Remittances, social inequality and transnational family organization: A Cape Verdean case study
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The transfer of money from migrants to their relatives in the country of origin is a transnational practice of considerable economic importance for many receivers all around the world (e.g. Glick Schiller & Fouron 2001; Van Hear 2001; Horst 2004; Eastmond & Åkesson 2007). In recent years, migrant remittances have increasingly come to be considered ‘the real economic adjustment programme of the poor’ (Portes & Hoffman 2003:74). Migrant remittances to developing countries were roughly three times official development assistance in 2006, or more than 300 billion USD (UN News Service 2007). However, the ways in which remittances impact upon local settings are often complex and contradictory. Today they tend to be viewed in a positive light by the majority of policy makers and development researchers, who anticipate that migrants’ transfer of money will contribute to poverty alleviation in developing countries. Whether remittances also diminish social inequalities is deemed much more uncertain, and many researchers argue that they tend to exacerbate social stratification.

In this paper I explore the complex dynamic between remittances, transnational social organization and inequality through an anthropological study carried out in Cape Verde. More specifically, the study looks into how variations in family organization influence the distribution of remittances and their effects on local social stratification. Drawing on ethnographic information from a Cape Verdean community where a process of changing family relations has transformed the distribution of remittances, I show that attention to family and kinship, themes of central importance in anthropology, can generate new insights into the vexed relation between remittances and social inequality.

The study is primarily based on fieldwork conducted in a rural community, which I have chosen to call Ribera. In Ribera, remittances are an institutionalized part of livelihoods. Nearly everyone has a close relative abroad, and most households have during the last year received money from a migrant. After having stayed for a while in the community, I started to realize that remittances to a much larger extent did contribute to socio-economic inequality.
one generation ago than they do today. Among the households headed by elderly people, there is a difference between the households that received remittances in the 1960s and 1970s and those that did not. Still today the households that received money from abroad during this period of time are clearly better off in terms of living standard and social status than other households headed by elderly persons. Among the households headed by young and middle-aged people, the same difference is not discernible. These households have only been liable to receive remittances during recent years. My own observations, as well as data from the interviews I carried out, make it clear that nowadays the reception of remittances does not guarantee a household a better socio-economic standing than those households that do not receive remittances.

When I asked people in Ribera about the reasons for the historically changing impact of remittances upon local stratification, they often answered by starting to talk about family relations, and the transformations these have undergone. They talked about lack of confidence between partners, the reason why marriages had become outmoded and young men’s lack of responsibility for their children. It turned out that all this was important for the impact of remittances on social inequality in Ribera. My aim in this paper is, thus, to trace the connections between increasingly instable conjugal relations, changing family organization, migration, remittances and social stratification.

Remittances, social stratification and family organization

Since the early 1970s, the question of whether remittances have a positive or negative impact on the receivers’ economic and social situation has been much debated. Today, however, the majority of contemporary remittance studies are coloured by a common optimistic tone. The dominant view is that remittances have a positive impact on economic development and poverty reduction, and one reason for this confidence seems to be the sheer insight that remittances amount to an enormous – and rapidly increasing – amount of money. The optimistic attitude among researchers and policy makers became even more manifest after the publication of the 2006 edition of the World Bank’s yearly report on “Global Economic Prospects”, which was dedicated to Economic implications of remittances and migration (2006). Critical voices have, however, warned against an overconfidence in remittances’ possibilities so solve the problems of global economic injustices, and ironically coined remittances ‘the new development mantra’. It is also evident that in even the most optimistic
reports on the effects of remittances, there are areas of concern. One of these areas regards the impact of remittances on inequality.

