Horizons of long-distance intimacies
Reciprocity, contribution and disjuncture in Cape Verde

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Abstract

This article employs the renewed anthropology of kinship to revisit historical approaches to the study of social relations taking place in transnational social fields. Based on multi-sited qualitative anthropological fieldwork with a strong historical perspective centred on biographical interviews and social network analysis, the author examines a particular Cape Verdean household that comprises four generations and extends its contacts between several Cape Verdean islands, Portugal, São Tomé/Príncipe as well as the United States. The contextualization of the individual life courses of its members and their changing relatedness in the course of time brings to surface a complex design of factors that contribute to the sense of belonging or detachment in this Creole transnational island society. These are different levels of mobility, the challenges and limits of diverse levels of technical connectivity between several localities, the dynamics between approved relatedness and family-based migration regimes as well as the normative aspects resulting in a gendered perspective on the demands of reciprocity. The author introduces the notion of a "contributive family model" in order to capture the individual choice of keeping in touch and the meaning of social practices, which transform ideas of relatedness into reconfirmed transnational solidarities.

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1. Introduction

“Si bo escreve’m um ta escreve’b, si bo esquece’m um ta esquece’ b, ate dia ki bo volta.” (Cesaria Evora, Sodade).

“If you write to me, I will write to you, if you forget me, I will forget you, until the day that you return.”

In her melancholy song ‘sodade’, which contributed to the worldwide reputation of the small island state of Cape Verde, Cesaria Evora, la Grande Dame of the Cape Verdean music scene captures two elements of Cape Verdean sociability which are central for understanding the particularities of social life in the archipelago. The song deals first with the absence of a loved person who left their home country under insecure conditions and with the uncertainty if he or she will write, will forget his or her lover staying at home, or will ever return. A second feature of this chorus line is the idea of reciprocity: whoever writes, will be written to, whoever forgets, will be forgotten, whereas an eventual return can revoke this forgetting.

Family relations in Cape Verde are considerably shaped by the fact that migration has always constituted the foundation of the archipelago’s social structure and therefore every Cape Verdean knows of the experience of being separated from a loved person as well as the weight of the question as to whether a certain relationship can be
sustained in the future. Evora’s lyrics illustrate the sometimes bitter awareness that social relations are not naturally given, but that they need to be lived, cultivated and renewed, and that they can also break down.

At the same time, these insights stand in the centre of recent kinship theories which, independent from migration movements, stress the active composition and the processuality of social relations. Until the 1970s, anthropologists, in addition to historians, had heavily focused on structures of alliance (marriage) as well as descent (biological reproduction) and were particularly interested in comparing the structural foundations of human relations. The works of the American cultural anthropologist Schneider (1984) led to a radical turn and, at least for a couple of years, to a withdrawal from the anthropology of kinship which once had been so central to the discipline. According to Schneider, kinship should not be seen as biology, as also apparently ‘natural’ relations are the result of culturally determined symbolical processes. This idea was followed by a drastic renewal of the anthropology of kinship. Since the early 1990s, the question of how kinship is constituted as a particular form of social commitment and mutual liability has been examined by various anthropologists who once more pushed the topic with innovative power into the centre of anthropological studies (Faubion, 1996, 2001a,b, Franklin, 1997, Peletz, 1995, Strathern, 1989, Weston, 1991).

Particularly the approaches developed by Janet Carsten (2000, 2004) have been relevant for my research. She employs the notion of ‘relativeness’ for describing social relations in order to avoid the bias of Euro-American perspectives on kinship (Carsten, 2000, 4). Carsten begins with Schneider’s denaturalization of kinship and is in search of the real and everyday condition of social relations. She puts her anthropological focus on everyday actions such as living together under one roof, collective meals or social activities such as support and care. In doing so, notions and practices of mutual responsibility and moral duties become understandable and comparable from an intercultural perspective. At the same time, she stresses the formability or plasticity of social relations which are always “under construction” (Carsten, 2000, 18). Shared substances such as mother’s milk or other forms of food, but also blood or semen, can produce relatedness (ibid., 21). John Bornemann provides a complementary perspective and calls for a radical de-categorization of the anthropological perspective. In his view, research based on categories such as sexuality, gender, marriage and kinship imply a moral connotation of the subject, which impedes a critical examination of normative conditions. He suggests replacing the term kinship with ‘care’ in order to be able to understand the cohesion of society (Bornemann, 2001, 31/44).

Besides this renewed understanding of family and kinship, social scientists in the past decades have been dealing with the increasing mobility of people who, for different kinds of reasons and motives, opt for changing their place of residence temporarily or forever. Refugees, politically persecuted people, labour migrants as well as the so-called cosmopolitans, such as employees of transnational companies, ‘expats’ who work for development cooperation organizations, or scientists, change their place of residence, start a new life at a new place and each of them has to answer the question, if and how to stay in touch with those remaining in the home country, in his or her own way. Steffen Mau describes a shift from a monolocal to a plurilocal model of the family wherein, due to globalization processes, relations of solidarity and mutual responsibility do not wither but need to be organized in new and different ways in order to be sustained (Mau, 2007, 112). It should be added that it is difficult to consider concepts such as transnationalism or diaspora without taking into consideration the cohesive force of close social relations, as in many cases, bonds such as family or friendship are the crucial factors for choosing a certain place of migration and keeping in touch with the home country (Boyd, 1989, Gershon, 2007). Therefore, the creative strategies within transnational families prove to be central for understanding micro-perspectives of transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000, 202, Pries, 2007). Furthermore, family life across borders can provide insights into transnational care and support systems which, particularly in economically marginalized regions of the world, constitute the pivot for collective survival (Baldassar, 2007).

Hence, this article deals with the characteristics of family relations taking place in transnational social spaces and specifically with the burdens and challenges attached to it. For two reasons Cape Verde will serve as a significant case study. First, the historical development of Cape Verdean culture will show that migration can have a decisive influence on the local notion of the family. Second, the challenges of transnational family lives and recent globalization-related transformations can be observed especially well at this location. I will focus on

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1 Commonly the Portuguese noun “saudade” is translated into the English noun “longing”. However, there is a considerable semantic difference between the two, saudade rather denominating feelings of absence, related to the immigrant history of the Portuguese nation (Feldman-Bianco, 1992).

the fact that on the one hand social spaces, in the context of globalization, can become independent from the powers of state borders (Maihold, 2005, 53–56) and therefore many families live their social practices across long distances (Mau, 2007, 71). However, on the other hand, spatial mobilities across national borders are more than ever shaped by state regulative practices. Unlike commodities, services or information, human mobilities are structured by mostly Western states’ migration regimes and these decide who is allowed to cross national borders. State institutions therefore hold great definitive powers over social belonging as well as interfamilial dependencies and hierarchies (Faist, 2000, 15). This also concerns possibilities of transnational care which are shaped by visa regulations, telecommunication or the access to means of financial transfer (Baldassar et al., 2007, 3, Bryceson and Vuorella, 2002, 11). Anthropological theories have suggested that the notion of belonging in transnational families, more than in other contexts, is a question of choice and negotiation. Drawing from B. Anderson’s understanding of community, Bryceson and Vuorella write: “Families, ethnicities and nations can be seen as imagined communities. One may be born into a family and a nation, but the sense of membership can be a matter of choice and negotiation. One can alter one’s nationality and citizenship just as one can alter one’s family and its membership in everyday practice” (Bryceson and Vuorella, 2002, 10). Consequently, the question needs to be asked: why and how do people create and maintain kinship ties across great temporal and spatial distances? And: why and at which point do family members get disconnected and decide, consciously or not, not to continue their relations?

