

CONTRASTING TANZANIAN AND ITALIAN PERSPECTIVES ON MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHERING

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ABSTRACT

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This report reflects on, and contrasts, gender in Italy and among the Wagogo of Tanzania with regard to two distinct concepts: *motherhood* and *mothering*. In both realities women are under scrutiny: particularly, their bodies are seen as the vessels of their reproductive capacity and the locus of their sexual activity. Among the Wagogo as well as in Italy women's sexuality and reproductive potential are subjected to social control which seems to ignore a fundamental consideration—and its implications: a woman is first of all a person.

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Keywords: Italy, maternity, motherhood, mothering, Wagogo

*Introduction*¹

The outcome of my research carried out among the Gogo women of the village of Chigongwe (District of Dodoma, situated in central Tanzania)² may at first glance seem far removed from Italian society with regard to maternity³ and the role of the mother. Gogo mothers breastfeed their babies on demand for 24 to 30 months, maintaining body contact all day long with their newborn babies, whilst continuing to perform the tasks required of them by their demanding daily life (Mabilia 2005). The adjective 'demanding' is to be understood in the sense that nothing is ready-made or within easy reach: from obtaining food to preparing it, from collecting water to gathering firewood for cooking, many activities entail long hours of walking in the heat of a sun rarely tempered by a breeze. The way these women play their reproductive role still seems to be determined by physiological, and therefore natural, rhythms; they appear to be closely in touch with the physical and functional nature of their bodies, which would seem to set them irrevocably apart from what being a woman means in the Western world, which is so tightly linked, and in such complex ways, with the new frontiers of reproductive medicine. In the Gogo culture the tasks of nurturing and feeding babies are considered part and parcel of a female's responsibility, these child-raising duties taking up the bulk of her daily life. And it should not be forgotten that, at the same time, women are expected to take care of any older children and to fulfil the needs of their husbands and extended families. During the breastfeeding period, women are expected to observe the post-partum taboo calling for sexual abstinence, so as not to disrupt the balance between mother and child, a condition considered fundamental to ensure the good quality of the mother's milk, as evidenced

by the correct growth of the newborn. Only a healthy baby will make a woman a ‘good mother’ (Mabilia 2000).

Superficially, this picture appears to have nothing in common with Italian reality. From the much briefer period of breastfeeding on the part of Italian mothers—provided formula is not used from the very start—to the precocious moment of separation—when an Italian working mother is lucky enough to find a convenient and affordable day nursery; from the dependency on experts monitoring the baby’s health and growth which is so much a part of Western child-rearing to the necessity of confronting the toddler’s expanding requirements on an almost daily basis: it seems another world altogether. And yet, asking oneself to what extent Italian women share the condition of Gogo mothers discloses some basic similarities underlying the obvious differences.

Motherhood—‘being a mother’; and motherhood—‘acting as a mother’

What strikes one more or less immediately is that in both worlds the woman/mother is the object of continuous attention especially focused on her body: the vessel of her reproductive capacity and the locus of her sexual activity. This attention, though expressed in different forms and through different routes, is inspired by the same purpose: the control of the woman’s body to ensure the healthy outcome of the reproductive process and the correct—in the sense of sanctioned as correct—use of her body.

Amongst Gogo women, pregnancy is neither the object of special attention nor a subject for conversation or questioning. When pregnant, a woman is never made the focus of public interest, as any explicit enquiry or remark concerning a hoped-for child may give rise in the mother-to-be to suspicions and fears that she may become the target of envy or the victim of some evil power. Pregnancy is protected by not speaking about it, by avoiding doing anything that may draw attention to a process, a condition of a woman’s body which is known—by the community no less than the woman herself—to involve inherent uncertainties and dangers. Caring for a woman’s pregnancy therefore takes the form of not paying attention to it. Paradoxically, however, the aspect of uncertainty—it might just be air, the Gogo woman thinks—is nevertheless experienced in a very tangible way by the expectant mother, through the transformations her body undergoes and the messages it sends her and which she knows how to interpret, although they are confined to her deepest and most intimate feelings. *Keep it out of your mind and inside your body.*

