West African Transnationalisms Compared: Ghanaians and Senegalese in Italy
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The paper compares two different West African communities living and working in Italy. The mostly male Senegalese migrants generally belong to the Mouride Sufi brotherhood, whose vertical and horizontal ties are reproduced in transnational networks, and these often help migrants organise their business activities as well as their temporary settlement within the receiving contexts. Ghanaians in Italy are Christians with a growing number of Pentecostals. They have a balanced gender ratio and, unlike the Senegalese who are strongly identified with the project of return, Ghanaians families tend to settle in Italy. Yet transnational connections and activities (remittances, home associations, investment in housing or entrepreneurial activities) are frequent among Ghanaians too. Despite differences, there are therefore also similarities. The paper focuses on the complex politics of interplay with the receiving contexts and explores the potentials and obstacles for the enhancement of transnational linkages.

Keywords: Transnationalism; Migration; Ghanaians; Senegalese; Italy

Introduction

As Sayad (1999) often stressed, an immigrant is always and also an emigrant. Many studies have drawn attention to migrants’ practices aimed at sustaining multi-stranded social relations that link their societies of origin and settlement. Going beyond the ‘bipolar model’ (Rouse 1991), various scholars nowadays emphasise the emergence of a social process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders, and call such a process transnationalism (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). Despite some skepticism about the newness of the transnational phenomenon (think about the Italian diaspora on the one hand, and
studies of rural–urban migration in colonial Africa on the other), for various reasons—globalisation, technological change, processes of decolonisation etc.—transnationalism acquired a particular intensity on a global scale at the end of the twentieth century. Today, transnational networks function intensively and in real time while being spread around the world (Vertovec 1999).

To enhance this debate, Smith and Guarnizo (1998) suggested the need for more comparative work on transnational formations. In responding to this challenge, and having compared the practices of the same group of migrants (Senegalese) in different localities, showing the importance of local contexts (Riccio 1999, 2001, 2003a, 2004), I am now beginning to compare transnational practices undertaken by different groups, including Ghanaians (see Riccio 2003b, 2005a) and Senegalese, living and working in the same country (Italy). Here, I provide an initial ‘macro-sociological’ comparison of these two different transnational communities coming from West Africa, exploring the multiple effects of group differences and highlighting some important similarities. Both Ghanaians and Senegalese reveal themselves to be very committed to place of origin but, as we will see, their experiences within transnational spaces and Italian society differ.

This article provides a description of the main characteristics of Senegalese and Ghanaians in Italy, and more specific information about their experiences in the Emilia Romagna and Lombardy regions. The objective is to enhance the understanding of the socio-cultural configurations displayed by these West African migrations within Italian society, and I will refer to some comparative points which need to be analysed through further research.

Two Different Traditions of Migration

Sometime in the mid-1970s, Ghanaians began to realise that Ghana was no longer, as it had been for a long time until the end of the 1960s, a country that attracted immigrants from other, poorer countries, but had become a place which itself needed to export people, skilled and educated as well as unskilled (Peil 1995). Many migrated to other West African countries such as Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire, but others moved to Europe, the USA and Canada, forming what Van Hear has called a new diaspora (Van Hear 1998, 2002). The majority of Ghanaian migrants to Italy originate from the southern region of Ghana and especially Ashanti. Mollel (2000) suggests that emigrants are more likely to be southerners than northerners because of the lower level of education and the consequent lack of opportunity to finance emigration in the north. The Ghanaians, many of whom live in Northern Italy, come from Kumasi and the villages around that town. The easy entry into the labour market of the Italian northern regions, together with the reliance on social networks (kin and village), explain the influx of Ghanaian migrants (Riccio 2003b).

In addition to a long tradition of migration within West Africa, Senegalese emigration to Europe began in the colonial period with the French enrollment of Tirailleurs at the end of the nineteenth century and during World War I. After the
independence of French West Africa (1962), there were increasing numbers of migrants, largely due to the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s in France and the resulting demand for unskilled foreign labour. This emigration concerned mainly Toucouleur (Fulani), Serere and, above all, the ‘willing’ Soninke migrants (Manchuelle 1997; Timera 1996). Yet, in the mid-1980s, the downsizing and restructuring of industrial enterprises in France badly affected Senegalese workers. A new type of migration developed which was characterised by family or individual initiatives, a widening range of destinations, and the importance of access to trade for the success of migratory strategies. Nowadays, with the crisis of the Groundnut Basin, Senegalese young people from the Baol (Touba, Diourbel), Djambour (Louga), Cayor (Kebemer), Sine (Kaolack) and Dakar leave for new receiving countries such as Spain, the USA and Italy and, through their circulatory movement, shape new transnational spaces (Carter 1997; Ebin 1996; Riccio 2001).