The empirical literature on the impact of remittances on inequality is mixed. Some argue that unlike development aid, remittances flow directly to households that really need them and therefore contribute to poverty reduction. Other researchers find evidence that remittances worsen income distribution (Aguinas 2006). A common conclusion is that the outcome depends on the selectivity of migrants. Remittances will reduce income inequalities only if migrants are recruited in poor households. Some researchers have suggested that the selectivity of migrants differs between transnational places with a well-established history of mobility and places in which migration has only just begun (Massey et al. 1994; Jones 1998). Where migration is a recent phenomenon, migrants typically come from the middle level of the local socioeconomic spectrum. By contrast, where there has been a long history and a high prevalence of mobility, migration tends to become socially less selective and more representative of the whole community, which means that more people from different socioeconomic strata are liable to receive remittances. Based on these assumptions, it is argued that when remittances become institutionalized within local livelihoods, the inflow of money from abroad does not have a negative impact on patterns of social inequality (Cohen 2004).

As I will show, this pattern is applicable to the historical and social context of Ribera. It can be used for analysing how the historical development of out-migration from Ribera interacts with the relation between remittances and inequality. With regard to the main theme of this paper - the relation between family organization and distribution of remittances - it is more difficult to rely on earlier research as this relation is little explored. In the first place, much research on development and remittances departs from the implicit assumption that all migrants direct their remittances to only one ‘family’, a concept which in economical literature often is used synonymously to ‘household’. The assumption that migrants send their money to only one household is, for example, made by proponents of the dominant micro-economic model of remittance behaviour, the ‘new economics of labor migration’ (NELM) (Stark & Bloom 1985; Stark & Lucas 1988; Taylor 1999). According to NELM theory, ‘the
family’ first supports the migrants to move and find new occupations. Thereafter, the migrants continuously send a part of their income to ‘the family’.  

As pointed out by the sociologists Mariano Sana & Douglas Massey (2005), another common assumption in the NELM literature is that the receiving household is based on a nuclear family. Furthermore, this family is supposed to be cohesive, traditional and headed by a man. The migrant who belongs to this kind of family is also envisaged to be of a particular kind: He is male and either the son of the household head or the head himself (ibid). Thus, remittance research still often overlooks the considerable global variation in family and household organization, as well as the fact that an estimated 50 per cent of the world’s migrants are female (International Organization for Migration 2008). One recent example of this bias is found in the oft-cited volume *International Migration and Economic Development* by the economist Robert Lucas (2005). In a discussion on migration, poverty and inequality Lucas talks about the migrant as a ‘father’ who leaves ‘wife and children’ behind (ibid:267).

The case of Ribera underscores that it is wrong to assume that the contemporary migrant is a male breadwinner who leaves wife and children behind. In Ribera, as in many other places in Cape Verde and elsewhere, conjugal relations are often transitory, there are few households based on nuclear families, and women migrate more often than men. All this has an impact on the relation between remittances and socio-economic inequality.

**Background and methodology**

Cape Verde is a good place in which to study transnational phenomena such as remittances. To emigrate, in that country, is to follow a deeply rooted tradition, and hundreds of thousands Cape Verdeans have left their homeland since the end of the eighteenth century. Mass migration began in the early twentieth century and has been directed to three different continents: America, Africa and Europe. Today, people with a Cape Veridian background living outside the islands probably outnumber the half a million persons who actually live in Cape Verde. Thus, besides the nine inhabited islands in the Atlantic archipelago, Cape Verde as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) also includes migrants in many different

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1 In the NELM literature, three different reasons are given for why the migrants continue to send remittances. Firstly, they may do it as a delayed payment for the economic investments the family has made in order to make the migration possible, secondly, the migrants may send money as a kind of insurance to the family in times of crises, and, thirdly, they may remit because they want to be eligible for the family inheritance (Mazzucato 2006). In all these cases, the imagined receiver of the remittances is ‘the family’ forming one household located in one place.
countries of destination. Nearly everyone in Cape Verde has a close relative living abroad. All this means that most individuals are oriented towards people and resources located in settings far away.