Contrary to most papers in this special issue, my presentation focuses less on diasporic perspectives but rather deals with the impact of plurilocality and the perception of transnational family life in the sending country. Applying an action- and actor-centred approach, I will concentrate in particular on the constructedness of familyhood and employ the advances of the renewed anthropology of kinship to reflect upon the characteristics of social relations which span great temporal and spatial distances. In doing so, I will pay special attention to the inequalities and dependencies resulting from these distances as well as to the different frameworks that shape social relations spanning different countries. Based on a qualitative anthropological approach with a strong historical perspective centred on biographical interviews and social network analysis, I will examine the perspectives of a particular Cape Verdean family that comprises four generations and extends its contacts between several Cape Verdean islands, Portugal, São Tomé/Príncipe as well as the United States. Accordingly, its time frame begins with the late phase of Portuguese colonialism in the 1940s, and covers postcolonial changes after national independence in 1975 as well as the changing regimes of labour migration to Portugal and the United States in the 1980s and 1990s until today. My argument will be structured as follows: first, the central historical configuration which is important for understanding this specific social structure will be illustrated. In the case of Cape Verde, we need to identify forms of social interaction as they developed during Portuguese colonialism and focus on their impact on social life in the archipelago. Next I will describe postcolonial changes and their consequences for Cape Verdean family life. Due to the fact that in Cape Verde, it is not biological bonds but rather the social unit of the household which is crucial for understanding systems of support and care, I will at this point introduce the concept of the transnational household, i.e. a social structure that offers shelter and supply for its members, and simultaneously extends between several countries. With the objective of capturing the interpretation of social structures from the perspective of individual family members, the interpretation will centre on a particular exemplary Cape Verdean transnational household which is based on the island of Fogo and extends its contacts to Portugal and the United States. The historical contextualization of this particular family history and its embeddedness in different kinds of historically changing national frameworks will provide a suitable background for illustrating positive impacts of migration for family members staying in the home country but also possible limitations in the family’s mutual responsibilities.

The results presented in this paper are part of an anthropological research project based on twelve months of fieldwork carried out on the islands of Fogo, Brava and Santiago as well as short trips to visit family members overseas living in Lisbon and in several cities in the wider area of Boston, United States.3

3 Fieldwork has been divided into several parts. First, two field periods (10/2006–7/2007 and 3–4/2008) were undertaken in Cape Verde, which were financed by Freiburg University as well as by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in form of two post-doc scholarships. The next part of the fieldwork was part of a comparative international research project financed by the Foundation for Science and Technology; Lisbon (Portugal). Finally I undertook several trips to family members living in the diaspora, one of which (9/2008) was financed again by Freiburg University. I would like to express my gratitude to these institutions. Furthermore I thank the editors of this special issue of ‘History of the Family’ as well as Mary Chamberlain and Esben Leifsen for their helpful comments on a former version of this paper and also Lourdes Fernandes Fontes, my research assistant in the field.
2. Social relations in colonial and postcolonial Cape Verde

Since the discovery (ca. 1455) of the previously uninhabited archipelago by Portuguese sailors, local social relations have been shaped by high mobility. Here I will show that during the colonial period (1460–1975) life on the nine inhabited Cape Verdean islands was linked to certain types of migration which in turn had a formative impact on the local social structures. The Portuguese crown, then in search of new travel routes for transporting slaves, textiles, weapons and gold, took over the country in 1460 and handed it over to liege lords who started to cultivate cotton and sugar cane with the help of the forced labour of African slaves (Carreira, 1982; Lobban, 1995, 15). During this phase of the Portuguese expansion, the Cape Verdean islands constituted a crossing of sea and trading routes between Africa, Brazil, Europe and India and were primarily used as a transhipment centre for trafficking in slaves who were deported from the coast of Guinea and transported to the New World (Silva Andrade, 1996; Lobban, 1995). In the following years, the archipelago was not only populated by Portuguese traders but also by different groups of settlers—missionaries, people banned from the crown, convicts, expelled Jews from the Iberian peninsula, soldiers, etc.4

As in other territories which were part of the economical system called “plantation complex” by Philip Curtin (1990), slavery was the key socio-economical basis for the development of social stratification. Therefore, property, education, skin colour and religion made up the central features of social differentiation early on.

However, it must be mentioned that as the climatically arid conditions did not favour the cultivation of sugar cane, Cape Verde never became a plantation economy to the same extent as Madeira, the Azores, São Tomé or the islands of the Caribbean.5 This implied that the distance between owners of large estates and African slaves could be smaller than on the other plantation sites mentioned.6 According to Lobban, the relations between masters and slaves ranged from suppression and brutality to benevolent paternalism (Lobban, 1995, 31). The Portuguese traders had their acreage and their private houses in Cape Verde and many of them had sexual relations with female slaves during their transit stays on the islands (Carreira, 1984; Lobban, 1995, 24, Silva Andrade, 1996, 45). The question of what forms of spatial, social and emotional encounters in this early phase of colonial dominance were possible has not yet been treated sufficiently from a scientific perspective.7

In the course of a few generations, the children from these race- and class-transcending relations evolved into a new social stratum which due to their direct ancestry from white masters were not considered to be slaves, but due to their descent from Africans differed from the mostly lighter skinned Portuguese from the metropolis.8 During these first three centuries of Cape Verdean settlement, spatial mobility evolved as the decisive factor for appropriation of economical and social capital. Trading constituted the financial foundation for purchasing territory and slaves and consequently shaped the social,

4 Due to the influence of non-documented travelling between the islands as well as between the continents, population numbers as well as reliable numbers on emigration in the course of Cape Verdean history are difficult to give (see for a detailed analysis of the difficulties in receiving reliable data Gôis, 2006. Carreira (1982: 18) refers to the national census, indicating a population size of 181,000 in 1940 and 270,000 in 1970. According to the census in 2000 the Cape Verdean population was approx. 414,000 (Instituto National de Estatística, 2000). With regard to documented emigration, Carreira indicates a total of 18,626 emigrants to the United States between 1900 and 1920 (differentiating between islands) and a total of 27,765 of general emigration in this phase (the biggest numbers going to the United States, to Guinea Bissao and to São Tomé/Principe). Between 1927 and 1945, only 1408 Cape Verdeans went to the USA and altogether 10,120 emigrants were documented, the biggest group going to Portugal. Between 1946 and 1952, 6,804 emigrated and 87,142 between 1953 and 1972 (Carreira, 1982: 81). The peak of Cape Verdean emigration was in the 1970s (Carling, 2001: 8), declining to a total of 12,206 between 1995 and 2000, of whom 55% went to Portugal and 19% went to the United States (Instituto National de Estatistica, 2000).

5 A slavery-based economical system was established only on two islands, Santiago and Fogo (Andrade, 1996: 52). However, contrary to cultures of slavery in the New World, only a few families were able to afford a bigger number of slaves. According to Lobban one third of slave owners had one or two slaves for doing housework. The average of Cape Verde slave owners had three to four slaves; the maximum was between forty and sixty slaves (Lobban, 1995: 31).