Ghanaians and Senegalese in Italy: The Quantitative Background

The most recent published data (Caritas di Roma 2004) record 2.2 million regular foreign residents in Italy (‘regular’ means immigrants holding the permit to stay called permesso di soggiorno). Thirty nationalities make up 80 per cent of the total number of foreigners, testament to the diversity of migrant types and origins. This is characteristic of what could be called a post-industrial immigration country. Italian immigration is principally labour immigration: more than 60 per cent of foreigners state that work is the main reason for emigration from their own countries whereas around 20 per cent cite family reasons and study; tourism or religious reasons follow with minor percentages. Recent migration to Italy (although highly functional, despite populist and racist denials) represents a very flexible and often unprotected labour force employed within the most degrading and low-wage sectors or in the service and domestic economy.

Regarding the West African migrant communities, Senegalese (mainly Wolof) and Ghanaians (mainly Ashanti) are, with Nigerians, the most numerous nationalities coming from sub-Saharan Africa. More precisely, there are 47,762 Senegalese, 24,986 Nigerians and 23,060 Ghanaians. Although certain ethnic groups predominate, both Ghanaians and Senegalese remain multiethnic communities: together with Wolof one may find Serere as well as Fulani, and beside Ashanti one finds other ethnic groups such as Ewe. Compared with Ghanaians the great majority of Senegalese are men (90 per cent). This characteristic, combined with the low percentage of Senegalese who declare that family is the main reason for migrating (9.1 per cent), testifies to the tendency to maintain a very male and mobile migratory mode compared with other migrant communities (Caritas di Roma 2004).

Most West African migrants live in the northern regions of Italy, especially in Lombardy and Emilia Romagna. Lombardy, with its highly developed industrial sector, remains the region which attracts most labour migrants in Italy. This region hosts around 500,000 foreigners. Indeed, this successful economic situation tends to
favour migrants’ entry into the local labour market. Besides Milan, Bergamo and Brescia (see Kaag, infra) constitute the most important receiving contexts for Senegalese and Ghanaian migrants because of the widespread presence of small and medium-sized enterprises, but also because they both represent an important historical destination for West African migration. The constant growth of migration in these cities and their provinces is due partly to the fact that migrants tend to follow paths shaped by social, kinship and religious networks.

Emilia Romagna’s regional economy is also characterised by the success of highly specialised small and medium-sized enterprises. Such an economic framework is thought to favour migrants’ entry into the local labour market in employment which is sometimes precarious but at least legal. Together with these economic characteristics, one should add that Emilia Romagna, with its 217,000 foreigners, is often considered amongst the leading regions in the enactment of social policies for migrants. Compared with Ghanaians who settled in Emilia (Riccio 2003b), most of the Senegalese moved towards the coastal provinces of the Romagna sub-region (Riccio 1999). With regard to the coast, the history of Senegalese migration displays different patterns from those in the rest of Italy, where the first Senegalese migrants were young urban students (Campus et al. 1992). Although in Ravenna province the majority of immigration was due to opportunities for employment and, consequently, regularisation, the main attraction of the beaches as a suitable market made the traders and the street-peddlers the pioneers of Senegalese immigration in Romagna. Many Senegalese state that, while they were met by Italian institutions which did not seem prepared for the management of immigration, they also encountered a very well established Senegalese trade organisation (Riccio 2001).

As intimated above, another important difference between the two communities is the dominant migratory mode. If already at the beginning of the 1990s Ghanaians showed a growth in family reunifications and signs of settlement (De Filippo 1992), Senegalese migrants resident in Italy were mainly men migrating as individuals, following the paths shaped by migratory networks. The number of women (3,607) has been growing through family reunion, although much less so than in other migrant communities. This tendency confirms an orientation towards the sending context. From this point of view I would disagree with Mboup’s otherwise interesting study (2000), when he foresees for ‘the Senegalese of Italy’ a trend towards settlement and family reunification. Although it is true that, when compared with migrants from Burkina Faso (see Hazard 2002), one finds some family reunification among Senegalese, the great majority remains male. The transnational mode of organising the migration experience remains dominant. This means engaging in economic transactions (including trade) across international boundaries, and over considerable distance, spending much of their time away from place of origin, but returning there at fairly frequent intervals with the overall goal of creating an economic, social and spiritual life for themselves and their families in Senegal (Riccio 2004).