In Cape Verde, remittances have become an institutionalized part of livelihood strategies. Carling (2005) estimates the proportion of Cape Verdean households receiving remittances to be between one third and two thirds. In 2006 registered remittances accounted for 13 per cent of the gross domestic product (International Monetary Fund 2006). To this should be added money sent outside the official transfer mechanisms, for example when a remittance sender asks a friend or relative travelling to Cape Verde to transport cash to a receiver. According to my observations, this a common way of sending remittances.

The argument in the paper builds upon more than ten years of ethnographical experience with Cape Verdean migration, including studies of both senders and receivers of remittances. The material for this particular paper has been collected through participant observation and interviews among people from the rural community of Ribera. The main part of the fieldwork was carried out in 2007 among the slightly more than fifty households that make up the rural community of Ribera. In addition, I have interviewed people who have left Ribera for the nearest provincial town, which I have given the name Boca.2 In Boca, people from Ribera tend to live in the same peripheral quarter of the town, which has made it easy to find people to interview and also made it possible to carry out participant observation among people originating from Ribera but now living in this semi-urban environment.

The research was guided by the insight that all economic action is socially embedded. When focusing on remittances, this is immediately obvious as they normally are transferred within a family network. Questions about the ‘family migration story’ were consequently a part of all interviews. I talked to people about the movements of their family members, and asked them about their views on the living conditions of those who had left. I also inquired into the intensity in their contacts with the migrants, and asked whether migrated family members used to send any money. In Ribera, as in many other places, it is clearly inappropriate to directly ask how much money people receive from the migrants. There is a taboo against openly discussing details of individual or household economy with anyone, even the closest

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2 Altogether I have carried out 43 interviews in Ribera and Boca.
relatives. Questions about exact amounts of money are especially sensitive. Thus, it is impossible to acquire a detailed knowledge about how much remittances people actually receive. As pointed out by the anthropologist Liisa Malkki (1995:51), both from an ethical point of view and with regard to the success of the fieldwork it is extremely important not to become a scientific ‘detective’ trying to discover what is ‘hidden’. A more general understanding of the role of remittances in different household economies was possible to gain, however, through discussing overall livelihood strategies. Accordingly, I interviewed people about key issues related to local household livelihoods such as wage labour, ownership of land, sale of agricultural products, payment of bills and construction of houses. During my stays I lived in three different households in the community and had ample opportunities to follow their everyday economics. Participant observation also deepened my understanding of local and transnational family organization, as well as of social stratification in Ribera.

Presentation of Ribera, Cape Verde: Livelihoods and social stratification

Ribera is situated in the mountains of the island of Santo Antão. The households in Ribera survive and try to improve their standard of living through a combination of small-scale agriculture, wage labour and remittances. Historically, farming has included a combination of subsistence and cash-crop production. The main cash-crop has been coffee, but today the coffee bushes are overgrown by shrubs and weeds as production no longer is profitable. Besides dwindling world market prices and increased wages for agricultural workers, the lack of a road to Ribera contributes to make the cultivation of coffee unprofitable because of the high costs for transportation. The distance from Ribera to Boca, the nearest town, corresponds to one hour of strenuous walking in mountainous terrain, and in comparison with the situation some 30 years ago when the (female) carriers who brought down products to the road earned nearly nothing, prices for manual transportation of coffee and other produce has risen considerably. As a consequence of these changing circumstances, little cash crop is cultivated in Ribera today.

Most households in Ribera have access to a small plot of land, either as owners or as sharecroppers. The sharecropping system (meia) is institutionalized on Santo Antão (Stockinger 1990), and gives the cultivator the right to keep 50 per cent of the harvest. The owners of sharecropped land seldom reside in Ribera. Usually they live in an urban area in

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3 This is a methodological problem that is inherent in many studies of remittances, although it is quite seldom referred to.
Cape Verde or in the diaspora. Maize and beans are staple crops, and besides them people grow a variety of produce, such as sweet potatoes, manioc and different fruit trees. Drought is a recurring problem throughout the Cape Verde islands, but since Ribera is situated in one of the few areas where it rains nearly every year, the harvest is seldom totally lost. As for animal production, many households raise a pig or two, as well as some chickens. This means that most households have a guaranteed supply of basic food, although some essential foodstuff, like rice, cooking oil and sugar have to be purchased in one of the groceries in Boca.