For the Italian woman, on the other hand, a wanted pregnancy is something to be made public and constantly monitored and checked. Whereas for the Gogo woman the experience of pregnancy is one of uncertainty, with the unborn baby belonging to the realm of the possible and being kept *out* of her mind owing to fear, for the Italian woman the same experience is as much objectified and made public as it is present *in* her mind. The Italian woman’s experience becomes concrete and visible very early on, an objectification which takes place ‘outside herself’, so that every confirmation of what her body tells her no longer belongs to her. Whilst until the middle of the last century pregnancy was defined by its biological characteristics, the absence of menstrual bleeding marking the beginning of the state of ‘happy expectancy’, scientific progress has now made it possible to transform the hope for a child into a test with infallible results. Pregnancy in the West

can nowadays be technically objectified, and the mother's womb has become the locus of intervention, control and assistance; as Duden (1994:17, author's translation) writes, 'a [uterine] system for supplying the foetus'. A process of ever more invasive medicalisation has made women totally dependent on medical science, undermining women's traditional knowledge and with it the significant meaning of their own bodies.

The messages now sent by the bodies of Italian women have become mute, inarticulate, no longer signs but symptoms to be interpreted by the doctor, from whom they expect answers, confirmations and reassurance, in a word, protection. Until not long ago, Italian mothers were filled with wonder when they first felt the baby move inside them: for a long time, this was the proof of pregnancy. That 'first movement' continues to be a source of wonder today, even when a woman has long known that she is pregnant and much of the mystery has been disclosed by scans and chemical tests. That wonder, however, risks being reduced to a kind of living fossil, as the Italian woman is being—and is allowing herself to be—progressively dispossessed of her own body, entrusting it to a science which, far from being neutral, has in fact gained power over her. This expropriation is not confined to the ambit of medicine alone, but can be detected throughout the various levels of Italian society.

Once the baby has been born, our two women approach the tasks of care and upbringing in very different ways. I will not go into the aspects of their relationship with the baby here, nor will I dwell on the Gogo mother's long breastfeeding period, or on the facts that she is made responsible for a whole range of tasks and that, as the centre of intertwining physiological and social bonds, she is under constant social scrutiny (Mabilia 2001, forthcoming). Likewise, I will only passingly refer to some aspects I have already mentioned such as the Italian mother's much shorter breastfeeding period or her decision or need to replace breast milk with formula, nor will I go into the question of her total or partial availability for the baby's care, which soon has to compete with other aspects of her life as an adult woman and is therefore delegated to others. In raising the issues which set the two worlds so irrevocably apart from each other, what I am especially aiming at is the highlighting of a basic conceptual distinction—that between *motherhood* and *mothering*—with reference to which the attitudes to maternity in the two cultures differ radically. Motherhood and mothering are both facets of being a mother, but are indicative of two precise, and distinct, processes. While motherhood is a biological event which, as we know, can be interpreted differently according to the social and cultural context, mothering is a social construction, and can be defined by means of models, rules and expectations which, collectively, play a part in the construction of gender.

For a young Gogo girl, the sense of impending motherhood—that is, of bearing many children in the not too distant future—is part of growing up. To her, as a young girl, it means gaining awareness of a specific quality of her femaleness, namely giving birth. From early childhood onwards, by observing adult women in her home and in the neighbourhood, she begins to form a vision of what she will be like when she grows up: a mother with children to feed, care for, bring up, a condition that will make her an adult woman. In this way, her personality is gradually shaped by a process of identification with her own mother, through the constant sharing, first as a simple spectator and imitator, and then as a pupil and assistant, of those practical tasks which, as she grows up, will become her own tasks. At the onset of menarche, puberty rites will formally teach her

her rights and duties as a future adult woman. If motherhood is the condition defining social maturity, this crucial step will be the starting point for learning how to 'act as a mother', whereby behaviour, rules and prohibitions will all come together to make her into a 'good' or 'bad' mother, in her own eyes as well as in those of her community. In this way, the image of a woman will slowly, gradually take shape in her mind, a woman who is entrusted with many tasks, but for whom the concepts of motherhood and mothering will take on characteristics and values which she will internalise so deeply that they will become an inextricable part of her personality and uniqueness as a woman.

