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Indice

n.86



Editoriale

**1 Ritornare. In modo dignitoso
e sostenibile**

Dossier: Ritornare

**7 Il Rimpatrio volontario assistito nel
vissuto dei richiedenti asilo e degli
operatori dell'accoglienza**
di Elena Liberati, Pierluigi Musarò,
Paola Parmiggiani

**14 "Tutto è previsto per venire qui, ni-
ente è previsto per tornare indietro":
la sfida del ritorno nel caso dei mi-
granti maliani in Francia e Spagna**
di Annalisa Maitilasso

**20 Migrazione e sviluppo: il migrante
di ritorno può essere visto come
un agente di sviluppo nel proprio
Paese di origine?**
di Meryem Lakhouite

**24 From Failure to Success:
Return Migration in Albania**
by Kosta Barjaba, Joniada Barjaba

**30 L'aide au retour dans
l'accompagnement social en
France : symptôme d'une politique
d'injonction à la circulation**
par Sophie Mathieu

**37 Un'opportunità per chi?
Peculiarità e ambiguità delle
migrazioni di ritorno in Eritrea**
di Valentina Fusari

**41 Migrants' Remittances: a Critical
Lifeline for Millions of Families in
Africa and a Security-net for the
Ones Willing to Return**
by Sana F.K. Jatta

**48 La tutela dei migranti senegalesi
nel momento del "ritorno".
Quale governance per una
comunità transnazionale?**
di Luca Santini

**54 "Structures of Return" Between
Italy and Ethiopia: Mobility of
the Second Generations to the
Ancestral Land as a Self-fulfilling
Prophecy**
by Giuseppe Grimaldi



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60 Situations de retour et transformations discrètes du champ migratoire France-Algérie. La mobilité estudiantine en question
par Constance De Gourcy

64 Ritornare a casa. Le associazioni di villaggio e l'organizzazione delle veglie funebri nella città di Parigi
di Maria Elisa Dainelli

70 Aimé Césaire, il ritorno e la costruzione del futuro
di Francesca Romana Paci

74 Progetto Hermes 2
di Barbara Cassioli,
Open Group società cooperativa

78 Va' e torna: la migrazione di ritorno senegalese con un web documentario
di Marcella Pasotti e Silvia Lami

Immigrazione

83 Italia Africa Business Week
di Cleophas Adrien Dioma

84 Summit Nazionale delle Diaspore con la cooperazione internazionale di Cleophas Adrien Dioma

Storia

86 La questione della pena capitale nel Regno del Marocco tra tradizione e abolizione
di Francesco Tamburini

Letteratura

92 In memoriam: Peter Abrahams 1919-2017. Scrittore dell'Atlantico Nero, da Johannesburg alla Giamaica
di Itala Vivan

Arte

95 Riserve africane. L'arte contemporanea di un continente tra cacciatori bianchi e ansie definitorie
di Simona Cella

98 Art, Displacement, and Social Context in the 57th Venice Biennale 2017
by Mary Angela Schroth

104 Reggio Emilia: Fotografia Europea 2017
by Mary Angela Schroth

Moda

108 Cambio d'abito
di Kaha Mohamed Aden

Fumetto

112 Prospettive comiche e sguardi originali nelle recenti uscite del fumetto africano
di Maria Scivo

Eventi

114 Summer School su migrazioni forzate e asilo: seconda edizione
a cura della redazione

116 Il progetto "Integr-azione": immagini come voce
di Elisabetta Degli Esposti Merli

Libri

118 Un uomo non piange mai
di Roberta Sireno

118 L'età del transito e del conflitto. Bambini e adolescenti tra guerre e dopoguerra 1939-2015
di Ruggiero Montenegro

119 Fiabe migranti, una creazione collettiva
di Maria Scivo

119 Insegnare a studenti a zigzag
di Maria Scivo

“Structures of Return” Between Italy and Ethiopia: Mobility of the Second Generations to the Ancestral Land as a Self-fulfilling Prophecy

The mobility of second generations is a subject of increasing interest in the scientific community. Here is the story of Marta, an Italian woman of Ethiopian origin, who moved to her ancestral land to work in an NGO.