In the elderly generation, most people have worked all their life in agriculture, either on their own small plots, or as (badly) paid agricultural labourers. Today, however, middle-aged and young people seldom are prepared to spend their lives as subsistence farmers with no or little monetary incomes. This is an attitude that distress and annoy members of the old generation, who much lament the fact that areas of cultivable land today lie uncultivated. At the present, men generally try to find a job in the construction sector, which presently booms on the island of Santo Antão. During the last years, some construction projects have been carried out also in the community of Ribera, financed by international development aid and executed by the municipality, which have made it possible for some men to find short-term employment close to home. Others leave early in the morning, and walk down the mountain to get to their workplace in Boca, or still further away. For women it is harder to find a job, and most females in Ribera have no or very irregular incomes. The traditional income earning activity for women has been to carry burdens, to and from Ribera. Elderly and middle-aged women often tell stories about their youth when they went down to the road up to three times a day, always with a heavy burden on their head. Presently, the ongoing construction projects in Ribera offer quite a few women temporary work as carriers of cement and sand from the road to the construction site. This is a heavy job, but since alternatives are few women find this an opportunity to gain some money.

The houses that are being constructed or repaired today are all part of a public social housing programme. The owners of these houses or houses-to-be are either among the poorest in the community, or in a position to persuade the municipality that they are in need of support. Without the support from the social housing programme it is hardly possible to construct a new house in Ribera, because of the costs involved. In order to exemplify the high costs,

4 Houses in Cape Verde are made of sun-dried bricks made by sand, gravel, water and some cement.
people often refer to the fact that it costs 300 Cape Verdean escudos (3 Euro) to bring a small bucket of sand to Ribera. There is a general agreement among the villagers that the continuing moving out of people from Ribera is directly related to the economic difficulties involved in building a house in a place without a road.

The lack of a road is a constant topic of conversation in Ribera. Those who work in Boca leave before sunrise and do not return until late in the evening. Children attending secondary school spend about three hours a day on their way to and from school, and elderly people lament about the long walking distance to health care and other services. But despite this, Ribera is not a place cut off from the rest of the world. People, even ninety-years-olds, constantly walk up and down to Boca and other places along the coast. Some villagers leave for work on other islands, and others come back for shorter or longer periods of time. Many households have a television, and nearly all have a telephone. The telephone has often been installed with support from migrant family members who want to keep in touch. When the telephone rings in a Riberan household, the call is more often than not international. A telephone call from Lisbon or Boston is an everyday occasion in many houses, and people refer to these places with a cosmopolitan familiarity.

Migration history and inequality

International migration from Ribera has been going on since the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s outward mobility accelerated as a consequence of the growing demand for labour in North and Western Europe. Since then a small but steady stream of people from Ribera has left for Europe and the U.S. Traditionally, migration has been considered a male activity, but many locals maintain that during the last decades more women than men have migrated from the community. Their explanation for this is that there is a high demand for female labour in countries of destination, and that it is easier for women to led a life as undocumented migrants without being caught by the police.

With regard to people in the elder generation, migration is clearly seen as linked to social stratification. When I asked people who the most influential individuals in Ribera are, they often mentioned three men in their seventies who all had been abroad when they were young. These men, people explained to me, had worked hard in stranjer (foreign countries), and they had saved money and bought land. This was in a period of time when cash-crop production was more profitable than nowadays and land therefore was in greater demand. One elderly
man explained to me that when migrants in his generation started to buy land, prices increased and consequently only migrants were able to purchase more land. Most of the elderly returnees have also been able to build a nice house for themselves and their family. When walking around in Ribera, it is easy to single out the houses that have been built or enlarged by people who migrated in the 1960s and 1970s. Although traditional in style, these houses are comparatively big, they often have a roof made by tiles and they are sometimes whitewashed. People who accompanied me on my walks, pointed out these houses as “kaza d’emigrant” (migrant’s house). In conclusion, households headed by elderly men who migrated when foreign labour was in high demand in Europe, and thereafter returned, generally are considered to be well off.