Ghanaians on the other hand, as mentioned above, reveal signs of settlement and insertion into the industrial labour market. Yet this does not prevent them keeping in
contact with the local sending context (see Altin 2004; Riccio 2003b; also Mazzucato, this special issue). The transnational connections and activities are numerous and frequent, comprising hometown associations, the considerable amount of remittances and investments in Ghana, and the recurrent evocation of the sending context in social and religious gatherings. The rest of the paper looks more closely at some of these similarities and differences.

Transnational Families and Work Strategies

‘The family is the domain of both primary attachment and primary fear.’ Van Dijk’s sharp comment (2002: 180) applies perfectly to both Ghanaians and Senegalese, especially when we consider the relationship of the extended family with the migrant abroad. A common refrain among members of both communities concerns the pressure of the expectations of the extended family, members of which demand money for the house, for children’s schooling, for the pilgrimage to Mecca (this applies to Senegalese only), for new clothes, etc. It is in the sending context, Ghana as much as Senegal, that the extended family and household display ambivalent characteristics: on the one hand they represent the most important source of never-ending special obligations; on the other they provide migrants with important status recognition.

It is widely accepted that the family is the pillar of Senegalese and Ghanaian social organisation, both in Senegal and Ghana and for Senegalese and Ghanaians abroad. In both cases, emigration is more a family strategy than just an individual one (Amassari and Black 2001; Kabki et al. 2004; Mboup 2000; Schmidt di Friedberg 1994). Although paternal authority is under attack in contemporary Senegal, with divorce rates on the rise, young people migrating more frequently now without parental permission, and possibly a breakdown in intergenerational communication (M.C. Diop 1993, 2002), the family is still the most durable social and political institution (Cruise O’Brien 2003). Nowadays, about a quarter of married men have more than one wife, but the number is declining as lifestyles change and younger people in the cities are gradually rejecting polygamy (Antoine and Diop 1995).

According to A.B. Diop (1985), communalism and a hierarchically structured solidarity constitute the organisational premises for the Wolof family, and Mollel (2000) stresses similar characteristics when discussing the Ashanti family. The Ghanaian extended family, it is argued, functions as a mutual aid organisation as well as a socialising agency in which each member has rights and obligations of reciprocity. Nevertheless, this famous solidarity of the family is two-sided. For better or worse one is never alone, finding support and counselling, but also competition, conflicts, arguments and frustration. There exists a constant bargaining between the migrant and the various members of the family, and the demands of the migrant’s family members are not always a source of satisfaction but are contested and negotiated more often than public discourse would allow (Henry and Mohan 2003). Furthermore, there exist various difficulties encountered by migrants within
households that stretch transnationally (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). For instance, wife and children can be perceived as being ‘hostages’ of the extended family.

This specific problem may be less common among Ghanaians in Italy, the majority of whom opted for family reunification before the mid-1990s. If for Ghanaians the management of family reunification represents a sign of success, Senegalese are the least keen on this and tend to leave the family in the place of origin. Migrants of both communities tend to go back and forth, but the Senegalese have to deal with an added pull factor from the context of origin. If the family’s reunification enhances the status of a Ghanaian migrant, for a Senegalese it can become a source of stigmatisation expressed through the fear that children may lose their cultural and religious point of reference by living abroad. The resistance to this option among Senegalese Wolof (the Soninké in France behave differently; Timera 1996) seems due to a combination of economic and cultural factors. Children are less expensive if they remain in Senegal and will grow up more in keeping with the ‘right values’ if raised there.

These tendencies also affect work strategies. Ghanaians, women as well as men, find a reasonably satisfactory insertion into the local labour markets in Modena and Reggio Emilia (Emilia Romagna) as much as in Bergamo and in Brescia (Lombardy). Moreover, the presence of children implies a more complex interplay with the institutions of the receiving countries, and a consequent enhancement of the understanding of such institutions as primary and secondary schools, hospitals, cooperatives and associations providing help with children with learning difficulties (Riccio 2003b). Among Senegalese one may find migrants entering the formal labour market with some success (as masons, welders, factory workers etc), who, encountering exploitation, and not being afraid to make their presence felt, interact with the institutions of the receiving context a great deal, organising forms of sociopolitical representation following the model of the Italian associational structure, and shaping their own personal networks as well as relying on those based within the community. On the other hand, there exist a diminishing number who, rather than entering the formal labour market, actually prefer to trade, and follow an inward-looking life strategy, avoiding contact with Italians except for the necessary bureaucratic obligations. These migrants benefit instead, spiritually as well as materially, from life within a transnational space (Riccio 2003a, 2004; Sinatti 2005; see also Kaag, infra).