by Giuseppe Grimaldi

The phenomenon of the so-called *second generations*¹ mobility to the ancestral land is gaining increasing importance in the academic debate after being confined for a long time to the liminal experience of the short-term visits for vacation purposes (King and Christou 2011). The main frame of reference for second generations' long term return developed through transnational (Reynolds 2008) or postcolonial approaches (Potter and Phillips 2006) and strongly focused on issues of cultural identification (Wessendorf 2013). To define the phenomenon of second generations' mobility to the birth country of their parents, King and Christou coined the concept of “counter diasporic mobility” (2010), a migration chronotype aimed at addressing the complex relations orienting the “return” experience of second generations. However, the connection between second generations and their ancestral land is too frequently considered as a starting point of the analysis rather than the outcome of structural processes (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p. 16). The motivations causing second generations to return to their ancestral homeland are generally unquestioned. In fact, the main interpretation of the process is based on the explicit representations subjects offer to explain their decision. Returning might be a reaction to the process of marginalization they experience in their homeland (Wessendorf 2016; Potter and Phillips 2006), as well as an opportunity to be involved in a transnational field (Reynolds 2008) or a space to confront their concepts of home and belonging (Christou 2016). Although these processes play a crucial role in the orientation of second generations' counter diasporic experience, they say very little about the reasons which make the ancestral land a site of possible futures (Appadurai 2013).

As a matter of fact, understating the attraction second generations feel for the ancestral land is questionable for a series of reasons. The lack of investigation into the motivation behind counter diasporic projects turns out to hide micro, meso and macro structures (Faist 1997) intervening in their mobility patterns. Furthermore, the celebration - rather than the investigation - of their attributed cultural or racial “doubleness” (Silverstein 2005) may turn into a proper self-fulfilling prophecy, legitimating the cultural classifications fueling their differential condition.

I would argue that all the aforementioned factors intervene in the production of second generations counter diasporic mobility. This contribution draws upon the mobility experience of Marta, an Italian woman of Ethiopian origin who I worked with during my fieldwork in Ethiopia (January-April 2016). Tracing back the significant steps that allowed her to work for an Italian NGO in Addis Ababa, I will underline how her “voluntary return” was based on a proper status transition: to enhance her career path, Marta - an Italian looking for a job position in international development - became an Ethiopian working for an Italian NGO. Specifically, I will consider a set of structural processes intervening in her transition: from her transnational familiar network, to the NGO market strategies and the Ethiopian nation state politics of long-distance nationalism: all of which intertwined and oriented her mobility choice. The analysis is intended to highlight what I define as “structures of return”: a set of structural processes of “othering”, from everyday practices of differentiation to institutional classifications in both the homeland and the ancestral land, influencing second generations' orientation to return.

From cosmopolitan to ethnic working mobility

M: Actually, I did not decide to come to Ethiopia. I wanted to go to Mozambique. The recruitment office of the international volunteering service chose the destination. During the selection process, they strongly pushed me into going to Ethiopia because of my background. Furthermore, my mother was very worried about Mozambique. I could have said no. But I had no other option. The alternative was to keep working as a waitress in Ostia.²

In this extract, Marta is talking about the end of 2013, just before she decided to move to Ethiopia for the international volunteering service. Born and raised in the suburbs of Rome, Marta grew up alone with her Ethiopian mother. After her degree in international cooperation, Marta faced the Italian structural problems connected to unemployment and lack of social mobility among young people. Her application for the international volunteering service represented an opportunity to make use of the expertise she gained during her studies. Marta's choice to move to Mozambique coherently followed her willingness to use her social capital to legitimize herself as a cosmopolitan citizen (Linklater 1998). However, in her interview, Marta clearly addressed two structural processes intervening in her final decision. By emphasizing the role her mother and the recruiter had in her choice to opt for Ethiopia rather than Mozambique, Marta brought to light some of the narratives generally used to explain second generations' engagement with the ancestral land: her belonging to a transnational familiar network (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011), and her presumed multicultural competence (De Jong 2016). The analysis of how these phenomena oriented her mobility path will allow us to frame her counter diasporic mobility as a proper self-fulfilling prophecy.

Transnational familiar networks play a crucial role in sustaining cultures of migration (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011). From access to housing, to economic and social support, transnational familiar networks activate circuits of reciprocity of crucial importance in the definition of mobility paths (Grimaldi, forthcoming). Marta's mother wanted her daughter to opt for Ethiopia - rather than Mozambique - because she could have benefited from her local familiar network. However, the ways second generations perform (in a Goffmanian sense) their social position within the familiar local network turns out to be a slippery slope where their local practices reverberate transnationally.



From access to housing, to economic and social support, transnational familiar networks activate circuits of reciprocity of crucial importance in the definition of mobility paths.