6 As in other places with an economy based on slavery the social distance towards slaves belonging to different categories varied. In Cape Verde, a differentiation was made between recently arrived Persons from Africa, called bocais, slaves socialized in Cape Verde called ladinos, escravos de comércio and escravos de trabalho (Batalha, 2004: 23).

7 Elisa Silva Andrade compares the relation between Portuguese traders and African female slaves with the exploitative and violent situation in the Caribbean and North America (Andrade, 1996: 45). Whether this comparison is valid remains open to further discussion. Nascimento, writing about survival strategies of Cape Verdean women in the plantations of São Tomé/Principe, describes how they tried to establish intimate contacts with European plantation owners. These relations indeed were shaped by an enormous power imbalance, nevertheless this does not necessarily mean that emotions (on both sides) were not involved (Nascimento, 2007).

8 In Cape Verde, as in most Creole societies, a whole range of terms for categorizing phenotypical differences exist (Lobban, 1995: 53-57; Meintel, 1984).
This day. From the end of slavery to the 1970s, the and is perceived as a collective trauma in Cape Verde to Tomé and Príncipe can be considered as forced migration influence on life in the island community. 

Today, the biggest diaspora community can be able to send remittances to their families in Cape Verde, and to São Tomé and Principe. Links with North America, developed during the slave trade, became consolidated in the early nineteenth century as whaling ships from New England regularly made their stop-over in Cape Verde and hired mostly local young men as workers on the boats. Due to frequent supply crises, these men took the opportunity to leave their country (Batalha, 2004, 37; Halter, 1993). North America is still perceived as a preferential migration destination where Cape Verdeans find work in different sectors and are able to send remittances to their families in Cape Verde. Today, the biggest diaspora community can be found in the state of Massachusetts and, depending on the categorization and the documentation of immigrants, consists of 50,000 to 260,000 or more persons (Sánchez Gibau, 2005, 415; Carling, 2001, 7; Meintel, 2002). In recent decades this group has sent large amounts of remittances. It constituted a significant force during political elections and still has an important economical influence on life in the island community.

In contrast to the former example, emigration to São Tomé and Principe can be considered as forced migration and is perceived as a collective trauma in Cape Verde to this day. From the end of slavery to the 1970s, the Portuguese colonists took advantage of frequent supply crises in Cape Verde in order to transport thousands of Cape Verdeans to São Tomé and Principe to work on the coffee and cocoa plantations. At the beginning of the 19th century recruiting agencies were introduced, receiving considerable commission when they managed to recruit workers for the plantations in the other Portuguese colonies (Carreira, 1982, 119). The fact that this extremely hard work had first been carried out under the conditions of slavery and later, from the 1970s onwards, as indentured labour under rather exploitative conditions with barely any financial gains, was perceived as particularly painful. Even today, Cape Verdeans remember the landing of Portuguese ships during the years of famine when the family had to decide which member would have to go. Although sensing their grievous destiny, most families agreed to this, because the sum handed out before the boat’s departure would stay with the island population and guarantee their survival for another couple of months. Today, this transaction is perceived as some kind of sale of family members. Additionally, the fact that those family members who were forced to go to São Tomé hardly had any way of keeping in touch or of supporting their families staying in Cape Verde, disturbs the inner balance of many families to this day (Nascimento, 2007).

These two examples are interesting not only because they illustrate different kinds of migration procedures but also because the combination of social class, migration destinations and the results for those staying in the home country becomes apparent. First, only those qualified, in most cases, young men, were able to reach desired destinations such as the United States. Second, the potential scope for personal development in the United States or São Tomé and Príncipe was extremely different and had a strong impact on those staying at home. While families who had relatives in the United States could be looked after in the case of an economical crisis, those who went to São Tomé were never seen again, nor did they send letters or any kind of financial support. 

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9 Portugal prohibited slavery in 1858, Brasil only 1888. Nevertheless, the system of indentured labor in the context of plantation economy was conducted until the 1970s and this hardly could be differentiated from the exploitative conditions of slavery (Batalha, 2004: 39).

10 According to Deirdre Meintel between the years 1747 and 1979 there were 58 years of famine, during which 250,000 people lost their lives (Meintel, 1984: 55–72).

11 In historical literature on Cape Verde this type of spontaneous migration is often called ‘voluntary migration’. However, this term remains debatable, since the majority of migrations occur under the pressure of economical scarcity, political instability or, as in most Cape Verdean cases, the imaginative promise of “uma vida midjo”, a better life, on the other side of the national border.

12 Today by no means would it be possible to evaluate a certain migration destination unitary as success or failure. The Cape Verdean community in Massachusetts, for instance, has existed for nearly two hundred years and conditions of integration or upward mobility have varied considerably during this period. More than ever there are enormous differences in terms of financial income or social and political integration. The Cape Verdean community is here, as it is in other places, anything else than a homogenous group, but needs to be differentiated according to social class, gender, generations and other kinds of categories (see for instance Batalha, 2004: 181–188). However, the typology offered above is valid in the sense that it refers to the perspective of those staying at home, who evaluate and compare their family members’ migration destinies.
different migration destinations thus determined the supply situation of individual families within Cape Verde. Furthermore, it was possible that within a family, one member, due to his or her relation to a successful migrant, had a better life than those who did not have such kinds of connections. Hence, the dependencies and stratifications within those families staying in the home country could be structured according to the different migration destinies of their relatives.

The historical trend described above constitutes the central framework for the development of family structures as they can be found today. Comparable to other Creole societies contemporary Cape Verde is shaped by social dynamics which reflect historical asymmetries and antagonisms. On the one hand, a patriarchal family model has been adopted from the Portuguese, which centres on the ideologies of Catholicism and the authority of the father. On the other hand, irrespective of this social practice, conjugal relations tend to be weak and fathers frequently are absent and do not or hardly contribute to their children’s well-being (Rodrigues, 2003, 2007).

Accordingly, since the beginning of settlement on Cape Verde, the mother–child-dyad has constituted the backbone of Cape Verdean society. During their journeys, the Portuguese travellers as well as the landowners left their children with the mothers who primarily stayed in the country (Carreira, 1984; Grassi, 2007). The mothers were responsible for providing for the children. Stable and continuous close relationships therefore evolved mainly between mother and child. The most common expressions for conjugal relations reflect these constellations: the terms mãe-de-fidj (mother-of-the-child) and pai-de-fidj (father-of-the-child) indicate the ambivalences underlying conjugal relations and the fact that generational relations in Cape Verde are stronger.

In general, the following type(s) of family can be found in Cape Verde: in many households a man and a woman live together calling each other marido (husband) or esposa (wife), irrespective of the fact if they are married or not. Usually the respective man has a couple of more-or-less hidden relations to one or more women who are called rapariga (girl) or pekena (little one). These relations can be temporary but they can also last a couple of years or even decades. Thus, the term “hidden polygyny” (Rodrigues, 2007, 141) seems to be appropriate in these cases. Should these hidden relations result in children (out-of-wedlock), they are commonly called fidj-de-fora (children from outside).