Concerning work strategies, Ghanaians are not an homogeneous community. Although the majority is formed by unskilled workers (mechanics, labourers in small and medium firms), one also finds skilled and educated migrants who are often obliged by a discriminatory labour market to accept jobs below their qualifications. One key activity which stimulates the social mobility of migrant workers and empowers their entry into the labour market are the courses of formazione (vocational training). These courses are held every year and are normally financed by the local government. Both Ghanaians and Senegalese actively participate in these courses to enhance their work opportunities. Although sometimes the courses may
lead to frustration given trainees’ expectations, both Ghanaians and Senegalese are conscious of having undertaken a programme of training, through work experience as well as through the courses, which would have been impossible even to contemplate in the sending country. This also provides them with some human capital which they can directly or indirectly exploit when back home.

Although it is of diminishing importance, the activity practiced by some Senegalese all over Italy remains street-selling. Often an illegal practice, but one which was significant within the informal economy in the past (Riccio 1999), it functions either as temporary employment while waiting to find a better job in the Italian labour market, or as a seasonal job when there is a well-established network of vendors as in Brescia (see Kaag, this issue), the coast of Emilia Romagna (Ravenna and Rimini) and in Tuscany. The Senegalese newcomer finds that there are wholesalers who will supply him with products to sell and teach him the strategies of peddling. Nowadays, thanks to the Bersani Law (40/1998), the regularisation of self-employment has led to an impressive growth of Senegalese entrepreneurs. Indeed, in the most recent data, while Senegalese in employment constitute 65 per cent of the migrant community, some 20 per cent are self-employed (Caritas di Roma 2004). Although many seek entry to the small and medium-sized enterprises in the north of Italy, the number of self-employed is a meaningful one from a comparative point of view, placing the Senegalese third in this category after Moroccans and Chinese.

Together with trade, services such as telecentres, restaurants and craft enterprises seem to be the sectors where Senegalese invest in a future as self-employed in Italy. Recent data (200) provided by Infocamere count 9,696 enterprises managed by a Senegalese, of which 1,292 are in Lombardy, with half of these in Milan. In Emilia Romagna it is in the province of Ravenna where Senegalese entrepreneurial ventures have taken off. Indeed, with 253 enterprises the Senegalese are the largest foreign community engaged in self-employment and their businesses constitute some 20 per cent of total enterprises (Provincia di Ravenna 2003). The main activity is trade and commerce. In other words, many of these entrepreneurs are former peddlers who now practise within a regular framework. There exist attempts to develop a strategy of self-employment in other economic sectors, but these often fail. Interviews with key informants attribute these failures to the lack of training in keeping a business activity going within a complex and competitive labour market.

One should add that such a labour market is characterised by occasional episodes of discrimination which mean that it is more difficult for Senegalese entrepreneurial ventures to survive. There are also episodes of misunderstanding due to the lack of knowledge of the norms and bureaucratic procedures underlying business activities. Concerning the potential to create joint ventures, there exists the problem of reciprocal trust. This is sometimes due to racism, sometimes to the lack of experience in working together. An exception seems to be represented by young Italian entrepreneurs who like to maintain more symmetrical and reciprocal relationships with Senegalese. Sometimes Senegalese workers are able informally to shape real friendships with Italian workers and even with employers, and these can become
springboards for transnational entrepreneurial projects. Such situations play a pioneering role and reveal themselves to be influential in developing new ways of interacting between Senegalese and Italian within workplaces, though it is important to emphasise that to say this is to take a long-term view of the process.

The majority of Senegalese have been integrated regularly and irregularly into many small firms as welders, masons, labourers, mechanics, in construction and painting and decorating. In the two industrial provinces of Bergamo and Brescia the Senegalese labourer is becoming a very respected public figure (Scidà 2002). Their insertion into the labour market in these provinces is characterised by low-skilled jobs in small and medium enterprises in manufacturing (especially in Brescia) and in manufacturing and construction (in Bergamo). Among employed workers there is on the one hand the frustration of encountering cases of exploitation, on the other the satisfaction of having learned a job and sometimes acquired a qualification.

The transnational predisposition of many Senegalese migrants, which is well suited to economic activities such as trade and import/export, may be more problematic with other kinds of employment. Indeed requests for longer holidays which would enable migrants to stay a couple of months in Senegal are the subject of complex negotiations and sometimes bitter conflict within the work environment (Ceschi 2005). There are cases in which the migrant worker leaves a full-time regular job in order to be able to spend enough time in Senegal. On the other hand, there are employers who demand a signed resignation letter in advance to be used in these cases, or to make workers redundant when needed. These practices are illegal but they testify to that sense of exploitation often denounced by Senegalese, who are otherwise appreciated as hard workers. It is their orientation toward Senegal which is often regarded with some suspicion (Riccio 2000).