In difference to this, houses headed by middle-aged or young people are never pointed out as kaza d’emigrant, even when a member has migrated. Among these households, reception of remittances is not in and of itself understood to be an indicator of a better economic standing. When I asked a young women whether people who receive remittances are richer than others, she merely shrugged her shoulders and answered, ‘that can’t be taken for granted, it depends on how much they send’. It was clear that young people did not count on remittances as a secure basis for a living. A typical comment which I heard many times was that, ‘the migrants of today have other responsibilities, they cannot send so much money’. Thus, nowadays there is no straightforward connection between remittances and economic stratification in Ribera. Socio-economic differences among households headed by younger people are sooner related to access to wage labour. Households in which at least one member earns a salary from a more or less steady employment are clearly better off than other households.

The question is then why remittances earlier on had an impact on patterns of social inequality in Ribera, but seemingly do not play the same role today. Partly this can be explained by historical variations in the selectivity of migrant. Drawing on survey data collected in Zacatecas, Mexico, the geographer Richard Jones (1998) proposed a model on migration and inequality consisting of three temporal stages. In the first stage, the migrants come from a small number of households that are already fairly well off. When these migrants start sending remittances, local income inequalities increases. In the second stage, due to contacts between the pioneers and those who stayed behind, also people who are less well off manage to migrate, which means that even poorer households are liable to receive remittances. At this stage, inequalities decrease. In the third stage, migration has created a transnational ‘class’
that stands increasingly apart from a group of poor households who have never sent away any migrants. This leads to an increasingly unequal income distribution.

In Ribera, as in Zacatecas, the first important wave of out-migration caused increased inequality. The male Cape Verdean migrants who left for Northern and Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s were able to send home what locally was considered large sums of money. Land prices increased and the majority of the households, those without migrants, found it gradually more difficult to gain access to land, while households with migrating members were able to sell large parts of their harvests. A second similarity with Jones’s model is that also in Ribera migration successively spread to a large part of the community, which meant that remittances progressively reached more and more households. In difference to the Mexican case, however, a discernible well off transnational stratum has not been created in Ribera. As we have seen, almost everyone has a close relative abroad and the absolute majority of the households sometimes receive remittances. Although there are economic differences between households, there exists no local socio-economic elite. This was pointed out by many informants who said that, ‘rich people do not live in Ribera’.

Three factors may account for the fact that Ribera not entered the third stage of Jones’ model. Firstly, in Cape Verde emigration has been going on for a longer period of time than in Mexico and is an extremely well established tradition (Åkesson 2004), which makes it plausible that in relative terms more persons have emigrated from Ribera than from the communities in Zapatecas studied by Jones. In Ribera, the long-term and steady outflow of migrants has prevented the emergence of a delimited transnational ‘class’, as most people maintain ties with relatives living abroad. Secondly, land prices in Ribera have declined during the last decades, as cash crop production has become less and less profitable. Among other things, this means that it is not viable to use remittances for buying land and thereby acquiring a superior position in society. The third reason, which has to do with differences in family organization, I will now discuss in some detail, starting off by describing how family relations in Ribera have changed during the last generations.

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5 This was when the market price of coffee was higher, and girls and women who carried goods down to the nearest motor road still earned extremely little.
Historical changes in family organization among people from Ribera

The traditional family in Ribera forty years ago was a cohesive and patriarchal nuclear family. The dominating ideal for young people was to marry and thereby enter into a life-long relationship. The partners should ideally work together for a better future, which importantly included the construction of good house. The man was seen as the head of the household and the main breadwinner, whether he worked with his hoe on the small terraced field or tried to improve the life conditions of his family through emigration. Women also worked in agriculture, and could additionally earn some money as carriers, but they were primarily regarded as housewives and mothers. Their mothering role was often demanding as many couples had about ten children.