Reliable and stable relations between men and women are rare to this day. Most women have children with more than one man (as do men with more than one woman) and as a sort of rule the children will stay with their mother in the case of a separation. Therefore, a house usually shelters a couple of children who have different fathers and more half brothers and sisters than proper siblings. However, mutual support not only exists between mothers and their children but includes all those who live together under one roof. The Cape Verdean term a familia indicates a social facility not necessarily based on biological kinship or bound to a specific locality but which has its centre in a certain household (see Grassi, 2007, 47). Due to the fact that the households’ social centre usually focuses on the women living in the house, they are frequently labelled

13 Just like many scholars who debated the terms 'creole' and 'creolization' and their applicability with regard to different regions or phenomena in the world, I use them rather narrowly defined for those societies arising out of the so-called 'plantation complex' (Curtin, 1990) especially in the wider Caribbean region but also in the African Atlantic islands or in those of the Indian Ocean, e.g. Mauritius. On the one hand, creolization indicated the creation of a new culture, originating from two or more cultures of origin, referring to the encounters between white colonists and Africans deported into the New World. An important aspect is the fact that Creole societies usually cultivate a discourse of social difference based on a juxtaposition of plantation/peasantry, black/white, master/slave. For detailed and valuable overviews on the emergence of the concepts and their critique, see Palmié (2006) or Stewart (2007).

14 Similar to Portugal, the child in Cape Verde carries both the father’s and the mother’s family name.

15 When a couple, living together, call themselves marido (husband) and esposa (wife), this can mean that they are officially and legally married. However, in most cases, these terms indicate merely their open acknowledgement of their relationship.

16 António Carreira uses the term “poligamia de facto” (Carreira, 1984: 30).

17 Before national independence in 1975 these fidj-de-fora were not eligible for their father’s inheritance. After introducing a national Cape Verdean family law, fidj-de-fora are recognized as legitimate children of their father. However, children who are rejected and not registered under their father’s name still have no access to his inheritance.

18 The difference is here, that men openly keep a couple of relations at the same time, while most women either have one relation after the other (i.e. serial polyandry) or manage to hide their parallel relations since they fear violent reactions from their partners.

19 In Cape Verdean Kriolu no terminology exists for differentiating between siblings and half-siblings. All children born from the same womb are considered full siblings, while those having the same father but a different mother usually don’t live together. Still they would call each other brothers and sisters.

20 I made my observations in the rural and semi-urban space of the islands Fogo and Brava, and the results can partly be transferred to these spaces in other islands. This is different from the country’s capital, Praia, where the households are much smaller and the nuclear family is in the majority.
forms. Grassi (2007) or Meintel (1984) have classified Cape Verdean kinship, which I find understandable given the high variability of life heterogeneity of local notions and social practices (Lamphere, 2005). She bases her argument on examples from the perspective of kinship studies, Carsten and Hugh-Jones have demonstrated that households may reflect a local perception of kinship but at the same time argue that in many houses it is not the level of kinship that expresses relatedness but rather the unit of consumption and mutual support. A house, despite its solid composition, can embody processuality and flexibility (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995, see also Bestard-Camp, 1991). In the case of Cape Verde, this approach makes sense, given that family structures are fluid and, in the case of fathers, can lack the sense of responsibility. Households on the other hand are perceived as reliable units of support. In addition to these household-centred theories, I introduce the notion of the "transnational household". In doing so, I will apply Carsten's call for an actor-centred perspective in order to understand realms of support and care. Transnational households are what I see as social units that provide care for a particular group of people who consider themselves to be part of the same family network, irrespective of biological ties or not, and who contribute to its members' well-being, irrespective of whether they live many thousand miles away. Hence, a transnational household eventually has its centre in a certain locality, but integrates with an omnipresence and a normativity of migration which constitutes a key factor for understanding social proximities.

3. Conceptual and methodological considerations

The household, as an alternative or complementary unit for understanding social support systems, proves to be a reasonable level of analysis particularly in studies on transnational social structures. Households are significant knots of transnational care and communication and therefore need to be taken into account for understanding not only the level of governmental and communal structures but also the micro level (Brettell, 2000, 107; Cohen, 2001; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991). Furthermore, from the perspective of kinship studies, Carsten and Hugh-Jones have demonstrated that households may reflect a local perception of kinship but at the same time argue that in many houses it is not the level of kinship that expresses relatedness but rather the unit of consumption and mutual support. A house, despite its solid composition, can embody processuality and flexibility (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995, see also Bestard-Camp, 1991). In the case of Cape Verde, this approach makes sense, given that family structures are fluid and, in the case of fathers, can lack the sense of responsibility. Households on the other hand are perceived as reliable units of support. In addition to these household-centred theories, I introduce the notion of the "transnational household". In doing so, I will apply Carsten's call for an actor-centred perspective in order to understand realms of support and care. Transnational households are what I see as social units that provide care for a particular group of people who consider themselves to be part of the same family network, irrespective of biological ties or not, and who contribute to its members' well-being, irrespective of whether they live many thousand miles away. Hence, a transnational household eventually has its centre in a certain locality, but integrates with an omnipresence and a normativity of migration which constitutes a key factor for understanding social proximities.
persons who have access to this social structure without necessarily living in this locality.

After the first contact and introductory conversations with the household members, a preparatory interview was carried out with each person living in the house. For this, I used ego-centred network-mapping techniques, as they are common in qualitative network research (see Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Schütze, 2006, 297). The interviewee was asked to fill in his or her active and important social relations on a map consisting of concentric circles (or in case of unfamiliarity with these kinds of mediums, to do this with the help of another person). Particularly illuminating was the discussion accompanying the process of mapping the relations because it provided insights into the individual appraisal and reasons for including the respective person.

Subsequently, several biographical interviews were carried out in order to capture important changes within the respective social space. These were likewise accompanied by visualization techniques since most family structures are quite complex—not only for the anthropologist. Here, an individual’s recollection of his or her personal biography is perceived as a constructive moment because the information conveyed is understood as being less important than the actual process of communicating about the biography (Lucius-Hoene and Depermann, 2002). During the interviews, I gave special attention to changes in political frameworks, for instance with regard to the moment of political independence or important shifts in European or North-American migration policies. Furthermore, my questions asked during the interviews invited the interviewee to concentrate on events, crises and biographical ruptures, given that the anthropology of social relations has shown that in biographical moments a re-arrangement of social relations can be observed (Johnson-Hanks, 2002). My proceedings were highly influenced by the methodologies on family histories, as developed by Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima (2005), Hareven (1994) as well as Mary Chamberlain (2006, 5–13) who employed life-courses approaches combined with biographical interviews for studying historical and transnational family relations. In a recent article, Chamberlain and Leydesdorff (2004) raised our attention to the fact that subjective narratives of self are part of a constant dialectic between self and memory and therefore the interview situation can imply specific priorities and silences which may require particular awareness (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff, 2004, 232).

Last but not least, parallel to these acquisition techniques, frequent visiting of the households and participant observation as the most classic ethnographic method served as a central way for reflecting on the narrative account from another perspective. This was also an opportunity to include discordances and lines of conflict which initially were hidden by the interviewee during the face-to-face encounter. Likewise, participation at family gatherings and other kinds of celebrations constituted an appropriate basis for illuminating different interpretations of the same circumstance from different perspectives.