Concerning Ghanaians, as some community members stated self-critically, many see themselves as entrepreneurs at home (for instance, there are cases of dependent workers who, after years of developing friendships with Italian employers, become their informal agent in Ghana, selling surplus stock when they visit back home), but hesitate to participate in autonomous projects in Italy because of the same difficulties experienced by the Senegalese. Travel agencies (very important in shaping emigration from the sending context too; Van Hear 2002) may constitute an embryonic exception to this trend. In Modena an agency has started which, in addition to typical travel services (ticketing, booking), undertakes many other functions. These include helping in dealings with Italian institutions and with the complicated bureaucratic procedures (visas, translation of documents) involved in the movement of people (first and foremost), money and products. As well as services for the rapid transfer of money, such as Western Union, the agency also provides organisational support for cultural events aimed at ‘intercultural dialogue’ and integration into the local society.

The point about the transfer of money brings us to another crucial aspect in the exploration of transnational linkages: remittances.
Transnational Obligations, Representations and Remittances

Migrant remittances are important in a number of ways. As Mansour Tall has shown, they are a cornerstone of the Senegalese economy (2002). In addition to their importance at the national level, remittances contribute to making ends meet for thousands of Senegalese and Ghanaian families. Often remittances are not just a supplement to the household economy, but the basis of its subsistence (CeSPI 2003). This is especially the case with households headed by elderly couples whose children live abroad (see Carling 2004). Remittances may also be directed into investment, especially in housing, and household goods and home improvement (Smith and Mazzucato 2004; Tall 1994). Such investments are amongst the most important sources of status in Ghana and Senegal. Remittances may also be channelled towards investment in small businesses.

Beyond their economic significance, remittances are a fundamental symbol of the emigrant’s loyalty towards their non-migrant family in Ghana (van Dijk 2002) and in Senegal. Senegalese discourse is replete with the celebration of migrants as symbols of contemporary society, because of their solidarity and their efforts in coping with being far from home for the well-being of their families. The overall economic success of migration stimulates the development of a culture of migration (Hannerz 1992) in which migrants become contemporary heroes. Many Senegalese musicians (such as Yossou N’Dour and Ismael Lô) celebrate migrants as symbols of contemporary society (Riccio 2005b). The migrant is also becoming a public figure represented in the Ghanaian Concert Party within the diaspora (Altin 2005). Therefore, keeping in touch and sending remittances whenever possible is a key aspect of migration as a desirable and admirable project for many West African migrants. Interviews reveal a tendency to send money home regularly (each month or every two or three) on the part of both Senegalese and Ghanaians. There are also special occasions such as emergencies or family ceremonies (baptisms, weddings, funerals etc.) when financial help is requested directly from the sending country (Kabki et al. 2004).

The labourer’s salary in Italy in 2005 varied from 900 to 1,200 euros per month. From interviews with both Ghanaians and Senegalese, average monthly savings ranged from 250 to 500 euros, i.e. typically between 25 and 50 per cent of income. Obviously, migrants who have managed a more successful entry into the receiving society, who have an employment for life, and who have achieved family reunification, perhaps buying a house in Italy, do not manage as much as those who live more on the margin of society and who, relying on informal networks, spend less and are able to save much more. As always with studies of remittances, however, unregistered remittance flows are the great unknown. Indeed, the favourite way among both Ghanaians and Senegalese remains the informal channel, using personal networks which seem more trustworthy and less expensive than other ways. Sometimes, it is the migrants themselves who take the money with them. When this is not possible, they may rely on kinship or friendship networks. Thomas, a Ghanaian living in Modena and travelling back and forth, has often helped relatives by taking...
their savings to Kumasi. Among Senegalese, brotherhoods’ solidarity may play some role too. For instance, Talla, a migrant living near Rimini and belonging to the Mouride brotherhood, tends to rely on co-followers of the same spiritual guide (marabout) who take money to Senegal for the family and the marabout himself. Up to 50 per cent of total Senegalese remittances may be sent through informal, i.e. non-recorded, channels (Tall 2002). African migrants in Italy are those who make the least use of banks (5.5 per cent of total remittances). Furthermore, other formal agencies specialised in money transfer, such as Western Union and Money Gram, are of growing importance. These channels are used by some migrants, though they complain about the cost, despite recognising their speed and efficiency. One may summarise that the cost, together with issues of trust, make the informal means still the preferred channels for remittances. Sending money home is also an important concern for migrants’ associations.