As Marta stated:

M: Here you know what you can do and what you cannot do. You have to care about too many things. When I walk with my dog, I feel like an alien.³

As a component of the network, Marta was expected to fill a

“Strutture del ritorno” tra Italia ed Etiopia: mobilità delle seconde generazioni verso la terra d’origine come profezia che si autoavvera

Il tema dei ritorni delle seconde generazioni di migranti alla terra d’origine ha acquisito un’importanza crescente nel dibattito accademico, dopo essere rimasto a lungo confinato all’aspetto parziale delle visite a breve termine. Minimizzare l’attrazione che le seconde generazioni sentono per la terra dei genitori è, per molti aspetti, discutibile.

L’articolo presenta il caso di Marta, una donna italiana di origine etiopica, della quale si delinea il percorso che l’ha portata a lavorare per una ONG ad Addis Ababa. Una serie di processi strutturali sono intervenuti: dal *network* familiare transnazionale alle strategie di mercato dell’ONG, fino alle politiche di nazionalismo “a lunga distanza” dell’Etiopia.

Le reti familiari transnazionali, infatti, attivano circuiti di reciprocità di cruciale importanza nei percorsi migratori. Anche la famiglia di Marta ha avuto un ruolo nell’orientare la sua scelta, creando un orizzonte di attesa, al quale, inizialmente, la donna voleva sottrarsi. Come componente di un *network*, Marta aveva degli obblighi sociali e morali ai quali attenersi, e il suo comportamento si rifletteva sulla reputazione non solo propria ma dell’intera famiglia.

Ma anche il piano politico ha il suo peso nel determinare la mobilità internazionale delle seconde generazioni. Dal 1991, l’attenzione del governo etiopico verso gli Etiopi della diaspora è andata crescendo. Nel 2002, è stata creata per loro una “carta d’identità della diaspora”, che testimonia l’origine etiopica; nel 2013, un manifesto ufficiale è stato ratificato, per incoraggiare l’impegno della diaspora nel contribuire allo sviluppo della nazione. L’istituzionalizzazione di uno “stato diasporico” è servito come strumento di riconoscimento per le seconde generazioni.

Il ritorno, nel caso di Marta e non solo, si configura allora come una “profezia che si autoavvera”, in cui diversi fattori si intrecciano e orientano le scelte, creando, infine, una sorta di ibrido, culturale e legale.

set of social and moral obligations within the local context. Her social behavior constantly reflected on her reputation, as well as on her mother and her familiar network social status.

In short, transnational family ties, despite representing a crucial aspect in the activation of second generations' counter diasporic mobility (Reynolds 2008), may be so tight to strangle. Marta's cultural competence of these dynamics played a decisive role in her initial choice to avoid Ethiopia. On the contrary, during the interview she had for the international volunteering service, the recruiter emphasized her status of cultural broker (De Jong 2016, p. 53) to push Marta towards her ancestral land. As an Italian of Ethiopian origin supposed to work for an Italian NGO in Ethiopia, Marta fitted the recruiter imaginary of the cultural "halfie" (Silverstein 2005): he imagined Marta as the prototype of the stakeholder, the subject in between the developers and the subjects in search of development. The paradigm of in-between-ness that has strongly influenced the academic analysis of second generations' social life (Silverstein 2005), is nowadays a central narrative in the public discourses on inclusion and multiculturalism.

A supposed cultural hybridity of the second generation is widely considered as a source of legitimation in the neoliberal and especially the developmental market (Faist 2009). This led to widespread emphasis on cultural difference without attention to the structures of inequality this paradigm is embedded in. In this respect, the celebration of Marta's "otherness", underlined a process of structural "othering" (De Jong 2016) she was forced into.

On balance, even before the activation of her mobility path, Marta had to deal with a process of structural ethnicization and cultural differentiation that played a crucial role in her final choice. However, once in Ethiopia, Marta had to question not only her ethnic belonging, but also her status as an Italian citizen.

Institutionalizing hybridity.

Becoming a foreign national of Ethiopian origins

M: After two months, I understood that Ethiopia was the best place to gain some work experience. I got in touch with an Italian NGO operating in Addis Ababa [...]. Once I had finished with the international volunteering service I applied for the diaspora card.

As a result, they hired me as an Ethiopian citizen.⁴

Marta's status transition clearly stands out in the interview extract. Her decision to institutionalize her Ethiopian origins needs to be explored within further structural processes orienting her supposedly "voluntary" return. It is necessary to take into account the role that the diaspora plays in the reproduction of the ancestral land.