4. The case study: Maria Louisa, her household and its proximities across long-distances

This exemplary transnational household is located in São Jorge, a village with a population of around 800 in the north of Fogo island, one of the four southern islands of the archipelago, the so-called sotavento island group (“under the wind”). This area of the island is more fertile than others and most people cultivate their gardens for at least a couple of months per year. Usually the population lives from fishing, cultivating crops (during 6–8 months of the year) and roughly 20% of the population have regular work, i.e. providing transport services, working as employees in schools or in the health sector etc. According to my survey, the vast majority of households have connections to family members living overseas (in different countries). However, few households declared receiving financial remittances regularly and most of them only receive remittances once in a while.

At the very beginning of my research, in 2006, I got in touch with the owner of the house, Maria Louisa, who was

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23 For several reasons I chose Maria Louisa’s household as an appropriate example. First, on a personal level, I had close and continuous contact with this household during my research on Fogo Island. Second, this household was part of a village where I carried out a household survey and hence offered the possibility to compare and relate this particular household to the rest of the village. Third, I found this household, its transnational connections and history suitable for illuminating certain particularities which were less condensed in other households of this village. Generally, Maria Louisa’s household reflects overall tendencies and its composition certainly is comparable to other transnational households in São Jorge. To protect the privacy of the individuals included into the research, I have used common names as pseudonyms.
63 years old at the time. She lived together with six people: one of her brothers, who was 67 years old, her eldest daughter Amelia, 47 years old, and two younger sons, Joao, age 25, and Felix, age 23. Furthermore, Maria Louisa’s grandson Jailson, who was 3 years old, as well as Betylisa, who was 13 years old and was introduced to me as Maria Louisa’s niece, also lived in the household (Fig. 1).24

I usually visited the house in the afternoons, when Maria Louisa had finished her work in the gardens and sat relaxing at the back of her house, watching little Jailson while her brother was having a nap, when her daughter Maria was just about to come back from work in the kindergarten and the two boys, Joao and Felix, were still going about their daily business. As a rule, Maria Louisa would start the conversation with some remarks about the heat or the wind, the shortage of vegetables or some minor events in the village. But sooner or later, she would reflect upon Vera’s eventual next visit, Emilia’s difficulties at her workplace or why Toni had not been calling for such a long time. Vera, Emilia and Toni are family members who have a strong presence in Maria Louisa’s house, despite the fact that they are usually physically absent, living in Portugal and, in Emilia’s case, in the United States. By means of financial remittances as well as food and gifts sent via bidons, old oil drums, across the Atlantic, but also by way of eventual visits, many migrants manage to fulfil their role, expressing the continuity of relatedness and solidarity across the sea. To understand this household composition, the meaning and role of those present but also of the absent family members, we have to dig into the household’s specific social history. I will first give an account of the historical development and concentrate on the household members’ changing experience of relatedness over time. In a second step, I will analyze these relations with respect to specific and general patterns of mobility and immobility and focus on issues such as mutual support and transnational care.

Maria Louisa was born in São Jorge in 1945. The 1930s and in particular the 1940s were extremely difficult years in Cape Verde, when severe droughts had hit the country and scarce crops did not provide enough food for the islands’ populations. Maria Louisa does not remember much of her early childhood but she told me that three of her six brothers and sisters had died during the years of famine. Her two elder brothers had gone to São Tomé, therefore only herself and another sister stayed in her father’s house. In the 1950s, rain became more frequent and the family made their living working in the fields, cultivating corn, beans, and other kinds of crops as well as keeping chicken, pigs and some goats. During the dry season between February and July, they mainly had jobs provided by the Portuguese government, such as building roads, walls or water tanks.

Maria Louisa remembers that she had her first love affair quite early. It was her best friend, Nenezinha, two years older than her, whom she told about António’s approaches and it was also to her she confessed first when she discovered that she was pregnant. Her first child, Amelia, was born in 1961 when Maria Louisa was 15 or 16 years old and Nenezinha became Amelia’s godmother. A couple of years later Nenezinha had to leave the country in order to accompany her parents to Portugal. In the interview Maria Louisa commented: “At the moment of the departure I thought my heart would break. I was not sure whether I would see her again, but I knew that my heart would always stay with my good childhood friend. I cried days and days.”25

Maria Louisa continued her life in Cape Verde and stayed together with António, the father of her first child, with whom she managed to establish a household. At the end of the 1960s, António, whose father came

24 The following information on biographies and family histories is the result of one or several interviews with those family members living in Cape Verde. Furthermore, I was able to meet several family members who usually lived in the diaspora, either during their visits to their home country or during my visits to Lisbon and Boston. Emilia I had met before her departure to the United States and I had asked her several times about the progress of her migration papers as well as her ideas and perspectives on migration. Furthermore, I had met one family member, Vera, during one of her regular home visits and contacted her when I was in Lisbon, in January 2008. Unfortunately, an interview with António, the father of Maria Louisa’s elder children, and Toni, Vera’s brother, both living in Lisbon, could not be realized. While in both cases time restrictions were given as a reason, I had felt a certain and understandable hesitation on their part to discuss somewhat complicated family issues with me, a person whom neither had met before.

from a Portuguese family, started working for the Portuguese government and moved back and forth between the island’s main town and the countryside and also spent longer periods of time on the neighbour island, Santiago. In 1965 Maria Louisa gave birth to a boy, Toni, and one year later she had her second daughter, Vera. The years to follow were strongly affected by the struggle for political independence which, unlike in countries such as Guinea Bissau or Angola, was rather a non-violent political movement in Cape Verde. In 1975, directly after political independence, António decided to emigrate to Portugal. Despite the hostilities towards those belonging to the economical and political elite at that time, he was amongst the minority that opted against Cape Verdean citizenship and continued life under a Portuguese passport. Maria Louisa, to whom he was not married, decided to stay together with their three children a little while longer in Cape Verde and was planning to follow him to Portugal as soon as António’s life would be stabilized. In Portugal António found a reasonably paid job as a teacher and started sending money regularly for his wife and his children left behind in Cape Verde.

During all these years, Maria Louisa had stayed in touch with her childhood friend, Nenezinha, and once in a while she received a letter wherein her friend told her about her life in the Portuguese city, her house, her husband, and her sons. At the end of the 1970s Nenezinha sent a letter saying that she had been ill for a while and needed help in the house. She asked Maria Louisa to send Amelia, the eldest daughter, whose godmother she was. But Amelia, who never had left the island, feared the high waves and was too scared to travel. Therefore, Maria Louisa instead decided to send her youngest daughter Vera, then 12 years old, to Portugal to continue her life in Nenezinha’s house. When I met Vera on one of her regular visits home in São Jorge, I carried out an interview focusing on the particular experience of these years:

H: “Were you scared to leave your home and go abroad, to a place you had never seen before?”

V: “No, I was not scared. I have always been the more adventurous among us; I was not scared to go anywhere. On the day of my arrival to Lisbon I had a red ribbon in my hair that would help identify me. Aunt Nene was a good friend of the house, so somehow I knew that everything would be fine. And I liked it from the beginning, I liked the kids in the house, and I enjoyed doing my work there.”

Due to the fact that António, Vera’s father, was a Portuguese citizen, it was possible to organize immigration without encountering legal problems. Transport and communication were still slow at this time but once in a while Maria Louisa received a letter telling that Vera had a good and safe life in Portugal. In the 1980s, Vera managed to save some money and also started sending small amounts of remittances to Cape Verde.