Associations, Transnational Practices and the Interplay with the Receiving Context

For both West African communities, a multiplicity of actors plays an important role in the interface with Italian institutions as well as being crucial in maintaining the transnational connections with the homeland. An important function is performed by the national associations.

As in other contexts (Owusu 2000), the Ghanaian association has shown itself to be a strong and resilient organisation throughout the 1990s and even more so nowadays. This is confirmed by an outsider’s view, that of the Modena councillor of social affairs, who more than once stressed that the Ghanaian association was the most reliable of the various migrant associations within the province. Compared with other migrant associations in Modena and Reggio Emilia, the Ghanaian association has remained cohesive and consistent throughout the years, managing to represent the diverse and sometimes contrasting interests of its members, who differ by age, gender, local sending context and other variables. The aim of the association is to help its members relate to Italian institutions, laws and associational structures on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to keep alive what is thought and felt as Ghanaian culture and ‘home’ (Manuh 2003) by organising language lessons (Akan and English), cultural events and information about the sending country and the Ghanaian diaspora. Concerning the receiving context, the association facilitates processes of integration by helping in accessing an expensive and often discriminatory housing market and establishing successful ‘diplomatic’ relationships with local governments, churches, police and trade unions. The Ghanaian association is also important in sustaining transnational ties with Ghana, with projects to organise a quiz show on Ghana’s geography and culture for children, and a proposed magazine to host journalists writing about Ghanaians in the diaspora and recent transformations in Ghana (Riccio 2003b).
During the 1990s the Senegalese developed a similar form of organisation with numerous provincially-based Senegalese Associations of Italy united by a Coordinamento (CASI, Coordinamento delle Associazioni Senegalesi in Italia). There is a distinction between religious organisations (see below) and these non-religious associations; the latter have emerged from the Italian voluntary associational structure and declared themselves independent from both religious organisations and political parties (Schmidt di Friedberg 1994). These associations of foreign nationals are often shaped by migrants who are the most knowledgeable about the institutions in the receiving society. These are often the better educated, an elite who represent the foreign community only to some degree (Riccio 2001). In respect of the Senegalese, the organisation of these associations has had different outcomes in different provinces. Yet, there are similarities in the potential conflicts between the leaders and the rank-and-file. There are many sources of conflict arising from different affiliations in the sending and receiving contexts, though these often concern only the elite because, in a typically practical fashion, many Senegalese subscribe to more than one association. In other words, the important cleavage is that between the bottom of the community and the conflicting elites. In some cases the association is strong, cohesive and well-organised, as for example in Bergamo. There, each member pays a fee and in this way various initiatives concerning migrants’ problems are financed, e.g. funerals, ill-health or bureaucratic expenses. Despite this empowering experience, however, other lay associations in other provinces have declined; other potential forms of organisation are developing, such as cooperatives or enterprises targeting more specific objectives together with more focused social organisations such as village associations.

Besides the branches of national associations in the various provinces, there are also village and ethnic associations which are numerous in both the Ghanaian and Senegalese communities. The former tend to develop in the provinces with many migrants coming from a specific village or district. Such associations become involved in projects of various kinds such as the construction of a well back home or collecting funds to build places of worship, schools and health centres. In the case of the Senegalese, ethnic associations refer to the linguistic or ethnic minorities in Senegal who also organise themselves within the diaspora. There are, for instance, 12 Fulbé (Fulani) associations with a total of 1,400 members in Italy. Ghanaians too have many regional and village associations which join together in the national association when there exists a need to relate with Italian institutions, but play their own game when they have to collect funds to be sent to the local area of origin. Developed initially to ensure services for funeral and outdooring (baptisms) ceremonies back in the home village, gradually the purposes of these associations have become more complex, involving the transfer of money or products (medical drugs and equipment) for collective objectives such as community development, the construction of health centres or small hospitals, and the improvement of regional transport. These initiatives seldom involve Italian associations or institutions, except for the hospitals.
Finally, one should note individual initiatives based on Italian associational structures which allow socially active Ghanaians or Senegalese to become involved in cultural and economic activities, networking with the actors of the economic and institutional system within specific localities. Associations involved in intercultural events (music performances etc.), but also those concerned with entrepreneurial projects, represent good examples. However, the crucial question of trust and envy characterising attitudes towards these initiatives needs to be stressed. Although these social actors can contribute in a very rich way to various kinds of project addressing both sending and receiving contexts, constructive entry into complex institutional networks depends also on the trust that other national, ethnic or religious associations can show towards these more individual initiatives (see Henry and Mohan 2003 on Ghanaians in Milton Keynes, UK). Often migrants who play for themselves run the risk of being stigmatised by others and by other types of association. Such suspicion needs to be overcome with what is evoked as ‘honest’ behaviour towards co-nationals.