However, every Gogo woman, like any other human being, is also a person with her own clearly defined individuality, her own way of thinking, of feeling, of perceiving the legitimacy of her own behaviour, with her own expectations and her own sense of duty. In this sense, as she grows up she will acquire her own style of behaving, her own style of viewing herself, of presenting herself, her own style of relating to others. Her own way of being, between an ideal and a real way, will also make her unique as a mother, nurturer and wife. It is hardly surprising that, in the course of this complex enculturation process of becoming an adult woman, the dynamics surrounding a Gogo woman, who is expected to be a mother, nurturer and wife all at the same time, are not exempt from contradictions, tensions and conflicts which invariably place her at the centre of attention, subjected to the control and judgement of everyone around her, family and community alike.

On the other hand, Italian little girls may well play with dolls, but their upbringing, whether informal or formal, places very scanty emphasis on their understanding their own sexuality and their own reproductive capacity, on what it means to be a mother—whether and when she chooses to be one—as well as a wife or partner. Instead, their female bodies become a setting for displaying forms, attitudes and fashions, and their newly-acquired signs of reproductive potential are significant in the restricted ambit of sexual precociousness—something to be lived at the level of the self, of personal experience, like a rite of passage, but of no consequence for the autonomy and self-consciousness of the future women. School, success at work and economic independence fill the horizon of an Italian adolescent girl as she becomes mature. It is of course true that motherhood, along with marriage or forming a couple, are objectives for many young women, but they are preceded or accompanied by the priorities just mentioned. These priorities may conflict with the image of a woman who, in the collective imagination, is still expected to place motherhood at the centre of everything.

Individual aspirations may thus come up against the cultural pressures coming from such a society as the Italian one, which continues to make motherhood and childrearing the subject of discussion often completely divorced from a reality where women still bear heavy responsibilities—whilst little or nothing is done to prepare them for a task where the boundary between private and public is ill-defined. The achievements won by women, though important, have not been matched by that anthropological revolution in customs, behavioural models and world-views which was supposed to involve men, alongside women. In Italy, as elsewhere, cultural, social, political, ideological and economic models continue to penalise women—as compared with men—in the allocation of roles, prerogatives and powers. It is no coincidence that whenever women act as people with rights, and hence individual freedoms of their own, ethical barriers are put in their way,

relegating them to their 'natural' role as wives and mothers. Any naturalness here is totally ideological, however, for at the very time its praises are being sung the birth rate in Italy is amongst the lowest in the world. How could it be otherwise in today's Italy, where motherhood has come to be the watershed marking the near irreconcilability of a woman's private life and professional life? The M factor (M standing for motherhood) that Soffici (2010) talks about, 'a handicap for women', plays a crucial role in their feeling perennially torn between their aspiration for financial autonomy and recognition at work on the one hand and their desire to be mothers and feel serenely engaged in the bringing up of their offspring on the other. To Soffici, buying into the idea that these are conflicting aspirations—failing to see them as two sides of the same coin—is the symptom of rigidity and lack of awareness: roles have been turned into prisons; they are seen as mutually exclusive instead of harmoniously coexisting aspects of a person's life. Obviously, this does not depend on women alone. From this point of view the society of Italy, a country where the family is paid lip service as a 'sacred icon', seems in fact to be briskly heading for the imposition of an either-or between 'private life' and 'public life', between family and work.⁴

Concluding comments

So here are two worlds, that of Gogo women and that of Italian women, which, despite specific characteristics of their own, continue to express what societies expect from mothers, what societies consider as a woman's vocation, starting with her reproductive, nurturing and caring roles. In the Gogo case this supposed vocation is instilled, promoted and motivated via the enculturation process which is designed—for all its contradictions—to prepare the woman for her future role as a mother. In the Italian context, on the other hand, the choice of motherhood and baby care is still entrusted to a purely female vocation, a maternal instinct which is supposed to supply all the answers in terms of care, emotional attachment, relationships and identity—or at least those answers which lie outside/alongside the ever-expanding domain of medical competence. The Italian woman herself finds that these two channels, the emotional and the scientific, are not sufficient to resolve the conflicts arising in the course of her quest to be, at the same time, a mother *plus* something else—to be *a person*, with all that the word implies in terms of expectations, feelings and visions of her own 'being in the world'.