From time to time, Maria Louisa, who was in her mid 30s at the time, would ask António to bring her and the children over to Portugal but due to the fact that they were not married and she was a Cape Verdean citizen while he was Portuguese, this apparently was difficult to be realized. After a couple of years of separation, their emotional relation changed and at a certain point Maria Louisa began to realize that António would probably not come back again; nor make her follow him to Portugal. Her friend Nenezinha had told her that in Portugal António was going out with another woman. “Na migraçon mudjé ta perdi homi fasi”, she told me (In English: “in migration a woman loses her man easily”). Maria Louisa told me that she did not dare to ask or criticize him but rather hoped that this affair would come to an end soon. However, during his phone calls António started accusing her of having sexual relations with other men and she realized that they had lost their level of trust and mutual understanding. At a certain point of accumulated mutual suspicions, jealousies and accusations, António stopped calling and stopped sending money.

Due to these changes, not only in her social situation but particularly in terms of economical provision, life in Maria Louisa’s household became more precarious and in her need for support she came together with another man. A couple of years later Maria Louisa had two more sons, João, born 1981, and Felix, born 1983, but she continued living in her own house and did not move in with the father of the two children. It was also in the 1980s that Toni, her eldest son, decided to leave Cape Verde and follow his father António and his sister Vera to Portugal. Given that his father was Portuguese it was still easy for him to go abroad and obtain Portuguese citizenship. Nevertheless, Toni’s departure was particularly difficult for his two younger brothers, João and Felix, who had had a very close relationship with their elder half-brother, whom they also perceived as a kind of father figure. Given that their biological father was living in Cape Verde and emigration procedures to Europe were becoming stricter by the day, they were not able to follow António, Vera and Tony, but had to stay in Cape Verde and continue their lives there together with their mother.

In the interview with Amelia, Maria Louisa’s eldest daughter, I asked her if she ever regretted not having taken the opportunity to go to Portugal and follow her father and her two siblings. But Amelia replied that this had been her own decision, that she had always felt very close to her mother, but also to Cape Verde, “a minha terra” (“my country”), as she told me, and she never considered migrating to any place in the world. When she was nearly 30 years old, Amelia had been together with a man called Leroy who had lived in Brockton, United States, since his early childhood and who travelled to Cape Verde every few years maintaining his connections to the islands and visiting friends and family. His relation to Amelia was only of short duration but Amelia became pregnant and gave birth to a little girl whom she named Emilia. Despite the separation Leroy accepted his fatherhood, registered his daughter and stayed in touch with both of them. He was married in the United States, where he had a house, a wife, and two children, but in accordance with Amelia it was decided that their daughter Emilia should be brought up in Cape Verde and be sent to the United States when she was 18 years old. Leroy kept his word, visited them every couple of years, handed in a petition in order to take his daughter to the United States and Emilia received the respective letter from the American embassy when she was 17 years old.

However, in 2006, when Emilia was finally supposed to go, she was pregnant and was sure that she would get in trouble with the American embassy in case she wanted to take her child with her.\footnote{This reflects rather a myth than a reality. According to contemporary immigration law in the US, migrants are allowed to take children, who are minors, along. However, even today many women who had become pregnant during the period waiting for their visa, fear complications in the admission process and rather opt for leaving their children behind. Misunderstandings of formulations in visa regulations are very common since many Cape Verdeans, especially from the poorer social strata, neither read English, nor formal Portuguese.} When I met Emilia she told me that she perceived this as an irony of her life because she had been waiting for so long and had always known that she would sooner or later leave the country and start a better life elsewhere. The question whether she would stay together with her son in Cape Verde or leave without him was extremely difficult for her but then she decided to go in order to make the best of her life, to be able to provide for her son and take him to the United States as soon as possible. “If I stay now, we will stay forever. This would not be good. I have to make the best out of this opportunity in order to be a good mother,” she said. Hence, on the day of her departure Emilia left her new born boy called Jailson with her own mum in her grandmother’s house. Within a couple of weeks, she found a job and started working regularly in a Cape Verdean grocery shop, trying to put as much money on the side as possible to send to her mum and her son in Cape Verde.

Two years ago Maria Louisa had unexpectedly received a letter from São Tome. The letter had been sent by the Cape Verdean embassy telling her that one of her brothers, who had been living in São Tome for the past fifty years, was incapable of caring for himself and eventually would become involved in a national programme designed to help Cape Verdeans in need, who were residing in São Tomé, to return to their country of origin. Two months later her brother, whom she had not seen for half a century, arrived in Maria Louisa’s house.

Maria Louisa’s daughter Vera, who has since received Portuguese citizenship, travels to Cape Verde every second year to look after her family. When I met her during one of her stays on the island she told me several reasons for her frequent visits but the well-being of her mother, her sister and brothers was stressed in particular. During our interview, it became obvious that Vera’s life in Portugal was very much focused on her family members staying in Cape Verde. She was exceptionally well informed about the situation in the house since she did not only call regularly but was also in touch with neighbours who gave her information about her family’s state of affairs. Furthermore, she knew who contributed to the household income since she kept in contact with family members who lived in different locations in the diaspora, for instance, Toni (Portugal) or Emilia (United States).

On her last visit she recognized that her mother’s health was getting worse and that her uncle’s arrival as well as Emilia’s recent departure caused more and more work for the women in the house who had to care for four men and a little boy. When Vera was back in Portugal she discussed the issue with Nenezinha, still Maria Louisa’s most important friend, and Nenezinha got in touch with the members of her own family who were still living in Cape Verde. Betylisa, Nenezinha’s granddaughter, had been living in a rather poor family in the neighbourhood and moved into the house supporting Maria Louisa and Amelia (Fig. 2).

5. Doing ethnography in transnational social fields: Tracing obligations and moralities across time and space

Maria Louisa’s transnational household, its members’ different life courses and their changing relationships over time allowed several particularities of Cape
Verdean sociability to surface which will be contextualized next. I will draw on the individual experiences of these family members who are part of four generations and, including supplementary information gained during my fieldwork in the area, draw wider conclusions in terms of relatedness across long distances.

First, we need to highlight the social differences arising from different levels of mobility. Despite the fact that all members of the household are part of the same transnational social field that links Cape Verde with the Cape Verdean diaspora, not all of them are mobile and not all of them contribute to life in this transnational household. For instance, Maria Louisa, Amelia, João and Felix have never left Fogo Island. António and Toni fall into the category of migrants since they do not commute between old and new home but live their lives only in the new place. Vera who regularly travels back to her home country and Nenezinha as well as Emilia, who do not travel but still are very much involved in and contribute to Maria Louisa’s transnational household, can be called transmigrants as their activities are essential for keeping this translocal household alive. Notions of immobility or mobility prove to be crucial for identifying an axis of social stratification and mutuality within the family. The three categories identified here—staying or non-migrant family members, transmigrants, migrants—highlight proximities as well as distances which can be related not only to their physical mobility but particularly to their level of contribution to the transnational family life.