An exception to this trend is represented by individuals who address the broader issue of citizenship for migrants within the local context. Here one may encounter persons who prefer to participate within the provincial or communal consultative councils for foreigners (Consulta degli stranieri; see Però 2002) to seek to empower and enhance access to citizenship for migrants in general, not just Senegalese or Ghanaians. This is an individual path that may be admired and less stigmatised, especially with the recent rise of stricter policies towards migrant residents. For instance the president of the Foreigners’ Communal Council of Modena in 2003 was a Ghanaian, who is fully involved in mobilising both migrants and Italians in the struggle for entitlement to citizenship. He finds the interests of the Ghanaian association too parochial and remote. More recently in Ravenna, a Senegalese elected as representative within a provincial council belonged to the Tidiane minority and not to the Mouride majority. This is to say that the diversification with which migrants have been entering the Italian public sphere in recent years is tending to overcome national, ethnic and religious lines.

The Mediating Role of Religion

The majority of Ghanaians in Italy are Christians, with a fast-growing number of Pentecostal churches: within a short space they grew from 15 to 25 in Modena, and the growth in Reggio Emilia has been even more marked. The relevance of Pentecostalism within the Ghanaian diaspora has been thoroughly analysed by van Dijk, who has stressed its important transnational and rural–urban ties (1998), its ability to temper family pressure on the migrant (2002) and to present itself as an organisation facilitating the relationship with ‘Western culture’. This last outcome is achieved through at least three characteristics: a shared narrative emphasising the ‘modern’ person as being at the same time ‘moral’; the provision of strategic networks
able to enhance the opportunities for social mobility; and the provision of a symbolic safety-net in the face of an intermittently hostile immigration setting.

Although Muslim and therefore very different, the Mouride Sufi brotherhood seems to play a similar mediating role among Senegalese. Mouride transnational formations are kept alive by oral conversation and the selling of cassettes, where besides prayers and *kasaids* (sacred poems) one finds information about *ndiguel* (orders, decrees) from the Khalifa (the head of the order). These social formations are shaped and strengthened mainly by the activities of the numerous *dahiras* (religious circles) widespread in the receiving countries, and by the frequent visits of marabouts (spiritual leaders) from Senegal (Riccio 2004). Through the activities of the *dahiras*, the Mouride movement is also able to organise the interface with the institutions of the receiving society and to channel important resources to Senegal, especially to Touba, the capital of the Mourides (Gueye 2002). This organisation is very important in maintaining transnational connections, in providing migrants with spiritual and ideological points of reference, and in aiding the development of networks that are combined with other networks. The ideology of work, identification with a perceived Islamic morality to be practiced in everyday life, and respect of the rules and institutions of the foreign environment represent the strengths of the Mouride model of migration. This discrete and pragmatic stance allows Mourides to be appreciated by Italian society more than many other Muslim minorities (Schmidt di Friedberg 1994).

On the other hand, among both Ghanaian Christians and Senegalese Muslims, one finds a critique of the foreign, Western context in which immorality in terms of lack of faith, sexual permissiveness, racism and ignorance seems to abound (Riccio 2004; van Dijk 2002). A meta-culture of difference and a strategic essentialism are combined with the individual appropriation of prosperity through the symbolic elaboration of religious morality. The African background of these two historically reterritorialised and indigenised religions (Diagne 1993; Meyer 2001) may reveal itself with the fact that both religious organisations provide members with a way to communicate with the ‘invisible world’, and that from both points of view material prosperity reveals success (grace or *baraka* with Senegalese; prosperity, gospel with Ghanaians) in both visible and invisible realms of life. Thus, despite differences, religious organisations play multiple mediating roles within both transnational communities: between the invisible and the visible, between the community and the West, between sending and receiving contexts. Organisationally religious organisations facilitate processes of networking; symbolically they stimulate a tempered mimesis by allowing the acquisition of the material prosperity of the West without becoming immoral and becoming ‘Western’.

Religious rituals are also the occasion to foster intergenerational and transnational ties and may become sources of media consumption. Roberta Altin (2004, 2005) has shown how transnational networks emerge from the Ghanaian diasporic consumption of videotapes representing various ceremonies. The need to film and send homemade videos was conducive to the development of a professional network involved in
formatting, packaging and distributing these products. Most of them concern rites of passage such as baptisms and funerals. Gradually the repertoire expanded to comprise cultural events, shows and concerts travelling through the Ghanaians’ mediascapes and ethnoscapes (to paraphrase Appadurai 1996).

