Abstract

Making a life: Meanings of migration in Cape Verde. By Lisa Åkesson
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This anthropological study examines the meanings and practices associated
with migration in Cape Verde, and the social and historical space in which
these are produced. More specifically, it analyses an ideology of migration
that concerns collective experiences of Cape Verde’s history, political econ-
omy, ecology and geography as well as notions about the life of the person.
Mass migration from Cape Verde has been going on for more than a cen-
tury, and today the diaspora communities in America, Africa and Europe
outnumber the population in the Atlantic archipelago. As a result of this,
nearly everyone in the homeland has a close relative living abroad.

Ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the town of São Vicente has pro-
vided insights into the many ways in which São Vicentians engage with
their migrant relatives. Activities, ideas and material resources located in the
diaspora strongly influence the lives and identities of those in the homeland.
Precisely because practices associated with mobility are so deeply entrenched
in São Vicentians’ everyday lives, aspirations to migrate become self-evident.
The ethnography suggests, moreover, that the Cape Verdean culture of mi-
gration is underpinned by the construction of both the individual and the
nation. When aspiring to make a life through migration, São Vicentians
imagine themselves as respected and autonomous persons, but they simul-
taneously participate in the creation of their (trans-)nation. Hence, migration
is not perceived as a rupture or discontinuity in one’s experience of self and
others, but rather as an integral part of Cape Verdean life.

By exploring how mobility is culturally construed, this dissertation shows
that migration cannot be adequately understood by using economic expla-
nations and conventional perceptions of upward social mobility alone. It
also demonstrates that the Cape Verdean culture of migration must be under-
stood from a transnational perspective, as the long-distance interaction be-
tween those at home and those abroad is crucial in shaping the migration
project. Attention to this interaction makes it clear what it means to be a
transnationalist while remaining at home, and distinguishes this dissertation
from most other contemporary studies of transnational migration, which
focus on the experiences of those who have actually migrated.

Key words: Anthropology, Cape Verde, culture of migration, transnationalism,
sending country perspective, kinship, life-making