These differences are important to more fully understand the social distances arising within transnational families. In this sense, Bryceson and Vuorela have suggested the term ‘frontiering’ which they find helpful for analyzing contrasting perspectives, values and life styles (Bryceson and Vuorella, 2002, 12). They...
underline the fact that relatives living in different places become influenced by different and sometimes contradictory cultural patterns which can result in intra-familial conflicts and struggles. According to my observations in the field, these effects of frontiering were indeed relevant during interactions between the above mentioned categories of household members. Particularly between those staying in Cape Verde and migrants who never came back again, imaginations and stereotypes hampered the continuation of contact and support. While those staying in Cape Verde imagine the lives of those who go abroad to be part of a Western lifestyle as displayed, for instance, in Brazilian telenovelas (i.e. typical clichés of social life in the occident, such as: extreme material wealth, loss of moral values, individualism, free sexuality…), those who go abroad feel the pressure of transnational solidarity. The inability to respond to expectations of those staying at home and reduce their level of poverty can therefore produce feelings of guilt and hence, reduce communication and support (see for this aspect Carling, 2002, 12). For instance, Amelia’s daughter Emilia had left the island with the idea to work for her family, contribute to their life and take her son to the United States within a couple of years. These kinds of personal expectations are frequent at moments of departure, while at the same time only a few migrants are able to fulfil their dreams of material prosperity. Many Cape Verdians work in the United States or Portugal in harsh conditions but, for various reasons, many of them never manage to accumulate the expected sums and to establish the kind of lifestyle they had aspired before their departure. Emilia went to the United States as an adult and the lack of schooling and language proficiency implied that she became employed in a Cape Verdean business which allowed her to survive and keep her legal status, but the amounts she was able to send to Cape Verde were much smaller than she had expected.29

Besides contradictory values and norms in terms of gender, sexuality, generational relations, consumption, lifestyle politics, etc., resulting from the effect of ‘frontiering’, I would like to stress the significance of individual life prospects which are crucial at a place where mobility defines the position of the person in the respective society. The individual self-perception related to immobility or mobility can contribute to a deep gap or rupture within transnational families. In the case study mentioned above, this applies in particular to brothers and sisters with different biological parents, who, during their stay in the home country, have shared life and perspectives but later in life experienced a different kind of access to space which divided them into two groups with extremely different viewpoints and projections. Evidently, the question of formal citizenship also contributes to defining who belongs where, who is allowed to travel, who is labelled as being illegal and therefore cannot travel and who is forced to stay at home. These facts can result in a reorganization of ‘family horizons’, a term suggested by Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima (2005), who are not concerned with transnational family structures in their article but with methodologies of family histories. They suggest this term for dealing with the fact that a person, when asked about his or her particular family history and its constellation, will always remember certain relatives and will always neglect or entirely leave out others. In general, the term ‘horizon’ might be more appropriate than ‘frontier’ because it stresses the significance of different point of views. Horizons are mobile and constantly changing, varying according to the viewer’s standpoint. Based on my observations in Cape Verde, this effect is even more stressed when we deal with transnational families. Physical distance can result in social and emotional distance and additionally the time factor can contribute to the slipping of a certain relative behind the family horizon. Evidently, this applies above all to deceased relatives but long-distance relations are shaped particularly by the ability of the person to establish a sense of familyhood and emotional proximity in order to transcend physical and temporal distances. Obviously, this depends on the individual’s will to stay in touch and to maintain the connection with relatives living in distant places. However, as Baldassar et al. (2007) have shown in their research on transnational care, it is also a question of availability of appropriate means for expressing emotional closeness. During my research I worked with many families who had lost contact with one or several family members who had gone abroad. Maria Louisa’s brothers who went to São Tomé during the years of famine are but one example. Due to the extremely harsh conditions of work and life in general, the possibilities and probably also the emotional ability to stay in touch with the home country, a place to which these migrants would supposedly never return, were considerably limited. Nonetheless, the example of São Tomé is an extreme one and we do not have to go so far in order to understand reasons of ruptures and disconnections.

29 The main part of my fieldwork concentrated on the effects of migration in the home country. However, my insights into the various reasons for losing or cutting off contact with family members staying at home were complemented by impressions gained during my visits in the diaspora (wider area of Boston, Massachusetts in September 2008), when I visited the islanders’ friends and family members.
Therefore, I would like to suggest the notion of ‘connectivity’ in order to understanding the redefining or reordering of long-distance relations. From my understanding, ‘connectivity’, contrary to ‘relatedness’, focuses less on the qualitative characteristics of social relations but deals rather with the technical linkages between different places. Due to the fact that some family members go to places where transport and communication can facilitate keeping in touch with those at home, others go to places where these kinds of connections are much less developed which can mean that they eventually slip out of sight from their family members’ horizons. For instance, those Cape Verdeans who went to places within Africa always had comparably weaker conditions for staying in touch and expressing their sense of familyhood, compared to those who went to European or North American states.30

In addition, besides the technical structuring of transnational family life, also normative, moral and emotional aspects need to be included. Especially those who are willing to contribute to transnational life and who feel the duty and the responsibility towards those staying in the home country, carry the burden of transnational obligations. In our case, this applies in particular to Vera and Nenezinha, both female members of the transnational household, who made their lives abroad based on the premise of being part of a translocal social structure that needs their active commitment. The question of which family member becomes involved in what level of intensity strongly depends on culture specific norms and expectations. The historical overview showed why women and women’s networks are perceived as reliable structures and the present constellation in Maria Louisa’s household supports the hypothesis of a continuation of these culture specific norms. In times of crises, female family members get in touch with each other and organize help and care. Evidently, the decision as to which woman is supposed to fulfil which particular aspect of transnational responsibility is discussed and negotiated; however, it would be more than problematic to withdraw one’s self from these kinds of expectations.

Furthermore, in our case study it became obvious that some family members use migration as an exit strategy in order to reorganize their lives and to link up to new social circles. During my fieldwork I became aware of many examples of this kind of behaviour which I call ‘voluntary disconnection’. On the whole and keeping the dangers of generalizations in mind, it can be said that compared to female members of Cape Verdean families it is much easier for male members to exercise mobility for changing family relations. In addition, the historical overview has illustrated the gender-specific levels of duties and responsibilities which still prevail. António’s example was not extraordinary at all, rather the contrary: in many households with which I have been working, relations existed to one or several family members staying in the diaspora, the vast majority male, who had started a new, in some cases, parallel family life overseas. In this context it is worth mentioning that many migrants neither leave addresses nor telephone numbers at their departure which, according to my interpretation, can be seen as a strategy to leave the question of keeping in touch open. However, apart from interpreting these kinds of ruptures as conscious strategies, we should also consider them as being part of life’s unpredictabilities. Following family histories in Cape Verde, I was told several times that formal procedures of migration applications which took a long time contributed to an eventual break-up and the re-arrangement of family relations. Particularly when migrants initially need to legalize their stay or try to become US or Portuguese citizens, these steps can become more difficult than presumed before departure. Hence, the process of bringing family members from Cape Verde into the diaspora can last many years. When I tried to discuss this issue with a Cape Verdean man, he apparently felt a slight bias in my interpretation in the sense that I seemed to have an image of a selfish migrant who does not care about those staying in the sending country. He commented:

“You have to see, sometimes life is faster. You think you are supposed to do this and this, but then everything comes unplanned. You cannot plan everything. And for some people it is not possible to wait 10 or more years for their family.”