Two Different Transnational Trajectories and the Common Relevance of the State

Transnational migration is often considered a social phenomenon that defies nation-states’ territorial sovereignty and power over people’s identities (Appadurai 1996; Kearney 1996). Consequently, in the age of globalisation, it seems obsolete, according to some scholars, to continue with the intellectual effort sometimes subsumed by the term ‘anthropology of the state’. The aim of this section is to illustrate that both Senegalese and Ghanaian transnational communities confirm the relevance of the state in affecting transnational social formations. Consequently, I argue in favour of a transnational approach that flirts with—instead of avoids—the ethnography of institutional and state-like practices.

Kearney and Appadurai emphasise the counter-hegemonic nature of transnational practices, portraying them as acts of resistance and as signs of the decline of the modern nation-state. Although I understand the reasons for these suggestions, empirical evidence shows that the exclusionary and disciplinary power of states, far from fading, is actually growing, and that the state may in some cases play an active role in the economic and political use of transnational migrant organisations (Basch et al. 1994; Smith 1998). In Europe, especially concerning migration policies, nation-states still maintain absolute sovereignty over decision-making. As Gledhill (1998) stresses, within Western capitalist economies states are adapting their roles to the changing economic contingencies by cutting public expenditure and restructuring or even dismantling welfare systems, but at the same time controlling migration flows.

In Italy, for instance, the Bossi–Fini law (189/2002), with its exclusionary, semi-racist approach, abolished the possibility that a returning migrant could take with him or her the national insurance contributions deducted throughout their career in Italy. This change greatly affected transnational migrants. Many Ghanaians, even with a regular permit to stay, left the country for good, and invested their capital in business activities or in house building in Accra and Kumasi. Those who remained (many families with young children), although very attached to their home country, are slowly concluding that the wish to return is a myth. For them, the prospect of settling in Italy is the sad reality. The impact of closing borders is becoming hard to take also for many Senegalese transnational migrants, who, in contrast with the past (Riccio 2001), are now starting to feel that they belong neither here nor there.

From the sending state’s point of view, Ghanaian fears of the ‘dissident migrant’ changed drastically in the 1990s, and official discourse now highlights the role of the transnational community in developing the country. The change of regime affected the representation of the diaspora but also the concrete space for conceiving and
investing in transnational projects. On the other hand, Salzbrunn (2002) has shown the important role of transnational migrants in Paris for the Senegal election campaign of 2000. Transnational networks provided a sort of informal political capital which the leader of the opposition, Abdoulaye Wade, utilised in his successful bid to take power after decades of Diouf (PS—Socialist Party) hegemony. In other words, instead of postulating the end of the state in the face of transnationalism, one needs to explore the interplay between the two and the ways in which they affect and transform each other.

Clearly, to compare different transnational trajectories is a complex task. To explore how a transnational project becomes possible for some migrants and not for others requires taking into account numerous variables. As Grillo (2007: 209–10) put it:

The answer is complex, requiring an understanding (historically and at a given moment) of the dialectical relationship between, *inter alia*, the global political economy and the political economies of sending and receiving societies; the local political, economic, environmental and demographic situation ‘there’ and ‘here’; the economic and social niches which exist and/or might be created (ditto); the cultures of emigration and immigration; ideas about, and ideologies of, ‘race’ and ethnicity; legal systems and regimes of rights and duties; the (changing) nature of systems of kinship, land and property, and gender relations; and, last but not least, religious beliefs, values, practices and institutions.

As I mentioned in the introduction, this article constitutes only a beginning of such a comparison. I have started to explore the experiences of two West African communities resident in Italy. There exist striking differences between them, such as the two colonial backgrounds (French and English); the presence of conflict and changes of regime which have characterised Ghana but not Senegal; the different religious beliefs (Muslim and Christian); family, generational and gender relationships within the transnational space; and different work strategies and migration prospects. Despite that, this discussion has also shown some clear similarities. Both transnational communities are multi-ethnic, despite the majority belonging to one particular group; both are bound by various processes of social control that stretch transnationally. Remittances and investments back home tend to target similar sectors: the extended family, house building, small businesses, religious organisations, health and rural development and, from a symbolic point of view, they all aim at recognition and status enhancement. Although religious belonging differs, religious organisations play similar mediating roles. In facilitating an interplay with the receiving societies, West African migrants can rely also on a developing system of representations and associations (national, ethnic, religious, village) which reveal themselves to be important transnational actors too. Finally, from a theoretical point of view they both substantiate the need to ‘bring the state back in’ in the debate over transnationalism.
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