Despite this nuclear family orientation, extramarital relations were common. For married men, to develop a relationship with one or more pekena (girlfriend, litt. 'small girl') was expected behaviour. This means that elderly married men more often than not have children born out of wedlock.6 Seemingly, this was not perceived to be a reason for divorce. An elderly woman, Maria, explained to me that if you were a judicious women and had a husband who was responsible and ‘worked for the family’, you did not leave him just because he had sexual relations with others. ‘Excuse my language’, she said, ‘but men have always been street-dogs (catxor d’rua) and a prudent women knows that if she waits long enough for her husband he will always come running back to her’. Similar opinions were voiced by other elderly women who told stories about their husband’s unfaithfulness. One woman told me that she had moved away from her husband for a while, until he had broken up with his girlfriend, but others just ignored their men’s eskapades.

Among younger people, life-long relationships are much rarer. Conjugal relations have become increasingly transitory, and men’s attachment to their female partners and children is generally believed to be weaker today. Among young and middle-aged people, bonds between mothers and children are often far stronger than that between partners or between fathers and children. Maria, who has many adult children, shared her opinion on why couple relations have become more transitory in the young generation:

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6 Women in this generation often have a child who was born before they married, and fathered by another man than their husband. The loss of virginity was not an impediment to marriage. There were, however, severe social sanctions against a married woman who had an extramarital relation.
Today, there is no confidence between women and men. When the man finds a new partner, the woman also goes looking for one. Young women know that there is a great risk that their partner will not make a serious effort to build a common future. He will not work for the family. Young women do not trust their boyfriends’ willingness to contribute. If I had been young today, and living together with one of these young men who don’t think about the future of the family, I would have left him and worked for my children and for myself.

Maria makes three important points in her statement. First, she declares that neither women nor men have a confidence in their partners. A lack of trust between the sexes is often referred to by both males and females in Ribera (and other places in Cape Verde). Secondly, she hints at young women’s new attitude towards sexual infidelity. They do not quietly accept that their partner has another girlfriend, and it also happens that women themselves start a new relationship when they are dissatisfied with the present one. Thirdly, Maria refers to what many young and middle-aged women talk about: their difficulties to find a man who ‘works for the family’. A common pattern in many women’s struggle to build a better future is to find a ‘responsible man’. Such a man is hardworking and he gives at least a part of his salary to his female partner, who always is the one who is responsible for making ends meet in the everyday economics of the household. His ability and willingness to share household expenses is crucial not only in terms of economy. From women’s perspective it is also decisive for the seriousness and strength of the relationship between the two of them.

Moreover, a ‘responsible man’ strives to construct a house for himself and his woman and children. To be living in a house of one’s own has a strong economical, social and symbolical significance. People in Ribera talk about ownership of houses in terms of ‘living a dignified life’.

Today, it is common that women have children with more than one man, and have seen their hope of a ‘responsible man’ dissolve with each of them. Quite a few women relate ‘men’s irresponsibility’ to heavy drinking of locally produced sugarcane liquor (grog), and many women (and men) are of the opinion that excessive drinking is much more common among younger than among elder men. Women I met complained about men using their money for rounds of grog instead of saving them for the construction of a house.

When I talked with men about the generational changes in patterns of conjugal relations, they agreed that young people today easily break up a relation, but they found it difficult to explain why this happens. Generally, they were not open to the idea that men should have become
less responsible, which is voiced by many women. Some of them instead blamed the women, and said that they are not interested in serious relationships. One man told me that his experience was that ‘women just want your money, they are never interested in you as a person’. Most young men, however, seemed to admire the long-term relationships of the old generation, and lament the fact that these kind of relations have become uncommon. They talked approvingly of couples who had lived together ‘fifty years or more’, and wanted me to believe that these couples always had lived in peace. One man said, half jokingly and half seriously, ‘when I talk about these old people and the way they have lived I use to say that the factory which made them, that factory has gone down the drain’.