Furthermore, the legal constellation in our case study renders conjugal reunification difficult and contributes, in terms of migration, to the family’s focus on generational linkages. According to recent information from the civil registry office of Fogo Island, marriage, i.e. the legalization of conjugal relations, has become steadily less frequent during the last couple of decades. Nearly all registrars and other officials as well as the general population identified migration as the main factor hindering men from getting married. Many Cape Verdean men avoid or refuse marriage in order to keep the question open whether or not their female partners

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30 These infrastructural differences in connectivity not only exist between different countries, but also the situation between a capital city and smaller cities, or city and rural areas, where fewer migrants are present, can imply a weaker level of technical connectedness.
will follow them to the foreign country. Furthermore, as single migrants they keep the option to marry another person, often belonging to the same extended family, and facilitate her legal entry into the United States. Another interpretation is that these men want to keep their freedom, be it in terms of material and moral responsibilities or sexuality and that they choose strategies enabling them to live several family lives parallel. Generally, it remains difficult to adequately include the perspective of male household members in the picture. Evidently, most of them contribute in one way or the other to its members’ well-being. Sometimes their active contribution to family life, such as helping their children to migrate, sending remittances or caring for those children who live in their houses, remains hidden or invisible—not only from the anthropologists’ gaze but in particular from local public discourses.

At this point, I would like to introduce the notion of ‘transnational social control’. As Eleonore Kofman (2004) raised in an overview of the relation between family structures and the policies of migration, conjugal as well as generational relations across national boundaries imply dependencies for those staying behind on those having emigrated. Due to long procedures in order to realize family-based migration, which sometimes takes more than a decade, those who live abroad and are willing to sustain those staying at home in many cases exercise great pressure in terms of defining the appropriateness of moral behaviour. Particularly couples constantly have to negotiate who is supposed to do what and who is allowed to go where and with whom, and these debates, as in the case of Maria Louisa and António, can erode trust and confidence over time. Given that for most Cape Verdians from the poorer social strata family-based migration is the only option for migrating, legalizing conjugal relations becomes a crucial deed, especially for those who stay. In this sense, the legal framework of emigration repeats historical Cape Verdean family structures which support generational relations more than conjugal. Unmarried women who do not manage to migrate independently from the fathers of their children are defined as being disconnected from those family members who have already gone abroad and are forced to stay, whereas their children are eventually able to go abroad.

Most migration policies further complicate the contact between brothers and sisters who have different fathers in migration. This is a common constellation in Cape Verde. While siblings with different fathers usually live together in their mother’s house and sometimes are not aware that they have different fathers, migration procedures cut the household unit into pieces, dividing them into those related to mobile persons and those whose relatives either have never migrated or have migrated and do not make any effort to support family-based migration.

A last point worth mentioning is the meaning of reciprocity in these transnational households. The course of time has demonstrated that reciprocity comes into play in certain moments in life. Sending Vera to support Nenezinha at a difficult moment in life can be seen as a typical way of female mutual aid—and this is not disturbed by the fact that Nenezinha lives many miles away. Organizing Betylisa’s arrival in Maria Louisa’s house several years later can be interpreted as a kind of direct response to former aid, but not necessarily. The contact between Maria Louisa and Nenezinha is based on friendship, a chosen and well-kept relationship that stands the test of time and continues throughout their lives. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that this transnational household includes some persons who are not necessarily related via blood ties. Particularly the discussions accompanying the mapping of the individual social network proved that for the assessment of a certain relationship it was not kinship but rather communication and support in times of need which was important. Furthermore, the importance of the relations which can be labelled as ‘fictive kinship’, for instance in the case of godparenthood or foster relations, became apparent. These bonds evolved over the course of many decades and developed a certain level of mutuality and loyalty that in the end proved to be even more reliable than kin ties. In my case study, the nexus Maria Louisa–Vera–Nenezinha can be seen as the gravitation centre of mutuality, whereas the quality of the other relationships in the household need to be measured differently and individually. Generally, these flows of reciprocity do not necessarily only involve bilateral exchanges of aid and support, but can occur between several generations. Due to the fact that also many Cape Verdians in the diaspora rather socialize with Cape Verdians and prefer to marry a partner from a Cape Verdean family, these flows of intra-family reciprocity can be renewed again and again.

6. Conclusion: Transnationalism and the contributive family model

Relatedness in transnational families can be an ambivalent experience. Solidarity or distance? Staying, leaving or going back? Parting, rupture or renewal of a relation? It can be assumed that these questions are heard more often in transnational families than in those where family members live in close spatial distances.
However, my research has shown that spatial proximity cannot constitute the key criterion for social proximity but that ways can be found to articulate intimacy across long distances.

The most important result of my research is the insight that relatedness, in the case of these transnational social structures that extend across enormous distances, needs to be done. This is to say that many factors can contribute to separation and loss, as I have described in the first section of this article, but relations can be maintained if this is the person’s desire. Therefore I am introducing here the concept of the ‘contributive family model’, which implies the actor’s choice and act of keeping in touch. As already indicated before, the term ‘contribution’ may suggest a slight emphasis on material or financial aspects. However, from the perspective of the islanders, the symbolic meaning of calls, visits, sending greetings via others, i.e.: demonstrating social presence despite physical absence, is highly valued as an explicit demonstration of transnational solidarity.

This has also become obvious in Maria Louisa’s transnational household where family relations are not at all arbitrary and liable to change at any time. Family and kinship may be socially and culturally determined constructs, but they are constructs with a powerful meaning which cannot be ignored easily. The general desire to stay in touch and to take care of each other can be found in transnational families as well. Daniel Miller goes in a similar direction and warns anthropologists not to focus too much on changing and fluid relations after decades of focusing on structures and norms. According to Miller, we should not ignore the normative foundation of human relations and the prescriptive set of behaviours which underlie our ways of dealing with others (Miller, 2007, 538). Human relations may be variable and can be negotiated but “...flexibility and negotiation are a direct result of the struggle people have in trying to retain clear principles and formal expectations in kinship in the face of the complexity of modern family lives” (Miller, 2007, 540).

Particularly in moments of crisis, expectations and norms in apparently fluid and non-binding social units become evident. In these moments, it is usually clear which relative has to fulfil which duty. In the case of Cape Verde it became obvious that a familia is experienced differently according to gender, generation as well as the respective locality—which became comprehensible against the historical background. Possibly several persons can be called upon and the individual choice can indeed be part of intra-familial negotiations. However, these agreements underlie culture specific, historically grown norms and hence, in Cape Verde, female relatives still carry more responsibilities than males.

However, social relations—negotiable as well as prescribed—are structurally determined and in the case of transnational family lives we cannot deny that the powers of the nation state and its definition of relatedness can be decisive for social relations that extend across the borders of different countries. Transnational families are more occupied than others with promoting the cohesive forces within social structure and to struggle against those factors producing difference and separation. Liability and responsibility are shaped by the frameworks of the modern nation state and in many cases, the desire to contribute to transnational familyhood becomes complicated by weak levels of technological connectivity. Evidently, ruptures or break-ups can happen. But, as shown in Cesaria Evora’s song quoted at the beginning, social relations are not fixed but fluid and remain always under construction and therefore, whoever went away can come back, and whoever has been forgotten can bring himself back into memory.

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