitly, to the great syntagmatic views of the world, they relate events to national interest or to geopolitics even if they make these connections in inverted, truncated or mystified ways" (Hall 1980: 137). *Ghanacoop*, as diasporic actor in the migration development arena, performed its discourses on gender and development as connected to world issues, migration engagements, poverty and underdevelopment narratives.

"Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own grand rules - it operates with exceptions to the rule" (Hall 1980: 137).

Ghanacoop, acknowledged the legitimacy of gender discourse and showed its apparent embodiment of these discourses; it also demonstrated a capacity to identify global, national and local discourses on gender mirroring different expectations and peculiarities. Depending on the type of audience, they were able to adapt their argument of women's empowerment. Whether it be local Italian institutions or Catholic interlocutors, it was reinforced in terms of identity and of family. Thus *Ghanacoop* displays and clearly shows the ability to reproduce heterogeneous discursive domains.

However, negotiated codes operate through situated logics. *Ghanacoop* acted a double logic: on the one hand the logic, internal to the organisation, where to adjust social identities, gender roles, and common feelings and representations. On the other hand, an external logic that mirrors diaspora and development discourses, gender equity and good governance. In the process of mirroring and decoding of the discourses, contradictions, frictions and potential conflicts between cultural and social *habitus* on gender are revealed.

Nonetheless, in interviewing the organisation's women, their gender role, appeared recodified through migration, they referred many of their behaviours and ideas on family organisation as acquired within migration to Italy, though their ideas of family

echoes the Catholic definition of marriage and couple's reciprocity roles. Family seems to become a naturalised and almost universalised code; it could possibly even be defined in this case as an iconic sign. Although the idea of family cannot be more deeply analyzed in this paper, it is essential to underline how imagination and decoding of conjugal representation, as context appropriated, plays a role in the description of the private sphere of conjugality, of its peculiarities. Obviously, there is a stratification and recodification of practices, images and *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 2001) that take shape within migration, but I argue that the description of the conjugal relationship in relation to recent Ghanaian history and the Italian context demonstrates the subjectivity's decodification and the plurality of peculiar meanings that, in a range of practices and discourses, are conceived as appropriate, recognizable and narrated.

Nonetheless, as already demonstrated, there are discrepancies, differences and features of gender relations in the discourses and in the practices that appear to stretch in opposite directions. However, in the complexity of the processes, which recodify and elaborate new images of family, of gender identities and roles, marriage has become a transcultural construction to naturalize tasks and to practise women's subordination.

Concluding remarks

Emigrant collectives involved in co-development translate practices and social relations in order to negotiate their own presence in the project and usually they do this with many social actors and diverse representations of development, in both the receiving and sending countries. However, while mediation with the authority on the needs and representations of development requires careful attention, in addition to categories and translation, re-codification also involves principles and characterizations that the groups operating in co-development and in decentralized cooperation should have, as well as the ways to adhere to the models provided in these groups. Ianni (2006) remarks how, in order to foster civil society and decentralized cooperation, criteria are needed to pinpoint the subjects able to build consensus and the ones tending to widen existing breaches within the groups. In her perspective, criteria such as gender equity, human rights' defense, sustainable development and good governance should rule associations' acceptability as actors of decentralized cooperation.

However, such characteristics should be considered as the very goals rather than as requirements of the associations (Mohan 2008). Specifically, ethnographic research

shows that even in the groups that seem to fulfill these criteria, gender equity is given by the virtual presence of the members' wives, formally enrolled but not actually participating in the decision making process. Codified gender relationships and concealed kinship allow a more effective control within co-development projects and within the associations, and at the same time they strengthen stratified trust-based connections among individuals who act within a network of criss-crossing relations. Nonetheless, it clearly consolidates preexistent and often asymmetrical binds that are not apparently undermined or that remain unchanged in the project.

Co-development, which potentially has the aptitude to intersect power asymmetry (Riccio and Ceschi 2010), allowing new political subjects to redistribute material and immaterial resources as well as knowledge, revealed, almost through this case study, its limits to break power asymmetries, which are naturalized within complex cultural frameworks. Furthermore, power asymmetries between genders have not been dismantled. Paradoxically, through a recodification of meaning and local context mimicking, power asymmetries were unchanged if not strengthened.

Considering its essential peculiarity, co-development actually defines and steers both discursive acts and practices, as well as the private and public sphere of migrants as social actors on the stage of institutional forms, where practices take on the more concrete dimension of economic-political space, of exchange as commitment. Co-development, therefore, produces and enacts representations of development, representations of the forming of social groups that develop strategies for belonging to multiple contexts, visions of politics and of the role of political institutions, and languages of power and of the participation of the political. New actors, such as *Ghanacoop*, materialize the production of discourses, becoming new brokers of development. As such, they move between and beyond borders, negotiate their role with local institutions in Italian and Ghanaian contexts, build their political authority and prestige, and in the groove of development discourses also build their legitimization to act.

Moreover, development discourses or rhetorics have been appropriated and recodified by this Ghanaian migrant's organization, allowing them to allocate conflicting cultural representations of gender relations within a new framework, which apparently mimics the immigration context and alludes to categories and concepts of development thinking. Looking at the practices of performing gender equity, the paper has demonstrated how practices and discourses stretch in opposite directions. Finally, it also

argued that co-development is not, *per se*, a process of dismantling power asymmetries between genders. Through *Ghanacoop's* analysis, the legitimization process of gender's asymmetry clearly appears: naturalizing and universalizing behaviours and roles, redefining the hierarchical solidarity and subordination in alternative and appropriate words, and mirroring the discursive production of development organizations.

Good governance, democracy, and gender equity are some of the key words of development language and they appear to be entirely realized within co-development. However, within development language-knowledge, social groups and migrants' collectives adjust gender and authority *habitus*, ascribed identities and political action strategies for citizenship and integration to local context of immigration. Ethnography revealed how co-development, mobilizing migrants' collectives to mediate translocal political and social contexts, implicates processes of encoding and decoding language, power relations and social codes. Thus, it reproduces and moves itself within power relations without succeeding in changing asymmetries. Yet, development language and globalization, as dominant discursive domains, find new vernacular forms of expression of political and social action. Therefore, co-development produces a new political subjectivity, which, while appealing to the global and transnational identities, subsumes plural social identities that perform within the social, cultural and geographical landscapes.

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