In the old generation, a women and a man who live together normally are married, while younger people live in *de facto* unions. Marriage is linked to the Catholic Church, which plays an important role in Cape Verdean rural areas such as Ribera, but people are never criticized for not marrying. Young and middle-aged people say that marriage is ‘outmoded’ and ‘has fallen in disrepute’. The reason for this, some women told me, is that there are so many divorces, and when there is a divorce everybody blames the woman. Another reason is that both women and men conceive of marriage as an institution that legitimizes male dominance and control, and this also naturally make many women hesitant to marry.

The changes that have taken place with regard to conjugal relations have had an impact on the organization of households. Whereas people in the old generation often live in household they themselves have formed as wife and husband, this is more seldom the case with young people. When a couple break up, the children as a rule follow their mother. If she does not have a house of her own, she normally stays with her parents. This means that a common pattern is that a household includes an elderly married couple, one or two daughters and their children. Men who has neither a house of their own nor a steady partner may also live with their parents. Besides these common forms, there is a big variation in how households are organized. I have interviewed both men and women who live on their own, single parents (mostly female, but also one male) who live alone with their children, grandchildren staying with their grandparents and members of households including a number of different relatives in an extended family. In short, households are formed in many different ways, but most adult women and men dream of a house of their own, a house where they can live in ‘dignity and peace’. Whether this household also should include a partner of the opposite sex seems in most cases to be an open question.
**Variations in transnational family relations and their effect on the distribution of remittances**

During the 1960s and 1970s most migrants from Ribera were male. The typical migrant intended to work abroad temporarily, with the idea of accumulating savings and returning home to make use of them. Characteristically, the migrant was married and he directed his remittances to his wife, who took care of the household during his absence. As a consequence, the comparatively few households which included a migrant often raised their economic standard considerably in relation to households that did not have a migrant member.

During the last decades the process of changing family relations has transformed the distribution of remittances in Ribera. This has to do with the fact that conjugal relations have become more transitory. If relations where both partners live in Cape Verde tend to be transitory, this is even truer of transnational relations. One important consequence of this is that nowadays long-lasting transnational ties hardly ever are based on a relationship between a woman and a man. Contemporary migrants do not send money to a partner, instead they as a rule have economic obligations towards a number of households.

When people migrate from Ribera today, they seldom leave with the intention of raising the living standard of a nuclear family. This differs from what is more or less taken for granted in much of the literature on remittances and labour migration. At the present, both men and women migrate, and a wish to improve one’s own life is often a strong driving force behind migration. People who want to migrate often formulate their hopes for a better future by saying, ‘I want to make my life’. In practice, this means searching for the economic means to make the transition to autonomous adulthood in which one owns a house and – maybe together with a partner - is head of a household.

Through my interviews it became clear that both male and female migrants who have left Ribera during the last decades tend to start up a new family, or at least become parents in the country of destination. People in Ribera often acknowledge this by saying that today’s migrants cannot send so much money to their families in Cape Verde, ‘because they have their own responsibilities’. Fatima who has a daughter in Portugal explained her daughter’s situation to me:

She has children and a boyfriend over there, and everything is expensive. She also has a
daughter who goes to school here in Cape Verde. She can’t send me money every month because she has to pay a very high rent for her apartment, and then she must take care of her children. Everything in Portugal is expensive, expensive.

Fatima’s neighbour Ana, who has three children in different European countries, has similar experiences of her children’s possibilities to send remittances:

My daughter has a good job, but you know, she has three children, she has three children at school. But she sends me a little something when she happens to meet somebody who shall travel to Cape Verde. I have a son who is called Zé, he sends me some money now and then, he has only one child, a child and a girlfriend. And Wilson, he used to send me more, but now he has three children at school, and he has another one here, a daughter here. And that huge rent he is paying!