Nowadays, the relation between the Ethiopian nation state and its dispersed population is crucial. The term "diaspora" itself is a central category of ascription and recognition within the Ethiopian public space. Since 1991, with the fall of Mengistu and the raise of the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) as the hegemonic force in Ethiopia, the institutional attention on the people of Ethiopian origins worldwide has constantly increased, overturning the centralist attitude of the Ethiopian nation state (Iyob 2001). This





Camper trip to Ethiopia. © Chloe Mukai

process clearly institutionalized after 2001, with the end of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict, the affirmation of a developmental rhetoric, and the opening of the Ethiopian nation state to transnational capitals (Lyons 2007).

In 2002, the first governmental office fully dedicated to diaspora was created (Kuschminder and Siegel 2013). Contextually, the Ethiopian origin ID card was released. The so-called «diaspora card»,⁵ designated the «foreign national, other than a person who forfeited Ethiopian nationality and acquired Eritrean nationality, who had been Ethiopian national before acquiring a foreign nationality; or at least one of his parents or grandparents».⁶ After more than 10 years of specific regulations supporting diasporas in their economic engagement with Ethiopia, in 2013 an official manifesto was ratified to encourage the diasporas' official engagement in the nation building process.⁷ Ethiopian government policies of transnational engagement made the term “diaspora” a specific and recognized category within the Ethiopian public space, the material representation of the national developmental paradigm. The social recognition of a diasporic status clearly served as a pattern of identification for second generations: their structural differentiation compared to the Ethiopian social setting turned into a self-valuable attribute. Furthermore, the institutionalization of their “diasporic condition” served as an essential tool to enact long term mobility paths to the ancestral land. Legally speaking, any diaspora cardholder is not required to have an entry visa or residence permit to live in Ethiopia and has the right to be employed without a work permit.⁸ As soon as Marta finished her volunteering service - a job she gained through a process of ethnicization- she applied for the diaspora card. On balance, she had a job in an Italian NGO as an Ethiopian citizen.

Ironically, her Ethiopian cultural background was not relevant to the company's choice to hire Marta. As she stated:

M: They only hired me because of the diaspora card.

Language knowledge was not a requirement for my job position. [...] I spend most of my time at work writing grant projects in Italian or communicating with international partners.⁹

With her choice to pursue a career in transnational humanitarianism, Marta decided to navigate the structures orienting the return process: she went from being an Italian citizen willing to enact her cosmopolitan citizenry to becoming a foreign national of Ethiopian origins working for an Italian NGO.

Concluding remarks: the structures of return

The diachronic analysis of Marta's working path showed how her initial cosmopolitan aspiration went through a set of structural processes transforming her into a cultural, and even legal “hybrid”. Marta's counter diasporic project undoubtedly represented a field of possibility, and it granted her working and social mobility. Nevertheless, her mobility path was strongly oriented by processes of essentialization, preconceptions and institutional frameworks forcing her into

the epistemological paradigm of the cultural, racial and legal “halfie”. Under this perspective, her counter diasporic project configures as the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy. A prophecy emphasizing her differential recognition (Ricchio 2011) of Italian as a source of legitimation, thus obscuring the structural phenomenon operating on her condition, from the familiar structures to the cultural attributions, from the nation state policies to the NGO neoliberal strategies.

By analyzing Marta’s career path in Ethiopia, I did not mean to make her experience the paradigm of second generations’ return to the ancestral land. On the contrary, I wanted to examine how structural processes reproducing second generations’ differential condition may lead to the production of proper “structures of return” orienting their transnational lives.

NOTES

- 1 - The term second generations is strongly problematic both as an analytical and as a descriptive tool (see for example: Colombo 2012; Andall 2002; King Christou 2010). I will use the term because of its emic value and I frame it as a socially constructed and culturally connoted “condition”.
- 2 - Fieldnotes, 20.03.2016.
- 3 - Fieldnotes, 16.03.2016.
- 4 - Fieldnotes, 20.03.2016.
- 5 - Dual citizenship has never been recognized in Ethiopia. See Manby 2016, p. 101.
- 6 - See Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), *Providing Foreign Nationals of Ethiopian Origin with Certain Rights to be Exercised in their Country of Origin* - Proclamation No. 270/2002, Federal Negarit Gazeta, 8 (17),
- 7 - In this document, the category of diaspora - therefore, the possible beneficiaries of the specific programs of transnational engagement - has been extended to Ethiopian citizens living abroad. See *Federal republic of Ethiopia diaspora policy*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013, Addis Ababa (<https://goo.gl/cNlo7v>).
- 8 - See *Basic Information for Ethiopians in the Diaspora*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diaspora Engagement Affairs General Directorate, September 2011.
- 9 - Fieldnotes, 20.03.2016

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