Thus in both contexts—the Gogo and the Italian—women find they have to contend with the difficulty of harmonising the requirements, expectations and choices facing the person-woman as she tries to fulfil the various roles assigned to her. And so, for a woman, motherhood and mothering mean, in both worlds, managing to bring together and harmonise the biological fact of motherhood with the social fact of mothering, and both of these with her plural identities. These two facets, interpreted so diversely in each of the two societies, in fact share a mixture of elements which are inter-related, sometimes contrasting, sometimes complementary, sometimes hierarchical, always governed by rules and norms which each woman must reckon with by either absorbing/harmonising or challenging/rejecting them.

What Italian women frequently experience in practice, in their role as mothers, is a sense of discontinuity between motherhood and mothering. This discontinuity is primarily the result of not knowing how to do things because they have not been taught how to do them, and is aggravated by media models which are so far removed from reality as to give rise to frustration and feelings of inadequacy. Deficiencies in public services place Italy well short of the target, set by the European Community, of one baby out of every three in a nursery—a target already reached not only by all the Nordic countries, but also by France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Belgium.⁵ Italian women have been coping, wherever possible, by calling on the solidarity of their own mothers. Italian grandmothers have, once again, come to form the vital link between motherhood and mothering, whereas for Gogo women it is the mother's task to lead her daughter—metaphorically—by the hand, along the path to physical and social maturity.

The Italian response, when there is one, lies entirely within the realm of solidarity, a solidarity which is not celebratory but rather concrete and participatory, based on a rediscovered sharing of gender—female gender. We are dealing here with a totally private, personal response, and also a privileged one, in that as motherhood is deferred, grandmothers are likely to be of an age where they are more in need of care than able to offer it. Italian women, with their rights, prerogatives and expectations, are undergoing a new and alternative experience concerning the maternal figure. This role is at present neither the product of individual choice nor the conscious option of a society choosing to attach priority to safeguarding women as persons. Failing to ensure this safeguard makes the concept of 'defence of life' a sham, a blank screen onto which images are projected as far removed from a woman's real identity as they are linked to stereotypes that, rather than help life, abuse it.

NOTES

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¹ This report is based on a paper presented at the Academic Forum for Gender Policies and Studies, University of Padua: *The de-gender-ate mother. Maternity: choice, desire and destiny*. Acts of Congress, Padua 14–16 May 2008.

² My anthropological research on behavioural models and on the significance and dynamics of breast feeding was conducted amongst the Wagogo between 1989 and 1992 as part of a paediatric project run by Doctors with Africa, CUAMM, Padua. The purpose was to understand the background of malnutrition in children during the period of breast feeding. I selected a sample of 250 households (25 per cent of the total) where I could meet mothers and infants between breast feeding and the beginning of weaning. Roughly six months later, I reduced the number of mothers to 114, out of which 86 were breast-feeding, while the remaining 28 had begun mixed feeding. The first contact took place through structured interviews concerning three topics: food production, nourishment and breast feeding. Only the last topic regarded women exclusively, whereas the other two involved men as well. With the reduced group of mothers I drew up another series of structured interviews focusing on the points which appeared to require further examination. Knowledge of the Gogo language was fundamental. For more detailed information, see the most recently published articles and monograph describing the fieldwork, listed at the end of this paper.

³ 'Maternity' is used in the course of this report as a neutral term with respect to the opposition between the culturally marked concepts of *motherhood* and *mothering*.

RESEARCH REPORTS

⁴ Soffici (2010: 14, author's translation) writes: 'Equal opportunities—while theoretically warranted by various laws and grounded in the Constitution—find no confirmation in real life.' And yet motherhood is formally protected in line with European standards!

⁵ Europe had asked Italy to cover 33 per cent of its day nursery requirements by 2010. What we have in fact is a coverage of 11.9 per cent (ISTAT data).

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