Like these two women other remittance receivers in Ribera accepted that their children and siblings who live abroad have other priorities besides supporting family members in Cape Verde. The idea that the goal of migration primarily should be to support those left behind is prominent in much remittance literature, but this notion, thus, is shared neither by migrants nor by non-migrants from Ribera.

However, besides the more individualistic dream of “making a life”, the hope to support different family members also is an important motive for migration, especially among women who leave children behind in the care of female relatives. Women who have left children behind are reliable senders of monthly remittances. Even when mothers have been absent for many years, they are not expected to ‘forget’ their children, and they must continue to support them or arrange for their emigration. It is much more acceptable for fathers to remit no or very little money to their children. Furthermore, both women and men often have an intention to help ageing parents, and especially mothers have a moral right to support from adult children. If a migrant neglects helping a mother who lives in poverty, this is heavily criticized. Migrants’ siblings may also receive support. As these different relatives do not always live together, contemporary migrants often remit to two or more households.

When I visited an elderly couple in Ribera, they showed me a photo of a their daughter Sonia who lives in Italy and works as a domestic servant. The photo was a close-up picture of Sonia, who rested her head on her hands and looked worried. On the back of the photo Sonia had written, ‘look how worried I’m about being able to help you all’. Sonia’s parents explained that Sonia has one child in Italy, whom she supports on her own. Moreover, she sends money
every month to her two sons who live with her sister in Praia, the capital of Cape Verde. She also tries to help her parents, especially when they are unable to pay their electricity and telephone bills. And then there is a sister who lives in Boca, who is unemployed and a single mother of two small children. This means that Sonia has obligations to four different households.

In difference to the male migrants some forty years ago, Sonia and other contemporary migrants distribute their money to a number of households in Ribera and beyond. For people in Ribera this development implies that many households receive some remittances, while no household receive enough remittances to be regarded as ‘rich’. The new structure of family organization puts a pressure on Sonia and other migrants to share their limited incomes between a number of households, but it also diminishes the risk that remittances exacerbate social inequalities. This is so not only because many migrants send their money to more than one household, but also because each of these households only receive a smaller amount of money. This means that although remittances today are distributed more equally, they are also quite thinly spread. This was reflected in the way many people in Ribera talked about remittances as being rather insignificant for their livelihoods. An old man in his eighties, with three children abroad, said that, ‘if they send something, that’s good, but if they send nothing, we’ll make it without them’. A younger man talked about the money he occasionally received from his brother in the United States as ‘something that’s not very important’. A third person, a woman in her sixties with two daughters in Italy, showed a somewhat less indifferent attitude. She declared: ‘You can’t wait for them to send something. You can’t rely on their money. Ask for something? Never! But if they send something I happily accept it.’ These three quotations reflect an attitude that was manifest in many interviews: A playing down of the connection between reception of remittances and the making of a living.

In conclusion, remittances are both thinly and quite equally spread among the households in Ribera. As in other places with a long history of migration, many of the households have a former member who has migrated, and this broad selectivity of the migrants partly explains the wide distribution of remittances in the community. Another factor, which I have focussed on in this paper, has to do with the 'lack of confidence' between women and men. The increasing transitoriness of conjugal relations has transformed the structure of transnational family ties. Men and women who migrate often start up a new family in the country of destination. When they send remittances to family members in Cape Verde, they do not invest
in their own future life, as in former days. In relation to the debate on remittances and inequality, the case of Ribera shows that variations in transnational family organization may play an important role. This is a connection that hitherto has received scant attention among both scholars and policy makers. Probably this has to do with the compartmentalization of research, which entails that scholars who are interested in economics seldom deal with studies of family and kinship, and vice versa.

References